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BOOKS ON MONGOLIA

ABOUT US

LIFE'S LIKE THAT!

In Search of Sacred Names

Tamerlaine the Great, the Ilkhan Shahs of Persia, the Khans of Russia's Golden Horde, the Manchu Emperors of China, the Moghul Emperors of India, even Count Dracula, boasted that the blood of one man, Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol nation, ran through their veins.

When the Russian revolutionaries seized control of Mongolia in 1921, they set out to eradicate his name for ever. For decades, none dared utter name of Genghis Khan for fear of committing a thought crime. Even down to the 1980s, no history museum was permitted to portray him in any exhibit.

In 1921, the Russians began exacting revenge for centuries under 'the Tartar Yoke' by making even the Mongols forget their past. The first step towards fashioning Socialist man out of the feudal nomad was the arrest and execution of the nobility, most of whom claimed direct descendancy from Genghis Khan and his sons. Then in 1925, the new rulers abolished the use of all family and clan names.

'It was purely for political reasons, to eliminate the influence of the nobility and destroy the hereditary status of their children,' explained Zhambaldorjin Serjee, Director of the State Central Library. Since then Mongolians have only used one name, their given name to refer to themselves. 'Two or three generations later, people here didn't even know they had lost their clan names,' Serjee said.

Between 1922 and 1940, nearly 100,000 out of one million population - nobles, lamas and Communists alike - were executed or imprisoned in wave after wave of purges.

'My parents were amongst those killed, so I don't know my family name ' said Enkhbayar, the leader of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, the former Communist Party which was returned to power in a landslide vote last June. Some 60 percent of the country is in the same position but soon after the collapse of Communism, the government permitted Mongols do not know their family name

'As part of restoring their national identity, people started to search for their roots and in 1991 President P. Ochirbat issued a decree for the restoration of family names. People were free to pick their own names,' said Serjee who has written a guide on how to do it.



The only known portrait of Chinggis Khaan drawn 40 years after his death.

Most people have chosen the Genghis Khan family name, Borjigid, which like many other names is taken from clan totem - a blue grey wolf. The name literally means 'Wolfmaster'. Other Mongolians are named after other animals like eagles or crows, as well as professions such as smith, hunter, or camelbreeder.

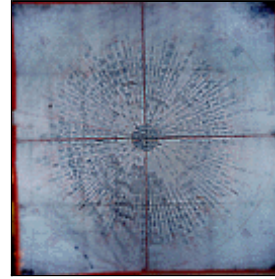
Traditionally, Mongolians are fascinated by genealogy. The book written not long after Genghis Khan's death 'The Secret History of the Mongols', details Genghis Khan's forebears and in his researches Serjee has found that some Mongolian family trees date back to the 8th century.

'But most people relied on oral traditions, memorising the name each generation as far back as seven generations,' he said. Ancestral worship was important in Mongolia, and the Mongol Khans built

shrines to hold annual offerings and sacrifices to the spirits of the departed.

There is no Mongolian Almanac de Gotha or Debrett's but one complete genealogical tree he found in the archives of the Sholoi Khan. It dates back 350 years and by 1905, there were 11,960 names arranged in a series of widening circles.

Mongols living in Inner Mongolia have been permitted to carry on keeping their genealogical trees but on Chinese documents they are generally obliged to use shorter sinified names like Hao or Bao. Those living in Russia, such as the Buryats switched over to taking the Russian system of patronymics, and adopted their grandfather's given name as their family name.



The genealogical record of Sholoi Khaan, one of Mongolian nobles.

The reliance on single names, even a country as small as Mongolia has created many difficulties.

'The choice is not all that big. Police records list 10,000 women called 'Goldenflower', Altan Tsetseg, and another 10,000 'Sunflowers' (Naran Tsetseg). And it can be very confusing, even in parliament we had four MPs all named Batbayar,' Serjee said.

It also helps avoid inbreeding, a problem which became noticeable in areas like the Gobi with small populations.

'It was a big problem in this area, especially in the 1970s. It was difficult to travel, let alone marry someone in another district because of the red tape. In one place around here, none of the children was ever smart enough to graduate from school, ' said Naranchimeg, a broadcaster at the Gobi Wave radio station.

Mongolia is in the midst of a major effort to issue new identity papers and restore the traditional name system. Serjee's research has identified 1,260 family and clan names for people to choose from and in his booklet, he provides a methodology for researching ancestral names. The book has maps showing where certain clans or families predominated.

Serjee discovered his real family name, Besud, by coming to the place where his parents were born and consulting elderly locals about which potential name was correct.

'There are not so many people around on the steppes so they know each other very well. Herdsmen can usually distinguish all their animals, even if they have a thousand head. They remember this sort of thing very well,' he said.

Mrs Enkhtuya, an English teacher in Ulaanbaatar did just this and found that the herdsmen remembered her grandparents name, which is Haruul, meaning border guard.



J. Gurragchaa

'I am very proud and happy. Now I know who I am and where I came from,' she said.

Although 60 percent of Mongolians have preferred to choose to belong to Genghis Kan's clan, others have sought to found their own illustrious name like, Mongolia's first and so far only man in space.

Cosmonaut Gurragchaa, who returned to earth in 1981, has registered himself as Mr. Cosmos, ensuring that generations to come will not forget who they are and where they came from.

