

**Cult of the State:
State in the culture of the Mongols**

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1.1. Introduction

In the latest stage of the debates about studying of the state a major concern has been the 'state idea' and 'state abstraction' as opposed to the concrete sides of the state as an institution and a process. I suspect that the discussion in the phase of state idea lacks case studies and concrete examples of the ideological form of the state. In the following essay, I will introduce a case study from Mongolia as a particular example of the state idea.

The state as an idea, or a conception, should be analysed in accordance with cosmology and ways of thinking of society. For this reason, at the beginning of the essay I will give a brief introduction to the cosmology of the Mongols, which further on will help to analyse the state cult of the Mongols. According to the cosmology of the Mongols (especially, evident and common in Khalkha, the central Mongolian tradition), the state consists of two parts such as the body of the state (institution and process as concrete state) and spirit of the state (power as abstract state)¹, which is to some extent, a reflection of the religion. In this way, the state cult of the Mongols (*töriin шүтлэг*) reminds us of P.Abrams (1988)² and M.Taussig (1992), who claim that the state is god.

I suppose, the second important aspect in examining the state is the historical outline, which shows the origin, development, and changes of the state during its long tradition. Therefore, I will present at least two historical scenes of the state, its origin and contemporary condition. Here, by acknowledging G. Steinmetz (1999), I will illustrate the state as a product of culture, which has its own life both in concrete and abstract senses, in different cultures. Therefore, the state and the state idea is not the same

¹ Probably, some people do not exactly say that state has the parts, but one could easily find out that they implicitly mean it. Also, the Mongol notion of *töriin сүлд* which can be understood as the 'spirit of the state', and which will be analysed in the next part of the essay, is a great example of how they see the state consisting of the spirit and body.

² He wrote the article in 1977 and it was published after his death in 1988.

everywhere. For example, in the case of the Mongols, the state idea developed as a cult (*töriin shütleg*), which originally came out in terms of religion, and later in contemporary Mongolia, it could be identified more in terms of the traditional knowledge of administration (*zasag*)³. The binary composition of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*) (and the state idea) as god and traditional knowledge⁴, contradicts the theory of P. Abrams (1988) and M. Taussig (1992), which sees the state as a god and 'the opium of the masses', this is in the final part of the essay.

In the third part, I discuss the theoretical development of the state idea in anthropological discourse, which has gone through several logical steps: 1) the claim that the state is an idea, 2) that it is indivisible from society, 3) that the state idea derives from society, 4) that the state is a god, 5) and that the state is opium or false consciousness. By the above steps, by discussing A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940), M. Foucault (1980) P. Abrams (1988), T. Mitchell (1991, 1999), M. Taussig (1992) and Y. Navaro-Yashin (2002), I will provide examples from the state cult of the Mongols.

1.2. Cosmology of the Mongols

Before illustrating the cult of the state among the Mongols it is necessary to give an introduction to their cosmology and their way of thinking. The essential part of their cosmology is a kind of shamanic thinking that everything in the world has a soul (*üns*) or a spirit master (*ezen, ongon, sakhius* and *süld* etc) (Purev 1998: 107-109). First this applies to living creatures such as man, animals and plants, then broadens to non-living entities such as mountains, rivers, stones, and so on. Finally, it extends to non-natural attributes made by human. For example, the state as an authoritative institution also has a spiritmaster or masters.

Relation between soul and body. A single theory, which contains the shamanic view can summarize Mongols' notion of soul and body. People may not say the same as the following theory, which we will propose, but their views imply the following theory. People with religious beliefs, either shamanism or Buddhism, always explain humankind and its happiness, suffering, illness and trouble in relation to souls. For example, if someone becomes sick then it means that his soul is cursed (*khörlogdoh*) or polluted (*buzartah*). In other words, when one's soul is cursed by invisible attacks of other spirits one's body feels bad (or suffers misfortune), because the soul and body are two inseparable parts of a person. Then people will ask a shaman or lama what happened to the soul and what should be done to fix or cure it. In order to make him healthy they usually heal the soul first, and then maybe the body of the sick person. This kind of example can be found in many other different situations, not only illness, and indicates the conclusion that humans have two main parts, body and soul (which can be found in many other religions). If one imagines a human as a complete being, Mongols would

³ The term *zasakh* (verb), version of *zasag* (noun), is common in the historical sources, such as the thirteenth century *Secret History of the Mongols*, which used with the meaning to administrate, rule or simply to fix, but the form *zasag* is very rare. Therefore, probably, *zasag* indicates long to the government or state institutions not an old idea.

⁴ We cannot define an exact historical stage in which state idea as an idea began to contain the notion of administration, in addition to god.

say that half of it is body and the other half is soul, and man is complete when both are together. This means that a soul without a body or a body without a soul would not be understood as a man. Because of the binary composition of man, every fortune has two explanations or reasons, one of which is related to the visible body, one to the invisible soul. If so, it makes sense to heal the sick person's soul first, because they believe that his soul is the main cause of his problem.

To conclude, man does not only consist of the body which we can feel with the five senses, but half of man is his intangible soul. In this case the reason for having religious practices and practitioners such as priests, shamans, etc. is to make a connection between these visible and invisible parts of humankind. In general, the two parts can be understood as concrete and abstract.

