

## Chapter 3

# RELIGION, NATIONALITY, AND “CAMEL CULTURE” AMONG THE MUSLIM MONGOL PASTORALISTS OF INNER MONGOLIA

Thomas WHITE

**Y**ou notice Begtei mosque long before you arrive. Its white minarets draw the eye from across the Kööbür Plain,<sup>1</sup> a vast area of dunes, saxaul shrubs, and scattered herds of sheep, goats, and camels, in northeastern Alasha League, the westernmost part of Inner Mongolia. Before its rebuilding (completed in 2013), the mosque consisted of nothing more than a few low earthen huts, whose building material did little to distinguish them from the surrounding landscape. On the walls of one of the new side buildings are hung large, professionally printed posters providing the names of the individuals and organizations that contributed to the rebuilding of the mosque. One of these posters is in Chinese, the other in Mongolian, for this mosque is one of only two that serve the roughly two-thousand-strong community of Muslim Mongols, as well as some local Hui. Funding for the rebuilding came from local Muslims (both Mongol and Hui), but also from Hui communities in other parts of Inner Mongolia, and even Ningxia. In the autumn of 2013, to mark the rebuilding of the mosque, a large celebration was held; I discuss that event toward the end of this chapter. There now exists an extensive anthropological literature on the Islamic revival in China, demonstrating how this revival has now spread beyond the heartlands of Chinese Islam to the multiethnic periphery of the country, particularly Yunnan, where some Muslims had formerly shared cultural and religious practices with other minority nationality groups (e.g., Hillman 2004; McCarthy 2005; Caffrey 2014; Atwill 2018; Stewart, this volume). For example, before 2000 in Haba, northwestern Yunnan,

“Islam was to all intents and purposes defunct,” with local Hui participating in “Tibetan Buddhist, Naxi Dongba and other animist practices” (McCarthy 2005, 126). After connections were established with an Arabic school in Shadian, eight hundred kilometers away, religious leaders and funding were sent to the remote community, resulting in the establishment of a large new mosque, and the adoption of markers of piety such as head coverings, leading the anthropologist to speak of a “reconversion” to Islam. Similar instances of “reconversion” were reported in other parts of the province (McCarthy 2005, 126). The rebuilding of Begtei mosque, with funding from both local Muslims and those from other provinces, would appear to provide yet more evidence of the way in which transregional networks of Muslims in China (see Erie 2016, 315) have facilitated the revival of Islam among communities in peripheral regions.

Yet to speak of a “reconversion” to Islam among the Muslim Mongols, if by that term we mean the abandonment of non-Islamic practices, would be misleading. While Kööbür might be remote and peripheral from the perspective of Chinese Islam, it has historically been home to several regionally important Tibetan Buddhist sites. In the Haruuna Mountains, which mark the northern edge of the Kööbür Plain, a small Buddhist temple has been rebuilt at the foot of a cliff that bears the miraculous image of a bull camel. The reconstruction of the Temple of the Bull Camel (Mn. Buurn Süm) was instigated by prominent local Muslim Mongols, and the annual ritual held at the temple is attended largely by Muslim Mongols. One of those involved in the revival of rituals at this temple was Batbagan,<sup>2</sup> the former party secretary of a nearby village (Mn. *gatsaa*), now in his sixties, whose family I came to know well during ethnographic fieldwork between 2013 and 2015.

In this chapter I try to provide some solutions to the following ethnographic puzzle: why have Muslim Mongols been involved in both the apparent revitalization of Islam in Kööbür (manifest in the reconstruction of Begtei mosque), and the revitalization of rituals at a Buddhist temple? I argue that this cannot be seen as merely the endurance of a long-standing tradition of religious eclecticism among this community, but must also be understood in the context of the Chinese state’s nationality (Ch. *minzu*) and cultural heritage policies. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter also seeks to give voice to the diversity of opinion among the Muslim Mongols. Ethnography provides a unique window onto the ways in

which concepts central to Chinese governmentality since 1949—"religion" (Ch. *zongjiao*), "culture," and "nationality"—are deployed and contested in the course of everyday life.

#### THE MUSLIM MONGOLS OF ALASHA

The origins of the Muslim Mongols remain unclear, subject to contestation among scholars, as well as members of the community. Most agree that their ancestors have been in Alasha since at least the mid-eighteenth century, when the prince of Alasha returned from fighting the Zunghar in what is now Xinjiang, bringing with him two hundred Turkic captives who were settled in the banner (see Ding 2006). Other scholars suggest that at least some of their ancestors were Islamicized Mongols from Turkestan (An 2009). According to a legend that has some currency among the Muslim Mongols, their ancestors were five grape sellers from Turkestan who were unable to return home from Alasha after they became bankrupt, whereupon they married local Mongol women, settled in the banner, and became Mongolized. My informants told me that several Uyghur traders who plied the caravan route between Xinjiang and Baotou in Inner Mongolia, which ran through northern Alasha, also settled among the Muslim Mongols up until the 1950s.

