

Mongolian National Costumes Reflected in the Oral Literature and Popular Rituals

Kang Shin* · R. Chultemsuren**

Professor, Dankook University*

Professor, State Pedagogical University of Mongolia**

Abstract

In the oral literature of the Mongolians such as folk-tales, legend, epics, poetry, songs, riddles etc., there are endless examples describing various stories about the origin of the costumes, ornaments and accessories, or the way how they were designed and changed with the times and how they correspond with relevant customs, public rituals and etiquette in general.

In this paper we argue that every piece of the Mongolian national costumes and wear in general has specific meaning and symbolism, which is still the miraculous universe waiting to be unveiled properly. As for the Mongolians, the costumes and accessories mean the treasury of intellectual culture of their own as well as their daily necessities of life. There are still many undiscovered features of ancient national culture, apart from characteristics of various tribes and clans of the Mongolians.

Key words : oral literature, public rituals, national costumes, ornaments and accessories,
symbolism

1 . Introduction

The Mongols has developed in the process of their history a great variety of daily and casual wear designs as all the other nations of the world has done. There are certain specific features of the national costumes of the Mongols, which is attributed to the quite different geographic conditions like extreme continental climate with four seasons of the year or to the specific nomadic way of life. Therefore the specific composition is motivated by a great choice of combination of basic components

Corresponding author: Kang Shin, E-mail: kangshin@dankook.ac.kr

based on local raw materials like felt, wool, leather or hunting trophy furs be it either wolf, fox, or marmot and sable etc.

Completely different uniqueness of Mongolian national costume is inseparably connected with other features of social life coming to contemporary generations through Shamanist philosophy, Buddhist religion and related customs and rituals. Ornaments and symbols, accessories and details constitute the inexhaustible richness of this cultural fund. The Mongolian tribes such as Khalkhs, Buriads, Durvuds, Uzemchin and many others had contributed their share of taste and art further enriching the diversity of folk art in general.

From early 1920-s and 1930-s the Mongols had adopted European style of wear as one of the options of modern time. During the socialist times the national costume deel, a gown-like long wear, had been a typical wear for elderly, herders, lamas and national wrestlers. Women put it on as a casual wear on the occasion of the national holiday, Naadam. As for public officials it became a wear of the past days. People wearing deel were not even allowed to revolutionist youth gatherings and parties and other public places such as restaurant etc. It is only after the collapse of the communist regime in early 1990 that all layers of the society regained the freedom of wearing deel anywhere and at anytime.

The ethnologists and other scientists has been studying the features of the Mongolian national wear from every possible point of view. Here in this paper we will make an attempt to concentrate on the special features of Mongolian national costume as it is reflected in the folklore and customs.

II. The History of the Mongolian Hat and the Ethics and Etiquette of Respecting it

1. The Origin of the Hat and Legends Concerning its Symbols

The Mongols have attached profound significance to their traditional hat. That's why they praise it as the hat of the raising state. The hat may be called crown meaning to reflect the utmost respect towards it. The legends witnessing the significance of the hat for the Mongols are endless. They are being told from generation to generation of all Mongolian tribes. Here we shall mention only two of them.

1) A Legend about the Velvet Hat

As the legend goes that the front part of the velvet hat¹⁾ symbolizes defense and security against the enemies who may make an invasion sometime or other. That's

why it has a shape of a mountain, barrier or cover. The hat is open from behind, which means the Mongols have openhearted, friendly relationships with the northern neighbor. The red ribbon²⁾ at the back of the hat is reflecting the symbol of purity. It is because the Mongols worship the red color. When Mongols hand over a gift they bind it with a red thread or stick a piece of red paper. By this they mean to pass to the receiver a message that the present is pure and is symbolizing sincere approach. A number of research works describe the sense of attaching a red ribbon to the back edge of a hat exactly this way.

2) A Legend about the Mongolian Hat

Another legend refers to Zanbazar as the designer of the Mongolian hat. Zanbazar was the pioneer spreading Buddhism all over Mongolia and also the inventor of the 'soyombo' alphabet. He was the first Mongolian theological monarch who lived in 1635-1723 and was worshipped as Enlightened Highness Zanbazar.

