

# Is ethnocentrism adaptive?

## An ethnographic analysis

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**Abstract:** An ethnographic analysis of two neighboring ethnic groups, their differences, and their mutual perceptions gives an existence proof that: (1) neighboring communities with an almost identical way of life nevertheless develop quite different interactional norms; (2) these entail significant costs for inter-ethnic interaction; (3) the norms of the 'other' are commonly perceived as moral failures (ethnocentrism). Ethnocentrism may serve an adaptive function: steering behavior towards co-ethnics.

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**ethnocentrism:** the feeling that one's group has a mode of living, values, and patterns of adaptation that are superior to those of other groups. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (2000:12933)

### I. Introduction

The is essay is about 'ethnocentrism' as defined above and not about the 'ethnocentric syndrome' (Levine & Campbell 1971; Brown 2003). The latter's definition includes many things beside ethnocentrism, and the causal relations between them are poorly understood (so perhaps best not to lump them).

‘Ethnocentrism’ is passing negative moral judgments on how ethnic others organize their lives. It is not new. Herodotus long ago concluded that all peoples were “convinced that their own usages far surpass those of all others” (quoted in Brown 2003). Much preferable, from a humanist perspective, is the cosmopolitan alternative: tolerantly perceiving ethnic diversity as so many possible arrangements of a human life. In order to better promote such tolerance, we must understand better the object of our appeals: ethnocentric humans. So I ask the question: did natural selection favor a susceptibility to convince ourselves that our own culture is morally superior? To answer ‘yes,’ properly, is to make the case that ethnocentrism promotes behaviors having a positive impact on reproductive success (synonymous with ‘favored by natural selection’). This is the meaning of ‘adaptive’ in my title and in the evolutionary literature (any connotations of ‘adaptive’ as promoting happiness, harmony, etc. should be left at the door; they are not the subject of this essay).

Ideas, habits, or beliefs which regulate social behaviors between humans are ‘interactional norms’—“the rules of the game” as Barth (1969, 1994) called them. Among them are the mutual expectations of host and guest, reasons for feeling ashamed, beliefs about proper child-rearing, notions of the appropriate reaction to insult, what constitutes an insult, etc., etc... Rather than distributed at random, such norms come in relatively tight, mutually coherent, and stable clusters because humans differentiate into distinct local populations that reproduce information in relatively stable and homeostatic fashion. This is a predictable consequence of the social learning biases and social-control mechanisms which govern the acquisition of bits of culture (memes) from one generation to the next (Barth 1994; Boyd & Richerson 1985; Henrich & Boyd 1998; Gil-White 2001; Henrich & Gil-White 2001; McElreath et al. 2002). Social labels have emerged to mark the boundaries where the most abrupt and most strongly correlated changes in interactional norms occur—these are commonly referred to as ‘ethnic’ labels.

It is true that not all self-identifying ethnies have a clearly distinctive culture to match, and that only the existence of an ethnic identity determines—in the final analysis—whether we have an ethnie or not (Barth 1969 is the locus classicus for this now-widely-accepted subjectivist perspective). However, even in such cases members of an ethnie *believe themselves* to be culturally particular, which in turn is due to the fact

that important institutions and interactional norms usually do distinguish an ethnies. Though this is often forgotten, the argument that ethnic boundaries typically *do* coincide with particular interactional norms also has Barth 1969 for locus classicus (Barth 1994 reiterates the point). It is the stability of the association of an ethnic identity with a relatively homeostatic and relatively homogenous set of interactional norms that I take as my basic premise and point of departure.

None of this contradicts the rather platitudinous and universally accepted truth that ‘ethnies are constructed.’ But because ‘constructivism’ is commonly confused with other positions (that ethnies are allegedly radically unstable, ‘situational,’ ‘instrumentally determined,’ a matter of individual choice, etc.) a contradiction may be perceived. There is no space to correct such confusions here, the resolution of which this essay needs to take for granted, but I have reviewed the relevant literatures and given article-length treatments of such problems elsewhere (Gil-White 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

If ethnocentrism is adaptive, the evidence is in how it affects the structure of costs and benefits when people behave in an environment with clusters of intercorrelated norms. Any social interaction may be modeled as a ‘game’ with payoffs to the ‘players’ dependent on the ‘strategies’ followed by each participant in the context of others’ strategies. By accounting the payoffs as costs and benefits to reproductive success, we can determine whether particular strategies are likely to be favored or disfavored by natural selection (see Maynard-Smith 1982). Strategies pursued in all kinds of social ‘games’ will have an impact on reproductive success because humans are highly interdependent (for a review of the theoretical literature on human ultrasociality see Gil-White & Richerson 2002).

Almost any social interaction must solve the ‘matching’ or ‘coordination’ problem, because any interdependent interaction is at risk of failure if participants have different assumptions and expectations (even assuming good will on all sides). For example, when my counterpart and I speak different languages, we cannot easily communicate (and therefore cooperate). McElreath et al. (2002) have modeled such problems formally and shown that, given interactional norm differences, natural selection favors discrimination, and also the signaling of membership in a particular normative

community (so as to facilitate the discriminations). Given that ethnies are relatively coherent, homogenous, and stable clusters of interactional norms, those who prefer interacting with *coethnics* will be picking better-matched counterparts, and thus will have higher reproductive success on average.

But what proximate psychological mechanism gets a person to prefer her coethnics? Ethnocentrism, and not by accident, but by design. In this paper I will defend the following: 1) that even neighboring ethnies will develop important cultural differences; 2) that these differences impose significant costs; and 3) that the other community's norms are judged as moral deficiencies, rather than merely different, all of which is consistent with the argument that ethnocentrism plays a functional role in promoting ideally matched interactions.

## **II. Setting**

For a total of 14 months, I have studied the locality of Bulgan Sum, in Hovd Province, Republic of Mongolia, on the international border with China (Xinjiang). I lived and worked mainly among the Torguud but also spending some time among the local Kazakh, who practice a very similar nomadic pastoral lifestyle, and who are fluent in Mongolian. My fieldwork with the Kazakhs began when I had already acquired reasonable fluency in Mongolian (local Kazakhs are all fluent in Mongolian), so the increased rate of data collection, plus coming already with a mountain of Torguud ethnographic observations for comparison, somewhat compensated for my shorter stay with the Kazakhs.

