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Enlivened Memories: Recalling Absence and Loss in Mongolia

~ *Rebecca Empson* ~

This chapter is concerned with the way in which a memory reveals itself and the impact this has for concepts of the person. I suggest that, in Mongolia, relations between living kin, who are absent from each other for parts of the year, are maintained through practices that involve attending to certain objects in the house. These include photographic montages which emphasize agnatic relations and embroideries that lace the inside walls of people's homes and draw attention to the mobility of women and their transformations. In contrast, techniques that allow for continued relations with the deceased pivot around the necessary objectification of another person's body. This involves a particular way of looking at another person that allows for a recollection of a person and a reinscription of that person when Mongolians observe deceased kin members as reborn in the living. The chapter examines the political motivations behind locating memories in people and things, and explores their effects in terms of different forms of sociality.¹

The literature on memory in anthropology can, broadly speaking, be said to fall into two main strands. Firstly, anthropologists drawing on the work of Halbwachs (1992) and Connerton (1989) have focused on "collective" or "social" memory to explore how extraordinary events, such as war or migration, are recalled through a collective mnemonic medium (see Antze and Lambek 1996; Said 2000; Humphrey 2003). Here, anthropologists have focused on the way memory is reproduced by a group of people who may or may not

define themselves as kin. Secondly, a focus on how individual life stories are recalled and narrated through different mnemonic devices has allowed anthropologists to explore how memory plays an important role in the construction of the person and the creation of different forms of subjectivity (see Hoskins 1998; Kuchler 1987; Radley 1997[1990]). These approaches reach out to wider debates concerned with the access or ownership of knowledge among people who define themselves as kin (see Strathern 2005).²

This chapter will bridge debates found in these two prominent approaches. It focuses on the way collective or shared memories are recalled by individuals. It also examines how individual memories may be reproduced over generations. In both cases, memory becomes a political device that shapes knowledge as a cultural artefact which can be passed between people. Yet, memories can also influence the way we perceive the world without our directly wanting them to. Arnheim (1974[1969]), for example, has drawn attention to the way memory always supplements and influences our perception of things.³ He suggests that past experiences are not simply stored as representations that project outwards through the mind's eye. Instead, there is always a relation between seeing and recalling, so that in perceiving something, we simultaneously draw attention to our own history and what we have seen before. Similarly, Casey suggests that: "In remembering, there is a tenuous but consistently felt "self-presence" of the rememberer that inheres in what is remembered" (2000[1987]:ix-x). The idea that our perspective is influenced by what we have experienced before means that it is hard to keep the concepts of kinship and memory distinct from each other. When thinking about kinship, ideas about inheritance and obligation come to the fore, so that what makes people kin always seems to be dependent on knowledge of what has been before.

A Kinship based on Separation

In a very general sense, memory, or reflection, allows one to recall an event that one has been temporally or spatially separated from. Drawing attention to a severed past influences the way we construct our own self-fashioning and relations with others. Among the Buryat, an ethnic Mongolian group who live along the northeast Mongolian–Russian border, and with whom I did my fieldwork, a sense of absence, of

being separated from some place or person, grips many levels of sociality. Primarily, there is a sense of absence from place, as the Buryats migrated to Mongolia from Russian Buryatia in the early 1900s. Leaving behind most of their possessions, they fled at night, crossing the border in small groups through the forest. Settling in Mongolia in clusters based on previous kin networks, the Buryats reproduced links from the areas which they had fled.

Although they escaped war and disruption in Russian Buryatia, life in Mongolia has not always been peaceful for the Buryats. They were heavily persecuted during the socialist period, to such an extent that almost all the adult male members of the community were taken away or killed. People were charged with being counter-revolutionaries or siding with the Japanese. Expressions of a distinct Buryat identity were held to be politically polluting and representative of a kind of history that had to be erased for the socialist world to come into being. Commenting on ideas about loss and the annihilation of cultural forms during the Mongol-Soviet government, Humphrey (1992) has noted that this period “cannot accurately be described merely as a ‘social transformation’ . . . , but was more like a strange apocalypse, in which ordinary people were stunned but nevertheless had to go on living” (Humphrey 1992:380).

Notwithstanding this “apocalyptic” separation from place and people, a sense of absence from place and kin continues to permeate many aspects of Buryat relations, as it is also integral to the movement involved in nomadic herding practices that dominate the area. While agnatic kinship, based on the idea of “shared bone” (*etsgiin töröl, yasan töröl*), continues to permeate much of Buryat life, throughout the year people move to different locations, engaging in other types of relations, while still being tied to their agnatic household. In turn, as the people who inhabit a house change seasonally, the physical shell of a house also reconstitutes itself in different places. At different times of the year, wooden houses (*baishin*) as well as Mongolian felt tents (*ger*), and the people who inhabit them move over the landscape to different seasonal pastures.⁴ The seasonal movement of people, and the places they inhabit, create the continual need to relocate both physical and relational boundaries as distinct forms of sociality are acted out in different places. This can give rise to the feeling that there is no fixed place or singular mode of sociality in which to situate people when trying to define kin relations.