The frontal shield of the Mongolian hat is symbolizing the geographic configuration of the territory of Mongolia. The 64 strips sewn together and making the hat tepee-like--recently the design is simplified and now having only 32 strips--and represents the variety of Mongol tribes. The bundle on the top of the hat called 'sampin'³⁾ is symbolizing the harmony and unity of all Mongolian tribes. The general shape of the Mongolian hat reminds a mountain top. Thus being strongly tied up together the Mongolian state will be standing as boldly as a hilltop. Mongolian state has a big gate in frontal side. This gate provides access to the neighbor states on the South. This huge gate must be well guarded and to symbolize this security it has two red ribbons on both sides, which are symbols of spears.

Mongolian state has reliable strong fortresses from both sides. To symbolize this security the hat has two standing ears from both sides, which one would never bend down. Similarly the Mongolian hat has a minor leakage hole on the back, i.e. the hinder part of the hat. In order to guard this back entrance and to prevent probable losses two sword-shaped red ribbons symbolize the security. The red color had two reasons for being popular. First the red color has been a favorite color of the Mongols. Secondly it is the symbol of purity and genuine properties and reflects the category of saint value. Thus if only the Mongolian people wear their hats it naturally symbolizes that their wealth is properly guarded and the statehood is protected.

2. Popular Rituals about the Hat

If any Mongolian drops his hat by accident he will immediately catch it with the right hand, shake the dust from it, then he will kiss it and put it on. In the Secret

history of the Mongols this rule is confirmed convincingly. It goes this way: 'Tev Tenger, a shaman had caught Otchigin by his cloth on the chest and went wrestling with him. Tev Tenger's hat became fallen behind the big pot meanwhile. Father Munlig immediately caught it, kissed gently and put on his knees.'⁴⁾ This citation is a good evidence how the Mongolians worshipped their hats. Another case is that if someone steps over the hat unintentionally the owner of it would keep it over an open fire for a while suggesting the process of purification and only after that he would put it on again. The hat and belt are sacred things for the Mongolians. It is the soul of luck and symbol of masculinity for them.

Even for the contemporary Mongolians it is a strictly forbidden taboo to put on the hat reversely. It is only at the funeral ritual the one who by astrologic rules should touch the deceased person before anybody else must turn back his hat and raise up the hem of his long gown and fix behind the belt. When one had to express his condolences to the family of the deceased he had to bend in the ears and turn the hat backward. This was the ritual and ethics of mourning. Nowadays turning the hat backward is accepted as stylish and as symbol of a tough guy especially in the entertainment business.

In the earlier times special vassals took care of the hats of royalties and top aristocratic elites. They would never let their lords' hats to be put at low places, i.e. on the bed, table or ground etc. Even today the hat of the head of a family is being kept on a high place. This rule is still rigidly observed. If one happens to stay overnight at some family he will without fail ask for a permission to take off his hat from the head of a family. Otherwise it will be accepted as a rude abuse of the host.⁵⁾

Even nowadays, it is a strictly observed rule to come in to a family with the hat on. The herders and elderly people among others in rural areas are very sensitive to this etiquette. It is a strict rule that a guest must have his hat on while he is being offered tea or any snack of the day. Greeting ritual on the occasion of the Lunar New Year requires that each should have his hat on. The Mongolians hate to put on the other's hat. However, if a situation will require one to put on the other's hat unavoidably he will intentionally loudly remark with well expressed tune of disappointment What a pity it is not my own hat but other's. It is not pants but the head cover. By this ritual he apologizes for breaking the rule. It is an old rule of etiquette in a long journey that the elderly invariably guides the group. If someone is on the way all alone. It is considered traditionally that the hat is leading him. So it is no wonder if one happens to be on the way in the morning of the Lunar New Year's day he will first greet his own hat and perform a greeting gesture as if he did with a human. This rule works even these days with little or slight modification showing what a special mentality is this hat worshipping ritual. One never gives a hat as a present. If one finds a lost or left behind hat he would never take it because it is 'a

turned down container', which might bring misfortune. If one sees a baby making the first steps in his life he will gently slap him with the hat of the father as giving the baby symbolic lifelong protection of the father.

