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# Social relations, networks and social organisation in post-socialist rural Mongolia

David Sneath

This paper describes the forms that networks take in rural Mongolia, and examines the nature of the social relations involved. It suggests that the conventional use of the term 'reciprocity' to classify and analyse these relations is inappropriate and suggests an alternative one, based upon the concept of obligation. The paper details the form of goods and services accessed through networks of kin and friends, and examines their significance. The importance of networks of 'social relations of obligation' in pre-collective Mongolian social organisation is examined. The configuration of such networks today may prove to be a key element in the emergence of new economic formations. In a way that is analogous to spatial mobility, rural Mongolian networks can be seen to be an adaptive response to variability—that is, both predictable and unpredictable change. Just as migratory movement is a more flexible use of pasture than sedentary herding, networks are more flexible than fixed groups for dealing with variable and occasional needs.

## Introduction

The background to this discussion of the operation of networks is one of social change and economic shortages. The post-Soviet era of Mongolia, or the 'Age of the Market' (*zakh zeeliin üye*), has meant a loss of almost all the benefits of a Soviet-style society, limited though these may appear to westerners. The safety of cities and rural areas, created by the high level of social control, is a thing of the past. Unemployment has also increased rapidly, and education has suffered. There is widespread perception that young people are growing up lawless and without respect for figures of authority. There has been a slow collapse of effective state social security. Today, people can, all too easily, become destitute in a way that was unthinkable ten years ago.

Cheap fuel oil was another advantage of the old regime, although not one for which the old Mongolian government could claim much credit. The Soviet Union had sold oil very cheaply to its satellite states, and for Mongolia this meant that mechanical trans-

port, a key factor in such a huge and thinly populated country, was affordable and widely available to local government, national services and productive enterprises alike. With the introduction of something approaching the international market price of oil, Mongolia found it could no longer afford to use the quantities it did in the past. As a result there is a severe shortage, high prices, and petrol rationing. Health services and veterinary care are also facing a decline, and the increased difficulty of transportation means that they are less available than in the past.

In both rural and urban areas of Mongolia the shortages of goods and services has promoted the tendency for produce to be obtained through contacts of one sort or another. Of course, this is by no means a new phenomenon. In the commandist period this practice was widespread, and as authorisation was necessary for a wide range of goods and services, links with those in positions of authority were of prime importance. During the collective period, networks tended to reflect the formal structures of power. Although there have been

changes to this official structure, the networks remain, having grown around and along the lines of power of the old organisations. Today the control such officials have over the economy and society may have lessened officially, but the economic dislocation of reform (particularly the problems of distribution) has led to shortages, high inflation and general economic instability. In this situation many officials retain effective control of much of the distribution process, because they remain part of old networks that have access to goods and resources.

The response of many Mongols is to rely to an even greater degree on family and friends—these people are the resources that you *can* count upon. Through such networks they hope to gain access to the wide range of goods and services that are not freely available, but may be gained from those in the right position, not necessarily a senior one. (Drivers, for instance, though subordinate to various officials, still manage to supply their family and friends with transportation, although this has become much more difficult due to petrol shortages.) Because of the increased reliance on individually produced and procured goods, and upon personalised relations for their distribution, the economy seems to have become more, not less, 'embedded' in the opening years of the 'age of the market'.

### The analytical approach

The use of the term 'network' has an established place in social anthropology. Barnes (1954:98–99) defined 'network' to mean the field of relationships between individuals, and Radcliffe-Brown (1968:190) described it as the set of social relations which exist in reality. Since then those concerned with network analysis, such as Lomnitz, have linked it with reciprocity and made much use of the concept of 'the reciprocity network'. "This is not a social group or institution; rather it is a social field defined by an intense flow of reciprocal exchange between

neighbours" (Lomnitz 1977:209). I wish to decouple the concepts of network and reciprocity, and so throughout this paper my use of the term conforms with Radcliffe-Brown's early definition.

Mongolian rural households supply and receive goods and services, to and from each other, on a regular basis. The nature, frequency and value of these transfers are discussed below, but they range from consumer goods like alcohol and tobacco, to animals and even the use of motor vehicles. Between family and friends there is no question of charging money for such things; it would be entirely inappropriate.

The conventional approach to the analysis of these relations would be in terms of exchange and reciprocity. Mauss established the notion of exchange as a key concept for the analysis of economic systems (Mauss 1925). Polanyi defined three types of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange (Polanyi 1944). Although the applicability of the category of 'reciprocity' will be questioned below, if we accept it for the time being to mean the non-commercial transfers between friends and relations, it can be seen that in these terms all three mechanisms are at work in Mongolia today. Redistribution remains in the form of rationed petrol, flour and other foodstuffs, as well as the widespread remnants of the commandist economy—the allocation of supplies and resources to official organisations. As a result of reforms there is an increasing amount of market exchange, but this is of limited scope as yet, especially in rural areas.

Sahlins' work remains very influential in the study of reciprocal exchange (Sahlins 1972). His approach sets out a continuum that ranges from the 'pure gift' of 'generalised reciprocity', through mutuality, to the unalloyed self-interest of 'negative reciprocity'. By this scheme reciprocity is at its least altruistic at greatest social distance.

