



HUMANS, DOGS, AND OTHER BEINGS

*Myths, Stories, and History in
the Land of Genghis Khan*

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Baasanjav Terbish, *Humans, Dogs, and Other Beings: Myths, Stories, and History in the Land of Genghis Khan*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0450>

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Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0450>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-515-1

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-516-8

ISBN PDF: 978-1-80511-517-5

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-519-9

ISBN EPUB: 978-1-80511-518-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0450

Cover image: Sharav Baldugjin, *A Day in Mongolia: Summer* (between 1905 and 1913). Tempera on cotton 138cm x 177cm, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marzan_Sharav_001.jpg. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

1. Culture and Cosmology

A particular species of naked ape occupies an intermediate level on the food chain, either collecting crumbs from the table or serving as dinner to those higher up. In direct confrontation, individual members of this species stand no chance against chimpanzees or bonobos, their closest evolutionary cousins. More formidable predators—bears, tigers, wolves, and others—are simply out of their league. The animal kingdom to which this species belongs is an unforgiving place where survival and reproduction depend on size, speed, and adaptability. Traits like sharp teeth, strong jaws, muscular bodies, superior senses of smell, endurance, and an accompanying bad temper predominantly determine who occupies the top tier of the food chain.

This naked ape is the human—or, more precisely, the forebears of humans—who endured this precarious existence for a significant portion of their evolutionary history. This remained the fate of humans despite our ancestors using lithic, or stone, tools since the dawn of the genus *Homo* some 2.8 to 2.3 million years ago, and despite some of them beginning to harness fire—a tool with potentially transformative power—as far back as one million, or perhaps even 1.5 million, years ago, with daily use of fire for cooking and warmth starting around 400,000 to 300,000 years ago.

But everything changed in the grand feast of nature when humans developed a remarkable ability to amplify their power. Rather than evolving stronger limbs or sharper teeth, we achieved this by collaborating in large numbers, sharing stories, and creating technologies as extensions of our human capabilities. This transformative shift, which led to the emergence of human culture and is often referred to as the Cognitive Revolution, is believed to have occurred between 70,000 and 50,000 years ago. During this period, early humans developed complex language, abstract thought, and advanced tools, laying the foundation

for art, social organization, and cultural expression as we know them today. Over generations, cumulative cultural advancements gradually transformed humans into apex predators, elevating our species to the top of the food chain. This transformation, while gradual in human terms, was almost instantaneous when viewed on an evolutionary timescale, occurring merely over tens of thousands of years.

This shift to collective strength was crucial. As individuals, humans lack the physical prowess of many other animals—indeed, a lone human would still be easily overpowered by a chimpanzee or bonobo. Yet, our ability to work together, share knowledge, and innovate collectively became our defining strength. Human culture, in this sense, is our species' true superpower, shaping not only how we survived but also how we thrived. Understanding the Cognitive Revolution is essential for appreciating the development of cultures worldwide, including that of Mongols.

This opening chapter introduces key themes that will recur throughout the book. These include an exploration of the definition of culture, including its functions and transformative powers, the distinction between cosmology and religion, and unique stories known as *bolson yavdal*. These topics will serve as essential tools for analyzing the four animals—dogs, marmots, cats, and camels—in the subsequent chapters.

The Primary Function of Culture

In its most straightforward definition, human culture is a product of human imagination, encompassing a range of complex behaviors that arise from these mental constructs.

Our closest evolutionary cousins, chimpanzees, not only have emotions that are clearly similar to ours but also exhibit rudiments of culture, characterized by varying behaviors and traditions among different chimp communities. Some chimp populations have been observed engaged in group hunting while others have not. Certain groups exhibit tool-making skills by modifying sticks or leaves for specific purposes, a trait not universally observed. Like humans, chimps live in social groups (albeit much smaller than those of humans) with a dominance hierarchy, and form fluid social networks and bonds

through grooming, playing, and other social interactions. They are adept problem-solvers, and their societies can simultaneously experience conflicts and cooperation.

While there are obvious parallels here with human societies, the spectrum of human cultural activities is unparalleled both in terms of complexity and scale. A chimp or a dog won't be able to comprehend the majority of human behavior merely by observing people's actions. Our cultural practices, which are by definition complex, such as worship, trade, marriage, and more, would appear to a dog, for example, as a sequence of unrelated movements—people following each other, eating, 'barking', exchanging paper, copulating, fighting, departing, defecating, and repeating—without the contextual understanding that humans attribute to these practices. This is because all human behavioral patterns are imbued with imaginary values and carried out within the framework of fictional connections, hierarchies, and goals that members of a given cultural community share collectively in their brains. Consequently, to the naked eye of an animal that cannot share common myths and fictions with humans and thus cannot see the world through human eyes, understanding and following human cultures becomes impossible.

