

Mongol Nüüdel: 'Tradition', Changes, and Memory

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Abstract

Based on the memory and experience of some local elderly herders and a case of some current seasonal nüüdel (travels) in the west of Mongolia, this article provides a comparative illustration on how practices of nüüdel from one pasture to another differ from those conducted in socialist times. Using the reconstruction of a 'traditional' nüüdel and following some existing literature on nomadism and pastoralism, this article intends to show that nomads are not barbarian wanderers who constantly move around in the 'free' and/or 'unoccupied' landscape. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, it provides a detailed illustration of indigenous experience and knowledge on the pasture, landscape, climate and the environment; techniques to pack, unpack and to safely lead a caravan; love and care for herd animals; division of labor in the household and interaction and collaboration of local people; and customs and treatments to the local spirit masters.

Key words: nomadism; pastoralism; seasonal travel; caravan and human-animal relations

Introduction

In *The End of Nomadism?* Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath (1999) pose two questions. The first question asks if the so-called nomadic way of life in Inner Asia, in Russia, Mongolia and China will end in the changes of urbanisation and globalization. The second question asks if the misunderstanding of nomads as barbarian, backward and low tech will end. Their response to the first question suggests that mobility is essential in preserving the environment and not ending the nomadic culture. Therefore, policies providing more and more mobility instead of restricting, by fencing and privatising pasture such as in China, can help nomadism not to end. To respond the second question, they attempt to show that pastoralists in Inner Asia are not barbarians, and their way of life is not backward, and their technology is not low but the nomadic pastoralism is a sophisticated way of life based on their ecological knowledge and experience instead. To end the negative supposition of the term 'nomad' and 'nomadism' they suggest using the term 'mobile pastoralism', and appealed not to use the term nomad to end its negative connotations. Following their appeal, Bumochor Dulam's 18 years later published paper *Afterlife of Nomadism* Bumochir Dulam (2017) examines the use of the term 'pastoralism' and 'pastoralists' by focusing on the concept 'unsustainable pastoralism'. According

to him, after the end of the term nomadism, the term pastoralism which depicts its afterlife faced a similar fate by gaining a different kind of negative connotations. In the afterlife, due to the increasing amount of critique to the lack of the mobility Mongolian pastoralists in Mongolia and China accused for degrading pasture and the environment, and mobile pastoralism blamed for having an unsustainable nature. For instance, about Mongol herder in China, Dee Mack Williams writes that Chinese officials and scientists contemplate that ‘Mongols never learned to look beyond their sheep to the soil, so today they have no regard for the land that farmers have cherished’ (2000: 508). Similarly, in Mongolia an international expert Ian Hannam writes that “Mongolian rangeland is degraded because herders are unable to apply sustainable grazing practices. Mongolian grassland is not valued so its regulation and management have been avoided in the past. Herders continue to graze their livestock on public land unrestrained, where there is high competition for good pasture. They use public pasture and water free of charge and without initiative to protect and properly use it” (2012: 418). According to Bumochir, these accusations contribute to shaping the supposition of pastoralism as harmful and destructive and pastoralist as greedy and unsympathetic.

This article intends to follow discussions on the derogatory suppositions of the term ‘nomadism’ and ‘pastoralism’ as developed in the work of Humphrey and Sneath and continued in Bumochir’s paper. I will first demonstrate the complexity of Mongol herders’ indigenous ecological knowledge, considerations of the environment, care to the pasture, love to herd animals, division of labour in the household, techniques in packing and unpacking, and safely leading a caravan, and finally the symbolic system, customs and taboos herders often follow in the *nüüdel* from one pasture to another. Second, to escape from different accusations, pejorative implications, and misunderstandings about nomadic culture and mobile pastoralism in Inner Asia, I suggest using the indigenous Mongolian term *nüüdel* which indicates the seasonal travel and mobility of pastoralists. More precisely, to accurately understand and present Mongol herders and their culture without Eurocentric or any other alien biases that can be embodied in the popular terms such as ‘nomadism’ and ‘pastoralism’, I suggest to use the term *nüüdelchin* (*nüüdelchid* in the plural) for nomads and *nüüdel* to depict their travels.

In the following, I will present a brief overview of a *nüüdel* that I had the chance to witness in Khovd in 2018. To compare those aspects that changed (see also Rossabi and Rossabi 2006; Sonompel 2012; Yembuu 2016) in the practice of *nüüdel*, I will reconstruct some *nüüdels* from the socialist past on the memory of some local elderly herders.

A *Nüüdel* in Post-Socialist Mongolia

In April 2018, during my fieldwork in Khovd *aimag* in the west of Mongolia, I had the chance to observe a *nüüdel* (pastoralist’s travel from pasture to another) and compare it to elderly people’s description of *nüüdel* prior to the 1990s. The one I

witnessed was a *nüüdel* of a young couple from Bayangol *bag*, Mankhan *sum*, known as the region (*nutag*) where Zakhchin Mongols inhabit. Baatarsuren Batnasan is the father of the family, and he was 28 years old when I met him in 2018. Oyuntulkhuur is the mother of the family, originally from the neighbouring Takhilt *bag*. They married in 2015 and have now three children. The eldest is five years old, the second child is three years old, and the youngest is eleven months old. For about a year he and his family worked as watchmen (*manaach*) at the Bayangol *bag* and received about 30 goat kids as payment. To support his living, The World Vision International donor organization additionally gave his family three cows. When I met him and his family, they were at the spring pasture at the place called Khudgiin Tokhoi and about to move to a place called Angist which is about 30 kilometers away. They were moving to Angist to work as assistant herders (*tuslakh malchin*) for one year. For the salary, they were planning to receive one hundred goats. The person who employed him and his wife in Angist was Khayankhyarvaa Khasuu¹ from Takhilt *bag*. Khayankhyarvaa is an *Ulsyn Avara Malchin* (State Honoured Herder) and he has a large number of livestock. Two small trucks called *porter* (портр) in Mongolian came to help them to move (see also Yembuu 2016). Baatarsuren's brother had one truck. Munkhdavaa Khasuu from the Khasuu family came with another truck. When I saw them, one of the trucks already had two cows on its carriage.

