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## ***Bii biyelgee* as Mongolian Cultural Heritage: Epistemologies of Authenticity**

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**Keywords:** *bii biyelgee*, Mongolian dance, anthropology, heritage, authenticity, epistemology

Note on transliteration: The transliteration of Mongolian words uses the following system. a =a, b =б, v =в, g =г, d =д, ye =е, ё =ё, j =ж (pr. /dj/), z =з, i =и, i =й, k =к, l =л, m =м, n =н, o =о, ö =ө, p =п, r =р, s =с, t =т, f =ф, h =х, c =ц (pr. /ts/), ch =ч (pr. /tch/), sh =ш, shch =щ, e =э, yu =ю, ya =я, ' =ь, '' =ъ.

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### **Introduction**

In 2009 the *bii biyelgee*<sup>1</sup> dance was inscribed in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need for Urgent Safeguarding of UNESCO. Since then, this local, peripheral dance form of the Oirad Mongols, whose mimed movements refer to the nomadic way of life of the Mongols, has gained increasing visibility, becoming one of the epitomes of Mongolian nomadic culture [1][2][3].

There are many ways to deal with questions of heritage in Mongolia and elsewhere [4][5]. This paper addresses the mobilisation of authenticity as a key value in discourses of knowledge in patrimonial<sup>2</sup> context. Although this might seem a very limited aspect of heritage making processes, this focus appears quite fruitful to study the role of epistemic dynamics at stake in such cases. Moreover, I argue here that shedding light on a dance practice such as *bii biyelgee* can contribute to further elaboration in the debate about authenticity as a value in patrimonial context.

The issue of authenticity in dance is quite representative of a certain aspect of heritage studies. In the broad spectrum of dance studies, issues of authenticity are often viewed through the lens of the comparison between two dances, one of them being thought of as the authentic version of the other, which is in turn the transformed version of the former. Let me draw a brief overview of a well-known debate in ethnochoreology and the anthropology of dance. Roderyk Lange insists on formal evolution of the Polish peasant dances, once they are performed in an urban context [6]. Drawing on the idea of linear transformation, Hoerburger, who studies Ukrainian folk dances in various contexts, argues in favour of a typology opposing first

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<sup>1</sup> There are several ways to transliterate it, I here use one of the most common ones.

<sup>2</sup> That is to say, in the context of inscription as heritage.

existence folk dance and second existence folk dance; the latter being a revived, folklorized<sup>3</sup>, staged, thus transformed and inauthentic version of the former [7]. Finally, Nahachewsky gives its full theoretical expansion to this paradigm: he differentiates participatory dances, allegedly those performed by local communities for their own entertainment or at ritual occasions, from presentational dances, that is dances choreographed and performed on stage to the appreciation of non-participatory audiences [8][9].

This might seem a good model to think about *bii biyelgee* and Mongolian staged folk dance. In many regards what is called *Mongol ardyn büjig* (“Mongolian folk dance”) can be described as a staged, choreographed, and professional version of *bii biyelgee* and other local dance forms, of recent invention, developed under the technical influence of ballet and in the aesthetic manner of the national dances of the Moiseev Ensemble<sup>4</sup>. Hence, my choice to call it staged Mongolian dance, to avoid any ambiguity conveyed by the term “folk” (*ardyn*). By contrast, *bii biyelgee* easily appears as the original, authentic version of staged Mongolian dance [10].

Yet this paradigm is, in many aspects, insufficient to account for the complexity of Mongolian dances. Of course there are many characteristics commonly evoked to oppose the two practices: staged dance is professional whereas *bii biyelgee* is familial; staged dance conveys wide, visible and supple movements whereas the movements in *bii biyelgee* are sharp and brisk, since usually performed in the limited space of the nomadic *ger* (yurt); staged dance is definitely creative, incorporating contemporary influences, while *bii biyelgee* is traditional or, as they say, “*natur*”, and must remain exactly what it has always been. Yet in the field this “Great Divide<sup>5</sup>” is not so strict and a lot of overlapping occur: *bii biyelgee* dancers (also called *biyelgeech* or *biich*) sometimes endorse salary and payment for their activity, contemporary choreographers tend to adopt the brisk and sharp quality of *bii biyelgee*, and there are more than one example of dances, sometimes called *bii biyelgee*, that are in fact the products of socialist cultural policy and of choreographed stylisation [10]. Following Nahachewsky’s typology, *bii biyelgee* is, just as staged Mongolian dance, a presentational practice. As a consequence, the boundary between *bii biyelgee* and Mongolian staged dance is not so easy to determine.

