

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS IN MONGOLIA

Maqsooda S. Sarfi*

Abstract:

With the collapse of Soviet Union, the Mongolian government besides introducing democracy attempted to re-introduce the traditions and customs that existed there before the Socialism. In 1990, Mongolia proclaimed its new constitution where it stated the basic human rights including freedom of religion. Shamanism and Buddhism are back in every family; likewise construction of both yellow and red sect of lama monasteries are in full swing, Muslim *Kazakhs* have full freedom of worship, and many Christian churches are operating in different parts of Mongolia. Both young and old visit religious places and feel pride in their traditions. One finds in every corner near the monasteries fortune teller lamas predicting the future of the people who stay in queue for long to know about their coming years. *Chingiz Khan* is now the hero and founder of the Mongol *Ulus*. Old script is back in schools.

The paper will throw light on the customs and traditions of Mongols. How Mongols have retained past traditions and what is happening with this revival of customs and tradition and its affect on the society on the whole.

Keywords:

Tsagan sar, *Naadam*, name ceremonies, hair cutting ceremonies, greetings, hospitality, India, Mongolia.

Introduction:

Mongolia *Khox Tengir* or blue sky as called by Mongols, and *Sogen no Kuni* or grass land called by Japanese, lies in between the two big powers Russia in the north and China in its east-west and south. Mongolia covers the land of 1.5 million sq km, half of the size of India, with a small population of 2.7 million. Today there are more than twenty ethnic groups in Mongolia. The *khalkha* Mongols are in majority constituting about 86 %, the other ethnic groups are *khazaks*, majority of them living in Byan Oligi, *Buryats*, *Bayats*, *Kalmaky*. Mongols speak *khalka* Mongolian and other languages spoken are Russian and now a day's English as well.

Mongols once shaped the course of history for the whole of Inner Asia and extended their empire up to Europe. They left their imprints on different civilizations and connected East with the West through the famous Silk Road. Like in the past, today as well the geographical location of Mongolia makes it very significant in this whole area. It is no more a buffer state between the two great powers but it does play an important role by strengthening its bilateral ties with Russia and China.

* Visiting Faculty, Center of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir Srinagar/0165, Fukatani, wo-37-2, Kanazawashi, Ishikawa, Japan: shiotanim@yahoo.com

Mongolia has maintained balanced relation with its close neighbours and has created a multi-faceted foreign policy, which has linked it with the outside world politically, economically and culturally.

India and Mongolia although geographically very far of countries are linked with each other since ancient times. Mongols and Indian share a common cultural legacy. In the distant past Mongol Buddhist monks visited India to acquire knowledge in all the fields of life and in contemporary times too Mongolian students are evincing interest in the Indian universities to learn English, Information Technology and religious subject. Indian government has been providing scholarship for Mongol students in different educational areas. In Mongolia a center of information and technology after the name of Atal Behari Vajpayee has been established. A Rajiv Gandhi Art and Production school is enabling Mongolian youth on different skill courses. Mahatma Gandhi street with Gandhiji's statue is in the center of Ulaanbaatar. Mongolian people call Indians as their spiritual neighbours.¹ The strong factor in their relations is Buddhism, which along with religious philosophy gave Mongolia its language, literature, folklore, medicine, culture, customs and traditions.

Buddhism reached Mongolia from Kashmir² via Tibet and Central Asia where people embraced it and kept it very close to their hearts. It became their strength when uniting against Manchu's or going through transition in modern period. Even in Socialist period when religious practice was not allowed Mongols in the heart of hearts were Buddhist. Seeing an Indian, they will say "*burkhanni gazraaas irsen khuun*" (they have come from the land of Buddha) and showed a lot of respect towards them.

Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Mongolia was wholly relying on it both politically and economically, and obviously with the

¹ In 1996 James Baker, State Secretary of United States of America visited Mongolia and it was he who said in his speech that United States, Japan and other donor countries are the third neighbour countries to Mongolia besides its two close neighbours Russia and China. Since that time Mongolian Government has used it often.

² It becomes clear that Kashmir played a significant role in the spread of the faith there, as Prof. Shi. Bira writes, ("The Indo-Mongolian Relationship: A Retrospective outlook on Buddhism," *Studies in Mongolian History, Culture and Historiography*, (selected papers) Ulaanbaatar, 2001, pp.362-370) "from Chinese's sources we know that in the reign of *Ogedei Khaan* the Kashmiri monk Namu and his brother came to the Mongolian court. He stayed in the reign of *Ogedei Khaan's* successors *Guyuk* and *Monke Khaan*. The later appointed him as *Guo-shi*, the state preceptor. He was given a jade seal to administer Buddhist affairs. He was much honored at the Mongolian court. He was assigned to be the head of ten thousand Kashmirian households".

collapse of socialist system, Mongolia was left alone with tremendous economic and social crises. Many donor countries came to its rescue to help and along with erstwhile socialist Central Asia, it too choose the road to democracy and market economy. Although the transition period was very painful, it has emerged out of it with its new polices, planning and is heading towards a successful path of democracy.

