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Socium Division Markers: Instruments of Kinship Relations as Expressed in Oirat and Buryat Traditions

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People in traditional societies are involved in kinship and property systems and social relations. A traditional society's social structure relies on specific markers and substantive zomorphic codes. The nucle family, the basic unit in the structure of Mongolian society, has some unique characteristics. One of these is the "gal," or "fire," whose image and associated religious practices appear in the traditions of Buryat and Oirat Mongols. The commonality of views and ritual practices between the Buryats and Western Mongols is apparently due to their shared ethnic history, their formation in close contact with Turkic peoples, and the migrations of Oirat Mongols on the northern periphery of the Mongolian world. An investigation into the markers of Buryat and Oirat social units therefore seems worthwhile.

Key words: Oirat community, Buryat, human, social, traditional culture

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1. Introduction

Family is defined as a small part of a larger social community defined in Mongolian culture by patronymy. In the past, the existence of a family independent of larger patronymic groups was impossible. Connections between members of the social community were extremely strong, supported by alliances, vassaldom, marriage, and economic and historical ties. Mechanisms for legitimizing religious affinity and maintaining the unity of society were also

important. The concept of “family” in the worldview of a society is transmitted by various images and symbols. This article is devoted to the study of these family markers.

2. Family

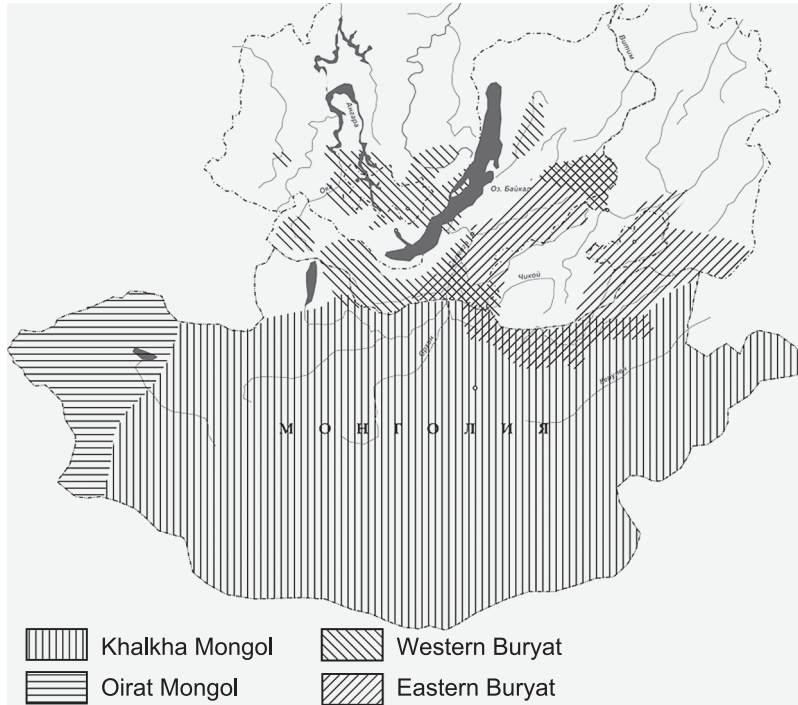
The small family, the main unit of society in the social structure of the Mongolian people, had a number of names: “gal” (fire), “ail” (family or home), “ail bule” (family), “bule” (family), “ger buliin” (family), “ger” (home), and “buluk” (or “sum,” a lower administrative unit in East Mongolian), from “buleg,” meaning “cluster” or “group” in Western Mongolian. In this paper, I would like to present and analyze a number of key markers representing the family as part of larger society in the traditional culture of the Western Mongols, including Oirat Mongols and Buryats. How did the Oirat Mongols become part of the Buryats? A Buryat student of this problem, P. Konovalov, has hypothesized the existence of historical and ethnic commonalities between the two groups, whose developmental trajectories were interrupted by the calamities in the Eurasian region during the Late Medieval and Early Modern epochs (Konovalov 2011: 21). In the ethnic structure of the Buryat, more than twenty units of Oirat descent have been noted (Nanzatov 1999: 80–81). It is quite probable that the features of many cults in the traditional culture of the Western Buryats and Mongols were formed on the basis of a common Oirat-Buryat cultural legacy.