When I arrived, Baatarsuren's *ger* was empty and all of their belongings were packed except the stove and smoke pipe. After Oyuntulkhuur made us tea, the last piece to pack in the *ger* was the stove and the smoke pipe. She dumped ashes in the stove far from the *ger*. Then finally, they dismantled the *ger*. The *ger* was small and fit on the carriage of the truck with two cows. Baatarsuren cleaned the truck carriage and loaded carpets (*shirdeg*), felt walls (*tuurga*), and felt roof (*deever*) in the bottom of the carriage. Then he loaded wooden roof poles (*uni*), then the walls (*khana*), column (*bagana*) and the roof ring (*toono*) on the top. He put the door (*khaalga*) upright behind the truck cabin. The roof ring was on the top of the loaded carriage on the felt roof ring cover (*örkh*) which is reminiscent of the way how to load a roof ring on the camel. This is because the roof ring and its felt cover objects that preserve the fortune of the family (*geriin süld*). Baatarsuren put chests and other furniture along the two sides of the carriage to enclose what is loaded in the middle. After having finished loading, ropes were used to bind the loads on the carriage. The two cows were still on the carriage all the time while the *ger* was loaded, which made it a lot more difficult to load. The two cows were pushed to the small space left at the end of the carriage. The last bit to be loaded on this truck was a motorcycle (see also Fraser 2018) with no petrol. Since there was too little space at the carriage with two cows, the family decided to put the motorcycle on the top of the *ger* where the roof ring was. They removed the roof ring, and four men put the motorcycle on the top of the *ger*. The second truck carried all of the goats including one man who had to watch the goats.

¹ Khayankhyarvaa was born in 1964. He is a herder in the Takhilt *bag*. His *elken* (clan) is Tavint.

The mother of the family with her three children and a baby goat sat in the cabin of the truck. The father of the family put three stones on the mark where their *ger* was and burned juniper – which is a common custom among different Mongol groups. On the paved road, they quickly and safely arrived at Angist.

When we reached Angist, Khayankhyarvaa’s wife Shurentsetseg Tserendorj² welcomed us outside her *ger* with tea and food. The weather was very pleasant with no wind. The pile of hay in the newly built stone fence (*chuluun khoroo*) indicates that Khayankhyarvaa and his family members are hardworking people. First, they started to let the goats and cows to get off the truck and immediately started to feed them with the hay. The animals looked hungry and weak after the harsh winter. Then, the family unloaded the *ger* from the truck carriage and started to erect it.

To me as an elderly person who grew up in a herding family and a scholar who studied Mongolian culture and *nüüdel*, the choice of the date in the lunar calendar to move and dismantle and erect the *ger* was not so different from other Mongols’ choice and from how relocations were done in the past. But the use of trucks to transport the *ger* and other baggage were obviously different from how people moved in the past. Baatarsuren’s use of trucks to transport people, animals, and the *ger* is not unique but, in fact, common across Mongolia.

This article is an ethnographic depiction of the Mongol *nüüdel* tradition. It will elucidate on how people used to move in the past and how they remember *nüüdel* today to explain the perceived contrast and the difference between past and present relocations. To this aim, they endorse the so-called *ulamjalt* which means “traditional” *nüüdel*.

Many Zakhchin Mongols in the far west of Mongolia still move to their traditional summer pasture, but in a different way using trucks on a different route. In this article as an example of an *ulamjalt nüüdel*, I will introduce two different destinations of *nüüdel* to a summer pasture: one is in the Altai mountain known as *Altai davdag nüüdel* which means a “*nüüdel* to pass the Altai mountain” in Mankhan *sum*; people call the other *ers öndriin nüüdel* which means the “extreme height or altitude *nüüdel*” in Zereg *sum*.

In the following, I will show how what Mongolian herders call *nüüdel* is different from its English translation of nomad, nomadic and nomadism. The interviews that I conducted during my fieldwork reveal that the Mongolian term *nüüdel*, which can be translated into “nomadic trip” or “travel”, has a much broader meaning than the English nomad, nomadic, and nomadism. *Nüüdel* is not about “wandering nomads” but is rather to be understood as a complexity of pastoralists’ knowledge and practice (Tomorjav and Khurelbaatar 2017). First, *nüüdel* was pastoralists’ cognitive knowledge of the environment, geography, animals, and the natural world

² Shurentsetseg was born in 1964. She is from Ulaan Khüree *bag* and her *elken* (clan) is Khovog. She says her ancestors are Torguud Mongols who migrated from the current region of Kalmykia to Xinjiang. They were led by Uvsh Khan.

(Tomorjav and Khurelbaatar 2017). Second, it was about an ethical symbolic code of conduct to treat people, animals, spiritual beings, the environment, and nature (Dulam 2013). Third, *nüüdel* in spring, summer, and autumn was a herding technique to prepare for winter by training to make animals strong and healthy to survive long harsh winter conditions which helps herders to increase their economic benefits from mobile pastoralism (Rossabi and Rossabi 2006; Tomorjav and Khurelbaatar 2017). Fourth, *nüüdel* is a communal practice to build trust between people, pass and preserve customs, generate knowledge, and teach and train the young people and young animals. The interview material to be presented in this paper reveals that herders share their memories about how their ancestors and elderly family members conducted *nüüdel* in the past and how elders taught them *nüüdel* and explained to them what *nüüdel* does to animals. To reconstruct the past and reflect on changes, my interview partners also compare the so-called traditional with modern *nüüdel*. For comparison, I will present now two *nüüdel*s from the past that are based on the memory of some elders.

A *Nüüdel* in the Altai Mountain in Mankhan, Khovd

The purpose of this *nüüdel* known as *Altain nüüdel* (*Nüüdel* of Altai) is to move to a cooler place in the high mountain area to escape the summer heat and the mosquitoes and flies bothering humans and animals. People stay there during summer and early autumn and return when the weather cools down in the first morning frosts. The Zakhchins claim that this *nüüdel* has some old historical roots. An elderly Khayankhyarvaa explained the *nüüdel* as follows:

Our Zakhchin people (pl. zakhchid) used to spend the cold winter in the warmer place with less wind. From the beginning of spring, in the old words to bring herds to the new year (ond oruulakh) people made otor. In the otor, herders constantly move following places with nutritious grass to help animals to gain khar makhan targa (black flesh strength). They stay in such areas until around 15 to 20 June. Then the summer heat with mosquitoes and flies starts. To escape from heat and flies, not all families or whole families but the ones in otor moved to the Altai mountain. Our zakhchin people used not to leave any animals including the sick and lost ones. It was a principle of a herder. Second, herders used to carry as little luggage as possible to keep the baggage small and light.³

Choosing the day to relocate is also important. It is considered not good to start the *nüüdel* on someone's bad day (*jas ödör*) or dog day (*nokhoi ödör*), but rather to choose a good day in the calendar with good fortunes. Zakhchins consider dog day the worst day for those with livestock. There is a phrase "No walls that can be untied on the dog day" (*Nokhoi ödör termiin am salgadaggüi*). People believe that moving on the dog day opens the gate of misfortune (*garzyn üüd*) resulting to the loss of men and animals. In the case of such a misfortune, monks need to conduct rituals