The socio-cultural trends are to some extent the continuation of the great past as the civilizations do not exist in isolation and present cannot be detached from the past and future. Mongolian nomadic customs and tradition are closely linked with its religion. The religious customs and traditions inherited by the Mongols are: “*Tsang Sar*” (white moon month), naming, haircutting ceremonies, greetings and so on. Apart from the religious ceremonies, the Mongols celebrate, *Eriin gurvān naadam* i.e. three games of the men, wrestling, archery and horse racing. Following are a few ceremonies and other customs that show how the traditions exist today in Mongolia.

Tsagan-Sar:

Tsagan Sar is celebrated as the New Year as per the lunar calendar, usually in the month of February or March. The preparations start a day earlier when *ger* (apartments), livestock barns are cleaned to make the festivity. On the other hand *bituun* (the last day of the year ceremony) includes burning off candles to symbolize enlightenment of the *samsara* (world). In every household Mongols put three pieces of ice at the doorway so that the goddess could take it when visiting the house hold. Along with it there is a large amount of covered food where animal meat is covered by a pile of *boov* (ceremonial bread) in an odd number of layers and heap of candies are put in the form of pyramid. Grilled and minced meat steamed inside a pastry called *buuz* forms part of the offering. The celebration would last for three days but one could visit the relatives or friends for about seven days. *Tsagn Sar* is also associated with the Shamanic faith as the Mongol families remember the spirit of their dead family members. To commemorate it nine bowls of water and sticks are placed on a small table and Shaman performs the prayers in honor of the dead kin and especially for the patrilineal



ancestors.³ In the early days on this occasion Mongols used to wear white clothes, ride a white horse and eat *tsagan idée* (milk products) like milk and cheese as white is considered auspicious. In the decorated monasteries celebration start a month ago and people visit these in large numbers and chant Buddhist prayers for a rich future and sound health. In many such places dances are also performed. Outside every *ger* people build a big mound towards its southern side where they leave eatables, usually green tea and food with a prayer.

For *Tsagan Sar* people make preparations many days earlier and make variety of food. They also visit their friends and relatives. The youngsters go to pay respect to their elders. When a guest enter a *ger* he or she extends his/her hands towards his elders, palms upwards, bows and present a *khadakh*⁴ (a blue silk scarf) and says, *tani amar sain uu* (I hope all is well with you). The elder puts their hands on the younger one's shoulder and says, *mend amar bain uu* (may your life be prosperous), the younger ones stretch both hands towards the elder. That he has come with an open heart and the placing of his/her hands underneath the elders hands symbolizes one's readiness to help the elder person in their hour of need. The second day is for women and third for the youth. Younger people receive gifts and presents from their elders.⁵ The special dish of the day is *oji* (mutton).

Eriin Guran Naadam:

Another traditional national festival that Mongols celebrate since the ancient past is *Eriin Guran Naadam*. The three games, horse race, wrestling and archery have been celebrated since the beginning of their military and tribal past along with the poetry, which also represents an unbroken tradition. It is celebrated in the month



³ <http://www.nadammongoliannaadamfestival.com/>

⁴ *Khadak* has a special significance in Mongolian traditions. To present a *khadak* is a sign of respect and reverence. Acceptance of *khadak* is a sign of compliance of the wish.

⁵ A few families in Ulaanbaatar invited me on such an occasion. The whole ceremony was just like the religious festival in India very similar to *Eid-ul-Azha* or *Navratari*. I too was given presents by telling me *miin okhiin* (My daughter).

of July and many foreign delegates also come to watch it. Except wrestling, which only men could participate, both men and women could participate in archery and horse riding. Mongols have great respect and love for both the horse and the saddle. “A Mongol is born in the saddle and he dies in the saddle”, says a Mongol proverb. A saddle is never thrown on the ground but is kept vertically facing the north. Saddle of women and men are kept in the *ger* in a fixed position, women’s on the left and men’s on the right.

During the *Naadam* festival the children who take part in the game are between eleven to five years of age. The age of the horse is also three, four and six years. Jockeys wear very colorful dress made especially for the occasion and they are trained for months. Both the rider and horse are praised by reciting the poetry. Capacity and strength of the horse and its birth place is also mentioned. The winners are given gold, silver and bronze medals but the one who did not perform well is also rewarded to boost up the horse owner so that the horse could perform well in the next race. Sarcastic songs are sung for the horse.