2.1 The cult of fire. Home fireplace and its attributes

The hearth fire is the main symbol for family in Mongolian culture. The association between family and fire originated in ancient times, when fire symbolized the clan and each clan had its own fire originating from the forefather of the “yas” (bone) (Vyatkina 1969: 53). Beliefs about a remote ancestor and founder of the social entity transformed into a belief in a spirit master of the hearth. Images of this deity varied throughout historical periods and among Mongolian ethnic groups.

Initially, the fire deity was female, as can be seen from its various names—“otgalan qan eke” (or “Mother Othan-Galahan”), “El-Galahan eke” (or “Mother-Fire El”), “Gal-eke” (or “Mother Fire”), and “Ot eke,” “Od eke,” and “Ut eke” (or “Mother Ot”) (Neklyudov 1982: 269). A woman, a mother, an elderly lady, and a grandmother are all personifications of fire. This image formed during the period of the matriarchate, when the fire cult was maintained by women. This is proven by archeological findings such as female figurines found close to home hearths (Galdanova 1976: 151). According to G. T. Tsybikov, the emergence of a female fire deity, the mistress of fire, was linked to the everyday responsibilities of women, which included looking after the hearth. From this link emerged fire priestesses, or “udagan” shamans of the female milieu (Tsybikov 1927: 64). That is why, among many peoples of Southern Siberia and Eastern Asia, the performance of various rituals connected with fire and the hearth is associated with women.

Later, during the advent of the patriarchy, the male image replaced the female one and the fire deity became a bearded old man. Other images appeared as well. In Mongolia, the image of a married couple, Chagatai and Chanhalan, is particularly popular. In the Buryat tradition, they are named “Sagadai” and “Sanhala-hatun.” This couple represents the keepers



Map 1 Mongolian-speaking ethnic groups in Mongolia and Buriatia.

of the hearth in common Mongolian culture.

Nevertheless, traces of the female deity remained in Western Mongol and Buryat traditions until the early 20th century. The importance of the hearth mistress's image was probably determined by the settlement of Oirat Mongols and Buryats on the periphery of the Mongolian world and by the influence of neighboring Siberian nations such as the Turks and Tungus-Manchu. For example, the Evenks considered the hearth the home of a clan's mother, its guardian. The clearest traces of the worship of a female fire deity are found among the Altaic peoples, who honored "Ot ije," the "mistress of fire." For Tuvinians, though not for Mongols or Buryats, new fire in a newlywed couple's yurt could be kindled from the hearth of the bride's mother: "After the singing of songs, if the 'toi' was in the native village of a bride, one of the guests would run into the bride's parents' house, take burning wood from the hearth and put it into the newlyweds' hearth" (Dyakonova 1980: 23). The hearth itself also symbolized the mistress of a house, as is evident from the interpretation of dreams in the Yakut folk tradition.

According to the Mongolian scholar Erdenebold, the Oirat Mongolian tradition still renders the master spirit of a hearth as female. The Western Mongols dedicated a horse to the spirit of the hearth, and the mistress of a house could ride this horse as the principal keeper of a family's hearth (Erdenebold 2005: 118).

The female fire deity appears in the ritual practices of the Western Mongols and Buryats.

Let us consider the common features of Buryat and Western Mongol wedding rituals. First, there is the custom of sharing fire, or “gal hubaaha,” which takes place during a son’s wedding. The essence of this custom is the lighting of a fire in the newlyweds’ hearth by the groom’s parents, who share their fire by bringing it from their yurt to a new house built specifically for the young family. Among the Western Buryats (for example, the Bil’chir or Unga Buryats), this ritual is performed by the groom’s mother: “She went to the newlyweds’ yurt and lit the fire in their hearth with the help of fire brought from their yurt.”

The Uriankhais of the Altai have a similar custom, according to which the newlyweds’ hearth is lit using the groom’s father’s flint stone. As Mongolian researchers argue, this custom reflects the continuity of generations and the blossoming of a family.

