CUSTOMS RELATED TO THE HOUSEHOLD

 Customs related to the household and human life include social events (childbirth, weddings, celebrations and funerals) that occur in the life of a family or community. Oral poetry and traditional customs express a family’s or community’s feelings of respect, well-wishing, or sorrow for a person or persons. Benedictions and songs are performed to a great extent in the celebrations of those events related to an individual’s household. They thus also express aspects of traditional ethics and morality, points of view, and senses of beauty of the Mongolian nomadic people.

 If you look at the customs of the household superficially, it seems rather personal; indeed one member of society shares one’s exceptional experience with others in one’s own community. However, the oral poetry used in customary events of a Mongol’s household reflects characteristics of nomadic herder’s labour. Cutting a child’s hair for the first time, for instance, or giving a name to a newborn, creating children’s toys and games, wearing a new deel (traditional gown) for the first time, adopting a child, conducting a wedding, setting up a new ger, or celebrating an anniversary (or birthday) are all forms of the customs related to the household with distinct characteristics.

CUSTOMS OF GREETING

 The customs Mongols have for greeting and showing respect toward others is traditionally quite rich. When guests arrive at someone’s ger they say nokhoi khorī (hold the dog) before getting off the horse. Thereafter, when someone comes out and holds the dog, the guest takes his khet khatga (knife) from his belt and gets off the horse. After tying his horse to the hitching post, the guest enters the ger. If there are two or more people in the ger, the guest greets them saying sain baiitgaana uu? meaning “Are you all well?”; or if there is only one person in the ger, he greets this person by saying Sain baina uu ta?, meaning “Are you well?” The act of taking the knife from the belt expresses that the guest has no thoughts of harming the family.

 The head of family invites the guest to take a seat. Ac-
According to the seasonal characteristics, the guest greets them by asking the family if they are getting through (or passing) the summer (winter, spring, autumn) well. Then the family replies that they are getting through the season very well and asks the guest the same question. The family asks the guest, “From where are you coming,” “Where are you heading to,” and “What is the purpose of your journey,” all while offering tea and food as a sign of respect.

If the guest comes when the new tea or meal is being prepared, it is believed that his journey will continue very well. Consequently, the guest speaks about the place where he is coming from and going to and the purpose of his or her journey. Following the exchanging of their names, they exchange snuff bottles and tobacco pipes with each other, while the conversation about current conditions in the pasture, such as the health of the livestock, its fertility, how well or bad this year’s grass has grown, and how the weather has been. If the visitor is coming from far away, the family lets him stay and rest overnight.

If the guest is someone with whom the family is previously familiar, the conversation takes place about news related to their job or events taking place with their family. It is a custom that the younger person greets the oldest person first. If two people come across to each other in a pasture or on a road, the two greet and pass on their right sides. If not in a hurry, they get off of the horse and greet each other while sitting and exchanging their snuff bottles or tobacco pipes. Consequently, they go on their ways after having friendly conversation. During the rituals of felt making, fleece beating, foal branding and other customary events, people mutually share with each other well wishing poems and benedictions as respect.

CUSTOM OF PREPARING TOYS

Mongolians have the custom of preparing children’s toys. Toys are not merely meant to amuse babies or infants, they can also symbolize auspicious omens. For instance, traditional toys can consist of felt cut into animal shapes with scissors, small bows and arrows, a herring-bone tag, or a bell. They are often dangled from the ceiling spokes of a ger. According to a fairy-tale, parents should hang a felt-shaped fox near the infant. If there is no felt-fox, a real fox will come to a sleeping infant and tell it that its mother had died. The infant will believe this and start to cry. The sly fox says, “Your mother is not dead, your mother is alive.” The infant will then become glad to hear this and will smile. If the felt-fox is present, the real fox comes and sees that it is not possible to cheat the infant, thus the infant with the felt-fox never cries while sleeping. It is a superstitious belief that infants converse with a fox in its sleep.
Mongolians consider childbirth as a good omen. We say that when a child is born, its food is predestined, that is why childbirth is an exceptional event in our life. So we perform an ablution to the child in order to honor the one who has adapted the form of a precious human body and has been born on the earth as a little citizen of the state. This new member is washed ceremonially with pure water of its birthplace and its life-long name is given to him or her by his or her parents and relatives. The ceremonial washing of a child is performed within 6-7 days of its birth among its parents and close relatives. The ablution of the child can be performed within 16 days upon the circumstance of life and work.

Dairy products, cooked meat, and fermented mare's milk are prepared for guests, but the drinking of vodka is traditionally forbidden. The feasting should be ended before sunset, just as wedding rituals end before sunset.

A sheep is butchered at the moment when a child is born. We clean the intestine and stuff seasoned blood into it. Then we cook the blood stuffed intestine, sheep's liver and kidney, and pieces of tail's fat. We respect and offer a practical midwife a saddle of mutton. Members of the Myangad tribe bring pails with skewered meat, shin-bones, fat of the tail, and cooked rectum to the midwife and child. They then wave this food before them and give a piece of meat three times, saying "Khurai, khurai, khurai." The remnants of this meal are kept for three days. Then the parents (father and mother of the child) can eat them. This kind of food at the child's ablution is a sign of honour.

The ablution of the child is performed at the appointed time as soon as the feast starts. The midwife washes the infant with strong tea or soup. The very popular method among the Mongolians is to wash the infant with the salted broth of cooked meat garnished with grain and powdered juniper needles. The salt cleans the infant's body and the juniper needles sanctify the infant. The grain symbolizes the wish to be multitudinous.

