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**Photo Essay: Encounters with the Buryat pastoral women in  
Mongolia**

Master's Project

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## Glossary

**aimag** -region and/or province

**bagh** -administrative sub-division within a soum

**dzud**- natural disaster, harsh winter

**GDP**- gross domestic product

**ger** –round portable, wood-framed, cloth and felt-covered house

**Negdel**- agricultural collective

**soum**- an administrative unit within an *aimag* outside of the capital city

**uul** – mountainous area

**toono**- dome of the ger

**bagaanas**- central poles in the ger

## Introduction

In today's world it is extremely important to study cultural diversity to raise awareness about communities that are at risk. Being enthralled by different cultures and values I wanted to base my research on an ethnic group specifically. Moreover, my ethnic background (Turk) gave me the idea to research Mongolia, specifically the herding tradition. The more I studied Mongolia, the more I became intrigued by its long-standing tradition of pastoralism. After encountering various media sources about herding, I decided to hone in on the experience of women in herding communities. My work will look into the Buryat ethnic community specifically. More specifically, sources cited that women were contributing to the decline of pastoralism by leaving for the Mongolian capital city of Ulaanbaatar. The gender question in pastoralism piqued my interest as I have always been keen on linking different interdisciplinary studies with ethnology, such as gender.

Pastoralism is a tradition that is still present despite factors contributing to its fading. One such factor is the fact that women are choosing a different life path to herding. The topic of gender is relevant in today's world, and it is becoming prominent in Mongolia, hence this project. The master's project is in the form of a photo essay that will focus on the tasks of Mongolian Buryat women. Additionally, the project tries to understand the reason behind the decline of women living a traditional lifestyle. The goal is to bring specific attention to the female Mongolian pastoralists, specifically Buryat women and to raise awareness on gender and how it reflects in the Mongolian traditional lifestyle. The project is in the form of a photo essay (brochure) and composes of two elements. The project is in the form of a photo essay and composed of two elements. The photo essay displays a selection of photos where women carry out their daily tasks and these pictures are accompanied by text that gives additional context. The photo essay also shows Mongolian culture and the beauty of a rare custom in today's world.

The photo essay tells the story of female herders in Mongolia. That could ignite great interest in people to travel to Mongolia. The idea is to create more interest in the Buryat, which could benefit the herders. During my fieldwork conversations, people in Mongolia did note that tourism could help with the future of herding. Tourism can aid local herders in preserving their cultural heritage. The photo essay allows the readers to observe life in the countryside more intimately. Despite their struggles, the Buryat manage to keep up their tradition. As pastoralism is valuable and has been a tradition for generations, Mongolians want to keep

this tradition alive since it represents them and brings together people from various ethnic backgrounds.

My supervisor Alevtina Solovyeva had an immense impact on my work. She provided invaluable insights that facilitated familiarising myself with the culture. Alevtina also connected me with Yanji Dashtseren, who in turn had a network of people in Mongolia to whom she helped me reach out. Yanji became my key informant and gatekeeper. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Bogii and Pujee, who drove me and Bogii everywhere in Mongolia. Pujee was the person who introduced us to locals in the districts of the Khentii *aimag*. Pujee and Bogii helped me find people to portray in my essay and with the language barrier. Conversations between Pujee and I were mainly through the translator and sometimes we also spoke a few simple words in Russian. I relied on Bogii's translation in order to speak to locals. My visual anthropology supervisor, who helped me with the visual aspect of my work, was Liivo Niglas, with whom I reviewed my photos and who provided insights into how to choose the best pictures and finalise my photo essay idea. In addition, I worked with and received assistance from Madis Kats, an ethnologist, when designing my brochure and understanding its technical parts.

I used various Ethnographic methodologies in this work: visual ethnography, participant observation, and interviews. I will analyse two primary methodologies in the following research, namely visual anthropology, and participant observation. In order to fully illustrate and evidence the circumstances of female Mongolian herders, I considered it advantageous to engage the audience through visual media. By observing visually what women Mongolian herders look like, the details of their households, what tasks they are expected to complete in a herder community and how they go about their day to day lives, I consider that the audience will gain a much more impactful understanding of the Buryat pastoralist tradition from a gender perspective.

The introduction part of this work gives an overview of my project and its aims. Also, I will note the methods that I used while conducting my research. In the following chapters, I will elaborate on the details of my project by covering the traditional lifestyle of Mongolia and its recent history and briefly introducing the Buryats, who live in Mongolia. In the methodological part, I will focus on visual ethnography, fieldwork, and participant observation, and I will also cover the topic of ethics in visual anthropology. The last chapter

will cover the photo essay itself: the process, the methodology and history part, and extended commentary on the project.

I would like to note that I am not claiming to research about a new topic. On the contrary this has been studied before. Women herding and leadership is not a unique concept to my work only; but I consider that it needs more awareness in the context of Mongolia. Hence, I contribute to this topic with my research and project.

## 1. Cultural background: traditional lifestyle

In this chapter I will talk about pastoral tradition in Mongolia, Buryat's history and belief, women's position as pastoralist, their education, and leadership programmes.

### 1.1. Pastoralism in Mongolia: a tangible heritage

Mongolia, a land famous for Genghis Khan, borders China and Russia. Moreover, it is one of the largest countries in the world by land area, with only 3.3 million people living there, 40% of whom are herders. It is a country that hosts many diverse ethnic groups. Also, Mongolia is well-known for its rich tradition of pastoralism. Despite facing challenges in a modernised world, people are still managing to preserve the herder lifestyle in Mongolia. The land of Mongolia is more than 1.5 million square kilometres. A significant part of this is grassland, making the country suitable for herding. The Gobi Desert makes up the south, while the north of the country is mountainous.

Due to being the most sparsely populated country in the world, Mongolia provides herders with excellent opportunities to herd animals. Most Mongolians live in *aimags* (provinces), i.e., the first level of administrative division in Mongolia. The one provincial municipality is the capital city Ulaanbaatar, which serves as a home for more than half of the country's population (more than 1 million people). *Soum* is the second smallest administrative division, meaning a district. The smallest of these *aimag* and *soum* is a subdistrict *bagh* (*bagh*), referring to an area that is not a centralised village and includes only herders.

For thousands of years, Mongolians have been engaging in pastoralism. They rely on their animals for income, food, tools, clothing, and fuel. Herders are mobile; they migrate to various summer and winter camp locations. Herders have multiple animals they herd, known as *tawan khoshuu mal*, which refers to the "five snouts," namely sheep, cattle (including yaks), camels, horses, and goats (Atwood 2004: 14). All these animals are being herded in separate locations. Most animals, such as sheep, goat cattle, and horses, are herded in the steppe. Others are kept in the mountainous areas (*uul*), while camels are found in the Gobi Desert, and reindeers up in the north. The aforementioned five animals are all milked and provide nutritious food to the locals. The animals serve different purposes, for example, sheep, cattle, goats are raised for meat, and horses for riding. Both camel and cattle are used as beasts of burden (Atwood 2004: 14). As much as herders keep these animals for personal use, they are also used in market production (Meurs 2022: 84). One third of Mongolian GDP



comes from agriculture and livestock husbandry (Boldgiv 2020: 5). The most important income source for herders is cashmere from goats. Due to that, several herders raise goats, however it should be noted that these animals have a harmful impact on the grasslands.

The seasonal mobility of pastoralists requires them to have a portable house, called a *ger*. Gers are sturdy wood-framed, cloth, and felt-covered homes (Atwood 2004: 15). Gers. They are made for different weather conditions in order to endure the Mongolian climate. The portable home is assembled and taken down in 30-40 minutes contain a stove with ventilation in the middle of the structure. The stove serves two purposes, to heat and for cooking. Mongolians use dried cow or yak dung for fuel. The stove is great for cold winters as it heats the house in no time and keeps the place warm until the early hours (Golubski 2019: 4). A modern *ger* consists of cupboards, tables, chairs, and colourful chests containing valuables, two beds, and a television. The latter is powered by a solar panel (placed on top of the *ger*). If a family can afford it, they can own two *gers* – one for living in and the other for cooking and preparing food (Golubski 2019: 21). Additionally, the *ger* is divided by gender. When entering the *ger*, the left and right sides are specific to a particular household member. The left side is for men, and the right is for women. It is not allowed to pass through the middle point to the other side of the *ger*. It also has a traditional ritual division between masculine and feminine energy. The division is due to the two central poles (*bagaanas*) that symbolise the woman, and the man that supports the dome (*toonoo*) which symbolises the sky. In other words, the man and a woman come together to support the universe. The left side, for men, is purely masculine, and the women's side is considered impure (Spain 1993: 142). This led to men getting to keep books on their side and women were not allowed to read them until recently. There is a Mongolian saying, "For a woman to look at a book is like a wolf looking at a settlement (Spain 1993: 142)." This suggests that women being literate was not seen as natural by men. Yet, a change took place after an essential movement in Mongolian history. During the socialist revolution, books travelled to the women's side to enable them to become literate, too (Spain 1993: 142).