Moreover, the paradigm of the Great Divide is flawed in itself. First, it is imbued with a judgemental perception of authenticity: folklorized versions of authentic dances, being inauthentic, are often considered of lesser anthropological interest. Second, by the use of Laban notation systems for human movement the authors engage tremendous effort to establish authenticity as a formal and objective feature of certain dances, but of which other dances are to be deprived, notwithstanding local revendications of the opposite. It therefore contributes to extend local debates on authenticity within the field of research, instead of analysing the local context of the emergence of such claims of authenticity.

As a matter of fact, the value of authenticity is strongly mobilized to differentiate the two practices. A constructivist view can here be helpful to study discourses of authenticity in

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<sup>3</sup> The term itself is representative of a view of staged dances as unauthentic elements of “folklore”. The negative connotation of the word is perhaps more perceptible in French.

<sup>4</sup> The Moiseev Folk Dance Ensemble was founded in 1937 by the Russian choreographer Igor Moiseev to display, choreograph and develop folk dances of every nationality in the USSR.

<sup>5</sup> The expression was forged by anthropologist Jack Goody to describe a general trend in the history and epistemology of anthropology to think in a binary way about the distinction between “us”, Europeans and North Americans, “civilized” people, subjects of the anthropological scientific discourse and “them”, “primitive” people, objects of the anthropological discourse [11].

relation with the socio-political positions of the actors who use such discourses. Such a view is especially well illustrated in the literature in French by the concept of 'patrimonial arena': patrimonial contexts are considered as fight rings or arenas where local positions of power (and social conflicts) express themselves in the determination of what is to be considered as a legitimate heritage and what is not [12].

However, such a view, bound to socio-political aspects of heritage processes, tends to underestimate the epistemic dimension of the mobilisation of authenticity as a way to construe the legitimacy of a cultural practice as cultural heritage. This epistemic dimension is, I argue, what gives strength and legitimacy to the value of authenticity. This aspect is well underlined in studies on various topics in patrimonial contexts, such as the case of the *nestinarstvo* fire walking ritual in Bulgaria [13], the lace-makers of Slovakia [14] or the revivalist movement in Norwegian traditional dance [15]. Indeed, as French philosopher Michel Foucault convincingly argued, episteme (epistemological systems of legitimation based on knowledge and scientific-like types of discourse) is intrinsically bound to social hierarchies and relations of power. Unlike the constructivist perspective, Foucault's theory presupposes that not only knowledge and values gain their legitimacy from the positions of power from which they are stated, but that the reverse is true: epistemological types of discourses significantly contribute to instate and reinforce social hierarchies and relations of power. This is what he calls the knowledge-power complex [16].

I propose here to use the case of Mongolian dances to extend such theoretical perspectives and more precisely to reflect upon the specific epistemics of authenticity mobilised in the case of dance practices. What kinds of knowledge, what types of epistemologies are summoned to build up the legitimacy of a dance practice as cultural heritage? To answer this question, I first examine general discourses about the authenticity of *bii biyelgee*, especially those directly generated by the patrimonial context and the institutional authority of UNESCO: such discourses mostly describe *bii biyelgee* as authentic because of its ancientness and bond to the nomadic way of life; yet this absolute characterisation is often subsumed by a relative definition of authenticity, opposed to notions such as modernity, evolution or creative art. In the second part I use legends of origin of the *bii biyelgee* to deepen the analysis of indexical modes of reasoning that, I argue, give this relative definition of authenticity the strength of an absolute. Third, I compare two types of discourses conveying contrasting epistemologies: the contrast between an epistemology of gesture and an epistemology of biography of the heritage bearer is, I argue, constitutive of the knowledge-power complex in the case of dance practices in patrimonial contexts.

The paper is based on qualitative methodology, including eighteen months of fieldwork in western Mongolia (Hovd, Uvs, Bayan-Ölgii) and in Ulaanbaatar, between 2010 and 2015. This has allowed me to meet with more than a hundred persons involved in heritage making processes around *bii biyelgee*, including people from the UNESCO commission and from different cultural institutions, professional dancers and choreographers, researchers, *biich* – dancers of *bii biyelgee* – of varied ages, ethnic groups and social categories. The present paper is based on the study of the types of discourse and reasoning revealed in official documents and public occasions, but also collected in fieldwork interviews and conversations. It deals with the apparent homogeneity of such discourses and shows the interest of distinguishing between several types of epistemologies to understand processes of heritage making and its specificity in the domain of dance.



Figure 1 Biich: Sh. Lhamhüü, Huurch: B. Dorj, Malchin sum, Uvs.