The parents of the infant offer the honourary scarf to the midwife or the senior person who will give the name to the child. The midwife can give the child a name which she considers to be auspicious. The parents may also write down several names on scraps of paper and then roll those papers up and put them into a vase with grain. Then vase is shaken several times. The rolled papers appear on the surface of the grain in the vase. One of the papers is chosen and read. This name is whispered into the right ear of a boy and the left ear of a girl three times. Then the name is announced to all gathered.

This kind of whispering to the right or left ear is linked to the ancient Mongolian tradition that the western or left side belongs to man and the right or eastern side belongs to woman. The use of grain in the vase symbolizes that the child's fame will be as abundant as grains in a jar. Mongolians say, "Your parents can give you your name, but only you yourself can attain your fame."

The naming of a child symbolizes happiness, health and goodness. The choice of names reflects people's wishes and values. If a child is born on Thursday, he or she can be named Pürevjav (pürev is a sanskrit word meaning "fourth day"; jav is "salvation" in Tibetan). If the child is born on Sunday, he...
or she can be named as Nyamjav (nyam is the Tibetan word "sun"; so, nyamjav is "sun-salvation"). Naming a child, for some families, is very delicate. Some families name their child Muu-nokhoi (bad dog), Khünbish (not human), or Bibish (I am not). To protect the child from death, parents may give their children names like Terbish (that is not), Adilbish (that is not similar to), or names such as “dog” and “mendicant.” Other types of names include Tömör (iron) and Ölchir (hardy). According to superstition, these names can help children avoid evil spirits who can bring harm to the child.

All of those who attend the child’s ablution give presents to the newborn child. Particularly, the midwife gives a gift to the new infant. Close relatives can give foals, lambs, or baby-camels. These animal gifts are an asset for the future livestock-breeder.

Exceptional gifts for child include a sheathed knife, a bow and arrow, a bridle and saddle, and tools. Parents can give gifts to the guests, as well.

At the ablution of the child, we sing lullabies, songs symbolizing the infant’s future, and songs that extol the parents’ kindness. In earlier times, there was a custom which was called the child’s endowment. It says:

May the child experience wholesomeness
And be beneficial for humankind and the environment
By ridding us of the nine misdeeds,
May the child
See a hundred autumns,
By living for a hundred years
May the child be stronger than ore,
May the child’s offspring multiply more than grain!
Khurai, khurai, khurai!

This kind of well-wishing is a very old form of benediction. The words of the benediction explain the purpose of the ceremonial custom and share the happiness of the new parents. The content of the benediction consists of two parts. The first part of the benediction speaks about how the child’s parents met, fell in love, and conceived their offspring. The second part of the benediction speaks about a child’s destiny to be healthy under one’s parental affections and to grow up to be a good and respected person in one’s community.

You, benevolent, are gathered
To make a bountiful feast;
We wish the newborn child
All the best;
We are proud of this noble child
Who became a precious human being;
You can reach two years of age
Your first hair can grow
You can recognize your parents
With your pretty eyes
You can reach four years of age
You can visit your neighbours
You can reach five years of age
And help your parents
Then it continues, speaking about life:
This benediction wishes you
To be kind to your parents
Be a support to your relatives
Serve your country meritoriously
Be world-famous
Be a good person
I say this benediction
For your noble child

This symbolizes the child’s future. This benediction is the request of the community and wishes of the Mongolian people.
CUSTOM OF CUTTING THE CHILD’S HAIR FOR THE FIRST TIME

Although the custom of celebrating the cutting of the child’s hair for the first time is named differently among the Mongols, such as khūkhdiin üs avakh (cutting the child’s hair) or örvöög ürgeeekh (clipping the child’s crest), the main content is the same. The custom is practiced for boys when they are at age 3 or 5, and for girls at age 2 or 4. This is due to the Mongols’ traditional belief in odd numbers as arga (method) and even numbers as bilig (wisdom). The celebration of the custom of cutting the child’s hair for the first time is celebrated the same as other customary celebrations, that is, by preparing various plates and dishes of tsagaalga (dairy products), meat, and traditional beverages. It is a custom that every guest gets a taste of the tsagaalga and every child gets a full cup of the tsagaalga.

Relatives and close friends of the parents participate in the celebration of this customary event. Among the Khalkh, Dörvöd, Bayad, Myangad and Khotgoid ethnic groups of Mongolia, the grandfather, father or a respected and elder participant, and (among Buriad ethnic groups) the midwife, first touches the hair of the child with a knife or pair of scissors. When the steward of the ceremony says “Let’s start to cut the hair of our son (or daughter),” the most respected person sitting at the northwest first touches the head of the child with a wooden knife. Afterwards, the most senior person one cuts the hair with scissors and wraps a bit of the hair with a khadag (sacred scarf). The child is given a taste of milk from a cup and then a bit of the milk is applied to the forehead. The same person gives a benediction. Thus, while the child goes around the guests from right to left, the guests cut off pieces of hair. The mother of the child collects and wraps the cut-off hair in a khadag. During the cutting of the child’s hair, every guest gives a present to the child, giving well-wishing words, such as:

Live long
Be happy
Be kind to your father
Be helpful to your mother
Be meritorious for your country
Be the foremost citizen among the people

In such a manner, these words are the expression of the Mongolian aspirations.

