Placing Self Amid Others

A Mongolian Technique of Comparison

Se situer par rapport aux autres. Une technique mongole de comparaison

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Caroline Humphrey

HOW MIGHT a people of radically non-European culture deal with comparison? This question is interesting in itself, but it also opens the further horizon of a comparison of comparisons, namely to think about that other method in the same terms that anthropologists consider their own academic attempts. This paper is first of all an essay in historical anthropology that tries to understand the conceptual premises of a case of comparison from 18th century Mongolia, and its more distant aim, which can be only hinted at here, is to follow the consequences of this understanding for our own (« Western ») conceptual apparatus. Matei Candea (in this volume : 183-218) has proposed a framework for distinguishing methods of comparison, observing that anthropology has engaged with two comparative heuristics. One, which he dubs « frontal comparison », consists of contrasting an unfamiliar ethnographic entity with the traditions of thought of the ethnographer, with the putatively familiar background of « us ». In the other, « lateral comparison », the analyst lays a number of external cases side by side and looks for contrasts and similarities among them. Candea's argument is that this lateral method, which was a standard approach in the past but was undermined by epistemic critique in the 1980s, has been overtaken in anthropology by the « full frontal » mode, and that despite also being subject to powerful objections this frontal dualism is still on the rise ; now, however, it is time to turn to the interdependence of the two heuristics and in particular to bring lateral comparison back into the light (*Ibid.*). This article will attempt to run with Candea's fertile proposal, suggesting that the Mongolian case, even if it is considered « frontally », is in some ways

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familiar rather than entirely other, and yet it engages with comparison differently from either of his two heuristics. Not only in positivist or scientific traditions but also in interpretive ones, the anthropological maker of comparisons holds the judgemental key and by this fact stands back from the entities to be contrasted with her own culture or with one another. The Mongol method does not observe this detachment: the writer, and by implication « us », is located in among the entities, as one of them. I shall argue that this stance rests on, or rather is part of, a distinctive way of conceiving cosmological relations.

Who can be more prone to reflection and self-analysis than the now subordinate descendants of a former global Empire? The Mongol empire (1206-1368) was one of the largest in world history and its rulers must have had practical knowledge of a great many peoples. But the only extant Mongol-language history written at the time was primarily a record of events and was unconcerned with comparison. It was only later, after the collapse of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China (1368), after the break up of the Mongol realms, failed attempts at reunification, recriminations, and the gradual absorption of almost all of the Mongols into the Manchu Qing Empire (1644-1912), that Mongol writers established a genre of chronicles that took stock of their past and sought to position the Mongols in relation to other peoples. This article focuses on one such work, the *Yeke Monggol Ulus-un Altan Tobci Tuguji Orusibai* (Golden Summary Narrative of the Great Mongolian Nation, henceforth *Altan Tobci*), written in 1760 by a Buddhist lama known as Mergen Gegen. The work has a magnificent sweep, from the emergence of the cosmos to the doings of people in Mergen Gegen's own time. It offers insight into a non-European way of doing comparison, using its own ontological categories, values, and means of establishing relations. Yet its procedure – the correlation of abstracted qualitatively unlike objects – should not be seen as a single operational template flowing easily from « a culture », of the kind some anthropologists extract from their materials. With the cognitive premises at his disposal Mergen Gegen's work could still take various directions, and indeed the author by his own account struggles terribly with the problems of writing a *history* with this kind of correlative comparison in mind. In other words, the same historical preoccupations that awoke the interest in comparison was become an obstacle in the smooth operation of the conceptual tools at Mergen's disposal.

By the eighteenth century the central and southern Mongols were thoroughly Buddhicised and had accepted many Sanskritic-Tibetan teachings about the make-up of the world. Tied to outlying principalities of the Manchu Empire, they were to a great extent distanced from the

activities that Laura Hostetler (2000) identifies with the « early modern period » of Qing China, such as exploration of overseas lands, administration of colonies, cartography, ethnography, or exchanging ideas with Europeans visiting Peking. This did not mean that high-status lamas were not cosmopolitan in the great alternative realm of Buddhism. They journeyed over vast distances on pilgrimages and in search of advanced learning, knew several languages, and were familiar with the cross-continental trade that was vital in sustaining a civilised life out in the steppes. A few lamas of various ethnicities writing in Tibetan were curious about the world beyond Inner Asia and wrote geographies concerned with routes, travel times, cities in Turkey or Russia, the Swedes and Japanese, or the mythic land of Shambhala¹. However, Mergen Gegen was not one of them. His work, like many other Mongol chronicles of the time, is undoubtedly non-modern. He was not interested in the locations, number, or even the observable characteristics of different peoples² but in the generic moral qualities he could attribute to them and how these qualities interacted with one another. He compares his contemporaries, whom he despises, with the wonderful ancestors of the past – but the seeming familiarity of this endeavour should not mislead us into thinking we can easily understand the concepts and difficulties through which he attempts to reach a conclusion. The *Altan Tobci* culminates in the proposal of a multi-scalar structure that provides a way to interpret the counterposed ethical principles embodied, in Mergen's view, by the peoples of Asia. Mergen's work emerged from a particular ontology of the beings in the world, which I will explain after a short introduction to the writer himself.

Mergen Gegen as author

The nature of the author Mergen Gegen (1717-1766), including his own ontology as a person, is far from straightforward. He was a reincarnation, the Third in the line of Mergen Gengens – the last of which, the Eighth, died in the 1970s in the Cultural Revolution – all of them

1. Humphrey and Ujeed (2013 : 103-117) compare Mergen Gegen's work with that of Lubsang-chültüm and Ishibaljir Sumpa Khenpo, both of whom wrote geographies in Tibetan. On the emergence of Tibetan geographical knowledge in the face of cosmological schemes in the 18th-19th centuries, see Matthew Kapstein (2011) and Lobsang Yongdan (2011).

2. Mergen thus eschewed a type of everyday comparison entertained by his near contemporaries, such as Danzanravjai (1803-1856) : « The Chinese, since he is of dragon's ancestry, dines on vegetables, has a bad temper, does not know shame, is always thinking up something, and is greedy for profit. The Tibetan, since he is of demoness ancestry, dines on flour, is lustful, quick-witted, and his main thought is envy and jealousy. The Mongol, since he is of monster's ancestry, dines on meat, is proud, likes to talk, is not reliable in his thinking and understanding, and will be trying to strike back », quoted in Atwood (1994 : 48).

held to be bodily manifestations of the same « soul » (M. *sünesü*), which had originated as an emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushiri. This Third reincarnation was born to pious lay parents in a side branch of the noble « duke » (*güng*) family of Urad, the rulers of a broad region just north of the bend in the Yellow River. He was recognised to be Mergen Gegen as a young child, whereupon his parents gave him up to be a lama in the local Mergen Monastery and he was given the personal monastic name Lubsangdambijaltsan. Within « Mergen Gegen » (« Wise Illumination »), which was an identity and title, each physical incarnation had its own individuality and familial affiliations. So this was an author who embodied in his own person similar problems of sameness (the line of reincarnations) and difference (historical individuals) that he found so intractable in writing his chronicle. In this paper I use the title Mergen Gegen as the name of the Third Incarnation since it has come to function with this meaning among ordinary Mongols today and in the scholarly literature.

