"Suspended" Tradition – A Nomadic Time Concept

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Paper for

Ethnography and liminality: boundaries, opportunities and living "at the edge"

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Structured Abstract

This paper builds on the paper presented at the Ethnography Symposium 2013 by Heather Höpfl, David, Weir and Saranzaya Manalsuren, entitled "'A single proverb has thousands of meanings: Nomadic inheritance tradition – Euthanasia by grandson', and extends the analysis into a framework for understanding the identity and behaviours of the new generation of Mongolian managers. It is based on participant-observation fieldwork. One of the co-authors is a Mongolian national who works as an expatriate in the UK and has also worked in other European countries and is currently studying for a doctorate at Essex University.

Purpose
This paper fits clearly into the concerns of the Ethnography Conference with liminality and changing modes of cultural transmission stated as "Ethnography and liminality: boundaries, opportunities and living 'at the edge'".

This paper looks at the nomad concept of time orientation that articulates the nomadic philosophy and identity for thousands of years and continue to influence Mongols' behaviour. We are interpreting traditional nomadic time philosophy, how it suspended during the socialist period and challenges encountered in contemporary Mongolia since 1991 when transited from socialism to capitalism. In addition, we are going to highlight the use of indigenous knowledge in constructing management concept in emerging countries.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper is located in self-participant observation using an ethnographic perspective. In addition, phenomenograhy used as one of methodologies to investigate people's experiences qualitatively and draw conclusions on shared meanings. This research adopts a first-order approach to give an authentic voice to local managers and avoid researcher's description.

Introduction

The Mongolian nomadic perspective is very different from the western way of thinking. Due to the pastoral life style, being closer to nature and the environment and developing indigenous knowledge is the essence of nomadic culture, one of the nomadic metaphors is land and its relationship between nature and human life. Nomads depend on nature, weather and land and their life revolves around *motherland* and birthplace. Mongolians call their land "*eh oron*", meaning motherland, the origin of everything; it is given by their ancestors and it is their responsibility to give it to their descendants. The nomadic culture and nomadic society can be described by a symbolic relationship between the landscape and the Mongol people. The symbolic relation has articulated by early Mongolian spirituality started with Tengerism ("Eternal Blue Sky") and see the sky as a father figure and earth as a mother figure; in between the sky and the earth, human beings are born, live and pass away. Mongols' belief is that every person belongs to their homeland, exactly the same as every human is born from a mother; thus they worship their birthplace and sacred mountain throughout their life (Buyndelgeryin, 1999).

That motherland concept develops nomadic trilogy time orientation which could represented by model of "ancestors-me-dependants", in other words "past-present-future". It opposes the Western time concept of only past, present or future orientations.

During socialism, the tradition of spiritual belief suspended and purged nomadic rituals for ancestors and sacred mountains. Portraits of Lenin and Stalin placed on most honorary place inside the yurt and women did tea libation to great socialist leaders than divines of mountain.

When capitalism started since 1991, spiritual belied officially accepted in Mongolian society. That in turn, produced another unexpected change: in a poor country recovering from Soviet domination — where Mongolia's occupiers had wiped away its records and the physical traces of its past — shamanic practices have offered some Mongolians a way to reinvent their own history. Shamans offer clients the supposed opportunity to meet with the spirits of their distant ancestors and hear "fragmented stories about their lives in the past," as (Buyandelger, 2013) observes. "Shamanism is a historical memory for people who lost parts of their ancestral homeland, and who had been marginalized and politically oppressed."

In contemporary Mongolian society, it is common practice to approach shamans or monks to ask about their link with their ancestors, how it will affects present actions, and influences their descendants' future. Therefore, the trilogy concept is growing stronger than ever. It would be interesting to find out that how trilogy orientation affects in decision-making in

managerial practices and conclude the use of indigenous knowledge on management practices in emerging markets.

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In the earlier paper we identified several characteristic streams in Mongolian nomad culture contributing to a traditional nomadic identity including the mode of residence, in the Ger or Yurt which is a circular felt tent, easily dismantled during the seasonal move and been a home for generations for Mongols. The Yurt is central to the Mongolian way of life, its relation to "place" and thus to the conception of "Nomadism." This impacts on concepts of place, of domestic roles and infuses the language of everyday discourse including that of management with characteristic expressions such as "keeping the hearth" and Can't set a fire by one wood, can't count single person as a family". These expressions are well evidenced by Mongolian proverbs and everyday sayings; such as " "Saving the fire/ keep the hearth" (*gal manakh*) – meaning is carry on family tradition, and in direct meaning is making an organisation or place of work homely. There are special roles and performances attached to them such as special expectations for the youngest son of a family.