When we cut the child’s hair for the first time, we leave a tuft of hair on the forehead of the boy and two tufts of hair on the temples of the girl’s head. According to tradition, those tufts of hair symbolize the wish that the boy become the head of a family and that the girl become a wife of a family. This tuft of hair on the forehead can grow until the boy’s mature-age. When the boy reaches maturity he can wear a braid. The tuft of hair on the temples can grow until the girl reaches maturity, after which she can wear pig-tails before her marriage. In recent tradition, the hair of a girl is not cut entirely, instead only a piece is cut just for the custom.

Following the completion of the cutting the child’s hair, the ceremonial event of the custom takes place by offering various dishes and plates to the guests. There is a tradition that, if possible, the hosts arrange a small festival including a wrestling match among children and a race of two-year-old colts. The custom is often celebrated at an age when the child has the ability to sense that the celebration is being held especially for him or her. Therefore, the poem of benediction for the ‘child’s ablution’ are mostly intended for the child’s parents, while the poem of benediction for the ‘cutting of the child’s hair for the first time’ are intended for the child. For instance, the following benediction is told:

It is an honour for me
To spread this delicate honourable scarf
By the wholesome dairy products
Before all of you who are feasting;
It is a reasonable feast
On the occasion of cutting
The hair of
This darling child

The minstrel explains the cause of reciting the benediction on the occasion of child’s hair cutting and continues:

Your parents make the steel white scissors
And sharp white razor ready to cut;
To open the blades of the gold-gilded scissors
Is safe for a child’s life;
To open the blades of the silver-cased scissors
Is safe for a child’s eternity;
Let’s pass the scissors
With steel-blades
And golden shafts
To everybody and cut the child’s hair;
Let’s help in the accumulation of goodness
To elongate the child’s life more;

The cutting of the child’s hair with respect is thus explained.
CUSTOM OF WEARING A NEW DEEL

The general clothing of the Mongols is a traditional costume called a deel (gown). Mongols sew deels for their children mostly with sharp coloured fabrics, beautiful edging, and adornments. The following verse is told during the first wearing a child’s new deel:

Your front skirt is maybe accompanied by foals and colts
Your back skirt is maybe accompanied by sheep and lambs
Your inner skirt is anointed by fat and oil
Your outer skirt is decorated with thongs;
This year your clothing is cotton
Next year your clothing shall be silk;
May your clothing never be dirty
May your clothing never become frayed
But may you yourself be eternal!

Afterwards, the quilting of the deel is removed. The child is kissed and the new deel is blessed. A child wearing the new deel gets excited. It makes the parents happy. The child can show off the deel to the children of his or her neighbours, and their parents reward the child with sweets. The adult neighbours traditionally encourage children with sweets on the occasion of his or her new deel.
TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF GENEALOGICAL INHERITANCE

Mongolians carefully maintain knowledge of their genealogies, which can stretch back to ancient times. Accounts of the descent of their relatives and children help to define families as a unique social unit and as a site for a process of biological and social inheritance. That is why they carefully examine the genealogical and intellectual character of those who would become husbands and wives. Therefore, they deem the marriage of their son and daughter to be a sacred duty of national significance. They check the genealogical character of the would-be daughter-in-law and seek her parent’s consent.

Both parents of a would-be couple examine the genealogies of both sides, their compatibility, disposition, consciousness, body shape, benevolence, labour, principle, knowledge, skill, and age. Those would-be couples are examined by several points in their ability to live in compatibility. If their ancestors were thieves, liars, bad at working, ill-dispositioned, or had a chronic illness, the marriage would be called off. This is evidence that they understood the importance of an account of the genealogical descent of their families and children.

It is taboo among the Mongolians to intermarry within a tribe. It is taboo to intermarry within seven generations from the paternal side and three generations from the maternal side. These rules are maintained to prevent inbreeding.

Mongolians say “Kin prefers kin, a growing tree favours its ground”. Our senior people advise us to trace our descent by paternal relations. It is necessity to keep one’s pedigree safe. It is a sacred duty to trace one’s genealogical descent well. The paternal relative is agnatic, the maternal relative is cognate. Our ancestors knew their genealogy back nine generations, starting from themselves and their father and extending back to their grandfather, (elents) great-grandfather, (khulants) great-great-grandfather, (dutakhun) great-great-great-grandfather, and (budantsar) great-great-great-great-grandfather. They trace children starting from themselves to their son, (jich) grandson, (guch) great-grandson, (döch) great-great-grandson, (tach) great-great-great-grandson, and so on.

There are no names for each of these nine generations in the English language. Our ancestors taught us to name these nine generations, but recently this tradition has fallen into disuse.

The male-side is broken into three generations:

1. Abga – paternal aunt and uncle
2. Üyel – offspring of the brothers only, üyel-ber – wife of a cousin’s son
3. Khayal – paternal second cousins (they are agnatic through the male side)

The female side is broken into the following:

1. Nagats – maternal aunt and uncle
2. Bül – offspring of the sisters only or offspring of the male and female relatives (sobrinus)
3. Bülentser – consobrinus

Parents of the son-in-law and parents of the daughter-in-law can call each other khud. Torkhem are the parents of the daughter-in-law. Khadam are the parents of the son-in-law. Male parents are khud, female parents are khudgui. There are parents whose son marries a daughter, and whose daughter marries a son alternatively.
FEAST CUSTOMS

Mongolians celebrate important events with festivals and feasts, and these usually follow a well-established system. A good steward is selected to conduct the feast. It is unwise to interfere with the plans of the steward, even to change one’s seats without his or her permission. The steward, who knows the proceedings of the feast well, can decide when benedictions can be chanted, what songs can be sung, and what solemn ceremony can be performed in compliance with the established proceedings.

