

Tarrying with Repression: Political Anecdotes and Social Memory in Northern Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

This article¹ explores different forms of social memory about the state socialist repression of Mongolian Buddhism in the 1930s. Based on two political anecdotes collected during fieldwork among Darhads in Northern Mongolia as well as on recent studies of social memory in Mongolia and Buryatia by Christopher Kaplonski and Caroline Humphrey, I identify three ‘mnemonic tropes,’ which are appropriated by people in recounting these tragic events of the past, namely, what I call the digital, the paranoid, and the comical mode of collective remembering respectively. In broad terms, these mnemonic attitudes seem to correspond to three scapes of remembering: a radically liberal, a mildly conservative, and a neo-authoritarian political climate respectively.

Key words: social memory, story telling, Buddhism, state socialism, political culture, humour, postsocialism, Mongolia, Darhad Mongols

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly agreed that the rapid ‘developments in the post-Communist world offer an especially rich data bank for students of [social] memory’ (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 110). There is also agreement that the distinctiveness of these ‘data’ arises from the totalising claim to truth propagandised by state socialist discourse, including the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle disciplines of amnesia which were used to mould past events in accordance with an idealised present (see Hosking 1989; Skultans 1998). The question remains, however, what *kinds* of remembering (and forgetting) we are talking about. My contention is that, whilst people might make recourse to any of these and very possibly other styles of remembering when evoking their (or their relatives’) past as state socialist subjects, there is a nonetheless a distinct politico-mnemonic pattern to be discerned here. The Russian Buryats, for example, who continue to be subject to fairly repressive structures partly due to their minority status in neo-

authoritarian Russia, seem to favour strongly allegorical mnemonic forms at the expense of more direct modes of remembering (Humphrey 2002). Conversely, many urban Mongolians such as the population of Ulaanbaatar, which has been immersed in a liberal political climate for more than a decade, tend to adopt highly transparent and direct modes of remembering, as opposed to their northern peers' significantly more guarded ways of recollecting the past (Kaplonski 1999, 2004).

The specific point that I wish to add to these already established findings is that, possibly due to their positioning within a relatively confined spatial, social and political realm, many rural Darhads appear to favour yet another mnemonic attitude in remembering the purge of Buddhism. More specifically, my intention in what follows is to account for the distinct work of humour and hyperbole in two Darhad anecdotes (*onigoo*) about these tragic events as they took place during the late 1930s, with the aim of contributing to the comparative study of how people across the postsocialist world are now coming to terms with the moral legacy of their communist past.

THE PURGE OF MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM

Between autumn 1937 and spring 1939, writes Christopher Kaplonski (1999, 2004), on the order of the so-called Extraordinary Plenipotentiary Commission, 20,474 Mongolian 'counter-revolutionaries' (*esergüi хүмүүс*) were executed and 5,103 were imprisoned for 10 years, more than half of whom were Buddhist *lama* (Kaplonski N.d). During the same period, the Buddhist church was divested of the considerable wealth, property and influence which it still held at that time. Out of the approximately 700 monasteries, which were scattered across the country in the early 1930's, only a handful was left intact at the end of the decade. The rest were demolished, frequently down to each piece of brick or wood deemed useful in the construction of collective farms. On a more symbolic level, the communist party orchestrated the ritual burning of sutras and other holy treasures with the aim of eradicating Mongolia's Buddhist heritage (see also Bawden 1986; Siklos 1991; Bareja-Starzynska & Havnevik 2006).

It is hard to come by any figures documenting the rise and fall of the Buddhist church in the Darhad Depression, but it is clear that the area took its toll in the purges. In the early 20th century, there were five Buddhist temple sites in the Darhad Ih Shav' (i.e. the land and subjects belonging to the ecclesiastical estate of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu). The main monastery of the Darhad Ih Shav,' the Zölöngiin Hüree, alone accommodated between 700 and 1200 *lama*, and to this we may add the several hundred lamas affiliated with its two other monasteries, the Ivdiin Hüree and the Burgaltai Hüree (Pedersen forthcoming; see also Zhamtsarano 1979: 16; Sandschejew 1930).

It is against this historical backdrop that I was told that more than 90 individuals were "taken away by the red soldiers" in 1937, mainly high- or

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

middle-ranking *lama* from the three aforementioned monasteries, but also a small number of shamans. As local lore has it, all the captives were rounded up and brought to the Öliin mountain pass,² where several army trucks were waiting (this was as far as the road went back then). Here, the captives' horses were confiscated, but their saddles were left in a huge pile right next to the ritual cairn (*ovoo*), so that, for years to come, no one crossing the pass was able to avoid the eerie sight. The great majority of Darhad captives seem to have been either executed or perished in prison, for only four apparently managed to return to their homeland, invariably to the great shock of their relatives, who had long thought them dead. One of these four survivors was Luvsan-Dorj, who had been a junior lama in the Ivd monastery, and whose family was renowned for its many high-ranking *lama* (apparently, two of his uncles were in the same monastery). It is his story, as told to me by his cousin Dorj-Palam, that I shall recount later.

THE DIGITAL MNEMONIC TROPE

How do Mongolians confront the memory of the purges in the electrified political climate of postsocialist social life, where people suddenly were forced to make 'substitutes for history at a time when history itself is only ... becoming possible'? (Humphrey 1992: 377). As a prelude to Dorj-Palam's anecdotes, I shall now discuss in some detail Humphrey's (2002) and Kaplonski's (1999, 2004) studies of social memory among different Mongol groups, and by so doing introduce my model of mnemonic tropes.

