

THE BIRTH OF MODERN ANTHROPOLOGY IN MONGOLIA

By A. Róna-Tas
University of Szeged, Hungary

(Editor's note: This paper was originally presented at the 24th Annual Meeting of the AAS, in March 1972. It is reprinted here essentially as delivered.)

The birth of a child, a society, a religion or a science has always been one of the most fascinating events of history. We try to grasp the new which is to us essential, but not independent of its antecedents and within the historical framework in which it comes to life.

The birth of Mongolian anthropology or more precisely the birth of modern anthropology in Mongolia is marked by the names of two men who remained till now, in spite of their significance for the world history of anthropology, unknown to the learned Western Hemisphere. The two men, one in the North, in Outer Mongolia, one in the South, the province Jehol of China, created independently of each other, in the same period, life-works which became the very beginnings of cultural anthropology in their country. It would be an oversimplification to say that they had no predecessors. The Mongols have a long history of their own literature beginning with the famous Secret History of the 13th century and continuing with religious and lay works during the following 700 years. In this rich literature we find many important records, observations and materials on the everyday life of the nomadic Mongols. But they remained sources, scattered observations, valuable as they be, without any systematization; sources for science and not science itself.

Lubsangchondan, a Kharachin-Mongol from Southeast Mongolia was the first who made it his aim to outline the traditional social and cultural anthropology of the Mongols. He worked in the first decade of our century with the South Manchurian Railway Company in Jehol and wrote there in a copy-book his work: Mongxol-un Jang aYali-yi tobčilan bičigsen debter (A copy book in which the customs of the Mongols are briefly written.) The original manuscript was written between 1914-1916 and

its autograph copy was recently found by Professor Heissig in Japan.

The aim of the work has been clearly formulated by Lubsangchondan: "... because of the circumstances that there are many who know nothing about their traditional origin, did I write this..." The oppression of the Mongols by their own aristocracy, the progressing of sinification, the hostility of Lamaism toward the traditional Mongolian customs awoke the desire and necessity of self-consciousness and of the rescuing or resuscitating of the consciousness of national identity. These were mutatis mutandis the same causes which gave birth to anthropology in Europe only a hundred years earlier.

Some of the main chapters of Lubsangchondan's work are:

- The mythological origin of the Mongols
- The primary social unit, the ayimag
- The oldest Mongolian clans
- The geographical distribution of the old Mongolian tribes
- Family and wedding
- Death and burial rites
- Agriculture and animal husbandry
- Everyday life: meals, drinks, cloth
- Everyday works: manufacture, trade
- The origin of the clan of Chinggis-khan
- The rules of Chinggis khan
- The spread of Chinese settlements over the Mongolian territory
- Money and measures
- Hereditary law
- Mongolian folk-medicine
- Shamans and shamanism
- Calendar, administration and so on.

The work consists of 45 chapters. Till now only a short report, an outline of the contents and two brief excerpts have been published by Professor Heissig. We hope to have the whole work in our hands as soon as possible not only because of its unique value as a source to be sure this above all, but also because of its outstanding merit in the history of Mongolian anthropology. It was a major step in the objective description and systematization of the anthropological material and we have to confess that up till now we do not have a similar work done by modern standards at our disposal. It is unnecessary to say that to learn how the Mongols

thought about themselves at the beginning of our century is as interesting as the material itself.

If possible, even more interesting is the life and work of a contemporary of Lubsangchondan. His name was Baldugin Sharav and he was the most important Mongolian painter of the first half of our century. His life is a true mirror of the fascinating historical events of Outer Mongolia.

Sharav was born in 1869, a year later than e.g., P. Wilhelm Schmidt, the founder of the Vienna-School of anthropology. He was a contemporary of such scholars as A. L. Kroeber, F. Boas, J. G. Frazer, and W. Wundt. But the young boy, an illegitimate son of a shepherdess had not the slightest idea about European science. He cared for the sheep and goats, wandered with the herd in search of water and grass - and drew in his spare time on all possible flat surfaces. The lamas of the nearby monastery discovered his talent early, tried to bring him into the steppe-monastery, but in 1891 he went to the capital which was then called Ta Hüre, the Great Monastery. The 22 year old boy met on the streets, among others, painter-lamas who painted Buddhistic scrolls and sold them to pious passers by. Day by day he observed their work, got into conversation with them and asked them about their secrets. One of the painter-lamas, Luvsandongov, focused his attention upon the young man, took him under his wing, gave him a yurt, and taught him the elements of Buddhistic painting. He also learned from other masters and joined the monastery. After a time he could sell his own paintings; he received for one painting one khadakh, silk scarf, and for 4-5 scarfs he could buy a lamb.

