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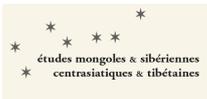
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## Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines

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Logics, Stakes and Limits of Cultural Heritage  
Transmission in China, Russia and Mongolia, followed  
by Varia

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### Dancing heirs of nomadic culture. The *bii biyelgèè* dance and heritagisation processes in Mongolia

*Danser l'héritage culturel nomade. La danse bii bielgèè et les processus de  
patrimonialisation en Mongolie*

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# Dancing heirs of nomadic culture. The *bii biyelgèè* dance and heritagisation processes in Mongolia

*Danser l'héritage culturel nomade. La danse bii bielgèè et les processus de patrimonialisation en Mongolie*

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- <sup>1</sup> *Bii biyelgèè* is a dance form of the Oirat (or Western) Mongols originating from the Mongolian Altai. It displays mimetic gestures referring to daily life activities of the nomads, along with other gestures, some of which are gender-dependent. It was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (hereafter Urgent Safeguarding List) in 2009. Since then, it has become an emblem of Mongolian nomadic<sup>1</sup> culture and national identity, and its transmission to younger generations is nowadays at the core of cultural policies in Mongolia.
- <sup>2</sup> The 2013 Periodic Report, sent to UNESCO by the Mongolian National Commission, accounts for the implementation policies of safeguarding (UNESCO 2013). In it, most of the measures relating to the transmission of *bii biyelgèè* to young Mongolians across the country, correspond to a centralised, mass mode of transmission, reflecting investment in educational and cultural institutions: schools, Mongolian State University of Arts and Culture (Mongol Ulsyn Soyol Urlagiin Ih Surguul', hereafter SUI), cultural centres, etc. In response to the periodic report, the UNESCO Committee significantly highlights this course of action (UNESCO 2014) and requests closer attention is paid to local modes of transmission, in order to avoid the risk of “distortion and de-contextualisation” of the practice through inadequate, mass modes of transmission (UNESCO 2014, Point 6).
- <sup>3</sup> The above example immediately highlights the paradox of a practice that claims to follow from a continuous and informal transmission, but is safeguarded mostly within the frame of important and particularly voluntarist state policies. The question of the

legitimacy of the heritage “bearers”, who are able to ensure the transmission of the practice, arises as well. The bearers, who come from minority Oirat subgroups in Western Mongolia, are now recognised as having preserved their practice from the influence of official dance forms developed in the 1950s in the capital Ulaanbaatar. Under these conditions, how is their integration into the official networks of centralised cultural institutions played out today? To answer this question, this article invites us to consider not only the political, institutional and discursive dimensions of the heritage processes, but also, and above all, the agency, relative positioning and modes of commitment of the various actors in the field, particularly those of the recognised bearers.

- 4 Heritage-making processes can be defined as encompassing both the inscription of a practice on a list and the implementation of safeguarding policies by local institutions and actors. UNESCO’s definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter ICH) in 2003 caused great waves of enthusiasm, given that the new concept was designed in opposition both to the idea of the tangibility of monuments, sites or objects, and to the value of exception and representativeness associated with them, as they were assimilated into masterpieces. Both aspects were seen as implementing a Westernised model of heritage, possibly following biased aesthetic criteria, and of not sufficiently considering the cultural variability of local viewpoints on the notion of heritage. Enhancing the safeguarding (rather than the protection) of intangible cultural elements (vs tangible ones) was supposed to valorise the point of view of local communities, groups or individuals designed as heritage bearers (Bortolotto 2011, 2012; Tornatore 2011).
- 5 On the other hand, the implementation policies have brought into focus, often passionately and sometimes problematically, the tensions arising locally between the different kinds of actors: UNESCO, national institutions of state parties, researchers, professional artists, leaders, integrated or marginalised members of the communities and so on. Some authors, looking beyond the heritage consensus, even speak of the heritage “arena” to describe the kinds of negotiations or even tensions highlighted by scholars in case studies from very diverse contexts (cf. Bondaz *et al.* 2012). In addition to these socio-political tensions, epistemological aspects, especially around the issue of authenticity, have been mobilised in passionate debates regarding who can be considered a bearer and who cannot (Givre 2012; Makovicky 2010). As we shall see, the case of Mongolian *bii biyelgèè* does not escape these tensions, despite the appearance of a very consensual discourse.
- 6 This case also invites us to link the analysis of heritage processes with the issue of globalisation. To nuance a commonly expressed idea, Mongolian national identity today, from the point of view of heritage processes, is not only constructed with reference to the central, majority ethnic group of the Halh (cf. Bulag 1998; Marsh 2009; Pegg 2001), but I argue, it also relies on locally identified expressions, valid for their diversity. Such a diversity in local forms of art tends to be associated with minority groups such as the Oirat. The Oirat (Western) Mongols are a minority<sup>2</sup> group from Western Mongolia, with a long and stratified history of migration and demographic and territorial reorganisation. The Oirat are today considered as composed of subgroups (sometimes called “small ethnic groups” or *baga yastan*) whose number and boundaries may vary according to locutionary context as well as across time, even in the national census. Henceforth, the Oirat represent, for most Mongolian people, an embodiment of



these two criteria – the illustration of a “culture” based on nomadic pastoralism and the value of “authenticity”.

- 8 The heritagisation process implies some identification of the bearers, both at this institutional level and among the community. Any dancer who practices movements resembling *bii biyelgèè* cannot claim this title. The position of the bearer, as it emerges from the processes of heritagisation, reveals the ambiguity of the character: they are supposed to transmit a practice anchored in an atemporal, ideally pre-socialist past. At the same time, they can only be recognised through their participation in the activities of nationally visible networks and institutions, inherited from the cultural structures of the socialist period and stimulated by contemporary state heritage policies. Actually, the life trajectories of *bii biyelgèè* dancers, also named *biich*, even when they are fully recognised as bearers, do not always correspond to the ideal image displayed during the heritagisation process. As this paper will demonstrate, they can be described as a socio-historical product of a former revivalist episode, sustained by Mongolian state cultural policies, which took place in the 1980s, rather than as keepers of a pre-socialist preserved past.
- 9 This invites us to question the role and agency of local actors, both in the processes of heritagisation, and in the shaping of the modes of transmission that are related to them. However, it must be borne in mind, and this is the hypothesis that will be defended throughout this article, that this positioning is not only configured by the *biich*'s own will but in interaction with the complementary figure of the professional dancers, and therefore in a relative manner. I will argue, based on the Mongolian case, that the idiom of authenticity generally mobilised in heritage processes reflects the positioning of the bearers of heritage practices, as opposed to the local actors who make use of them from the outside – representatives of state and local authorities, choreographers and professional dancers, visitors, film-makers, researchers or tourists, etc. The paper also questions the hypotheses of discontinuity between the socialist and the post-socialist periods (see Pegg 1995, 2001; Bumochir & Munkherdene 2019; Tsetsentsolmon 2015), by arguing that significant elements of continuity can be found. They even allow to rethink heritagisation processes beyond the UNESCO Convention and across the borders of political regimes. This paper proposes to theorise such processes on the long term as cyclical phenomena.
- 10 In order to address these issues, this paper will be divided into four distinct sections. The first section will look at the heritagisation process of the *bii biyelgèè* within the broader framework of the redefinition of Mongolian national identity in a post-socialist context. In the second section, the long-term development of the complementary categories of performing and authentic arts, the basis for the contemporary recognition of *bii biyelgèè* as suitable for heritage making, will be examined. In the third section, the ideal image of the bearer will be contrasted with the sociological and historical profiles of the paths taken by local actors. This reflection is continued in the fourth section, which highlights the asymmetrical complementarity of the roles between the bearers and the other local agents of heritagisation.
- 11 This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork research accomplished between 2010 and 2015, over a total of eighteen months in Mongolia, with interviews conducted in Mongolian by the author. In addition to participant observation for qualitative research, the author used public documents relating to the UNESCO application and took care to interview a variety of actors: *bii biyelgèè* dancers, association leaders,

professional dancers, dance teachers and choreographers, cultural centre directors, as well as amateur practitioners, audience members and general public. References to interviews from the field are indicated in the text by: (Int. Name). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from Mongolian are the author's.