In Sahlins' analysis the closely knit household shares produce and labour, so that as each member contributes to, and benefits from, the 'pool' of goods and serv-

ices this process can be seen as 'reciprocal' in a generalised sense. However, in Mongolian society a comparable analysis concerns networks rather than "kinship-residential groupings" (Sahlins 1972:198). In this case it is the obligation rather than the exchange aspect of the relationships that is more useful in understanding their significance.

It may be that approaches that presume reciprocity are most appropriate for the study of relatively stable arrangements concerned with provisioning. While the supply of goods is also of crucial importance in Mongolia, it is often services and assistance that are seen as the most important benefits received through these social relations. In this sense, security is one of the key aspects of these social relations, rather than the exchange of objects.

Sahlins' model is built about the concept of reciprocity, so that return gifts or services are assumed and expected (Sahlins 1972:188). "Pooling is an organisation of reciprocities, a system of reciprocities", he writes. The language used is so infused with the notion of exchange that it precludes the recognition of non-reciprocal distribution or transfer.<sup>1</sup> Sahlins admits, however, that 'reciprocity' is very unequal among kin, and that the flow may be 'one-way' for a long time. Pryor (1972:72) notes this and points out that using Leach's approach this imbalance would be explained as being compensated by a reciprocal flow of 'intangibles'. Such an analysis is open to attack on a number of grounds, and although his methodology may not be without its flaws, Pryor's study of Eskimo distribution patterns provides a convincing critique of it. He found that "the views of Mauss and others who believe that exchange in pre-capitalist societies is essentially reciprocal seems belied by our results ... We tried to test the notion that distributions 'balanced' by a counterflow of such invisibles [prestige, status, etc.] Our regression experiments showed that these did not seem to play a sufficiently important role to yield results" (Pryor 1972:100-101).

Pryor (1972:3), unhappy with the implications of the term 'exchange', uses the term 'transfer', because it does "not presume the existence of 'two-way transactions' that in some way balance". He then distinguishes "two types of transfer transactions: centric and noncentric transfers, the differentiating characteristic being the degree to which the system of transfers is structured with a focal point such as a political or religious leader or institution". Thus Polanyi's concept of 'centricity' is used by Pryor, and deals primarily with distribution that centres on an individual or agency—a pooling of resources.

The problem with this sort of approach is that it attempts a typology based upon the movement of the objects involved, not upon the nature of the relationships. By Pryor's scheme a given social relationship—such as between relatives—might be classified as reciprocal at one time, and as engendering a noncentric transfer at another time (if, for instance, one of the partners falls sick). But the *relationship* itself has not changed over this period, and it seems to me that to base a classificatory scheme on the relationships themselves, and one that encompasses the different forms of transfer that can result from them, would be more suitable.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the later work on 'exchange' also tends to look at these relationships from the point of view of classifying the different ways in which objects may move. Gregory (1982) makes the point that gifts create relationships between people (the 'subjects' of exchange), while commodities create a relationship between the 'objects' of exchange. I would tend to reverse the causal relationship and say that while relationships between people and objects creates commodities, relationships between people create gifts. This may be glib, as it is obvious that gifts both result from and reinforce the relationship. Still, the way in which Gregory formulates his analysis is telling.<sup>3</sup> In Mongolian rural transfers between kin and friends, the relationship is certainly primary, and gifts and services

may move along that link (reinforcing it, certainly) but do not of themselves create it.

There is a concept of reciprocity in Mongolian society, indeed a strong norm. I am not suggesting that reciprocity is unnecessary in the analysis, but simply that it is not the defining characteristic of the relationships that form networks. The norm favouring reciprocity operates inside these relations just as it does—to a lesser degree—outside them. Thus a symmetry in the relationship may be expected between people of approximately the same age, such as schoolfriends, but this is not the case with relations between people of different ages. In the case of elder kin, or friends of ego's parents, the obligations of the relationship may be quite unequal, and more importantly, different in kind. In general the junior partner is expected to provide physical services for the elder, especially anything where youth or vigour is important. The senior partner is expected to make use of the resources that elders are associated with, principally their influence, advice and sometimes wealth. It may be that this relationship involves very unequal 'exchanges' of goods and services. Indeed, it may be an almost entirely one-way affair, with the recipient giving nothing appreciable in return.

The important aspect here is that the obligation is mutual, even if this is rarely or never called upon in the case of this or that individual. The principle of reciprocity may be seen to apply, perhaps, at different levels. For example, an uncle may help his nephew over and over again without any return from the young man concerned. His sister and brother-in-law, the parents of the youth, however, may well give presents to the uncle. In order to characterise this bond by its reciprocal nature, one must begin to deal with the question of what constitutes the units of reciprocity—an individual or a family household? This sort of approach would be problematic. It is clear, however, that there is in general an obligation to assist each other placed on both nephew and

uncle, although this obligation may not be exercised by both partners. The nature of the obligations involved depend upon the relative roles of the individuals involved, that is they are dependent upon their age, their closeness and their gender.

Rather than classify the relationships by the way objects may be transferred along them, I suggest characterising them by the social obligations that they entail. The transfers of goods or services that might accompany these links are classified by the relationship.<sup>4</sup> An analysis based on 'reciprocal' relations (generalised or restricted) will not, I think, accurately reflect the nature of the bonds marked by the transfers of assistance and gifts. It is the obligation implicit in the relationship that is crucial. These obligations are mutual, but the transfers that they engender are not necessarily reciprocal.

