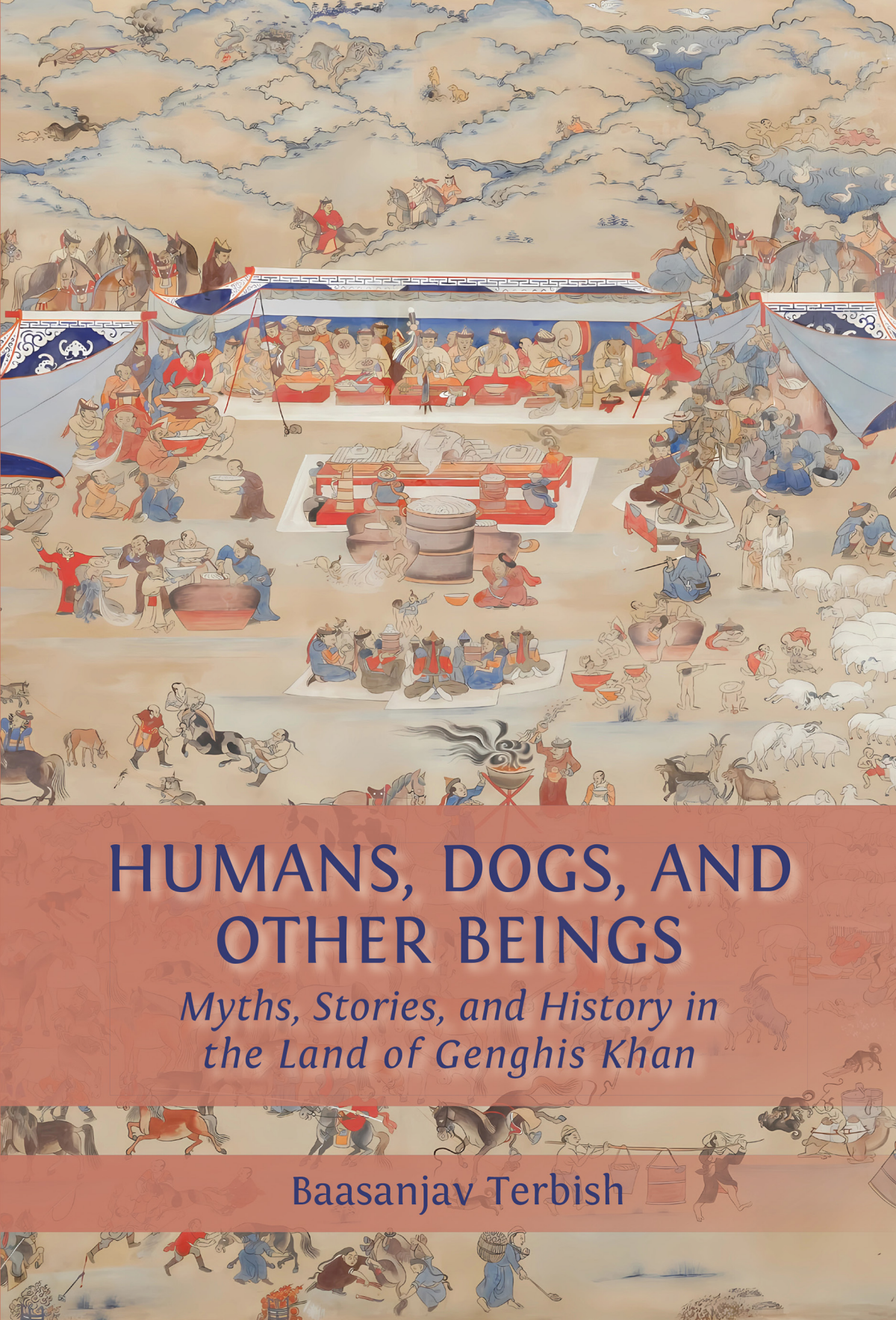

HUMANS, DOGS, AND OTHER BEINGS

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

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5. The Camel

During the spring season, a family of nomads in the Gobi Desert assists the births of their camel herd. The last camel to calve experiences a difficult labor, lasting for two days. With the devoted assistance and intervention of the family, a rare albino calf finally enters the world. However, the joy is overshadowed when the mother camel rejects the newborn, withholding her vital milk—a refusal that places the calf's life in jeopardy.

In a determined effort to restore the crucial bond between the mother and the calf and ensure the survival of the latter, the nomadic family seeks the spiritual assistance of a group of monks who conduct a special ritual. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the compassionate Buddhist gods stay deaf to the solemn chants of their devoted servants whose efforts fall short of establishing the desired bond. Undeterred, the family turns to a musician, asking him to perform a special melody designed for such occasions using a horse-head fiddle. Upon arriving at the nomadic camp, the musician initiates the ritual by carefully placing the horse-head fiddle on the front hump of the mother camel, establishing a cosmic connection between the instrument and the beast. Then he proceeds to play a melancholic melody, accompanied by a female member of the nomadic family who recites a soothing song known as 'hoos'. As the weeping sounds of the horse-head fiddle and the ethereal song fill the air, as it happened for so many times in the annals of Mongolia, nothing short of a miracle takes place—the mother camel begins to shed tears, the liquid grace of compassion, streaming from her eyes. Immediately following the completion of the musical rite, the mother camel allows her calf suckle life-granting nourishment from her teat, confirming the restoration of the maternal bond.

This is a scene from a 2003 documentary film titled *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, directed by Mongol and German filmmakers. The film captures the daily life of a nomadic family in the region, providing

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a glimpse into the deep connection not only between nomads and animals but also between mother and offspring. In Mongol culture, the bond between a mother camel and her calf symbolizes the cosmic love between a human mother and her offspring.

Mongols have traditionally herded animals, collectively known as *tavan hoshuu mal* or the 'five types of livestock', which include camels, horses, sheep, goats, and cattle. Among these, the camel holds a unique significance, especially for camel herders. While not all herders across Mongolia keep camels, and those who do not tend to have only a general understanding of them, my extended paternal family had deeper than usual knowledge of them due to one of my uncle's occupation as a camel herder. His work provided our family with a closer connection to and understanding of camels. For many camel herders, the camel is one of the most anthropomorphized animals among the 'five types of livestock'. However, families that do not keep camels often view horses as the animals closest to humans. These differing perspectives highlight how herding families across Mongolia have varied experiences with and attitudes toward the animals they raise.

This final chapter discusses the treatment of camels by Mongol camel herders, highlighting the cultural and economic significance of this species, which broadly represents how other types of livestock are managed. It consists of three parts: Part I explores the role of camels in culture, while Part II examines camels as a biological species. The Conclusion briefly touches on broader themes, including how herders use animals, among other things, as a lens to reflect on existential questions such as the meaning of life.

Part I

The Camel in Culture

In autumn, a nomadic camp comes alive with the sounds of camels—some grumbling, others growling, and a few emitting their distinctive grunts. Amidst this lively scene, the gaze of an onlooker can be easily captivated by a particularly large and well-groomed camel. This majestic creature, with two humps adorning its back, stands proudly on a white felt in front of the *ger*, its head immersed in the nomadic dwelling.

Inside the *ger*, a festive atmosphere unfolds. Against a high wooden chest displaying a row of colorful thangkas depicting multi-limbed gods, fierce-looking bodhisattvas, and portraits of benign ancestors gazing down at the mortals, a table is laid with a spread of food and dairy products, signaling a joyous occasion. The camel, seemingly accustomed to such an ambiance and treatment, remains composed and motionless, its soulful brown eyes calmly acknowledging the moment. While partaking in the celebratory food, the nomadic family performs a series of rituals, beginning with the purification of the camel using juniper incense. The smoke envelopes the camel's head, drifting through the *ger*, and floats out the door into the morning light. Next, a *hadag* scarf, the color of the blue sky, is tied around the camel's neck. Then, the hosts embark on a ceremony, reciting a poetic tribute to their two-humped guest. With reverence, they extol the camel through formulaic lines that praise its unique physical characteristics:

> The camel possesses the ears of a mouse
> The gait of a cow
> The knees of a tiger
> The lips of a hare
> The neck of a dragon
> The eyes of a snake
> The head of a horse
> The wool of a newly shorn sheep
> The hump of a monkey
> The hair of a rooster
> The teeth of a dog
> And the tail of a pig.

In this praise, the camel embodies the qualities of all twelve animals in the traditional calendar. Despite this, the camel doesn't have a month named after it. This omission is explained in the following legend: Once upon a time, the Buddha allocated each month in the year to an animal, yet he left the slot for the first month unassigned. This turned into a bone of contention, attracting two contenders who couldn't be more different from one another: the mouse and the camel, each presenting compelling reasons for the first month to be named after them. The Buddha, in his boundless wisdom, decides to settle the matter through a competition. He informs the mouse and the camel that the winner would be the one who first glimpses the morning light. Eager to secure the honor, the

camel ascends to the top of the highest hill, ready to welcome the first rays of morning light. The mouse, miniscule in size, positions itself at the camel's feet, aspiring to achieve the same feat. Observing the mouse from above, the camel, confident in its victory, relaxes, contemplating, 'How can this diminutive creature aspire to witness the dawn before me, the tallest among all animals?' As the first light breaks, the camel gracefully stretches its long neck and closes its eyes in blissful anticipation of the warm sunlight gently touching its muzzle. Seizing the moment, the mouse swiftly ascends the camel's neck, leaps onto its head, and joyously squeaks, capturing the first ray of light. Henceforth, the first month of the year has been named after the resourceful mouse.