³ Interview with Khayankhyarvaa Khasuu, Mankhan *sum*, Khovd *aimag*, April 2018.

and read prayers to close the gate of misfortune. Also, the untying of the walls of the felt tent on the wrong day provokes the opening of the gate of misfortune (Baumann 2008). This has to do with the custom to take out the dead by untying the *ger* walls on the side to the direction where the corps of the dead supposed to be buried on the funeral day. This funeral custom has been practiced until recently. It is common among Mongolians to consider that god (*burkhan*) looks through the holes where the wall and the door meets on the right side of the door (*baruun khatavch*) while the demons (*chötgör*) look through holes where the wall and door meets on the left side (*zүүн khatavch*). Therefore, when setting up a *ger*, the left wall and the door should be tied tightly while the right side can be left loose.

During the *nüüdel*, the *geriin ezen* (the master of the family) instructs all other family members who should do what and when, for example, when to move, pack, unpack, and stop etc. The *geriin ezegetei* (the mistress of the family) organises and packs food and other things inside the *ger*. Besides these, there is no strict division of labour between *geriin ezen* and *ezegetei*. The route of the *nüüdel* starts from Takhilt (or Angis), and there is a place to spend the night 25 kilometres from Takhilt. In between, there is one break for lunch. It is usually the *geriin ezegetei* who is in charge of packing food and facilities to cook lunch. Shurentsetseg Tserendorj from Ulaan Khuree bag, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag, said the following about the role of the *geriin ezegetei*:

Geriin ezegetei is in charge of packing cooking facilities such as dishes and soup pans etc. and makes sure that they do not make noise and break during the travel. She has to think where to pack what and how to pack etc. For example, she cannot put the ash pan of the stove somewhere that it can make lots of noise. So, she has to figure out how to make it not noisy and where to pack it. She prepares food and dairy products for the travel four or five days before the travel starts. It can be too heavy to load lots of food, so she has to take what is necessary to produce dairy products and food on the way. For example, those are sources to produce kumis and vodka from milk. There are *ovoos*, passes, and mountains on the way and necessary offerings need to be prepared and ready to offer during the trip. As soon as the caravan stops, junipers to burn and food milk to offer to the mountain should be ready with her. If she made a kumis or vodka beforehand in spring, then she is supposed to have the first bit of those to offer for spirit masters on the way. She also should take small bits of animal ears cut-off to make marks, which should be left on the mountain to ask for the protection of the mountain spirit masters. On the way of the travel herders, she leaves the animal ear pieces left from marking on the *ovoo*. Also, because the travel starts early in the morning, every night she should make sure young children sleep early, usually in the box for dung (*arag*). When the caravan stops in the evening, young children can be still sleeping in the box, while their mothers can do other works.⁴

⁴ Interview with Shurentsetseg, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag, April 2018.

To expand on some of her above points, daughters in law are supposed to help their mothers in law. But there is a difference between the number of children daughters in law gave birth to. After giving birth to three sons, daughters in law become *darkhan ber* which means a “sacred daughter in law.” Those with three sons can help to pack chests and those with five sons are allowed to pack images of deities and other ritual objects on the chest. Those who have less than three sons or no sons can help to pack food and kitchenette.

Also, to add on her mention of customs regarding animal markings in her talk, remains of markings from animal ears are often put together like prayer beads. They cannot be thrown away in impure places but in the mountains or *ovoos* to prevent from loss and misfortune of animals. This is a form of respect to animals, and people believe that not following those customs can cause illness, decrease in number and all sorts of other livestock misfortunes.

Some households move thirteen to fourteen times a year, and camels are the main form of transport to carry baggage. For this purpose, people are used to train camels from an early age. Names of camel ages starts from *botogo* for one year old and goes to *torom* for two years old, *guna gunj* for three years old, *shülden* and *khizaalan* for four and five. Trainings used to start from the age of *torom* which is the age of two, by riding and then teaching to sit and stand up with baggage. Camels that do not spit or fall down are commonly trained for *nüüdel*. Before *nüüdel*, the camels need some preparation according to the time of the year. In the summer time, they need to be fed less for three to five days. When starting to move to the summer pasture, they require one night of rest. In the autumn after the camels increased in weight, they cannot be fed too much for about two days. For this purpose, two camels can be tied together. The rope goes on the back of one camel and the other end of the rope can be tied by the thigh of the other camel.

On the night before the day to move, the *geriin ezen* prepares all of the livestock, organises the household members and their tasks, and catches and keeps horses and camels for riding and loading. It is better to have as many people as possible for long distance travels. Khayankhyarvaa says the following about this:

Imagine five households. We decide on the day to start the travel. Everything should be planned ahead, for example, Dorj will bring the cattle, Dulmaa will make this and that to prepare etc. Nothing should be left unplanned. In doing this, everyone helps everyone. If an animal is missing, then, others should offer help by saying “I can have a look at the animal when I get there for this purpose”, or by saying “your cattle were there and horses were there” etc. One helps another to locate and find their missing livestock. Also, there is a custom not to leave any man or animal on the black mark (*khar buir*) in the old place where people lived. If they are a few horses or camels to travel, then, we are expected to share what we have. *Nüüdel*s may sometimes include people who do not have a horse to ride. It does not matter if they are rich or poor, the principle is not to leave them on the place where a black mark remains after moving. Some stubborn people refuse

to move and stay behind. They do not feel good when they stay. When those who refused to travel together move separately, they could encounter different troubles, one of the camels can go angry, bad weather such as rain and storm, anything that could require manpower. Second, it is a way to overcome difficulties with the help of each other. Even animals search for company when they are on a trip. They become confident when they are in a large number. Or, maybe wind blows down the tent. Something bad always happens to those who move separately.⁵

According to the *nüüdel* customs, Mongolians consider leaving someone on the black mark the worst thing. Khalkh people talk about an evil pale-faced spirit (*chötgör*) in White with big sharp fangs called *Zan* who visits remaining people. Zakhchin people do not directly talk about such evil spirits but rather talk about ‘bad fortunes’. For example, a Khayankhyarvaa told me that “in the mountain gap called Tsenkher, a family was left behind on the black mark and moved separately afterwards. Then, wind blew their tent, while there is normally not much wind in June. Therefore, maybe some evil spirits bothered them.” Anyway people think something happens that can be called a curse or harm of a bad spirit.