For the Buryats, however, the separation and incorporation of people and place is not unsettling or difficult. The interior layout of the house allows for this shifting of people and place. As a one-roomed, open-plan space, there are no personal areas inside a house. Instead gender, hierarchy, and status define the interior. This adaptability allows for the incorporation of different configurations of kin members, as well as outsiders, at any given moment. In turn, people remain attached to a house by ensuring that certain things remain contained inside the house as people and houses move location. These things act as sites that maintain aspects of people's relations in their absence. Indeed, it is imperative for Mongolians that people are able to manifest themselves via things, in different spatio-temporal locations, beyond the confines of a single bodily form (see Gell 1998; Strathern 1994). Where movement is an essential aspect of everyday life, and locality is not given, the separation of people and place are not seen as a failure of relations. Rather, in this context, absence is a means through which people relate. In order to illustrate this, I present some ways in which the Buryat maintain relations with kin in the absence of people. This material will provide a contrast to ideas about how people maintain relations with deceased kin members through lay-rebirths.

Making Relations through Absence

I open this section with a recollection concerning how I learnt that people were attached to a house, even in their physical absence. I came to understand this through the process of attending to and looking at things with others during which our interaction with objects sparked various memories. What I want to emphasize in the following account is that recalling absence is both a means by which to reveal knowledge to others and an end in itself. This idea echoes Lambek's point (see chapter 10) that it is only when memory is considered a utility, rather than a capacity, that questions of excess or scarcity arise. The distinction between memory as capacity and as utility is important to keep in mind. In this chapter, the past imbues objects and people with a sense of history that can be drawn upon as a capacity for living. But memory can also provide a means or a utility by which knowledge is revealed to shape the present. In this context, memories may be guarded or revealed for political means.

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In late summer of 2001, I was, for a couple of weeks, alone at the summer encampment with the eldest female member of the household, whom I shall call Toya. That summer the grass had been a lush emerald green, and the calves had grown into strong cows. At times, up to eighteen family members had gathered at the encampment and there had been a bustling and joyous atmosphere as we helped make milk products and gather berries. But the steppe that surrounded us was now turning a shade of pale yellow and we began to feel a chill in the evening air as we milked the cows. Other family members were in small glens deep in the forest at makeshift encampments collecting hay. As we carried the heavy pails of milk inside, I noted the familiar taut expression on Toya's face. The pain in her right wrist was caused by the summer's intensive milking. When I inquired about her wrist, Toya had explained to me that it was due to the fact that, as a young daughter-in-law, she had sometimes milked up to twenty cattle during the summer on her own, twice a day. After letting the cows out of the corral, we stretched out on the beds, a moment's rest before we began to separate the milk and prepare firewood for the stove. This evening, however, the routine took a different turn. As we lay there, the sunlight casting its last long orange beam through the open door, Toya began to tell me about her family and about her life as a young daughter-in-law. With other family members absent, there was a sense of time standing still. We talked at our leisure as Toya showed me various things inside the house. Toya's recollections that evening were a kind of turning point. Suddenly, the house was not simply a semi-permanent structure that sheltered us from the heat or wind. Instead, it came to life with the history of past relations, and people in the family seemed to be very different people when viewed from this perspective.

In recalling this occasion, my account signals some of the multiple levels on which memory works. The account is based on my own retrospective imagining of a particular evening that involves recalling spoken and unspoken details. Much memory works like this: we may recall some seemingly passing detail and this can trigger the recall of something else, so that any sense of scale between these links becomes untraceable. In this sense, recollection can happen to you without your intention. But once revealed, you can choose what to do with this knowledge. Toya's recollections, and my own wish to reproduce them here, provide an opening by which we can begin to see how things

in the household are enlivened with people's relations. I turn now to examine three objects that Toya used to reveal different family memories: photographic montages, emotive embroideries and concealed pieces, and rebirths.