After the purification ritual performed inside the *ger*, the camel is granted the freedom to join its herd awaiting nearby. The purpose of the ritual is to show respect to the camel herd and convey wishes for its prosperity.

Such scenes are a common sight across Mongolia, where nomads herd camels. This praise, which has many versions but is similar in content, accompanied by the legend about the absence of the camel in the twelve-year animal calendar, can be heard during various camel-related celebrations as well. These celebrations range from annual festivities dedicated to camels (as seen in this example) to consecrating a camel, camel races, castration, and releasing a bull camel among female camels. To grasp the role of camels in rituals, one must delve into cosmology, an imaginary realm with real-world effects.

The Camel in Cosmology

The camel stands out among livestock with its remarkable combination of diverse traits drawn from across the animal kingdom. For camel herders, the camel is, as mentioned, the most anthropomorphized of the 'five types of livestock'. Several popular sayings emphasize this deep cosmological connection, such as 'humans and camels have bodies that are related' (*hün temee hoyor mahbodyn töröltei*), 'only humans and camels are afraid of their dead' (*temee hün hoyor* ühseneesee *aina*), and 'the most adorable beings in the universe are a human baby, a puppy, and a camel calf' (*yör*töntsiin *gurvan höörhön*: *hüühed*, *gölög*, *botgo*).

Despite its chimeric beauty and human-like characteristics, the camel is not considered close to humans in the Buddhist reincarnation cycle,

nor is it believed to possess spiritual powers. Although the camel may hold an elevated place among livestock, it is still classified as one of the 'five types', signifying it as an indisputable possession of humans. This implies that camels, like all other livestock, are beyond the interest of nature spirits, shamanic gods, or Buddhist deities, who neither attempt to steal the camels from rightful human owners nor offer them protection voluntarily. Consequently, when any livestock crosses into sacred spaces, especially the so-called 'wrathful places', nomads become anxious, fearing that their animals might provoke these sacred locations and suffer as a result.

In the animal kingdom, creatures instinctively safeguard their 'possessions', such as a kill, by themselves. However, Sapiens are different. Instead of personally safeguarding their valuables, humans employ an array of technologies and entrust the protection task to various beings and entities, including family, friends, community members, the state, and the supernatural.

Supernatural protective technologies include rituals of consecration, affixing amulets to individual camels, and seeking the intercession of a Buddhist deity called Günjinlham. In Buddhist iconography, Günjinlham takes the form of a wrathful female deity with badass looks and formidable weaponry enough to scare the light out of predatory wolves or spirits that spread diseases and bring misfortune. She is depicted topless, with dangling teats, wielding a razor-sharp sword in her right hand, and cradling a cup made from a human skull in her left hand. Mounted on a wild yellow camel, she exudes a fierce presence that would make even the villains from a post-apocalyptic *Mad Max* world seem angelic by comparison.

The idea of animals or livestock being safeguarded by supernatural forces is not unique to Mongol culture but is prevalent in many societies worldwide. In Christianity, for instance, St. Anthony the Abbot is venerated as the patron saint of animals, and his intercession is traditionally sought for the protection of livestock. Similarly, rituals such as the blessing of animals on St. Francis's feast day underscore the enduring presence of such practices in European societies.

To add an extra layer of supernatural protection for their camels, Mongol herders perform a ritual called *seterleh*. This ritual is intended to transfer ownership of the animals from humans to the supernatural realm.

Seterleh, the Ritual of Consecration

In Chapter 2 about the dog, I pointed out that the *seterleh* ritual has traditionally been performed as part of a medicinal rite aimed at healing the sick. During this ritual, an animal is consecrated and dedicated to the gods. Once under the protection of the supernatural, the consecrated animal is emancipated from human control and must be treated with reverence. It is to be fed well, allowed to roam freely, and expected to die a natural death as a possession of the supernatural. In this sense, consecrated animals in Mongolia are similar to cows in Hinduism, which are holy creatures associated with the gods. The ritual of *seterleh*, however, extends beyond dogs and can involve any of the 'five types of livestock'.

The *seterleh* ritual may also serve more practical purposes beyond the healing of sick humans. It may be performed to improve the quality of the livestock. It is usually healthy and virile male animals who can sire superior offspring that get consecrated in this way. For example, a ram with good physical characteristics and impressive testicles can be consecrated with the hope that it will sire as many lambs as it could and simultaneously protect the whole flock through acquiring a divine patronage.

Another motive for performing this ritual is to acknowledge and reward the exceptional services rendered by a particular animal, which may be old, castrated, or female. In such cases, the fortunate animal is released from human service and provided with compassionate care for the remainder of its life.

These three functions of the *seterleh* ritual could be considered independently and pursued separately. However, more often than not, nomads perform the ritual with these three functions overlapping. For example, a ram might be released with the hope of curing a sick person, siring as many lambs as possible to improve the quality of the flock, and as a reward for being an exemplary specimen.

The *seterleh* ritual for camels is performed as follows, which gives an idea to the reader of how it is performed for other livestock animals. The chosen camel is typically an uncastrated male camel, exhibiting docility in riding, possessing a calm disposition, and at the pinnacle of virility and strength, bringing joy to the eyes of its human owners. The initiation

of the ritual takes place outside the family *ge*r, amid a festive ambiance, officiated by a knowledgeable person well-versed in its execution.

This person recites a special Buddhist text dedicated to camels, accompanied by a traditional praise and well-wishes to the camel. Incense is ignited, and the ritual performer circumambulates the camel in a clockwise manner, enveloping it in the purifying juniper smoke. A *hadag* scarf is tied around the camel's neck, while its leg, sole, nose, and mouth are anointed with ghee butter. Then a special scroll containing well-wishes or mantras is placed in a small bag and securely fastened around the camel's neck.

The underlying concept behind dedicating a camel to a deity is to designate the camel as the deity's riding companion. In return, the deity is expected to protect the camel and, by extension, the entire herd to which the camel belongs. Consequently, it is typically forbidden for mortals to ride such a camel. While the consecrated camel can be dedicated to various deities, primarily Buddhist ones, there are instances when it is also devoted to the shamanic Tengri. In such cases, a shaman typically officiates the ritual.

Post-ceremony, the consecrated camel cannot be sold on the market, slaughtered for meat, or employed in transportation and other customary camel activities, lest one wishes to incur the wrath of the gods. The Buddhist scroll tied to its neck is periodically examined for signs of wear and tear.[1]

Taboos

All societies have prohibitions or restrictions against certain practices, objects, substances, and places. The strongest expressions of such restrictions are commonly known as taboos. The word 'taboo' derives from the Polynesian 'tapu', meaning something sacred, prohibited, or set apart. Violating a taboo can lead not only to social consequences, ranging from ostracism to more physical forms of punishment, but

1 Traditionally, the only other scenario in which a camel was exempt from human use was when it was chosen to carry one's parent's corpse for an open-air funeral. Adorned with a *hadag* scarf and carrying two empty baskets turned downwards on either side of its body, the camel symbolized the inverted world for both the deceased and the survivors. After the funeral, the cart that transported the corpse was left outside with its wheels facing skyward for three days.

also to supernatural repercussions. However, what is considered taboo can vary from one culture to another. In some societies, consuming the brains of another person, for example, would be taboo; in others, not eating them during cannibalistic rituals would be considered socially unacceptable. In some, marrying a close relative is taboo; in others, such marriages are the norm.

The nomadic way of life in Mongolia is abundant with taboos. Many of these taboos are manifestations of cultural prejudices and biases regarding specific groups of people, animals, substances, practices, or places. Sanctioned by the supernatural, these taboos serve as mechanisms that enforce and perpetuate structures based on notions of purity and pollution, sacred and profane, social hierarchy, unequal power dynamics, and the delineation between 'us' and 'them'—topics we have explored.

Let's examine several taboos connected with livestock, focusing on camels. Camels hold a unique status as the only livestock whose young are prohibited from entering the *ger*. As readers may recall, Mongols extend a similar ban to dogs (see Chapter 2). This restriction doesn't rise from deeming camel calves impure, but rather stems from perceiving them as ambiguous beings—neither true beasts nor human infants. This example highlights the human tendency to fear the ambiguous or the unknown and to keep it at bay. In the case of the camel calf, this fear, however, is a product of the rich human imagination, where what is unequivocally a camel's young is imagined as an ambiguous entity—half-animal, half-human—in the cosmological domain. As a consequence, the camel calf is denied entry into the human habitat. Typical of *Homo sapiens*, what nomads deny in one instance, they accept as valid in another instance. Thus, to underscore the significance of camel calves, nomads ceremoniously hang camel calf placenta above human heads inside the *ger* at the roof opening, one of the most sacred parts of the *ger*. In Christian terms, this practice is somewhat akin to placing a placenta on the altar in a church. As discussed, during an annual ceremony to honor camels and wish for their health and multiplication, a camel is invited to place its head inside the *ger* to undergo purification and receive a *hadag* scarf.

In contrast to camel calves, the young of sheep, goats, cows, and horses, considered unambiguously proper beasts, are warmly welcomed on all fours inside the *ger*, particularly during freezing temperatures

when protection within the warmth of human shelter becomes essential. However, if the need arises to bring a camel calf inside the *ger*, it is permissible only after putting a special hat (*zulai*) on its head. In the eyes of the nomads, this ritual signifies a symbolic transformation of the camel calf into an entity of the same status as a human baby, thus allowing it entry.

