

**The Khotons of Tarialan, Western Mongolia:
Ethnicisation, Belonging and the Politics of Difference**

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dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2026.1-208**Abstract**

The article critically examines the fluid and complex processes of ethnicisation among the Khotons of Tarialan, in the Ulaangom region of western Mongolia, a minority historically associated with agriculture, Islam, and Turkic origins within a predominantly Mongol pastoral context. Methodologically, it draws upon a plurality of historical, comparative, documentary, and ethnographic sources to trace the historical construction of Khoton ethnicity, approaching it as an ethnic assemblage in Anna Tsing's sense – an open-ended and historically contingent configuration – and to examine its emergence, the ways in which it is reenacted through everyday interactions, narratives, and myths, and how it is experienced and shaped through practices of belonging. The ethnographic approach is further strengthened by the use of photography as a means of exploration, interpretation, and collaborative engagement with the people encountered during fieldwork. The analysis explores majority-minority dynamics across multiple scales, demonstrating that contemporary forms of recognition produce visibility while simultaneously operating through essentialising logics that reify difference.

Keywords

Khoton, Western Mongolia, Ethnicisation, Assemblage, Belonging, Majority-Minority relations, Ritual and Memory.

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What did I miss in this field research?

For the first time, I was not sleeping with the families, nor living (even for a short time) with them. The base was a hotel in the city, the capital of the UVS region.

When I fell asleep, I was not wrapped in the circle of the ger, a living envelope that protects and warms, that draws a temporary line between the inside and the outside.

An outside that incessantly enters in through the air, that passes into the felt and through any chink, that keeps making you feel in all of the steppe.

I get out of bed... I move quietly so that no one will hear me. I leave the door ajar. I go downstairs for a moment. But I do not find "my" air, I do not find "my" silence.

I close my eyes and do not find "my" scent. I do not feel what my body is desperately searching for.

The difficulty this year [2024] was not being with the families in their gers.

Notes from the Field Journal, August 2024

From this discomfort, from this slippery terrain enclosed in the field notes, begins my reflection.

In 2023, while I was in Ulaanbaatar, I was struck by the narratives I encountered about the Khotons¹, who were described as a minority of non-Mongol origin, sedentary and devoted to agriculture for centuries, within a world of nomadic pastoralists. This clearly dichotomizing perspective, reinforced by strongly essentializing arguments such as the alleged presence of differentiating phenotypical traits (in particular eye and skin colour, and the shape of the nose), resonated with my own long-standing research on relations between majorities – self-defined as “sedentary” – and itinerant minorities, more commonly labelled as “nomadic,” in the European context (Okely 1983; Stewart 1997; Tosi Cambini 2023). These narratives therefore appeared to me almost as an “upside-down” world, in which it was the majority – defining itself, in some sense, as “nomadic” – that constructed and labelled the Other, represented by a minority described as “sedentary.” Accordingly, when David Bellatalla – a scholar of Mongolia who has been based in the capital since the early 1990s – asked me to join the research team that would work on the Khotons the following year, I accepted the invitation².

Focusing on the Khotons of Tarialan, Western Mongolia, this article argues that they are the product of an ongoing process of ethnicisation, enacted through narratives of

¹ The transliteration of Mongolian terms follows the standard adopted by the International Association for Mongol Studies (IAMS), except in direct quotations, where I retain the transliteration used by the original author.

² The research team comprised, in addition to myself and Bellatalla, his wife Ganaa, originally from the capital of Uvs, where her family resides, and Nadia Breda, with whom I have shared other fieldwork experiences in Mongolia and with whom I co-direct the naMec Center. The fieldwork was conducted during the summer of 2024, a period in which we carried out unstructured interviews (including some audio recordings), visited cultivated fields and other places and sites accompanied by Khoton individuals, and spent entire days or parts of days with Khoton families. We designed the fieldwork so as to avoid becoming acquainted with people and families through channels that might have imparted an imprint on the relationship (for example, by contacting them through local authorities). For this reason, relationships with Khoton people developed through chance encounters and by using a snowball sampling method. Ganaa's linguistic competencies proved invaluable at all stages of the research, as did the assistance of her family members in locating certain sources. The team worked in a highly collaborative manner, sharing notes, reflections, and materials, and bringing into dialogue the specific skills and perspectives of each of us, as elicited by our interactions with the Khotons. The same spirit of sharing was applied to the visual material, which – as in previous fieldwork conducted together with Breda – is collectively attributed to the naMec Center.

origin, ritual practices, and post-socialist policies of heritage and minority governance. It is organized into two parts. The first analyzes the process of ethnicisation, trying to interweave the scientific literature with the legends of the Khotons and the material collected during the fieldwork. The second part focuses on one of the traits of this process, that of the ambiguous, power-asymmetric relationship between a majority and a minority, the latter retaining in its collective memory the historical persecution it has endured. An interesting trait that complexifies the relationship between majority and minority is also found in the major occult power attributed to the Khotons. Practices of divination and ritual mediation with invisible forces are deeply embedded in Mongolian cosmological traditions (Hamayon 1990; Humphrey & Onon 1996; Delaplace 2023). Within this broader context, however, the Khotons are acknowledged to have more powerful declinations of this practice, which could be used against the majority, in particular the capacity to “curse”. The fear of an evil that backfires, of the violence inflicted that can turn into negative energy, is found very frequently, one need only think, in other contexts, of similar accusations against “Gypsies” or “Afro-descendants” (Bogdal 2023; Stewart 1997; Taussig 1980). We will see interpenetrations at different scales between the groups and their members, which particularly in the first decade of the 2000s were also epitomised by post-socialist policies related to minorities and territorial “strategies” of productive-economic “development”, within which processes of heritagization through UNESCO categories and essentializing perspectives likewise emerge.

Alongside participant observation, unstructured interviews, and collaborative field exploration, photography constituted an important complementary ethnographic tool in this research. The visual dimension made it possible to document the material and spatial configurations through which Khoton belonging is enacted in everyday life: cultivated fields, irrigation systems, pastoral mobility, ritual sites, and traces of socialist and post-socialist transformations. The photographs also generated conversations and memories during fieldwork, eliciting narratives that often expanded or complicated verbal accounts. In this sense, the visual material offers an additional perspective on the historical sedimentations, territorial practices, and affective dimensions through which processes of ethnicisation are materially experienced and negotiated.

1. The Ethnicization of the Khotons of Tarialan as an Assemblage Process

1.1. Exploring the land of the Khotons and moving in-between agriculture and pastoralism

The Khotons are a small ethnic group, primarily residing in Uvs *aimag* (province), with a population of just over 11,500 people³. Our fieldwork took place in the Ulaangom area, specifically in Tarialan *sum* (district). The very name of the district, already opens up to the particularity and discontinuity revealed by the landscape before our eyes: the word *tarialan* in fact means “cultivated field” / “arable land”. And it is, in fact, farmland that begins to open up in front of us, as we leave the city behind and approach the capital of the district (fig. 1). Fields, barns, hay bales, tractors appear...and then we discover, with the guidance of some Khotons, the ancient irrigation system built largely at the time of Galdan Boshugtu Khan (1644–1697), and the Russian one, which we are told dates back to 1976.

These rural landscapes embody historical trajectories, political transformations, and everyday negotiations. The persistence of infrastructures, traces, and spatial practices sedimented over time renders the environment ethnographically meaningful, as an active repository of memory and belonging.

As Martínez suggests, material environments preserve layered temporalities and “persistent presences and haunting absences” through which neglected histories continue to shape contemporary social experience and everyday spatial practices (Martínez 2018: 1, 8–10). Within this perspective, photographing past, abandoned, and contemporary cultivation infrastructures, together with cultivated fields and ger camps, made it possible to trace the material intersections of settlement, mobility, ecology, and memory, situating everyday agricultural and pastoral practices within their broader historical and cosmological landscape. As Heng notes, attention to wider ritual and environmental contexts enables the researcher to “create a portrait of that space,” making visible the broader social and cosmological relations embedded within everyday environments (Heng 2017: 98).

Impressed by this landscape, at times punctuated by abandoned buildings from the socialist period – a regime that had strongly promoted the agricultural sector by relying precisely on the Khotons in this area – and dominated by former silos and remnants of former agri-food facilities (fig. 2), the attention of the entire research team is drawn to the agricultural expertise immediately displayed by the family and other farm laborers whom we encounter at work in the fields.

³ National statistics of Mongolia, Census of Population, <https://www.1212.mn/en/statistic>. 5,000 of Khotons live in Tarialan district, Uvs province, where we carried out the research.



Figure 1 The landscape approaching Tarialan. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 2 Abandoned buildings and former silos. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The ways of thinking of these farmers living in a mobile pastoralist environment occupy a significant place in my reflections. As the fieldwork extends over time, I am afforded the opportunity to become more deeply acquainted with the territory and, above all, to experience forms of hybridization at multiple levels – cultural, religious, familial, and also occupational – through the simultaneous management of agricultural and pastoral work. My inquiry thus does not seek what “visibly” distinguishes them, but rather traces of more complex processes, which encompass the capacity – on the part of the Khotons – to mix, to reshape, and to move beyond the identity categories imposed upon them.