## Heritage-making policies in post-socialist Mongolia

### The dance of nomadic pastoralism

- 12 In the application file written by the Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO, as well as in the speeches of the various local actors quoted above, *bii biyelgèè* is unanimously recognised as a practice intrinsically linked to the nomadic pastoral lifestyle of the steppes. The themes staged in the dance explicitly refer to the daily life or festive activities of Mongolian nomadic herders, through mimed or stylised gestures. The female dance *Hödölmör*, “activities”, shared by all the Oirat subgroups, displays the typical actions of the Mongolian woman: washing her hands and face by drawing water from the basin, combing and braiding her hair in the Oirat fashion, preparing felt from sheep wool, preparing leather straps and, for some subgroups, preparing the barley flour. In contrast, the male dance *Eriin gурvan naadam* evokes the “three manly games” of ankle bone shooting, archery and wrestling in their Mongolian variants<sup>6</sup> (Lacaze 1995, 2000). Several dances evoke ritual gestures such as *Tsatsal*, the ritual sprinkling of dairy products that is performed daily in the domestic setting, as during the *ovoo* cult or mountain worship, or *Mörgöl*, “prayer”, in which the dancer, with clasped hands and their face immersed in inner concentration, evokes the Buddhist prayer. But the most emblematic dances of the nomadic steppe pastoralists are those that evoke horses, specifically the swift dance *Joroo mor'*, “ambling horse”<sup>7</sup>. In this dance, the dancer's shaking shoulders evoke not only the pace of the horse itself, but also the movements of the rider carried by his mount across the steppes<sup>8</sup>.
- 13 Some gestural aspects of *bii biyelgèè* also relate to the nomadic way of life. Its squatting postures, the limited scale of its movement spatiality, and the sharp, brisk quality of its movements, are commonly associated with the traditional performance conditions in the limited space of the nomadic yurt. Indeed, this is the place where *bii biyelgèè* was usually performed, especially during familial celebrations, such as weddings and the haircutting ceremonies, or in the evening after a long day of work at the camp or in the steppes. It is commonly said that it helps relax stressed bodies; but it also magnifies the beauty of ordinary gestures during leisure and/or nomadic gatherings, such as the New Year Celebration, *ovoo* cult or Naadam Festival (Cf. Blanchier 2018).
- 14 *Bii biyelgèè* is also anchored in a series of oral and musical practices directly linked to Mongolian nomadic traditions, as indicated by the typical Mongolian instruments that accompany the dance. Apart from the *shanz* and *tovshuur* lutes (usually used for epic or legendary songs), *bii biyelgèè* is frequently accompanied by the two-stringed *ekel* fiddle with its goatskin table, or more recently by the horsehead fiddle – the famous *morin huur* created, according to the tale, from the skull, sinews and hairs of a magical, beloved horse. These instruments are commonly said to imitate the rhythm of horses and more generally to evoke the steppe landscape and the Mongolian Oirat legends (cf. Pegg 2001).

Figure 2. A Hoton family performing *bii biyelgèè* and its mimetic gestures under the yurt

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- 15 Above all, *bii biyelgèè* is described as originating (*üüssen, üüseltei*) directly from nomadic life, as in this legend:
- 16 [*Bii biyelgèè*] originates from ancient activities of the people. The *bii biyelgèè* originates from milking, libation of tea and milk premises, cult of the mountains and waters, obtaining of wool and cashmere from one's herds, cultivating cereals and many such activities. This is precisely where an authentic art (*yazguur urlag*) originates from<sup>9</sup>. (Int. Tserendulam Bidernee, August 2013)
- 17 In this story, Tserendulam, a female *biich* in her sixties, evokes the well-known relationship between the mimed gestures of *bii biyelgèè* and the general activities of the nomads. Yet in this instance, she does not point out to the relation of resemblance between the dance and daily activities but rather to a relation of origin.
- 18 There are many legends recounting the origins of musical, vocal or instrumental genres in Mongolia, many of which evoke a relation of the imitation, and perhaps emulation, of natural elements. For instance, the *höömii* (overtone singing) is said to arise from the vocal imitation of the sounds of the wind and rivers (Curtet 2013, p. 110 ff., p. 346 ff.). The long song evokes the outline of rugged landscapes (Legrain 2014, p. 263 ff.); the horsehead fiddle refers to the special relationship between a person and their horse (Pegg 1995), and so on. Legends of the *bii biyelgèè* origins are comparatively few and rarely told, which makes them all the more significant.
- 19 Let us take this legend, told by a Dörvöd artist from Uvs.
- If you ask: How and from where did *bii biyelgèè* originate? Well, this happens in spring time, when the cattle give birth. [...] [The nomads] prepare wooden bowls, the children play rhythms on them. With a bowl and horsehair, the father makes a *tovshuur* lute, on which the uncle plays the Praise of Altai (Altain magtaal). Listening to the song, the children won't sleep. They want to enjoy the song and thus they stand up and start to dance. They make the legend out of this<sup>10</sup>. (Int. Liilaa Sodnom, August 2013)

- 20 This legend catches the attention, as the origin of the dance is not located in the natural environment but in the domestic and humanised context of a nomadic camp.
- 21 The UNESCO nomination form underlines these aspects extensively:  
 Mongol Biyelgee is unique and distinguished art expression, which has embodied and originated from the nomadic way of life of Mongols that expressed lifestyle, customs, traditions and spiritual practices through dancing elements. (UNESCO 2009, section D)
- 22 As an art that emanates from this way of life and gives it expression, *bii biyelgèè* seems to meet the requirements of an ICH element apt to respond to contemporary cultural policies.

## Nomadic heritage policies

- 23 Far from being an isolated event, the inscription of the *bii biyelgèè* at UNESCO took place in a context marked by strong heritage effervescence. In 2009, *bii biyelgèè*, was inscribed together with “Traditional music of the Tsur” (USL<sup>11</sup>) and “Mongol Tuuli [sic], Mongolian epic” (USL), later joined by “Traditional music of the Morin Khuur” (RL) and “Urtiin Duu, traditional folk long songs” (joint inscription with China – RL)<sup>12</sup>. After those successful inscriptions in 2009 and another one in 2010 (“The Mongolian Traditional Art of Khöömei”), the National Commission proposed ten elements in 2011, a considerable number for Mongolia. Only one was finally retained: “The long-song performance technique of the limbic flute players – circular breathing” (USL). This can be explained by the enthusiasm in Mongolia for the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, signed in 2003 (hereafter 2003 Convention). It came at a time when the country was redefining itself, in the wake of the 1990 Democratic Revolution, as a nomadic nation. This included the protection of salient cultural elements (customs, oral traditions, etc.) related to nomadic pastoralism among its national priorities (Campi 2012).
- 24 The promotion of *bii biyelgèè* in the 2000s and 2010s was part of a vast movement to protect and promote Mongolian national identity. Landlocked between its two powerful neighbours, Russia and China, Mongolia gained its independence from the Sino-Manchu yoke at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by allying itself with Russia and then with the USSR. This geostrategic choice led to it becoming the world’s second socialist regime in 1924 (see Legrand 1975). With the end of the USSR, the democratic transition of the early 1990s put an end to Mongolia’s insertion into the socialist world, depriving it of a valuable ally (Maire 2016, p. 79)<sup>13</sup>. The fear of China’s increasing hold on Mongolia’s economy and culture was amplified by the economic crisis (linked to the transition to a market economy) of the 1990s and the mining development policy of the 2000s and 2010s. It is also reflected in the resurgence of a strong nationalism, characterised by acute Sinophobia<sup>14</sup> (cf. Bulag 1998, Billé 2016). These elements, together with the need to position itself strongly in a changing international arena, gave rise to a policy of “national security” in which Mongolia’s political and territorial integrity, and the protection of its economy, are now in continuity with the maintenance of a cultural identity based primarily on nomadic pastoralism and its cultural and artistic expressions (Campi 2012).
- 25 The 1992 Constitution makes the state the warrant of nomadic pastoral activity<sup>15</sup> as well as the guardian of the “culture and heritage of the Mongolian people<sup>16</sup>”. The

“Concept of National Security of Mongolia<sup>17</sup>” document (published in 1994, updated in 2010) crystallises the association between national security and the preservation of nomadism, through the importance given to the preservation of environmental conditions, necessary for the maintenance of Mongolian nomadic pastoralism, and specifically related cultural elements (*ibid.*). For many Mongolian people, the heritage mission of the Mongolian State, with regard to the arts and practices linked to nomadism, seems self-evident. During the 1990s, cultural policies were undertaken at the highest level of the state with the aim of restoring cultural elements specific to the nomadic pastoralists of Mongolia. Intellectuals such as Dulam Sendenjav were entrusted with political missions aimed at reintegrating Mongolia into its own national history and culture<sup>18</sup>, as well as at developing national rituals and symbols rooted in the Chinggiskhanid past and nomadic civilisation (Bianquis 2013). While the 1990s, the decade of democratic transition, were marked by a harmful economic crisis, the 2000s saw the beginning of relative prosperity, enabling Mongolia to implement the desired heritage and cultural policies at a higher level and with international recognition.

### Threats to the transmission

- 26 Traces of this perspective can be seen in the arguments put forward by the National Commission in section 3 “Urgent need for safeguarding” of the nomination form. The first cause incriminated is the modernisation of lifestyles, notably through two major trends, globalisation and urbanisation, which are said to be the cause of young people’s lack of interest in *bii biyelgèè*.

Due to intensified dynamics of globalization and assimilation of worldwide pop culture and arts channelled into oneness of style, standards and trends, the traditional cultures seemingly lose strengths and thus some specific forms and types of traditional cultures face danger of disappearing. This impacts “biyelgee” as well. [...]

