

# THE IMPORTANCE OF MILK IN PASTORAL NOMADIC SOCIETIES OF INNER ASIA

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Cultures are, in many ways, defined by their food. Foods once eaten because of the environmental conditions or the way of life of a society become, over time, incorporated into the cultural fabric of that society. When the environmental or physical constraints are removed and no longer determine the diet of a culture, the foods are culturally maintained. At the very least, foods which once had historical, physical significance continue to be considered important in a cultural context and this emphasis is often reflected in a particular culture's folklore. For the settled communities of Inner Asia as well as for most of the Middle East, wheat and bread are the main stays of life. For the pastoral nomads of Inner Asia, however, whose main foods were the products of their herds, milk was essential. This brief examination of the historical and folkloristic evidence of milk's exalted position is based on readings on the Mongols and on field research conducted in Kazakhstan during the summers of 1990 and 1991 with the help of ethnographers from the Chokan Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnography, at the Kazakh Academy of Sciences in Almaty.

The pastoral nomads of Inner Asia were pastoralists because of the mobility it afforded them. This mobility was a result of the herds they tended. For the Mongols of the 13th and 14th Centuries, and for the Kazakh until the 20th Century, these herds consisted mainly of horses, and sheep and goats. Horses were used

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as military mounts, provided transportation, and also provided meat and milk which was fermented and drunk as *kumiss*, *kumlud*. Sheep and goats in mixed herds were the predominate animals of the nomads, providing the day to day sustenance. Occasionally cows were included in their herds, but, because cows were less mobile than horses and sheep they were in lesser quantities than the others. Camels were also sometimes included in the herds because of their capacity to carry heavy loads, although they were not used militarily. Camels provided milk which was fermented (*shubat*, *wysam*, in Kazakh) and also meat but, as they were quite valuable pack animals, camel meat was quite a rare commodity.

Of all the milk products, *kumiss* was the most favored was held in highest esteem. (*Kumiss* is usually translated as "fermented mare's milk", and indeed it is usually found in a mildly fermented state, as this is an effective means of preserving the milk. There are, however, over 40 different types of *kumiss* and one type, *cayman saumal*, is that which is freshly taken from the mare, cooked, and drunk right away.) The drinking of *kumiss* is a great source of pleasure and there are many rituals and observances attendant to the preparation, serving and collection of *kumiss*. We have a firsthand account from a visitor to the court of Batu, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, which describes the food of the Mongols in the Golden Horde in the mid-13th Century. William of Rubruck, a Franciscan Friar on a religious mission to the Mongol Empire says of the Mongols:

... in the summer as long as they have any *cosmos* [*kumiss*, my note], that is mare's milk, they do not care about any other food.<sup>1</sup>

Further on he describes the Mongols preparation of *kumiss*, which is quite similar to today's practice :

... when they have collected a great quantity of milk, ... they pour it into a large skin or bag and they begin churning it with a specially made stick which is as big as a man's head at its lower end, and hollowed out; and when they beat it quickly it begins to bubble like new wine and turn sour and ferment, and they churn it until they can extract butter. Then they taste it and when it is fairly pungent they drink it. As long as one is drinking, it bites the tongue like vinegar; when one stops, it leaves on the tongue the taste of milk of almonds and greatly delights the inner man; it even intoxicates those who have not a very good head.<sup>2</sup>

1 Dawson, Christopher, *Mission to Asia*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1967, pp. 97.

2 Dawson, pp. 98.

William of Rubruck goes on to describe the milk and milk products of other animals kept by the Mongols:

From cow's milk they first extract the butter and this they boil until it is completely boiled down; then they store it in sheep's paunches which they keep for this purpose; they do not put salt into the butter; however it does not go bad owing to the long boiling. They keep it against the winter. The rest of the milk which is left after the butter has been extracted they allow to turn until it is as sour as it can be, and they boil it, and in boiling, it curdles; they dry the curd in the sun and it becomes as hard as iron slag, and this they keep in bags against the winter. During the winter months when there is a scarcity of milk, they put this sour curd, which they call *grut*, into a skin and pour hot water on top of it and beat it vigorously until it melts in the water, which, as a result, becomes completely sour, and this water they drink instead of milk.<sup>3</sup>