Between 1862 and 1877, northwestern China was thrown into turmoil by what is known in China as the Hui Uprising (Ch. Huimin Qiyi). Chinese Muslim forces caused great damage within Alasha, plundering the livestock of local herders, and attacking Buddhist monasteries (Liang 2006, 205–226), as they took revenge on the Mongols for their loyalty to the Qing. The uprising led to the temporary expulsion of Chinese Muslims from Alasha, and left a legacy of interethnic suspicion. Nineteenth-century Mongolian literature responded to this unrest by portraying the Mongols, Manchu, and Chinese as united by Buddhism against the Muslims (Elverskog 2006, 139). Indeed, over the course of the Qing era, the association of the Mongols with Tibetan Buddhism was hardened. This is particularly the case in Alasha, owing to its comparative proximity to the Tibetan Plateau.

Against this background, it is particularly remarkable that the Muslim Mongols were allowed in 1890 to build a mosque, known as Holboo *mechid*, on the Kööbür Plain. It seems likely that permission to build a mosque was granted because of the loyalty of the Muslim

Mongols in fighting against their coreligionists (Yang 2004, 18). In 1920 permission was granted by the banner for another mosque to be built to the north of Holboo. This became known as Begtei *mechid*.

It appears that in the late Qing and early Republican periods, some Chinese Muslims from Ningxia were also incorporated into the Muslim Mongols. After 1931, for example, over one thousand Chinese Muslims from Ningxia fled to Alasha to escape conscription by the Muslim warlord Ma Hongkui, and some of them married local Muslim Mongols (Ding 2006, 27). They joined Chinese Muslims who had already arrived in Alasha to work in the salt trade or as hired laborers for local Mongol pastoralists. Again, some of these were incorporated into the Muslim Mongol community (Ding 2006, 24). Today, Muslim Mongols belonging to the Ma and Yang lineages (Mn. *obog*) are widely recognized to have Chinese Muslim ancestry. In addition, there is a significant community of herders who are today classified as Hui who live in the vicinity of Begtei mosque, many of whom are the descendants of the large numbers of Chinese Muslims who worked in the caravan trade.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s, teams were twice dispatched to assess the nationality status of the Muslim Mongols of Alasha (Ding 2006, 39). Within the banner they were known as the “Mongol Hui” (Mn. Mongol Hotung; Ch. Menggu Huihui or Meng Hui), though to the Hui from Ningxia they were the “turban Hui” (Ch. Chantou Huihui), a term that suggested their Xinjiang connections.<sup>4</sup> While the Hui had been granted their own nationality solely because they differed in religious terms from the Han (Gladney 1991), it was decided that religious difference alone did not provide enough grounds for the creation of a separate Muslim Mongol nationality, and they were instead classified as members of Mongol nationality.<sup>5</sup> Their use of the Mongolian language and their pastoral “way of life” (Ch. *shenghuo fangshi*) were defining factors here. Their numbers were also deemed too small to merit the creation of a separate nationality (Ding 2006, 39).<sup>6</sup>

Today a variety of ethnonyms are used by the Muslim Mongols to refer to themselves. Older members of the community, in particular, will often use the term *Hotung* to distinguish themselves from surrounding Mongols, whom they refer to as *Mongol*. However, the use of this ethnonym in the public sphere was regularly disparaged, since it is the Mongolian equivalent of the Chinese *Hui*, referring to the nationality from which the Muslim Mongols were keen to distinguish themselves. Instead, the unwieldy term “members of the

Mongol nationality who believe in Islam” (Mn. *Islam shütlegtei Mongol ündesten*) was preferred. As this preference suggests, an effect of the Chinese state’s nationality classification has been to make the Muslim Mongols identify strongly with the Mongol nationality. This identification has been reinforced through the education system, as Muslim Mongols are educated with other Mongols in Mongolian-language schools (Yang 2004, 20).

#### ISLAM AND CARE FOR THE DEAD

Given this strong identification with the Mongol nationality, which is normally associated with Tibetan Buddhism rather than Islam, it is worth explaining why the Muslim Mongols continue to identify with Islam, to attend the mosque, and to donate substantial sums to its renovation. In this section I argue that one central reason for the survival of Islam among the Muslim Mongols is that it is the medium through which care for the dead is practiced. I also seek to show how the events at which the dead are prayed for provide occasions for the blurring of the boundary between the Muslim Mongols and the Hui, a boundary that at other times looms large in the social life of the Kööbür region.