The focus on their agricultural activity – so strongly emphasized in the various written and oral sources we collected during fieldwork – is shaped by several intersecting factors. First, the adoption of Russian forms of farming during the Soviet era – when, as is well known, agriculture, crop cultivation, and also mining were extensively promoted – followed by the more recent adoption of Western models of agriculture. These economic policies directly affected the Khotons, whose agricultural knowledge and practices were fully exploited by the Soviet government. Subsequently, with the advent of neo-capitalist policies, the Khotons were once again incorporated into political programs framed as so-called development strategies and into the expanding agricultural business, both as wage laborers and as entrepreneurs. In this process, they also adopted a range of technologies – above all those related to irrigation systems – which we observed in

operation during fieldwork and which contribute to a strong external “visibilization” and emphasis on their occupational specialization⁴.

In our fieldwork, this intertwining of agriculture and pastoralism emerges as very much alive. During the explorations of the territory, we encounter around forty *gers* (Mongolian tents) very close together, where cows are grazing. We approach one and ask to enter: the lady welcomes us with *suutei tsai* (a savory salted milk tea). She tells us that they are a Khoton family but that she is Dörvöd (Cl. Mo. Dörbet), her husband is Khoton. On the north side is the sacred area, with photos of her father and her son, who is a judo champion.

This family, like all the others nearby, engages in both farming and herding. Here we can see how the coexistence of the needs of agriculture and those of animal husbandry is managed, including the need to keep cultivated fields out of reach of livestock. In this family, the Khoton husband, Bold⁵, works exclusively as a farmer, his Dörvöd mother-in-law is solely engaged in herding; and his Dörvöd wife, Sarangerel, combines both farming and herding activities. The latter told us that she became Muslim through marriage. The family owns 20 hectares of land and grows barley, potatoes, carrots, onions, watermelons and *manjin* (a type of beet), as well as leaving some land for hay for the animals. The lady tells us that with the end of the *negdel*, the livestock was divided up, while the land they cultivated was given as property according to the number of family members. They sow in May/June and in the Summer they manage to have two harvests⁶. In December, they return to live near the cultivated fields, put the animals in pens and feed them until April, when they move on. In the valley/steppe, about 20 km away from the centre of the district, towards the mountains, live those who mainly raise cows, like them. They move twice a year, but some move five times a year. This number probably varies with the number of animals they own. Those who raise sheep and goats move further away, even closer to the mountains. The *gers* around theirs are inhabited by relatives (see figs. 3-4).

⁴ “In Mongolia the policy of agricultural development has been one of the means of socialist modernization. In the first phase (1940s and 1950s), state farms were constructed and performed well. During the second phase (after 1976) new state farms constructed closer to the urban markets did perform well economically but at a considerable ecological cost. After the end of the socialist regime, because of the lack of financial support, the state farms began to collapse. Therefore, in 2008 the government again began to give financial support to agricultural business” (Konagaya 2013: 266). For a discussion of agriculture among the Khotons, see Breda (in preparation).

⁵ All names of the people encountered in the field are pseudonyms. It should be added, moreover, that the issue of the pronunciation of the name of a Khoton person - as we shall see - is still today perceived as a risk, linked to a curse.

⁶ The territory of Ulaangom is characterised by an extremely cold continental semi-arid climate <https://weatherspark.com/y/112127/Average-Weather-in-Ulaangom-Mongolia-Year-Round>

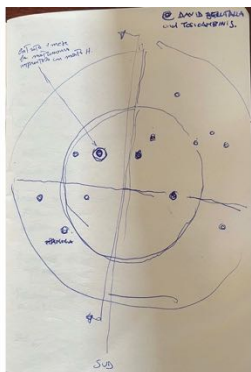


Figure 3 Sketch of the spatial organization of the gers of Bold's family and his relatives, Drawn by David Bellatalla and Sabrina Tosi Cambini. Field journal, 2024.



Figure 4 Ger camp. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The wife's mother is 84 years old: when she arrives at her daughter's *ger*, where we are, she takes over the conversation. She starts asking us questions, which makes the young woman more open towards us. David tells the two women that Nadia comes from a family of farmers, which intrigues them, and they start asking specific questions to compare: in particular, when they sow and if there are greenhouses. The mother has 10 children in total, five of whom live there, in the *gers* around us, and the other five, we understand, in the village. The elderly woman shows us the handmade pasta her daughter is preparing, as she does every day. Outside, they are drying *Aaruul* (cheese made from drained sour milk drying on the sun) like the one they offered us. Other children arrive from nearby *gers*, curious about our presence. Ganaa asks to Sarangerel's young son if he wants to go and live in the capital when he grows up, and the boy replies that no, he wants to stay here and be a carpenter.

Within this dialogical framework, the family explains to us how field irrigation works. The water they use to irrigate the fields is supplied in rotation every two weeks. We ask if they can show us their fields the next day and the young woman replies that her husband is on his way back from Ulaangom and that, if we wait for him, they can take us there right away.

The man (a Khoton) arrives shortly afterwards. He tells us that he has been selling his agricultural produce to the scattered shepherds, while those from the city come directly there to buy. They do not go to the markets to sell; the vegetable trucks we saw in Ulaangom belong to people who buy their produce and resell it to people in the city.

The man does a few chores, exchanges a few words with his wife, and the conversation with us inevitably dies down a little. Then, over a cup of tea shared with us, and continuing the conversation on production and trade, he explains that livestock numbers have increased over the past decade and adds that he would like to open a slaughterhouse to sell meat as well. We leave the *ger* together and the couple accompanies us to see their cultivated fields: we follow them in our car. Bold shows us the irrigation system: the water comes from a pipe connected to the central system (which we had already visited). He turns on the water, which flows into a channel, and gradually inserts metal plates, like small manual sluices, to make the water flow sideways. To explain better, he draws a diagram on the ground, which he immediately erases.

He explains that there is no one responsible for turning on the water for the fields, but rather a schedule that everyone decides together, so that when it is their turn, each person goes to turn on their own central pipe to irrigate their own cultivated land. We say goodbye and arrange to meet the next day in the late morning, as it is his turn (figs. 5-6).



Figure 5 The pipe connected to the central system. Photo by naMec, 2024.

The next day, we also learn that they have about ten horses, but above all 200 sheep and goats, which are with the Khoton herder who takes the animals to the green mountain pastures for everyone. There is a mixture of non-specialisation and specialisation, which flows smoothly through these family and “ethnic” environments.



Figure 6 Bold picks the golden ears of grain, offering them to us as a symbol of abundance. Photo by naMec, 2024.

While it is well established that the relationship between agriculture and pastoralism always calls for a deep and contextualized perspective, this is particularly true in the case of the Khotons where it must necessarily be situated historically and

approached through a flexible analytical lens capable of bringing out its dynamism over time and the changes associated with multiple factors. These processes can also be traced at the level of linguistic terminology. Discussing the origins of the Khotons and referring to various sources, Tatár Fosse (1979: 9-10) notes that cultivation in the Ili Valley appears to have been introduced primarily to sustain military needs: under the supremacy of the Züünger Khans, agricultural production was already carried out by prisoners of war from Kashgar, pointing to an early system in which coerced or displaced populations played a key role in food provisioning. A Chinese source, cited by the author, notes that in the 18th century the agricultural practices of the Kirghis closely resembled those of the Oirats, as both were adapted to a nomadic mode of life rather than to fully sedentary farming. Chinese accounts further describe extensive cultivated areas in the Kashgar region, from which the Oirats relocated individuals engaged in agriculture to other territories. The Mongols themselves practiced forms of nomadic cultivation and, in areas where land was not farmed, relied on the gathering of wild plants as substitutes for cereals and vegetables. Although the origins of these cultivation practices remain unclear, it is likely that Turkic-speaking populations within the Züünger Khanate influenced Mongolian agricultural knowledge. According to Tatár Fosse, this interpretation is supported by a Russian source from 1731-1732, which reports that the Oirats compelled the so-called “people of Bukhara,” that is, Eastern Turkestani populations, to cultivate the Ili Valley and other areas through irrigation. Over time, these cultivated plots were subsequently taken over and farmed by the Oirats themselves. The author also states that sowing was called “*’alban tarialan’* (official, state sowing) and the working persons *’tariany cêrêg, tariačîn cêrêg’* (soldier of sowing, agricultural soldier)” (*ibid.*) *Tariachin* [tariačîn] is the key term. While during the period of the Khanates, the *tariachin* could be described as a soldier-farmer – that is, a man who cultivated the land while at the same time taking part in the defense or expansion of territory – in the Mongolian context more generally, characterized by a predominantly pastoral local economy, *tariachin* refers to one who cultivates the land. However, what must be borne in mind is that this semantic marking (foregrounding a minority activity distinct from that practiced by the majority) contains a degree of fluidity that keeps socio-cultural and ecological categorization open. It does not exclude the possibility that such a person may also engage in pastoralism and mobility. It is a term that is shaped by meanings whose emphases shift differently across distinct periods of local and broader history. To grasp this fuzzy quality – which is often lost in translations into European languages, such as, for example, the term *farmer* – it is useful to compare it with the Mongolian term *fermer*, borrowed into Mongolian through Russian from the international lexicon of market agriculture, is widely used in contemporary policy discourse, development programmes, and legal frameworks to designate the figure of the commercial agricultural producer. It evokes a socio-economic model based on private or household-based management of land, market-oriented production, access to credit and mechanization, and integration into commercial value chains. While partially overlapping with *tariachin*, the two terms are not fully interchangeable. Unlike the latter, whose semantic field encompasses broader historical, social, and moral understandings of cultivation and agrarian belonging, *fermer*

foregrounds entrepreneurship, commercial production, and economic efficiency. Its contemporary usage thus reflects broader post-socialist transformations through which agriculture has increasingly been reconfigured as an economic enterprise and land as a productive asset.