To dismantle a *ger*, its ropes should be untied anticlockwise, and clockwise when building it. In other words, clockwise works in erecting and anticlockwise in dismantling. To dismantle its walls, one has to start from the west. The roof ring (*toono*) should be taken down in the direction of the place moving next. The cover of the roof ring (*örkh*) has to be removed in the direction of the *geriin ezen*’s fortune, its dust has to be cleaned to that direction, and to this aim footprints are made in that direction.

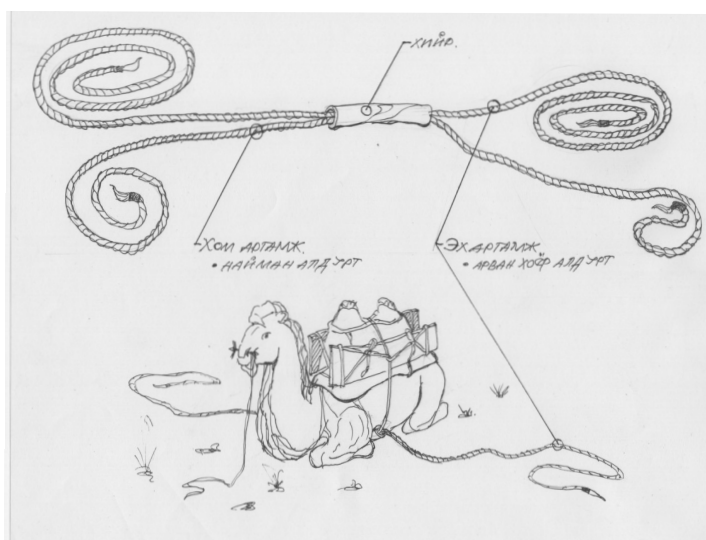


Figure One: The parallel ropes
(Illustration credit to D. Gantulga, Khovd University)

⁵ Interview with Khayankhyarvaa Khasuu, Mankhan *sum*, Khovd *aimag*, April 2018.

There are different techniques to load different parts of a *ger*, furniture, and other belongings on camels. For example, by using roof poles (*uni*), two camels can be loaded. The parts of a *ger* are split, and the poles of one *ger* can be divided into four parts, two of which will be loaded onto each camel. A camel loaded with roof poles (*uni*) also carries the felt roofs (*deever*) and columns (*bagana*) of the *ger*, and food such as flour, rice, salt, meat etc. The camel that carries the column always has to be the last camel in the caravan, because the long column can hit the camel in the front. Another way is to use a *ger*'s walls to load. Camels loaded with walls are suitable to take on chests, cabinets, and all other wooden furniture. The tying of the loads on the camel also has a special technique. *Tenjee argamj* is a rope that binds the chest, *arag* (basket for animal dung) etc. Besides *tenjee*, there are two long parallel ropes to be joined under a camel's belly. One of them is eight *ald* (length of eight spread arms) long, called *khom argamj*, while the other one is twelve *ald* long called *ikh argamj*. More precisely, the parallel joint part goes under the belly and felt has to be placed to protect the belly from the parallel parts of the ropes. The four ends of these two ropes are for fixing the weight on the camel (see figure one). In this way, binding loads on the back does not hurt the camel. My interview partner Shurentsetseg said the following about how to bind loads using the two ropes:

If the rope is on the sternum, then, camels cannot stand up when the loading has finished. This is because the rope is pressing the sternum of the camel which hurts. Those who are loading obviously tighten the ropes very well when such a tight rope surely hurts the camel. Elderly people they check the tightness of a rope by using two fingers. If they find the binding to be too loose, then, they require to tighten it again. It should be tight enough that a camel halter barely fits.⁶

Ropes and techniques to load and tighten the rope are actually a test. There is a phrase in case the rope is too short at the end of the knot. The phrase says *ald dutakhaar avgain muu, delem dutakhaar deesnii muu, uya dutaval (erkhii dutaval) eriin muu* which means "If the rope left is short about a size of one spread arm, then, it is the wife's fault; if the rope left is short about a size of half a spread arm, then, it is the rope's fault; if it is a knot size [thumb size] short, then, it is the man's fault." Since everyone's participation in the *nüüdel* was understood as a sort of test, everyone tries their best. Shurentsetseg says the following:

A strong man finds a way to knot the rope if the rope is a little short. The wife who made the rope without considering the size of the camel and the load is a bad wife. People say the size of the *ikh argamj* is usually about eleven *ald* of a woman, and the *khom argamj* is about six *ald* and a half. I have not noticed the length of *tenjee argamj*. I cannot figure out why I have not noticed its length. I guess it should be different according to the size of chests etc. [...] All of the knots should be *khövördög* (the one that is easy to untie by pulling from the end of the knotted rope), not the *ükhliüt* one (the one that does not untie by pulling from the end of the knotted rope).

⁶ Interview with Shurentsetseg, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag, April 2018.

By just pulling from the end of the rope, the knot unties [see figure two]. If one makes an *ükhlüüt* knot then he/she will be blamed badly. Imagine if the rope needs to be urgently untied to tighten or the load needs to be fixed on the road, then, the *ükhlüüt* knot does not release but will take so much time to untie it. Here, we call the *ükhlüüt* knot *alan uyaa*. If the knot cannot be quickly released, then, it will have to be cut off. Therefore, every man in the *nüüdel* carries a knife. In the urgency, the *ikh argaj* and *khom argamj* need to be cut off near the sternum of the camel. Cutting here can immediate free the camel from the load.⁷

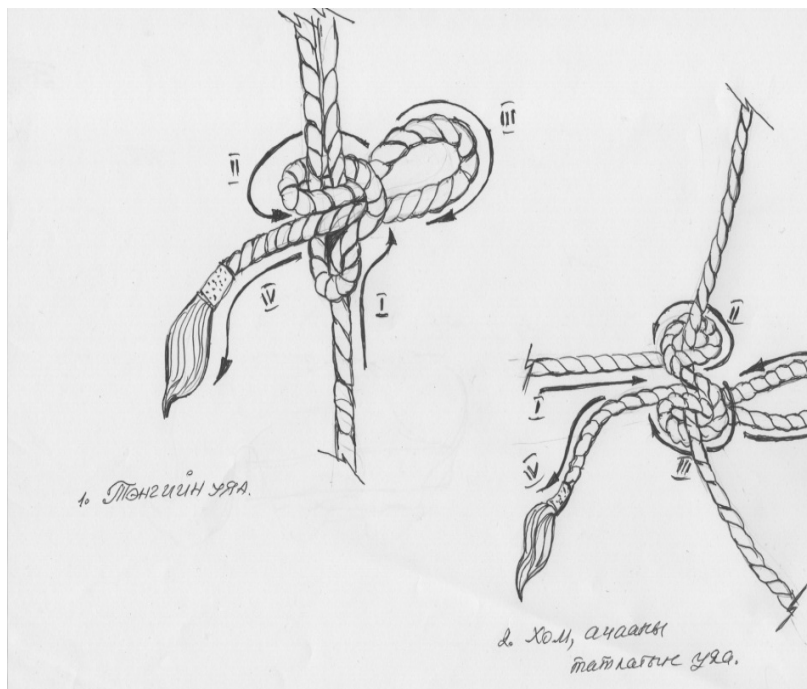


Figure Two. 1. *Ten* rope knot 2. *Khom* rope knot
(Illustration credit to D. Gantulga, Khovd University)

