



PERSPECTIVE

Colonization and decolonization of knowledge on nomadism and the Cultural Revolution in Mongolia

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This article examines how Western social evolutionary theories, scientific racism, and social Darwinism operated as colonial knowledge to marginalize Mongol nomads, labeling them as primitive or idiotic. It details how the Soviet-sponsored communist regime in Mongolia internalized this paradigm to justify the ‘cultural campaigns’ (soyolyn dortolgoon) of the mid-twentieth century, which sought to eliminate nomadic traditions in the name of progress. The paper highlights the intellectual resistance led by prominent Mongolian scholars – including Ts. Damdinsüren, B. Rinchen, Kh. Perlee, and N. Ishjamts – who challenged these Eurocentric biases. By conceptualizing ‘nomadic civilization’ and securing international recognition through UNESCO, these academics initiated a crucial decolonization of

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knowledge. The study concludes that while these efforts successfully reclaimed cultural agency, overcoming the legacy of internalized coloniality remains an ongoing challenge in contemporary Mongolia.

Introduction: Labeling Mongol Nomads as *Barbarian*, *Idiotic*, and *Orc*

In 1999, as a graduate student, I witnessed a debate on the history of Mongolian civilization between the philosopher B. Batchuluun and my father, the philologist S. Dulam.¹ Batchuluun argued that ‘nomadic civilization’ is a contradiction in terms, asserting that civilization in Mongolia only truly began with the rapid sedentarization and urbanization of the 1950s. Conversely, Dulam maintained that a distinct ‘nomadic civilization’ had flourished in Mongolia for thousands of years. Adhering to social evolutionary perspectives, Batchuluun argued that nomadic cultures, unlike their sedentary counterparts, are incapable of evolving into a true civilization, as the very concept of ‘civilization’ is etymologically and historically rooted in fixed settlement. This premise, he noted, explains why many mainstream scholars reject the phrase ‘nomadic civilization’. Dulam countered that the concept of civilization should not be constrained by its narrow etymological origins, as the term has evolved significantly to encompass diverse socio-cultural systems.

The debate opened with presentations from both scholars and lasted nearly three hours; yet, for the audience, declaring a clear winner proved difficult. In this paper, I wish to revisit this debate and contribute my own perspective. I suggest that social evolutionism, operating through the legacy of the ‘coloniality of knowledge,’ remains a primary reason why nomads have historically been dismissed as ‘uncivilized’.

In contemporary Mongolia, the tendency to view nomads, herders, and rural residents as unrefined or uncivilized persists. For instance, following the popularization of the film *The Lord of the Rings* (2001) and the *WarCraft* franchise (1994, 2016), the term *orc* (орк) – denoting a brutish, aggressive, and vulgar humanoid race – became a common derogatory slang term used to describe people from the countryside (*khöddöö*), particularly nomadic herders (Myagmarsüren, 2018). Labeling

¹ For more information see the daily newspaper *Zuuny medee*, No 107, June 3, 1999.

rural populations in this manner essentially extends old evolutionist biases through modern pop-culture metaphors that reduce nomads to barbarians.

Moreover, this pejorative framing of Mongols extends far beyond Mongolia's borders. For example, the Belgian-Dutch motorsport driver Max Verstappen used the word 'Mongol' as a slur for an idiot on two separate occasions – in Portugal in 2017 and in the United States in 2020.² Historically, variants like 'Mongol', 'mongoloid', or 'mongolism' have been weaponized to imply that someone is underdeveloped, primitive, disabled, ignorant, or simple. In 1977, the American new wave band Devo released a single titled 'Mongoloid' on an album centered on the concept of 'de-evolution' – a nod to John Langdon Down's 1866 assertion that Down syndrome represented a form of biological regression. The song satirically claims that being a 'mongoloid' is inconsequential because modern culture has de-evolved to the point where such individuals fit right in.