One important feature of folk arts and culture is that they exist and evolve in tight connection with natural environment [sic], traditional industries and social relations. However, urbanization trends accelerate [sic] faster, internal migration intensifies even more and, consequently [...] **our young generations face imminent threats of losing opportunities to inherit and maintain intangible cultural heritage expressions within its original state, natural environment and social settings by and large**<sup>19</sup>. (UNESCO 2009, section 3.b Threat and Risk assessment)

- 27 The 2003 Convention aroused great enthusiasm among researchers by proposing to move from a historical (sites and monuments) to an ethnographic model (practices). It also moved the paradigm from “protection” to “safeguarding”, understood as a mode of preservation that considers dynamics specific to the practices themselves instead of seeking to put them in a glass case. In fact, however, resilience to the protection perspective was often observed in different contexts (Bortolotto 2011; Tornatore 2011). This certainly seems to be the case with the *bii biyelgèè* application, where heritage appears as the antithesis and victim of modernisation, perceived, through globalisation and urbanisation, as synonymous with the destruction of local ways of life, and therefore of the heritage attached to them. This interpretation consolidates the above-mentioned vision of the *bii biyelgèè* as an emanation of a nomadic pastoral way of life, which risks disappearing alongside it. The nomadic way of life, from the perspective of

heritagisation, is here perceived as a cultural whole. This is an implicit, yet decisive, aspect of what should be an ideal cultural heritage.

- 28 The definition of the heritage element does not, however, only embody an absolute ideal. It also depends on the relative, or contradictory, positioning of the “authentic” practice vs other similar, yet “inauthentic” practices, especially, in our case, the stage form of Mongolian dance.

## Stage and authentic dances. An archaeology of categories

- 29 *Bii biyelgèè* is thought of as authentic, not only in relation to the nomadic way of life, but also as opposed to Mongolian stage dance, which is seen as a creative, and therefore inauthentic, practice. Conversely, *bii biyelgèè* is not seen as a dance (*büjig*), but rather as a fixed element of folklore, emanating from the local culture it represents. The definition of an element of cultural heritage – as opposed to the evolutive and creative dimension of artistic, professional and stage practices – is quite striking, with regards to the vocabulary employed by all actors in Mongolia (those in charge of heritage policies, *biich*, professional dancers and choreographers) to describe *bii biyelgèè* as antithetic to Mongolian stage dance. Most of the employed terms directly qualify the authenticity of *bii biyelgèè*. *Ulamjlalt*, “traditional”, conveys the idea of “tradition” (*ulamjalal*), as a continued transmission from generation to generation (*ulam*). *Yazguur*, “authentic”, etymologically refers to the ancient origins or roots of the practice as a way to guarantee its value<sup>20</sup>. *Natur*<sup>21</sup> is employed in a meaningful way to describe the very authenticity of *bii biyelgèè*. Such words are commonly defined in regard to opposing values, steadily represented by Mongolian stage dance. For example, *natur* means that no modification should be made to the practice, as opposed to *deglelt*, “choreographed”, which implies such operations as “mix” (*holih*), “introduce” (*oruulah*) or “modify” movements (*öörchlöh*). Such actions are generally welcome in a choreographed dance, but in *bii biyelgèè* they seem to threaten the integrity of the practice, and they have even been described by some as the cause of its progressive disappearance. In the context of heritagisation, this opposition between staged and authentic arts is made in favour of the latter, at least in appearance. To understand the archaeology of this dichotomy, we have to go back to socialist cultural policies.

### Origins of Mongolian stage dance

- 30 As the 1950s trained choreographer Dolgorsüren Garam wrote, “Mongolian dance of the yurt dwellers, along the long road of its development (*höggil*), has gradually matured into an accomplished performing art [...] and has developed into an autonomous professional art genre”<sup>22</sup> (Dolgorsüren 1993, p. 13, cf. also Nanjid 2009). This way of conceiving the transformation of nomadic local practices into accomplished and autonomous “arts” (*urlag*), under the modernising and beneficial influence of socialism, is a recurring point of view among dance scholars in Mongolia. In the case of dance, it is mainly Russian classical ballet that is described as the technical and aesthetic operator capable of giving obscure local practices the dimension and lustre of a professional dance of international standing.

31 At the same time, choreographers and policy-makers alike see Mongolian dance as deeply rooted in a local and ancestral past<sup>23</sup>. This ambivalence is at the heart of the foundation of the National Music, Folk Dance and Folk Song Ensemble<sup>24</sup>. Dual guidance was therefore immediately given to the National Ensemble, as stated in Decree No. 72/114 of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee Conference of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party dated December 1 1950: "The content [of the Ensemble's productions] must communicate the political and ideological trends of the Party"<sup>25</sup> and the form must be "popular" (*ardyn*). Where one might have recognised, almost word for word, Stalin's famous formula "national in form, socialist in content", in practice, however, the first objective was reduced to a minimum. In Mongolia, the ideological "content" is not displayed by Mongolian stage dance (see Blanchier 2018, pp. 135 ff.) but rather by ballets, operas or plays. The National Ensemble is in fact (at least in the field of dance) dedicated more to the second task. The institutionalisation between the "classical" arts (*songodog*), which find their place within the Central Theatre (for dramatic art, later to become the Drama Theatre) and the Opera-Ballet<sup>26</sup> (for classical dance and lyrical song), and the so-called popular arts (Mongolian music, Mongolian dance), were thus combined with a series of separate tasks. The classical institutions were there to convey ideology in the Western "great genres", while the folk arts were in charge of showcasing the Mongolian nation's colourfulness. The creation in 1967, under the leadership of Dolgorsüren, of a complete "Mongolian folk dance" (*mongol ardyn büjig*) curriculum in the dance section of the conservatory, leading to a professional diploma alongside that of classical dance (*songodog büjig*), confirmed this separation of genres. It was in this context that the Mongolian national dance was truly reinvented as an independent genre.

Figure 3. The prima ballerina Alimahüü Jam"yan performing a choreographed version of Dörvöd *biyelgee* with bowls at the 1<sup>st</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students in Prague in 1947



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### Is socialism to blame?

- 32 The UNESCO nomination form directly accuses socialist cultural policies of having contributed to the degradation of local practices, such as *bii biyelgèè*, especially by repressing local forms of expressions and by promoting (although this remains somewhat implicit) Russian-influenced forms of art such as the Mongolian stage dance:

During the whole last century, the state policy was deviated in regards of treating traditional culture and arts, particularly folklore performing arts due to “proletarianism” which suppressed [sic] everything associated with national identity and traditional culture. Eventually, it affected existence and survival of “biyelgee” negatively, by and large, too. Thus, the number of “biyelgee” bearers and performers has been reduced and its core characteristics and performance qualities have been jeopardized. (UNESCO 2009, section E, item 3.b Threat and Risk assessment)

- 33 This view is also expressed by some *biich*, who readily point to the harmful influence of Mongolian stage dance, a product of socialism, on *bii biyelgèè*. They appear broadly in line with a statement relayed by Western researchers describing socialist cultures as deleterious to local arts: by becoming “scenic”, “folk” and “national”, arts such as *höömii*, or overtone singing (Curtet 2013), epic recitation (Pegg 1995), long song (Yoon 2011), horsehead fiddle (Marsh 2009) or dance have become detached from the pastoral-nomadic context (that is under the yurt) and ritual connotations that would have once presided over their performance, leaving us with a watered-down version of themselves (Pegg 1995, p. 78 ff., 2001, p. 255 ff.). However, what we can discern from

the history of the *bii biyelgèè* shows that it has not been repressed to that degree. *Biich* like Pürevjal Magsar (1892-1983) have contributed to the emergence of Mongolian stage dance, and several videos in the national archives, the earliest of which dates back to 1954, show official festival-like occasions where the local *bii biyelgèè* is honoured. While it rightly highlights the phenomena of censorship, ideological instrumentality and the attenuation of the ritual dimension of certain practices, particularly in the fields of song and epic, this rhetoric of loss leaves out no less important aspects of these processes. The socialist period not only contributed, in terms of cultural “development” (*högjil*) policies, to the promotion of Soviet-influenced performing arts, but also, and in a complementary way, to the deployment of the category of “authentic”, *yazguur*.