There is something that is collective about Mergen Gegen as an author. I am able to say this because, having done anthropological fieldwork over many years (1995-2007) in his Mergen Monastery in Inner Mongolia (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013), I discovered that in the opinion of the lamas each subsequent reincarnation had made « small changes » to the texts of prayers attributed to the Third. Furthermore, according to local lay people and Urad scholars, his songs, musical compositions and poems were often artistic re-workings of folk versions used in rituals. The culture of the laity thus contributed to the œuvre of Mergen Gegen, and he (the Third) remained unusually close to them for a high Buddhist reincarnation. This explains one of his motives for writing the history, a central aim of which was to document and extol the genealogy of his ancestors the Urad Dukes (Mergen Gegen Lubsangdambijaltsan 1986). However, *Altan Tobci* does not work like the classical anthropological accounts of genealogy making. The genealogies it contains are not the product of oral manipulation of genealogical material to fit a current social situation, but rather of « antiquarian shaping of existing written historical data [...] to provide a convincing picture of a long lost reality » (Atwood n.d. : 22). Mergen used sources in Sanskrit (probably in Tibetan translation), Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian, and he had to take them seriously, if not necessarily agree with them. Out of all this he was determined to sift out what was true – what really happened. Buddhism appears in this work only obliquely, in habits of thought and a characteristic morality, rather than in explanations of karma, emptiness, enlightenment, or nirvana. The Buddha is mentioned only in passing, other great Buddhist teachers

are also given short shrift, and the Gegen's own previous incarnations are not mentioned at all. The *Altan Tobci* is fundamentally an appeal to lay people to take up certain ethical values in the light of the history of kings, rulers, and their deeds³.

The book's shocking aspect was its denial of the two prevailing orthodoxies of Mergen Gegen's time. While it adhered to the chronicle format that had become conventional by the 18th century⁴, it in fact queried all of the other histories of the Mongols. Notably, it dared to interrogate the deeds of Chinggis Khan and denigrate his heirs, hence questioning their moral right to the political domination they maintained in subsequent centuries. Instead, it promotes the glorious exploits of Chinggis's younger brother Hasar (Qasar) and his descendants, to one lineage of which the Dukes of Urad and Mergen himself belonged. A second motive was just as contrary: to undermine the Tibetan institutional hegemony in Buddhism and the political axis sealed between high Tibetan prelates and the Manchu Emperors (Elverskog 2006), thus laying the historical grounds for Mergen Gegen's own view that Mongolian people should understand the liturgy and perform it not in Tibetan but in their own language – when elevated by rhyme and metre, the Mongol language was perfect for acclaiming the gods in Mongol lands⁵. The temptation to jump to a comparison with Wycliffe's English translation of the Bible would be premature, however. One first has to examine the nature of the *components* of comparison. What exactly is it that Mergen is comparing when he sets « the Mongols » against « the Tibetans », or the « descendants of Chinggis » against those of Hasar? In my view these categories can be seen as kinds, as will be explained below.

Kinds in the world

Isabelle Stengers writes, following Duhem, that :

« [...] the conceptual event that made the modern sciences possible happened in the fourteenth century, when thinkers first defined qualities not in opposition to one

3. The « non-religious » character of the book is almost certainly why *Altan Tobci* was not included in the Collected Works (*Sumbum*) of Mergen Gegen published by a committee of high lamas in Peking after his death.

4. *Altan Tobchi* (Mergen Gegen 1970 [1765]) has 32 chapters, its first half spanning from the origin of the world to the first Mongol ancestor Börte-Chino, and the second from Börte-Chino to the writer's own time. Each chapter ends with a précis homily in verse. The book concludes with an essay explaining why Mergen Gegen wrote the book and what he hoped to achieve by it.

5. *Altan Tobci* must have been one of Mergen Gegen's last compositions, for it was written only four years before he died. Before that the life work of this most cosmopolitan writer was devoted to creating a poetic aesthetic for translating and re-composing the Tibetan liturgy in the vernacular, Mongolian.

another, but in terms of increasing or decreasing degrees of intensity. This new conceptual definition was necessary before Galileo could characterize the motion of heavy bodies in terms of increasing and decreasing degrees of velocity » (2011 : 50).

It cannot have been that Mergen Gegen did not understand the idea of comparison by assessing the degree of intensity of a common property, but it is certainly the case that he seldom if ever writes in this way. The bodies he compares are set up as « related », but not by degree or anything they have in common. In this way, the problem he sets himself is akin to the question in the title of Marcel Detienne's book *Comparing the Incomparable*. However, despite his title, Detienne in the end retreats from stark incommensurability: he suggests that analysts need to « develop comparative categories that are “generic” enough to allow the beginning of a comparison but neither too general nor too specific to any given culture » (2008 [2000] : 25). What the analyst should aim to study is not any such category itself as it appears in several cultures (*e.g.* « the stranger king » or « polytheism »), but the « choices » different peoples have made in adopting elements of such a category and putting them together in consistent ways (*Ibid.* : 32)⁶. Mergen Gegen resolutely avoids this sort of analysis and any kind of choice. His primary conceptual world is one of existential differences, that is, not the relational divergence that an object has from others, but the *constitutive* difference of the objects in themselves⁷ – entities, including himself, that he (or someone else) then may put into relation, which may well be a negative one. « Analogism » as defined by Philippe Descola is one way of conceptualising such an operation⁸. Situating himself in the midst of all these things, and not postulating any external position one could identify with « objectivity » Mergen is a polemicist, a taker-of-sides, who sets himself – as well as the Mongols he identifies with – as one of the bodies to be related.

Mongols rendered the idea of existential difference in visual representations. Specific to them, as far as I can ascertain⁹, was a genre of painting in which animals, birds, fish, insects and mythical creatures are depicted in seemingly chaotic proximity. Looking more closely, what is actually

6. See also Joel Robbins, Bambi B. Schieffelin & Aparecida Vilaça (2014 : 562-563).

7. « Each produces its own line of divergence, as it likewise produces itself » (Stengers 2011 : 60).

8. Analogism is « a mode of identification that divides up existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances separated by small distinctions [...] so that it becomes possible to recompose the system of initial contrasts into a dense network of analogies that link together the intrinsic properties of the entities that are distinguished in it » (Descola 2013 : 201).

9. In the mid 18th century Mongolian high lamas, who regularly had to attend the Manchu court in Peking, would have been familiar with Chinese painting styles. But Mongol lama painters were trained in the quite different Tibeto-Mongolian tradition, which had its own materials, utensils, colours, and visual conventions (Charleux 2008).

shown in expressive detail is each animal engaged in its own characteristic activities (the scorpion stings, the panther hunts, a heavily clawed beast, perhaps a bear, disappears behind a mountain). They are different from one another and from human beings. *Baigal* – « the way things are » – has provided nothing to connect them.

Illustration 1. Painting on paper (date unknown. C. Humphrey, personal collection)

Although the living beings (*amitan*) shown in these paintings appear disorderly, the artist has already done some sorting out. He has illustrated « birds » generically on one page and « animals », on the other, these being categories that include mythical (Garuda) and non-Mongol (monkey, lion, etc.) creatures. But more interesting is that just as each animal is also depicted as its own kind of being, the « landscape » is equally fragmented. Nothing is given by this world to hinder the artist from making the elements comparable in his own way. This he does by pictorial means :

by disposing the creatures to fully occupy the space, and above all by re-sizing. In miniaturising the elephant, or enlarging the scorpion to the same size as the fox, the artist renders the idea of their singularity as types and their lack of externally given commensurability. *He himself* has made each creature approximately the same size and evenly distributed – equivalently consequential – and in this limited sense comparable with one another, or indeed available for comparison (relation) with beings and objects from other realms. Such objects may include auspicious symbols from Buddhist antiquity, such as the « inexhaustible treasure vase » (*bumba*) representing the innumerable qualities of a Buddha's body, as seen in Illustration 2. Here six domesticated animals are depicted together with four auspicious symbols.

Illustration 2. Drawing on paper (date unknown. C. Humphrey, personal collection)

Mergen Gegen's history frequently uses the existence of prototypical modules of knowledge about « kinds » (animals and birds, but also metals, atmospheric phenomena and purely notional objects) to prompt his readers' imagination with regard to differences between human beings. He writes, for example, that people may be like « the sly vicious bats, which are called animals because of their claws and birds because of their wings » but on the other hand they could be like « wise and spirited cuckoos »¹⁰. Such passing analogies do not annihilate the void between kinds but propose an equivalence of the inner moral qualities of objects whose difference is preserved.

10. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 59 ; folio p. 1 verso) ; Mergen Gegen Lubsangdambijaltsan (1986 : 95).

