

# **Ethics of the Civilizational Approaches and National Characters: Navigating Cultural Relativism and Universalism in the Mongolian Context**

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## **Abstract**

This paper<sup>1</sup> critically explores the ethical tensions between cultural relativism and universalism within the framework of the civilizational approach in Mongolia. Drawing on historical, philosophical and socio-political dimensions, it examines how Mongolian society negotiates moral values in regard to sharing traditional nomadic cultures and civilizations with other nations and how to use Buddhist ethics and international human rights discourses. The paper analyses how Mongolia's resistance of civilizational discrimination helped adopting global ethical values via UNESCO and revealing the complexities of moral pluralism in a rapidly globalizing yet culturally distinct society. By engaging with theories of civilization, ethics and intercultural dialogue, the study contributes to broader debates on whether ethical norms can be universally applied or must be culturally contextualized.

Keywords: nomadic, ritual cultures, national character, social evolution, symbolism

## **Social Evolutionism to Universalism**

It is no secret that throughout history, nations have viewed themselves through an ethnocentric lens—regarding themselves as civilized while labelling other coexisting peoples as primitive or savage. Especially from the 16th to 17th centuries onward, as the social and human sciences began to take shape in the West, scholars such as Thomas Hobbes and Montesquieu wrote about so-called savage and barbarian societies. They described these "savage" or "barbarian" peoples as constantly engaged in conflict with one another, lacking laws and morality, and therefore incapable of developing any concept of justice. For instance, Thomas Hobbes (Hobbes, 1968 [1651],

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pp.115-116) stated that “out of Civil States, there is always ware of every one against every one”—in this way, he distinguished societies without civil states or civilization and used the indigenous peoples of the Americas as an example of “savage people.” Likewise, the French philosopher Montesquieu, in his work *The Spirit of the Laws* (Baron de Montesquieu, 1748, pp.375-385) cited the [Mongol] Tatars as an example of primitive or barbaric peoples. He discussed that:

Chap. XI. Of Savage And Barbarous Nations: There is this difference between savage and barbarous nations; the former are dispersed in clans, which, for some particular reason, cannot be joined in a body; and the latter are commonly small nations, capable of being united. The savages are generally hunters; the barbarians are herdsmen and shepherds (p.375).

Chap. XII. Of The Law Of Nations Among People Who Do Not Cultivate The Earth: As these people [tartars] do not live in circumscribed territories, many causes of strife arise between them; they quarrel about waste land as we about inheritances. Thus they find frequent occasions for war, in disputes relative either to their hunting, their fishing, the pasture for their cattle, or the violent seizing of their slaves; and, as they are not possessed of landed property, they have many things to regulate by the law of nations, and but few to decide by the civil law (p.376).

The portrayal of nomadic nations as lacking legal systems, cultural values, and moral principles became deeply entrenched through these early works and eventually shaped the convictions of thousands of later scholars. From this intellectual tradition emerged the theory of social evolutionism, which proposed a staged progression: initially, societies were organized as hunters and fishers, then moved on to the domestication of animals and the rise of pastoralism, and finally to the development of agriculture (Dalrymple, 1757, pp. 86-88). Within this Western conceptual framework, nomadic societies were viewed as lacking private property and legal institutions (Goguet, 1761). As Bassett (Bassett, 1986) notes, this perspective led to the classification of nations based on their level of cultures and civilizations, organizing them along a linear evolutionary scale from “savage” to “barbarian” to “civilized” (Morgan, 1907) and later by many scholars (Huntington, 1993; Khazanov, 1994; Kradin, 2014; Lattimore, 1940; Toynbee, 1987) and politicians (Brubaker, 2017; Morieson, 2023; Saleem, 2023; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022, 2023).

