

❖ FEAST CUSTOMS



Mongolians celebrate important events with festivals and feasts, and these usually follow a well-established system. A good steward is selected to conduct the feast. It is unwise to interfere with the plans of the steward, even to change one's seats without his or her permission. The steward, who knows the proceedings of the feast well, can decide when benedictions can be chanted, what songs can be sung, and what solemn ceremony can be performed in compliance with the established proceedings.

Such feasts have strict rules, which do not restrict the guest's freedom to revel; they instead create favorable conditions for the guests to be comfortable. An address at the feast or celebration should be expressed in a concise and artistic language.

Just like the above mentioned rules, the treatment of guests, such as when tea is to be offered or how vodka is to be given, has a strict order. The first offering to a guest is tea, followed by a meal with meat, and then soup. At intervals, often marked by songs and benedictions, *airag* (fermented mare's milk) and milk-vodka are offered to the guests according to established rules. When tea is offered, the following benediction is recited in the poetical sense.

*This beverage is called tea
Which is a type of drink
Which is offered to a guest
Which is the best of all beverages, and
Which is offered as a gift to our guests
Please, everyone, have tea.*

In case of a meal with meat, the follow benediction is recited:

*With a lid-shaped tail
Fore legs, hind legs, and ribs
Of the white-faced sheep,
This is the food for all Mongols;
They are arranged on a big tray;
Dear guests,
Have all of you a taste!*

These eulogized words are polite requests to invite guests to drink tea or eat their meal.



There is a custom to offer cups of milk-vodka to the adults three times. Generally, these cups of milk-vodka can be offered to only a person who has reached manhood. It was commonly unacceptable for those under 25 years to drink vodka.

There are also special benedictions. The benediction of the *airag*, which is uttered at the start and end of a feast, can include the following:

The pail of *airag* is placed in the middle of white *ger*;

*It is the best part of a perfect beverage,
Which is the generous gift of flowers grown in the summer, and
It is proffered to all of you
As the kindness of mares.*

In such a manner, the benediction begins as the lid of the churn is cleaned and opened with an honorable scarf.

All the guests take their seats in the *ger*. The tea is offered to everyone. The head of the host family slices pieces of mutton, places them on a tray, and distributes them to every guest. The soup is offered to everybody. After this, the head of the host family explains the purpose of the feast and suggests the name of a steward who is skillful in managing festivities. All the guests may second the suggestion. Once a person is elected as a steward of the festivity, he can arrange everything. The steward may say, "All of you together with the head of the host family, made me a steward." The feast is conducted according to strict rules. Every guest should take his or her proper seat. Each person's dress should be proper and their hat should be placed on their head. No smoking is allowed and no obscene words may be said. No brawling is allowed in any case. If anyone infringes upon a rule, he or she can be punished by being forced to drink a large bowl of fermented mare's milk. The steward should sit on the upper end of the eastern side of the *ger*. Singers and fiddlers sit by the steward on the eastern side, where the women and children also sit. But men sit on the western side according to their age and rank. Most elders sit cross-legged on the northern part of the *ger*. The guests on the eastern side sit with their left-knee bent. The guests on the western side sit in the opposite manner. These raised knees on the both sides are meant to prevent possible evils.

The steward nominates one *airag* ladler (a person who ladles *airag* from the churn) and two cup-deliverers. Everybody who has reached manhood has to drink three bowls of *airag* before the feast starts. After taking three bowls of *airag*, the feast starts with singing the traditional long song "Tümen Ekh" accompanied on the *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle). Singers sing three verses of the song, and all participants are invited to sing. *Airag* is offered to everybody at every break between songs. At some point, the steward announces a big break. After the break, the guests come back

to their seats. The steward allows singers to start the next round of singing. A singer usually leads others in a song with refrains. Every guest can drink *airag*. The feast continues in this way. After three rounds of singing, the people at the feast gather in *ger* again. At this time there is no strict demand for drinking. But people listen to the singing while some of the guests take bowls of *airag* at their will. When the feasting is nearing an end, the head of the family announces, "Let's see off the feasting". The steward suggests that the singers sing a long song to end the feast. The singing starts:

*Well, we enjoyed ourselves
At the joyfully wondrous feast;
We are like the puffy cumulus clouds
Soaring along before
The dew-impearled wind and
Under this remarkable benevolence*

After the song is sung, the head of the family asks the minstrel to utter a benediction. The minstrel takes a ladle from the *airag* churn, places it on the sacred scarf and says the benediction:

*We stick to the established custom,
Even though it was very nice;
It was enjoyable for all the kin
To feast for a long time;
It is possible to stay the whole day
But we think about your day jobs;
It is possible to stay the whole night
But we think about your night jobs;
We wish your horses may increase to tens of thousands
And we wish your *airag* may be like the water of the ocean*

Then the minstrel ladles up and pours out the *airag* in the churn three times before giving back the ladle to the *airag*-churn ladler.

This is common for an ordinary feast. If the feast is for a specific event, there can be other, particular rules for that feast. For instance, in the case of a *ger*-warming feast, the minstrel first says a benediction about the *airag*-churn and then utters a benediction of the *ger*. Then all the guests drink the *airag* and end the feasting.

These feast-ending benedictions and songs are never to be taken lightly. People consider them necessary to restrain the over-enjoyment and prevent people from missing their work responsibilities. There was the established rule when a feast must start and when it should end. Even the amount of drinking *airag* is taken into consideration. According to tradition, no feast should drag on longer than the appointed time. Feasts in honour of children and weddings, in particular, are traditionally ended before the setting of the sun.