One more notable change in Mongolian history was after the Soviet Union. During the socialist regime, the livestock of herders belonged to *negdel* (an agricultural collective), which occupied an area or a district. Pastoralists herded for the state in *negdel* because the state owned the livestock and thus provided all the essentials for herding (Golubski 2019: 3). This time was safe for herders because the state took care of the costs of livestock mortality that came with environmental disasters such as predator attacks, droughts, or *dzuds* (harsh

winters) (Ahearn 2018: 402). This system was a result of the collectivization process in the 1920s. However, once the socialist system collapsed, a new programme came along in the 1990s, i.e., privatization. This meant that state-owned livestock now became the herder's responsibility; in other words, they became the owners of the herds and had to manage their own income (Adiya 2010: 107). Privatization brought unemployment to the country, as 50% of the population was not working. This led to people searching for jobs abroad or getting informal work, and some became herders. This was a problem because not everyone who became herders knew what they were doing, and the government was no longer involved in managing the livestock of the herders as it used to be (Ahearn 2018: 402). Many herders struggled because they were left to their own devices with herding in a harsh environment (Golubski 2019: 3).

Herders live by the belief that time and space are limitless. This is why the recent change in pastoralism goes against their belief, namely the privatization of the land which means dividing the land so that individual people possess it (Sarlagtay 2004: 327). Yet, Mongolians see the land as accessible for everyone to use and graze; hence, privatizing the land goes against their ideology.

## 1.2. The Buryats: history and belief

Buryats are recognised as one of the largest ethnic groups in Mongolia after the Khalkha. They mainly live in the northern and north-eastern regions: Dornod, Khentii, Selenge, Bulgan, and Khövsgöl ( $\approx 46\ 000$ ) (Khabtagateva 2013: 155). However, Buryats can be found in places other than Mongolia, such as Russia and China (by the name Barga). The most significant number of Buryats live in the Buryat Republic in Russia ( $\approx 450\ 000$ ). Moreover, many Buryats reside in China ( $\approx 70\ 000$ ).

In the modern period, Buryats living in Mongolia often are the descendants of Buryat Russian migrants. It is believed that both poor and rich escaped Russia from the Soviet projects of collectivization that created a threat to their cattle and lives (Nowicka, Zhanaev 2017: 123). Historically Buryatia and the Buryat ethnic group were formed after the Russian conquest and establishment of the Russian Mongolian borderline in 1720. That meant the Baikal region got separated from Mongolia and its population (Bruun, Narangoa 2006: 274). This created a division between the Buryat people based on their territories. One is the Western Buryats (Cis Baikalian) and the other the Eastern Buryats (Trans Baikalian)

(Khabtagateva 2013: 156). They have differences in some cultural and dialectic ways. For instance, in the 18th century, Eastern Buryats became Buddhists while the Westerners were more massively converted to Christianity. Additionally, the latter adopted a more Russian culture, as evidenced also by their names. Eastern Buryats have names of Mongolic Tibetan and Sanskrit origin, while Western Buryats carry Slavic and Christian names (Khabtagateva 2013: 156).

The aspect of belief among Buryats is important. As mentioned, Buryats converted to a different faith, but from the beginning and in different periods shamanic traditions played a noticeable role. Many of those Buryats who have been converted to Christianity keep belonging to their ancestral traditions and beliefs and (in different proportions) combine Christian and indigenous shamanic ideas (Khabtagateva 2013: 156). However, shamanistic traditions now exist in local Buddhism, as well as regional shamanic traditions adopted a lot from Buddhism, and many practices and beliefs are presented in both interacting faiths. For example, in shamanism, the supreme deity is the Eternal Blue sky (Khükhe Mönkh Tengeri), whom Buddhists Buryats also worship nowadays (Khabtagateva 2013: 157). Buryats have a more complex set of gods with a hierarchy from shamanism and „complicated sacrificial and initiation rites (Bruun, Narangoa 2006: 272).” Buryats respect and worship their deities, and they have sacrificial places for it. There are stone piles called *ovoos*, found both in Mongolia and Russia. *Ovoos* can be found on mountain tops and roads. Furthermore, *ovoos* can also be found in sacred mineral springs, alongside lakes, ponds, or rivers, where water spirits are thought to reside (Lindskog 2016: 3). To worship the spirits of the location, a traveller has to offer something that can be alcohol, fermented milk (*airag*), or objects such as coins, buttons, or tobacco (Khabtagateva 2013: 157). In *ovoos*, many silk scarves are tied to the location and can be in different colours representing a specific aspect. By way of example, blue, the most common colour one can find there, represents the eternal sky and good luck. Yellow represents positive energy and the sun. White represents, and red means fire, and the colour green for pasture and wisdom. Buryats consider *ovoos* to be places where humans (re)establish prosperous relations with the spirits, where they can ask for a fortunate future (Lindskog 2016: 2). These offerings can restore the imbalances that cause disasters and prevent them. For Buryats, it is essential to mainly protect nature from *dzud* and drought (Lindskog 2016: 2).

Besides *ovoos*, Buddhist Buryats women also make offerings in their daily lives. Furthermore, Buryat women have had a significant role in Buddhism. For instance, women

make milk tea and sprinkle it as an offering to nature and the earth (a practice included and popular in Shamanic and Buddhist traditions). This will ensure lasting health and wealth in the family and daily work lives (Bamana 2015: 199). Buryat women also have been mediators between the Buddhist temple and family religious needs for years. The women have done a lot for the temples and for monks by sewing garments to devote to their beliefs (Bruun, Narangoa 2006: 284).

It is essential to note that in 1937, after the 1921 revolution that turned Mongolia to Russian communism, a significant historical tragedy regarding Buryats and religion took place, known as The Great Purge. The latter greatly affected Mongolian Buryats, who had recently migrated from Russia at the start of the 20th century (Nowicka, Zhanaev 2017: 124). In Khentii and Dornod *aimags*, around 5368 Buryats were reported to be killed. The fear of being the next killed urged Buryats to conceal their identities (dialect and origin) and declare themselves as Khalkha people (Nowicka, Zhanaev 2017: 125). As a result, to become a „real Mongol “traditional culture of Buryats, their dialect started to fade (Nowicka, Zhanaev 2017: 125).

Regarding religion, during the purge era, Buddhist clergies (together with shamans and other religious specialists) were persecuted due to a new official socialist and atheistic ideology that took over the country. Many temples were destroyed. Monks were unfortunate as some were killed, tortured, and sent to Siberian work camps, and some turned to lay. For example, some people practiced shamanism in the shadow of Buddhism, yet it still had an unfortunate end. Shamanism, unfortunately, could no longer be practiced as well. All the shamanic paraphernalia and clothing got destroyed or put into museums. The time was rough; for 60 years, religious traditions were prohibited from being practiced by anyone in Mongolia (Bruun, Narangoa 2006: 255).

Shamanism and Buddhism is valuable in today’s Mongolian world, including Buryats (during the revival of shamanic rituals Buryat practices often were regarded as the most authentic and well-preserved). Mongolians perceive it as a national culture that unites Mongolian peoples within and across the state borders. The religious practises had an essential role in reformulation and rebuilding of the Mongolian national identity (Bruun, Narangoa 2006: 224).

### 1.3. Women as pastoralists in Mongolia

There has been a concerning decline in pastoralism among women. That can be due to a range of factors, yet lifestyle can be considered one of the main reasons. Mongolian pastoral women are notable for their diligent work. Mongolian rural women have different roles, such as cooking, tending to their kids and animals, sewing clothes, and caring for the household. Men who live with their wives and children have to tend to animals, too. If they want, the men can help with household tasks, yet it is optional for them to do so. A household in the traditional Mongolian lifestyle is gender segregated, which can lead to issues such as the decline of women in pastoralism.

Education also affects the decline of pastoralism among women due to young women choosing to stay in the capital city after completing their education. Young women are seeking a different path for themselves that does not include herding. They do not return to their countryside life (herding) unless they are unable to find a job in the city. That could be because career options in the city provide financial stability. Also, the jobs demand less physical labour from them. Women from herding families can choose a career that they are intrinsically interested in instead of continuing the pastoralist lifestyle they grew up with.

Compared to other Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Mongolia's women are more authoritative and independent. Mongolian rural women can have a freedom of choice over their life. It is being significantly encouraged by their families. Their freedom and independence to choose a different life path can stem from sexism. In Mongolia, it is said that if herder women were to stay as herders, they would not be as good as male herders due to their feminine nature. In traditional Mongolian culture, women are seen as fragile and weaker than men, and unable to tolerate the hard labour required for the pastoralist lifestyle. Hence, having a career option that does not physically strain them is considered more favourable by their families, too. Seemingly, such work can only be found outside of the herding lifestyle.

Herding tradition is not only affected by only young women deciding to leave for the city but also because some parents send their younger kids to school that are in *soums* because there are none in the *bagh*. Women are the caretakers of children that is why when kids are sent to school mothers go with their kids to be there during the early years of school. For herders, their animals are important; hence men stay to look after the livestock (Golubski 2019: 5). This affects the future of herding because both men and women have their gender-

related roles, and their joint contribution makes herder family life more stable. If there is only one gender doing all the work (usually men), it will strain the social and economic situation, resulting in losses (Golubski 2019: 5).

