Tsatsal: The Symbolism and Significance of Mongolian Milk Spoons

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Abstract: Milk and meat are the pillars of Mongolian cuisine. Milk also holds a special symbolic place as a ‘white food’. Milk is used in several Mongolian rituals, including the ritual of tossing milk into the air or sprinkling it onto a person, animal, or object, as an offering to the spirits, a supplication, a blessing, or a protection. Often the device used for this ritual is a tsatsal (wooden ceremonial milk spoon) decorated with a variety of carved symbols: mythical, animistic, Tibetan Buddhist, zodiacal, nationalistic, naturalistic, realistic, geometric, floral. Milk tossed from the carved indentations in the bowl of these spoons is transformed from a common material substance into a spiritual substance that transcends the boundaries of matter and attains a significance of its own. Traditionally a milk spoon was one of a nomad family’s few possessions that had only a spiritual (as opposed to practical) function. It is the only spoon that is not used for cooking, serving, or eating, but is still intimately connected with food.

Nomads of the Steppes

Mongolia is a sparsely populated, landlocked nation in East-Central Asia, bordered on the north by the Russian Federation (Siberia) and on the east, south, and west by the People’s Republic of China (including the Chinese autonomous region of Inner Mongolia).1 Covering an area of 1.5 million square kilometres, Mongolia is slightly smaller than Alaska or Iran. Geographically Mongolia is a land of desert, semi-desert, and grassy steppes, with mountains in the west and southwest, and the Gobi Desert in the south-central part of the country. The climate ranges from arid desert to continental (with large daily and seasonal temperature ranges).

Mongolia’s economy is based on mining (coal and many industrially important minerals), the rapidly growing service sector, and animal husbandry, the traditional mainstay of its economy in the past. Only a century ago, most of the population was classified as nomadic animal herders. Today, one-third of Mongolia’s population of 3.2 million is engaged in herding and agriculture (primarily herding), a number that has recently declined from higher levels after an unusually severe winter in 2009-2010 destroyed nearly a quarter of the country’s livestock. In recent history, prior to that disaster, Mongolia had a population of
about 30 million herd animals, or ten times its human population, and a larger percentage of its people lived as nomadic herders.

Today, one-third of Mongolia’s people live in the capital, Ulan Bator (Ulaanbaatar), and 62% of the total population is urban. Those Mongolians still engaged in herding and agriculture live in rural areas and are considered either nomadic or semi-nomadic depending on how often they move their households and whether they plant any crops at all (possible in only a small part of the country, since most of the land is not arable).²

Both nomadic and most semi-nomadic people live year round in gers (yurts), portable, circular-shaped, one-room houses made of wooden latticework covered with a thick layer of wool felt and an outer layer of canvas for added protection against bad weather. These traditional Mongolian gers can be quickly and easily disassembled and packed up for transport, along with the owners’ other household goods, for reassembly in another location. In the past, Mongolian nomads moved their households and herds eight to ten times a year. The method of transport was pack animals and carts: camels and yaks loaded with packs, and/or wooden carts with wooden wheels, pulled by cattle. Today, Mongolian nomads might relocate only twice, to winter and summer pastures, unless there is a need to move to better pasturage at other times during the year. Their household possessions and disassembled gers are usually packed onto small trucks or four-wheel-drive vehicles like Land Rovers, and sometimes loaded onto motorcycles, too. Wealthier nomads might even need to transport their satellite dish, solar-powered electric generator, and modern television set to their new location.³

The Traditional Mongolian Ger “Kitchen”

Nomads tend not to accumulate nearly as many material possessions as settled populations (especially those living in high-consumption societies), and they seldom carry anything superfluous with them. Almost all of Mongolian nomads’ possessions are functional (although sometimes also highly decorated), and they often serve more than one purpose. However, their material possessions can also include a few items of spiritual significance only, such as small items associated with the veneration of ‘house gods’ and ‘pasture gods’, if the family subscribes to animist/shamanist beliefs, and/or a small shrine if they are Buddhists.⁴ In addition, among the few ritual objects in their possession is often a tsatsal, a special carved wooden spoon used for specific offerings—usually of milk—to the deities in the Mongolian pantheon and also for ritual blessings or expressions of good will.

