

# Analyzing the Symbolic Meanings of Certain Mongolian Rituals for “Unsettled” Children

Gerelmaa Erdenechuluun

Department of Cultural Study of Mongolian National University of Arts and Culture, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Email: gerelmaa0207@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Erdenechuluun, G. (2025). Analyzing the Symbolic Meanings of Certain Mongolian Rituals for “Unsettled” Children. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 389-403.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.134023>

**Received:** February 17, 2025

**Accepted:** April 26, 2025

**Published:** April 29, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

In this paper, we aimed for rituals related to infants through the lens of the dichotomous classifications within the liminality theory of ritual studies. Specifically, we categorize these rituals into four main sections: 1) rituals of acknowledging the spirit child, 2) rituals performed during the liminal phase of “non-human” existence, 3) rituals conducted through the dearest child’s objects and belongings, and 4) rituals for the burial of dearest child. Through these categories, we attempt to clarify the meaning of certain rite of affliction. Overall, rituals performed for dearest children are fundamental practices aimed at influencing non-human forces, appeasing, deceiving, or correcting them, to establish the boundary of death. The rite of affliction associated with the dearest child can be interpreted as community’s unity and represents a collective societal response.

## Keywords

Liminal, Dom, Taboo, Society, Unity, Affliction, Remedy

## 1. Introduction

Mongolians have a rich array of rituals and taboos associated with children, deeply embedded in their cultural traditions. Among these practices, a child who repeatedly dies in the mother’s womb or in early infancy, or who is prone to illnesses and exhibits frailty, is referred to by various terms such as “enkher-enkhrii khuuhed” (tender child), “togtdoggui khuuhed” (unsettled child), “oroolgon khuuhed” (sickly child), and “achirkhan-achtai khuuhed” (fragile child). These children are subjected to specific protective rituals, which often involve charms and ceremonial practices aimed at safeguarding them from harm.

According to the Mongolian Language Dictionary, the term “enkhrrii khuuhed” refers to a “delicate child who is forbidden to walk barefoot and meet strangers.”

This concept also appears in certain Mongolian dialects, where the term “enkher” refers to the collar of a traditional Mongolian garment, the deel. It is believed that dressing a child in this manner may provide protective benefits. These children are not only given special names but are also distinguished by unique clothing, accessories, and are the focus of various taboos. Rituals surrounding these children are often performed with the assistance of spiritual practitioners such as fortune-tellers, shamans, and monks.

The significance of rituals related to tender children extends beyond their birth, encompassing pre-conception prayers for a safe and healthy pregnancy, rituals aimed at ensuring the child’s survival and well-being, and ongoing ceremonies throughout the child’s early life. These include practices during pregnancy, childbirth, naming ceremonies, hair-cutting rituals, the donning of special garments, and even funeral rites. All of these activities follow meticulously observed customs and rituals.

Despite the importance of these practices, they have not been extensively studied. However, certain rituals have been compiled and examined within the scope of cultural heritage research. Fieldwork conducted by ethnographers such as D. Nansalmaa, B. Lhagvasuren, and D. Tangad has yielded valuable insights into these traditions. However, detailed research on the specific customs surrounding tender children remains limited, with the exception of B. Tuultsetseg’s studies on the attire and accessories of these children.

Globally, the study of rituals concerning the loss of children and those intended to reconnect or reincarnate them in subsequent lives has significant cultural and social implications. These rituals are not only relevant to the field of children’s rites but also contribute to the broader understanding of social and cultural dynamics. Scholars such as B. Shinkevich, L. Zhukovskaya, and W. Heissig have documented the Mongolian practices related to unsettled children in their studies.

Moreover, leading scholars in socio-anthropology, including E. Durkheim, B. Malinowski, J. Fraser, A. Van Gennep, V. Turner, M. Douglas, and R. Rittner, have explored the symbolism, meaning, and social roles of rituals associated with tender children, such as stillbirths, spirit children, dearest children, and spoiled children. Their research examines the significance of child burials, taboos, and symbolic actions, revealing how these practices contribute to the formation of social structures, community values, and collective beliefs.

The rituals performed by Mongolians to protect children, particularly those aimed at preserving life and warding off threats, play a critical role in understanding the people’s worldview, their concept of the cosmos, and their perceptions of human existence. These rituals not only reflect deep cultural and social values but also illuminate the fundamental beliefs that shape their communities.