A more recent controversy involved a prominent French rapper. On Human Rights Day in 2021, a Scottish-based Mongolian NGO issued a formal position statement against him:

On 17th November, French rapper Aurélien Cotentin – known as Orelsan – released the song 'Odour of gasoline' as part of his album 'Civilization'. The song already has over 9 million views on YouTube and is expected to be a contender to win the World Music Awards. Orelsan has a major tour planned for 15th January 2022 in France, Switzerland, and Belgium. Orelsan repeatedly uses the word 'Mongol' pejoratively in this song. We are concerned that the French language has misappropriated the word 'Mongol' and our identity as Mongols. It is concerning to see that young people and pop culture have accepted this use as the norm. Orelsan has over 1.6 million followers and subscribers on social media. As such, he is an individual of influence. We believe that our voices must be heard, and we must educate people and end this misuse,

² For more information see https://www.espn.com/f1/story/_/id/30230063/mongolia-accuses-f1-verstappen-racist-derogatory-remarks

especially considering today – Friday, 10th December 2021 – is World Human Rights Day.³

The song's pejorative language deeply troubled the Mongol Identity NGO and the wider Mongolian community. A Mongolian colleague of mine, who studied in the United Kingdom alongside me in the early 2000s, frequently petitioned dictionary publishers to remove 'mongoloid' and 'mongolism' as terms for Down syndrome due to their racist and derogatory origins. Numerous Mongolian citizens, NGOs, and government representatives have repeatedly protested this terminology. V. Ganzorig, director of the Down Syndrome Association of Mongolia, has dedicated his efforts to urging the UN and UNESCO to completely eradicate these terms, building upon historical precedents. He notes that during the 18th World Health Assembly in Geneva in 1965, G. Tuvaan, the Minister of Health for the Mongolian People's Republic, formally raised objections to the clinical misuse of 'Mongolism' and 'Mongoloid', emphasizing their harmful connotations. Although Tuvaan's objections were recorded in the official WHO protocol, no formal resolution or recommendation was issued at the time.⁴

Continuing this resistance, Ganzorig produced the 2022 film *Trio*, a powerful campaign centered on a young Mongolian boy with Down syndrome. *Trio* screened in 17 countries across five continents, reached major international bodies such as the UN and UNESCO, and claimed 22 awards at international film festivals. The narrative follows a nomadic boy with Down syndrome who lives with his mother and must navigate profound struggles after her passing. Within the context of prevailing prejudices, the boy faces a triple stigma: he is a Mongol, a nomad, and an individual with Down syndrome – and is dismissed as 'idiotic' on all three counts. However, the film portrays him as deeply intelligent, loving, and capable. *Trio* delivers a clear message: individuals with Down syndrome are not lesser, nomads are not barbarians, and it is fundamentally wrong to conflate a genetic condition with an ethnic identity. In essence, the film works to decolonize the evolutionist academic paradigms that have long marginalized nomads, Mongols, and neurodivergent individuals alike.

³ For more information see the video on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhaeOTc51XU>.

⁴ <https://montsame.mn/en/read/331622>

In this paper, I argue that these pejorative labels are the direct byproducts of colonial knowledge structures that treat nomadism as an evolutionary dead end (Down, 1866; Galton, 1869, 1914; Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, 1926; Morgan, 1877; Weber, 1968). Under the logic of social evolutionism, it was structurally preordained that nomads and hunter-gatherers would be classified as backward, barbarian, uncivilized, irrational, or simple-minded. Accordingly, this paper examines how social evolutionism and Social Darwinism functioned as forms of colonial knowledge that catalyzed Mongolia's twentieth-century Cultural Revolution, and explores how Mongolian academics have resisted and sought to decolonize these paradigms.

Coloniality of Knowledge: Scientific Racism, Social Darwinism, and the Mongols

The trajectory of modern colonialism began in the fifteenth century with the European 'Age of Discovery', remaining a defining force in global history for centuries (Benjamin, 2007, p. xiv). By the early nineteenth century, anti-colonial resistance began to take root globally, gradually dismantling formal imperial rule – a process some historians mark as complete in 1999 when the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong to China.