1.2. Navigating the literature on Khotons

From our fieldwork and the literature, the Khotons seem to embody the fluidity of ethnicisation processes as well as the risk of reification and essentialisation inherent in ethnic relations between different human groups and, in particular, between a majority and a minority.

In much of the scholarly literature, the ethnonym Khoton conventionally evokes a set of characteristics associated with the group, including a settled lifestyle, agricultural practices, and a historical connection with Islam. These associations, however, reflect historically produced representations that have contributed to constructing a homogenising and stereotyped image of the group, obscuring its internal diversity and the complexity of its historical and cultural trajectories. Beyond the importance of taking into account the different periods, attitudes, and objectives of the scholars who have written about them, the multiple historical narratives and reconstructions concerning the Khotons also attest to the internal heterogeneities of the group, whose origins are complex and multifaceted. In this regard, Ha *et al.* (2023) from the Institute for Western Frontier of China, Shaanxi Normal University, highlight the complexity of ethnic identity formation and the role of historical, cultural, and linguistic factors in shaping the Khoton community in Mongolia. The Khotons are descendants of various ethnic groups who migrated to Mongolia during the Züünger Khanate – the powerful Oirat Mongol empire formed in the 17th century – and Qing dynasty, following prolonged warfare and above all the widespread massacres of the Züünger Oirat people, brought about the destruction of that polity in 1759. They were primarily settled as farmers in regions like Hovd, Uvs, and Bayan-Ölgii (Badamkhatan 1996). Their migration involved people from the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang, China, and various ethnic groups from Central Asia (*ibidem*). Among recent studies, Yunusijiang Aili – specialising in the history and historical geography of Xinjiang – argues, in his research on settlements along the Ili River during the Züünger period, – that the Züünger people used the term “Khoton” to denote village-like organisations composed of individuals linked by close kinship ties, in order to collect grain taxes (2017, cit. in Ha *et al.* 2023).

Birtalan (2012), in the introduction to the volume bringing together the essays resulting from the fieldwork conducted among the Oirats by a research team she coordinated, suggests that the term “Khoton” alludes “to their being ‘town-dwellers’ (xot)” (ivi: 21) and she defines them as “an agrarian people of Turkic origin coming from Turkestan. They were moved to the territory of Mongolia in the time of the Jungar Empire” (*Ibid.*).

Early notes by the very famous investigator-traveler G.N. Potanin (1881) – who conducted research on the Oirats in Western Mongolia – and B. Vladimirtsov (1916) – who compared the linguistic and lexical materials collected by Potanin with those collected by himself in the Ulaangom province – linked the Khotons to Altaic-speaking communities, mainly Sart

clans and Black Kyrgyz tribes. The Russian Orientalist A.N. Samoilovich, taking up and comparing these two authors, concludes his analysis by stating that the Khotons belong to ancient Altaic-speaking peoples from southern Xinjiang (1916). Three distinct terminological perspectives regarding the Khotons emerge in the works of Potanin, Vladimirtsov, and Samoilovich, each encoding a different semantic priority. Potanin's account, based on his 1876–1877 journey, is exploratory and narrative in character: he consistently employs the ethnonym *Khotoni* and frames the group through historical process rather than through either economic function or stabilized ethnic typology, explaining their formation as the result of capture and displacement: “they were formed from various groups, to a considerable extent from war captives”; and emphasizing memories of Central Asian origins such as Oš and Bukhara (Potanin 1881: 1-12). By contrast, Vladimirtsov adopts a functional ethnographic perspective and introduces a technical, activity-based classification: he states that “the principal occupation of the Khoton is livestock breeding and agriculture” and, more pointedly, that “the Khotons are regarded as the best *zemledělcy* of north-western Mongolia”, thereby defining the group primarily through the neutral occupational term *zemledělec*, which denotes the practice of cultivation without invoking ethnic origin or historical status (Vladimirtsov 1916: 267). Samoilovich, finally, reorients the discussion through philological and historiographical critique, refusing to ground classification in economic activity and instead framing the Khoton in ethnic-historical terms as *osēdlye türki* (“sedentary Turks”), a designation that encodes sedentariness (*osēdlye*) and Turkic linguistic affiliation (*türki*) rather than livelihood; his analysis repeatedly foregrounds origin, language, and religion - treating Islam as a comparatively thin layer over earlier beliefs and stressing the advanced Mongolization of speech - so that the group is defined by what they are and where they come from, not by what they do (Samoilovich 1916: esp. 279–281). Taken together, these lexical choices are methodological: Potanin's *Khotoni* constructs a historical-narrative identity grounded in displacement and composite origins, Vladimirtsov's *zemledělec* constructs a functional-economic identity centered on cultivation, and Samoilovich's *osēdlye türki* constructs a historical-ethnic identity grounded in sedentariness and Turkic affiliation. The different perspective orientation of the three authors produces non-overlapping semantic constructions of the Khotons. During the same period, the traveler, historian, and social geographer, G.E. Grumm Grzhimailo, who devoted a number of works to the history of Central Asia, suggested that the term Khoton referred to settled Mongolian Muslims - distinguishing them from nomads - emphasising their urbanised lifestyle and Islamic faith (1926). As recalled by Lkhagvasuren, the first director of the National Museum of Mongolia after democratization, and by Konagaya, an ethologist who lived in socialist Mongolia and is now emeritus at the same institution,

During the socialist period in Mongolia, disciplines such as history and ethnography were heavily influenced by official Communist ideology. Mainly for this reason, few serious scientific works were published on topics relating to the Oirat in particular or even to Mongol history and culture more generally.[...]. A collection of monographs called

Ethnography of Mongolia was published in Mongolian in 1996 (Badamkhatan 1996), and the second volume of this fundamental work focused on the Oirat (2014: iv).

Badamkhatan linked the Khotons to intermarriage between Oirats and Uzbeks, as well as Altaic-speaking peoples captured during the Züünger Khanate and Qing Dynasty. In particular, according to him, the Oirats used "Khoton" to refer to people from Little Bukhara or the six cities in southern Xinjiang, China.

The post-socialist context broadened scholarly horizons by removing previous constraints and restrictions on research.

According to historian Oyunjargal (2024), who uses Volumes XCII-XCIII of the *Bibliotheca Oiratica* – a new series appeared in 2006 –, the migration and political integration of the Khotons into western Mongolia in the eighteenth century reflect their resilience and their contribution to the agricultural and administrative development of the region, rather than any association with slavery. The Khotons already possessed considerable agricultural experience under Züünger rule and continued these practices under the Qing, thereby contributing both to the regional tax system and to agricultural expansion. Oyunjargal argues that the Dörvöd played a crucial role in the migration, resettlement, and integration of the Khotons in Ulaangom: their leadership, in conjunction with Qing administrative policies and the Khotons' capacity to participate effectively in agricultural production and taxation, facilitated the group's stable incorporation into the region. From this perspective, while the migration was initially prompted by political instability, it ultimately evolved into a process of integration and community consolidation, rendering the Khotons a fundamental component of the social and economic fabric of western Mongolia within the imperial framework.

Ha's reconstruction (2025) differs in part from Oyunjargal's, yet remains clearly complementary, as it places particular emphasis on the relationship between the Khotons and Qing modes of territorial governance. Ha situates the settlement of the Khotons within the broader context of Qing military-agricultural colonisation. From this standpoint, their relocation and agricultural activities are closely linked to the state-organised *túntián* system, a form of military-agricultural land organisation in which cultivation functioned as a key instrument of frontier administration, population management, and imperial control⁷.