Illustration 3. Qing era Mongolian block-print¹¹ (C. Humphrey, personal collection)

This carved wooden block illustrates not a one-to-one analogy of « character » between human and animal, but the situation of the human *amid* animal creatures. Again, the entities are re-sized so as to make them « comparable ». A person, a monk sitting in meditation, can be discerned centre-left, being more or less ignored by the creatures around him. Another small possibly human form appears from behind a tangle of wild beasts to the right. The aim appears to be to convey a didactic message : humans are animals (*amitan* « living beings ») among others. They may have been animals in a previous life and as animals they may be reborn. In this human life they alone can achieve enlightenment by means of meditation, but a uniquely human, definitively superior position does not exist.

Illustration 4. Print from reverse of the wooden block (C. Humphrey, personal collection)

Astrological calculations are another way of setting up equivalences, and the reverse side of the wooden block provides a simple example of how this was (and still is) done. In this case the creatures represent the twelve animals of the calendar cycle and become adjustable signs denoting years,

11. The fine detail of this two-sided printing block suggests that it was made by a professional carver, probably a lama asked to supply a useful chart for marriage divinations (see Charleux 2008 : 316-324 for a description of the activities of Mongol painters in the Qing period). The block is undated, but the dark patina of the wood and the style of the couple, suggest a date in the 18th-early 19th centuries.

directions, months and hours in the day. In the Mongolian practice of divination the animals retain a certain minimal meaning derived from their generic characters – the tiger is magnificently fierce, the sheep docile, and so forth, these being ideas applied in principle, somewhat tenuously, to people born in those years. But use of the animals as divinatory signs brings them into relation with one another in a way that is unrelated to their symbolic capacities as animals, a typical analogistic move (Descola 2013 : 202). This is an example of what Marilyn Strathern calls the « abstract form » of relation itself. Quoting from Paul Rabinow (2011 : 123), she notes that such an abstract relational form occurs when entities are brought into « a proximity in which they establish *relations among and between themselves* while remaining external to each other » in such a way that different capacities come into existence through these new relations (Strathern 2014 : 4)¹². In this Mongol case the extra and different capacities can answer the question : should the man and woman get married ? The couple is shown cleverly lined up with the twelve animals so as to indicate which years are compatible. According to Mongolian friends, the chart is readable as follows : if the man is born in the Tiger Year, a Hare Year wife will be auspicious, and so forth reading leftwards along the line ; if a couple are both born in the Dragon Year their marriage will be successful ; a man of Dog Year or a woman of Sheep Year may marry someone born in the Ox Year, and all three of these birth years will work well with a person of either sex born in the Dragon Year.

These visual examples show the exiguousness, and in the divinatory case the complete absence, of « context ». Direct interaction with things as such is, I suggest, a fundamental Mongol way of being, not just produced by artists. That staple of sociocultural analysis, « the context » as a pre-assumed backdrop to action, may not be relevant to the working of some cultures, perhaps especially those of highly nomadic people whose existence depends on constantly changing experiential interactions with animals, grasses, waters, and so forth¹³.

12. Marilyn Strathern adds concerning abstract forms of relation that « their capacity to carry value conceivably points to the fact that such notions are not reducible to particular instances of them : that is, they have specific features as abstract forms » (2014 : 5).

13. Dillon *et al.* (2008) argue that socio-cultural theory is a Western construct based on the idea of pre-defined ideas (structures, schemata, etc.) that can then be talked about as « context dependent », where context is described as the backdrop to behaviour. They suggest that in Mongolia, by contrast, meaning and context emerge simultaneously from people's direct and personal interactions with changing environments : « Landscapes are enacted or performed and brought into being through that engagement, rather than being seen as something pre-existing. Out of this both meaning and context may *subsequently* be described » (*Ibid.* : 22).

Be that as it may, my reason for citing these various visual ways of depicting the « kinds » of teeming creatures of the world is to show that there were different ways of creating correspondences between them and to provide an initial episteme for Merген Gegen's similar operations using narrative. It is essential to realise that these means – the analogies between humans and animals, the Buddhist symbols, the divinatory charts – had come into being over centuries and, while not immune to change, were established conventions among the Mongols of his time. I suggest that Merген made use of similar deployments, setting unlike things adjacent to, or « opposite » to one another without a hierarchising judgement, and that these became the techniques by which he later creates the grand comparative structure with which his history culminates.

However, it was primarily humans, not animals, that concerned Merген Gegen and this posed problems for him. He was after all a Buddhist lama and must have held at some level to the doctrine of human universality and perfectibility. On what principle could human groups be differentiated from one another? What should be the guiding reason for discriminating between them? In the next two sections I describe first the cosmology of origins with which Merген played in order to arrive at the category that most concerned him, « the Mongols », and second I detail the obstacles linked to historical method and Merген's own identity that complicated and undermined this category. If the end point was to contrast « the Mongols » with other peoples such as « the Chinese » or « the Tibetans » there had to be some way of presenting such groups as persisting and consistent wholes.

How the human kinds came to differ

The earliest Mongolian chronicle, the 13th century *Secret History of the Mongols*, starts as follows: « The origins (*izagur* “root”) of Chinggis Khan. At the beginning there was a blue-grey wolf, born with his destiny ordained by Heaven above. His wife was a fallow deer » (de Rachewiltz 2014: 1). The progeny of these two were the Mongols. Merген Gegen, however, like other historians writing after the spread of Buddhism in the 16th and 17th centuries, converts the two animals into the names of people and follows their ancestry far back to the kings of Tibet and before that to the kings of ancient India. Indeed, Merген's *Altan Tobci* devotes unusual attention to the time before the Indian kings, to the origin of the world itself and the emergence of humanity. He does this, in my view, because it enables him to explain why human beings differ from one another and

why they are as inadequate and wrong-willed as they are¹⁴. Only knowing about things *from the very beginning* will enable people to understand the truth, he writes¹⁵. This is also the preoccupation of someone reflecting on how to explain not only the loss of Mongol greatness but also the catalogue of tragic mistakes and misplaced pride of later generations (a not unfamiliar endeavour for historians in general).

The sources for Mergen's account of the origin of the world are classical Sanskrit texts, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa* and the *Abhinīṣkramaṇa sūtra*, from which he quotes directly but selectively¹⁶. After having explained the emergence of movement, heat and cold from the void, and then the formation of the four substances (air, fire, water and earth), the consolidation of the continents and the heavens, he describes how certain heavens, personified like gods, descended to earth, transmogrifying into the first vital beings (*sim-e amitan*). These creatures were perfect in every respect, light shone from their bodies, they were eternal, and could visit the heavens as they wished. They were not yet either human or animal, nor male or female ; the sun and moon did not exist ; there was no time, but only undivided happiness. But in the next epoch, these « honest and sincere » pre-humans with the full array of moral qualities began to differentiate themselves by their actions. Unlike in mediaeval European thought, where the initial caesura between animality and humanity becomes a conflict in the interior of the human being (Agamben 2002 : 9-12 , 33), in these Asian narratives there is no separation ; the physical and the moral go hand in hand from the start and they change together as a consequence of action. With the first wrongful act, when out of an excess of happiness someone grabbed the « vital essence of the earth » (*gazar-un sim-e*), the living beings lost the light from their

14. Mergen Gegen knew and made reference to the 17th century chronicle of Sagang Secen, *Erden-iin Tobci*, which also provides a long description of the origin of the world. But the two authors' use of the material was different. Sagang Sechen's main concern was to provide a deep historical justification for the union of the « two principles » of religion and Khan's power that would culminate in the *cakravartin* ruler, exemplified by the Chinggisid Mongol emperor Hubilai (Bira 2002 : 191-197).

15. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : first chapter, folio p. 2 recto).