Creating complex cultures is a uniquely human cognitive ability. Even our closest evolutionary relatives, such as chimps, or our longtime animal companions, like dogs, lack the mental capacity to conceive of 'imaginary bananas' or 'fictional communal sausages' that would enable the creation of imaginary chimp or canine cultural norms and ideas of paradise—concepts that could be used to secure cooperation among a potentially unlimited number of their kind. In contrast, imagination comes as naturally to humans as swimming does to fish. Even babies as young as 18 months demonstrate remarkable imaginative abilities, engaging in pretend play such as using a pebble to represent a car or 'eating' imaginary food. This early stage of symbolic play marks the beginning of our imaginative powers. As we grow, this ability expands, and our cultural lens becomes even more powerful and symbolic, shaping how we see and interact with the world. Objects, animals, and ideas become technology, food evolves into cuisine, sex transforms into sexuality, and nature is reimagined as infrastructure governed by gods and laws.

Some chimps have been observed using tools like sticks to measure depth, stones for digging or cracking open hard nuts, leaves as sponges, and even spears for hunting. Let's call these 'primary tools' or 'primary technologies'. Humans also use these primary technologies, often for similar purposes. However, what sets humans apart is our ability to use primary technologies to imaginatively create secondary technologies, which can then be used to create tertiary technologies, and so forth. This capability aligns with our ability to imagine things that do not exist in nature, share stories, and communicate complex ideas.

A prime example of this is mathematics, which can be seen as a type of primary technology. Historically, mathematics has enabled the development of secondary, more advanced technologies, including systems for taxation, trade and commerce, architecture and engineering, astronomy, and beyond. These secondary technologies have, in turn, paved the way for even more advanced, or upper-level, technologies. In fact, humans can utilize almost anything—whether animate or inanimate, or even abstract concepts—as tools or technologies. For example, in Mongol culture, animals are not only sources of food and materials but also tools for thinking about human society, morality, fears, and the meaning of life, as will be explored throughout the book.

If animals like dogs or chimps possessed similar imaginative powers that threatened our dominance, we humans—competitive as we are—would have long been at their throats. Instead, we keep dogs as pets and chimps as entertainment in zoos, reminding us of our unique position in the animal world. This distinction underscores the extraordinary human ability to transform tools into an endless hierarchy of technologies, shaping not just our survival but the way we perceive and engage with the world.

That said, we shouldn't feel too smug about ourselves and our abilities as individuals. In essence, we are not so different from other mammals and share many traits with the rest of the animal kingdom, such as aggression, fear, stress, and predation, along with primal instincts shaped by our long evolution on the savannah—traits like social behavior, parental care, and play. Moreover, as individuals, we are frail beings who would struggle to survive alone in most environments. Our strength comes from our membership in human groups which are held together by cultures.

Since their emergence, human cultures have served as evolving repositories of accumulated knowledge, enabling us to embrace rationality, temper our primal instincts and individualistic tendencies, and create technology, art, and literature. Most importantly, cultures have facilitated the synchronization of *collective* behavior to achieve common goals.

Historical records reveal how the ancestors of the Mongols, as pastoralists and hunters, adapted to their environment and thrived on the harsh Mongolian Plateau. While imagination shaped human culture, it was also deeply influenced by the co-evolution of humans with animals and the environment.¹ Using creative thinking and logic, the Mongols managed livestock such as cattle, yaks, sheep, and goats. They also relied on dogs for herding and hunting, rode horses for mobility, and used camels to carry loads. Observing animal behavior and adapting to their surroundings were vital for survival. These interactions likely played a key role in the cultural and cognitive development of nomadic societies like the Mongols. Stories, rituals, and etiquette further united them, allowing them to function as a cohesive group.

These cognitive abilities and practices are not unique to the Mongols but are inherent to all members of *Homo sapiens* who live in and are shaped by culture. Evolutionarily, human culture enabled our species to occupy the 'cognitive niche',² equipping humans with the skills and technologies to outsmart nature. Consequently, today we not only dominate the food chain but have also decoded the genetic map of life, chronicled our species' origins, explored the nature of matter and energy, left our footprints on the moon, and calculated the origin of the universe.

However, it is important to note that the primary function of human culture is not to elevate humanity to cosmic heights or to represent reality accurately. Rather, culture's function is to interpret the world

1 Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed*.

2 The concept of the 'cognitive niche' refers to the evolutionary strategy by which humans have adapted to their environments primarily through intelligence and social learning, transmission rather than through physical specialization. This idea, developed in evolutionary psychology and anthropology, suggests that humans survive and thrive by using abstract reasoning, tool-making, cooperation, and cumulative knowledge to solve ecological and social challenges. See Pinker, 'The cognitive niche: Coevolution of intelligence, sociality, and language'.

in ways that promote cooperation, knowledge accumulation, and reproduction. While some accurate understanding of the physical world is essential for these purposes, human culture primarily requires knowledge that helps us navigate the world at the scale at which our bodies operate and perceive reality in ways relevant to our survival and reproduction. In this sense, culture is like a user interface, simplifying and interpreting the complex ‘reality’ we cannot fully comprehend. This cultural knowledge may include practical insights such as understanding animal behavior, recognizing useful plants, or developing tools. It also encompasses concepts like gods and myths that do not exist in objective reality but help humans navigate the world and build societies.

