



relation. The kind of property in question is what I call 'personal' – it belongs to someone by virtue of long use and physical interaction. One focus of this article, therefore, is to shift attention back to the 'person-thing' aspect of property, but another is to draw attention to the existence of personal property *within* various encompassing categories of collective property. Most of the paper is devoted to a detailed analysis of the Mongolian case. But this example may have more general import for the understanding of socialist society, since not only were Mongolian concepts of personal property not erased by the Soviet-type regime, but arguably they were enhanced by the practices of 'actually existing socialism'.

In the long history of Mongolia, funeral rites have changed, especially with the advent of Buddhism from the seventeenth century and its brutal, though incomplete, suppression under Russian Soviet influence (see Bawden 1977; 1985; Jagchid & Hyer 1979: 96–109; Kornakova 1904; Rinchen 1955). Practices regarding property have also changed over the centuries, in somewhat the same rhythm, the main transformation occurring between the 1920s and 1950s, with the elimination of feudal relations and the drastic limitation of familial property as Soviet-style collectivism was imposed. If Buddhism deprecated the individual accumulation of property, the socialist regime (for different reasons) more or less forbade it, and it is not surprising therefore that the standard binary distinction between private and collective property is not very informative for Mongolia. Private property as a legal category could be said hardly to have existed during socialist times, while collective property comprised a vast, diversified, and multi-stranded sphere. Yet relatively little is known about actual behaviour in relation to broad brush-stroke characterizations of state, public, or socialist property in this region, as Mongolian ethnographers had small interest in such a topic and the country was more or less closed to foreign anthropologists. It is in this context that I advance my study of death rituals and personal property in the late socialist period of the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> That historical context has now vanished, for Mongolia in the 1990s abandoned Communism, promoted privatization, and encouraged revivals of both Buddhism and shamanism. But I hope that my investigation of how people in those days dealt with significant 'things' at the time of death may be of more general import by helping us to re-think our 'common sense metaphors' of property and possession (Strathern 1993: 98) and hence to imagine alternative epistemologies of people-object relations.

Mongolians say that death should not be regarded as such a terrible event. In Buddhist thinking it is 'an eternal truth', a reprise of a person's earlier deaths, and a foreshadowing of those of the future. To die in the right way means separating oneself from this life in order that one may be reborn, and for this one should prepare by distancing oneself from material objects. In fact, even though in old age a Mongol man or woman is expected to have few goods left, their property already having been passed to the younger generation, this separation from the last remaining possessions is felt to be a hard one. Then, in a number of further rituals as soon as death occurs, the living give other objects to the dead person, placing them in greater or lesser proximity to the corpse, in the shroud, inside the coffin, and in the grave. Through the intense discussions that go on among the bereaved around these activities, we see, I suggest, that it is not just that people change objects by their

use of them, but also that objects can be employed to change people, that is, to improve or 'correct' them. This article thus moves into the terrain explored by Janet Hoskins (1998), who shows how the meanings given to what she calls 'biographical objects' can be used in telling stories to make sense of people's otherwise untold life histories. In this case, however, the focus is not on narratives but on actions, those undertaken by both the dying and the bereaved, as significant and transformative deeds.

### *Personal property and private property*

'Personal property' as the term is used here is not a kind of private property but radically different from it. Let me start by explaining how Mongolians distinguish two subtly different kinds of personal property. The distinction they draw is not one of dissimilar rights *vis-à-vis* other persons but concerns different social understandings of the relation between the person and the thing.

When a person lies mortally ill, I was told, valuable possessions such as rings, watches, or necklaces are removed from them, or, better, the dying person herself asks for them to be taken off and handed over to appropriate relatives. In the presence of these precious things, it is said, a person cannot die, because desire still ties them to the world. Taking away such treasures is held to pacify the dying, to allow them to die.

The pious action of giving up valuables, which is clearly influenced by Buddhist ideology, coexists with another idea, which seems to combine Buddhist with folk-religious concepts. It is believed that the spirit or 'soul' (*siins*), even after death, remains emotionally attached to one particular object which was much used in the person's lifetime, the *xorgodoson yum*. The verb *xorgodox* means to long for something (an object, a place, an animal or a person), to take shelter in it, and be unwilling to leave it. Perhaps this particular thing (*yum*) stands for everything that the dying person was attached to or somehow inhabited, and I shall call this object the 'refuge thing'. Yet no one knows what this thing is, not even the dying person, because it is the soul which clings to it and one's soul may have attachments of which one is unaware. So after a death, the relatives must immediately go to an astrologer (*zurxaich*) to find out what this refuge thing is. It is not necessarily valuable, perhaps a pair of spectacles, a snuff-bottle, a diary, or a flint used for making fire. The astrologer gives a hint, indicating the kind of thing, and the family then usually has no problem in deciding what it is. This object is then speedily given away, destroyed, or sold, or even buried with the body;<sup>2</sup> – anyway it is got rid of, because to keep it in the family would be to risk continuous plaguing by the soul. This would be manifest as bad luck for the family,<sup>3</sup> and it would also be a sad fate for the soul, unable to free itself from its emotional tie and take a new birth. The valuables and refuge thing are both 'personal property', and they could even be the same physical object, but we see that the Mongols differentiate between two kinds of relation, one an effect of desire for prestigious things, the other constituted by involuntary fondness.

As regards relations with other people, both the valuables and the refuge thing belong to the dying person, but they are also in principle part of the

joint inheritance (*öv, xöröngö*) of the family. Normally, by the time of death the members will have long ago come to an agreement about who will possess them next. Yet, the refuge thing is excised from the inheritance, and this deserves a little further discussion. Paradoxically, it has to be given away because the link with the deceased was too strong; in other words, the object was too close to the person for it to be ordinary property and form part of the heritage passed as shares (*öv xuv*) through the generations. In constituting the link with the refuge thing as realizable only through the abstractions of *zurxai* astrology, the Mongols are differentiating it from the relations of intention and desire that pertain to the glittering valuables noted in the first example.