Another related theme is that of the special role of knowledge and the collective responsibility for its transmission. Thus For Mongols: "The greatest wealth is knowledge, followed by second wealth of having many children, and material is the least wealth – *(Erdem nom deed baylag, ur huuhed dund bayan, ed horongo adgiin bayan).* In this culture therefore material wealth may be traditionally seen as an encumbrance rather than an advantage and more value is placed on learning from elders and travelling lightly with few possessions.

Yet, once the owner of possessions died these possessions were often buried together or given to a shaman/monks to pray for the soul who is to be reborn into a new life.

Context

The complexity of the current situation is self-evident as are the proliferation of modes of analysis: it has been well claimed that "In many ways, it is the recent rediscovery and fascination with the perspective of multiple and hybrid identities that create the need for a more complex method of analysis by which to understand subjects" (Sheth, 2014). The trope of the "manager as nomad" has become quite widespread recently and there is much of advantage and interest in it. Czarniawska warns that the subject is not to be taken too loosely or casually and that the "manager as nomad" trope is more complex than it at first appears to be (Czarniawska, 2012). Gaggiotti (2012) challenges the trope of self-nomadism as a career or fashion choice. McKenna and Richardson (2007) elaborate the complexities of the self-initiated managerial wanderers and Crowley-Henry and Weir (2007) have reported on self-initiated "managerial nomads" whose careers follow "protean" structures, morphing from one shape to another. Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (1999) invite us to consider the "anthropology of empty spaces." Crowley-Henry (2012) sees the analogy of the river as more compelling than that of the ladder in considering global career trajectories.

However, the literature has so far been relatively light in studies of management in cultures in which nomadism is traditional, embedded and supported by cultural anchors. Acton (2010 and 2004) has essayed some helpful schema and has linked this to the need to create alternative schema of economic morality. Table 1 in the previous paper attempts to lay out some of the possibilities.

But still much of the literature on nomadism, like indeed most of the literature since Rostow (1960) on economic development implies movement between two more or less fixed positions rather than attempting to capture the essence of the non-fixity of these positions and the non-existence of either starting points or destinations.
For Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad occupies a special existential space because "Nomads are excluded from history, yet they break through into history by virtue of their very geography, that is, a movement that cannot be controlled.(Semetsky, 2008,vii). For Deleuze, all "becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries and exits" (Deleuze, 1987, p. 2).

Grosz has enquired "*…what does it mean to reflect upon a position, a relation, a place related to other places but with no place of its own – a position in-between?" (Grosz, 2001, 90) and Luz has argued "*against this encompassing dualism or binary logic, discussing the occurrence of a third physical position between them." She proposes the concept of "in-betweenness" as more than "a state of liminality and borderline"…but "a natural process of place-making" (Luz, 2003). In this paper we sketch out what these new directions imply for the study of a society and economy on the move with no clearly fixed points of origin and no objectively-determined point of direction.

Luz claims that this interstitiality is especially characteristic of the contemporary scene because "the 'between' word is part of our routines, our everyday practices of coming and going, our mobile narratives and nomadic stories. While we occupy, claim and explore the city and its spaces, we interact bodily with objects and spaces on a daily basis. As nomadic subjects we are constantly in a state of transition between things." (Luz, 2014, 150).

In this paper we claim that the case of Mongolia is especially interesting because the "between" trope is embedded in the existing culture and in particular in its experience of a form of nomadism whose cultural and linguistic implications are very pervasive that while Mongolia as an economy and society may appear to be definitively in a subaltern position in terms of its state of economic development it already inhabits a meaning-space that is not merely post-modern but in some ways may be a shape of things to come. Thus, we are not here concerned with the problematising of interstitiality or the negative effects of nomadism or the loss of specific identity as when Sheth draws attention to the denigrating effects of mixed identities (Sheth, 2004).