Spirit master and the notion of *süld*. Apart from soul there is such a thing as spirit (*ongon*), which holds a similar meaning to the soul. But spirit is a soul without body, it is a dead man's soul. In other words, Mongols, especially shamans call living beings' souls 'spirit' after death. When a soul becomes a spirit it has the power to possess natural and social objects, and is called 'spirit master' (*ezen, ongon, sakhius, süld*, etc.) of the thing it possesses. This means that things can have spirit masters and living things can have them in addition to their souls.

Mongols use a number of different terms for 'spirit master' depending on the object and variation of ethnic groups. Among these, an interesting term is *süld* which has a wide range of meanings and uses. A concept of *süld* is already attested for the time of Chinggis Khaan; according to it everyone, including Chinggis Khaan himself, has a genius, a protecting companion (Heissig 1980: 84). In the sense of a protecting spirit, the term specifically denotes the 'state *süld*' or '*toriin süld*' and one of its literary meanings is the 'state spirit'⁵. We will turn to the idea of the 'state spirit' in the next part of the essay.

Two co-existing worlds. The above ideas show that there are two co-existing worlds in which man lives. This is so not only in Mongol shamanism but also in many other societies. For example, E. Shieffelin (1985: 707-724) writes that among the *Kaluli* in New Guinea, people talk about visible and invisible worlds. In Mongol shamanism it is the "world of sun" (*nartyn oron*) and "world of darkness" (*kharanhuin oron*). A-L. Siikala (1978: 319) mentioned the normal and supranormal worlds among the shamans in Siberia. The "visible world" or the "world of the sun" belongs more to humans, and the other one is for the spirits. Man lives in both of them same time, because man consists of two parts each of which is essentially related to one of the two worlds. Man lives with his concrete part in the human world, but his soul communicates with the world of spirits. Therefore, man is responsible in both of the worlds, and the two parts of man in the two worlds are closely connected to each other. When the soul encounters trouble in the invisible world it influences the bodily part of man and is expressed as an illness or a misfortune. Furthermore, the dualistic characteristic extends to all the things related to man and his society. This means that everything, not only man but

⁵ Also refers to the standard of Chinggis Khaan, the *Tug* (Flag) *Süld* consisting of nine horse manes and tails.

the whole society consists of the abstract (soul) and concrete (body or material) parts and lives in two co-existing worlds. The summary of my interpretation on the cosmology of the Mongols is shown in the following figure, and it is necessary to underline that some Mongols probably do not agree with it.

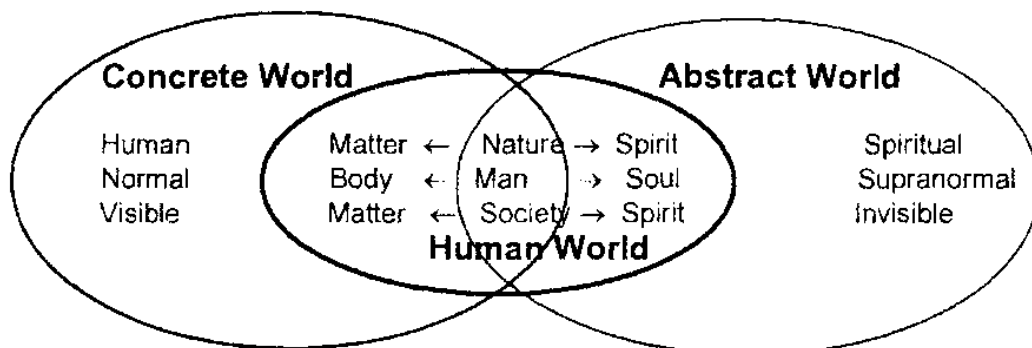


Figure 1. The Human World in Mongol Cosmology. The circle in the centre is a description of man, nature and society. They each consist of two parts. One has matter and body, the other spirit and soul. Although these two parts are united they belong to two different worlds. The Concrete World which is normal, visible and with the sun, and the Abstract World is the spirits' world, which is supranormal, invisible and dark.

1.3. State Cult of the Mongols

The state cult⁶ (*Töriin⁷ shütleg*) of the Mongols might be better understood in terms of their cosmology, presented in the previous part. In the widest extent of the principle of binary composition which applies to humankind, not only man but also man-related functions and institutions have binary natures, more precisely, things such as the state have the two elements, namely, the concrete and abstract or body and soul, etc. In other words, the state – institutions and functions – has a spirit in a similar way that man has a soul or a mountain has a spirit master (*ezen, ongon, sahius, süld*, etc). This is probably the reason why Mongols sometimes use the term "state *süld*" (*töriin süld*) or "spirit of the state", as mentioned in the previous section. The term '*töriin süld*' implies at least three different but closely related notions. First, it is the nine white and five black standards (flags) made from horse manes (*khar, tsagaan süld*) (see figure 2, 3), which were the sacred standards of Chinggis Khan's Empire, and it is written in the thirteenth century historical literature *Secret History of the Mongols*, that the standards founded by him during his life time. Second, it recently started to refer to the state emblem. Finally, '*süld*' refers to the power and spirituality which the state holds (*töriin süld*), and which people do not explain. However, in this essay I will use the term with its general meaning, 'spirit of the state'. Therefore, we have two inter-related notions in general, 'state cult' and 'cult of the state *süld*', and the two in a wide range denote one complex cult of the state.

