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CEREMONIES CONCERNING NATURE AND ITS SEASONS

Ceremonies concerning nature and its seasons, including lunar festivals, libation ceremonies, animal birth events, milking ceremonies, bird endowments, and foal branding rituals, are deeply rooted in the customs of the nomadic people. They are ceremonies done to see off and to welcome the seasons and to worship nature.

MILK LIBATION CEREMONY

Mongolians undertake milk libation ceremonies to honor the heaven, earth and mountains when spring arrives, the weather turns warm, and the snow and ice melt. This is also the period when young animals are born and milk products become available. Milk libation symbolizes the arrival of these young animals and the dairy products. It venerates heaven and nature and asks for the endowment of nature. It is a custom unique to the nomadic peoples.

This symbolization concerns each of the five kinds of animals. Ceremonial actions and poems vary according to the beginning of birthing and milking period of each of these animals.

In order to perform this ceremony powdered juniper needles are burned at home as an offering. The juniper needles are mixed with artemia and a rendered cream that includes the best ingredients. They are then burned on the northern side, or on all four sides, of the night corral of the flock of sheep.

Generally, Mongolians burn juniper needles or incense when they perform special ceremonies. Doing so suggests that this burning has a magic power to sanctify. This act is linked to the worshiping of fire, which has been practiced by Mongolians since ancient times.

Using a cypress-wood pail, we milk the mother animal that brought forth the first young of the season. Generally, two females with compatible year-signs perform this libation ritual. One of them holds the pail with milk in her left hand while the other one dips the libation ladle into the pail with her right hand and then makes milk-libation movements to the ninety-nine heavens, the seventy-seven masters of dairy products, and the surrounding mountains. They go round the gers and night corrals of the flocks in a clockwise direction.

Special verses are recited during the event that asks the heaven, mountains and rivers for their love and blessings. For instance, two verses of this ceremony state, “May there be no a sudden incident, death, natural disaster or livestock robbery; May there be plenty of pasture and water...” After performing the milk libation ceremony, everybody enters the ger to celebrate by consuming the ceremonial food and drink. It is a common custom among Mongolians to do a milk-libation ceremony every morning and evening.

The custom of milk libation has prospered and been maintained in Mongolia first under the dominance of shamanism and then later under Buddhism. Some words related to shamanism and also Buddhism in the libation poems can still be heard.

There are also blessing rituals for the tethering of newly weaned baby lambs or kids. These and the milk libation ceremonies are performed by reciting the endowment verses and ritual praises for the increase of the animal population.
SPRING ENDOWMENT

With the arrival of spring and mild weather, livestock is emancipated, but pasture grass is still usually rare. Animals typically give birth in the spring, however, despite these conditions. This is the busiest and hardest period for livestock breeders. There is the Lunar Month festival which celebrates the passing of winter safe and sound. The spring endowment symbolizes the end of the hardships of winter and the welcoming of a new and favorable season. Our livestock breeders deem it necessary to undertake a ritual that symbolizes that everything in the universe is in coming forth, that the animals are producing their young, and that dairy products are available. They, therefore, perform a ceremony of bird or camel endowment at the end of spring and the beginning of summer. This is the celebration of welcoming an auspicious season after raising young animals well and increasing their animal population.

According to the verses, "Do not go out to see the birds flying away; Do not come in when you see the birds flying back in", it seems that birds flying away means sadness and birds coming back means happiness. The return of birds is a sign of coming good times. The following verses are recited during the bird endowment ceremony:

When the white pen comes
When the snow on the mountain melts
When the whitish yellow mare gives birth
Plenty of endowments may come
Hurray, Hurray, Hurray
When the swan comes
When drifts of snow thaw
When mares give birth
Fortune of endowments may come
Hurray, Hurray, Hurray
When the cuckoo comes
When the frozen earth thaws
When lambs are released from their tethering-line
The endowments may come
Hurray, Hurray, Hurray

The swan is considered to be a beautiful, lovely, and harmless bird. It is believed that if a swan cries while passing over a ger during its journey back in the spring, then that summer will bring happiness and plenty of dairy products.

The verses of the endowment ceremony of the camel are similar to the verses of the bird endowment ceremony. It also symbolically welcomes the warm season and gives blessings to the newborn animals. The verses of the bird endowment ceremony are common among livestock breeders who live around many lakes and rivers and the verses of camel endowment ceremonies are common in the Gobi desert where there are many camels.

MARE MILKING CEREMONY

The milk libation ceremony is celebrated to greet the warmth of spring and to receive the newborn animals. But at the beginning of summer, the mare’s milking ceremony is performed as a sign of mare’s milk fermentation. Mongolians have a custom to tether their foals and colts on the Tiger Day, at the inception of summer, and release them from their tethers on the Dog Day of autumn. There is a custom to celebrate the occasion of fermenting mare’s milk with a feast, which is held within three days of the tethering. We rejoice with a feast when we release our foals and colts from their tethers in the autumn. Nearby catchers of horses gather together when the day of tethering arrives. The most venerated catcher of horses binds an honorable scarf to his lasso pole, catches the first born foal, and then hitches it to the first peg of the tethering-line.

As soon as the tethering of foals and colts is over, the household invites those participants and hosts for a day of feasting mare’s milk fermentation.

After tethering, the household ferments their mare’s milk and preserves it. They also prepare dairy products for the feast of mare’s milk fermentation. Nearby acquaintances, friends, and relatives gather for the feast. Particularly, those
who first participated in tethering foals and colts will come to the feast. They bring milk-vodka, shredded cheese curds, rendered cream, cottage cheese, and other dairy products as a contribution.