Luz draws our attention to three areas of interest in this re-orientation of theoretical concern, namely, the liminal places of transition and passage, the spaces between buildings and the transit(ional) localities of transportation or communication (Luz, 2014, 151) and we have something to say about each of these. Where Luz claims that "the mobile agents and nomads, who inhabit our spaces of transition and social mobility, can produce 'new' spaces as they go and move along with their everyday lives, places which although transient can sometimes offer new possibilities" (Luz, 147), our argument is that in many respects these inter-cultural conditions already exist in the Mongolian story. In other words in this story it is interstitiality that provides what Luz identifies as a goal of identity work, "a safe and comfortable 'environment' to explore and develop learning experiences." (Luz, 2008). Thus, it is possible that Mongolian society is worth studying not merely in its own right, but also as an indication or clue about a possible trajectory of a nomadic world society.

Ferraro and Garella characterise liminality as a master category of explanation and explicitly cite dreamlike and trance states as possible sites for "a little-explored terrain …, where we

see a mixing of the boundaries between interior and exterior reality, individual and couple goals, and theoretical aims and concrete aspirations - all requiring a meticulous task of reconnaissance." (Ferraro and Garella, 2009). They describe liminality as the "quality of sacred things and events imbued with a timeless aura…on the conceptual level, the liminal may be "dreamtime" or mythtime, time before time when another order of life prevailed" (Ferraro and Garella, 2009, 189).

Harris proposes the use of non-linguistic instead of narrative methods in ethnographically-based creative therapeutic work with war-damaged young people (Harris, 2009). Donnan and Haller go further and propose that the emphasis of much traditional anthropology on borders and boundaries and the concentration on state-defined entities as research sites has hindered an understanding of the central importance of liminal phenomena and they stress the importance of those who like North Asian shamans move up and down spatial and temporal boundaries (Donner and Haller, 2000) and argue that ethnographic research can unravel informal connections, embodied practices and understandings of everyday routines in these milieux. For Bourguignon, (1986) trance-states can be seen as part of an essential healing process and Lee uses a similar approach to interpret the phenomenon of "amok" in Malay culture and suggests that "running amok by taking the participant outside of or to the boundaries of acceptable public behaviour in a strictly culture-constrained milieu can be interpreted as a plea for status enhancement (Lee, 1981). Holloman takes the discussion right back into the heartland of the traditional concerns of social anthropology by proposing that the liminality of the trance-state can be a preparation for a future re-incorporation of the individual into the group by the process of *"psychic opening,"* a state in which the individual's defenses are suddenly lowered. (Holloman, 1974) and many commentators like Cornelius(1995) and Feriali (2009) follow Turner in noting the role of music and other supportive non-verbal phenomena as adjuncts to the liminal experience. But Feriali explicitly disavows the explanation of music as primarily therapeutic in these contexts, preferring like Crapanzano (1973) to emphasise its role in normal social interaction pointing out that the spirits encountered in possession states split into recognizable tribal and cultural forms. Likewise Bargen (1988) notes the relation of spirit possession liminal encounters to the reality of gender conflict.

In this paper we note the central significance of these liminal phenomena in explaining behaviour and social experience in the study of managers in contemporary Mongolian society.

Liminality in Mongolian society

Research methods

This paper used phenomenograhy as the main methodology. Phenomenograhy is a qualitative research methodology, which investigates people's experiences qualitatively and draws a conclusion on shared meanings. The aim of the paper is to find out how contemporary Mongolian managers experience liminal phenomena during great transaction periods from socialism to capitalism, in particular how trilogy concept of ancestors-me-descendants reflected nature of managing activities. This paper aims to study not only the objective reality, it goes beyond the phenomena and attempts to explore the human experiences that lead to "sense-making" of this particular phenomena. Sense making supports this paper how Mongolian managers understand the "job of managing," how they are experiencing liminal phenomena during tremendous socio-economic changes, and why they acted in a particular way. This enables to answer main research question of liminality in Mongolian society with contemporary managers' perspectives.

Qualitative interviews with 35 individual managers carried out in Mongolia, 8 of whom have experience of managing in both socialist and capitalist economies, with the other 15 being younger managers who have worked only in a free market economy, and additional 12 interviews with expat manages, who shared their working experiences and observation working with Mongolian managers. The outcome of experiencing phenomena of working for both a planned and market economy brought an additional insight to create a unique local experience, which may be applicable to the former Soviet Union.