Although I had a main host family, a local tradition compelled many to host me for a few days (in exchange for photographs) and this turned me into a nomad among nomads, traveling every few days by horseback to a new temporary abode. The added discomforts were more than offset by the dramatic exposure to a very large set of domestic observations in independent households, which deepened the statistical breadth of my ethnographic experience.

The district 'center', Bulgan, is a town that serves as a focal point for the nomadic pastoralists who roam the district, and it is also their legitimate point of contact with state

structures, such as they are. During the fall, winter, and spring months, nomads are relatively close to town but in the summer they migrate to the highland forest-steppe atop the Altai range. Few herders (15% at most) are true nomads, migrating to winter grounds (in the low hill-country or in the sands of the true desert) and even shifting location during the winter season. However, even these have a 'winter' property, a plot of land to which they own title with full property rights, which is sometimes equipped with a small bunker used for storage, and always with a corral to protect the animals from winter conditions and to store fodder collected in late August/September. These titled pieces of land are very small and, apart from these, the wilderness is ownerless. Most herders spend the winter in the floodplain and do not migrate during this time. On the whole Torguuds and Kazakhs are territorially segregated, even if the territories are contiguous (the Kazakh herd to the East of Bulgan, and the Torguuds to the West).

Bulgan Sum might seem like the wrong place to go fishing for strong normative differences between neighboring ethnies. Torguuds and Kazakhs practice an almost identical way of life: they both herd goats, sheep, cattle, horses, and camels, and in the same proportions; they both live in *ger* (Turko-Mongolian tent; *yurt* in English); and they inhabit the same environment. In addition, both ethnies share cultural ancestry.

The Turkic Kazakhs are the descendants of nomadic horsemen who helped Genghis Khan sweep across Central Asia and much of Russia in the thirteenth century...Although their Turkic and Mongolian ancestors roamed the Central Asiatic steppes for hundreds of years, the Kazakhs did not acquire a distinct identity until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries...—Weekes (1984:194)

Moreover, Both Torguud Mongols and Kazakhs have roamed this general area (Jungaria, and its environs), for centuries. In fact, a good portion of the Torguud Mongols immigrated to Bulgan Cum from Jungaria proper, across the Chinese border, and all of the local Kazakhs came to Bulgan Cum from next-door Jungaria as well. For these reasons, as we shall see, this fieldsite offers a powerful existence proof for the argument that physical environments and their associated ecological adaptations do not easily constrain normative culture (*contra* Tooby & Cosmides 1992).

My argument is that biases to produce ethnocentrism were selected for because they adaptively steer individuals away from easily mis-coordinated—and therefore costly—interactions with out-group ethnics. First I demonstrate the premise: despite being neighbors with virtually identical economic/ecological adaptation, Torguuds and Kazakhs have quite different norms. Secondly, I argue that such norm differences result in significant costs for inter-ethnic interactions. I am neither exhaustive nor systematic—merely *dramatic*. No normative differences resulting from religious differences are considered.

### III. A catalogue of cultural differences

#### A. Explicit norms

I shall begin with norms that are at, or relatively close to, the extreme of being perfectly explicit rules that people are consciously aware of *as rules*, and which they therefore have no trouble remarking upon and talking about.

**Leaving the parental home.** Among the Torguuds, every child that marries, male or female, inherits some animals and sets up a new *ger* (yurt—Central Asian tent). Post-marital residence is ad-hoc: a newly married herder may migrate with his father, his father-in-law, a brother or brother-in-law, or a friend. No such arrangement need be stable. Kazakhs, on the other hand, practice patrilocal residence. A man will live with little privacy in his father's *ger*, in fact, until the first child is born, upon which he inherits some animals and sets up his own abode (he nevertheless migrates with his father and they manage the joint herds in common). The youngest son, who never moves out of his father's *ger*, is the exception. He is compensated for this inconvenience by inheriting all of his father's accumulated and remaining property when the old man dies, including his *ger*. This arrangement is called 'stem-inheritance.' The youngest Torguud son, on the other hand, sets up his own independent *ger* immediately, and does not have a disproportionate claim to his father's property when the old man dies.

**Courtship and marriage.** Kazakhs recognize three different marriage processes. In the ‘formal proposal’ marriage the boy’s father makes an initial foray, followed by many ritual niceties that the earlier scouting expedition almost guarantees to be a foregone conclusion. The ritual back and forth ends with a trip by the boy to announce his intention to take the girl before the wedding date. The FOB may still refuse his daughter’s hand at this late date, but if he gives his expected final blessing then a posse from the boy’s side (the boy and his mother, plus any kind of elder male, but not the father) go over to get the girl on the wedding day. They will bring a horse for the girl’s family. If the girl’s dad gets offended on this day because the horse is of low quality or some other slight, he will not refuse his daughter’s hand, but he will not give it on that day and another day is set. After this the wedding may take place.

If the ‘formal proposal’ fails, a boy could go to plan B, and this is the second kind of marriage, which we may call ‘tolerated theft’. If the two lovers are agreed, then on the appointed night and hour the boy stops his horse or jeep at some distance and will then steal up to the girl (who must be ready outside of her home) and whisk her away, bringing her into his father’s *ger*. This, everybody agrees, establishes an irreversible *fait accompli*. The boy’s dad and some elder males of the boy’s then immediately go see the FOB. The boy’s father places his hat at the feet of his counterpart and confesses that his family has wronged him by stealing his daughter. The girl’s dad then picks up the hat, hands it back, and the boy’s representatives depart. A succession of ritual niceties similar to the above then take place and the marriage is finally consummated.

The third kind of marriage may be called ‘real theft’. In this case the *fait accompli* of having the girl enter the boy’s father’s *ger* after being abducted requires taking the girl against her will. The boy will stalk the girl with a few of his friends, and together they surprise and subdue her at an opportune moment, force her into a jeep, and take her to his father’s home. Once she has been taken inside, however, everybody agrees that there is no reverse course, and they are wedded.