16. In Mergen's times, the Sanskrit original of *Abhidharma-kośa* was lost and the text only existed in Tibetan, Chinese, Uighur and Mongolian translations. Mergen probably used Tibetan translations of these works (Baldanzhapov in Mergen Gegen 1970 [1765] : 27). He did not follow the *Abhidharma-kośa* in all respects. Mergen limits himself to this earthly world and does not describe the system of other « worlds », the hells and heavens that make up the universe. He omits the distinction between the world of non-being (absolute emptiness) and the world that « has form », and he leaves out any account of the spiritual « places » that Buddhist philosophers called upon to explain the stages of enlightenment on the way to Nirvana. He barely mentions the theory of karma, the classification of causes and effects, or rebirth, though they take up the entire fourth volume of the *Abhidharma-kosa*. For such omissions Baldanzhapov calls him a « naïve materialist » (in *Ibid.* : 68-69).

bodies. They then began to compete with one another for each type of nutrition successively provided by nature. Now it was downwards all the way. As people began to eat fruits they differentiated into ugly and beautiful ; when the fruits were greedily used up they began to collect and cultivate wild rice, but this food was unclean and as a result people developed sexual organs, hairy skin and bad-smelling sweat. By the time the land was ploughed for agriculture male and female had become different, people began to wear clothes, marry, and conduct rituals. A period of conflict ensued, government became harsh. One by one moral norms vanished, as theft, violence, and finally telling lies brought humanity to its present state : variegated, but as a whole ill-favoured, short-lived, and plagued by illness and death¹⁷. The first crucial message from the ancient Sanskrit texts Mergen wishes to convey is that the acts of humans change not only their own nature but also the social world they live in. Eschewing specifically Buddhist virtues, he enumerates the familiar moral values known to his Mongolian readers that progressively fell by the wayside : sagacity, kindness, honesty, effort, truthfulness, and abiding by laws and customs.

The first social kinds (M. *izagur* « root », « origin », « descent ») formed in the midst of this process. When three moral values were still present a man with a pure soul and honest character succeeded in creating harmony and the grateful people chose him by acclaim as their Emperor, Mahasamadi¹⁸ Khan. He was the originator of the kingly *izagur*. At this point « human animals » (*kümmün amitan*) had begun to be born through the womb and they multiplied greatly. They ceased to know one another and began to take wives from amongst their own kin (*törül*). To regulate this situation the Khan divided the people into five « clans » (*obog*) – these « were » earth, iron, water, wood and fire – and he forbade marriage within one's own clan. Soon countless clans with various names developed. Four broader caste-like kinds or species (also called *izagur*) of people separated out : those who studied written works and did good in the world were the Birmans, those who meditated and thus acquired holy magic powers were the Arshid, the ordinary people who lived without too many faults according to custom and law were the Irgen *izagur*, and those who killed, and ate much blood and meat became the Black *izagur*¹⁹.

17. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : chapter 3, folios 5 recto, 6 verso).

18. Also known as Mahasammata, « the Great Elect ».

19. Without explanation, in the next sentence Mergen lays out a slightly different, more Sanskrit version of the four *izagur* corresponding to the *varnas* : the Kings, the Brahmins, the ordinary people, and the black ones. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : chapter 3, folio p. 6 verso, 7 recto). Lubsangdambijalsan [Mergen Gegen] (1998 [1765] : 102).

So in this chapter Mergen Gegen lays out two different ways that humans first differentiated from one another : by « clan », initially dictated by the Khan, and by « caste », arising from their own dissimilar activities. The clans are conceived as unlike but equivalent to one another, as is shown by the Khan's decree that the five clans « are » earth, iron, water, wood and fire, these being what the Mongols call the « five elements » (*mahabud*)²⁰. But the castes are not equivalent, because they form a hierarchy established by the greater value of some activities over others. The latter idea threatens the general switch-ability of kinds and their aptness for being put to use in any alternative schema. At the end of his book Mergen will return to the idea that a person/group can be *better* than others, precisely by their deeds. However, the Mongols never had a caste-like organisation, and reproduction by birth takes over his narrative. With this, much of the initial distinction between « castes » and « clans » was dissolved²¹. Although in real life *ijagur* (« descent groups », « species ») were comprised only of patrilineal kin, while *obog* (« clan ») might also contain dependents of the leading family (commoner subjects, servants, captives, etc.), they end up as similar entities. Both were conceivable *as such*, *i.e.* as wholes irrespective of a description of their contents²² by reference to the genealogical reproduction of the ruling family that stood for that entity. These conceptual building blocks were combined in larger assemblages called *ulus* (a « people » or « realm ») that were themselves likewise imaginable as separate wholes. As Christopher Atwood has written :

« In Mongolian chronicles of the seventeenth century, the world described appears divided into realms or countries (*ulus*), each with its own customs, languages, and traditions of rule. Neither political disunity within a realm, nor a realm's incorporation into a larger empire, disrupted this sense of a historically continuous domain » (1994 : 44).

Thus imagined, such entities are like latter-day social « kinds » – of which the prototypes were the five clans and four castes of antiquity – that in this form then become available for ordering, re-sizing and relating to one another like the kinds already described for animals²³. Even the fact that they are all human provides no single quality held in common to make

20. In early Buddhism only four « great elements » (Pali : *cattāro mahābhūtāni*), earth, water, fire and air, were recognized. Space and consciousness are occasionally found in the Pali Canon as fifth elements.

21. After the first chapter the word *izagur* (« root », « origin », « genesis », « ascent-group ») is used to refer to a group defined through time by kinship (for example, the ascendants of Chinggis Khan) ; meanwhile an *obog* (« clan ») is defined by an ancestor separating off and founding a descent group through his male progeny.

22. See Marilyn Strathern (2014) for an extended discussion of this point in a different context.

23. This is my suggestion and does not mean that the Mongols of Mergen's time thought.../...

them comparable *along a scale*. They are comparable only in a different way, as elements that can be set against, or aligned with, one another.

How, though, to combine this synchronic method of ordering with Mergen's other obsession : the history of such groups through time ? He writes in his introduction of the « seed of the seed of the ruling khans that by the gracious light of the sun, moon and stars [forms] the people and countries » and he describes his history *Altan Tobci* as their « written genealogy, the flowers and leaves of a fruiting tree »²⁴. Given the conceptualization of human groups just described, one could say that writing history had to be genealogical. But Mergen had an additional reason, which lay in the genuinely unfamiliar (to a European mind) way in which present-day people were conceived as *facing* their past and *being* the summation, as it were, of good and bad actions taken in the past.

Facing the past

Having spent half of his book describing the Indian and Tibetan kings, their shenanigans, battles, wives, wayward children and so forth before even getting to the Mongols ; and having stated so frequently in his poems at the end of each chapter the need to know your ancestry because that is what makes you what you are, Mergen's readers were led to think of themselves as the *outcomes* of all this history. An unbroken line would stretch all the way back to antiquity. Mergen often encourages such thoughts. For example, he observes that between Blue-Grey Wolf, the ancestor of the Mongols, and the first Indian king Mahasamadi, 1 121 565 generations passed²⁵. In later chapters genealogy provides the very framework of the narrative, specifying the generation, the names of the sons of each mentioned person, the age of the father at each son's birth, and often dating by reference to Chinese dynastic years²⁶. Within the general Buddhist understanding that the present is a moment in a vast eon of decaying, the tabulation of successive generations produces a sense of time added on, but without a teleological end.

[End of note 23] of the descent-defined human groups as the same as animal species, for which there was a different vocabulary (*züil, törül züil*). Mergen Gegen does not discuss the separation of animals, birds, etc. from the first undifferentiated living beings.

24. Lubsangdambijaltsan [Mergen Gegen] (1998 [1765] : 95 ; folio pp. 1-2).

25. *Ibid.* : 133 ; folio p. 56.

26. Mongolian has a rich vocabulary of terms for descent. Many of these are recognisable from the earliest written histories but have changed or added meanings through the centuries. A particularly fertile time for such new connotations was the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, when terms that had referred primarily to lineage began to be used also for ethnic group and a new lexicon was developed, using suffixes, to render the idea of « nation » in the modern political sense (Lhamsuren 2006 ; Atwood n.d.).

