Analysis of the Symbolic Meaning of the Mongolian Ritual of Shirge for Children

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Abstract

A ritual is a social model intertwined with human life, practices, and customs, creating a framework for human actions that have shaped cultural heritage through ancient rituals. These rituals have been a central focus of research across various social sciences and humanities, including cultural studies, psychology, religious studies, ethnology, anthropology, and sociology.

Traditional rituals specifically related to children form a significant part of Mongolian customs, passed down through centuries. They embody profound symbolic meanings, such as safeguarding children from potential dangers, illnesses, and hardships while bestowing blessings for health and longevity. This article explores the symbolic aspects of rituals associated with children, with a focus on the ritual of shirge, using ethnographic field research to examine the nature of affliction embedded in these symbolic actions.

In ritual studies, concepts like "affliction" introduced by researcher such as V.Gennep, V.Turner, and C.Bell, involve analyzing actions undertaken in response to fear, suffering, conflict, or struggle. This concept helps deepen our understanding of social and cultural transformations, people's mentality, and the main characteristics of rituals in a given community.

Keywords:

Ritology/ritual study, affliction, tradition, symbol, ritual offerings, liminal, the main charasteristic of ritual,

Introduction

Rituals have been studied both as a subject of religious studies and as an interdisciplinary field known as *ritology* or *ritual studies*. Scholars have proposed and developed theories and methodologies for the study of rituals, contributing significantly to the establishment of "theories and methods of ritual studies."

Beginning in the 1970s, prominent scholars such as R. L. Grimes, R. Rappaport, É. Durkheim, E. Leach, V. Turner, A. Gennep, and C. Bell developed theoretical frameworks and methodologies, making invaluable contributions to the advancement of ritual studies.

According to ritual researchers, …rituals are fundamentally *actions* that, in a broader sense, constitute the social structure and reflect human consciousness, spirituality, and culture... (Cossu 2010)

In recent years, among Mongolians, there has been a growing focus on studying rituals, their structure, and their roles within the fields of social and human sciences—particularly cultural studies, socio-cultural anthropology, history, psychology, and sociology. This research aims to understand and interpret human existence and being. Therefore, it is essential to study the rituals passed down through generations to uncover the lifestyle, culture, and unique characteristics of a nation or ethnicity.

While many Western societies count human existence from the moment of birth, Mongolians regard the beginning of human existence as starting at conception. Consequently, Mongolians observe specific rules, taboos, and rituals during pregnancy, which continue throughout life's transitions and cycles. The beginning of life, in particular, is considered a significant event, and the associated rituals have evolved and been preserved within the socio-cultural environment.

In this sense, the processes of conceiving, birthing, and raising a child are not merely biological; they are also imbued with symbolic rituals that reflect the social and cultural values of any society. Among Mongolians, traditions related to welcoming a child, performing child-rearing rituals, and passing down the wisdom of nurturing and educating children have been established and transmitted across generations.

Special attention is given to the period from a child's birth until the symbolic haircutting (*sewleg ürgeekh*), during which specific rituals are performed to protect the child's health and ensure their survival. Therefore, research into the essence and nature of Mongolian child-related rituals provides valuable socio-cultural insights into the worldview and understanding of human existence held by Mongolians.

Among the rituals aimed at protecting a child's life and health, raising them safely, and ensuring the survival of children prone to misfortune, the *Shirge* ritual remains widely practiced. This ritual, a form of appeasement and healing, reflects Mongolians' reverence for children, seen as the beginning of new life and unable to distinguish good from bad or protect themselves. Mongolians have historically performed this ritual daily, believing that unseen malevolent forces afflict children and that the ritual could ward off such harm.While there have been ethnographic studies by 20th-century researchers such as S. Badamkhatan, N. Urtnasan, D. Tangad, G. Batnasan, G. Tserenkhand, Ts. Ayush, and B. Lkhagvasüren that mention child-related rituals, in-depth research into their symbolism and significance in Mongolia remains limited. D. Tangad's *"Dictionary of Mongolian Folk Healing"* documents several versions of the *Shirge* ritual, providing interpretations of some of its meanings.