## **2. Methodology and Sources**

From the perspective of ritual studies, particularly drawing upon the anthropological theories of Arnold van Gennep, it is proposed that:

“Rituals are activities intrinsically linked to the life cycle of individuals, facilitating transitions from one life stage to another. These transitions, which span the entirety of human existence, are demarcated through several ritualistic phases. These include the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal stages, involving separation, transition, and reintegration, respectively. Such transitions, manifesting primarily through ritualistic behavior, are prevalent in all societies, from birth to death.” (Van Gennep, 1961: p. 11)

Building upon Gennep’s framework, Victor Turner further expanded on the concept of liminality in his own anthropological methodology. Turner emphasized:

“Rituals engage participants in a temporary suspension from societal norms during the liminal phase, thereby enabling entry into a transitional process that holds significant implications for social renewal” (Turner, 1967: p. 63). He elucidates that the liminal phase is a state that transcends established social structures, classifications, and legal frameworks, essentially creating a “free zone” that lies outside the temporal constraints upheld by society. This phase is defined as *communitas*, a concept Turner expounds upon as a space wherein participants are equalized in their experience and are in a heightened state of collective unity (Bum-Ochir & Munkh-Erdene, 2012: p. 148).

Turner’s ethnographic research on the Ndembo people of Zambia highlighted how rituals enacted during times of fear, suffering, or life-disrupting conflict serve as efforts to restore balance and alleviate distress. Such rituals, which emerge as responses to ancestral or spiritual transgressions, aim to rectify damage and restore equilibrium. Turner characterized these rituals as *affliction* rituals (Turner, 1991: p. 40). Thus, rituals performed in response to emotional or existential distress are viewed as symbolic acts designed to alleviate suffering, a concept encapsulated in the term “affliction” within Turner’s theoretical framework.

In the case of rituals associated with tender children in Mongolian culture, these practices align with the characteristics of *affliction* rituals as outlined by Turner. This research, therefore, adopts Turner’s liminal theory as a guiding analytical framework to examine the ritualistic practices surrounding tender children. By adopting a dichotomous approach to ritual studies, this study aims to deconstruct, analyze, and synthesize the symbolic meanings and societal roles embedded within these rituals.

The sources utilized in this study draw from the works of scholars specializing in Mongolian customs and ritual practices, alongside field materials collected during the researcher’s ethnographic investigations from 2022 to 2024. This includes field data gathered by the *Tsakhim Suvarga NGO* in 2022 from Bayankhongor, Gobi-Altai, Khovd, Bayan-Ulgii, Uvs, Zavkhan, Khentii, Sukhbaatar, and Dornod provinces. Additional data from 2023, fieldwork in Bulgan, Uvurkhangai, Arkhangai, Khuvs-gul, Khentii, and Dornod provinces, along with the national survey of intangible cultural heritage conducted by the Mongolian Ministry of

Culture and arts, have been incorporated (Alimaa, Byambajav, Gerelmaa, & Erdenechuluun, 2022). Furthermore, ethnographic data from the Bayad Cultural Heritage NGO collected in 2024 inUvs province have been included, supplemented by media documentation and associated metadata from these field studies (Cultural heritage of Bayad ethnic group, 2024).

This comprehensive methodological approach aims to explore the rituals surrounding tender children in Mongolia, situating them within both symbolic and social contexts. By synthesizing ethnographic data with ritual theory, this study aspires to contribute to the broader understanding of how these practices function to maintain cultural identity and address existential concerns within Mongolian society.

### 3. Results of the Study

In examining the rituals associated with tender children through the concept of *affliction* rituals, this study follows a dichotomous methodological approach rooted in the liminal concept of ritual studies. The rituals associated with tender children have been categorized according to a chronological or staged sequence of activities. These are as follows:

#### 3.1. Rituals for Calling Children and Cycles of Life

The rituals for calling children encompass various traditional practices aimed not only at the desire for abundant offspring and blessings but also to address situations where children are difficult to conceive or fail to thrive. These rituals include a variety of spells, incantations, and charms. In various regions of Mongolia, there is a longstanding tradition of invoking children's blessings through natural and sacred sites, such as stone statues (human stone statues, male and female stone carvings), rocks (mother rock, milk rock, woman's rock, etc.), children's sacred heaps, mountains, and caves. These sites, often seen as symbols of the earth, sky, and ancestral spirits, are central to these rituals where prayers for children's well-being are offered.

Additionally, beyond the use of specialized healers, shamans, and monks to conduct rituals, there are household charms and rituals designed to protect children from stillbirth and miscarriage, which have been passed down through generations. To symbolize the desire for fertile offspring and healthy children, rituals such as wedding feasts, fire offerings, household blessings, and ceremonial offerings at sacred mounds often include rites intended to elicit laughter and joy from children. Examples include the seven-child feast, the "Samgan" feast, the invocation of children, and the creation of children through symbolic gestures and rituals.

