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KINSHIP VS THE RELATEDNESS OF VITALITY IN THE BURYAT-MONGOL
CULTURE¹

Introduction

The academic discussion and analysis of kinship is usually confined to several established models, applied nearly universally to various human societies. Those ideas are further framed within discourse of technology and scientific progress, with a number of scholars arguing that kinship cannot serve at best as a concept of shared ‘natural’ background. For this reason, there is a pressing need to explore local ideas of ‘relatedness’ and to apply them as independent analytical categories in conceiving human societies. This paper outlines the ‘relatedness of vitality’ in the Buryat-Mongol culture, which reveals a few important implications for consideration of ideas on human being and social bonds. The works of professor Sławoj Szynkiewicz on kinship and Mongol society in general were one of the major inspirations for this analysis. In his prominent book *Pokrewieństwo. Studium Etnologiczne* Sławoj Szynkiewicz (1992) mentions that kinship studies gave ethnology a chance to join the league of “true sciences” since they operated on and explored the phenomenon of natural order (Szynkiewicz 1992, p. 5). Nevertheless, as he showed in this book and his other works (Szynkiewicz 1977, 1981), kinship always constituted a problematic question for anthropologists due to the paradoxical lack of precision in its understanding. Although kinship was taken for granted, the analytical categories were negotiated through the history of social sciences².

Despite various methodological approaches, the study of kinship in opposition to other kinds of relatedness, such as neighborhood, friendship or marriage, is based on exploring certain “materialities” (actual or fictional) which make biological reproduction possible (Brandtstädter, Santos 2009, p. 2). Children share the “biogenic substances” with their parents and other relatives, with the idioms of nature forming the root motive of

¹ Proofreading by Krzysztof Kardaszewicz.

² The kinship studies and their criticism were a subject of numerous debates especially in Western anthropology, while in the scholarly works of the Soviet tradition they were almost not developed. I rely on the recent discussion on kinship theories carried out by such scholars as David Schneider, Janet Carsten, Susanne Brandtstädter, Margaret Strathern, Bruno Latour; and in Mongol studies particularly – Sławoj Szynkiewicz, David Sneath, Christopher Atwood.

kinship (Schneider 1980). The European imagery behind the concept of “blood” embodies the conceptualization of these materialities and serves as the constituent metaphor of generational continuity tying people within kin relationship (Ossowski 1966; Madajczak 2013, p. 14). The “blood” bonds in the contemporary societies are superseded with the fascination with gene and genetics as defining crucial elements of kinship. Such an approach shaped the “genetic” family ideal, which gained unheralded strength among researchers, policy makers, and in the culture at large (Wegar 2000, p. 363). Thus, despite the revision of biological determinism in the anthropological studies of kinship, it remains to be the central element of its both colloquial and scientific understanding of the term.

This imagery provided basis for one of the main critiques of the so called “classic” kinship³. It was pointed out that these ideas were inherent to Euro-American folk imagination with such concepts as nature-culture, sexual procreation etc. Being transplanted to the non-European context through academic discourse, they were applied almost without limit to various ideas concerning social structure. As a result a whole range of cultural ideas were attributed simply to kinship (Schneider 1980). To date, the main methodology of those who followed this critique was discovering other cultural forms of relatedness. The wide range of the term “relatedness” itself was used as an attempt to get rid of biological connotations of kinship in its analysis in order to theorize in frames of more fluid and active terms (Carsten 2004; Brandstadter and Santos 2012, p. 10). In this article, I will follow this trend by introducing a special kind of relatedness from the Buryat-Mongol case, which I will call “vital forces”. From my point of view this enigmatic idea allows for a broader interpretation of social order than the idea of “classic” kinship as commonly understood in social sciences. This is the very reason for which the local ideas of relatedness should be explored and introduced as alternative analytical categories.