For Torguuds there is only one process. The two young lovers must both agree, and the FOB must give his permission. As with the formal Kazakh process, by the time the *cüi tavix*—the asking ceremony—takes place, there has been an understanding. At

this ceremony the FOB and other male representatives of the girl's (these can be any male elders) are honored and feasted with much pomp at the boy's father's *ger*. There is much ceremonial presentation and drinking of vodka and *shimiin arxi*, a spirit made from fermented milk (both of which are absent from the Kazakh ceremony because at such occasions they will observe the Islamic prohibition against drinking alcohol), as well as milk and tea. Throughout the ceremony the ritual status of the asking party is very low and they are very obsequious to the girl's representatives. Neither the boy nor the girl are present.

Later the father of the boy must make a separate visit to the girl's father's *ger* to plead for a date. Several such trips will be made if the father of the girl is recalcitrant, and of course obsequiousness and deference will be extracted from the father of the boy. After the date is set, the boy and girl are married.

The premarital relationship is also different for Kazakhs and Torguuds. In practice both Torguuds and Kazakhs are for the most part animist, but Torguuds are nominally Tibetan Buddhists, and Kazakhs are Muslims for whom the prohibition against premarital sex is important (for males *and* females; I could find no evidence of a 'double standard'). Torguuds have very liberal attitudes towards sex, their main concern being that marriage be in the cards so that no shame will befall a fatherless child. Given an imminent marriage nobody seems to care enough to admonish a young couple not to have sex. Many think it is quite natural and have no problem with it, while others do show a weak ambivalence and may claim that sexual mores have been relaxed in recent times. It is not uncommon for the young unmarried lovers to sleep together in the girl's father's *ger*, and my observations suggest that by the time the wedding takes place, at least half of all couples already have their first child.

**Adoption.** A Kazakh grandfather will adopt one or two of his grandchildren from among his sons, and the decision is his alone. These adoptees are never told they have been adopted, but grow up in close proximity to their birth parents due to Kazakh patrilocality. In my view this makes it tough on the birth parents, especially mothers, whose eyes are prone to sigh after the child.

Among the Torguud, on the other hand, adoptions take place between close friends or family members. It is always an altruistic gesture: a child is given to a couple who has been unable to bear a child. These families then undertake to migrate far from each other to make it easier on the parents who gave the child away, and also to keep knowledge of the adoption from the child. However, a few years later, when the child has already formed a strong bond with the adoptive parents, and is also capable of understanding such things (between 10 and 15 years of age), he or she will be told who the biological parents are and will be allowed to develop bonds with the biological family. One of my best informants, Batmaraa, is a middle-aged man who was adopted in this manner, and he has warm and close relationships with both his families.

**Naming prohibitions.** These obtain between certain kin categories, and require that people literally refrain from pronouncing the name of certain others. Circumlocutions are used when addressing someone whose name is forbidden.

The naming prohibitions of Torguuds and Kazakhs are curiously the inverse of each other. Among the Torguud some may not pronounce the name of women who marry into the family. For example, you may not pronounce the *bergen's* name (an older brother's wife), and will address her as '*bergen*'. Your wife will also observe this prohibition, as will your children. The principle generalizes to other members of the patriline into which the woman married. Thus, for example, even a second-cousin in that patriline will refer to her as *Bergen*. In fact I even observed a man address his wife's patrilineal second-cousin's mother as *Bergen*—so the principle is quite productive and will apply even to 'honorary' members of the patriline.

Among the Kazakh it is exactly the reverse. It is the woman who marries into a family who has naming constraints put *on her*. Forbidden are the names of her husbands brothers or sisters, and of her husband's sister's husband, who will be simply *akh*, *egch*, or *diüü* (respectively, 'older brother', 'older sister', and 'younger sibling'). Forbidden also are the names of her husband's older brother's children, and the name of an older *ber* (a daughter-in-law, like herself, who is older). The principle generalizes to other men in her husband's patriline (e.g. the husband's patrilineal cousins, the husband's grandfather, etc.).

**Joking relationships.** A Kazakh is supposed to tease his *jezdee*, or his older sister's husband (more generally, a man who takes for wife a female senior in ego's patriline). The joking relationship is reciprocal, so a Kazakh will tease back his *baldiz*—his wife's younger brother. Much of the teasing onus is on the *baldiz* because irreverence towards an elder is what accounts for so much of the fun. Other relationship categories, such as the *baz* (men who have married sisters), may sustain a fair amount of teasing, but none is institutionalized to this degree. The relationship between the *xayna aga* and the *küiyeu* (that is, between the older brother of one's wife and oneself) is all to the contrary very solemn and respectful. One would never dare tease such a man. Torguuds recognize the same relationship categories (the *jezdee* is, in Mongolian, the *xürgen ax*, and the *baldiz* is the *xür düü*) but there is no institutionalized joking relationship for any of them. There is only solemnity towards elders among Torguuds.

**Differences in diet.** Despite herding the same five species of animals, and being limited to simple culinary traditions, eating among the Kazakhs is nevertheless a strikingly different experience—in the palate, in the belly, and in one's bowel movements—from eating among the Torguud. I restrict myself here to those marked contrasts which cannot be attributed to religious differences.

Kazakh food is tasty, but it comes at a price. Morning and midday meals involve much heavily salted or sweetened butter, with bread and tea. Both Kazakhs and Torguuds add about a third of milk (a combination of cow's and goat's milk) to their tea, and some salt. However, Kazakh tea is brewed so long that it takes on a dark, chocolate color and literally gallops with caffeine. In eleven months of fieldwork, my stomach made me proud by never giving the slightest complaint, which provoked raptures of astonishment and praise. However, my first encounter with Kazakh tea caused massive heartburn.

Torguud tea is tasty, refreshing, and mild, such that neophytes may drink copiously. Torguuds are fastidious about keeping tea fragments out of the cup, and to this end use a colander when serving. Kazakhs don't bother, and one usually has to stop and leave some beverage in the cup because to drink anymore is to eat the bitter debris of tea fragments at the bottom. Kazakhs will also leave the tea in the idle kettle, on the hot stove, just as Americans leave the coffee pot heating, achieving the same bitter result that

Americans do. On the plus side, Kazakh bread and butter in the morning and midday are positively delicious compared to the typical fare in a Torguud household.