Such symbolic transformations can also be found in various cultures and traditions. For instance, in shamanism, animals can shapeshift into humans. Similarly, in numerous ancient religious practices worldwide, sacrificial rituals involved animals, which were often perceived as representing humans.

If animals can shapeshift or become symbolic representations of humans, the reverse is also possible in Sapiens' imagination, as seen when humans are symbolically imagined as animals. One well-known example in Christianity involves biblical symbolism, where, in the eyes of God, the congregation is likened to a sheep flock, and Christ is represented by a sacrificial lamb. So the Mongol practice of symbolically imagining a camel calf as an entity akin to a human baby, achieved by placing a hat on its head, shouldn't be deemed exotic or unusual in the broader context of human cultures.

Given the close symbolic association of camels with humans, the consumption of camel meat is often veiled under alternative names such as 'the meat of the long-legged one' or 'the meat of the tall one'. It is also prohibited to gather other livestock in a location where a camel was slaughtered, echoing a ban reminiscent of that observed in a human cemetery.

Many taboos have complex explanations that can be challenging to untangle. A case in point is the prohibition imposed on pregnant women, forbidding them from consuming camel meat and relieving themselves in the presence of camels. This taboo stems from the belief that such actions might result in the baby being born with a cleft lip, resembling the split appearance of a camel's upper lip. The rationale behind this taboo can be approached from different angles. Firstly, it may be linked to traditional anxieties surrounding pregnancies in the past when child mortality rates were high, and nomads had limited means to address birth-related deformities and conditions like cleft lip. Communities sought to protect pregnant women and ensure healthy

deliveries, contributing to the establishment of such taboos. Secondly, this particular taboo could have been rooted in gender hierarchy, intertwined with concepts of purity and pollution. Prohibiting certain practices for women while allowing them for men suggests a potential patriarchal power dynamic, where women were traditionally perceived not only inferior to men but also polluted or susceptible to pollution. Hence, despite pregnant women being banned from eating camel meat and relieving themselves in front of camels, expectant fathers were, technically speaking, always able to expose their private parts to whatever livestock they wanted to and eat as much camel meat as they desired, without repercussions for themselves and their unborn babies. Some Mongols attribute the taboo against women relieving themselves in front of camels as a tradition rooted in showing respect to these amazing animals. While this explanation holds some cultural validity, what is notable is the absence of a similar prohibition for men, suggesting that camels, supposedly, don't take offense when men urinate in their direction.

Pregnant women in Mongolia face another taboo: riding camels during pregnancy, even though riding horses is deemed acceptable. The rationale behind this prohibition is the belief that if a pregnant woman rides a camel, her gestation period will extend to twelve months, contrary to the biological reality of nine months. As readers might have already guessed, this taboo doesn't extend to expectant fathers. However, as with many taboos, there exists a workaround: a pregnant woman can lift the potential negative consequences of this taboo by crawling underneath a camel. If you chance upon the sight of a pregnant woman maneuvering beneath a camel in the vast expanses of Mongolia, don't assume she's searching for a lost wedding ring. You now know the cultural context behind such an act.

To better comprehend the essence of these camel-related prohibitions, consider a fictional taboo in America: Pregnant women are strongly advised against driving a Ford Explorer SUV and, specifically, from urinating nearby. Ignoring these prohibitions may result in the child remaining in the womb for up to twelve months and experiencing issues with movement coordination upon birth—mirroring the reported transmission problems in Ford SUVs, such as rough shifting, slipping, or occasional malfunctions. In cases where a Ford Explorer is the only family ride, pregnant women are recommended to perform a purification ritual to counteract potential taboo effects. This involves opening and

closing the SUV's hood seven times before hitting the road. This taboo, of course, doesn't apply to their husbands or any other man because they have superior penises.

Real taboos are often rooted in historical or traditional practices that might be biased or discriminatory. Over time, these practices become ingrained in culture, particularly within religions, and the associated taboos persist as a means of preserving tradition or as integral components of religious belief systems.

Mother-Offspring Bond in Biology, Culture, and Folklore

Female animals are often associated with motherhood, symbolizing nurture and self-sacrifice. However, contemporary animal studies, as demonstrated by Lucy Cooke, an authority on the subject, challenge this age-old notion, revealing a world far more complex and interesting.[2] One prevalent myth is that all females possess an inherent, almost mystical maternal instinct that effortlessly guides them to understand every need of their offspring and be devoted to them. In reality, across the animal kingdom, many male animals demonstrate remarkable commitment to parenting. In various bird, amphibian, and fish species, single fathers often shoulder the entire burden of raising the young, while mothers may simply leave for good after laying eggs.

Recent scientific evidence suggests that caregiving isn't the exclusive domain of one sex; both males and females possess the same neural architecture associated with caregiving instincts, which can be activated or deactivated like a light switch. This phenomenon also holds true for mammals, including the ever-so-popular laboratory mice. While mice exhibit nurturing behaviors toward their young, they also harbor a darker side, with both males and females sometimes engaging in infanticide. The galanin neurons in their brains play a crucial role, either activating parenting instincts or, conversely, triggering infanticidal tendencies.

In the animal kingdom, the goal of motherhood, however harsh it may sound, isn't about indiscriminate nurturing. Rather, it's about strategic investment. A female's limited energy is carefully allocated to maximize the number of offspring that survive and eventually reproduce. At its core, motherhood is fundamentally a selfish endeavor, driven by a simple evolutionary imperative: for reproduction to succeed, a female must

2 Cooke, *Bitch*.

first ensure her own survival in a dog-eat-dog world where she is either finding her next meal or trying not to become one. A 'good mother' instinctively knows when to make sacrifices for her offspring and when to prioritize her own survival. Despite the powerful drive to nurture and protect, and the undeniable strength of the mother-infant bond, the evolutionary perspective presents mothers as multidimensional and nuanced figures.

In contrast to the animal world, the mother-infant bond in humans operates on two levels: biological and cultural. Biologically, as in other mammals, this bond is forged through tangible and measurable physical and hormonal changes during pregnancy and childbirth. A key player in this process is oxytocin, a hormone that not only facilitates the physiological aspects of motherhood but also helps establish an immediate bond between the mother and her newborn. Often dubbed the 'love hormone', oxytocin is instrumental during birth and primes the new mother to form a deep connection with her newborn. Activities like breastfeeding further immerse the mother in oxytocin, effectively creating an addiction to caring for her baby. This surge of oxytocin rewires the mother's brain, making it exquisitely sensitive to her infant's cries, scents, and visual cues, which explains the well-known phenomenon of mothers exhibiting remarkable fearlessness in defending their young.

While oxytocin plays a starring role in early caregiving, the biology of maternal bonding in complex social creatures like humans goes beyond this initial rush—or the lack of thereof. Evolution has provided alternative, more stable pathways to attachment. This more enduring form of caregiving attachment develops through social interactions, where repeated exposure to babies has been shown to stimulate the production of other neuropeptides in those who interact with the babies. This extends the circle of caring attachment not only to biological mothers and fathers but also to more distant relatives and even foster parents.[3]

In human societies, the cultural aspect of the mother-child bond often takes precedence over its biological foundation. Across various societies, this bond serves as a cornerstone for familial relationships and social structures. Since the primary function of human cultures isn't to mirror reality faithfully but to ensure cooperation and social order,

3 Ibid., 122-54.

cultures create myths and ideals, including those about motherhood. In many societies, maternal love is exalted to a near-sacred status, praised as an enduring force that transcends challenges, adversity, and even space and time. This idealization strengthens the sanctity of the bond, embedding its significance into social norms, rituals, and myths.

As one might expect, this idealization overlooks the messier realities of daily life and the complexities of human psychology. Just as in the animal kingdom, not all human mothers naturally bond with their babies, and not all women experience maternal love. Many of us know mothers with depression who struggle to connect with their infants, or women who simply do not like children. Conversely, we see fathers and even unrelated men with a strong nurturing instinct, with many primary caregivers being fathers rather than mothers. Behaviors that deviate from idealized cultural norms are often dismissed or stigmatized as 'unnatural' or 'abnormal', implying that women who struggle to love children are frequently labeled as 'unnatural' or 'unfeminine'.

In Mongolia, where animals are frequently anthropomorphized and serve as human avatars in stories and rituals, the idealized love between a human mother and her offspring is often expressed through stories involving camel mothers and calves. In folklore, one particularly touching example of this bond is found in a popular üge poem composed at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century by Sangdag the Storyteller. This üge poem conveys the lamentations of a mother camel taken away on a caravan journey and her calf left behind in the pastureland. Through their expressions of longing and sorrow, both the mother and calf reveal their deep emotional connection, with their separation only intensifying the anticipation of their reunion.

Lamentation of the mother camel separated from her calf and hired in a caravan

I bore him as fate had planned long ago,
After conceiving, my love did grow,
I brought him forth at the destined hour,
As ancient destiny showed its power.

While I raised him tender, from youth to this day,
By my human master's will, we parted our way.
I let him suckle my first milk, so tender and fair,

Raised him with love, with utmost care.
Why this abrupt parting, what did I do
To deserve such sorrow? I haven't a clue.
What did my little one think, as I left for distant lands,
With heavy burdens to bear, in harsh, unforgiving sands?

Resting his dark eyes on the vast plain's view,
Straining to recognize shadows dancing, they seem so true,
Will my little one, mistaking them for me, leap and run,
Dashing forward, under the scorching sun?