Within this framework, the agricultural practices of the Khotons are interpreted as the result of their incorporation into a structured regime of land use and settlement. Their labour, access to land, and patterns of residence were shaped by administrative planning and imperial strategies of frontier consolidation. Taken together, these two reconstructions highlight contrasting yet useful complementary perspectives: one emphasising agency, continuity, and mediated integration, the other foregrounding coercion, state power, and institutional frameworks of frontier governance.

Precisely because the Khotons emerged through the historical articulation of diverse populations from Central Asia and China, shaped by migration, displacement, imperial

⁷ The Chinese term *túntián* is composed of *tún*, meaning "to station or encamp (troops)" and *tián*, meaning "field" or "cultivated land".

and state interventions, intermarriage, and cultural adaptation, while their ethnonym and collective identity have also been produced through external categorizations and representations of their distinctive way of life, their ethnicization may be approached as an assemblage in Tsing's sense (2005, 2015): an open-ended and historically contingent configuration continuously reassembled through the interplay of historical memories, religious affiliations, agricultural practices, state classifications, everyday interactions, and practices of belonging. This perspective foregrounds the relational and processual character of identity formation and ethnic differentiation, moving beyond any understanding of the Khotons as a homogeneous community. This pluralism and capacity for adaptation and transformation over time also emerge clearly from Tatár Fosse's (1979) study, based on fieldwork conducted in the early 1970s among the Khotons of Tarialan, the same area where the present research was carried out. Summarising and comparing the main contributions (up to the years in which she is writing) concerning the historical facts that led to their arrival in Mongolia, the author concludes:

it seems to be apparent that the population designated by the Khoton collective name consists of several factions (*Jös, Búrúd, Xasnūd*), which have their counterparts in other Mongolian-speaking clans with similar names, apparently of Turkish origin, living in western Mongolia. Although the origin of some of their tribal names is unknown, judging by certain ones, four main components seem to emerge: 1. Kirghiz (*Burud, Šalbav, Xoc* tribes; 2. Uzbek (*Özbök - Üdzübük*); 3. Kazak (*Xasnūd, Jös*); 4. Altaic (*Šawaā*). This is reflected in their own legends of origin, which reveal a northern and a southern migration (1979: 5).

As shown in different ways by the sources discussed above, such migration involved exile, capture, or voluntary relocation. In this sense, the settlement of the Khotons can be understood as being closely tied to imperial geopolitical shifts, the urgent need in Mongolia to introduce cultivation in order to supply the army, and Qing administrative policies. In the memories of the Khotons we met – as we will see – captivity, forced labour, and discrimination are deeply felt and condensed into a violent legend: that of the “Valley of the Thousand”.

Drawing both on the literature and on our fieldwork, I argue that the Khotons can be considered a *border people* (Wilson & Donnan 1998): a group historically situated between cultural worlds, that does not fully belong to a single social order, and lives at the intersections of language, religion, economy, and mobility. Situated between (historical) Turkic and Mongol worlds, Islam and Shamanism, mobility/migration and settlement; agriculture and pastoralism, their story is one of cultural resilience through selective adaptation: the ethnogenesis Khotons of Western Mongolia reflects multiethnic origins, complex migrations, and adaptive cultural retention, maintaining some distinctiveness amid a dominant Mongol-pastoralism society.

The multiplicity of historical reconstructions, origin narratives, linguistic traces, religious practices, occupational specializations, and political classifications discussed so far suggests that the contemporary configuration of the Khotons is the outcome of an ongoing process through which heterogeneous elements have been progressively brought into relation and made socially meaningful.

In this sense, Anna Tsing's notion of assemblage, introduced above, offers a productive analytical perspective (Tsing 2005, 2015). Assemblages are open-ended and historically contingent formations emerging through unstable articulations among actors, practices, institutions, material environments, and regimes of power. From this perspective, the ethnicization of the Khotons can be understood as an assemblage process, produced through the intersection of imperial displacements, agricultural colonization projects, pastoral mobility, religious transformations, kinship networks, local memories of violence, socialist modernization policies, and contemporary heritage-making practices.

The Khoton case illustrates the processual character of ethnicity. Historical sources variously define them as sedentary Turks, Muslim farmers, descendants of prisoners of war, agricultural specialists, frontier settlers, or descendants of multiple Central Asian populations, while contemporary narratives emphasize clan affiliations, memories of suffering, agricultural expertise, and religious particularities. It is through the contingent articulation of these heterogeneous elements that forms of commonality, connectedness, and shared fate become socially salient (Brubaker 2004). What persists over time is therefore a dynamic field of relationships, continuously reshaped through the interaction between external categorizations and internal narratives, state classifications and everyday practices, memories of displacement and territorial attachments. In this sense, ethnicization temporarily stabilizes a field of relations through which memories, origin narratives, ritual practices, territorial attachments, and experiences of marginality become articulated as markers of collective difference.

1.3. (Re)building the sense of belonging and of the homeland, woven into the sense of minority

While being identified as Muslims and, at times, identifying themselves as such, the Khotons we met during our fieldwork have abandoned formal Islamic rituals, blending shamanistic practices with residual Turkic elements. Practices such as circumcision, the use of amulets, and reverence for river spirits illustrate forms of religious syncretism and cultural retention under conditions of assimilation pressure. Many of their customs and linguistic remnants reveal Turkic roots, although their current spoken language is Mongolian. As the linguists Zhakupov *et al.* (2024) highlight, in fact, the Khoton language became extinct as a result of social pressures and the adoption of the Dörvöd dialect of the Oirat language; however, elements of Turkic origin – particularly Kyrgyz – remain embedded in the language, mostly in the ritualistic one. Despite this language loss, some Turkic personal names and ritual terms persist, as we also observed during our fieldwork. The disappearance of Arabic-script readers by the 1930s (Zhamtsarano 1967) symbolizes the quiet vanishing of a distinct intellectual and religious tradition. During fieldwork, we were able to observe how Khoton burial practices, such as in-ground burial facing west and the use of coffins, starkly contrast with Mongol customs. These funerary rites point to a vestigial Islamic influence – now more ritualistic than theological – yet the maintenance of a distinct mortuary logic continues to reinforce community boundaries.

In the field, we also encountered one of the *molda* present in the area, a religious figure *sui generis* who resonates with the figure described by Stépanoff and Zarcone as “un personnage hybride à la fois soufi et chaman, mais également barde, devin et guérisseur” (2011: 27). Even in the words of the *molda*, the repetitive prayer commemorating God becomes “une incantation à caractère purement magique et perd sa fonction d’exercice mystique” (*ibid.*). This figure is attributed divinatory capacities and the ability to influence the weather through magical rituals, particularly rain-making practices.

The *molda* received us after we had waited for nearly two hours, as he had been engaged with a family; indeed – as we were told – he performs rituals for people who call upon him for a wide range of needs, in addition to presiding over the celebration of births and deaths. He possesses sacred books, which he refers to as *Šaskal*, containing prayers and divinations – especially those aimed at influencing the weather – and carries with him, enclosed in a small pouch, 21 small stones collected from areas considered sacred, often characterized by the presence of rivers or springs. According to the *molda*, there are currently 6 or 7 *moldas* in the area and 27 across the entire district.

The sense of belonging among Khotons is reinforced through a common tracing back to seven clans (*elkhen*). The fluidity and variation of clans names across time and observers (Potanin with his research, conducted between 1876 and 1877; Vladimirtsov in 1911; Badamkhatan in 1958; and Tatár Fosse in 1971) emphasize the constructed and changing character of ethnic “identity”. In a recent publication, others report: “it is said that the seven families that first arrived became the seven clans of the Khotons: Shaavai, Shalabag, Burdag, Holdog, Hochi, Holden, and Has” (see Möngöntsetseg 2024: 230). In the first days at Ulaangom, with the research team we walk on the Ulaan-Uul (Red Mountain), which majestically towers above the human construct. At its sacred water spring we encounter a man, Bayar, who immediately identifies us as foreigners and addresses us with a clear pleasure in speaking English (in fact, few people speak it). In our conversation we share with him the fact that we are interested in understanding certain aspects of the Khotons' lives. The man looks at us enthusiastically and exclaims: “I am a Khoton!”.

Without hesitation, he invites us the next day to go and visit him at his home. The family lives on a small fenced plot of land, on the edge of town (the other houses on the surrounding streets are like this too), towards the mountain. Within the fenced compound are three permanent gers and several horticultural greenhouses: three in full regimen plus others under construction. Along with this type of cultivation, there are several parts of the property used as vegetable gardens. In the greenhouses we find mainly courgettes, lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes and cabbage (fig. 7).



Figure 7 One of the greenhouses on Bayar's property. Photo by naMec, 2024

The entrance to the main ger features an additional covered structure with a cemented base. Bayar is a Khoton from this area, while his wife is Khalkha from UB, where his parents emigrated. Their way of speaking is very different. Together with them is their little boy, about 2-3 years old, who has the so-called “Mongolian spot”. They welcome us with hospitality and offer us food: for us, it is a great novelty to eat dishes cooked with those freshly picked vegetables, paired with barley, in the Mongolian countryside. One of the gers is used as an evangelical church (Pentecostal): he is a pastor. There are books and religious material in the Mongolian language, and an interesting map that shows us the “evangelical” Mongolia (see fig. 8).