### **Cultural relativism**

However, scholars who opposed unilineal social evolution argued that instead of classifying cultures hierarchically, we should understand their diversity as coexisting phenomena that cannot be reduced to a single

evolutionary scheme. The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (Herder, 2024 [1896]) believed that culture was plural and should not be ranked by Eurocentric criteria. He contended that history must be understood through the lens of its specific geography, climate, language, and time period, and not judged from the outside. Most importantly, Herder viewed language as the key expressive force of a culture — shaping how people think and perceive the world. On the role of language in culture, he wrote “has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech dwell its whole thought-domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. Whoever is ashamed of his language is ashamed of his people” (p. 146). He asserted that all cultures are morally equal and valuable. In his writings, Herder discussed national character and cultural relativism, arguing that cultures should be evaluated internally, not by external comparison, as reflected in his claim “Every nation bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independently of all comparison with that of others; every nation is as it is because it so wills itself to be” (p. 301). Herder affirmed the equal moral worth and dignity of all cultures, regardless of time or place “Let us not look down with contempt on the peoples of earlier times or of distant lands. They too were animated by their own spirit and worth” (p. 386). He further emphasized cultural particularism — the idea that each people follows its own unique developmental path “Peoples, like individuals, have their own way of existing, their own joy, their own sphere of perfection” (p. 327).

Following Herder’s ideas, the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (Wundt, 1916, p.115) wrote about the cognitive capacities of ancient and modern humans: “The intelligence of primitive man is indeed restricted to a narrow sphere of activity. Within this sphere, however, his intelligence is not noticeably inferior to that of civilized man.” This view suggested that differences between peoples arise from environment and culture, not from innate intellectual capacity — rejecting the notion that one group is mentally superior to another.

Franz Boas (Boas, 2016 [1896]) critiqued unilineal evolutionist models in favor of historical particularism, stating that we recognize that each cultural form is the result of a long series of historical developments, and the attempt to classify them according to one general scheme is bound to fail. The historical events that have led to a given cultural form are often so complex and unique that they cannot be reduced to a common formula. Consequently, it is futile to arrange cultures in evolutionary sequences unless the historical connections between them can be shown (pp. 481–483). Boas used Morgan’s general scheme of family evolution — from matrilineal to patrilineal — and the use of masks across cultures as examples to illustrate his point. He critiqued the comparative method for wrongly assuming that similar traits always stem from the same causes. Instead, Boas championed a historical approach, where each culture must be understood in terms of its unique environmental, psychological, and

historical context. From this perspective, not only are cultures fundamentally relational, but individuals themselves are heterogenous in character. Boas's psychological outlook suggests that while "the main mental characteristics of man are the same all over the world," cultural differences arise not from variation in consciousness or brain capacity, but from experiential influences, particularly cultural ones.

### ***Constitutive Cultures and Individuals***

Thus, civilizations and cultures differ due to cultural experiences, not cognitive capacity. Building on this, Philip K. Bock and Stephen C. Leavitt (Bock & Leavitt, 2018) argued that personality traits vary across cultures precisely because of cultural influence. They proposed that when an individual's behaviour diverges from societal norms, it reflects a "personality-type explanation"—often rooted in personal psychological history such as childhood experiences. Conversely, when someone behaves in line with socially established norms, it represents a "cultural-type explanation". This view supports the idea that while cultures like nomadic civilization exert influence, membership in a culture does not mean each individual must conform to its norms.

Culture is not an external structure imposed on individuals, rather, it emerges through processes rooted in individual personalities and psychological experiences (Sapir, 1924). As summarized by Kirmayer (Kirmayer, 2001) "For Edward Sapir the concept of culture was a reification of processes that were rooted in individuals' personality and psychology." In effect, Sapir saw culture and individual as mutually constitutive rather than dichotomous: culture is formed through shared behaviours and consensus among individuals, while individuals are shaped meaningfully by their cultural interactions. He emphasized that individuals are active agents, not passive inheritors of social tradition. It is not only cultures that exhibit relative characteristics, but individuals too show such variability. Culture is a fundamental basis for the formation of personality, as illustrated by Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 2005 [1946]) in her anthropological study of Japanese national character. At the same time, Alfred Kroeber argued that cultural patterns are not an accidental aggregation of unrelated elements, but rather form a coherent whole through a process of internal configuration — a force that integrates and organizes them (Alfred L Kroeber, 1969 [1944]). According to Kroeber, this notion of configuration provides the most reliable and productive basis for defining, distinguishing, and studying cultures (Alfred Louis Kroeber, 1952, p.5). While many cultures may include similar elements, each one arranges and synthesizes them differently. Thus, cultures differ in their configurations, that is, in how they integrate and structure their elements. These configurations are developed historically, a point that links Kroeber's work to Boas's theory of historical particularism (Alfred L Kroeber, 1969 [1944]).