When grazing with his friends on the open plain,
In joyful reunion with mothers, they gain,
Will my little one run with excitement, but after finding I'm not around,
Lie down, four limbs trembling, in sorrow, on the ground?

Hearing his mother's voice from afar, so keen,
Will my little one roll like tumbleweed in the wind?

Upon hearing calls from hidden place,
Mistaking them for his mother's vocal embrace,
Will my little one look around, seeking me in air
Longing for my presence, in deep despair?

Since he first saw the sun's soft golden light,
By my side, he grew up, day and night.
Will my little one, with sorrow etched on his face,
Run, his muzzle drooping, in the vast, empty space?
Unaware of his littleness and left to himself too soon
Will my little one fall into the traps of the ground?

If fate permits, I'll safely return from this caravan ride,
Meet my dear little one, joyfully by my side.
Protector spirit of my human master, as suffering's course is run,
Grant me safe return to my dear little one.[4]

Lamentation of the young camel separated from his mother

She who gave birth to me, so dear,
She who raised me, oh so near,

4 Damdin, B. et al., 'The camel', 36-38.

My loving mother, gone from sight,
Left, vanished in the fading light.

Her return from far, lowing in quest of me,
Would lift my spirit before her shape I'd see;
I was happy then, oh dear poor mother mine,
Suckling endlessly, feeling so fine!

Her swift approach from pastures wide,
With melodious grunt as her guide,
Would cheer me up, oh mother dear,
Before I'd even see you near!

When I see other mothers' gazes,
Their eyes may resemble yours, but in different ways,
How heart-warming to rest beneath their cover,
Where I discover solace, just like with you, dear mother.

If only this parting from my dear mother
Had happened in my second year, when I am a bit more mature!
When I meet my loving, deserving mother,
As ancient destiny's virtue we uncover,
I'll be freed from the cruel separation's tether,
And be happy with her forever and ever.[5]

Stories such as these 'lamentations' undoubtedly humanize camels. They also influence human empathy for camels, particularly because, to the best of my knowledge, no comparably evocative stories exist in modern Mongol literature or folklore regarding other female animals and their offspring.

In fact, the idealized mother-child bond is a central theme in Mongol folklore and literature, dating back to the foundational texts of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, when oral traditions were first recorded in writing. Among the unique works from this period, known for their portrayals of khans and notable figures, is a poem that captures the mutual longing between an ordinary mother and her son, a cavalryman serving in a distant part of the expanding Mongol Empire. Written on parchment

5 Ibid., 38-39.

and believed to date back to the 1240s, this poem originates from the Golden Horde, a state founded by Genghis Khan's grandson, Batu.[6]

The idealization of the mother-offspring bond among camels mirrors that among humans, and this bond is even enshrined in an ancient legend recounting the burial of Genghis Khan. According to the legend, following the interment of Genghis Khan's grave, a special ritual was carried out—a camel calf was sacrificially laid to rest in the presence of its grieving mother. The purpose was to enlist the camel, as the only creature cognizant of the Great Khan's burial site, to guide his kin to the tomb when necessary. This genre is still popular in the folklore of Southern Mongolia, particularly in *bolson yavdal* stories that narrate events from the early twentieth century. Such stories often revolve around thieves who, in their quest to safeguard stolen goods buried underground, resort to killing camel calves with the intention of making their bereaved mothers etch these locations into memory, thus enabling the thieves to be led back to retrieve their ill-gotten gains at a later time.

These stories about the powerful bond between mother camels and their calves, however, are not mere baseless myths. Instead, they likely originated from observations that became idealized in culture and folklore. Among all livestock, when a camel calf dies, most mothers linger around the lifeless body for many days without food or water. This endurance is facilitated by the remarkable hardiness of camels, which can survive without sustenance for extended periods. While other livestock, like cattle, also exhibit grief when losing their offspring, their physiology prevents them from displaying the Spartan-level mourning seen in camels. The fact that the mother camel sheds tears and vocalizes her distress with high-pitched cries adds a human-like dimension. Witnessing such scenes is genuinely heart-breaking for any observer.

The maternal bond, however, may not materialize initially or may break later on for various reasons. In the case of camels, Mongols use a method to mend the relationship or establish a new bond, which consists of a ritual known as 'the song to encourage a mother camel to suckle her calf by uttering *hoos*, *hoos*, *hoos*'.

6 Poppe, 'Zolotoordynskaia rukopis' na bereste'.

Mother-Offspring Bonding Ritual

The opening scene in this chapter illustrates a popular ritual used by nomads to help mother livestock accept rejected offspring. This ritual is performed on all female livestock, including ewes, goats, cows, and mares, not just camels. The main difference when performing the ritual on various animals is the variation in song lyrics.

In the case of camels, nomads perform a ritual when a young calf is either rejected by its mother or faces starvation due to its mother's inability to produce milk. If the mother camel has milk but refuses to feed her calf, nomads encourage her to accept her offspring. When the mother cannot produce milk, or is sick or dead, the objective shifts to finding another lactating camel and persuading her to adopt the additional calf.

When a nomadic family decides to perform this ritual, both the head of the family and his wife actively participate. The husband is responsible for handling the mother camel by capturing, securing, and immobilizing her. Meanwhile, his wife ensures that the calf, typically tethered to a rope pegged to the ground, successfully suckles from the camel's teat.

Occasionally, during this ritual, someone plays a horse-head fiddle. Whether accompanied by an instrument or not, when the melody begins, both the husband and his wife start reciting a melancholic song, punctuating the verses with the repeated utterance '*hoos*, *hoos*, *hoos*'. Although devoid of specific meaning, this repetition sounds sorrowful to Mongol ears and supposedly to Mongol camels as well. While many versions of this song exist, here is one to give an idea:

> Why are you squeamish
> About your young calf
> That became your offspring by suckling your milk?
> Your calf is waiting for you, hungry;
> Let it suckle your nutritious milk.
> Hoos, hoos, hoos.
>
> Why did you drive away
> Your beautiful young calf
> That became your offspring by partaking your white milk?
> Your calf is grunting under the midday sun;
> Let it suckle the maternal milk.
> Hoos, hoos, hoos.

Why did you leave alone
Your tiny calf
That became your offspring by drinking your filling milk?
Your calf is grunting in the evening;
Let it suckle your warm milk.
Hoos, hoos, hoos.

The melody varies across Mongolia, highlighting the diversity of Mongol culture. In some regions, the melody mimics the distressed cries of a young calf or a mother camel hurrying back to her calf. In Western Mongolia, among some Oirat groups, nomads may perform pieces from heroic epics such as *Jangar* for this purpose. In other places, nomads may simply sing beautiful melodies akin to love songs. The prolonged lyrics and soothing tone of the music—coupled with the fact that the mother camel is compelled to suckle the calf—typically influence the camel, softening her heart, reviving her maternal instincts, and guiding her to adopt her calf or a second calf. Legend has it that camel mothers who initially rejected their calves but later accepted them back develop an even deeper affection for their offspring.

In addition to the horse-head fiddle, nomads occasionally use the flute. When the nomadic family decides to enlist a skilled musician for this ritual, they extend an invitation, prepare a small feast, and show great respect to the guest. The musician begins by hanging his instrument on the hump of the mother camel, allowing the wind to generate a natural sound. As the musician plays the instrument, the *hoos* song gradually accompanies the melody. This ritual extends beyond the mother camel and calf; the audience also includes the gods and nature spirits, who are invoked to help soothe the mother camel and encourage her to accept the calf.

Given that this ritual is a cultural practice, and cultures inherently distort and reinterpret reality, the success of such rituals among Mongol herders is attributed to the magical power of the song and the benevolence of the gods, rather than any other practical factors. If nomads were to perform these rituals without appeasing the gods and replacing the *hoos* song with any soothing melody—such as the nursery rhymes 'The Itsy Bitsy Spider' or 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', or even a more romantic tune like 'I Just Called to Say I Love You'—the outcomes would likely have been the same. Consider this comparison: In many

modern Western countries, including in the United States, farmers use various methods to encourage mother cows to accept their calves, achieving good results. These methods primarily focus on creating a calming environment and fostering a bond between the cow and the calf, without resorting to religious rituals invoking Jesus Christ or saints in charge of cattle. In fact, these methods resemble those used by Mongol nomads, which involve gentle handling of both the mother and the calf, encouraging positive interactions, and reintroducing them in a controlled setting to help the mother acclimate to the calf. Additionally, rubbing the calf with the mother's milk or other familiar scents enhances recognition. In human terms, it's akin to a depressed mother resting on a soft couch, listening to calming melodies, inhaling therapeutic herbs, and receiving care from two specialists: a psychoanalyst with a soothing voice, gently encouraging her to reconnect with her baby's needs and nurturing instincts, and a masseur performing a calming massage focused around her breasts. After such rituals, few mammalian mothers would resist breastfeeding their babies.

Part II

The Camel as Livestock

In winter, a woolly camel stands tall in the middle of the snow-draped semi-desert. Those familiar with Bactrian camels from photos in wildlife or travel journals would be astonished to see one in person: its snout and nose covered in white foam, resembling a two-year-old after a birthday party with cake. However, the camel isn't in a celebratory mood; it is in full breeding season, with steam billowing from its nostrils, which are covered in a frothy substance that envelops half of its face. This foam results from increased salivation and the mixing of saliva with nasal secretions, a phenomenon peculiar to male Bactrian camels during breeding season.