Every ger is assembled with its single door facing south (which a young local described to me as ‘Mongolian GPS’). In the centre of each ger is a small, round, sheet-iron stove (usually fuelled by dried animal dung), with a stovepipe leading up to an opening in the centre of the ger’s top; this stove is used for both heating the ger and preparing food indoors. On
the north wall, opposite the south-facing entry, is sometimes a religious shrine (Buddhist, or animist/shamanist, or both, depending on the owners’ beliefs). Arranged around the curving walls of the ger are single beds (which double as seating during the day), wooden chests for clothing, and perhaps a small set of shelves (often made out of the wooden boxes used for transporting household goods) for the kitchenware (mostly cookware, some of which doubles as tableware). Some, but not all, gers also have a low wooden table and small, short, backless wooden stools, placed in the middle of the room between the central stove and the north wall. Just inside the door, a barrel of fermenting airag (kumis, made from mares’ milk) occupies the space to the right (south-west side) of the door, as you face outward from the ger. Traditionally this kumis container was a large bag made of leather; today it’s likely to be a recycled industrial heavy plastic barrel.

Kitchenware consists of a few metal bowls, pots, pans, jugs, and kettles (usually made of inexpensive, lightweight aluminium), along with metal ladles and large wooden or metal spoons, all used multi-functionally for cooking, processing milk products, and serving foods. Smaller bowls (metal, sometimes ceramic) are used for serving the numerous tea concoctions and soups favoured by the Mongols. Some families also own a few ceramic and/or metal plates (often used only for serving foods). Many foods are simply eaten by everyone from a single communal bowl. There are also wooden milk churns, metal milk cans, wooden racks and trays for drying meats and milk products, and wooden, metal, or plastic buckets that are sometimes turned upside down to double as stools. Metal and wooden boxes, and bags made of burlap or animal skins, hold food supplies such as tea, rice, and flour.

In the past, ancient Mongolian nomads ate with their fingers and with knives (all men carry hunting knives); spoons were a later addition. Food is prepared in such a way that it can be eaten with only those implements: knives for cutting large chunks of meat into smaller ones and for lifting meat to the mouth; fingers for eating meat (on and off the bone), as well as steamed dumplings, fried dumplings, and some solid milk products (cheese, dried yoghurt); and spoons for liquids such as soups (although many soups and other liquids are sipped directly from bowls). One source says that chopsticks were introduced into Mongolia by the Chinese during the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911), but that forks and spoons have completely supplanted them in more recent times. This may well be the case in urban areas, but my own experience—and that of others who have lived in Mongolia and travelled extensively there—is that fingers, knives, and spoons are still the most common eating implements in a nomad’s ger.

The only ‘spoon’ that is not used for cooking, serving, or eating—but is intimately connected with food—is the ceremonial tsatsal, used for making libations, primarily of milk.
Tsagaan Idee: White Foods

Meat and milk are the mainstays of the Mongolians’ diet. Both foods are products from the same domestic animals (along with useful hides, fleece, and wool, especially cashmere from goats, as well as transportation provided by some animals). The Mongolians refer to these animals as ‘the five muzzles’: horses, cattle (cows and yaks combined, as well as hainags, a cow/yak cross), sheep, goats, and Bactrian camels. People living in the northwest regions of Mongolia, bordering on Russian Siberia, add a sixth muzzle to the herd: reindeer, which are also raised for their meat, hides, milk, and uses for transport.

Nomadic Mongolians subsist primarily on meat (and some preserved milk products) during the winter season from October to April, whereas milk (in many forms) makes up the majority of their diet in the summer season from April to October, the six months between the birth of new animals and the end of the milking period. Through thousands of years of experimentation, Mongolians have learned to make a surprisingly large number and variety of milk products—boiled, curdled, fermented, and/or dried, as well as distilled—many of which are little known in the West. Milk is turned into many forms of cream, butter, ‘milk skins’, soured clotted milk, buttermilk, yoghurt, sour cream porridge, cheeses, ‘milk vodka’, kumis, and several other variations on this same lacteous theme. Milk from all of the ‘six muzzles’ is used for dairy products, although milk from certain kinds of animals is often preferred for a specific product, such as mares’ milk for kumis, and sheep, goat, camel, and yak’s milk for a variety of fat-rich cream products.