## I. The *bii biyelgee* as a legitimate cultural heritage

This first part draws sketches of the *bii biyelgee*, viewed as an ideal candidate for inscription, in the eyes of the UNESCO conception of cultural heritage as well as in the eyes of local actors.

It is often acknowledged by scholars that UNESCO promotes a certain vision of what an element of Intangible Cultural Heritage should look like. Some even go as far as to say that UNESCO and other similar patrimonial institutions tend to generate similarly fashioned items of heritage, whatever their cultural origin, instead of promoting local diversity of practices [17]. In this regard, the UNESCO nomination form<sup>6</sup> reflects a certain conception of the main characteristics of a legitimate element of cultural heritage. I give a brief review of those main features, before trying to characterize it as a whole.

a. Characteristics of the practice: The practice is described as deeply anchored in the nomadic pastoral culture, thought of as a traditional way of life. First of all, the movements of *bii biyelgee* are mainly mimes of daily life activities of the nomads, such as felt- or leather-making, lassoing, daily rituals (prayer – *mörgöl* – and libation – *cacal*) and the horse gait (mostly ambling horse, *Joroo mor*). The dance thus appears as a danced mirror of the nomadic way of life. Second, gestural characteristics of *bii biyelgee*, including its squatting postures, the limited scale of its movement spatiality, and the sharp, brisk quality of its movements, are commonly said to refer to the traditional performance of *bii biyelgee* in the limited space of the nomadic yurt. The two arguments are coherent with the general idea that *bii biyelgee* is intrinsically linked to the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/mongol-biyelgee-mongolian-traditional-folk-dance-00311?USL=00311>

nomadic way of life, perceived as a cultural whole. This is an implicit, yet decisive, aspect of what should be an ideal cultural heritage: it is representative of a cultural whole.

b. Characteristics of the transmission: *Bii biyelgee* is definitely described as an ancestral practice, that is a very ancient dance, whose transmission is said to have been uninterrupted for many generations. This aspect of uninterrupted chain of transmission is often used to discriminate true bearers from fake *biich*, who learned only recently the *bii biyelgee* dance and thus are suspicious of not knowing the genuine practice. An essential aspect of this view is that the ideal transmission is familial. Actually, some recognized *biich* have learnt otherwise, which makes the idea appear more as a rhetorical device or an ideal norm, in response to implicit criteria of UNESCO. The post-inscription policy in Mongolia, by developing mass transmission and didactic types of teaching, tended to make this more and more of an ideal and less and less of a reality. The fact is particularly salient in the recommendation of the UNESCO committee to pay closer attention to the modes of transmission, to avoid the “distortion” of the practice itself (Point 6 of the Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee 9.COM 5.b.5 in response to the Periodic Report of 2013<sup>7</sup>).

c. Characteristics of the persons: Heritage bearers mentioned in the nomination form correspond to a stereotype commonly met in heritage processes. They are very old persons (of both sexes), very few in number, very isolated in location; they are all of Oirad ethnicity and each of them represents his / her own ethnic group (Points C, E, 1c of the form). However, this vision of *bii biyelgee* bearers appear to be partly inaccurate: there are actually much more than the twenty *biich* mentioned in the form, in Mongolia. Not all of them are elderly people, most of them live in Ulaanbaatar and no longer in Altai remote regions; they are organized in associations and networks since before the inscription<sup>8</sup> and although they do represent their own ethnic style, many of them also know the neighbouring ethnic styles. Far from reflecting the reality, the form thus conveys a stereotyped view of the aged and isolated *biich* as a typical figure of heritage bearer.

d. Characteristics of the threats: The threats evoked in the nomination form are at the same time arguments in favour of an inscription on the List of Cultural Heritage in Need for Urgent Safeguarding, and keys to understand the underlying norms of cultural heritage. If *bii biyelgee* is endangered by increasing urbanisation (Points 3a, 3b of the form), it is thereby defined as a rural practice, intrinsically linked to the nomadic way of life. When it is said to be threatened by global forms of art, aesthetics and culture (*ibid.*), the implicit view is that a proper element of heritage should be a local one (as opposed to global) and an intact one (as opposed to “transformed”). This aspect is reinforced by a third threat, cultural policies of the socialist period (Point 3b): *bii biyelgee*, as a legitimate cultural heritage, cannot get transformed by cultural policies: either it is preserved as such, or it simply is at risk of complete disappearance.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/9.COM/5.B.5>

<sup>8</sup> Which means their organization is not merely an effect of the inscription [10].



