

**The Political Significance of Clan-structured Rule
in 13th Century Mongolia**

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I. The structure of Mongol society in the 12th and 13th century, according to the sources available to us, was based on the clan-system. The Mongolian clan formed a strictly agnatic or patrilineal unit, marriage alliances were guided by the principle of exogamy.

Rashid ad-Din, the Persian scholar and long-term first minister of the Mongolian Il-khanate in the 13th century, informs us: „They all dispose of a carefully established genealogy, since Mongolian custom demands it that they preserve the origin of their ancestors. To each child is told and explained his descent. There is, therefore, none among them who has not any knowledge of his tribe and his origins“¹.

The knowledge of a person's descent, however, was not only a question of family interest and social order, it was, moreover, a factor of considerable political relevance. To what extent this basically characteristic feature of steppe-nomadic society contributed to the successful building of the Mongol Empire, and why it ultimately, not to say, inevitably, led to the empire's decline and fall, is the topic of the paper in hand. I will try to explain the process in three steps as given below.

- 1) Rule through hierarchy by descent : First successful endeavours to unify the Mongol tribes in an imperial confederation under Khaidu and Khabul Khan.
- 2) Rule through hierarchy by descent according to Činggis Khan's new order : Integration taking the place of unification; the rise of the Mongol Empire.
- 3) Intransigence of clan-structured rule through hierarchy by descent and centralized state-rule : partition, decline and fall of the Mongol Empire.

¹ Quotation according to Vladimircov 1948, p.56

II. *The first step : Rule through hierarchy by descent.*

According to the Secret History, the origin of the Mongols was wholly tied up in the account of the descentance of Činggis Khan, whose mythical ancestors were a „blue-gray wolf and a fallow doe“². Their eighth descendant in the direct male line was Borjigidai Mergen, the „Good Marksman“, with the „Wild-Duck-People“³. These Borjigid, or Wild-Duck-People, hence form the original „yasun“, „bone“, i.e. the agnatic line, of Činggis Khan's ancestry.

The chapter concerning the early history of the Mongols in the Yüan Shih, revised during the reign of Khubilai, records that Khaidu of the Borjigid-clan was unanimously acclaimed Khan, and that his Ordu was situated on the banks of the Khara Gol, a righthand tributary of the Orkhon River. To cross the river, Khaidu had built a dam whereby traffic was facilitated. Afterwards, tribal families from all areas around came to submit to him in ever increasing numbers⁴.

This report in the Yüan Shih is the first evidence of a tribal confederation in connexion with Činggis Khan's ancestors. It does not, however, specifically mention „Mongol tribes“, but rather generally refers to tribes from all areas, in accordance with our knowledge of the ethnically mixed character of the peoples in those days. The period of this early confederation can be assumed to have been the first half of the 12th century.

Khaidu was the great-grandfather of Khabul, who, according to the SH, „ruled over all the Mongols“⁵. Khabul's successor as Khan – after Ambakhai Khan had been captured by the Tatars and betrayed to the Chin – was Khutula, Khabul's middle son; he became a heroic figure in the Mongolian saga: „The warrior's voice was like thunder, his hands like the paws of a bear; and with these hands he could break the spine of the strongest man. If, when sleeping by the camp fire at night, glowing embers fell upon his body, he paid no attention – if this wakened him, he thought that lice had bitten him, scratched himself and fell asleep again. He ate a three-year-old sheep and drank a huge bowl of kumiss at every meal and still could not satisfy his appetite“⁶.

When he was made Khan, the SH reports, „The Mongols rejoiced, and in their rejoicing they danced and feasted. After raising Qutula as qan, they danced around the Leafy Tree of Qorqonaq until there was a ditch up to their waist, and dust up to their knees“⁷.

To return to the clan-lines of the Borjigid, with regard to the transmission of a position of power. The exact genealogical connexions are not always quite clear, as there are certain contradictions between the statements of the SH and Rashid ad-Din⁸. What does at least seem

² Secret History of the Mongols (SH), § 1; de Rachewiltz 2004 (I), p. 1

³ Ratchnevsky/Haining 1991, p. 14 n. 84

⁴ Weiers 1997, pp. 31-32

⁵ SH § 52; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p. 10

⁶ Ratchnevsky/Haining, op. cit., p. 11

⁷ SH § 57; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p. 13

⁸ Ratchnevsky/Haining, op. cit., p. 10, n. 63

quite clear, though, is the fact that the two main lines of the Borjigid-clan were established among the descendants of Khabul Khan. They were the Tayičiyud-branch, which assumed the prerogative to rule as Khan (Khaidu-Khabul-Ambakhai-Khutula), and the Kiyat-branch, the cadet line (Khaidu-Khabul-younger sons, eventually down to Yisügei, Činggis Khan's father).