⁶ My use of the term 'state cult' includes state rituals such as sacrifices, prayers and worships, and also the traditional knowledge of administration, rule and government.

⁷ The term *tör* (state) has not had just one single meaning through Mongol history. In contemporary Mongolian it implies to the state in terms of 'government', but its old meaning is *yos* (custom, rule, morality and correct way of acting). It will be discussed at the end of the essay.

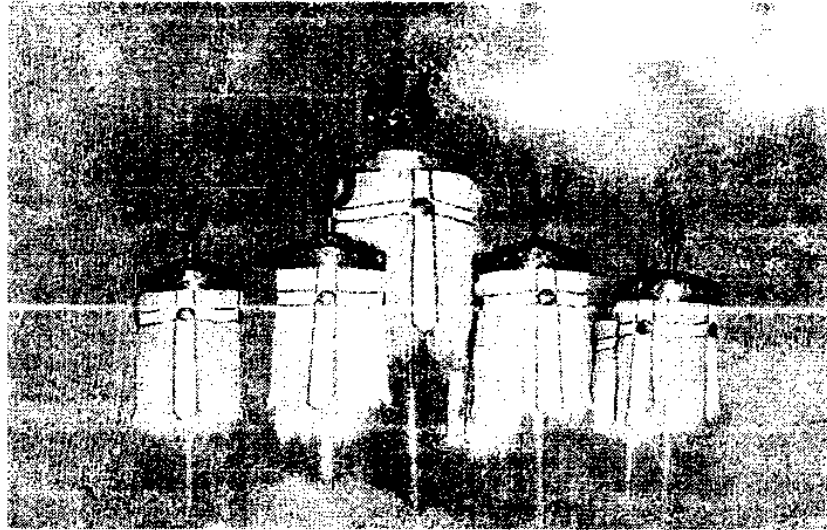


Figure 2. White Standards of Chinggis Khaan, which are now in the Government Building of Mongolia (Lündendorj 2002).

Origins of the state cult. Mongols' worship of the state, or the abstraction of the state, was established and developed through the history not only of the state but in general throughout the history of the Mongols, in a sense including both the state and society. I suppose that there are various socio-cultural aspects and elements through history, which influenced the establishment and evolution of the state culture. Therefore, I prefer to use the word 'origins' in plural form, denoting the wide range of influences. Mongolian philosopher Ch. Jügder (2002: 105) writes that the long and complex tradition of the state eventually becomes the cult of the state.



Figure 3. Black Standard of Chinggis Khaan, which is now in Ordos, Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, China (Sharaldai 1999).

According to him, the Mongol cult of the state originated in the time of the Huns in Central Asia, who believed their king to be the descendent of heaven. However, the historical materials of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries introduce more precise ethnography about the cult of the state. The cult and the idea of the state were based on and consisted in at least three inter-related cults. The Mongol state cult (*töriin shütleg*) has a foundational relation, first, to the cult of the *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven), the main deity of Chinggis Khaan and his empire, second, the worship of the white and black sacred standards (flags) (*töriin khar, tsagaan süld*) (see figure 2, 3). in relation to Chinggis Khaan's ancestors, and third, worship of Chinggis Khaan and other Khaans⁸ after their death.

⁸ Mongols do not only worship Chinggis Khaan, they also worship his queens and sons.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, during the years of the Mongol Empire *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven) was the main deity and guardian of the empire, which had an enormous effect on the cult of the state. For the Mongols, *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven) was not simply a cult but the foundation of everything. S. Dulam (1996) has done a study of texts on the sacrificial manuscripts of the *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven) from around 16th and 17th century. He maintains as it is stated in those texts that *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven) was a symbolic form of 'supreme mind' (*deed oyun sanaa*), 'supreme action' (*deed orchil*), and 'supreme truth' (*deed unen*) and 'resource of intellects' (*oyunii urgali*). Following him, N. Lündendorj (2002: 25) illustrates that terms such as '[empire] under the power of Eternal Heaven' (*mönkhe tngri-yin kücün-dür*) from the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries meant 'to rule the empire with the supreme mind'. Furthermore, according to N. Lündendorj (2002: 35) the Mongol cult of the state was based on the worship of the *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven), because it was the source of political thinking. Becoming an inseparable part of the empire *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven) was one of the reasons the people believed in and worshipped the state as an abstraction.

Worship of the 'state standards' (flags) (*töriin süld*) also has an essential role in the state cult. Chinggis Khaan had 'white and black standards' (flags) (*khar, tsagaan süld*) referring to peace and war and used to raise the white one at times of peace and the black one at times of war. The standards have a binary composition of concrete and abstract, in accordance with Mongol cosmology. The concrete side of the standards (flags) is the visual and explicit aspects of them, and the abstract side can be illustrated by two stages. The first stage is more specific, the standards (flag) have spirit masters (*ongon*) who are the souls of the previous Khaans, ancestors of Chinggis Khaan⁹, and the second stage is more general, the standards symbolise the 'spirit of the state'. In the latter, the standards are conceptualised in an objectified way, it is a symbolic object which contains the spirit of the state. Sharaldai writes that the Darkhads¹⁰ imagine the 'black standard' (flag) (*khar süld*) as a space of existence for the spirit (*süns süld*) of *Mönkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven), Chinggis Khaan, and all Mongol nations. In this sense, the standard (flag) is a spirit not only of the state, but of all Mongols.