*Figure 2 Mass transmission is perceived as generating potential risk of distortion of an authentic practice.*

The definition of an element of cultural heritage as opposed to cultural evolution is not only coherent with the UNESCO project of Cultural Intangible Heritage. It is also quite striking in the vocabulary employed by all actors – those in charge of heritage policies, *biich*, professional dancers and choreographers – in Mongolia, to describe *bii biyelgee* as opposed to staged Mongolian dance.

Although the *bii biyelgee* is often described as cultural heritage in an absolute way, this definition is in fact based on a series of binary oppositions of values. In this regard, the vocabulary employed to define and describe *bii biyelgee* is quite representative. Most of the employed terms directly qualify the authenticity of *bii biyelgee*: *ulamjlalt*, “traditional”, conveys the idea of “tradition” (*ulamjlal*), as a continued transmission from generation to generation (*ulam*); *yazguur*, “authentic”, etymologically refers to the ancient origins or roots of the practice as a way to guarantee its value (*yazguurtan* means aristocratic, of aristocratic origin). *Natur*, as far as I know a word borrowed from Russian *naturan*, itself borrowed from the French “nature”, is employed in a meaningful way to describe the very authenticity of *bii biyelgee*. Such words are commonly defined in regard with opposite values, steadily represented by staged Mongolian dance. *Natur* means for instance that no modification should be made in the practice: it is opposed to *deglelt* “choreographed”, which implies such operations as “mix” (*holih*) the movements, “add” (*oruulah*) new movements, or “modify” them (*öörchlöh*). Such actions are generally welcome in a choreographed dance, but in *bii biyelgee* they would threaten the practice in its integrity and are even described by some as the cause of its progressive disappearance. Where the value of authenticity is concerned, transform a practice means no less than kill it. This binary structure of values is to be linked to the fact that authenticity appears as a key value especially where an object or a practice deemed authentic is confronted to an object similar enough to be taken for the former, but essentially different in that it is inauthentic [18].

This relativity of the value of authenticity and the risk of confusion arising from it are particularly well illustrated in the case of Mongolian dances: the remnants of the socialist influence makes recently invented cultural practices pass for local ancient and typically Mongolian ones, while the recent development of *bii biyelgee* leads to the development of intermediary forms of practices, therefore arising confusion in the identification of *bii biyelgee* vs. staged Mongolian dance [10]. The need to (re-)define *bii biyelgee* as an authentic practice, and the binary way in which it is done so, precisely arise from this context of confusion, and conveniently meets the implicit expectations of UNESCO. *Bii biyelgee* is 'authentic' *bii biyelgee* only when it can be opposed to "dance" (*büjig*), defined as a creative practice. Conversely, *bii biyelgee* is not a "dance" in this sense, but rather a fixed element of folklore, emanating from a local culture which it represents.

This, however, does not explain how such a relative definition of authenticity is given the dimension of an absolute. To deal with this question, I now examine indexical modes of reasoning that tend to promote absoluteness in the authenticity of *bii biyelgee*.

## II. Authenticity as an absolute: indexical modes of reasoning

### 1. A tale of the origin

"[*Bii biyelgee*] originates (*üüssen*) from ancient activities of the people. The *bii biyelgee* originates from (*üüseltei*) milking, libation of tea and milk premises, cult of the mountains and waters, obtention of wool and cashmere of one's herds, cultivating cereals and many such activities. This is precisely where an authentic art (*yazguur urlag*) originates from (*üüseltei*<sup>9</sup>)".

In this statement, Cerendulam, a female *biich* in her sixties, evokes the well-known relationship between the mimed gestures of *bii biyelgee* and general activities of the nomads. Yet this time, she does not point out the relation of resemblance between the dance and daily life activities, but a relation of origin: what makes the *bii biyelgee* linked to the nomadic way of life is not only that it represents or imitates it, but that it originates or emanates from it.

There are many legends recounting the origins of musical, vocal or instrumental genres in Mongolia, many of which evoke a relation of imitation, and perhaps emulation, to natural elements. For instance, the *höömii* (overtone singing) is said to arise from the vocal imitation of the sounds of winds and rivers. The long-song evokes the outline of rugged landscapes; the *morin huur* (horse-head fiddle) refers to the special relationship between a man and his horse, and so on. Legends of origins of the *bii biyelgee* are comparatively few, and rarely told. This makes them all the more significant. Let us take this legend, told by a Dörvöd artist from Uvs.