Before the feast celebration, a long white felt rug is spread out at the head of tethering-line. On the felt there is a table on which cooked cakes of flour are tiered. There is also a plate full of boiled mutton and vessels with mare’s fermented milk for offering, milk, milk vodka, among other foods and drinks. At the head of the table, a big wooden pail full of milk is brought. The wooden ladle with its long handle bound with five-colored scarves is placed over the top of the pail. The head of this ladle has nine square holes. This pail of milk and the ladle, which will be used in this offering, are placed to the west of the other products. All of these items need to be placed before the gathering horses.

The horses are gathered and brought to the tethering-line at sunrise. At first, the first born foal is caught and hitched to the tethering-line. When catchers finish tethering the foals they place their lasso poles in a row at the back of the ger. All gathered people can then enter the ger and have tea. Then they go out of the ger, where upon the milking of mare begins. The first mare is milked by a man. This is a vestige of ancient tradition. In Mongolia men used to milk mares in ancient times. The Secret History of the Mongols says, “Temujin went on in pursuit of a palomino gelding with its companions and when he came to the Bogurchu’s household, Bogurchu was milking a mare.”

After milking the mares, a milk libation ceremony is performed. In order to do so, nine men who ride grey horses are picked from those participants. The head of the ger (or household) can lead them. If nine horses of whitish colour are insufficient, seven or five horses can be used. The nine horsemen mount their horses and come to the door of the
tend that they are unable to carry them to the ger. In such manner they come to the door of the ger and shout, “We have brought dairy products of the milk-libation ceremony.” The head of the family comes out of the ger and says “Did you have a good trip?” One of the people answers, “We had lunch at the rich spring and spent a night at a place with rich treasure.” They offer the products to the head of the family. The head of family asks, “What have you brought here?” One of them replies:

This is the wether
Which goes at the head
Of the thousand sheep,
Which is the best
Of the ten thousand sheep.
This is the wether,
Which is slain and blessed
With the libation of milk from a
Grey mare, which
Bore a colt with a gold chest
And silver hind quarters.

Then the plate of mutton and other products are offered to the head of the family. He assigns two people to place the tub of mutton and other products before the fermented mare’s milk container. These people slice the mutton and apportion a slice of mutton to each attendant, except for the portion of wether and the stomach. The wether is picked by hand and the stomach is cut and mixed with noodle soup. All those attendants share the resulting noodle soup. The stomach is a symbol of abundance; the wether is a symbol of firmness and strength.

Then the feast of mare’s milk-libation starts. The general proceeding is the same as other feast proceedings. But their contents are different. It reflects the manner and movement of tethering foals or colts and mare’s ferment milk-libation, for example.

When the mare’s milk-libation starts, participants ride their horses and follow the head of the family and other horsemen. They go around the tethering-line in a clockwise direction three times. The male head of the family starts chanting a poem related to mare’s milk-libation in a tuneful voice:

The reason to chant the milk-libation is the
Fortunate birth of the
Dappled mare;
Your milk has not yet been
Tasted by all,
Only your dappled foal
Has tasted it;
Even if you hold out your fingers
It can fill your palm with stretched fingers;
If we put a vessel under a mare’s udder
It can fill the vessel up to its brim;
As an offering,
We make this milk libation.

When the mare’s milk libation poem is recited, one of the riders makes an offering of mare’s milk and shouts, “May we satisfy the mare’s milk thirst!” Others join him. The riders go around the tethering-line in a clockwise direction three times and come to the door of the ger. They dismount and lean their lasso poles on the roof of the ger. They then bring the pail of milk into the ger and place it in the khoimor or most sacred place in the ger. After completing the milk libation, they bind one sacred scarf to the mane of a stallion and another to the neck of the first born foal. They carry a plate of tiered cakes and other food from the tethering-line. They say, “How heavy, let’s rest” and “Let’s move”. They pre-
FOAL BRANDING CEREMONY

When the weather becomes colder in autumn, the horse-breeders have a custom to set the mares and foals free of their halter and hobbles and to celebrate the feast of “Foal branding”. From ancient times, the feast used to have the name of the “Feast for foal branding”, due to the custom that horse-breeders used to brand the foals right before coiling the tethering line and letting them join their mothers. According to historical documents, since the establishment of the customs “Worship of Chinggis Qahan” in the late thirteenth century, the feast has been renamed to the “Feast for branding foals with tasam (the special “dash” brand) of Chinggis Qahan”.

In order to perform this ceremony a fire is set in the vicinity of the tethering-line. An iron brand is made red hot. Each foal or colt is then branded, after which the brand is dipped into a pail of fermented mare’s milk. The pail is brought into the ger to be served. Guests are invited to enter the ger. They take their seats around the honoured area of the ger to have food and drinks that were prepared for the foal branding ceremony. Prior to starting to enjoy the food and drinks, the head of the family takes a khadag (sacred silk scarf) and offers a benediction poem from the honoured individual who had branded the foals and counted the horses. In response, that individual recites a benediction poem related to the custom of foal branding. A mare’s milk-libation is offered to heaven, earth and mountains. Thereafter, the feast for the “Custom of foal branding” continues according to established rules.

Mongolians have a tradition to catch foals on Tiger Day, in the beginning of summer, and release them on Dog Day, at the end of autumn. In some localities the ceremony is called the “Feast of Chagt”. While the ceremony has general characteristics to those practiced throughout the nation, there are very distinctive elements that are defined by locality, ethnicity, and weather conditions. For instance, in some localities they do not release tethered foals and colts, thinking that tethered foals and colts in the autumnal frost will become more hardy. They release them at the beginning of winter or on the 25th day of the last month of autumn. Then they arrange a “Feast of Unhobbling”.

Photo by Sh. GERELSAIKHAN