Wrestling is another game that Mongols are very fond of. In wrestling the rules are not fixed but the one who first touch’s the ground with his hand or knee is a loser. Wrestlers wear tight fitting *shudag* (trunk), *dzodug* (short jackets with long sleeves) leaving the chest bare. The *gatal* (boots) are traditional



with toes upturned. Each wrestler has his own herald who chants the poetry and attributes it to his champion. These contestants come to the ring leaping, sprawling, and flapping their arms like an eagle. The one who losses have to pass under the arm of the winner to express that there are no grievances between them. After the match the contestants shake hands with each other. The titles given are like Falcon, Elephant and Lion etc.

The game of the archery is believed to have originated in the 11th century. Bows and arrows have remained much like the same over

the centuries. Both men and women take part in this game. It is a wonderful scene to watch them compete with each other according to the rules, which have come down from the past generations.

Name Ceremonies:

Some other traditions are like giving the name. As in the past so is the practice now among the Mongols; they consult lamas for giving the name to a new born as well as for fixing the date of the marriage. This practice has come down since the time of Chingiz Khaan and even persisted during Socialist period. During the 12th century, as described by the sacred legend, Mongols have had purely Mongolian names such as:

Mongolian Names		
<i>Narantsetseg</i>	“ <i>Nar</i> ” (sun)	“ <i>Tsetseg</i> ”(flower)
<i>Mongkhuu</i>	“ <i>Mong</i> ” (silver)	“ <i>Khuu</i> ”(son)
<i>Altantoya</i>	“ <i>Alth</i> ” (gold)>	“ <i>Toya</i> ” (light)

After the Buddhism penetrated into Mongolia the language of the religion was Tibetan or Sanskrit so the names were given like:

Sanskrit Names		
“ <i>Tuvan</i> ” (One of the names of Buddha the god of mercy)	“ <i>Dashzevga</i> ” (Double happiness)	“ <i>Yanjma</i> ” (Goddess and patroness of poetry)

Tibetan Names		
“ <i>Dava</i> ” (Monday)	“ <i>Myadag</i> ” (flower) “ <i>Maa</i> ” (mother)	“ <i>Nyma</i> ” (Sunday)
“ <i>Myagmar</i> ” (Tuesday)	“ <i>Lobsan</i> ”(Developed) “ <i>dorj</i> ” (interest)	“ <i>Ragcha</i> ”(guardian) “ <i>Suren</i> ”(genius)
The Name Meant for the Evil		
“ <i>Terbish</i> ”(That is not)	“ <i>inbish</i> ” (This is not)	“ <i>khuunbish</i> ” (Not a human)
“ <i>Nokhoi</i> ”(dog)	“ <i>Nergui</i> ” (without name) ⁶	

⁶ Maqsooda Sarfi, *Society of Mongolia, with special reference to Religion and Culture*, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, 1995.

During the Socialist period it became fashion to give Russian names also but now people have switched to the old names and these days for boys popular name is *Temujin* after Chingiz Khaan.

Hair Cutting Ceremonies:

Referring to the ritual of the first haircut, the Mongols avoid using the word hair; instead they use *dakh* (something fine, characteristic of the steppe flower). In the past the ritual was performed on a fixed date of the year for the well being and good health of the child. In the case of boy's hair was cropped, and only a tuft was left at the top of the head symbolizing manliness. For the girls tufts were left on both sides of the head symbolizing the future maiden's beauty. Now-a- days we do not find these customs but what is still in practice are consulting lama for the date of haircut. Hair is usually cut with the mothers working scissors, to which is tied *khadhak* (a blue scarf). The first hair lock is cut by the elder person of the family and begun from the left side. After cutting a small lock of hair the scissors are given to the mother; she also cuts a lock and then it is the turn of the father and other close relatives.⁷ After cutting a few locks of hair, the final shaving is done by the elder person. The child is given a cup of milk after the hair cut, placed on the same blue scarf. After the baby sips, it is then passed on to the other people present in the function. Gifts and presents are given to the child that includes money; alcoholic beverages, koumiss, cheese. Close relatives of the family on this occasion bring valuable presents including cattle. After the hair cut, the mother collects all the clipped hair into a kerchief and sews them into the child's pillow.⁸ This is followed by a feast, songs and dance.

Greetings of the Mongols:

Greetings of Mongols are very loving. The way they greet each other is very unique and depends upon the season and circumstances. Seasonal greetings are associated with the cattle breeders. During summer and autumn people greet each other by asking; *mal chin sain uu* (how has the cattle fattened). In spring and winter they greet by saying how the cattle has withered in winter. If somebody sees another person milking the cow, the person is told, *sureg amgala sun shim arvin boltugai* (let

⁷ In one such function of the baby who was very attached to me I was asked to cut a lock of hair with the same scissors. I felt honored.