"If you ask: How and from where did *bii biyelgee* originate? Well, this happens in spring time, when the cattle give birth. [...] [The nomads] prepare wooden bowls, the children play

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<sup>9</sup> *Mön l ard түмний язгуур erh ashgaas üüssen. Biyelgee malaa saada, cai süünii deejig örgöh, uul usandaa zalburch mörgöh, maliinhaa noos nooluuriig avah, taria tarih geh met züilees üüseltei. Endees l yazguur urlag üüseltei.*



rhythms on them. With a bowl and horsehair, the father makes a *tovshuur* lute, on which the uncle plays the Praise of Altai (*Altain magtaal*). Listening to the song, the children won't sleep. They want to enjoy the song and thus they stand up and start to dance. This is the legend.”<sup>10</sup>

In contrast with legends of origin in musical domains, this legend of the origin of *bii biyelgee* catches the attention: the origin of the dance is not located in the natural environment, but in the domestic and humanised context of a nomadic camp. Moreover, the legend describes *bii biyelgee* as emanating from daily playful rhythms rather than from the imitation of typical gestures. In this version, *bii biyelgee* emerges not from gestural imitation, but from rhythmic impregnation: the nomadic way of life is not only the subject matter of the dances, but their very substance, of which the dance only gives a special gestural actualisation. It thus promotes a model of emanation, rather than of imitation, that leads from nomadic life to *bii biyelgee* dancing. A causal relation of indexicality is thus established between the nomadic way of life and *bii biyelgee*: if *bii biyelgee* can be said to be an authentic practice, it is not so much because it imitates daily life activities as because it is caused by them, because it emanates from them.

This legend directly echoes many narratives of childhood that I have collected among elderly *biich*. According to them, up until the mid-twentieth century, *bii biyelgee* was mostly practiced not on stage for festivals nor for special ritual occasions, but in very ordinary and daily contexts. *Bii biyelgee* evening scenes are commonly described as performed in an ordinary, familial context, under the yurt, after a day's hard work has been achieved. Most of the time, people describe a parent, male or female, or an elder person of the family (father or mother, uncle or aunt, grand-father or grand-mother) playing a musical instrument such as the *ekel* (*ikel*) fiddle or the *tovshuur* lute, sometimes singing or reciting epics. On this music all the children of the family were to stand up and dance, and this was the ordinary familial entertainment under the yurt. This typical *bii biyelgee* evening scene directly echoes that of our legend: in this sense, the meaning of the gestures is less important than the circumstances of the dance performance: they are what guarantees that the gestures of the dance are impregnated with the substance of the nomadic way of life.

More specifically, such occasions are commonly described as occasions of learning *bii biyelgee* in a “natur” way (*naturaar surah*), that is without didactic learning, by mere impregnation. Thus, the *bii biyelgee* evening scene appears as a ‘scene of the origins’ in two ways: first it is described in the legend as the special occasion in which *bii biyelgee* was originally born. Second, it is also the repeated occasion for each generation to learn *bii biyelgee* in turn, in the very conditions of its legendary origins. Learning *bii biyelgee* in the *natur* way means, in this case, learning it as if it were reinvented from the origin. The causal relation between daily life and *bii biyelgee* is not only characteristic of a legendary origin of the practice, but of its very transmission. Learning in such a context as the evening scene under the yurt somehow guarantees that the dance you learn is impregnated with the very same qualities than the very first *bii biyelgee*; such a practice is imbued with the very substance of the nomadic way of life,

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<sup>10</sup> *Bii biyelgee yaaj, haanaas üüssen baina geheer havar cagt mal töröl törнө. [...] Modon ayaga hiideg, hiiühdüüd toglodog, Aav n' ter ayaga, moriny üseer tovshuur hiinee. Ah n' altain magtaal duulna, Hiiühdüüd sonsood untahgüi, ene ayalguug sonsohod durтай. Teriig sonsohyn tuld bosoj bielnee. Endees domog hiinee.*

from which it directly emanates and originates. This indexical relation between the dance and the way of life, perceived as the very heart of a “natur” way of learning, also serves as a basis to its authentication. In such a view, the authenticity of the *bii biyelgee* does not stem from its formal properties, qualities of gesture or subject matters but from the conditions of its transmission, which guarantee the causal relation, and not only a relation of resemblance, between a dance and a way of life. As a consequence, *bii biyelgee* may be analysed as an index for the nomadic way of life from which it emanates, and not only for a symbol or a representation of it<sup>11</sup>. This relation of indexicality considerably reinforces the legitimacy of *bii biyelgee* as authentic in an absolute way.

Yet this evening scene remains an ideal. In the patrimonial context, it is often quite impossible to prove that this is the way you have actually learnt *bii biyelgee*. One needs to produce indexes in order to legitimate one's claim for authenticity. Two ways of argumentation are thus very common among *biich* to prove their authenticity. One is the argument of the exact gesture, reproduced identically from generation to generation, which mobilises what I shall call an epistemology of the gesture. The other is the relation to a rural nomadic typical way of life, which supposes biographical discourses.



