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BOTH HOMELAND
AND HOST SOCIETY

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Avuncular Terminology in Buriad Diaspora Relationships with both Homeland and Host Society¹

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Abstract

The significance of the kinship relationship between the mother's brother and the sister's son (avunculate) was one of the most discussed topics in the history of social anthropology. Two theories of pre-Schneiderian age – descent and alliance approaches – both consider avuncular relations as tense and contradictive, associated with certain privileges of the maternal uncle and his senior hierarchical position in relations to the ego. This paper tries to show the relevance of the classic anthropological theme for contemporary social and political realities in Buriad society, specifically to extend the discussion of the classificatory/metaphorical use of avuncular kinship terminology to a new context – that of diaspora relationships with both homeland and host society. There is a tendency in recent kinship studies to argue that kinship terminology can be employed very flexibly to handle relationships of various kinds, and that kinship terms should often be understood as referring to a kind of social relationship rather than to a specifically genealogical connection. Two cases, which I present in the paper, show how Buriad diaspora communities in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (China) involve the avuncular relationship to define both their concerns and tensions in relations to colonisers in the homeland in Russia and the social inequality of migrants in the host society. This local phenomenon shows that kinship terminology continues to have a wider social significance, being used, for example, to express current inequalities of power and the impact of political changes on local experience.

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Introduction

In this paper I will discuss ethnographic material that I collected during fieldwork conducted during a series of field studies between 2007 and 2009³ in Buriad⁴ diaspora communities in north-eastern Mongolia (Dornod and Hentii provinces), in China (Inner Mongolia, Hülün Buir – see map), and in the homeland for many of them, Zabaikal'ski *krai* and Buryatia in Russia's Eastern Siberia.



Aga Buriads diaspora in Mongolia and China

Here I will talk in particular about the Aga Buriads⁵, who constitute the majority among Buriads living in the diaspora, and focus specifically on the diasporic context of Buriad kinship and the metaphorical use of avuncular kinship terminology. I give a short account of avuncular relations among different groups of Mongols, along with an analysis of mother's brother (MB) and sister's son (ZS) relations among Buriads. I explore in which social context and for what social purposes avuncular terminology has been adopted in the Buriad diaspora. Two cases presented in the paper show that in dyadic relations of MB/ZS the Buriad diaspora flexibly place themselves as the ego in

³ Modern Buriads are scattered in three countries: Russia, Mongolia, and China. According to the 2002 census, there were a total of 445 thousand Buriads in Russia, mostly living in eastern Siberia in three administrative units: Irkutsk region, Buriad Republic, and Zabaikal'ski *krai* region. About 42 thousand Buriads live in Mongolia, mostly in the eastern *aimags* (provinces). There is no accurate official data about the Buriad population in China because they are officially counted under the wider heading of 'Mongols' in ethnic identity categories. Buriads in China call themselves 'Shenehen Buriads' after the name of the place they live now, in Hülün Buir League of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. Shenehen community elders talk about seven thousand people in their community.

⁴ Throughout this article I use the spelling 'Buriad' rather than the alternative 'Buriat' or the Russian spelling 'Buryat' as: (1) it is the way in which Buriad literary language provides official spelling based on Cyrillic according to the Buriad-Oros Dictionary (Cheremisov 1973), and (2) the Buriad language only has the status of one of the official languages in the Buriad Republic (Russia), but neither in Mongolia nor Inner Mongolia (China). The Khori dialect was taken as a frame for Buriad literary language.

⁵ Their name 'Aga Buriads' derives from their homeland in the Aga steppe (situated nowadays in Zabaikal'ski *krai*) close to the Mongolian border and characterises mostly their territorial belonging. Aga Buriads belong to the Khori clan family, the main group of the 'eastern Buriads'.

different positions: (1) in relations to MB, in which MB is used as a metaphor for the homeland and the people, who expelled them from there; and (2) in relations with ZS, in which ZS is used as a metaphor for a dominant ethnic group in the current host society.

This paper tries to establish the relevance of the classic anthropological theme for contemporary social and political realities in Buriad society, specifically to extend the discussion of the classificatory/metaphorical use of avuncular kinship terminology to a new context – that of diaspora relationships between homeland and host society. I argue that metaphorical usage of avuncular terminology in the diaspora should be understood within the broader context of Buriad kinship and its genealogical understanding of MB/ZS relations. What emerges from the Buriad diaspora material also shows that the kin term for traditionally tense relations has been put to a new metaphorical use to describe current social conflicts and to express diasporic concerns and tensions with both the homeland and the host society.

I should make clear the meanings of the terms ‘homeland’, ‘kin-majority’, and ‘kin-minority’, which I use here. Diaspora studies offer different connotations of the term ‘homeland’ stressing its changing meaning, along with its basic reference to the place to which an ethnic group holds a long history and a deep cultural association, or the country in which a particular national identity began in modern times (Cohen 1996; Markowitz 2004). Referring to the Buriad example, different groups of Buriads moved from Mongolia into the Baikal area, and the various Buriad genealogies and chronicles show that Mongolia was a place of ‘origin of their lineages’ (*ug garbal*) and is still perceived as the ‘historical homeland’ (Tsydendambaev 2001). Ideas of a prophetic return to their historical homeland in Mongolia were widespread and led to desires of the people to find the Promised Land there (Stroganova 1999; Empson 2006; Hüreibaatar 2007). After becoming subjects of the Russian Tsar, their mobility was limited by the state boundaries imposed between Russia and the Qing Dynasty during the 18th century. Buriads then continued to expand eastwards and southwards of Lake Baikal, and groups of the Khori clan moved into the Aga steppe closer to the Mongolian border during the 19th century, which became their ‘actual homeland’ (*nutag*). In diasporic practice, nostalgic yearnings are associated with particular places, which they separated in the Aga *nutag*: the parental village and individual birthplace (*toonto nutag*)⁶ at family pasture. From cross-generation perspectives in the diaspora, the notion of the ‘homeland’ changes again and denotes the place where migrants finally settled in a host country, i.e. the place they inhabited and ‘are in the process of making it the homeland’⁷ (*nutaglaja baina*) for the next generation. In this paper I will show how the interplay with different notions of ‘homeland’ was used by the diaspora to justify their recent migration to Mongolia, to claim that it was a ‘return’ to their ‘old homeland’ and a reunion with people of the same origin.

As the alienation of the Buriad diaspora communities from their kin in the homeland was comparatively recent (less than a hundred years ago), they still share the principal features of Buriad kinship and trace their personal genealogies to Buriad (mostly Khori) lineages. An estimated 30 per cent of Aga Buriads fled to Mongolia and Manchuria according to recent data presented by Nimaev (2007). Thus I use the term ‘kin-minority’ to refer to people who moved away and ‘kin-majority’ to those who stayed behind at parental villages in the homeland.

⁶ *Toonto nutag* is someone’s birthplace, where his/her placenta was buried under the doorstep of the parental *ger* (house). In contrast to *ovoo*, which is a communal place for worshiping lineage ancestors or local deities (*gajaryn ejen*), *toonto* is an individual and private space for worshiping certain predecessors (parents or grandparents) at their *buusa* (household).

⁷ All translations of quotations from Russian and Buriad are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

It also should be noted that these cases present an entirely ‘internal’ theme in the diaspora’s discourse and have been ‘listened in’ by me during private conversations of other people. These cases are very interesting because they present examples of a certain tension between the diaspora’s self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of a community’s introspection. My knowledge of the Khori dialect allowed me to work without interpreters and official attendants and just to listen to what people were talking about. My position as an ‘anthropologist’ in the field reminded me very much of the situation described by Bulag of his fieldwork in Mongolia. He distinctively belonged neither to the category of foreign anthropologists, because of his Inner Mongolian origin, nor to the category of native anthropologists (Bulag 1998: 6). My different identities (female Buriad from Russia with Aga Buriad family roots, currently working in the West but researching Buriad diasporas) were also puzzling to many people. Finally, my social niche was identified in a natural way through kinship characteristics: whose daughter I am, to whom I am married, whether or not I have children, and how close or distant I may be in genealogical relationship. Being identified as *nutage tyrel basagan*⁸ (a junior female kin from the homeland) I was treated in most cases with sympathy, as one of them who is also involved in re-establishing relations with kin scattered in three countries. Sometimes I felt that elders were likely to treat me as insufficiently ‘mature’ to explore such important issues as Buriad history and politics, which are – as they believe – mostly a male prerogative.