Mongolians consider dairy products to be ‘white foods’ (tsagaan idee), a special category of food. The colour white has long had a sacred role in Mongolian culture. Traditionally whiteness has been associated with women, and white is considered to be the ‘mother’ of all colours, which descend from it. White also has a number of positive attributes: light (as opposed to darkness), innocence, purity, nobility, kindness, honesty, happiness, prosperity, respect, high social status—and all naturally white-coloured things, from milk to clouds, are considered to possess these properties. In addition, the word milk (sü) itself connotes warm and pleasant feelings to Mongolians.

Tsatsai: Mongolian Milk Rituals

Milk holds such an important place in Mongolian life that it is used in many sacred rituals rooted deep in Mongolian history and culture. Women are usually, but not exclusively, the people who offer these libations, probably because women are the family members who milk the animals and process the dairy products, and also because of milk’s (and whiteness’s) symbolic association with women. In general, milk is offered as a gift to several spirits of the earth and sky, as well as being used for blessings and expressions of good wishes toward a person, animal, or inanimate object.
Every morning (and sometimes also in the evening), a female member of the family (usually the herder’s wife) steps outside the *ger* and tosses an offering of milk in five directions: upward to the sky (to the great god Tengri who lives in the blue sky, or to the many *tengris* in the heavens) and then in the four directions of the compass (‘the four directions of the wind’).¹¹ (A modern urban manifestation of this ritual is the tossing of milk off the balcony or out the window of a Mongolian’s apartment in a high-rise building in the city.) Shamans (male or female) offer libations in several ceremonies where milk is sprinkled into the air or onto an object, as do adherents of Burkhanism, a belief system influenced by Mongolian Buddhism and which includes some shamanistic aspects.¹² Many Mongolians also believe that an offering tossed into the air multiplies many times in its strength and effectiveness as it reaches upward to the spirits.

Milk libations (usually made by men) are offered to the spirits of rivers and mountains at certain times of the year, especially when the herders are moving their animals to different pastures. Milk offerings are also made, by laymen and shamans alike, at the sites of various *ovoo* (shrines, cairns) found throughout the countryside.

An especially important occasion for ceremonial libations is the Mongolian Lunar New Year that starts on the first day of the Tsagaan Tsar (White Month, White Moon), which occurs in late January or early February, when some people (both men and women) go at sunrise on the first day of the new year to designated sacred places, or even just outside their own *ger*, to greet the new year (and by extension, the beginning of spring) by tossing milk into the air toward the rising sun. At the beginning of spring the herder’s wife also goes outside to the back of the family’s *ger* to toss milk in the direction of north, to signify that the hard winter is over and better times are to come.

Another milk sprinkling ritual in the spring occurs after most of the animals’ new offspring have been born. ‘A prayer of sprinkling is told and an incense made of butter, cream, and juniper branches is burned at the west side or in the four directions of the camp. The milk of the first mother animal that delivered its baby that spring is offered to the nature...This ritual is done by two women, of whom one holds the vessel with the milk and the other sprinkles with a sprinkling spoon. They offer the milk to the 99 skies, 77 earth spirits and to the lords of mountains and rivers while going around the camp in a clockwise direction.’ This same source cites the prayer spoken when sheep’s milk is offered to nature in this sprinkling ritual:

- To the high king, Eternal Blue Sky
- To the Mother Earth and billion stars
- The Golden Sun and Silver Moon
- On this good fortune day
- We offer this ritual of sprinkling
- The milk of black sheep
Not tasted, no one touched
To ask for blessing and
To protect the sheep herds
When milking sheep:
Let the milk fill the vessel
Let your wish come true as you hope or
May the vessel be full
Milk be affluent
Livestock be many

When a guest or family member sets off on a journey by horseback or camel, milk is splashed onto the muzzle, mane, tail, rump, and sometimes flanks of the animal, as well as the stirrups of the saddle, as a blessing to protect the person on his journey. Modern modes of transportation (and their riders) are blessed similarly, with a splash of milk on the headlights, taillights, tires, and windshields of the truck, automobile, or motorcycle. Likewise, milk can be splashed onto the car of a train when someone is departing by rail. People standing on the ground even toss milk into the air as an airplane takes off from the runway, to protect the passengers on the flight.

