

Central Asia



Grégory Delaplace, *L'invention des morts. Sepultures, fantômes et photographies en Mongolie contemporaine* [The invention of the dead: Graves, ghosts, and photography in contemporary Mongolia]

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SINCE the twentieth century, Mongolian regions have increasingly experienced a type of cultural conflict between Western European values embodied in the form of Mongolian socialism, and “traditional” values that continue to exist. In some

cases, this conflict has given rise to nationalism within the process of modernization. Consequently, local communities have emphasized various patterns of culture, religion, language, customs, and so on in order to retain their identity and continued existence in a changing society. It is therefore of the greatest importance today that research be designed to consider the historical processes of transformation in Mongolian regions and analyze the key issues involved, as well as to determine the uniqueness that each region derived from its traditions that have formed over centuries. This edited volume under review—a revised and updated version of Grégory Delaplace’s doctoral dissertation (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Ve section) supervised by Roberte N. Hamayon—is highly enlightening in this context, and will thus find an appreciative audience.

The basic purpose of this book is to offer a contribution to the anthropological analysis of the relations that contemporary Mongols construct and maintain daily with their dead. The book includes ethnographic information gleaned between 1999 and 2005 from Mongol communities, particularly the Dörvöd nomadic herders who live in Harhira Mountains in the northwest province of Uvs and the provincial capital Ulaangom, as well as in the Mongolian capital Ulan Bator. This volume—whose outlined studies received an award from the Musée du Quai Branly in 2008—constructively builds up the reader’s knowledge of the subject through a clear and systematic examination of graves, interrelated stories of ghosts, funeral customs, and the ancestralization of photographs of the dead in Mongolia today. In fact, the author’s major concern to emphasize the particular modalities of relations that the Dörvöd maintain with their dead in contemporary settings led him to entitle this book not *Mémoire* but *l’invention des morts* [The invention of the dead], a term inspired by de Certeau (26). This choice reflects, to some extent, Grégory Delaplace’s initial intention to bring the reader into the cultural settings and religious traditions of the Dörvöd.

My overall impression is that the book’s main ideas focus more on “narratives” and “testimonies” rather than on “observations” in the strict sense of the term. The author, in fact, highly regards language in its function as a creative action of reality, and he builds his arguments upon narratives about the facts, and, to a lesser degree, concentrates on objective manifestations of the facts, such as those found in the functionalist sociology of August Comte and Emile Durkheim. In a sense, Grégory Delaplace conceptually brings to the fore a constructivist language which he strives to elucidate in the book, following the respective viewpoints of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on “perception” (183, 240); Christophe Pons on the decoding of the “experience of an apparition” (254), and Roland Barthes on the photograph of the deceased as a “living picture” (*tableau vivant*) representing the mythical denial of an illness and death (291).

Following the insightful “Preface” by Roberte N. Hamayon and the author’s “Introduction,” which provides us with an extremely lucid and helpful overview of the study, the volume is divided into seven carefully researched and well-organized chapters within three broadly defined breadths: “Graves” (chapters 1–3), “Ghosts” (chapters 4–6), and “Photography” (chapter 7). Throughout the book readers will notice how the author succeeds in his aim to bring these three areas of the socio-

religious life of the Dörvöd into a single analysis. In this task, the author particularly relies on theories of interpretation—especially those developed by WAGNER (1975) and by DE CERTEAU (1990)—according to which culture is invented daily. On the other hand, however, he used Hertz's (1907) work to endorse the idea that the fertile ground in which habits and customs are strongly anchored is the popular view of the world, such as the belief that “in establishing a society of the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself” (24, 290, 332–34, 348). Thus the reader is taken through narratives and specific details to realize how these above-mentioned statements match the author's relevant qualitative findings.