From this account we can get a sense not only of the importance of milk and milk products to the Mongols, but we also get a wonderful description of the processes involved in making *kumis* and *kurt*, processes which can be seen still in use today in rural Kazakhstan. Compare, for example, the previous descriptions from the 13th Century, to those told to me in the summer of 1991 in Kazakhstan:<sup>4</sup>

Butter was made from churned sour milk. Originally it was put in a skin bag, put on a saddle and churned on horseback. Later butter was churned in a wooden churn. After collecting the butter it was washed in cool water and salted. It was stored in a clean sheep or goat stomach, which was free from all moisture. The filled stomach was then stored in a cool place, either in a hole dug in the ground or in a stream. The milk that was left over from butter would be boiled, and put into a cloth bag and hung up. The liquid would drain off and the remaining solids would be salted and dried into *kurt*. Soft, undried *kurt* would be used in broth. Hard, dried *kurt* would be eaten as a snack.

In Kazakhstan, the steppe traditions are perpetuated to this day, even though the nomadic lifestyle is a thing of the past. These

3 Dawson, pg. 99.

4 My informant here was Xalibibi Abbasovna, the head of Ethnography of the Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnography in the Kazakh Academy of Sciences.

traditions are reflected and carried out through the folklore of Kazakhstan. One example of this is the following blessing:<sup>5</sup>

Akh mol bolsin,  
White plenty may there be,  
May you have abundant food,

Khimising kop bolsin,  
Your kumiss alot let it be,  
May you have a lot of kumiss,

Khambarata koldasin,  
Khambarata let him protect you,  
May the spirit of horses protect you.

In traditional nomadic Kazakh society, spring and the resultant lambing and foaling season was a cause for major celebration, not only for the symbolic and real renewal that it brought, but also for the renewal of milk products after a winter of dried milk and cheese. This blessing was used on the day on which the first *kumiss* was obtained.

On this day there was a big celebration. All of the horses were tied up, and everyone celebrated outside. The first *kumiss* was drunk only by women, presumably invoking a principle of homeopathic magic, ensuring that their own milk would be plentiful. Then fat from a slaughtered stallion was eaten. The fat from this respected and beloved animal would be one of the most potent symbols of personal wealth and eating it can be seen as a means of obtaining further wealth, in the form of livestock. The eldest and most respected member at the celebration, the *akhsakhal*, (white bearded one), would then say the blessing.

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5 The information on this blessing was provided by Prof. Raxmanqul Berdibai, Male, 65 years old. He is the head of the Dept. of Folklore, Institute of Literature, Kazakh Academy of Sciences, Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan. It was collected at the University of Washington, Seattle, in July, 1991. Prof. Berdibai is a respected Kazakh scholar who has written extensively on the subject of Kazakh Literature and Folklore. His concept of Kazakh nationalism depends heavily on a Kazakh identity derived from their nomadic past, historically or as represented in folklore. Because of this, the preservation of rituals and practices from the past is very important, and is continued even in the context of an urban environment. Prof. Berdibai was born in the city of Turkestan, in the Chimkent Oblast (region), which is in south-west Kazakhstan, near the border with Uzbekistan. He lived in this region until he was 40, when he moved to Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, to work at the Academy of Sciences, Chimkent

The word *akh*, meaning white, in the first line of the blessing refers to milk and milk products. If they are plentiful, the Kazakh are well off. To have a lot of *kumiss* goes beyond mere physical sustenance for the Kazakh, and gets to the very core of what it is to be Kazakh. To be without *kumiss* is to not be Kazakh. *Kambarata*, is the Kazakh, horse spirit.<sup>6</sup> This spirit is called upon and its powers are invoked to protect a herd and to ensure high production. With this reference, it is clear that this blessing comes from a pre-Islamic religious heritage, a Turkic animistic and totemistic heritage.

