



The Value of 'Culture'

An Example from Mongolia

BY PAULA L.W. SABLOFF

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY DOESN'T get much respect from the public these days. Archaeology, on the other hand, remains beloved because it captures people's imagination, and biological anthropology is valued because it satisfies people's desire to understand what makes us human. But what does cultural anthropology contribute? Has its usefulness and the public's interest in it faded with the integration into the global economy of isolated societies like the Mundurucú of Brazil? Aren't the disciplines of economics and sociology more relevant to our understanding of people today than anthropology?

To those of us who have devoted our hearts and careers to cultural anthropology, it provides the best perspective for understanding peoples no matter what their situation. We would even argue that cultural anthropology's perspective and contributions are greater than ever before *because of* globalization, for we know that the key to understanding all societies is their culture. Culture is the prism through which we not only understand people today, but also yesterday, tomorrow, and far into the future.



A Pre-Renaissance painting by Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Saving a Ship*, 1457. Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection, 1917.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

If culture is so important, what is it? You will not be surprised to learn that anthropologists defined culture initially more than 130 years ago. The basic definition remains the same. In 1871, Sir E. B. Tylor turned the popular idea of culture on its head. Instead of treating culture as something that the rich obtain by studying music, painting, and other arts, in *Primitive Culture*, Tylor wrote that it is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

His idea was revolutionary in its day because he said that culture is not the exclusive property of the elite; rather it is something that everybody possesses. Culture is in our heads but it may also be seen in our behavior, artifacts, and speech. Tylor assumed that a people share culture through daily contact; he also wrote that a people share one culture and only one culture.

Many people—anthropologists included—still use Tylor’s definition of culture. It has worked a long time, but it is really like looking at a pre-Renaissance painting. The picture is beautiful and moving. But because the painting lacks perspective, it does not portray how we perceive reality. We can “read” it, but we know the image is distorted. Similarly, Tylor’s defini-



A Renaissance painting by Pieter Jansz, *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem*, 1631. Philadelphia Museum of Art: John G. Johnson Collection, 1917.

tion does not fit modern reality because he treated cultures *as if* they existed in isolation. By ignoring the outside world (the context of a society), his definition became unsatisfactory and no longer useful.

Just as the Renaissance provided a new perspective for painting, so the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his colleagues provide a new way to look at culture. While his definition grows out of Tylor’s, it refocuses our attention onto the complex interrelationships within and among all kinds of societies—agrarian, urban, and mixed nation-states. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published just over one hundred years after Tylor, Geertz writes: “Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be . . . an interpretive [science] in search of meaning.”

This metaphoric sentence (it always makes me visualize cultures as various spiders sitting on webs of different patterns) focuses our attention on *meaning*. Meaning is manifest in symbols, which take the forms of artifacts, behavior, and speech. By focusing on meaning, Geertz opens up the boundaries of culture to fit the modern circumstances in which cultures exist and change. First, a culture may exist in several places in the world at any one time. For example, the Mongolian culture is practiced in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Germany, and New Jersey; it also travels on the Internet. Second, individuals may keep several cultures in their heads. A child has the ability to act “French” at her maternal grandparents’ house and then act “American” at her paternal grandparents’ house. Third, every culture has variation. In other words, even people who share a culture may give different meanings to the same events. We all know that men and women often interpret the same events differently; so do adults and children, natives and immigrants, different minority groups, etc.



In 1990, Mongolians who desired to free the country from 70 years of Communist Party control made banners, held demonstrations in the main squares of cities, and gave speeches against the Party. All these activities symbolized their desire for democracy.

And fourth, because there are choices of meanings in every culture, culture is contested. That is, groups supporting different meanings try to have *their* perspective predominate throughout a society. Americans see this during elections, when the two main political parties propose different visions for our country.

Geertz's understanding of culture is more flexible and obviously fits modern societies better than Tylor's original. To return to our analogy of art history, Geertz's definition of culture resembles a Renaissance painting that uses perspective, thus appearing realistic to the viewer.

STUDYING MONGOLIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

My recent work in Mongolia illustrates how anthropologists use Geertz's definition of culture. In 1998, I undertook research on Mongolian political culture, that is, their changing views on how government should be organized (as a democratic, socialist, or Communist government). Sandwiched between Siberia (Russia) and China, Mongolia stretches across Central Asia, covering an area that would stretch from Philadelphia to Boulder, Colorado, in the USA. Its political culture and history are greatly affected by its location.



Mongolia is sandwiched between China and Russia (Siberia).

National Museum of Mongolian History (top), Kevin Lamp (bottom)

Mongolian Political History in the 20th Century



Serfs and some nobility were poor, malnourished, and ill-clothed in the Manchu period (1691-1911). Photo dates to 1917.

UNTIL 1911, MONGOLIA was a feudal society subject to its southern neighbor, the Manchu Dynasty of China, and the Lamaist religion of Tibet. Mongolian princes, descendants of Genghis Khan, were vassals of the Manchu

Emperor. They ruled Mongolia with Manchu administrators and Lamas, some from Tibet. The serfs—house servants and most herders—made up the bulk of the population of 600,000 people. The serfs were often illiterate, hungry, and dressed in rags. The free class of herders and townspeople were often poor and illiterate as well. Most traders and craftsmen were Chinese, as Mongolians felt such work was beneath them.