Figure 8 The Ger used as an Evangelical church. Photo by naMec, 2024.

Bayar tells us that because of his beliefs he has no problem with his neighbours, while the ten Khotons living in the village do. He says that in all, there are about thirty “Christians” (as the Pentecostals call themselves) in Ulaangom, about 10 in each ethnic group. In 2021, American pastors came to visit him in Ulaanbaatar. Bayar gives us the gift of the story of his conversion⁸.

⁸ There is no opportunity here to elaborate on this theme, but it is worth remembering that the conversion narrative is central to the biography of every evangelical believer (at least when it presents itself in this aspect). Bayar uses strongly communicative facial and body expressions, along with a remarkable linguistic richness. The ethnographic work of

After continuing our lunch and conversation in the shade, we ask Bayar about the origins of the Khotons and he replies: “we are the descendants of Turkish prisoners-of-war”, without however placing this forced displacement in time.

We then show him the page of Tatar Fosse's article where the names of the tribes are listed, divided by author: he recognises those collected by Badamkhatan, (in particular: Bürd, Šava, Holidog, Šalavai, Ogotor) and claims to be descended from Ogotor⁹. Bayar argues that these groups were formed to avoid unions (interbreeding).

The next day, while visiting the Cultural Centre with the Mayor and the Head of the Culture Sector of the Tarialan district administration, we were told that the Khotons were formed from three “peoples”: 1. Turkic Peoples, 2. Kyrgyz, 3. Noyon Chagatai. The third claim, left us – the members of the research team – somewhat surprised¹⁰.

This link with India is also recalled by the Deputy Mayor, whom we met for the first time the following day at the district centre, where he welcomed us into his *ger*, set within a courtyard surrounded by wooden and masonry house. During this initial encounter, as soon as we began to share our interest in the Khotons with him, he immediately stated that the Khotons are “different people,” adding that with the end of socialism they were able to meet with the Khotons of Inner Mongolia.

Regarding the seven tribes, he states that they have different origins: the Ogotor were hunters rather than farmers, the Bayads were also originally hunters, while the Dörvöd are herders. Furthermore, according to the Mayor, the issue of the seven tribes concerns the maintenance of distinct lineages. Like Bayar, he also mentions the legend of the 40 young women, by contrast the *molda* – the religious figure we met – makes no reference to this narrative and states that the seven tribes relate to the seven men who arrived to this territory as slaves.

This aspect of “slavery,” which recurs in many of the authors cited above, remains vivid in the memories of the Khotons we met and is concretized in the legend of the “Valley of the Thousand.” In the literature, I found only one account that can be linked to this narrative, as reported by Otgon:

In 1683, these Khoton farmers were brought to Hovd by Galdan Boshugtu and started farming. In 1685, when he chose Ulaangom as a stronghold to stop the Manchurian invasion, Ilies started large-scale irrigated agriculture by attracting the Khotons he had planted in

Wood (2023) explores the emergence of the Evangelical church in Mongolia, with particular attention to the experience and perspective of pastors and leaders.

⁹ “*Ogdār*: Badamxatan’s (1958: 38) supposition, that it might be the Mongol equivalent of the Turkish *Özbök* is not proved. His *Ogotor* may have been derived from the analogy of the Mongol *ogotor* which also appears as a clean name, although similar clean names can also be found among the Kirghiz. The *-dar* element of the name can be a Turkish affix standing for plurality” (Tatar Fosse 1979: 4).

¹⁰ The historian and former ambassador of Mongolia to India, O. Nyamandavaa (2020, 2021), traces a long-term Mongol-Indian connection forged through warfare, captivity, and forced conversion under the Delhi Sultanate (14th-15th centuries), when large numbers of Mongol soldiers were taken to northern India, converted to Islam, and partially settled there, while other contingents remained along the Indo-Afghan frontier. Led by non-Chinggisid commanders linked to the Chagatai ulus (that is, the political domain allotted to Chagatai Khan), these groups formed enduring Mongol communities in Afghanistan and the Indian borderlands, preserving western Mongolian linguistic features and giving rise to hybrid populations shaped by mobility, Islamization, and imperial military networks.

Hovdo. These Khotons still live in this area and are part of the Mongolian nation. [...] In the summer of 1749, 12 families who came to Ust-Kamenogorsk in Eastern Kazakhstan reported to Russia that: "The soldiers of Oirat Dugar and Sandag came and took more *than 1000 of them by force and took them to the East Hand region*" / 20.t.28/, the number of the population is shocking (2024: 16-17, my italics).

It is essential to take up the issue evoked in the last passage of the above-mentioned text, highlighted using italics: among the Khotons with whom we have interacted, this painful and dramatic passage in their history has been reworked through the legend of the "Valley of the thousand".

In Tarialan district, in fact, there is a place known as Myangany Denzh, "The Mound or Hilltop of a Thousand" literally, or "Plateau of a Thousand", associated with a legend from the time of Galdan Boshugtu. As the director of the Uvs province Museum recounted, legend has it that "around a thousand Khoton people were gathered there. They were driven up the hill, and those who became exhausted or fell behind were killed, while only the strong and quick-witted who managed to reach the top survived. It is said that the survivors were chosen to work in agriculture, as they were considered capable and strong".

This story belongs to oral tradition, for which I have not yet found other written sources; however, together with the other members of the research team, I was able to hear it in a more dramatic version directly from Bat, who guided us to Myangany Denzh. In the days that followed, we set out in search of the path leading to the valley where, according to the Mayor's account, a heart-shaped stone lies hidden. But in that vast expanse – boundless and hushed – finding our way becomes an almost impossible task. After several attempts, we return to the village, and there, in the stillness of the square, we encounter a man in his forties, astride a motorcycle with his three children. We ask him for directions. He tries to help, but explaining the route proves difficult – for him as well for us, despite the presence of Ganaa in our team.

The man, named Bat, agrees to guide us. He explains that he needs to change vehicles – to switch to a more suitable motorbike – and signals for us to follow. He stops briefly to see his wife at one of the small shops lining the central square, close to the town hall. He changes his jacket, then rides off again, stopping once more to speak with a few people gathered near a stadium built through top-down funding between 2019 and 2020. After one final stop to refuel, we follow him in our four-wheel-drive vehicle. The road quickly dissolves into a raw, winding trail. I jot down notes in my notebook: the turns we take, the landmarks we pass, power lines, trickling streams. At one point, we cross a brook that, Bat explains, in his grandfather's time – the first mayor of the district – was so wide that no caravan could cross it. And then, the trail vanishes, becoming the dry bed of a river that snakes between two sheer rock faces. We follow it, inching forward, until we reach the great stone (figs. 9-10).



Figure 9 The dry riverbed reaching “The Mound of a Thousand”. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 10 The great stone of “The Mound of a Thousand”. Photo by naMec, 2024.

We climb down from the vehicles, approach the boulder with reverence, and begin a deep and resonant conversation with the man. He tells us that he brought here an American who has been visiting them for 20 years, and about a dozen years ago, a group of Koreans.

Ganaa: So, do you work as a tour guide?

Bat: No. [...] So those Korean people, they were from different religions. Christians, you know, they don't believe in superstitions and such things. I helped and served them out of kindness. I have 10 younger siblings, so I need money for the calves. ... Then those people ran down from the Zürhen had (Heart Rock). [...] When she [one of the Korean woman of the group] went in, she started crying. I asked, “What happened, sister?” and she said, “This is a terrifying place”. We don't believe in superstitions. prayed, and there were different shamans and religious people there. And then they said, “There is blood of people all over this place”. I was shocked. So those people sensed that many Khoton people had been killed here. I hadn't said anything about it. I hadn't said anything about how 1,000 Khoton people were killed, and that they killed a pregnant woman to make it 1,001. Those people just sensed it when they left from here.

G.: Where were people running to? Or were they running down, cut off from the mountain?

B.: They were running from here.

G.: Probably from down below, right? And then were cut off at the Zürhen had (Heart Rock), weren't they?

B.: That's what I heard.

Legend tells of a time when, each year, the Khoton were led to that dry riverbed...for a trial between life and death. A desperate race.

Only the first thousand to reach the great stone would be spared. The rest, sacrificed on the spot.

This cruel ritual endured through the years... until one day, a mother, braver than fear, hid her child beneath her skirts... and crossed the stone.

And so, the myth of the thousand shattered. The saved became a thousand and one. A quiet rebellion, a whisper of hope carved forever into memory.

The valley appeared as a landscape marked simultaneously by presence and absence, where historical violence and social marginalization persisted not only through narrative memory but also through the affective texture of the environment itself.