Additionally, renowned foreign scholars, including L. N. Zhukovskaya, W. Heissig, Ch. Bawden, and S. Shinkevich, have shown interest in Mongolian rituals such as child appeasement, banishment of evil spirits, summoning of souls, and those related to a child's destiny. For instance, S. Shinkevich categorized child-related rituals into themes such as entrusting the child to the protection of nature, strengthening their connection to the household and parents, and explained their significance, which is particularly relevant to this study.

Research Methodology

From the perspective of ritual studies, anthropologist A. Van Gennep describes rituals as activities associated with the life cycle transitions of individuals, marking the movement from one social state to another. These transitions are universal across societies, encompassing various stages from birth to death. According to Gennep, such transitions involve three distinct phases: separation, transition, and incorporation, collectively forming the liminal phase. Transition is typically expressed through ritualistic actions (Gennep 1961).

Building on Gennep's theory and methodology, Victor Turner developed his own framework, emphasizing that during transitional periods, participants temporarily step outside societal norms to undergo the process of transformation. Turner identified this transition as playing a pivotal role in social renewal (Turner 1967). He described the liminal phase as an intermediate state that does not conform to established structures, categories, or norms and exists outside the legal and orderly frameworks of society. This phase functions as a "free zone" beyond conventional societal timelines and is termed communitas (Бум-Очир Д., Мөнх-Эрдэнэ Г. 2012).

In his study of the Ndembu people of Zambia, Turner examined rituals performed in response to fear, suffering, conflict, and disrupted equilibrium in life. He interpreted these rituals as attempts to repair harm or misfortune caused by ancestral spirits or malevolent forces, often seen as consequences of failing to fulfill social or moral obligations. Such rituals aim to restore balance, alleviate fear and suffering, and involve symbolic acts of communication with spiritual forces (Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure 1991)

Turner coined the term rite of affliction to describe these practices. He framed them as symbolic actions performed by individuals to relieve their fear, suffering, or emotional distress, often involving acts of transferring their burdens to others or seeking spiritual intercession. The concept of affliction thus encapsulates the ritualized expression of human efforts to confront and resolve existential anxieties.

To elucidate the symbolism of the *Hüühed Shirgelenekh* ritual, we drew upon field research materials collected between 2020 and 2024 across 16 provinces and 123 districts. These include:

1. Field research conducted by the NGO "My Mongolia: Explorers of Cultural Heritage" in Dundgovi, Umnugovi, and Tuv provinces in 2020, and in Arkhangai, Khuvsgul, and Zavkhan provinces in 2021 (Миний монгол төсөл 2020).

2. Studies by the NGO "Tsakhim Suvarga" in 2022 in Bayankhongor, Govi-Altai, Khovd, Bayan-Ulgii, Uvs, Zavkhan, Khentii, Sukhbaatar, and Dornod provinces (Соёлын яам 2022), and in 2023 in Bulgan, Uvurkhangai, Arkhangai, Khuvsgul, Khentii, and Dornod provinces (Цахим Суварга ТББ 2022-2023).

3. Ethnographic field research conducted in Uvs and Bulgan provinces in 2024 by the NGO "Bayad Cultural Heritage" (Баядын өв соёл ТББ 2024).

4. Materials and media documentation gathered during the 2022 and 2023 National Inventory and Research of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Соёл урлагийн газар 2023).

These comprehensive resources formed the foundation for analyzing and interpreting the ritual's symbolism.

Researchers and scholars have primarily focused on describing how the *Shirge* ritual is performed, only briefly mentioning its meanings and symbolism. However, there remains a significant gap in providing a theoretical evaluation of the ritual's purpose, necessity, underlying reasons, and essence.