Thus if the objects of desire are one kind of personal property, the refuge thing is what we might call hyper-personal property. It is significant that in both cases the tie between person and thing is established through constant use. The feeling that certain lived-with things are particularly evocative of a person who has died may be universal, but the precise forms and import of such an idea in different societies are not. I was told that tradition-minded Mongols prefer old things, well worn, with a patina of use, and a deep, long-lasting, inherent smell. Rather than buy a new bowl, for example, such a person might prefer one with cracks and signs of mending, showing that such a bowl had been cared for and used. For such a bowl to become 'his', he would have to use it too, but the relation is hardly exclusive, since part of the value of the bowl lies in the marks of its handling by others. Mongols keep the clothes of close relatives who have died, the stains and odour of them reminding them of the loved one. In the case of prominent heroes, items such as weapons or clothes may be worshipped as a communal heritage.<sup>4</sup> Particular admired qualities of the deceased adhere to the object, these being aspects of his (good) fortune (*xeshig*). This can apply to the most humdrum of things, such that they suddenly become valuable after the owner's death. For example, a Mongolian family of my acquaintance was amused when a very aged relative's piss-bottle was stolen after he died, but the reason was clear – the bottle had acquired the quality of 'long life'. Thus it emerges that personal property in general is not conceived of in opposition either to joint property or to previously individually held possessions. Rather, it is, as it were, an additive part, through which one's own use cumulates on the handling by predecessors. As I mention later, this concept of material possessions is paralleled by similar ideas about the social person.

The refuge thing, however, breaks out of this idea by its very excess, as if one particular person belongs to the thing rather than the other way around. Even with an ordinary, but especially redolent, inherited object one is sometimes afraid that the deceased's soul will creep back to it, and in this case one may go to a lama to have him perform a rite of separation, after which it can be used without anxiety. Thus, to clarify, it is not that there is any fastidious revulsion from the residues of previous users (rather the reverse), but that one might need quite simply to excise their longing if it had become excessive. It is as if, within the communal there is an intensifying scale of the personal, culminating in a hyper-identification that bursts beyond the collective. Interestingly, there is a somewhat similar structure of ideas with regard to land. Pastures (and land in general) up to the 1990s were public property, that is,

used by households subject to the control of institutions such as princely fiefdoms and monasteries or, more recently, to that of brigades, collectives, and the state (Sneath 2001). This does not mean that there were no personal ties to land. People had accustomed seasonal pastures which they would call 'mine'. But there was also a relation to land equivalent to that with the refuge thing. The *toont gazar* is the particular spot where each individual's afterbirth was buried, a place one is reverentially drawn to and should never forget. If someone is ill or dispirited, he should privately go and roll in the earth at this place, a sacred act of becoming physically part of it, 'as if one belonged to that land', as one Mongol confided to me.

Let us contrast this nexus of ideas with personal possession in societies with private property. I will not rehearse the debate between Strathern (1993) and Thomas (1993) about whether 'possession' in Euro-American ideology is conceived in ways that differ radically from those of societies such as Melanesia, but it does seem to me that the massive presence of private property inflects the possibilities available to *imagining* 'possession'. The very word in English works as a metaphor, as Strathern notes (1993: 98), suggesting the naturalness of holding on to things as against other people. Yet, even in Europe, other constructions were possible in times less saturated with capitalism than our own. Philosophers such as Rousseau and Smith inscribed a need for the gaze of the other in the very definition of humanity, and they argued that this need could be judged either negatively, as vanity or *amour propre*, or neutrally, as the desire for esteem that is inherent in the interdependence of life in society (Todorov 2001: 14–17). We can see that 'possessions' might partake in such an ambiguity. They could be seen as an effect of the desire to surpass and compete with others. But they could also appear as the signs whereby people seek social recognition, not out of 'vanity' but because our accession to humanity consists in the acknowledgement we accord one another (Todorov 2001: 15 paraphrasing Smith). The institution of private property, stipulating exclusivity, enshrines the former attitude, whereas it seems to me that the Mongols' views, at least in their more philosophical moments, had much in common with the latter. In the 1980s, valuables, for example, retained a trace of their earlier badge-like quality (i.e. demonstrating social status, such as being married or a member of an ethnic group), and in this way they can be seen as *reaching out* towards the consideration of others. In this light, the relinquishing of valuable personal property at death can be seen not just as the rejection of desire but also as a sign that one renounces the need for recognition by living people, in other words, it is a turning away from social life as such.

Perhaps such an idea of possessions as signifying human interdependence is dimly present everywhere, but it is swamped by private property that is conceived competitively and exclusively. Let us pursue some other implications of the 'private' category. Private ownership does not depend on use. One thinks, for example, of the case recently described in a British newspaper of a small boy given a train-set for Christmas. But when he unwrapped the present, the box was empty. This prompted many people to go to great trouble, obtaining a key and opening up the closed Boots department store, in order to get him 'his' train-set. The boy owned the train-set by virtue of the same operation (a sale) as that by which a pension fund owns shares in a

company – an ‘abstract’ legal operation that is independent of scale, for private property can be held by collectivities as well as individuals. As an idea, it homogenizes all kinds of relations between people and things. When Mr Brown dies, all of his things, the car he uses every day, his house rented out in France, his watch, his money, are legally ‘his’ to the same degree and disposable according to law. Daniel Miller writes (1987: 118–20):

Unfortunately, the particular division most often invoked in contemporary political rhetoric concerning public and private property is misleading ... since the concept of private property suggests a close relationship between person and thing, whilst in practice private property is an institution which works to produce precisely the opposite effect. Private property as an institution conflates the direct relationship between the individual and those objects with which he or she is associated in self-construction with those over which he or she has legal rights. As an institution, private property is the foundation of abstract relationships between anonymous people and postulated objects, an extreme example of which is the relationship between shareholder and investment.

Miller goes on (1987: 120) to make a distinction between private property and ‘personal property’. He argues that the latter is associated with communal property, such as state- or kin-held property, rather than private property, since personal property ‘is a statement of relative inalienability’. Miller’s statement raises three issues which I discuss briefly in turn: the conflation between private property and possession; the idea of relative inalienability; and the association between personal property and communal property.

As Miller notes, our common-sense idea of private property conflates it with ‘those objects with which [a person] is associated in self-construction’, yet such an overlap is surely an ideological obfuscation. We all know of situations like the office-worker who regards a computer as ‘mine’ when that machine is owned by the company. Yet, as suggested above, the exclusionary connotations of ‘possession’ in capitalist society inflect such a relation differently, I would suggest, from the otherwise similar appropriations I shall describe for socialist society.