In the evening Kazakhs eat meat. And so much of it! At least one and a half times as much as Torguuds do. They very often eat not fresh meat, but a heavily salted variety (called *khataamal* in Mongolian), aged for almost an entire year (at big celebrations, however, animals are invariably slaughtered for the purpose and fresh boiled meat is eaten then). The Kazakh *khataamal* is literally drenched in salt and the fat is crystalline and transparent. The taste is good but so strong that, given a choice, I never would have eaten more than two or three pieces (but I never had a choice). When done eating meat, Kazakhs wash it down with a bowl or two of *surpa*, which is a wholesome greasy meat broth that Torguuds never eat. Kazakhs eat more yoghurt, and their version is denser than the more liquid Torguud fare.

Torguuds enjoy fresh-boiled meat the most. Like Kazakhs, Torguuds cure some meat for later consumption but not with Kazakh artistry. Strips of meat are simply left to wither and desiccate, until they become so hard that the only way to consume them is to maul them with the blunt side of an ax into little shreds, at which point they are sprinkled into a boiling broth and eaten with noodles. These broths are not interesting, but soy sauce or hot sauce will make them passable. Their great advantage is in being light on the stomach. Torguuds eat considerable quantities of wheat noodles and bread (from purchased wheat flour). I lack exact measurements but believe grain products to constitute by far the largest part of the Torguud diet both by weight and volume.

### **Costs from different explicit norms**

Can we say that the above differences would make interethnic interactions costly? For starters, imagine an interethnic marriage. Since the rules and traditions involving courtship, the asking of a bride's hand, and the marriage ceremonies are all different, there are a myriad opportunities for members of one ethnies to get things 'wrong' from the perspective of the other, causing insult. Moreover, if a Kazakh takes a Torguud wife, he would be bringing her into his father's *ger*. This is probably awkward for any new wife but especially so for one whose culture has not prepared her for the experience.

The joking relationships are another clear area of trouble. If a Torguud man takes a Kazakh for wife, his Kazakh *baldiz* (sister's younger brother) may feel compelled to treat him in an irreverent manner that is neither expected nor condoned in a Torguud *khür düü* (the equivalent relationship). But the Torguud, as *jezdee* (older sister's husband) will be expected by Kazakhs to be a good sport. Any taking of offense would be perceived by Kazakhs as a faux pas. Conversely, a Kazakh who married a Torguud man's older sister, becoming his *khürgen akh* (the equivalent of the *jezdee*) might take unexpected liberties with his *khür düü* and hurt his feelings, which could lead to wider ramifications.

The differences in diet also present difficulties. Torguuds seemed to have the same difficulties I did with Kazakh food, and they would often point this out to me. It is thus harder for a Torguud to show proper appreciation as an honored guest (by consuming large quantities of food) if the host is Kazakh, and this can again cause offense. Kazakhs may have converse difficulties with Torguud food. Beyond this, consider that the Torguud wife of a Kazakh will underperform given all of the differences in the culinary traditions, and also in the 'theater' of hosting interactions. She would also be incapable of producing the art (tapestries and rugs) that Kazakhs proudly display in their *gers*, for the Torguuds make a different kind of rug and do not make tapestries. This would be embarrassing to the husband and would cause loss of status.

Given that the naming prohibitions are the inverse of each other, a woman who married into a Mongol household would be tempted to refrain from using the names of all sorts of people whose names she may use. The bigger problem, however, would be for the Torguud bride of a Kazakh, who would feel tempted to use the prohibited names of all sorts of people, which would be frowned upon.

Finally, consider that the Torguud wife of a Kazakh would be scandalized to find that her father-in-law will adopt one of her children on a whim. Kazakh women do not find this easy, but at least they grow up expecting it, and it does not affect their personal opinion of the father-in-law, or their behavior towards him.

## B. Implicit Norms

These are norms that informants are either completely unaware of, or for which they have some awareness but never in the form of an explicit declarative statement akin to a law or code. Collectively, these are sometimes referred to as ‘ethos.’ I restrict myself to a relatively extended treatment of the most dramatic implicit difference between Torguuds and Kazakhs—honor, or the protection of one’s social face (and associated norms of politeness).

Teasing is a highly gendered male activity in either community, but much more highly valued among Kazakhs, for whom laughter dominates a large proportion of all interaction. Torguuds tend to consider excessive teasing a form of impoliteness, and, coming from a junior, disrespect. Whereas it is not uncommon for Torguuds to sit in near or total silence Kazakhs appear to find this impossible. Torguuds are in general reserved and their use of humor will favor innocent jokes (if jokes are used) rather than teasing as a way of building a relationship. In particular, the behavior of older Torguuds is austere and courteous, whereas Kazakh older men delight in much loud and indecent teasing, and in some categories of relationship (especially that between *jezdee* and *baldiz*) they will not merely tolerate but positively delight in all sorts of abuse from their juniors. There are individual variations, of course, and one can find big teasers among the Torguud and reserved people among the Kazakhs. But even shy male Kazakhs (and the women) will delight in the public exploits of their more extroverted friends, and will lend themselves as ‘straight men’ for many an improvised routine. I must note, however, that even the Torguud appear quite far from having a ‘culture of honor’ as described by Nisbett & Cohen (1996); they are more polite and more easily offended than Kazakhs, but they hardly approximate the attitudes of white Southerners in the US (Gil-White, forthcoming).