This study attempts to explore and clarify the *Shirge* ritual, traditionally performed to dispel a child's fears, alleviate distress, and eliminate illnesses, through the lens of the concept of *affliction*. The article employs observation, comparison, and ethnographic fieldwork as its primary methodologies to investigate the symbolism of the ritual and its intrinsic meanings within the framework of affliction theory.

Research Results

Mongolians perform the *Shirgeh* ritual for children exhibiting discomfort or unusual behaviors such as excessive crying, illness, skin rashes, nightmares, poor appetite, refusal to breastfeed, or unusual fits of laughter suggestive of intuition or premonitions. The ritual is typically performed at dusk or during the evening, utilizing fire, water, salt, iron, lead, candles, or milk (less commonly). The method varies depending on the symptoms displayed by the child. While mothers usually perform the ritual, in some regions, specialized lamas or shamans are invited to conduct it.

The *Shirge* ritual can be categorized based on the materials used, as follows:

1. Salt in Fire: Rock salt is placed in the fire, and the child is held and circled clockwise over the fire.
2. Smoke Purification: Flat stones (designated *Shirgeh stones*) near the western corner of the ger are used. Salt and juniper are burned on the stones, and the smoke is waved over the child's head, waist, and limbs.
3. Shirgeh Bowl or Ladle: A specially prepared chipped bowl or a *Shirgeh ladle* (similar to *Shirgeh stones*) is filled with water, mixed with soil from thresholds, walls, or soot from the stove. The child is shown the mixture and circled counterclockwise.
4. Charcoal in Water: Prepared similarly to the above, but with glowing embers from the fire added to the water. Salt and juniper are sometimes included.
5. Lead or Wax Casting: Melted lead or wax is poured into water, creating shapes. The resulting shapes are examined near a light source to interpret the child's fears or afflictions. These shapes are placed under the pillow or attached to clothing for protection.
6. Hot Iron Dousing: A piece of heated iron is plunged into cold water, producing a hissing sound. Sometimes, the heated iron is swung in front of the child to startle them, followed by sprinkling water on their face.
7. Milk Ritual: Rarely observed among some Buryat and Hamnigan groups in Khentii and Dornod provinces, where milk is used in the ritual.

The main materials used in *Shirge* rituals are fire, water, stone, salt, iron, milk, and wax. Among these, fire, water, salt, and iron are most consistently employed across different ritual forms. This study will explore the symbolic meanings and roles of these essential components within the context of *Shirge* rituals.

Rituals involving fire in *shirge* practices: The use of fire for purification has been a longstanding tradition among Mongolians, as documented in historical sources. For instance, Plano Carpini noted that foreign envoys visiting the khan were ritually purified by passing between two fires. He further described a practice where individuals returning home late at night or after participating in funerals or other

significant events were purified by fire before entering their home. A family member would carry a firebrand, circling it three times around the person before allowing them inside (Карпини 2022).

Even today, households with newborns observe purification rituals involving fire. If the head of the household returns from long travels, funerals, or burial grounds, they light fires or strike matches near the doorway to purify themselves before entering. Similarly, if visitors arrive late at night, firebrands or embers are thrown towards the doorway to ward off misfortune or bad energy. Protective rituals, such as drawing a zigzag line with fire or tying red cloth on both sides of the doorway, symbolize barriers and purification, echoing the ancient practice of passing through two fires.

Among the Darhad ethnic group, protective symbols are often placed above the cradle or near the infant's fontanel. For example, red cloth in the shape of a cross (+) is attached to the cradle's arch or the flap of a child's traditional costume (deel). The wooden arch of the cradle itself is symbolic, resembling the sacred frame of the yurt's toono (crown opening). Some families intentionally craft cradles from red willow, emphasizing this symbolic connection.