Three main topics will be introduced in the article. The first one is (1) relatedness of vital forces, which are rarely included in studies on the social structure. It is important, due to its implications for considering the idea of (2) human being and personhood. In the present article, using my fieldwork⁴ notes I will show which ideas shape the concept of human being in the Buryat culture. The specific conception of humanity implies also a significantly distinct vision of (3) social ties. Presenting Buryat-Mongol culture through such concepts corresponds to the general tendency of making the academic sciences more responsive, inclusive and dialogical (Hoppers 2002, p. 4).

The human being in the flow of vitality

Let me begin with a literary fable by Dorzho Sultimov “Mother’s Tenderness” (*Ekhyn enkherel*), where the main hero, Buda, meets a strange old woman who strikingly reminded

³ Under “classic” kinship theory researchers usually imply the works on “kinship system” which tended to dominate anthropological studies in the early 20th century. In this context, David Schneider occupies a pivotal role in the reformulation of kinship studies in anthropology (Carsten 2004, p. 18)

⁴ The research project lead by Ewa Nowicka entitled “Between Russia, Mongolia and China. Buryats and the challenges of the XXI century” funded by the National Science Centre, the decision number DRC-2011/03/B/HS6/01671. I took part in the fieldwork only in Aga Okrug, Ulan-Ude and Kizhinga *aimag* of Buryat Republic, Khentii *aimag* of Mongolia in 2012, 2013, 2014. Apart from it, I conducted my own fieldwork during summer vacation time 2012-2016.

his own already departed mother. He was moved by seeing the old woman during a journey far away from his home place. They had a very short but warm conversation and at its end the woman finally spoke the following words:

What a nice name you bear... The name of Buddha... Buda, I am giving you my age (lifetime). There is such a tradition (*zanshal*) among Mongol peoples... Take my age (lifetime) – said the old woman (Sultimov 2012, p. 106).

The main hero was deeply impressed with her words and the meeting – the old woman seemed to encompass the essence of motherhood and bestowed him with her vital energy. Despite it being a literary fable, the root motive of the story is based on clear cultural imagination of human relations. During my fieldwork in Buryatia, I could hear similar stories told by the locals. I met a woman who, while herself adopted into the family, used to be a beloved granddaughter and took special care of her grandmother when she became severely ill. She remembers a particular moment when the grandmother told her *Minii nahye abaarai* – “Take my age (lifetime)” before she passed away. She found this phrase very touching, a kind of special blessing from her grandmother that she felt will surely bring happiness to her life, and reflect on her being a good granddaughter.

These stories introduce us to a fascinating topic of vital forces – a kind of substance, energy or force that can be transmitted beyond the narrowly understood biological heredity. In these examples, one’s lifetime, success, and virtue are considered in the category of richness, which can be reduced or multiplied, and can be granted to another person (Oyungerel 2013, p. 118). Certain “materialities” in this sense, unlike in biological heredity, can be transmitted between even genetically unrelated people.

The biological conceptions of kinship enjoy a strong position in the Buryat society as well. The metaphor of blood as the force transmitting both maternal and paternal substances is also now common among Buryats⁵, and even more common due to the accelerating language shift to Russian. It was borrowed and cultivated together with the western medical institutions and technologies from the beginning of the 20th century. In the same way, genetic studies enjoy remarkable authority, though in fact many of their ideas are interpreted within the framework of the local culture of knowledge. Local ideas of relatedness did not disappear in confrontation with newly adopted “scientific” explanations. Here, I would like to introduce the notion “vital forces” that includes various ideas, like *ami*, *sülde/hülde*, *sünesün/hünehen*, *khii morin*, *sür*, *suu*, *zali*, *sog/tsog*, which can vary much from region to region and therefore are often interpreted in different ways (Humphrey, Ujeed 2012, p. 152-167). The ideas of vital forces were considered by scholars in a number of contexts, among others as counterparts of the Christian soul, in relation with the ideas of Weberian charisma and concepts of human individual in Mongolian cultures. The term “vital force” or “vital power” was used among others by Tu Wei-Ming