Among Torguuds, those who take liberties with the public ‘face’ of others are a ‘big tease’ (*togloomch*) or ‘misbehaved’ (*sakhilakhgüi*) and such behavior is not indulged in all contexts. Among Kazakhs such people are more often *sakhuu* or ‘boastful’ (men compete for the title—it is only ironically derogatory). When describing the activity, Torguuds are more likely than Kazakhs to disapprovingly characterize it with the verb

*durumjilakh* (to mock), as opposed to the Kazakhs, who will call it *toglokh* (to play), or else will ironically approve of *durumjilakh*. Indeed, my rapport with the Kazakhs took an unambiguous quantum leap forward when they discovered that I am ‘boastful,’ which immediately set off an exhausting contest to find out who could tease with me the hardest. The other side of the coin of the Kazakh ethos is that those who *get* teased may not take offense—they must be ‘good sports.’ It thus endeared me to Kazakhs that I enjoyed getting teased, and also had a generous supply of hearty comebacks. Among Torguuds my ‘big tease’ personality does not always work to my advantage, and building rapport requires me to moderate my preferred form of interaction.

Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, a well-chosen anecdote is worth a thousand explanations. Here is one that dramatically illustrates the extremity of the Kazakh ethos which makes clear the real dangers inherent in interethnic interaction.

Because I began my work among Kazakhs after about six months of living with the Torguuds, I came to my new community with attitudes towards elders and strangers, and towards the appropriateness of public teasing, that had moved considerably in the direction of Torguud norms. My new ethos was now fairly automatic rather than deliberate, but I was soon to become quite aware of it. The Kazakh style initially shocked me as an affront with intent to offend, especially because it happened from the very beginning and with absolutely no warning.

At the beginning of my story, I was attending the second day of a two-day Kazakh *toi*. These are communal celebrations where there is eating, wrestling, horse racing, praying, and a general good time. My Kazakh host on that day was a young man by the name of Khurmet. As in the old circus act, where an impossible number of clowns disappears into a VW beetle, Khurmet hammered a spectacular amount of grunting human flesh into his jeep. But why? After just one bone-crushing mile, we were already there, and I could not help thinking bitterly that we should have walked. If a ride is available (horse or jeep) no Kazakh or Mongol ever walks.

Khurmet and I approached a large crowd seated on the ground in a large circle, inside which the wrestling would soon begin. Khurmet then went about greeting and catching up with friends. I felt a tug on my arm and found myself looking down at a

short, stocky man in his forties who sported a generous beard that exaggerated his already very round head (even for these parts). The day before this man had seemed rather abrupt and impolite to me, and now he proceeded without any preamble whatsoever to accost me in fluent Mongolian,

“Hey! Where the hell are the photos that you took yesterday?”

“Ah...they have not been developed yet.”

“Why have you not developed them?”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“When are you going to give us the photos?”

“When I get home I will develop them, and then I will send them here.”

“Ah! You are *bad!*” And he stuck his pinkie out forcefully in my direction.

There is a five-fingered system of evaluation in these parts, shared by both Mongols and Kazakhs. An upright thumb is ‘very good’ or ‘the best,’ and at the other extreme, the pinky means ‘the worst.’ The remaining fingers express the other points on the continuum. So I was told that I was *the worst* by someone I had never even been introduced to, when I rather saw myself more in the capacity of honored guest come from far away. I wanted to retaliate with my middle finger but, arbitrary cultural differences being what they are, all I would have said is: ‘average.’

“Fine. I’m leaving!” I decided to take offense. By this time I had already suffered what I considered to be several days of completely unwarranted Kazakh impoliteness and hostility, and my patience was wearing dangerously thin. So I began to storm away indignantly but, as luck would have it, just as soon a much nicer man seized my left arm and gently said, “No, no.”

Without releasing me, he scolded the first guy in Kazakh, then herded me into the large circle. A *sirmakh* (rug) was laid on the ground and I was given the best seat in the house. A millisecond later, Ibrakhim, one of my favorite people, came out of nowhere and plunked himself down to my left. Things were looking much better now. I was with my friend Ibrakhim, and I was being treated like an honored guest. To the left of

Ibrakhim sat this other man with a very big, muscular face sporting a beard, and who had seemed nice enough the day before. Since they had seen much wrestling in their time, but not too many Americans, I missed most of the action happening right in front of me while I chatted with the three of them.

When I was done drinking my bowl of *airag*, I hesitated for a second and decided to put the bowl down on the *sirmakh* between my crotch and my crossed legs. It did not seem right, but the alternative was to place the bowl on the carpet of excrement that began where the *sirmakh* ended, and that did not seem right either. As usual, my Western intuitions led me straight into a norm violation. When the bearded man with the muscular head noticed what I had done, he pointed to my emptied bowl of *airag* and, with a fiercely hostile face, scolded,

“You may not do that! That is against the *ēc!* [the body of traditions, pronounced ‘yos’]”

“I didn’t know. Please forgive me.”

“This time I will forgive you, but the second time I will not.” His act was good, he looked like a real tough guy. I was unsure if it was or not theater, but given the context of how he and I had come to be together on this *sirmakh*, I decided in that split second to treat him as a teaser and give some back.

“Of course, of course” I replied with a perfect deadpan, looking straight into his eyes—a model of *gravitas*. “The second time you *must not* forgive me. No.”

He cracked. A broad smile broke out all over his face and I knew instantly that I had been right. But I was still annoyed that he would permit himself liberties such as no Torguud ever would—especially with a foreigner. To punish him, I went into heavy teasing mode and made him the butt of every single joke I made. For example, when Ibrakhim asked me if he could have one round of *airag* in my bowl, I said,

“Well, I think that’s okay, but you better ask *this* guy first! He really knows the *ēc!*”

The guy I was supposedly punishing loved every minute of it, and there was an explosion of laughter every time I pulled one of these.

The wrestling ended with Ibrakhim's younger brother, Nurai, making champ, and after that it was time to eat. We all went into the large Kazakh *ger* and sat on the floor in circular groups of five or six, leaving a space in the middle for the large communal pot that would soon occupy the center of each. There were about 15 such groups inside the very large Kazakh tent. The men were segregated from the women, and the old from the young. The circle I was seated in included the nice man who had saved me from mister 'gimme-my-photographs', but he could no longer be too friendly or else risk looking like a wimp in a circle of macho guys all of whom were now going on about me in Kazakh and laughing among themselves. I was very ill-at-ease because nobody was saying anything to me directly (except to criticize and correct the way I was sitting even though given the crunch it was well-nigh impossible for me to collapse myself into a proper lotus). Every time they laughed conspiratorially about me I had the natural reaction that anybody in this sort of situation will have: I smiled uncomfortably. To their way of judging, however, I was not uncomfortable enough, and one of them immediately sought to correct that by accosting me with a hostile expression and switching to Mongolian,

“Can you understand Kazakh?”