S. Dulam's work on Mongolian symbolism highlights the sacred meaning of the toono, associating its circular shape with fire symbolism. Dulam notes, "The circular *toono* is essentially a representation of the swastika (khas). The fundamental structure of the traditional Mongolian khas symbol is, in fact, derived from the crossed sticks used to create fire. This symbol represents the origin of fire" (Сэндэнжав 2013, 61)

It is a common tradition among Mongolians to purify items associated with children, such as cradles, straps, and clothing, using fire. This practice of invoking the protection of the Fire Deity involves sanctifying children's belongings in fire to bring them under the deity's divine care. The ritual stems from the belief that objects like flames, embers, ashes, soot, scissors, hearths, and fire squares possess purifying and protective powers (Тангад 2020, 71).

Additionally, in some regions, a ritual to transform the child into a "brown hare" involves drawing a line of soot from the crown of the child's head (known as the "fire seam") to the tip of the nose. The term "fire seam" refers to the soft spot on a baby's head before the skull fully fuses. Among the Bayad ethnic group, the child's head and face are covered with a piece of black cloth during the *shirge* ritual. In other areas, practices include reversing the child's hat or covering their face with the cradle's cloth. These rituals, such as the transformation into a "brown hare" or covering the child's face with black fabric, may be rooted in the belief that the child has seen an invisible, supernatural presence with their "third eye," causing them fear and distress. By obscuring the "fire seam," crown, or "third eye," these practices aim to shield the child from perceiving such unseen entities, using fire's purifying qualities to ensure protection.

Rituals involving iron in the shirgeh practice: Among the fire purification rituals, the "fire seam" ritual is particularly intriguing. This ritual, which is associated with the blacksmith's horn, is sometimes understood in the same way as the shirge ritual for children. On certain auspicious days, people visit blacksmiths to purify their children, much like how one might perform the shirge ritual. Erdeney Pinee, a recognized bearer of the intangible cultural heritage of Mongolia, inherits and performs the blacksmith's horn ritual, which is passed down through nine generations. According to Erdene, the Tuva people take their sick or restless children to the blacksmith's horn ritual to heal them, choosing any good day for the ritual (Баатархүү 2017, 308).

During this ritual, iron is prepared, heated, and struck with a mallet on a stone, creating a loud noise and scattering red sparks throughout the room. It is believed that anyone who witnesses this ritual will experience healing from their illness, and that restless children will calm down, no longer crying or fussing. This is similar to the shirgeh ritual in which hot iron is brought near the child's eyes and then removed, symbolizing the process of purifying and stopping any negative influences. Furthermore, hot iron is sometimes dipped into cold water, creating a hissing sound, which serves as another form of purification. On one hand, the ritual is meant to shock the child, while on the other, it aims to burn away any bad things seen by the child's eyes with the power of the fire.

The phrase *"gan shirgeh suukhaa"* (iron purification) or *"ganga shirgeh suukhaa"* (purification with iron) spoken during the shirge ritual seems to be directly linked to the ritual of iron purification.

Rituals of purification with water: In the shirge rituals performed with water, a broken bowl is filled with water, and small amounts of dirt from the doorstep, stove, bed, and threshold are added along with salt, creating a mixture that is then poured around the child while the following chant is recited:

"The evil eye is in the spring,
The known harm is in the water,
The bad omen is in the spring,
All the dirt is in the harm."

The chant ends with the words "shirge shirge shirge," and the ritual is concluded by throwing the mixture toward an ill omen, turning away without looking back, and entering the house. The primary goal of this ritual is to purify the child from harmful forces or bad omens. This purification method indicates that the practitioner is absorbing or washing away the child's negative experiences or afflictions into the water.

The ritual is often performed when the child cries due to bad omens, dreams, or unseen fears. The practice, known in some regions as “water-shirgeh” or “shirgeh with water,” involves using water to cleanse the child of these influences. Additionally, the ritual of placing cold water on hot flames to create a popping sound symbolizes the interaction between opposites. Fire, representing positive energy, and water, representing absorbing and purifying qualities, come together to neutralize negative forces.

