

# Nomads of the High Plateau

## Photographs of Mongolia

*Robert McCracken Peck*



For at least 10,000 years the people of Mongolia have dealt with minimal rainfall, sparse vegetation, and some of the most difficult climatic conditions in Central Asia by assuming a semi-nomadic existence. Although some collective agriculture was instituted by the country's communist government in the 1950s, pastoral nomadism is still a way of life for at least half of Mongolia's 2.5 million people.

Chenggis Khan, Mongolia's revered 13th century leader, would be pleased to know that nomadism continues to flourish in his homeland. He felt so strongly that his nation's strength depended on its mobility that he forbade the building of permanent structures. If a population was self-sufficient and mobile, he reasoned, it could never be defeated in war. It was a strategic principle he exploited in reverse to create the largest empire in history.

While today's Mongols are more concerned with maintaining their flocks of livestock than conquering or defending land, there are many aspects of their daily lives that their more warlike ancestors would still recognize.

Robert McCracken Peck has traveled throughout Mongolia, from the forested regions of the northern frontier to the Gobi Desert in the south, seeking out families and individuals who are still living in the traditional ways. "Since the opening of the country to the rest of the world in 1990, nomadic life in Mongolia has begun a profound and permanent change," observes Peck. "I have been fortunate to see and record the old Mongolia and to witness its transition firsthand."

"Mongolia Observed," an exhibition of Peck's photographs, will be on display in the Museum's Sharpe Gallery in early 1997. A small selection of his work is illustrated here.



FIG. 1  
MEN WITH  
HORSES  
Bulgan Aimag,  
September 1994  
Mongolian herdsmen are devoted to—and dependent upon—their horses which provide them with transportation and food. Children learn to ride bareback almost as soon as they can walk. During the summer months, *airag* (fermented mare's milk) is the national drink of choice.  
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FIG. 3  
WRESTLER AT NAADAM  
Hovsgol Aimag, July 1996

Naadam is a multi-day summer festival during which Mongols gather to engage in riding, archery, and wrestling competitions. With Mongolia's national flag flapping beside him, a Naadam wrestler displays himself before an assemblage of herdsmen who have gathered for the event. Such ritual dances, mimicking a falcon's flight, are performed before and after each match. They are intended to demonstrate the wrestler's grace, strength, and courage.

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FIG. 2  
A HORSE-BREEDER AND  
HIS SON WITH SADDLES  
Hovsgol Aimag, June 1996

Even among nomadic families, semi-permanent storage buildings are sometimes needed to store food, skins, and pieces of equipment. Homemade wooden pack saddles are among the essential items kept in this horse-breeder's cabin.

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FIG. 5  
BOWL OF CHEESE FOR  
NAADAM  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag,  
July 1995  
A bowl of yak's-milk cheese, the  
bounty of the steppe, serves as  
both symbolic and real reward for  
successful wrestlers at Naadam.  
Recipients, who each receive a  
handful of cheese, toss pieces into  
the air in thanks for their victories  
before sharing their prize with  
family and friends.