The use of Buriad, Khalkh Mongolian, Russian, and Chinese or even mixture of these languages among Buriads depends on the country and the region they live in. Part of my research was conducted in Russia, informants there mostly speak the Khori-Buriad dialect and Russian languages. In China, the diaspora speak the Khori-Buriad dialect with the influence of the local Barga Mongol dialect, widely using mongolised versions of Chinese terms. In Mongolia, they actively use Khalkh Mongolian and the Khori-Buriad dialects, also mixed in a hybrid form. Inevitably, difficulties arise if one attempts to use a unified transliteration for all these languages and various dialects of these languages. The system of transliteration of non-Slavic languages in Cyrillic script was extended to Buriad according to the official spelling taken from the *Buriad-Oros Dictionary* by Cheremisov (1973). Explanations are added where necessary to some versions of dialect and historical words.

Avuncular Relations in Kinship Studies and in Mongol Society

Appealing to the mother’s brother (MB) and sister’s son (ZS) controversy in social anthropology, the significance of the avunculate in kinship studies has been one of the most discussed topics in the history of social anthropology. Even if it faded from the major topics of the discipline after the 1960s, when much scholarship on the topic was produced (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 2008 [1958]; Goody 1959; Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949] and others), Bloch and Sperber (2006) recently again drew attention to the ethnographically widespread avunculate and reviewed different theories that have been used to account for it, mostly in patrilineal societies. Being aware of the kinship critique formulated by Schneider and his followers, Bloch and Sperber (2006: 337) show their agreement that “phenomena described by anthropologists under the label of kinship, are cultural and therefore

⁸ In the Buriad language the word ‘*basagan*’ has several meanings: girl, daughter, young woman. Specifying me as ‘*tyrel basagan*’, elders in the Buriad diaspora put me in the category of junior female relatives: younger sisters, daughters and grand daughters.

historical constructions, and that people's thoughts and actions are about these constructions rather than about immediate facts of biological kinship." Nevertheless, in their view, biological factors should not be abandoned in the explanation of these cultural constructions. Concerning the avunculate, they see it as one of a number of cross-cultural regularities and connect it to Fortes' and Goody's earlier idea that all human beings actually trace kinship bilaterally, and contradiction arises between a universally bilateral kinship system and an occasionally occurring unilineal descent system. However, if they live in a patrilineal system, that system will favour inheritance only patrilineally. As it goes against natural impulses (the tendency of altruism and sentiments to close kin), a specific favouring of a man's sisters' children in a patrilineal system acts as a compensatory device to relieve the tension in relations between mother's brother and sister's children, allowing resources to actually flow bilaterally. Bloch and Sperber come to the conclusion that the avunculate in patrilineal societies is not inevitable, its forms are not everywhere the same, and many local and historical factors need to be taken into account:

"The various manifestations that so many anthropologists have recognized as different instances of the peculiar mother's brother – sister's son relations are clearly cognate, and it is an interesting fact that, in many places in the world, people consider the relationship between mother's brother and sister's son as very special and very interesting, but these cases also turn out, on close examination, to be very varied – sometimes involving symmetrical jokes, sometimes asymmetrical joking, sometimes avoidance, sometimes significant economic privileges, sometimes sexual rights, and sometimes only ritual manifestations, and, furthermore, though in some cases it is actual mother's brothers and sister's sons who have the rights in question, sometimes the relation involves wider classificatory groups." (Bloch and Sperber 2006: 116)

As an alternative approach became known as alliance theory developed later by Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]), all the relationships, including that between mother's brother and sister's son, are understood in a classificatory sense, i.e. as referring to groups of people, internally related by unilineal descent from the previous generation and externally related by the exchange of women. In this context, a man's MB could be anyone belonging to a clan from whom any member of his lineage received a wife. She may come from a different descent group, a different alliance group, and a different territorial and political group. In some societies, the exchange relationships between lineages are meant to be permanent.⁹ In others, relationships can change with each generation. There is often a rank distinction between 'wife-givers' and 'wife-takers', although which is considered superior varies between societies. In the Mongolian kinship system, which extensively used generalised exchange, 'wife-givers' are considered senior to 'wife-takers'. This rank distinction was often projected to political relations with neighbouring peoples indicating power positions in political alliances. For example, in Mongol-Manchu marriage relationships, which were practiced starting from the 17th century, the Mongol elite married daughters of the conquering Manchu elite, and a special term *tabnan* (son-in-law or wife-taker) pointed out the dependant position of the Mongols in this alliance (Jagchid 1986; Bulag 1998).

Within the general set-up of these theories – even if MB/ZS relations can be treated in different ways – both the descent (of which the Bloch and Sperber paper is an example) and alliance approaches consider avuncular relations as being tense and contradictive, associated with certain

⁹ For example, the Kachin of Burma and the Purum of India are among classic anthropological examples (Leach 2004 [1958] and Needham 1983). Shirokogoroff focused on permanent exchange relationships between lineages among the Tungus of northern Manchuria (1999 [1935]: 92).

privileges assigned to the maternal uncle and his senior hierarchical position in relations to the ego (Dumont 2006 [1971]).

Various accounts of avuncular relations among peoples of Mongolian origin (including Buriads) have been presented in the substantial literature on Mongols, mostly in terms of concepts developed in descent theory. Ethnographers applied rich historical and linguistic descriptions, folklore, mythology, and norms of the Mongolian customary law to showcase the variety and importance of avuncular relations among the people they studied. It is remarkable that kinship terminology to describe MB/ZS relations is virtually the same in different dialects of the Mongolian language, drawing on the *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* (Starostin et al. 2003). MB is referred to and addressed as *nagasa*, and the sister's children are called *zee* or *zeener*, with some differences depending on dialect and writing systems.¹⁰ Maternal kin are often specified using the relevant terms of respect taken from paternal kinship terminology, such as father (*etsege*, *aba*), elder brother (*aha*), and mother (*ej*). Thus, the maternal father is called *nagasa etsege* or *nagasa aba*, the maternal mother is called *nagasa ej*, and the mother's elder brother is called *nagasa aha*. The question might arise, whether any respectful behaviour goes together with these terms of respect?

It turns out that various groups of Mongols consider MB/ZS relations serious, and people indeed use different forms to express their inherent respect towards *nagasa*. Here are some selected ethnographical accounts: Mostaert stated that maternal kin are highly respected among Ordos Mongols (cited in Krader 1963). Avuncular relations among Kalmyks (a group of western Mongols also known under the name Oirats), as noted by Schorkowitz (2004), also could be tense and antagonistic with the material obligations of the maternal uncle to support his sister's son. As to Khalkh Mongols, they tried to regulate avuncular relations through the norms of customary law (Ryazanovskii 1921). Articles of the Code *Ikh Tsaaz* – consolidated customary law issued after Khalkh Mongols made peace and formed an alliance with Oirats in 1640 – enacted mechanisms of conflict resolution between MB and ZS. For example, article 194 of the Code stated that “*nagasa* should not recover a debt of his *zee* [for a third person]; and, if *zee* steals anything from his maternal uncles, he should not be punished, but should pay back equal cost of the stolen” (*Ikh Tsaaz* 1981 [1640]).¹¹ Lois Schram (1954), describing the social organisation of Monguors (groups of Mongols living in Qinghai and Gansu provinces in China), declared the extraordinary power of MB as an ‘outstanding feature’ of Monguor society. The MB has the right to inflict capital punishment on his sister's children and is metaphorically called in folk aphorism ‘master of *zee*’ (Schram 1954: 98–99). Monguors kinship also gives an example that respectful behaviour towards MB can be even reinforced “over and beyond the inherent respect owed by the ZS” (Krader 1963: 312) through kinship terminology, when MB is called *nage didie*, thus placing MB in the kinship structure as equal to the grandparental generation, because *didi* is a term of the grandparental generation.

¹⁰ The *Etymological Dictionary of the Altaic Languages* provides the following dialectal variations of MB in the Mongolian language: *navaču* in written Mongolian; *naxaču(i)* in middle Mongolian; *nagac* in Khalkh ; *nagasa* or *nagaxaj* in Buriad; *navæ* in Kalmyk; *naga*, *nagan*, *nagã*, *nagači* in Ordos; *nauči*, *naučō*, *naučō*, *nagču* in Dagur; *nagačə* in Shary-Yoghur; *nagə*, *nagai* in Monguor. ZS in Mongolian languages is *žege*, *žige* in written Mongolian; *žeje* in middle Mongolian; *zē* in Khalkha; *zē* in Buriad; *zē* in Kalmyk; *žē* in Ordos; *žə* in Dongxian; *žē* in Dagur; *žī* in Shary-Yoghur; *žē* in Monguor. According to Starostin et al. (2003), the term *nakču* was borrowed from Mongol to Manchu language.