Going back in time in 1206 -1368 (Mongol Empire) ancestors of Mongolian women were extraordinary. They managed to be both warriors on the battlefield and mothers taking care of their children. Royal Mongolian women used to rule territories, ride horses, and command in wars. They were judges over criminal cases and even wrestled men (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 30). The women of Mongolia nowadays stay true to their roots. as pastoralist women still hold such greatness and knowledge. They have the same leadership qualities, are equally respected and separate gender based herding tasks do not diminish that (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 33). However, their potentials still need to be fully recognised by the community, especially by other men. Thus, they are not actively participating in leadership positions (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 34).

Notably, in 1924 women gained the right to vote, with Mongolia being ahead of other countries at that time. Once the government adopted the new constitution, it declared that "all citizens of Mongolia are entitled to equal rights irrespective of their ethnic origin, religious belief and sex (Adiya 2010: 98)." Two years later, in 1926, women gained more liberty by getting equal rights to work, education, and political participation (Adiya 2010: 98). Also, in 2012 Mongolia ranked first in gender equality in the categories of "economic participation and opportunity" as well as "health and survival" (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 30). Yet in political decision-making, Mongolia is ranked 127th out of 135 nations in terms of gender equality. This indicates that male-dominated decision-making affects pastoral women, as 42% of employed women are working in agriculture (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 30). What is lacking in women's decision-making is the fact that the men do not take them seriously. Women seemingly have an essential role in water management (water collection). Yet they do not hold the power to decide where to dig a well (Voltolini 2015: 20). Based on this example and women's role as herders, their ability is limited within the domestic sphere. Outside domestic work, their decision-making and voices hold less power (Voltolini 2015: 20).

It is important to mention socialism in the context of women and gender equality. Notwithstanding the negative effects of the socialist era, it had benefits for girls. Since then, the enrolment of girls in education has been higher than for boys. The collapse of socialism also impacted the numbers because boys returned to being herders while girls stayed in

schools (Adiya 2010: 112). The herding tradition expects boys to continue their father's job while women can continue their education (Adiya 2010: 50). The differing expectations could also be because Mongolian women are not seen as physically and mentally capable of the pressure and the violence that comes with herding. Hence, the attitude can be seen as protecting the girls for a better future or more narrow-minded thinking (Adiya 2010: 50). Education for Mongolian women is heavily supported, primarily by their families. It is believed that if a girl does not have a proper education, her future will not be as good as she might marry an unfit man. Also, sending girls to schools can be driven by the fact that some families are poor, so they rely on their girls to provide the best future for themselves (Adiya 2010: 38).

Education is the key to equality. In Mongolia, women with knowledge are more respected and can voice their opinions better (Adiya 2010: 14). Also, having higher education usually benefits women by gaining them more participation in livestock and income related matters (Meurs 2022: 80). The more Mongolia supports herder women to continue pursuing higher education, the better, as it can help them to become more invested in herding decisions (Meurs 2022: 96). There are even programmes specifically designed for girls to complete their high school and continue in their education path to support their empowerment (Meurs 2022: 96). There are also summer schools for herder girls to support them in their education by teaching them further maths and English.

#### 1.4. Decision-making: empowering female herders

One of the tasks of herder women is water collection; their responsibility is to get water (Hawkins, Seager 2010: 26). Usually, the water is carried back using a cart or by hand. Yet the man decides where to locate the *ger*, as it needs to be close to a body of water or a well needs to be dug and men are considered to be familiar with the pasture (Hawkins, Seager 2010: 27). Men have more power over water management when it comes to decision-making, leading to gender discourse. In fewer households, men decide alone, but in most families, men and women consult in the process of where to move the home or dig a well, but men have the final word (Hawkins, Seager 2010: 27). This decision-making role granted to men indicates that it comes from traditional gender roles, whereby men as herders are considered to have more knowledge about the surroundings (Hawkins, Seager 2010:27). Hence, they are better placed to locate any potential digging places and nearby waterbodies. This also suggests that any environmental decision-making is driven by gender-specific



environmental assessments (Hawkins, Seager 2010: 27). There is a need for more collaboration even though most management is done together. Yet, Mongolian men control the overall household decision-making. One of the doctors from a *bagh* in Voltolini's research said that women often stay at home and not deal with pasture management as it is not something they are familiar with. It is an activity that men do, and women are told by men how to handle the herds. Even though it is said that women in Mongolia are more respected in terms of being a herder than in other Asian countries, achieving more genuine gender equality still seems to be a work in progress. For some women, the men in their lives tell them that they are not knowledgeable about the pasture. As one of the women said, it is natural for women to follow the men who make decisions (Voltolini 2015: 48). Voltolini has concluded that different studies point to how women are not seen as official herders like their male counterparts but as helpers. This could lead to women wanting more leadership in pasture management (Voltolini 2015: 20).

Roberta Hawkins and Joni Seager elaborate in their study on how women are seen as poor decision makers and the education of women. Mongolian male herders saw women as good decision-makers, then the general lifestyle could also change. However, if women are seen as poor decision-makers, it will take years to see any change to see women as leaders in their herding community. The traditional belief that women are fragile beings and not good decision-makers has its impact, as women are opting for a different career path than pastoralism. Women in Mongolia, especially in rural areas, need to be seen as great leaders as much as men. It is not as if the women of Mongolia are illiterate or do not have access to education. On the contrary, Mongolian women, even those in rural areas, are given an option for education that most pursue. In Mongolia, women are more educated than men, which indicates that the problem is not their literacy but traditional gender and social beliefs regarding women that get in the way of women gaining a leadership or a decision-making position. Change needs to take place on a larger scale to reach rural areas. Thus, women need to be elected to the national office to become role models and show other women that they can also be great leaders (Hawkins, Seager 2010: 28).

Leadership and empowerment programmes encourage women to partake in them. Most programmes are designed to empower women and raise awareness on matters of equality and pasture management (Daley 2021: 17). The topic of gender in Mongolia is relatively new and has received more and more spotlight in recent years thanks also to these programmes. In addition, in those programmes, women can learn more about leadership,



empowerment, and self-confidence as women pastoralists face discrimination when voicing their opinion on community matters regarding development or herding in general. More participation by women is needed in such activities, mainly to counter the traditional view of women, which is quite narrow-minded. For instance, there is still a belief that men are more intelligent than women “women have long hair and short minds (Voltolini 2015: 52).” In Mongolian tradition, a woman is deemed a good wife if the house and the kids are taken care of. Women’s involvement could increase the diversity of herding views and help tackle the needs of community members currently more overlooked. This is important as it could eventually strengthen the collective decision-making and governance processes of community organisations (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 30).

In research conducted by Tunglag Ulambayar and Maria E. Fernández-Giménez on the topic of gender and how it varies between households and community groups, the results were that the majority of households (64%) were male-led. Out of those female-led households, 46% were run by widowed or divorced women, suggesting women could gain leadership without the presence of another man in the home. One thing to note about the results is that female-led households did not have durable phones or television and vehicles (trucks and motorcycles), and they also had limited access to knowledge exchange and information sharing. It suggests that such households are more vulnerable to any issues that come with herding. The recent *dzud* disaster caused immense livestock loss, an example of female-led households having fewer assets and limited information sharing. Female led household were much more negatively affected by the harsh winter. Another critical factor in their household vulnerability is the apparent lack of participation in local initiatives resulting in non-benefactor community collaborations (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 31-32).

Some locals believe that women in rural areas hold a vital role.

“When experienced senior women or those female heads with higher education stay at home and do not participate in collective efforts, the entire community can lose the opportunity to learn from their experience and knowledge (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 33).”

Overall, women are great leaders who build trust among their group, which is reasonably necessary for herding. Strong faith and connections could lead to “improved rangeland management and, ultimately, to better natural resource conditions (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 33).”

Other academics think educating women on leadership and encouraging them to try community leadership roles could contribute to more „successful pastoral communities and

sustainable rangelands (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 33).” However, taking on new responsibilities, such as being a community leader, caregiver, and stay-at-home spouse, can burn women out. There is a greater chance of women being more courageous to take on a leadership role if more women were to do it. Both men and women support this idea (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013: 33). Thus, it is vital to have more programmes that empower women and make them feel confident in their knowledge and abilities. As stated in Ulambayar’s and & Fernández-Giménez’s research, if given a chance, a well-educated pastoral woman can be the change that the Mongolian traditional lifestyle needs for better herding. I believe that more confident, empowered women in leadership positions can be the secret weapon for tackling the recent decline of women in pastoralism and for ensuring the continuation of the traditional lifestyle in Mongolia.

## 2. Methodologies and implementations in the fieldwork

In this chapter, I will talk about ethnographic methodologies I used in my research and how I implemented them during my fieldwork. I will also cover the topic of ethics regarding visual ethnography.

### 2.1. Fieldwork

My fieldwork took place in Mongolia in 2021. I spent 9 and half days observing and collecting information by visiting different families. Despite the short duration of my fieldwork, I gathered enough visual material for the purposes of the topic at hand. My initial fieldwork idea was to visually capture climate change issues and their impact on the lives of herder families through interviews and surveys. However, my topic changed due to minor challenges with that subject; hence I opted for an issue more closely aligned with my previous research interests, namely women and gender equality. However, when collecting information about climate change as my initial topic, I conducted online fieldwork, which was challenging as there were not many who were able to assist me with that topic. I observed various social media sources see what kinds of posts are posted on climate change. As my topic changed, I had to rely on my fieldwork diary notes and additional help from Yanji from Mongolia, who was able to obtain additional information for me from Pujee.