This sort of constellation of relationships is more responsive and flexible than those of rigid reciprocity, where the inability of, say, a poor, old, sick or low-status individual to repay the help and goods supplied to him, should in the long term prevent the supply of much in the way of goods and services. However, with relationships based upon obligations the norms to help kith and kin generate a network that is based upon the rough principle—in the words of another—supply to each according to their need, and expect from each according to their ability. This 'moral economy' means that there are, in effect, a series of mutual-help networks.

This perspective is almost identical to that of Alfred Gell, although arrived at independently. Gell (1992:151) coins the term 'indigenous service economy', and describes it like this: "Moral obligation dictated by role-definitions provides a basis for a political economy and social-reproductive regime, which I will name 'the indigenous services economy'".

What Gell would term the Mongolian indigenous service economy remains very important; indeed as has been noted above, it has increased in significance in response

to recent shortages and inflation. In some cases we even get the indigenous service economy superficially resembling the market; for instance when there were shortages of consumer goods people often had to resort to giving money as a gift, because they could get no useful goods. What looked like cash payment was actually second-rate gift giving.

### 'Social relations of obligation'

I propose to use the term 'social relations of obligation' to describe the nature of the social relations that I am concerned with in my discussion. If following Radcliffe-Brown we take networks to mean social relations that exist in reality, then those links along which assistance flows, or may be expected to flow in need, can be distinguished using this admittedly clumsy term. Where relations of obligation exist they may be marked by the giving of goods and services, and also by requests for the same.

I have two reasons for continuing to use my approach, based as it is upon the concept of a network of relations of social obligation, and not adopting Gell's term 'the indigenous service economy'. The first is that I wish to emphasise the aspect of the network, and the second is that I believe that notions of social obligation form a complex within the Mongolian cultural system, and influences society in a number of ways, not just in the sphere of economics.

### Different bases of 'social relationships of obligation'

The network of social relations of obligation is generated by the action of several factors, the first being kinship. In general, kinship provides the most intense bonds of obligation, and the most numerous. Mongolians tend to have large families, 52.7 percent of the population being under 20 years of age according to the 1989 census, and so the kin network is usually large and

well-extended. These relations are generally strongest inside the household, and tend to become less intense with increasing distance, as classical network analysis describes. However, they also differ in nature, depending upon generational distance and, to some extent, gender. In rough terms elder partners are expected to provide assistance such as advice, influence, and material goods or money; while juniors are expected to provide respect, obedience and labour. Within these rough expectations males and females are generally expected to provide the forms of assistance appropriate to their genders. It should be noted that these are expectations rather than rules, and there is great variety in practice.

The role of affines in this system is interesting, in that their obligations are at least as strong as to cognates. This is particularly true in respect of the son-in-law, because as Humphrey (1983:347-50) notes in the Buryat case there is a traditional attitude towards sons-in-law providing additional servile labour. Today there remains a strong norm that a son-in-law should provide help and assistance for his wife's parents, and marriages are, therefore, of great economic importance.

Friends, particularly schoolmates and those who have served together in the army, are probably the second most important category of members of these networks. Being usually of similar ages, friends do not generally have the sort of asymmetrical obligations that are associated with relations between those of different ages, particularly kin. In many cases gifts between such friends will be associated with recreation, such as presents of alcohol and tobacco, but they are also obligation relationships that are called upon to provide services or goods that one partner may need from time to time. For example, help with obtaining transport or local government authorisation are typical favours that friends will expect from those able to provide them. In general, however, these obligations tend to take a slightly lower priority to those of kin within a generation or two of ego.

The way in which such networks interact with hierarchies is a complex one. They can be seen in some cases to stem from status differences and in some ways to reinforce them. If relations of social obligation connect those of unequal status, then the nature of the obligations on each side different, and resembles that between senior and junior kin; thus those in superior positions may very well be described as 'patrons'. Patron-client relations are an important feature of Mongolian society, and the individual acting as a patron is often described as being like an elder brother or a father to his clients. Although described using the metaphor of kinship, these relations are generally less affective than those between genuine kin, but resemble them insofar as the senior partner is expected to provide advice and assistance in a similar way to elder kin, and junior members to show respect and obedience.

While obligation may form the essence of these social relations, the norm of reciprocity means that these links are most stable where obligations can be seen to be mutual and reciprocal. In this sense, extreme inequality between actors linked in this way may undermine their relations. I suggest, then, that where individuals amass extreme wealth relative to their relations and friends, there are likely to be strains on these 'relations of obligation'. It is likely that either the circle of those included in this category will be restricted, or that the assistance offered to other members of the network will be increasingly conditional. The experience of Inner Mongolian privatisation shows that one form which asymmetrical social relations between those of very different wealth levels may take is that of patron-client bonds. In these terms the relationship between patron and client are conditional, whereas that between close kin tends to be unconditional.