The act of placing water in a bowl and using it in the ritual is linked to practices in Mongolian shamanism, where water is believed to absorb both positive and negative energies. The ceremonial use of a broken bowl or pot is a reflection of invoking these energies, particularly negative ones, which are believed to be drawn to and neutralized by the water. In Mongolian tradition, the threshold is considered sacred, and it is believed that the spirit of the house is protected by the threshold, keeping away bad luck from entering the home. Thus, by purifying the threshold, the ritual also symbolically represents the warding off of bad omens and negative energy, preventing them from entering the household.

This dualistic concept of using opposites—hot and cold, fire and water—reflects the Mongolian belief in harmonizing and balancing forces to protect and purify individuals, especially children, from harmful external influences.

If fire is considered to have purifying, upward, and strengthening qualities, water, in contrast, is associated with downward flow and absorbing energy. In *shirgeh* rituals that involve water, the act of calling and absorbing various forces into a bowl of water mirrors practices like shamanic rituals where spirits are summoned (Г Золбаяр 2014, 201), and the Darhad ethnic’s shamanic cleansing or *khorgog* healing rituals (Пүрэв 2014, 326-327). These practices involve using a bowl of water to absorb and summon both positive and negative forces, reflecting the concept of purging or calling forth energies in Mongolian cultural and shamanic traditions.

The use of a broken bowl or vessel is associated with drawing in and absorbing negative energies. In the water-based *shirgeh* rituals, dirt from the threshold, four corners of the stove, and ash from the cauldron are placed in water, as mentioned earlier. Mongolians believe that the threshold of the house is a sacred place where the household spirit resides, protecting the home from evil and preventing bad influences from entering. Thus, by purifying these elements with water—without adding fire or hot elements—it is implied that the ritual indirectly represents the presence of fire, which is symbolically conveyed through the dirt from the threshold and cauldron’s ash. This use of water in purification rituals serves as a way to counterbalance and neutralize negative forces while symbolically acknowledging the role of fire and its protective, purifying powers.

Salt-based shirge rituals: As mentioned earlier, salt is a key component in the *shirgeh* ritual. In some regions, salt is specifically set aside for this purpose, and there are even practices of whispering and preserving it. Since salt has been widely used by Mongolians in their daily life, it is also associated with certain unique spells and rituals.

In Mongolian tradition, the act of adding salt to fire during the *shirgeh* ritual parallels adding water to fire for purification, symbolizing the essence of salt in relation to water. Mongolians traditionally view salt as representing hardened, dried tears. When searching for something, people often hold salt in their hands, and when performing rituals involving water, they similarly use a bowl of water to summon or drive away evil spirits or negative forces. Just as people avoid asking for "black" water, they also avoid asking for salt from others, as spilling salt requires it to be dissolved in water. Similarly, people avoid dealing with garbage or anything associated with impurity.

Thus, when used in *shirge* rituals, water and salt can be seen as two different forms of the same entity, symbolizing purification and the power to cleanse and ward off negative influences.

A person has long recognized extraordinary events happening to their offspring or hidden causes that cannot be confirmed through their five senses, creating knowledge through this understanding. However, this knowledge is not just practical; as Cassirer suggests, "If there is an important distinction between humans and animals, it is that humans live not only in the physical world but also in a symbolic universe.

> Phylosopher Gombosuren ….Language, myth, religion, and science are parts of the universe that create symbolic networks, various channels, and the complex tissue of human experience. Symbol is the formal synthesis of sensory diversity" (Гомбосүрэн 2019).

In other words, the way humans represent the fundamental meaning of what they know through forms and structures is symbolic cognition. When examining rituals like *shirge*, it shows that although certain negative or harmful things cannot be sensed through the five senses, humans have the ability to perceive and represent them symbolically. In this case, elements such as water and salt are used to express the presence of unseen, malevolent forces. Therefore, rituals and their systems can be seen as processes of human cognition, serving as tools that regulate the relationship between humans and the world around them.