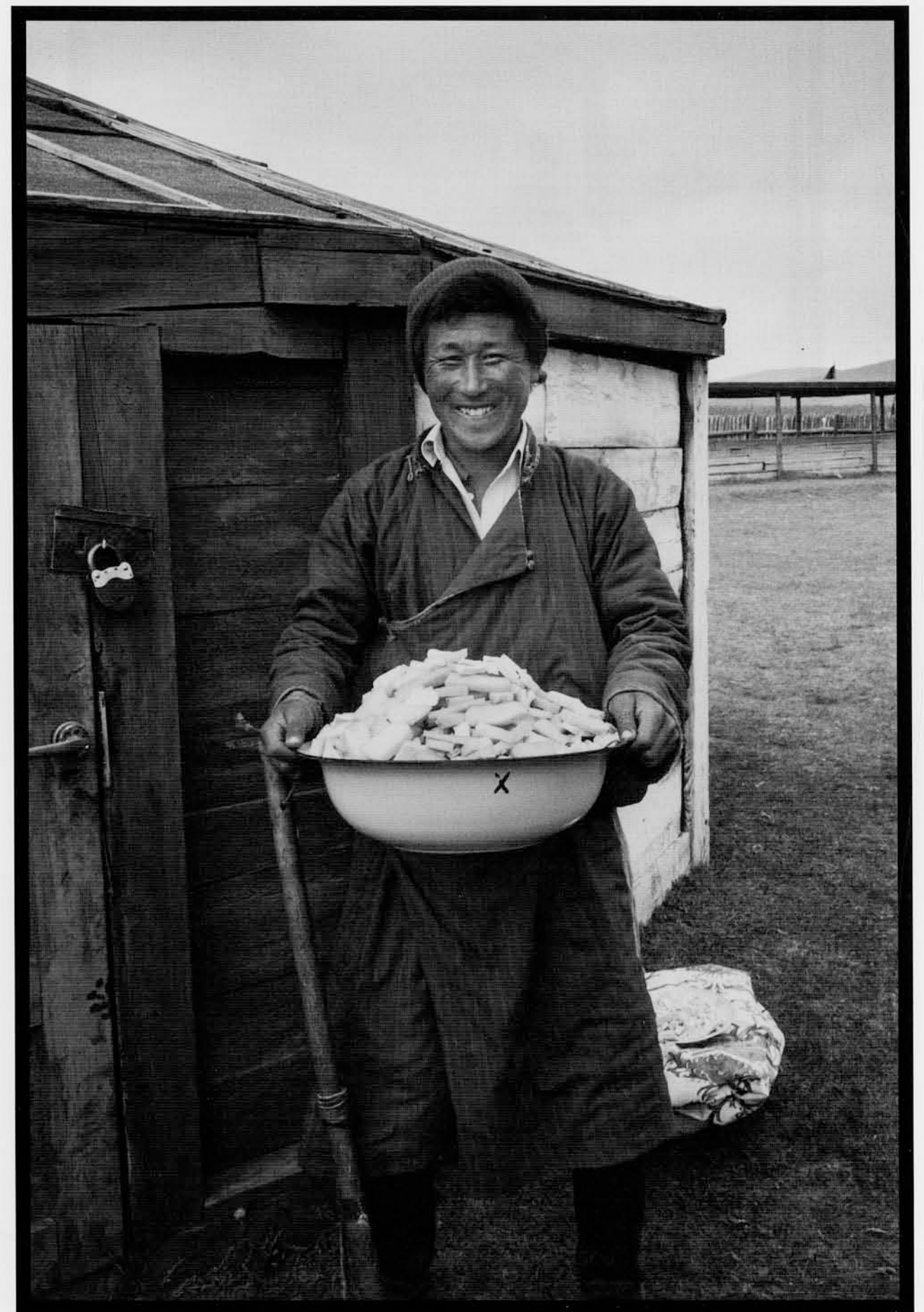
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FIG. 4  
TWO OLD FRIENDS  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995

To the widely dispersed herdsmen of Mongolia's steppe, Naadam provides a welcome opportunity to see old friends and new. Medals marking service to the country are often worn on such special occasions by men and women alike.