The inductive approach has applied in data analysis and focused on both collective and variation in the experiences of a group of people (managers). Concurrent to finding variation in the ways of experiencing the phenomena, the outcome space created to maximise the variations in in-depth interviews and analyse the structural relationship between categories. This research adopts a first-order approach to give an authentic voice to local managers and avoid researcher description.

Findings and discussion

Management study in Mongolia is a relatively new subject, and there are no empirical studies in local managerial values and practices. However, with the strategic importance of the economy, politics and foreign direct investment (FDI), a growing body of literature and empirical studies has been developed in social anthropology, political and social studies, focusing on social changes during and after the transition from a planned to a free market economy in Mongolia. Thus, some aspects of socio-cultural studies may support the present study to develop a hypothesis about local managerial values and approaches. (Dalaibuyan, 2012) notes that informal networks play a crucial role in Mongolian society in both rural and urban areas. Gankhuyag (2002) argues that there are four main types of networking in Mongolia, including kinship, classmates of alumni, co-workers and *neg nutgiinhan* (people from the same homeland) (2012: 44). Further, Dalaibuyan (2012) observes that the collectivist nature of traditional culture and socialist nature made a workplace a social gathering. Similarly, (Puffer et al., 2010) noted that Russians view the workplace as a place for friendship, social contacts and entertainment, rather than work itself. As a consequence, the importance of informal networking in Mongolia is similar to the Russian *blat* (access to services and goods), Chinese *guanxi* (favour through personal networking) or Kazakhstani *clanism* (kinship network). However, the additional category of *neg nutgiinhan* (people from the same homeland) brings an interesting insight to the informal networking concept and further, it points to an investigation of the role of *neg nutgiinhan* in the local organisational and managerial context. For Mongolians, birthplace (land) is an important metaphor to shape their worldview and thinking (Wickham-Smith, 2013), hence exploring how this metaphor of vista influences managerial practices in the local context was the starting point to understand local management approach.

Through self-observation and shadowing local managers for two weeks, one of the very common decors in the office was pictures of mountain or certainly figure of Chinggis Khaan, who has ruled The Great Mongolian Empire in the 13th century. Other decors including names written Mongolian old scripts, stamp shaped in lion or chess with traditional figures.
 (See picture below)

Photo 2: painting of Zorgol Khairkhan – a birthplace for CEO of private company, which has 500+ employees. Taken by Saranzaya Manalsuren (2014)

Photo 2: General Manager's family name written in Mongolian old script, which used officially in Mongolia between 1292-1924.

Taken by Saranzaya Manalsuren (2014)

Every time when I asked the meaning of items, managers all replied "Painting of my birthplace" or "my mountain where I belong" and followed by a long memoir of their childhood or parents. It shows that indeed, birthplace, vista is the important metaphor to shape Mongols' thinking, and since 1991 when democracy replaced seven decades of socialism, it replaced portraits of socialist leaders by more national identities and objectives of birthplace.

Photo 3: Chess with traditional Mongolian myth figures in the hallway of the office. Second floor. Taken by Saranzaya Manalsuren (2014)

Based on the finding that birthplace or sharing locality plays an important role in Mongols' thinking, it lead next question of how it influences managerial activities. Dalaibuyan (2012) notes that informal networks play a crucial role in Mongolian society in both rural and urban areas and *neg nutgiinhan* (people from same county) is one of four main types' informal networks in Mongolia. Managers answered my questions of how do they find clients or potential employees, most of them mentioned about through *neg nutgiinhan* (people from same county) and manager B said *"Finding a good employee is not easy, the reason I got him is I know his parents. I know his root and upbringing; his gene would not betray anyone.*" It may bring the point of sharing locality means building trust for Mongols. In other words, there is a Mongolian phrase of "Having local devil is better than having a foreign god".

Second interesting fact about liminlaity in Mongolian society is Mongolia has a high percentage of membership in political parties and Dalaibuyan (2012) finds the percentage is highest compared to other post-socialist countries. Thus, it was worth investigating it further whether or not political activities block equal opportunities and promote unfair practices

through *tanil tal* (acquaintances), as noted by some scholars in the Eastern European and Central European context (Dobovsek and Mesko, 2008, Grodeland, 2007). It could be seen as mediating the experience of transitional economies (Rose and Mishler, 1998) and how high political activities influence local business and aspects of managerial practices in Mongolia. It is different politics than Stewart (1983) or Hales (1986) described, where management is a "political activity" and managers spend most their time in informal relations and "politicking." In other words, in Mongolian management, being a member of a political party or having a good connection may guarantee their organisation a degree of success as there are informal rumours of "behind every successful company, there is an MP," thus bringing up an interesting point of manager as politician or politician as manager. Through initial questionnaire before interview, half of the participants were a member of one of the strongest political party and admitted that almost the key barrier in local business is politics and being involved in political activities helps in their business. Most of them said, "*The business environment is becoming healthier compare to years ago, however, for time being, getting involved in political activities smoothes certain things, such as making appointments with local authorities and getting required signatures and stamps.*"