¹¹ Russian translation of the Code extracted from an internet source:

http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/Dokumenty/Mongol/Ojrat_ulozenie_1640/frametext.htm (accessed on 17 August 2010).

All these accounts show that, in different Mongol groups, *nagasa* indeed had a senior hierarchical position in relations with *zee*. Latent tension in relations between *zee* and *nagasa* was considered; certainly *nagasa* was a term of high respect for *zee* and required appropriate respectful behaviour and obedience.

Avuncular Relations in Buriad Society

Recent scholarship on Buriad society continues to emphasise the persisting power of kinship categories for Buriads¹², and avuncular relations is one of the examples. The description of MB/ZS relations among different groups of Buriads has a long scholarly tradition, starting from the early decades of the 20th century or even earlier, see the ethnographic accounts by Khangalov (1958–60 [1903]), Baldayev (1959), Petri (1924), and others. These accounts describe earlier forms of kinship that were later strongly influenced by various factors during the Soviet period. This paper cannot describe them in detail, but to put avuncular relations in the context, let me characterise Buriad kinship briefly.

In anthropological literature, the whole range of Buriad groups have been described as a society, which keeps patrilineal ideology and in which social relations are based on patrilineal and matrilineal kinship, which are both considered important. The knowledge of the ancestors of nine generations of the male line was required, but the knowledge of the ancestors of nine generations of the matrilineal line (*yuhen nagasa*) was also appreciated.¹³ In general, the Buriads followed the rule of patrilocal residence; and property in livestock, the ‘five type of herds’¹⁴ (*taban xushuu mal*), was traditionally distributed among the sons. The youngest son of a family inherits the main body of the parents’ livestock and remains in the father’s house to continue the agnatic household. Examples of matrilocal marriages, when a daughter inherits her parents’ property and brings her husband to her parents’ house (*xyr’ge oroxo*), may happen in the absence of brothers (Gerasimova et al. 2000).

People believe that children inherit their bones from the father’s side (*yahan*) and their flesh (*myahan*) and blood (*shuhan*) from the mother’s side. Relatives from the matrilineal side can be called ‘blood relatives’ (*shuhan tyrel*) or ‘flesh relatives’ (*myahan tyrel*), but the name *nagasanar* for male maternal relatives is used more commonly with further specification of the maternal kindred: *nagasa ahai* (mother’s brother), *nagasa eji* (mother’s mother), *nagasa aba* (mother’s father), *nagasa abgai* (mother’s sister). Kinship terminology also specifies the gender of the sister’s children (*zeenuud*) as *zee xybyyn* for a sister’s/daughter’s son and *zee basagan* for a sister’s/daughter’s daughter. According to the rules of the seniority, the ego should not call any of the senior kin relatives from both sides using their names but only the formal *ta* (you) if addressing them directly.

Ethnographic literature contains rich descriptions of various manifestations of avuncular relations among different Buriad groups mostly based on observations of ceremonies of the life-cycle rituals (the first hair-cutting of the child, *milaanguud*, the cluster of ceremonies accompanying a wedding, and the funeral rituals). Most of them contain ceremonies, which manifest ritual respect toward *nagasa*. For example, *nagasa* is honoured to be the first to cut a child’s hair among other senior kin during *milaanguud* among Aga Buriads (Tsydenova 2007). In the ceremonies accompanying a

¹² Among recent works in Russian on Buriad kinship see Gerasimova et al. (2000), Basaeva (2002), Abaeva and Zhukovskaya (2004). Among publications in English see Humphrey (1998), Shimamura (2004), Empson (2007a, 2007b).

¹³ Baldayev (1970 [1959]) noted public tests among western Buriads, when elders expected that young guests would name not only patrilineal but matrilineal ancestors also.

¹⁴ Sheep, horses, cattle, goats, and more rarely Bactrian camels.

wedding, such as the bride's farewell feast, poetic panegyrics (*magtaal*) praise the lineage of maternal uncles of the bride, and maternal uncles of both participate in the ceremony of the bride-price presentation among Selenga Buriads (Basaeva 1984). Maternal uncles are offered ceremonial gifts of fat when *zee* comes to the wedding of *nagasa*'s son among Irkutsk Buriads (Khangalov 1958–60 [1903]).

Folk moral instructions formulated as sayings also require respectful behaviour towards *nagasa* in everyday practices. Sayings, which I collected among Aga Buriad families living in Russia (Ulan-Ude, Aginsk) and Mongolia (Dashbalbar)¹⁵, require to treat *nagasa* respectfully in the house of *zee*: to offer him the place of honour (“the maternal uncle's seat is high”, *nagasyn huuri deegyyr*) and to “respect his opinion” (*nagasyn yge xundetei*). Restrictive sayings as “Do not eat the shoulder of a lamb [*dala*] in the presence of your maternal uncle” (*nagasynga dergede dala myljeje bolox ygy*) require that the best dishes should first be offered to *nagasa*.

Restrictive rules in relations between *nagasa* and *zee* can be observed in the funeral rituals. In her study of funeral practices among Irkutsk Buriads, Khandagurova (2003) observed strict differentiation among roles of patrilineal and matrilineal male kin during funerals. Even if maternal uncles share most of the preparation duties (to accompany the funeral cortege, to fill up the grave) with agnatic kin, they are still treated as ‘guests’. The presence of the maternal uncles is time restricted – they arrive later, but not too late to accompany the funeral cortege of the *zee*, and leave the funeral feast earlier than patrilineal relatives – and only those who did not come for the funeral can come to the 40-day commemoration. Moreover, rules can be more restrictive for *zee* during the funerals of *nagasa*. Folk sayings of Aga Buriads request to “keep off your maternal uncle's bones” (*nagasyngaa yahanda gar xyrexe ygy*) and prohibit going to the burial place during his funeral (*nagasyngaa xydөөлүүлgede xyyp oshoxo ygy*). It means that *zee*, as a person belonging to another ‘bone’ *yahan* (lineage), is not allowed to touch the body of *nagasa* during his funeral, during the washing of his corpse, changing of the shroud, and accompanying of his funeral cortege. This is the duty of his sons.

Responsibilities and obligations of *nagasa* towards *zee* were fixed in the norms of the Khori Buriad customary law of the 18th and the 19th century (*Obychnoe pravo khorinskikh buryat* 1992). Different cases concerning divorced, widowed, and unmarried women with children involved different levels of material obligations of the maternal uncle to support his sister's children. For example, the maternal uncle was obliged to take care of the illegitimate child, to adopt him, or to find an adoptive family among kin, if the husband did not accept paternity of the child after marrying his sister (Ryazanovskii 1921: 22). The sister's children (*zeener*) saw the maternal uncle as a person, who must offer help and protection. Otherwise it was perceived as ‘very insulting and offending’ for *zee*, and considered ‘disgraceful behaviour’ for *nagasa* (*nagasa zeenere gomodxooxo yoho ёho ygy*). Folk songs praise *nagasa* with generous and decent behaviour calling him ‘golden’ (*altan*) and ‘dear’ (*xairatai*) *nagasa*, who can be compared with an ‘ocean of gifts’ to his *zee* (*zeenerte belegei dalai*). Grateful *zee* appreciate him in return wishing *nagasa* to have long life and happiness (*ami nahandaa jargaltai yabyt, ayaa xairatai nagasa*)¹⁶.

It is interesting that a call for help is addressed not only to *nagasa*, but to the protective spirits (*ongon tegeri*) of his lineage, “Heaven of the maternal uncle, help me!” (Buriad: *nagasyn tengeri, tyhalyt!*). Sayings such as “the maternal uncle's star is bright” (*nagasyn odon exe*) or “the maternal

¹⁵ Interpretations and comments to these sayings are heavily based on the explanations of my informants.

¹⁶ Cited from *Magtaal ureel, solo* (1995: 17). Ulan-Ude: Buriadai nomoi kheblel. An editor of the volume is not indicated.

uncle's heaven is high" (*nagasyn tengeri ynder*) are the examples not only of pleasing him, but obviously enduing *nagasa* with supernatural power. It seems that *nagasa*, as a person through whom maternal ancestral spirits deliver protection, should be treated as if he were *ongon* in shamanic practice. If the *ongood* are 'fed' by offerings, in like manner, *nagasa* is offered the best dish. And *nagasa* is offered a place in the 'place of honour' in the northern part of the *ger* (house), where the family's protective deities are usually placed in a *taxil* (family altar). This is probably the pragmatic reason for respecting *nagasa*, because he gives *zee* diversity with the links traced to maternal ancestors in addition to paternal ones and widens the pantheon of protective spirits as a result.