Our modern understanding of genetics, evolution, physics, and astronomy—concepts describing molecules, immense time scales, ultraviolet light, or particles moving at the speed of light—is a sophisticated by-product of human culture. Humanity thrived for most of its existence without this knowledge. We only uncovered these natural laws, describing particles and phenomena invisible to our eyes, undetectable by our senses, or unfathomable to our brains, relatively recently, thanks to advances in science—a recent outcome of cultural evolution.

In this sense, human culture is closely adapted to our sensory systems, which similarly evolved to help us navigate the world, rather than to reveal ultimate truths or objective reality. For instance, when we look at an apple, we perceive its shape, color, and ripeness—traits that are evolutionary significant for survival and reproduction, such as identifying edible and nutritious food. Beyond these physical properties, an apple can also represent various culturally specific ideas. In Christian and Islamic mythologies, for example, it symbolizes the forbidden fruit, while in other cultural contexts, it might signify prosperity. Beyond that, our sensory perception does not reveal deeper realities, such as the apple’s molecular structure, gravitational pull, or the complex forces of nature at work. These details are not directly accessible because they are not essential for our immediate survival. Because our sensory systems prioritize practicality over comprehensiveness, the development of modern science was far from inevitable. Science emerged through specific cultural, historical, and intellectual conditions, enabling us to

transcend our sensory limitations. By creating theoretical frameworks and powerful tools, science has enhanced our human capabilities, allowing us to explore dimensions of reality that our evolved senses alone could never detect. Thus, we could just as easily have persisted indefinitely in pre-scientific societies, relying solely on the knowledge necessary for survival, cooperation, and reproduction, and still become apex predators and transformers of our environment.

Consider the many tribal societies across the Amazon, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Melanesia, whose communities lived in pre-scientific conditions until the twentieth century when waves of European-led modernity reached them. These societies exemplify the ways in which advanced science is not a prerequisite for human survival and societal development but rather an optional and relatively recent expansion of our cultural capabilities.

In human culture, almost every belief, concept, or activity is rooted in and communicated through stories. Stories serve as the building blocks of culture and do not necessarily need to convey the truth or faithfully represent reality. In fact, most stories we encounter, believe in, create, or pass down—whether they are myths, religious doctrines, political ideologies, national histories, tribal genealogies, autobiographies, conspiracy theories, or rumors—are subjective interpretations or fictions.

Even scientific explanations, despite their grounding in empirical data, fall within the realm of storytelling. Contrary to popular belief, science is not merely a method for objectively conveying cold, hard facts. Instead, it uses stories to interpret data, observations, and experiments, which are inevitably shaped by the subjective perspectives of scientists. This is why the same data or observation can be interpreted one way and celebrated as a scientific breakthrough, only to be revised or reinterpreted by later scientists, who may discard it as incorrect or refine it through a new narrative.³ This self-correcting mechanism makes scientific stories uniquely superior in the pursuit of truth, especially compared to other types of stories—such as religious doctrines or political ideologies like Marxism-Leninism—that are often presented as infallible or non-revisable.

3 Latour, *Science in Action*; Byers, *The Blind Spot*; Cooke, *Bitch*.

Science's narrative nature also explains why today it is often incorporated into older systems like cosmologies and religions. Traditional frameworks integrate new scientific ideas into their explanatory paradigms, blending old and new narratives. This interplay between past and present is a fundamental aspect of cultural evolution. It reflects how human cultures continually adapt, weaving new stories into older systems to create cohesive, evolving worldviews. For example, as we will explore in Chapter 3, modern Mongols integrate traditional shamanic or Buddhist beliefs with scientific concepts in areas like medicine.

To recap, evolution did not shape the human sensory system to perceive reality as it truly is but rather to guide behavior that supports survival and reproduction. Similarly, human culture serves as a repository of both accurate knowledge and mistaken beliefs or myths, perpetuated by institutions like religion, ideology, mass media, and even science. This duality is essential for understanding how societies function and helps explain why humans can demonstrate remarkable intelligence in some areas while being susceptible to illusions or fantasies in others.

These themes are explored throughout this book, particularly through the example of the Mongols, who collectively achieved extraordinary feats in empire-building and the promotion of art and knowledge⁴ while adhering to deeply superstitious rituals and following harmful ideologies. Before examining the Mongol case in detail, however, it is helpful to first provide a brief overview of Mongol history.

A Very Short History of Mongolia

Mongols emerged as a regional power in 1206 when they established the Mongol Empire under the leadership of Genghis Khan (Chinggis Khaan in Mongolian). He not only consolidated all the steppe tribes on the Mongolian Plateau but also proceeded to elevate his empire into a global superpower by conquering new lands, a legacy continued by his sons and grandsons. In the second half of the thirteenth century, Mongol territory, now spanning from Central Europe in the west to the Sea of Japan in the east, was divided into four Genghisid states by his grandsons: Grand Khan's central dominion in Mongolia (since 1206)

4 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan*; Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*.

and China, also known as the Yuan (–1368); the Ilkhanate of Persia (1265–1335); the Golden Horde of Russia (1266–1502); and the Chagatai state of Central Asia (1264–1705).