These asymmetrical 'relations of obligation' have been very important in the operation of informal hierarchies in the past, as shall be described below, and remain influential. The antiquity of a set of ideas,

that might be described as a complex of norms within Mongolian culture, may be seen in the way that the same basic conceptual scheme operates in the realm of traditional religious offerings. Ceremonies such as that of the *ovoo* involve the honouring of spiritual 'masters of the land' (*gazaryn ezed*) to whom gifts are offered, and the expectation that these entities are obliged to bring good natural conditions in the locality.

Such asymmetrical relations might fall into the category of nepotism, and this is a well known tendency in Mongolia, even at the highest levels of government. Recently, for example, there was some discussion in the press of one instance of such nepotism. Places as exchange students in Turkey are much sought after by young Mongolians, and these awards are the subject of fierce competition. The successful applicants are supposed to be selected in exams held by both the Education Ministry and the Foreign Ministry. The Mongolian weekly, *Ardchilal* ('Democracy') published an article alleging that almost all twenty of the current places were filled by young relatives and friends of senior members of the present administration, and listing fifteen of them and their connections (*Ardchilal* No. 44(104) November 1992). Gifts may help bring about the creation of such relations, but they do not, of themselves, create them. For this reason, direct gifts that are designed to act as bribes have limited effectiveness. A well-placed relative or close friend is a much better asset to an ambitious Mongolian.

### Goods and services accessed through the network

In the following pages I will deal mostly with the instrumental and functional aspects of these relationships, but it should be stressed that these are also largely affective bonds, and affection, respect, and the pleasure of another's company play an important part. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the practical use to which these relationships are put.

To begin by looking at gifts, a study of rural Mongolian household budgets<sup>5</sup> in Uvs *aimag* suggested that on average 12.9 percent of the income of the households interviewed was expended on gifts, (although this amount ranged widely from 1.3 percent to 40.8 percent of the household's income). Households studied in the same way in Dornogov' *aimag* spent on average 13.6 percent on gifts, and although the absolute accuracy of these figures cannot be very high, this finding is in line with the material from Uvs. Some error is likely to be present because of the difficulties of gathering accurate data from people who are relying on memory, and often on guesswork, to put precise figures on their expenditures and incomes, and because of the limited number of detailed household budgets that could be collected. However, the figures give some indication of the importance of material transfers between households. When one also notes that a large percentage of income is spent on food<sup>6</sup> (around half), gifts clearly represent an important aspect of the domestic economy. Favourite gifts include alcohol, cloth, tea, sweets, other foodstuffs and money.

These figures are not the whole story, for they are based upon the cash income of the household concerned, and tend to underestimate the numbers of domestic livestock that are given to family and friends. The author notes that the herding family he lived and worked with, gave no fewer than five sheep and goats to family and friends over the six months. When the formal interviews were carried out, however, the household counted only the animals given to the more distant relatives as gifts, the others were included in those that the family considered to be home consumption.

Networks are also of importance when it comes to the ownership of livestock and their pasturing arrangements. Since the privatisation of a high proportion of formally collective livestock, a large number of animals are owned by people living in towns and cities. There is a strong tendency for animals to be herded for friends and

kin, outside formal economic relations, so that if they give anything at all, people give some present to the herdsman for looking after their animals from time to time, rather than paying any sort of set fee. Although this gift may be in the form of cash, the amount of frequency of these gifts are explicitly unspecified, and left to the owner to decide. Usually some gifts will also be given by the herding household to the owner of the animals. A poor household will very much want animals to herd, so as to make use of various animal products, and even a well-off herding household generally accepts additional livestock for this reason.<sup>7</sup>

In the two case study sites, of the 15 urban households interviewed who had livestock herded for them by other households, over half had their animals herded by kin, and the others all described those who herded their animals as friends. Eight households said they gave gifts to the herders, one said they gave help in finding resources, four gave nothing regularly, and two said they paid a fee for herding their animals. When gifts are given they are generally adapted to the needs of the recipient and, of course, the resources available to the giver: tobacco for a smoker, hay to a herdsman who requires it, tea for the whole family, and so on. Although only one respondent described it explicitly in the interviews, the general obligation to help relations and friends find scarce resources makes this a very common way in which those in the *sum* centre may help the pastoral members of their network.

When calculated in standard stocking units, I found that in the Dornogov' study site 47.5 percent of all livestock herded by the households studied was owned by the former collective (the company), 12.8 percent by other official organisations, 27.5 percent by the herding households themselves, 8.1 percent by their kin, and 4.1 percent by their friends. If we exclude animals belonging to the company and other official organisations we find that almost a third of all the private animals herded by this



(admittedly small) sample were owned by their kith and kin.<sup>8</sup> In the Uvs case study site many more of the former collective animals had been privatised, and company holdings amounted to only 29.3 percent of the herds of the studied households, calculated in standard stocking units. Private animals belonging to the herding household themselves constituted 64.4 percent of the total herds, those owned by their kin 4.7 percent and their friends 1.7 percent. The numbers of animals owned by relatives and friends together amount to around 9 percent of the total number of non-company livestock. Although much lower than the reported numbers of animals owned by kith and kin in the Dornogov' study, they are still significant, and suggest that networks are an important issue in ownership, as well as in the supply of goods.