There is a very favored expression giving another chance to show one's respect to his hat. When one starts for a longer trip he would remark: I'll shake the dust from my hat. There are innumerable other expressions or symbols and good or bad signs in a great variety of etiquette and attitude connected with the hat. Taking hat off - to be ours. Taking it the next day - to be other's. It is a good sign if one dreamt putting on other's hat, or the hat of a dignitary or even of a state official. The dream reader's fortune-telling book suggests that a dream of putting a winter hat is a sign of getting a reputation and promotion.

The etymology of the word 'malgai' in Mongolian, i.e. the hat is derived from the cover for a man's bare head. In accordance with the three soul doctrine of Shamanism the purpose of the hat is to protect intellectual or heavenly soul which used to be believed to hide on the top of the head. Thus at any occasion of top etiquette, a formal ceremony or traditional ritual the first duty for participants is to put on the hat or to check whether it sits correctly.

III. Folklore and Rituals about Mongolian Clothes, 'Deel'

Mongolian traditional deel is a multipurpose stuff. It is a casual top display of honor, wealth, pride and dignity. It is a pragmatic working clothes making riding on horses or camels comfortable. It is a reliable protection from cold, easy to put on and light to carry. It can also serves as a mat or blanket when one needs to sleep in the open air. The ancestors and Shamans in the ancient times were wearing white deel. In the concept of the shamanistic praying rituals this color could summon the owners of the white pole of the universe and represent good fortune. In the medieval times during the celebration of the Lunar New Year's day all the Mongolians, both royalties and commoners as well were riding white horses and wearing white deel, and greeted each other with white khadag, the silk symbol of good wish.

1. Oral Literature praising Deel

When the first ever deel is being sewed and put on a baby the following parable used to be sung as felicitous sayings:⁶⁾

Let colts and foals step all over your front skirt!

Let sheep and lambs jump all over your back skirt!

Let grease and fat stick on your inner skirt!
The possessions are fragile, but the possessor is eternal,
Let your deel be made of cotton this year, but full of silk next year!
May you enjoy even better things than what you already enjoy!

Besides these initiation good wishes there are uncountable other parables when the first ever deel shall be awarded by good wishes of other relatives and friends of the family.

2. A Legend about Princess Baljin Khatan

There is a legend about how the design of Buriad deel originated. This legend came to the contemporary Mongols through centuries of oral transmission. Today this legend is still kept alive among Khalkhs, Buriads, Uvurlugch tribes as oral and written heritage and has numerous versions. The story of the legend is being unfolding as the beil, an aristocratic rank Buuvei of Solongod tribe brings as a bride from a remote kingdom the princess Baljin, the daughter of Tsagaan Lus Khaan for his son, prince the khun taij named Tai.

The legend ends in tragedy. The bail Buuvei had been cheated by his jealous second wife and ordered to mutilate and cast away Princess Baljin by cutting off the legs and arms, extremities and the head. Legend has it that after the horrible tragic incident the Buriads came to mourn and remember the tragedy of a young beauty of their origin. In designing and making their deel they intentionally cut out sleeves and the chest of deel into smaller pieces and then sew them together.

Thus although it may be an oral literature it still gives certain valuable ideas for orientation for ethnologists concerning the origin of Khori Buriads, the Buriads in general and their traditional clothes.

3. A Legend about a Woman's Deel of Burials

The legend goes as an elderly couple is preparing their daughter for marriage. The mother took a sample of her palms to design the back and front sides of deel. The idea of the upper back part of deel had been taken from the shape of the little finger and the outer part of the wrist. The basement of the thumb gave the idea of shoulder. The middle junction of the thumb gave the idea for a wider part of the sleeve and the thumb end gave the idea the narrow part of the shoulder. The thumbnail gave the idea of the 'nudarga', the prolongation of the sleeve that may be bent back and used to serve as gloves in cold winter. This is the way of designing woman's deel from small parts as the legend describes.⁷⁾

Another legend explains the reason why the sleeve base of Burials' deel is unusually wide. Once during the feudal battles one had to rescue and protect babies. So he managed to hide the babies in the wide sleeves.