Apart from being eligible as khan through hierarchy by descent, let us now turn to the other main criteria which allowed a person to become khan in those days: who, in fact, was able to attract followers from all areas, as it is said of Khaidu in the Yüan Shih, with whom could they identify themselves?⁹

In the early days of known Mongol history, clan-alliances and tribal confederacies generally seem to have been loose rather than firmly established units. Once having formed such an entity, this manifested itself in the „Khuriltai“ or „Council-meeting“¹⁰. The Khuriltai elected a „Leader“ or „Khan“ for the following purposes: to provide sufficient means of subsistence and to ensure the continuity of such necessities. Sufficient means of subsistence mostly meant what the SH refers to as „olja“, lit. „findings“, translated as *ts'ai*, „valuables or wealth“ in the Chinese glossary¹¹. Those, who were able to provide „olja“, could consequently count on increasing political influence, increasing power and, last not least, an increasing number of followers.

Not to be disregarded, either, in this context, is the phenomenon of ‚charisma‘, a quality characteristic of all successful Central-asiatic rulers, favoured, perhaps, too, by the continuous struggle of a mobile nomadic society against the permanent dangers of economic and social instability.

A „Khan“, therefore, was also a powerful and influential personality with whom followers even of different ethnic origins could identify themselves.

In a beautiful poetic passage, the SH describes such a declaration of allegiance. When Temüjin decided to separate from his earstwhile anda Jamukha, those who joined Temüjin pledged their word and swore their oath of loyalty in this way: „We as vanguard shall speed after many foes: for you fine-looking maidens with beautiful cheeks, and geldings with fine croups at the trot we shall bring. When in a battue we hunt the cunning wild beasts, for you we shall go ahead and round them up. For you we shall drive the beasts of the steppe until their bellies press together; for you we shall drive the beasts of the steep banks until their thighs press together. In the days of war, if we disobey your commands, deprive us of all our oods and belongings, and our noble wives, and cast our black heads on the ground! In the days of peace, if we violate your counsel, cut us off from our retainers and possessions, and our wives, and cast us out into the wilderness!“¹²

⁹ Weiers, op. cit., p.32

¹⁰ Vladimircov, op.cit., p. 100f.

¹¹ Weiers, op.cit., p. 32

¹² Sh § 123; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., pp. 49-50

Nevertheless: When the ability to lead failed, and „olja“ was no longer insured, the willingness of followers to identify themselves with a khan decreased. The „Centre“ lost its attraction, and the destructive, centrifugal forces inherent in the clan-oriented steppe-society gained the upper hand. Such a process seems to have been the natural course of events in the rise and fall of Central-asian confederations altogether.

The 13th century Meng-ta Pei-lu states, for instance: „The empires of the North, be they a thousand or a hundred miles square, are of no permanence; they flourish and they decay; they rise and they fall.“¹³

Another contemporary witness is the Persian historian Juvaini, who describes the period of disunity and conflict in the following words: „They had neither ruler nor leader. The tribes lived apart, singly or in twos; they were not united and were either at war or in a state of superseded enmity with each other; they were compelled to pay tribute to the Chin emperor and lived in abject poverty.“¹⁴

The SH, too, recalls this period of strife in another of its famous poetic passages: „The starry sky was turning upon itself, the many people were in turmoil: they did not enter their beds to rest, but fought against each other. The crusty earth was turning and turning, the entire nation was in turmoil: they did not lie on their coverlets to rest, but attacked each other.“¹⁵

A tribal confederacy led by a ‚khan‘, whose claim to power was solely based on clan-hierarchy by descent and whose fortune in war had abandoned him, had proved not to be viable in the long run, as the examples of Khaidu, Khabul and their descendants clearly demonstrate.

The second step : Činggis Khan's new order.

In the period of decline during the second half of the 12th century, as mentioned above, a descendant of the Kiyat, the cadet-line of the Borjigid-clan, enters the stage of events: Yisügei Bayatur, a man of valour and renown, though never Khan himself. The Tayičiyud, who still regarded the claim to become khan as their prerogative according to the traditional hierarchy by descent, had always held Yisügei in distrust. This was openly revealed after Yisügei's murder by the Tatars. Hoelun eke, his widow, together with her young children, was rejected and expelled from the clan-community by the Tayičiyud, the occasion being the spring-sacrifice to the ancestors. In the words of the SH: „You are one for whom the rule holds not to be called and given food; you are one for whom the custom holds to eat if she chances upon food; you are one for whom the rule holds not to be invited and given food; you are one for whom the custom holds to eat if food comes by her.“¹⁶ And the

¹³ Meng-ta Pei-lu 1980, pp. 16 and 19

¹⁴ Ratchnevsky/Haining, op. cit., p.12

¹⁵ SH § 254; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p. 183

¹⁶ SH § 71; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.17

following day, they leave Yisügei's family in deepest despair, saying: „The deep water has dried up, the shining stone is shattered.“¹⁷

Temüjin, nine years old at the time, thus grew up with a negative image of clan-based hierarchy by descent, a fact his mother Hoelun never tired of keeping alive in his memory: „We have no friend but our shadow, we have no whip but our horse's tail, and we ask ourselves how to take vengeance for the outrage committed by our Tayičiγud kinsmen, how can you be at odds with each other, like the five sons of Mother Alan of old?“¹⁸