Gifts and herding arrangements are, however, only some of the more visible aspects of the importance of such social relations of obligation. Herding households assist members of their network in a number of ways, and again, kinship is central. In both the Dornogov' and Uvs case studies respondents were asked to list those people from outside the household who provided most help to them. In both studies around 80 percent of those listed by respondents were cognatic or affinal kin.<sup>9</sup> These kin may not be living nearby. The heads of the household in which I stayed, for example, considered the person who helped them the most to be their son, who lived in the local *sum* centre. Although he visited rather occasionally, and was not able to help much with daily tasks, he provided goods such as veterinary medicine (his wife was a vet) and helped his parents gain access to other important services.

In both case study sites, transport emerged as being one of the most important services commonly accessed through networks. The provision that the *negdels* made for moving herding families to and from seasonal pastures has declined, and in some areas it has been withdrawn altogether. The result of these developments is

that, as with other resources in short supply, the herders turn to their networks to obtain this service.

Because of the nature of the help and assistance that may be provided in this way the services supplied through such relations can have an importance out of proportion with their hypothetical cost. For example, in a crisis, transport or medicine may be vital for the survival of people or animals. Herdsmen do consider 'risk-avoidance' when it comes to such relationships, the question of who can be relied upon in this or that contingency is treated seriously. This is another aspect of the 'embedded' nature of the economy which makes quantification difficult.

For these reasons, among others, it becomes very difficult to decide upon the units for production and consumption in rural Mongolia. A formal unit, such as a household (*am örökh*), in fact relies upon the services of the many people in their network. The problems of formal economic analysis are exacerbated because households linked in this way are not related by the market, they do not exchange goods and services for money, they do not even barter them, and the services and goods available through networks are not open to all, but are restricted to those linked by the bonds of kinship, friendship, or in some cases, residential proximity.

It is difficult to know whether the economic importance of such networks will decline if the shortages give way to a good supply of most of the goods in demand. If Mongolian consumers can easily buy what they need, will the tendency to obtain them through networks decline? My guess (and it can only be one) is that it will, up to a point, but that the social logic of obligatory help and gift-giving will remain very important. It should also be noted that in the near future there is little prospect of such general access to goods and services. Even if the economy boomed in Mongolia, the perennial problems of transport and distribution in a country the size of Mongolia means that even if there are no shortages of

goods in the towns, herding households will still place great importance on the flow of material from visiting friends and relations.

### Networks and social organisations

Although the categories of people included in networks is fairly clear, it is problematic to presume that in practice operational networks will centre on particular individuals or types of resources. Patterns of mutual assistance are complex and fluid; there are a multitude of bases for cooperation and exchange, so that there are various constellations of social relations which may be significant at any one time.

An analysis of social organisation should include an examination of the most common forms of cooperative activity. It is important to know if these forms are based upon residence, the joint use of resources, kinship, or some other principle. Pastoral Mongolians camp in small groups of one or more yurts, called *ail* or *khot ail*. These may accommodate one family or several; generally the members of these households herd their animals jointly. Mongolia is a very diverse country, and residential patterns differ. In the Gobi part of the country, for instance, the *ail* is usually made up of a single family (sometimes living in two or three yurts), while in the central and northern regions the encampment is usually larger. The complex nature of residence patterns cannot be examined in depth in this paper and varies in form throughout Mongolia, so only some aspects will be dealt with here, notably those general characteristics that reflect the operation of networks.

Turning to the question of joint activities, the case studies suggest that the most important basis of cooperative activity beyond the household is generally kinship. In the Uvs case study residence was a significant factor for cooperative activity, but weak. Informants described services provided for, and received from, other households and their frequency. This showed that

kinship and kin provided services between two and twenty times more often than those of neighbouring households, described as *saakhalt ail* (or *khoshuu ail* in local Uvs parlance). The sorts of activity that such neighbours cooperated with were: shearing sheep, combing cashmere and making felt. Relations and friends also helped with all these tasks, but were also relied upon for help in seasonal migration, getting fuel and herding.

In the Gobi areas of Mongolia, herding households tend to be more isolated, and rarely camp together in encampments. In the Dornogov' site, joint work of the *saakhalt ail* type was not mentioned by any of the informants, and this cooperation was not carried out by the families the author lived with. Neither, it should be added, did they organise any joint activity with people who used the same water source. (This category—*neg usnykhan*—was not mentioned as a grouping that organised joint activity, or did anything else, by a single herdsman interviewed in any of the case study sites). The only informant in either of the study sites who answered 'yes', when asked if they were part of any sort of grouping that carried out tasks jointly, explained that he worked jointly with his son.

It may seem strange, at first, that herding households exchange services with neighbouring households, and yet do not constitute a group that carried out joint activities. However, when one considers that a household will often have completely different immediate neighbours in summer and winter pastures, and that all sorts of joint activity will occur from time to time in a very fluid and flexible way, one understands why herdsman in all the studied sites were emphatic that households are not members of enduring neighbourhood groups that carry out joint work. Households do, of course, cooperate in work, but there is no fixed neighbourhood group that does this. The really stable units are administrative: the *bag* (or *ferm* in state farms), and kin-based units such as the *örök* (fam-

ily or household) which are relatively stable manifestations of family relations.