The bull displays unmistakable signs of aggression, such as heightened vocalization, restlessness, enlarged testicles, along with hyper-protective instincts toward its harem of female camels. The otherwise docile bull undergoes a transformation into a wild aggressive state during this period, posing a danger not only to other camels but

also to anything or anyone moving in its vicinity, including nomads. The bull is equipped with a special muzzle—reminiscent of a scene from the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), where the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter, played by Anthony Hopkins, is restrained in a straightjacket and has his mouth covered by a muzzle-like mask with red straps—that prevents biting or harming others while allowing essential functions like eating and drinking. To signal its heated status, the bull is also adorned with colorful ribbons and, as a final mark of humiliation to its masculinity, a red felt flower on its testosterone-crazed forehead. This striking sight is typical in Dundgobi Province during camel breeding season.

In contrast, castrated bulls exhibit no such aggressive behavior and maintain a consistent demeanor throughout the year. Castration is a commonplace practice in livestock management, serving as technique to control temperament and aggression, making animals more docile for transportation and other human needs. Moreover, it helps manage herd dynamics by maintaining a balanced male-female ratio and selectively altering physical traits over generations.

Much like King Midas from Greek mythology, who turned everything he touched into gold, humans perceive and interact with the world through cultural lenses, transforming everything they touch into an artificial realm. Objects and concepts become technology, nature is molded into settlements, sex becomes sexuality, and animals are tamed into livestock. As a species evolved to create and thrive within artificial environments, Sapiens have excelled in tool-making and perfected the sharing of knowledge through language and writing, while constructing complex social systems and infrastructures. Consequently, human life is not a 'natural' existence but an artificial one, with differences between groups arising solely from their respective cultural choices.

This artificiality encompasses the treatment of livestock. Camel herds, like other domesticated animals, don't lead 'natural' lives, guided by free will and instincts to roam as they please. Instead, they exist in human-controlled environments. Each stage of a camel's life—from birth to calfhood to juvenile and breeding ages, as well as their working life and ultimately death—is meticulously planned and shaped by humans. This section explores this aspect of the camel's life.

The Camel in History

The earliest art in Mongolia, featuring camels alongside woolly rhinoceroses, mammoths, ibexes, ostriches, and bison, is found at Rashaan (Batshireet *sum*, Hentii Province) and Hoid Tsenher (Manhan *sum*, Hovd Province).[7] Dating back to the Upper Paleolithic period, approximately 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, this artwork depicts a Mongolia that was vastly different from today.

The earliest evidence of camel domestication is present in rock art at Bichigtiin Am in Bayan-Hongor Province.[8] These petroglyphs, which show humans riding camels, were likely created around 1500 BCE, with updates continuing until the eighth century CE. These later artworks lack depictions of woolly rhinoceroses, mammoths, ostriches, and bison, indicating a shift in fauna and climate more similar to today's conditions.

The first documented reference to camels appears in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, highlighting the diverse roles camels played in Mongol society during the thirteenth century. Herded by specialized camel herders,[9] camels were used for riding, transporting goods, and as draft animals. They pulled two types of carts: the two-wheeled *qasaq* and the four-wheeled wagon used for transporting fixed, non-collapsible *ger*s.

Camels were exchanged as gifts and offered as tributes to the Mongols by neighboring peoples, such as the Tangut and the Xia.[10] Their cooked meat provided nutrition for hardy nomads. During times of conflict and intertribal wars, these resilient animals even served as sustenance ATMs on four legs, as exemplified by Ong Khan, who, while fleeing from the victorious Temüjin, reportedly sustained himself by 'pricking camel's blood to drink'[11] when he had no other food to eat.

The imperial annals also mention geographic locations with camel-related names, such as *Bu'ura Ke'er*, or 'Bull Camel Steppe' (today the Jonon Valley in Mongolia's Selenge Province), and *Teme'en Ke'er*, or 'Camel Steppe' (north of Lake Dar in Inner Mongolia). These names underscore the deep cultural and historical connection that the Mongols shared with these animals.

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7 Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia*, 450.
8 Ibid., 447.
9 *The Secret History of the Mongols* §232.
10 Ibid. §250; Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia*, 602.
11 *The Secret History of the Mongols* §151.

The Secret History of the Mongols suggests that the roles of camels have endured over centuries, as contemporary Mongolia continues to utilize them for purposes similar to those in the thirteenth century.[12]

The Silk Road is unimaginable without the Bactrian camel. An ancient and vital trade network linking East and West, it facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies, as well as diseases. During the height of the Mongol Empire, the Mongols controlled this commercial superhighway, which, besides providing financial gains, gave them military and political advantages, enhancing their ability to govern the vast empire more effectively.

Following the fall of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China in 1368, camels were used in trade between the Mongols and Chinese during the succeeding Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Envoys from Mongolia and Jungaria journeyed to Beijing, herding camels and horses laden with furs. Despite being designated as 'tributes' by the Ming court, these commodities were reciprocated with a fixed fee for each animal and fur item, essentially constituting a form of payment to the nomadic emissaries. If the nomads deemed the compensation inadequate, which happened from time to time, they reverted to their customary diplomatic tactics—either raiding the Ming or issuing threats—to negotiate higher fees.[13]

In 1655, the Halhas of Mongolia established a peace agreement with the Manchu Qing dynasty, which had replaced the Ming. As part of the accord, the Manchu Qing conferred the title *zasag* ('ruler') upon eight Halha chiefs. In return, these rulers committed to annually presenting the 'tribute of nine whites'—comprising one white camel and eight white horses—to the Qing Emperor.[14] Following Mongolia's submission to the Manchu Qing in 1691, the tradition was not only continued but the Dariganga group in Eastern Mongolia was entrusted with the care of the Emperor's herds, including camels.

Mongolia's trade, both domestically and internationally, has relied on camels since ancient times. By the seventeenth century, the overland Silk Road had largely fallen into disuse, supplanted by more efficient

12 Camels were not only documented in the earliest Mongol imperial annals but also featured in the accounts of foreign observers, including Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, and Marco Polo.

13 Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia*, 557.

14 Ibid., 311.

sea routes. The decline of the Silk Road coincided with the rise of the so-called Mongolia's Tea Road, a route established by a treaty between Russia and the Manchu Qing in 1689. Though little known outside the region, it was an important commercial route linking China with Russia through Mongolia. Within Chinese territory, goods were transported on mules or mule carts to Kalkan on the China-Mongolia border. From there, camels carried the goods across the Gobi Desert to reach Urga. Subsequently, the goods made their way to Kyahta, a Russian settlement on the Mongolia-Russia border.

As the name suggests, the main item transported along the Tea Road was tea, although other goods were also traded. Not all tea or goods, however, were destined for Russia; Mongolia's substantial demand for tea was met through this caravan route, too. Among the Mongols, tea was highly valued, not just as a refreshing beverage but also for its symbolic and practical uses. It was offered as gifts to social superiors and deities, and, in regions where conventional coins were scarce, tea even functioned as a form of currency. A pressed tea block could be used to purchase various goods and services, including those provided by sex workers, at a rate of one tea block for a lust-quenching encounter.[15]

Following the victory of the People's Revolution in 1921, the state retained control over the utilization of camels in domestic transportation. From 1921 to 1949, 10,000 camels annually crisscrossed the young socialist nation, forming ancient caravans that were indispensable to the transportation network.[16] Camels served as the primary logistical animals until 1960, handling about sixty to seventy percent of all goods transported during this period.[17] While the use of camels for moving goods diminished with the widespread adoption of Soviet lorries

15 Pozdneev, *Mongoliya i Mongoly*, 115-16, 137.

16 Traditionally, Mongols employed two caravan methods: the Halha and Harchin caravans. The Halha caravan involves loading camels in the morning, moving until sunset, and unloading before nightfall. The Harchin method, on the other hand, loads camels in the afternoon and unloads at or after midnight. Whether covering short or long distances, caravans only permit camels to walk, avoiding rushing or running. Camels maintain a pace of six miles per hour, covering about 50 miles in a single day. Long-distance caravans exclusively use older, experienced camels aged six or seven, while younger camels hone their skills during short-term trips. Regardless of the distance, caravans typically walk for three days and then rest for one day.

17 Mijiddorj and Juramt, *Mongol Temee*, 25-26.

and the construction of the railways system, their role as draft and transportation animals in the daily lives of herding families persisted.

The Mongolian Camel

The camels found in Mongolia are of the Bactrian variety, distinguished by their two humps. These camels, with thick wool, are well adapted to cold climates, although they are comparatively less resilient in extreme dry and hot conditions when contrasted with their one-humped cousins in Arabia and the Sahara Desert. Camels in Mongolia prefer Gobi-type or soda-impregnated pastures, and herders deliberately graze them in such locations. Mongols classify domesticated Bactrian camels into three types based on their habitats.

The first is the 'red camel of the Galba Gobi' (*Galbyn goviin ulaan temee*), which lives in the Galba Gobi region in Ömnögobi Province. Approximately seventy percent of camels in this area boast a red or red-brown hue.

The second type is the 'brown camel of the Hanyn Hets' (*Hanyn hetsiin hüren temee*), native to Mandal-Ovoo *sum* in Ömnögobi Province. These camels, primarily brown or dark brown, are typically used for riding rather than as pack animals.

Last and least, the 'camel of Dohom Tungalag' (*Dohom tungalagiin temee*) from Dohom Tungalag in Gobi-Altai Province, exhibiting shades of brown and dark brown, is the smallest of the three.