The above picture depicts how to fasten and knot the *nüüdel* ropes. Here, the *ükhlüüt* or *alan* literally means “dead without a loose end to release by pulling”. This is something that travellers should consider seriously. About the loading pans, dishes, and kitchenettes, Shurentsetseg says the following:

Pans need to be cleaned and wrapped. A pan with a soot can never be loaded on the camel. It is almost a law here; elderly people will get very angry. These need to be loaded on a gentle and well-tamed camel. We usually put the pan upside down in between the humps. Then, the two packs of loads on the two sides of the camel make a flat top to put the pan and other things. This way the pan is blocked from four sides to prevent it from falling down,

⁷ Interview with Shurentsetseg, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag, April 2018.

with two humps and two side loads. Nowadays, we also have a stove to carry. What can I say about these artefacts? They are things that annoy camels.⁸

Costumes, ornaments, and colours of the horses during the *nüüdel* show that the Mongol *nüüdel* is a ground where one can find a complexity of symbols. The *geriin ezegetei* who leads the caravan often prepares clothes to wear to lead a caravan. Many people make a new *deel* (a Mongolian robe) to lead a caravan. After packing and before departing, the *geriin ezegetei* used to change her old *deel* to a new one and ride her fully dressed (*büren tonogtoi*) *önchtei mori* (a horse she owns). In the past, it was common to wear a ceremonial female costume called *avgai deel* to lead a caravan. Also, the ridden horses wore *shigshregs* on their bridles which make a noise when walking. People believed that the noise of the *shigshreg* prevented from misfortunes.

Horses are very important. The *önchtei mori* (a horse she owns) is given to every bride when bringing her to her husband's family. The horse should have a full ornament and trappings with silver decorations. This horse is often ridden to lead a caravan. It must be solid-coloured (*büten züstei*) and should not be piebald or spotty, but it may have a white spot on its forehead. White hooves are interpreted as a good omen for safe travels. Such a horse should be trained to lead a caravan at the age of two. When the horse grew old, a new horse was trained to replace it. The horses learn not to be frightened, to be able to walk next to a camel and trotting evenly. When the lead horse is too fast, the loads became loose but if it is too slow, the camels become lazy. A caravan must have a uniform speed for camels not to get tired and to keep the speed. Therefore, to have a fully trained horse to lead the caravan was understood as a security measure for having a safe and pleasant trip.

It is common among Zakhchin to have a ritual prayer within fifteen days after the first day of the new year to protect from misfortunes in the coming year. The annual prayer also secures all of the *nüüdel*s of the family throughout the year. Furthermore, before departing on a *nüüdel*, people burn a juniper on the mark where the *ger* was and leave dung and further means to make fire for other people. The idea behind this is to leave the place that can be used again by other people. All of these are the tasks of the women. It is common not to let men clean the places and ashes in the stoves. After women have cleaned up the places, the *geriin ezen* puts incense on three stones and burns it, as Baatarsuren did in the start of this paper. Ankle bones cannot be left behind. Zakhchin people say that an ankle bone left in the old place can cause some misfortunes and problems on the way of a *nüüdel*. They say the ankle bone that is left behind thinks that this family does not have children to play with ankle bones and looks out for the caravan until it passes two mountains, which is not good for children's fortunes. For this reason, all of the ankle bones should be picked up and collected. All of the spikes and posts need to be removed. They cannot be left stack in the ground, and holes have to be concealed to relieve earth.

⁸ Interview with Shurentsetseg, Mankhan sum, Khovd aimag, April 2018.

Loading camels needs to start early in the morning before it gets too hot. Different camels carry different baggage, for example, religious and ritual objects, children, chests etc. The loads on the two sides of a camel must have equal weights. Baatarsuren says the following:

The weight of the two loads has to be the same. If one of the chests is 20 kg and the other one is 15 kg, then, the lighter luggage should be put on the side where the camel humps bent. Bent humps give extra weight on the luggage. We need to start packing early in the morning since flies and mosquitoes do not let camels keep sitting while loading. Last year in Tsenkher pass, at three o'clock in the morning, the car helping to move finally came. We loaded the camels and as soon as we finished loading where the camels were resting, flies started to bother. We had just managed to load on time. This year, this place has lots of flies as well. Since the grass is not good there, we will not move there this year.

Because of such reasons, the caravan should be on the road early in the morning. The exact time and date of departure is not announced. Children get excited during the *nüüdel*. Two or three children sit in one big *arag* (a dung collection box). The camel to transport children is the last one to be loaded and the first one to be unloaded. The camel with the children also carries food and drinks for immediate use. This camel is the first of the caravan, and the next camel is the one with the chest and the roof ring (*toono*). Young camels should be in the middle of the caravan and old ones at the end. While some people still load the camels, those who know the route already start departing with the livestock. Also, children who can ride horses help adults to herd on the way of the *nüüdel*. When the caravan passes other herding families, they bring tea and food to show their welcome. People often consider the *nüüdel* as something pure (*ariun*). Drunken or angry people on the way are therefore considered a bad sign.

About the route, the obstacles, and the dates of a *nüüdel*, an 85-year-old Zakhchin man whose name is Khasuu Tooroi⁹ from Mankhan *sum*, Khovd *aimag* says the following:

In our *sum*, to reach the summer pasture it takes three nights and three days. The spring pasture is in Zereg river. From Zereg river it is about 20 to 25 km to the *sum* settlement. From the *sum* settlement Botgono pass and Tsenkher pass it is about 35 kilometres. The summer pasture is near Baga Ulaan mountain which is another 18 to 20 kilometres. In the summer pasture, there are no flies and the grass is nutritious which is suitable for livestock to gain fat and strength. Basically, a good place to stay away from the heat and the flies. We usually stay there from 25 June to 15 August. From around 10 to 15 August, we move back to Tsenkher. It is not so hot and there are not many flies around this time of the year in Tsenkher.¹⁰

As most Zakhchin people told me, the most difficult route to travel on the Altai mountain is the Khorj Khodood mountain. Also, the West Mountain in Zereg is a very

⁹ He was born in 1933 in Khovd near the Tsenkher river in the old Zakhchin Banner. His *elken* (clan) is Tavin.