The central Yuan dynasty was overthrown in China in 1368 by the ‘Red Turban’ rebels, who established the Ming dynasty. Fleeing to their ancestral land north of the Great Chinese Wall, the Mongols founded a state known as the Northern Yuan. In contrast, Mongols in other Genghisid states chose not to return to Mongolia but instead stayed in their respective territories, assimilating with local dynasties and establishing various states, some illustrious and others less so. The last of these states persisted until the early twentieth century in Central Asia. One of the most consequential offshoot polities was the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent, founded by Babur (1483–1530), whose mother was a direct descendant of Genghis Khan and whose paternal ancestor was Tamerlane. Tamerlane held the title of *küregen* (Imperial Son-in-Law) due to his marriages to Genghisid princesses, and his paternal lineage traced back to the Barlas, a Mongol clan.

Traditionally, Mongols were shamanists. They were first exposed to Tibetan Buddhism in the thirteenth century under Kubilai, the founder of the Yuan dynasty, even though neither Kubilai nor his immediate successors officially adopted Buddhism as the state religion. After the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, many Mongols returned to traditional shamanism, while some continued to practice Buddhism. A mass conversion to Buddhism did not occur until the sixteenth century, and by 1640 Buddhism was officially declared the state religion among the Mongols and the Oirats.

In 1691, the Buddhist Mongols of Mongolia submitted to the Manchu Qing dynasty, a nomadic people of Jurchen origin which had replaced the Ming in China. The Western Mongols, known as the Oirats, followed suit in 1757.

Mongolia remained a backwater region under foreign dominion until 1911 when, with the overbloated Manchu Qing dynasty in its death throes, the Mongols proclaimed their independence, akin to Jonah from the Biblical story emerging from a whale’s belly. They enthroned the Javzandamba Hutugtu, revered as a ‘living Buddha’, as their theocratic king. However, the young Buddhist kingdom’s peace and tranquility were short-lived. In 1924, Mongolia underwent a

tumultuous transformation into a people's republic, modeled after the Soviet Union, where the governing atheistic regime remained in power for the next seven decades.

During the socialist era, Mongolia prided itself on being the second socialist country in the world after the Soviet Union. In line with this dedication, Mongolia remained steadfast in its socialist stance, seeking to create an earthly paradise for toilers and herders on the steppes, until early 1990. This made it one of the last nations within the socialist bloc to relinquish state socialism before the Soviet Union itself fragmented at the end of 1991 into fifteen post-Soviet states, each going their own way with a newfound sense of independence.

In the chapters that follow, we will return to Mongolia's history and discuss in greater detail how various animals were treated across different historical periods. For now, let's return to the topic of culture.

Mongol Culture and Its Transformation

People often speak of 'Mongol culture' as if it were a singular, fixed entity. However, it is important to recognize that there has never been a homogeneous, unchanging Mongol culture, despite how the term is often understood or propagated by Mongol nationalists. All cultures are dynamic; after all, if they did not evolve, we would still be living in the pre-Stone Age. In addition, the idea of a timeless, unchanging 'Mongol people' is a fiction—a collective mental construct. Try teaching a chimp or a dog to distinguish between 'Mongol people' and 'Chinese people', or any other human groups, and you'll quickly see that no animal could make this distinction or comprehend concepts like nationalism or patriotism.

Historically, the term 'Mongol people' dates to the time of Genghis Khan, who unified all the nomadic tribes on the Mongolian Plateau, many of which had distinct names and sometimes even different languages. Through this political and military unification, all tribes under Genghis Khan's leadership were brought together under the banner of the Mongol people.

Today, the term 'Mongol people' continues to serve as an umbrella encompassing various groups across the region, each with its own unique stories, rituals, values, technologies—and therefore, cultures—that constantly evolve. Even groups with shared ancestry, origin myths, ecological conditions, a nomadic lifestyle, and Buddhist beliefs

tend to differentiate themselves. They do so by subtly modifying the performance of similar rituals, narrating familiar myths and stories with unique variations, adhering to distinct norms, developing specific technologies, aligning with slightly different values, and prioritizing certain animals over others. This explains why, for example, diverse groups across Mongolia today exhibit unique variations in rituals, such as those observed during weddings, childbirth, and funerals. These local variations have been meticulously documented by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences in Ulaanbaatar, which has conducted ethnographic expeditions throughout various regions of the country since the socialist period. What holds true today has been the case in the past.

In the realm of culture, centrifugal and centripetal forces work together. While groups may strive to distinguish themselves by fostering local cultural variations, a countervailing force simultaneously works to bind these groups together, uniting them under a dominant group or culture. Yet historically the term 'Mongol culture' has never managed to square the circle, and there has never been a single, homogeneous culture attributable to all Mongol groups. However, this diversity should not be viewed as a flaw but rather as an integral aspect of every human culture.