- 34 Marsh, using Geertz’s concepts, has shown that Mongolian cultural policies during the socialist period can be described in terms of a dialectic between two complementary currents. The former, known as epochalist (“The Spirit of the Age”), aims to promote a modernisation based on a strict imitation of the Russian “elder brother” (*ah*) model. The latter, known as essentialist (“The Indigenous Way of Life”), (Geertz 1973, p. 240), aims to develop a form of socialism adapted to Mongolia’s cultural, geographical and historical specificities (Marsh 2009, p. 67). Following his analysis, the late 1970s and early 1980s should be interpreted as “essentialist”, in the sense that this watershed in the cultural policies positions Mongolian arts against the “Russification” of previous decades, in favour of “authentic” (*yazguur*) local forms of art. As an illustration, the Central Party Committee’s 54<sup>th</sup> directive of July 1982, where this turning point in Mongolian cultural policy is expressed, invites us to:

Study and inventory (*nyagtlan sudlah*) the many beautiful Mongolian ancestral customs (*mongol ovogtny olon saihaan yos zanshlyg*) related to, among other things, the wedding ceremony, archery, wrestling, etc. song and dance, costumes and footwear, domestic furniture, horse and camel harnessing, embroidery, sculpture, ornamentation, of the Halh, Buryat, Dörvöd, Bayad, Zahchin, Ööld, Torguud, Hoton, Dar’ganga etc. ethnic groups. [elements] which, having been handed down to us (*ulamjlan üldsen*) from the time of our ancestors, constitute a priceless and inexhaustible (*ünelj barshgüi*) heritage treasure (*öv sand*) [...] [and] are not treated in a way that pays attention to the customs of their possessors (*eznii yosoor handahgui*). Hence the serious endangerment of precious elements of our popular culture (*ardyn soyl urlag*), which, forgotten, destroyed, cannot reach the next generation. (Central Party Committee’s 54<sup>th</sup> directive of July 1982, quoted by Jav 1990, p. 34)

- 35 To say that not enough attention was paid to the possessors (*eznii yosoor handahgüi*) should be interpreted within the context of a reaction to the Russification of Mongolian culture, embodied by Tsendenbal’s<sup>27</sup> policies of the previous decades (cf. Marsh 2009, pp. 100-101). But above all, the text contains all the elements that form the basis of an Intangible Cultural Heritage policy: 1) an awareness of the priceless value of an ancestral culture; 2) the realisation that it is endangered, particularly in the continuity of its transmission to future generations; 3) the need for an inventory that will transform this popular culture into a “heritage treasure” (*öv san*) for future generations. Unlike what is suggested by Tsetsentsolmon (2015) or Bumochir and Munkherdene (2019), who tend to think of the UNESCO ICH framework as disruptive from the socialist era, I propose to see, in the contemporary UNESCO-related heritage policies, a long-term heritagisation process having a socialist background.
- 36 During this period, personalities such as the composer N. Jantsannorov and the ethnomusicologist J. Badraa (cf. Marsh 2009, p. 100; Curtet 2013, p. 235) contributed to

setting up “festivals of authentic arts” (*yazguur urlagiin ih naadam*) and “popular talent” (*ardyn av’yaastan*) competitions, which largely foreshadowed the heritage policies of the 2000s. Firstly, the communist, militant figure of the “amateur” (*uran saihand*) is replaced by that of the “talented [person] from the people” (*ardyn av’yaastan*) (*ibid.*). Of course, to a large extent, these festivals continue a concept of amateur artistic practices inherited from the previous period. Nevertheless, within the expression “talented [person] from the people”, the term *ardyn* no longer refers to revolutionary ideology but to local origins and the typically Mongolian character of the artistic practices represented: the “talented [persons] from the people” are those non-professionals who practice “authentic arts” (*yazguur urlag*)<sup>28</sup>.

37 Secondly, besides the opposition between “classical” (*songodog*) and “folk” (*ardyn*) art, there is also the opposition between “folk” art, transformed by socialism, and “authentic” (*yazguur*) art, which carries a typically Mongolian essence. Colwell (2018, p. 208 ff.) discusses the emergence of the concept of *yazguur*, especially among Mongolian musicians and music theorists, in the 1970s and 1980s. The ethnomusicologist Badraa Jamts, for instance, uses the phrase *ardyn yazguur urlag*, “authentic folk art”, to oppose the Eurocentrism (or Russo-centrism), and modernist ideology of development implied in the professional “folk” arts duly transformed for the stage. Colwell argues that, on the other hand, Badraa’s understanding of *yazguur* might be influenced by the Russian term *samobytnost’*, meaning “originality” (in the sense: referring to the origins), and therefore suggests changing the translation of *yazguur* to “original” (Colwell 2018, p. 215). In principle, these *yazguur* arts readily refer to the wealth of musical arts and oral literature perceived as “original”, that is typical of nomadic pastoralism, rooted in local subgroups sometimes ethnically identified<sup>29</sup>, often perceived as intact and ancestral, of which the Oirat are ideal representatives. In the context of heritagisation, the small ethnic groups (*bagu yastan*) are also associated with positive values of diversity, on the one hand, and “authenticity” on the other<sup>30</sup>, as people tend to see them as both geographically and symbolically marginalised, and therefore preserved, during the socialist period. Their arts are particularly represented by various traditional instruments (the horsehead fiddle, *shanz* and *tovshuur* lutes), popular song genres (such as the long song, the short song, the mocking song), other vocal practices (such as eulogies, epics, etc.) (Curtet 2013, p. 179) and, of course, *bii biyelgèè*.

38 Today’s denial of a revivalism, prior to the one promoted by UNESCO at the end of the 2000s, seems to me to be typical of a structural “amnesia” that this paper argues correlates with heritage processes: ignoring the previous revivalisms of a practice makes it possible to emphasise its truly ancient, ancestral and untouched character, while at the same time reinforcing the rhetoric of a surviving practice that has undergone deleterious policies. The image of a *bii biyelgèè* that is doubly complementary to Mongolian stage dance thus emerges: not only is it a source and guarantee of Mongolness, but it is also its antithesis, the preserved version, the one that has escaped socialism.

## The bearers: their idealised image and life trajectories

39 Let us now shift the analysis to the main actors of heritage, the *biich*, whom UNESCO refers to as bearers. What is their position in relation to cultural policies that seem to

be defined, for them and in their name, by institutions that are external to them? And how does taking their position into account shed light on the transmission processes at work in heritage-making?

### The heritage bearers' profile. The nomination form and the field

40 Despite the absence of explicitly discriminating criteria, a coherent and consensual image of the figure of the *biich* emerges through a quick analysis of the nomination form's text and photos. In fact, the photos, of which there are ten, are less focused on presenting the practice of *bii biyelgèè* than on the idealised features of the *biich*. Against a neutral background (a sheet stretched indoors), outdoors or in a yurt, these photos depict individual portraits of *biich* dancing. Their faces, sometimes smiling but always absorbed in an attitude of intense concentration, are wrinkled, giving an image of elderly, solitary people happy to dance for themselves. The colourful costumes convey an image of ethnic diversity due to the plurality of the bearers. The photo gallery credits the photographer (2008, A. Duurenjargal [sic]) but never the *biich* themselves, who are thus presented less as individuals than as variations of the same mould. The text is along the same lines. There is a list of names in the "community(ies), group(s) or individual(s) concerned" section of the nomination form (UNESCO 2009, section E, item 1.c); however, this list displays the ethnic diversity of bearers of the same mould rather than individuals. One may identify key features from the image of the *biich*, as delineated in the nomination form. The *biich* are:

- rare (about twenty bearers), the scarcity being explicitly associated with the endangerment of the practice. As said in the Nomination form, "It is currently nearly-extinct and as mentioned in the item C, there are just over 20 bearers of *biyelgee* dance tradition from given ethnic groups, who preserved the originality of *biyelgee* dance" (UNESCO 2009, section E, item 1.c).
- rooted in their local ethnic and rural identity, "autochthonous/native", both originating from a district of the western provinces (here Hovd and Uvs), and belonging to an Oirat ethnic group. This valorisation of local anchorage is to be understood in relationship to the shared vision, in Mongolia, of Oirat culture as a reserve of authentic Mongolness as well as displaying a colourful, politically neutral ethnic diversity.
- isolated: not only do the *biich* live in "remote lands", but the list shows barely two or three *biich* per district/ethnic group; this is the antithesis of the image of a tight-knit local community, suggesting that they are isolated bearers.
- old ("over 60-80 years old", UNESCO 2009, section C, item 1.d), which is meant to echo to the rareness and endangerment, as well as to enhance the unavoidable long-term maturation of a heritage bearer.

41 This typical portrait of the indigenous *biich* – isolated, local, elderly and rare – creates a link between the bearer and the broad image of marginalised elders, ultimate bearers of a disappearing practice. However, the facts stated in the form do not fully correspond to what I encountered in the field, a few months after the inscription. First, the *biich* are not isolated from each other in remote villages of the Mongolian Altai: the majority live in Ulaanbaatar, the others in provincial or district centres. Only a few people, like Humbaa or Jalh, still set up their yurt away from the district centre in the summer. Moreover, far from carrying out their *biich* activities independently of each other, they frequently gather at performances or projects to promote their practice

(training, documentary films, festivals, etc.). Although this fieldwork took place in 2010, after the registration was complete, the *biich* stated that signs of the practice's revival were noticeable from the early 2000s. Photos of the *biich* Balgan, although not all precisely dated, show him and other *biich* participating in festivals in Ulaangom, the capital of Uvs Province, where he is from, from at least as early as 2001. Other photos show him participating in the following national and international events<sup>31</sup>:

- Concert of the Oirat singer J. Erdenedalai (15 January 2004);
- Autumn Festival, Paris (21 September to 1 October 2006);
- Mongolian Dance, Music and Ballet – Lincoln Festival, Asia Society (24 July 2007);
- Great Morin Huur Festival (2007);
- Mongolian New Year's Greetings, on the set of the NTV television channel (2008).