Such feasts have strict rules, which do not restrict the guest’s freedom to revel; they instead create favorable conditions for the guests to be comfortable. An address at the feast or celebration should be expressed in a concise and artistic language.

Just like the above mentioned rules, the treatment of guests, such as when tea is to be offered or how vodka is to be given, has a strict order. The first offering to a guest is tea, followed by a meal with meat, and then soup. At intervals, often marked by songs and benedictions, airag (fermented mare’s milk) and milk-vodka are offered to the guests according to established rules. When tea is offered, the following benediction is recited in the poetical sense.

This beverage is called tea
Which is a type of drink
Which is offered to a guest
Which is the best of all beverages, and
Which is offered as a gift to our guests
Please, everyone, have tea.

In case of a meal with meat, the follow benediction is recited:

With a lid-shaped tail
Fore legs, hind legs, and ribs
Of the white-faced sheep,
This is the food for all Mongols;
They are arranged on a big tray;
Dear guests,
Have all of you a taste!

These eulogized words are polite requests to invite guests to drink tea or eat their meal.
There is a custom to offer cups of milk-vodka to the adults three times. Generally, these cups of milk-vodka can be offered to only a person who has reached manhood. It was commonly unacceptable for those under 25 years to drink vodka.

There are also special benedictions. The benediction of the airag, which is uttered at the start and end of a feast, can include the following:

The pail of airag is placed in the middle of white ger;

*It is the best part of a perfect beverage,*
*Which is the generous gift of flowers grown in the summer, and It is proffered to all of you*  
*As the kindness of mares.*

In such a manner, the benediction begins as the lid of the churn is cleaned and opened with an honorable scarf.

All the guests take their seats in the ger. The tea is offered to everyone. The head of the host family slices pieces of mutton, places them on a tray, and distributes them to every guest. The soup is offered to everybody. After this, the head of the host family explains the purpose of the feast and suggests the name of a steward who is skillful in managing festivities. All the guests may second the suggestion. Once a person is elected as a steward of the festivity, he can arrange the feast according to strict rules. Every guest should take his or her proper seat. Each person’s dress should be proper and their hat should be placed on their head. No smoking is allowed and no obscene words may be said. No brawling is allowed in any case. If anyone infringes upon a rule, he or she can be punished by being forced to drink a large bowl of fermented mare’s milk. The steward should sit on the upper end of the eastern side of the ger. Singers and fiddlers sit by the steward on the eastern side, where the women and children also sit. But men sit on the western side according to their age and rank. Most elders sit cross-legged on the northern part of the ger. The guests on the eastern side sit with their left-knee bent. The guests on the western side sit in the opposite manner. These raised knees on the both sides are meant to prevent possible evils.

The steward nominates one airag ladler (a person who ladles airag from the churn) and two cup-deliverers. Everybody who has reached manhood has to drink three bowls of airag before the feast starts. After taking three bowls of airag, the feast starts with singing the traditional long song “Tümen Ekh” accompanied on the morin khuur (horse-head fiddle). Singers sing three verses of the song, and all participants are invited to sing. Airag is offered to everybody at every break between songs. At some point, the steward announces a big break. After the break, the guests come back to their seats. The steward allows singers to start the next round of singing. A singer usually leads others in a song with refrains. Every guest can drink airag. The feast continues in this way. After three rounds of singing, the people at the feast gather in ger again. At this time there is no strict demand for drinking. But people listen to the singing while some of the guests take bowls of airag at their will. When the feasting is nearing an end, the head of the family announces, “Let’s see off the feasting”. The steward suggests that the singers sing a long song to end the feast. The singing starts:

Well, we enjoyed ourselves  
At the joyfully wondrous feast;  
We are like the puffy cumulus clouds  
Soaring along before  
The dew-impearled wind and  
Under this remarkable benevolence

After the song is sung, the head of the family asks the minstrel to utter a benediction. The minstrel takes a ladle from the airag churn, places it on the sacred scarf and says the benediction:

*We stick to the established custom,*  
*Even though it was very nice; It was enjoyable for all the kin*  
*To feast for a long time; It is possible to stay the whole day*  
*But we think about your day jobs; It is possible to stay the whole night*  
*But we think about your night jobs; We wish your horses may increase to tens of thousands*  
*And we wish your airag may be like the water of the ocean*

Then the minstrel ladles up and pours out the airag in the churn three times before giving back the ladle to the airag-churn ladler.

This is common for an ordinary feast. If the feast is for a specific event, there can be other, particular rules for that feast. For instance, in the case of a ger-warming feast, the minstrel first says a benediction about the airag-churn and then utters a benediction of the ger. Then all the guests drink the airag and end the feasting.

These feast-ending benedictions and songs are never to be taken lightly. People consider them necessary to restrain the over-enjoyment and prevent people from missing their work responsibilities. There was the established rule when a feast must start and when it should end. Even the amount of drinking airag is taken into consideration. According to tradition, no feast should drag on longer than the appointed time. Feasts in honour of children and weddings, in particular, are traditionally ended before the setting of the sun.
NEW GER-WARMING FEASTS

There is a saying: “A hearth starts from the smoke of the trivet, a ger starts from a hut.” Erecting a new ger is part of the marriage ceremony. Some families renew their gers. This is very common among the people. During the ceremony dedicated to the raising of a new ger, it is customary to say a benediction and to give a blessing. The blessing of the new ger is giving when the felt is put on the ger for the first time. The benediction is recited when feast starts.