One could assert, from a bird's-eye view, that what we understand as 'Mongol culture' is anything Mongol groups make of it, and indeed throughout history, Mongol groups are known to have made of it a surprising variety of things. In fact, this holds true for all cultures such as 'Scottish culture', 'Turkish culture', 'Japanese culture', 'American culture', and so on. Given the dynamism of human cultures, what people proudly identify as cultural elements today may not have been perceived in the same light in the past, especially under different political or religious systems.

Chimps, Bonobos, and Human Culture

Broadly speaking, humans are part of the animal kingdom and share not only a common evolutionary ancestry with other animals but also various traits. Just as chimps and bonobos, our closest evolutionary cousins, can reveal much about humans, so too can other animals, as will be explored later in more detail. If we ask the question, 'What exactly can chimps and bonobos teach us about ourselves that the other

four species in this book cannot?’ the answer is that these two great apes can shed light, among other things, on the evolution of social behavior in humans—a topic relevant to understanding how human culture operates.

While suspicions about the connection between humans and primates have circulated among scientific circles since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), chimps firmly established their reputation as the model for human ancestry in the 1970s. Chimps live in a hierarchical social structure where individuals hold varying ranks in terms of social status. Chimps in higher positions often exert greater influence and strive to maintain their status by recruiting lower-ranked individuals as followers or assistants. Human societies share similarities with chimp groups in this regard. People in all known cultures dedicate their lives to preserving or enhancing their social or symbolic standing, often by actively recruiting support and assistance.

What is particularly interesting from a philosophical point of view is that, as a hierarchical and social species, we rarely reflect on our inclination to seek followers and assistants or to become others’ followers and assistants—much like a fish might be the last to ponder why it lives in water. In contrast to chimps, human primates extend these hierarchical relations to other species. This inclination becomes apparent, as will be discussed in the next chapter, in our natural adoption of dogs.

Besides the hierarchical social structure humans share with chimps, we also share a set of psychological traits, which are products of millions of years of evolution as a single species believed to have diverged into two species approximately six to seven million years ago. While many ingrained psychological traits in both chimps and humans need to be understood on their own terms, and comparisons must be made with scientific caution, we should appreciate that many of our deeply ingrained behavioral instincts, over which we have little control, are products of evolution. In his widely acclaimed book, *The Chimp Paradox* (2012), psychiatrist Steve Peters introduced the concept of the ‘inner chimp’. This ‘inner chimp’ represents the emotional and instinctive part of the human brain, which often hijacks rational thinking and provokes behaviors deemed culturally inappropriate. Peters offers strategies for managing our ‘inner chimps’ by understanding our thought patterns and improving emotional self-control to achieve both personal

and professional success. Fundamentally, Peters' advice centers on mastering control over our deep evolutionary instincts, symbolized by the metaphorical 'inner chimp', and aligning our behavior with societal norms and values, particularly those of the modern West. Peters and other psychologists who recognize the chimp as the best available—albeit approximate—model for human ancestry argue that studying chimp behavior provides valuable insights into the deep workings of the human psyche.

But more crucially for cultural analysis, hierarchical chimps not only mirror human societies but also influence prevailing ideas about human male behavior. The chest-beating, male-bonded, and highly aggressive tendencies observed in male chimps have led to the belief that human males are similarly pre-programmed for violent dominance over both females and social inferiors. Consequently, this perspective has contributed to the establishment of a scientific orthodoxy that postulates the supposedly innate nature of patriarchal structures in human cultures.

However, we aren't related to chimps alone; we are equally related to bonobos, sharing about 99 percent of our DNA with both species. Bonobos and chimps are believed to have diverged from each other around one to two million years ago, implying that their common ancestor, which diverged from our human forebears six to seven million years ago, might have displayed a mix of behavioral characteristics that we observe today in both bonobos and chimps. However, despite their common ancestry, bonobos couldn't be more different from patriarchal and aggressive chimps. They are matriarchal and generally less aggressive, challenging the orthodox notion that great apes, including humans, are naturally predisposed to creating societies dominated by aggressive and violent males. In contrast to chimps, bonobo communities consist of unrelated females forming sisterhoods that overpower and keep larger males in check, especially regarding aggression. Cohesion within bonobo communities relies not only on physical intimidation and fights but mainly on frequent mutual grooming and lovemaking, fostering cooperation, and alleviating competitive tensions.⁵

5 Cooke, *Bitch*, 182-210.

This behavior bears remarkable similarity to human social dynamics. Dominated they may be by chimp-style patriarchal structures, many human societies also rely on acts of mutual assistance, playfulness, and passion to maintain cohesion and alleviate tensions. This is also relevant when considering Mongol culture, where hierarchical structures of leadership historically relied on not just physical dominance but also strategic alliances, loyalty, passion, and mutual respect.