The Muslim Mongols assemble in their hundreds on the Kööbür Plain three times a year. Two of these events (Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr)<sup>7</sup> take place at Begtei mosque, while the third takes place during the summer at a burial ground known as Arsu, which lies to the northeast of Begtei, but where there is no mosque. Another burial ground lies next to Begtei mosque. This practice of burial distinguishes the Muslim Mongols from other Mongols in Alasha, who today cremate their dead, and who lack communal cemeteries. At one or more of these three annual events, extended families (both men and women) will gather to pray at the graves of their deceased close relatives.<sup>8</sup> This involves an ahong<sup>9</sup> (today these are almost all Hui) leading the relatives in prayer by the graveside. Each family will also normally sacrifice a sheep or goat at the event, often explaining that they do so to provide food for their dead relatives.

These practices also take place at Begtei mosque when the Muslim Mongols assemble for Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr.<sup>10</sup> The presence of deceased forebears at Begtei is often cited as a reason for supporting the mosque materially. When I asked Batbagan why he was providing a sheep for the celebration of the reconstruction of Begtei

mosque in 2013, he told me that this was because Begtei was where his ancestors (Mn. *deed*) were. Praying for one’s dead at Begtei or Arsu inevitably involves contact with Hui, whether among or ordinary herders who live in the vicinity, whose dead are also buried in the cemetery next to Begtei mosque. At Eid al-Adha in 2013 I even talked to a Hui man who told me he had traveled up from Ningxia with his family “for a day out” (Ch. *zhuan yi zhuan*) and explained that he had donated to the reconstruction of the mosque. He told me that Muslims were “one family” (Ch. *yige jia*). The Hui anthropologist Ding Mingjun (2006), who attended one of these ceremonies at Begtei Mosque in 2003, argues that in Muslim Mongols’ relations with the Hui, it is their shared religion that predominates (Ch. *wei qianti*), rather than their different nationalities.

In the latter part of this chapter I provide evidence which suggests that Ding’s claim is overstated. For now, however, I want to draw on my ethnography to demonstrate how ceremonies and Begtei can also provide occasions for the expression of cultural, as well as religious, commonality between the Muslim Mongols and the Hui. In the autumn of 2013 I traveled with Batbagan to Begtei, to attend the celebration of Eid al-Adha. We arrived on the evening before the celebration, and Batbagan decided that we would spend the night in the house of Guo Xingjian, a Hui camel herder who lived close to the mosque, and acted as its caretaker. Guo’s forebears are buried in the cemetery behind Begtei, along with other Hui and Muslim Mongol families.

Guo speaks fluent Mongolian, and he and Batbagan chatted happily about camels for several hours. The next morning Batbagan and Guo said they would fast until they got to the mosque (Mn. *mat-sagtai yabah*), but they offered me some food. I said that I would go without too, but Guo said that this was unnecessary, telling me in Mongolian, “You’re not from the same root as us” (Mn. *ta manus neg ündes bish*). As we walked the short distance to the mosque, Batbagan and Guo discussed the Mongolian names for certain types of grasses. Batbagan told me that Guo Xingjian was such a skilled camel herder that he could recognize the hoofprints of his own camels in the sand. He said that Guo Xingjian was a “true Mongol herder” (Mn. *jinhen Mongol malchin*). Batbagan then mentioned that he had been asked to gather objects relating to the region’s pastoralist heritage for an exhibition that would be held at the celebration to mark the rebuilding of Begtei. He asked Guo if he still had any of the cushions

(Mn. *zaas*) that were traditionally placed between the camel and their load when they were used to transport goods. Guo said he thought he probably did. As we shall see, this conversation is remarkable in the context of contemporary ideas of cultural heritage in Alasha, which posit “camel culture” as the possession of the Mongol nationality.

#### ALASHA “CAMEL CULTURE” AND THE SACRED LANDSCAPE OF THE HARUUNA MOUNTAINS

The Haruuna Mountains are home to several important Buddhist sites. Around fifteen kilometers to the east of the Temple of the Bull Camel lies the Temple of the Red Pagoda (Mn. Ulaan Subragyn Süm), established at the foot of a phallic rock formation. East of this is the famous Monastery of the Caves (Mn. Aguin Süm), established at a cave where the Indian saint Padmasambhava (Mn. Lobonchinbo) is said to have crushed a demon (Mn. *shülmüis*) under a huge stone, still visible today. The Monastery of the Caves is linked “geo-spiritually” to both the Temple of the Red Pagoda (as the female to its male), and to the Temple of the Bull Camel. Padmasambhava is said to have ridden a bull camel (Mn. *buur*) on his way to destroy the demon in the cave; after Padmasambhava had destroyed the demon, the bull camel was transmogrified into a dark imprint on the sheer cliff face of a nearby mountain, where it remains to this day.

