



# Keeping the Hair-cutting ceremony in the context of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia

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## INTRODUCTION

The hair-cutting ceremony, a traditional ritual for young children, is a unique family event in both Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. Despite their shared heritage, these two regions exist within distinct political, economic, and cultural contexts, each contributing to the unique interpretation and celebration of the ceremony (Appell-Warren & Fong, 2014).

Mongolians celebrate the hair-cutting ceremony with family members, relatives, and neighbours because they believe it will positively affect the child's future life (Aryasuren, 1985; Adyasuren & Nyambuu, 1991). However, for Inner Mongolians, it is about keeping the child's spirit safe. Therefore, they intentionally leave certain parts of the hair on

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the head of the child. For boys, parents save the hair above the forehead (*magnai*) and for girls, hair at the temples (*sanchig*). Both families in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia will cut their child's hair and hold a celebration at the age of 1, 3, or 5 for boys or at the age of 2 or 4 for girls (Gelegjamts, 2015).

During the ceremony, the oldest member of the child's maternal family (*nagats*) plays a significant role. They start by cutting a small piece of the child's hair, which is then kept together with a coin (*zooos*) and milk butter (*öröm*) until the child reaches twelve years of age and is considered an adult. The timing of the ceremony and the person who initiates the haircutting are determined by the Buddhist calendar (Osor & Chimed, 2013).

Our study investigates the meaning of the hair-cutting ceremony in more depth by exploring how it is celebrated and how it has been kept under the social, political, and cultural influences of the two different settings. Our research questions are: (1) What does the cutting ceremony mean in both settings? (2) How do the families in both settings celebrate the hair-cutting ceremony? (3) How and why are Mongolians keeping this ceremony?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was applied to the study. This research design can explore the complex social phenomenon under investigation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), enhance data credibility (Baxter & Jack, 2008), and gather a wide variety of evidence through interviews and observation (Yin, 2015). To obtain answers to the research questions, the data collection includes semi-structured interviews with participants and observations of behaviours in naturalistic settings (Lincoln, 2005).

According to the interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews, each participant was interviewed once. Each interview length was about 35 minutes. The total length of the interview is 14 hours. Oral permission in the Mongolian language was obtained from each participant before recording each interview. Qualitative interviewing emphasizes "the active participation of the interviewer and the importance of giving the interviewee voice" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 31) by allowing participants to relate their own stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), for example, in the pursuit of understanding the par-

ents’ belief systems. I had an audio recorder next to the participant to ensure the accuracy and redundancy of the data collection during the interview process.

These interviews allow them to understand, describe, analyze, and co-construct the meaning of their experiences with the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of in-depth interviews shifted the focus from me, thus allowing participants to name, describe, construct, and transform their identities and realities. Thus, in-depth interviewing is critical in clarifying and reflecting on multiple dimensions of each participant’s story while constructing meaning toward participants’ identities (Lincoln, 2005). This study is particularly conscious of the specific and individual sociocultural lenses that serve to construct meaning with the participants. Thus, researcher reflexivity is vital during the interview process to fit the needs of each participant (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Nine participants were interviewed. Six are from Mongolia, and three are from Inner Mongolia. The background information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

As observers, we wrote descriptively, recorded field notes, sorted raw data that responded to research questions, and used rigorous methods to validate observations. Observation allows me to record behaviour as it happens. Merriam's (1998) suggestions informed my observations of critical elements to include (a) physical setting, (b) participants, (c) activities and interactions, and (d) conversations. Observations were recorded at eight hair-cutting ceremonies: seven in Mongolia and one in Inner Mongolia.

Table 1. Participants of the interview

Figure 1. Geographical locations of the Participants

Mongolians		
Gender	Age	Location
Male	81	Moved to UB, Khalkha
Female	33	Sukhbaatar   <u>Uzemchin</u>
Male	79	Moved to UB, Khalkha
Female	31	BayanUlgii   Kazakh
Female	25	Arkhangai   Khalkha
Male	24	Born in UB   Khalkha
Female	34	Immigrated to UB, Khalkha
Inner Mongolians		
Female	70	Shiliin gol aimag
Female	39	<u>Huhhot</u>
Male	45	Ordos



The raw data collected, including interviews and observations in the field, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is helpful in analyzing aspects and themes related to an issue, providing opportunities to gain in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

### **MEANING AND PURPOSE OF THE HAIR-CUTTING CEREMONY**

The general meaning and purpose of the ceremony are similar in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, such as blessings, keeping the first hair, and celebrations with family members, relatives, and friends. Blessing the child will block misfortunes in the child's life and bring the best things to the child's life with the blessings. The first hair is not thrown away. Because it is considered sacred. When the child gets sick, even the adult family members smoke out of the first hair to expel the evil and sickness from the child. Until the end of the spring season (*Khansh neekh*) and after the fall, it is not preferred to celebrate the hair-cutting ceremony because the child might feel cold and have a head sickness. Suppose the child has a bad temper, a sickness, or a delay in development. It is expected to be healed through the hair-cutting ceremony because it is believed that bad things will be gone through the first haircut. Everyone at the ceremony sips milk to symbolize holiness/sacredness.