The idea that personal property is ‘relatively inalienable’ is also problematic, mainly because of its ambiguity. This is an idea one could agree with if it refers to the way in which an object is felt to be imbued with the cumulated personhood of its previous owners. But this is a different sense of ‘inalienable’ from that provided by Annette Weiner (1992: 26), whose formulation posits inalienable property as mostly impersonal (land, regalia, inheritable titles, magic texts, etc.), and, while often given out on loan, inalienable from social entities rather than individual persons. Inside social groups, however, people’s goods are constantly being given away – and given away for ever, *a fortiori* in the case of death. Thus, in another sense one could say that property in its *personal* aspect *is* alienable.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the case of the refuge thing its too-personal impregnation compels alienation. The discourse of ‘inalienability’ deflects attention from the dilemmas of individuals, and I am referring here not just to the difficulty of giving up treasured possessions, but to the problem of giving to one person rather than another. It is to this point that I now turn, for it is around the time of death that the issue most importantly arises, before addressing the question of personal property in socialist society.

## *Social contexts of personal property*

In the 1980s Mongolian people did not generally consider it proper to make wills (*gerees*, *gereelel*) disposing of their possessions after death by their own choice. With the exception of meritorious donations made to the monastery, all of the inheritance (*öv*) should be handed over in customary proportions to the rightful heirs, the immediate family,<sup>6</sup> with the last parental part remaining to be taken over by the youngest son. In recent centuries written wills have been exceptional acts, made when there was a question of publicly dispossessing heirs. But in practice, as I was told, there are always choices to be made, against custom as it were, and this becomes a matter of moral decisions. The old person may be properly silent until the very point of death, but it may happen that he knows, and everyone else knows, that he has a favourite among the grandchildren and longs to give that child a special valuable. Now if he dies without speaking out, it is feared that not only will his soul remain unquiet but that the child also will be haunted by the unrelieved attachment of the grandparent (*xorgodono*). Knowing that the last moments are nigh, the old person may think, 'I'm going to die anyway, so even if I offend custom I'll relieve my soul,' and he may decide to make the bequest to the beloved child. Paradoxically, according to Maussian thought, in this case ultimate detachment from a person is achieved by giving something to them.

Clearly, such dilemmas arise within a specific set of ideas about familial property, among which the major categories may be roughly translated as *öv* (inheritance), *ed* (goods), *ömch* (possessions), and *xöröngö* (property, capital). These terms are often paired with one another to convey nuances of meaning. I would like to draw attention to the word *xöröngö*, which conveys an idea of transformation and multiplication, since the same word is used for yeast, for the ferment used to make alcohol, for seeds, for money capital, and more generally for a source or origin. The ideal is that *xöröngö* in the sense of bacterial ferment should continue for ever, like the family's hearth fire. Ideologically, therefore, we can see *xöröngö* in the sense of property as conveying the idea of a series of growing, transforming things, parallel to the reproductive human kin relations created over generations. This conception must be related to the fact that the most salient forms of property in pre-modern Mongolia used to be people and livestock. In the 1980s the familial inheritance (*öv xöröngö*) continued to be divided among heirs by the notion of shares (*xuv*), an idea of proportions of a whole as distinct from the allocation of particular objects. I was told that the disposal of *xöröngö* property by

It is in this context that the Western-derived idea of ‘private property’ (Hann 1997; Pipes 1999) has an uncertain existence in Mongolia. Private property is known as *xuviin xöröngö* or *xuviin ömch*, and neither expression has eliminated the idea of the share (*xuv*). A man might buy his own motor bike, for example, and could dispose of it. Not only, though, would the decision to sell be subject to family discussion, but the proceeds should in principle be shared among those who provided the resources to acquire such a valuable thing in the first place. Furthermore, a seller should keep back some tiny part of the object – like a hair from the mane in the case of a horse – in order not to lose the fortune (*xeshig*) of that thing. One may see bunches of such hairs tied up in the roof-poles of yurts, and the fortune thus accumulated belongs to the family rather than to the individual who sold the animal. In the socialist 1980s such ‘private property’ was a tiny proportion of property in general. Items that are private property in many societies, such as houses, vehicles, and work implements, were generally communally owned.

Yet I argue, in confirmation of Miller’s suggestion, that socialist society *de facto* strengthened the presence of personal property *within* the category of collective property. This happened again through use. Perhaps there is some universally human quality that will always interfere with total uniformity. The effect, at any rate, seems to have been to transform the ‘public thing’ (*nüitiin yum*) into something personalized through the individuality of usage. Let me provide two examples, one from Russia and one from Mongolia. Sergei Alashev (1995) describes the working of a Russian ball-bearing factory. In theory, since the output is meant to be uniform, the workers should be faced with rows of identical machines. In fact some of them are very old (working since the Swedish concession in 1924), others are made in the factory itself, and all of them, particularly a batch which arrived with a design fault, have been patched up in one way or another by the workers themselves. It takes years for each worker to become familiar with a machine.

The equipment works thanks to the fact that the worker knows it inside out. It is HIS (or HER) machine. It is almost her child. *Kadrovie* (experienced) workers know how often and where it has to be lubricated, what exactly it is necessary to adjust and when, where and how it should be hit (with a sledgehammer) to eliminate a defect. The day-to-day setting-up is done by the operators themselves. We often hear talk of this or that machine having its own character, arrogance, that each one needs an individual approach (Alashev 1995: 80).

In this situation, the director’s bright idea of rotating workers’ jobs, which he picked up on a visit to Japan, was laughable. As Alashev comments, ‘Having mastered the finer points of the machine, the workers become practically indispensable, almost appendages of the machine’.

I have introduced this Russian example because it is directly comparable to a case from rural Mongolia in the 1970s. Each brigade in the commune was allocated a large cart and four horses to draw it. My informant’s uncle had charge of these horses. They were not his property, but he tended them with special care, gave them training and extra hay, and refused to allow ordinary villagers to make use of them. The horses became remarkably strong, dashing creatures. They attracted the attention of the brigadier, who decided to give one of them to the district leader as a present. The uncle strongly



objected. The horse was given, however, and the uncle refused to go on driving the cart. As it turned out, the leader was unable to make use of the horse – it was too headstrong and could only in effect be driven by the uncle – and so in the end it was given back to the brigade.