For instance, during the process of marrying off a daughter, rituals involve blessing the daughter's possessions with symbolic representations of children's blessings. This includes specific ceremonial prayers known as "Children's Invocation," a ritualistic prayer asking for children, performed during the wedding. Similarly, rituals like placing children on household rugs and offering them sweets or

treats before commencing the feast are symbolic of calling forth future children. In the course of these feasts, laughter and joy, created by the children's playful participation, act as symbolic acts of inviting children into the family.

Furthermore, during fire-offering rituals, there are cases where children are allowed to feed young birds, such as a magpie, symbolizing the ritual of inviting and calling children into the world. These practices all serve the purpose of invoking joy and harmony through the laughter and playfulness of children, linking them to the broader symbolic framework of child invocation.

Another deeply symbolic practice is the ritual where women who have borne many children invite others into their homes for tea and food offerings. During such gatherings, children are allowed to play with toys in the home, spreading joy and laughter, which is regarded as an integral part of invoking children. This belief is rooted in the notion that the strength and energy of mothers who have borne many children, combined with the laughter of their children, signifies the calling of future children—thus encapsulating the idea that “children call other children.”

A common example of a ritualistic belief within Mongolian culture is the practice of adopting a child. Families struggling with infertility or those unable to conceive often adopt a child from another family, thereby symbolically “calling” a child into their lives. This act is not only seen as an invocation of children but also as a ritual of bringing forth offspring, similar in nature to the earlier mentioned joy-inducing rituals.

Moreover, specific rituals aimed at securing children, such as “making children” or “securing offspring,” are typically conducted by specialized healers, monks, or shamans. One example is the ritual of “making children” where, on a Thursday, a healer marks specific trees or objects and creates a wooden figure symbolizing a child. The figure is then decorated, and various magical practices are performed to ensure the conception of children. The ritual involves placing the figure in a specific location where sunlight first touches, symbolizing the first light of life. The figure is then blessed with a series of symbols and rituals, such as writing sacred words on stones, sprinkling milk, and wrapping the figure in clean cloth as a protective gesture.

This particular ritual reflects the deep-seated cultural belief in the importance of invoking children and maintaining fertility, with the notion of “making children” symbolizing a broader spiritual and cultural practice related to ensuring the continuation of life. (Tudev, 2007: p. 117)

Additionally, healers, shamans, and monks are invited to the household to conduct specific rituals, such as constructing a small child's shelter in the northwest corner of the home and preparing a chest with a complete set of horse tack. This ritual involves creating a special resting place for the child and symbolically inviting the child. The horse tack, including the saddle, bridle, and whip, is carefully prepared and placed in the chest, which is then locked. Even if the family eventually has children, the chest remains unopened for three years (Tangad, 2020: p. 296).

Regarding this, a resident of the Buyant soum in Bayan-Ulgii, J. Ganchimeg,

stated:

*“...When a family has difficulty conceiving, they bring in a soothsayer to perform a specific ritual. Especially when a child is born but cannot survive or grow properly, it is believed that the spirit of an ancestor has returned but could not be reincarnated properly. Therefore, if one wishes to have a son, they prepare a complete set of horse equipment, including a beautiful saddle and horse accessories, and place them in a chest without showing them to anyone. Only in this way will a son be born into the family. Mongolian men greatly value horses, so this is the method of invocation. After performing this ritual, the family will have a child. I have personally performed this ritual, and several families I know have had children after doing so...”*

In general, the rituals related to conceiving children observed in the context of unsuccessful pregnancies are distinctly different from those performed when no children have been born. For instance, in rituals asking for children’s blessings, the emphasis is often placed on invoking the natural world and calling upon divine gifts. In contrast, rituals performed by families struggling to conceive a child focus more on appeasing spirits and removing obstacles.

For example, in typical rituals for calling children, families express their wishes through celebrations and offerings, requesting children through ceremonies held at sacred sites. However, families who cannot conceive tend to focus on rituals that involve more direct intervention, such as constructing a shelter or preparing a chest with horse equipment. These acts are seen as part of the effort to remove any potential obstacles to conception.

Moreover, rituals conducted during pregnancy resemble those performed in cases of miscarriage or maternal discomfort. For instance, a pregnant woman might perform rituals using items such as the claws of a bear, the bones of a marmot, the tail of a female marmot, the glass from a grandmother’s bead necklace, or the hair from the forehead of an ox. She might also use gold, silver, or iron locks, place thorny branches inside the home, or wear a headdress made from an artistic bird’s nest to ward off misfortune and ensure a successful pregnancy.