Moreover, despite perceiving women as symbolically inferior, the Mongol tradition of revering wives and mothers—evidenced in the influential roles of queens and mothers in nomadic governance—parallels some aspects of bonobo societies, where females maintain authority and foster group harmony.⁶ The Mongols' ability to integrate near-egalitarian practices, such as communal decision-making during migrations, with the hierarchical demands of war and empire-building reflects the flexibility inherent in human culture. Just as chimps and bonobos offer contrasting conceptual models of social organization, Mongol culture exemplifies the human capacity to reconcile seemingly contradictory traits—dominance and equality, patriarchy and reverence for women—depending on the context.

While humans share genetic and behavioral traits with both chimps and bonobos, *Homo sapiens* is also a vastly different species, largely shaped by human culture. As mentioned previously, human culture is highly flexible, both accommodating and suppressing natural instincts, while imposing various socially constructed behaviors through stories, rituals, rewards, and sanctions. This explains why different groups develop distinct cultures and why the same societies undergo cultural shifts over time, giving rise to a potentially infinite number of cultural variations.

Despite hierarchical and patriarchal structures observed in chimp troops and modern human societies, it's also crucial to consider the possibility that historically, there may have been cultures characterized by matriarchal or truly egalitarian principles because cultures have a curious tendency to develop a life of their own over time and harbor the capacity to arrange their members in various ways, potentially diverging from human instincts. In this sense, humans are not only active creators

6 Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*; Bruno de Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*.

of cultures but also passive products of cultures. This is a point worth keeping in mind when contemplating cultures. Just think of recent movements such as the Free Love Movement (which rejects patriarchal norms related to marriage and sexuality), polyamorous communities, LGBTQ+ communities, communal living experiments (aimed at creating egalitarian social structures), and the hippie movements of the 1960s-1970s (which rejected many societal norms, including traditional gender roles). It's almost certain that throughout history, there were groups with social structures distinct from the patriarchal system that today dominates human cultures.⁷ If we push this argument further, we find that every human culture harbors its unique conception of paradise, whether in an afterlife or here on Earth—a vision sometimes markedly divergent from known societal structures. While it's true that no group has realized the ideal utopia of its collective imagination, the mere existence of these fantasies stands as a testament to the transformative potential of *Sapiens* culture.

Living Entities: Sacred Places and Spiritual Animals in Mongol Culture

Grigory Potanin was a Russian ethnographer and one of the most significant early modern researchers to contribute to the study of Mongolia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He led an expedition into Northern Mongolia in 1876-77. In his observations of local life, Potanin noted that the indigenous people lived in a world where there were no distinctions between human society, nature, and the supernatural. He found indigenous life intertwined with all-encompassing spiritual elements. Every mountain or valley had a spiritual master or guardian (*sabdag*) who bestowed 'gifts' on humans in the form of game or grass for herd animals that sustained humans. Humans, for their part, had to respect the supernatural realm. Although spiritual masters of nature were sometimes imagined as having animal body parts, more often these masters of mountains and valleys were believed to be the mountains and valleys themselves. For local people, every locality—mountains, forests, the steppe, rivers, etc.—was considered a living entity. The folklore

7 For further exploration of the topic of egalitarian societies in the past, see Graber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*.

Potanin collected also showed that many animals, integral to the living landscape, were believed to possess magical or spiritual powers.⁸

Potanin's observations reflected ways of life in Mongolia that had changed little in outward appearance for centuries. If one is to compare thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sources on the shamanic Mongols with Potanin's diaries, one will find many similarities. Across generations, nomads lived in the same nomadic tents (*ger*), ate the same food, tended to the same herds, used similar technologies, worshipped the supernatural, and believed in the awareness and magical powers of places, trees, rocks, natural phenomena, and animals.

The Mongols' mass conversion to Buddhism in the sixteenth century placed new Buddhist lenses atop the old shamanic ones, providing new yet familiar perspectives on the surrounding world. One of the principal distinctions between shamanism and Buddhism lies in their perspectives. Shamanism, characterized by a local outlook, places emphasis on the distinctive features of the local supernatural order, including low deities and spirits with 'dark sides' believed to be able to address the immediate daily problems and pleas of local people. In contrast, Buddhism adopts a universal outlook, venerating high gods and beings whose powers are believed to encompass the entire world and the entirety of humanity. Buddhism also fundamentally revolves around the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha Shakyamuni, guiding individuals to liberate their minds and attain *nirvana* or eternal bliss as their ultimate goal. In Mongolia, the incorporation of local animistic worldviews into the new Buddhist belief system facilitated a relatively smooth transition from a shamanic society to a Buddhist-dominated one without significantly distorting the previous supernatural order. In this symbiotic relationship, Buddhism piggybacked on the shoulders of shamanism, with the latter shouldering the burden of addressing local spirits and attending to the daily concerns of nomads, while the former claimed credit as the official state religion of the realm. The form of Buddhism practiced among the Mongols was thus a syncretic religion, making it both universal in its goal to save humanity and distinctly local by appeasing—with the help of shamanic-turned-Buddhist concepts,

8 Potanin, *Ocherki Severo-Zapadnoi Mongolii*.

deities, and rituals—the unique spiritual pantheons of specific locations across Mongolia.