*Figure 3 Learning in a familial context. The biich B. Chuluunbaatar plays the horsehead fiddle for his family.*

### **III. Traditional way of life or exact gesture: alternated epistemologies in dance**

<sup>11</sup> The opposition between resemblance and causality as modes of relation stems from Peirce's semiotic theory: an iconic sign bears resemblance to the thing it refers to whereas an index or indicial sign is viewed as a consequence of inferred, yet invisible, cause [19].

## 1. The exact gesture

Chuluunbat is a *biich* in his fifties, son of Dashdorj, a well-known *biich* of Torguud *bii biyelgee*. For him, the very sign of authenticity lies in the exactness of the gesture. He explains the following schema by these words:

“Ok, this is me, Chuka [Chuluunbat]. There is my disciple. There is the disciple’s disciple. I have studied from someone else, then I will teach to that one. This person needs to learn correctly from me, right? When that one teaches in turn, he must not teach wrong. For this he needs to learn correctly from me. For this, I myself need to know correctly. If I am correct, then the next one has a chance to be correct too. I must not teach wrong to him. If I teach wrong, the following person does wrong and so forth, then [the gesture] is lost. (...) The second one here is the disciple of the first one. If you look at them side by side, then you can compare and decide whether the second one is doing the same or not. But if you look at the last one, he is doing fake<sup>12</sup>.”

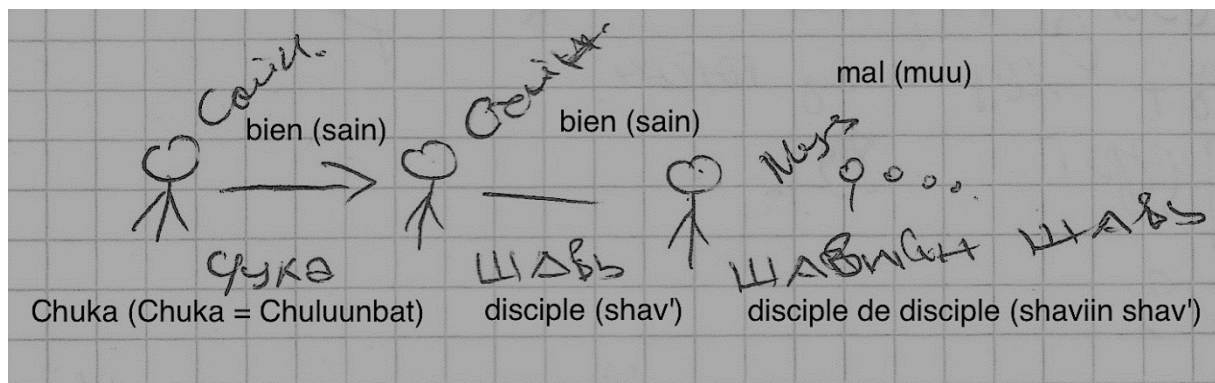


Figure 4 Chuluunbat's schema of transmission: the exact gesture.

Transmission of the dance is, for Chuluunbat, a lineage of correctly dancing persons. This is to say that, for Chuluunbat, the “correct” (*sain*) transmission does not lie in specific modes of transmission, but in the ability of each link in the chain to perform the correct or “exact” (*zöv*) movement. The “correct” (*sain*) transmission, as opposed to the “bad” (*muu*) one, depends on the “exactness” (*zöv* vs. *buruu*) of the gesture transmitted. Thus, there should be nothing easier than to look at a person and determine if he/ she is doing authentic *bii biyelgee* or transformed (thus inauthentic) one: the comparison between the gestures of the master, and that of the disciple. If they are the same, and if the master was exact, then the disciple is doing authentic *bii biyelgee*. Chuluunbat suggests to extend the comparative procedure even to *biich* masters who have passed away, thanks to videos from the archives, to determine, among contemporary self-declared authentic *biich*, which ones are real ones and which ones are “fake” or “pretending” (*hudlaa*). In Chuluunbat’s view, the exactness of the gesture appears as an index

<sup>12</sup> Ene Chuka, bi, ene tiimee, shav', ene hünii shav'. Ene shaviin shav'. Bi eniig ene hünees sursan, bi ene hünd zaaj ögnö. Ene hünd zaaj ögööd ene hün zaaj ögöhdöö buruu zaaj ögj bolohgüi. Ene hün nadaas sain sursan baih ёstoi, tiimuu ? Bi ene chin ööröö sain baih ёstoi biz dee. Bi ene sain baij ene hün sain baih. Ene hünd buruu zaaj bolohgüi. Ene hün buruu zagj ögsön bol ene hün buruu zagaad avsan baigaa baihgüi yuu. Teheer ingeed ingeed ingeed algasan. (...) Ene hün ene hünii shav' bai shdee, hajuudaa üzeh, ene hoёр адилхан байна uu, адилхан бish байна uu ? Tiimee ? tiimuu ? gehdee l enii shav', ene harahad, ene hudlaa hiisen.

of authenticity, because it is taken as a token of correct transmission on a potentially unlimited chain of ancestors-masters of *bii biyelgee*.