In the subsequent chapters of the volume the author skillfully engages with rich data to expose the centrality of the dead in the everyday lives of the Dörvöd. One of the more consistent findings is that the deceased are made visible and invented as partners of a punctual relation in the context of ritual. And the author helps readers to grasp this mode of relations with the dead through successive and perceptively chosen examples of burial, stories of ghosts, and social uses of photography. In the first part of the book (chapters 1–3), a diachronic analysis of data highlights the fact that people's habits and customs, far from being a program of set rules, constitute “tradition” as it is commonly known. Namely, in every culture, there is a continual process of invention through which practitioners or members of that culture are neither passive “heirs” nor “actors.” In fact, four centuries of Buddhism and seventy years of socialist ideology have failed to sweep away the reappearance of ancient beliefs, despite the legal obligation to go through the services of funeral parlors or *buyan*. This is of course no means to say that the institution is no longer influential. As the author neatly put it, “If the employees [of *buyan*] are no longer involved in the choice of a burial place, the institution remains nevertheless the main mediator by which the funerary ideology is converted into practice. What *buyan* enable here is both the collaboration between several actors (living and dead) and the articulation of two ideologies: a state ideology, which is in deconstruction and a religious ideology, which is in reconstruction, in a single practice (81).

Specifically, the description of the history of legislation on the subject of burial and cemetery, the seldom-followed decrees relocating cemeteries and the prohibition of the “exposition” or abandonment of corpses in scattered places (open air) in order to make them available for vultures and wolves to devour is notably effective. It transpires that these details above all others tend to evidence the resurgence of cultural identity consciousness of the Dörvöd, whose funeral rites implement occult techniques dealing with the “treatment” of or caring for the souls of the deceased. Thus the *funeral rite constitutes the ritual relationship acted jointly by all participants during this process* [reviewer's emphasis]. In particular, as Grégory Delaplace remarkably depicts for us in Chapter 4, “[The Dörvöd] seem only to attribute to the dead a kind of social existence in the form of ghosts arising from the souls of the dead who have not yet found a ‘real rebirth.’ The dead who are reborn by definition no longer exist as the deceased. No ghost can go through the process of ancestralization—of course they can reappear, though it is not mentioned in the stories. The only deceased parent with whom a stable and ‘positive’ ritual relation is considered are the deified dead whose portraits are temporarily exposed in the

form of icons at the back of dwellings” (290). Notwithstanding changes in circumstances, the author alleges that these inveterate practices still exist. Analysis of the Dörvöd’s “narratives” have shown that it is “the dead who are acknowledged as dead that are surrounded by silence: [...] What is surrounded by silence is in fact the self of the deceased associated with the event or circumstance of their death” (201). It follows, then, that the Dörvöd evoke a deceased person as a formerly-living parent. In view of this, they remember everything, except death as such.

These above-mentioned details about the dead thus sharpen vital aspects of the socio-religious life of the Dörvöd that allows Grégory Delaplace to make it clear that “the conceptions of the rebirth as formulated in present-day Mongolia do not have much to do with the notion of karma (cause and effect), which is justly rooted in the doctrinal Buddhism regarding the absence of the notion of the individual soul and hence its transmigration. The logic of Mongolian popular representations today is based on the notion of the “individual vital principle,” or the soul that can be reborn successively from one person to another” (190). It is readily apparent that the present-day Mongols hold the common idea that a human being constitutes (1) an individual soul principle (*süms*) (often located in one’s bones) which is supposed to be born again, (2) the vital force (*süld*, often associated with flesh) which does not survive after death, and (3) the unifying principle (*am*, generally breath) which assures the dynamic association of different components of the body. In view of this, the Dörvöd consider death as the separation of human souls. The common belief in the region is that the soul, once separated from the body after death, will be reborn “more or less far from one’s descent group according to the ‘family offerings’ [*burhan*] that the deceased acknowledged during their life on earth and those that their family had accumulated during and after funerals” (186). In a sense, as the author points it out, the Dörvöd’s preference to let the soul of the deceased “disappear” is not really contradictory to their hope for its rebirth. This is because they strongly believe that “the deceased has a ‘future divinity, or icon,’ which is incompatible neither with the ‘disappearance’ of the ‘soul’ nor with rebirth” (188).