In addition, I relied on my memory and my observations while participating in the day-to-day activities of the Buryat communities. During my fieldwork, I met families from diverse backgrounds; a few were better off than others as they herded more than five hundred animals and had assistant herders with them or working for them.

As the fieldwork took place in a culture different from what I am familiar with, I sought to educate myself on the relevant customs and traditions. Nonetheless, simply reading source materials on how Mongolian people live is insufficient for fully understanding the reality. Their lived experience was more enthralling than I foresaw. The people I observed were very welcoming, often letting their guards down and behaving in a familiar manner with the guests that entered their homes. However, these informants were found thanks to either luck or the driver's connections, as he is an important figure in that community. Having a key person from a tight-knit community is vital for the success of the project for any researcher. I considered myself very fortunate to have found someone like that to drive me around and introduce me to people. As the trip was during the corona period, herders were not

particularly keen on letting strangers visit their homes for understandable reasons. We visited five *soums* within the time frame of 9 and half days. At first, it was difficult to find people who were interested in letting us stay over and visually capture their lifestyles and to interview them. However, the more we drove around, the more we met people who would lead us to the next person, or we would meet with a family who already knew the driver. Most families we visited lived either with a young son or alone as husband and wife. A good few had another family member living with them as well.

Their ages remained around 40-80, and if they had kids, then the kids were teenagers, with anyone over the age of twenty either already married off or studying in the city and visiting their parents during the holiday week. Coincidentally, my trip coincided with a school holiday week. Thus, we saw a young man who was visiting their parents from the capital city.

Approaching families was sometimes haphazard as COVID-19 was at its peak in Mongolia, and households were reluctant to allow guests to enter. If they did let us in, then the conversation was shallow and not as pleasant as we hoped, since their attitude towards us was cold from the very beginning. Whenever we felt that our presence caused discomfort, we did not stay more than 20 minutes and instead went on to find a different household. This was because understandably we did not want to cause any discomfort. Luckily, the majority of the families were welcoming and interested in sharing their culture and tradition with me, either because they had a fair share of thoughts to share with us or out of courtesy. It is a well-known fact that in Mongolia, herders are welcoming and happy to let strangers in to share their traditions. During my fieldwork, the driver usually knew which households to approach, and he had his own strategy for it. He avoided families with a single motorbike and new-looking *gers* as it was a sign of a young family living there. They would not know much about the topics we were looking to discuss, and the driver also noted that it would not be right to stay with them as they might have a small child. Altogether, it would have been inconvenient for both parties. Thus, we sought out families with more vehicles than only motorbikes, implying that an elderly family was living there instead of single men or young families.

Most families were weary when I asked for permission to take photos. At first, they did not understand why it was necessary, but after explaining, the informants mostly agreed. They wanted to know where the data would end up, whether for the private or public eye (Jagriti 2019: 2). I explained to them that it would be for the public to see. However, I observed

women being uncomfortable about being photographed, which I tried to alleviate by creating a safe environment. I did this by asking about their daily lives and talking while capturing them in their environment. To make being photographed more intimate and safer, I also disclosed information about myself; since I obtained personal details about their lives, it felt appropriate for this exchange to be mutual. Also, it is a straightforward way to have a smoother connection with one's participants (Jagriti 2019: 2). Understandably, I was in the private space of people that they were not that confident with sharing immediately with a stranger. It is important to note that in research, it is crucial to view the participants who share an essential part of their lives as human beings, not only as mere information sources (Jagriti 2019: 2).

As a custom, before taking any photos or engaging in conversation, I handed the woman of the house sweet treats as a gesture of gratitude for them agreeing to let us into their private space. Usually, after that we were invited in to sit down and have a cup of salty milk tea with bread and either dried curd or yogurt. After eating, we continued with our interviews or questionnaires, and mostly the husbands would do the interviews and answer the questions; if needed, their wives would help. However, we also visited households without men where the women would respond. Usually, after interviews I would ask again if they would be comfortable with me taking pictures. I noticed that the people we met would rather have their environment photographed than their faces – this was a common theme among women. In general, it was challenging to simultaneously take pictures, talk and be a part of their lifestyle, so I entered observations in my notebook only either late at night or in the morning when I could be alone with my thoughts. As people were constantly surrounding me, finding a time and place to be alone for even 30 minutes was challenging. Also, for safety reasons, I stayed within a reasonable distance from the *ger* or house. I was told to stay near my companions and the *ger* of the host for safety. Most interviews lasted about 20-50 minutes, depending on how much the participants had to say about climate change. I always double-recorded by using a camera and a phone to record the interviews.

When taking photos, I ensured I created a safe environment by showing interest in the people being photographed as individuals or complimenting their looks, especially with respect to women, as I noticed a few were on the shy side. As a freelance photographer, I know how to take portraits, but I had to learn when it came to taking pictures of them engaged in daily activities. I was conducting visual ethnography and participant observation in order to capture the right moment and make them feel I was not invading their privacy. People were

incredibly open to showing me photos of their homes, their belongings, hand-me-downs, and anything that held importance. I observed that they were glad to share these things with a stranger. Also, the driver sometimes told me to take specific photos of items he found important for his national identity such as the garments, horse riding equipment and chests of drawers, food, drinking cups or technology. While at first, I felt his suggestions interfered with my methods, soon I started to appreciate it as I got more comfortable with my visual ethnographic skills. Even though I have used visual ethnography before in my studies, as it is a relatively new skill, I was not confident enough to implement it right away I did not anticipate needing to rely on the visual ethnography method, but it did make me understand the Buryat community and Mongolian traditional herding lifestyle from a local's perspective. A few informants placed their prized possessions in front of the camera. By way of example, one research participant was a horse rider and he had put all the medals he had won on a string which was stretched across the *ger* to show his identity.

There were instances when Pujee used my camera without me instructing him as to what he should photograph, this is known as the auto photography method. This method is also great because participants get to photograph things that represent them (Noland 2006: 2). It enables to see the world through the participants eyes, resulting in more raw data. That was also challenging because, at first, I felt the need to interfere. I wanted to make a few suggestions, but eventually, I let him have fun with it. Hence, relying on the abovementioned methods introduced newcomer confidence in myself. First, I felt a sense of pride in the way Pujee and the participant were showing the objects to someone who was an outsider, which made me appreciate my position as a researcher there. Also, it gave me a sense of joy as well, managing to incorporate other people into my work. This was very meaningful because thanks to their contribution my work was more informative.

With respect to the equipment utilised during the fieldwork, I always carried two DSLR cameras: a Nikon D600 (the main one used for photos and videos) and Canon EOS 700D (for quick and efficient captures). My Nikon 50 mm was always on manual and was great for getting better images and videos. On the other hand, Canon saved me some time and was easier to use when I had no time to adjust the camera settings. Sometimes I kept the Canon camera in the car just in case there was something interesting to capture when doing outdoor activities. I found it convenient to have cameras in various locations.

As I only spent a short time with everyone, I took portraits that were not a visual representation of their lifestyle. At that time, I did not realise how useful it would have been if I had more moments in which movement was happening. Encounters with the research participants were brief, as it was challenging to create a safe environment where they felt sufficiently comfortable in the presence of a camera. Sometimes the informants wrote down the answers to the surveys, so there was nothing to photograph as it would not capture a moment from their ordinary way of living.

My primary methodology type was visual ethnography; thus, I thought that language would not pose any issues, yet it proved to be the opposite. Sometimes I was alone with the informant/s and could not communicate with them, so the action was visually captured, yet the backstory was gone. Hence, my lack of language knowledge and reliance on my Russian skills were quite limiting because a great deal of the participants did not speak Russian. However, conducting fieldwork with a translator simplified my research as I could communicate better with the people I met.

One of the ethnographic methodologies is also participant observation which has been the primary methodology for anthropologists for qualitative data collection during their fieldwork (Kawulich 2005: 2). This method gives anthropologists a better understanding of the people they study in their natural settings while participating in those activities (Kawulich 2005: 2). This process requires one to blend in with the community one is researching and simultaneously observe their behaviours and daily activities while staying objective (Kawulich 2005: 2).