### ***National characters***

Based on these foundations, anthropologists and social psychologists began to explore the concepts of national character and national stereotypes. H. Duijker and N. Frijda (Duijker & Frijda, 1960) identified six defining features of national character:

1. The psychological traits that distinguish members of one nation from others;
2. The most prevalent behavioral traits among adults in the society;
3. The dominant patterns of conduct, values, and belief systems in the society;
4. The standardized personality traits shaped by socialization and education within the culture;
5. The learned and inherited cultural behaviors, norms, values, and goals embedded in institutions and their products;
6. The expression of the nation's spirit or mentalité in the arts, literature, and philosophy (Duijker & Frijda, 1960).

Duyker and Frijda explained the motivation for nations to construct and define their own civilizations and identities through two key reasons: First, under colonialism, conquest, and imperial control, dominant nations undertook studies of other peoples to assert power. For example, Benedict's research was conducted with the aim of understanding both some Native American groups and, more urgently, the Japanese national character, who at the time were perceived as America's principal wartime enemy. Her study is thus situated within the context of colonial knowledge production and has been criticized for its orientalist and instrumentalist framing (Benedict, 2005 [1946]). Second, beyond colonial interests, the 20th century saw widespread reactions to modernization and globalization, as many nations and peoples — along with their governments — began to fear the erosion or loss of national identity. This triggered a growing concern and movement to recover and revive national character, motivated by fears of cultural homogenization under globalization (Duijker & Frijda, 1960).

Turning to Dean Peabody (1928–2013), he conducted comparative psychological research across six countries—Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States—to test whether national character differences are empirically real. His 1985 study, *National Characteristics*, concluded that different nationalities exhibit fundamentally distinct psychological profiles—not as stereotypes but as shared collective beliefs about their national traits (Peabody, 1985). Later, Antonio Terracciano and colleagues (Terracciano et al., 2005) conducted a large-scale cross-cultural analysis—sampling 3,989 people in 49 countries—to compare perceived national character with measured personality traits (via NEO-PI-R observer and self-reports). They found that national character ratings are consistent within cultures but do not align with average personality trait scores (median correlation ~0). Terracciano et al. argued that national character is socially constructed, a collective narrative held by

cultures, whereas personality traits are likely biological and universal, appearing in individuals regardless of nationality. Therefore, even though societies hold consistent beliefs about what defines them, these beliefs do not map onto actual individual personality profiles (Terracciano et al., 2005, p.96). They concluded that national character beliefs primarily serve to reinforce national identity and cohesion.

The ongoing scholarly debate regarding national character can be understood from two distinct perspectives. On one hand, national character may be interpreted as a construct engineered by the state—an instrument employed in the formation of national identity and the articulation of civilizations or cultures. In this context, it serves not merely as a tool for conceptualizing the nation-state or civilizational project, but also as a mechanism through which the state molds collective identity and instills shared social values.

On the other hand, it is essential to recognize that these state-produced notions of national character are also shaped by broader contextual factors such as the natural environments, collective patterns of thought, and the historical memory of a people. Accordingly, the formation of cultures and civilizations cannot be fully realized through top-down state initiatives alone. Rather, it must incorporate the public's shared consciousness, creative participation, historical experiences, and customary practices in order to attain legitimacy and broad societal acceptance.

In this sense, people do not passively internalize or adhere to a state-imposed vision of cultures or civilizations. Instead, the success of such projects is contingent upon the presence of widely shared and internalized universal beliefs and values that resonate with the lived experiences of the population.

## **Nomadic Civilizations**

In an effort to define their own culture and civilization, Mongolians have embarked on a search for national identity. They characterize the Mongolian nation as nomadic, possessing a nomadic way of life, and justify this primarily through two arguments: first, the traditional lifestyle of pastoral nomadism; and second, the historical legacy of empires that were formed under the title of nomadic states. Unfortunately, these terms—such as nomadism, pastoralism, nomadic cultures, and nomadic civilization—have largely been introduced through external sources, particularly by European and American scholars, as well as by historical records from neighboring countries.