Later Mongols adopted the term 'state *süld*' (*töriin süld*) to refer the state emblem in the 20th century. The visual aspects of the two 'state *sülds*' (*töriin süld*) are completely different, however, people were treating the new emblem as if it was the 'state standard' of Chinggis Khaan. In this way, it makes sense that contemporary Mongols have a tendency to respect everything which has the state emblem on it. For example, the monetary unit is an object with the state emblem on it. This is because, people intentionally or unintentionally think of spirituality and abstraction of the power of the state in relation to the Mongol Empire. The term 'state *süld*' (*töriin süld*), whatever it is applied to, is almost equal to the notion of 'state cult' (*töriin shütleg*).

⁹ For example, Mongols say that the white standard's (*tsagaan süld*) spirit master is the soul of Ambagai Khaan, Chinggis Khaan's grandfather.

¹⁰ In the fourteenth century, Khubilai Khaan, grandson of Chinggis Khaan, selected five hundred households from all over Mongolia to protect and arrange the sacrifice for the standards (flags), and they are called Darkhad (Sharaldai 1999: 158). Darkhads are in Ordos, in Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of China, and still make the sacrifices.

Finally, the notion 'state *sūld*' (*tōriin sūld*) or spirit of the state, to some extent, contains the cult of Chinggis Khaan, because of his great effect on the history of the Mongol state. For the Mongols it is almost impossible to imagine the 'state idea' (state abstraction) without Chinggis Khaan both in historical and spiritual senses. About the worship of Chinggis Khaan, W. Heissig writes the following.

In Mongolian shamanism the spirits of the forefathers are worshipped because they offer help against the threat to life posed by powers of evil, forces of nature conceived of in personified form. It is, accordingly, only an adaptation of this fundamental concept of shamanism if historical Činggis Khan too should receive such worship after his death. ... According to the Mongolian tradition, shrines for the sacrifices in memory of Činggis Khan were originally erected in the thirteenth century, at four different places within the Mongol Empire. Today only the Ordos shrine is still known; it was very much neglected for a while in the eighteenth century, and only came back into use through the command of the Manchu emperor. In 1863, Togtoqutōrū, a Khalkha¹¹ prince, built a Činggis shrine in northern Mongolia, on the river Kerūlūn, in which the same prayers were recited in the worship of Činggis Khaan as in the Ordos¹² shrine.

Independently of this, Činggis Khan was sacrificed to in all the Mongolian princely families who descended from him. This sacrifice to their ancestor corresponded to the significant procedure in many Mongolian tribes of making sacrifices to the ancestor-spirits on particular days of the year, mostly on the respective day of death (Heissig 1980: 59-60).

It would be very limited to say that only descendants of Chinggis Khaan pray and worship him, rather, in the state cult (*Tōriin shūtleg*) people who are not kin or even members of the same clan also worship Chinggis Khaan. In particular, examples of it can be found among the contemporary Mongols. Sacrifices held by the Mongolian State, sacrifices in the USA organised mostly by Khalmucks¹³ and other Mongols, and even Darkhads in Ordos who are responsible for all of the sacrifices are not his descendants. I think that this transition from kinship to the whole nation shows why Chinggis Khaan is an essential part of the state cult (*tōriin shūtleg*), because Chinggis Khaan is no longer a kinship figure, but a representative of the whole notion of Mongol.

To conclude, all three origins or influences on the state cult (*tōriin shūtleg*), in the early stages were kinship oriented and went through a transition to become oriented to the nation as a whole. We can find elements of kinship in the foundational stages of the state cult (*tōriin shūtleg*). *Mōnkhe Tenger* (Eternal Heaven), for example, is an ancestor of Chinggis Khaan. In

¹¹ Central Mongolian ethnic group.

¹² Mongols located in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of China, where the Darkhads live.

¹³ They were originally a part of the Oirat Mongols in the western part of Mongolia, and in around the 16th and 17th centuries they moved to the Caspian Sea, and during the mid-20th century some of them migrated to America. There are also other Khalmucks in Xinjiang, north western China.

the thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols*, Chinggis Khaan is always referred to as a descendent of the *Tenger* (Heaven), and Chinggis Khaan always says *Tenger Etseg* (Father Heaven). Also, the state standards (flag), specially the white one, have a guardian spirit which is the soul of Ambagai Khaan, Chinggis Khaan's grandfather. Moreover, the sacrifice for Chinggis Khaan was more kinship-oriented in the first place. Therefore, the origin of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*), in the first instance was a kinship-based ancestral cult, more referring to private and family aspects of shamanism. In the next phase, the ancestral cult becomes more a state cult and worship of the state. Here, the state cult, cannot be understood only in the sense of kinship or shamanic practice, rather it becomes a complex notion, including various aspects relating to state and people's imagination of the state. For the next part of my essay, I will turn to the next stage of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*), and the revival of the worship of the state by Mongols and the Mongolian state.