Communication with informants was especially effective when I put my camera aside because it was obvious that the camera put pressure on them. People were more open to communicating once the camera was not present. Participant observation is one of the most practical ways to understand and integrate oneself into a different environment. As an observant, it was challenging to partake in most activities as the participant had to invite me first. Yet, in rare cases, I could initiate the participation myself. However, as they were herders and I did not have relevant experience, I could only help with minor tasks such as dung collecting or preparing the table. In one instance, the informant took me on a horse ride to check on the livestock, and once we found the animals, he gave instructions on how to call the animals together. This is an example of a moment where we managed to communicate despite our lack of common language knowledge. There I managed to both

observe and participate in someone's lifestyle. As I mentioned, one of the most challenging parts of the fieldwork was the lack of language knowledge, but with the help of my translator, I managed to get the needed information. It was essential to create a comfortable space for the informant, so I usually strayed away from writing in my notes during participant observation. Therefore, I had my phone in hand, and once our conversation ended, I wrote down the information I had received. I usually wrote all the other information (i.e. my own observations) in the morning or the night before going to sleep I wrote less during the last days of my fieldwork as I did not seem to find any free time from all the activities I did. Such as riding a horse and checking on the animals, translating interviews with Bogii, meeting new people and filming interview clips. I wrote down my observations and feelings about my environment, and the information relevant to my research topic. I wrote about the people I had met and extra information that was not relevant to the people but to me as a researcher as to how to improve as a researcher, and sometimes I wrote down the errors I made that I should avoid as a researcher going forward.

My position as a young woman researcher had benefits. For instance, it was easier for me to blend in and gain the host's trust. Yet, being a woman has its dangerous side, as I could be an easy target for harassment. Often, the informants asked me how a young girl like me could fly that far alone on her own, whether I felt afraid or if my family was fearful of my safety. I ensured them that I had trusted myself in the hands of my informants and that I felt safe to be in Mongolia. I felt safe as a woman researcher in the countryside as I had two adult informants with me who guaranteed my safety. One time it was apparent that my driver did not want to stay with one host family for two reasons – firstly, random people kept coming in and out, and secondly, young men were visiting. As I understood, sexual harassment and rape issues were still prevalent in the countryside against women. I only once felt uncomfortable in the presence of another informant. That was when a person drunk in the daytime initiated physical contact with me without consent. After my experience and conversations with the participants, I sensed that Mongolian women herders would have a tough time here, especially young women. I even encountered conversations where the discussion involved selling me off to the informant's family for dowry, which I quickly dismissed as local humour and did not give importance to it.



## 2.2. Visual ethnography

One of the most important authors for visual anthropology students is John Collier who paved the way for by placing photography on a prominent position in the visual anthropology world. The first book of John Collier, Jr is “Visual anthropology: Photography as a Research Method” in 1967 which put photos into a different and better perspective and second edition of the book is coedited by John Collier, Jr and Malcolm Collier in 1986, which is a classic.

Visual anthropology means using various visual mediums in fieldworks and then presenting the outcome of the visual data in the form of a visual project. Visual anthropology mainly consists of two primary approaches: different visual mediums as data collection or visual medium as a mirror of human experience (Annist, Kaaristo 2017: 87).

Visual ethnography is one of the most efficient ethnographic methods. It helps with interpreting and understanding the data from a different perspective. In addition, this method consists of various visual approaches: photography, film, video, painting, drawing, et cetera.

The current qualitative ethnographic method focuses on the lives and the environment of the participants (Glaw 2017: 2). Visual ethnography utilises various forms of visual materials, of which photos are the biggest medium. Photography is an excellent medium for gathering data and recording field notes and memos (Scott 2018: 723). As mentioned, visual methods are being used to record data; in my case, the data was photography (Scott 2018: 21). I used my photos to tell a story in a photo essay. Through photos, the observer can come up with their own story. Photos are ambiguous, allowing the audience to interpret the meaning of the photo they see themselves.

Visual ethnography was my primary method for conducting this project. It is a unique way to document people and their environment when there is a need for visual support or documentation in fieldwork. I used the camera to portray and support the aim of my project, which is to understand the lifestyle of Mongolian pastoralist women in the Buryat community. The camera can be seen as an instrument to tell a story. With the camera, one can create an intimate connection with the research participants. Yet, the process can be tricky, especially in an unfamiliar cultural space where speaking the local language is advantageous. Having common sense in these instances is helpful as one could otherwise come off as invasive while taking photos of every moment of the participants’ day. Being a confident photographer alone will not be sufficient if the pictures are not taken with ethics in mind.

There were instances where I did not want to use my camera because I wanted to get out of that researcher persona. I should have always stayed in that role. I still need to find the line between being a researcher and a non-researcher. This points to another topic that I struggled with during my fieldwork, which was how the participants viewed me either as an insider or an outsider. As the latter, I had the advantage of getting them more excited to share their life and traditions with me. As a stranger, I was in a position where they could entrust me with sensitive topics they would not share with other locals. For example, in the fieldwork, one woman told me that she disguised her son as a girl to ward off any negativity that could make him ill. It is often said that sharing intimate parts of your life with strangers is more accessible as they can be neutral about it. As an insider, I gained their trust in order to be a part of their lifestyle, to eat and live with them. As a researcher, navigating between being an insider and an outsider is quite challenging. It depends on the context, interactions, and a researcher's relationship with the community (Jagriti 2019: 3). One cannot control their position as an insider or an outsider as it is already forming the minute one reveals their gender, status, age, and ethnicity to the participants (Jagriti 2019: 2-3). If the researchers find the middle ground between being an insider and an outsider, the research outcome will be more reliable (Jagriti 2019: 3).

Intimacy with participants allows one to conduct visual research more efficiently, especially in smaller communities. Creating a bond and attachment with one's participants gives them better results. However, this can lead to difficulties after fieldwork when one must then detach oneself from the place and people in order to conduct neutral work (Jagriti 2019: 5).

Being attached and emotionally invested during fieldwork is usually not advised. Yet, it is challenging not to engage in this because emotions surface once one establishes relationships with the participants. If I would not have shown emotion and had become indifferent, the data would have looked quite different. Even though scientists are advised to conduct their research and get information without being emotionally invested, it is necessary to establish those emotions in order to gain the respect of the participants. I would not have been able to listen to people's personal stories if I had not been emotionally invested in my work.

The camera became an essential tool for me during conversations with participants (Schwartz 1989: 125). People were curious about why I was carrying my camera everywhere. When two brothers came to ask whether we had seen their lost horses, their eyes caught my camera. If I had not taken pictures of them, I would not have ended up

conversing with them about their lost horses Hence, my conclusion is that having a camera, even if one is not doing visual ethnography research, is still beneficial. Moreover, it gives locals a reason to start a conversation and makes interviews smoother.

When looking back at my fieldwork, I would have changed certain things, for example, I would have been less afraid of taking out my camera in the beginning. I thought my camera would objectify the participants. I could only make photographing people and their private space into a natural thing if I encountered something new (e.g., ritual). In the past or even today, using a camera comes with a sense of objectifying people during research, even if the camera is useful. Yet photography is no different from any other ethnography method in placing the participants as “other”. In a way, I am objectifying my informants with my camera; however, when I implemented a different approach where I could collaborate with them, I felt less invasive (Barley, Russell 2018: 4). The new approaches were visual ethnography methods: photo-elicitation (where you and your participants reflect on the photos), and autophotography (where you give the participant the freedom to take pictures of things that represent them). Those methods helped me understand the lifestyle of Mongolian herders. However, the photo elicitation and auto photography methods were not used in the photo essay.

Research should not be done on a subject but with them (Pink 2007:13). As a researcher, it was important to me to make my participants feel that they have the most say in what is essential to document and that they feel represented by these photos (Barley, Russell 2018: 5). Any visual data that a researcher is collecting should be concluded with a reflection by the informant, which is why visual methodologies are great for data collection and for reflection and collaboration with the participants (Barley, Russell 2018: 5).

A camera is an effortless way to start a conversation with informants, but it could also come with dominance issues. It is a tool that could harm the participants, which could change their status from a participant to a victim. A camera provides easy access, yet in some cases, it can be difficult for the researcher, especially when the participant is of a certain gender. In my experience, I gained relatively easy access to both women’s and men’s spaces. However, I can imagine a male researcher in my stead not getting access to areas where Mongolian herder women felt comfortable with me.

### 2.3. Ethics in Visual Anthropology

On ethics in visual anthropology, I chose to refer to Ingrid Rüütel's "Truths and Ethics in Visual Anthropology" study. Ethics in visual anthropology is vital because the collected data is sensitive, especially when it is shared with a broader audience. Hence "sensitive sense of discretion is required (Rüütel 2009: 205)" In addition, there are three different ethics levels in visual anthropology: the ethics of the photo taker, the ethical principles of the people featured in the photos, and the ethics of the public audience (where it is shown). Another ethical question is the portrayal of participants. It is unethical to stage scenes for the sake of your research. Ingrid Rüütel stated that an anthropological project is „a historical document (Rüütel 2005: 206).” Hence any fake situation is condemned. However, there are exceptions; for example, when the participants share ancient customs or wear a traditional garment, sing, and dance to traditional songs, it is appropriate to stage for visual data. Participants should not be forced to do something out of their comfort zone and be forced to behave unnaturally. Everything you capture and share with the world should be genuine. „Distorted details reflect alien ethics (Rüütel 2009: 205-208).”

Another ethical question emerged during my fieldwork when I witnessed one of my participants performing a religious ritual, which involved respecting the Sky deity and later doing a memorial ritual for her dead mother. When I entered the room with my camera to try to capture the scene, I questioned the ethics of photographing this intimate moment. How much of it was I allowed to photograph, and was it unethical of me to get too close to the altar with my camera? I did not start photographing until I got approval from my participant. It might have been challenging to get permission in more serious ritual sites. However, I was lucky enough to have had a safe bond with the housewife for her to permit me to photograph the moment. To elaborate, we should not take our position as insider/outsider researchers for granted and should always ask for permission, especially in such sensitive situations. I am beyond grateful that she entrusted me with that moment.