⁵ However, in traditional terminology and interpretation, blood was more akin to the European concept of milk as substance delivered by maternal line. The relatives from mother’s side are called *shuhan/čisun türel* (blood relatives) or *myakhan türel* (flesh relatives) and were considered *khari* (strange) to the subject. The concept of bone among Buryats and other Mongols is comparable with the role of blood among Europeans. It cooperates with constellation of notions like *ug*, *udam*, *esege*, *obog* etc. – “ancestral line, ancestry, ancestor”.

to denote similar dynamic of forces and overcome the dichotomy of spirit and matter in description of Chinese world model. The scholar finds it more accurate than other terms like “matter-energy”, or “material force” proposed by other researches for similar ideas (Wei-Ming 1989, p. 68).

I have also encountered the term “vital forces” in works of a Buryat ethnographer Galina Galdanova. She defined it as a multi-leveled imagery of forces initiating and supporting vitality (Galdanova 1987, p. 54; Oyungerel 2013, p. 90). She writes that the ideas of multiple souls in the Buryat culture are at a certain stage of evolution toward a concept of single individual one. Thus, the soul called *amin* includes multiple notions like “life”, “spirit”, “breath”, and “vital force”.

Although Galdanova considers the belief in vital forces to be founding elements of the individual soul, other scholars, such as Oyungerel Tangad, consider these ideas to be outside of evolutionary conceptions, but in close relation with the diverse ideas of human individual in non-European cultures, which I will discuss (Oyungerel 2013). The vital force is therefore considered here as the counterpart of the Christian soul in the sense that it is interpreted as the essence of humanity or at least as key-notion in understanding what being a human means. Thus I apply the term of “vital forces” or sometimes “vitality” to denote these various “psychophysical” structures of the Buryat world order.

The continuum of generations in the Buryat traditional culture is associated not merely with biological reproduction or blood ties, but also with the flow of these vital forces. Similar understanding of relatedness was explored in Nahuatl culture by Alfredo López Austin (1988), and also by Julia Madajczak (2014), with both scholars using the concept of “transmission of vital essences”. These vital energies of cosmic origin constitute the kin relationship not only within family, but also in various interactions between individuals of broader social groups. Such tradition also existed in Chinese culture at least of late Imperial China, where the essential element of natural kinship between father and child was the *qi* energy transmitted at the moment of conception; at the same time the upbringing and education was believed to create ties even between unrelated people (Bray 2009, p. 189-190). These parallels from different cultures are not meant to serve as outline of another universalistic model, but to point out the possibility and consistency of such vision.

In brief, parents endow their children with vital forces, transmitted not only in the moment of impregnation, but throughout lifetime. These relations of vital forces could be traced on various levels – family relations, other social or even political levels. I will only focus on the role of vitality on the level of immediate human relations within family, using material from my fieldwork to prove that “classic” kinship is too narrow of a concept to allow for understanding of human relations in this culture.

The relations of vitality

Let me return again to the stories described above. They are focused on the topic of “parental love” which serves as a significant metaphor of social relations. Parents precede their child in the closeness to the ancestral vital forces and thus act as the medium between them – this position constructs the core of the hierarchy. The parents themselves are the deities for their children, and should be treated with reverence despite their possible faults and misdeeds. Children who offend their parents are considered to have lost the protec-

tion of the deities (*sakhyusan*) and rarely enjoy success in life – they are simply cut off from the vital forces. Parents are often called *sakhyusans* which is the word for Buddhist *bodhisattvas*⁶. The “living deities” (*amidy burkhad*) can feel the vitality of their children, foresee and prevent their future disasters:

Treat your honored father and mother
According to the way (*yosun*) of Buddhism,
People of this world call them to be living deities in this life (Galshiev 2009, p. 94).

The relations between parents and children are one of the major topics in the Buryat public discourse, literature, songs and theatrical plays⁷. Parents are incorporated into the sphere of “sacrum” and serve as the necessary medium between such “sacrum” and an individual. The image of parents, especially that of a mother, is one of the most impressive motives in the Buryat culture extolled not only in songs but also in literature, poetry and other arts, and is comparable to the ideas of romantic love in European cultures. An interesting case was related by one 90-year-old informant:

In the past, when the Buryats were exiled to the north and imprisoned, they would take their mother’s boiled urine in a bottle⁸. They would add a few drops to their meal and drink it when they missed their homeland or when they were ill. This cured and helped them (fieldwork note, woman, 90 years old, Ulan-Ude, summer 2013, translation from Buryat).