These rituals, while diverse in practice, share a common goal: to protect the unborn child and ensure the family’s wishes for a healthy birth are realized. Ethnographic studies conducted among certain Mongolian ethnic groups indicate that primary ritual practices related to children are predominantly performed within the family, typically by paternal or maternal relatives. However, when these household rituals yield limited results—particularly in cases of recurrent child mortality—families increasingly seek intervention from religious specialists such as lamas, shamans, or diviners. This shift is driven by the belief that these practitioners possess the spiritual and ritual expertise necessary to mediate with supernatural forces, including celestial and terrestrial powers, deities, demonic entities, and natural forces, to protect and secure the well-being of the child.

The selection of ritual specialists is typically determined by the head of the fam-

ily or clan, based on perceived efficacy and tradition. Among these specialists, shamans are often called upon to perform intense and complex rites aimed at halting child mortality and counteracting malevolent influences. In contrast, Buddhist lamas engage in both everyday and extraordinary rituals related to child welfare, providing religious protection through prayers and blessings. Diviners and other ritual practitioners, meanwhile, are consulted based on the family's faith and belief system.

Overall, while the procedural aspects of these ritual practices vary according to the specialist performing them, their ultimate purpose and perceived effectiveness remain largely consistent across different contexts.

### **3.2. Rituals Performed during the Childbirth and Nurturing Cycle of Infants**

Rituals performed during the childbirth and nurturing cycle of infants: During the birth of an infant, great caution is taken with all things involved, including imposing restrictions, weaving patterns, unlocking household items and utensils, placing dog traps, using soot-covered pots, and creating a protective barrier around the home. Additionally, efforts are made to prevent dogs and birds from coming near the home. In some cases, families who have repeatedly lost children may construct a special dwelling such as an additional house, tent, or shelter specifically for childbirth. When a child is born, it is common for the child's father or another male, often someone of foreign blood, to assist in the delivery. This practice breaks the common belief in Mongolian culture regarding the three types of mothers—those who give birth, those who adopt, and those who have assisted others in childbirth—and addresses the negative perception of women who do not give birth themselves.

During childbirth, rituals include cutting the umbilical cord using rocks or stones, and binding the cord with wolf, dog (a spotted dog), or white deer sinews. Additionally, the person assisting the birth, or a foreigner, may help deliver the child by performing rituals beneath the mother's right groin. This process may include rituals like using dog traps, soot-covered pots, or placing the child in a metal pot, a belly, or even tying it with wolf skin. After the birth, the child is placed in the right sleeve or pants of the father's coat to complete the ritual. Another practice involves a "wolf mouth entry" ritual, where the skin around the mouth of a slain wolf is cut into a ring, dried, and used to usher the child into the world during birth.

In the Gobi region, if a child does not survive after birth, the family may tie a live sheep and press down on it with a red stone, placing it above and below the birth site. The sheep is positioned with its tail facing upwards, and the person about to give birth is seated on top of it, thereby ensuring a successful delivery. This practice is said to be a symbolic act of protecting the child and is seen as an important custom (Tangad, 2014: p. 190). Efforts to secure a child's survival, such as using wolf skin or sinews, seem to be attempts to confuse any controlling forces.

These practices appear to have evolved from the legend of Shaaluu Khuu, a long-standing tradition. After the infant is delivered, a variety of rituals are performed, including the practice of placing the child in a special cradle or shelter, blocking the path of the child's birth, hiding the umbilical cord, dressing the child in foreign garments, and even restricting the child's movement by confining it to a separate area. These rituals are often carried out through specific garments, tools, and accessories that serve as symbolic means to ensure the child's stability and protection.

In many regions, after the birth of an infant, the child is not bathed immediately. The mother, in parallel, will be given broth made from the bones of wild animals. When naming the child, a variety of names are used, such as "Not human, Not anyone, I am not, Bad dog, Unfindable, Beltreg, Hut, Lock, Slaughter, No name", with male names often being more distinct, such as Woman, Girl, Wife, Old woman, as well as names of foreign origins like Russian boy, Old Chinese" (Munkhtur, 2023: p. 36). These names are closely associated with the rituals and spells performed during the child's birth.

The rituals surrounding an infant's attire, food, living space, and even the space within the home, are all steeped in symbolic traditions, with various prohibitions and restrictions. For instance, in the ritual of consuming "khinshuu" (earth's ceremonial food), elders or ancestors' blessings are specifically honored. Special food offerings, such as sheep's meat, are given to ensure blessings for the child. However, certain foods like funeral meals or meals related to death rituals are strictly avoided for infants, as it is believed to be detrimental to their wellbeing. These practices illustrate a paradox where, while avoiding certain foods, the highest forms of blessing are still respectfully accepted by the family.