When asked whether rural Mongolians belong to a nomadic culture, many Mongolians answered, "I do move only 2-4 times, so I'm probably not a nomad," associating nomadism solely with the act of unrestricted seasonal migration. These terminologies were largely established by scholars and introduced into Mongolia during the Soviet and socialist periods through translations from English, Russian, and Chinese. In the post-socialist era, the

term "nomadic civilization" has been reconstructed and become widely used (See more on B.Enkhtuvshin, 2011; D.Bum-Ochir, 2019; B. Dulam, 2017; Sendenjav Dulam, 2013; Ichinkhorloo, 2024; B. Tsetsentsolmon, 2014; Baatarnaran Tsetsentsolmon, 2024).

At the same time, there has been a growing tendency to define Mongolian national identity through the broader term "Mongolian culture and civilization." Dulam Sendenjaviin (Sendenjaviin Dulam, 2008) offered a concise summary of "Mongolian nomadic civilization," stating:

"The central issue of Mongolian nomadic civilization lies in the development of pastoral nomadism and the creation of a culture and ideology closely tied to it. In connection with the culture of nomadic pastoralism, the dwelling (ger), clothing and adornment, food and beverage customs, festivals and celebrations, etiquette and moral culture, games and entertainment, oral literature, spiritual beliefs, music, and other artistic expressions have all come together as a unified whole."

Alongside this, efforts have been made to locate Mongolian identity in references such as Chinggis Khaan, The Secret History of the Mongols, Buddhism, and traditional customs and beliefs. The term "Mongolian civilization" typically refers only to the independent Mongolian state and its people. However, researchers (Adle, Habib, & Baipakov, 2003; Adle, Palat, & Tabyshalieva, 2005; Asimov & Bosworth, 1998; Bosworth & Asimov, 2000; Dani & Masson, 1992; Harmatta, Puri, & Etemadi, 1994; Litvinsky, Guang-da, & Samghabadi, 1996) discussed about nomadic civilizations and how to represent and encompass cultural practices, values, and belief systems rooted in nomadic life that have spread widely across Asia.

In other words, in these Asian countries, no single cultural form dominates; rather, multiple cultural traditions coexist. In these regions, pastoralism is commonly practiced in tandem with agriculture, modern industry, handicrafts, and a blend of various religions including Buddhism, Muslim and Christianity. The question being raised is whether there exists a shared cultural foundation across these nations and, if so, how to collectively name and represent it. Although the cultures of these countries have evolved over time, many scholars argue that a nomadic cultural foundation persists in their mentalities and social practices. Thus, the term "nomadic civilization" is increasingly favored in Central Asia.

### ***"Characteristics" of Mongolian Civilization***

Furthermore, Narangerel (2020) assert that the core of Mongolian culture and civilization is rooted in morality. He considered the concept of morality to be epitomized by Chinggis Khaan and the principles embodied in the "Yusun," or what we now call yos or "law and ethics." He critically followed Montesquieu's framework but expanded it by emphasizing "morality" in the governance and legal structures of so-called "despotic and monarchical

Tartars" (Baron de Montesquieu, 1748). In this sense, researchers (Atwood, 2004; Munkh-Erdene, 2022, 2023; Sneath, 2007) argue that Mongolia's state system since the 13th century has been founded on ethical governance, consensus, trust, harmony and "honesty and promise-keeping around patron-client relationship" (Jugder Chimed, 2021, p.150) culminating in the development of a "dual system" that made Buddhism the state religion. The label "moral culture" is used to describe Mongolian civilization, and many believe it should be revived in the post-socialist era.

Additionally, attempts have been made to define Mongolian culture through the cosmology and belief system of Tenggerism, associated with Chinggis Khaan. As argued by Sh.Bira (Sh.Bira, 2003), Mongolian culture and civilization under the Tenggerism or Heavenism was equal to today's globalization and served as the political ideology over the world. He argued that:

Initially, Tenggerism developed several elementary concepts, including the divine origin of khanship, the dualistic nature of the khan's power, his charisma and other related points (Bira 2000). Although the theory of divine origin of khanship was well known among nomadic peoples, it was the Mongols who not only kept without interruption the oldest version but also developed it considerably on the basis of their own perceptions and the achievements of more advanced civilisations (Sh.Bira, 2003, p.107).

This perspective emphasizes coexistence and the acceptance of other cultures, positioning spiritual belief as a connection between the supreme heavens and individual leadership.