In the meantime important political changes happened in the life of the Mongols. After the Chinese revolution of 1911, the new Republic gave autonomy to Outer Mongolia. The role of the local aristocracy grew. The wealth of the theocratic Emperor, the Bogdo Gegen and his feudal court had to be expressed also by artistic means. They commissioned the painters to make their portraits and they paid well for them. Sharav got an order to paint the portraits of the Bogdo Gegen and his wife, which he undertook with great success. These paintings remain to us and are very interesting because it can be clearly seen how he followed an original photograph when depicting the faces, while the figures, their clothes and the holy instruments had been painted after life. Sharav's great success brought him further orders. But soon he became aware of the fact that the temporary rise of the living standards and wealth in Outer Mongolia had neither

improved the life of the poor population, the arats, nor was it stable for the aristocracy. Sharav, the painter, turned in his works toward his compatriots, the people. His following order was to paint the palace of the Bogdo Gegen. He did this from a bird's-eye view, but on the painting the life around and in the palace got the greater importance. He painted a real genre-painting, describing the daily activities of the capital, caravans, playing children, various types of yurts, carts, horses, exercising soldiers, riders and walking lamas, love scenes, quarreling women, vendors, gentlemen and shepherds.

This picture was the most important step towards his great undertaking: to paint the entire anthropology of the Mongols. For many years he and his pupils worked on two great pannos, the one describing the everyday life, the other the kumiss feast. They finished their work in 1915, the same year that Lubsangchondan wrote his copybook on the anthropology of the Mongols.

I shall come back to the two pictures and try to give my reasons why I consider them to be not only pieces of art, but the first works of a Mongol on Mongolian anthropology. But now let us briefly follow Sharav's way of life which came into the closest contact with the Mongolian revolution of 1921.

In the year of the revolution Sharav left the monastery. The leader of the revolution, Sükhe Bator, who worked earlier in a printing-house, was his personal friend and he joined the printing house and offered his services. In 1923 he became a member of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party. He illustrated the new books, among others the first Mongolian translations of Western literature. His illustrations to Defoe's Robinson Crusoe remain to our day. He illustrated the first collections of fairy tales, among them the famous Siddhikdr collection. He drew pictures for school books, illustrated the first Mongolian newspapers, sketched political posters - some of which were described by Sven Hedin during his stay in 1924-1925 in Mongolia. It was he who sketched the first Mongolian military decorations and the first paper money of the MPR.

Nonetheless, Sharav maintained his affection for portraits. He painted his friend, Sükhe Bator, another leader of the revolution Cerendorj, the Unknown Soldier, then Lenin, Luxemburg and Liebknecht. He remained unconventional, an ever-joking son of his nation. Every day he went to a little restaurant near the new National Theatre in Ulan Bator, talked with the people, made little,

often satirical, sketches of them. He loved wine and women and endless anecdotes relate about his adventures. For the people he was the Mardzan, the Joker. He died in 1938.

As we have briefly seen Sharav's oeuvre represents in itself the whole story of Mongolian painting. The Buddhist-Lamaist iconography, the court-painting, the birth of national art and the political, revolutionary art. An outstanding life's work in itself, the study of which is at its very beginning.

At this occasion not his artistic value or creation interests us but his unparalleled intention to describe the whole daily life of the Mongols. Sharav himself was not an illiterate, but according to contemporary documents he wrote with difficulty. The majority of his shepherd compatriots, the arats, were illiterate and this was the very reason why his undertaking had a special importance. The painting of the traditional way of life was understandable for everybody and thus helped to evoke the national consciousness within the people.

Even a superficial glance over the pictures can offer arguments on behalf of his conscious plan to give a systematized and scientific description of the cultural and social anthropology of the Mongols. You will soon have opportunity to form your own opinion. I would like to call your attention to only five points which seem to be in favor of the fact that we are confronted here with a scientific undertaking.

1. The endeavor to describe the totality of the way of life. On the pictures we find all important customs, activities, objects. There is no one chapter of an anthropological description which is missing. The various economic activities, hunting, animal husbandry, agriculture, forestry, trade and caravan life are painted in all details. Let us take as an example the keeping of sheep. He painted milking, the shearing, the preparation of wool, the various stages of felt-making, the castration, the administration of property signs, the begetting and so on. In the scenes of agriculture we meet with the ploughing, the sowing, the manuring, the canalization, the harrowing, the harvesting, the threshing, the cleaning of the corn by casting it against the wind, the collection of corn, the various types of mills and so on. In the picture, rendered by separate scenes you will find the whole wedding ceremony, the various practices of folk-religion, fire-offering, kumiss-libation, hail-magic, divining shaman and the feast of the lamas. All social groups in pre-

revolutionary Mongolia are represented, high and servant lamas, feudal gentlemen and poor herdsmen, merchants and caravan-leaders, children, women of each rank. The whole cycle of life is depicted, from the birth till the burial ceremonies, not making exception of the habits of the sexual life. The types of tents, the various costumes, all the objects used are carefully rendered in vivid little scenes.