A bride in the Buryat tradition accepts the responsibilities associated with keeping the heart and continuing the clan. Her role in the wedding ritual—worshipping the groom’s parents’ hearth—reflects those responsibilities. Familiarizing herself with the groom’s clan, the bride must treat her groom’s father’s fire with fat and butter and add three logs to symbolize her wish to multiply the groom’s clan. The Buryats pay careful attention to the fire’s form and size during this ritual. If it rises high after the bride sacrifices the fat and butter, the life of the newlyweds will be long and happy. This process is only one element of a larger ritual for the Yakuts, whose tradition is to have the newlyweds’ fire lit by the bride. In the Yakut culture, special relations between a woman and the hearth fire are formed during the rituals of fire worship: “Parents of a groom tried to determine what kind of mistress she would become by judging the way in which she lit the fire” (Sleptsov 1989: 41).

In the fire worship ritual performed by the Buryat bride in her father-in-law’s house, the three logs put into the fire and many other aspects of the wedding ritual symbolize the future generations (“sulde,” or souls of children) the bride will bear. Small pieces of charcoal have the same symbolic meaning; this is confirmed by numerous examples from all genres of the oral Mongolian folk tradition, including such well-known proverbs as “There will be no fire from a single firebrand and a single man will make no man” and “One piece of firewood will not make a campfire; one man will not prolong his kin.”

More evidence of the Buryats’ still-female fire deity lies in the ritual named “the trial of the old women,” which is performed by the elderly mothers of large families. They gather in the house of a childless man, cook ritual porridge from sour cream and flour, and put it into bowls placed around the burning hearth. They then perform sacrificial offerings to the fire with butter and ritual porridge, and each participant strikes a childless man with her pants as she pronounces the words of a spell. This ritual is also one element in a more general pattern of sacrificial offerings to fire (to the fire cult). The fire is addressed by the old, happily married mothers of large families, whose status may rightly be identified as that of “udagan,” or priestesses of fire. For the Buryats, their magical procedures had to propitiate the fire deity and help solve the problem of childlessness.

If Buryat and Mongolian Oirat traditions imply the existence of a female fire deity, the culture of the westernmost Oirats-Kalmyks contains only one divine image: the mistress of fire, or “halyn Okn tengri.” With the spread of Buddhism, this archaic female deity was replaced by Lhamo, the deity from the Buddhist pantheon (Bakaeva 2003: 182).

Anthropomorphizing fire made possible the belief that spirits from various yurts could

quarrel. This belief is connected with a number of Mongolian taboos. For example, it was prohibited to place a yurt where another yurt used to be. This taboo dates back to beliefs about the sinfulness of mixing fires. Roaming from place to place, the Mongols never placed a dwelling where another once stood: “There was a belief that it was dangerous to enter the dwelling of those who left if there was still fire in their hearth (“hari hunei haluun gal deer buzha orohgui”). This ban suggests a clan cult of fire, with people particularly fearing a fight between two fires. Later, this taboo remained in force in relation to families within one and the same clan (Galdanova 1987: 24). Moreover, as G. Tserenhand notes, the Mongols never mixed ashes from different yurts (Tserenhand 1993: 34). They believed that there was a spirit of fire in the still-live hearth and that it would quarrel with a newly arrived spirit. A similar taboo governed travel culture. On a long journey, travelers avoided stopping at the “fire” of previous travelers: “Belen gal deere byyha ygei!” (“It is prohibited for a guest to camp near live fire”) (Zhamtsarano 2001: 245). A Western Buryat custom also prohibited building a house where another building had stood. According to Buryat beliefs, the spirit of the former building (the “mongol-burhan”) would bother the owners of the new one.

In the context of a people’s social structure, the hearth fire symbolizes the continuity of generations. One of the best wishes a young family could hear from their elders was “Let the inextinguishable fire burn in your hearth, and let your tethering post stand eternally” (Linkhovoin 1972: 52). It was prohibited to extinguish fire in everyday life, and pouring water into the hearth was specifically banned. These actions were considered ways of terminating life and family line. “Even if people left a place, they would leave the fire smoldering” (Galdanova 1987: 24).