The Valley of the Thousand emerged as a visually charged landscape where memory, suffering, and marginality become materially anchored: photographing the valley therefore involved engaging with the tension between visibility and opacity, between what can be visually rendered and what remains affectively or historically unspoken.

B.: Do you see that corner of the rock that sticks out? That's natural.

Ganaa: Over there, there are seven trees. People consider them a symbol of the clan. And there's an oasis (Mo. *burd*) too.

G.: Everyone talks differently about the seven *elkhen* (clans, relatives, or lineages). What's your version? Is it true that the people were divided into seven clans? When we came to meet director Tsolmon, we were people from different places. Some were Turkic, some were herders, some were from hunting lineages. So the idea that there are seven *elkhen* came from that. But when I met a man [...], a *molda*, he said seven men came first and formed the seven clans. There are many different versions.

B.: You can't trust the current *molda* men. They just make up stories and record them however they like. But the seven *elkhen* are actually the seven ancestral tribes meaning brothers, kin. If you study their customs, it's very strict. It's not just about seven people coming and founding something. It's about seven brothers, seven ancestral Khoton clans. And a person from one clan cannot marry someone from the same clan. So, they are kin.

B.: But brothers can't marry each other. So, originally, they must have been completely different people, right?

Man: They are seven different brothers. And they cannot marry within their own group like, same clan can't marry same clan.

B.: Exactly. For example, if you and I were siblings, our children couldn't marry. So they must be completely different people, unrelated, no blood connection. Otherwise, if they were actual brothers, their descendants wouldn't be allowed to marry.

The seven *elkhen* offer us a glimpse into a constant and dynamic process of reshaping social boundaries and group identity in response to new contacts and bonds formed between families and communities. As is well known, origin myths are not only cosmogonic narratives but also symbolic resources through which collective identities are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized over time (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995; Smith 1999). They provide shared interpretative frameworks that connect memory, territory, ancestry, and belonging, allowing communities to articulate meaningful relationships with the past and with the places they inhabit. In this sense, founding narratives operate as

cultural devices through which social boundaries are produced and reproduced, delineating significant differences, especially in contexts of interethnic contact, political transformation, and historical displacement. From a perspective of political history of collective identities, founding myths can also be reread as *strategies of historicization*: they not only narrate a sacred origin but make it present and relevant by incorporating it into ongoing processes of identity negotiation.

This is precisely the case with the legend of the 40 young women, a myth that goes beyond explaining the genesis of a people to construct a symbolic legitimization of their alterity vis-à-vis the surrounding Mongols and to establish a privileged connection with the Turkic-Altaic universe. It is a myth that several Khotons told us during one of our trips along the Harhira River, and which also appears in the literature. According to tradition, the Khotons trace their origins back to a group of forty young women expelled from a royal court, who conceived not through men but by “mystical” or cosmic means, through water, a sacred and recurring element in Central Asian mythology. This mode of conception, reported by Potanin and compared by Tatár Fosse with Kirghiz variants (1979), highlights how the Khoton myth preserves a more “archaic” version of shared motifs. A distinctive detail, also emphasized by our Khoton narrators, is that only the son of the noble woman, aided by water, is destined to rule, while the children of the serving maids are not considered relatives of the future ruler. Moreover, in some variants, abandoned children are suckled by wild animals such as sheep or dogs, a motif widespread throughout Eurasia (Tatár Fosse 1979: 6). In the Khoton myth, the figure of the child suckled by a birch branch (*Urgo modon êxitej, child with a wooden mother*) stands out: not fed at the mother’s breast, the princess’s son is given a bent birch branch to suck a potent symbol that evokes notions of purity and shamanistic elements (also found elsewhere in western Mongolia and Central Asia). The noble woman, their ancestral forebear, became pregnant as a result of a stream of blood that sprang up beside a river, and later, when her son became ruler, she was cast into the water; thus sealing the kinship of the Khoton people with water. Another element of this Khoton legend is particularly noteworthy: the children of the serving maids were said to have stones as their fathers. This powerful narrative, intertwining shamanistic elements, and Turkic-Altaic mythic structures, can be regarded as an “ethnic charter”, a symbolic identity charter that situates the Khotons within a *symbolic genealogy* as a people chosen by nature and sanctioned by the divine, distinct from the surrounding Mongols and connected to Turkic-Altaic cosmologies. As such, the myth functions as an instrument of historical and cultural legitimization, reinforcing their belonging and their right to a place of dignity and equality within the Mongols.

The place of female figures and water thus appears to be central. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to consider what Ha *et al.* propose as an additional interpretation of the name Khoton : “Some scholars believe that the word ‘Khoton’ is derived from the word ‘Haton’ (“lady”, “queen”) and say that the Khotons disguised themselves as women to protect their lives and escaped persecution in history” (2023: 356).

The kinship bond with water is renewed each spring through the ritual of immersion in the Harhira River, linking it to agriculture in order that an abundant harvest may be

ensured. The exact date of the ritual is determined by the *molda* in accordance with the astrological calendar. It is to the sacred site where the ceremony takes place that our Khoton interlocutors brought us, recounting all of this to us on site.

The point of the river where the immersion occurs lies opposite two ovoos, one male and one female, where the first part of the ritual – the owoo worship – takes place. Participants (men only) feed the owoo deities with food and drink while circumambulating them three times in a counterclockwise direction (opposite to the direction usually practiced).

Stones are also involved in this ceremony and are thrown into the river to propitiate rain. The ritual culminates in its most important moment: the immersion of one or more young Khoton men into the waters of the river. The exclusion of women from the ritual is not justified by our interlocutors with any specific explanation, but is instead presented as a traditional rule that everyone is expected to observe.

Agricultural fertility emerges from the continuous reactivation of relationships between the Khotons and sacred entities. Within this framework, the presence of the ovoos (fig. 11) – of which we were able to collect just fragments of their story – is fundamental to understanding the connection to the land to which they were brought (or to which they migrated), a land that has become their homeland (*nutag*), linked both to their genesis (the legend of the forty women) and to the activity they were compelled to engage in, yet which has become their source of wealth: agriculture. In this regard, the observations put forward by Delaplace and Legrain – albeit for a different context of analysis – are particularly pertinent:

The fact that a collective comes to constitute a community around the owoo that marks the core of a given “homeland” (*nutag*) – and most of all the fact that it will continue to do so for the year to come, in harmony with the *nutag* itself – is not something that is granted a priori; it is the result of some harmonizing work [...] Owoo festivals indeed appear as “points of transition”, points in both a geographical and temporal sense, whereby the community’s fortune comes to depend on its proper and harmonious composition and positioning within the intense and intensely changing complexity of the cosmos (2021: 15).

As with various Tungus and Mongol peoples studied by Dumont (2017), who migrated into Northeast China (the Hulun Buir area) between the mid-18th and the 1930s and are today classified as “ethnic minorities”, ovoos affirm the territorial anchorage of the Khotons. As Charleux and Smith (2021) remind, Humphrey argues the ovoos are a way of saying “We are here” (1995: 146).

Under a visual attention, ovoos emerged as spatial nodes through which landscape, memory, and collective belonging became materially articulated. The ritual landscape appeared as a condensation of intersecting temporalities in which ancestral memory, present-day practices, and future-oriented forms of territorial continuity coexisted materially within the same environment.

Following Martínez (2018), such landscapes may be understood through the coexistence of “plural intersecting temporalities” sedimented within space and material life.



Figure 11 Ovoos. Photo by naMec, 2024.

2. Ambiguity and relational multiscalarity: construction of otherness, reification and institutional instrumentalisation

"Have you found people with dark skin?"
 "Are you anthropologists? Then here you must go to the Khotons!"
 "Did you see? They have light-coloured eyes, different, straight noses and they are dark"
 "If someone works badly or something similar, you say them, 'You are a Khoton!'"
 Notes from the Field Journal, August 2024

As we have seen, the Khotons can be considered the contingent outcome of historical changing contacts among different population groups and shifting political regimes and policies across empires and states (from the Züünger Khanate to the Qing dynasty, from the socialist era to today's neoliberalism and democracy). However, I have observed that this long and varied process may completely disappear at several relational levels: in everyday interactions among people, as well as in local or national policies, where the demarcation of an irreducible and "naturalised" difference that follows the traces of visible phenotypes is often emphasised. The words quoted at the beginning are those of a Mongolian woman from Ulaangom (the first line), two employees of the Park Authority whom we met during a meeting for our research¹¹, and Ganaa, a member of our team, who tells us about the perception of a certain widespread feeling of discrimination towards the Khotons when she lived in the capital of the province.