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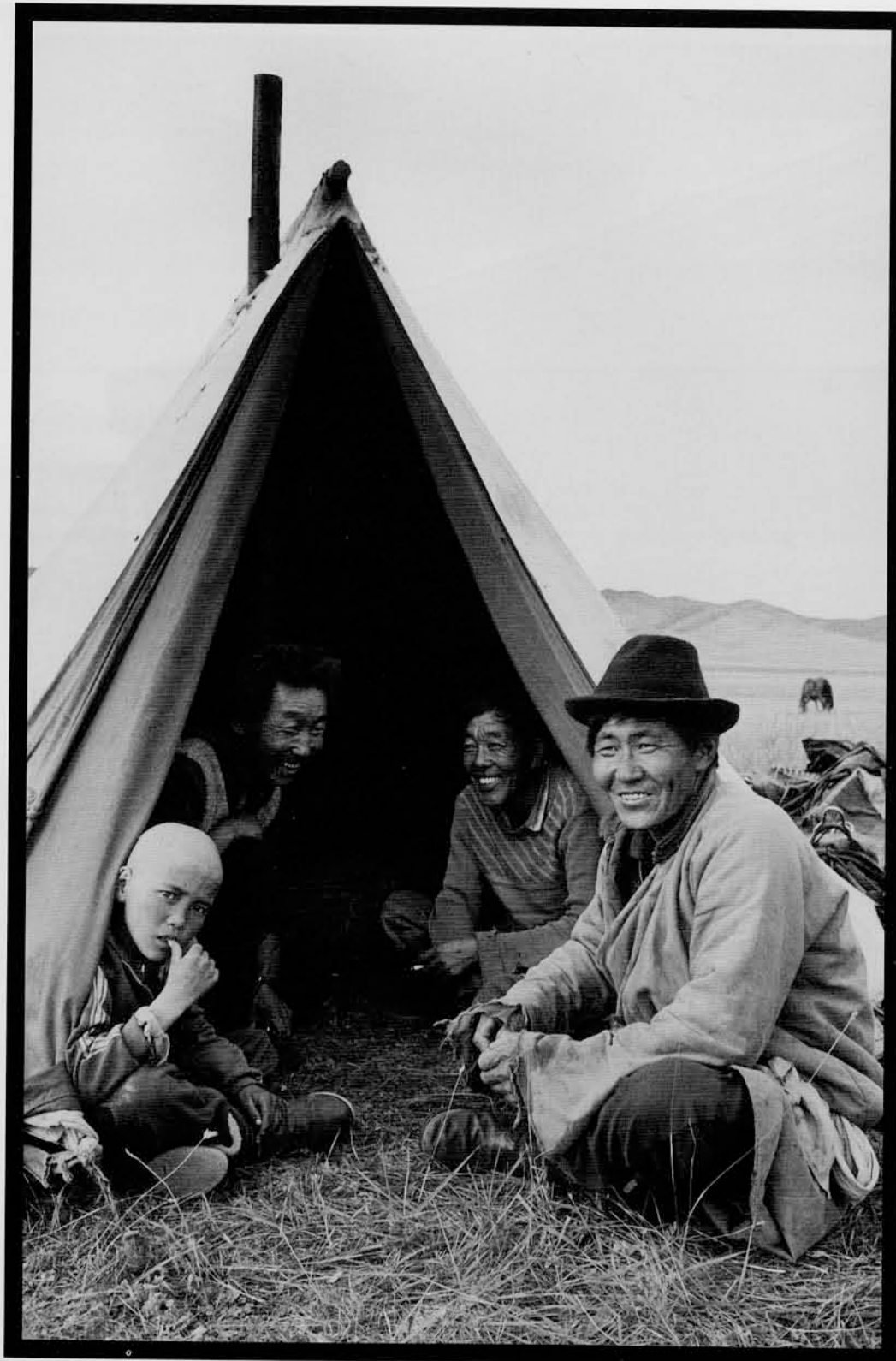


FIG. 6  
HERDSMEN IN TENT

Bulgan Aimag, September 1994

When traveling more than a day's ride with their flocks, Mongolia's herdsmen use small portable tents called *maikbans*. The larger *gers*, more difficult to move, remain in one location until the reduction of grazing opportunities nearby requires a more distant move.

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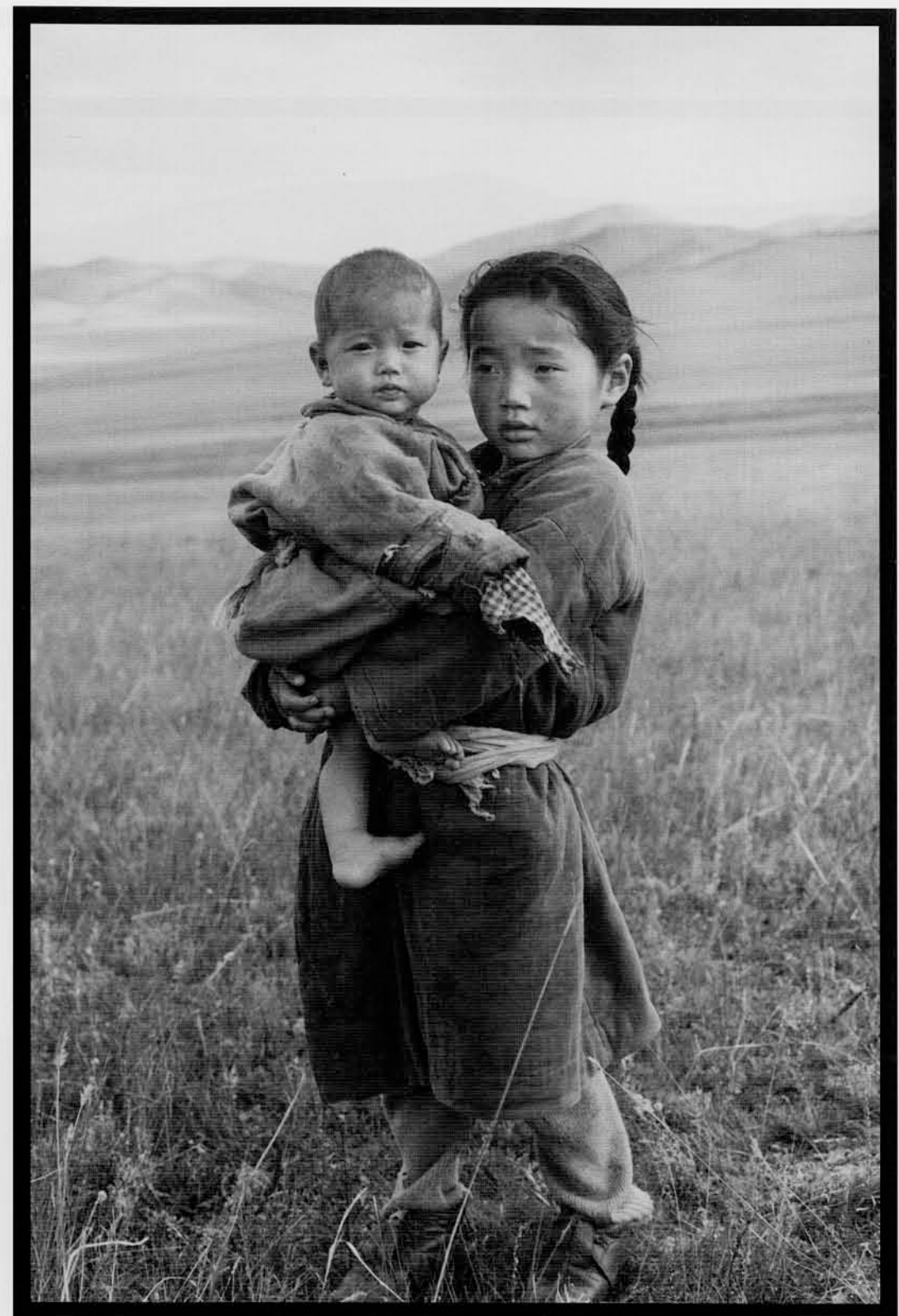