Photographic montages

In the northern, rear part of the house, in the most honorable section, opposite the door as one enters, stands a painted wooden chest. On the chest's surface, visible prized possessions that indicate wealth and prestige are displayed. In the center stands a large mirror. Surrounding this mirror on either side are two large frames containing a montage of three-quarter-length, portrait-style photographs of kin members on both the mother's and father's side. This montage creates a pile, or layering, of different images over time as old photographs are concealed behind new ones. Above the mirror, religious icons and images can be found that comprise a small shrine on which religious books, pictures of consecrated animals, and daily offerings of milk libations are placed. Above this shrine, on the wall behind the chest, hang large painted portraits of deceased patrilineal relatives. Around this fixed display, embroideries sewn by daughters-in-law are hung, depicting their views on different family relations. Guns, used by men for hunting, are placed at its side. Things kept inside the chest are never revealed to guests and are concealed from general view.

What kind of relations does the viewer honor by attending to and responding to these things? I suggest that photographic montages of living kin members mirror some of the compositional forms used to represent agnatic relations in traditional Buryat genealogies (*ugyn bichig*). Unlike anthropological kinship diagrams, Buryat genealogical representations do not define age groups in hierarchy from the top to the bottom of the page over generations. They depict kin relations in the form of a cluster of male descendants, expanding outwards from a single founder in the middle or top half of the page. Similarly, in the montage, the photograph of a patrilineal elder is often placed, with his wife, in the center of the frame, surrounded by their siblings and children, whose images extend outwards towards the periphery of the frame. On closer inspection, however, we see that what links people together in photographic displays differs from the agnatic links that join people together in Mongolian genealogical diagrams. Photographic



Figure 1 A photographic montage (photograph by R. Empson).

montages of kin members reckon relations through both the mother's and father's side and include images of other group relations, such as school friends.

In the socialist period, Buryat genealogical records asserted a kind of difference that was threatening to the political ideology of the time. During the political purges of the 1930s, household chests were raided and genealogical records were burnt.⁵ Patrilineal distinctions were banned as people were forced to use their father's name as their surname, thereby limiting knowledge of a familial history to a single generation. But through the display of photographic montages, people were able to recreate the kind of knowledge that was prohibited in genealogical descriptions. Like genealogical diagrams, the montage departs from a single person's perspective and provides a memory-map in which past and present relations are imagined to exist at once. Photographic montages display connections given through agnatic relations, based on the concept of "shared bone," in a visible form. In these foregrounded images, people appear as replicable members of static groups, with potentially infinite links to other groups. The

photographic montage remains as a fixed site inside the house which anchors meetings between groups of people who may be absent from each other for parts of the year. This technology is meant to be seen and inquired about. Its efficacy acts as a shield against relations which are concealed.

Emotive embroideries and concealed pieces

In contrast to these fixed displays, embroideries that surround the inside of the house provide a means by which women may visually appropriate their own space in the household. Women sew embroideries in the evenings and indulge in them as a creative endeavor. With no specific pattern to follow, they often draw inspiration from the world around them and there is a great variety of style and function. Inside the house one can find large wall hangings and smaller pieces, including runners that hang along beds with flowers and wild animals, duvet holders with swans and people, and triangular pieces with crochet edges that can be laid over chests. The designs in embroideries are very individualistic and their images stand as permanent reminders of the spirit in which they were made. Like a drawing, this sentiment remains contained in the piece as family members grow and change and, in turn, people relate to the fixed images differently over time. When moving pasture, a woman will choose which embroidery, and thus which sentiment, she wants to display at that given moment. At certain periods in her life, images of wealth and status may be appropriate. At another time, she may wish to emphasize her ability to depict beautiful flowers with an even and intricate stitch. Some embroideries are given away as gifts or exchanged with friends, so that ties of friendship are knotted into the very image displayed. A daughter-in-law may also inherit her mother-in-law's embroideries. In these cases, sentiments expressed through embroideries are passed between women.

When we were alone at the encampment, Toya pointed out two of her embroideries. Both were sewn when she was a daughter-in-law and had recently given birth. The first consisted of a large wall hanging in orange, blue, and green and was displayed on the wall behind one of the beds. It depicted three deer: one sitting, one standing, and one with folded legs on a mountain. She gestured toward it and explained: "... you see the three baby deer on this wall hanging. I made this



Figure 2 Toya's embroidery of three deer-sons (photograph by R. Empson).

embroidery when I gave birth to my third son. Because I have three sons I made an image of three deer. I embroidered three things for the blessing of having three children.” As a way of publicly celebrating her own achievement at having given birth to three sons, Toya chose to depict her children as three wild animals. In displaying this image, she forces the family to focus on her own transformed achievement from daughter-in-law to mother and the successful survival of her children from the vulnerable stage of infancy. That she still hangs this embroidery in the house, even though her children have grown up, highlights her wish to continue to display aspects of her own biographical history to others. The second embroidery, again a large wall hanging, was of a rather common image of the “four good animals” (*döröv saixan amitai*) in a variety of colors. This image was hung near the door. Toya explained that the image was placed here because it is believed to keep feuds outside of the house. It was sewn after she had her last child, a daughter. With four animals resting on top of each other, Toya explained that the animal at the top was a

bird, representing her daughter who would one day fly away to another family.