The three temples are still thought of as making up a single “parish,” since they are all associated with the unreformed Nyingma or “Red Hat” sect of Tibetan Buddhism (Charleux 2002). However, in 1928 the county (Ch. *xian*) of Dengkou was carved out of the territory of Alasha, taking the Monastery of the Caves with it.<sup>11</sup> Today it is still part of Dengkou County, now in Bayannuur Municipality, an overwhelmingly Han, agricultural administrative unit. State territorialization has had a significant effect on the religious landscape of the region. While they did occasionally attend the annual ritual at the Monastery of the Caves, Batbagan’s family did not contribute to it materially—by donating livestock, for example. When I asked why, Sarna, Batbagan’s wife, explained that “it’s not our place [Mn. *manai gazar bish*], it’s in Bayannuur.”

Once merely a subsidiary of the Monastery of the Caves, the Temple of the Bull Camel has gained a new prominence due to its inclusion under the framework of “Alasha camel culture” (Mn. *temeen soyol*; Ch. *luotuo wenhua*). This discourse began to emerge in the

early 2000s, as the local government in Alasha sought to exploit the developmental potential of culture, a trend that has occurred across China (Oakes 2006). Alasha had long been famous for its camels, even if their numbers had declined precipitously since the early 1990s, as a result of drought, as well as the state’s grassland management policies, mining, and the urbanization of herders (White 2016). Mongol intellectuals took advantage of the state’s enthusiasm for cultural heritage projects in order to defend the pastoralist traditions that are so central to Mongol identity (Khan 1996). These were now repackaged as “camel culture.”<sup>12</sup>

In 2002, “the camel husbandry customs [Ch. *xisu*] of the Mongol nationality—camel veneration, camel racing and the craft of camel tack” formed part of Alasha’s contribution to China’s national list of intangible cultural heritage (Huqun 2010). While camel racing and camel tack were uncontroversial, some work had to be done to justify the inclusion of “camel veneration” (Ch. *ji tuo*). Official documents seek to distinguish these rituals from “pure religious activities” (Ch. *chun zongjiao huodong*), in that they do not involve praying to a “higher power” (Ch. *shangcang shenling*) but are directed at the substance (Ch. *shiti*) of the camel itself (Huqun 2010, 21). Similar attempts to quarantine (celebrated) “culture” from (stigmatized) “religion” have been noted in other parts of China (e.g., Chao 1996). Such attempts must of course be seen in the context of the repeated efforts by twentieth-century Chinese governments to categorize and then expunge “superstition” (Ch. *mixin*) in their quest for modernization (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

The Kööbür region has emerged as a center of camel culture, owing to the historical role of its camels in the region’s caravan trade, to the presence of the Temple of the Bull Camel, and to the success of its camels in regional camel races. These races bring the Muslim Mongols of Kööbür into contact with non-Muslim Mongols from across Alasha. In 2004 a group of Mongol elites living in Bayanhot, the capital of Alasha, coordinated the reconstruction of a small temple at the foot of the famous cliff. These included the Muslim Mongol Altanuul, Sarna’s uncle, and a close associate of Batbagan’s. Before retirement, he had occupied a prominent position in the Alasha Left Banner People’s Political Consultative Conference (Ch. Zhengxie). Since then, organization of the annual ritual has rotated among local Muslim Mongol families, including Batbagan’s, though Altanuul continues to play an important role. This ritual centers on the



eneration of a sacred cairn (Mn. *oboo*) at the foot of the Bull Camel Mountain. Lamas from the Monastery of the Cave are invited to conduct the ritual, but they are not the hosts of the event. When I attended the ceremony in 2013, Altanuul, in his role as host, gave a speech to the assembled lamas and official guests, in which he boasted that the revived ceremonies, which included “cultural activities” (Ch. *wenhua huodong*) such as camel racing and wrestling, had “received attention” (Ch. *guanzhu*) from the media (Ch. *xinwen jie*) from across Inner Mongolia. Rumor had it that these “camel culture” events could also be personally lucrative, since the local government was generous in its support of them. In 2014 the local government, which saw the ritual as an opportunity to increase tourism in the region, took over its organization, branding it the Sacred Camel Veneration Folk Custom Cultural Activity (Ch. Shentuo Jisi Minsu Wenhua Huodong).

I have suggested that the revival of rituals at the Buddhist Temple of the Bull Camel by some of the Muslim Mongols must be understood in the context of the state's cultural heritage policies, while also being influenced by the stranding of the Monastery of the Caves outside the territory of contemporary Alasha, which has resulted in a vacuum of religious authority at the Temple of the Bull Camel. This development has created avenues for cultural entrepreneurs such as Altanuul and Batbagan to accrue symbolic (and potentially economic) capital. In the following section I discuss some of the diverging attitudes to participation in this ritual.