As with the ball-bearing machines, the horses, I suggest, became personal property, and again this was constituted primarily as a ‘person-thing’ relation. The effect of the individual transformation of the object, nevertheless, was to make it inaccessible to others. Why do we see a greater tendency in the socialist enterprise than in the family to make alterations and physically mould the object into something another person would have utmost difficulty in using? Perhaps this happened because it had to, because workers in collectives had no rights *vis-à-vis* one another, whereas in the family the customary rights of seniors and juniors, men and women, more distant relatives, and so on were well known, if not always adhered to. This theme, as also the topic of what one might call ‘managerial property’ under socialism (for example, the director who treats the entire enterprise as ‘his’), cannot be treated here as fully as it deserves. But I would end this section by observing that there are also many similarities between personal property in the family and in the collective. I was told by Mongols that the emotional and ethical issues of overdependence on, or clinging to, material things applied equally in the socialist sphere. In both contexts people would rather avoid using the word ‘mine’ (*minii*). Yet their actions spoke louder than words and everyone else did not hesitate to talk of ‘Dorji’s truck’, and so forth, even if in a legal sense it was not his at all.

Still, neither in the family nor the collective were relations stable over time or harmonious. In the 1980s people told me that families were quarrelling more over inheritance than they had done in the past. This might be difficult to believe, since in the 1980s inherited property was relatively insignificant and easily replaced in value by earnings. The issue for my respondents, however, was not how much was inherited but the perception that modern city life had brought about a decline in filial respect and the emergence of individualist attitudes. For religious people these were both indices of the ‘calamitous time’ (*tsöviin tsag*) in which we live. The *tsöviin tsag* is a Buddhist concept, the declining era of ever-increasing impurity of minds before the emergence of the next Buddha, the Maitreya. This religious sense of a crumbling society was of course in dynamic tension with the socialist ideology of increasing prosperity and success. In the mid-1980s the latter was still a prevalent public idea, hiding the processes of differentiation and competitiveness that have recently become apparent in Mongolia. Perhaps the ‘calamitous time’ idea was used to register the sense of the disturbance and disempowerment created by state policies that expropriated property from domestic groups and in doing so changed them. The Mongol case was, however, much less of a social overturning than that in eastern Europe (Verdery 1996), for the Mongols had been accustomed for centuries to overarching rights over land and to pervasive ‘dues’ owed by subjects to the state in labour and livestock taxes. So perhaps the ‘calamitous time’ discourse marked something more along the lines of a feeling of moral uncertainty, in which the relative decline of the range of familial authority had the effect of widening out the arenas in which Buddhist ethics were simply absent in

socialist spheres. In this situation, the funerary rituals of the 1980s were a distinctively religious context in a predominantly secular society. Certain aspects of property in general, notably its interaction with power relations, are hardly illuminated at all in them. Yet the funeral rites were not 'out of time'. For one thing, as I briefly discuss in my final section, they were distinctively different from pre-revolutionary rites, and for another, they constituted an intervention in social life. Being morally sustaining in spirit, they acted to strengthen and extend those Mongolian cultural values that accorded well with the Soviet variant of socialism, in defiance as it were of the disturbing underlying social trends.

### *Some ideas of personhood*

This observation leads to a consideration of the relation between people and

other signs (see below). Coexisting in a patchy and somewhat uncertain way with the Buddhist notion of *karma* (the life one lives now is a result of the good and bad deeds done in previous lives), the result of such ideas is that a given person can also be seen as a 'cumulate', as somehow more than just themselves. This idea can surface in a number of contexts including the shamanic, where the personhood of a given shaman is expressed as the sum or cumulation of the spiritual powers of all the previous shamans in his or her line (Humphrey 1996: 188-92).

There is another concept of the person in the rituals of death, the 'cosmological person'. This is represented above all by the corpse of the deceased (a body born at a particular cosmological instant and place), but also by material objects. In the 1980s Mongols knew very well the main astrological facts pertaining to themselves and people close to them (chiefly the date and time of birth in the twelve-animal cycle). For expert advice they would consult a *zurxaich*. The *zurxai* consists of a book containing lists and tables of signs: the elements (fire, air, water, wood, metal), the twelve-animal cycle of years, the planets and constellations, the signs of the Zodiac, the thirty-eight 'symbols' (jewel, dagger, blue lake, red sun, razor, etc.), the 'lords' of the days, the 'black dog of the sky', and so on. The relations among the objects in the *zurxai* are quite complex, since they consist not just of difference/similarity, sequence, addition, and so forth but also of concepts such as domination, being full, guarding, being stable, absorbing, or closing-off (Mostaert 1969: 21). The relations between astrological signs are conventions that stand for relations between the objects themselves, for example, that fire and air combine to produce force, while water and air produce discord. What is crucial here is that the relations are simultaneous, not 'discursive'. They are synchronic because they represent the way the universe truly is, has been, and will be. This is what enables the *zurxai* to be used to discover what must be the case in some situation of time or place that is otherwise unknowable, and to make a link with the cosmologically defined person.

A very important part of astrology is decisions about direction. On a significant journey, taking the 'wrong' direction defined in respect of one's own astrological characteristics, results in prolonged misfortune. At the same time, one's way is criss-crossed by the movements of other creatures and unseen powers travelling along their paths. Hence the extraordinary importance given to the correct directional placing of people and things in the funerary rituals, and the significance of rites of 'drawing in' or alternatively of 'repelling' spiritual powers encountered on the way. Objects belonging to people also have this directional-spatial aspect. Not only do they have their own symbolizing qualities (the sash which 'encircles', the cooking-pot which is open and 'upward looking', the collar which is the highest, senior part of the coat) but they also stand for the people who use them. Thus to step over a hat is to pollute it, since a hat is symbolically a 'high' thing, and to step over a particular person's hat is to insult and harm that very person.