From an anthropological and ethnographic perspective, scholars (Sendenjaviin Dulam, 2007, 2008, 2024; Nyambuu, 2023) have examined Mongolian culture through the lens of symbolic theory, asserting that Mongolian culture operates through symbols. These symbols not only encode positive values but also express prohibitions and taboos. The well-known Mongolian proverb "A person lives by the blessings of their words" ([Mongol khun] *amnii bilegeeree*) is often used to illustrate this symbolic system. Mongolian culture is thus understood as encompassing both nomadic traditions and oral heritage, passed down through generations.

### ***Yos judag and justice***

Although my research to some extent agrees with these scholars who interpret the characteristics of Mongolian civilization in connection with globalization, ethics, justice, and symbolism, I would like to offer my own interpretation on this section. When defining a civilization, it seems appropriate to attempt to identify the character specific to a given nation or people. It is necessary to closely study how the states and its people define themselves and what values they collectively agree upon.



Therefore, I examined the values most commonly discussed and supported among Mongolians and other closely related Mongolian peoples. In particular, qualities such as justice, honesty, and keeping one's word are highly respected in Mongolia. These values are collectively referred to as *yos judag* (honour and integrity), and they are more frequently discussed among bearers of intangible cultural heritage of Mongolia such as wrestlers, horse trainers, archers, and rural people. In other words, because competitive events are public and visible to all, human honour and integrity are most clearly demonstrated during the Naadam Festival and thus become the focus of public attention.

A striking example was seen in the 2025 wrestling tournament of the Naadam, when a young wrestler won and champions from the western provinces were defeated. A major topic of public discourse surrounding the event was that people debated which of the two defeated champions was honorable (*judagtai*) and which was dishonorable (*judaggui*). The label "dishonorable" was influenced by the perception that a wrestler did not compete with true skill or fairness but instead sought to exhaust and intimidate opponents using trickery. In another provincial tournament in 2025, a wrestler who won by unfairly grabbing his opponent from behind faced public demands to have his title revoked. This became a topic of public discussion about justice. In truth, Mongolian wrestling is a system with a very strict hierarchy, organized in a military-like fashion with clear ranks of power. However, as a strength-based sport, it requires not only discipline—the control and constant effort over one's own body—but also mutual respect for others and the ability to represent the dignity of society.

It is common for young wrestlers to revere and even fear senior champions. However, some champions are followed by rumors that they mistreat younger wrestlers and abuse their status and power, which has drawn public disapproval. From this, it becomes evident that even if one is a wrestling champion or a powerful figure, one must treat younger wrestlers with respect. When this customary norm is violated, the public responds with criticism and labels the violator as dishonorable. This is a recurring theme every year in wrestling competitions at the national, provincial, and district levels (Delaplace & Chuluunbat, 2022). Although local rivalries are common—where people cheer for their own region's wrestlers and take pride in having the strongest representative—this also reflects a broader sense of regional pride and local community identity (*nutag*). On another level, it speaks to the issue of how different ethnic groups and nations coexist alongside one another.

The issue of *yos judag* (honor and integrity) demands keeping one's word and avoiding false promises. It values being genuinely honest and disapproves of saying "yes" only to later back out by citing excuses. If something is not feasible or possible, one should not commit by saying "yes," but rather clearly express that it cannot be done. For nomads, time is measured in days or half-days, and space is gauged by natural landmarks

like mountains, rivers, and sacred cairns (ovoo). When meeting or engaging in shared activities, people must dedicate time and overcome distances—both of which are precious resources. Once a promise is made, it requires investing that most valuable resource: time. It also means physically crossing distances and setting aside daily responsibilities to dedicate oneself.

For herders, keeping one's word to attend events or meet with someone in distant places often means traveling at least 5–10 kilometers. In order for that, the herder needs reassigning or delegating household and livestock duties to someone else, coordinating tasks with others, and offering one's help in turn someday later. In this sense, honoring one's word requires significant commitment and cooperation within the household and beyond. It is built upon trust and mutual support, and at every level, fulfilling one's promise is expected. This reflects a form of moral economy and reciprocity. It acknowledges the effort and coordination others have put in—scheduling, labour, and negotiation—which must be respected. Because of the high level of commitment involved, once someone says "yes," they are expected to follow through entirely. The scholar B. Rinchen wrote about this in his work "Mongoliin za andgair bui za" ("The Mongolian 'Yes' Is an Oath"), which explored this cultural expectation. Even today, this is regarded as a key trait of a person with integrity. This principle is also expected in political, economic, social, and cultural life. For example, politicians, government leaders, and members of parliament, as well as large corporations, are expected to follow through on their promises with fairness and integrity.