4. Popular Rituals about Deel

The deel of an infant of few months is called with the sense of worshipping and paying tribute as bariuvch. When such a bariuvch is ready the mother puts in her arm imitating as if she is putting it on and, only after that she will put it on her baby. Another ritual is to touch with the bariuvch the right edge of the ger door from inside and slightly to rub it and then to put it on the baby. The beloved girl's deel in a family had left-handed flap design and the boys the ordinary right-handed flap design. Then while putting it on the following parable is usually sung.

Beware of dust and dirty deeds
 Prefer the butter, fat and wealth
 Beware of touching odd things
 Prefer the joy of wedding and a share

After offering such good wishes one used to pull three times the skirt of deel as a symbol of encouraging. Presenting a new wear to a kid is a symbolic moment for the Mongolians. In case of a girl the gift is given with a kit of needle and thread. In case of a boy a raw leather rope used to be attached what one would need for his saddle or to tie it up to a long rod to catch a horse, a mongolian type of lasso.

When visiting a family to express condolence one will unbutton his deel at the collar and under the right armpit and turn the edges in. The collar of a deceased's deel also used to be turned in and the corps should be placed with the head toward the door.⁸⁾

The Mongolians avoid it as a taboo to put on the others' deel feeling squeamish and discomfort of the dirt and sweat of it. If there is no other way but to put it on they would loudly remark 'This is not my deel. It is an alien's stuff!' and would spit with a strong gesture of disdain.⁹⁾ If one throw away for disposal an old tattered deel or the deel of a deceased person they would cut of the collar. It is also a strong taboo to step on the collar of a deel. One would never throw away to rubbish-dump the extra cloth, tissue and silk left out after making a deel. They will usually burn it on the flame, which is still observed throughout the nation.

It is generally considered as a breach of etiquette to receive a guest in deel without a belt. The tribes of Western Mongolia still set store by their ancient traditions of giving to the bride a few more spare deel collars just in case. This is a touching

endeavor to better secure their daughter in a strange environment.

There are ancient traditions of divination by means of dreams in Mongolia. For instance, if one dreamt that he put on a deel decorated with gold it is an encouraging and promising dream, a sign to be promoted soon. If one dreamt of putting on a white deel then the fellow will be shared some goodwill and charity luck. If one dreamt that he spent a night in the open air putting on black deel, it is a serious warning against probable misfortune or serious trouble. If one dreamt of putting on a red deel it might be a sign of death. If again he dreamt of a deel with different color patterns it is a sign of falling into a bad gossip scandal. If one dreamt of putting on a green deel he will be scared to death. If one dreamt of putting on a clean deel he will have luck soon. If one dreamt of putting on a dirty deel he will fall sick. If one dreamt of putting on other's deel it is a good sign. If he or she saw a wrapped deel the spouse will cause a lot of trouble and disappointing moments. If one dreamt of putting on a deel of a state official a son shall be delivered next time. If one dreamt of putting on a short deel it is a sign of incoming poverty, huge losses or natural calamities. If one dreamt of putting on a deel inside out it is a sign that the number of his cattle might be reduced in a large way. If one dreamt of seeing his deel in flames he will fall sick etc.

IV. Folklore and Rituals about Mongolian Belt, 'Bus'

1. Popular Rituals about Mongolian Belt

Various archeological findings and petroglyphs show that the Mongolians indeed started using leather belts from the prehistoric age.¹⁰⁾ As for the Mongolians they attach to the belt special properties as the ability to unify and gather together everything split or spread off. In the daily routine the belt is a universal hanger to fix and carry the bow-case, saber, knife and the snuff kit. It also underlines one's figure and shape of the body, thus having a decorative and stylish design purpose. By fixing up the stomach and other inner organs it protects one from shaking too much while riding a horse, doing his work and going on foot etc.

There is an ancient custom among the males to exchange their belts when they become really good friends as a symbol of swearing an oath. Thus in the paragraph 116 and 117 of the Secret history of the Mongols it is mentioned as Temuujin and Jamukha exchanged their golden belts at a place called Khorkhonag Jubur as a symbol of their renewed sincere friendship.¹¹⁾ Thus an exchange of belts is an ancient ritual of the Mongols to symbolize tying up each other by lasting friendship.