The state cult in contemporary Mongolia. In this stage of the development of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*), it has become more detached from the original elements of kinship, the ancestral cult and shamanism. We cannot draw a clear border between the stages; rather we see a long historical process, and from the contemporary stage we can see that the state cult (*töriin shütleg*) become different from the times of Mongol Empire. Probably, even from Chinggis Khaan's time the state cult started to detach from kinship orientation, because of his great influence on all of the Mongols.

After the social change (or revolution) in 1990, everything that was closed during the communist regime has been opened and brought back. In other words, the abstract world of the Mongols opened again. In the sense of the binary composition of the human world mentioned above, during communism people had the concrete world but had no access to the abstract world. During the communist period tradition and the Mongol cosmology was not completely destroyed but it was closed for a while. It was kept in the back of the nation's mind. For example, in the beginning of the 1980s, I remember that every morning and evening after milking the cow my grandmother offered a libation for all of the spirits of places and water, Buddhist gods and for '*töriin sūld*' (spirit of the state). Obviously, in this case she did not mean state in terms of government, because, Mongolian government was almost absent at the socialist regime, it was under the control of the Soviet Union. Rather, she meant the state abstraction implies to Eternal Heaven, Chinggis Khaan and his standards. This means that the concrete state (institution) lost connection with its abstraction. The abstraction of the state was living in the mind of people not in government or in state institutions or anything concrete relating to state. Therefore, among the first things to be revived was everything relating to Chinggis Khaan and Mongol Empire, and the abstraction of the state re-emerged in relation to the concrete parts of the new state. In this phase not only civil society but also state officials and government began to organize sacrifices for the spirituality of the state. It is the re-emergence of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*) in a similar form to the state cult of the Mongol Empire.

In the first instance, the Mongolian Government put the nine white standards (flags) (*tsagaan sūld*) of Chinggis Khaan in the government building, symbolising peace, and the Ministry of Defence put the 'white and black standards' (flag) (*tsagaan, khar sūld*) in the ministry building, symbolising the protection from war or any crisis (see figure 4), and setting a statue of Chinggis Khaan in the state



Figure 4. The White Standard in the Building of the Ministry of Defence is guarded at all times. (Photo from the personal collection).

*ger*¹⁴ palace for receiving foreign delegates (see figure 5). Then, many state-worship ceremonies (*tariin takhilga*), sacrifices and rituals for the standards, for Chinggis Khaan's 840th anniversary, for the sacred mountain, *Burkhan Khaldun*¹⁵ and for the 800th anniversary of the establishment of the Mongolian State, etc. were held with the support of state officials or under the direct supervision of the president and the prime minister of Mongolia.



Figure 5. State *ger* palace for delegates. On the right, J. Jelev, President of Bulgaria, and on the left, P. Ochirbat, President of Mongolia, with the statue of Chinggis Khaan, centre, 1995 (Ochirbat 1996).

One of the first rituals was the sacrifice for the 'black standard' (*khar sūld*) on the *Burkhan Khaldun* Mountain, held by the Ministry of Defence in 1995, and the President of Mongolia, P. Ochirbat and other state officials

¹⁴ Traditional Mongolian tent.

¹⁵ The sacred mountain of Chinggis Khaan, located in his birthplace, in the north east of Mongolia, in *Deigarkhaan sum*, *Khentii* province.

attended the sacrifice (see figure 6). In 2001, the President of Mongolia, N. Bagabandi made a decree to celebrate Chinggis Khaan's 840th anniversary in 2002, and the 800th anniversary of the establishment of



Figure 6. Sacrifice of the Black Standard by the Ministry of Defence, on the Burkhan Khaldun mountain, 1995. On the left, Minister of Defence and President P. Ochirbat (Ochirbat 1996)

Mongolian state in 2006¹⁶, and to establish a complex *ger* palace for the sacrifice to Chinggis Khaan. Also the decree elected the Prime Minister N. Enkhbayar as the head of the committee to organize the celebrations. The implementation of the decree further cooperated with the concern of the 'Ih Zasag'¹⁷ University of Law¹⁸ which first brought up the idea of establishing a sacrificial *ger* palace¹⁹ in *Khödöö Aral* on the bank of *Kherlen* river, in the area where Chinggis Khaan grew up and made the centre of Mongol Empire.²⁰ 'Ih Zasag' University had planned to make a sacrifice for *Burkhan Khaldun* Mountain once in three years, and the first sacrifice took place in June 2001. The ritual led by the shaman, D. Byambadorj²¹, and the President, N. Bagabandi, prayed to the spirit of the mountain in the same way as Temüjin (Chinggis Khaan's first name), as it is written in the thirteenth century *Secret*

¹⁶ In 1206, Temüjin united all Mongol tribes and established the Mongol Empire. In the same year he received the title of Chinggis Khaan, referring to a type of stone with a symbolic meaning of bold and hard.

¹⁷ The term is the name for the law of Chinggis Khaan, literally meaning 'the great solution'.

¹⁸ Head of the university Dr Nyam-Osor was born and grew up in the area.

¹⁹ The complex *ger* palace of worship in *Khödöö Aral*, consists of nine *gers* similar to the construction of the eight sacred *gers* in Ordos, Inner Mongolia. The first *ger* on the right is for heroes and weapons, the second, for Tului, youngest son of Chinggis Khaan, the third, for the queen Khulan, the fourth, for the *Ih Zasag* law, the fifth, for Chinggis Khaan, the sixth, for the Mongolian script (because it was the script of the Empire), the seventh, for Yesüi and Yesüigen queens (sisters), the eighth, for the sacred white horse, and the ninth *ger* is for traditional milk foods.