Many other situations also occasion the ritual sprinkling of milk as a blessing or an offering: when making wool felt; when a new site for the family’s ger is chosen; on the felt covering of the ger after it has been erected in a new location; when a burial place has been selected (but before the burial begins); when a child’s hair is about to be cut for the first time; on the first day of milking the mares; on the heads of male animals before castration; on the young male animal newly selected as the future sire of the flock or herd; at the beginning of a horse race, and afterward upon the winning horse. Milk is also splashed onto sick animals to make them well.

Although other liquids such as kumis, ‘milk vodka’, regular vodka, and milky tea are sometimes used in these sprinkling or tossing ceremonies, fresh milk is by far the favoured liquid because of its many positive attributes and its deep significance in Mongolian culture. Numerous written and photographic documents show that the milk can be sprinkled or tossed into the air using the fingers, a bowl (wood, metal, plastic), a ladle (wood or metal), a soup spoon or large kitchen spoon (metal or plastic), or a wooden spoon (such as a spoon with a deep oval bowl at one end and a horse’s head carved at the other end of its handle). But the traditional ceremonial spoon most often used for this ritual is the tsatsal, a uniquely shaped, carved wooden spoon crafted and employed solely for this purpose.
Tsatsal: The Symbolism and Significance of Mongolian Milk Spoons

Tsatsal: The Mongolian Milk Spoon

These intricately carved wooden spoons are among the few material possessions that nomadic Mongolians carry with them as they move across the steppes. Often presented to a bride upon her wedding, the family’s single milk spoon is a treasured possession passed down from one generation to the next. Its sole function is to transfer milk from another receptacle (bowl, jug, kettle) into the air, thus transforming the milk into a sacred offering to the gods, or into a blessing upon other people, animals, and objects.

Each of these spoons is carved out of a single piece of wood that is sometimes oiled or varnished, but left its natural colour, although a few of the carved spoons also have painted handles. The characteristic shape of the spoons is spatulate, with long handles decorated with a variety of carved symbols: mythical, animistic, Tibetan Buddhist, zodiacal, nationalistic, naturalistic, realistic, purely ornamental geometric or floral, often in combination. The ‘bowls’ of the spoons are flat squares or rectangles (or occasionally trapezoids), not the concave rounds or ovals characteristic of common spoons used for eating. The carving on these flat ‘bowls’ looks much like a waffle iron, with nine symmetrical indentations forming a grid of three rows of three indentations each. Each of these indentations is an inverted four-sided pyramid (or, less often, a small, circular, concave indentation), into which the milk is poured. Most of these spoons are carved only on the front side, although some of the spoons in my own collection are also carved, less extensively, on the back of the handles and/or on the back of the flat bowls.¹⁵

The flat bowl with its three-by-three grid pattern of indentations is the only element common to all these spoons. The nine indentations (three down multiplied by three across) represent a sacred and auspicious number to Mongolians, as do other multiples of three (which are computed by also counting the two diagonals of three indentations on the grid). Three and nine are also significant numbers in Buddhism—and indicate the direct influence of Buddhist symbolism on many of these milk spoons.

To Mongolians, the number three has several symbolic meanings:

• Past ~ present ~ future
• The three stages of life: youth/childhood ~ adulthood ~ old age/wisdom
• Heaven ~ earth ~ the lower world/underworld
• For Buddhists: the three pillars of Buddhism

Hence the carving on this grid, with its pattern of threes and nine, and the offering of milk from this grid, brings into play all of these symbols, with meanings that resonate deeply with many Mongolians.

All of the twenty-two tsatsal (contemporary and antique) that I have examined range in length from 18 to 40 centimetres and in width from 1.25 centimetres to 8 centimetres. With the exception of one very plain, crudely carved milk spoon, the highly carved handles of all
the other spoons display one or more of the following symbols, in various combinations, usually with several symbols depicted on each spoon:

- **Yin-yang symbol**, representing the interconnectedness and interdependence of seemingly opposite forces, including light and dark, good and evil, masculinity and femininity; the unity of complementary opposites.