In their marital homes, daughters-in-law frequently have to find alternative media through which to express their intentions and desires, as they are often unable to do so explicitly. Attending to Toya's wall hangings, we see that embroideries are not simply images that serve to decorate the house. They display carefully selected sentiments that a woman wishes to emphasize and draw attention to. Although addressed to an implicit audience, they force other kin members to acknowledge their perspective and agency. It could be argued that, since the 1930s, when many women were left to bring up their children on their own and people were banned from expressing distinctive familial memories, women developed alternative media in which to recall their own histories for their children. Embroideries also provide a way for women to outwardly display their continued connection to their children, even though their sons belong to their husband's kin groups, and daughters belong to another family. In this light, embroideries appear to offer a parallel commentary on kin relations to those in photographic displays. Through embroideries, women can spatially appropriate the household with images that celebrate their own achievements, and draw attention to their views and ideas as well as their skills.

Inside the chest on which the photographic montage is placed, concealed from general view, Toya showed me hidden things that have been detached from people at moments of separation and transformation. Such things are individually wrapped in blue ceremonial silk scarves and are carefully placed at the bottom of the chest, as if they have the potential to move and disappear but must be contained. The things hidden in the bottom of chests comprise actual parts of people's bodies, such as pieces of umbilical cords and children's hair from the first hair-cutting ceremony. When we switch perspective to these concealed pieces, what has been delegated to the periphery momentarily becomes a different kind of center. Like relations based on the idea of "shared blood" (*ekhiin töröl, tsusan töröl*), which are passed between a woman and her children, and between siblings, things found in the bottom of chests are the products of the movement and separation of people, and are created out of alliance and exchange in one's own lifetime. These relations are realized through a special type of communication (*xüiin xolboo, tsusan xolboo*) that allows people

to have continued anticipations, feelings, and premonitions about each other, even though they may be spatially separated.

Equally, it is imperative that people who have this type of relation are physically separated from each other. This is because relations based on “shared blood” are considered to be too close to live with. For example, it was suggested to me that when a child is first born, the mother and child merge into and become one another, so that the mother’s body becomes childlike, craving sweets and gifts from visitors and strangers. The ritual cutting of the child’s first hair creates a necessary distance between a mother and her child, separating their shared physicality. By creating a physical distance, and giving a part of oneself away, a livable version of the relation is formed. It is because of this that, when people are physically separated from each other, a part is often produced during this act of separation. By carefully hoarding a piece of the umbilical cord or pieces of the child’s first hair in the household chest, or through the display of embroideries, mother–child relations, relations between siblings, and a woman’s connection to her natal home are maintained as possible relations, regardless of people’s physical location. Things kept inside the household do not simply commemorate past relations; these things appear as a capacity or resource that maintains links between people in their absence.

By focusing on the ways in which relations are maintained in the absence of people and place, certain ideas about Mongolian sociality emerge from our analysis. I have suggested that relations based on agnatic networks are visibly foregrounded in photographic montages, which appear as immobile centers from which people reach out to different connections with other groups. These group relations are, however, dependent on the separation and incorporation of people. Relations from which one must be separated, in order to support the possible growth of this center, are displayed in embroideries that surround the display, or are stored in objects inside the chest that are concealed from general view. Things kept inside the house draw our attention to different domains of connectedness between groups or individuals. Instead of people constituting a home, in Mongolia, valued things kept inside the house remain in place and stand for relations that are attached to it (see Empson 2006). In this sense, a bodily presence is not always needed for relations between kin. Things kept inside the house become the site or body through which relations are maintained.⁶ In contrast, techniques that allow for relations with

the deceased revolve around the necessary presence of another person's body.

Rebirths

Talking about deceased people is something that Mongolians do in very specific ways and in certain contexts. One should not directly ask about, or provoke discussion of, the deceased. Through particular turns of phrase, people avoid uttering individual names, and find alternative ways to allude to people in the past (see Humphrey 2002). This includes displaying portraits of the deceased, attending to shamanic spirits and the abstraction of the "ancestors" in particular places in the landscape. Alongside these methods of recalling lost kin, the memory, or presence, of a deceased person is also kept "alive" via a living person's body. Lay-rebirths are one way in which the Buryat retain very individual relations with people after their physical death. In my conversations with Toya, she recalled detailed and cherished memories of her deceased father and brother to me via references to their rebirth in her family.