However, alongside formal geopolitical occupation exists a subtler mechanism: the coloniality of knowledge. As Paul Anthony Chambers (2020) notes, the theoretical framework surrounding the coloniality of knowledge and its decolonization was pioneered by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in 1992. While Quijano did not explicitly frame his analysis of globalized power dynamics around the term 'decolonization', he demonstrated that the control and imposition of knowledge forms the bedrock of colonial power. Long before this, Michel Foucault explored the intricate relationship between power and knowledge in his 1976 lectures (Foucault, 1980), illustrating how dominant, institutionalized 'scientific' knowledge systems actively suppress local, indigenous knowledges. A prime example of such a dominant knowledge system is social and cultural evolutionism.

According to Karuna Mantena, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British anthropology – particularly the tradition influenced by Henry Maine – helped pivot British colonial ideology from a universalist ethos toward a culturalist one. Building on Mantena's work, Bentley Allan argues that sociocultural evolutionism directly shaped British colonial policy from the 1880s through the 1920s.

The core premise of this theory was that societies develop along a fixed, linear trajectory from childhood to maturity, or from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’. While sociocultural evolutionism did not necessarily lock populations into permanent biological hierarchies, it nevertheless legitimized brutal exploitation by instilling absolute confidence in European cultural and racial superiority.

A socio-cultural evolution theory, alongside Social Darwinism, quickly adapted Charles Darwin’s biological principles to human societies. One of its foremost proponents, American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, argued that human progress strictly advanced through three stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Morgan, 1877, pp. 9–13). Similarly, Edward Tylor developed a theory of cultural evolution in his 1871 work *Primitive Culture*, attributing global cultural differences entirely to varying stages of development along a single human timeline – hence his use of the singular word *culture* (Tylor, 1871, pp. 1–23).

Crucially, these early models relied on unilineal evolution: the belief that all human groups pass through an identical sequence of developmental stages, even if they progress at different speeds. Consequently, contemporary ‘primitive’ societies were viewed as living relics of the past, capturing earlier stages through which advanced societies had already transitioned.⁵ Under this unilineal logic, pastoral nomads in Mongolia were classified as stuck in the stage of ‘barbarism,’ which pseudo-scientifically validated the application of the label ‘barbarian’ to living populations.

Furthermore, the British polymath Francis Galton extended these ideas into genetics and intelligence, coining the term *eugenics* (Galton, 1883). In *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Galton argued that intellectual capacity is inherited, asserting that measurable cognitive disparities exist not only between individuals but between entire nations (Galton, 1869, 2–3). Galton later defined eugenics as the study of social controls that could physically or mentally improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations (Forrest, 1974, p. 270; Galton, 1908, p. 321). This framework institutionalized a form of ‘scientific racism’ that naturalized economic underdevelopment and political subjugation.

By the twentieth century, social Darwinism and scientific racism had spread globally, becoming dominant lenses for interpreting human development. As institutional science cemented its authority, it became a powerful tool for racializing

⁵ For Heather Long and Kelly Chakov see <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/social-evolutionism/>.

and colonizing populations. Discrimination against communities deemed ‘savage’ or ‘barbaric’ was absolved of moral wrongdoing because it carried the imprimatur of scientific consensus, despite later being exposed as pseudoscience.

Consequently, British imperial policy from the 1850s to the 1940s operated on the conviction that imperialism was a benevolent force helping to civilize colonized peoples. It followed logically that ‘civilized’ societies possessed both the right and the duty to guide ‘lower’ societies upward. Forcing communities out of ‘savagery’ or ‘barbarism’ was reclassified as a natural, benevolent historical transition rather than an act of external aggression.

Although the Mongolian people were never subjected to direct British colonialism, these Western evolutionist frameworks deeply affected how Mongols were perceived globally. As nomads, Mongols were not only relegated to the ‘barbaric’ stage of development but were frequently used as case studies in evolutionist arguments. In his 1866 paper, ‘Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots,’ English physician John Langdon Down categorized Down syndrome by matching clinical traits to racial stereotypes, famously labeling it ‘a Mongolian type of idiocy’:

For some time, I have been directed to the possibility of making a classification of the feeble-minded by arranging them around the various ethnic standards – in other words, framing a natural system to supplement the information to be derived by an inquiry into the history of the case. ... The great Mongolian family has numerous representatives, and this division within this paper calls special attention. A huge number of congenital idiots are typical Mongols. So marked is this that when placed side by side, it is difficult to believe that the specimens compared are not children of the same parents. The number of idiots who arrange themselves around the Mongolian type is so great, and they present such a close resemblance to one another in a mental power that I shall describe an idiot member of this racial division, selected from the large number that have fallen under my observation. The hair is not black, as in the real Mongol, but of a brownish colour, straight and scanty. The face is flat and broad and destitute of prominence. The cheeks are roundish and extended laterally. The eyes are obliquely placed, and the internal canthi is more than usually distant. The palpebral fis-

sure is very narrow. The forehead is wrinkled transversely from the constant assistance of the levatores palpebrarum, which derives from the occipitofrontalis muscle when the eyes open. The lips are large and thick with transverse fissures. The tongue is long, thick, and is much roughened. The nose is small. The skin has a slightly dirty yellowish tinge and is deficient in elasticity, giving the appearance of being too large for the body (Down, 1866, pp. 260–261).

Down concluded his paper by characterizing the syndrome as a form of biological ‘retrogression’ and a ‘degeneracy of mankind’ toward a lower Mongolian archetype. Regrettably, this colonial-era framework cast a long shadow over Mongolian identity in the West, as evidenced by the modern examples cited above. Following the publication of Down’s paper, the association of ‘Mongolism’ with Down syndrome became widely known among Mongolians.

Similarly, Morgan’s unilineal trajectory further entrenched the historical depiction of Mongols as ‘barbarians,’ a trope dating back to the thirteenth century. While Morgan did not single out Mongols explicitly, his criteria neatly categorized all nomadic societies under the rubric of barbarism. Over time, this global trend of ranking societies by evolutionary stages permeated Mongolia itself. In the following section, I apply the insights of Foucault and Quijano to demonstrate how Western social evolutionism, integrated with the Marxist teleology of historical stages (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist), empowered socialist authorities to dismiss traditional nomadism as ‘uncultured’ during Mongolia’s Cultural Revolution.

The Socialist Cultural Revolution: Internalizing Colonial Knowledge in Mongolia

Mongolia was never colonized by Western European empires, and if we set aside the historical framing of the Manchu Qing dynasty and the later hegemony of the Soviet Union, the country technically sits outside traditional Western colonial history.⁶ However, the *coloniality of knowledge* heavily shaped twentieth-century Mongolian politics, sparking rigorous decolonial resistance from native intellectuals.

⁶ Considering discussions on the relationship of the Manchus and Mongols in the times of the Qing Empire or the Daiching Ulus (Munkh-Erdene, 2023; Sneath, 2007), Manchus did not colonize Mongolia. The Mongolian term *manjiin kolonichlol* (colonization of the Manchu) was first

In analyzing the creation of Soviet national identities, Francine Hirsch (2000) describes how the Soviet Union enacted a civilizing mission rooted in Marxist developmental stages, a policy she terms ‘state-sponsored evolutionism’. Drawing on Hirsch’s work, Tsetsentsolmon (2021) notes that under the communist regime, ‘culture was an ideological weapon controlled by the state to measure advancement and sophistication in the Marxist evolutionary schema’ (Tsetsentsolmon, 2021, p. 34). Within this evolutionary framework, pre-revolutionary Mongolia was classified as a feudal society. In the 1930s, Soviet Orientalist B. Y. Vladimirtsov coined the term ‘nomadic feudalism’ (*kochevoi feodalizm*) to describe this specific baseline. Tsetsentsolmon (2021) further notes that thinkers in the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) subsequently felt compelled to argue that nomadism could be reconciled with modern civilization (Tsetsentsolmon, 2021, p. 91).