Thus, to displease *nagasa*, first of all, means to displease the spirits protecting the maternal side. If *zee* were pushed out from under the protective umbrella of the maternal side's spirits, he/she would become very vulnerable and even unsafe, because maternal spirits can severely punish in return. Sayings warn *zee* of temperamental behaviour: "if you dare raise your hand against your maternal uncle, that hand will be paralysed" (*nagasada gar xyrøø haa, halga boloxo*) and "the maternal uncle's curse is heavy" (*nagasyn xaraal xynde*). To link the general reflections with my personal relations with one of my *nagasa*, I want to add that my atheistic mind was seriously undermined after I injured my knee in an accident (as I thought). My mother commented that the "maternal uncle's curse has reached you [me]" (*nagasyn xaraal xyrøø*) and reminded me of my conflict with her elder brother¹⁷ and made me consider relations with my maternal uncles more seriously.

According to predominating Marxist social evolution theory in the Buriad studies of Soviet time, avuncular relations, even if observed among different Buriad groups were viewed as a 'remnant of the past' (Rus. *perezhitki proshlogo*) (e.g. Viatkina 1946: 142), nevertheless Buriad researchers (e.g. Basaeva, Galdanova, and others) continued to write about other interesting examples and evidence of avuncular relations. Present-day ethnographic observations (including mine) show that relations between *zee* and *nagasa* are noticeably important nowadays and still imply status differences. The point to emphasise here is that respecting and honouring maternal uncles still remain in people's mind among the principles of Buriad kinship categories, and little direct antagonism between *zee* and *nagasa* is considered. In my view, this 'remnant' is nowadays rather more 'alive' than before. Modern Buriad society is changing rapidly, and social relations also are under constant transformation. The demographic situation with the high mortality of men of reproductive age in Siberia, emancipation processes, such as economic independence of women and feminisation of migration, a high divorce rate and sexual relations in partnerships without formal marriage, so that children are registered under the mother's father's name, can be counted among the factors which destabilise patrilineal ideology of Buriad society. In this situation the role of maternal relatives becomes more important than ever. Perhaps in these circumstances there will be a renewed interest in those aspects of post-Soviet Buriad kinship concerned with the changing role of maternal uncles among different Buriad groups.

Below I present how the genealogical understanding of avuncular relations in Buriad patrilineal kinship was creatively used by the Buriad diaspora in a wider context to characterise their relations in affinal alliances with neighbouring groups in the homeland and the host society.

¹⁷ This happened many years ago when I was visiting my maternal grandparents in Aginsk during school holidays. As an explosive teenager I did not tolerate the provoking behaviour of *nagasa*, who appeared to be not quite sober, making noise and disturbing everybody in the house.

Avuncular Relations as Kinship Terminology in the Buriad Diaspora Context

As I discussed in the last part, the kin-majority had (and still has) very strong notions of avuncular relations. *Nagasa* is considered a person, who can be supportive and protective of obedient and respectful *zee* or bring curses and misery down on rebellious and disrespectful *zee*. I assume that the kin-minority (the diaspora) had similar ideas of their kin-majority concerning ‘blessings or curses’ coming from *nagasa*, but their life in exile reshaped these notions, emphasising its metaphoric character.

I begin the following part with a short introduction of the historical context of separation and alienation of the kin-minority in exile, which will be helpful to understand the background of the cases described.

Growing dissatisfaction with Russian internal colonial politics was the main reason for Buriads to cross the border and to move into northern Mongolia and Manchuria at the beginning of the 20th century. The first migrants were pushed off their pastures by the mass colonisation of Russian settlers and violent clashes between Russian peasants and Buriad herdsmen. The second wave of migration was caused by the Russian Revolution, which signalled the beginning of a period of perilous transition. The new social order and revolutionary class-struggle affected and split Buriad society. People, who could not tolerate the Russian colonialism and political changes in Siberia and who were not tolerated by the new revolutionary order either, left their homeland. Indeed, many of them fell into categories of class enemies: wealthy herders, families of nobility (*noyon*) accompanied by families of dependant commoners, Buddhist clergy (*lama*), the Buriad Cossacks who served in the Tsarist army, and those who were involved in Buriad ‘self-defence units’ (Russian: *otriyady samooborony*) headed by Dugar Tapkhaev¹⁸ to guard Buriad villages against armed marauding raiders of whichever colour, ‘Whites’ or ‘Reds’.

Living close to the Mongolian border made it easier for Aga Buriads to cross the border. They settled in small cluster communities in proximity to the Russian border based on kin and previous community networks, hoping that they would eventually return. But the new revolutionary order in Russia labelled the Buriad diaspora ‘politically unreliable, dangerous elements’ (e.g. ‘anti-Bolsheviks’, ‘traitors’, ‘Pan-Mongol nationalists’, ‘Japanese spies’, etc.)¹⁹ during the 1930s in Mongolia and continued to hunt them down after the expulsion of Japanese troops from Manchuria in 1945.²⁰ Punitive mass operations of the ‘NKVD’²¹ (Soviet secret police) for many years kept the kin-majority in Aga in fear, they were suspected of keeping contact with the diaspora and the Soviets tried to trace fugitives through these kin relations. The drama of the Buriad diaspora consisted of the fact that, even if they escaped from Russia, they continued to be subject to Russian/Soviet persecution, through either the Stalin-style regime in Mongolia or the Maoist government in China.

The following section consists of two sub-arguments concerning two cases, which exemplify differing metaphorisations of avuncular relations in diasporic practices.

¹⁸ Recent publications of the archival materials show that Tapkhaev later tried to use the Russian warlords baron Ungern and ataman Semenov to bring the Buriads together with other Mongols in a Pan-Mongol movement (Kuz'min 2004).

¹⁹ Using different labels for Buriads depended on political charges against them and Soviet style politics in particular political period in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. In particular, among recent publications of Mongolian historians about public policies towards Buriads in Mongolia at that period see Ountungalag (2004) and Tseren (2004).

²⁰ The Soviet Union started its full-scale military action in the ‘oriental theatre of operations’ against Japan and entered Manchuria shortly after the defeat of fascist Germany in 1945. As an ally of fascist Germany during the Second World War, Japan was preparing to expand from Manchuria into Russian Siberia and Mongolia (Saaler 2006).

²¹ NKVD – Russian abbreviation for People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

Case 1: ego and 'a curse' of nagasa

One morning, when an émigré Buriad family in Shenehen had breakfast, family members suddenly heard the rising noise of heavy Russian aircrafts flying overhead to bomb the frontier positions of the Japanese Kwantung Army near the Chinese city of Hailar. The head of the family, Sambu²², commented the situation “Our mother’s relatives arrived!” (*ejimnai tyrel erev*). When bombs from the Russian aircrafts started accidentally falling in the proximity, he called the bombs falling on their heads “gifts from our maternal uncles” (*nagatatne beleg*).

Sambu’s son Jargal rendered this episode from his childhood emphasising elements of bitterness and sarcasm in his father’s comments about the Russians, whom he mentioned as “mother’s relatives” and “maternal uncles”. Obviously, Sambu could not have referred to the Russians as his biological maternal uncles. His son Jargal denied any immixing of Russian blood in his family and was sure of his Buriad ‘purity’. Their family genealogy, the *ugai bichig* of the Bodonguud lineage²³ displayed only males in the agnatic line, and links through women who might have been of different origin (including Russian) are not identifiable. The only way he could refer to them in such a manner was the long-standing neighbouring relations between Buriads and Russians in his homeland. What was so special in these relations that allowed him to use kin-idioms of avuncular relations toward Russians? I basically ask two questions: was it common practice among Buriads to use kin-idioms when they considered their relations to Russians? Or was it just his individual mode of reflection upon the former neighbours?