### ***Respect***

The immense value of gaining respect is well understood. But how respect is gained, how long it endures, and the space in which it applies are all critical. Human society functions through an intricate web of power—both visible and invisible. According to Foucault's theory of power relations, power is enacted through persuasion, coercion, and interaction. Power is exercised when an individual or institution compels others to act on its will, while those subjected to power may either submit or resist. Scholars especially Bum-Ochir (Bum-Ochir Dulam, 2006) have found that among nomads and Mongolians, rather than resisting power, people often accept it through forms of respect, working together rather than in opposition.

Respect, in this view, is not about blindly following a charismatic leader in patrimonial community and more about the contemporary notion of soft power—influencing others through alignment with shared values and principles, or by affecting their core beliefs. For Mongolians, respect does not center on changing or dominating others, but rather on coexistence. It is the recognition of one another's right to exist, to not be dominated or invalidated, and to live together in mutual regard. This philosophy is deeply tied to the Mongolian and nomadic way of life. Humans,

non-human beings, nature, livestock, and spiritual entities are all believed to coexist in interdependence. While herders do slaughter livestock for food, the fundamental goal of animal husbandry is to ensure the animals survive through the winter and spring. Grass grows as nature intends, animals graze as they must, and during droughts, plants wither. Human beings show respect by not interfering—by refraining from excessive digging, burning, or destruction.

Among herders, respect is not limited to the powerful, influential, or elderly—it also means respecting the customs and norms of one's local land, and treating the beliefs, cultures, and religions of other ethnic groups and nationalities equally. When Mongolian herders were asked in 2024 about religion and cooperation, they responded:

“Worshipping sacred mountains and avoiding the disturbance of stones or trees are part of Mongolian rituals and traditions. Whether one believes in Buddhism or Christianity, people should respect nature and the Earth. We generally have no issues with people of other religions. We respect those who worship and pray—everyone has the right to their own beliefs. But we feel pity when some try to convert others by offering food or material goods to the poor. That's their way of life, I suppose. They probably think someone will convert just because they accept material things. But really, they're playing on the Mongolian virtue of gratitude and helpfulness.”

Respect is a core principle that governs social norms and defines socio-cultural structures. Though generally stable, it evolves and flows between individuals. Within families, respect arises not only from generational differences—such as between grandparents, parents, and children—but also from merit and responsibilities. These forms of respect also carry influence or power. Respect is shaped through systems of intergenerational knowledge transfer—like elders passing down ethics to grandchildren—as well as in the coexistence of extended families. For instance, affection and support from the mother's or uncle's side, and skill training from the father's side, all help cultivate respect.

Respect is not merely about the weak revering the strong or following in awe. Rather, it's about how those with power and status extend that respect to the weak, the marginalized, and even the non-human. Mongolian traditional teachings emphasize age-specific modes of interaction with children: infants (0–3 years) are to be raised with godlike love; young children (3–5) are to be cared for with the benevolence of a true benefactor; children (6–12) are to be driven to labor like subjects; and older children (12 and above) are to be embraced as friends and equals. In this sense, respect is about coexistence and equality. Whether one is a child, a government official, a noble, an ordinary herder, an orphan, or an elder—if one possesses *yos judag*, mutual respect is established and social order is maintained. Scholars have noted that this philosophy has been integrated

into Buddhist ritual practice as a way of drawing nomadic civilizations into its orbit.

It is understandable that scholars are increasingly interested in how *yos judag*—honor and integrity—and the respect and order derived from it are maintained and continually nurtured within social and cultural life. Across the world, societies have developed mechanisms to organize social life, ensure harmony, and prevent conflict and war. These include public discourse, social contracts, the rule of law, the election of representatives, delegation of collective will and interests, and trust in strong leadership—all of which strengthen intercultural dialogue.