To systematically implement this Soviet civilizing initiative, the MPR established the first Cultural Attack Headquarters (*Soyolyn dovtolgoony shtab*) under the Ministry of Enlightenment in 1932 (The MPR, 1932, pp. 60–63; Tsetsentsolmon, 2021, p. 34). Later, to accelerate the objectives of the socialist cultural revolution (*sotsialist soyolyn kbuvisgal*), the Central Committee of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (MPRP) passed Resolution No. 249 on July 13, 1959, titled ‘*Oron dayar soyolyn dovtolgoon yaruulakh tukhai*’ (On Conducting a Cultural Attack Across the Country) (Sükhbaatar, 1967, pp. 531–536). The Central Committee followed up in 1961 with an additional resolution to sustain the campaign. The preamble to Resolution No. 249 explicitly targeted traditional ways of life, stating that the ‘political consciousness and cultural norms of our people are shallow, and reactionary, crude, and harmful attitudes alongside religious superstitions stubbornly persist in their daily lives’ (Sükhbaatar, 1967, p. 531).

By 1969, the MPRP issued Resolution No. 186, titled *Ardyn kbuvisgalyn 50 jiliin oi ugtaj oron dayar soyoljiltyn kbayer jiliin ajil zokhiokh tukhai* (On Organizing a Two-Year Culturalization Campaign Across the Country in Anticipation of the 50th

coined in Mongolia in the 20th century during the rule of Soviet socialism to justify the Soviet rule in Mongolia. In other words, it was Soviet communist knowledge. According to David Sneath (2007) and Munkh-Erdene (2023), unlike some communist historians, during the Qing period, Mongolia was not stateless. As Sneath argues, Mongols had a ‘headless state’, while Lhamsuren calls it a *taiji* government (Munkh-Erdene, 2021) (the government of nomadic nobles). In this sense, it can be considered that the Mongols were not colonized by any other forces (certainly not by the Western European Empires).

Anniversary of the People's Revolution). This decree relied heavily on the verb *soyoljuulakh*, which translates directly as 'to make cultured'.

The campaign focused heavily on public health, hygiene, and domestic cleanliness (*ariun tsever*). State mandates introduced European urban habits, such as daily cleaning of the hands, face, and teeth; sleeping on beds with sheets; and regular bathing and laundering. These routines were strictly enforced across the country's expanding school system. In rural districts, households were required to keep washbasins, soap, and clean bed linens on hand for unannounced inspections by local party cadres. Non-compliance carried the penalty of public shaming, such as being forced to display a prominent signboard painted with a pig outside one's home (Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, pp. 35–36).

While these directives sought to improve literacy, education, and sanitation by eliminating backwardness (*khotsrongui*) and uncultured behavior (*soyolgii*), they were fundamentally designed to erode traditional nomadic customs and replace them with Westernized, Soviet-approved practices. In a broader geopolitical sense, the campaign constituted an ideological and political attack on pre-revolutionary nomadic heritage and the legacy of the Chinggisid aristocracy.

The Mongolian journalist and author Tsenddoo (2015) notes that this state-led drive to eliminate 'feudal nomadic backwardness' began immediately after the 1921 revolution (see Sneath, 2007, p. 173; Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 40). He argues that the cultural attack forcibly decoupled herders from their traditional livelihoods by collectivizing private livestock (*niigemchlekh*) and re-educating 'shepherds into builders' (*khonichdyg barilgachin*). Echoing the colonial evolutionist logic, Tsenddoo concluded that the cultural attack marked an essential transition 'from culture to civilization' (*soyoloos irgenshild*). While the Cultural Revolution undoubtedly achieved success in public health and literacy, its ideological foundational premise – that nomads were inherently backward and uncivilized – was a direct consequence of internalizing Western and Soviet Marxist evolutionary theories.

Reflecting on the motivations and impacts of this period, historian Punsaldulam (2018) describes the Cultural Revolution as a systematic 'rejection of the old and the establishment of the advanced,' which cultivated what she calls an 'acquired culture' (Punsaldulam, 2018, pp. 16–17).⁷ Tsetsentsolmon (2021) notes that the ultimate goal was to construct a new 'national culture' built entirely on the

⁷ She criticized the destruction of 'tradition' by saying that the 'cultural revolution' failed to distinguish the difference between 'backwardness' and 'tradition' (Punsaldulam, 2018, p. 17).

Marxist evolutionary schema. Scholars like Stolpe (2008) have observed that this engineered transition replaced traditional values with an artificial value system.

This newly acquired culture was deployed across Mongolia to legitimize state authority, serving as visual proof that the nation was successfully mimicking the prestigious Soviet model of modernity (Tsetsentsolmon, 2021, p. 70).