A hearth fire, as Buryat ethnogenetic legends testify,¹⁾ could be extinguished with water only in one case: if a man died childless. If a Buryat died childless, people would say “gal gulamtyn untaraa (“his hearth has died down”)!” This is why the most terrible Buryat oath was “let my hearth die down,” meaning “let my family line end.”

The conclusions of E. P. Bakaeva, a student of Kalmyk culture, confirm this view. One of the most important functions of the hearth fire is the preservation of clan unity and the continuity of generations, as is illustrated by the sacrificial hearth fire rituals that mark key lifespan or transitional events (birth, wedding, death). Bakaeva argues that “among the main motifs of the ‘hal teeh’ ritual [which is performed when a clan loses a male to untimely death] are the necessities of the annual propitiation of a clan’s guardian deities, the procurement of health, and the number of clan members” (Bakaeva 2003: 203).

The “soliciting a child” ritual, widespread among the Buryats, testifies to the hearth’s role in ensuring the continuity of generations. Childlessness was a problem not just for a married couple but also for all their kin. Society therefore developed special measures aimed at “correcting” childlessness, and one of the most widespread was worshipping the master of the hearth. This was connected with fertility: for the Buryats, the fire deity was associated with childbirth. The ritual was named the “gal gulamtyn tailga.” If a young family had no children, one sheep and milk vodka were sacrificed to the fire deity, not by a shaman but by a knowledgeable old man—a “hayalgasha” (Basaeva 1991: 60).

The image of fire as a symbol of a family’s wellbeing and wealth was linked to the wellbeing of the entire clan. Accordingly, no family’s hearth fire could be passed on to another

clan. A member of another clan who lit his pipe from a family's hearth had to knock it out before leaving in order to avoid taking away the family fire (Vyatkina 1960: 220).

The guardian functions of fire are well known in Mongolian tradition. Fire protected people from the pestering of evil spirits. Both Buryats and Oirats, particularly Kalmyks, placed hope in the power of fire to protect a newborn family member from evil spirits. That is why the Buryats and Kalmyks buried the afterbirth of a newborn close to its house's hearth, opposite the entrance.

3. Animals as symbols of the fire

Symbolic connections between animals and the hearth fire were also common among Buryats, Oirat Mongols, and Kalmyks. A red goat was especially symbolic, and the Oirats would dedicate a goat to the fire deity. According to Erdenebold, this ritual was performed only by families whose fire spirits were considered ferocious. When a favorable day was chosen for a family, its hearth was cleaned and its stones replaced. The dedicated animal was decorated with ribbons on its neck. Old ribbons could be replaced by new ones, and the old ribbons were burnt.

The goat in the Buryat tradition was also a manifestation of the sun. Accordingly, Buryats often sacrificed goats to the sun. Ethnographic sources also contain a great deal of information on the dedication of goats to the fire deity by childless couples hoping to have children. The pre-Lamaist tradition of sacrificing a goat to the hearth deity persisted in the Buddhist tradition of worshipping the deity of the hearth fire. The only difference was that, in the latter case, the lama would sacrifice a statuette of a goat made from sponge, not a live animal. The goat cult that existed among the Mongolian people also spread among the Turkic peoples of South Siberia, who considered a red goat to be the mount of the master of the hearth.

Obviously, the preservation of the visions and traditions of the Buryats and Oirat Mongols, similar to the relevant elements of Turkic culture, was conditioned by the settlement of these peoples on the periphery of the Mongolian world, in the frontier zone near the Turkic tribes.

3.1 Clan/tribal fire

Fire as a marker of a socium appears vividly in public rituals such as the "tailgan." During his visits with the Western Buryats, T. Zhamtsarano described a traditional Buryat tailgan: "a small community of Mikhailov consisted of ten families. However, in the beginning, when 'tailgan' was performed for one local spirit, there were three families. At present during the public 'tailgan,' three cauldrons are installed for cooking meat in memory of the three families, and the present ten families each set a birch branch, which is called a 'turge.'²⁾ Bowls are distributed and families are seated in a special order" (Zhamtsarano 2002: 309).