As soon as the new ger is erected, the guests are invited in and seated. The head of the family ties a khadag (sacred scarf) to the toono (crown of the ger). The house-warming feast starts when words of blessing are uttered and when milk is sprinkled upon the crown, uni and khana (latticed wall of ger). When the blessing ceremony is over, the best pieces of meat are offered to the fire. Four pieces of cheese are placed in four directions under the vault of the ger. They will be kept there for three nights. This type of custom of blessing a new ger is probably linked to ancient fire-worship practices.

The texts of ger benedictions state specific items of each particular ger and eulogize them. This eulogy starts from the door or crown of the ger and then continues with eulogies to the walls, ceiling spokes, roof, felt coverings of the walls, crown cover, narrow ropes, decorated straps over the roof-covering, and so on. This eulogy follows the order of erecting a ger.

The roof-covering and wall-coverings are much eulogized. They are noticeable. In some ways, these are very similar to a felt eulogy:

These white wall coverings
And roof coverings are
Made of the wool of ewes,
Which were cleaned
And sprinkled with
The water of a sandy river
And drawn by strong horses

Actually it is possible to learn much about the skills of Mongolian felt-making, felt rugquilting, and wood-working by listening to the words of the ger benedictions and ger blessing poems. After the utterance of the new ger benediction, a new ger-warming feast starts according to established rules of the Mongolian feast.

WEDDING CEREMONIES

The wedding ceremony is basically a confirmation of marriage of a young couple and a chance to wish them a happy life together. This is also a chance to show the high trust in them from their parents, relatives, and communities. All those who attend the wedding ceremony wish them to be firm and to have a happy family. The traditional wedding ceremony of Mongolia is comprised of several parts: beseeching a bride and taking a betrothal gift to the bride-side; preparing for a wedding; undertaking the wedding ceremony; and holding ceremonies after the wedding. Those proceedings are to be conducted according to custom.

The proceeding starts by sending out two horsemen whose compatibilities are suited to this event. These matchmakers ride on white horses to beseech a bride who was chosen to be a wife for one’s bride-groom. This is the start of the wedding. The matchmakers reach the bride’s family and offer an honourable scarf to the father of the bride, saying to him:

We have a deer hunter,
You have dove-tailor of sables;

A horse is treasured to bring far near,
A girl is treasured to make kin

These words are terse and witty in a poetic manner. The parents of the daughter do not give their consent immediately but say they will consult among relatives and shall have a definite answer later. Then the two matchmakers leave.

After a few days, the paternal or maternal uncle, with a bride-groom and bearing presents, visits the bride’s family to try to get the consent of the bride’s parents. After getting the bride’s parent’s consent, they visit the bride’s side few times and confirm their consent. This signifies that their parents want their children to have a firm marriage and a happy life.

On the last visit of the marriage confirmation, both sides agree on the specific betrothal gifts and wedding date.

Before the wedding day, the bride-groom can give presents to his bride’s close relatives. It is considered to be a betrothal gift, but the gift consists of materials such as utensils and cloth, which the couple could use to sew a dress for the bride. But the most important items among the betrothal
gifts should be an odd number of animals. A white horse bearing a khadag (sacred scarf) on its neck is the most precious gift. Among the Khalkh people there is custom to bring the favourable horse as a precious gift with the utterance of the benediction. This act is called the benediction of the betrothal horse.

There is a tradition that the betrothal gift does not include a camel and goat. This is because Mongolians divide domestic animals into the categories of hot-muzzled animals and cold-muzzled ones. The hot-muzzled animals include the horse, sheep and cattle. The cold-muzzled animals include camels and goats.

Betrothal gifts can also include glue to hold pieces together and a metal file. This is symbolic of the young couple’s life together and a wish for their marriage to be firm. The betrothal gifts are symbols of the marriage firmness and the significance of these lawful acts.

A dowry is given from the bride’s side. The parents of the bride, for instance, could prepare an ornamental hair fillet, brooch, gowns for winter or summer, pillow cases, chests, or a certain number of animals for the dowry. These gifts are considered to be property given to one’s own daughter when she married.

The wedding feast is organized in the summer or autumn, when the dairy products are abundant.

One month before the wedding day, the bride with her attendants visits her close relatives. The wedding feast is arranged. The bride’s relatives give her presents at this feast. The bride’s parents attend the feast, but the bride-groom’s side does not. The bride’s would-be uncles on both sides come to her and take her to their homes and arrange a feast and treat her with gifts. After the above mentioned feast prior to the wedding day, the bride-groom’s parents prepare a new ger and cover it with felt and, following custom, the bride’s side provides girdles for the ger, the crown-covering felt, and the ger furniture.

The wedding ceremony is usually composed of three parts: the ceremony at the bride’s home; the wedding ceremony itself, including a ceremony of welcoming the bride; and the feast held three days after the wedding.

The team charged with bringing the bride to the wedding, which includes the bride-groom, comes to the bride’s home. They bring boiled mutton, airag, milk-vodka, cheese, silk, and an khadag. Then the bride’s parents mix the airag of the bride-groom’s side with their own. The mixing of airag from both sides in the churn is called “the ceremony to combine the airag in the churn,” and it symbolizes the establishment of a bond between the bride and bride-grooms’ sides.