By mnemonic 'styles' or 'tropes' I mean particular narrative bearings towards social remembering, which, being linguistic attitudes in Sperber & Wilson's radically pragmatic definition (1981), are only on the verge of the conscious, but still have an important impact on how and what memories come into being. Inspired by Roy Wagner's theory of tropes (1986), my concept of mnemonic tropes does not so much refer to a specific literary or symbolic style, but rather to a more general convention through which signification tends to be orchestrated within a certain cultural context. What will henceforth be known as the digital mnemonic trope, I thus propose, represents a culturally salient discursive attitude in contemporary urban Mongolia, which serves to produce transparent, unambiguous and straightforward propositions about the past; that is to say, judgements which tend to be 'digitalised' according to normative oppositions such as good/bad, true/false and victim/oppressor. A good example is the prolonged public debate concerning the socialist period which took place in Ulaanbaatar during the 1990s. If the first years following the collapse of state socialism were spent on building a new collective identity with reference to a glorious 'deep past' (Humphrey 1992: 376), then, observes Kaplonski, later in the 1990s it became possible, and even necessary, to turn to the socialist period and acknowledge Mongolia's own at times dark role in it. Having put aside the socialist aspect of their past for seven years, Mongolians

could now turn to it and safely, if gingerly, reincorporate it into their sense of who they were. Mongolians had clearly played a role in the purges, and this point was becoming accepted and examined in the fall of 1997. Mongolians, it was increasingly recognised, had been both the oppressed and the oppressors (1999: 108).

To some extent, what Kaplonski's here describes is reminiscent of other post-socialist countries (see e.g. Skultans 1998), but there are also important differences. Collective memory in those East- and Central European countries with a more or less established liberal tradition and an outspoken dissident culture during communism, such as Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic nations are likely to have taken a different turn than the Central and Inner Asian countries, such as Mongolia, where the communist revolution essentially amounted to one authoritarian (non-liberal) political discourse taking over from another one (cf. Humphrey 1994: 22). Perhaps this is why many people in Mongolia, and especially those living in Ulaanbaatar and other urban areas, sometimes seem to take on a 'radically liberal' attitude, as it were, in the ongoing public debates, not only about the moral legacy of the socialist past, but also about other sensitive issues, such as the galloping corruption or the status of religion in the future Mongolian society (see, for example, Rossabi 2005)

In any case, (Halh) Mongols tend to hold no-nonsense people in high esteem, considering such personal traits as directness, determination and straightforwardness (*shuluuhan*) to be genuinely Mongolian, as opposed to more indirect, ambiguous and convoluted ways of expressing opinions, which are dismissed as typically Chinese (or, indeed, Darhad) characteristics (cf. Pedersen 2006). Seen in this light, it is not so surprising that the debate in Ulaanbaatar about the Communist legacy largely has evolved around 'black and white' moral categories, which leave little room for moral ambiguity. For within this 'radically liberal' discourse, as Kaplonski puts it, 'the fact of claiming the status of victim logically excludes the possibility that the victim is also a victimiser ... If one is a victim, one cannot have been a repressor as well. Conversely, if one did the repressing, the logic excludes the possibility of also being a victim' (2004).

What all this suggests is that, on the digital mnemonic trope, that which is remembered only can take a no-nonsense, *shuluuhan* propositional form, for there simply is no narrative middle-ground for forming morally ambiguous judgements; for publicly remembering, say, that the Darhads were not just repressed by outside forces, but also from within. The paranoid mnemonic trope, to which we shall now turn, seems to accomplish exactly that, but this in a way which, as we shall also see, is perhaps *too* indirect.

THE PARANOID MNEMONIC TROPE

In a recent article (2002), Humphrey discusses a Russian Buryat narrative about Stalin as the reincarnation of a Blue Elephant destined to destroy Buddhism,

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

arguing that the narrative serves as an allegorical framework for the coming to terms with the purges of Buddhism in the 1930s. Once upon a time, tells the narrative, a blue elephant owned by a rich patron laboured hard helping to build a pagoda in India. Upon the day of the pagoda's consecration, a high lama arrived to give his blessings to everyone who had earned it. Only the Blue Elephant was left out. Soon after it died, but not before having made the following vow: 'Because you have forgotten about me, I will destroy your Buddhism three times in my next births.' And so it was. Of these re-incarnations, Stalin is understood to have been the final one (Humphrey 2002: 11).

Why, asks Humphrey, do the Russian Buryats confront the fate of Buddhism in this convoluted way? 'After all,' she notes, 'all the lists of victims do exist and their stories could be told privately in a matter-of-fact manner' (2002: 14). Given that the Buryats are 'still subordinated within political structures that close off space for open discussion' (2002: 2), the narrative's indirect style becomes understandable. At first sight, this is reminiscent of different 'counter-hegemonic' strategies used by post-colonial subjects (cf. Taussig 1993; Mbembe 1992), in the sense that it can be seen as an 'indirect hinting, [...] accusatory in tone' (Humphrey 2002: 18) with the subversive goal of blaming Stalin for the repression of Buddhism. Yet, notes Humphrey, this explanation is at best insufficient. If people feel that it was all Stalin's fault, why do they never say so, even under the most private forms and to people they trust most? What is more, if the aim of the story is to exercise the categorical logic of repressor and repressed, why make use of a mythical narrative, whose moral lesson is as obscure as in the present case?