Thus, apart from the biological act of procreation, the human being keeps receiving certain “materialities” from parents through his or her lifetime. Despite the common usage of biological idioms, kinship is not simply the “natural” fact, but a form of relatedness that in the Buryat culture should be maintained and renewed. Otherwise, the “essence” which we describe here as a “vital force”, stops circulating between the individuals and brings on their gradual decline. This requires a particular way of constructing relationships. After their death, ancestors lose their distinct identity and turn into impersonal vital power, which needs to be transmitted to the descendants and be sustained by them (Oyungel 2013). The descendants in turn need their vital power for success and wellbeing, and connect with it through rites and rituals in honor of their ancestors. This cooperation

⁶ The Sanskrit term for anyone who has generated [...] a spontaneous wish and compassionate mind to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhisattva>, (accessed: 09.09.2018). In common thinking of Buryats, Bodhisattvas are associated broadly with divine beings.

⁷ For instance, *Mankurt* staged by Oleg Yumov on the basis of the novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* by Chingis Aitmatov; *Ekhe* “Mother” staged on the motives of the novel by Dashzevegiin Mendsaikhan etc.

⁸ The text contains multiple references to physiological extracts, which bear different connotation in this culture. The Buryat-Mongol social norms had nothing in common with European distancing from nature and “shame” of bodily functions (Humphrey 1992, p. 176) thus interlocutors in the fieldwork seem to be less reluctant in discussing or mentioning such topics. Quite often, however, they used euphemisms like *yuumen* (the thing).

guarantees the continuity of the parties and preserves normal state of things, while both of them depend on each other.

The understanding of hierarchy in the Buryat culture should be read within this order of dynamic vital forces – something precedes and grants the vital force, and something receives it. One's proper place in the universe allows for receiving of the vital forces, thus breaking such hierarchy is considered to be destructive for a person, and also concerns the relations within the related kin groups. Such interpretation of hierarchy might seem opposite to its colloquial understanding. The superiors in this combination grant vitality to the inferiors but not take it. Those, who are residing closer to the sources of vitality become mediums in relation to those who are farther. The proper place in hierarchy is the condition for a normal circulation of vital forces. Such relatedness is realized through the ritual norms, etiquette and prohibitions (*seer*) which do not substantially change within or out of family sphere. One of my interlocutors told me the following story:

They were told that every family should take-in the mother for at least a couple of months and take care of her. Their mother was in a poor state. Therefore, they performed the rituals for prolonging her age at the moment when she was in a very bad condition. This way they gained another year, thus during this year even their grandchildren had a chance to look after her. I asked why they did it this way, and I was told that they were receiving buyan (charity, vital force of charity) (woman, 50 years old, Ulan-Ude, autumn 2015, translation from Buryat).

Thus, what is important is not a simple act of respect toward age or position, but the way in which vital energy is gained or even extracted from the senior person by other family members. With the approach of senility, a person is believed to be on the threshold of the worlds of deities, of ancestors. Although they already stopped having a decisive role in favor to the younger members of family, their words and opinions are considered with special attention as if they could foresee the future, and bring blessing to their descendants. In everyday life, this attention is expressed through such acts as, for example, performing massage for the seniors: a child doing massage is considered to receive the vital force of virtue, charity (*buyan*), while the senior on the contrary takes in the sin (*niügel*). If an old man scolded a child, the latter also should accept that as a way of receiving the vital forces (*buyan*). Any other assistance to the elderly has always been regarded as acquiring virtue. It is widely considered that looking after a senior person, cheering them up and satisfying their wishes and needs brings longer lifetime, welfare and success:

My uncle, not long before he departed, asked me to throw out his excrement. I took the latrine and saw that there was almost nothing there. I doubted why he bothered asking at all, but I said nothing and threw it out. When I came back, my uncle said to me: "live and keep thinking that you looked after your uncle, my dear". Then I understood that it was his best wishes (yurool) for my future life, and I was a fool to hesitate over his intentions (fieldwork note, woman, 89 years old, Ulan-Ude, summer 2013, translation from Buryat).