“No.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Just...because.”

“You are lying! You can understand Kazakh. Otherwise, why are you smiling?”

I could feel myself becoming a high-school geek again. Meekly, I replied, “I am a bit uncomfortable, you guys are laughing, so I smile.”

Most of them nodded as if this reasonably matched their intuitions, and I was momentarily left alone. The big pot was brought to the center of our circle, sporting various kinds of meat, and the boiled head of a sheep. Someone asked me whether I could eat the local food (this was a test) and I replied that there was no food I could not eat, which is true to a very close approximation. Note was taken of my boast, and then we all proceeded to feast in communal fashion.

As we were eating, one of them handed me a piece of meat to consume and informed me that this was pig's meat. "Really? Oh..." And I dug into it happily as derisive laughter exploded around me. An inside joke: Muslims think pork is unclean infidel food, and will not touch it. In my nervousness and discomfort I had failed to remember that and provided evidence of the human slime from which I came. Wonderful. I felt tremendously welcome. When the pot had been almost completely emptied of food, somebody had fun by imperiously ordering me to finish everything off, explaining that nothing must remain in it (there was general mirth at this) and I simply ignored him. My temper was gnawing dangerously at its leash, and soon it would be free.

The sheep's skull had now been stripped of all meat and somebody passed it to a guy only one impolite Kazakh away from me, to my right. This latter cracked the back of the skull open with the handle of a knife and began eating the brain. After consuming about half of it, he turned to me (I knew this was going to happen) and asked me if we ate this in my country. In Mexico, where I grew up, people do eat brains, so I said,

"Yes, we do." And inside I thought: *I'm going to pass all your little tests, you stupid bastard.*

"Oh yeah? *Here,*" he said, and he handed me that horrible thing, which I already knew he was going to do. I inquired if it was okay to pick the brain with my finger, and when they said it was fine I hesitated not and emptied the head. It didn't taste bad, and it marked the first time I have literally 'picked a brain.'

To my left was a heavy-set man whose name turned out to be Makhmed, and who I was about to make famous. He was relatively old for this group (in his 40's as it turned out), but obviously young in the spirit, for he managed to be just as rude as his younger companions. Deciding it was now his turn to have fun with me, he treated me to a little lecture on how Kirukhan (a very polite Kazakh who was a friend of my Torguud host Ooshoojav, and who had never been anything but nice to me) didn't have a penis, and that this was widely known and repeated by everybody. Everybody laughed every time he made one of these gratuitous inside 'jokes' at Kirukhan's expense, which he did because he knew Kirukhan was an acquaintance of mine. This was very uncomfortable for me. We had now descended to making sexual jokes about my acquaintances. What was I

supposed to say? Not that the turn of events surprised me entirely. Kazakhs are tickled by sexual jokes in the intense manner of any sexually repressed culture. From the get go, it had been almost routine for my Kazakh hosts to playfully offer their wives for me to sleep with. Even after six months of living among the Torguuds, however, I had only met one person who would make a joke of this kind.

The topic of Kirukhan's alleged phallic shortcomings was mercifully interrupted by the arrival of *surpa*: meat broth with the occasional piece of fat or meat. But Makhmed was not about to let up, he was having too much fun. As we slurped, he pointed to a big piece of fat in his bowl, very similar to the one in mine, and imperiously explained,

“You have to finish it all. You may not leave anything in the bowl.”

There was general laughter and chuckles. I wasn't sure whether the joke was that I was being made to suffer yet another indignity, or that they thought I would think the piece of fat was too disgusting to eat (as if the sheep's brain were not already getting digested). Either way I was done. The leash snapped.

With my anger in perfect control, I slowly turned to Makhmed and suggested, with quiet venom in my voice:

“Tell you what: I am going to learn from you. I will watch what you do, and that is exactly what I will do too.” What can the danger be?, I told myself, I already ate the brain.

Everybody could see that I was striking back and this produced some surprised laughter and much interest. All eyes were on Makhmed: the tables were turned and he was now on the spot. None of this escaped the surprised Makhmed, of course. His entire body language was saying, *Huh!?! You punk! You think you can dare me?*

“Hah! Very well,” he said outloud, “But you have to do *everything* I do!”

“That is what I said.”

So he hurried up his bowl of *surpa*, slurping the big piece of fat right into his mouth as he did. I made a big theatrical show of paying close attention and did the same with my own piece of fat, emptying my bowl shortly after his. Then *he* made a big show

of asking for a refill, communicating to everybody that he would drink *surpa* until I cried uncle. So that's the big challenge...I thought incredulously...we are going to sip broth like real men? As a child, I was known in my family as 'the vacuum cleaner' because after finishing my food, I would ask for seconds, thirds, and then I would clean up after my siblings. It was also impossible to find something that I would not eat. We had little use for Tupperware in my house. Poor Makhmed.

I asked for my second refill and emptied it shortly after he emptied his.

"Now we will see," he said dramatically, and motioned for a third. I of course also requested mine and drank it, but this time Makhmed was slowing down because we finished simultaneously. I was only warming up, but the third bowl had apparently been too much for this large, macho Kazakh. "All right, that's it!" he sighed exhausted and not a little surprised, wiping his face.

We were done already! I could hardly believe it.

By now I was squeezing as much payback as I could from these developments, so I also said "All right, that's it" *in Kazakh*, and tried to mimic the exact mannerisms that Makhmed had employed. I was finally having a good time, especially given that by now the *entire ger* (upwards of forty people) had congregated in a circling and towering mass to watch the challenge. The other men in my eating circle, and the server, apparently wanted not merely a challenge but a *competition*. So despite the fact that I had refused another bowl (because I was imitating Makhmed), they refilled it and offered me the fourth. I refused, explaining that my 'teacher' had not had another. This produced some laughter, and more embarrassment for my hapless opponent. But they insisted. So I turned to Makhmed, whom I was now beginning to pity a little (but just a little), and delivered the *coup de grace* by asking for his permission to drink the fourth. Defeated, he granted it (what else could he do?). I downed the fourth bowl victoriously to laughter and applause.