To an untrained eye, telling these types apart is as challenging as identifying triplet babies for a stranger—a task only a mother can master effortlessly.

Mongolia is also home to a forth type—the wild camel (*Camelus bactrianus ferus*), an ancient species. With fewer than 1000 surviving in Mongolia and China, they are on the endangered species list. As few as 500 of them are believed to be living in Mongolia.[18] Domesticated camels didn't derive from the wild camel; the latest DNA analysis suggests that the two species have diverged between 700,000 and 1.2 million years ago.[19]

18 Yadamsüren at al, 'The seasonal distribution of wild camels'.

19 Ji et al., 'Monophyletic origin of domestic Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*) and its evolutionary relationship with the extant wild camel (*Camelus bactrianus ferus*)'.

Renowned as the 'ships of the Gobi', camels stand out among livestock for their endurance. Not only can they live without water and food for a long time, but, in contrast to other herd animals, they can eat practically every plant, including thorny ones, like a desert buffet. They can also drink from a salty puddle as if sipping on fresh spring water.

My Father's Family

One of my father's younger brothers was a camel herder in Dundgobi Province. Despite his title as a 'camel herder', he also kept horses, sheep, and goats, like other camel herders. This is the same man who had a penchant for uttering dog-related profanities and once accused me of causing the death of his castrated goat. Besides his occasional outburst and unsubstantiated claims rooted in folklore and superstition, he was an adept herder and a very knowledgeable and practical man.

As a seasoned herder, he truly was the Crocodile Dundee of the semi-desert. He knew everything about livestock—how they behaved, what they needed to eat, where they grazed, how to spot and treat diseases, and how plants grew in the semi-desert. Additionally, he had a detailed mental map of the province and its vast grazing lands, coupled with exceptional survival skills. He was an excellent camel tracker, allowing his camel herds to graze independently over a wide area without human supervision.

His expertise extended to reading weather patterns and seasonal changes, crucial for planning livestock movements and ensuring the well-being of his own family. He could craft lassos and household implements, mend a broken *ger* or cart, and effectively handle challenges such as wolf encounters—skills common among herders. Mongol herders, as illustrated by my uncle, possess a deeper and more diverse knowledge of their immediate surroundings compared to city folks who struggle to find their way in a parking lot.

My uncle, the camel herder, was the youngest boy in his family. There were five children in total, with my father beings the second oldest. They were all raised in a nomadic camp, but except for the camel breeder, they later pursued professional careers in either Ulaanbaatar or the provincial

center of Dundgobi. Their eldest sister, who provided shelter to Sharik, spent her career working for the local water supply firm in her native province. She was a pious yet promiscuous woman, famous as much for her love affairs as for her captivating *bolson yavdal* tales.

My father's other younger brother, a distinguished professor of engineering and a staunch atheist, earned his degree at a university in Leningrad (today St Petersburg), as did my father before him. He spent his career lecturing at the State Technical University in Ulaanbaatar. He was also a proud owner of a private Soviet car, a status comparable to owning a private jet in today's America. During the summer holidays, this nerdy professor showed his wild side. He'd ditch the textbooks, hop into his Moskvitch car, and visit his baby brother, the camel herder. Whenever he arrived at their nomadic camp, he was greeted like someone who had descended from the cosmos in a space shuttle, and neighbors would soon arrive to marvel at his vehicle and listen to exciting news from the city. This professor truly cherished his only son and went to the extent of spoiling him by purchasing a small white dog as a playmate, which they kept in their flat in Ulaanbaatar.

Details about my father's younger sister are scarce, except for the tragic information that she passed away due to post-surgery complications in a rural hospital in Dundgobi.

The religious devotion within my father's family was inherited from their father, who was once a monk. After renouncing his vows and severing the ties that bound him to monastic life, he tied the knot with the daughter of a *taiji* nobleman from the renowned Borjigid lineage, direct descendants of Genghis Khan. I heard many times from my father about some details of their wedding, such as the bride arriving at the groom's *ger* on a white camel. During the socialist period, Mongols didn't use surnames but instead had patronyms. However, in the 1990s, when the parliament passed a law mandating surnames, my father chose to adopt his mother's prestigious lineage name as his surname. Technically, he should have taken his father's more modest lineage name. My paternal grandfather died when I was very young, leaving me with no memories of him. Had he lived until the 1990s, he likely would have given a nod of approval to his son's bold move to adopt a more esteemed surname.

Although I never knew my grandfather, I do remember his younger brother, who had been a monk in his youth and was forced to disrobe in the 1930s. Despite this, he continued practicing Buddhism secretly and conducted religious ceremonies for the community. He chose a life of celibacy, opting not to chase a nobleman's daughter or anyone else's daughter, for that matter. He spent his entire life in Dundgobi Province. Since being jobless was illegal in socialist Mongolia, my grandfather's brother worked as a clerk of some sorts in a state office in his younger years. Unlike many of his siblings, he did not herd camels or other livestock. By the time I was a child, he was already an elderly man, retired from his duties. Whenever I spent summers in Dundgobi, my father would take me to pay homage to him in his abode, a modest wooden wagon adorned with Buddhist tangkas and religious artefacts on the inside. Not only was he our extended paternal family's patriarch, but he was also the go-to buddy for all things spiritual in the community. In return for his services, people fondly called him a 'Buddha with shit', which is not a derogatory term in Mongolian but, on the contrary, is an ultimate compliment. It simply means that the person is as holy as a Buddha but responds to the call of nature like the rest of us mortals.

Influenced by the religiosity of his elders, my uncle, the camel herder, maintained the spiritual flame alive throughout the socialist period. Due to his status as the youngest boy in the family and the only one to pursue the life of a herder, my uncle served as the primary provider of meat for all his siblings. Every winter, our family, for example, received shipments of frozen meat gifts from him, including several sheep, half a cow, and a quarter of a horse, which sustained us throughout the cold winter months. He kept camel meat for himself, though. Their eldest sister, who lived not far from him in a provincial center, was the most frequent visitor and the largest consumer of meat, as she was a single mother looking after at least five carnivorous children. Whenever she or one of her children visited my uncle to request meat, milk, or dairy products, they also took Sharik with them as a charm offensive, knowing my uncle's soft spot for the dog. Sharik also eagerly anticipated these outings.

Weather Forecast by Looking at Camel Behavior

In the preceding section, we explored how taboos often reflect cultural biases and judgments. In contrast, weather forecasting based on the observation of animal behavior is generally less problematic for the following reason. Animals often exhibit instinctive behaviors in response to weather changes, and their sensitivity to environmental shifts, such as temperature and air pressure, is a biological trait, not a product of cultural factors. Over time, animals have evolved into Mother Nature's own meteorologists, developing behaviors as survival mechanisms rather than acts learned from superstitious human traditions.

In fact, the link between animal behavior and weather conditions tends to be universal, observed across societies. For example, European swallows flying low often signal rain, while frogs croaking loudly in Southeast Asia predict storms due to increased humidity. In rural Western societies, cows lying down are thought to indicate rain, while ants in the Amazon building higher nests suggest floods. These observations, embedded in folklore, reflect a shared reliance on animals as natural indicators of environmental changes.

In Inner Asia, whether you are in Buddhist Mongol territory or with Muslim Kazakh herders, if a camel starts doing a rain dance, you can bet your money that it's going to rain. While cultural contexts may influence specific beliefs, they usually don't alter the core observations. Examples of weather forecasting based on camel behavior in the Gobi region include the following:

> If calves or young camels cry or gather together, it signals deteriorating weather with possible rain.
>
> When a mother camel refuses to leave her calf alone, it indicates impending rain.
>
> Camels behaving as if thirsty by opening their mouths and moving towards the wind suggest an upcoming rain.
>
> When camels lie behind a bush or small hill to avoid the wind, it's a sign of an approaching storm or sandstorm.
>
> On calm days, camels going to pasture by themselves indicate the continuation of calm weather.

If a mother camel leaves her calf while it's still raining, it signals that the rain will soon come to an end.

Characteristics of Camels

In the Gobi region, nomads describe camels as calm, docile, and hardy. A popular belief holds that camels treat humans the way humans treat them. If a human mistreats a camel, it won't easily submit, even in the face of lashes and beatings. Camels exhibit territorial behavior and possess a remarkable instinct to return to their native land when transported elsewhere.

Camel herders typically know all their herds well, tailoring their care based on the age and sex of the animals. In the case of camels, different ages and sexes require different care. Broadly speaking, camel age is divided into three phases: calf, juvenile, and fully grown.

Of particular importance to camel herders is the juvenile stage, during which the camel undergoes substantial growth until the age of seven. By the age of eight, the camel's baby teeth are fully replaced by adult teeth, totaling thirty-four. In the Gobi region, nomads cease to distinguish camels after the age of eight, using a generic term for adult camels. To illustrate, male camels are assigned the following names from birth until the age of eight:

Camels aged up to one year are referred to as *botgo*, while those between one and two years are known as *torom*. The age range of two to three years is designated as *built*. Three to five-year-olds are known as *buuran tailag* (if uncastrated) or *tailag* (if castrated). Five to six-year-olds are called *högshin tailag*, and those aged six to seven years are named as *atantsar*. Camels over the age of eight are named *at* (if castrated) or *buur* (if uncastrated).

The typical lifespan of a camel ranges from thirty to forty years, with an average of twenty to twenty-seven years spent in the service of humans.