Before I turn to the kinds of relations that are created through rebirths, two points concerning terminology must be clarified. Firstly, when using the term "rebirth," I am not referring to "high-level" Buddhist reincarnations (*xuvilgaan*, literally an incarnation, transformation, or metamorphosis of a high-ranking saint) among monks and prophets (see Humphrey 1992 and Bawden 1985:41–2). The Buryat distinguish between high-ranking religious reincarnations and lay-rebirths. Lay-rebirths are referred to by a set of different terms. These include: "to be born again" (*irgej törsön/daxin töröx*), "to change/exchange birth" (*töröl ariljix*), "to find/obtain birth" (*töröl olox*), or "to be reborn" (*xoit töröx*).⁷ Secondly, lay-rebirths are identified in a variety of different ways from reincarnations. They involve recognizing a deceased relative's "soul" (*süins*) as reborn in the living and are common to almost every family.⁸ At death, when a person's body is still warm, people place an ink mark on their bodies. The deceased person's soul is then said to travel for forty-nine days while it finds a new body to inhabit. When the soul has chosen to inhabit a new body, the deceased person's ink markings reappear on that person's body, in the form of a birthmark (*temdeg*). This indicates that a person has become the receptacle for a deceased person's "soul." Rebirth is,

however, not solely apprehended through these markings. As a young child starts to speak and move about in the world, certain characteristics, stories of extraordinary experiences, idiosyncratic mannerisms, turns of phrase, and physical characteristics become recognizable to kin members as indicators of a rebirth. On the surface, rebirths look similar to the kind of transformations involved when ancestral spirits possess a shaman in trance (that is, a single body becomes the vehicle or container for several different ancestor spirits). On closer inspection, however, we see that when a rebirth is observed by a family member, only one person is ever visible in a single bodily form. While people within one family may claim that a kin member is a different rebirth, for each claim only one rebirth is possible. In this way, lay-rebirths are not about different souls momentarily possessing a single body. Instead, a single person “houses” another as an essential aspect of themselves.⁹

The Politics of Recalling Deceased Kin

If our perception is influenced by what we have seen and experienced before (see Arnheim 1974[1969]), what does this mean for the way we see and engage with others? In this section I note the contexts in which rebirths are recognized and the types of narratives that emerge when people recall aspects of deceased kin in the living. I examine this process in some detail because it is important to highlight that these types of recollections are different from the types of narratives evoked when glancing at a photographic montage or embroidery. As mentioned, in contrast to restrictions placed on recalling the deceased, lay-rebirths provide a way for people to talk openly among a group of relatives or friends about particular aspects of their kin that they would not normally discuss. Often confirming moral characteristics, these narratives also have the effect of asserting that living kin must have the same kind of character as that of one’s deceased relative. In such a way, recalling deceased kin involves exchanging knowledge about morally acceptable behavior. In cases where a person who suffered a difficult death is reborn, such as those experienced during the period of political persecution, people are able to acknowledge publicly cherished memories of those who were condemned by the state. Acknowledging the rebirth of a deceased kin member is often

something parents and elders cherish; it is charming and heartfelt, and leads to an extended reflection on the deceased person's life.

Drawing on Austin's (1975) discussion of speech acts which do, rather than just say, something, the mannerisms and speech of children can be said to trigger, in the minds of their elders, recollections of the life of a relative (see Hallam and Hockey 2001:43–4). Importantly, however, rebirths do not only trigger a recollection through a mnemonic sign (such as a birthmark or a turn of phrase). Rebirths also shape the way that people view and interact with each other. Identifying a rebirth can be viewed as a type of action that has an effect in that a child's performance and speech acts are *doing* something in the mind of their parents rather than just prompting them to recall a past person. This is because recognizing a rebirth leads to different perspectives that create very different subjects. For example, when people recognize that someone has been reborn, they will respond to that person with the type of respect that the reincarnated person would demand.¹⁰ When the mother of a friend of mine noticed that her eldest son's child had a birthmark similar to that placed on her deceased husband's body and enjoyed playing with the radio, she revealed to her family that her grandson was her deceased husband and advised her children to respect the young child: "*because he is your father.*" In this case, we see that when people treat children as elders or equals, individual memories of deceased kin are not the only thing being recalled. These recollections involve editing out memories of some in order for other people to be brought into focus (see Battaglia 1990). In so doing, they radically alter a group of people's relations with the living.

Equally, knowledge of a rebirth can be something that occurs at very specific and private moments. It can be a point of contention and something that one only tentatively mentions to others. In the case of a woman, for example, claiming that her son's child is a part of her own genealogy, can be seen to undercut agnatic relations. While I was alone with Toya, she explained to me that she had noticed marks on her granddaughter's arm that were similar to those placed on her deceased brother's body, but she had not mentioned this to anyone. "I think that Altaa [her granddaughter] is my brother," she explained:

although she is a girl, she plays with toy cars. My brother was a tractor driver. He was just like she is, always fixing cars. The way she walks

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and sways her arms are very similar to him. My brother was a very hard-working man with abrupt movements. Altaa always runs and walks with fast and wide steps. . . .