While if someone was sentenced guilty they confiscated his hat and belt before

anything else. The paragraph 244 of the Secret history of the Mongols tells another story about the belt. A shaman called Tev Tenger turned to Chinggis Khaan and said that he had dreamt earlier that he had predicted to Temuujin he would become the Emperor of the Mongolian empire and that his brother Khasar would be the next Emperor. Then Temuujin went in the dark night to catch his brother. He caught him, tied up his sleeves and confiscated his hat and belt. When he was ready to execute Khasar Temuujin's mother came as soon as she heard the incident. She finally freed Khasar's hands from his sleeves and gave back his hat and belt immediately, which is a symbol of restoring his dignity and pride. Then she strongly condemned for her eldest son, Temuujin's rude and cruel act making him much ashamed. Thus here one can see the real historic evidence confirming this ancient custom of diminishing one's dignity and pride by confiscating his hat and belt. When Chinggis Khaan bowed down and prayed to display his worshipping the sacred mountain Burkhan Khaldun he took off his belt and hung around his neck. The Mongolians attach such powerful properties to their belts like the destiny of fate and wealth. They believe that it holds the soul, luck etc. Thus when the soul quits the person they call it back by belt or when they pray for good fortune they do the same ritual. So to step over or to step on one's belt, even to touch one's belt by foot or to lend it to others is the most unacceptable offence against one's dignity and pride.

The Mongolians have a tradition to put under their pillows or hang on the ger roof rod the ears of a fox and the Ochir, thunderbolt in Buddhist ceremonies when they go to bed. The reason is that the fox is very sensitive to any sound even when sleeping. Thus the Mongolians are using a fox trophy to symbolize the strict vigilance and watchfulness for the night by tying their silk belts in a knot just like the ears of a fox. As for the Ochir they attach to this stuff the power to guard wealth and to prevent any loss.

2. Oral Literature about Mongolian Belt

1) A Legend Telling Why the Belt should not be Cut Off

A young man went to a wedding party of another clan despite warning of his parents. There he was finally poisoned and murdered by an evil-minded fortuneteller. When he was dying he asked to cut off his belt and to tie around his head. Thus probably from those misty and hazy times of ancient history the Mongolians believe that man's soul is in his belt and they naturally consider it as taboo cutting the long silk belt. They tie it in a knot and put it on a visible place when they go to sleep.¹²⁾

2) A Legend Telling Why Myangad Women wear Knives

As for the Mongolians only men used to wear knives. Women were not allowed to wear knives at all. It is only the Myangad Mongol women who used to wear knives at a time. In a time long ago the Durvud Dalai Khaan's order had been declared to gather a thousand warriors. However there were not so many men in their community. So the women had to be wearing knives and registered as warriors. Since those times this tribe is called Myangad, which means a number thousand in Mongolian. Thus since those events Myangad women have been wearing knives until they get married.

Thus even today if Mongolians dream of wearing a clean long silk belt they get happy accepting this dream as a sign of life in affluence. If they dream of wearing silver and gold decorated belt they take it as a good omen of wealth and opulence. If the belt gets untied while walking the Mongolians would take it as a sign of settlement of their problems easily and quickly.

V. Folklore about the Origin of Women's Decorative Hairs

The shape and design, the accessories and decoration of the Khalkha Mongolian women's costumes have gone through a long process of sophistication and elaboration, which greatly influenced their national costume design and pattern. The hair of women is an essential part of the whole costumes. It serves as the main decoration and adds grace and nobility.

Legend has it that the Manchus made Mongolian iron stoves for Khalkha Mongolians with four legs meaning father, mother, son and bride. The Manchus intentionally made the upper ends of the four legs in a form of black crows figuratively meaning to undermine and have Khalkha Mongolians' line cut off ultimately. But the Khalkha Mongolians outwitted the Manchus and they made a conclusion that crows dread the King of birds, the Khangarid bird. Thus they made their wives put on clothes in the Khangarid bird's fashion and let them comb their hair into two parts and fix it in form of horns resembling the powerful wings of Khangarid in order to frighten away the crows. They gave their wives fire-tongs in order to kill the crows by beating them on the beak.¹³⁾

VI. Folklore and Popular Rituals about Mongolian Cuffs

1. Popular Rituals about Mongolian Cuffs

The cuff or the sleeve-end collar, turnup of the Mongolian deel is a decorative accessory serving as a symbol of respect for others and it can be used as a protective collar for hands. There used to be two types of the cuff of Mongolian clothes such as inseparable one and detachable one from the sleeves. In particular the cuff of the Borjigin clan's had a shape of a foal's hoof which is well corroborated by ethnological studies.