"You are like *this!*" they all said, sticking their thumbs out, "You beat him!"

"No, no," I denied with mock humility, "I was just learning from him. I only had the fourth round because he gave me permission. It was not a competition." This

produced another round of explosive laughter. They were delighted that I had gotten the best of Makhmed, who pleaded with me several times not to mention any of this to Kirukhan. I would be lying if I said many moments in my life have been more delicious.

Much later, on a different occasion, my friend and host Khozau, in fits of laughter, explained that although Kazakhs do play a lot, on that day I had been sitting next to the worst, most boastful—the *biggest* teaser of them all (Khozau, a close second, evidently regarded this characterization as a tribute). “Makhmed doesn’t give a damn who he is talking to and makes fun of people he just met. That same year that you were here he told me the story, and he said the following, ‘I was trying to trip Fran but the pratfall was mine. I was really embarrassed!’”

This opened all Kazakh doors to me. My fame as a tremendously boastful guy spread quickly, and I upheld my reputation by teasing all comers viciously to general delight, not least that of my victims. Evidently, thanks to my thick-skinned family environment, I was highly pre-adapted to be a Kazakh ethnographer.

In my last trip to Mongolia (summer 2002), I came across Makhmed at another Kazakh *toi*. He was *delighted* to see me, and we laughed about the contest. There was also a hypothesis I had been meaning to test: I was sure that Kirukhan was Makhmed’s best friend, because the most vicious of Makhmed’s attacks on that fateful day had been reserved for Kirukhan. Sure enough, everybody was agreed, when I asked the question, that Makhmed’s bosom buddy was...Kirukhan.

#### **IV. Interactional costs**

Contrary to the usual ethnographic form, I kept in my account all of the offended irritation I initially felt at the ‘Kazakh treatment.’ That’s because it makes a point: I had been working with the Torguuds only a few months when I first visited the Kazakhs, but I was already a Torguud ethnocentrist. And this *despite* the fact that my ordinary and preferred mode of interaction is closer to the Kazakh ethos, and that I am trained to be professionally tolerant of cultural differences.

Imagine now what such an experience would have been like for a real Torguud who neither expects, nor is taught to tolerate, the taking of liberties with his social ‘face.’ A Torguud would find it difficult to be a ‘good sport’ and would thus become a ‘bad person’ among Kazakhs.

Bayr, one of my Kazakh friends, made this clear to me one day. After reminiscing fondly with him about a time when I had really put Khurmet (another Kazakh) on the hot seat, I remarked appreciatively that “Khurmet can be teased and he doesn’t get mad.”

“Of course not,” Bayr protested, “There is nothing to get mad about. People are just playing.”

“Well, I agree with you, of course. But there *are* some people who can’t take it.”

“Yes, that’s true. Those people are *bad*.” His expression was one of deep disapproval, and the pinky came out.

If those who can’t be good sports will be ‘bad’ in one community, whereas in the other community it is those who take too many liberties who are ‘bad,’ this is a recipe for mutual offense in inter-ethnic interactions. A Kazakh is more likely to offend a Torguud than another Kazakh, and the converse is also true. Such misunderstandings will hamper the processes by which interpersonal bonding otherwise smoothly occurs and will cause wasted time and effort—potentially, even injury.

It does not solve the problem to say that people can consciously adjust their behaviors. They will certainly try, but mistakes occur at the margins. It is easy for a Torguud to learn that Kazakhs enjoy much teasing, but harder to learn the subtle cues that distinguish teasing from real affronts in ambiguous situations. And recognizing such dangers is easier than knowing how to gently steer problematic interactions. Similarly, the location of the threshold (when have I teased ‘one too many’?) and special taboo areas are hard to identify for a novice, who is likely to conclude—incorrectly—that ‘anything goes.’ Finally, learning to enjoy public teasing and ridicule is quite a feat if one grows up in a community where this is usually a personal attack rather than a comradely show of affection. Kazakhs can also learn that Torguud interactions are more solemn, but finding the right kind of friendly bonding behavior is more difficult. Moreover, if

Kazakhs customarily strengthen bonds by taking liberties, occasional slips are bound to occur. Given the costs of making mistakes, and also the effort required to prevent them, it is easier simply to prefer coethnics whenever possible.

I could have focused on other domains of behavior but the point is amply made. Interactional norm differences create ample opportunities for *failures of coordination*, where the signals are interpreted in different ways by sender and receiver, or else where expectations are not fulfilled. This leads to imperfect or downright counterproductive interactions. Parents everywhere thus try to enforce that their children marry coethnics; not only because of potential problems between wives and their new families, but also—and perhaps most importantly—because the marriage of one’s children is in every simple society the beginning of a long-term alliance with the in-laws. An alliance partner that I cannot easily coordinate with is not a very good one. Parental enforcement of endogamy within the ethnic boundary would then significantly account for the maintenance of the social barrier, and would isolate one community from many cultural developments in the other. This in turn would reinforce the tendency towards separate cultural/evolutionary histories of two ethnic communities even if they were living in the same environment and side by side, as the Torguuds and Kazakhs have been.

## **V. Perceptions of the ‘other’**

In this section I substantiate my claim that normative differences observed in the other community will be judged in morally derogatory terms rather than with cosmopolitan detachment—even when relations are friendly, and even when there are plenty of positive stereotypes about the other community.

The Torguuds have an expression *buruu nomtoi* (‘having the wrong book’) which I first encountered while interviewing a man by the name Batulag and his wife Tsengelcüren. I began the conversation by asking them if when their son Baterdene became an adult they would allow him to take a Kazakh wife. As expected they responded, “*Kazakh boloxgüi*” (Kazakhs are forbidden). When I inquired why, they replied not merely that Kazakhs were different but that their traditions were ‘wrong’!