²⁰ Citation from the booklet about the celebration, published by the organizing committee in 2002.

²¹ He is a shaman belonging to the clan of Chinggis Khaan's mother and wife Börte, the *Oikhonuud* clan. He is originally from the Darvi sum of Khovd province, in the west of Mongolia.

History of the Mongols (see figure 7)²². It is interesting that a shaman started to lead the ritual. This is deliberately referring back to Chinggisid-type of rituals, as opposed to the Buddhisised ritual of more recent centuries.

In 2002, a great celebration took place at the *Khödöö Aral*, for the 840th anniversary of Chinggis Khaan, and all the state officials including the president, prime minister, members of parliament, the mayor of Ulaanbaatar, governor of the local administrative unit, and many others such as believers and spectators participated in the celebration. The celebration consists of several religious and artistic performances such as the worship of the state



Figure 7. Sacrifice to the Burkhan Khaldun Mountain in 2001. In the middle, dressed in yellow, N. Bagabandi, President of Mongolia, prepares to pray for the sacred mountain in the same way as Chinggis Khaan did in thirteenth century. On the right, shaman D.Byambadorj is sitting. (Photo from the author's personal collection).

hearth (*töriin gal golomt*) conducted by the shaman D. Byambadorj and the local governor with his wife²³, a libation of ninety-nine white mares' milk

²² His enemy, the Merkits were chasing him and he hid on Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and survived. He says: "On Burqan-qaldun,

My life was like that of a louse.
I managed to flee.
My only life was spared.
With only one horse
I followed the elk trails.
I made a yurt of twigs.
I climbed Qaldun.
On Qaldun-burqan,
My life was like that of a swallow
I was protected.

'I was greatly afraid. Every morning I shall sacrifice to Burqan-qaldun, and every day I will pray to it. The seed of my seed shall know this' he said. [The following is what the president did when he prayed, see figure 7] Facing the sun he draped his sash round his neck and hung his hat [by its cord] from his arm. He beat his chest with his hand. Kneeling nine times towards the sun. He gave offerings and prayers" (Onon 2001: 81-82).

(*yeren yesön tsagaagch güunii satsal*) for deities with the melody of traditional horse fiddle, and with the benediction (see figure 8), and a ritual to consecrate (*seterlekh*) a white horse for Chinggis Khaan by the shaman. The celebration also consists of traditional artistic performances of music, dance and poetry, and traditional sports such as wrestling and horseracing.



Figure 8. Libation of the ninety-nine white mares' milk. Benediction singer Tserendorj, holding white silk scarf *khadag*, and singing the benedictions, *Khödöö Aral*, 2002 (Photograph from the newspaper *Mongoliin Medee* [News of Mongolia], 31 July 2002, No 149 (899).

All the above cases, I suppose, are a sign of the return of the state abstraction, and the re-establishment of the union, as in the time of the Mongol Empire, of the two parts of the state. In the traditional Mongol way of thinking, when someone loses his *süld* (meaning here 'soul'), then he is half man, without power, like an empty bottle, he becomes weak and can easily receive curses and bad luck, because he lost his spirituality and connection to the abstract world. The state

without its *süld* would be just the same as the man without his. In that sense, the contemporary Mongolian State is re-building its power, not only by uniting the two binary constituents, but also by attracting people into the state institutions and functions. By combining the state cult into the concrete state, the Mongolian state is uniting the society with the state, because both the state abstraction and the state cult existed in the social mind. This is a certain way of ruling the country, as Chinggis Khaan says: "not to rule people's body, but to rule people's mind, to rule earth means to rule people, to rule people means to rule mind." (Lündendorj 2002: 33).

1.4. Is the state a kind of opium?

The above ethnography on the state cult of the Mongols confirms some anthropological theories on the state system and the state idea, or in terms of Mongol cosmology it is about the concrete and abstract composition of the state. In the following part, I will examine viewpoints of anthropologists (and political scientists) such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940), P. Abrams (1988), T. Mitchell (1991, 1999), M. Taussig (1992) and Y. Navaro-Yashin (2002), who all discuss the state idea or the state abstraction, in addition to the state system, institutions or functions and process, as Mitchell puts it, 'the state as an object of analysis appears to exist simultaneously as material force and as ideological construct' (1999: 76).

²³ The youngest son of the family is responsible for the hearth of his father, but for the state hearth or Chinggis Khaan's hearth, the governor of the smallest administrative unit of the local area is responsible, and gives offerings for the fire.

The first common point explicitly or implicitly shared by most of the above anthropologists is the idea that state and society are inseparable, by arguing that they reject (especially, G. Steinmetz (1999) and T. Mitchell (1999)) previous theories, which analysed state as a separate entity from society. This argument usually made in a Foucauldian sense that power extends well beyond state and "in reality, power in its exercise goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous" (1980: 72). Or as Navaro-Yashin declares, "the state circulates in the political imaginations of consumers of news, sitting in their homes and watching TV. Events in public life are reflected and magnified within a culture of news, alarm, and sensation. Indeed, in this exemplary and emblematic public square, there is no space that is arrested with one or another face of the state (2002: 2). This is what the Mongols phrase 'the state has thousands of eyes' (*tör tūmen nūdtei*) (Dashdorj 1964: 80), or more precisely, 'state power has a thousands of eyes' (*töriin süld tūmen nūdtei*) (Dashdorj 1966: 70), referring to the discipline of the state.