Fire lit during a period of public festivities, in a place sacred to a certain group (kin, clan, or tribe) where sacrifices to gods and ancestor spirits are made, belongs to the clan or tribe. Such fire is made of firewood brought specifically for the ritual by participating families. It is lit on top of a sacred mountain that, for a certain group of Buryats, is where the afterbirth ("toonto") of their ancestor was buried, or perhaps an ancestral burial place or one where divine attention was shown to the community. It is lit on a bonfire site founded long before

by the ancestors of the clan. The sacred nature of the clan fire and its connection with ancestors determines its mediating functions in addition to the cleansing qualities of hearth fire (which eliminates filthiness and brings grace). The ancestor spirits converse with their descendants, and this communication and the festive atmosphere remain in memory. Undoubtedly, every Buryat, who from early childhood participates in such public rituals, keeps memories of them for life. Here, I would like to cite an eyewitness account of the tailgan clan by N. E. Markakov:

“The village ‘tailgan’ was held in a locality named ‘Bazain hushun,’ a place of regular worship of our clansmen to the most powerful deities and holy spirits ... Smoke from the bonfire lit by our distant ancestors still sweetly waves over us.

“If during the clan relationship period, this bonfire was constantly alive, nowadays we come to our small fatherland and ‘blow’ this gleaming charcoal that is covered with ashes from last year’s bonfire.

“Each clan’s bonfire under cauldrons of water was placed according to the seniority of the clan, from right to left. Three round stones the size of a pigeon’s egg were placed at the perimeter of each clan bonfire. They were taken from the small fatherland (‘toonto nyutag’) and stood as signs for each clan. Firm believers would take this ‘mas-cot’ with them on long journeys in order to feel the presence of the fatherland everywhere they went.

“They constantly treated them to various offerings so that they remembered them and wished them well in all deeds and health” [N. E. Markakov].

Continuity between ancestors and descendants, dead and living, was the guarantee of a clan’s existence. Hearth fire and clan fire provided this continuity. The crackling of a fire was understood as the speech of ancestor spirits, who warned descendants about dangers, expressed their wishes, and supported or rejected decisions.

3.2 Cauldron

A cauldron, the symbol of a socium, joins the hearth fire in representing family and clan unity: “A hearth near which creation (cooking) was done and a cauldron in which this act was performed were interconnected in the traditional views of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples of Siberia” (Bakaeva 2003: 204).

In the Buryat milieu, the cauldron consolidates the unity of a clan. It is a symbol around which representatives of a clan gathered during sacrificial offerings to the ancestors: “According to ancient customs, a division of a clan or aimak was ‘formalized’ at a special ‘tailgan’ when a clan’s sacrificial cauldron was split to pieces, after which new clans and aimaks acquired their own new cauldrons” (Sanzheev 1988: 59).

In Western Mongolian tradition, a cauldron from the mother’s clan was the prime item in the yurt of newlyweds, where new family life began. Once a new yurt was built in the groom’s locus, new items were brought in and put in place. After lighting the yurt’s first fire, a sister-in-law from the bride’s side “would place a cauldron on a tripod and, hallowing it, drop some milk into the cauldron and then pronounce the good wish ‘hais n’ husamtai, haraach n’ utaatai.’ This was a wish that tea would always boil in the cauldron, that smoke would come out of the smoke hole in the roof, and that the family would live in wealth. Only

after this ‘implementation of good wishes’ would she pour water into the cauldron and make milk tea. The groom was treated to the first tea” (Ochir and Gladanova 1992: 44).

It is notable that the most sacred items, including the tripod, are delivered by relatives of the bride in the Bayad tradition. The tripod is also connected with the hearth fire and shares its symbolic meaning. The tripod and hearth stones are the most important items in a dwelling. They must be installed first, right after the assembly of a yurt, in many Mongolian traditions.