Traditionally, Mongols only give personal names to dogs. In contrast, livestock, including camels, are not assigned personal names (*ner*) but are given what can be termed as nicknames (*züs*) based on unique physical characteristics, fur color, and age. Examples include names like 'the two-year-old brown' or 'the five-year-old reddish-brown', and so on.

To further distinguish animals of the same age and similar coloration, nomads may incorporate other characteristics, including the shape of the hump, character ('the naughty brown', 'the gluttonous five-year-old reddish-brown'), the gait ('the swift brown', 'the leisurely walking brown'), as well as its mother's nickname into the camel's nickname ('the 'two-year-old brown of the white old she-camel'). These methods enable Mongols to create a potentially endless inventory of camel nicknames. Even if a nomadic family possesses a substantial herd—say, three hundred camels—each animal receives a specific nickname.

Utilizing Camels: From Milk to Wool

No part of livestock goes to waste among herding communities, and camels are no exception. Even parts that might raise eyebrows in the West—such as the tongue, head, internal organs, blood, bones, and feet—find their place in the resourceful cuisine of herders. When it comes to camels, everything is utilized, from the stately hump to the not-so-glamorous toes.

Among the many valuable products derived from camels, milk takes center stage. Renowned for its richness in proteins and nutritional value, camel milk is a dietary staple for many camel herding families. It forms the base for a variety of dairy products, including curds. Thanks to the high fat concentration in the milk, camel curds boast a unique texture and make for a hearty and satisfying snack.

Camel milk has a multitude of uses: it is brewed into tea, serves as a nourishing substitute for human infants, and is fermented into *kumis* or distilled into liquor. *Kumis*, made by mixing boiled milk with a special ferment, is a beloved beverage among Gobi nomads and is enjoyed year-round. Its popularity rivals that of soda in the United States, though it comes with health benefits rather than sugar highs. *Kumis* is believed to aid digestion, elevate mood, and enhance overall well-being. Camel milk liquor, meanwhile, is reserved for celebrations and religious festivals, adding a spirited touch to these special occasions.

Beyond milk, camels also provide wool, another valuable resource. Renowned for its lightness, softness, and warmth, camel wool is widely used to craft clothing, ropes, *ger* covers, and belts for *ger*s. Camel wool ropes, known for their durability and soft texture, serve various practical

purposes, from binding sheep and goats to symbolically tying together people's dreams when they are presented to newlyweds as a gesture of good fortune.

Camel Training

Training pack animals or those used for riding is a meticulous and time-consuming process, particularly for camels, given their immense size, strength, and often stubborn personalities. These animals require a carefully structured regimen to ensure they grow into docile and cooperative companions.

As early as three days old, a camel calf is gently secured with a rope to introduce it to the concept of restraint.

Around the age of two, a calf undergoes a ritual called 'the camel's prickling', after which it earns the title of *built*. During this ritual, a wooden stick, measuring twenty to twenty-two centimeters in length, is inserted into the camel's pricked nose. This procedure enhances the camel's docility and controllability, much like installing a steering wheel in a car—it might not like it, but it's essential for smooth rides ahead.

Between two and three years of age, camels begin training for riding. This phase requires patience and caution. Overusing the whip during this time is like trying to win someone's heart with constant nagging—it backfires spectacularly. Initial riding lessons should be kept short to avoid overexertion. Failure to follow these guidelines can result in rebellious behavior, outright refusal to move, or, in extreme cases, a camel dramatically lying down and refusing to get up. Re-training such a camel can be a herculean task.

An important milestone in the domestication of male camels is castration, typically performed at four to five years of age. Unlike other livestock, camel testicles are not consumed but are ceremoniously returned to the camel and hung on its hump—a symbolic gesture akin to gifting someone their own trophy for participating.

At the same age, camels begin carrying weight. To alleviate the strain from heavy loads, nomads cushion the front hump with specially crafted felt, ensuring comfort. Another critical body part requiring protection is the camel's sole. When the sole is damaged, nomads place a pair of skin

shoes on it until it recovers—essentially turning the camel into a four-legged version of someone recovering with orthopedic sandals.

Camel Breeding Practices

Nomadic communities carefully select the finest male camel to impregnate the herd of she-camels, a decision guided by a comprehensive list of criteria encompassing about three dozen characteristics that would put any man in a Mr. Universe competition to shame. Sought-after characteristics include a nice gap between the two front legs, large eyes, a calm demeanor, a hooked snout, a broad chest, the desired color (usually brownish-red or brown), a good pedigree (a pedigree of twins is particularly prized), high-quality wool, good health, slow fat and strength loss, and robust physique, not to mention an impressive penis.

Prior to releasing Mr. Charming to the female camels, the nomadic family recites well-wishes for his success and ceremoniously offers sprinkles of milk.

During the mating season, bulls may become aggressive and bite, prompting some nomads to muzzle their snouts. Caution is paramount during this period, with individuals advised against wearing red garments, as this color is believed to agitate the amorous bull.

To ensure successful mating, nomads usually introduce the bull to a group of female camels, allowing them to roam the semi-desert freely together and get to know each other better. For a more controlled mating scene, nomads enclose all the camels in a fence, allowing them to have intimate moments under their watchful eyes. The seasoned, prime bull is paired with approximately twenty to thirty females, while a younger bull—a bit like a junior heartbreaker still gaining experience—is assigned a more modest eight to twelve lovely females.

In the world of camel romance, it's all about creating the perfect setting for love to bloom on the freezing semi-desert. The mating process involves encouraging the bull to mount a she-camel at least twice a day. And if the bull remains in a state of heat after the females have completed their cycle, a cup of soothing meat broth is offered to help cool the beast down. The female camel's heat cycle lasts for around eight days.

Once a camel becomes pregnant, it receives special care and attention. Pregnant camels are spared from carrying excessive weight, provided

with lukewarm water, and allowed to stroll leisurely to the pasture or well. They are also kept away from potentially hazardous areas, such as slippery ground, rocky terrain, or other dangerous spots. Around three to four months before their due date, they are relieved of duties like riding to ensure a stress-free pregnancy.

As the birth date approaches, pregnant camels begin to show clear signs of labor. These include crying, spreading their hind legs, urinating frequently in small amounts, and alternating between standing and lying down. Most camel births occur in the chilly months of March through May. To protect the newborn, nomads craft special hats to shield the calf's delicate head and use warm cloths to cover the mother's hindquarters from the cold wind.

Compared to other livestock, camel calves take their time getting onto their wobbly legs, often requiring assistance from nomads to stand. Twin or albino calves are rare, and their births are considered highly auspicious.

Within an hour of birth, the calf is allowed to suckle from its mother's teats, beginning a precious bonding period. For the first two to three months, nomads refrain from milking the mother, ensuring the calf gets all the nutrition it needs to grow strong and healthy. During this time, mother and calf enjoy uninterrupted quality time, setting the stage for a robust start to life.

The End of a Camel's Life

As camels age or sustain incurable injuries, their economic utility diminishes, along with their owners' interest in keeping them alive. When a camel reaches this stage, nomads mark it with a distinctive sign, typically in the spring. Afterward, the camel is allowed to graze freely in the pasture, receiving special care and ample time to gain weight and accumulate fat—an essential step to enhance the quality of its meat. In line with the principle of 'no waste', a camel's final contribution to its owners is its transformation into a source of nourishment. Once sufficiently fattened, the marked camel is slaughtered in late autumn, and its meat sustains nomadic families throughout the winter months.

As noted earlier, the location where a camel is slaughtered is off-limits for gathering other livestock. Nomads also refrain from using the term 'camel meat', opting instead for expressions like 'the meat of

the long-legged one' or 'the meat of the tall one' or similar phrases. If you see Mongols munching away and describing the contents in their mouths as the meat of 'the tall one', or that of 'the long-legged one', or a comparable expression, fear not that they might be engaged in something sinister, and don't hasten to run for your life. Humans are great apes with the greatest imagination of them all. We can collectively imagine a camel as a symbolic human avatar or declare that bread and wine represent the flesh and blood of a God-turned-great-ape being. Nomads, consciously savoring real camel meat, may simultaneously fantasize about chewing a symbolic human avatar—a mental process referred to as 'cognitive dissonance', wherein individuals accept two or more mutually contradictory beliefs or behaviors as valid. Along with storytelling, this unique ability is among the most remarkable superpowers of our species, enabling the existence of human cultures, and, therefore, is an ability worthy of celebration.

Conclusion

In this concluding section, I wish to briefly ponder the question of the meaning of life. While this profound question necessitates an elaborate and extensive discussion, I'll focus on a few aspects, including how humans seek answers through animals, anthropomorphized gods, and several other concepts.

What purpose does existence hold for the herds? If one were to pose this question to herders, many might answer that the meaning of life for livestock lies in contributing to the well-being and prosperity of their owners by reproducing, maintaining good health, and yielding abundant resources such as wool, milk, and other commodities. This perspective reflects a deeply human-centric outlook, which is not surprising.

This book argues that humans perceive the world through the lens of human culture, which not only distorts and simplifies reality but also provides the framework through which everything becomes understandable in human terms. In doing so, culture widely employs other entities—whether animals, gods, nature, or objects—as reference points for humans to understand themselves and shape their worldviews.

Even when reflecting on their own existence or mortality, humans rely on this method.