The key expression that strengthens the *shirgeh* ritual for children is the incantation or chant associated with it. These chants include various references to potentially harmful influences or sources of ill luck.

Examples of such chants include:

"Is it from the black dog, or from the yellow dog?
Could it be from the soot-covered pot, or from the sweaty mouth of a child?
Is it from the barking dog?
Or from the creature of the thunderous sky?
Or from a far-off guest?
Was it when I was crossing over the hearth, *shirge shirge shirge*?
Is it from the house, from the spotted dog?
From far away, from nearby?
From me, or from my aunt?
Shirge shirge shirge...
Could it be from a woman? From a city dweller?
From a guest? From a rude woman?
From a bull, is it going to charge? From an old man, will it bite?
First incantation, first spell, first chant, *shirge shirge shirge*..."

These chants reflect an attempt to identify and drive out negative influences, with each line focusing on different sources of potential harm or discomfort that could affect the child.

These incantation words used in *shirge* rituals vary across different regions and ethnic, yet the core meaning and poetic structure remain similar. The chant involves attributing specific causes to the child's fear, such as the black dog, yellow dog, spotted dog, soot-covered pot, sweaty clothing, distant guests, relatives, and even creatures of the thunderous sky. The chants assign these elements based on their color, shape, or distinctive features. For example, the phrase "the child sweats" is linked to the belief that children may easily become frightened and sweat due to relatives, particularly from the mother's side, arriving on a sweaty horse.

From the chants, we can infer that recurring words like "dog," "pot," or "household member" reflect unfamiliar or alarming events that the child may not have encountered before—such as the sound of horses' hooves, dogs barking, the smell of sweat, or the bustle of unfamiliar people. These causes are believed to instill fear and discomfort in the child, and the chant aims to identify and address these sources of anxiety.

As researcher D.Tangad notes, "These incantation words serve to enhance the power of the ritual through the strength of the words themselves, and in some cases, they symbolize overcoming negative influences through the power of fortunate words" (Тангад 2020, 106). And recearcher Ts.Tserensodnom adds that "The incantation words from early times reflected belief in the 'magic' of language and were originally distinct in their function and meaning.

The modern use of the term 'incantation' has shifted, but it still retains a magical quality, as these words are believed to have the power to heal or drive away negativity" (Цэрэнсодном 2012, 29).

The central expression of the ritual is "language." Language is not merely a form of communication, but the incantation words spoken during rituals carry intrinsic meaning beyond mere expression. In this regard, F. de Saussure argues that "the sound of language is a sign; language is a combination of the signifier and the signified, which distinguishes between meaning and what is meaningful." Language plays a crucial role in understanding the relationship between the world and humanity through rituals, and in this sense, the language of the ritual serves as a medium that reflects the thought process through its meaningful connections to the symbolic representations expressed by sound. In this context, understanding involves a hermeneutic approach, where meaning is derived as a result of interpretation. "Language, within the scope of understanding, becomes a tool, and within the realm of interpretation, it serves as an instrument for explanation."

The repeated use of words like "black dog," "yellow dog," "smoky pot," "sweaty harness of saddle" and "aunt" in the incantations of the ritual represents forces or energies that have not yet become familiar sensory experiences for the child, such as sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste. These words generally express an attempt to address and control the unknown or unexperienced forces through the power of words. As suggested by the scholars mentioned, language is an essential cultural element that shapes human understanding, and rituals, through their multifaceted expressions, can be seen as a collective social activity.

Thus, the incantations like "shirge shirge" serve as a tool for understanding the relationship between humans and the world through rituals. In other words, the act of purification in the ritual, which involves combining fire and water to cleanse and remove negativity, is expressed through language. The chant "shirge shirge" amplifies the intention behind the action, symbolizing the purification of all evil and negativity. This use of language in rituals strengthens the ritual's effectiveness, reinforcing the idea of purging bad energies and forces.