Similarly, the Kazakh Folk-Metaphor:

*uizinda jarighan adam*

in his colostrum satisfied man

To be a man who has drunk his full of colostrum.<sup>7</sup>

again underscores the importance of milk in this society. My informant, Dr. Abdughany Jiyenbay says it refers to a man who is satisfied with what he has in life and is not jealous of others or selfish. As Dr. Jiyenbay says "a good guy".

When using the term colostrum Dr. Jiyenbay spoke in terms of the first milk of a mare after foaling, that of a ewe after lambing as well as that of a mother. The Kazakhs, being historically pastoralists, place a great emphasis on spring when all of the herds are giving birth, thus at once increasing the size of the herd and replenishing the major food source; milk and milk products. So important is the first milk of the season, particularly that from the primary animal, the horse, that special rituals are attached to it. I was told while in Kazakhstan that the very first milk of the year from the animals may only be drunk by women, who in fact, do all of the milking. After this a traditional soup, *uz koje*, which is a mixture of colostrum and oat or rice flour is made. Everyone, neighbors, guests, and all family members have to taste this soup to insure continued milk production.

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6 All of the four important categories of livestock; horse, camel, sheep and goat, have such spirits. Even cows, which are not part of Kazakh culture, and are somewhat denied, as they are the animal of the sedentary neighbor of the Kazakh, have their own spirit. These spirits, if they take on any shape at all, take human form and their powers are invoked to protect a herd and to ensure high production.

7 This Folk-Metaphor was collected by Professor Abdughany Jiyenbay, Male, 47 years old. He is an English Professor at Al-Farabi Univ., in Almas, Kazakhstan. It was collected at the University of Washington, Seattle on July 29, 1992.

This folk-metaphor seems to imply that an individual who has had his fill of this first milk, a special, rare treat on perhaps a yearly basis would not be jealous or selfish because he indeed **did not need to be**. If one is to understand this saying in terms of mother's milk, the meaning is quite different. Women only produce colostrum for the first two or three days after the birth of a child, thus the child can in no way have any conscious appreciation of it. The saying becomes much more figurative in this case, perhaps implying a socially expected level of maternal care and nurturing that is required to guarantee one grows up to be a good person. That is, one who receives all of his mother's love wants for nothing else. A slightly different interpretation may be that one who has **not** drunk to his satisfaction of mother's milk will likely be a greedy and unsatisfied adult. This interpretation, in fact, is in complete agreement with Dr. Jiyenbay's, that is, one who is completely satisfied with what he has in life.

It is somewhat significant that Dr. Jiyenbay's origins are from a rural area, but more to the point, all Kazakhs identify with their not so distant, nomadic, pastoral past. In fact, the last time the Kazakhs were able to determine their own fate until the dissolution of the former Soviet Union was when they were still primarily nomadic. Collectivization and sedenterization under Soviet rule forced the nomadic Kazakhs into a sedentary lifestyle. The Kazakh identity, however, and the use of folklore to bolster that identity look to nomadic past and that lifestyle to provide substance. The continued usage of metaphors such as this, with its obvious rural and pastoral origins, attests to this legacy.

Clearly the lifestyle of a culture determines the food types it depends on. These foods, however, over time, themselves become defining aspects of that culture and are reflected in its folklore and traditions. I have tried to show the historical significance of milk to the Inner Asian pastoral nomads, and how this significance, although originally driven by physical realities became cultural in later times. The importance of milk and milk products in Kazakhstan today is no longer a result of the physical demands of pastoralism, as most Kazakhs are no longer nomadic. Kazakh culture, however, now places a psychological and emotional importance on milk and milk products, that has outlived the physical necessity. We have seen how the cultural significance of milk is reflected in Kazakh Folklore. Folklore in this way provides not only a link with the historical past of the nomadic Inner Asians, but provides us with insights into current cultures of Inner Asia that have nomadic roots.