When one expresses his condolence he leaves down the sleeve-end collar and bends it in. In 1930s the radical revolutionist youngsters motivated by communists ideology and guided by the communist party cut off their sleeve-end collars. They criticized severely the traditional practice of wearing the cuff as vestiges of the old feudalism. Such a rude and powerful extremist campaign nearly led to the abandonment of this ancient tradition under the rule of Communism.

2. Oral Literature about the Cuff

Legend has it that the Mongolians had never surrendered to the Chinese. So the Chinese had decided to let the Mongolians put on the deel with sleeves left downwards slovenly bringing up the image of the ass or the donkey. Their underhand intention behind the decision was that they could make the Mongolians submissive just like the ass or the donkey in putting clothes without a cuff on the Mongolians and making them forget the dignity and the pride of their nation. However the Mongolians perceived their wicked plot beforehand and they turned up the sleeve-end collar thus making the cuffs. So they ultimately managed to outwit the Chinese. That's why the Mongolians take it as public morals to keep their cuffs upwards. It is no wonder they would think it to be a sinful offence against good manners to leave their cuffs downwards slovenly. So they make it a rule to keep the cuff of their clothes upwards when they visit a family, greet others at the New Year, or show respect to others.

VII. Conclusion

In the oral literature of the Mongolians such as folk-tales, legend, epics, poetry, songs, riddles etc., there are endless examples describing various stories about the origin of the costumes, ornaments and accessories, or the way how they were

designed and changed with the times and how they correspond with relevant customs, habits and rituals of etiquette.

The sense of the upward nose of the Mongolian national boots, 'gutal' is meant not to kill an insect. If one is obliged to kill a bug, a spider or any other insect it is deemed better to kill stepping on it with the sole of footwear and not knocking with the nose of the boot. The excuse for such method of killing is explained by the logics that any creature was born to walk. Thus it is a natural way of coincidental killing. Thus every piece of the Mongolian national costumes and wear in general has certain meaning and symbolism. It is still the miraculous universe waiting to be unveiled properly. There are still many undiscovered specific features of ancient national culture of the Mongolians. Further research and new findings what concerns folkloric art and the ethnic identity of the Mongolians will certainly enrich the world cultural heritage.

As for the Mongolians, the costumes and accessories do not merely mean their daily necessities of life but they also mean the treasury of intellectual culture of the Mongolians. It may safely be said that even such seemingly social values like education, patriotism, sovereignty or independence were taught and developed through the national costumes. So further studies on the Mongolian national costumes should cover their lifestyle, philosophy and world view as well as characteristics of every tribe and clan.

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Notes

- 1) The Mongolians have many different velvet hat designs for four seasons. There were fashions made in accordance with social ranking such as for aristocratic ranks, for executive officers, for lamas, and for commoners having their own ranking like for elderly, for wives, etc.
- 2) The very purpose of red ribbons is to tie up the hat and to prevent it from being blown off by the wind or to be dropped down. The State high rank officials wore the sharp red-ribbon hats. The State executives wore hats with brown ribbons. The Lamas used mainly multicolor ribbons. The high rank monks wore blue-ribbon hats.
- 3) The bundle on the top of the hat is called sampin. It can be made of big jewels, red coral, little white jewel bids. The red sampin represented the state high rank official. The yellow one belonged to Lamas. The bid sampin hat was used on the occasion of casual ceremony. When one had to express condolence he had to put on a hat with no sampin at all.
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- 10) The contemporary belt style tries to correlate to the color of a deel and the prevailing color of a belt is yellow. Male's belt is about 10 cm wide and 150 cm long and female's belt is about 6 cm wide and 130 cm long.
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