The individual considered cosmologically was thought to reproduce an astrologically given generic character or personality. People in the 1980s were identified by others, and even identified themselves, with the supposed character of 'their' animal in the cycle according to their year of birth. I met parents who were surprised when their young children did not show the

expected temperament of, for example, the Horse, or the Chicken. There are sayings about people in general, for instance, 'A person born in the Sheep year is calm and gentle', but people may also say of themselves 'I'm a Hare-year person and so I may be (badly) affected by something'. As we shall see, this astrological aspect of the person is also recognized in the funeral ritual. Unsurprisingly, the actual lived personality may not have tallied with the astrologically given temperament. In this case, material objects are deployed to 'correct' the character of the deceased. Personal property is not separated off from such considerations, since the acts of giving up material possessions, for example, also help to effect an ethical transformation in the soul.

### *A description of the Mongol rituals of death*

#### The laying-out

When someone dies (*üxe-*) everything is taken out of the *ger* (yurt) except for the dead person and the deity-statues. The body is laid on a white felt in the northern part, between the hearth and the altar, a man facing to the north-west and a woman to the northeast. The idea is that the body should face the way the soul must go, to the north, to be received by the gods, and that one side should be left free for the soul to escape.

If the dead person was religious, he or she would have had a 'bosom book' (*öbörön sudar*), a favourite religious text carried constantly in the breast of the gown. This book is placed under the head. All other belongings are removed. Oil-lamps are lit and incense and juniper-powder burnt. The smoke-hole of the *ger* is closed over, chinks at the bottom of the walls filled in with earth, and the door is shut. People are afraid of corpses. No one stays with the body, except perhaps a lama to see to the lamp and read prayers. The door is barred from outside, and a special sign indicating 'forbidden' is erected. This is a hair-rope, tied from the top right (east) corner of the door to a stone lying to the side. Red rags are tied to the rope.

If the family is living in a city apartment, one room is designated for the dead person and red and black strips of cloth are hung on the closed door, the black colour being a Russian influence. The family moves to live in another room.

#### 'Returning back'

A religious family would go immediately to consult a lama, so that he may 'open the golden vessel' (*altan sav nee-*), that is, he will explain to them the reason for the death and its relation to the fate (*zaya*) of the deceased. He will say whether the dead person had a proper life, whether he or she lived their destined life-span or died early, where the next life will be found, and he will indicate what the refuge thing is. The next life is always a human life, and the lama predicts quite firmly what kind of family it will be in, what the occupation will be, and whether the life will be happy or not. The place of the next life is sometimes declared to be a holy land, either India or

Tibet, but sometimes it is close at hand, in a family whose features are described in such a way that its identity may be guessed at. Indeed, the next life may even be in one's own family, in a younger generation. A woman can be born again as a man, and vice versa, although it is not thought a good destiny to change sex.

## The soul

The soul usually leaves the body before death. Indeed, the soul may have left and returned several times before a person dies.<sup>7</sup> Without a soul, the person becomes unfortunate, fails in everything, and may die unless the soul is recalled. If this cannot be done, the soul wanders and roams until the person dies and the proper rituals are conducted to free it from the attractions of this world. Some people say it leaves the body through the fourth finger of the left hand – for this reason Mongols often wear a silver *vachir* (thunderbolt, signifying immutability) ring on this finger, which is removed, of course, before death. Many people say that the soul in this period does not fully depart but 'penetrates' (*orshi-*) or 'sits in' (*suu-*) some living being. This might be an insect at worst, or a fish, or a bird. This kind of temporary penetration is not the same as the longing for the refuge thing, and is aimless. Only after some time will the soul be freed from this animal life, in any case not before forty-nine days have elapsed. After forty-nine days, the soul will find the path to its future place. This place may be the womb of a living woman. There are many stories of the bereaved recognizing the dead person in dreams during this period, and this always indicates that the deceased requires merit to be made (*buyan xii-*) to help her soul to a better future life. The family is in duty bound to order lamas to pray, or at the very least to ask a devout layperson to chant the *mani* prayer. Even in socialist times (1980s) people usually invited a lama to pray at home, though this was done privately, late at night, so that neighbours would not know.

## Requesting land

The lama or the astrologer must also give the family directions for finding an auspicious place for disposal of the corpse. The final resting-place should ideally be on the sunny slope of a hill, with a river to the south and a road in the vicinity. Two or three elders, often with a lama, set out immediately to 'survey the land'. Having found the spot, the spirit 'lords of the earth' are begged to permit a burial, for digging the ground and the disposal of corpses is thought to be an offence to them. With an antelope horn the lama now draws out a rectangle for the grave. He digs a token spadeful at the north-western corner, and then makes a request for the grave to be dug by strong young men. A folded ritual scarf (*xadag*) is put in the grave, a libation of milk is made, some cooked rice or millet is left, and the place is purified with incense and juniper-smoke. All of this is to placate the spirits of the earth. In some areas the process is known as 'buying the land' (*gazar xudaldaj avax*), and these and all subsequent offerings to the land-spirits are called 'the price'.



aim of this is to be able to recognize the person when they 'return back', since it is believed that the sign will reappear as a birthmark.

Then a male elder with one or two helpers enters the *ger* to prepare the body for burial. These people should wear their gowns and hats back to front and roll up their sleeves, all actions contrary to Mongol custom for everyday dress. The dead person's hair and nails are cut, and moustaches and beard are removed. In general, it is felt that the person should be naked at death (it is even good if the teeth have fallen out, as this indicates that the person has lived a sufficiently long life, will eat no more, and was destined to die at this time). The naked body is wrapped round in cloth up to the neck, as in swaddling. The body is placed on two undecorated white felts and then the whole is sewn up in a loose white cloth. The sewing is done anti-clockwise, contrary to everyday Mongol custom. Finally, the face is covered with a ritual scarf and a *nomyn xunjil* ('sacred blanket', a paper stamped with various prayers).

In the 1950s and 60s, when Russian cultural influence was particularly strong in Mongolia, some city people used to dress the body up in new clothes. Rings and other expensive jewellery were put on, and money (coins not banknotes) poured into the grave. Such lavish funerals came to be disapproved of and were rare by the 1980s. One relic of the Russian influence has survived: the use of a ritual scarf (*xadaq*) to cover the face, rather than a complete mummy-like wrapping with silk. The point of this is that the face can be revealed at the funeral. Formerly, no one saw the face after death, because 'The face of a corpse should not be shown to the (holy) sky'. Even today old people object to the revealing of the face and the use of the auspicious *xadaq* in conjunction with an inauspicious object like a dead body.