At this stage, I would like to clarify that not only does the state exist in society; society also exists in the state. For example, Foucault says that state power extends to society, but it is also extends from society to state, as an interaction, because, society has an established state idea which has sometimes been detached from the concrete state. In the case of contemporary Mongolia, the revival of the state cult occurred mainly because the popular cult of the state influenced the new state. To be more precise, Mongols had a long tradition of the state idea dating to the Mongol Empire, and later the state idea, as mentioned earlier, detached from the concrete state and had been living on only in the mind of society. That is why sometimes people pray to 'state *süld*' (spirit of the state as form of state idea) asking for protection against the action of the concrete state, which means that state has lost its abstraction. After 1990s in Mongolia, the state cult revived from society and influenced the state, which means that the state institution found its lost abstraction from its society. In this case, I suggest that state society combination exists not only in the extension of state power into society, but also in the exercise of social power on the state, and as an interaction between the two. The following paragraph on the reproduction of the state by society will explain how social action referring to the state makes state and society inseparable.

This last concept refers to the second common point shared by most of the above anthropologists, who argue that the state idea derives from society. For example, T. Mitchell, by defining 'state as a structural effect', discusses Foucault's the way external, coercive disciplinary power develops internal and productive power, which is not analysed by Foucault (1991: 93-94). This means that state is produced by society, because the endless repetition of the disciplinary power establishes structures, which eventually flow and produce the state with or without the external disciplinary power. The external power becomes internal and society stops noticing the external discipline. Navaro-Yashin explains a similar case from Turkey.

Recently in Turkey, the idea of the state has been significantly sustained through the everyday life practices of people outside, centres of

official power. In life rituals of bidding farewell to soldiers, in the mundane activity of watching national soccer on TV, in hanging flags up in private quarters in anxiety of festivity, and in many other daily life practices, ordinary people in Turkey reproduce an idea of the Turkish state. Many (now) commonplace events in public culture in Turkey – the matter of everyday life – enhance and normalise, rather than challenge the construction of the Turkish state (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 134-135).

The reproduction and enhancement of the state by society can also be found in the case of the Mongols' state cult (*töriin shütleg*), because, as I have mentioned, in Mongolia the abstraction of the state exists in the mind of society²⁴. Here, we can see three different but associated entities, **first, concrete state, second, abstract state, and third, society**. Moreover in contemporary Mongolia, to continue the discussion in the previous page, the abstract state exists only because people in the society keep it (it originally emerged from the state of the Mongol Empire). It could exist in their minds even in the absence of Mongolian state institutions. During the colonial period of the Manchu Empire (1690-1911) or during the years of the communist regime (1921-1990) the concrete state was hardly *the Mongolian state*, if at all. However, the cult of the state was still there. The evidence of this is the reconstruction of the state cult (*töriin shütleg*) after the social change in 1990. As I have maintained earlier, the state idea was not destroyed but closed for a while, and people prayed to the 'state *süld*' (spirit of the state as a form of state idea) during those years.

The above gap between the abstract and concrete state in contemporary Mongolia, to some extent, contradicts T. Mitchell's claim about the relation between the state idea and the state system.

The answer cannot be found by trying to separate the material forms of the state from the ideological, or the real from the illusory. The state-idea and the system are better seen as two aspects of the same process. To be more precise, the phenomenon we name "the state" arises from techniques that enable mundane material practices to take on the appearance of an abstract, non-material form. Any attempt to distinguish the abstract or ideal appearance of the state from its material reality, in taking for granted this distinction, will fail to understand it. The task of a theory of the state is not to clarify such distinction but to historicize them (Mitchell 1999: 77).

Indeed, if he is referring to the society by saying 'material reality', it is right that the state and society is inseparable, but the secondary question brought out in the above passage is about the relationship between the two appearances of the state, abstract and concrete. If the state idea derives from society and exists in its mind, then it does not have to be crucially linked to the concrete state. In the Mongol case, at the early stages, at the times of Mongol Empire, the state abstraction was a domain of the state, however, in the contemporary situation it is more a domain of people. Moreover, we

²⁴ This is what anthropologists say, but many Mongols probably would also say that state idea is not just an idea but it is also a spirit. However, in either case, it exists in people's minds. Because, even if it exists as a spiritual being it is the imagination of people which makes it more powerful.

cannot talk about the border between state and society in the case of state abstraction, because it is a domain of the society. Therefore, T. Mitchell's argument on the state border with society as 'elusive, porous, mobile and drawn internally' (1991: 77) works only in the sense of the concrete state.