Discussion

Rituals are dynamic in nature, evolving and passing down through generations. The study of traditions and changes in rituals provides an opportunity to identify the fundamental elements that constitute ritual systems. To shed light on the modern-day practices and traditions of the child-blessing ritual, we conducted a field survey from 2020 to 2024 across 16 provinces and 123 districts in Mongolia, based on field data collected from ethnographic research and intangible cultural heritage inspections. This

study utilized observation, interviews, and visual documentation methods, covering a total of over 360 households. A brief summary of the findings includes:

1. Variations in shirge rituals among Mongolian communities: The specific forms of rituals across regions show more variation than the types themselves, with distinctive regional features noted:
    - In the western regions (Tuvan, Uriankhai, Bayad ethnic groups), rituals involve placing sacred items such as salt and juniper around the child, with movement around the child and covering their body and head in black cloth.
    - In the Khangai and Bulgan regions, rituals often involve flowing water.
    - In the Gobi-Altai and Khovd regions, rituals include the heating of metal or sprinkling of water.
    - In Khentii and Dornod regions, a milk-based ritual is performed, distinguishing them from other regions. (Соёлын яам 2022)

2. Classification based on types of rituals:

Out of 360 households surveyed:

- Western region: 108 households
- Eastern region: 96 households
- Central region: 89 households
- Khangai region: 67 households

The breakdown of rituals performed:

- Casting metal or melting wax: 166 households (47%)
- Salt-blessing rituals: 120 households (33%)
- Water-turning rituals: 60 households (16%)
- Other: 14 households (4%)

3. Reasons for performing the child-blessing rituals and belief in their effectiveness:
    - 247 households from rural areas
    - 113 households from urban centers

A significant 98% of the participants in both rural and urban areas perform child-blessing rituals and strongly believe in their impact on the child.

These findings reflect the persistence and regional variety of shirge rituals in Mongolia, underscoring the cultural importance of such practices in different communities.

The above summary of the research indicates that with the transition to settled life, the use of certain items and rituals in the child-blessing ceremony, such as melting candles, casting tin, and salt-blessing, has become more prevalent in modern practices. While the materials and methods used in the rituals have changed, the underlying meaning and cultural significance of the ritual have remained aligned with tradition and have adapted to contemporary times.

Field research observed that in the western provinces, rituals that include ancient practices, such as using stones, open flames, covering with black cloth, and walking around the house, are still commonly performed. The belief in the ritual and the specific items used vary depending on the person performing the ritual.

Furthermore, regardless of region or whether one lives in urban or rural areas, the symbolism and essence of the child-blessing ritual are still understood and practiced, and these rituals continue to be passed down through generations. This highlights the continuity of the tradition, reflecting both the adaptation to modern contexts and the preservation of its deep-rooted cultural significance.

The research on the tradition and evolution of the child-blessing ritual suggests that it is an essential part of the child's integration into life (human existence) and is closely connected with many rituals and objects. In this sense, the expression of the conflict between life and death is reflected in both the child and the ritual performed on them. Philosopher S. Soyolmaa states that “conflicts often resolve on their own, without the need for mediation, as they are often mutually reinforcing. For example, in the Geser epic, the conflict between life and death is resolved by portraying life as a continuation of death, and death as a part of the cycle of life. This is an example of Mongolian mythological thinking, where conflicts are resolved as a means of understanding” (Соёлмаа 2019, 26).

In other words, Mongolians view human life as cyclical, and any ritual aimed at establishing a child is seen as an attempt to resolve the conflict between life and death. Thus, the child-blessing ritual is a tool to overcome this conflict and is evident during the transitions in the life cycle. Anthropologist A. Van Gennep introduced the concept of "rites of passage" in his work, where he emphasized that rituals emerge during these transitional stages of human life. Based on Gennep’s theory, Victor Turner developed his own ideas, emphasizing the concept of “liminality” in understanding the passage between different phases of social life. Turner considered liminality as a key tool for studying the transitions between various stages and levels of social existence.