When asked this question for the first time during a conversation, I was a little embarrassed. Not only had I not noticed any difference in "colour", but I also sensed why I had been asked this question. The following week, during a meeting with the Deputy Mayor of Tarialan, I happened to overhear a conversation between him and Ganaa about physical features, starting with the deputy mayor saying he was very proud to be 100% Khoton. Well, looking at our companion, he asked her if she was also Khoton or had some Khoton ancestry, and when she said no, he insisted, asking her if she was sure. Other

¹¹ 3 August and 8 August 2024.

episodes related to this kind of “bodily inscription” of difference were repeated during our fieldwork. As is well known, the search for and emphasis on finding this type of evidence of difference, making it visible and materialising it through the body, are classic aspects of a historicised relationship of power imbalance between two (or more) groups sharing the same space, and are obviously present in relations between a majority and a minority¹². The same applies to the incorporation and ambiguities underlying it on the part of the members of the minority themselves, which emerge when they in turn mark these phenotypes.

Bat: There are many prominent scholars, doctors, and professors who are Khoton. But they don't identify as Khoton anymore. They change their clan names to Dörvöd or Bayad. My brother said the same 10 years ago “Brother, I want to change my ovog [“surname” literally, but here it could mean ethnic or clan name]. I don't want to be Khoton anymore.” I asked why. He said, “I want to rise up, but being Khoton holds me back”. Even someone at the level of parliament or president wouldn't go by the name Khoton. Famous wrestlers, singers who are originally Khoton now use other ovog names. That's why I wonder if your research will have any impact.

[...]

Bat: Let me say something. The reason Khoton people are like this is because of a belief, they think we are cursed. One guy even held a microphone and sang a song announcing he was Khoton in Tarialan district, and then he died after being hit by a camel.

[...] When someone declares I am Khoton during their peak [height of their success], it feels like a curse follows.

Bat tells us this while we are in the Valley of the Thousand, connecting the violence and the different value of human lives contained in the legend to current discrimination. A profound sense of minority emerges, which is also expressed through the curse, the latter also surfacing in the meeting with the Deputy Mayor of Tarialan and at other moments in the field: a curse that the Khotons would also be capable of directing at others and to which they would link particular skills/powers/energies both in rain rituals and in divination. The theme of the curse deserves particular attention.

In fact, as is well established, symbolic beliefs such as curses play a critical role in defining and maintaining social boundaries between majority and minority groups. The attribution of a curse functions as a potent cultural symbol embedded in broader systems of ethnic differentiation and power. Practices and narratives involving curses could operate as tools of exclusion and markers of ethnic identity, reinforcing the marginal status of groups like, in our case, the Khoton. These spiritual beliefs are transmitted through oral traditions and ritual practices that associate misfortune and spiritual pollution with minority groups, thus legitimizing their social distance and exclusion. Pedersen (2011) – also worked with an ethnic minority – offers a compelling account of

¹² It is important to recall here the concept of “colour of line” developed in the early 1900s by W.E.B. Du Bois (2015). The colour line is a construction, a mobile frontier, whose historical dynamics, simultaneously material and symbolic, define and “make” “whiteness” and “blackness” as well as the relational meanings of these constructions. It therefore requires a reversal of perspective: it is generated by the asymmetrical distribution of power and material and symbolic resources.

how a new generation of disillusioned shamans and laypeople in Ulaan-Uul, in Northeastern Mongolia, navigated the intensifying post-socialist crisis through volatile and unpredictable spiritual encounters, manifestations of an “occult excess” that came to dominate social life on the geopolitical margins of the Mongolian state. He further explicates how spiritual afflictions, including curses, act as explanations for both individual and communal misfortune, simultaneously maintaining social order and ethnic boundaries.

The conceptual framework provided by Douglas (1966) on purity, pollution, and taboo is especially useful for understanding these dynamics: the metaphor of curse can be seen as a form of symbolic pollution that marks minority groups as impure or dangerous, which in turn justifies their marginalization and exclusion from dominant cultural and social spheres. This perspective aligns with Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of symbolic violence, wherein dominant groups impose stigmatizing narratives that sustain social hierarchies and inequalities. Spiritual beliefs, including curses, regulate behavior and uphold ethnic hierarchies by positioning minorities as morally or spiritually “other”. The fear of curses thus functions not only as a cultural explanation of misfortune but as a mechanism of social control within the complex matrix of ethnic relations. The belief in curses among cannot be dismissed as mere superstition but must be understood as an integral aspect of cultural identity formation and social stratification. These beliefs both reflect and reproduce historical patterns of marginalization, serving as symbolic markers that maintain ethnic boundaries and perpetuate social exclusion, contributing to the very process of racialization of the Khotons¹³.

Scientific thinking, with a long history dating back more than 100 years, also plays a role in the construction of “naturalised” and “essentialised” differences, which, once transformed into “things”, can be used in various ways by both the majority and the minority. The description provided by Vladimirtsov, later taken up by Zhamtsarano (1967)¹⁴ echoes in contemporary works by some Mongolian ethnologists who continue along lines of thought established during the socialist era, which emphasized ethnic identity as central objects of research:

The physical appearance and physiognomy of the Khotons are quite different from the Mongols according to the report of the scholar Vladimirtsov, who wrote “The Turkic Minority Group Called Khoton”, after having investigated them in 1911, and according to the second chapter of the work called “North-west Mongolia”, which describes the travels of Potanin from 1876 to 1877, and also the observations of the student Ceringdorji who went there in 1924 and 1925. The eyes are deep-set and large; the nose, straight and long; the hair of

¹³ Racism can in fact be defined as the naturalisation of bodily difference and – starting from this – race is understood as the “racialised” naturalisation of the social, cultural, gender and class position assigned to the subject.

¹⁴ The 1967 publication consists of the translation of several pages concerning the Khotons (ivi: 62–70) from Zhamtsarano’s book on the minorities of Mongolia, originally published in 1934. He was a Buryat Mongolist and ethnographer operating within the intellectual and institutional circuits of the early Soviet sphere, where scholarship was closely entangled with projects of state formation and social reorganization. His 1934 study was conceived not simply as descriptive ethnography but as a systematic, classificatory account of minority populations, their “origins and conditions,” designed to render them legible for administration, enumeration, and governance while standardizing knowledge on language, ritual, and social life.

the beard is plentiful, and so forth. This are characteristics of the Turkic race (Zhamtsarano 1967: 12).

In contemporary texts, such descriptions are reproduced, together with an emphasis on other characteristics that come to be essentialised, such as: “Khoton people different than Mongolians in anthropology; they have green cavernous eyes, higher roman nose. [...]. The Khoton Mongolian population is a small and relatively isolated ethnic group [...]” (Erkhembayar *et al.* 2024) and “The Khotons, who live in Tarialan district of Uvs Province, are considered to be part of the Western Mongolians of Mongolia, or Oirad Province, but they are an independent ethnic group that still maintains its unique cultural heritage” (Otgon 2024:15), and further on:

The Khoton people are anthropologically distinct from the Mongols. In the past, they had large eyes, a high nose, a long beard, and a Turkic-like appearance and physique. Today, they have changed to resemble the Mongols of neighboring regions. The Khoton people are very talented in singing, dancing, and playing the *khur*, which shows that they have inherited the cultural heritage of the peoples of Central Asia (ivi: 18).

The attribution of stable bodily features and inherited cultural dispositions to the Khotons illustrates how processes of ethnicisation can slide into forms of racialization. Such representations risk transforming contingent historical trajectories into essential properties of the group itself, reinforcing the perception of ethnicity as an immutable condition rather than as a relational and historically situated process. This link between a “classic” representation of a group as an “ethnicity” characterised by a specific language, culture and “physicality”, and the supposed preservation over time (centuries) of a unique cultural heritage, clearly illustrates the risk of treating local knowledge as “essentialising” folklore. As we shall see, by setting them apart, a difference has been institutionalised in their regard after having been naturalised.

Qinfu Ha, in his study on the ethnic designation of the Khoton (2025) highlights how in the course of Mongolia’s modern nation-state building formation, processes of cultural integration and identity reconfiguration gradually transformed “Khoton” from an externally imposed label (exonym) into a term of self-designation (autonym). This transformation reveals that the delineation of ethnic identity involves both self-perception construction and external sociopolitical shaping, ultimately emerging as a dialectical negotiation through historical intergroup dynamics between the in-group and out-group.

During our visits to the village of Tarialan, we encountered what we might describe as the “remains” of a “reifying” heritage process originally oriented toward foreign tourism: the closed hotel and the small museum with English captions inside the Cultural Centre (figs. 12-13). This was accompanied by the frequent reiteration, in our conversations with Khoton interlocutors, of the inscription of the *bii biyelgèè* dance on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. While this insistence can be understood as an expression of local pride, it also highlights how this form of recognition has neither generated nor sustained over time the kinds of effects

that many Khoton interlocutors had hoped for, such as increased visibility, popularity, tourism, or economic return. Balanchier (2023) offers a critical reading of the UNESCO heritagisation process through which this dance was recognised, noting that the inscription of the *bii biyelgèè* at UNESCO took place in a context marked by intense heritage effervescence, as part of a broader movement aimed at protecting and promoting Mongolian national identity.