Both the author and the reader are positioned as descendants exhorted to face towards the ancestors of an ancient blessed eon and admire them. Such a spatial-temporal orientation is encoded in the Mongol language. One looks forwards to the past : *ömnöl/emüne* (« earlier in time ») also means « in front » and « south ». *Urida* means « previous » and « ahead ». Perhaps it would not be wise to make too much of this, since the word « before » suggests a similar orientation in English. However, writers from the Mongol culture stress the significance of an orientation where the future is behind you and the past in front. They link it to the notion of cyclical time and a bodily/dwelling stance oriented by the movement of the sun (Zhanaev 2014 : 2). The future (*hoino*, « behind », « afterwards ») is the « time not yet come » (*ereedüicag*) and is unknown to you – but the past is spread before you. Mongols organise their dwellings so that the ancestors are literally before your eyes : entering the *ger* you cannot fail to see the altar opposite, set in the most respected place, on which are placed the funerary photographs of the deceased, pictures of distant « ancestors » such as Chinggis Khan, and images of gods (Delaplace 2008 : 293-303). Ancestors (*deedes*) are not only in front but also above (*deedes*, « higher ones »). As a Buryat writer notes, such a vocabulary of orientation of the subject subtly alters the localisation in space and time of action and its consequence. I cite an example because this is a topic that much concerns Mergen Gegen. In the Buryat-Mongolian sentence *gemyn' urida, gemshelyn' hoino*, which can be translated as « First the sin, then the regret », the English proposes the sin as proceeding in a timeline along which the regret follows. However, in Buryat the sin stands before the subject, while the regret is a different action that is behind him/her and yet to come (Zhanaev 2014 : 3). With this stance, holding a teleological idea of time becomes a physical impossibility – how to look behind you to see the aimed for goal ? Mergen Gegen seems to have thoroughly inhabited this way of thinking, seeing it as his role as a writer of history to fill in the landscape of the past *correctly*, so that people should keep all those sins (and the ancestors' good deeds too, of course) right before their eyes, and then behave well themselves.

The discontinuities and inconsistencies of peoples as kinds

In surveying the past Mergen's trouble was not the one that European writers struggled to imagine and theorize – the difference between ancient and modern times. He describes the Tibetan kings of yore in the same terms (jealousies, marriage arrangements, illnesses) as the Mongols of recent centuries – with perhaps just a little more magic in the air. His problem was that the procession of generations back to the ancient fount

was beset with awkward jumps, not to speak of the cosmological splicing that had to happen in order to explain the *divine* status of the Mongol rulers. And then, what about all the other groups of commoner status also called Mongols? In short, writing his history presented not only the issue of the continuity of the social units (« peoples », « kinds »), but also that of their integrity or internal unity.

It was not just that the entity Mergen called « the Mongols » happened, due to circumstances, to emerge in the form of a break in the genealogical narrative, but that his own conceptual apparatus and narrative determined he would have to record this fact, or face utmost difficulty in disguising it. One example will have to suffice here to demonstrate this point, though a longer analysis would show that the emergence of similar « kind-like » groupings *within* the Mongols (e.g. the Borjigid, Chinggisid and Hasarid groupings) had to appear as equally disjointed and variegated. Let us try to imagine the problems Mergen faced in trying to define « the Mongols » by their genealogical past. The jump from the Indian to the Tibetan kings was fairly easily negotiated – a younger son rejected by his family in India flees to Bengal and his descendants then travel to Tibet where their virtues are gradually recognised and they are made Khans²⁷ – but how to get from there to the Mongols and their first ancestor, who was popularly thought of as an animal, Grey-Blue Wolf, even if learned treatises had changed this to the name of a man? Mergen first has to jettison the wolf. In his account, after the eldest son of the Tibetan Khan, Mukrisambu²⁸, murdered an official in the court he was driven out and fled far to the north. He reached the land of the Bed people, where the ruler took him in. Here Mukrisambu was called Börte-Chino (« blue-grey wolf ») because of a mistake in writing his name. At this point Mergen Gegen says something extraordinary but characteristic: he writes that perhaps the whole history of the Indian and Tibetan kings – in other words the first half of his book – is « not much use to our Mongols », because Börte-Chino was actually the human son of Heaven. Having laid out the alternatives, scion of Indian/Tibetan kings and son of Heaven, Mergen, while clearly inclined to the latter, retreats before his other requirement of going back to the very origin and wheels in citations from other histories to explain how both could be true. How could this be? The account he concocts is that an unnamed Heavenly Being was sent by pure bodhisattvas to various peripheral lands where he incarnated himself successively in the form of three Tibetan Khans. The third time, by his own will, incarnating Manjushiri, he took

27. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 121 ; folio p. 13 recto).

28. In Lubsangdambijaltsan [Mergen Gegen] this name is written Mukarijimbu and Börte-Chino is written as Börtecinu-a (1998 [1765] : 132, pp. 53 sq.).

the form of the Khan who was the father of Mukrisambu²⁹. This contorted argument solves the problem : Mukrisambu/Börte-Chino, the ancestor of the Mongols, was both human and divine, being the first son of an incarnated heavenly being.

If continuity is thus somewhat equivocally negotiated, the internal consistency of « Mongol » was equally complicated. Having arrived in the north, Börte-Chino met a pregnant woman, Queen Maral (« Queen Deer ») of the Gowa clan, who was the widow of the recently deceased lord of the Da Je people and ruler of the Bed. She greatly esteemed Börte-Chino as the descendant of a great Khan and made him her consort and the head of her household. The Bed people then acclaimed him as their ruler. The son of Queen Maral by her previous husband became the founder of the Tayijud clan, one of the largest of the early Mongol groups and enemies of the young Chinggis Khan, while her progeny with Börte-Chino formed the ruling lineage of the Mongols³⁰. Crammed into this short passage, several constituent parts of « the Mongols » are carefully distinguished. Apart from Grey-Blue Wolf himself, there are the affines – Queen Deer and her Gowa natal clan. Then there are the affines of the affines, the Da Je people (this name is apparently a rendering of the Chinese for Tatar)³¹; and finally there are the mysterious Bed people, who initially formed the main commoner component of the Mongols. The name « Bed » for the people amongst whom Börte-Chino took refuge is written differently each of the three times it occurs in the St Petersburg MSS (Mergen Gegen 1970 [1765]). It could be read as Wid or Bid, while other chronicles give Bed-e and Bida³² or in several texts Jad³³. It has been suggested that this name could be the Mongol word « we » (*bid*), but scholars are more inclined to the derivation of the name from the Chinese *bei-di* (northern barbarians) (Bira 2002 : 200). The fact that it alternates with *Jad*, which definitely means « foreign » or « strange », lends credence to the latter interpretation³⁴.

In short, Mergen Gegen described « the Mongols » right from the start as a collection of alien elements. Implicitly his account sets itself against the versions of earlier histories, in which Börte-Chino may not appear at

29. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 134-135 ; folios 23 verso, 24 recto).

30. *Ibid.* : 137 ; folio 25 recto.

31. See Baldanzhapov's footnote 383 in *Ibid.* : 215.

32. *Shir-a Tugui*, Shastina (1957 : 127).

33. Lubsan Danzan (1973 [1655-1660] : 53). *Orungg-a sastir-un eki oru-siba*, in Vanchikova (2001 : 123).

34. For details of scholarly discussion of these terms and the versions given in different Mongol chronicles see Baldanzhapov's helpful footnotes (in Mergen Gegen 1970 [1765] : 214-217).

all and the story starts with Chinggis who is born in the land called Jad-Mongol³⁵, or Beautiful Queen Deer is a virgin³⁶, or Börte-Chino is a runaway younger son and not particularly divine, the « son of Heaven » appearing only later in the Mongol genealogy³⁷. Mergen's problem was that once he had embarked on writing descriptive history and devoted fifteen chapters to the doings of the Indian and Tibetan kingly families, he had to use the same method and selection of materials for the Mongol period. For example, since he had highlighted the clan exogamy decreed by the primal ruler Mahasamadi, he was obliged to take into account affines (relations through marriage) in the Mongol section, and then logically of the affines of these affines. Nor could he ignore the other rules of Mongol kinship : elder brothers senior to junior, children of the first ranking wife senior to those of secondary wives ; son-in-law subservient groups ; the lineage of the mother's brother to be respected, and so forth. And these were just the distinctions created within the ruling group. For « the Mongols » as a people, a gulf separated the nobles from the commoners who acclaimed them as Khans and who, as in most Mongol histories, start out frankly as strangers (Jad/Bid). Besides, in this mix, there were captives, slaves and servants.