## Placing objects in the coffin

These days the body is also placed in a coffin. Under the head mourners place a brick of tea as an offering to the earth-spirits. A further series of objects is put in the coffin or the grave. First, there must be a bowl, placed beside the head, containing fruit (apples, sultanas), berries, grains, and tiny pieces of dried cheese. The cheese should be crumbled up so it is 'like seeds'. All of this is regarded not as food but as 'things that will grow'. I was told that the idea is to make an offering that multiplies and is inexhaustible.

Other goods are placed to follow the soul. For a man his belt/sash and saddle-cloth must be included, and for a woman her scissors, needle, and thread. For a baby there are toys. A small model of a walking-stick is sometimes put in for either sex. In the 1980s people sometimes went against the entire Buddhist ethic described earlier by adding other things the person liked, such as tobacco or vodka, money or jewellery. This was immensely disapproved of by the devout. Finally, there was the disposition of two significant items: the bosom book and the refuge thing. The former is put in the coffin if it has not been given to someone in inheritance, and, as noted earlier, if the refuge thing has not been got rid of in some other way, it can be placed in the coffin.

Another symbolic act with a different intent also takes place at this point. Many people put into the coffin a model animal cut out of paper, the kind

of animal being determined by the instructions of the astrologer. Significantly, this is not the animal of the birth-year, nor does it represent any animal the deceased kept or was fond of. In one recent case in Ulaanbaatar it was an elephant, but sheep and horses also occur (an old woman I knew was given a horse, even though she was not born in the horse year and did not have a horse). As mentioned earlier, each kind of animal is held to have a typical character. I have heard people say that the horse is fast, intelligent, and courageous; the sheep is innocent; the elephant is strong and calm, although there is a certain amount of variation in these characterizations. The one chosen should reflect the actual personality of the dead person, and act as a correction (*zasal*) to harmonize it with the character given by the birth-year.

The coffin is made of wood and in recent decades has often been covered with black or red cloth, a European influence. Some old people dislike this custom, since black is an 'evil' colour, and red is also felt to be inappropriate because it is not a natural colour found in the world and signifies revolution. Since the burial of the great Mongol scholar and writer, B. Rinchen, in early 1978, a new tradition appeared which rapidly spread from the city to the countryside. This is to line the coffin in white, and to cover its lower part in green silk and its lid in blue, representing the earth and the sky. To the blue 'sky' are sewn a sun, moon, and flame in golden cloth, using the iconographic signs of the *soyombo*, the Mongolian national emblem. In some recent burials, a white arrow has been added, too, to indicate that the life-path of the deceased was straight and always prospering. These symbols are understood and used by many Mongols, since their meaning is explained in widely used school textbooks. Such new burial customs can spread quickly in the city and surrounding areas, helped by the fact that there are certain people who make a speciality of organizing funerals, and many families consult them about procedure.

## The carrying-out

The corpse is 'put out to the countryside' (*xödööliüle-*), an expression which is used even in the city. The date, precise time, and 'direction' of carrying out the corpse are calculated by the astrologer. One male elder is designated as the 'bone-carrying person' (*yas barix xiin*), which is an honour.

The coffin is taken out of the *ger* or the room in an anti-clockwise path (*nar buruu* 'against the sun') round the hearth or centre. It is obligatory that the threshold, or a stick representing it, should be in some way broken, even sawn in half. In the city a thin stick is laid across the doorway, and the 'bone-carrying person' makes sure to tread on it so it snaps. All of this is the antithesis of correct everyday behaviour. The coffin must be taken a little way in the astrologically correct direction, even if the cemetery lies in a different direction. Then it is placed on a lorry for the final journey.

Just as the coffin sets out, the close family must perform the ritual of 'inviting prosperity' (*dalalga ava-*).<sup>8</sup> One of the children of the deceased, male or female, takes a platter containing food (milk products, sweets, sugar, cakes) and places it on the inner flap of their gown, which is considered propitious because fatty hands are wiped on it after eating. Lifting both hem and platter,



the child makes three clockwise circles in the air, calling to the dead soul, 'Leave your blessing/fortune with us! *Buyan xeshigee xairlaa! Xurai! Xurai! Xurai!*' This food must then be eaten by the family and on no account be given to outsiders. Some families include small items of the deceased's personal property in the bowl, the idea being to retain the luck of the dead person lingering in these things.

Setting out on the truck to the cemetery, the 'bone-carrying person', wearing his clothes back to front or inside out and his hat bent inwards, sits up in front with a basket containing rice, millet, loose tea, and a few coins. Whenever the cortege comes to a stream or crosses a road, handfuls of these things are sprinkled. I was told by some people that this action is to prevent the soul escaping down these paths, and by others that it is to placate evil spirits and thus debar them from coming in these ways.

## At the grave

Arriving at the grave site, the coffin is placed in the ground. In the grave, and sometimes also in the coffin, are placed the powder of 'nine precious things' (gold, silver, coral, pearl, turquoise, lapis lazuli, steel, copper, and mother-of-pearl). Also added is a small amount of earth, sand, holy water, a powder made of sweet-smelling grasses and juniper, and grains of millet, rice, or barley. These things are obtained in tiny quantities from the monastery where they have been magically empowered by special mantra-like formulas by the lamas. They are said to be further payments to the spirits of the earth.

These days, the ritual scarf is removed from the face and farewell words are read out, though old people disapprove of the custom. The mourners make up their own farewell words, describing the merits, birthplace, study, work, and achievements of the deceased.

The coffin lid is then fixed on, the space around it filled with gravel or sand, and the top is covered with a large, horizontal concrete slab. A gravestone may be erected. For important people, wreaths and flowers are laid by institutions, but this is felt to be a foreign custom. Drinking at the graveside was also copied from the Russians but is now much discouraged. 'What an absurdity,' people say, 'How can you have a party at a graveside?'

A new custom, wholly Mongol in origin, has developed in the last ten years. Very many city graves now have a tiny model of the Mongol *ger*, usually made of painted metal, placed on the concrete slab. An oil-lamp may be lit inside, and grains, juniper-dust, or a few coins inserted, but most of the yurts are empty, with the doors open. Sometimes, one also sees a small model table and chair or stool at the side of a grave. I was told that all of these are places for the soul to rest in if it happens to return.