Next, one reads in Chapter 5 a series of stories about the encounters of the Dörvöd with their dead. The problem under discussion is neatly summed up in a subtitle to this chapter: What is a ghost? The answer is plain. Most Dörvöd believe that, “a ‘ghost’ is the deceased whose soul has not been correctly dispatched, or [...] the soul of a young person who died ‘prematurely,’ or the soul of a person who had a violent death, murder, suicide, or tragic life, and that their ‘desires’ continue to link them to this world. Such malevolent ghosts can cause trouble and do harm to the living” (216). Here the reader is informed about the important role that the ritual specialists or lama play for the community as spiritual leaders and celebrants of funeral rites. The functions of funeral rites are varied—“to assure a good rebirth, to dispatch the soul out of the sphere of daily activities of the living” (187), to “recall the soul,” or at least to pacify the deceased parent (offering of the family) who would not have found a “real birth” or who would not have been properly “dispatched.” Taken together, ceremonies and funerary portraits (individual or group photographs retouched to perfection) have the important role of exorcizing the circumstances of death and remembering the death of the former

parent. This suggests that through ceremonies and funerary portraits a deceased person is remembered as dying without regret, so that they do not have a reason to come back trying to make up for what they lost. *Of this view, ceremonies and funerary portraits serve to update a web of relationships between the Dörvöd and so are entrenched with their dead* [reviewer's emphasis].

Furthermore, the stress on the Dörvöd's notion of "invisible things"—an issue which resonates as leitmotiv throughout this book—proves to be particularly fruitful. Ghosts, souls, and other spirits are considered to be "invisible" but they can be said to share a similar regime of visibility, or what the author coined "a certain regime of communicability." This is because the Dörvöd claim to not only see these things, but also smell and hear them occasionally. On the whole, the Dörvöd strongly believe that a ghost story describes a unique sensation creating an inference of the presence of an agent, an inference which is immediately contradicted by the observation that there can be no such sensation without the presence of a perceptible agent. The following lines from the conclusion of Chapter 6 are rather typical of the author's underlying point: "More generally, deceased persons "do not seem to constitute a well-defined category in the imagination of the Dörvöd. Besides, the place of the dead among the "invisible things" is left outstanding [...]: "visible things," which are likely to be seen by "those who see things with their eyes" can be "all sorts of things," such as ghosts, devils, masters of places, and so on. So, with "masters of places" who are dissociated from the deceased, "ancestor spirits" (*ongon*) are considered as dependents of deities and 'invisibles things' among which the place of the dead is never specified [...]" (289).

The last chapter, chapter 7, is entitled "Portraits of Deceased Parents" and provides details about important funerary portraits and emphatic records of their current state of conservation and potential future use. Here I further realized that the Dörvöd's use of family offerings or gifts to spiritual beings forms a tradition that is very much alive. The book concludes with its underlying claim: Among the Dörvöd, "The dead seem to be invented as partners of different and non-complementary relations, sometimes even contradictory, through graves, stories of ghosts, and photography" (345). It is my contention that over time these socio-religious practices endure in collective memory, referring to the Dörvöd's insights and eliciting habits and rituals that affirm one of their family priorities: to maintain daily relations with their dead. Thus the deceased parents are not absent in the Dörvöd modern society that is changing.

Above all, the particular merit of Grégory Delaplace's book—which is indexed and illustrated with many fascinating stories and photographs—is that it has convincingly demonstrated its basic premise through an impressive array of primary texts interpreted from both the register of "symbolic" reading and a range of multidisciplinary theories. The evidence presented reveals a great cultural resurgence or movement towards the preservation of cultural heritage among present-day Mongolians. In particular, the Dörvöd are seen as the inheritors of deep-rooted, long-standing cultural traits. As Roberte N. Hamayon clearly states in the "Preface," "Throughout the book, the reader will not only discover new aspects of Mongolian society and Mongolian thoughts about death; he will also retain from Gregory

Delaplace's book a creative statement of how human imagination animates facts, words, and things" (12). This volume is not only a well-documented investigation and comprehensively constructed study of its subject, it is a model compilation of scholarly research. It represents an important new addition to the regional ethnographic literature. Equally important, its emphasis on the retention and role of religion in a changing society also helps to place current debates on this subject in a historical context.

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