In Mongolian culture, the concept of "ongod" or sacred shrines dedicated to revered ancestors and spiritual figures is important. The term "ongod" originally referred to a sacred object or spirit used in shamanistic practices. Over time, its meaning evolved to denote anything revered, cherished, or divine, and is used in this context to describe the sacred rituals and blessings given to newborns. Thus, the term "enkhrii" (cherished child) is also used in naming the child, representing its revered and sacred status.

Additionally, Mongols have a tradition of using specific types of cradles and clothing for infants, such as wooden, fur, or cloth cradles. In some cases, special, unique cradles are used, and one such practice includes using the skin of a deer or an antelope, or even the fabric of a camel's coat, for the cradle. This ritual is believed to protect the child from harmful external forces. In certain areas, the ritual also requires the use of red-colored herbs or plants to construct the infant's cradle. For example, among the Khalkha Mongols, a child who does not settle (i.e., remains restless or sickly) is not placed in a cradle, and sulfur is not sewn into their swaddling. However, among the people of the Gobi region, a child is believed to "settle" if a white camel's skin is used to wrap the infant during its birth and if certain blessings are performed during the process.

Various charms and adornments are attached to the child's cradle, and the

adornments for a cherished child are especially unique. In other words, anyone who visits the household, whether a relative or outsider, can determine that the child is a cherished one by observing the special adornments, ropes, and charms attached to the cradle. Among the Altai Tuvan and Uriankhai people, it is a common tradition to tie a bone or bead to the child's cradle. If a child dies after being placed in the cradle (i.e., after the washing ritual), the tied charm or bone is untied, and the loop left on the rope remains intact. A local elder from Bayan-Ulgii, B. Bayanmunkh, shared the following:

*“... The child's cradle (wooden cradle) has significant meaning. You can tell how many children the family has—whether they have daughters or sons—without asking the household owner. Just by looking at the cradle's rope, you can tell. If a family doesn't have a stable child, the spirit of the deceased child can be seen in the rope. When a child is born and placed in the cradle, if the child dies, the tied bone or charm is removed and discarded with the child. However, the loop on the rope remains. When a new child is born, a new charm or bone is tied.” (Gerelmaa, 2022)*

Not only can one easily tell if a family has a cherished child by looking at the cradle, but it is also understood that the family with a healthy, thriving child will avoid disturbing the newborn, refraining from making loud noises or causing unnecessary disruption. This reveals a belief among Mongols that by performing the washing ritual for the newborn, the child's spirit or life force is cleansed and strengthened.

Additionally, in the region, it is common to hang the hoof of a horse connected by sinew on the child's cradle, believing it serves as a protective talisman for the child. This is similar to the concept of guarding horses. In the Gobi region, there is a tradition of hanging a wet horse's hoof from the cradle's top. Other charms and amulets for the cherished child include various metals and animal parts, such as locks, nine-holed iron charms, “devil's eye” beads, hammers, axes, arrows, and smaller versions of livestock equipment like whips, ropes, and saddlebags. The use of animal parts, such as the claws of a fox, eagle, or bear, the fur of a wild animal, or feathers from a golden bird, is also common. These charms and amulets are made from natural materials and represent connections to the environment, wildlife, and livestock, all of which are believed to protect the child and provide strength and blessings.

In addition to the child's cradle, the child wears various adornments, such as bracelets on their hands and legs, anklets, earrings for boys, and necklaces or locks on their necks.

After the child leaves the cradle, a common item used by Mongols for children is a “harness.” This is used when the child begins to roll, crawl, and eventually learn to walk. This process is referred to as “putting the child in the harness.” The child's harness is commonly used in Mongolian culture, with special attention given to the cherished child, and it is made with extra care. For example, the har-

ness might be made from the skin of a bison, a buckskin, or other special materials, which are believed to provide strength, protection, and good fortune. The use of these materials connects to the belief that they bring qualities of bravery, vitality, and longevity, as these animals are regarded as strong and resilient. The harness, also referred to as the “age-appropriate restraint,” symbolizes the idea of keeping the child safe and preventing them from wandering off.

Near the place where the child is harnessed, a special cotton tent or structure might be made, and the child will be carefully adored and cherished. It is also believed that the child might be taken on trips, tied with a harness, to bring good fortune and health.