Here an old woman related a very common belief among Buryats, according to which those who are taking care of seniors, especially helping them with their physiological needs, receive great amount of vital forces and life success. The old people are perceived as radiating vitality, and proper relations with them will allow for it to be granted to other people. The same view could be found also in the work *Bilig-un Toli* (The Mirror of Wisdom) by lama Erdeni Khaibzun Galshiev (1855-1915):

Treat seniors

As if, they were your father and mother.

There is an old belief of people of the past

That this will expand your lifetime and wealth (Galshiev 2009, p. 94).

The longevity of seniors is also one of the good marks of a group's vitality. In a village of my fieldwork (Zagustai, Kizhinga district of Buryatia), a person died at the age 103 years, and was considered to bring good luck for locality and people living there. However, seniors could also hold-up the vitality and effectively take away the vital forces of other people, living or yet unborn, if they live long enough to see their third-great-grandchildren (*düshe*). This belief explains the custom of organizing honorable funeral during one's lifetime (Zhimbieva 2010, p. 41). In the ancient past, the long-livers could be killed or left in the steppe to die. In the Western Buryatia there was record of a practice performed on an old person's honor called *öökhe üngüülkhe* "make (an old person) chew fat" by driving a long piece of fat into his (rarely her) mouth until it caused breathlessness (Hamayon 2006, p. 33; Khangalov 1958, p. 11). A similar practice in Mongolia was known as *am barikh ach* (Hamayon 2006, p. 33; Kabzińska-Stawarz 1992, pp. 136-140). Such a ritual cannot be explained by merely economic accounts of a family – the rituals are products of the specific cultural reality based on the belief of the common vital force and its distribution between family members.

The vital force accumulated by ancestors is thus distributed between family members according their needs. The most vulnerable family member is of course a child, who needs to be protected and endowed with the life forces. Thus from the very moment of the birth, child is engaged in a network of dependence regarding its vitality, the same as all other parts of the universe. The parents grant *amin* to their children and through them, it receives vital forces, success and wellbeing from the deposit of its ancestral force.

The birth of children depends on the vital forces accumulated by parents. The most important function of a family is not the love and sacral relation between spouses, but the extension of family lineage (Basaeva 1980). In the case of problems with conception, apart from the medical assistance, young people resort to visiting places of fertility⁹ to enhance their vitality or look for potential problems in their "spiritual" heredity. In this light, an individual should not be perceived as ontologically autonomous but as a representative of the whole continuum of descent. The quality of ancestry (*ug, shanar, udkha*), a spiritual bond with ancestors or the vitality accumulated by past generations, is a matter to which one might relate and at times owe the quality of one's character, habits, but also of

⁹ These are special places where people "ask for children" leaving toys and praying. In Aga Okrug we visited two such places near lake Nozhii and Alkhana mountain range.

life success and well-being. It does not remind the general tendency to attribute a human character, human nature and human behavior to the DNA codes combinations (along with socialization processes) or conceive them in other purely biological terms.

A lifetime is counted from the moment of conception and woman bearing a child is restricted with numerous rules and prohibitions. She is to avoid crowded places, being present at funerals, or watching frightening things etc. The unborn child is already considered to be within its generational continuum, thus its health and character directly depend on the quality of the ancestral vital force, which can be both weak and strong. This also overlaps with a belief in reincarnation and karma, which in the Buryat case takes place within the related community. A newborn baby is not shown to others, and the family does not receive guests for the first month (or even a year) after a birth. In contrast to Europe, where one can see parents with newborn babies walking on crowded streets, or even during public events, the Buryat babies are hidden from others, and if necessary – transported in cars or taxis away of the potentially dangerous influences of others. In the evening, especially after baby was outside, parents wash it with *arshaan* (water from holy springs or sanctified by lama) and purify it with incense (*sanzai*). Throughout this time a child is nurtured with maternal substances and receives life-force with them. According to some of my interlocutors, such a practice seems to lie behind a common reaction of Buryat children to hide upon seeing strangers. Rituals performed for children are not connected only to “physical” or “psychological” health of a child but aim to accumulate and enlarge its vitality.