- 42 Besides these one-time events, the *biich* have been brought together within NGO institutions. The association Authentic Mongolian Popular Art of Bii Biyeleg<sup>32</sup>, was founded as early as 2006 by the professional dancer Lhagvasüren Zagdragchaa. Others, such as the Association for the Transmission of the Bii biyelgèè<sup>33</sup>, the Heritage Treasure – Bii Biyelgèè<sup>34</sup> and Ih Högsüü<sup>35</sup>, founded later, have taken advantage of the enthusiasm generated by the UNESCO inscription. Yet it is useful to bear in mind that the connection between *biich* through associations or cultural events precedes (and to some extent conditions) the UNESCO inscription as much as it follows it.
- 43 Similarly, the number, list and age of the *biich* presented in the nomination form have seemingly been oriented. The number of *biich* known to the Mongolian heritage services is much higher than those listed, with a significant number (including those mentioned in the nomination form) belonging to the average age group of 40s and 50s, at the time of the application. The 2009 file selectively mentions only a very small number of *biich*, no doubt chosen to represent the rarity of the bearers and a certain ethnic and territorial diversity. However, this under-representation in 2009 is matched by an over-representation in the 2013 Periodic Report: “436 practitioners [...] now registered”, a spectacular increase of about 4000% in four years. The report furtively suggests that this increase is primarily the result of an effective policy of identifying them and safeguarding their practice, yet the explanation seems insufficient. Rather, it appears that it is a matter of constructing an image of the *biich* as the bearer of an ancestral practice that is threatened with extinction, which is clearly in line with what can be termed a “rhetoric of safeguarding” (cf. Blanchier 2018, p. 168).

Figure 4. The *biich* Jalh Masгаа and the *ekel* (fiddle) player Tsezen Lhaidaa performing *bii biyelgee* under a modern yurt



© Raphaël Blanchier, Ulaangom, 2013

### Transmission in straight lines?

- 44 The biographical interviews conducted with several *biich* show that the transmission of heritage practices is complex. The cases of dancers from diverse backgrounds allow us to appreciate how today's heritage-related value of authenticity was forged in the cultural policies of the 1980s, and specifically in the recognition given by festivals to amateur practices vs arts professionalised by socialist cultural institutions.
- 45 The first case is that of non-professional artists, amateurs who turn away, in this period, from Mongolian stage dance to *bii biyelgèè* during amateur competitions and festivals. Yundendorj Yondon, a local government employee married to the Ulaangom theatre professional dancer Bayartai Genden, describes his entry into *bii biyelgèè* as follows:
- The administrative units had to present concerts. [...] [Professional] artists were not allowed to perform, only amateurs (*uran saiһanch*). At that time, among the amateurs there was no *biyelgèè* of the bowls... Colleagues told me: nobody offers *bii biyelgèè*. Why shouldn't we make it? You have a wife who is a dancer, why don't you study *biyelgèè*? At the end of the process [of preparation], we, the representatives of all the organisations, arrived at the provincial theatre. There was a selection. Once selected, we performed at the provincial theatre. Then those who were selected went to Ulaanbaatar. And there I got the gold medal. I danced with four bowls piled on my head [the last of which was] filled with milk<sup>36</sup>. (Int. Yundendorj Yondon, September 2013)
- 46 Therefore, Yundendorj, previously known more for his talents as an amateur accordionist, is recognised to this day as the bearer of *bii biyelgèè* of the bowls, which he actually learned in 1982 from his wife, a dancer of Mongolian stage dance.
- 47 The second case is that of dancers from public theatres in the western provinces, previously trained in the most academic tradition of Mongolian stage dance within

socialist institutions, who suddenly take it upon themselves to learn the *bii biyelgèè* of their ethnic origin. Among *biich* as well as among choreographers, researchers and cultural workers, Samjid Riimed is seen as the most prominent representative of the Urianhai *bii biyelgèè*. However, if he is indeed Urianhai, he did not learn *bii biyelgèè* from his parents or in his childhood. Born in 1938, Samjid joined the newly opened Bayan-Ölgii theatre in 1955 and recruited musicians and dancers. Spotted by Sevjid himself, the most famous of all Mongolian choreographers, Samjid learned the trade of a professional dancer on the job. He worked for forty-five years as a dancer in this theatre and completed his training at the SUIS, after which he was promoted to dance master; indeed, two of his children became choreographers of Mongolian stage dance. In the 1980s, stimulated by the promotion of the “authentic” arts (*yazguur*) and specifically the *bii biyelgèè*, he embarked on a personal research project with elderly people in his province to collect and document the gestures of the Kazakh and Urianhai *bii biyelgèè*, which he compiled into sequences of his own composition. Yet this does not prevent Samjid from being unanimously acclaimed as an authority on the Urianhai *bii biyelgèè*. In the end, contrary to what is commonly claimed, the *biich* are not recognisable as bearers because they learned *bii biyelgèè* in a familial environment from generation to generation, or because of the preserved nature of the gestures they dance.

- 48 The third case is epitomised by Dugaraa Batmagnai. Dugaraa (now deceased) was a professional dancer from the Hovd Theatre who became interested in the Torguud *bii biyelgèè* of the Bulgan District, his homeland, in the 1980s. In the archive videos, we can see how his way of dancing the Torguud *bii biyelgèè* was influenced by his training as a professional dancer, in contrast to others who have not received this training: arched posture, wide conventional smile, fluid and ample movements, transfers of weight from one foot to the other, etc. All these contrast with the reserved attitude, the concentrated look, the brief and abrupt movements and the immobility of the pelvis of the other bearers. However, Dugaraa is still recognised on a par with the others. Contrary to the opposition underlined at the beginning of this paper, one can therefore be both a *biich* and a pro dancer. What is the reason behind someone like Dugaraa being considered a *biich*? It is not his background, which is that of a professional dancer, or the transmission of *bii biyelgèè* through the family or from childhood, which he learned late in life and which his parents did not practice, or his particularly scenic way of dancing. The only plausible explanation is his regular participation in the festivals of the 1980s, which established him as a *biich* despite everything that, a priori, makes him the antithesis of a heritage bearer.
- 49 The authentic arts festivals of the 1980s not only enhanced the status of local practitioners of *bii biyelgèè*, but also led a number of non-*biich* to endorse the practice as if it had been in their family for generations. These policies have thus contributed to the recognition of *biich*, within the contemporary process of heritagisation, as people whose legitimacy as bearers is established purely by their participation in these festivals, even when the ancestry of a family practice or conditions of family transmission of an informal kind cannot be demonstrated. The 1980s are not only the object of a contemporary amnesia, they also play the role of a screen, masking the diversity of transmission procedures for the *biich* today who are recognised as authentic bearers.

## Transmitters and transmission of heritage

50 Heritagisation during the 2000s seems to have an effect similar to that of the revivalism of the 1980s: alongside the *biich*, who are recognised for their long-standing line of transmission, newcomers to the practice of *bii biyelgèè*, such as professional choreographers and dancers, and local children, are playing an increasing role in the process. Heritagisation seems to have stimulated what I call a substitution effect by which stage *bii biyelgèè*, a professional form assumed by dancers and choreographers from the socialist institutions of Mongolian stage dance, is often mistaken for the *bii biyelgèè* of the *biich*. As a consequence, one can also observe how the actors of the first practice, coming from the choreographic milieu, tend to take the place, in the public opinion as well as in the distribution of funds, that should have been those of the *biich* themselves.

### Heritage frustrations

51 In contrast to the 1980s, the current heritage situation promotes a substitution effect which, despite appearances, seemingly works to the disadvantage of the *biich* in material terms. If one follows the figures given in the 2013 Periodic Report (UNESCO 2013, section B.3.b), only four *biich* could be employed sustainably under the implementation policies. Out of 16,1 million MNT<sup>37</sup> of another training programme included in the same budget, only 3 million “were allocated to support 15 [sic] bearers taking part in the programme<sup>38</sup>”.

52 On the other hand, during events when the *biich* are directly involved, there is no money available.

[At the festival], you saw well... there was no money. A few tugriks to be made? No money at all! No recognition [lit. no title], no salary. I made the cakes myself, all by myself [implying to feed us, since even the meal was not provided]<sup>39</sup>. (Int. Ay<sup>40</sup>, September 2013)

53 This is how the *biich* Ay bitterly describes the festive event organised in September 2013 by the Gös<sup>41</sup> association, in which she invested a lot of energy. Rumours<sup>42</sup> of fund embezzlement from UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture were circulating around the president of this association, which ceased its activities following this festival.