⁸ In Kashmir the first hair (*zare*) cut of the new born baby is cropped on the date, which family think is auspicious. Among some families these *zare* are buried under a tree. Close relatives bring gifts to the baby.

the herd be peaceful and milk be in abundance or may the milk yielded be plentiful and may your herd grow bigger).

In professional greeting, a student is asked, *sain sorchee bain uu* (how are your studies going), if a person is seen writing he is wished, may your pen be sharper. And if someone is seen building his *ger* he is wished may it be beautiful and the person always replies may your wish be fulfilled. To a person traveling to a far off place is wished as, *altan shar zaam tani ulziteibaih boltugai* (let your journey be safe and successful). If a person is seen doing some evil thing they say *ner khugraas yas khugar* (better the bone be broken than ones reputation).

Hospitality:

Mongolians are often referred as “*zochilomtgoi*” i.e. hospitable to guests and as the proverb goes, happy is he who often has guest, cheerful is the home near which stands the horse of a visitor. They treat their guest with a lot of respect. Before asking anything the guest is served tea and *tsagaan idee* (milk products). Mongols do not like to ask the guest whether he or she would like to have tea, as the Mongolian proverb goes, “*asukhaar asgachikh*” (if you ask the guest the tea, it is better to serve it).⁹ As a sign of respect the host always extends his both hands, right arm supported with the left at the wrist or elbow and offers the cup of “*airag*” (koumiss) to the guest, and the guest in turn takes it with both hands. Both these gestures are sign of respect and politeness. On leaving the *ger* the host always wishes him /her good journey by splashing milk and hopes that the guest will come again as he/she is always welcome.

Exchange of Snuff Bottles:

Mongols use *khoorog* (snuff bottle) as a visiting card and their exchange show the pleasure of meeting the family. The exchange is a sort of introduction called “*tamkhilakh*”. The amazing thing is that changing the snuff bottles is like an art with which one can make good friends or spoil the relationship. When a guest enters into the *ger*, after enquiring the health of the family, he exchanges his snuff bottle with the host. Men put a pinch of tobacco on their nail of their thumb and smell it while the women only smell the bottle without opening it. To accept the snuff bottle with ones “*deel*”¹⁰ unfastened or sleeves rolled up are a bad taste and not permitted. These bottles are made of precocious stones, metals, bones, and crystal and are carried in the special silk pouches.

⁹ In Kashmir it is also considered bad to ask a guest whether they like to have something.

¹⁰ *Deel* is the national costume of Mongolia.

Some other Customs and Totems:

The other customs that they keep dear to them is that the first cup of tea or first meal is always served to the head of the family; if he is not in one's home the food is put into his cup. Mongols do not lick the teacups and cups used for "airag" but it is a must to lick the meal plate and curd plates. The articles like cups, glass, socks and shoes are considered good for bringing luck so are favorite items to give as gifts. On the other hand cap or hat should not be kept mouth open towards the sky as it may bring illness. It is considered good if a child falls while entering the house but bad if leaving the house. It is a taboo to praise small children as pretty, wise, beautiful.¹¹

Use of Colors:

Colours play an important role in the Mongol life. White signifies honesty, truth, and open heartedness. Blue symbolizes eternity, loyalty and consistency, red is victory, golden yellow is the most honorable colour and is used in documents and diplomas, which are written on a yellow paper. Black is not considered a good color.

Conclusion:

Ulaanbaatar of early 80`s and 90`s was green, beautiful, clean and fresh. There were very few buildings, environs were open and lively. All that has changed; high rise apartments have replaced *ger*. *Ger* is now considered out of date and hazardous to life and in some cases people who still live in *gers* are looked down upon as poor and traditional by the urban population. Now one could hardly hear the echo of a friend across the road that asks you, *integ khun yumo* (hi are you Indian), *naiz bolkhou* (do you want to be a friend). The roads are awfully crowded with vehicles jarring and rushing along the streets. There is not even a place for pedestrian to walk; even ten minutes drive



¹¹ Shiotani Shigek, E. Purevja 初級モンゴル語 *монгол хэл эхлэн сурах ычиг (Mongolian for the beginners)* 東京大学書林, Tokyo daigaku shurin, 2001, pp. 201-202.

takes more than an hour due to heavy traffic jam. The city is brimming with the eateries. Restaurants, bars, cafes and kiosks are filling vacant space. This scenario was not known in earlier days. Ulaanbaatar has become smaller in size. Although Mongolia is changing very fast in its outlook yet their nomadic culture is alive. The heart of the people is still nomadic and allied with their herds, living and letting the steppe culture to live.

Acknowledgement; All photographs used in the article are courtesy to Shiotani Shigeki.