Broadly speaking, the Buddhification of Mongolia resulted in the substitution of many, if not most, shamanic nature spirits with Buddhist deities. Consequently, many mountains, hills, and valleys are today considered to be under the protection of Buddhist deities. Exceptions are the so-called ‘wrathful places’ (*doshgin gazar*) or unpacified patches of land scattered across Mongolia where the *sabdag* protectors are believed to have remained shamanic or non-Buddhist. Wild animals inhabiting these ‘wrathful places’ and areas protected by exceptionally powerful and ill-tempered Buddhist deities are generally not hunted, as doing so may incur the wrath of these deities. I will return to this point concerning the connection between places and animals later.

What is amazing is the fact that despite the 150 or so years that have passed since Potanin’s observations, marked by the encroachment of modernity into nomadic life and the socialist experience of Mongolia (1924-90), little has changed in the country regarding how people, especially nomads, see the world around them. Compared with pre-socialist times, even if every location is not currently believed to be protected by a *sabdag* and not every animal is imagined to have spiritual powers (a legacy of Mongolia’s recent socialist past), many places are still endowed with supernatural ownership, and many animals are thought to have a magical essence (which is activated when they are under the protection of *sabdags*) that humans must take into account when interacting with them.

The Cultural Foundation: Cosmology and Religion

In its broadest definition, culture encompasses the entire way of life of a specific group including their worldviews, symbols, language, customs, artistic expressions, technologies, economy, and social institutions. This book adopts this expansive definition of culture. In contrast, cosmology constitutes only one part of culture, referring specifically to the metaphysical aspects of the universe as understood in the indigenous worldview.

To illustrate this distinction, we can use an architectural metaphor. Envision culture as a vast, all-encompassing dome, with cosmology

serving as its foundation. Structurally speaking, despite being a subsurface element, cosmology—much like a building's foundation—exerts a unifying force that holds a cultural community together. It does so by providing metaphysical or superhuman legitimacy to a shared foundational worldview, which is woven from myths about ancestors, gods, spirits, a nation's destiny, and the like.

If we examine the building blocks of this cultural dome more closely, we see that its cosmological foundation supports subsequent layers, including religion. However, unlike in a real building made of bricks and mortar, this conceptual cultural dome lacks a clear demarcation between its foundation (cosmology) and its ground floor (religion). This is because cosmology and religion often share the same stories and myths about the origins and workings of the universe, frequently involving superhuman or metaphysical entities. In this sense, religion integrates cosmological elements, and, reciprocally, cosmology may be a part of religion.

Put another way, religion is typically defined as a system of beliefs and practices legitimized by sacred texts, prophets, and revelations, whereas cosmology often relies on oral tradition and is accepted based on societal consensus. The philosophical implication of this suggests that even in an ultra-secular society without religion—such as some Scandinavian countries today that are close to this benchmark—there will always be a cosmology consisting of myths and fictions used to unite the cultural community. These myths and fictions may not involve ancient spirits or supernatural elements, but they will still pertain to things that do not exist in nature but rather only in the fertile human imagination. Examples include myths and fictions about inalienable human rights, liberal democratic values, nationalism—cosmological ideas that were not only alien to our ancestors but are also alien to the animal kingdom.

For example, in nature, chimps don't operate under the concept of inalienable rights as humans do today. They don't have a right to life (which would guarantee that no chimp is mauled to death by another chimp), a right to liberty (which would ensure the freedom to make decisions about their own lives), or a right to equality (guaranteeing equal treatment and protection by the alpha chimp). Nor do chimps follow a 'Rule of Law' ensuring all chimps are equal before the law or

possess 'Individual Rights' guaranteeing privacy, freedom of mating, or freedom of assembly. Furthermore, there is no 'Protection of Minority Rights' ensuring that smaller packs of chimps are not attacked by larger, more ferocious ones in the jungle. Instead, chimps, like many social animals, follow instinctual behaviors that maintain order and cohesion within their packs. These behaviors are shaped by evolutionary pressures, not abstract principles. Chimps also don't divide themselves into national groups based on physical appearance or origin myths, nor do they seek self-governance or political autonomy.

All these cosmological ideas—rights, laws, equality, and national identity—are products of human imagination, created to unite people and organize societies. Many were formalized relatively recently with the rise of modern nation-states, especially following the establishment of the French Republic in 1792, which marked a shift away from regimes governed by monarchs and religious authorities claiming divine right.⁹ As new ideas like nationalism, liberal democracy, and human rights became entrenched in European societies, they were exported globally, often through colonialism, diplomacy, and cultural exchange.