As the Manchu Dynasty was collapsing in 1912, Mongolia's leaders proclaimed national independence. Stating that their allegiance was to the Manchu Dynasty only, they affirmed that Mongolia should be independent of China if there was no Manchu dynasty. For a brief period, Mongolia established its own government, a theocracy headed by the chief Lama of Mongolia, the Bogd Khan.

But in 1919 the Chinese invaded again, and Mongolia turned to its northern neighbor for help. Soviet Russia had recently overthrown the Czar and established the world's first Communist government. Its new Bolshevik leaders happily supported Mongolia's fight against China and recommended that they gain independence, not only from the Chinese, but also from the aristocratic, theocratic government and replace it with a Communist one. In exchange for Soviet help, Mongolia's underground leaders, led by Choibalsan and Sukhbaatar, pledged themselves to the Communist cause. True to their word, the Soviet Army helped Mongolia gain independence from China and become an independent state in 1921. It was not until 1924, when the Bogd Khan died a natural death, that Mongolia truly became the world's second Communist nation.

Over the next 40 years, the Mongolian Communist Party (MPRP) built a socialist state by mimicking Soviet Russia. With the help of Soviet advisers and following Stalin's program for Russia, the MPRP destroyed the princely class and Lamaist religion through "the Purges"—massacres and murders that reduced the male population by a fifth between 1933 and 1953. The MPRP reorganized the former serfs into *negdels*, collectives of farmers and herders. It built industrial centers for processing animal products to sell abroad and producing the basic necessities of Mongolian life, including furniture, yurts, and food. It developed mining and other industries, and educated the populace so that the country went from 2% literacy in 1918 to 98% in 1989. All this was accomplished with the support of the Soviet Union. Additional support came from Japanese prisoners of war during World War II and later Communist China (after 1949). The Mongolian population grew from 600,000, mostly poor, malnourished herders in 1918 to 2.4 million educated, skilled workers in 1989.

When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, and Gorbachev began to withdraw the Soviet Union's economic support, Mongolia's intelligentsia decided it was time to end the one-party rule of the MPRP, or Communist Party. Over the next three months, the intelligentsia, students, and people at large held many demonstrations to topple the MPRP and establish a democratic, capitalist society. By June 1990, the MPRP permitted a national, multi-party, open election. The Mongolian people elected delegates to write a new constitution, and, in January 1992, they ratified a democratic, parliamentary constitution and a capitalist economic structure.

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Zorig, leader of the Peaceful Revolution, speaking to the Ulaanbaatar demonstrators January 14, 1990.



Herders near Ulaanbaatar are eager to tell Chinzorig their ideas on democracy.



A herder family celebrating Naadam (Independence Day) in Tuv Province.

After Genghis Khan's empire collapsed, Mongolia became a vassal state of the Manchu Dynasty ruling China (1691-1911). To rid itself of Chinese rule in 1920, Mongolia accepted "Soviet friendship"—seventy years of Soviet Russian influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Mongolia voted for a democratic, capitalist form of government in 1992.

Since then, the Mongolian people have been working toward solidifying a democratic, capitalist state. Herders who had been forced into agricultural collectives during the Soviet era returned to their nomadic lifestyle, living in yurts and moving their families and herds of cows, horses, sheep, goats, and camels or yaks from one pasture to another, just as their grandparents had. But they differed from their grandparents in that they began shifting to a political culture of democratic principles: support of human rights and multi-party elections, equality under the law, and rule of law. Without this cultural shift, Mongolia could not sustain a democratic government. That is the power of culture.

For former Soviet nations like Mongolia, the change from Communist to democratic culture means converting from the Marxist-Leninist definition of democracy to the Western ideal. Under Communist rule, Mongolians were told that they were living in a democracy. After all, they voted, didn't they? And they suffered equally. Therefore, Mongolia was a democracy! This cynical idea is actually a perversion of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that had been taught to Mongolian school children. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin explains that true democracy is based on economic equality: "Democracy means equality . . . *the abolition of classes*. . . And as soon as equality is achieved for all members of society . . . , that is, equality of

labor and equality of wages, humanity will inevitably be confronted with the question of advancing . . . to actual equality, . . . 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'" (pp. 119-20).

Later in the same paragraph, Lenin reiterates Marx and Engels's major theme, namely, that the democracy practiced in 19th century Europe and America is really capitalist democracy, or democracy for the few who control industry. *True democracy* will exist when the workers gain control of the state and establish "the equal right of all to determine the structure of, and to administer, the state." While this sentiment sounds extremely liberal, Lenin's plan to combine the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government into one decision-making body controlled by one political party, the Communist Party, fostered totalitarian (one-party) rule, something Western democracy directly opposes.

Mongolia's 1992 constitution replaces Lenin's definition of economic democracy with the Western concept of political democracy. It starts with a phrase from America's *Declaration of Independence*: "We, the people of Mongolia . . ." Now Mongolian democracy is to mean a choice at the ballot box, freedom of speech and religion, equality before the law, and freedom of the media. Other rights and freedoms (more in line with French democracy), for example, the right to a "healthy and safe" environment, health care, and education, are also included.