## TWO RELIGIONS?

Many Muslim Mongols with whom I spoke saw nothing wrong in taking part in rituals at Buddhist temples. Some of them even said that they had “two religions” (Mn. *hoyor shashintai*). According to Odonchimeg, a herder in her early thirties, “We Muslim Mongols also worship the Buddha [Mn. *Burhan shütne*].” Möndör, a Muslim Mongol herder in his fifties, told me, “Of course we worship the Buddha; otherwise we wouldn't be Mongols!” Others did not claim to worship the Buddha but instead provided explanations that referred to Mongol ideas of fortune, vitality, and wealth, ideas that are not necessarily marked as Buddhist. Batbagan, who identified strongly as a Muslim, told me that the Muslim Mongols (including himself) went to Buddhist temples to “increase the vitality” (Mn. *hii-mori sergeeh*)

of themselves and their livestock.<sup>13</sup> This was particularly true of the Bull Camel Mountain, at the foot of which stands the Buddhist temple mentioned above. The mountain is thus regarded as an especially powerful place, and many in Alasha also hold it responsible for the flourishing (Mn. *önör ösdeg*) of camels in Alasha, and for the speed of the camels belonging to the local Muslim Mongols.

Others, however, sought to play down the participation of the Muslim Mongols in Buddhist rituals. One elderly female herder told me how as a child she was taken by her father on the back of a camel to a nearby Buddhist monastery. She explained that they went there to see the masked dances (Mn. *tsam*) and *naadam*, and she stressed that they did not bow before the deities (Mn. *mörgöl hiihgui*) because “we Hotung don’t fit with Buddhism” (Mn. *manai Hotung sharin shashin taarahgui*). A similar argument, according to which the Muslim Mongols traditionally attended Buddhist monasteries only “to enjoy themselves” (Ch. *cou renao*) and witness the entertainment (Ch. *yule huodong*), was common among some of the more educated Muslim Mongols who lived in Bayanhot.

The Muslim Mongol scholar Erdenebayar, who lives in Bayanhot, told me that the Muslim Mongols in the past only attended Buddhist monasteries because the “cultural life” (Ch. *wenhua shenghuo*) in rural areas used to be “very backward” (Ch. *hen luohou*). According to Erdenebayar, while there was indeed a long-standing tradition of attendance at Buddhist rituals on the part of the Muslim Mongols, the nature of their participation had changed dramatically in recent years. In the past, he said, such rituals were organized by the temple itself (Ch. *miao shang de shi*), not by ordinary people (Ch. *laobaixing*). Now, however, Muslim Mongols, notably Batbagan and Altanuul, were organizing these rituals themselves. One Muslim Mongol businessman, Soyol, who lived in Bayanhot, told me that he did not support the involvement of Muslim Mongols in the organization of these rituals, on the grounds that it was “like mixing rice and noodles together.” The imam of Begtei mosque, Bai Fuxing, voiced his objections to their participation with reference to state policy. He said that in China there were five distinct official religions, only one of which one could be affiliated to. We can thus see how these rituals are contested among the Muslim Mongols. Erdenebayar, Soyol, and Imam Bai all emphasized the institutionalized Buddhist nature of these rituals, rather than their status as part of “Alasha camel culture.”

## THE BAI FAMILY: FROM SAVIORS TO STRANGERS

I had first met Imam Bai, now in his seventies, at an event to mark his departure on the *haj* in 2012. He is descended from a line of prominent religious leaders. According to him, his great-grandfather (Ch. *tai yeye*) had come to Alasha from war-torn Qinghai in the late nineteenth century, having been invited by the Muslim Mongols (here he used the term *Chantou Huihui*), in order to provide religious education, at a time when religious education was “in a bad way” (Ch. *bu zenmeyang*). He explained to me that his great-grandfather had “saved” (Ch. *jiu le*) the religion of the Muslim Mongols, while the Muslim Mongols had saved the lives of his impoverished ancestors. His father and grandfather also served as imams. Imam Bai speaks both Mongolian and Chinese fluently and has a habit of switching between the two, regardless of the language spoken by his interlocutor. He stresses that his father and uncles were born in the region, and are thus “Alasha people” (Ch. *Alasha ren*).