What we have instead, it seems, is a moral scenario in which no one single person is guilty, but where the sinfulness of everyone's actions must nonetheless be accounted for, if not in this life, then in the next. In the inherently sinful spectacle of birth and rebirth, only the shoulders of particular individuals are broad enough to bear the burden of making destiny come through, namely the leaders. Stalin in that sense is the ultimate tragic figure: 'a phantom of destiny' (2002: 12), who carried out what had to be carried out, not only according to the theory of historical materialism, but also according to an ancient predicament from which Mongolian Buddhism could not escape.

Unlike the situation described by Kaplonski, then, this is a non-digital mode of collective memory, for, as in the better-known case of individual paranoia, it works according to a principle of displacement, in which the actions attributed to another (in this case Stalin) are in some way 'about' oneself. [T]he reincarnation stories in some ways metaphorically mirror the metahistory generated by Stalinism, yet they also fundamentally challenge it by pointing up the crucial ethical issue erased by socialist metahistory, the ethical problem of individual accountability. These narratives, I suggest, are about complicity, for they reveal an uneasy, and probably unconscious, identification with Stalin. (Humphrey 2002: 1).

Unlike its digital counterpart, which produces radically transparent and morally clear-cut propositions about the past through a 'no-nonsense' logic of categorical inclusion and exclusion, the paranoid mnemonic trope brings about radically opaque and morally ambiguous attitudes towards the past through a dream- or myth-like process of displacement and substitution. Here, no single person is guilty in the liberal and individualist sense which necessarily renders someone else not guilty; rather, everyone is, if not guilty then at least complicit in a collective process of creation and destruction.

Apart from the fact that they are currently faced with quite different political climates, the divergent mnemonic attitudes of the Russian Buryats and the Mongolian Halh may also involve differences that are more internal to the two groups. Allegorical narratives like the above may thus be seen as symptomatic of a more general 'historiographical involution' among the Buryats; their long-term minority status having brought about an attitude which may be described as radically conservative. For if Kaplonski's data from Ulaanbaatar describes a form of social memory which is perhaps too transparent in the sense that becomes very easy for someone to forget his own complicity, then Humphrey presents a mode of social remembering which works to the exact opposite effect. On this mnemonic trope, peoples' evaluations of the past become so opaque that it becomes very difficult to come to terms with the moral challenges of the present. It is in this sense that the paranoid mnemonic trope may be described as too indirect, for it does not offer any break with the past.

However soaked the political climate of this backwater of Russia may still be in the structures of authoritarianism, a new market age (*üid*) of possibility, chance and uncertainty must also be emerging in postsocialist Buryatia; yet this is a situation to which many people seem apply the 'tragic' meta-language of predestination (cf. also Morreall 1999: 74-6). However, the question is what might happen if another minority group in a comparable situation instead were to engage with this era of chance with one of the languages of chance itself, such as that of humour? To this alternative scenario I shall now turn.

A DARHAD *ÜLGERCH*

One of the purged Darhad lamas was the older cousin of Dorj-Palam, famed story teller (*ülgerch*) in the Hövsgöl district of Ulaan-Uul. More than eighty years old when I visited him in 2000, Dorj-Palam would spend the day drinking tea, nibbling *aarüül* (dried curd) and smoking pipe in the *ger* of his youngest son. Here, amid the endless cooking of his daughter-in-law (*ber*), and with six grandchildren roaming around, Dorj-Palam admitted experiencing a deep peacefulness. Nonetheless, some of his best moments came when a visitor dropped by, for this gave him an opportunity to open up for his reservoir of anecdotes (*onigoo*). As his daughter mockingly remarked as I once rose to leave

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

having spent a whole afternoon listening to stories: ‘Please do stay longer. Not only are you making Dorj-Palam *ah* pleased by so eagerly listening in, you are also making *us* happy as this means that we don’t have to listen to these anecdotes again!’

‘I know countless stories, all equally unbelievable.’ Thus Dorj-Palam introduced himself when I first met him. The community sanctioned this explicit suspension of belief. Unlike the local ‘liars’ (*hudaich*), Dorj-Palam was considered to be a dignified elderly man (*övgön*) with a superior memory and an elaborate sense of humour. Many people brought their children to see him, and they seemed to do so with the double purpose of being entertained and to learn about the past. Dorj-Palam was, in that sense, a key figure in the basic process of social memory through which the past of a few is made into the past of the many (cf. Watson 1994).

Why were his stories so popular? For one thing, Dorj-Palam gestures vividly when telling them. Occasionally, he would jump up from his seat in the *hoimor* to mimic someone appearing in the narrative, apparently forgetting both his age and himself. Moreover, his stories were always packed with the sort of details that seem to feed the imagination best, like a pile of saddles left behind on a mountain top, or an army officer wearing lama’s clothes (see below). As a seasoned *ülgerch*, Dorj-Palam knew how to appropriate such common rhetorical techniques as voice-intonation, parody and hyperbole to get the biggest evocative effect out of the narrative material at hand (cf. Bauman & Sherzer 1973).