54 The *biich*, who, according to UNESCO’s motivations and aims, should have been the first beneficiaries of the *bii biyelgèè* inscription, have been somewhat marginalised, at least in terms of distribution of public funding, by the very heritagisation of their own practice. The substitution effect shows the ambiguities at work in the heritage process. There is a publicly claimed political desire to mobilise the whole of Mongolia (and not just the Altai provinces) around the promotion of *bii biyelgèè* within mass events. In consequence, *bii biyelgèè* is treated by the cultural authorities less as a local practice to safeguard (in the sense of the 2003 Convention), and more as a national emblem to promote. This national dimension of heritagisation certainly testifies to some “cultural nationalism” (Curtet 2013, p. 432 ff.; Curtet & Nomindar’ 2015; Nomindar’ 2012; Tsetsentsolmon 2012). But these ambivalences are also a sign of the asymmetry specific to the heritage arena, an asymmetry that de facto cuts across a multitude of actors, with diverse, even divergent, statuses, roles and interests. Reduced to the status of objects of discourse, the *biich* only have limited access to the heritage manna, whereas

the choreographers and other authorised actors of these heritage processes are able to draw prestige and financial benefits from it.

## The duty to transmit

- 55 How do the *biich* position themselves in this strongly asymmetrical relationship? To be a *biich* means, for them, not profiting from the practice. It should first and foremost be experienced as a moral duty, which does not fall to the others, the non-*biich*, or those who benefit most from the process:

For us, it's not about the money. I'm not doing it to get a medal either. I'm not going to go and say, "Give me the title of Meritorious Worker in Culture"<sup>43</sup> either. If they [the government] give it to me, I'll take it. If not, well, too bad. My father used to say, "I teach you this *biyelgèè*, you in turn must teach it". Having learned your father's movements exactly, it is up to you to perpetuate and spread this heritage. That is why it is my duty (*yostoi*) to teach the children well. Pürevjal said the same thing, and, of course, I intend to teach the children well. Therefore, having learned this way, the transmission goes on and on and on and on forever<sup>44</sup>! (Int. Chuluunbat Dashdorj, October 2013)

- 56 For the *biich*, the transmission of the *bii biyelgèè* heritage in a "just" or "correct" (*zöv*) way, in Chuluunbat's terms, i.e. being unaltered by the choreographic process, is a moral duty, as evidenced by the recurrence of the modal *yostoi* ("must"). Used in its strongest sense, it is a moral duty that, according to Badamtsetseg, we owe to those who passed on this heritage to us:

My father himself learned it from his father, Sharaa. Sharaa was my father's father. Dancers from generation to generation. What is called *biyelgèè*, what is called Zahchin *biyelgèè* will not disappear. It is passed on from generation to generation, it is perpetuated! I have to be able to do it. My father was able to do it; his objective was that I should also be able to do it. So my father was a famous *bii biyelgèè* dancer in Mongolia and among all the Zahchin, and also a horsehead fiddle player; yes, very famous; his name was Banzaa son of Sharaa. People know him, and all the scholars, the researchers of the arts, know him. And such a man, my father, he used to dance like this, with both shoulder blades, eh, this man, and yes, both shoulder blades. So while doing this, he used to bend backwards, until he hit the ground, and then get up, yes, that's what this man used to do. And so, this way of dancing, it's really superb and beautiful. So someone who dances the *bii biyelgèè* must absolutely (*zaaval yostoi*) hit the shoulder blades<sup>45</sup>. (Int. Badamtsetseg Banzaa, July 2010)

- 57 Badamtsetseg sees the duty of "just" transmission not only as a moral obligation, but as an integral part of the process of transmission "from generation to generation". In consequence, it would be to misunderstand the viewpoint of the *biich* to see in the transmission of the *bii biyelgèè* a mere reproduction of the movements, however accurate. With the movements themselves is transmitted the duty to transmit them faithfully. In short, the "true" transmission of *bii biyelgèè* is not the exact reproduction of the gestures, but the moral duty to perform and transmit them continuously in the "just" manner. From this point of view, the *biich* appears not only as the bearer or simply as the "passer" of a remarkable heritage. Above all, the *biich* are being "held" by the heritage, which they themselves hold: not only does *bii biyelgèè* belong to the *biich*, but the *biich* belongs to *bii biyelgèè*.
- 58 That point is, in my opinion, a significant aspect of transmission in heritagisation processes. Based on his analysis of Norwegian costume and dance revivalism, Egil Bakka (1992) proposes three typical postures. The "heirs" think of themselves as having

inherited the practices concerned, in a line of transmission described as unbroken. As such, they also see themselves as the legitimate owner but, in a reciprocal way, they also belong to their practice as much as it belongs to them: they are, for example, only able to dance the dance of their family, their village or their line of transmission. Conversely, the “user” is interested in the practice in order to make a broad use of it, for example in the sense that it gives them pleasure, it serves to assert a cultural identity or to implement preservation policies. Finally, the researcher is actually characterised less by their research approach than, according to Bakka, by their interest in the “preservation of traditional qualities” (whatever they are) of the practice in question.

- 59 This definition of typical roles allows us to avoid assigning authenticity based on objectivist criteria leading to a biased or even essentialist vision of things. Rather than either the paths taken by individuals, the intrinsic properties of practices, or the variability of claims, it highlights the stability of certain attitudes assumed in relation to the practice itself. However, these three figures are not on the same analytical level. Rather than three juxtaposed figures, it seems more effective to highlight the complementarity between the first two figures and the transversal character of the third. What distinguishes the user from the heir, in this sense, is the exteriority of the former’s relation to the practice concerned: the user can thus practice the dances of the village of their choice, according to their preferences or interest at the time. Yet the use they make of the practices concerned can be considered illegitimate by the heirs.
- 60 In this sense, it seems obvious to consider the *biich*, who belong to the *bii biyelgèè* as much as the *bii biyelgèè* belongs to them, as heirs. But it seems no less legitimate to think of the other actors concerned, as well as the heritage authorities in charge of the UNESCO file, as choreographers, and the general public as users, who have an external relationship with the practice, which they perform, claim and mobilise for various uses: leisure, heritage, choreography, etc. As for the researcher’s perspective, it appears to be mobilised by both. Not in a stable and continuous way, but in a discontinuous way according to the circumstances. The *biich* and the choreographers, as does the UNESCO nomination form, mobilise devices of objectivity to validate their discourses, aiming to demonstrate the substantial anchoring of *bii biyelgèè* in nomadic pastoralism, even though this substantialist anchoring appears to be constantly relayed by a relative definition of the *bii biyelgèè* as a heritage practice.
- 61 The distinction between heirs and users seems especially efficient when accounting for the tense relationship between *biich* (heirs) and other actors, acting as users of the same practice. Logically contradictory, these two attitudes seem to be mutually complementary: the heir is not defined as such only in their relation to the practice they inherit but in opposition to those who do not inherit it (the users) and vice versa.

## Conclusion

- 62 In the case of *bii biyelgèè*, the integration of heritage into Mongolia’s international and national political positioning in a post-socialist context means that the state and heritage institutions must be seen as major players in the heritage process. The UNESCO nomination form thus reflects both the image that the National Commission has of *bii biyelgèè* and the image it has of UNESCO’s expectations. The application file is

based on a rhetoric of safeguarding rooted in the perception of *bii biyelgèè* as a practice emanating from nomadic pastoralism, and in the figure of the *biich* as an ancestral character in danger of disappearing. This makes it possible to highlight three complementary dimensions of *bii biyelgèè*: a practice typical of nomadic Mongolia, an ancestral practice transmitted in a continuous manner and a practice threatened with disappearance, dependent on cultural policies, which should therefore be safeguarded. However, the case of *bii biyelgèè* reveals more subtle dialectics.

- 63 First of all, it is necessary to take into account the long-time span of cultural policies, beyond the sole period of ICH-UNESCO type heritage. On the one hand, this historicisation of heritage processes highlights the historical anchoring of contemporary categories of authenticity in the socialist policies of previous decades, even though the most common discourses today position heritage in opposition to or at odds with this socialist past. On the other hand, it shows how the recognition of the bearers today has its roots in earlier periods of revivalism, specifically the beginning of the 1980s, the authentic arts festivals of which have significantly contributed to forging the authenticity of the *biich* of the 2000s and 2010s. Taking this into account, alongside institutional processes and value categories, focuses attention on the relative positioning of several types of local actors in relation to the practice itself and to each other. The issue of defining a heritage practice cannot be dissociated from that of differentiating its authentic bearers.
- 64 The complementary roles of heir and user, as defined above, are in this sense the basis of a constitutive asymmetry. The *biich*, the claimed and recognised heirs, belong to this practice as much as it belongs to them (they are obliged, for example, to claim only the *bii biyelgèè* of their ethnic affiliation – transmission, for them, is not a choice but a moral duty). But the users are free to make use of the patrimonial object, precisely because they only have a subject-object relationship with it. This is precisely where the tensions inherent in the heritage process arise: the *biich* tend to be considered by the users (heritage authorities and choreographers, specifically) as objects, mere human embodiments of heritage with little say in the matter. As recognised bearers, however, the *biich* would like to be legitimate subjects of heritage discourse, with all that this implies in terms of recognition, economic development, etc. The freedom of users, with regard to the heritage object, facilitates the effectiveness of their hold on such an object. But the *biich*, bound by the relationship of inheritance (in the sense of Bakka 1992), do not have such freedoms: due to this asymmetrical relationship, recognising oneself as a bearer of heritage puts one on the side of the object for the users, rather than on the subject side.
- 65 While several heritage researchers, including Bortolotto (2011, p. 21), see the shift from the tangible to the intangible as a significant “heritage turning point”, in Mongolia the heritage of the *bii biyelgèè* is part of the continuity of a heritage vision that was already in place several decades earlier. On the other hand, some suggest that the transition from the tangible to the intangible has led to an abandonment, perceived as beneficial, of the object regime implied by the tangible conceptions of heritage. This is true in the official texts, of course, as long as we take “object” to mean the equivalent of “material element”. However, if we see things from the perspective of the field and take “object” in its epistemological sense (the object that a subject of knowledge has in view), the shift to the intangible does not tally with the abandonment of an object regime. On the contrary, the epistemological subject-object relationship seems to be inherent in the

processes of heritage. Thus, when the epistemological object ceases to be confused with a material object, it shifts in such a way as to assign the status of epistemological object to some of the actors of heritage (the heirs), who are at the same time in the position of subjects (whose object would be the practice).