Initially registered as members of the Mongol nationality, after the Cultural Revolution the imam's family chose to register themselves as Dongxiang, a small Mongolic-speaking Muslim group that live mainly on the edges of the Tibetan plateau in Gansu and Qinghai (Gladney 1991, 35), on the grounds that this nationality is both Mongolian and Muslim. Even so, at times he appears to refer to himself as one of the Muslim Mongols. He spoke of “we *Hotung*” (Mn. *manai Hotungchuud*), which in the context clearly referred to the Muslim Mongols rather than the Hui. He wanted to “spread the word” (Mn. *badruulah*) about this “unusual nationality” (Mn. *ontsgoi ündesten*). He told me that there were currently ten Muslim nationalities in China, but that he wanted the state to recognize “we Turbaned Hui” (Mn-Ch. *manai Chantou Huihui*) as a separate nationality. “In the future, our nationality will be recognized,” he told me (Mn-Ch. *hojim manai ündesten you ge diwei le*).

I found little support for such a move among the Muslim Mongols. Instead, the imam's Dongxiang nationality, and his idiosyncratic use of ethnonyms, provoked a degree of unease. One prominent Muslim Mongol in Bayanhot, told me that the imam could not “represent” (Ch. *daibiao*) the Muslim Mongols, as he was Dongxiang rather than Mongol. While there was respect for his ability to coordinate the rebuilding of Begtei, there were concerns that this had involved him associating himself too closely with Hui from Ningxia. Objections

were raised to his use of the term “Turbaned Hui” (Ch. *Chantou Huihui*) to refer to the Muslim Mongols, a term that was said to be used in derogation by the Ningxia Hui.<sup>14</sup> Some also reported hearing him speak of “we Hui” (Ch. *women Huihui*), while others whispered that his family were not in fact Dongxiang at all, but instead Hui from Ningxia.

Imam Bai often lamented the decline (Ch. *jianruo*) in religious knowledge among the Muslim Mongols, pointing to the attendance of many local Muslim Mongols at Buddhist temples. Until the 1950s, religious education had been provided at the two mosques, and there were ahongs in many families. The Cultural Revolution caused great damage (Ch. *sunshi*) to religion in the region, and there were now very few Muslim Mongols who had received a religious education. According to Imam Bai, Islam had been revived successfully in neighboring areas, such as Dengkou County and Ningxia, but Kööbür was “backward” (Ch. *luohou*) and “remote” (Ch. *pianpi*). It thus relied on Hui from surrounding areas to provide the clerics who would ensure the survival of Islam. The problem was that these Hui, unlike Imam Bai, spoke no Mongolian, which limited the extent of their interaction with local Muslim Mongols.

Having arrived in Kööbür from distant lands, the Bai family established a dynasty of respected religious leaders. As the Muslim Mongols increasingly came to identify with the Mongol nationality, however, the ethnic alterity of the Bai dynasty, now members of the Dongxiang nationality, began to erode their authority. And as Bai Fuxing in recent years has sought to foster connections between the Muslims of Kööbür and the Hui communities in other parts of Inner Mongolia, and in Ningxia, this alterity has been exacerbated, and his ability to ensure orthodoxy among the Muslim Mongols declined, despite his proficiency in Mongolian. In the final section of this chapter I provide an account of the celebration to mark the rebuilding of Begtei mosque, held in the autumn of 2013, showing how it tended to highlight the different nationalities of the Muslim Mongols and Hui, rather than their shared religion.

#### THE BEGTEI NAADAM

Several months before this celebration, Imam Bai announced that it would take the form of a naadam. He told me that he had decided to hold the naadam to “display” (Ch. *biaoxian chu lai*) the lives of “our

nationality” (Mn. *manai ündesten*), and “our former nomadic existence” (Mn-Ch. *üngereseñd manai nüüdel shenghuo*) (here he presumably referred to the Muslim Mongols). Across the Mongol world, *naadam* (lit. games) have traditionally accompanied ceremonies held at *oboo* (ritual cairns) in the summer. *Naadam* typically involve the “three manly games” (Mn. *eriin gurban naadam*) of wrestling, archery, and horse racing, though various other sports have been added at different points in time. Having been safely stripped of their former cosmological associations, *naadam* were appropriated by socialist states across Inner Asia. They are now held in the summer throughout Inner Mongolia, where they are strongly associated with the Mongol nationality. In Alasha today the centerpiece of *naadam* is now camel racing, since persistent drought means that very few horses are now kept by herders in the region. In addition to camel races, the *Begtei naadam* would also include an exhibition of “ethnic items” (Ch. *minzu yongpin*) and “camel culture,” organized by *Batbagan*. This would include ropes made from camel hair, camel nose pegs (Mn. *buil*), and the pack cushions (Mn. *zaas*) that *Batbagan* had requested from the Hui herder, *Guo Xingjian*.