Nomadic Civilization: Decolonizing Knowledge in Mongolia

Intellectual resistance against the Cultural Revolution and the political suppression of pre-revolutionary traditions emerged in Mongolia during the 1950s. Two prominent Mongolian philologists and cultural historians, Ts. Damdinsüren and B. Rinchen, led the defense of traditional heritage, spearheading an early effort to decolonize knowledge regarding Mongol nomadism.

In 1956, Damdinsüren penned an article titled ‘Let’s Preserve Cultural Heritage’ (*Soyolyn oviig khamgaalaya*), later published in a 1959 anthology (Tsetsentsolmon (2024), p. 86), which directly challenged the complete devaluation of pre-revolutionary Mongolian life:

Some people think there was only brutal culture in the pre-revolutionary period, and ‘the people’s advanced culture’ (*ardyn devshilt soyol*) spread only after the 1921 revolution. This has both correct and incorrect aspects. What is correct? Feudalist culture predominated before 1921, and only after the 1921 revolution did folk culture expel the remains of feudal culture. What is the incorrect side? In the pre-revolutionary period, feudal culture predominated but did not eradicate the folk culture. The two opposing classes of feudal society, feudal or the common people, have their literary culture representing their interests (Damdinsüren, 1959, p. 22; trans. Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 86).

Tsetsentsolmon (2024) notes that Damdinsüren intentionally adopted a measured, politically viable stance given the constraints of the communist regime, positioning himself as neither a romantic nationalist who blindly praised all feudal heritage nor a nihilist who condemned it entirely (Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 86).

Concurrently, in 1959, Rinchen published a collection of essays in Russian titled *From Our Cultural Heritage* (*Iz nashego kul’turnogo nasledia*), explicitly rejecting the

label of ‘uncultured’ (*bezkul’turnyi*) (Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 85). He argued that traditional Mongolian culture possessed a rich wealth (*bogatstvo*) inherited across generations. Rinchen openly challenged Eurocentric definitions of culture that routinely dismissed African and Asian societies, calling for the dismantling of colonial intellectual biases:

Our economists often mention that our country has more livestock per capita than any other country. According to this standard, Mongolian people (*araly*) could establish another record with the number of manuscripts per capita, which would be a fact to disprove the previous notions of illiteracy (*negramotnost’*) or ‘unculturedness’ (*bezkul’tur’e*) of Mongolian people (*narod*) vulgarizing the history of oriental culture. These days, African patriots respond to the colonist’s conception of the uncultured black with their books about the greatness (*velichie*) and glory (*slava*) of Africa. Similarly, Uzbek and Tajik scholars who grew up under Soviet rule started to work hard to explore their centuries-old cultural treasures. It is crucial for all Mongolists, either Mongolian or foreign, to study the cultural heritage of our people (Rinchen, 1959, p. 42; trans. Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 85).

Unlike Damdinsüren’s internal class-based compromise, Rinchen explicitly framed the denigration of Mongolian culture as a global colonial issue, drawing direct parallels to anti-colonial movements in Africa and Central Asia.

Following their example, subsequent generations of Mongolian scholars continued to deconstruct these colonial paradigms. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, archaeologist Kh. Perlee (2012) and historian N. Ishjamts became key figures in legitimizing the academic validity of ‘nomadic civilization’. Perlee focused on the historical depth of ancient Mongolian nomads for his Candidate of Science (1959) and Doctor of Science (1978) degrees, writing a dissertation titled *Some Issues of the History of Nomadic Civilization of Ancient Mongols*. He critiqued the historiographical tendency to view nomads purely through the lens of their relations with Chinese dynasties, arguing that Central Asian nomadism deserved recognition as an independent, foundational global civilization.