### **Symbolic-ritual cultures and civilization**

Researchers (Benedict, 2005) have described Japanese society as a “shame culture,” where both nations and individuals highly value honor and take pride in preserving dignity. Acceptance in society and the ability to live there depends on maintaining one’s reputation. In such cultures, societal judgment defines one’s very existence. It is often considered better to end one’s life than to lose one’s honor—death becomes a means of restoring lost dignity. In contrast, American society is characterized as a “guilt culture,” where the fear is not shame but being at fault. Adherence to written law is central, and violation of the social contract is met with judgment and punishment. The community emphasizes the necessity of penalizing wrongdoing, making the fear of punishment a core societal mechanism. This pattern is also used to describe European societies.

Let us now turn to my proposed perspective on the unique features of the Mongolian nation and its foundational nomadic civilization. How have Mongolians institutionalized and preserved the ideas of *yos judag*, respect, and coexistence? In the past century, many scholars (Lattimore, 1962) believed that nomads survived by rewarding those who conformed and violently eliminating those who did not. Others (Khazanov, 1994) argued that nomadic peoples—especially Mongols—were dependent on and borrowed from the institutions of sedentary civilizations. These views, often rooted in the now-contested theory of social evolution (Sneath, 2007), claimed that nomads assimilated into sedentary cultures and lacked their own civilizational frameworks. These perspectives reflect a deeper bias: that nomadic societies were incapable of building empires, and that the rise of nomadic states and civilizations was an anomaly requiring explanation through exclusionary and discriminatory theories. Such views are grounded in evolutionary thought, nationalism, sinocentrism and ethnocentrism (Munkh-Erdene, 2023) that denigrate nomadic cultures and elevate sedentary civilizations as the only legitimate state-builders.

Yet, preserving core values like *yos judag*, justice, fulfilling promises, respect, and coexistence was not especially difficult for Mongolian culture. Political and economic scholars (Ensminger, 1992; Ostrom, 1993) generally argue that maintaining any societal system requires institutions

that implement, monitor, and sustain social rules—and that such systems incur transaction costs. Who pays for enforcement? Should taxes be levied? Should the wealthy aristocracy finance the state? Or should the system be sustained through looting and conquest?

In contrast, Mongolian culture developed ritual-based mechanisms to transmit, monitor, and enhance its norms. If we understand Mongolian and nomadic culture as ritual culture, it aligns more closely with reality. Specific rituals encode and enforce social norms, even if they are not written or formally standardized. Given the vastness of the land, regional diversity in ecology, climate, language, and livelihood, rituals evolved locally to preserve shared values. These rituals allowed diverse nomadic nations to coexist equitably despite different environments, dialects, and economies.

Among nomadic civilizations across Eurasia, similar rituals and customs can be found, explained by the phrase "each region has its own traditions." Take, for instance, mountain and water offerings. Some cultures have cairn (ovoo) rituals, others worship nature spirits, ancestors, or former rulers. Yet behind all these ceremonies lies the shared goal of social and cultural cohesion—affirming the coexistence of human and non-human beings. These rituals remind us that human society is not superior to nature or spirits, and that all beings participate equally in the world. In ritual, everyone—from king to servant—is brought onto the same level of human experience.

Rather than being enforced by bureaucratic institutions like courts and police, rituals are upheld and enacted by the local people themselves. Thus, they require no special budget. Accountability for ritual violations is also managed by the community. The simplest form of enforcement is social exclusion—refusing to befriend, cooperate, host, or communicate with the violator. This isolation constitutes a powerful form of coercion in a culture rooted in reciprocity and collective survival in harsh natural and social environments. In the absence of centralized bureaucratic control, dispersed ritual control systems emerged.

The ideal figure of a person with *yos judag* is modeled, taught, and spread through stories and legends. Folk tales describing the good person or noble hero often follow a clear pattern. For example, some epics (*Jangar*, *Geser*, *Khan kharankhui* etc) tell of a hero who, even when exhausted in battle against a monster, pauses to eat and rest alongside it before resuming the fight—upholding mutual respect and integrity even toward one's enemy.

Rituals are referred to by various names: customs, taboos, etiquette. One of their most powerful forms is symbolism. Scholar S. Dulam (Sendenjaviin Dulam, 2007) and others have argued that Mongolian and nomadic symbolic systems embed their core values and worldview. According to them, Mongolian culture is symbolic at its core—expressing social structures, values, and norms through symbolic systems that include time, numbers, colors, cardinal directions, state insignia, personal names,

visual motifs, and omens. They interpret these as reflecting the deep interconnectedness of humans, nature, and animals—what some might call a holistic, positivist view.