These, I think, are some of the reasons why Dorj-Palam’s daughter-in-law and grandchildren always seemed to end up – oftentimes despite themselves – listening so carefully to his stories. This is also where his tendency to exaggerate (*hetrüüleh*) enters the picture. As one of the defining characteristics of a funny person (*shogch*), this ability is by no means to be confused with lying (*hudaich yarih*). Sometimes, I was accompanied by good friend visiting households in pursuit of legends (*domog*). On several occasions, immediately following these visits, I would gaily exclaim: ‘What a good storyteller that guy was!’ To which I received the reply: ‘No, a bloody liar, that’s what he is!’ The man we had just visited, I was now lectured, had simply been ‘making the *domog* up, for, ‘as everyone knows, he is a totally ignorant person!’

Proper stories – even fictional ones – are always told by someone who knows what he or she is talking about. It is not enough just to have a good imagination, for to simply imagine some line of events comes dangerously close to lying. Instead, a good storyteller is someone who, precisely by knowing what he is talking about, is able to mould this knowledge in such a way that it becomes attractive to listen to. For the same reason, I was told, a genuine anecdote (*jinhene onigoo*) is essentially a true and concrete (*bodit*) past event, which may well be presented in an unusually detailed (*nariin*) and hyperbolic fashion, but never with a purely fictitious (*zohiomol*) and untrue content. Perhaps this is why I failed so dramatically on the few occasions I tried to tell a joke. The problem not only

was that my Danish jokes were well nigh impossible to translate. Even when I succeeded in conveying their meaning, people did not find them funny; indeed, some were quite taken aback by their blatantly fictional nature. When cracking my jokes, it seems, I was not seen so much as a subtle *shogch* as a crude *hudalch*, for rather than dramatising a real event that might have happened to someone, I was conjuring something up that could never have happened to anyone.

Thus jokes as we know them do not seem to exist among the Darhads, only anecdotes do: humorous narratives built either on real events or on events that can easily be imagined as real. Also, the structure of *onigoo* differs from the typical Western joke (see Freud 1991; Apte 1985)³. While jokes (as we know them) are built up to bring about explosions of laughter at specific points during their narration (the punch-line), the typical Darhad anecdote – two examples of which I am about to present below – rather is told with the aim of eliciting a trickle of mirth throughout its narration.

ANECDOTE A: THE IGNORANT POLITICAL CRIMINAL⁴

The first anecdote is about Dorj-Palam's cousin Luvsan-Dorj, a lama from the Ivd monastery.

All the lamas from our family, including my own father, were captured when one day the communists suddenly came after them. Only I escaped because I was out herding sheep; anyway, I was so young that probably they would not have bothered. We never saw our relatives again. Apart from Luvsan-Dorj.

At the Öliin mountain pass trucks were waiting for them. The saddles were left in a huge pile. Some were very nice ones, which had belonged to high-ranking lamas. I remember how one would come across the remains for years to come. The trucks brought them to Mörön, like all the other captives from across the Hövsgöl province. This was the last Luvsan-Dorj ever was to see of his relatives among the captives. The communists always liked to force together people who did not know each other before.

The prison consisted of a long line of *gers*, which were fenced off from the outside. No one knew what was going to happen, let alone knew why he had been arrested. Every day, a truckload of prisoners was picked up from each end of the row. Luvsan-Dorj's *ger* was in the middle. With horror he observed how ever more prisoners were taken away, and ever more *gers* were dismantled. Rumours had it that people were taken away to be executed.

Then one day Luvsan-Dorj and his inmates found themselves in the back of a Russian truck. The journey took days. They were not allowed out. Finally they reached Ulaanbaatar, where they were put into a new prison. Once again, people seemed to be arriving and departing on a random basis. And once again, no one had the faintest idea of what was happening, or why. When one day Luvsan-Dorj was ordered to leave, he asked: 'Where are you taking me?' Without bothering to

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

look at him, a soldier barked: 'To the Valley of Suffocation' (*Hahanhün Am*). 'Zaa,' Luvsan-Dorj told himself; 'now my time is up.' But when they arrived Luvsan-Dorj realised that he had misunderstood the soldier's words completely. Rather than signalling his imminent death by hanging, the term Hahanhün Am turned out to be the name of his new destination: a mouth (*am*) of a valley made into a huge labour camp. Not surprisingly, this made Luvsan-Dorj extremely happy; he laughed for days at his mistake.

For the next four years Luvsan-Dorj laboured hard at the Hahanhün Am. One autumn day in the fields he was summoned by a guard, who asked: 'What have you actually done to be here?' I have no idea! One day in 1937 I was just captured. I was never told why,' answered Luvsan-Dorj in perfect accordance with the truth. Evidently an insider-man of sorts, the guard now gave the following advice: 'Listen, if you are ever asked this question again, remember to reply thus: 'I am a political criminal (*uls töriin gemt hereg*). Therefore, I am paying my debts to society for 10 years.' Finally, after years in ignorance, Luvsan-Dorj had been told what he was doing in prison.

