



Institute for
Social Anthropology

Centre for Studies in Asian Cultures
and Social Anthropology



OAW
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ISA INTERNATIONAL GUEST LECTURE

The State Constructs the Clan:

Anthropological Imagination and the Discourse of Tribalism in Inner Asia

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Wednesday, 3rd of November 2010, 16.00 pm [c.t.]

AAS Building Wohllebengasse, Seminar room 1
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Nineteenth century evolutionist social theory saw kinship as the organising principle for non-state society. This theory of change, by which egalitarian kinship society preceded impersonal class society, became the frame in which the anthropological conceptions of tribe and clan developed. But by the late twentieth century anthropology had largely rejected both evolutionism and classical theories of tribal kinship society. This paper explores the implications of this revisionist turn for our understanding of 'tribal' societies of Inner Asia and the dichotomisation of 'state' and 'non-state' society. I argue that the ordering of political relations by principles of descent can be seen to be a feature of aristocracy, and that these relations include many of the power technologies associated with states. Instead of a sharp division between the state and putative tribal society we see comparable projects of rulership with varying levels of centralization and bureaucratization. The local power relations that have made possible Inner Asian states could be reproduced with or without an overarching ruler or central 'head'. This political environment, in which almost all of the operations of state power exist at the local level virtually independent of central bureaucratic authority, I term the 'headless state'.

Dr. David Sneath is a Reader in the Anthropology of Political Economy, Head of Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He completed his PhD at Cambridge University in 1991. His doctoral research was a study of social, economic and political change among Mongolian pastoralists in Inner Mongolia. He carried out postdoctoral research on environment and society in Inner Asia, winning a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in 1994. In 1998 he took up a Lectureship in Anthropology and Development at Oxford University, before returning to Cambridge in 2000. He regularly travels to Mongolia for research and has conducted extended pieces of fieldwork with pastoralists. He is a co-editor of the journal *Inner Asia* and has authored more than 20 books and papers on the region. Recent publications include: *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Representations of Nomadic Inner Asia*, 2007, Columbia University Press; *Changing Inner Mongolia: Pastoral Mongolian Society and the Chinese State*, 2000, Oxford University Press; *The End of Nomadism? Society, State and the Environment in Inner Asia*, (with C. Humphrey) 1999, Duke University Press; and 'State policy and pasture degradation in Inner Asia,' *Science*, Vol. 281, No. 5380.