¹⁰ Interview with Khasuu Tooroi, Mankhan, Khovd, April 2018.

high mountain which is difficult to pass. To travel to such places, the weight of loads on camels should be low, and those travelling should not take much luggage. To pass the mountain, the caravan must stop near the mountain to rest for one night. If there are many *nüüdel*s passing the mountain, people have to make a plan which caravan should pass when and who can help them. If there is someone who has high blood pressure, altitude sickness, is injured, or too old and weak, someone needs to take that person on his horse and help him or her to pass the mountain. Not only man but also animals have altitude sickness. It is called *uulyн сүр тсokhikh* which means “mountain height hit.” According to Khayankhyarvaa, usually animals that have never been in the altitude or are sick get hit by a mountain’s height. An interview partner said the following about this:

When, for example, horses or camels are hit by a mountain height, they suddenly stop walking. We call this *сүр харvakh*, or “shooting of a height”. In 1978, some young people went to the mountain to collect gooseberry (*toshil*). Suddenly, one of the horses collapsed and died on the spot. An elderly man who had been travelling with them explained them that it is the shooting of the mountain height.¹¹

But they do stop walking. In this case, an old experienced camel should lead those having altitude sickness. Camels follow the ones in front of them. Families always have a camel that leads. Things considered to be impure cannot be loaded on leading camels. They have to be kept pure with good fortunes.

The main purpose of this travel is to let livestock gain *makhan targa* which means a “flesh weight”. Livestock fat that has not been consumed from the past winter turns into flesh, and this process is called the “flesh weight”. Gaining of a good flesh weight (*makhan targa*) helps livestock to have enough strength to pass the next winter. When new grass grows around May, animals start transforming their remaining fat (*öökh*) to flesh (*makh*). In December, all of the nutrition gained during the summer and autumn transforms into flesh (*makh*). Therefore, in the summer pasture, animals should gain as much fat weight (*öökhön targa*) as possible. The fat turns into muscle meat after a while. Economic profit increases when animals gain enough flesh weight, and their capacity to survive harsh winters and springs increases. For these reasons, Zakhchins embark on long and difficult *nüüdel*s, by camels in the past and by trucks in the present. Also, another reason to travel so far for so long is to let animals be fed with various wild and organic herbs. For example, *vanseemberüü* (*Saussurea dorogostaiskii* Palib) is a nutritious flower; animals do not eat all of it but only the root of the plant. Khayankhyarvaa says the following about this plant *vanseemberüü*:

But they do stop walking. In this case, an old experienced camel should lead those having altitude sickness. Camels follow the ones in front of them. Families always have a camel that leads. Things considered to be impure cannot be loaded on leading camels. They have to be kept pure with good fortunes.

¹¹ Interview with Khayankhyarvaa Khasuu, Mankhan *sum*, Khovd *aimag*, April 2018.

In this westward mountain, there are lots of *vanseemberüü*. In the past, animals ate them and man ate them when eating their animals' meat. Nowadays, animals do not eat such plants. They eat what they find where I stay. Animals are now fed with what we give them, similar to farm animals. Our herding is transforming to something like farming. As a result, we no longer obtain as much nutrition as we used to from our animals we consume. So, we should be lacking some nutrition. In the past, elderly people used to burn bones in the pasture after animals gained weight in the summer. Then, animals ate the bone ashes to obtain calcium. Nowadays, people use grinded bones to feed animals. We now tend to substitute herbal and organic nutrition with medications (*em taria*) and chemicals. This is so wrong. Then, we consume the animal meat that still contains these medicine and chemicals. The worst is this ivomec (or ivermectin) and that Chinese *kerlin* (sanitization chemical). Animals get lice again only after three weeks since having been washed with the Chinese *kerlin*. Or we use dung ashes to get rid of lice. Also, *maaguur*, animal sickness, is a problem. Mostly those that gained enough weight get *maaguur*. When they get *maaguur*, their back wool turns dark and become fluffy. Many people simply use ivomec to cure *maaguur*. But ashes are much less poisonous. Ashes is very good to remove *khürd khorhoi*, a certain type of parasite, with a black head and a white bottom. Here, we have something called *shigüür* which comes from grass. People say *shigüür* becomes *khürd khorhoi*. This parasite sucks animal blood and the animals may die because of it. For these reasons, to cure, we still use some established customs to take care of livestock and keep animals as mobile as possible. The sole purpose of the *nüüdel* is letting animals obtain spring flesh weight, summer fat weight, and spring flesh weight to keep animals strong and healthy. These *nüüdels* also help animals to survive harsh winters. When we have such *nüüdels*, we do not need to prepare hay for winter. Animals that were well-fed on a *nüüdel* survive the winter without hay. Helping animals to survive the winter with their own capacity. This is the *ulamjalal* (tradition) we had. Now, people tend not to have many *nüüdels*, instead they prepare as much hay and other fodder as possible.

The *nüüdel* in the Altai mountain first of all forbids consumption of alcohol and parties. Secondly, it requires team work and collaboration and teaches those travelling how to care about each other and about the animals by helping and not leaving anybody behind. In the *nüüdel*, both human beings and animals become unified with life to move forward and survive. The principle is to find the accurate speed of travel by synchronizing with everyone's foot (*khöld taaruulakh*) including the weak, sick, old, injured, and lost.

A *Nüüdel* in the Extreme Altitude in Zereg, Khovd

During the same field trip, I had the chance to interview several people about a different *nüüdel* called *ers öndöriin nüüdel* which means "a *nüüdel* in the extreme height in Zereg *sum*". My interview partners were Gantulga Damdin, a lecturer at

Khovd University from Zereg *sum*, his mother Shuuraa Munkh (born in 1931), and her younger sister Baast Munkh (born in 1947).