The small residential unit—the *ail* or *khot ail* (encampment)—is formed for a variable length of time, as a flexible mobilisation of network links. These encampments are the visible manifestation of social processes; they reflect social organisation, rather than provide the foundation for it, and this will be discussed in greater depth below. The most important assistance between households occurs along the lines of kinship and friendship, although clientship was also important in the past. Proximity, or the joint use of some resources, will generally be important only when it coincides with one of these social relations. For example, when labour is needed for some seasonal activity, such as combing hair from livestock or breaking horses, relatives and friends will often come and help from some distance away, although closer neighbours may not.

Before looking in more detail at the changing situation in Mongolia today, it may be interesting to place these developments in their historical context by briefly reviewing the ways in which social organisation and residence have interacted with networks in the past.

The pre-revolutionary management structure, as far as we can reconstruct it, was characterised by large numbers of animals in the ownership of nobles and monastic institutions. The actual herding of animals seems to have been done by flexible combinations of individual households, the poorer ones tending to cluster about richer 'patron' families. The Mongolian pastoral economy underwent a series of changes after the Soviet-style MPRP<sup>10</sup> took power in 1921. The feudal and ecclesiastical classes were stripped of their power and wealth.

In studying this pre-collective pastoral society some of the best material I found was the work of A.D. Simukov, a Russian ethnographer who worked extensively in Mongolia in the early 1930s, before collectivisation. Although he includes some

Marxist analysis, his work includes a great deal of valuable observational material.

Simukov (1933) studied *khotons* (*khot ails*)<sup>11</sup> in one sub-district (*bag*) in Arkhangai *aimag* in 1933. In this region, he notes, the *khot ails* tend to be the largest in Mongolia, and this is still noticeable today. He found the average size to be around 4–5 households and noted that they were largest in summer. He wrote "each separate *khoton* is not a constant organisation. Existing today, it may disappear tomorrow...the number of *khotons* in one sum (district) is constantly changing". He studied 100 *khotons* (*khot ails*) and classifies them thus "the *khotons* with constant composition 45 percent, the *khotons* of mixed character 25 percent, the *khotons* with inconstant composition 30 percent. He notes that those households who camp together as one *khoton* continuously are those with the highest number of kinship links between the member households.

Simukov avoids describing the *khoton* (*khot ail*) as a group, instead he talks of "the process of joining-up in *khotons*" (my emphasis). Simukov found that kinship was the most important feature of this process. "There is a clear tendency to join up in *khotons* according to kinship lines in this *bag*" he writes, noting that agnatic kinship between household heads was most important, accounting for 41 percent of the *khot ails*. Those camping with their sons-in-law came second with 21 percent of the studied encampments, and other relatives accounted for 35 percent. I propose that this social process of *khot ail* formation involved the manifestation of social relations in a residential form. Rather than being rigid and stable, these relations were a fluid and flexible network, based largely on kinship, but also on patron-client relations and friendship.

The cooperative activity Simukov describes as undertaken by members of *khot ails* is herding animals and felt-making. Joint activities by members of neighbouring encampments, he noted, were almost entirely absent. "Sometimes", he explains, "two *khot ails* will come close enough together to ex-

change lambs.<sup>12</sup> It is the only form of cooperation between *khotons* (*khot ails*) that we managed to observe" he wrote. He also notes that the rich tended to join up with poor households to make use of their labour, and the poor were only too willing to herd for the rich as they had great difficulty living independently. Simukov describes the senior figure who could usually be seen as the head of each *khot ail*, characterised not only by generally being an older male, but also by being rich. Those households who camped together usually recognised this senior and referred to him using the term "*akh*" (a term used to mean elder brother, elder male relative or friend). These relations match perfectly with what I have described as 'patron-client' relations.<sup>13</sup>

The reason that poor households were dependent upon rich 'patron' families was not just their need for food, even if they could provide this for themselves; they were often reliant on richer households for the use of draught animals. In addition there were occasional needs arising for various religious and medical expenses which the poor could not pay, and would expect help in these matters from their rich relatives or patron.

This form of dependence seems to be a longstanding tendency in Mongolian rural society, which could be described as 'traditional'. In the area of Dornogov' where I carried out research there had been a widespread practice of herding animals for rich owners. The poor often relied upon such arrangements for their subsistence. "There was no contract for herding animals in those days," explained Lubsanjamba, my oldest informant, "the *ezen* (owner) of the animals did not say you had to give him a fixed amount of money, or wool or a certain number of lambs or litres of milk each year. People knew each other, and what was given was up to the *ezen*, from time to time he would say if he wanted something and when he wanted it—some milk—products, a sheep or something else".<sup>14</sup>

Since that time the collectives (*negdels*) were introduced in the 1950s. They were

large collective farms that owned most of the livestock and allocated labour; households were allowed to own some private animals.<sup>15</sup> Residence continued to reflect the now changed social relations, with *khot ails* still very much in evidence, but adapted to new administrative constraints. Those well-placed in the new structures of power became important parts of the rural networks. Social relations of obligation (of both the symmetrical and asymmetrical patron-client type) continued to serve as a basis for the supply of assistance and goods.

Recently there have been a number of economic reforms designed to privatise collective and State assets, and build a market-oriented economy. In 1992 the *negdels* were largely replaced by companies, and a distribution of formerly collective assets was begun. Throughout the country, Mongolia is carrying out these reforms in rather different ways.<sup>16</sup> Some areas have dissolved the companies; in many districts they remain, having privatised a high proportion of the formally collective livestock. Where collectives have become companies, they continue to hold quite large numbers of animals. These are herded by households under 'lease' arrangements that are almost identical to the old 'norm' by which the collective members were given production plans.