Overall, the rituals performed to protect the child, including the child’s clothing and accessories, serve as talismans or charms to secure the child’s well-being. These include the cradle, adornments, and harness, and are important symbolic elements of Mongolian rituals.

For the cherished child, it is common to dress them in special clothing, such as a multicolored robe or a Kazakh-style robe. For boys, a woman’s robe might be used, and for girls, a monk’s robe is typically worn. In particular, in areas like Gobi-Altai, Bayan-Ulgii, and Zavkhan, it is believed that if a multicolored robe is made with 77, 99, or 108 pieces of fabric, it will bring good luck. The father would gather fabric from families with many children who have grown healthy and strong, and use this fabric to sew a robe, believing it will help the child thrive. These specially sewn robes might be referred to by names such as a “multicolored robe,” “patched robe,” or “stitch robe.”

In some regions, cherished children are also dressed entirely in white clothing, including shoes and accessories. Researcher and doctor B. Tuultsetseg has studied these garments and the accessories related to cherished children, based on field materials and items kept in the Mongolian National Museum. According to her findings, Mongols have long believed that children who do not settle down easily, are sickly, or are easily frightened need special protection from illness, accidents, or bad spirits. To protect them, families collect scraps of clothing from different homes, including the edges of robes and pieces of new silk, and sew them into garments like robes and cradles. The collected pieces often have symbolic numbers like 77, 81, 99, or 108, which are connected to ancient Mongolian traditions of shamanism and beliefs in the 99 deities of the sky and nature. These numbers are thought to offer spiritual protection (Tuultsetseg, 2018: p. 41). The robes used for cherished children are often designed with wide, spacious cuts and short hems, ensuring the child can move freely and safely.

This practice reflects the Mongols’ deep connection to their spiritual beliefs and their desire to protect their children from harm, using natural materials and symbolic rituals to ensure the child’s well-being and future health.

### **3.3. Rituals for the Burial of Cherished Children**

Rituals for the Burial of Cherished Children: During our research, we encountered

some oral accounts stating that when a cherished child or the only child of an aristocratic family passed away, the child was buried with its cradle. However, this practice was not particularly common.

In the legend of the lullaby, it is said: "... Then Eldei and Deldei, having brought a spotted deer from the mountains, placed two beautifully decorated cedar chests on the back of the deer, one of which contained the beloved younger sibling, while the other contained the child's shoes, clothes, and toys. They then sent it up the mountain to be carried away..." This relates to the practice of burying a child with its cradle in the Khalkha Mongolian nomadic culture, which connects to the burial tradition of placing the child in a cradle, especially seen in ancient child burials (such as in the Olnit Cave burials). This ritual might be linked to the ancient practice of burying children with a cradle or chest, especially when the child passed away. In particular, among the Khalkha people, there is a common belief to avoid reusing the cradle of a deceased child, as it is considered taboo to do so.

In some places, children are buried with their cradle, with the cradle being carefully crafted from a sacred tree like the bodhi tree, or the child might be placed into a specially sewn bag and buried. When performing the burial ritual, the child's body would be placed inside a cloth bag made from blue or white fabric, and along with the child, cooked meat (often including sheep bones) and toys would be placed inside. For a boy, the toy would be a properly oriented hoof, and for a girl, an incorrectly oriented hoof. The burial would typically be performed by a male relative—father, brother, or uncle—who would carry the body to a crossroads, where they would leave it and return, often with a symbolic gesture of leaving the horse's reins dangling, which represents the idea that the child will return home.

In some regions, the child is weakly secured in the cradle and carried along many paths, where the child would likely fall off and be lost. In these cases, the family would not turn back, and the child's spirit would be considered lost. Generally, when performing the burial, if the family wanted to symbolize the child returning to the family after death, the cradle was used, but when the family wished to lose the child's spirit, the child was allowed to wander and be lost at the crossroads, never to return.

It appears that there was no special mourning or ritual to "relieve grief" in Mongolian practices surrounding the burial of a cherished child. Instead, after the loss of a child, various other rituals were performed, often with the purpose of calling the spirit of a new child to the family, or performing other healing and ritual acts to address the grief.

#### 4. Discussion

The sorrow of losing a child, the grief of death, is felt not only by the family and the close community but also by the broader society. This grief and longing to prevent further sorrow and to leave behind descendants have likely led to the development of various rituals associated with cherished children. From a theoretic-

cal perspective in ritual studies, any ritual performed in such circumstances can be categorized as an “afflictive act,” as we mentioned earlier.