Over the next couple of weeks, the *Begtei* event was a frequent topic of conversation in *Batbagan*’s house. *Batbagan* predicted that many people would not attend, because there would be no opportunity to “have fun” (Mn. *naadah*), as the event’s location meant that they would not be able to enjoy alcohol or cigarettes. These vehicles of sociality play a prominent role at the camel-racing events which the Muslim Mongol riders attend. *Imam Bai* had also suggested that only riders from *Kööbür* and their camels could take part in the races at the *naadam*. This was disappointing to the Muslim Mongol riders. In the words of *Batbagan*, “the more camels the better!” (Ch. *yue duo yue hao kan*). *Sarna* complained that it would not be a proper “celebration” (Mn. *nair*), since there would not be any singing, a *sine qua non* of any Mongol gathering. *Batbagan*’s daughter-in-law was scornful of the fact that, despite these crucial absences, the event was still billed as a *naadam*. She also complained that *Imam Bai* had been soliciting alms (Mn. *badar*) from local herders for the event. *Batbagan* said that he was giving a goat, but *Mönkhbayar*, his son, refused to do so, even though he received a “telling off” (Mn. *haraah*) from his father. He told me that he would have made a donation of livestock if the host (Mn. *ezen*) of the event had been a Mongol, but did not want to because, he said, *Imam Bai* was Hui. *Mönkhbayar*

refused even to attend the event, saying it would be “full of Hui” (Mn. *Huihui düüren*).

On the day before the naadam, Sarna, Batbagan and I were given a lift to Begtei by Batbagan’s nephew in his pickup. We arrived to find a stage set up in front of the front gates of the mosque, the background to which showed an idealized pastoral scene. The stage was flanked by two Mongolian *ger* (yurts), one of which was to contain Batbagan’s exhibition.<sup>15</sup> On either side of the stage large speakers had been set up, and these were already blaring out Mongolian folk songs. I fell into conversation with a young Hui ahong whom I recognized from Eid, when he had asked me for tips on how to learn Mongolian. Now he told me that he was worried about the Mongolian music, fearing the impression it would make on ahong “from outside” (Ch. *waidi*). He told me that the mosque was a “sacred place” (Ch. *shensheng de difang*), where such activities were forbidden.

After the introductory speeches, there followed a parade of the different Muslim nationalities of Kööbür. A Hui woman wearing a headscarf and a man in Mongolian costume provided a running commentary in Chinese and Mongolian. They explained that Kööbür contained various different nationalities (the Muslim Mongols [Ch. *xinyang yisilanjiao de Mengguzu*], Hui, and Dongxiang) who “helped each other and were united” (Ch. *xianghu bangzhu, xianghu tuanjie*), echoing the official discourse of “the unity of nationalities” (Ch. *minzu tuanjie*) (Bulag 2002). This assertion of unity, however, went hand in hand with the display of state-approved difference, which was evident in the parade. The Muslim Mongols came first, dressed in Mongolian robes and offering blue scarves (Mn. *hadag*) in the direction of the officials on the stage. Their group also contained a few young men in Mongolian wrestling gear, followed by several people in Mongolian dress riding camels. They were followed by the Hui representatives, who were dressed in smart white shirts, waistcoats, and suit trousers and whose *minzu* identity was signified by their white caps alone. Bringing up the rear was a small group of around ten Dongxiang, who were dressed identically to the Hui. Whereas at Eid a few weeks earlier, sartorial distinctions between nationalities had been absent, now they came to the fore. This kind of representation of *minzu* differentiation through costumes, parades, and performances has been well documented by anthropologists (e.g., Schein 2000; Gladney 2004). In this context, the Hui are often defined negatively, since they lack the costumes and dances that are

used to distinguish other ethnic groups (Gladney 2004, 152). This lack became more evident when I went to see Batbagan's exhibition of "ethnic items" in the Mongol *ger* next to the stage. A triangular tent (Mn. *maihan*) of the type used by caravan men also had been set up outside. Noticeably absent from Batbagan's exhibition were any objects that might signify the Hui or Dongxiang nationalities, both of which had been represented during the parade. Indeed, some of these "ethnic items" (bits of camel tack) had been carried by Muslim Mongols as they paraded past the stage. Batbagan told me that the Hui had nothing to display, since they had "no culture of their own" (Mn. *ööriin soyol baihgui*). Mönkhbayar later remarked that the only thing they could display was their white hats (Mn. *tsagaan malgai*). This sentiment is frequently heard among Mongols in Alasha.

The exhibition of "camel culture" in the Mongol *ger* solidified its associations with the Mongol nationality. There was no mention of the fact that the cushions had been borrowed from the Hui herder Guo Xingjian, who—dressed similarly to the other Hui—was apparently now no longer a "real Mongol herder." The fact that the area around Begtei has long been home to a significant community of Hui pastoralists was thereby occluded, since "camel culture," objectified in the form of ropes, saddles, and caravan cushions, was presented as the exclusive property of the Mongol nationality. Although shared religion might have "predominated" (Ch. *wei qianti*) (Ding 2006) at the celebration of Eid, at the naadam to mark the rebuilding of the mosque what came to the fore was the distinctions of nationality.