FIG. 7  
SISTERS

Bulgan Aimag, September 1994

From an early age, the children of nomadic families are given important responsibilities. Caring for younger siblings, collecting firewood and yak dung for fuel, and assisting with the summertime milking of livestock are among the daily tasks expected of each child.

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FIG. 8  
FAMILY WITH MOTORCYCLE  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995

A possession of enormous pride but limited utility, a Russian-made motorcycle symbolizes the changing aspirations of Mongolia's nomads. To save precious gasoline, this family demonstrates its most valuable possession with a push.

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FIG. 9  
GIRL WITH PINE NUTS  
Bulgan Aimag, September 1994  
In northern Mongolia, where the steppe grassland is interspersed with forest, pine nuts provide a welcome addition to the traditional diet of meat and dairy products. Though difficult to find and harvest, they are offered to guests without hesitation.

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FIG. 10A  
ERECTING A GER  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag,  
June 1996

Against the age-old architecture of a *ger* (seen here in skeletal form before the felt walls and canvas cover have been applied), changing fashions of dress reflect contact with the outside world.

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FIG. 10B  
WOMAN GIVING MILK  
BLESSING  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July  
1995

A felt and canvas *ger*, the traditional home of the nomad, provides shelter against the extremes of Mongolia's climate. A spoonful of milk, tossed skyward in blessing at the outset of a journey, assures safe travel to family and visitors alike.

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FIG. 11  
HOSPITALITY  
Hovsgol Aimag, September 1994

With bowls of cheese, a canister of yogurt, and teapots at the ready, three women await the arrival of guests in their *ger*. The area to the right of the *ger*'s door is traditionally where meals are prepared.

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FIG. 12  
WOMAN GRINDING TEA  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995

Because of the difficulties in transporting loose tea on the hot and dusty trade routes from the plantations of China to the Mongolian steppe, the leaves are molded into bricks. The bricks are chopped and ground as needed. The pulverized powder is then boiled with water, milk, and salt before it is served. (A covered mechanical sewing machine sits on the table behind.)

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FIG. 13  
BOY WITH STAFF  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag,  
July 1995

Crippled by a winter freeze that nearly cost him his life, 9-year-old Uugan Bayar possesses a wisdom and serenity that defies his age. Extremely harsh winters—temperatures of 20 to 30 degrees below zero are common—contribute to Mongolia's high rate of child mortality. The log structure is a government administration building in the town of Renchen Lumbe.