Literally, they said, “*Kazakh ěc buruu baina*,” (Kazakh traditions are wrong), adding by way of explanation that Kazakhs had a different *nom* ‘book.’ When I sought further explanation they said that, in this context, *nom* was merely another word for *ěc*, the body of traditions. My impression is that *nom* is very close to what anthropologists mean when they say ‘cultural grammar.’

Another time I was chatting with old Shumagu about the dangers of mountain streams. He explained the common Torguud belief that one may not go in because the stream is *dogshin* (untamed), and one’s arm and leg will become crippled. I asked him if it was okay for the Kazakhs to go in, and, surprisingly, he said it was. Why? I asked. “*Buruu nomtoi*,” he explained, and they would not get sick on account of it. He also claimed that they urinate, defecate, and wash their clothes in the stream (none of this is true), and that following any messing up of the stream it will dry up. Being able to do things that Torguuds cannot might seem like evidence for having the *right* book, but such is not the case.

My young friend Tsooloo on one occasion likewise observed that one could not put a curse on a Kazakh because they were *buruu nomtoi*. Again, an advantage, but it results from having “the wrong book.” He also said they were *muu khün* (bad people) and when I asked him to explain himself he again said they were *buruu nomtoi*. I later raised the issue again and he made the following clarification,

“No, we don’t say they are bad, just *buruu nomtoi*.”

Although Tsooloo corrected himself on this point, the elision between *muu khün* and *buruu nomtoi* had not proved difficult.

Once, when I was alone inside a Kazakh *ger* with two Torguud friends, one of them pointed to the hinges of the tent door and said “*buruu nomtoi*,” shaking his head with an amused grin, as if it was obvious that I would naturally share his ethnocentric reaction at finding that the hinges were not on the right-hand side (viewed from the inside), which is where Torguuds religiously put them (Kazakhs don’t care where they go). Both my friends seemed to consider *buruu nomtoi* a complete and sufficient explanation for Kazakh strangeness.

Another time, on the last leg of the long migration from the highlands, the Torguud caravan in which I traveled passed a Kazakh *ger* just as we entered the desert floodplain. My then host Baatar had to call out several times before the man inside came out to answer our questions about where to cross the water safely. As we waited for the Kazakh man to come out, Baatar's brother impatiently observed that it was taking quite a while, to which my host's wife, practically spitting her contempt, retorted, "Well, what do you expect? *Buruu nomtoi!*"

I have focused especially on Torguud perceptions of Kazakhs because Torguuds in fact rarely make disparaging comments about the Kazakhs, even though I fished for them. When explaining why their children may not marry a Kazakh the worst they would ever say was '*buruu nomtoi.*' There was never any gratuitous piling. Many Torguuds even have favorable stereotypes of Kazakhs as industrious, sober, and hard-working (quite just). Even when I came back from my first excursion into Kazakh country, nobody was ready with questions about how terrible they had been nor did they point out any bad things about the Kazakhs (this, despite the fact that after my very first foray it was obvious that I was psychologically exhausted and glad to be back).

The same cannot be said for the Kazakhs. Most of them do not seem to have hostile feelings towards Torguuds, and outward relations between the two communities, as I have said, are friendly. But it was common for Kazakhs to make disparaging comments about Torguuds, even though I am a Mongolian-speaking ethnographer who came first from the 'other side,' and who has worked mostly with Torguuds. Whenever I ask Kazakhs whether Torguuds have a particular tradition that Kazakhs have, if the answer is no, they will not say "no, they do it differently" (an oft heard Torguud answer to the inverse question). Rather, they will say "Mongols can't do it" or "they don't know how to," and there is always ethological contempt in the affirmation. This kind of attitude makes derogatory moral evaluations about the other community's norms seem natural, but similar evaluations by Torguuds are quite interesting given that it is easy to find them admiring the Kazakhs.

Thus, I believe this is rather strong evidence for the hypothesis that there is a natural tendency to judge deviations from our norms as *moral failures*. Feelings of hostility are hardly necessary (though they will certainly make derogation more intense).

## Conclusion

Even though the two communities in my field site have almost identical ecological adaptations, share parallel histories and even some common cultural ancestry, and have lived as neighboring communities in Jungaria (and environs) for a long time, they are quite different in many important normative domains.

It is not hard to make the case that these differences will result in important costs for those who interacted with members of the opposite community instead of with their own, and it is this circumstance that would make a psychological bias which steered interactions discriminatorily towards coethnics adaptive.

My argument is that ethnocentrism—the perception that other communities are not merely different but morally deficient—does precisely this: that is, it steers interactions away from foreigners and towards coethnics. The ease with which Torguuds explain to themselves the normative differences of Kazakhs as a moral failure underscores how self-evident such ethnocentric judgments appear to people. Moreover, the fact that Torguuds have quite a few positive beliefs about the Kazakhs suggests that negative moral evaluations do not require any special animosity: they merely flow from the observation of normative differences.

As I have argued elsewhere (Gil-White 2001), ethnocentrism may result from applying ‘cheater detection’ mechanisms (as hypothesized in Cosmides & Tooby 1992)<sup>1</sup> which, inside one’s own ethnic community, can legitimately be described as identifying individuals who are moral failures, to individuals in other communities, where it cannot be legitimately described this way. Since those in other ethnies are at a different cultural

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<sup>1</sup> I do note, however, that Cosmides and Tooby’s data suggests that the proper definition of ‘cheater’ is the one I defend here, and not the one *they* defend. Their data shows that people are good at catching all sorts of norm violators, not just those who break “social contracts.” The breaking of social contracts may, of course, be construed as a norm violation, but it is a subset of norm violations more generally.

equilibrium, they always violate my norms. If I have a bias to interpret behaviors which contravene my norms as being performed by 'cheaters,' then I will evaluate ethnic others as moral failures. This invidious judgment is unfair, but it does steer individuals away from costly *inter*-ethnic interactions and towards easily coordinated *intra*-ethnic ones. In this functionality may lie an explanation for the apparently universal tendency to make ethnocentric judgments.

Ethnocentric judgments very often are essentialist, as if the 'moral failures' of a different ethnic community were believed to result from an unalterable biological nature. An argument to explain this essentialism may be found in Gil-White (1999, 2001, 2002).

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