- 66 It is true that the subject-object relationship, although fundamentally asymmetrical, is also, in law, relative. When caught in the asymmetry between the roles of heir and user, typical of patrimonial situations and revivalisms, it tends to become substantial and to freeze the relations between the *biich* and users of the *bii biyelgèè* in a structural asymmetry. The *biich* are caught in this asymmetrical epistemological relationship that they have contributed to constructing by assuming the role of heir in the eyes of users. Conversely, the users' room for manoeuvre is limited because in order to make use of the heritage they have to recognise, at least in a subterranean way, that they will never be heirs to it, and, even if this has few consequences for their lives or careers, they are still confronted with the potentially exasperated claims of the *biich*. This dichotomy thus crystallises in the definition of a divided field of Mongolian dance, where the *bii biyelgèè* and Mongolian stage dance, while being defined as mutually exclusive, never cease to overlap and interpenetrate each other.
- 67 This perspective, which tends to describe the *bii biyelgèè*/ Mongolian stage dance cleavage as a dynamic system, should not, however, make us forget the historical dimension inherent in any heritage process. Guillard (1997) highlights, in the case of the "character dances" of military origin, performed in Touraine's dance societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, cycles constituting periods of revivalism. Every sixty years or so, a generational phenomenon leads the children of the previous generation to take a new interest in the practice concerned, before letting it fall back into oblivion for contingent reasons (war, marriage, etc.), until the next generation seeks to revitalise it again. This periodicity establishes both the claimed ancestry of a practice and the continuity of its transmission. Within this perspective, which is fruitful for understanding revivalism as a series of functional cycles, we must also consider how the revivalism of the previous generation tends to be concealed in the process of legitimation. By drawing inspiration and yet also denying previous revivalisms the idea of an intact ancestral practice is constructed, rather than recreated, during successive revivalisms. Further research, combining anthropology and history, and carried out in a comparison between several heritage areas, will undoubtedly make it possible to support this hypothesis.

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## NOTES

1. By this term I hereby and hereafter refer to the idea of “nomadism” as constructed and implemented through dance and other media in contemporary Mongolia. The reader must, however, keep in mind that “nomadism” or “nomadic” is not here defended as a social sciences concept nor used to describe the various forms of seasonal mobility and herding systems that have been described by researchers; as a concept, it has been duly critically challenged by authors such as Humphrey & Sneath (1999) or Orhon (2011).

2. As opposed to the Halh majority group of Central Mongolia. In Mongolia, Halh are often considered as the true descendants of Chinggis Khan’s Golden lineage, especially among radical nationalist milieux. The official Mongolian language stems from the Halh variant, to the detriment of other dialectal forms, including the Oirat’s.

3. I hereby refer, of course, to the *image* of today’s Oirat groups in Mongolia, notwithstanding the fact that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, so-called “Oirat” people constituted a strong empire bearing threat to Halh rulers of Central Mongolia, up until the point that they looked for an alliance with the Manchu Qing Dynasty to defeat them, before displacing or destroying most of them.

4. *Tavan hoshuu mal*, a Mongolian phrase to designate the five species breed (in variable proportions depending on the region) by nomads in Mongolia: horses, oxen (cows and yaks), goats, sheep and camels.

5. Including food preparation techniques (dairy products, meat), material preparation (felt, leather, etc.), etiquette and rules of conduct, religion (prayers, rituals, cult objects) and artistic forms of expression (legends, proverbs, songs, music, epics, embroidery, handicrafts, dance, etc.).

6. The official “three manly games” usually include the following: archery, wrestling and horse racing, whereas anklebone shooting was added recently. But in *bii biyelgèè*, the horse gait is displayed in specific dances, such as *joroo mor’* (see below), and therefore absent of the dance “three manly games”. This dance thus includes anklebone shooting as a third game, to keep good numbers.

7. There are others, in certain ethnic groups, such as *jalam har* or *balchin heer. juraa geldene*, specific to the Hoton (a subgroup of the Oirat distinguished by their alleged Kirgiz ancestry and Muslim-originating rituals), evokes the pace of the camels in a caravan, which are listed in the lyrics of the song that accompanies it.

8. A near exhaustive survey of the evocations of nomadic pastoralism in the *biyelgèè* dance is given in Blanchier 2018, pp. 51 ff.
9. *Mön l ard түмний язгуур ёрh ashgaas үүссэн. Biyelgèè malaa saada, tsai сүүний дèèjiig örgöh, uul usandaa залбирч мөргöh, малинhaа noos nooluuriig avah, taria тарих гèh мèt зүйлèès үүсèлтèи. Èндèès l yazguur urlag үүсèлтèи.*
10. *Bii biyelgèè yaaj, haanaas үүссэн байна гèhèèr havar tsagt mal төрөл төрнө. [...] Modon ayaga hiidèg, hүүhdүүд тоглодог, aav n' tèr ayaga, moriny үсèèr товшуур hiinè. Ah n' altain magtaal duulna, Hүүhdүүд сонсоод унтаггүй, èнè аялгууг сонсоход дуртай. Тèриг сонсохын тuld bosoj biyelнèè. Èндèès domog hiinè.*
11. USL: Urgent Safeguarding List, RL: Representative List.
12. The latter two elements were first inscribed in 2003 and 2005, on the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity before being transferred, by effect of the transitional clause (Art. 31) of the 2003 Convention, to the Representative List of the ICH. For the full list of elements inscribed by Mongolia, see UNESCO 2021.
13. While this strengthening of Mongolian national identity seems typical of nationalist resurgences in a post-socialist context, recent studies have emphasised the socialist foundations of the nationalism that has been expressed since 1990 (see Suny 1993; Hirsh 2014). In the case of Mongolia, Bulag's seminal work on "Mongolness" shows how contemporary Mongolian nationalism is part of the continuity of a national construction inherited from the socialist period, where the emergence of a modern socialist state goes hand in hand with the emergence of a properly Mongolian nation-state, where ethnic, territorial and cultural boundaries ideally coincide (Bulag 1998, p. 28).
14. For Bulag, the gradual matching of Mongol and Halh, the majority ethnic group in the territory of present-day Mongolia, is at the centre of an exacerbated nationalism. Today, it goes hand in hand with an attachment to the ethnic "purity" of the Mongols, which in its extreme forms generates racism and xenophobia. The "true" Mongols are thus the Halh, an ethnic group associated with the "golden lineage" (*altan urag*) from which the blood of Chinggis Khan is said to flow. Sinophobia, which is the most frequent and violent form of xenophobia, is not only linked to the economic and international situation, but also reflects local conceptions of the transmission of Mongolian identity.
15. *Mal сүрег бол үндесний байлаг мөн бөгөөд төриин хамгаалтад байна*, "The livestock is a national asset and its protection is the responsibility of the State" (Mongolian Constitution, chapter I, article 5, paragraph 5). Secretariat of the Constitutional Court of Mongolia [1992] 2021
16. *Mongolyn ard түмний түүh, soyolyn дурсгалт зүйл, шинжлèh ухаан, оyuuny öв төриин хамгаалтад байна*, "The State is in charge of the protection of elements carrying memory of history and culture of the Mongolian people, his scientific and intellectual heritage" (Mongolian Constitution, chapter I, article 7, paragraph 1). Secretariat of the Constitutional Court of Mongolia [1992] 2021.
17. *Mongol улсын үндесний аyuулгүй байдлын үзèл баримтлал*, "National Security Concept of Mongolia", elaborated by the National Security Council of Mongolia (*Mongol улсын үндесний аyuулгүй байдлын зөвлөл*). This text, which also gives the main directions of the Mongolian State international policy, is to define the protection of a national culture against both the inner threat of extreme nationalism and the external threat of foreign (especially westernised) cultures, seen as potentially deleterious for the nomadic culture, especially in the age of globalisation (Campi 2012). See National Security Council of Mongolia [1994] 2010.
18. Supposedly destroyed by the socialist regime.
19. Bold in the text.
20. *Yazguurtan* means aristocratic, of aristocratic origin.
21. Current knowledge indicated that this word was borrowed from the Russian *naturan*, which in turn was borrowed from the French *nature*.