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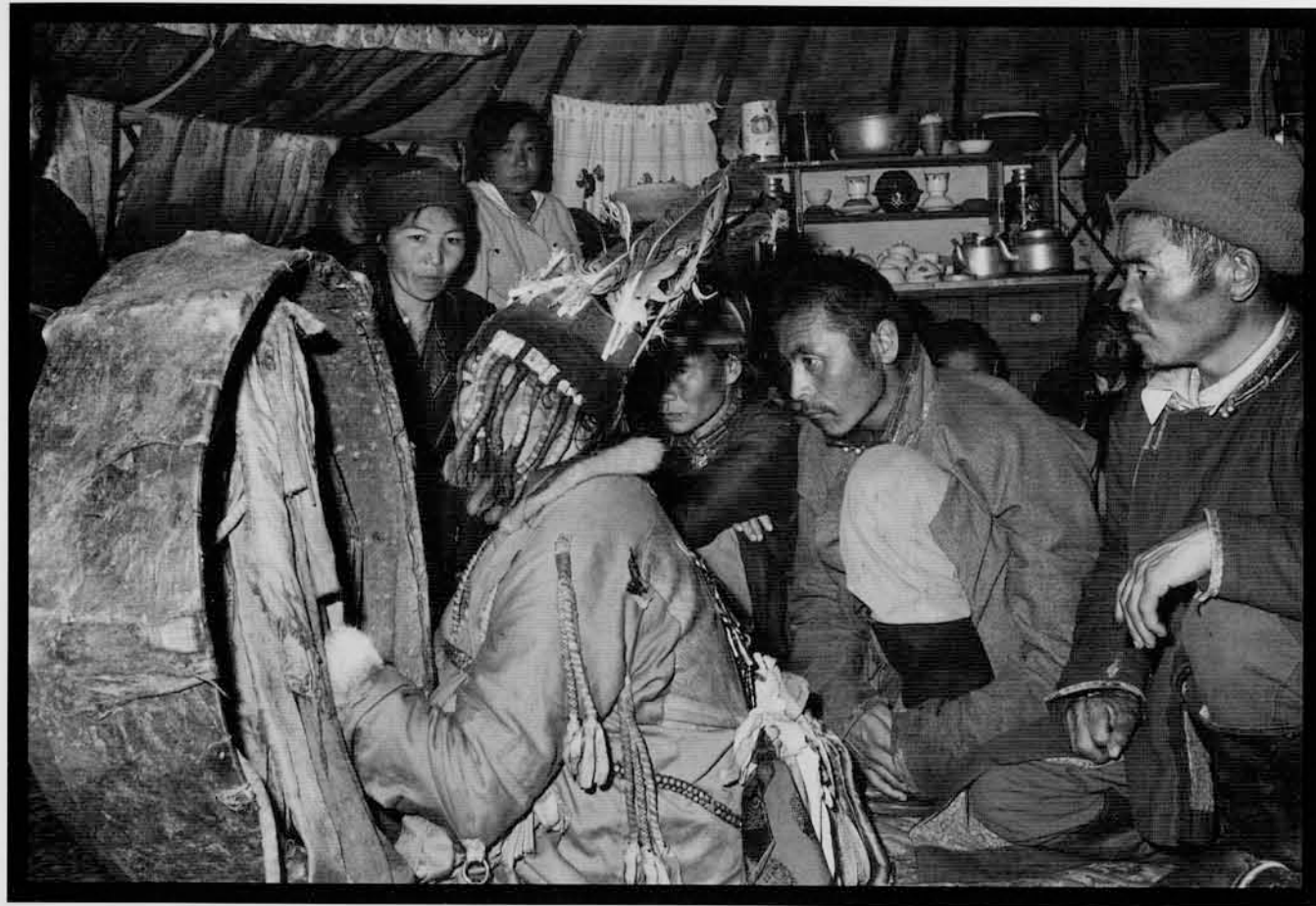


FIG. 14  
SHAMANESSE  
Darhaad Basin, Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995

A spirit religion as old as human history, shamanism in Mongolia has persisted through centuries of competition (primarily from Buddhism) and prohibition (under the communist government, 1921–1990). Here, in an all-night ceremony, the shamanesse Bayar journeys to the spirit world as her family and neighbors look on. Her shaman's robe and sacred drum are used only during ceremonies.

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FIG. 15  
YOUNG MONKS  
Gandan Darjaling Monastery,  
Hovsgol Aimag, June 1996

With Buddhism now permitted after many years of prohibition, Mongolia's monasteries are once again filled with the sounds of young voices. As in earlier times, boys from nomadic families—some as young as seven—are committing themselves to the rigors of Buddhist training at monasteries throughout the country.