At this time, the eldest daughter-in-law, who is accompanying the bride, announces that it is time to go to the bride-groom’s side. The caravan loaded with the dowry and gifts starts toward the bride-groom’s home. The reason for this is that the furniture and other gifts should be arranged in a new ger before the bride’s arrival. The parents prepare the bed, pillowcase, mattress, chests full of goods, utensils, racks, kettles, ladles, and quilted felt rugs. In addition, they provide her daughter with a saddle, bridle, whip, and deels for four seasons (enough to wear for three full years), and various items of adornments.

A specially appointed man with a compatible year with her can take the bride from her home at the moment of dawn. At this moment, the bride converses with her friends of the same age. They refuse to let her go and stand holding each others’ sashes, but the bride is forced to let go. This is just pretence. The bride-groom and his attending people together with the bride go around the bride’s ger and reach the bride-groom’s parent’s home at sunrise. This is a very common custom.

The father of bride invokes benevolence and stays at home, but her mother goes with her and stays with her for three days. Only an odd-number of people can take a bride from the bride’s side, and only an even number of people can return her. When the bride and her attendants approach the bride-groom’s home, horseman with a plate full of dairy products welcomes her and her attendants. There are two parallel fires lit at this time. The couple walks between the two fires. This is a symbolic consecration or cleansing by fire and is meant to bring happiness.

As soon as the bride arrives, white felt is laid in front of the new ger. The sun is symbolized by grains on the right side of this felt and moon is symbolized by grains of rice on the left side. The bride-groom can stand on the symbol of the sun, the bride can stand on the symbol of the moon. The bride-groom holds the condyles of a tibia bone, while the bride holds the medial malleolus of a tibia bone. They turn toward the sunrise and pray to the rising sun. They then bow and hold up the tibia to the rising sun three times. This is a vestige of sun-worship of our ancestors. The two ladies from the bride and bride-groom’s sides (they are usually elder daughters-in-law) conduct the bride to the ger. The hair of the bride is parted on the crown. She puts on the wife’s garb and hair ornaments. The mother-in-law offers her a cup of milk, and the bride can taste it. After it, there are proceedings of bowing to the fire, Buddha, the parents-in-law, the dog, and the fermented mare’s milk. Every bowing has some kind of sayings. The most important prayer of those is the prayer to the fire. It has an established precedent.

This ceremony provides evidence that Mongolians worshipped fire, as has other peoples of the world. From ancient times, we have deemed fire to be sacred; it is the spirit of the
hearth that inhabits a fire.

At the beginning of the ceremony, two elder daughters-in-law from each side of the young couple conduct the bride and seat her with bended knee on the left side of the white felt of the bride-groom’s father’s hearth. At this moment the two hands of the bride are clad in white lining. The bride offers odd pieces of silk, grease, and ghee to her father-in-law’s fire and bows three times to the trivet. The trivet is the most important item of the hearth. Its three legs are believed to symbolize the father-in-law, the mother-in-law, and the bride. It signifies that the father-in-law is on the right side and mother-in-law on the left side and bride is at the front. The bride’s prayer to the fire is similar to the odes connected to fire worship. This shows a respect of the hearth of the father-in-law and is a request of love.

Bride beseeching, betrothal gifting, and house warming all use the same types of benedictions. The wedding benediction is poetic and rhythmic, and it speaks about the significance of marriage; it teaches its listeners about good behaviour, ethics, and morality; it extols the bride’s mother; and it speaks about the wedding proceedings to the wedding guests.

The rituals of the bridal party, the welcoming ceremony of the bride, and the feast at the home of the bride’s family after the wedding ceremony each have a specific type of benediction. There are sometimes benedictions of the bride and two parents of the bride and bride-groom. These benedictions put an emphasis on the importance of marriage and its institutional significance, but each benediction is peculiar and specific depending upon who is involved.

For instance, there is a feast which is arranged just before the bride’s departure to her would be parents-in-law. Its purpose is to see her off at this moment:

Even though the current
Of the Ganges River is powerful,
It flows to the slope of the mountain;
Even though steel is strong enough,
It can be made supple in the hot fire

This stanza reminds the listeners of the need to follow the laws of life, in which everything is ruled by natural law. The fledgling of the nightingale, when its young grow up, takes wing to far mountains. At the ceremony after the bride’s arrival in the new ger, the following benediction is recited:

It is said that there is an affinity without meeting
It is the fate of previous deeds
It is said that there is an amble without training
It is an endowment from Heaven
There is an easy approach
Even though the four white mountains are difficult to climb up
Forty-thousand people are many
They came from four parents
The white clouds flow across the air
They have water connection
The living beings of the universe are many
They have affinity connections

This is an explanation of the importance of marriage and of the bond of families.

The most interesting form of the well-wishing is “the kind word of mother’s milk” at the wedding ceremony. At the end of the wedding ceremony we say the well-wishing “the kind word of mother’s milk” and present the gifts to the bride’s mother.
BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

One of the traditional ceremonies among the Mongolian customs is the birthday celebration. This celebration can be divided into two types. One is a child’s birthday celebration, another is aged people’s birthday celebration. The one-year birthday celebration is arranged as a feast among the child’s parents, their relatives, and close friends. In recent times, children’s birthdays are celebrated each year among the child’s relatives or friends. This is a new social ritual.