Are Mongolians moving toward a political culture of Western democracy? Are they maintaining their former Marxist-Leninist culture? Or are they building their own political culture? With the help of Mongolian researchers, I interviewed over 1,200 Mongolians in 1998 and 2003 in order to



A young man casts his ballot for president, May 2001.



Byambajav shows that although the law states that all residents will receive the same amount of land during privatization, plots vary by the size of bribes.

discover the direction in which Mongolia's political culture is moving. We collected opinions from nomadic herders and teachers, young and old, city and country people, and people with elementary-school educations and those with Ph.D.s.

Data analysis is just beginning and I hesitate to make generalizations yet. However, the data from nomadic herders with elementary school educations (eighth grade or less) who live near the capital city of Ulaanbaatar show an interesting mix of Leninist and Western ideas. When asked to describe a democratic country, idealized notions of democracy coexisted with the reality of everyday pressures and practices in Mongolia.

Beginning with *human rights and freedoms*, many nomadic herders stated that people in a democratic country have the right to make their own decisions and enjoy freedom of speech, religion, education, and residence. Many also complained that Mongolians sometimes abuse free speech; the social order is breaking down; and economic freedom too often results in poverty and unemployment. On the one hand, herders appreciated their new-found freedoms and their joy that Western democracy is being instituted in Mongolia. On the other hand, they expressed nostalgia for the days when the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) maintained law and order and all Mongolians were equal economically.

Next, concerning *multi-party elections*, some of the nomadic herders said that pluralism leads to good decisions in government and at home; multi-party elections allow the representation of different ideas in government; anyone can now stand for political office, whether or not a member of the MPRP; and government benefits from a balance between different ideologies. However, they also feared that multi-party

elections cause quarreling and disunity within families and communities, as well as confusion, for there is no longer one 'truth.' These answers support the notion that although some herders saw the benefits of Western democracy, others were confused and angered by it, preferring the old Communist system.

Herders listed specific *responsibilities of a democratic government*: raise the standard of living of the nation and reduce poverty; care for the poor; provide human rights to all citizens; pass good laws; maintain law and order; and privatize land equitably. The first two items suggest that the herders longed for the Communist-era ideal of an all-powerful and distant government that is responsible for assuring the economic equality and well-being of all citizens.

Believing that *capitalism*, or at least a market economy, is an integral part of democracy, the herders said that it would improve people's quality of life, spur national development, and allow industrious people to become rich. This is contrary to Marx, who had promised greater economic development under Communism than under capitalism. Yet, herders were concerned that capitalism would create a great differentiation in wealth between the rich and the poor.

Most of the herders also believed that *private property* is an essential characteristic of democracy. Understanding that private property allows people to make their own economic decisions, enter the market economy, gain wealth, and therefore, attain a better life, most respondents supported private property. But again, they worried that the privatization of land and government businesses is not being administered properly, resulting in corruption. A few also expressed concern that privatization would destroy some government industries and cause some people to become impoverished.

Overall, our preliminary results suggest that there is little nostalgia for the former Communist regime when the herders in the Ulaanbaatar region think about capitalism, the market economy, and private property. They clearly prefer being responsible for their own economic fate rather than being obligated to the government, as they had been during the decades of central economic planning. These herders also preferred living in a society with human rights and political freedom. However, they were nostalgic for a government that had maintained law and order and made policy decisions for the country; under socialism, life was simpler and better because they knew there was one truth.

RELATING POLITICAL CULTURE TO THE CULTURE CONCEPT

The Mongolian nomadic herders' ideas of democracy reflect their Communist past as well as their democratic, capitalist present. While we might consider the Marxist-Leninist and Western definitions of democracy to be mutually exclusive, our interviews suggest that some herders have clung to the Marxist-Leninist definition, some have adopted the Western one, and still others have taken parts of each to give democracy their own meaning. By so doing, they illustrate the Geertzian idea that even members of the same culture and social stratum can give different meanings to the same term, democracy. As Geertz and his colleagues remind us that culture is contested within any society, so different herders see the good and bad of democracy and support different political parties.

Just like us, Mongolians contest the different meanings of democracy at each election. In 2000 and 2001, the MPRP regained control of Mongolia's Parliament and reinstated the MPRP president. The Communist ideas of economic equality and a 'humane government' (responsible for the people's welfare) resurfaced after four years of capitalist and democratic reform under the Democratic Coalition. The June 2004 election gave half the seats to the MPRP and half to the Democratic Coalition. The tone of this government will not be determined for many months.

The Mongolian example illustrates the power of the anthropological concept of culture. This concept shows that we cannot assume people in one society all think or act alike—or that they think the same way we do even though they use the same words we do. We can understand their behavior better if we can understand the variations of their political culture. Just as we have to understand a people's history and geography, so we need the third piece of the puzzle, culture in all its forms, in order to understand how they behave. This is the power of cultural anthropology and why it remains critical to the study of human behavior at every level of organization—clan, tribe, village, city, nation, and the world. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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