Finally, Mongolian managers tend to spend a considerable amount of time and funding for cultural or religious activities, such as worshipping the mountain, visiting monks, celebrating the Local County's anniversary, organising horseracing, or donating money to the construction of religious sculptures. This theme emerged from the initial pilot informal interviews with senior managers from Mongolia and agreed by local managers during main data collection. Reasons of all those activities have limited evidence of marketing or promoting their businesses, it is more to do with their spirituality and showing a respect to their mountain and ancestors. Thus, nomadic time concept of ancestors-me-descendants influences local managerial activities that differ from Western view of thinking in terms of time, planning, controlling, and profit-oriented ways.

Conclusion

To sum up the description of liminality in Mongolian society we return to Turner's classic concept of liminality, especially his model of human interrelatedness (Turner, 1969) to bring a conclusion tothis paper.
Turner extended Van Gennep's original work *Les rites de passage* (1909) where he described the rite de passage in terms of three part-structural rituals: (1) separation, (2) liminal period, (3) reassimilation (Gennep, 1909) and Turner focuses on middle stage of rites

of passage- the transitional or liminal stage. (La Shure, 2005) As Turner develops his liminality concept through the process of developing social structure by individuals and showing how the involvement of individuals plays an integral role in building structure in society. (Turner, 1967) He sees society in two types, the first is structured and created by hierarchical systems in political and economical position with the involvement of individuals based on different types of evaluation systems. In the second stage social organisation bases for society emerge in the liminal period, in terms of unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. (1969: 96)

This second model of human interrelatedness, communitas, has a number of cultural manifestations, of which liminality is only one. The two other manifestations that Turner mentions are marginality and inferiority. To express the relationship of these manifestations to social structure in spatial terms, they are in between (liminality), on the edges (marginality), and beneath (inferiority). (La Shure, 2005)

In Turner's manifestation of social structure in these quasi-spatial terms, where does Mongolian society stand? Since there now have been two decades of democracy, which brought a renaissance of national identity in the context of a free market economy, Mongolia has experienced its worst inflation ever since the modern restructuring of the economy in Mongolia, the highest GDP rate, many other dramatic socio-cultural changes such as rapid urbanisation, pollution and poorly-planned city expansion, plus a repositioned labour force in which a cadre of Western-educated younger workforce has replaced Soviet-graduates and the average age of senior managers become reduced to the mid-thirties: likewise businesses started twenty years ago are approaching development or expansion level for those who have become significant employers in the national economy. Thus, Mongols themselves may say they are now at the point of passing the liminality stage and on the edges (marginality) of creating structured society.

On the other hand, Mongols believe that they are inheritors of the "golden thread" of Chinggis Khaan and almost everything seems to be named after by his name, starting from vodka to the airport. In addition the celebration of Naadam, or Eriin Gurvan Naadam- the "Three Games of Men" – a distinctively Mongolian festival, comprising a religious, secular, political or social ceremony followed by traditional three games of wrestling, archery and horseracing is highly significant. Naadam plays a significant roles for Mongols and maintains the national identity both within and outside the boundaries of Mongolia (Rhode, 2009) the colourful and dramatic public performance of Naadam may seem they are over-manifesting

their rituals to their ancestors; ongoing fail for negotiation between Mongolian government and one of the largest foreign investors, chaotic admin systems and numbers of signatures and stamps needed for running business locally may put marginals (expats, who are in between two cultures) and outsiders (people, who are interested in running business or working in Mongolia) off and doubt Mongols are at the stage of marginality.

Conceivably, it is now timely to revisit to Van Gennep's original formulation, for liminality is the ambiguous phase where the initiate is outside of society but preparing to re-enter society. Arguably, this liminality is characteristic of both individuals and of Mongolian society in general.

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