Financially the Begtei naadam had certainly been a success. Attendees had been encouraged to donate (in addition to any donations they had made toward the reconstruction), and their contributions were written down methodically. Imam Bai told me that he had plans to use this money to establish an Islamic school at the mosque, to replace the one that had closed in the 1950s. This would allow young Muslim Mongols to be trained as ahong. Others, however, were skeptical. What family would encourage their child to pursue the impoverished life of a rural ahong, rather than become an official or trader in the bustling city of Bayanhot?

Were Imam Bai's plans for a school to come to fruition, the influence of currents of Islam from other parts of China might perhaps become more pronounced, as Imam Bai would no longer be in effect the sole conduit for Islamic knowledge. However, as this

chapter has shown, they would have to reckon with the ongoing subjectifying effects of the state’s nationality policies, which have encouraged many of the Muslim Mongols to identify strongly with the Mongol nationality. The serendipity of history and geography has meant that the Muslim Mongol homeland of Kööbür, remote and peripheral from the perspective of Chinese Islam, overlaps with a sacred landscape with strong Tibetan Buddhist associations. The identification of the Mongols with Tibetan Buddhism, a legacy of Qing rule (Crossley 2006), remains strong, particularly in Alasha.

In addition to Tibetan Buddhism, pastoralism remains a key marker of Mongol identity. I have argued that the congruence of the anxiety of Mongol intellectuals over its disappearance in Alasha, and the local government’s cultural development policies, have led to the emergence of “Alasha camel culture.” This includes “camel veneration rituals” that exist in contested relationship to Buddhism but have provided some local Muslim Mongols with a means of accruing prestige in a manner that would not be possible at the mosque. This mosque remains a focal point for the Muslim Mongols, since it is here that they come together, along with local Hui, to pray for their dead. However, the naadam held at Begtei in 2013 revealed the way “camel culture” can be used to shore up the ethnic distinction between the local Hui and the Muslim Mongols, despite their shared religion and common pastoral heritage. This event was supposed to instantiate a translocal community of Muslims, which had taken material form in the impressive new mosque, but it served to demonstrate the continued power of nationality as a means of organizing identity and alterity in contemporary China.

#### NOTES

1. My transliteration of this toponym reflects the local Alasha dialect of Mongolian.

2. All names are pseudonymous.

3. According to local officials, the administrative unit (Ch. *zhen*) that occupies the majority of the Kööbür region has a registered population of 4,125, of which roughly 60 percent are members of the Mongol nationality, while 26 percent are Han and 14 percent Hui. Figures are approximate because of migration to Bayanhot, the capital of Alasha League.

4. In the first half of the twentieth century, the term “Hui” or “Huihui” was used to refer to both Turkic- and Chinese-speaking Muslims; “turban Hui”



(Ch. *Chantou Hui*) was used generally to refer to the group now known as the Uyghur (Gladney 1991, 18; Ding 2006, 28).

5. Gladney (1991, 300) errs in claiming that the Muslim Mongols are classified as Hui.

6. This did not prevent other numerically small groups in Inner Mongolia, which had often been regarded as Mongol, such as the Orochen, Ewenki, and Daur, from being registered as separate nationalities (Bulag 2010, 172).

7. The Muslim Mongols refer to these as “the Great Prostration” (Mn. *ib mörgöl*) and “the Lesser Prostration” (Mn. *bag mörgöl*), respectively.

8. I was told that people normally pray for parents (both father and mother), brothers and sisters, and aunts and uncles.

9. This word, from the Persian *akhund*, is used by Hui across China to refer to Islamic religious professionals and tends to be used more widely than “imam” (Ch. *yimamu*) (Lipman 1997, 48).

10. At Eid al-Adha an animal is also sacrificed for oneself and one's (living) family. This animal is said to carry one to heaven after one's death. Larger animals (e.g., cattle) are able to transport more people.

11. The creation of counties in Inner Mongolia was carried out in order to administer recent Han Chinese immigrants. It prompted much resistance from Mongols.

12. This is true even though since the 1980s, cashmere goats have been far more economically important for local herders.

13. *Kii-mori* is a complicated concept that might be roughly translated as “fortune” or “vitality.” *Kii-mori* flags are raised outside the homes of most Mongol herders, to increase the vitality of both humans and animals (see Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 2012).

14. It was compared to the Mongolian word *Sogoo*, which is used to refer to Han Chinese, especially those from Minqin County in Gansu.

15. Mongol *ger* have in general been replaced by brick houses in Kööbür, but they continue to function as an important signifier of the Mongol nationality in China.

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