22. *Mongol tuurgatny бүжиг хөгжлийнхөө урт замьн тул үйгээс үйгэд улам улмаар боловсрон төгөлдөрсээр таизны урлаг [...] мөргөжлийн биьг даасан урлагийн төрөл зүйл болон хөгжж иржээ.*
23. For an analysis of the stage model continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods see, for example, Curtet 2013, p. 226 ff.
24. First called the National Folk Song and Dance Ensemble of the Mongolian People's Republic (BNMAU-yn Ardyn duu tancny ulsyn ansamb'l'), currently the National Academic Song and Dance Ensemble of Mongolia (Mongol ulsyn үндесний дуу бүжгийн ердмиин чуулга). The adjective *ardyn*, literally "of the people", is a genitive of the word *arad/ard*, which first designated the pre-revolutionary peasantry and then, more broadly, the revolutionary "people". In this context it refers rather to the people as a cultural entity (the *Volk* of German Romanticism) with a distinctive folklore. In this sense, it is often used as a quasi-equivalent of "national" (*үндесний*), an idiom favoured in the 1930s to foster the "development" (*хөгжил*) of a national culture (Legrain 2014, p. 94). The "Mongolian folk songs" (*mongol ardyn duu*) are intended to be popular as an emanation of both the revolutionary people and a nationwide cultural identity. It should be noted that today, the opposite movement seems to be observed: *үндесний* tends to be considered as equivalent to *ardyn*, as far as the arts are concerned, and national appears as a synonym for popular, in the sense of the English "folk" in folk dance.
25. *Aguulga n' [...] manai namyn үзэл суртлын бодлогыг сурталчлах*, quoted in Lhagvasüren 2005.
26. The Drama Theatre (Ulsyn dramyn tyeatr) and the Opera-Ballet (Ulsyn duur' бүжгийн ердмиин тyeatr) separated in 1963.
27. Leader of the Mongolian People's Republic from 1940 to 1984.
28. The blurred and shifting meaning of those categories has been highlighted by several scholars, among which Colwell (2018), Tsetsentsolmon (2015).
29. For a discussion of the representation of Oirat ethnicity in Mongolian dances and in relationship to the socialist concept of ethnic groups, see Blanchier 2015, 2018, p. 211 ff.
30. This can be compared, to some extent, to the national policy of *minzu* ("nationality") in China. See Mullaney 2011. However, as demonstrated by Legrain (2014), the agency of local people and activists is more significantly at play in Mongolia, than it seems to be in China.
31. For this study, private archives, such as the photo albums compiled by the *biich* themselves whilst participating in these events, have been the most accessible and reliable source for documenting the events' existence.
32. *Mongol ardyn yazguur urlагийн бii biyelгèè holboo.*
33. *Mongolyn бii biyelгèè өвлүүлèè holboo*, founded in 2010, chaired by choreographer S. Sühbaatar.
34. *Mongolyn өв союлын èрдèнè - бii биилèг*. Founded (most likely) in 2009, chaired by choreographer D. Nanjid.
35. Founded in 2010, chaired by journalist Ch. Önörtүvshin.
36. *Alban gazaruud koncyert бèлдèè yostoi. [...] Urlагийн хүмүүс оруулж болохгүй. Dandaa uran saiһanch, тèè. Uran saiһanch хүмүүст тийм аягтай биyelгèè багаагүй. Hamt ажилладag humus ингèй: Iim бii биyelгèè һийһ хүн байһгүй. Iim болчихгүй үүү? Бүжигчин авгатай бii сурahгүй үүү? [...] Za сүүлт n', баигууллагийнһаа бүгдèрèè Aimgiin тyeatrт хүрч байна. Shalgalt өгнө. Shalguulaj аваад, аimgiin тyeatr, тèгèдèè shalguulaad Uлаанбаатарт. Тèгèдèè алтан myedal. Èнè дөрвөн сүүүтaй аягат.*
37. Mongolian түгрүг, or tugrik, the local money.
38. "Under the 2010 decree 546 on the protection of the ICH element of the Minister of Culture, Education and Science, we organised training and apprenticeship programmes involving 81 individuals for 16,2 million tugriks budget. From this budget, 3 million tugriks were distributed as a support to 15 bearers who were involved in the programme" (UNESCO 2013, section B.3b).
39. *Möngö байһгүй... Chi harsan биздее. Heden төгрөг авah, yuu ch байһгүй. Tsol байһгүй, tsalin байһгүй. Boov һийсен, би гants.*
40. The name has been changed.

41. The name has been changed.

42. So far unverified.

43. Mongol *ulsyn soyolyn tèrgüünii ajiltan*, one of the highest awards for cultural workers.

44. *Bid nar, möngönii yum bish bai shdèè. Bi, tènd mèdal ögch. Bi èniig avahyn tölöö hiigèègüi shdèè tii. Soyolyn tèrgüünii ajiltan gèsèn ög gèèd bi ööröö hèlchihgüi. Tèr ulsuud nadiig ünèlüülèh bi avna. Tèhgüi bol baihgüi shdèè, tiimèè, tiim l baigaa biz dèè. Minii aav yer n' bol hèlj baisan: ènè biyelgèè chamd zaaj ögch baihdaa, chi tsaashaa zaagaad ögökh hèregtèi. Chi aavynhaa hödölgööniig yag sursnaraar ööröö övliülèh, nè müüsèn oruulsan yum baihgüi. Tiim ch baisan uchraas l, bi hüühdüüddèè dooshoogoo sain zaaj ögökh yostoi. Pürèvjäl guai ch bas hèlj baisan. Bailgüi yuund: zaa, hüühdüüddèè sain zaaj ög'yo shüü. Tiim uchraas iim sursan yum aa, ènè tsaashaa ingèèd ingèèd ingèèd, ingèèd oluulaa bol"yo shdèè.*

45. *Manai aav öörühöö aavaas, Sharaa gèdèg hünèèsèè sursan. Manai aavyn aavyg Sharaa gèdèg hün baisan yum. Üyè damjsan, udam damjsan iim büjigchin. [...] Biyelgèè gèdèg yum n', zahchiny biyelgèè gèdèg yum ustgahgüi, üye udam damjaad ingèèd yavch baigaa yum chin. Bi èniig chadah yostoi. Minii ètsèg chadaj baisan yum chin' bi chadah yostoi l gèsèn zorilgotoi. Gèhdèè minii ètsèg chin' odoo ingèèd бүр, Mongol *ulsyn*, бүр èнè, zahchiny бүр nèrtèi biyèlgèèchin, morin huurch, бүр aldartai tiim, Sharaan Banzaa gèdèg hün baij baisan, odoo èнè hümüüs bol tanina doo, èнè urlag sudlaachid bol бүгд tanina doo. Tègèèd tiim hün baisan, tèr hün chin' manai aav chin' odoo ingèèd biyelj baihad chin' бүр èнè hoyor dal, dal yalaa, èнè хүний тий? èнè hoyor dal baidgii shdèè, èнүүгèèèè бүр ingèèd aragshaagaa unaad, gazar tsohiod bosood irdèg, tiim hün baisan baihgüi yüü. Tègj biyeldeg, biyelgèèni tèr ontslog tèr baihgüi yüü, hamgiin gol n' zahchin biyelgèè biyelj baigaa hün, dal zaaval tsohiih yostoi.*

## ABSTRACTS

This article questions cultural and heritage-making policies in contemporary Mongolia, using the example of the Oirat's *bii biyelgèè* dance, inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in need of urgent safeguarding in 2009. As it is both the dance of minority groups and a paragon of national nomadic culture, this study proposes to rethink the transmission of the *bii biyelgèè* within the framework of heritagisation processes. It aims at considering its historical roots (both political and epistemological), as well as the relational positioning of a variety of local actors including recognised “heirs” as well as “users” of heritage. Heritage is viewed as a heuristic lens through which identity-making processes and cultural negotiation in the socialist and post-socialist countries of Eurasia as well as on the global stage can be understood.

Cet article interroge les politiques culturelles et de patrimonialisation en Mongolie contemporaine, en prenant l'exemple de la danse *bij biyelgèè* des Oirates, inscrite sur la liste du patrimoine culturel immatériel nécessitant une sauvegarde urgente de l'UNESCO. Le *bij biyelgèè* étant à la fois la danse de groupes minoritaires et un parangon de la culture nomade nationale, l'auteur propose de repenser la place de la transmission dans les processus de patrimonialisation, en tenant compte de leurs racines historiques (à la fois politiques et épistémologiques), ainsi que du positionnement relationnel de plusieurs acteurs locaux : les “héritiers” reconnus du patrimoine et les autres “utilisateurs”. Ainsi, la patrimonialisation peut être considérée comme une perspective heuristique pour comprendre les processus de construction et de négociation des identités culturelles dans les pays socialistes et post-socialistes d'Eurasie et sur la scène globale.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Mongolia, dance, heritage, nomadism, identity, culture, public policies

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