A child’s birthday celebration intends to bring together the child’s age-mates and to treat them with dairy products. At this moment of celebration, the child can be seated on the white felt at the northern part of ger. The feast starts with a benediction, saying:

Your growing age,
Expanding deeds,
Studying,
Learning,
Knowledge,
Proud name,
Be always
Like the rays of the sun
And the light of the moon;
Rise and rise,
Glory and glory,
Behave like a hero to the state,
Be favourable to your relatives,
Be helpful to your parents,
Be friendly to brothers and sisters,
Be a good citizen,
So we wish all the best!

This is a benediction. When a child turns five-years old, we prepare a saddle and point out a horse, which the child likes. When we celebrate the child’s birthday we saddle a horse and put the child on the horse and anoint the horse’s mane and crupper with fermented mare’s milk and the child can drink the remnants of the milk. When a new saddle is put on the horse, the father of the child first mounts the saddled horse. After dismounting, the child is placed on the saddled horse. The child’s father then steers the child on horse around the corral of sheep three times in a clockwise direction and says:

May the valleys be full of horses,
May the corrals be full of animals,
May your child be set upon the saddle
In front of you
Riding your own colt!

According to established tradition, Mongolians officially celebrate the birthday of those living to seventy, eighty-five and ninety years. But the participants in these birthday celebration are their own children, grand-children, relatives, and local people of that location. During this event there is horse-racing and wrestling. This is a kind of festival. The birthdays of the ninety and ninety-five year-old people are commemorated more respectfully. There is a benediction to the benevolent elders:

Dear esteemed elder,
Your labour is valued by the state,
Your name is written in the chronicle,
You are respected by all;
You are supported by your relatives,
You are the pride of your grandchildren,
You have become a senior of the universe;
May all your wishes came true;
We arrange this feast on the occasion of your ninetieth birthday

On this occasion the merits of grey-haired man or woman can be enumerated in poetic and rhythmical manner. The feast is conducted according to the general established rules. In this benediction we say:

You are appreciated by the state,
You are respected by the populace,
You are noted in the chronicle,
You are supported by your relatives,
You are a patron of your great-great-grandchildren;
Dear grey haired person,
You have become senior of all;
You are well content with your life,
We commemorate your ninetieth birthday
And wish you all the best

In such a manner we recite the exploits of our grey-haired people in a poetic and rhythmical tune. This is just at the beginning of the celebration feast of the grey haired people. There follows certain announcements that address the guests, often in the witty words of a poem. The feast is conducted by the established rules.
FUNERAL PRACTICES

The internment of the body in Mongolia customarily belongs to kings and nobleman, saints, and shamans. The dead body of ordinary (common) people is traditionally left exposed at an open countryside place. But the honouring of remains is common and funeral proceedings are almost the same. According to tradition, the dead bodies of kings and nobleman were entombed in special places. The dignitaries of monks were embalmed or cremated and placed in stupas. Shamans (male or female) were buried with their drums in mausoleum-like spaces built on the highest places.

As mentioned above, the dead bodies of common people were left exposed at an open place of the countryside. Such a way of burial was normal in the vast countryside. But it is not suitable for urban people. So the interment of the dead body is today more prevalent.

When somebody takes their last breath we do not touch the body while expressing our condolences. But before the body gets stiff, someone old from the person’s relatives drops milk in a mouth of the dead body and closes the eyes and carefully places the body on a bed. Then the face of the dead body is covered with a white sheet. The furniture of the ger is taken out or arranged inside of the ger as possible. The dead body of a woman is placed in the eastern part of the ger, the dead body of men is placed in the western part. The ger must be kept as cool as possible.

Anything that glitters, such as mirrors or glasses, are removed from the ger. If they are unable to be removed they are covered with black cloth. When a monk, aged man, or devotee takes their last breath, chanting monks are invited. One of the chanting monks tolls the knell and blesses the dead body with a sacred sutra.

According to tradition, a monk is invited in any case. He performs an exorcism, which drives out any evil spirits. He also scatters the body with juniper needles and perfume. Then the top felt covering is closed and its rope is turned in the counter-clockwise direction and attached to the western wall lattice. If the door of the ger is a felt flap, it is stretched onto the roof of the ger. On ordinary days, these kinds of actions are forbidden. The clothing of the dead person are sterilized and aired.

The funeral procession is performed according to Buddhist ritual. A monk specializing in the almanac can be consulted about what to do with the corpse. Customarily, a man or woman close to the deceased offers a khadag to this monk. The monk explains what to do, such as how to touch the remains, how to choose where to bury it, what to prepare for the funeral, and in which direction to move. He also indicates what coloured cloth is to be used to cover or wrap the corpse and what happens to the dead person’s soul. These steps are all a part of the preparations for funeral.

The remains can stay in the ger from three to seven days before burial. The ordinary man’s remains can stay for three days without burial. The remains of parents and elder paternal or maternal uncles and aunts can stay for seven days without burial. During this period, there are actions that are traditionally forbidden, such as speaking loudly, making noises, and quarrelling. Traditionally, we request from the mountain spirits a patch of land to use to bury the dead body with the assistance of the monk. This plot of land is marked with a horn of antelope and a drop of milk on it. This is the sign of honouring the dead person. After this, the grave can be dug with mattock and crowbars.