Another ethical question is how much one can photograph, mainly in closed communities. Pastoralists in Mongolia are more of a closed community, so I tried to keep my distance from them, especially in situations where I witnessed someone's intimate moment. Unless I was permitted to capture the moment, I kept my camera in the bag and continued with participant observation. There seems to be a misconception about private space. Researchers seem to think capturing intimate moments comes naturally once the participants allow researchers

into their personal space. One should never stop asking whether the moment or thing they want to capture got approval from the participant.

Whenever I noticed discomfort in my participant's face, I removed my camera. Morality always comes first before my passion for taking photos. Ethics was crucial when dealing with guests or children in the area. Usually, I asked the parent or another adult whether they approved of me taking photos of the child. Most responded with, "Of course!" Photographing strangers, we met by coincidence was challenging because I did not know if they were fine with being photographed. The driver initiated the permission question, which mostly guaranteed approval from the locals. There were also instances in which hosts were jokingly telling guests, "Look, a girl is here to take photos of our lives!" and telling others to be open to the idea of being photographed.

### 3. Creation of a photo essay: process and reflection

In this chapter, I will talk about the theoretical part of the photo essay method and its history. I will also elaborate and reflect on my photo essay process. This is followed by an extended commentary on what I learned throughout my fieldwork about the topic of gender (women's role) among Buryat herders and what other topics arose through the research.

#### 3.1. Extended commentary on “Encounters with the Buryat pastoralist women in Mongolia.”

In the age of technology, anthropology is on an intense course toward visual documentation, enabling the creation of more photo essays. The photo essay approaches anthropology from a personal vantage point to make the readers believe in the experience rather than simply telling it with only words. In the past, cameras were a power tool, but nowadays, many people have a smartphone that does not pose a great deal of threat to an average person (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 2). Photo essays are storytelling visual pieces that are series of photos “investigating and describing a specific theme (Sutherland 2016: 116).” Photo essay has a long history of usage. It is a great means, especially in situations where photos can transmit essential themes that are topical. The photo essay concept in visual storytelling goes back to the time when mass-circulated magazines first started using it. That phenomenon was known as photojournalism; it was common for journalists and photographers to work together (Sutherland 2016: 115).

Photo essays started because images reached a larger audience than written text, as not everyone could easily understand written texts during those times. Also, photos carry more power than text which is why in photo essays, they are the primary focus. Photo essays started in Europe in Germany at the end of the 19th century when magazines began to use images in addition to their text, although unfortunately World War II put an end to it (Graf 2014: 1). Soon after the WW II, American publishing houses took over the visual journalism tradition of Europe. In 1936, LIFE magazine published its first issue, established a large following among the middle class. Henry R. Luce and Daniel Longwell were the masterminds behind the magazine LIFE magazine, which was the first to use images as a primary editorial tool (Graf 2014: 1-2). What helped LIFE magazine come to life was Henry Luce's journalistic vision. He was the man who believed that photography had more to provide (Graf 2014: 2). In Luce's mind, people are simple beings who want quickly absorbed

images without explanation. An image that can inform and entertain fascinates people as it becomes a sensation in Luce's vision (Graf 2014: 2-3). The motto of LIFE magazine was that an image is a tool for information. Shortly after the launch of LIFE magazine, it gained a rival – Look magazine, which had a similar vision but where LIFE dealt with political stories, the main aim of Look was to entertain its audience (Graf 2014: 6-7).

The origins of the concept of photo essays were a shade more negative than its present-day use; back then, people had ready images to share with the world about the cruelty of humankind (Becker 1995: 6). Older magazine photo essays were overly descriptive, including descriptive texts, titles, subheadings, and captions that all helped the reader better understand what was taking place in the photo. Nowadays, photo essays use limited descriptive texts and assume the reader will understand what is going on in the picture (Sutherland 2016: 116). Photo essays not only need to have a comprehensive narrative but an aesthetical side as well. That is why the author needs to pay special attention to the layout of the photo/text narration from beginning to end (Sutherland 2016: 115). The text brings together the photo essay and helps the reader to navigate through the photo essay (Sutherland 2016: 116).

Photo essays, especially in cultural anthropology, are excellent means to portray the living conditions of the participants, their day-to-day lives, and their relationship with each other (Sutherland 2016: 117). Hence, I opted for a photo essay project, this way, I could also introduce my topic and the key people who play a crucial role in it.

Photo essays originated from journalism and originally used only a single image to tell a story unlike now, where photo essays contain more than one picture in order to give a complete overview together with descriptive text. The ethnographic photo essay must behave differently from art ones, as they need more descriptive text and written context for research purposes (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 3). Regarding the basics of photo essay, one is not required to have a background in visual anthropology, but it is beneficial (Crowder, Cartwright, 2021: 2). It is necessary to remember that images do not serve as illustrations of ethnographic text. On the contrary images carry power over the texts, not the other way around. Selecting photos during and after the fieldwork is the basic principle of a photo essay (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 2-3). The images should be professional, aesthetically pleasing, and theoretically interesting (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 4). More goes into photo selection yet finding these elements in a photo will provide a stronger image. The second basic concept

is the descriptive text which must be informative in terms of providing inside and background knowledge to set the atmosphere of the picture. The last basic concept is how the entire essay comes together; the layout of the text and image will give the reader a pleasant experience on any source (such as a wall, a page or a website) (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 4-5). Keeping these basics in mind will result in a successful photo essay that will give an engaging experience to the reader. A photo essay must speak to the audience. These elements seem simple and easy to follow. However, they are “deeply informed by ethics, theory, and practice (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 2-3).”

When engaging with the photo essay, naturally, images are the first thing one reads, while the text is secondary. Images hold more power over texts in photo essays, and the two come together to create a balanced piece of work, where “images and words flow in parallel streams, informing and amplifying each other (Sutherland 2016: 118).” As mentioned, images are powerful, but the audience gives meaning to these photos through their interaction with the images. Photos can say more than plain text and provide a better introspective on human conditions and their realities (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 10). “Photographs get their meaning from the way people involved with them understand them, use them, and thereby attribute meaning to them (Becker 1995: 5).” Photos also get their meaning from the written text.

The text must balance out the photo-text ratio so that photographs and text offer separate but potentially overlapping information streams (Sutherland 2016: 119). In an ethnographic photo essay, an image alone cannot make an argument or construct an analysis (Sutherland 2016: 119). Regarding the visual aspect of the text, it is best to keep it the same on each page. Having a smaller and more compact text encourages readers to engage with the work (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 8). When the photo essay layout is aesthetically pleasing, it will be easier for the reader to go from a large image to a text box. Through the layout, the audience will understand the message of the photo essay better (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 8). Sequencing of the photos is as important as the text that balances it out (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 4). Images that were thoughtfully selected are there for a reason, to relay information (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 8). The text should contain enough data on research methods and theory, and in the primary body texts, there should be enough context to complete the images. It is primarily images that describe the scene, not the text. The text should support the photos by giving information on the key people and the ethnographic setting of the scene, offering “ethnographic details that enhance the power of the image



(Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 6).” It is best to refrain from providing long paragraphs of text as it could detract people from the image. It is rather challenging to find a balanced text position as front laying the text could result in too much information that burdens the reader. On the other hand, providing text at the end makes the images stand out yet might overpower the reader due to the unbalanced separation between the text and the photo (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 6-7).

An ethnographic photo essay bases its work on theory in order to explore the human condition through images. The latter functions as data that provides theoretical context for analysing the theory further. The benefits of opting for an ethnographic photo is that they can be both aesthetically pleasing and ethnographically informative (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 4). Thus, when providing text to accompany an image, one should keep it ethnographic and provide missed information about the pictures. When writing the text, it is best to use one’s own words rather than writing stemming from an academic theory. It is best to paraphrase and cite only those works where “a quotation comes directly from the research itself and either provides context or helps develop a character in the visual narrative (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 7).” In the ethnographic photo essay, images and text must be complementary rather than supplementary (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 3).

### 3.2. Photo essay process and self-reflexivity

I originally intended to have an exhibition for my project. I was planning to have an exhibition about Mongolia and its climate situation, specifically how climate change affects the lives of herder communities day to day. I opted for an exhibition for one main reason. That is, I enjoy capturing moments and raising people’s awareness by showcasing photos about how climate change affects Mongolian herders. After my fieldwork in Mongolia, I realised my photos did not display evident climate change issues; hence, I could not continue with that topic. I had to choose a new topic to tell a story with my photos. I had many options; one of them was how average pastoralist women live their lives in the countryside. The women topic came to me after the topic of climate change. I originally chose the topic of climate change because my research interest lies in cultural preservation. Unfortunately, the Mongolian herding tradition is threatened not only because of climate change but also because of women leaving for the city to pursue a different lifestyle. Having deliberated how to reframe my project based on data collected during fieldwork, given my interest in cultural preservation it seemed appropriate to switch from investigating the threat posed by climate

change to the survival of the Mongolian pastoral tradition to the impact of women opting less and less often to stay in the countryside on the herder communities.