- **Two fishes intertwined in a yin-yang configuration**, representing an animal that never closes its eyes and hence is always vigilant; also symbolizing the unity of men and women, with the masculine and feminine uniting to reproduce human beings. **Two fishes in a parallel vertical or horizontal position** are an ancient pre-Buddhist symbol, as well as a Buddhist symbol of happiness, conjugal fidelity and unity, fertility, and abundance.

- **The Endless Knot**, a geometric diagram symbolizing Buddha’s endless wisdom and compassion, without beginning or end; the union of wisdom and compassion; the continuity and the interrelatedness of all phenomena, despite the interaction of opposing forces; presumably also suggesting the intertwining of husband and wife as the cornerstone of the family. The spaces created by the intertwining of the knot’s element can also have numerical significance.

- **The Three Precious Jewels** (or **The Triple Gem**), representing the three pillars of Buddha: Buddha himself, the Dharma (Buddha’s teachings), and the Sangha (Buddhist monks and nuns, and the community of people who have attained enlightenment).

- **Eight Jewels** within a flame nimbus, symbolizing the granting of wishes or bringing of wealth; eight is an especially auspicious number in Buddhist iconography.

- **The Begging Bowl**, a symbol of Buddhist humility, but which on these spoons might also represent the bowl in which milk products (‘white foods’) are offered to guests or as libations.

- **The Soyombo ideogram** on the Mongolian national flag, representing the freedom and independence of the Mongolians. The **three flames** at the top symbolize prosperity in the past, present, and future. The **round sun** and **crescent moon** are ancient Mongolian symbols representing the origin of its people. In the lower part of the ideogram, the **triangles** at the top and bottom symbolize the spear and the arrow, both pointing downward to indicate the defeat of Mongolia’s enemies. Two **horizontal rectangles** and two **vertical rectangles** (the latter representing firmness and strength) are said to enclose and stabilize the round motif (an unstable form), which also contains the **fish yin-yang symbol**, with its attendant meanings. (Sometimes the ‘three flames’, or even a single flame, are carved on these spoons separately, independent of the Soyombo national ideogram.)

- **Mongolian Calendar Animals**: The handle of one of my favourite milk spoons depicts the twelve animals of the Mongolian 12-year calendar (based on the Chinese
zodiac and representing the twelve different animals associated with the cycle of individual years): rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig, in that order from top to bottom. Possibly a spoon crafted for the tourist trade, the backside is also highly carved, with the large flat ‘bowl’ completely decorated with a scene of grassy steppes, peaked mountains, a full moon, stars in the sky, two camels, and two gers, and the handle is ornamented with two large leaves enclosing the word “MONGOLIA” in English.

• The ‘Five Muzzles’: This spoon is another favourite of mine, because its handle depicts the ‘five muzzles’, the heads of the domestic animals from which milk is obtained: camel, horse, cow/yak, sheep, and goat. This spoon also gives a clue to the probable regional nature of these artifacts; had it been carved by, or for use by, Mongolians living in the north-western part of the county, it might also have included the ‘sixth muzzle’, a reindeer.

• Two Elephants, a Hindu symbol associated with wealth and fame. I have seen elephants carved on only two spoons, in conjunction with a yin-yang symbol and a dragon with a flaming tail.

• Dragon with a single flame at the point of its tail; a serpentine Chinese-style dragon with a distinctive face, suggesting that it might be a ‘torch dragon,’ the mythical creature responsible for creating day and night, seasonal winds, and the aurora borealis.

• ‘Left-hand’ Swastika, in Buddhism a symbol of the footprints of Buddha, as well as prosperity, long life, and eternity; sometimes highly stylized and depicted as an interlocking pattern of repeated swastika motifs.

• The MANDORLA (two overlapping circles), symbolizing the unity of complementary opposites (heaven/earth, life/death, good/evil, light/dark, man/woman). Two interlocking diamond shapes possibly have the same symbolic significance.

• Lotus flower, one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism, representing spiritual and mental purity.

• General floral motifs, probably representing stylized depictions of wild plants found in Mongolia.