Rituals performed for cherished children are considered actions directed toward non-human forces, aimed at controlling, deceiving, or altering the course of death within the practical realm. For example, rituals such as preparing a cradle, constructing a shelter, placing the child under the care of a dog, passing them under another person’s belly, raising the child in another family, adorning them with ornaments, or dressing them in certain clothing—all serve the purpose of creating a symbolic separation, marking the child as not fully belonging to the human world, or not considered to be of the same family, or even not born of the same mother. These actions signify a form of social and familial isolation, distinguishing the child as “not mine” or “a foreign being.” In ritual study, non-human force refers to a power that exists beyond human control and influences human actions. It can manifest in religious, natural, or intangible energetic forms and is closely tied to the structure, meaning, and purpose of rituals. For example, deities, sacred spirits, ancestral souls, and supernatural forces are included in this concept. In Mongolian shamanism, invoking the power of the heavens and connecting with the spiritual realm can be seen as a form of interaction with non-human forces.

Above all, the belief that the soul returns and that human life is cyclical is foundational. It is through preparing the things used in the previous life, such as possessions, that the child is symbolically called back. For instance, the ritual of preparing a saddle and horse equipment, often practiced in households where children do not stay or thrive, reflects the idea that Mongolian men have a strong attachment to saddles, bridles, and other horse gear. These rituals act as a way of “tricking” the forces and “stabilizing” the child’s existence. On the other hand, belief in various natural causes or the influence of some malevolent force, such as a curse, or being affected by local spirits, might lead people to perform rituals like offering sacrifices to request children or performing ceremonies at child burial mounds.

These rituals are carried out in the belief that certain external forces (such as evil spirits or natural causes) affect a family’s ability to have children. Therefore, rituals like offerings at mounds or making requests for children are part of the broader cultural tradition of dealing with these spiritual and societal challenges.

Among the Mongols, various reasons have been given for why a child does not survive or dies, and these reasons are expressed through rituals aimed at identifying and addressing the underlying causes. Practices such as anointing the child in a dog’s den, binding them with a wolf’s skin, dressing them in clothing of foreign ethnicities like Kazakhs or Chinese, and tying them in trousers and shirts all represent efforts to separate the child from their kin, with the intention of ensuring the child survives.

In the rituals associated with cherished children, various animal names, body parts, skin, hair, and even bedding dust are commonly used. This suggests several reasons behind these practices:

1) The belief that the child might not be of human origin, but rather the offspring of a specific animal.

2) The desire to invoke the power and boldness of animals in order to repel malevolent forces that harm the child.

3) The concept of equating humans with animals, suggesting a similar treatment for both.

In these rituals associated with cherished children, the involvement of men is particularly prominent. Additionally, it is common to see dogs and camels being specifically incorporated into the ritual acts. For example:

- Anointing the child in a dog's den.
- Using a dog to drag a rope through the child's clothing.
- Giving the child the name of a dog.
- Dressing the child in a dog's clothing.
- Having the child step on a dog or binding their body with a dog's skin.

In Mongolian culture, rituals involving dogs are abundant, with one such practice being the offering of an oath with a dog's blood. This reflects a belief that dogs can be reincarnated as humans. As mentioned earlier, this connects with the broader concept of the soul's cyclical nature, wherein a spirit is believed to return in another form, often after passing through a certain stage.

Furthermore, there were rituals concerning camels, especially when camels give birth. In Eastern Khalkha, it was considered auspicious to treat a camel's calf with great care, placing it in a special pen, and preventing people on horseback from approaching. The belief was that "people and camels are two different categories of beings," and these rituals involved giving the calf special clothing and symbolic acts to encourage prosperity in the family. It was even believed that after a camel's calf died, mixing its wool with that of sheep and other rituals could bring prosperity to the family and ensure future success.

This shows that the rituals connected to cherished children involve calling, deceiving, or controlling various forces in the world beyond human existence—acting in the realms of life, death, good, and evil. In this sense, the rituals are performed during transitional or liminal periods, symbolizing the in-between stages of existence. These rituals thus maintain their form as afflictive acts in the liminal phases of life.

In addition, regarding children's funerals, research by foreign scholars such as M. Mead, A. Gennep, and E. Durkheim has shown that various rituals were performed to support the mother's emotional state and to soothe the spirit of the deceased child. Durkheim viewed children's funerals as processes through which the family and community overcome the grief and loss of a child and recover from psychological trauma. On the other hand, C. Hertz and F. Aries defined these rituals as a transition aimed at guiding the child's spirit to the afterlife. In other words, according to the conclusions of scholars like M. Mead, the funeral of a child is aimed at helping the family and community, while according to R. Hertz and others, the rituals focus on the deceased child.