Mergen Gegen complains that it was extremely hard work for him to put all this in order and show his recalcitrant readers which were the really important points to be followed :

« I am tired. Clearly it is just as absurd as being a two-legged person in *Zuda* [a mythical region in India where people were one-legged monopods], in addition to working hard for nothing, for me to construct a genealogy for people who devalue the gold and silver of kinship and patrilineage but value the iron and copper of relatives through marriage. Nevertheless, just as a hollow drum cannot help making a sound when it is hit by a drumstick, once a great person's order has been given it is hard to disobey even if it is difficult »³⁸.

It is unclear which great person Mergen is referring to, but whatever the case his ultimate task was to visualise such disparate social assemblages as wholes, since it is as singular entities (« the Mongols », « the Koreans », etc.) that he wishes to make comparisons. It seems from the anguished

35. *Cagan Teiike* (Vanchikova 2001 : 72).

36. *Orungg-a sastir-un eki oru-siba*, (Vanchikova 2001 : 123) ; *Shir-a Tuguji* (Shastina 1957 : 127) ; Lubsan Danzan (1973 [1655-1660] : 53).

37. Lubsan Danzan (*Ibid.*). We could note, incidentally, that in these stories of the originator « stranger king » it is never because he is a stranger that the first ancestor is remarkable. In the steppes of Inner Asia migrants and escapees were an everyday matter. Börte-Chino had to be marked out some other way (or dispensed with).

38. Lubsangdambijaltsan [Mergen Gegen] (1998 [1765] : 185 ; folio pp. 126-127).

tone of his writing that this was not just an academic exercise but a subjectively felt contradiction – for he was exhorting readers to emulate their great predecessors, and *his own ancestors*, the Hasarids, were the most disintegrated of all.

Greatness disintegrated by moral faults

By the mid-18th century Mergen's beloved Hasarids were such a dispersed and shadowy entity that many Mongols may not have been aware of them as « a group » at all. This was in contrast to the Chinggisids, who zealously maintained the notion that they were the Golden Clan and had a grip on far more large hereditary princedoms than the Hasarids, who were the younger brother's descendants. Many of them, having been the first to submit to the Manchus in the 17th century, had been bundled up into military units called Banners and sent off separately to conquer or defend the far reaches of the emerging Qing Empire. In Mergen's 18th century world their maximum clout was as the Dukes (*güng*) of small and scattered realms.

Yet for Mergen Gegen this tragic disintegration was not the result of circumstances but due to the ancestors' faults. He composed a beautiful ode spoken by an ancestral mother on her deathbed imploring her sons to stand together³⁹ – but to not avail, since the following chapters describe the divisive sins of pride, hatred and violence that afflicted the Mongols in the centuries after the collapse of the empire. For a while the Hasarids observed exogamy as a group and thus remained a « complete » (*bürin*) clan. But they later divided into four groups, no longer recognised one another as kin, and therefore began to take wives from one another. This was both a sin and a fatal mistake in Mergen's view⁴⁰. He tries to shore up the situation by listing the components of the Hasarids – the geographically scattered Banners whose aristocrat rulers formed in his view a « single clan » (*nigen obug*) – who should not take wives from one another⁴¹. Needless to say, this was a lost cause. He ends the chapter with a sad poem :

Eki nigen modun-aca delgeregsen salagan
The spreading branches of a single originating tree
Ey-e ügei samagun-dur qoqiraju salugad

39. A long speech by Alan (Alag) Goa, not found in any other chronicle. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 138-139 ; folio 26 verso).

40. Mergen cites with approval the edict of the Ming Chongzhen Emperor who in the seventh year of his reign [1634] decreed that marriage within a clan would be punished and the wives sent back with their dowries.

41. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 157 ; folios 41 verso, 42 recto).

Having ruinously broken off in disharmonious conflicts
Eciis-tegen nabcin-anu butarju
 In the end their leaves will fall off and die
Ene gem-üm egüsgel-i egüride cegerle
 Always be wary of the cause of such a mistake [sin]⁴².

The next six chapters are solid genealogy, the hundreds of names of the Hasarid ancestors and those alive who should remember them. Having thus done his best to gather the pieces together, Mergen Gegen writes that he is tortured by there being « too many reasons (*uchir*) » and that his work is unfinished. In a stanza that is both an ending to the main body of the book and an introduction to his great conclusion he writes that the « four foreigners » and the « five coloureds », united from top to bottom, have need of two teachings : military instruction and religious scripture, and that this is the task of the wise men and officials composing the laws of a unified state and its generations⁴³.

The five coloureds and the four foreigners

The « five coloureds and the four foreigners » were Mergen's solution to his struggle to control history, and it is with them that he conjures his comparisons. This was a modular structure that eradicated by dictate the problem that any historian or anthropologist faces – how to define the units to be compared. More strangely and originally, it did not call for any abstract idea by means of which comparable phenomena could be discovered and investigated in unlike entities. This latter method is common in both « frontal » and « lateral » comparison (for example, in Benedict Anderson's account of how he was able to compare the mutually alien Javanese and Western politics by invoking the idea of rationality as a mediating instrument, and in his later more « lateral » work, when he used « forms of nationalism » as a way of seeking likenesses between Tsarist Russia and British India, or Hungary, Siam and Japan) (Anderson 2016 : 17-18). The « five coloureds and four foreigners » scheme operates in quite a different way, through the ontology of discrete entities described earlier.

The expression first occurred in the 16th century⁴⁴ to denote the model by which Mongols began to conceptualise their vanished imperial empire. Chinggis's achievement as Emperor had been to organise his subject

42. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 157 ; folio 42 recto).

43. *Ibid.* : 168 ; folio 52 verso ; Lubsangdamijaltsan (1998 [1765] : 183).

44. The earliest occurrence is in the undated, but probably c.1550, *Chinggis Hagan-u Altan Tobchi* (Christopher Atwood, personal communication).

peoples by this scheme⁴⁵, and Hasar's glory, at least in Mergen's account, was that it was he who conquered the four foreigners. The formula was soon applied to other Mongol khans with pretensions to greatness. By the 18th century the five coloureds and four foreigners (henceforth the 5/4) had become a set piece for Mongol historians, who occasionally altered the peoples comprised in the scheme and provided their own interpretations of its meaning. Essentially, this was a model that created relations of opposition between elements whose precise content is uncertain. Mergen Gegen, who as we have seen laboured terribly with the content (continuity, consistency, wholeness) of his social units, seized gratefully on the 5/4 model, for it enabled him to exit from troublesome historical events and filter the peoples of his world into the clearer, simpler idea of related whole elements. Marilyn Strathern rightly remarks, « One can show how relations have their effects without having to, or necessarily being able to, specify exactly what is related » (2014 : 6). As I shall soon describe, Mergen Gegen, made use of the openness of the categories of such a model to insert his own layer of content into them, different from that found in any other history.

In the version most frequently found in the chronicles the « five coloureds » were : the Mongols (blue), the Chinese (red), the Sartaul (Central Asian Muslims, yellow), the Koreans (white) and the Tibetans (black), and each was assigned a direction, respectively : Centre, South, North, East and West. Mergen does not query this allocation⁴⁶. The content of the « four foreigners » is more unpredictable, appearing variously as distant Asian peoples, as the four successor Khanates of the Mongol Empire, or as legendary kingdoms such as those of the virgins and the dog-headed people. In the hands of learned lamas the scheme was applied well beyond peoples and government, and its abstractness and versatility became evident. It could be de-composed and 5 or 4 employed separately, or put together as 9. The idea of five related objects was particularly fertile, since it could be used to tie the five peoples with the five *mahabud* elements as well, in either of their Chinese or Indian variants, along with all the astrological links attached to them. By the 17th century the abstract five was popular in many different fields of learning, being used for example to categorise bodily organs in Mongol medicine and clusters of sounds in linguistics.