There is a thesis in anthropology that kinship itself is a process of becoming; that kinship can be constructed not only by biology (conception and birth), but also through growing and living together in one household as Janet Carsten (2004 [1995]) argues. Carsten’s thesis supports my argument that living side by side with Russians for several centuries involved Buriads and Russians in various forms of ‘social’ kinship in addition to a certain number of external marriages with Russians.²⁴ Thus, applying kin-idioms was the way to reflect on the nature of this relatedness. It can be seen from available historical literature, that there was a set of kin-idioms used by Buriads towards Russians and the Russian state. It seems that differences in the historical context entailed a different use of kin-idioms, and what social groups applied them for which purposes. Most of these kin-idioms can be grouped into the following categories: (1) intra-family caring relationships, especially adult-child, which constitute a core metaphor among kin-idioms; (2) relationships between siblings, which can imply both equality and subordination. I start with the above two categories to show that usage of certain kin-idioms reflects a transition in relations with Russians. I assume that if one set of kin-idioms was used to consider relations with Russians as being coherent (e.g. as between parents and children, or between siblings), another set of kin-idioms was assigned new usage to show tensions and conflicts in relations with Russians – namely that of avuncular relations. Reflections of Khori Buriads about their relations with Russians give many examples of the situational use of these kin-idioms.

²² All names of informants are pseudonyms.

²³ *Bodonguud* is one of the eleven lineages of Khori Buriads.

²⁴ The occasional immixing with neighbours changed the physical features of many Buriad and Russian individuals. German geographer and ethnographer Pallas, who travelled to eastern Siberia at the end of the 18th century, already noted the existence of a mixed-race population in some settlements (Pallas 1989 [1788]). It is interesting that ataman Semenov himself was of mixed origin having a Buriad mother of the Khori clan. He was born in the Russian Cossack settlement (*stanitsa*) on the Onon River near the Mongolian border, and Khori Buriads were his ‘maternal uncles’.

Adult-Child Caring Relationships

I start with examples of the most widely used kin-idiom, that of adult-child caring relationships. When Khori Buriads decided they wish to remain on the territory under Russian control, they voluntarily became subjects of the Russian Tsar. They recognised him as ‘*manai Ejen*’ (our master), just as the Qing Emperor was the *Ejen Khan* for other Mongols. This is another example, how the term *geriin ejen* (the head of a household) was extrapolated to the social order in polity along with the Mongolian notions of the universal order, argued earlier by David Sneath (2007). I suggest that in this case *ejen* (as the head of a household) can be considered as a kin-idiom, because it reflects the superiority of the father as the head of the household and the subjected position of other family members living in that household. In the language of kinship, subordinates often view their rulers as a ‘father or parent’ and correspondingly position themselves as ‘sons and daughters’. As the Russian historian V. Trepavlov observed in his study *White Tsar*²⁵: *the image of the monarch and of allegiance among peoples of Russia from the 15th to the 18th century* it was common in Russian imperial tradition that both Russian and non-Russian subordinates viewed the Russian Tsars as ‘merciful fathers’ (Russian: *Tsar batyushka*); according the sacred image of the merciful and protecting paternal ruler to Russian Tsars was common for many colonised ethnic groups of Central Asia and Siberia (Trepavlov 2007). Khori Buriads appreciated that the territory under Russian control afforded them peace and stability. The Russian colonial authorities practiced different forms of indirect rule over Buriads, and Khori clan leaders (*taisha*) as leaders of large and united kin groups were more independent from the Russian colonial administration than other Buriad groups. At the early stage of their relations, Khori leaders had a strong bargaining position to acquire and to extend grazing land in exchange for their allegiance to the Russian Tsars. Allegiance was fixed by duties and obligations in the form of taxes, military service in the Russian army, and occasional additional duties (e.g. transportation service, building roads, fencing internal borders, etc.) negotiated with the Khori leaders. In return, they were honoured by statehood investitures, such as titles, standards of the Siberian non-regular military units, awards, access to Russian formal education, etc. The first cases of rivalry over land between Buriads and local Russians were successfully resolved by Khori Buriads, very much in line with the Mongol perception of aristocratic order. A delegation of Khori aristocratic leaders, headed by Turakin, travelled to St. Petersburg in 1702 to meet the highest Russian aristocratic leader and *Ejen* (ruler) of the state – the Russian Tsar (at the time Peter the Great). His imperial edict was the first official document that protected Khori Buriad pastures from uncontrolled land acquisition. It was probably the high point of Buriad confidence and trust in the Russian establishment, and it was believed that ‘aristocratic order’ could henceforth be used as a mechanism of conflict resolution in relations between neighbours. Impressed with the imperial reception and the power of the Russian imperial statehood, Khori leaders glorified Peter the Great in their songs of the time as a “holy and blessed” merciful ruler, who had “firm and wonderful words” (Tulokhonov 1973: 100). Moreover, there was a sort of divine kinship, as part of which the Russian Tsars were revered as emanations of protective Buddhist gods: “Called White Khan (...) Reincarnation of the White Tara – divine mother (...) Our holy master” (*Sagaan xaan neretei (...) Sagaan Dara exein xubilgaan (...) Manai ezen bogdo lo*) (quoted from Tulokhonov 1973: 100). After the official patronisation of Buddhism

²⁵ There are different opinions why Russian Tsars were entitled as ‘White Tsars’ among Turkic and Mongolian peoples. Suggestions are based on different semantics of the word ‘white’, which can mean ‘west’, ‘noble’, and ‘great’. One of them, in particular, refers to the history of the Golden Horde, when Russian Tsars were subjects of the ‘western part’ (White Horde) of the Golden Horde (Trepavlov 2007: 27).

in 1741 by the Russian Empress, Catherine the Great, she too was declared to be the reincarnation of the Buddhist goddess of mercy, the ‘Mother White Tara’ (*Tsagaan Dara-exe*). All the successive Russian Tsars were formally associated with the Buddhist god ‘The White Elder’ (*Tsagaan ybgen*) (Abaeva et al. 2004). To the Buriads, applying these adult-child caring kin-idioms (e.g. *bogdo ejen*, *Tsagaan Dara-exe*, *Tsagaan ybgen*) to the Russian Tsars at the early stage of colonial relations was but one more indication that they viewed the Russian rulers as legitimate overlords, expressed through the symbols of Mongolian political-religious tradition. The Buriads also appreciated that they had been accepted into a strong alliance, in which their new ally was superior in many ways.

Relations between Siblings

In contrast to kin-idioms with which Khori political and religious leaders addressed the Russian Tsars, another group of kin-idioms characterises relations of a later period – that of establishing broad contacts between Russian settlers and Buriads. These ‘brotherhood’ kin-idioms referred to relations between siblings, and it is significant that they can express both equality and subordination. As many researchers have noted, Buriad-Russian contact situations stimulated mutual influence upon one another, economically and culturally reciprocal relations between two neighbouring communities (Bolonev 1992; Humphrey 1998; Buraeva 2000; and others). Khori Buriad historical chronicles of the 19th century (e.g. Yumsumov, *The Origin and History of the Eleven Khori Buriad Lineages* 1995 [1875]) described how Buriads learned from Russians to cut hay, to sow wheat and corn, to build fences for cattle and wooden houses to live in. Buriad families formed long-standing trade relations with Russian families, and there were the special terms *nuker* (friend) and *anda nuker* (friend and brother) for the trusted partners. Russian colonists also used the word *nuker* for Buriad partners from whom they learned cattle farming, leather working, and milk processing technologies (Bolonev 1992). There are mentions in Buriad diaspora narratives from Dashbalbar that Buriads used to send their sons to stay with the families of Russian *nukers* to learn Russian technologies such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and brick stove-setting while they lived in the homeland (Rinchinova 2007). Sometimes they would name their sons in honour of their Russian friend, thus involving both families into a parenthood shared between exchange partners. Reading the local press and records of the labour units of Buriad communities in Dashbalbar, Erentsav, and Dadal (e.g. by Regzendorzh 2003; Mahabarada 2005; Gantogtox 2005; and others), one notices that many people, primarily among the first generation of emigrés, had Russian names misspelled in a specific manner according to Buriad pronunciation, for example ‘Mikhula’ for Nikolai or ‘Bolodi’ for Vladimir. Because Khori Buriads were devoted Buddhists, presumably this was not a question of baptismal names, but merely names from Russian neighbours familiar to the Buriads from their homeland.