Before a state law of the 1950s enjoining hygienic burial, funerary customs were rather different (Bawden 1977), and many old people still do not like the practices described above. The idea was that the corpse, left unburied, should quickly disintegrate. There was no gravestone. Grass should cover the place soon, so it becomes indistinguishable from the open steppe. 'We are born from land,' said one man, 'and we want to fade away into the land.' It was good if wild animals and birds quickly came to devour the body. Even today

any place associated with animals is considered auspicious for burial. So if, at the 'surveying of the land', the elders see a cow at some place, or a hare lying, they will choose that spot. It is especially good if a hollow can be found where a cow gave birth to a calf, or a mare to a foal. If it rains or snows during the burial that is considered a good omen, since precipitation brings growth, fertility, and prosperity. The dead person in this case is said to have been meritorious, since he brings such good things by his death. This saying in fact neatly expresses the ambiguity of all the actions in the burial rituals which seem to denote removal of the body into 'nature'. If the transformation of the body into some fertile energy is a theme from indigenous folk culture, there is also an alternative Buddhist explanation: what is 'sown' is merit and what is signified by 'growth' is the unquenchable nature of this merit.

### The return home

After a Mongolian burial there is always a circumambulation round the grave three times in a clockwise direction. Returning home the mourners must not look backwards, nor should they talk to anyone. If they are riding, they spur their horses to a wild gallop. Arriving at the encampment, country mourners are purified by passing between two large dung-fuel fires. Even in the city, they should hold their hands over a fire, and then should wash their hands and face before going into the house.

### Making merit

At home a feast is organized with as many milk products as possible. Fat and cream are served, but drinking much alcohol is not appropriate, as this is a sad occasion intended to make merit (*buyan xiix*) for the benefit of the deceased. The family 'whiten their hands' (*gar tsaila-*) by giving little presents. Every guest is given something, matches, needle and thread, soap, towels, notebooks, pens, candles, tea, sweets. This gift-giving is a kind of merit-making and purification combined. Those who touched the body, those who carried the corpse, and particularly the lorry-driver, are given more substantial presents in money, though my informants emphasized that these tasks are done as meritorious acts and never for the sake of money. At the feast, the 'bone-carrying person' and the lorry-driver sit at the honourable head of the table.

Forty-nine days after the funeral, merit is again made in the rite of 'giving alms to children and dogs'. The children of friends, distant relatives and neighbours are invited round and a special food is prepared for them consisting of steamed rice with sugar, sultanas, and butter. Then they are given a normal meal. Plates of food are set out in the street for roaming dogs, with boiled millet and giblets.

### Care of the grave

In the old days no one would go to see the grave. It was avoided for at least three years, as people did not want to see mangled remains. Now people do visit on occasion, and scatter milk, grains, and juniper-dust. On the seventh,

twenty-first, and forty-ninth days a lama at the monastery should be asked to read prayers for the soul of the dead. The bowl with grains and fruit, first put in the coffin, is something that should be repeatedly given. Even many years after a death, one can see such bowls recently left at the grave, with a lamp lit within the small model *ger*.

### *Concluding discussion*

As has been remarked by Strathern (1997), connections and relations, like society itself, require imagining. The same can be said about the relations we call 'property'. The Mongolian rituals of death bring to the fore some important ways in which persons and things are mutually constituted by processes of objectification (see Mi90er 1987), and I would suggest that objectification can be seen as process of imagination. In this case, it is material things that are made to stand for (objectify) human relations that are imagined through the interpretations people make of these objects. My argument is that 'property', in either its personal or its co90ective aspects, is inseparable from these various processes whereby the person of the deceased is imagined. In this conclusion I cannot tie up all the ends of the ethnography, which I hope has some interest on its own account, but let me first list the main ways that property appears. It figures here not so much as wealth to be fought over (the most usual way it appears in the Euro-American imagination; cf. 'the reading of the wi90' in countless novels), but rather, in a variety of ways, as something expressive and transformative of persons-in-society.

Personal property appears as fo90ows: it may be valuables, enchainments to the world, which should be relinquished to achieve the freedom of the soul. It is those mundane things that stand for the presence of the deceased, and should be treasured in order to absorb their qualities to oneself. It can appear in the form of the working instruments, which would support him or her in the next life. Personal property also appears as refuge things, those objects of excessive fondness that must be destroyed for ordinary life to continue. Col-0ective property appears in the form of the bowl of fruits and seeds, which I see as symbolic *xöröngö*, given it is not clear to whom, but handed over together with the body just when the family takes over custodianship of the familial property. This differs from the various payments families make to the lords of the earth, symbolic precious things designed to avert anger at the disposal of the unclean corpse. Finally, the plate of *dalalga* food contains the col-0ective good fortune that the mourners invoke to themselves. The fact that personal objects belonging to the dead person are sometimes placed in this plate shows again how the fortune belonging to the deceased (and thus attached to her things) should be separated from her and reabsorbed by the family. No single rationale can account for everything in such a complex sequence of performing detachments and re-attachments. Yet two contrary themes stand out, the jealous guarding of fortune, as distinct from the Buddhist injunctions that merit is made by giving things away, and that the soul is freed by relinquishing objects.

By observing the particular attention Mongols pay to specific person-object relations, we are led to think again about personal property in a way that has import for anthropology more generally. Activities involving material things

are self-transformative, not only in a phenomenal way, but also ethically-ideologically. In this sense, for religious Mongols relinquishing a valued possession is similar to other attempts to perfect oneself by telling rosary beads or studying the bosom book throughout one's life. To acquire or take over things, on the other hand, is to link oneself ever more closely into the dense web of 'collective property'. Perhaps some future work should seek to differentiate this latter category. This article has argued that the idea of 'private property' cannot help to explain what is personal about property. The term 'collective' may turn out to be equally misleading when we want to understand the various quite different contexts in which people actually operate: for example, in the Mongol case, custodial holding of land (Sneath 2001), serial ownership of items like tools, the wearing of badge-like valuables that denote social status, or proprietorship of *xöröngö* livestock that require constant care for their reproduction.