The coming winter Luvsan-Dorj got to work as a cook. Here, he made good friends with a new inmate, a highly educated and cultured young man. He advised Luvsan-Dorj that, if he contributed something to the prison suggestion-box, he might have a chance to get out of prison before expected. Knowing all too well that he had another five years to go, Luvsan-Dorj said: 'why not!.' So, the man formulated a letter on his behalf suggesting various improvements to the prison kitchen. Soon, the officials sent word for him. After having praised him for his 'valuable contribution,' they then asked him: 'Now, Comrade Luvsan-Dorj, why are you in prison?' Taking a deep breath, and concentrating on appearing appropriately confessing, Luvsan-Dorj said the magic formula 'I am a political criminal, therefore ...'

The following morning Luvsan-Dorj was released from prison. Finding himself at the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar without money, food or proper clothes, he decided to walk all the way back to his beloved *nutag*. It was winter as he started the journey but late summer when he finally reached the *ger* of his parents, both now quite old. Luvsan-Dorj decided to enter as if nothing had happened. With an expression of pure horror and disbelief (he thought it was a ghost), his father exclaimed: 'Luvsan-Dorj?' To which his mother, always the calmer one, retorted: 'Well, given that he is obviously still alive, of course he would return!'

I think that one of the things that make Dorj-Palam's account so effective is the manner in which it manages to make tragic events of the past into an object of comedy. While this is clearly not adequately conveyed in my written and translated version of them, Dorj-Palam's anecdotes come across as extraordinarily funny when listening to them. Let me now, as a prelude to presenting the second anecdote, discuss why this might be so.

On hearing Anecdote A, the listener clearly finds his/herself identifying with Luvsan-Dorj during his meaningless quest as a victim of the communist purges.

We feel with him as he fears; we laugh with him as he laughs. It is with his eyes that we see the long row of *gers* gradually diminishing, and it is with his ears that we hear about the Valley of Suffocation, in either case only to give rise to an outcome quite different from what we (with him) had expected. Also, when realising just how long Luvsan-Dorj had been ignorant about the reason for his imprisonment, we cannot help sharing his experience of deep irony at the moment the 'reason' is presented to him. And finally, after having caught a glimpse of the monotony of life in prison, we also come to imagine the build-up of emotional excitement as Luvsan-Dorj walks the entire way to Hövsgöl, only to be put down by his mother's witty remark upon his arrival.

All the above processes of identification and sympathy refer to what might be called the literal work of humour in Anecdote A. By this term I refer, firstly, to the fact that the aforementioned mirth may be experienced by practically anyone, regardless of whether they are Darhad or not, or whether indeed they have witnessed Communism or not, for the various inconsistencies upon which this humour builds (Koestler 1964; Douglas 1968) are internal to the story; that is, do not require knowledge of any affairs external to it. Secondly, the form of the humour is also quite straightforward, with multiple lapses of suspense-creation being followed by a sudden release from the tension or expectation that has been built up (cf. Freud 1991). In that sense, even if Anecdote A is not quite identical to a (Western) joke, its literal work of humour is built into a string of finite narratives, each with the same structure as a joke.

But there is also a more complex level of humour on which the anecdote can be said to operate; a dimension of the comical or more precisely satire, whose deciphering requires much more contextual knowledge than what is alone provided by the narrative. A bit like the famous Soviet *anekdot* (Yurchak 1997), Anecdote A may thus be said to reveal the always superficial and oftentimes blatantly arbitrary nature of state socialist ideological discourse in all its absurd contradiction. Arguably, apart from presenting an entertaining story, Dorj-Palam thus also sent the meta-political message that, as much as it was a coincidence that his older cousin Luvsan-Dorj was purged by the Communists, so it was also a coincidence that he was set free.

There is clear a sense in which what occurred to Luvsan-Dorj on both occasions was not the result of his actual beliefs, but only what he *appeared* to believe; namely, upon his imprisonment, the fact he happened to be wearing his *lama's* clothes upon the arrival of the army (i.e. appeared in the very image of a real counter-revolutionary) and, just before his release, that he wrote a suggestion letter to the authorities (i.e. performed precisely as a reformed counter-revolutionary should). By imagining Luvsan-Dorj repeating, over and over again, the to him meaningless words 'I am a political criminal ...,' the (informed) listener may thus come to realise (with Luvsan-Dorj) that 'what counted in [communist ideology] was external obedience, not 'inner conviction' (Zizek 1993: 229).

Leaving aside the moot point as to whether the cynical worldview of the last

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

Soviet generation (Yurchak 1997) is comparable to the Mongolian experience of late socialism (for was there not a paradoxical sense to which some Mongols *believed* what they were pretending?), we have still not discussed how the comical mode of collective memory differs from the paranoid form described earlier. To this question we shall turn after having been presented with another of Dorj-Palam's anecdotes.

ANECDOTE B: CAUGHT BY LAMA REBELS

This is the story about a man called Ohinjii Chuluun. A real Darhad, he was born near the Tenggis River.⁵ He grew up to become a senior officer. Around 1931 Chuluun was sent to Arhangai Province to assist in the repression of Buddhist counter-revolutionaries (*hub shalyn esergüün*). The uprising involved not only lamas, but it was them who supervised it. For the lamas, it was the Shambalyn Dan'.⁶ They told people that the Wanchin Bogd⁷ had arrived in Ih Hüree [Ulaanbaatar], that a big war had begun, and that they must burn down any building belonging to the Socialist Party.