Her husband, she claimed, had told her that he noticed characteristics in the child that reminded him of his deceased mother. Keeping the



Figure 3 Altaa as Toya's deceased brother, swaying her arms as she walks with wide steps (photograph by R. Empson).

knowledge of the marks on the child's body to herself, it was as if she continued to keep this private in order to be able to maintain a sense that her brother was close to her, even though she lived with her husband's kin.

Implicit in the acknowledgment of intra-kin rebirths is a strong notion of rights over people. Identifying someone as a rebirth involves making particular claims on them. This is most obviously realized when we focus on the implications of claiming rebirth in adoption practices. While a child who is considered to be the rebirth of a woman's deceased husband does not actually have to live with her as her husband, rebirths involving deceased children often involve the rebirth being adopted by the family of the deceased child. For example, in one family a young child died from severe burns suffered in an accident involving the family hearth. A few years later, a neighboring family gave birth to a son with a birthmark across his torso that looked like burns incurred from a fire. The family who lost their son adopted this child as it was believed by both families that he was the rebirth of their deceased son.¹¹

Questions to do with adoption rights raises issues about the extent to which Mongols hold that the rebirth actually is the deceased person. We have seen that adoption practices suggest that Mongols do, to some extent, see the rebirth as the deceased person, and certain obligations flow with these claims. Yet, we have also seen that a person is sometimes held to be a different rebirth by different kin members. In these cases, people may respond to a given person in very different ways; acknowledging a rebirth does not determine every way in which people relate to a person. For example, it is very rare that a person will be given the name of their rebirth. People do not mention lay-rebirths in genealogical records, nor do they claim that they have no children because their child is the rebirth of their grandfather. It seems as though attending to a rebirth is contained within a type of perspective that allows one to view a person in a particular way, whereby a different kind of subject is created depending on who is doing the viewing and with whom they are doing it.¹²

Because rebirths are usually identified through another's recollection, a given person is very much the author or creation of the person who views them. In a chapter concerned with concepts of origins and ownership, Strathern (2005) has drawn attention to the fact that people may be "owned" in different ways by different kin, and that what

people count as kin may differ according to different people (Strathern 2005:138–42). Drawing on these ideas, I suggest that when a child is held to be a different rebirth according to the person who views the child, different kin members can be said to count kin in different ways. For example, we have seen that there is often a difference between who the mother and the father think that a child is a rebirth of, and claims of rebirth are often asserted to a select group of people. In such a way, recognizing a rebirth becomes a way of anchoring a person in relation to oneself (Strathern 2005:40), through a particular situated perspective, so that new and varied relations are created between the living.

Examining the way in which rebirths are identified has revealed a relationship between recalling and perceiving. It has been fruitful to treat rebirths as a particular way of *looking* at people. This is not to suggest that the mind is simply a storehouse for memory. Nor do I see this as a psychological idea of “projection,” whereby recognizing a rebirth becomes an act of not successfully forgetting (see Bolles 1988). Instead, intra-kin rebirths involve recalling personal recollections of experiences and of relationships, but in so doing people are also placed “under the compulsion of other people’s expectations” (Humphrey 1992:386) of these recollections. We have seen that vision, situated in another person, is necessary for a person to become a form other than themselves. But we have also seen that this type of perspective is not the only way that people view each other. Given the temporal aspect of the perspective involved in recognizing rebirths, the idea of “commemoration” in the Western sense seems inadequate (cf. Hallam and Hockey 2001). Instead of acting as fixed sites in which people record the memory of a deceased person, I suggest that people’s bodies work as channels that allow people to actively create new relations with the living through the appearance of the deceased.

A Model for Social Immortality?

I have suggested that viewing a person as the rebirth of a relative involves a switch in perspective. Initially one’s gaze is fixed on some detail, such as a familiar movement or turn of phrase that cues the recall of a memory. Here the rebirth’s body becomes an object by which the deceased person is made visible. However, a person’s body

is not simply an object, via which the past is recalled. We have also seen that lay-rebirths allow for the soul of a given person to endure, through a succession of persons, over several generations. But the soul also makes them all one person as a single person is repeated, give or take some alterations, over generations. Given the fact that rebirths allow for the repetition of a single person over generations, does treating this idea as a kind of memory undermine the fact that Buryats hold that living people actually are their deceased kin? I hope not. Instead, intra-kin rebirths draw attention to the multiple kinds of perspectives that are inherent in the politics of reproducing kinship.