45. Also known as the « nine great realms » (*yisün yeke ulus*). According to Christopher Atwood (personal communication) this conceptualisation of empire is Mongolian, not Tibetan or Chinese, though it has clear parallels with the mandala-like forms invoked by Tibetans in the 7th to the 9th centuries (Kapstein 2011 : 339). Some Mongol authors tried to combine it with a wider Buddhist geography in which Chinggis conquered the 361 « clans » (*obogtan*) and 720 languages of Jambudvīpa, the « continent » of the terrestrial world (Atwood 1994 : 48).

46. The colour assignments are invariant in Mongol chronicles, but the directions vary.

Scholars of Mongol history have argued that the use of 5 element models from the 17th century onwards was a backwards step in the emergence of « modern thinking » and it is perhaps worth briefly explaining this view in the case of linguistics – if only because it describes an alternative path that Mergen might have taken, but did not. In spoken Mongolian certain vowels and consonants occur together while other combinations are inadmissible, and this being an agglutinative language (unlike either Chinese or Tibetan), these « harmonies » continue through an entire word with the addition of suffixes. The earliest Mongolian linguists determined in the 13th century that three types of vowel sounds (« male », « female » and « neuter ») organised these harmonies. The same analysis enabled the categorization of the consonants that went with the vowel types, and at the same time an alphabet (or syllabary) was established for written Mongolian. Although no copies of these early studies now exist and they are known only through later commentaries, their analysis is broadly how the language is understood today. However, 17th century commentators added their own quite different organisation of the vowels and consonants into five sets identified with the five *mahabud* elements. Since pairs of these elements were either in benign agreement or harmful opposition, language could now begin to serve as a marker for many different kinds of relationships. The first letter of the word determined the element to which it belonged, so now, for example, a herder could work out if a pasture was auspicious by relating the first letter of his name with that of the first letter of the name of the place, a lama could know if a tantric prayer was beneficial or dangerous for him by checking his name against the first letter of the prayer, and so forth. Soviet editors of these texts have derided this system as « a servant of religion »⁴⁷. What had Mongolian linguists come to if they were juggling two different (Chinese and Indian) systems of elements and advocating both essentially for divination, when they could have been developing the earlier foundations of linguistics?

Mergen Gegen ignores the divinatory possibilities of the relations between elements, and we can see thereby that « analogist » thinking can serve quite different purposes in one and the same culture. His own highly original use of the 5/4 schema serves to bring to attention the diverse relations between different moral values. In this he tends towards a grounded realism, since when describing values such as honesty or (negative) aggression he illustrates his definitions by the actual familial relationships in which these qualities are, or are not, found : the nephew who rightly respects the paternal uncle, the younger brother who lacking customary

47. See Purbo B. Baldanzhapov, introduction to Dandzan-Dagba (1962 : 30).

respectfulness quarrels with the older, and so forth. The qualities (*cinar*) of moral relationships are then set out as objects themselves, devoid of « context », such that they themselves become relatable, like the animal kinds or indeed the elements. In other words, Mergen is constructing relations between relations ; he is using 5/4 as a matrix in the primary meaning of the word, the place from which something else develops. However, his aim in doing so is not prognostication/divination, but rather to force his readers to think about the implications of upholding different ethical principles at the same time.

Let us follow Mergen's logic here. First, with appropriate caution, he affirms the turnaround of time : « They say that peace and prosperity are followed by disorder, and chaos and disorder are followed by peace ». Next he insists that one's actual actions right now are what matter : « In reality (*cuxum*), whatever a person does, those are the consequences (*ür-e*) he'll get ». He then specifies the five moral qualities (*cinar*) : compassion, customary obligation, law, wisdom and firmness, and writes :

« All of this has come to be known as the five coloured and the four foreign, which, if it is taken in its greatest sense refers to the structure of the entire universe, if taken in a small sense it refers to the existence of a single human body. If it is applied to the state, force (*cirig*) and learning (*bicig*) should be studied ; if it refers to religion, it requires the study of scripture (*nom*) and powerful rites (*tarni*) »⁴⁸.

This grand idea leads straight on to the aligning of four moral values with the four elements and their qualities : compassion – softness, wood ; obligation – hardness, iron ; law – heat, fire ; wisdom – cold, water. These he calls the « four foreign » because the elemental qualities are foreign (*hari*, opposed) to one another : softness to hardness and heat to cold. We need to bear in mind that these four elements are already lined up by established convention with the four colours, the four directions and the four peoples associated with these direction/colours. Mergen now adds the 5th moral value, firmness (*batu*), which is linked to the neutral element earth and to the colour blue, is located in the centre, does not distinguish between the others, and thus makes them a totality (*neyite*)⁴⁹. With this flourish⁵⁰, he writes that the four foreigners thus become the five coloureds. I would like to assure readers of this article that Mongols of the older generation would not find these superimposed alignments at all complicated to comprehend – they learn this kind of thing at their grand-

48. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 169 ; folios 52 verso, 53 recto) ; Lubsangdambijaltsan (1998 [1765] : 183-184).

49. Mergen Gegen (*Ibid.* : 170 ; folio 53 recto).

50. As far as I know Mergen Gegen is the only author to turn the 4 into 5 ; other writers deal with them as two separate series.

mother's knee. They would immediately understand that, as far as peoples are concerned, the pivotal 5th element, « the Mongols », are the ones Mergen is lining up as alien to none. The associated quality, *batu*, has a range of positive meanings : strength, honesty, reliability, truth, and stability. Implicitly Mergen is contrasting the Mongols with the others, for example « the Chinese », who are red, east, fire, heat, and associated with the moral quality of « lawfulness » (*jirum*, which could also be translated as established order, regime, or rule).

In the concluding section Mergen moves beyond in comparing peoples to conjuring relations between the ethical qualities. Having already written that the 5/4 scheme applies at a vastly different scale to great states and also to individual persons, he indicates that each subject, at any scale, is going to be a complex domain manifesting the set of tensions of alien qualities. His next paragraph sets out schematically the actual behaviours of which the abstract moral qualities are the symbols (*belge*). For each he provides a negative and a positive example (e.g. for *jirum* « lawfulness », refrain from taking what is not your own and accomplish the tasks you begin ; or for *mergen* « wisdom », refrain from intoxication and use discrimination and logic). From these specifics, Mergen zooms out again to the abstract qualities. His whole 5/4 edifice ends up with the idea that a subject in any position will encode the whole model, and therefore will have to live with (accommodate, equivocate between) ethical qualities that are opposed to one another : soft compassion facing its alien hard law, and hot customary obligation facing its alien cold wisdom. This balancing act (my words) must be studied further through the sutras and tantric prayers (Mergen's words). « Anyone », he declares, « boasting of their education but not in fact having knowledge or understanding of theory (*onul*) will not be able to [comprehend] something that is like fitting the square of precise words into a circle – which is what I have [tried to] accommodate in this [book] »⁵¹.

I have attempted here to configure Mergen Gegen as a theoretical agent rather than a passive subject of culture, so it is apt to think about what sort of theory he produced. First, in a political sense, in situating « the Mongols » and by implication himself at the centre of the 5/4 scheme, Mergen is not thereby constructing a hegemonic position. Descendant of a great empire he may have been, but he downplays the imperial meaning of 5/4 and instead privileges its use as an explanation of ethics.

51. Mergen Gegen (1970 [1765] : 170 ; folio 53 recto).

In any case, the model in his hands is not conceived in such a way as to make the centre its beneficiary. Rather, this central space is one among congruent or « equivalent » others⁵² and the model as a whole is a way to indicate an *arena* in which analogous elements are inter-related and affect one another⁵³.