In areas that have divided formally collective assets, some enterprises termed 'cooperatives' (*khoshoo*<sup>17</sup> or *khoshoolal*) have been formed, often it appears around some section of the old *negdel*. For instance, in the *sum* centre the small factories or plants that the collective had set up became 'cooperatives'. Where pastoral 'cooperatives' have been formed it appears that networks are fundamental to them. In Dornod *aimag*, Bayantumen *sum*, for example, a 'cooperative'—the Bayan Tsagaan *khoshoolal*—had been set up by herders in April 1993. It was composed of ten families, all of whom were kin, and was formed around certain resources that used to belong to the old collective, notably some vehicles, a large winter animals enclosure, haymaking and po-

tato fields. The membership of the cooperative was based upon the kin network of the man who was central to its formation, and not upon a residential or neighbourhood group. Some members had come from some distance to join the cooperative that their kinsman had founded. Although all ten member households helped make hay together in the summer, most of them lived in several different places for the rest of the year. During the labour-intensive haymaking season kin networks were once again in evidence as other relatives of the member households came to help, and not people from neighbouring encampments. The cooperative was described as a temporary and experimental formation, which might be disbanded if it was not seen to be working well.

The nature of the social obligations involved in the Bayan Tsagaan *khорshoolal* is well demonstrated by the way that members said that they would on no account employ paid workers to help with seasonal labour, and that poor kin were included in the cooperative. The formation of this cooperative should not be seen however as typical of the changes underway in the whole of the country. In the two *sums* in Dornogov' *aimag* where I worked, for instance, there were not initiatives of this kind.

In the current 'age of the market', the perceived increase in individualism and egotism meant that in the region I studied there is a widespread impression that largescale cooperative activity has decreased. One can see why: the lower level of social control and increasing importance of private animals has promoted competition and suspicion. This means that people tend to fall back upon the people perceived to be reliable—kin and friends.

Patron-client type relations also remain strong in this region, and can even be seen to be increasing in importance. In an environment of scarce resources, and highly personalised economic arrangements, an individual's standing in the local government and community may give them largely exclusive access to important re-

sources, such as transport. Opportunistic and entrepreneurial activity on the part of those in positions to benefit from economic deregulation is likely to increase the dependence of others upon them. Of the numerous examples that I found of successful individuals with connections with senior officials, the best is a scrap-metal trader who was unusual in that he was making several million tögrög a year<sup>18</sup>, selling scrap iron to China. It was generally agreed that his undisputed business acumen was only part of the reason for this success. The other was the fact that he was the son-in-law of one of the most senior officials in the state farm, who, although recently retired, retained his influence and wide range of contacts.

## Conclusion

The pattern that emerges is that a certain complex of norms concerning role-specific obligations to relatives, friends, patrons and clients can be identified in Mongolian culture. In the past, encampments and patron-client clusters were not permanent, but were flexibly constituted. To make such a fluid system of social organisation work, a set of principles was required which allowed households to fit together in a predictable way. The cultural complex, with its roles, ranking obligations and norms provided such a mechanism. The networks were, and remain, the range of possibilities for assistance and cooperation that may be used by the households concerned in a variety of constellations, and also the range of each household's obligations. In addition, because of the persistence of the cultural complex regarding social relations of obligation, non-residential patron-client type relations with officials tended to form.

During the long period of the collectives, social relations of obligation grew along the lines of the formal structure of the collectives and state farms. Even with the partial removal of this official structure, the networks remain, having grown (like the organic network of a plant) around and along

the lines of power of the old organisation. It may be that a similar process has occurred elsewhere in post-socialist Inner Asia, and that the continued power of collective farms in Buryatia and Tuva is at least in part due to the economic importance of the *social relations* generated by the institution, as much as the formal structures. Although these formal structures may have been changed or abolished, the networks that grew up about them remain largely in place. Much of the entrepreneurial activity that has occurred, such as it is, has been based upon these networks, because they often control access to a whole range of resources. It is unsurprising, then, that 'new' economic enterprises may closely resemble the old in terms of personnel and working practices.

What we see when we study the network of 'social relations of obligation' is the variety of ways by which Mongolians have created a larger socio-economic field (for it cannot easily be termed a unit) which is more powerful, better provisioned and more secure than atomised individual households. Resources, services and produce that are not owned or ordinarily available to households and individuals are accessible to this larger field, the 'network'. Rather than investing in the ownership of a motor vehicle—which would be far beyond the means of most herdsmen—one invests in the goodwill of a driver or official with a vehicle.