Herders in Burgasan *bag*, Khöndlön *bag*, and Buraa *bag* located at the side of the Sutai mountain all move to a high mountain called Baataryn Nuruu for summer pasture. There are two ways in this *nüüdel*, *ööd nüükh* to move upwards and *uruu nüükh* to move downwards. The purpose of the upwards *nüüdel* is to come as high as possible in the mountain to escape from the summer heat, to let animals put on weight, to hunt, and to collect herbs for humans and animals. Herders start preparing to move three or four days in advance. They erect the *nüüdliin ger* which is the travel *ger* to check, fix and replace missing or broken parts and pieces to prepare for the strong wind. Their *ger* for travelling to the mountain is usually small and has four walls. Before the use of trucks after the 1990s, most people used to have five camels for this trip each of which with not too heavy baggage. The four walls, two by two, can be loaded on two camels and they were used to load other baggage. The two other camels did not use walls to load but used *khom bambai* to carry loads. *Khom bambai* had two short ladder-shaped wooden frames with felt mattresses called *bambai* which means “a shield to protect camels from rubbing”. The fifth camel had another *khom*, a felt mattress that goes around the camel hump and its two ends meet at the camel bottom. The fifth camel was a spare camel to load remaining luggage from the other four camels. The Mongol *ger* has two large pieces of felt for the roofing called *deever*, and three pieces to cover the wooden walls called *tuurga*. Each of the three *tuurga* can be loaded on three different camels, and the two *deever* on the two other camels. Another important piece for loading luggage are ropes made with yak wool called *tatlaga* which means to pull, or *argamj* which means to tie or to bind. Each camel needs two *tatlaga* for binding baggage on the camel’s back. The camels should be kept in a dry place. For safety reasons, all *tatalaga* have to be checked before the *nüüdel*.

One or two days before departing, those used for traveling have to be caught and tied outside the *ger*. If it is spring, the camels can get diarrhoea from eating new grass. If this is the case, they need to be fed less for one or two days to cure their stomach and to prepare them to travel to the mountain. To travel down from the mountain ridge, camels have to be fed less for seven to ten days. Most caravans used to travel for about one hundred kilometres to get the summer pasture in the mountain. Each trip lasted for about 20 to 30 kilometres, depending on the routes, heights, and obstacles. Before climbing the mountain, herders often spent the night on the bottom of the mountain. The routes to climb the mountain were always shorter than the routes in the steppe. Women did not lead camels to climb the mountain, but usually experienced elderly man led camels one by one or two at the same time. If two were walking simultaneously, the elderly experienced camel should be the first one to lead the line. To climb the mountain, camels should not get too tired. When they start breathing heavily and their nose begins twitching, they need a short rest.

On the way to climb the mountain, one has to mind *tülkhets* which means “a push” and *devkhets* which means “to jump”. *Tülkhets* is a rock that can push camels off the path way down to the mountain or cliff. Based on their memories of the previous trips, travellers should consider the number of *tülkhets* and their shapes and positions. When loading camels, size, weight, and shape of baggage should be appropriate to pass safely those *tülkhets*. Experienced, elderly, and strong men help camels to pass the *tülkhets*. They fix the pathway by placing stones on the lower side and camels pass one by one. Men stand on the lower side of the mountain to prop up camels in case they are pushed by a *tülkhets* rock and moved into a leaning position. *Devkhets* is the way to pass rocks, stones, and other material that blocks the pathway. When camels climb up to pass a blockage, the load moves down to the camel bottom. Therefore, some of the men push the camel load from the back when a camel climbs over the blockage, while some other men pull the camel and its load from the front. Camels sometimes also need to be unloaded to pass the blockage. On such a difficult route, animals trust humans. When humans lead animals and move forward, the animals become brave and follow them.

When the caravan reaches the mountain ridge, the *geriin ezegeti* takes the lead again, while men check the herd. There are big *ovoo* (or *oboo*) stone cairns on the ridge. Women burn juniper and offer milk to the *ovoo* and leave small pieces of animal ears cut off from marking animals. Also, to beckon good fortune, people talk about the nutrition of the pasture, pleasure of the summer, and scrutinise the weather and the year as well as the blessing of the mountain spirit and its protection of the *nüüdel*. Once arrived at the mountain ridge, all of the families and their caravans split up and head to their individual summer pastures.

After reaching the summer pasture, all humans and animals take a good rest for two days. Loaded camels would not be fed for one or two days. In autumn, they would not be fed for three or four days. Elderly people explain that this is because camels can get sick with *jilben güikh* or *jilbentekh* when they are fed nutritious mountain grass and herbs after spending lots of energy during the days of the *nüüdel*. In this case, the camel skin swallows as if it has water underneath the skin. It is a big difference of pasture and grass between the steppe and the mountain. For this reason, sheep will be kept nearby and all other animals have to start eating only small pieces of the mountain grass until their physiology adapts to the new pasture and environment. It is the same in the case of humans being close to dying of thirst; in this case, they cannot immediately drink too much water.

After spending a few days together, the women and children stay with the young animals and their mothers in the main summer camp, while the men take the rest of the herd to travel further. This is called *khosh*¹² *nüükh* or *tsaram nüükh*, or commonly

¹² In paragraph 169 in the *Secret History of the Mongols* from the thirteenth century, *qoš* denotes “travel tent” (de Rachewiltz 2004, Vol. II: 613). According to Igor de Rachewiltz, in the 13th century, the term *qoš* designated a “small tent suitable for casual use by one or two individuals” (613). Also, in the paragraph 80, *qošiliq* means “tent” (Vol. I: 23, 374). While in the paragraph 245, *qošiliq* is a tent used during funeral rites (Vol. II: 885).

known as *otor* in contemporary Mongolia. This is also where we can see different types of dwellings used for a very short period of time. *Urts* is a *ger* without a roof ring (*toono*) with two or three walls (*khana*) and three or four roof poles (*uni*). Some of such *khosh nüüidels* go to places where camels cannot travel, but horses and cattle can. In those *nüüidels* with horses and cattle, a much more simplified form of a *ger* called *khatguur* is suitable. *Khatguur* does not have walls (*khana*), it uses about 30 to 40 roof poles (*uni*) like a *tepee*. But a *khatguur* has a small roof ring (*toono*) about 50 to 60 cm diameter. This roof ring has a small hole where the flue pipe goes in. There are horses especially trained to load a *khatguur ger*. All of the 30 to 40 roof poles can be loaded on three horses. These poles also help to load and pack other things such as the felt for building the walls (*deever*) and roofs (*tuurga*) on the horse. The travellers in the *khosh nüüidel* also ride horses. In those places where riding is impossible, they walk, and they also carry the *khatguur* if the horses cannot carry it.