Chuluun's unit's assignment was to track down a large group of rebels, who were believed to be hiding in the thick forests around the Tamir River. One day, he went alone to the forest, scouting. Suddenly the rebels appeared out of nowhere, grabbing Chuluun and beating him severely. Then they brought him to their hiding place, which was located deep in the forest.

A big, yellow banner (*tug*) dominated the centre of the camp. Having stripped Chuluun naked, the rebels tied him between two trees in front of the banner, stretching his limbs to their limit in the process. 'Look,' they told him, 'we want to sacrifice you to the banner!' (*tug tahih*). To his terror, Chuluun saw some hardened, brown things, which somehow had become stuck on the banner. 'These are the dried-out hearts of other officers from the Red Army!,' the lamas shouted, and added: 'Tomorrow, we will tie up you up in heavy ropes, leaving only a tiny space around the solar plexus. The moment we cut your body open, the tightness of the ropes will create the necessary pressure to make your blood pump out until your heart is as dry as *aariüül*. By then we will rip it out of your carcass and smear it onto the *tug*, just as we have done with other communists'

Intoxicated by their collective thirst for blood, the rebels went on to chant:

Shar tugaa manduulj	Raising yellow banner
Shashny süriig badruulj	Burning flame of faith
Shavi nar bolson bidnüüd n'	We, who have become disciples
Shambalyn daind mordoyo	Let's go to the holy war

As the lamas now started drinking, Chuluun was left suspended between the two trees. The sun was burning on his naked body and, by nightfall, countless mosquitoes tormented him. It was very late when the rebels finally went to sleep,

leaving only a single guard. But, as he soon fell asleep also, Chuluun managed to get a hand free so that, finally, he was able to scratch himself! Only by then did Chuluun start thinking about escaping. Soon, he managed to untie himself from all the ropes. He now set off into the forest, running wildly without any sense of direction, or indeed plan other than getting as far away as possible from these savage lamas.

Just before the break of dawn Chuluun reached the end of the forest. He found himself on a beautiful steppe with grazing horses and a single *ger*; towards which he immediately started to walk. Only too late he realised that he was stark naked. No less embarrassed by humans than afraid of dogs, he approached very carefully. But there was no sign of life. Unusually, the door was wide open. Inside, everything was beautifully decorated, but in a total mess. At that point, the truth dawned on him: the *ger* belonged to a high-ranking lama, who had fled from the approaching army.

Despite it being in the middle of the summer, the only clothes Chuluun managed to find was some heavy winter garments, hidden at the bottom of a drawer. The lama and his family must have brought the rest with them. So, he had no choice but to dress up in full winter outfit: thick skin boots, the characteristically pointed hat of a *hamba* lama, and a massive yellow *deel* sewn out of nine sheepskins. Not far from the *ger*, he also found a nice horse which had been left there to graze.

The sun was rising as Chuluun took off. Soon, he heard the approaching sound of horsemen. They were getting still closer as he reached the Tamir River. There was only one thing to do. He jumped in the river with the horse, leaving his pursuers behind (the current was very strong). But the horse turned out to be strong and, by clinging to its neck, Chuluun just made it to the other side.

With the danger now over, Chuluun began searching for his missing men. Soon, he found himself in the vicinity of an army camp, a group of soldiers approaching him. 'Hands up!', they shouted on recognising the imposing figure of a *hamba* lama. Only after so long a soldier got close enough to recognise Chuluun's face: 'but Sir,' he exclaimed, 'is that really you?'

Compared to Anecdote A, the listener's identification is probably less univocally on the side of this anecdote's main character. Still, there is little doubt where one's overall sympathy should lie. While Chuluun is apparently not to be blamed for doing his job as a red army officer (this could have happen to anyone, the underlying message seems to be), the rebel lamas are clearly reproached and ridiculed for behaving in a violent, irrational and excessive manner. The poor Chuluun as the victim of the primitive lamas' counter-revolution – this seems to be the explicit moral lesson of Anecdote B. In that sense, the two anecdotes emerge as each other's inversions, for if, in Anecdote A, a lama is presented as the innocent victim of communist repression, then in Anecdote B, a red army officer is the innocent target of Buddhist oppression.

If however Anecdote A resembles the black humour characteristic of many

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

totalitarian societies, the story of Chuluun is like a full-blown comedy. For one thing, note the fact that no one gets hurt. In spite of the ample signs of past violence (the remains of human hearts, the abandoned *ger*), we are not presented with any account of suffering. Indeed those human hearts as well as the empty *ger* are used to bring off some of the comical highlights of Anecdote B. For another thing, notice also that, despite the many dangers he is faced with, Chuluun comes out in one piece, totally unharmed if somewhat diminished in status.

Apparently, there is no room for tragic heroes here. In fact, we seem to be presented with an ensemble of clowns or, at least, people with multiple faults. Unlike in Anecdote A, everyone in Anecdote B thus seems to be laughed *at*, not *with*. If the first anecdote makes us laugh together with Luvsan-Dorj (and the other captives) at the arbitrariness of the communist system, then the present one makes us laugh at the *dramatis personae* themselves, for its comical effect is essentially fabricated by bringing people down from whatever elevated position they (think they) have. Thus the red army as much as lamas are presented as imperfect people who make mistakes, such as falling asleep on night guard, and being caught while scouting in the forest.