Nor is the idea of a central element « foreign to none » (*hari ügei* – literally without opponents) anything like the European concept of objectivity. The latter, situating itself as external to the phenomena described, is justified by objective knowledge that needs to be mastered, insists that its own type of comparison *must* be possible, to be achieved by rationality and commensurability, and results in a position from which phenomena can be judged (Stengers 2011 : 58). Mergen Gegen never assumes there are measurable scales (by which commensurability might be achieved). Instead, his scheme of moralities operates with the « either/or » notion of *hari* (« not like », « opposed »). His own position, the central *batu*, is what unites the others by (uniquely) being opposed to none – but what it unites is a field of contradiction. In this way Mergen is making an argument : that the four moral values that are necessary for each subject are nevertheless intrinsically in tension with one another.

Although I have called the 5/4 scheme a structure, clearly it is dissimilar to the structures that anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown extracted from their field materials. Mergen did not « uncover » or « discover » the pattern by simplifying/clarifying diverse observable data. Not only was the skeleton of the model proposed long before his time but it was in principle not derived from observation and not subject to verification from data. But 18th century writers did think it corresponded to actually-existing dispositions and oppositions among the phenomena in the world, and it did require the analyst to think hard about its application in any new sphere of knowledge. In this sense, the 5/4 scheme could perhaps be likened to the comparative philologist Dumézil's structure of triads, which

52. For this reason, « the Mongols » are not conceived as « incomparable » in the way that military historians of the 19th century set up as incomparable the identity of France as a nation (Detienne 2008 [2000] : x) or 20th-century American political science constructed US « exceptionalism » (Anderson 2016 : 15).

53. One could perhaps see the centrality given to « the Mongols » in the 18th century as historically contingent on a lack of interest in the geography produced by other Asian civilisations. In the late 19th century the influential Inner Mongol historian Injannashi still used the 5/4 model but, unable by then to ignore Chinese political and geographical discourse, took the revolutionary step of shifting the blue Mongols to their actual position in the North. Injannashi also made idiosyncratic use of the 5/4 model. He turned the traditional « five coloureds and four aliens » into « four coloureds and five aliens », omitting the Muslims of Central Asia. Little-known people of the far west comprised the five aliens, along with the Dog-Heads and other legendary realms (Atwood 1994 : 51-52).

proposed that interactive clusters of threes organised the diverse phenomena (social organisation, myths, rituals, law) of Indo-European civilisations. Of course Dumézil's immeasurably more sophisticated analysis takes steps that Mergen never does, such as establishing the limits of a form of association, its flexibility, and its relation with the same form appearing elsewhere⁵⁴. The two authors were dissimilar in a more fundamental way: if Dumézil gathered materials intending to uncover organizing principles used in the societies themselves and hence held himself responsible to them, Mergen was completely uninterested in such interrogation – for with regard to the categories he used, he already knew. His problem was not whether the Mongols or anyone else thought in terms of kinds or 5/4 patterns. Rather, it was the question of how to use the scheme creatively, to add elements and build up relations, in order to make evident the things he thought were important.

Finally, Mergen's mode of comparison never quite leaves aside a sort of theoretical democracy of the human and non-human. After the exposition of the 5/4 of ethics, he cannot return to a conception of his « genealogy book » as mere history. Instead the book re-appears in the only way it can, as a marvellous apotheosis (of the way things have come to be as they are) and in this form the treatise itself becomes an object with which relations may be drawn. Who has relations with the book? Those fitted, or conversely unfitted, to benefit from it. Let us see what Mergen writes about this:

« The genealogy book mounted on the wind horse of instances, dispelling the darkness of confusion of the mind's vision occurring in an epoch of [moral] decay, is as clear as the sun's orb and on rising it bestows to the peaceful assembly of the countless six-legged ones the joyous festivity of the vital essence of honey ».

Mongolian colleagues have assured me that the « peaceful assembly of the countless six-legged ones » refers to bees. Contrasted with them are:

« Those [bulls] with loose bowels, which casually kick out the soil of their bushy sins with their hooves, how can they attain to the book or to the author? The clods of earth can only fall on the head of the stupid bulls. Isn't it a matter of being taken over by arrogance and then being hit on the nose and eyes by [their] own brutality? »⁵⁵.

Of course these passages could be literary tropes, or metaphors for human types (in which function the bees have done sterling service in many a culture). But I think not only. The teachings of the Buddha were intended for all sentient beings: in this moment you may be human, but before, in countless earlier lives, you surely were not. To this day, Mongols find it

54. See discussion of Dumézil in Nick Allen (1999) and Marcel Detienne (2008 [2000]: 59-64).

55. Both quotations, Mergen Gegen Lubsangdambijaltsan (1986: 185).

easier to imagine rebirth as an animal than as another « kind » of human being, such as a Chinese or a Russian (Billé 2014). Perhaps Mergen Gegen really meant the bees and the bulls. In this case in comparing these animal kinds by his previous method – abstracting a moral activity of bees (peaceful congregation) and opposing it to a habit of bulls (useless rampaging) – he would also have been conveying a didactic message to his readers, one that is a corollary of his way of doing comparison : you are in this subjective position now, but you would find the same moral dilemmas in a quite different one.

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Caroline Humphrey, *Placing Self Amid Others: A Mongolian Technique of Comparison*. — This paper attempts to understand comparison as an intellectual endeavour in a non-European cultural milieu and then takes up the challenge of relating this case to the ways in which comparison is done in anthropology. These issues are discussed through analysis of one example, that of the conceptual apparatus of a Mongolian Buddhist lama and poet of the 18th century, Mergen Gegen. His aims were in some ways similar to those of the many European writers of approximately the same period who compared peoples (« the Greeks », « the Jews », etc.), since he was concerned to assess the qualities of « the Mongols » as contrasted with other peoples of Asia, but to do so he operated in a different way. The paper argues that Mongolian comparison was done on the basis of a general cosmology of separate, unrelated beings or objects and by means of constructing analogical relations between these elements that enabled equivalences and oppositions to be established. It is shown how this task was in tension with the writing of the history of « the Mongols ». For in order to set up « the Mongols » as an object in a comparison their history had to be written in such a way as to enable conceptualisation of this people as an internally consistent « kind », equivalent to other cosmological elements. Having, not without difficulty, achieved this task, Mergen Gegen then wielded a grand structural schema capable of linking – by analogy and on different scales – political, ethnic, geographical and moral dimensions in order to produce comparisons between peoples.

Caroline Humphrey, *Se situer par rapport aux autres : une technique mongole de comparaison*. — Cet article s'attache à appréhender la comparaison en tant qu'entreprise intellectuelle dans un milieu culturel non européen, tout en relevant le défi de mettre en perspective, à travers cette étude de cas, la manière dont la comparaison s'effectue en anthropologie. Ces questions sont discutées à travers l'analyse d'un exemple, le dispositif conceptuel d'un lama bouddhiste et poète mongol du XVIII^e siècle, Mergen Gegen. Son propos est à certains égards similaire à celui de nombreux auteurs européens de la même période qui entendent comparer entre eux les peuples (« les Grecs », « les Juifs », etc.) : tout en cherchant à établir les qualités des « Mongols » par contraste avec d'autres peuples d'Asie, il procède néanmoins de manière différente. Cet article montre que la comparaison mongole s'appuie sur une cosmologie générale d'êtres ou d'objets séparés et isolés, à travers la construction de relations analogiques entre ces éléments, de manière à établir des équivalences et des oppositions. Il montre aussi que cette entreprise entre en tension avec l'écriture de l'histoire des « Mongols ». Afin de saisir les « Mongols » comme un objet de comparaison, leur histoire doit être écrite de manière à rendre possible la conceptualisation de ce peuple comme étant un « type », doué de cohérence interne et équivalent à d'autres éléments cosmologiques. Après avoir, non sans difficulté, réalisé cette tâche, Mergen Gegen élabore un grand schéma structurel permettant de relier – par analogie et à des échelles différentes – les dimensions politiques, ethniques, géographiques et morales des peuples à comparer.