Within this process, one can observe the full ambiguity of a valorisation of the Other that is grounded in its essentialisation, operating within a problematic relationship between the majority and the minority, in which processes of marginalisation are simultaneously at work. This is by no means an isolated case: aspects of a discriminated minority frequently enter into the dynamics of national identity construction, and, in the realm of dance, the case of Romani flamenco in Spain is emblematic.



Figure 12 Some artifacts displayed in the Tarialan museum. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 13 Main square of Tarialan. Photo by naMec, 2024.

Have contested their stigmatisation by adopting the discourse of local heritage protection to defend novel, globally-circulating conceptions of heritage, it seems that for a certain years, some opportunities were given, but it also seems that a top-down approach quickly prevailed, which at times was completely detached from the context. This top-down process was driven by the government and supported by wealthy individuals – some of whom also held political positions at the district level – during an initial period, when funding and formal forms of recognition, including that associated with the dance, were provided. However, these individuals gradually began to withdraw their support once they realised that their power within the village and their decision-making autonomy were being threatened by external actors endowed with greater political and economic authority.

In this regard, the case that stands out most in our view, and which represents a clear example in this respect, is that of the mosque, which we find not only abandoned because it is no longer used, but also partly reused by residents as a storage facility (figs. 14-15).



Figure 14 Overview of the Mosque complex. Photo by naMec, 2024.



Figure 15 Sign and entrance door of the Mosque complex. Photo by naMec, 2024.

We are told that this mosque was built in 2008 and that a Mulla came from outside, a Kazakh, belonging neither to the community nor to the territory. Initially, it had about ten followers, who gradually stopped attending. By 2013, attendance had completely ceased, and the mosque was closed permanently in 2021. It appears that some of the villagers intend to build a new mosque (although we do not understand whether this is a popular initiative or one promoted by the local authorities/Khoton élites): the land is just on our right where we are sitting talking to our Khoton interlocutor, waiting for the *molda*. The years of the mosque's construction, the application for and granting of UNESCO recognition for "folk dancing", the museum exhibition and the construction of the hotel are all the same: all in the second half of the 2010s.

Being free, together with colleagues from the research team, to consult the library of the Tarialan Cultural Centre, I came across a range of texts, ranging from "grey" literature on the "traditions" and "customs" of the Khotons to publications on the district and various reports. Some of these texts particularly attracted my attention, among them a book entitled *Khoton Türkleri*, published in Ankara in 2015 by TİKA - Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, which operates under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, founded in 1992 with the aim of establishing strong collaborations with the countries of Central Asia in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics (USSR). The book, which is written in a reportage style (it is edited by a journalist-writer and his team, with a remarkable collection of photographs), is an extremely interesting “political” product, which gives us the opportunity to see what a minority can become within a landscape of relations between states, which bring with them economic interests and the assertion of wide-ranging political, religious and cultural influences. In this sense, the presentation of the work by the president of TIKA exemplifies how history and culture can be strategically mobilized as instruments of political rhetoric, intertwining an ancestral “kinship” still considered present between Turks and Mongols, and invoking a claimed responsibility: elements used as a “natural” motivational basis for Turkey’s operations in Mongolia.

Within the materials consulted in the library, I found further evidence of the intertwining of institutional attention and the involvement of foreign actors, in particular in the book *Sum Economic Development Strategy 2007-2015* written in English by the Tarialan district administration and the Tarialan district core team (Munkhsoyol *et al.* 2007), which mixes the issue of recognition and improvement of the Khoton minority, including cultural heritage, with the economic development of the territory, in the undefined period of the so-called “transition economies”. In this case, the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Open Society Forum (OSF) are directly involved, as well as the Centre for Policy Research¹⁵. A major strategic focus identified by the *Strategy* is the cultural and tourism potential linked to the “Khoton ethnic group”, which – it is claimed – “has preserved their indigenous customs, cultural practices, and historical heritage over centuries” (pp. 67-68). Though tourism is not yet developed – the text specifies – Tarialan has high potential due to its natural landscapes – such as the Harhiraa-Turgen mountains and Uvs Nuur basin – and unique ethnic traditions (ivi: 32).

It is here that we find traces of the project for the construction of the local mosque – conceived as a “safeguard of the Khoton’s religious and cultural identity” – which was subsequently implemented and ultimately failed, as we observed during fieldwork. Alongside this essentializing reading, on which a top-down interpretation and implementation of a presumed form of “cultural valorization” is based, the expected outcomes of the Strategy also include the reduction of social issues such as alcohol use and crime (ivi: 78). Additional strategic projects further aim to improve education – through school and kindergarten reconstruction – and healthcare, through hospital upgrades (ibid.). These latter aspects also appear in the Education Quality Reform Project Indigenous People Planning Framework (2013), a plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Mongolia implemented with support from the World Bank. In this governmental document, the Khotons, together with other minority groups (including Kazakh, Tsaatan, Tuva, and Dukha), are defined as “Indigenous Peoples”. According to the World Bank’s definition, the term “Indigenous Peoples” is used in a generic sense to refer to a distinct, vulnerable social and cultural group possessing certain characteristics to varying degrees¹⁶.

¹⁵ We cannot delve into the complex and intricate role of donors in Mongolia since the end of socialism here. For a critical view on the subject, see Ichinkhorloo 2021.

¹⁶ See <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/833801468053412190>

The Khoton's relationship with surrounding actors – be they other Mongolian groups, the central state, or foreign institutions or foundations, such as TIKA or the Open Society – reveals a continuous tension between visibility and invisibility, between recognition and marginalization, between pride and disavowal. The case of the Khoton people exemplifies the complex processes through which minority identities are shaped, negotiated, and often marginalized across multiple levels: from everyday interactions to political rhetoric, from local narratives to international agendas.

What might appear as a “simple” ethnic belonging is, in fact, a multilayered construct, charged with historical, symbolic, and material significance, a space where social hierarchies are reproduced, cultural boundaries are reinforced, and political and economic roles are constantly redefined.

The so-called “cultural valorizations” highlight the ambivalence of external interventions, which may create opportunities but also risk essentializing identities or imposing top-down visions disconnected from local realities. Our fieldwork has clearly shown that knowledge and rituals – especially those related to water – continue to play an active role in the contemporary context, but their symbolic significance in the dynamics of political and “ethnic” recognition seems to have been sucked dry by mainstream “development” logic and practices and by internal dynamics that have seen the role of the Khoton élites prevail as privileged interlocutors in the political initiatives implemented.

Conclusion

Khotons display a historically deep and distinctive intertwining of agricultural and pastoral activities. This configuration unsettles conventional oppositions between sedentariness and mobility, revealing livelihoods forged through long-term adaptation to shifting political regimes, ecological constraints, and social hierarchies. These lines and “knots” (Ingold 2015) formed through the stratification of events and generations constitute useful interpretive tools for understanding the contemporary context. Their identity emerges as a negotiated practice, shaped across multiple scales of recognition and within unequal relations of power.

The Khoton emerge as the “product” of connections, displacements and mobilities, classifications, memories, ritual practices, and public policies. For this reason, the Tsing's concept of assemblage provides particularly appropriate analytical lens for understanding the contingent, relational, and historically situated processes through which they are continually constituted.

The legends the Khotons of Tarialan pass down – of the Valley of the Thousand, of the Forty Women – operate as performative narratives that mediate their relationship with territory, suffering, and state power.

The complexity of Khoton religious practices further illustrates this processual understanding of identity. Islamic references, shamanic and animist elements, divination, and rituals coexist within the same families and individuals, keeping classificatory boundaries open. This is not to overlook the early stages of Pentecostal influence, marked by the conversion of ten families, an emerging phenomenon that deserves further

analytical attention. These embodied practices sacralize space, anchor belonging in a symbolic geography of displacement, and mediate political visibility, enabling forms of autonomy within regimes that tend to reify ethnic difference. Yet belonging remains a field of tension, where everyday practices reveal multiscale negotiations of identity.

The analysis also highlights the ambiguity of contemporary recognition itself. Processes of valorization that seek to acknowledge cultural difference also operate through essentializing logics that fix and reify it. Within a problematic majority-minority relationship, visibility becomes inseparable from categorization.

By tracing identity through embodied interactions with landscape, history, and knowledge, this study conceptualizes ethnicity as a relational “choreography,” continuously reshaped by context and by the micropolitics of belonging. This approach brings to the fore the invisible work of becoming and feeling one is a Khoton. Finally, within this framework, photography contributed to tracing the material, spatial, and sensory dimensions of ethnicization, following how belonging is continuously negotiated also through landscapes, infrastructures and ritual spaces. The images produced during fieldwork should therefore be understood as a way to engaging with the fragility and ongoing transformation of everyday social worlds. In fact, some of the spaces, practices, and material configurations documented during fieldwork were already in the process of changing, disappearing, or being reconfigured. Martínez describes this condition as an “anthropology of a vanishing object,” in which ethnography confronts environments and forms of life that exist within processes of rapid transformation and disappearance (2018: 8).

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