Like spatial mobility, Mongolian networks can be seen to be an adaptive response to variability, that is both predictable and unpredictable change. Just as movement is more flexible than static dwelling, networks are more flexible than groups for dealing with variable and occasional needs. In the case of migratory movements, for example, the need for help from a given person may only arise once or twice a year, but can be very important at that time. Networks remain as important for social organisation in rural life as they were in the past. The mobility of pastoral families meant that in the past residential grouping could reflect the flexible nature of networks

of social relations of obligation, and today, in the present restructuring to the pastoral economy, some analogous tendencies appear to have developed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It may be that the 'maximising man' model, that seemed to offer the rigour of classical economics to anthropology, over-emphasised the self-help aspects of sharing to the extent that it became seen in Sahlins' model as a reciprocal activity. The importance of, for want of a better term, what we call the notion of 'enlightened self-interest' in the generation of economic and social forms, may well have been rated too highly in western economic thought over the last few decades. To move beyond the current thinking in economic anthropology we may require approaches that place more stress on the complexity of motivational and expectational processes.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Pryor's use of his typology is full of normative presumptions which I find unhelpful in this case. For example, "such redistribution can be either regressive (e.g. if the political authority keeps for his personal use what is collected), progressive (e.g. if the goods are collected from the rich and given to the poor), or neutral" (Pryor 1972:36).

<sup>3</sup> See discussion of Gregory by Strathern (1992:176–177).

<sup>4</sup> This may in part be influenced by the way in which in the West we separate commercial and personal activity to a considerable extent, so that we might deal with the same person on two different footings, giving a well-known customer some gift one day and selling him something the next. In general this separation is weaker in Mongolia, and when we are dealing with the domestic mode of production it is almost entirely absent. In this case the question 'are you giving me this sheep or selling it to me' rarely arises, and so the classification of the transfer into an act of 'pure giving' (generalised reciprocity), delayed exchange, or selling (commoditisation) is not usually significant. It is more important to classify the relationship between the people concerned. If you know that you can be reasonably sure whether the donor is selling the sheep or giving it.

<sup>5</sup> The figures given here are based upon an initial analysis of material collected during six months of fieldwork by the author in *Sumber* and *Dalanjargalan sums* in *Dornogov' aimag*, and upon case studies carried out in *Davst sum* in *Uvs aimag*, and *Bayantumen sum*, *Dornod aimag* by B. Telengid and Caroline Humphrey as part of the MacArthur ECCIA project. It should be noted that they involved relatively small numbers of informants interviewed in depth as part of a period of participant observation. Twenty households had their household budg-

ets recorded in Davst, and 21 in Dornogov'. The accuracy of the statistics quoted therefore, cannot be assumed to be very high. These households were, however, carefully chosen so as to be as representative as possible, and we expect the data to be good enough to provide a reasonable representation of the general situation.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to cash expenditure on flour, if one looks at the domestic consumption of animals in the families studied in Dornogov' *aimag*, they reported that they consumed, on average, 22.6 small animal equivalents each year. This is 2.6 percent of the total number of livestock herded by the households concerned, calculated in small animal equivalents each year. This represents, however, 9.4 percent of their privately owned animals. Turning to the Uvs *aimag* study, it was found that average domestic consumption worked out at 27.9 small animal equivalents per year. This amounted to 6.5 percent of these families' private holdings. (The reported domestic consumption ranged from 9–40 small animal equivalents per year, from 2–10.2 percent of the total herd numbers).

<sup>7</sup> In part this may also be because animals, like children, are generally seen as a blessing and valuable in their own right.

<sup>8</sup> The percentages are, as one would expect, at slight variance with the percentages found when every single animal in the *sum* is considered. Using the complete local government statistics for *Sumber sum* where the first study was done we find that 42.6 percent of the livestock is owned by the company, 35.8 percent is in private ownership by herding and non-herding members, and other official organisations own 21.6 percent of the animals. I estimate that in *Dalanjargalan* in 1993, company holdings now stand at 42.0 percent, the herding members 41.8 percent, non-herding members 11.0 percent, the company factory owns 2.7 percent and other official organisations account for 2.5 percent of the total livestock.

<sup>9</sup> Out of a total of 85 people named, 68 were kin.

<sup>10</sup> The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, generally known now as the *Makh nam*.

<sup>11</sup> Simukov notes that the term he uses for the encampment—*khoton*—is largely interchangeable with the term *ail* (pp. 22–23). Simukov also mentions that the term *khot ail*, was sometimes used, and I shall include this in brackets as this term is widely used today.

<sup>12</sup> A useful labour-saving practice as the ewes will not suckle the strange lambs and so milk is retained for milking while labour is saved by the unification of the lambs with the adult herd.

<sup>13</sup> Simukov described a pattern familiar to me from the accounts of many of my old informants both in Mongolia and from earlier work in Inner Mongolia. For this reason I believe the pattern was widespread.

<sup>14</sup> These formations seem to have occurred elsewhere. In the fifties 'primary cooperatives' were

formed in Inner Mongolia. On the exterior they were a collaborative grouping of equals. In fact, an examination of the internal structure of these early cooperatives suggests that they were more like clusters of poor clients about a rich patron.

<sup>15</sup> 50 private animals were permitted in most of Mongolia, and 75 in Gobi regions.

<sup>16</sup> The method of privatisation was to issue *tasalbar* coupons worth a total of 10,000 tögrögs. The small and large coupons (representing 3,000 and 7,000 tg respectively) were used at different times to buy animals, and sometimes enclosures and other assets from the company.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that this term can also be used for marketing organisations based upon old state structures.

<sup>18</sup> One dollar was worth around 400 tögrögs at the time of study (Feb.–Aug. 1993).

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