It also became clear that additional resources would have been required to host a photo exhibition. Hence, I pivoted to a photo essay for the project as it reaches people more efficiently. I had a selection of photos that I could use to tell the story of the pastoralist women of the Buryat community in the Khentii *aimag*. Moreover, I opted for a photo essay as it gave me more freedom to add more text, since text can support photos quite well. In addition, the photo essay method provides a better platform to reach more people because it can be in the form of a brochure circulated both physically and published online in a PDF format. With a method such as visual storytelling, one can talk more in-depth about the given research topics. It was also quite an easy decision to switch my project to a photo essay because I am curious about this style of photo documentation. This could also benefit me if I am willing to learn more about photojournalism.

Once I decided to the output of my fieldwork should be a photo essay, I reached the next obstacle – realising that selecting the right photos would be more complex than expected as I was unfamiliar with the process. The initial photo selection was challenging. My topic is about the women’s lifestyle as pastoralists in Mongolia. Hence, I selected one specific family where I encountered two women and tried to tell a story through their photos. However, the images did not seem to convey the message I wanted. Hence, I decided to focus on multiple women and tell their stories of life as a pastoralist in Mongolia. I chose the women with whom I had created a particular bond; hopefully one can also notice that from the photos. Thanks to our connection during the fieldwork, I had the most pictures of and information about the lives of those women. In the early stages of photo selection, I realised it would be better to categorise these women into specific groups. I made a folder for each woman and added every photo I took of them and their environment. After going through the pictures, I made a ‘NO’ folder that included the images that did not pass the first stage. I reviewed the remaining pictures with my visual anthropology supervisor Liivo Niglas to see which would best suit the photo essay.

The goal is to tell a story with these photos, so they need to be alive and have dynamics. Not every woman I had photographed had those types of dynamic images, so I decided to focus not only on the action part of the photos but the intimacy and rawness of the moment. The remaining six folders included photos suitable for the photo essay. After that, I wrote an

introductory text about each woman, including their background and every detail I retrieved from my fieldnotes, and enquired after more information from my informant. The text in the photo essay is to give additional context. Once I started compiling the full draft of the essay, I randomly placed the bits of text and photos to see how they fit together. Then I decided to remove one woman from the photo essay as her photos did not work with the overall images in remainder of the essay. Photos were less dimensional and dynamic than the rest and seemed more randomly captured, not thought through.

As the next step, the photos were cropped into various sizes to give freedom for creativity and not to be restricted by specific measurements for all the images uniformly. Each photo also contains a title that describes it and adds additional information that the reader might need to learn about the people.

After that, I started to write the introduction of my photo essay which had to include key facts about my work in Mongolia, with whom I carried out my research, where and when. I added the topic of my project and the importance of it and why it matters to talk about women herders of Mongolia in today's world. Then, I went on to perfect each woman's background text to give an overview of them and go in-depth into the stories they told me. Quite a few stories were more severe than others; hence my supervisor and I found it would be better to place the women and photos in such an order that the topic of the stories would gradually get more sensitive and intimate.

That being done, it was easier to continue with my photo essay because what remained was editing my work. Working on text is more difficult as the focus should be on the photos rather than the text; however, the text still has importance and gives an overall framing for the work. The texts about the women featured needed to be precise, not two pages long, so as not to exhaust or bore the target reader. There should be a balance between the number of texts and photos but finding that balance was difficult.

I needed inspiration to create my photo essay, as I needed to familiarise myself with this visual work. Thus, I turned to other photo essays, primarily those on the traditional Mongolian lifestyle or herding in different cultures. Perusing such materials helped me to understand my own research better. Unfortunately, I should have undertaken this step before the fieldwork, as it could have been beneficial when visually photographing people.

A crucial step in a photo essay is deciding who the target audience is – for this photo essay, I opted for general audience. Then, it is vital to make the essay accessible and not overly

theoretical, as the general audience will need help understanding the anthropological theories. Thus, even in an academic ethnographic piece, one should refrain from sounding too theoretical (Crowder, Cartwright 2021: 6-7). My photo essay differs from other photo essays in that the photos do not overpower the text but instead work together with it. Most photo essays keep the text part relatively short and straightforward. I opted for a photo essay where text has equal importance to photos, but still the photos are more prominent. It is difficult to compare my work with other photo essays because there is no strict rule for photo essay layout. The essential and central aim is that the focus is on photos. That is why my work differs from general photo essays where images and ethnographic text co-exist. My ethnographic text tends to be different. At first, I provide broad context on Mongolia, and then I get more personal with each photo series about the different women featured in the essay.

One of the main challenges in creating a decent photo essay is finding photos that can tell the story and be captivating enough to engage the audience. The time I spent observing and assessing the quality of the pictures was almost as nerve-racking as taking those photos. Images had to be carefully selected. I criticised myself too much as I slowly began to think I lacked suitable materials. Yet the more time I spent with my photos, the more intimate my knowledge about them became. I assessed them as individual photos and removed myself from the process because I understood that an overly critical mindset would not modify the fieldwork results.

Another challenging part of the photo essay was writing the text that brought the entire story together. I did not know what the style of the text should be and how academic it should sound. While it is a photo essay (which is an art form), it is also intended to be informative about Mongolian women as pastoralists. Finding the right tone was a tight rope walk. Looking back, I would assess my efforts as successful in finding the right writing style. Yet, improvements can still be made if using the same format in the future. One of the key things I learnt through the process of compiling the photo essay is how important it is to take photos with the final format or medium in mind. That should ensure that the photos will look better with respect to concepts, dynamics. Unfortunately, during my fieldwork I took photos with a different mindset because my focus at the time was different.

Even though it was challenging for me to embark on the project of compiling this photo essay, I learnt a great deal through it. One of them is how global events can interfere with research plans.

My master's project was not exempt from changes and delays when the Corona pandemic took over the world. Due to corona my plans changed, and I could not visit Mongolia in 2020. Due to uncertainty about the whole situation, I was advised to change my topic however I did not consider that because I was keen on finishing what I started.

It is natural to have challenges in your work, but overcoming challenges is something I learnt the hardest ways in recent years. It made me grow as a person not only in my studies but in my personal life as well. In addition, creating photo essays needs patience because some photos might not work together, meaning one must go through all the photos for another hour again. Finding a good layout for the images requires patience and diligence.

When it comes to the design then photo essays need to be aesthetically pleasing for the readers in terms of text and photo layout. It was challenging to find the correct balance to bring my ideas into life and Word was not a good option for the design. I was lucky enough to be guided and advised by Madis Kats, an expert in creating photo essays. He introduced me to an InDesign programme that simplified the layout process. InDesign is a programme that helps create posters, brochures, leaflets, books, etc. As my photo essay is a brochure, it was easier to create brochure pages in a more artistic way than Word could have facilitated. I experimented with the size of the photos and how small or large the text should be.

The process of finalising my text was challenging. I tried to keep it both ethnographic and literary in terms of the writing style. One rule of thumb for writing a photo essay is to keep it simple and to use one's words more than quoting from others. Nonetheless, as one is dealing with an ethnographic project, I still aimed to keep in references for the academic aspect while making the tone more accessible for the general audience.

As for the positive part, I realised that my passion for photo essays grew stronger as I am considering photojournalism in the future if things go well. This is a newfound passion that I never imagined I would ever have. My goals for the photo essay were almost achieved, and I never knew how capable I was of doing something unfamiliar.

### 3.3. Extended commentary on “Encounters with the Buryat pastoralist women in Mongolia.”

In this chapter, I will focus on what I learnt as a researcher from Buryat pastoralist women and their lifestyle and what topics I encountered during my research process. As a female researcher, I have always been keen on learning about other women’s experiences in different cultures. Hence, Mongolia was an excellent choice for me. The fieldwork provided information about the positive and the negative aspects of being a female herder in Mongolia.

To start with, the women I met were incredibly generous in sharing their lives with me. I understood that being a herder woman is such an admirable profession as these days many women in Mongolia choose to live in the city or provinces instead of the countryside. I learnt that Mongolian women are strong and resilient. They can overcome the hardships of herding despite some men saying that women are fragile and unable to herd as well as men. The women I met were just as capable and independent as their male counterparts. From these women I learnt that everything can be done as long as one has faith in it. Their faith in their animals and the land and spirits is something that I have never come across before. By sharing and caring for the land by making offerings to spirits who in turn gift the worshipper a prosperous land for herding. Establishing strong relationships not only with the spirits but with other people is something I also learnt from them. And the most important thing is that to be patient. I implemented this in my research as well, especially when I was rushing to finish my work or go to Mongolia during COVID-19. I let time do its thing and not worry too much about things that I could not control.

One particular thing has stayed with me from my fieldwork is the approach that Buryat have towards the land and how it can be respected. I remember when I sought to collect stones with me to bring back home to Estonia, they understood it was well-intentioned but told me that picking rocks and taking them with you is like hurting the land spirits. That changed my perspective on collecting stones as souvenirs, and I have adopted the Mongolian approach since.