On the mountain, different animals go to different pastures. For example, horses, sheep, and goat graze in the area called *khöö*. *Khöö* is a place near the glacial region. It is also a good place to collect herbs and to hunt. *Vamsembleruu* popular is for its medicinal purposes, and the snow cock (*khoilog*) is a popular game bird. People dry snow cock meat in the *urts* or *khatguur*. Dried snow cock meat is considered the main medicine to cure wounds. Another animal frequently hunted by people and used for medicinal purposes is the marmot. People take the marmot stomach without opening it and dry it with herbs eaten by the marmot. Besides using dried marmot stomach for medicinal purposes, in spring, when the animals are weak, herders use such dried marmot stomachs to provide nutrition. One marmot stomach can be mixed with other fodder or grass and can feed many animals. In the mountain, people normally move to two to three *khöö*/s and spend about two months in the summer pasture.

After spending about two months from around 10 June to 10 August in the summer pasture, people start moving down to the steppe from the mountain. In the mountain, in the first month, people used to travel further to the mountain region called *khöö*, while in the second month, they used to prepare for the *nüüidel* to return to the steppe. It is the time when animals have gained enough weight (*öökhön targa*). Also the camels have gained the weight they need to transport the loads on the move backwards. Camels gain their appropriate flesh weight until November. For the returning *nüüidel* it is therefore important to preserve the fat weight of the animals rather than to burn it. To preserve their fat, camels need to be restrained and trained carefully (*soikh*). This can be done by examining, for instance, camel dung for changes from flat to droppings. The same applies to horses. Then animals become thinner and lose their stomachs. This makes them stronger and faster. When animals get ready to move, many families depart in the night. Some say maybe this is due to the historical past and memories of times of war and conflict when moving during the night was less risky.

To move back down from the mountain, an alternative route that may be shorter and quicker may be chosen. To go down a steep mountain slope, the load on the camel back should be tied from the camel's upper thigh to prevent letting the load slide down to the camel's neck and head. About such short cuts, Gantulga Damdin¹³ says the following:

Once I made a short cut to *Khamar Shand*. It is not easy to go down the mountain through a steep path. To go down through a steep route, we have to tie the camel load in a different way, called *tsavichilakh*. The word comes from *tsavi* [which is the upper inner thigh]. We tie the loads on the two sides of the camel from the upper end of the camel thighs. Camels do not feel comfortable when we tie around their inner thigh, it probably tickles them. Therefore, camels need to be trained and get used to such fastening. To train camels and make them get used to the fastening, the camel needs to be fastened around the upper thigh to slide down from a steep hill slope. In such a striking situation, camels do not feel the tickles from the fastening around the upper thigh but are scared instead and try to slide down safely. On the steppe, camels would not let one fasten around their upper thigh. In the condition of sliding down by sitting like a dog on the bottom, camels probably understand that the fastening of the load around their upper thigh is the best.

Therefore, short-cutting the number of ropes in the *tsavichilakh* style will have to be prepared in advance. When sliding down to a steep mountain slope, the loads will have to be tied from the upper end of the camel thighs. The distance to slide down is about a kilometre. On the way to slide down, there are places called *tavits*, small flat places where camels can rest and loads can be re-fastened. When camels slide down one by one, they cannot be tied from one another. Gantulga shares his story how some camels slid down:

When I was sixteen years old, because we were short of manpower, I had to lead the camels to slide down the steep slope of *Khamar Shand*. There was a storm in the mountain and we urgently had to move back. When I looked back when I was sliding down, the camel's head looked in the sky and I could not see the mountain at all. The camel's chest was hitting and pressing on my shoulders. Below in the bottom of the slope, a few elderly people were smoking and waiting for me. They were also watching, instructing and encouraging me by shouting "that is right" (*zūitei*) and "keep going" (*yavaad bai*). Both I and the camel were sweating and when I finally got down on the bottom of the slope, I was covered with so much camel wool. This is the moment that makes young men, horses, and camels lose courage. It was basically loose flat blue stones that slid down as soon as I and the camels step on them. This is really what happens. *Khamar Shand* and *Ekhen Bosgo* are very steep. Also, *Böörgiin Gol* is very steep. Also, that *Aguutyn Denj* is steep, and that really tests the courage of men, horses, and camels. Today, a sixteen-year-old kids would never do such a thing.

¹³ Gantulga is from *Zereg sum* and his *elken* (clan) is *Buurlynkhan*. He is a lecturer at *Khovd University*.

Zakhchin herders try not to scare camels too much during these extreme travels. By keeping loads light, not forcing too much, letting them rest to calm down, and by escorting to encourage them etc. The best way is to be with a camel in situations where they may lose courage. If that happens, animals can never make it. Therefore, herders' encouragement is an essential task, and to kill the courage of a young camel would be a complete waste of it. These camels would have no use except becoming food. Some young men say that horses are very clever (*ukhaantai*). They can slide down such steep slopes on horse by sitting not on the saddle but on the back of the horse behind the saddle while the horse sits on the two back legs to slide down. They also say both camels and horses have an ability to sense or understand what man is trying to do in extreme and urgent circumstances. In such circumstances, humans and animals share the hardships and survive together. They live together and suffer together in the extreme environment of a high mountain. Therefore, they say "livestock are not animals to eat, but they are knowledge to love" (*mal bol idekh yostoi animan bish harin khairlakh yostoi erdem*). Elderly Zakhchin people complain that the young people of our time consider animals no more than food that should be eaten, or a ride that should be mounted. Before the 1990s, when Zakhchin people travelled by using camels, they used to have a human-animal relationship. But with the extensive use of automobiles, people started to use trucks to move and stopped using camels and horses to move (Chatty 1986). Those few who still use camels to move do not pass the Altai mountain. Those old *nüüdel* that passed the Altai mountain and the *nüüdel* in the extreme high altitude were heroic shared experiences of humans and animals.

Conclusion

Nüüdel in Mongolian culture is a symbolic complex of human existence and practice within time and space. Herders' consideration of almost everything in the *nüüdel* and symbolic practices that imply those considerations make Mongol herder's *nüüdel* a pure and tolerant trip. In the imagined complex setting of *nüüdel*, man, animal and the natural environment recognise each other's existence, understand each other without words, and live in harmony and respect. The *nüüdel* in the Altai mountain and the ones in the extreme altitude are the testing ground where men and animals bond, develop a close relationship, and build trust which shapes human-animal relations.

Also, the *nüüdel* in the Altai mountain and the ones in the extreme altitude is a testing ground of Mongol herders' bravery, compassion, technique and knowledge. The use of trucks, technology, and other inevitable advancements, however, hastens the vanishing of the conventional practices and knowledge of *nüüdel* inherited from the past.

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