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that among Buryat nomadic herders, living people manage relations with absent people via certain objects that remain carefully contained or displayed inside the house. Relations with deceased relatives are maintained through their appearance in another person's body. In relation to this, I draw attention to an analogous example. Recalling a person through another person's body has certain similarities with *Malangan* practices described by Kuchler (1987) in northeast New Guinea. Like *Malangan* art, intra-kin rebirths can be said to provide a model for social immortality. Kuchler explains that *Malangan* sculptures are conceptualized as providing a "skin" for a deceased person's life-force (Kuchler 1987:240). Kuchler highlights that the immortality of a person is achieved through its rechannelling in different sculptural containers. She states: "Like the human body after death, so the sculpture after it has been 'killed' in ceremonial exchange has to decompose to set free the force so that it can be rechannelled into [new] people and sculptures" (1987:240).

In the Mongolian context, people rarely talk about deceased kin. Yet, through rebirths, the deceased can be said to *reach out* to the living as they display themselves in people's bodies. Like *Malangan* art, the form in which this display occurs is temporary and varied, depending on who is viewing the subject. But it is also repeated over generations. As long as someone is able to recognize a rebirth, the deceased person continues, irrespective of the person's temporary existence in different forms. Being able to recall knowledge of the deceased person is an important factor in what makes this continuation possible. In turn, when the recognition of a rebirth has occurred, it transforms the temporary objectification of a person's body, and the subject is revealed as a version of another. In that moment, the viewer sees the

embodiment of a memory, and through recalling it they literally bring that memory to life.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have presented three ways in which memory informs different forms of sociality. Photographic montages, women's embroideries, and pieces of people concealed inside household chests anchor people who may be physically absent or silenced to particular networks of relations. In contrast, intra-kin rebirths, allow people to draw on the past and attend to the deceased in a new form. In the early 1990s, Humphrey (1992) suggested that Mongolians were in the process of rethinking their "deep [pre-socialist] past" as a source of moral authority for the present. Since this knowledge was not presented through any single institution, it had to be sought through means of diverse and individualized actions (see Humphrey 1992). Focusing on these diverse actions, Humphrey suggests two types of enactment by which various past-orientated meanings may be evoked. The first, termed "historical mimicry," refers to the reproduction of events or physical objects that are held to have the symbolic or metonymic capacity to represent ideas from the past. Here, the aim is to recreate a copy of an event or object that represents a past idea, and the reproduction of ideas is more important than the need to reproduce the features of the past in its entirety. The second enactment defined by Humphrey is referred to as "embodiment." This involves the identification of living people or actions with those of the past. Here, an event or person is said to be of essentially the same nature, or to have the same identity, as some past event or person. Regardless of their different outward appearances, then, the manifestations are all of a single spiritual entity.

The material discussed in this chapter echoes these two kinds of enactments. When separated in life, people are able to maintain relations with each other by distributing themselves through things that are carefully contained inside the household. Photographic montages reproduce relations between agnatic groups. These images are not an exact replication of the networks themselves but, like the genealogical diagrams which they succeed, they outwardly project the idea that

people who are tied to the house have infinite links to other groups. In turn, embroideries present female biographies and life histories. They could be said to act as “biographical objects” (see Hoskins 1998) in that they serve as vehicles by which women can narrate stories about themselves to others. In such a way, embroideries appear as “supplements to an existing self [rather] than means that help selves become what they are” (Keane 1999:183). Pieces kept inside the chest draw attention to alternative relations that facilitate movement and transformation. In contrast, relations are also contained in people as links with the deceased are mediated through the living. Here memories and subjects are mutually constitutive through ideas about embodiment as a living person’s body is necessary for maintaining a relationship with the deceased. By rendering the body an object to be observed, a person is able to recall the memory of a deceased person. They then bring the memory of that person to life through the body of another, reconfiguring a new relationship to the subject. This way of making the deceased visible allows for memories to be made into present realities.

These three ways of evoking the past also run counter to secular memories that have been preserved by the state. During the socialist period, for example, when people were prohibited from communicating with their ancestors through shamanic performance and many male members of the community were either killed or taken away, relations with the deceased persisted through rebirths.¹³ In the present day, rebirths are often used to recall events and people that are not present in wider public debates. In turn, photographic montages became popular at a time when genealogies and ideas about individual or familial differences were prohibited. In the current democratic climate, they serve to exhibit networks that differentiate status and prestige. In all cases, people turn to these means as a way to claim authority over their own past (see Carsten 2000:689 and Humphrey 1992:379). This chapter has focused on the containment of relations in things and people. It has highlighted the politics involved in revealing or concealing knowledge and the different ways in which this knowledge is then reproduced and communicated to others. With the multiple senses of absence and loss created by the politics of migration, I suggest that viewing the body or objects in the household as enlivened containers or sites is necessary for the remaking of Buryat kinship.