Implicitly, Chuluunbat means that you need to have learnt correctly from ancient masters, preferably in your family, to be an authentic *biich*. This presupposes that ancient masters of *bii biyelgee* all did correct *bii biyelgee*, an aspect contested by another *biich*, Badamceceg, in her fifties. She argues that nowadays almost anybody doing a few movements can pretend that they learn from a *bii biyelgee* master: we must not take what they say for true, she says, if they can't prove the authenticity of the master they pretend to have learnt from. To get around this obstacle, many *biich* resort to another kind of reasoning, based not on the gesture itself but on their biography.

## 2. The biography as index of authenticity

Besides this epistemology of the gesture, *biich* often use aspects of their biography as ways to legitimate their authenticity. The use of biographical elements as a way to legitimate the authenticity of a practice is not only one method among many others, but works, I argue, in complement with the epistemology of the gesture.

The first aspect of biography is the reference to a long genealogy of *biich*; many *biich* claim to be descendants of *biich* to the second, third, fourth or even more generations. Yet when asked the name of *biich* ascendants they are rarely able to go beyond one or two generations above them. Indeed, the continuity and number of generations masks the lack of information about really ancient generations as well as gaps and discontinuities of practice during the life of a single *biich*, while reinforcing the stereotype of unquestionably ancient practice.

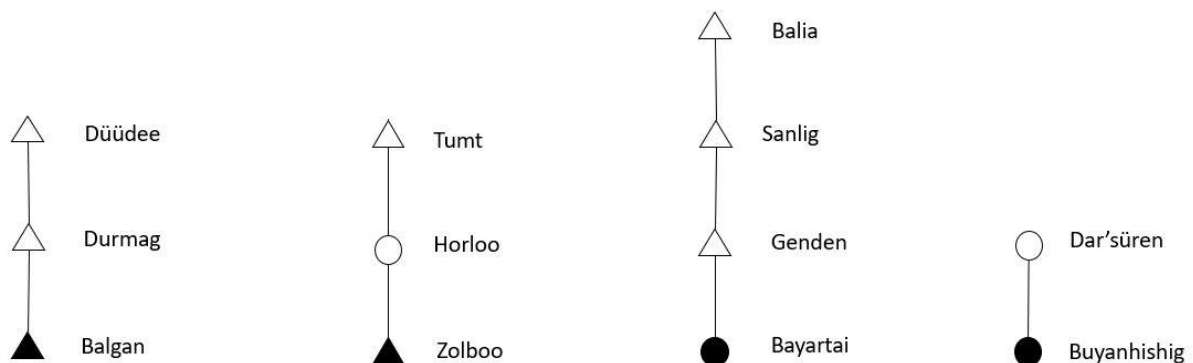


Figure 5 Four genealogies of contemporary *biich*.

But this aspect is not as important as the fact that biographical elements are summoned to support the view that *bii biyelgee* emanates from the nomadic way of life. Actually, mimed gestures in *bii biyelgee* are often said to be not just conventional “dance movements” (*büjgiin hödölgöön*), but “life itself” (*am'dral*). Therefore, tremendous importance is given to the personal knowledge of the daily life gestures mimed in *bii biyelgee*. During a lesson to professional dancers, famous *biich* such as Bayartai or Balgan insist on showing not only the danced gestures but also the technical gestures to which they refer – even if this means carrying heavy tools like a grindstone (*teerem*) in the dance studio to show the grinding movements of

the Hoton *bii biyelgee* “Seten Zалуу”. According to many *biich*, you have to actually live like a nomad to understand the essence of the mimed movements. In this regard, well-known *biich* commonly evoke their rural childhood and life under the yurt, but also their anchorage in a local network of ancient *biich*, whose reciprocal visits in the camps of one another generated an atmosphere favourable to the impregnation of *bii biyelgee*. Some also enhance their impregnation in a markedly Oirad cultural context: to learn *bii biyelgee* you also have to know about the history and legends, customs and traditions, and even dialect specific to your own ethnic group.