For example, anthropomorphizing animals is common among pastoralist societies and those who closely engage with animals. These cultures often project human traits onto animals, attributing them with emotions, characteristics, and cosmological roles. Similarly, humans have historically envisioned gods with human-like qualities, reflecting the broader human tendency to use metaphors and symbolic representations to make sense of complex concepts. Once animals and gods are cast as mirrors reflecting human traits, it becomes easier to imagine their thoughts and intentions and thus use them as cognitive tools to reflect on human nature.

However, this process is not universal. While many cultures, such as those in Mongolia, anthropomorphize animals and gods, others view them as distinct entities with their own intrinsic qualities. Despite such variations, one constant emerges: human cultures consistently use external entities to mediate emotions, reflect on existence, and construct meaning.

This way of thinking is also enabled by our cognitive ability to infer what others are thinking—known as *theory of mind*—which we apply not only to fellow humans but also to animals. Given our rich imagination, it's unsurprising that we believe we can even comprehend the thoughts of imagined entities like gods, whom we often create in our own image.

In religious traditions like Christianity, which emerged from the nomadic herding societies of the Middle East, the metaphor of a god as a shepherd and humans as sheep is common. In this context, people view themselves as part of a divine flock, much like how humans regard herd animals as possessions. This pastoral metaphor emphasizes a possessive relationship between humans and their deity.

In contrast, the Mongols, traditionally a herding and hunting people, offer a slightly different perspective shaped by shamanism and Buddhism. Mongol herders, like their Christian counterparts, connect the meaning of life to fulfilling what we believe our gods expect of us, mirroring the expectations we ourselves hold for our animals. For example, in shamanism, gods are generally not seen as possessive. Instead, they are viewed as neutral observers or indifferent entities, much like Mongols view *wild* animals. These shamanic gods are not concerned with human

sexuality or personal lives; rather, humans must establish a dovetailing relationship with them through the intermediary of shamans or with the help of rituals and offerings. Without the constant celestial surveillance, the meaning of life in shamanic Mongol belief thus lies in living it to the fullest—raising herds, hunting, enjoying pleasures, maintaining relationships, and anticipating the continuation of these same pursuits in the shamanic afterlife, which is imagined as a mirror image of this life.

Unlike shamanism, Buddhism in Mongolia is a foreign import, originating among sedentary people in India who pursued a different lifestyle and valued crops more than anything. In classical Buddhism, humans are not considered the possessions of gods. In fact, the gods themselves are subject to the samsara cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Although these deities may reside in more pleasant realms and hold greater power, they are still bound by impermanence (*anicca*)—one of the fundamental truths in Buddhism. Like all beings in samsara, gods must face the inevitability of death and rebirth. Moreover, time in samsara is perceived as cyclical, not linear, with beings continuously experiencing the cycle of existence until they achieve nirvana and transcend samsara. Curiously and perhaps not coincidentally, this concept of cyclical time aligns with the agricultural cycles, in which crops grow and are harvested seasonally, with annihilation being followed by new growth.

While both Buddhism and shamanism lack a singular, omnipotent god, Buddhism diverges by focusing on self-awareness and the cultivation of compassion, which influence one's karma and thus one's position in the cycle of rebirth. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is liberation from this cycle of rebirth and suffering. In Mongolian Buddhism, adapted to nomadic values, the relationship between deities and nomads is akin to how nomads treat *consecrated livestock*. Nomads protect and feed these animals but don't see them as possessions, much like Buddhist deities who don't regard humans as their responsibility. As a result, in Mongolian Buddhism, the focus for laypeople is not on single-mindedly worshiping gods or relying on supernatural intervention, but rather on fostering self-reliance and practicing Buddhist teachings on karma, ethical conduct, and compassion. The immediate—though not ultimate—goal is to secure a favorable human rebirth through the application of Buddhist principles.

The profound question of the meaning of life, however, extends beyond the purview of religion alone. Various philosophical schools

and traditions offer alternative perspectives that exclude gods from the picture. Among the best known are absurdism, existentialism, nihilism, hedonism, humanism, transcendentalism, and logotherapy. While these schools differ in their approaches, many emphasize humanity as a central source of meaning and reverence. Some, like absurdism and existentialism, acknowledge the inherent meaninglessness of life, while others, such as humanism and transcendentalism, suggest that meaning can be found in human potential or a connection with nature.

Each school offers distinct ways to grapple with life's meaninglessness or uncertainty: absurdism embraces the tension between humanity's search for meaning and the universe's indifference; existentialism focuses on creating personal meaning through choices and actions; and logotherapy finds purpose even in suffering.

Storytelling is an ancient and ingrained human impulse that we use to convey the mundane aspects of life, as well as the grand stories about the origin of the universe. History is filled with countless origin stories as old as humanity itself. These stories often depict the universe as having been created by a diverse array of entities, including gods, great spirits, celestial serpents, and cosmic eggs imbued with the power to give meaning to human life. Indeed, there are as many creation stories as there are cultures.

With the advent of science and modern astronomy, a new kind of creation story emerged, grounded in observational evidence and our understanding of the laws of physics. This modern account not only pinpoints the age of the observable universe at approximately 13.8 billion years and explains its origin from the Big Bang but also provides us a new perspective, situating our existence within a stupendously vast cosmic expanse. From this broader viewpoint, Earth appears as a mere speck—a pale blue dot orbiting an inconspicuous star, just one among hundreds of billions in the Milky Way galaxy, itself part of trillions of galaxies in the observable universe, which could be just a fraction of a much larger, potentially infinite multiverse. In this unfathomably vast cosmic panorama, life on Earth lacks inherent or predetermined meaning or purpose. From the universe's viewpoint, the existence of life, the presence of joy or suffering, and even the existence of the universe itself lack intrinsic significance. If life were to vanish on our planet tomorrow, the vastness of the universe would remain unaffected. Even if the universe

were to cease to exist the day after tomorrow, it would simply cease, with no further implications. The universe, our solar system, and life on Earth only hold significance in the stories that Sapiens tell each other.

No matter which lenses we use to view the world, each individual grapples with the question of life's meaning in unique ways, making it a deeply personal quest. We navigate through the labyrinth of life, weaving stories of our own creation that unfold like imaginary movies in the private theater of our minds. Much like a Hollywood director bringing stories to life on the silver screen, each of us engages in the mental act of directing and producing our own life-story movies, trying to make sense of our existence. Some see their life as an action-packed thriller, while others star in a comedy or spend their lives immersed in a family soap opera.

Personal life stories are a bit like Netflix categories: one could be living in a scientific documentary, a religious drama, a philosophical saga, a patriotic epic, or a Wild West adventure. People cast themselves as protagonists in genres ranging from romance to horror, and some may find themselves entangled in the plotlines of meaningless, banal movies, yearning for them to end. But unlike the linear genres adhered to by Hollywood movie studios, human life unfolds with dynamism and unpredictability. Circumstances change, people grow older, their outlook on things changes, and our personal movies, in which we play the leading role, also undergo transformations. A bright comedy might shift into a gloomy, tear-jerking drama before reverting to a chilly, full-blown tragicomedy. The fluidity of life and people's inner conflicts, combined with the forgetfulness and meaning-seeking penchant of *Homo sapiens*, ensure that our personal movies are as ever-changing as a kaleidoscope. We constantly edit and re-edit the scenes of our life stories, reliving and reinterpreting them with each iteration.[20]

20 This is why the scenes and events that make up our life stories often seem to exist outside a linear timeline and are sometimes experienced simultaneously, as though all our experiences—both past and present—coexist in a single moment. This helps explain why people can feel both like the young children they once were and the elderly individuals they have become. As attested in countless soul-searching poems from around the world, written mainly by middle-aged or older poets, when one reflects on life, no matter how eventful or rich, it often feels fleeting, like a dream—so short and ephemeral. This is because, even as we approach the end of life, we still feel like the children we once were at its beginning.

Yet, the influence of social institutions—such as religion, philosophy, ideology, science, cinematography, poetry, as well as family and community—plays a pivotal role in shaping our personal stories. As social species, many people seem to find satisfactory answers to the meaning of life by aligning their personal narratives and worldviews with those presented by religious, philosophical, scientific, artistic, and various societal repositories of knowledge. Just as there are multiple sources that offer answers to this existential question, humans tend to have a multitude of answers that are often in a constant state of flux.

You don't have to be a religious scholar, philosopher, astronomer, or movie director to ponder the meaning of life. While there are those who feel lost and struggle to find a coherent storyline, many ordinary Mongols I personally know derive deep meaning and satisfaction not necessarily from contemplating long hours on life's meaning, but from daily activities such as herding animals or serving their parents and family. Humans think and derive meaning as much with their bodies as with their minds.

Perhaps the meaning of life is not found in grand revelations, but, like herds grazing under the eternal blue sky, in the simple act of moving forward, step by step, until we too are swallowed by the horizon, where everything fades into the oblivion of time. Yet, our uniquely human gift lies in the stories we create along the way. Whether shaped by our understanding of gods, nature, science, or personal imagination, these stories give our fleeting existence its richness and meaning. As we reach the threshold of the horizon, we may wonder whether the meaning we sought was real or merely an illusion. But rather than despair at its fragility, we might embrace the wisdom of impermanence. Life's beauty lies not in its permanence but in its ability to inspire us to create and to imagine meaning where none may inherently exist. And when we finally step over the horizon, we might remember that, as Mark Twain once said, we were all absent from existence for billions of years before we were born—and it caused us no discomfort then, nor will it when we return to the great nothingness from which we came.