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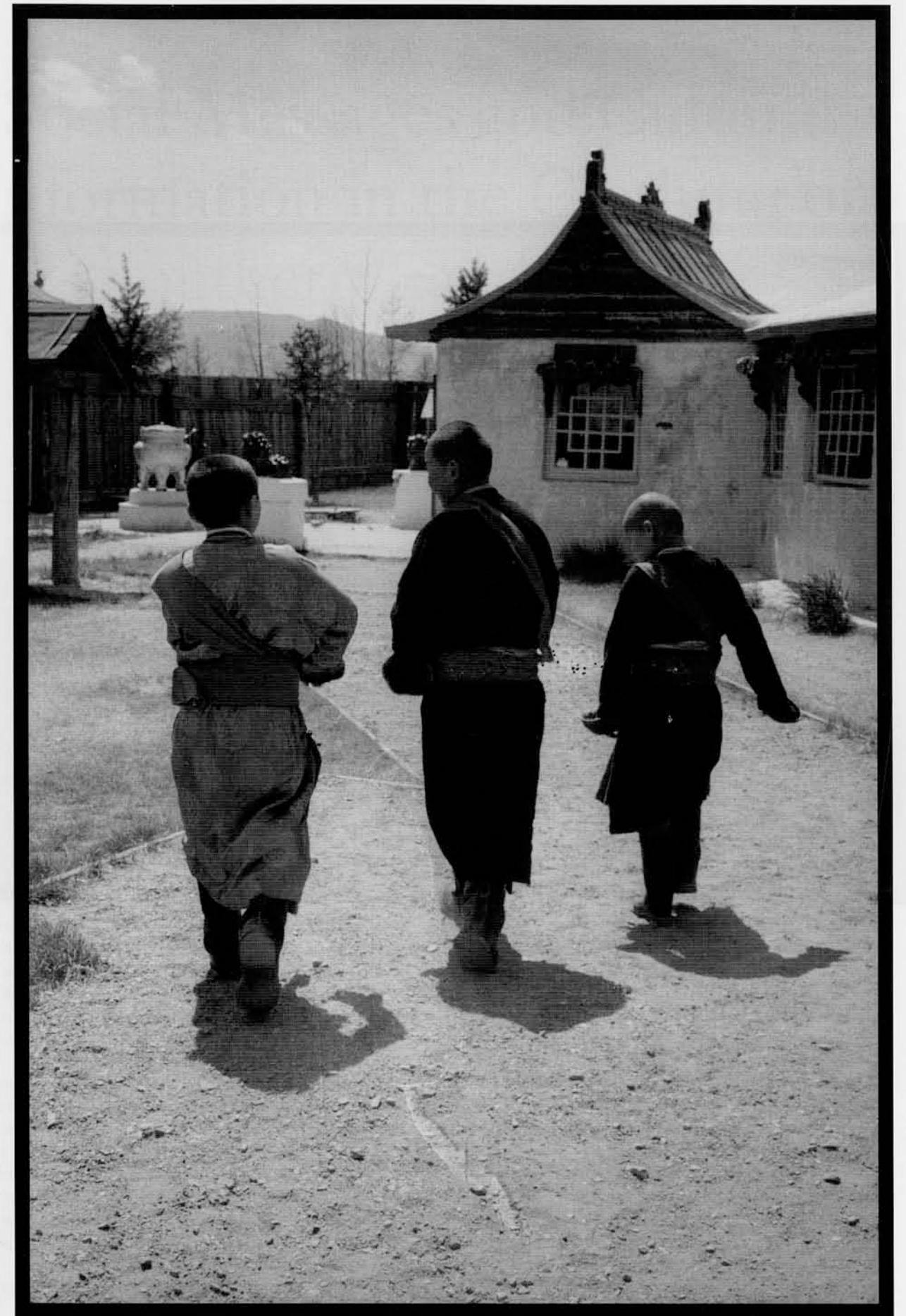




FIG. 16

BOY WITH YAK

Hovsgol Aimag, July 1995

At elevations of 5000 feet and higher, yaks and yak/cow hybrids are more commonly found than cattle in northern Mongolia. Their ability to haul carts, and their milk, fur, leather and meat are all vitally important to herding families. Though of enormous size and strength (a big bull can weigh up to 800 kilograms or 1760 pounds), most are sufficiently domesticated to be controlled by the children.

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