Two of the milk spoons I examined are very different from the others: longer, wider, less curvaceous in shape (more like flat sticks), with five to eight distinct divisions on the handles, each division framing a specific symbol carved in bas relief, with an additional floral motif at the top or bottom of the handle. (The nine indentations for the milk are more simply carved, unpainted and unvarnished.) Both of the spoon handles are painted in bright colors (green, yellow, red, pink, blue, orange; one also has highlights of metallic gold paint), whereas most milk spoons are unpainted and simply oiled, varnished, or untreated.
Both these painted spoons have two motifs in common: the **Endless Knot** (which appears on many of the other spoons, too) and the **Right-Turning Conch Shell**, representing the spread of Buddha’s teaching in all directions, like the sound from a conch shell trumpet, and the consequent awakening from ignorance. Other symbols on these painted milk spoons include:

- **The Wheel**, one of the most important Buddhist symbols, representing the teachings of Buddha, as well as transformation and rebirth; the wheel of life.
- **A Bowl filled with grain** (rice?) being nibbled on by two white rats, perhaps symbolizing abundance.
- **A rat, horse, ox, rooster, and snake**—all animals associated with specific years on the Mongolian 12-year calendar, as well as with Buddhist legends.
- **The sun, moon, stars, mountains, flowers, grasses, foliage, and blue sky**—all natural images important to nomadic herders and believers in animism.

All of these ritual spoons convey a sense of the individual carver and the spiritualism inherent in each piece—Buddhist, animist, and shamanist beliefs, as well as the direct link between the animals and landscapes that produce the milk and the sacred uses of that milk in many Mongolian rituals. En route from bowl to sky, tossed from the carved indentations on these spoons, milk is transformed from a common material substance, essential for daily life, into a form of worship, a supplication, a blessing, which transcends the boundaries of matter and attains a spiritual significance of its own. No wonder nomads count these spoons among the most precious of their few material possessions.

**Notes**

1. Much of the information in this paper comes from my own experience during five trips to Mongolia with National Geographic Expeditions, in 2006-2008, including visits to the National Museum of Mongolia, interviews with Mongolians living in the capital city, Ulan Bator, and visits to nomads living in gers in the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park near Ulan Bator. Subsequent correspondence with scholars who study Mongolia has added to my knowledge of this subject. I have also eaten many of the Mongolian milk products described in this paper, in both Mongolia and the Buriat-Mongolian regions of southern Siberia around Lake Baikal.


4. Mongolians were originally animists/shamanists. After Buddhism (especially Tibetan Buddhism) spread into Mongolia, it eventually became the dominant religion there. Mongolian adherence to Buddhism has waxed and waned over the centuries, for a number of reasons, but has been experiencing a revival in the recent post-Communist period. Today, approximately 50% of Mongolians identify themselves as Buddhists, whereas a much smaller percentage claims to be shamanists. However, many people apparently adhere to both belief systems simultaneously, and practice rituals belonging to both religions.


8. ‘The Traditional Cuisine of Mongolia: White Essen: Mongolian Milk’, http://www.legendtour.ru/eng/mongolia/informations/mongolian_milk.shtml. Traditionally, milk and meat constituted the entire nomadic diet, except for a few wild berries, fruits, onions, and garlic foraged from the land. Contact with the Chinese, and later the Russians, eventually brought root vegetables, cabbages, cucumbers, bell peppers, grains (wheat, rice, barley), and a few spices (black pepper, red pepper) into the Mongolians’ diet. But as late as 2007, Mongolia’s ambassador to the United States told a group of meat-eating Texans in Dallas, ‘We’ve started a campaign to get [Mongolian] seniors to incorporate more vegetables into their diet. Most people have subsisted on a diet of mutton, and we know that is not healthy. But part of the problem is psychological. They’ve never eaten vegetables, and they don’t believe in the need to do so’.


13. ‘The Traditional Cuisine of Mongolia: White Essen: Mongolian Milk’, op. cit. It is unclear why the milk of a black sheep is used; perhaps the reference is to duality in nature: black sheep, white milk.


15. Since very little has been published about the actual form, decoration, and symbolism of these ceremonial spoons, the information in this section is based primarily on (a) my own collection of Mongolian milk spoons; (b) those I have seen in Mongolia and in photographs; and (c) an interview with Battsetseg Chagdgaa in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, in September 2008. My personal collection of fourteen milk spoons (contemporary and antique) was acquired during five trips to Mongolia in 2006-2008. I was initially attracted to them because of their beautiful carving, a prime example of Mongolian folk art. Later I learned directly from Mongolians about the use and symbolism of these spoons.