One of the things that make Anecdote B so funny to a Mongolian listener, I therefore think, is the manner – so familiar from the communist propaganda cinema of the 1950s and 1960s – in which the lamas are presented as if caught in their strange superstitions and needs. For example, is not enough for them capture the enemy; no, the lamas want to sacrifice him in an excess of irrational violence, which eventually is what enables the prisoner to escape. Still, of course, had Anecdote B actually represented a sample of real propaganda, then no red army officer would have allowed himself to be captured this easily, let alone appearing in the hilarious guise of the enemy, or, indeed, stupidly attending his insect bites before contemplating his escape.

Chuluun the real Darhad is no role model, and herein lies the full extent of Anecdote B's subversiveness, in the sense that it is an inherently comical narrative, which leaves no room for the ideal. While the lamas clearly are the worst hit, no possible victim goes free in this characteristic piece of meta-political satire. And that, I repeat, constitutes its most lasting message: that there are tales, histories (*tüüh*), without heroes.

THE COMICAL MNEMONIC TROPE

The Darhads are famous for their joking all over Mongolia. While this tendency to speak 'in a roundabout way' (*toi-roo yardah*) is not always considered to be a good thing (see Pedersen, forthcoming), many people in the Shishged consider it to be a necessary fact of life. As Tsegmed, a Darhad poet and former journalist, explained to me:

I have travelled all over Mongolia, but nowhere were people speaking like

they do here. Darhads speak in a poetic way. They use metaphors (*ziirlel*) and alliteration (*tolgoi holboh*) a lot. It is connected to our character (*chanar*), and to the nature (*baigal*) around here. The Halh lands stretches from Uvs in the west to Buir Nuur in the east, but the Darhad land only lies in between the Olin Davaa and the Örög Davaa. Everyone knows each other around here, and the *taiga* encompasses us on all sides. The place is like a stomach. If you speak in an open manner (*il todoor*), it will be inappropriate (*evgüi*). So, things are invariably said in a roundabout way.

For example, instead of saying that someone's shirt is dirty, we will sing a song about it. It is not sung directly to the person [which it is about], but to someone else, and then it goes round, so that finally the person will learn about it. The joking is taking place in secret (*dalduur shogloj baij*), but eventually he will become aware of what he is being criticised for. Such are the famous Darhad joke songs. They may appear as common songs of the people, but they are not, for they always have authors. But they are unknown. If you ask, people will just say, 'well, I heard that song at a wedding.' This may appear to be a very superficial mode of expression, but under the surface there is a grand idea. In Halh songs, it is as if things are being said directly (*shuud helchihej bairaa yom shig*). Darhad songs on the other hand have a hidden meaning (*dald utgatai yom ldaa*).

Tsegmed's words confirm that there is close affinity between joke songs⁸ and gossip (Bergmann 1993). But the same goes for anecdotes in that they supposedly also involve some real state of affairs, which is being made into an object of ridicule. As in the joke songs, most *onigoo* thus involve a person or a group of persons who at some point have done something wrong or stupid, of which the song serves as a reminder. As in the case of gossip, a strong normative undercurrent thus seems to run beneath the Darhad anecdotes: they often include an element of critique, a certain 'evaluative component' (Bergmann 1993: 8). This was made clear to me when I once asked a Darhad friend to tell me all the anecdotes he knew of. 'Morten,' he then said, 'there is no way I can do that. Most *onigoo* I know are about people living around here, and imagine if they found out that you have been recording me telling these things about them!'

Returning now to the discussion of mnemonic tropes, Dorj-Palam's anecdotes are interesting given that a similarly comical attitude towards the events of the 1930s does not seem to prevail among other Mongolian groups, who share the same essential history of religious oppression. In that sense, the Darhads can be said to take up a middle position between the Ulaanbaatar Halh and the Russian Buryat. Neither totally paranoid nor fully digital, the above narratives seem to instantiate a complex mnemonic space, where the characteristic double vision of people who were subject to state socialism can be re-enacted. For if these narratives may be said to facilitate an unmasking of state socialist ideology as briefly suggested above, then it is important to emphasise that they do so in a decidedly double-edged manner. If, on the one hand, these narratives serve to reveal the random process through which heroes as well as villains were identified during

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

(especially) the paranoid 1930s, then, on the other hand, the same narratives also serve to unleash a repressed layer of suffering and guilt, which seem to run deep among certain families, whose relatives were purged during that period.

It was only a couple of years back, and following a painful visit to the national archives in Ulaanbaatar to document the fate of their purged relatives, that Dorj-Palam's family received official recognition of their victimhood, and were allocated the standard 1 million Tg. compensation for their 'repression by false political affairs' (*uls töriin hils heregt helmegdegch*). Several other Darhad families have gone through the same process of moral and economic rehabilitation over the last decade (I heard of at least a handful in Ulaan-Uul). All this is to be understood against the backdrop that, until 1990, most people lived in total oblivion of the whereabouts of their purged kinsmen. Indeed, many children who grew up following the purges were kept ignorant about the real fate of relatives who had fallen victim to them. This secrecy was maintained, not only to save the children from the unsettling truth about their relatives (the explanation favoured today), but also, and much more controversially, because some of their parents had meanwhile been incorporated into the state or party apparatus following a deliberate strategy on behalf of the rulers (cf. also Humphrey 1994, but see Kaplonski 1999 for a contrasting view). Evidently, such clear-cut breaks with the past must have produced an intense (if also deeply repressed) sensation of guilt amongst those people, who found themselves making a living from the same political body, which had caused the death or imprisonment of their relatives (see also Humphrey 1994).⁹

Mongolian society, in that sense, had as few pure heroes as it had pure villains. Instead, there was a 'presence of both subordination and domination in almost everyone's life' (Humphrey 1994: 24). Virtually any person could—and still today can—be identified as both victim and oppressor, for practically everyone was subject to as well as rendering **other people object to the??check author****** state socialist 'social contract' (cf. Zizek 1993).

