
A day celebrating Mongolic identity, solidarity, and diversity in Princeton, New Jersey

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I first became aware of the Mongol American Cultural Association (MACA) when I was googling for information on Mongolic communities based in the U.S. approximately four years ago. By visiting MACA's website for the first time, I was also informed that a ceremony-featuring ethnocommunal gathering has been held on a yearly basis since the late 1980s. Having long yearned for connecting to the small, dispersed, but proud Mongolic communities in the American Northeast, in November, 2012, I was lucky enough to reach Princeton and witness in person the burgeoning spirit of Mongolic **identity, solidarity, and diversity** that would not be similarly felt elsewhere. Not a historian, I'm not going to recount the founding myths of Mongolic peoples. Not a poet, I'm not going to couch my feeling with the event in literary phrases. Instead, as a student of social science, I consider that November day as one raising the consciousness of Mongolic **identity, solidarity, and diversity** within our diasporic communities and inviting further dialogues and even brotherly supports across our communities in Mongolia-the-independent-state, Southern Mongolia, Kalmykia, Buryatia, Tuva, and Hazaristan.

Ethnonational **identity** tells one who he or she is, who he or she is not, and of which group he or she may claim membership. The shared distinct self-identification of being ethnically Mongolic, regardless of whatever tribal affiliations, whatever religious practices, whatever linguistic nuances, whatever historical trajectories, would not have been around without an essentially similar collective memory of the political entity founded by Chinggis Khan centuries ago that gave rise to what is later known as a common claim to be Mongolic. However, in our times, such a common allegiance has rarely been hailed in an all-inclusive manner until MACA's magnanimous efforts. While those from Mongolia-the-independent-state may not only claim their Mongolic identity but also be recognized as such, those of Mongolic heritages but from outside Mongolia may have, to varying extent, to inhibit their Mongolic identities for practical reasons. In this regard, the *génie* of Chinggis Khan Memorial Ceremony consists in its offering an opportunity for Mongolic peoples outside Mongolia-the-independent-state to jointly and unfetteredly assert their Mongolic identities, even if that lasts for only one day. Thus, many of our ethnic kins who may use non-Mongolic languages in daily life drove hundreds of miles for the annual gathering simply to "reboot" the aspect of their identity for which they want recognition and preservation.

If coming together in honor of Chinggis Khan were all about **identity**, then we might ignore how much the event is also meant for promoting greater mutual contact, understanding, network, kinship, and even empathetic feelings among different

Mongolic groups, among individuals within a group, and among individuals across groups. I positively noticed that attendees, different Mongolic groups as they represent, were not necessarily concentrated according to specific group or regional identities, but presented a tendency to seat themselves randomly, which had the potential of facilitating conversations between individuals who might previously have had little knowledge about one another's Mongolic heritage. The event was also my first of its kind where members of different Mongolic groups had an opportunity to appreciate one another's music, songs, and dances all within one sitting. I was no less impressed with the already-established cross-group networks evinced at the reception where members of different Mongolic groups were able to proactively approach one another. A day of building consciousness of one another's existence and experience may pave way for further interactions conducive to the development of emotional attachment. Such attachment will be indispensable in order to genuinely bind various Mongolic groups together by transcending the linguistic, religious, cultural, historical, and political barriers that give them myriad justifications not to build **solidarity** with one another.

Solidarity building does not need to come at the expense of the amazingly **diverse** historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic heritages various Mongolic peoples claim. If MACA designates this annual ceremonial event for allowing people of Mongolic roots to assert a common identity as well as for generating greater cohesion among them, then it can equally be understood as a stage on which for Mongolic peoples to share with one another the unique and distinct aspect of their identity.

The dancers and singers from Mongolia-the-independent-state represented the most-blossoming and best-supported of Mongolic cultural traditions by showcasing the *bijelgee* dance as well as the inebriatingly beautiful operatic singings developed out of folk songs (*ardiin duu*). In the meantime, the band from the Ordos subregion of Southern Mongolia signaled to attendees a persistent and unrelenting pride Southern Mongolians take in their Mongolic identity by graciously blending both ethnic and popular elements into their rendition and by offering a medley of Southern Mongolian folk songs that people like me have been so much missing. Buryat artist Namgar Lkhasaranova and the other two ethnomusicians demonstrated the highly distinct musical heritage of the Buryat people in Southern Siberia that I had not been able to contemplate until at the event. As the first Mongolic community settled in the U.S. and the most significant proponents of MACA, Kalmyks dedicated their fusion of Oiratic and North Caucasus traditions, which again invited various Mongolic peoples to marvel at our diversity. Though subjected to mass deportation in the mid-1940s, Kalmyks not only maintained their ethnic morale, but also initiated the presence of Mongolic peoples in the U.S. The representation of the Iranic-speaking Hazara people at the ceremony can also be marked as an example of re-oriented ethnonational consciousness and of the tremendous cultural and historical diversity among Mongolic peoples we have yet to explore. Hereby, another *génie* of MACA's annual Chinggis Khan Memorial Ceremony is its serving as probably the only occasion, to

my knowledge, to be able to integrate a widest possible range of Mongolic **diversity** into one theme.

Thanks to pioneers of our senior generations from Southern Mongolia (*Övör Mongol*), Kalmykia (*Xalimag*), and Mongolia-the-independent-state (*Ar Mongol*) who sowed the seeds for a Pan-Mongolic communal tradition in the U.S., this annual gathering has been hopefully achieving a threefold mission: **commemorating** a common founding hero, Chinggis Khan, who laid the foundation for the distinct identities Mongolic peoples hail today, **congregating** people of various Mongolic heritages to facilitate their mutual understandings as well as to revive ethnic kinship that has been historically undermined, as well as **consolidating** support from the greater U.S. society with regard to issues concerning the Mongolic world. In retrospect, this year we have had music and dance heritages of Mongolia-the-independent-state, Southern Mongolia, Kalmykia, Buryatia represented. In prospect, perhaps next year there would be those of Tuva and Hazaristan added?