There was another form of symbolic kinship relatedness through military service in the Russian army and participating in war actions similar to ‘brotherhood-in-arms’. Nevertheless, the army is in fact, as Patrick Heady (2003) notes, an ideal institution for expressing hierarchical relationships, such as is subordination to a higher authority in the kin structure. Cossack units constituted a special group among the Buriads and accounted for nearly 15 per cent of the Transbaikalian population (Rupen 1964: 10), thus extending Russian influence. It is declared in Buriad Cossack oath-songs that they “became sworn brothers of the Russians forevermore” (Russian: *na veka*

pobratavshis' s russkimi).²⁶ For Jargal's family this was not just an abstract point, his father Sambu (a person who exposed this important comment for our study), was a member of a Buriad Cossack unit incorporated in the Transbaikal Cossack Host serving along the internal border²⁷. Together with other Siberian Cossacks, Sambu personally fought for Russia during the First World War against the Germans in 1914. As Jargal said about his father, "(...) he [Sambu] went west as far as Austria-Hungary and came back with no 'wounds' [*sharha*], the chest full of Russian Crosses of St. George."²⁸ Historical surveys on Siberian Cossacks support my opinion that Sambu was a member of the ataman Semenov cavalry brigade, which was the only unit from Siberia sent to the western front.²⁹ Jargal probably left this fact unmentioned on purpose. Possible connections of Sambu to ataman Semenov also could have caused his escape from Russia after the 1920s. Many diasporic families preferred to keep silent about the shadowy past of their fathers to secure their lives in a host country.

As mentioned above, there was a sense of relatedness of composite character with Russians. It was based on genealogical connections, exchange relations with local Russians, joint military service in the imperial army, divine relatedness, and the paternalism of the Russian Tsars and Russian statehood. In addition, Buriads widely used different kin-idioms to characterise certain degrees of ethnic group cohesion.

Kin-Idioms in a Modern Mongolian Context

However, the Russian colonial advance turned into gradual ethnic deprivation of Buriads. The end of the 19th century saw conceptual 'ideological misunderstandings' of Khori Buriads concerning their actual position in relations with Russians and the Russian state: the loyal subordinates and good neighbours (considering themselves friends and brothers) came to be treated as a deprived, colonised people. By the beginning of the 20th century, many setbacks were disappointing: the best pastures along the Ingoda River were lost due to the mass arrival of new Russian settlers; the prestige of clan leaders declined as well as their ability to protect their kinsmen and their pastures; and there was a sudden mass loss of Buriad men, who had been recruited as field forces (Russian: *rekvizitsiya inorodtsev*) by Russian authorities to dig war trenches at the western front and at the Kola peninsula. Very few of the almost 30,000 recruited came back (Zhalsanova 2007). Most of the families were left without support and potential guards from illegal and aggressive land acquisition by new settlers. Earlier Khori clan leaders had been able to buffer external colonial impacts and to prevent broad contacts of their kin groups with events outside Buriad surroundings. Scattered pastures with no defined limits to the east allowed for periodic relocation of Khori Buriads every time the arrival of new Russian settlers made land scarcer. From the perspectives of Khori Buriads, outlined in their chronicles of the 19th century (e.g. Toboev 1995 [1863]; Yumsunov 1995 [1875]), their territorial expansion to the east to the Aga steppe was presented as an attempt to find alternatives with the local Russian administration, which connived at the violation of the land

²⁶ Cited according to Lambaev (2005).

²⁷ Ethnic military units of Buriads and Xamnigans were formed by the Russian paramilitary administration in Siberia to perform security and administrative functions in the Transbaikal border area that had traditionally been the domain of the Russian Siberian Cossacks.

²⁸ Imperial Russia's highest military decoration for bravery.

²⁹ Semenov's biographers Borisov (1921) wrote that Semenov's raids wreaked such havoc that "afterwards the name of the 'yellow [*Buryat*] Cossack' induced horror amongst the Germans" (quoted according to Bisher 2005: 27). Semenov also described an episode when he walked with his fellow Buriad soldiers to the Kremlin, "where they encountered Russians who refused to believe that they were not Japanese" (quoted according to Bisher 2005: 26).

division between two neighbouring groups. Chronicles also present detailed descriptions of how they lost their lands, which they claimed according to earlier agreements with the Russian administration (Yumsunov 1995 [1875]: 80), and acknowledged the increasing inability of clan leaders to regulate land tenure in legal ways due to the canny judicial adjustments of the local colonial administration (Yumsunov 1995 [1875]: 77–78) and corruption (Toboev 1995 [1863]: 11 and 23–24). Land survey data was very schematic and insufficient, in many places Buriad pastures were interlaced with land of Russian settlements inciting tension and open conflicts between neighbours. This situation became the foundation for the unpleasant ethnic stereotypes and turned into ethnic hostility with new settlers. In contrast to Russian *sibiryaks* (old settlers), new settlers behaved as conquerors raiding the neighbouring Buriad settlements along the Ingoda, Onon, and Ilya Rivers. The ‘excesses’ of violence were not ignored in popular memory, and memories of the elder generation in the homeland and in the diaspora communities still are too vivid to allow them to feel at peace with Russians.

Aga Buriads probably reacted more desperately to the change for the worse, for them it was a very drastic and rapid change in relations with Russians and the Russian state. Their loyal and respectful treatment of senior and powerful quasi-kin was answered with ‘disgraceful and offending’ behaviour. Protection by the state authorities and the Tsar ceased, cooperation and friendly relations with former quasi-brothers ended, and all that remained was antagonism, violence, and losses. The absence of alternatives gave credence to the argument voiced by ethnic and Buddhist leaders that decisive remedial action must be taken. In the colonial context, this could mean revolt and ethnic uprising, which took place locally here and there, but in the context of the Mongolian nomadic society, Khori Buriads again used their mobility as a survival technique. Part of them broke the alliance relations with the Russians and just moved away seeking refuge with other Mongol groups. But the former ally of the kin-minority continued to be an actual ally for the kin-majority, thus the kin-minority could not change the general pattern of identification they had followed in the homeland. The former ally could not be excluded from the category of ‘relatives’, but his identity could be manipulated and removed into a different genealogical relationship: thus removed in the genealogy to relatives from the maternal side (*ejiiin tyrel*) or *nagasa*. The Russian *nagasa* became insulting and dangerous, depriving his *zee* of protection, support, land in common use, and the surrounding of direct kin in the homeland; now his protective spirits became punitive. Diaspora elders explain that “together with the homeland [we] have lost everything” (*nutaga aldaad byxiigөө aldabdi*). The ‘heavy curse’ of *nagasa* followed the rebellious *zee* even if they were far away from each other. There was a widespread allegorical notion among Buriads in Mongolia that the head of the Russian/Soviet state was a hungry devil spirit, who continued to punish Buriads for many years wherever they were. One of the poems contains an allegorical rendering of Stalin, who was described as “(...) a bearded old man with a tobacco pipe [in his hand, as] Lord of Hell, Erlik Khan in marshal dress glowers over the Buriad’s sufferings”.³⁰

It is very difficult to deal with categories, which involve people’s emotions and feelings, because individual or group reflections and allegories used are very situational and subjective. Local and

³⁰ Mongolian: ‘*Maxir gaanstai saxalt bagsh (...) marshalin omngөлtei Erlik xan*’. I recorded this poem when it was performed on a stage in a local House of Culture during the *Naadam*, the traditional summer wrestling festival, in Dadal in 2007. Only a handwritten version of this poem by, Nergui, a contemporary Mongolian poet of Buriad origin, was available. The title of the poem, *Bariani jiliin naadam*, literally means ‘*Naadam* of the year, when [all] have been captured’. The poem describes how all Buriad male adults were captured during political purges during the 1930s in Mongolia, how there were no men to perform *Naadam* that year; how ‘Khori Aga women’ lost their sons, and how ‘Onon daughters-in-law’ were widowed and left alone.

historical factors influencing Buriad diaspora groups played also a crucial role. Even if a case was a product of individual memory in one of the diaspora families, certainly, its logic was based on the general pattern of Buriad understanding of the world based on kin classification. Avuncular terminology was put into new use as new kin-idioms to express Buriad diaspora concerns about their antagonistic relations with their former territorial and political ally.