I believe this is why, unlike for instance in the more well known Jewish jokes, Dorj-Palam's stories do not implicate a clear-cut distinction between oppressors and victims; between the cause of the purges, and their effect. On the contrary, his story telling evinces an essential blurring of this opposition by allowing the two positions to swap places in the different anecdotes. While anecdote A and B share the same theme, namely the conflict between Buddhism and Communism in the 1930s, then the two stories also present two opposing views on this tragedy, namely the perspective of the lamas and the (Mongolian) Red Army respectively. If the victims in Anecdote A are clearly the lamas and the communists clearly the oppressors, then in Anecdote B it is the other way around, with the lamas constituting the oppressors and the communists the victims.

CONCLUSION

We may conceive of the political anecdotes presented in this article as two memorable snapshots from one of the most turbulent periods of modern Mongolian history, as well as an indicative sample of Darhad oral history. They offer, I believe, a glimpse into the narrative ethos of contemporary Shishged Darhad society in terms of what matters, and what does not, when the inhabitants of this rural backwater are telling their stories. Indeed, one may even identify a unique mnemonic trope in these shared orchestrations of the past, which is the main reason why I have chosen to discuss them here.

If the digital and the allegorical attitudes represent the two poles on a continuum between the most direct and the most indirect moral judgements, or could we say between a radically liberal and a radically conservative stance towards the past, then the comical mnemonic trope, as I now hope to have established, seems to inhabit that precarious middle position on which moral propositions are both literal and figurative, 'real' and 'unreal,' at the same time (cf. also Bateson 2000). Deftly navigating within this suspense, seasoned storytellers like Dorj-Palam propagate a morally and logically ambivalent attitude to the past; a double vision in which people appear simultaneously guilty and not guilty; guilty because this mnemonic trope enables people to remember to remember (what took place), not guilty since it also aids them in remembering to forget (why it took place). Humour, after all, always was recognised by the intelligentsia for its unique capacity to deal with the individual and collective crises caused by the random 'objectivity' of communist policies (e.g. Kundera 1992). Certainly, for rural Mongolia, the irreducible ambivalence of the comical seems to capture peoples' attitudes better than Václav Havel's much-cited contention that, under communism, the essential non-dissident stance was 'pretending not to pretend' (1986).

What I have here identified as the comical mnemonic trope, in sum, can be said to represent a distinctively performative orchestration of the past, which enables the Darhads to bridge the gap between destiny and chance, between who they were before, and who they are now. It is, one might say, a distinct way of domesticating history by putting it into play; a unique mode of connecting the repressed and subjective memories of the past with the contested social and cultural values of the present: we were not wrong, we were not right; they were not wrong, they were not right. Now, all we can do is to laugh.

NOTES

¹An earlier version of this article was part of my draft Ph.D. dissertation (Pedersen 2002), but was eventually omitted due to space considerations. I thank Caroline Humphrey for her encouragement and productive critique. Two anonymous reviewers have offered some

THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

very valuable comments, for which I am also grateful. Finally, I would to express my gratitude to Hüreibaatar and Uranchimeg for our many interesting discussions.

²This is the most important mountain-pass in the Shishged Valley; politically, geographically and culturally sealing the Darhad Valley off from the southern steppe-lands. See also Chapter 1.

³The joke, writes Berger (1997: 153), 'is probably not universal. Thus it is my impression that East Asian cultures, though they are full of the comic, have not cultivated the joke as has been the case in Europe and the Middle East.'

⁴The following anecdotes were collected in the summer 2000 in collaboration with Bum-Ochir Dulam.

⁵The Tenggis River flows from the Mongolian/Russian border into the Shishged River. Since the name Tenggis appears at the beginning of the *Secret History* (Cleaves 1982: 1), the Darhads claim that Chingghis Khan himself originates from their region.

⁶This term is widely used by Mongolian Buddhists to refer to any kind of religious war, often but not necessarily mythical of nature.

⁷This is probably a Mongolian name for the Panchen Lama (Bum-Ochir Dulam, personal communication).

⁸The Darhad 'joke songs' (*shog duu*) or 'mocking songs' (*hoshin duu*) have been described and analysed in a number of publications (e.g. Badamhatan 1986: 145; Pegg 1991: 230–31; see also Tsegmed 1992).

⁹I stress that I do not claim to be discussing any concrete case here. Rather, I am referring to *general* attitudes towards the purges as they are revealed, for instance, in Dorj-Palam's anecdotes about these events. Far from attempting to pass any judgement, then, what I am trying to do in the present analysis is to understand how certain narratives make people 'remember events that [during communism] did not occur or were described in terms unfamiliar to those who experienced them' (Watson 1994: 6).

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THE STATE AND NATION SINCE CHINGGIS KHAN

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