Here, the conclusions of K. Humphrey's study of Mongolian children's funerals are particularly intriguing. He stated that for Mongols, the ritual of burying a child has a hidden purpose of guiding the child's spirit to the right path and preventing grief from affecting other members of the community (Humphrey, 1999: p. 78). Additionally, the funeral ritual is seen as a stage where the spirit of the deceased child transitions to a new life, ensuring that the spirit does not bring misfortune to the family (Humphrey, 2002: p. 76). These findings are quite interesting.

In general, the rituals associated with cherished children seem to have developed in close connection with the Mongols' worldview, which prioritizes the collective—"the people, the nation"—rather than individualism. These rituals are also deeply intertwined with the nomadic lifestyle and communal livelihood. Therefore, the meaning and content of these practices are defined through collective actions. In this regard, as proposed by E. Durkheim, V. Turner, and B. Malinowski, the meaning of these afflictive acts is to promote unity and social cohesion, which can be seen as a social response to tragedy. In other words, the essence of the rituals associated with cherished children in Mongolian culture can be understood as a means of overcoming fear, sorrow, and suffering, instilling the belief that the family will bear a new child, and ensuring the stability of both the family and society. Thus, these rituals can be seen as a way of healing and restoring the social fabric.

## 5. Conclusion

The Mongols have long valued having many children, considering it a sign of prosperity. If a child in a family repeatedly dies in the womb or at a young age, or is prone to illness, or is weak and frail, they are often referred to as "enkhrenkhrii" (cherished child), and various rituals and charms are performed specifically for them. From the very beginning of their traditional customs, the Mongols have paid close attention to all aspects of a child's life, from the ritual of calling the child before birth, to ensure the health and safety of the mother and child during pregnancy, to protect their life, and to care for them in terms of food, clothing, and living conditions.

In this presentation, we have analyzed the rituals associated with cherished children using the dichotomous method from the theory of liminality in ritual studies. We divided the rituals into four categories: calling the child, rituals performed at the age of maturation, childbirth and childcare rituals, rituals involving children's belongings, and the rituals of burying a cherished child. Through this approach, we have attempted to clarify the significance of certain rituals by examining the afflictive actions associated with them.

Any rituals performed for cherished children are viewed as methods aimed at controlling death and the forces outside the human world. These actions are seen as ways to trick, deceive, or correct death. In this sense, the rituals associated with cherished children are rooted in the Mongols' beliefs in reincarnation and the results of actions (both good and bad). The rituals have a foundational nature of

comforting, deceiving, and expelling negative forces, and have been performed through the power of humans, animals, and natural forces to guide the transition between life and death.

Moreover, the purpose of these rituals is to instill trust and hope in both the practitioner and the one receiving the ritual. In this regard, the meaning of the afflictive acts associated with cherished children can be seen as a social response to establish unity within the community and to ensure the continuity of the family and society as a whole.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## References

- Alimaa, Byambajav, Gerelmaa, & Erdenechuluun (2022). *National Survey and Study of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Eastern Region*. Mongolian Ministry of Culture and Arts.
- Bum-Ochir, D., & Munkh-Erdene, G. (2012). *From the Perspective of Socio-Cultural Anthropological Theory*.
- Cultural Heritage of Bayad Ethnic Group NGO (2024). *Field Research Report of Bayad Ethnic Group's Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Cultural Heritage of Bayad Ethnic Group NGO.
- Gerelmaa, E. (2022). *Project Report on Mongolian Folk Healing Culture Related to Child-birth and Child-Rearing*. Tsakhim Suvarga Cultural Heritage Explorers.
- Humphrey, C. (1999). Rituals of Death in Mongolia: Their Implications for Understanding the Mutual Constitution of Persons and Objects and Certain Concepts of Property. *Inner Asia*, 1, 59-86. <https://doi.org/10.1163/146481709793646429>
- Humphrey, C. (2002). Rituals of Death as a Context for Understanding Personal Property in Socialist Mongolia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 8, 65-87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00099>
- Munkhtur, C. (2023). *The Mongolian Rites of Becoming a Person*.
- Tangad, D. (2014). *Ethnographic Fieldwork in Mongolia*.
- Tangad, D. (2020). *A Dictionary of Mongolian Dom*.
- Tudev, L. (2007). *Mongolian Prophecy*. Urlakh erdem.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols. Aspect of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1991). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Cornell Paper Backs.
- Tuultsetseg, B. (2018). *On the Clothing, Garments, and Attire of Unsettled Children: A Collection Study*.
- Van Gennep, A. (1961). *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press.