Property is tied up with particular political and economic situations. It is true that the above discussion has remarkably little of a socialist feel to it, at first sight. Mongol society ceased to be a Buddhist theocratic state in the early 1920s. With the subsequent suppression of virtually all forms of 'private' property, we can fairly say that the socialist period saw a greatly increased communalization of property and the transfer of many rights away from families to larger units. Yet during the same period the changes in the rituals of death show a parallel move towards *personalization* of the relations between people and material objects. I argue that this personalization is in fact characteristic of socialist society.

Historical changes in the death rituals provide some evidence for this point, and also establish that the rites in the 1980s cannot be seen as 'survivals' from pre-socialist times. At the beginning of the century, enormous attention was paid to begging permission for a burial from the 'lords of the earth' and to the expelling of sins and impurities on the day after the funeral (Kornakova 1904; Smolev 1900). There is no mention in either of these exhaustively detailed descriptions of the bosom book, the refuge thing, or anything put in the shroud or coffin apart from incense. No member of the family could touch or prepare the corpse (this was done by lamas), so there was no rite of 'touching by hand'. The face was not shown at the burial and there were no eulogies, no portraits, and no gravestone. The rite of 'correction' does not figure. In general, as compared with the 1980s, there was more concern with a cosmological afterlife and a more definite rejection of the corpse as a mere polluted shell.

By contrast, the socialist era rites show very much greater concern for the specific person and character of the deceased, and for the continuing affective relations with particular people among those left to mourn. At the same time, these rites demonstrate a new social recognition of a variety of personal relations with things (relations of handling and use, of desire and attachment, of habit and dependence, and so forth). Perceiving these relations enables us to understand more fully the coexistence of personal with communal (including 'socialist') property.

I have argued that in this context personal 'possession' is not so much conceived as a relation against others, but more vividly as a relation *vis-à-vis* the self. Through it one transforms one's social and working environment and indeed oneself. We have seen how the Russian worker adapts 'his' machine to

give a personal character to his working activity (Alashev 1995: 82). 'The skilled craftsman does not formulate his refinement as a rationalization proposal, but realizes it independently.' Moreover, he keeps quiet about his secrets of craftsmanship, not because he is afraid of losing something but because there is no stimulus to transfer work experience other than personal sympathy (1995: 83). The new recruit learns only through friendship with a teacher, and in this process he turns himself into a worker like the others – all of them radically individual. Alashev describes the 'non-technological character' of socialist-type production as a 'condition of existence'. It seems that there was something about the socialist set-up, perhaps the idea that each person should strive to labour for no other reason than the abstract value of labour itself, which encouraged individuality. Yet this may not be best understood as a matter of 'resistance' – a systematic negation (by means of appropriation) of the impersonalizing effects of socialism – for 'resistance' as an idea tends to rely on the antimony of individual to society that I have argued against. Could we not re-think this personalization as a move outwards of the person, towards, even into, the object, rather than an incorporation of it into the self? Might this not be, in fact, the reality of Marx's fantasy of what would happen when private property is transcended, when our senses are no longer estranged from the world by our 'stupid and one-sided' concern with possession? 'In practice,' Marx wrote, 'I can relate myself to a thing humanly only if the thing relates itself humanly to the human being' (1964 [1844]: 139, discussed by Taussig 1993: 97-9). However interpreted, the social value given to idiosyncratic person-thing relations is part of the way 'property' is imagined, and therefore is reflected in Mongolia in the transformation of the funeral rites.

These rituals enable us to see how the process of personalization has its place amongst a variety of other ways that 'things' are held to affect the person one is. Because in Mongolia the cosmological person was held to have a more fundamental basis than the social (temporary) one, both communal and personal property relations were in a sense encompassed and denied the kind of imaginative autonomy they have in some capitalist societies. Decisions about taking a new job, moving to a different apartment, marriage, giving a dowry, handing over an item of inheritance, and buying and selling important items were all typical occasions for consulting the astrologer. Thus, the cosmological person was present in everyday life along with the person as a socialist worker or an individual, characterful personality, and all were tied together in the same ego. Material 'possessions' were likewise attributed with cosmological properties. They were all the more important as means towards living a good life and effecting ethical actions *because* they were so personalized. The important point is that personal property does not appear here as a sign of something else, but *as property*, that is as a relation acknowledged by society involving not only proprietorship within a collective entity, but also desire, loss, mastery, habit, acquisitiveness, and other emotions.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The materials for this paper were gathered in Ulaanbaatar and surrounding areas. I was able

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## Rituels mortuaires comme contexte pour la compréhension de la propriété personnelle en Mongolie socialiste

### Résumé

Cet article propose une nouvelle considération du concept de 'propriété personnelle' et il prend l'exemple des rituels mortuaires mongoliens dans le cadre du socialisme des années 80 pour explorer cette idée. Ces rituels ne fournissent pas l'occasion de diviser les propriétés entre les héritiers (cela a généralement été décidé longtemps avant la mort) mais ils comprennent une série d'actions qui rendent plus spécifiques les rapports des défunts avec les possessions matérielles. Les objets deviennent des propriétés personnelles par suite de l'usage prolongé et de l'interaction physique. Les rituels portent sur les relations des défunts avec ces objets, concentrées sur le désir, la renonciation, la dépendance et autres émotions. De ce fait, cet article replace l'attention sur le côté 'personne-chose' de la notion de propriété. Il discute aussi les contextes socio-politiques dans lesquels cette relation prend de l'importance et soutient que la société socialiste n'élimina pas mais au contraire ouvrit des contextes dans lesquels une telle personnalisation pouvait se manifester. Il est avancé plus généralement que la propriété personnelle, ainsi située, diffère considérablement de la notion de 'propriété privée' qui est si éminente dans la société capitaliste. Cette différence exige dès lors que nous repensons la façon dont la possession peut être imaginée et que nous donnions une considération nouvelle aux formes de propriété qui sont conceptualisées plus en termes d'attachement humain à des objets qu'en termes de relations exclusives vis-à-vis d'autres propriétaires. L'ethnographie mongolienne suggère que, tout comme les gens changent les choses matérielles par une interaction longue et intensive avec elles, il y a des catégories de propriété personnelle qui changent elles aussi leurs propriétaires, du fait que les actions d'utiliser, d'abandonner, de donner et autres sont des affaires morales qui transforment la personne.

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