To broaden the discourse of the flexibility of kin-idioms in the modern Mongolian context, I can add that not only Buriads nuanced power positions in their political relations using avuncular idioms. Mongols used not only the kin term *ah* (older brother) to express their politically depending position from the Soviet Union in the ‘brotherhood’ of socialist countries. Remembering their subordinated position in this alliance, one of my acquaintances in Ulaanbaatar said that sometimes they used to call Russians *nagasanar* to toady them ‘in a flattering tongue’ (Mongolian: *saimsrakh*). Bulag (1998) and Humphrey (1983) already argued that the Mongolian Communist elite married Russian women to elevate their political status. One of the typical cases was Prime Minister Tsedenbal (one of the Mongolian political leaders from 1952 to 1984), who married the Russian woman Anastasia Filatova (Bulag 1998: 145 referring to Humphrey 1983). In this marriage (and in many other similar cases) Russians became ‘wife-givers’ to Mongols and also could be referred to as *nagasa*. Indeed, the kinship term *nagasa* was used on occasions to nuance that relationships with Russians became more embarrassing, making their dependence as *zee* more profound.³¹ However, having ‘*Shar*’ (Blond), how Mongols nicknamed A. Filatova, as an ‘in-law’ relative created priority to receive special treatment of *nagasa*. Extra donations for cultural and educational projects in Mongolia in the form of ‘presents’ (Wedding Hall, Children’s Palace, Palace of Youth Technology, kindergartens, and international children summer camp Nairamdal) are considered to be the results of her personal ability to charm Soviet leaders during their visits to Mongolia. As one of the Soviet functionaries commented the cost of presents to *zee*, “You, Nastya, are becoming too expensive for the Soviet people.”³²

To sum up, the common factor for both Buriad and Mongol cases was that the metaphor of *nagasa-zee* relations was used to express different degrees of conflicts in inter-ethnic relations. Buriads used the metaphor of *nagasa-zee* relations to emphasise an open conflict with the Russians and their own victimisation as they were *zee*, when *nagasa* imposed ‘curses’. Mongols used the metaphor of *nagasa-zee* relations to emphasise their half-hearted and insincere demonstration of respect to *nagasa*, which they had to show under pressure in their dependant position.

Case 2: ego and ‘blessing’ to zee

Another case from Buriad diaspora contexts recalled the category of ‘maternal relatives’ again, but in a rather different way. This time, the Buriad diaspora flexibly placed themselves as ego in relations with *zee*. The dominant ethnic group of the host society, the Khalkh Mongols, was classified as the group of *zee*.

³¹ In her interviews in the mid-1990s, Filatova-Tsedenbal has mentioned that friends of Tsedenbal – Namsrai, Shirendib and Tsedev, also high rank state politicians – openly accused her of abuse of power, “‘You are placed here by Soviets! You’ve got a man of no character, you just rule him.’ I was pregnant at the time and just ran out crying. But later I cooled down and replied, ‘Yes, you are right, I was sent here by the Soviet Union. Are you against it?’ And one of them answered in drunken courage ‘Yes.’” (quoted according to Shinkarev 2004).

³² Quoted according to internet source: <http://www.peoples.ru/family/wife/tsedenbal/> (accessed on 19 August 2010). The appreciation of her personal merits nowadays goes along with the restoration of the Soviet time legacy in Mongolia, the positive evaluation of Tsedenbal’s activity, and Soviet economic aid in general.

One day, the head of a household in Dadal (Khentii province) took us – an elderly Buriad man and me – to visit a local tourist site, the famous Deluun Boldog, the place where young Temüchin³³ (later Chinggis Khan) was born³⁴ as recorded in *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Sitting on a slow horse-cart, I enjoyed the sightseeing and listened to my host Byamba and his guest as they chatted about family-related subjects. Byamba's daughters were studying in Ulaanbaatar and he was concerned that they might marry outside the Buriad community into Khalkh Mongol families, as many young Buriads did during their extended years of schooling outside their community, and he worried that he would not be able to bear it. His friend replied that “nothing bad would happen” (*ayulgyi*), “(...) because we [Buriads] are already two-time maternal uncles [*xoer daxin nagasanar*] to the Mongols”. They both started laughing, as it was a good joke, and then the topic of their conversation shifted and they continued to chat about other things.

I understood the basis of the joke as being that Byamba and his guest recalled the most memorable and important marriage alliances of Buriads with Mongols. This refers to the well-known genealogical myths about the origin of Chinggis Khan, presented in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, according to which his mother, Hö'elün Üjin, was a daughter to the Olqunu'ud lineage from Borgajin Tokum, presumably located in an area to the north-east of Lake Baikal. Buriads who live there now also name the Olqunu'ud lineage among their ancestors. Thus, Buriads can be considered *nagasatan* of Mongols from early on. Secondly, the mother of the then Mongolian President Nambariin Enkhbayar³⁵ was a Buriad woman from the village Dadal. In the eyes of the majority of the Mongolian population, the son of this Buriad woman was perceived as a genuine Mongol (i.e. not Buriad) because his father was a Khalkh Mongol. He thus represents the dominant ethnic group, while his mother was born in ‘the cradle-land’ of Chinggis Khan in Dadal. His half-Buriad origin was not well-known and the émigré background of his mother's family was not talked about until recently (Chimitdorzhiev 2007).

Stressing that “we [Buriads] are already two-time maternal uncles” (see above) was an attempt to make their position as *nagasa* indisputable. It seems that the underlying reason of the conversation was Byamba's anxiety about Buriad and Khalkh Mongol interethnic relations. What made him so nervous of having Khalkh Mongol ‘in-laws’? Was it the troubled and tragic past, when all his older male relatives were killed during the devastating purges of Buriads in the 1930s in Mongolia? Or was it his personal worry that his future *zeener* would not belong to Buriad *yahan* (bone) but more likely be counted as a Khalkh Mongol? The reply of his friend, who had experience living outside the Buriad community, mostly in Ulaanbaatar, reactivated common ancestral links to Mongols and applied Mongolian kinship consciousness to calm Byamba's anxiety. Very likely, his friend also referred to the hierarchical role-expectations in these relations, according to which a *zee* is a person who demonstrates respectful behaviour towards *nagasa*. To my mind, the joke among these two

³³ I transliterate the historical names as they appear in the classical Mongolian script of ‘Temüchin’, ‘Hö'elün Üjin’ and ‘Olqunu'ud’, as translated by F.W. Cleaves in *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

³⁴ Dadal has been chosen by Mongolian officials as his purported birthplace, because some sites there fit the description of his father's, Yesügei, household according to the famous historical chronicle *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Now Dadal has become one of the major sites of the official Chinggis Khan cult in Mongolia, where he is worshiped as the founder of the Mongolian state. In 1962, despite the instructions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union not to do so, the Central Committee of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party decided to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Chinggis Khan's birth. The celebration was aborted and party leaders were repressed as part of a case that became known as the ‘intellectuals’ affair’ (Kaplonski 2004: 66 and Rinchinova 2007).

³⁵ He was acting President from 2006 until spring 2009. According to my informants in Dadal, his mother's family was one of few survivors, who successfully fled from Shenehen to Mongolia during the advance of the Kwantung Army in the mid 1930s in Manchuria. The Mongols shot anyone, including Buriads, who tried to cross the Mongolian border from ‘enemy’ territory.

was, on the one hand, a self-deprecating joke about the common lack of respect toward Buriad émigrés from Khalkh Mongols since they came to Mongolia. On the other hand, the words seem to express a hope for long overdue respect. Referring to the fact that ‘Buriad’ women gave birth to the most prominent historical leader of all Mongols, Chinggis Khan, and also to the current political leader of Mongolia, was a way to appeal to *zee* concerning benefits of having Buriads in marriage alliance as ‘wife-givers’. Perhaps the joke involved a bit of both.

Obviously, there is tension between notions of patrilineal kinship and affinal alliance and their creative usage in a form of kin-idioms. In this case, the *nagasa-zee* kin-idioms seem to emphasise the various conflicting and contradictory kinship ties between Mongols and Buriads, since the latter separated from the Mongols and migrated away in different waves later calling themselves ‘Buriads’.

It was easy to leave the Mongols several centuries ago, but it was hard to gain acceptance again upon return. The formal border demarcation was not the principal problem. Some refugees from Mongolia tried to move back over the border almost immediately after their arrival on Russian territory. For example, the chronicle of the Selenga Buriads (Lombotserenov (1996 [1868]) shows that different segments of various Mongol and Tungus groups (the author named Horchin, Solons, Abaga, Khalkh, and Urianhai among others) went back to Mongolia after twenty years on Russian territory, but ten years later they again left Mongolia. Their ‘shuttle’ movement was stabilised when they finally became subjects of the Russian Tsar in 1720 and joined Selenga Buriad lineages. Another chronicle of the Selenga Podgornii-Turiin lineage (Gempilon 1996 [1832–1833]) described an attempt to return to Mongolia as a personalised story of one of their lineage founders. Someone called Muuhai went to Mongolia to visit the younger brother of his father, Il’den, who was a ruling noble (Mongolian: *jasag*) in Tushiyetu Khan *aimag*. The meeting of the uncle and nephew was described as follows:

Uncle: Is your father Andakhai alive?