Even the smallest household rituals demonstrate why Mongolian culture can be called a ritual culture. Mongolians observe detailed customs when visiting a home: arriving by car on the southwest side, approaching the horse tethering post respectfully, dismounting on the left side, leaving large bags and sharp objects outside, straightening clothes, and adjusting sleeves before entering. Inside the ger, guests avoid sitting in sacred places, do not glare at shrines, accept food and drink with both hands or from the right, and avoid slurping or clanging dishes. One must not step on the threshold, lean on support columns, or stare at religious objects. Children grow up learning these customs, which are socially enforced rituals that guide respectful interaction and prevent rude or offensive behavior.

These practices are deeply symbolic. For example, circling tea clockwise, avoiding stepping on thresholds, or not leaning on columns are explained through local stories and taboos. Yet all convey the same message: “I mean you no harm; I respect you.” These actions appeal to both conscious and unconscious awareness—ritually embedding respect in both mind and body. People may not fully rationalize their behavior, but they internalize and replicate it, unconsciously absorbing respect-based practices. In summary, Mongolian—and by extension, nomadic—civilization may be best described as a symbolic-ritual culture that expresses its national character through daily rituals, symbolic meaning, and embedded ethical values. From daily life to state ceremonies, rituals guide people to act with *yos judag* and mutual respect.

### **Concluding remarks on Universal and Particular Aspects of Civilization**

Civilization is both a universal and a relative concept. Every nation has the right to define its own civilizations, and the citizens of a given country participate in this process by defining their collective identity. As mentioned in the theoretical section above, national characteristics cannot be used to mold every individual into a single, uniform pattern. Rather, they reflect the shared beliefs accepted by the people. In other words, not everyone in a given nation is necessarily strong, tall, or fully embodies the cultural symbols of their society at all times—but their acceptance of these values is what defines the collective identity of that nation.

Mongolia, for example, is making efforts to study its national identity and define its nomadic civilizations. However, there are many problems. Let me give one example. UNESCO, as we know from its conventions, encourages each nation to define and express its own civilizations. In line with this, Mongolia has organized the “Nomadic Culture Festival” annually since 2017, under the framework of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The aim has been to recognize and promote

people and organizations who preserve and carry forward cultural heritage—not to have them compete, but to showcase and protect traditions from being forgotten or lost. Since 2023, this effort has expanded into the “World Nomadic Culture Festival,” which serves not only as a national event but as a platform for communities and nations across Asia who identify as descendants of nomadic civilizations and bearers of “living heritage” to present, protect, and promote their cultures in line with the goals of UNESCO’s cultural conventions.

However, the UNESCO convention requires that bearers of intangible cultural heritage be officially recognized by the respective government then by UNESCO. This methodology—now being adopted by Mongolia—presents challenges. People have criticized the process by which individuals or organizations must be officially designated by the government in order to participate in such festivals or be invited to international events. Why, they ask, should the government determine who is an authentic bearer of tradition? The root of this issue lies in the UNESCO registration system, which mandates state recognition, responsibility for protection, and financial oversight through national budgets. On one hand, it is good that the government takes responsibility for funding and legal protection. But on the other, it increases the likelihood of bureaucratic red tape.

Moreover, civilization is not a competition between nations. Framing civilizations in terms of rivalry contradicts UNESCO’s principles of intercultural dialogue and multilateralism. Civilization is not something to be pitted against another. A person defines themselves through many overlapping identities. For instance, an adult woman may simultaneously be a daughter, a granddaughter, a mother; in the workplace, she may be part of a team; to her morning jogging partners, a friend; to her schoolmates, a classmate; to her political group, a party member; in her local community, a herder or a farmer; and perhaps a romantic in love with a melodrama. A person has many identities shaped by social and cultural contexts. This aligns with the idea that individuals possess multiple identities—they are *dividuals* (Strathern, 1988), not fixed, uniform persons, but composite beings shaped by shared affiliations and the ethics of all stakeholders who co-construct, influence, and negotiate their roles, responsibilities, and recognition within a given cultural, social, and institutional context.

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