If we resume the discussion of culture using an architectural analogy, in the 'real' world the building remains fixed once its foundation is laid and its walls are built, bound together by mortar. However, in the imaginary cultural dome, both the overall cultural framework and its components—including the foundation (cosmology) and the ground floor (religion)—constantly evolve and influence one another. For instance, the establishment of Buddhism in 1640 as the state religion among the Mongols illustrates this interplay. Buddhism incorporated elements of foundational shamanic cosmology, while shamanic cosmology itself adapted under Buddhism's influence. These organic shifts in foundational myths and fictions embedded in religion and cosmology resonated throughout the entire national culture, shaping the national economy, political systems, art, education, and even healthcare.

The flexibility and resilience of human culture are evident in the Mongol experience. Over time, Mongol society endured historical upheavals, such as transitions from one religion to another, from nomadic lifestyles to socialism, and from one political regime to the next.

9 Macfarlane, *The Invention of the Modern World*; Armitage and Subrahmanyam, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*.

Despite these changes, Mongol culture absorbed external influences while preserving core elements, such as belief in the supernatural, oral traditions, and enduring cosmological frameworks. As this book will explore, under state socialism, Mongols maintained these cultural pillars even while adapting to modernity.

To understand culture's dynamic nature, it is helpful to move beyond rigid textbook definitions or nationalist portrayals. Instead, imagine Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, where melting clocks create a surreal impression of time bending and flowing. Replace the clocks with representations of culture, and you'll have a vivid image of how culture operates: a social construct that is inherently flexible and constantly evolving. Like Dali's clocks, culture bends and shifts while retaining its contours, reflecting the collective beliefs, values, traditions, and behaviors of a society over time. This dynamic balance between continuity and change is what makes culture both resilient and adaptable.

In its broadest definition, cosmology, as we have discussed, not only encompasses ancient metaphysical knowledge but may also include any system of metaphysical knowledge through which members of a given society seek to comprehend the world they inhabit. This extends to modern ideas and stories, captured in unique narratives known in Mongolian as *bolson yavdal*, which can be translated as 'it really happened stories'. Since they shed light on the hidden connections between humans, animals, and the spiritual realm, *bolson yavdal* stories will be extensively used throughout this book. It is therefore important to clarify what these stories are and how they contribute to understanding Mongol culture and beliefs.

Bolson Yavdal Stories

Bolson yavdal stories recount unusual or mysterious events believed to have happened in the recent past; therefore, it is assumed that they have living witnesses. Contrary to the views of skeptics, these stories are not merely strange or amusing anecdotes nor are they horror tales akin to Western urban legends. Instead, they carry significant meaning for many Mongols. These stories serve as moral lessons, reinforcing family ties and reflecting broader social structures, including patriarchal

values. They also provide frameworks for understanding causality, morality, and social norms in ways that reflect Mongol cosmology's adaptability to changing contexts, such as urbanization, globalization, regime change, and climate change.

Unlike urban legends, which are often detached from cultural or moral foundations, *bolson yavdal* stories are deeply rooted in Mongol cosmology and carry a sense of believability that reinforces their educational and explanatory purposes. For example, they often explore causality by connecting mysterious events or experiences to moral or cosmological principles, offering a way to make sense of the world and its changes.

These traits—depicting recent events, being highly believable, serving a moral or educational purpose, and explaining causality—set *bolson yavdal* stories apart from other narrative forms such as folk tales, legends, anecdotes, gossip, and myths.

Bolson yavdal stories often revolve around sacred stones, holy springs, spiritual animals, and spiritually-protected locales. In these stories, human protagonists find themselves in trouble due to transgressions of taboos, ignoring omens, removing sacred objects, or mistreating animals in spiritual locales. For example, in many *bolson yavdal* stories, removing sacred stones from *ovoo* cairns leads to individuals suffering or even dying due to supernatural causes. *Ovoo* cairns, dedicated to the spiritual masters of specific areas and serving to consolidate patrilineages by connecting them with the realm of spirits and ancestors, are scattered across Mongolia. This makes such incidents a popular topic, with witnesses found in almost every location—often a friend of a friend or someone else vaguely familiar—adding an element of believability to the story. While some *bolson yavdal* stories are purely fictional, others may be based on real events or experiences, albeit distorted or misinterpreted in the retelling. In these stories, wrongdoers aren't merely individuals facing consequences; their actions often reverberate across their entire families. This narrative choice reflects the core of Mongol social structure, emphasizing the significance of families embedded in patrilineages rather than autonomous individuals. By illustrating the collective repercussions of individual transgressions, *bolson yavdal* stories reinforce family ties, fostering a shared sense of moral responsibility within the community.

Besides oral transmission, *bolson yavdal* stories are now also shared in newspapers, internet forums, or compiled into anthologies alongside accounts of encounters with ghosts. These newspaper articles, online discussions, and books are often presented as testimonies, either collected by the writers or transcribed from the words of witnesses. In other words, these aren't first-hand accounts, but curated stories, making them difficult to verify, which serves such mystical stories well.

The following chapters focus on four animals—the dog, the marmot, the cat, and the camel—exploring them as cosmological beings with spiritual powers recounted in *bolson yavdal* stories as well as flesh-and-blood creatures embedded in Mongol history.