According to the almanac a coffin can be chosen and its exterior and interior is padded. When the inside of the coffin is of a suitable size for the dead body, the exterior is decorated. The inside lid of the coffin is covered with whitish blue crepe and the bottom and inside walls of the coffin are covered with green crepe. These two colours symbolize the
blue sky and green earth. The exterior of the coffin is covered with the blue or red and black cloths.

The dead body can be carried away on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, which are considered to be auspicious days. The burial must be finished in the morning or before lunchtime. According to the almanac, the dead body can be touched by a person (whose birthday is compatible with the dead person). Then the husband or wife, children, and close relatives can also touch the body, after which all those present can express their honour to the deceased.

There were customs to honour the dead person by the people who dispose of the corpse, such as touching their cap in or turning its front in, or roll their sleeves in, turning their collars in, or turning the skirt of their gown out. Those who dispose of the corpse do these things. This is a way of communicating with the world of the dead. These customs are forbidden for everyday behaviour, except during the time of the funeral. Traditionally, the dead body was carried away by loading camels in the Gobi or an ox-drawn cart in hilly areas. In recent times, the dead body is carried away in a coffin loaded onto a lorry or van and taken to a cemetery.

When the dead body in the coffin is taken out from ger, a piece of wood is placed at the door. The coffin is taken out of the ger head-first to symbolize this as a reverse-event. The funeral procession starts from the dead person’s home and ends at the cemetery. Nowadays, a photo of the dead person is carried in front of the procession and people who are grieving the passing of the deceased hold up bunches of flowers. The coffin will be carried to a lorry directly by a certain number of the sons, cousins, or others close to the dead person. These people carry the coffin on their shoulders to the van or lorry.

The ger is pitched up and marked with a stone, which indicates that it is forbidden to cross this patch of land for a certain number of days. When the funeral procession starts from the ger to the cemetery, a certain number of people remain and wave a number of items in the direction of the funeral procession, including dairy products on a plate, a tankard of tea, and a sutra of ten thousand poems called Jadamba, which speaks of the virtues of the dead person. Those who are in the funeral procession are forbidden to talk to each other or to look back. The leading cord of the camel loaded with a dead body can be slung over the shoulder of the driver who is steering the camel. This specific act is a sign of the honour of the dead person.

Sons, daughters, close relatives, friends, and monks participate in the funeral ceremony. When the funeral procession arrives at its destination, the remains are taken off the carrier and placed on a long piece of white felt (nowadays, a rug). A hard white rock is placed under the head of the coffin. Four poles with the letters of a mantra are erected in four directions. At this moment the monks chant and scatter grain to please the mountain spirits.

At present, the dead body is placed to the west of grave. The grave is deaned while people in the funeral procession stand in silence. It, briefly, is a ceremony to part with the dead body. Next, the deceased person’s wife, husband, or children may say a few words. Then the oldest friend of the person pays tribute to his or her life and work. If the deceased was young, the elderly people touch dead person’s forehead with their hands as an expression of love. If the deceased was older, young people bow to the knee of the dead person, which is an expression of respect and honour. After these proceedings those who part with the dead person, stand up in silence to pay a last tribute to it.

Then a small amount of milk is poured and a handful of grains is scattered. The coffin is bound with rope and then lowered slowly into the grave. The ropes are then gently pulled up. The earth is scattered over it and piled onto the grave, which is marked with a tombstone. There is an epitaph with a surname and name, dates of birth and death. The upper part of epitaph is often circular or in a sharp triangle. The six letters of the mantra are sometimes engraved. This is a symbol of benevolence. Some graves are piled with earth only. These graves are decorated with stones and covered with grains. There is a wish that the deeds of the dead person be prosperous just like the sun and moon forever, and thus, figures of the sun, moon and fire are often inscribed.

After the burial, the place around the grave is cleaned. The people in the funeral procession go around the grave three times in a dockwise direction and demonstrate their honour and grief. Then they take transport and go back by a different way than they came. To look back at the grave is forbidden.

The people who have stayed at home, re-pitch the ger and clean the quilted felt rug, rearrange the furniture of the ger, and prepare food and tea. A ceremonial ritual is then held in which those who participated in the funeral ceremony pass between two fires and wash their hands with black and white holy waters as a way of cleansing themselves of the spirits. They are fumigated with burning juniper needles and incense, and then treated to tea and food.

At the last moment, the most senior person or most important man or woman at the ceremony expresses their thanks for sympathizing with them in their bereavement. There is no tradition of drinking vodka or wine at funerals in Mongolia. At the end of the ceremony, there is the distribution of incense, matches, candles, and upturned vessels, including cups. The driver of the lorry or van, the person who disposed of the corpse, and those who helped greatly are rewarded with khadag, tea, and some money.

An idol for the dead person is created and Buddhist sutras are chanted for forty-nine days after the burial ceremony. If the soul of the dead person doesn’t leave its body, there is a special spell to make this happen. The close relatives of the dead person are forbidden to enter and enjoy the feast, to gather for the Lunar Month festival, to go hunting to kill any animal life, or to have their hair cut before the end of the forty-nine days of official bereavement. In our funeral ceremony there are certain types of shamanistic customs, but they have been enriched by Buddhism, particularly by the yellow sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

There is a custom to do something special in memory of the deceased, including requesting benedictions and eating only millet for the forty-nine days in bereavement. At the end of this period, we feed stray dogs and do ourselves a funeral repast. Nowadays, due to urbanization and globalization, a more worldly funeral system has been introduced in Mongolia. The cremation of dead bodies is a new and increasingly common practice.