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NOTES

- 1 Part of the material presented in this chapter is also discussed in another article where I explore objects in the Mongolian house in relation to the generation of people and place (see Empson 2006).
- 2 This is, of course, not an exhaustive review of the approaches to memory in anthropology. In contrast to works which focus on how memory plays an important part in the construction of identity and self, anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers have focused on memory as something that we encode in our mind (see Cole and Gay 1972; Bloch 1998; Sperber 1989 [1985]; Yates 1974). Others have focused on embodiment, whereby memory is constituted in the act of bodily recalling (see Casey 2000[1987]; Connerton 1989; Csordas 1994; Hallam and Hockey 2001). A good overview of approaches to memory in the humanities and social sciences can be found in Olick and Robbins (1998).
- 3 In a similar way, Casey (2000[1987]) has highlighted the plurality of memory and the “intermediate forms” of remembering involved in perception. These concern moments such as recognizing X as Y, or being reminded of B by A, and reminiscing as a wide-ranging practice that can also be seen as a type of memory (see Casey 2000:x). Drawing on a phenomenological approach, Casey suggests that these intermediate

mnemonic modes take us from the mind into the world of lived experience.

- 4 See Humphrey (1995): “The Mongols do not take over any terrain in the vicinity and transform it into something that is their own. Instead, they move within a space and environment where some kind of pastoral life is possible and ‘in-habit’ it” (1995:135).
- 5 Kaplonski (1999) explains that, when carrying out such raids: “The Ministry of Internal Affairs operated according to a set pattern. The ministry’s men arrived most often at night, usually in a group of two or three. If household items were not confiscated on the spot, chests were sealed and the most valuable items were removed. In due course, everything was confiscated from the families. . . . Repeat confiscations were not unheard of if a family managed to acquire animals or property from friends or relatives after the initial arrest and confiscation” (Kaplonski 1999:97).
- 6 The landscape surrounding the house is also marked with stone cairns, sacred trees, buried placentas, and tethering posts that invoke a sense of inhabited space in the absence of houses and people. This marking of space creates a sense of being attached to a homeland (*nutagyn gazar*), even though the Buryats are relative newcomers to the area they currently inhabit. For ideas about memories residing in the landscape, see Pine (ch. 5).
- 7 Lack of information in the ethnographic record about such ideas can, in part, be attributed to Buddhist scholars who have dismissed this way of thinking as somehow a misinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine. It is important to note that ideas about lay-rebirth exist not just among Buddhists in Mongolia.
- 8 In this chapter, I refer to the Mongolian term *süns* as “soul” (see Humphrey with Onon 1996:213). It is important to note that the reincarnated aspect, or “soul,” shapes the physical body as well as the mind of the person that it inhabits. In this sense, the soul refers to an entity (or a cluster of entities that encompass a single concept) which leaves the body at death and can return in another person. A local Buddhist monk explained that a person has several different souls. When a person is scared, experiences some polluting influence, or has its soul “stolen,” one of these souls may leave the body. The idea of multiple souls allows for the possibility that a soul can be reborn in someone else while that person is still alive. This idea does, however, leave some questions unanswered. For example, if the soul is called back to the original person, then will the person whom the soul temporarily embodied die?
- 9 When focusing on lay-rebirths, I focus on a very particular concept of the person. It is important to keep in mind that other aspects also shape

people. For example, the shared substances of “blood” from the mother and “bone” from the father also determine a person’s physical body, their ethnic identity, and aspects of their personality. Nevertheless, when rebirths do occur within families, they scramble linear ideas about shared substance and allow people to contract or expand their network of kin beyond those based on shared blood and bone.

- 10 Such a view challenges Euro-American ideas that knowledge is indexed to age, by the fact that reincarnated children actually are their elders (see Gupta 2002).
- 11 For memories of anticipated reunions, see Carsten (ch. 4).
- 12 For ideas about different family perspectives of the same memory, see Feuchtwang (ch. 7).
- 13 Humphrey (1992) has noted that: “‘Embodiment’ as a type of enactment does not, of course, only occur in situations of oppression [such as the Soviet-dominated period in Mongolia], as can be seen from the political prominence of the reincarnations of Buddhist saints in Tibet and Mongolia in the past, but its more secular and grass-roots manifestations often run counter to more secular forms of the state (not only the socialist state)” (Humphrey 1992:383).

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