Among some groups of Western Mongols, the cauldron and tripod are related to the father’s clan: “The Derbets usually present a yurt, bowl, and trivet from the groom’s family, as do the Burkhangs” (Vyatkina 1960: 220). This is probably either a transformation of former customs connected with the mother’s clan in the patriarchal tradition or an influence of Turkic culture, with which many Mongolian people, such as the Derbets, interacted directly. In the wedding rituals of their neighbors, the reindeer-herding Toja-Tuvinians,³ a cauldron was included in the mandatory items of the bride price: “a bronze cauldron was given for a bride’s ‘skull’” (Vanshtein 1980: 27). Another Turkic nation, the Kazakhs, always gave their separating sons a yurt of their own and a small cauldron from the father’s hearth: “In the perception of the Kazakhs, the ‘kazan-oshak’ (hearth) symbolizes the procreation and functioning of a family” (Toleubaev 2000: 168). As we see, the wedding items presented by the groom’s side in the Derbet tradition reflect the custom of the Kazakhs.

A full cauldron symbolizes the satiety and wellbeing of a family. It also suggests an impregnated womb, and these two images together connote fertility and wealth. The cauldron is associated with a pregnant woman among the Kazakhs. During a protracted childbirth, they cook meat in a cauldron saying, “What will give birth faster, a black woman or a black cauldron?” The inviolability and inexhaustibility of the cauldron’s grace were preserved if the food it contained did not overcook or overflow. Otherwise, happiness (like the contents of the cauldron) could burn in the fire.

3.3 Tree

The tree as an image is an important socium marker. The Buryat traditional worldview understood not only the unity and interdependence of man and nature but also the interconnectedness of generations. A tree symbolized this interconnectedness because its roots determine the nature of its branches. A well-known Buryat saying states, “modonoi yndehen gazar doodyyr, hunei undehen gazar deeguur,” which means “the roots of a tree grow wide under the ground; the roots of a man spread everywhere above the land.” However, in this particular case, the “roots” of a man are his descendants, not his ancestors. To speak of “terminating” or “eradicating” somebody’s clan, the Buryats used the expression “yndehyn’ tahalkha,” which means “to uproot” or liquidate all descendants (Galdanova 1997: 94).

A human life cycle is associated with the growth of a man and his descendants. This idea is expressed in the Western Buryat ritual of burying the afterbirth. Putting birch chips into a pit in the ground where the afterbirth was placed, the Buryats would say, “Multiply, branch out like a birch tree” (Hangalov 1960: 370). A tree can also symbolize a social entity such as a family or clan. According to Western Buryat custom, during the public sacrifice ceremony each household’s head (representing the entire family) would put a birch branch in front of him: “However, during a large clan ‘tailgan,’ the birch branch can unify the entire community,

represented by the elder” (Hangalov 1960: 309). During a large tailgan, while the entire tribe worshipped certain deities and ancestors together, each clan’s members performed individual offerings of ritual food to their tree, addressing only the ancestors of their clan.

Such beliefs connected with trees were not present among the Western Mongols, probably due to the peculiarities of their natural environment, which has few forests. In general, the cult of the tree survived in the traditions of the Olet, Zakhchin, and Torgut Mongols. Beliefs in the guardian function of certain trees such as the juniper and red willow (used to scare away evil spirits) and birch (from which yurt supports were made to guard against thunder) are still important.

This paper attempted to examine the most meaningful markers of social entities among various Mongolian inhabitants of the Mongolian-Turkic frontier. The shared beliefs and ritual practices between the Buryats and Western Mongols can probably be explained by the groups’ common ethnic history and the migrations of Oirat Mongols to the periphery of the Mongolian world.

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Notes

- 1) In particular, a legend about the origin of the Buryat Ekhirit and Bulagat tribes says that when the kinsmen wanted to extinguish with water the hearth of the elderly childless female shaman Asuihan, she begged them not to do so, having seen two burning coals in her hearth foretelling the birth of two sons.
- 2) Wood or branches can also function as markers of unity in traditional Buryat culture.
- 3) The mutual influence of Turkic- and Mongolian-speaking ethnic groups on the northern periphery of the Mongolian world is also visible in the borrowing of some Derbet kinship terms from the Turkic language.