Nephew: No. He went to *burkhan* [i.e. died]

Uncle: So to where did you return?

Nephew: My father was from here. That is why I’m back. Can I stay?

Uncle: No.

(Quoted according to Gempilon 1996 [1832–1833]: 166)

Nevertheless, the uncle allowed him to stay, although not for long. The nephew was treated as an honourable guest. His uncle, grandmother, and cousins gave him many presents and wished him to become rich and noble in a foreign land (Gempilon 1996 [1832–1833]: 166). This episode shows that the claim to come back to the homeland based on legitimate patrilineal descent (son of elder brother) was not accepted, as it would threaten the ruling position of the younger brother’s descendants. The ‘bone’ (*yahan*) had been broken and the patrilineal line split into several lineages. Buriads even had a special ritual *yaha xaxalxa* (divide bone), to exclude possibilities of future territorial claims based on having common patrilineal ancestors: representatives of fissioning groups would cut a cooking pot and a bow into two parts saying, “as broken pieces cannot become whole again, we, as a broken bone, will never be whole again” (Viatkina 1946: 138). As Caroline Humphrey (1979) observed in her study *The Uses of Genealogy: a historical study of the nomadic and sedentarised Buryat*, groups were very inventive in formulating their claims. If having direct common ancestors (patrilineal and matrilineal) was not strong enough for a valid claim, other kinds

of claims (obviously the weaker ones) based on mythical and magical (a shaman ancestor who became the spirit-owner of the land (*gazarei ejen*) ancestry also could be recalled.³⁶

According to Günther Schlee (2004), who reflected on different strategies of regrouping in alliances among nomads of eastern Africa, claims were only claims and did not imply an immediate ethnic re-affiliation. It seems that earlier attempts of segmented Mongol groups to return to Mongolia failed, because all pastures there had been redistributed and allotted, and there was no available territory neither for strangers nor alienated kin. Taking their claimed relatedness into consideration, they can come to stay only for a short time as guests rather than kin, enjoy hospitality, and then go back. For example, Aga Buriads regularly found refuge in Mongolia during drought seasons in addition to pilgrimage and trade travels deeper into Mongolia. As one of my informants in Aga remembers, local Mongols in Ul'xan were used to Buriads staying on their pastures from time to time and they knew each other well. Once, when their *ail* (group of relatives) from the village Togchin crossed the border, local Mongols exclaimed greeting them: "Bannermen of Chingghis Khan arrived!" (*Chingise togchin ervaa*), because people from the Togchin³⁷ lineage traced their descent to Chingghis Khan's banner men (*togchin*). Another informant in Aga, who was 99 years old in 2007, told me how her father used to cross the border to Inner Mongolia during drought seasons. But when her family stayed on Mongolian pastures for more than two years, the Mongols would just "(...) turn over our *ger* [felt yurt] like a haystack [*buxal sherexe*]", thus letting them know it was time for the guests to return home.

It was much easier for rejected kin to go back to territories under Russian protection and to join Buriads there, who were actively expanding their territory at the time. They integrated and 'adopted' newcomers inserting them into 'junior' lineages (Humphrey 1979), thus expanding Buriads territorially and numerically. Accordingly, different strategies of inclusion and exclusion, practiced by different ethnic groups and alliances, required different periods of time for the actual ethnic re-affiliation: some can be easily adopted and integrated; others can be considered 'others' even hundreds of years after their arrival and never be fully accepted. Specifically, when Aga Buriads took refuge in Mongolia during civil war in Siberia around the 1920s, they expected that they could be included and recognised based on the claim of common ancestors (e.g. mythical matrilineal through Chinggis Khan), as they had done with other Mongols 'adopting' them into the Khori clan lineages. But Mongols used a strategy of exclusion and discriminated against strangers, if they wanted to stay longer on their pastures. Hospitality towards kin turned into hostility, when the Mongols realised that the Buriad refugees could not return and actually became homeless. This is one explanation why Buriads have been marginalised inside Mongolia. In self-descriptions they clearly called themselves 'immigrants' (*eruul zon*) or 'immigrants who came hiding' (*nyuusaar eryyl zon* i.e. 'illegal immigrants'). After all, they were guests in the land belonging to the Mongols, and the Buriads being hosted in Mongolia understood well the ambivalence and double meaning of their position – between 'guest and enemy' (Latin: *hospes* and *hostis*) – and the various tensions which this ambivalence entailed. It brought about tension between gift and reciprocity as well as obligation and debt. Accordingly, the 'language of hospitality' was based on kinship ties

³⁶ For example, in Buriad requests addressed to the Hülün Buir Military Government Office in 1922, they reasoned that the land of the Mongols was the land of their ancestors and their original homeland before; thus they returned "to their own country" (quoted according to Hürelbaatar 2000: 75).

³⁷ The Togchin lineage was not included into the main eleven lineages of the Khori Buriads. It is one of the Khamnigan Mongol lineages strongly assimilated with the Buriads. For more details about the social organisation of the Transbaikal Khamnigans and their relations with the Khori Buriads see Shirokoroff (1999 [1935]).

and the rights and duties between kin. On the one hand, Buriads as the ‘receivers’ of hospitality felt indebted and grateful for the shelter, but on the other hand, invoking kinship ties and mutual obligations between kin aimed to limit hostility. Researchers already noted that Buriads in Mongolia have been subject to latent discrimination for years, and many people were at pains to hide or change their Buriad belonging in favour of the dominant Khalkh Mongols (Bulag 1998; Kaplonski 2004). Nevertheless, the high level of integration of Buriads into Mongolian society (contribution to modern Mongolian history, recent democratic movement, culture and science) can be considered as their politics to create trust and also as their ‘duty’ as the indebted. To some degree, they consider Buriad losses during repressions also as their ‘contribution’ to and ‘sacrifice’ for the new Mongolian state, a statement clearly articulated by Damdinzhav, the Mongolian historian of Buriad origin, in his book *The Fate of Buriads who Fought for the New Mongolia (Shine mongolin tölöö temtsezh yavsan buriaduud tedgeeriin huv’ zaya, 2006)*. In this context, the multiplication of being ‘two-time maternal uncles’ of the Mongols (and even more, because Buriad-Khalkh marriage alliance is reproduced locally in growing numbers of marriages of the younger generation), to my mind, may also be a way to express the extreme vulnerability of the Buriads’ position among Mongols, and the continuation of the dual perception of Buriads as being neither strangers, nor kin.

What is described here is the Buriad diaspora’s entirely internal discourse, which they would probably not even dare to mention outside the community in Khalkh Mongol surrounding. This alludes to a certain discrepancy between Buriad self-presentation in Mongolia and what is discussed inside the community, an inner reflection upon their ambiguous position in Mongolia today.

Concluding Remarks

The repeated metaphorisation of *nagasa-zee* relations in the cases presented here confirm, on the surface, the tremendous power of kinship categories for Buriads (already described by many scholars). Their world is still to a great extent mentally shaped by idioms of kinship. Above all, the Buriad diaspora experience shows, that along with the generally accepted view that ‘in ego-centered topology, Buriads define their initial social place in the world only primarily by patrilineal kinship terminology’, (formulated earlier by Humphrey 1998: 412) matrilineal terminology can also be put to use, thus extending this limit. Nevertheless, matrilineal classification can also be used to express specific relations that cannot be ‘determined’ by patrilineal classification. Biological tension between maternal and paternal lines in the Buriad patrilineal situation has been metaphorically extrapolated beyond kinship for controversial social relations and power positions in their alliance relationship with homeland and host society. Because avuncular relations allow for a wide range of equivocal feelings, both ‘curse and blessing’, the Buriad diaspora utilises the avuncular relationship to define both their concerns and tensions in relations to colonisers in the homeland in Russia and the social inequality of migrants in a given host society. I therefore suggest that analysing such diaspora experiences contributes to an understanding of the kinship system in Buriad society in general and also shows that kinship terminology continues to have a wider social significance, being used, for example, to express current inequalities of power and the impact of political changes on local experiences.

Such cases are probably not sufficiently numerous to start a critical analysis of how widespread the metaphorical use of avuncular terminology as kin-idioms is. However, Buriad diaspora cases demonstrate the tendency of the more elaborate and extended use of kinship terminology as well as the creation of new kin-idioms along with older, commonly used ones.

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