The guide-lines of Temüjin's creation of a new order on the steppe, once „the people of the felt-walled tents had been brought to allegiance“¹⁹, and he himself had been given the title of Činggis Khan, were certainly influenced by the experiences of his youth, and not least by the said negative image of the traditional concept of clan-based hierarchy by descent. Unlike the states hitherto created by the steppe-nomads, Činggis' goal was for his empire to last forever! Apart from the principle of loyalty and reward, two considerations formed the basis of the measures which he now introduced; in the words of Ratchnevsky: „The power of the tribal chieftains must be reduced and a core unit must be created which would be unconditionally loyal to the ruler and would carry out his politics, whatever these might be.“²⁰ Integration took precedence over unification, and the 'Thousands' of Činggis Khan's new army were not created on the basis of tribal affiliation. Rather, in distributing tribal members – apart from non-Mongols – under the command of men from various tribes, the Great-khan clearly aimed at weakening the power of the former tribal leaders. The old goal of the steppe-warriors to obtain „olja“ or „wealth“ was declared insufficient, the new goal was the utter defeat of the enemy. Činggis Khan's decree to that effect is found in the SH: „If we overcome the enemy, we shall not stop for booty. When the victory is complete, that booty will surely be ours, and we will share it among ourselves. If we are forced by the enemy to retreat, let us turn back to the point where we began the attack. Those men who do not turn back to the point where we began the attack shall be cut down.“²¹ Proof of loyalty was given by those who followed Činggis Khan's new order; they were rewarded accordingly, regardless of their origin, with high positions, important tasks and a share in the booty. What is remarkable to note, though, is the fact that, despite its negative image, clan-based hierarchy by descent was to remain unchanged in principle – with but one significant difference: the new line of hierarchy by descent was to begin with Činggis Khan himself. The claim to power and to command the loyalty of followers was to be the sole prerogative of his descendants.

The third step: Clan-structured rule in conflict with centralized state-rule.

After the death of Great-khan Möngke in 1259, it quickly became apparent that a centrally governed Mongolian Empire was impossible to maintain. The oligocratic rulers of

¹⁷ SH § 72; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.18

¹⁸ SH § 76; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.20

¹⁹ SH § 202; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.133

²⁰ Ratchnevsky/Haining, op. cit., p.90

²¹ SH § 153; de Rachewiltz, op. cit., p.76

the clan-based Mongolian élite, direct descendants of Činggis Khan all, had increasingly taken to appoint military leaders and political advisers according to their own personal preferences²².

The emergence of cliques, groups and factions, therefore, became inevitable. A further complication was the increasing number of direct descendants of the Borjigid-clan. Mongol politics were subsequently more and more dominated by the respective interests of the rulers in the successor states – evidence of which, among other facts, was the decline of the old centre of Karakorum.

Mongol clan-consciousness, originally favourable to the building of an empire, finally proved fatal to it, leading to its partition, decline and fall²³. For three generations, the great Mongol Empire had lasted as a unity. It was the destructive dynamics of a separatist clan-consciousness which superseded the constructive dynamics of an empire-building clan-consciousness – partition and the emergence of the successor states, Qypchaq, the Il-khanate, Čayatai and Yüan proving the case.

There is, however, another factor which cannot be disregarded in the context of the disintegration of the Mongol Empire, its insufficient institutional basis²⁴. The dilemma of Mongol rule – not only in China – was the inability to achieve a durable identification with the civilian institutions of the conquered countries and to modify the military and colonialist character of their rule – unlike their Central-asian cousins, the Manchus, four hundred years later.

The Mongol Empire rose through the powerful dynamics inherent in the clan-based society of steppe – nomads; it failed because of the intransigence of the said clan-structure and centralized statehood. This structural incompatibility became most evident in the Mongols' conquest of highly developed states such as Khorezm and China, when they sought to rule them with their oligocratic clan-élite.

III. To conclude: What remains?

Even with the demise of the various successor states of the Empire, it is worthy of note that the Mongolian governing élite of the surviving tribal confederations, throughout their being part of the Ch'ing Empire, and up to the first half of the 20th century, continued to derive the right to rule from their direct descent of the house of Činggis Khan. An impressive number of consciously kept and carefully maintained genealogical tables still extant bear convincing evidence to that fact.

²² Weiers 2004, pp.116-117

²³ Kulke 1997, pp.25-26

²⁴ Franke 1974, p.346

What remains of the largest land-based state created in the history of human kind to this day, however, is a Mongol nation – of all the old steppe empires the only one to have achieved modern statehood, even though realized in separate entities.

Činggis Khan's famous dictum :

„Altan bie minu alžavaas – alžaaturaj! (If my Golden Body should weaken – let it weaken!)

Akhu tör minu büü aldarturaj! (My present state, though, must not be lost!)

Büten bie minu zovboos – zobturaj! (If my Perfect Body should suffer – let it suffer!)

*Büren uls minu büü sandarturaj!*²⁵ (All my people, though, must not be in confusion!)
may have materialized after all!

²⁵ Quoted according to Natsagdoræ 1991. frontispiece

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