The third conception presented by some of the above anthropologists acknowledging the two previous common points is to equate state with a god. This is a logical continuation of the approach to the state as an idea, such as 'fiction' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940), 'mask' (Abrams 1988), 'fetish' (Taussig 1992) and 'fantasy' (Navaro-Yashin 2002) of the society. Furthermore, P. Abrams (1988) and M. Taussig (1992) more precisely argue that state abstraction is like a god. As P. Abrams puts it,

My suggestion, then, is that we should recognize that cogency of the idea of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis. But the very reasons that require us to do that also require us not to believe in the idea of the state, not to concede, even as an abstract formal-object, the existence of the state. Try substituting the word god for the word state throughout *Political Power and Social Classes* and read it as an analysis of religious domination and I think you will see what I mean. The task of the sociologists of religion is the explanation of religious practice (churches) and religious beliefs (theology): he is not called upon to debate, let alone to believe in, the existence of god (1988: 79-80).

Following E. Durkheim (impure sacred) and P. Abrams, M. Taussig (1992:144) by developing his idea of state fetishism, also maintains that the state is similar to a god. Indeed, the state abstraction is like a god, or even sometimes it is a real god. Especially, in the example of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Mongols, the worship of heaven and ancestral spirits, which was an essential part of the state cult, was about a god. But, what I do not agree with is P. Abrams and M. Taussig's conclusions, which follow Marxist notion of god as an 'opium of the masses'. The state cult does not have to be opium. By introducing P. Sloterdijk and S. Žižek and discussing the notion of 'cynicism' Navaro-Yashin (2002) makes an opposing argument to the opium view and false-consciousness.

The point of the matter is, however, that few politicians are successful in convincing their subjects that they just are. And behind them stands the coercive force of the army and the police (the precipitation of the last military coup), which reminds citizens that if they were to refuse to act as though they believed in the ideology of the state, their freedoms would be at stake. ...Cynicism, or doing as if one does not know, is a technique of contemporary Turkish state power. Arguably, cynicism is the condition on which the Turkish state still maintains an existence despite having repeatedly reached the verge of a breakdown (2002: 163).

According to her, state is not false consciousness, because people know what state is doing, and they are aware of the falsity of ideology. "The idea is that things are "just bad" and there is not much hope in trying to change them. Better to try to save one's self and one's immediate family within the wreckage created by the state" (2002: 164). There is a famous

Mongolian phrase (*zūir setsen üg*) about cynicism in sense of what Navaro-Yashin writes, which supports the argument that the state cult is not false-consciousness. It says that *Tōriin tōlōō ogtono booj ükhekh*, which literally means that 'the mouse commits suicide for the state'. This phrase has an ironic use referring to the cynical view that 'there is no need for an ordinary man to commit suicide because of state affairs, because it will not help to solve the case'. More precisely, just as Navaro-Yashin writes, the phrase means, 'people better do nothing about what happened, because, anyway state force will not allow people do something against it, and people will just lose'.

There is another reason why the state cult is not about false consciousness (opium), because, the state is not only a god; it is more than a god. According to Jamtsarano, one Mongolia's leading researchers, in 1920s, Buddhism is not like opium.

Seeing that the basic aims of our Party and of Buddhism are both the welfare of the people, there is no conflict between the two of them. They are mutually compatible. It is sheer folly to put on a show of revolutionary bluff and misunderstand this, and to drivel about the Party's doctrine and the Government's policy being contrary to religion. Hence Party and Youth League members ought not to act in this way. *It is a special case that in Russia religion is the opium of the people.* What our lord Buddha taught cannot be equated with aggressive religions like Mohammedanism and Christianity, and though the communist party rejects religion and the priesthood, this has nothing to do with our Buddhist Faith. Our Party wants to see the Buddhist Faith flourishing in a pure form, and approves of lamas who stay in their lamaseries, reciting the scriptures and faithfully observing their vows (Bawden 1968: 286).

I argue, following Jamtsarano, rather than there only being a belief in the existence of the god-like figure, in addition to a god, in contemporary Mongolia, the state cult is about the right way of organizing and ruling society, and developing the country. Through the state cult people worship all the classical and skillful ways of ruling, and traditional teachings about the state, which were attested in the history of the Mongols with the success of Chinggis Khaan, and what Mongolia lacks now. In addition to this, the Mongol term *tör* for state, has a meaning of *yos*, which has a broad meaning of custom, rule, morality and correct way of acting, etc. In that sense, the term *tōriin shütleg*, which I have translated as 'state cult', more precisely, can be understood as a 'cult of the right way of ruling'. In that case it is obvious to worship the state because it is the ruler. For the Mongols, in order to rule or to find the right arrangement (*zasakh* - fix), the state has to hold knowledge, and it is what they say 'the lineage of the state is knowledge and the lineage of the kinship is parents' (*tōriin khelkhee erdem tōriiin khelkhee etseg ekh*). Therefore, the Mongols' state cult consists of a spiritual power and skillful rationality, and the latter contradicts what Abrams and Taussig call opium.

1.5. Conclusion

By acknowledging George Steinmetz's (1999) definition of the state as a product of culture, I conclude that the state is something more than an institution or a process and apart from its common elements, it can be different things or notions in various cultures, because it is a culture. The notion of the state has certain origins and lives in various cultures, which built up through the long history of nations, to be specific, it is a product of history and culture.

In a given society, the life of the notion of the state consists of at least two parts, a concrete life of an institution and a process, and an abstract life in the mind of society. The relation between concrete state, abstract state and civil society vary in different cases, because of the variation in the life histories of these things in various cultures.

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