This framework suggests that the child-blessing ritual can be seen as a "rite of passage," marking a transition from one phase of life to another, integrating the child into the world of humans, while also symbolizing the ongoing cycle of life and death.

The concept of liminality, as explored by anthropologists like Victor Turner, emphasizes a state of transition where individuals undergo significant transformations before reintegrating into society with a new status. During this liminal phase, people often face crises or challenges, and the ritual or ceremony serves as a process of overcoming and resolving these difficulties. In this context, the child-blessing ritual can be seen as a vivid example of liminality, where the child is temporarily separated from the social norm, undergoing a process of symbolic purification or protection, and later reintegrated into the community.

The ritual acts as a mechanism for restoring social harmony, addressing fears, troubles, or obstacles that may arise in the family or society. The child's involvement in the ritual symbolizes this process of transition and healing. As the ritual works to resolve tensions or uncertainties, it reflects a larger societal effort to repair and reinforce relationships, both within the family and the broader community.

In this way, the ritual's symbolism and its internal dynamics, such as the use of specific objects (salt, water, symbols of danger), hold a deeper significance in maintaining social cohesion. The ritual, through its transformative process, fosters the unity and stability of the community, reinforcing the shared beliefs and practices that keep the social order intact. The "affiliation" or symbolic connection inherent in the ritual is not just a personal transition for the child, but a collective act that strengthens social bonds and restores balance.

Conclusion

The ritual of "shirge" (child protection or blessing) has been an essential part of Mongolian culture, safeguarding the health and life of children from various threats and dangers. Rooted in ancient traditions, it involves practices like using fire, water, salt, and other elements to protect children. The name "shirge" seems to derive from the actions associated with the ritual, such as stirring water or using hot objects, which produce sounds and movements that are believed to ward off harm. This aligns with the concept of apotropaic magic, or protective rituals, found across different cultures, especially for shielding children from evil forces.

The Mongolian practice of child shirgel reflects a deep connection with elemental forces—fire being seen as a purifying and protective force, and water symbolizing a counterforce with its flowing, absorbing properties. The ritual, which may involve creating a balance between good and evil, protecting life through the combination of opposites, serves as a profound way of ensuring a child's safety.

In modern times, although the methods and materials used in these rituals have evolved, the fundamental beliefs and the importance of these rituals in Mongolian society remain unchanged. The symbolic and cultural significance of these practices continues to be maintained and passed down across generations, regardless of changes in the way they are performed.

This ritual acts as a mechanism for resolving tensions or obstacles in a community, reinforcing social harmony, and ensuring the well-being of its members.

Field research conducted from 2020 to 2024 shows that, while the practice of "shirgel" has adapted to urban settings, the core beliefs that underpin the ritual remain consistent across different regions and communities.

The continuity of these practices demonstrates their significance in the social fabric of Mongolian life, where rituals help maintain the balance between humans and the natural world.

The concept of liminality, central to the understanding of rites of passage, provides an insightful framework for interpreting the ritual of child shirgel. This transitional phase, marked by the separation of the child from everyday life during the ritual, symbolizes a purification or protection process before re-entering society. This aligns with the notion that rituals are not merely symbolic acts but also serve as mechanisms for re-establishing social order and unity. In Mongolian rituals, especially those involving child protection, this process can be seen as a manifestation of the tension between opposing forces (good vs. evil, life vs. death) being resolved through sacred acts, fostering a deeper connection with the spiritual and material worlds.

Thus, the "shirg" ritual is not only an act of protection for the child but also a key cultural and social tool that bridges the human world with the unseen forces that govern life. It reflects the Mongolian worldview where life, death, and protection are interconnected, and through rituals like "shirgel," balance is restored and maintained within the family and community.

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