There are many things I learnt from my fieldwork in Mongolia but one of the most prominent take aways is that one should not overprepare or set any specific expectations because most of the time, fieldwork will turn out differently from the set plans. When I was in Mongolia, I was originally supposed to stay in the countryside for 13 days, but upon arrival I was told that due to some unexpected issues the fieldwork was going to be delayed. Instead of viewing

the news as a setback, I reframed this as a positive development which enabled me to conduct so-called mini research around the capital city Ulaanbaatar instead. From this, one can conclude that while setting goals is important for research, low expectations are equally relevant given that often issues can and will arise during fieldworks.

Many different topics surfaced when I was writing the cover text for my photo essay. The main topic to note is that of education and how women these days decide to leave for the city due to the better living and employment opportunities that offers over the countryside. This explains why I only encountered small children who were girls and not teenagers during my fieldwork, whereas there were boys from all age groups. The studies I read explained that boys are more likely to drop out of school due to lack of workforce at home.

One should also note the fact that boys are expected to carry on as herders, while this is not the case for girls. These factors could result in boys avoiding going to school altogether, as they already know that they will remain in the countryside as herders after school. The present day gendered approach to pursuing education is empowering for the future generation of women in Mongolia. However, boys need to be supported in education as well. That is because those women who do not finish high school and instead marry a man who is not educated (at least to the same level) could well face issues in their relationship, such as verbal or physical abuse. For example, one particular student from Khentii *aimag* in Adiya's study stated that women who do not have education end up marrying the "worst men"—implying that education is the door to a better life but also to choosing a better partner for marriage (Adiya 2010: 86). Men without education can be ignorant of some important topics such as gender and leadership. The latter is another topic that came up in my research. These days, Mongolian women have programmes encouraging them to participate in leadership or empower them to understand their abilities better, showing that not only men can be great leaders but women as well. Even though women are respected in Mongolia, women are still not taken seriously regarding pasture management. Notably, the programmes are not only made for women, but some include men as well so they could also be educated on these important matters of gender equality. The intention is that men can then empower the women in their lives to take up leadership roles. The more Mongolians educate people on gender equality the better for the overall herding communities because both men and women have individual qualities that benefit the herding tradition.



During my fieldwork, I realised that Buryat women have the largely similar roles in the household, yet some do less than others due to their background. For example, Amgalan a woman discussed in chapter “Amgalan” of my photo essay, comes from a household with a husband and two sons and assistant herders. In her household, most of the physical labour is done by the men in the household or Munkhzul, the assistant herder. Hence, Amgalan herself is expected to focus on domestic affairs and kids. However, in a different household that was not included in my photo essay, I encountered a woman who was active both outside and inside of the *ger* as she did not have enough (hired) workforce in her household. Hence, the distribution of tasks can depend on the household dynamic and the availability of workforce.

I want to highlight one typical scene from my fieldwork: drinking milk tea and watching the women make that. Tea practise in Mongolia is very important and one thing I witnessed is how the first milk tea is always given to the man because he is the head of the household and then to others. I also learnt that it is advised to drink the milk tea prepared by a woman before doing any important tasks or going on a journey outside the *ger* (Bamana 2015: 199). That is because the tea is seen as a good luck symbol and provides successful journey due to woman’s pure and kind wishes that are imbued in the milk tea.

I learnt that herding is difficult and that those women who choose to go for something else are doing it because there are better financial opportunities outside of the countryside. Yet there is still a need for more gender equality when it comes to herding, because the labour distribution is not equal not only from the women’s perspective but the men’s as well. Those men who have wives who live elsewhere must deal with many tasks that usually strain them. As much as this work focuses on women, it is essential to mention that herding requires both men and women to participate in a knowledgeable and judgment free environment.



## Conclusion

The photo essay and cover text give necessary information to understand pastoral women in Mongolia and learn more about its long-lived herding tradition. Additionally, it provides background knowledge about the Buryat ethnic group and their beliefs.

I chose a photo essay as my visual project as it gave me more freedom with experimenting. Additionally, I could use more text to give a better context about the researched women and essential topics that surfaced when I was writing about these women. The master project titled “Encounters with the Buryat Pastoral in Mongolia” will be available to read from March. The photo essay consists of two main components which are images of Buryat pastoral women and text that gives an overview and goes in-depth about their personal stories. The photo essay will be available both online and in the department of Ethnology at Tartu University in the form of a brochure.

This cover text provides an insight into the roles of Buryat pastoral women in Mongolia and analyses the topics that surfaced when researching about women and their decision to leave the herding lifestyle behind. This work focuses on important topics, one of which is the programmes that are carried out in Mongolia. Specifically, to empower women, share knowledge about pasture management skills, and talk about gender roles in herding. Another essential topic in this work is education, especially among women, as it provides them with better employment opportunities. It is important to note that herder families favour their daughters over sons when it comes to education. That is because young men are expected to return to herding after their education. That can be because the traditional view of women is that they are fragile and cannot handle the masculine lifestyle of herding. At the same time, it is coded in boys that education is of secondary importance and being a herder is important for men especially as they are the lineage carriers.

This project aims to bring awareness to pastoral women in Mongolia, especially in the context of Buryat women, and to inform on the gender-segregated roles of herder women and how they are reflected in the traditional Mongolian lifestyle.

The cover text of the project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical overview of Mongolian history, pastoralism, specifically in the context of women, as well as the history and beliefs of the Buryats, education, and leadership programmes. The second chapter gives an overview of the methodologies that were used in the fieldwork,

visual anthropology, and ethics concerning visual anthropology. The final chapter talks about the methodology and the history of photo essays. It will also focus on the process of the photo essay in detail, which is followed by an extended commentary where I comment on what I learnt through this project.

As a final word, this work has created deep interests in me regarding photojournalism and cultural preservation. Regarding the future, I intend to continue my future works on Mongolian women and traditional lifestyle in the context of cultural preservation.

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## Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

### Kohtumised Burjaadi karjaste naistega Mongoolias

Antud magistriprojekt on fotoessee pealkirjaga „Kohtumised Burjaadi karjaste naistega Mongoolias” ja koosneb kahest põhikomponendist: fotograafia ja Burjaadi naiste lood. Fotoessee on kättesaadaval brošüüri kujul (Tartu Ülikooli Etnoloogia osakond) ja interneti platvormis alates märtsikuust.

Käesoleva projekti katustekst annab ülevaate Mongoolia karjaste naiste rollidest ning sellest, miks nad eelistavad linna elu karjuse elule. Uurimustööst ilmneb kaks olulist teemaharu, millest üks on Mongoolias läbiviidavad programmid, kus rõhutatakse naiste efektiivseid juhtimisoskusi, sh karjamaade juhtimist ning soorollide võrdõiguslikkust. Teiseks määravaks haruks on haridus eriti just naiste seas, sest see on võtmeks parema elu kujundamisel. Karjaste perekondades oluliselt toetatakse mõtet, et just tüdrukud peavad jätkama oma haridusteed rohkem, kui poisid. Mongoolia traditsiooniline vaade rõhutab, et karjaelu ning selle juhtimine on maskuliinne elustiil ning naised on selleks liiga haprad ja nõrgad. Samas poistele on aga sisse kodeeritud, et haridus on teisejärguline ning karjaelu juhtimine on esinevanemate traditsioonide oluline jätk.

Käesoleva projekti eesmärk on tõsta teadlikkust Mongoolia naiste karjakasvatamisele, eriti Burjaadi naiste kontekstis ning tuua tähelepanu karjaste naiste rollidele ja kuidas need rollid peegelduvad Mongoolia traditsioonilises elustiilis.

Valik eelistada fotoesseed tulenes soovist edastada inimestele Mongoolia naiste isiklikke lugusid läbi visuaalsete vahendite, mis toetaksid luua personaalset kontakti nende inimestega. Niisamuti on fotoessee kättesaadav nii paber kandjal kui ka *online* platvormis.

Lõputöö jaguneb kolmeks peatükiks. Esimene peatükk annab teoreetilise ülevaate Mongoolia ajaloo, karjaelu traditsioonilisest eluviisist, niisamuti Burjaatide ajaloo ning uskumustest, nende naiste rollidest, haridusest, kohalikest programmidest, mis käsitlevad naiste karjaelu juhtimist ning soorollide tähtsust.

Teine peatükk keskendub projekti metoodikale, kus kirjeldatakse detailselt visuaalset etnograafiat, sealhulgas välitöö protsessi ning visuaalse etnograafia eetilisi printsiipe.

Kolmas ja viimane peatükk kirjeldab fotoessee meetodi ajaloolist tausta. Samuti täpsustatakse ja kajastatakse fotoessee protsessi, millele järgneb laiendatud kommentaar selle kohta, mida

autor oma välitöö käigus omandas soorollide kohta Burjaadi karjuste seas ja millised muud teemad uurimistöö käigus esile kerkisid.

Kokkuvõtvalt võib öelda, et antud projekt annab publikule täieulatuslikku pildi Burjaadi naiste karjakasvatuse traditsioonidest.

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**Photo Essay: Encounters with the Buryat Pastoral Women in Mongolia,**

supervised by **Alevtina Solovyeva** and **Liivo Niglas,**

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