2. The pictures have not only an artistic but also a scientific structure. For example, on the upper part of the painting "The everyday life of the Mongols" are depicted the occupations typical for Northern Mongolia, on the lower part we find scenes representing the life of the desert regions of Southern Mongolia. The various scenes of the wedding ceremonies beginning with the suit and ending with lighting the new fire are placed in the due chronological order.

3. The conscious scientific aim of Sharav is reflected by the manner in which he takes care to show all important details. The saddle is not only painted on the horseback but once the horse is casting off its rider and the saddle is flying in the air so that its parts can be observed separately. We meet not only with all types of the yurt, but also with a scene where a yurt is just to be built, enabling us to observe all parts otherwise hidden under the outer felt cover. The various possibilities of hobbling the horse are painted from various sides to make clear this practice. The parts of clothing can be seen not only as they are worn but bathing persons lay their trousers, skirts, boots and hats on the shore of a lake for closer inspection.

4. It is also a part of artistic formation but at the same time it is a way of describing the life, that everything is depicted in its motion, in its dynamics. As one can see in the picture, all figures and horses, are painted in their movement. Time is insufficient to discuss how Sharav used the elements of the old Buddhist-Lamaist style and how far away he drifted away from it. I would only like to point out that the dynamic element in his style was one of his most important innovations. The most difficult task, to describe on a static picture the dynamics of the life, has at least been attempted.

5. At the very beginning of the history of anthropology we frequently meet with the heroization of the traditional way of life. Sharav is rather critical and does not hide his irony. His satirical point of view finds its realization in every part of the picture. The

drunkard lama-priest is vomiting the overly enjoyed kumiss, the lama-servant is making fun of his master, the quarrelling priests in the background of the very formal scene of the official Lamaistic kumiss feast reveal his views on the theocracy. Neither does he spare the evil customs of his compatriots, as sexual perversity, nor the quarrelling of the women. He is making fun in all possible situations. The bottom of a barrel is dropping and the milk is pouring over the earth, a rider is thrown by his horse, or the neighbors are calling the attention of a woman to her husband and his mistress. For this special satiric criticism did he get his nickname, the Joker.

To paint the everyday life, to compose a pictorial anthropology was a unique attempt having its own historical and personal reasons. Certainly similar attempts can be found in the European history of anthropology. The oeuvre of Breughel, the Flemish school of genre-painting could be mentioned as possible parallels. But the aim of the European genre-painting was only the artistic reproduction of scenes of the everyday life and not a systematic, conscious representation of the whole. The European genre-painting had other sources, roots, other aims and other historical functions. To be sure, the pictorial anthropology of Mardzan Sharav was a blind alley. The method could not be and has not been followed. It pertained to a special period of the Mongolian history which ended in 1921. The social and political circumstances have been radically changed and the revolution gave way to the development of the new science. The illiteracy has vanished step by step, the sons of the arats learned not only to read and write but learned their own history and traditions. The new anthropological school in Mongolia is growing up before our eyes. Nevertheless, we have to consider Sharav one of the forefathers of modern Mongolian anthropology. His dream to describe totally and critically, consciously and systematically the facts of the everyday life has to be realized by our joint endeavor.

The change of the traditional way of life in Mongolia is one of the most fascinating cultural changes in the world. Nomads who build a modern, new, socialist society between the Soviet Union and China have every reason to attract our attention. The conflicts between old and new ways of life offer endless material to social and cultural anthropologists. One need not be a prophet to foresee that the interest for Mongolia will rapidly grow in the near future. For scholars who are the sons of quite another culture, it will be and always remain a difficult task to observe and describe the Mongolian way of life, in

its tradition and in its change. Surely it gives a certain chance for objectivity but at the same time it has and will have its own barriers diminishing the possibilities to understand many circumstances, customs, trends and structures which are natural to somebody who was born and who lives in the society observed. On the other hand, for a member of a culture there has to be a certain distance from the object that he is trying to describe. When and where this distance comes into being, the possibility of the birth of national anthropology is present. How this possibility is realized is dependent upon the special historical and social circumstances not to speak of the personal ones. In the Autonomous Mongolia the lamasery life, the increasing Chinese and Western influence on the life of the aristocracy, the enormous cleavage between poor and rich, the necessity of the evocation of national consciousness gave the framework in which anthropology came to existence.

Among these circumstances anthropology had not only pure scientific function. For the Mongols it showed their own values, criticized their backwardness but at the same time helped them to a healthy self-consciousness. Thus the birth of modern anthropology in Mongolia had its own political functions. Lubsanchondang and Sharav were aware of their historical role. And their life work enables us to observe from the very near the birth of a science in the middle of Asia.

(The painting by Mardzan Sharav, reproduced here, is now kept in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ulan Bator. It is 137 x 174 cm large and painted with gauche technique.)