The *biich* thus defines himself or herself as authentic not only as a descendant of a lineage of famous *biich* or as a regular practitioner, but as a legitimate representative of an ethnic group<sup>13</sup>. Some even argue that belonging to an Oirad ethnic subgroup is not only a necessary but a sufficient condition to be an authentic *biich*: the ability to dance *bii biyelgee* is sometimes even described as inscribed in the Oirad genome, thus excluding people of other ethnic origins. In this sense, the mastery of the right gesture cannot be sufficient to become a *biich*: one does not become a *biich*, one is born a *biich*. The important evocation of genealogical and biographical elements in self-legitimation of the *biich* as bearers of an authentic practice thus serve as indexes of this innate quality: one is a *biich* not because one practices good *bii biyelgee*, but because one can prove his / her belonging to an ethnic subgroup famous for its practice of authentic *bii biyelgee*. In this epistemology of biography, as opposed to the biography of gesture, there cannot be a *biich* that is not an Oirad one. And dancers overtly practicing several ethnic styles of *bii biyelgee* are suspicious of not being authentic *biich*.

While the epistemology of gesture would allow transmission to anyone, provided that it is correct, the epistemology of biography makes transmission of gesture a secondary aspect of authenticity: authenticity would then rather be transmitted as an intrinsic quality of the person, together with elements such as family lineage or ethnic belonging, as opposed to learned gesture.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is legitimate to ask what the social effects of these two regimes of authenticity are. The initial paradox of authenticity as an absolute value, although defined mainly by opposition to what is not authentic, is based on indexical reasoning that describes the *bii biyelgee* not only as an image, but as a direct emanation of the nomadic way of life. Yet this indexical legitimation can be subdivided, in turn, in two main types of discourses: one that is based on the comparison of gestures and one that refers to biographical aspects of the practitioner, as indexical clues of authenticity. In the field, it appears that both types of discourse are mobilised to define authentic practice as opposed to “fake” practice, or to staged Mongolian dance. But the fact is the two are rarely used together. Rather, they are used alternately by *biich*,

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<sup>13</sup> I have written several times about the question of ethnic diversity. Here it may be sufficient to remind the reader that specific dance “styles” are commonly attributed to each ethnic group of the Oirad ethnic mosaic [1][20][21]. This does not mean, however, that a *biich* knows only one ethnic style, his / her own. Indeed, *biich* regularly practice other dance styles. Yet they claim to be legitimate representatives only of the *bii biyelgee* of their own ethnic group [10].

legitimate bearers of heritage, to deconstruct pretences of authenticity among non-*biich*, self-proclaimed *biich*, or “inauthentic” *biich*. In their mouth, such discourses thus become weapons to define themselves as authentic *biich* and to defend themselves against illegitimate pretence. In doing so, they reinforce the binary structure of authenticity by drawing an absolute separation between authentic and inauthentic, which in turn reinforces the binary opposition between *bii biyelgee* and staged Mongolian dance. This binary aspect seems rather characteristic of dance practices, a hypothesis that still calls for proof and testing by comparison with other similar contexts. Although many aspects of heritage processes have not been examined here, the paper suggests the importance of studying the epistemological dimension of discourses of authenticity in order to shed new light on relations of power at stake in heritage making processes.

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### **Abstract / Хураангуй**

Бий биелгээ нь 2009 онд Юнеско-ийн биет бус соёлын өвийн жагсаалтад бүртгэгдсэн байна. Бий биелгээний тухай судлагааг сайн хөгжүүлж байгаа ч гэсэн бий биелгээ хэрхэн яаж монголын биет бус соёлын өв болж байгаа гэх талаас хийсэн судлагаа ховор байна. Жирийн иргэд болон судалгааны байгууллагууд нь бий биелгээг соёлын өв бөгөөд язгуур урлаг гэдгийг нотлохын тулд чухам ямар судалгааны төрөл, арга зүй, онол, эпистемологийг хэрэглэдэг вэ гэдгийг энэ өгүүлэлээр судалж байна. Тиймээс онолын хувьд бий биелгээ нь үргэлж нүүдэлчдийн аж ахуйтай хамааралтай байгаа бөгөөд нэг талаас бий биелгээний хөдөлгөөн нь аж ахуйг илэрхийлэж, нөгөө талаас бий биелгээний ерөнхий намба төрх (характер) бийч хүний өдөр тутмын амьдралаас төрж үүссэн байна гэж хэлэлцдэг байна. Энэ хоёр тайлбар нь төрөл, эпистемологийн ялгаатай ч гэсэн хамтад хэрэглэж байгаагаараа энэхүү судалгааны ажлын онцлог юм.

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