Ishjamts likewise condemned the marginalization of pastoral societies and the persistent stereotype of the uncultured nomad (Ishjamts, 1975):

N. Ishjamts criticizes ethnocentrism in Chinese historical records, describing China as ‘cultured’, ‘humane’, and ‘peaceful’, whereas nomads are ‘fierce’, ‘brutal’, and ‘blood-and-guts’. N. Ishjamts defines the culture of nomadic pastoralist countries as a ‘civilization of nomads’ (*nüüdelchdiin soyol irgenshil*) or a ‘mobility civilization’ (*nüüdel irgenshil*). He further legitimates the deep tradition of ‘nomadic civilization’ that consists of ‘nomadic culture’ (*nüüdliin soyol*) with the predomination of nomadic husbandry and ‘nomadic civilization’ (*nüüdel irgenshil*), which had literacy. N. Ishjamts claims that ‘Mongolian nomadic civilization had been chang[ing] for the preceding 70 years’ and a new developmental era had started with the democracy’ (Ishjamts, 1993, p. 221; Tsetsentsolmon, 2021, p. 92).

The deliberate assertion of a ‘nomadic civilization’ functioned as a direct counter-narrative to the stigma of being ‘uncivilized’ (Tsetsentsolmon, 2014, p. 422). The nomadic lifestyle was reclaimed as an essential, positive pillar of Mongolian identity. Over the subsequent decades, scholars like N. Khavkh (1995) and S. Dulam (2013) expanded this theoretical framework. Since the 2000s, researchers including Sneath (2007), Bumochir (2014), Tsetsentsolmon (2021; 2014), Punsaldulam (2018), and Munkh-Erdene (2023) have further advanced the decolonization of nomadic knowledge in contemporary Mongolia.

These intellectual efforts culminated in international institutional recognition, spearheaded by UNESCO. In November 1966, UNESCO launched a pilot project dedicated to the study of Central Asia. In 1972, Kh. Tserev, Secretary of Mongolia’s National Commission for UNESCO and Vice President of the MPR Academy of Sciences, attended a planning meeting in Paris and proposed a new research theme: ‘The Role of Nomadic Peoples in the Civilizations of Central Asia’. As UNESCO representative V. Turin noted, the project aimed to re-evaluate regional history, counter Eurocentric and neo-colonial analytical concepts, and foster intercultural humanism (Bira & Luvsandendev, 1974, p. 282; Tsetsentsolmon, 2024, p. 94). This initiative led to a landmark international UNESCO symposium held in Ulaanbaatar in 1974.

The collaboration between the Mongolian government and UNESCO eventually laid the groundwork for a permanent institutional presence. On September 16, 1998, as an offshoot of its landmark Silk Roads Project, UNESCO co-founded the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations (IISNC)

through an accord signed by Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Indonesia. Since its inception, the IISNC has operated under UNESCO auspices as a leading global academic anchor for decolonizing the history of nomadic Central Asia.

The formal validation of ‘nomadic civilization’ stands as a key historical example of intellectual liberation from colonial paradigms. While terms like ‘the colonization of knowledge’ were not explicitly used by early pioneers, it is clear that twentieth-century Mongolian scientists recognized and actively combated the flawed, eurocentric biases that underpinned modern colonial thought.

Conclusion

Although Mongolia escaped formal Western territorial colonization, its intellectual landscape was deeply affected by colonial knowledge structures. This internalization led many Mongolians to devalue their own heritage. The premise that nomadic civilization is an oxymoron – or that traditional lifestyles are inherently backward and uncultured – took firm root during the mid-twentieth century. Despite persistent resistance from native scholars, this bias still lingers today among certain researchers and commentators who continue to treat obsolete colonial-era evolutionist hierarchies as objective scientific truth.

Knowledge is the primary catalyst for shaping public opinion and collective memory. As the legacy of the Cultural Revolution demonstrates, deeply flawed or ideologically driven knowledge structures can warp a society’s self-image. When a nation loses its intellectual immunity to colonial paradigms, it risks losing the ability to appreciate its own cultural values, trading its heritage for an estranged, rootless ‘acquired culture’.

This article has touched upon only a few dimensions of the Cultural Revolution and the reclamation of nomadic civilization. The legacy of colonial knowledge continues to distort many other facets of Mongolian heritage – propagating biases that traditional folk art is not true art, Indigenous medicine is not science, Shamanism is not a legitimate religion, and nomadic empires were not true states. Thoroughly mapping and dismantling the role of these inherited biases remains an essential task for contemporary scholarship.

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