The Buryat idiom associated with one’s ancestry and origin (*ug*) is not a tree (as in a case of a genealogical tree), but a water spring (*bulag*) which flows and nurtures its environment¹⁰. In the same way, a newborn child receives a stream of vital forces (*amin*, *sünesün*, *sülde*, *zayaa* etc.) from its parents, allowing it to fulfill its potential. One’s physical appearance, predisposition, confidence, wealth and life success are believed to be the result of either strong or weak ancestral vital forces and in the lesser extent that of the soul, DNA, law of consanguinity and individual merit. As I have already mentioned, the ties bonding the child and its ancestry are not a biological *fact* but a relation, which should be renewed and maintained through proper rituals and social order. Otherwise the “spirit-matter”, or “vital force”, stops circulating between the individuals and brings them a gradual demise.

As such, relations are also based on the exchange of vital forces. A child is perceived to be on the border between human and divine, between descendants and ancestors, and requires special treatment both to protect it and to be protected from the spiritual forces. Due to the high rate of infant mortality in the past, a child was not given a name up to its third year of life and thereafter was considered to be on its way to becoming human (*khün bolokho*) (Basaeva 1980, p. 90). The child’s behavior, especially that of one who doesn’t speak yet, is considered as reliable indicator of vitality and fortune. The child is said to feel the vital force – *amin* – of people, thus in case it is well disposed to an elderly person, the latter should anticipate a long life. In the opposite case, the child will cry and refuse to approach:

¹⁰ *The water spring has its source, the human being has its origin (ug)* (a Buryat proverb); *ug bulag* “the origin/water spring”.

Children in one house would cry enormously staring at such person. They would see how one breathes (amilga), his vitality (khii) and everything what one is going to take back. They are amazing fortunetellers (medelshe) (woman, 67 years old, Ulan-Ude, autumn 2012, translation from Buryat).

If during a visit to one's home, a child wants to take a poo, it is considered as a symbol of good fortune, bringing richness and wealth to the house – a *khesheg*, or 'grace' and vital power (Oyungerel 2013, p. 91), making the master of the house very happy. Those whom children like and eagerly approach should anticipate well-being or new offspring, and when it gives money or money-like round or glittering objects, one should take and keep them and await good fortune. One informant told me how a polite little son of her friend once unexpectedly spitted on her face. The boy's mother, being shocked to the core, immediately started to scold and punish him, but the woman stopped her, saying that the child was just curing her this way (spitting on an ill person's face is the one of traditional curing methods by lama) and that she should be graced with a both good health and wealth. Thus, on one hand, a child receives protection and vital forces from adults, but on the other hand – adults can receive the forces of richness (*khesheg*), longevity (*utanahan*) and fertility from a child. This is the other side of "hierarchical" relations which require exchange of these forces.

Concluding remarks

The examples discussed here, were of course only a few of the numerous practices which are performed to maintain the relatedness of vital forces. This understanding of substance as a flowing and transforming phenomena builds relatedness between persons – and even building one's humanity – and remains beyond the current theoretical vocabulary on kinship. What is important here is the way in which social relations are embedded within the processes of vital force circulation. The principles of the flow of vital forces serve as a basis of numerous beliefs and behaviors which could be mistakenly interpreted as simply tradition, respectfulness or economical and hierarchical considerations. Instead, the principles are behind a process of constructing and maintaining of different kinds of relatedness, including kinship, and should be included in consideration of the ideas of social order in Buryat culture.

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