The celebration has specific differences regarding the child's age, the selection of the person who touches first, and the special dish at the table. In Mongolia, the hair-cutting ceremony is celebrated for the female child at an even age and for a male child at an odd age; in Inner Mongolia, it is twelve years old (Saingerel, 2016). When selecting the person who cut the child's hair first, in Mongolia, the person with a pleasant year (*iveel jil*) and the eldest family member in Inner Mongolia are honored for the responsibility. The table is set in Mongolia with *tsagaalga*, and Inner Mongolia prepares for the table *uuts/shush*.

### *THE PERSON WHO CUT THE HAIR FIRST*

The person who cuts the hair first should be successful in one's personal life to symbolize that the child will follow a similar successful life path. According to the horo-

scope, people who have a pleasant year with their child will make positive changes and do good things for the child. The most reputable person used to start the ceremony of cutting the child's hair in Khalkha, Durvud, Bayad, Myangad, and Khotgoid. However, for the Buryat ethnic group, the person who helped with childbirth had the privilege of cutting the hair first. (Sampildendev, 1985.) For the Myangad ethnic group, the eldest person first touches the child's hair and starts cutting despite their pleasant year or age. (Jargalsaikhan, 2015)

#### *SELECTING THE CHILDREN'S AGES FOR HAIR-CUTTING*

Children's hair is cut at age five in Khalmik (Empson, 2011). Some families choose to cut the hair of all the children simultaneously when they cut their firstborn's hair. (Sampildendev, Urtnasan, & Dorjdagwa, 2006). Children's hair is cut at age 3 or 5 for Durvuds, despite the child's gender.

#### *CULTURAL RITUALS INTEGRATED INTO THE HAIR-CUTTING CEREMONY*

The hair-cutting ceremony is interrelated with cultural rituals and beliefs: horoscope, nomadic ethics, verbal poetry, belief and remedy, traditional medicine, Buddhism, pursuing peace, and nomadic order for the fest.

#### **MODERN CHALLENGES FOR CELEBRATING HAIR-CUTTING CEREMONY**

Due to urbanization, modernization, and lifestyle changes, young parents face difficulties organizing the Hair-cutting Ceremony for their children. These challenges include:

Lack of traditional knowledge: Many young families have limited knowledge about traditional rituals for young children, leading to uncertainties about properly conducting the ceremony.



Figure 2. Cultural Rituals Integrated into the Hair-cutting Ceremony

Busy life and scheduling conflicts: With modern lifestyles and overlapping workdays, finding a suitable time for the ceremony becomes challenging when the traditional day and time are already selected.

Westernized preferences: The preference for Westernized celebrations has become more common, diverting attention away from traditional ceremonies like the hair-cutting ritual.

Extended and alcohol-infused celebrations: Nowadays, some people tend to include alcohol in their celebrations, leading to more prolonged and extensive ceremonies that may not align with traditional practices.

Replacement of the first-year birthday: In some cases, modern families opt for other celebrations to replace the traditional first-year birthday, diminishing the significance of the hair-cutting ceremony.

Modernization of songs and blessings: Parents often replace traditional songs and blessings with their favourite modern alternatives during the ceremony, potentially diluting the authentic cultural elements.

By recognizing and understanding these challenges, efforts can be made to preserve and revive the significance of the Hair-cutting Ceremony, ensuring its continuation as an important cultural tradition.

## CONCLUSION

Under the influence of urbanization and globalization, the Hair-cutting Ceremony tends to be celebrated with minor changes. Based on the research results, the young generation now celebrates the hair-cutting ceremony without any rejection, as advised by their family elders. However, the young generation lacks a deeper understanding of the meaning and symbolization of this ceremony. The hair-cutting ceremony remains one of the most common celebrations among Mongolian felt tent dwellers, demonstrating and sustaining unique cultural characteristics. Therefore, it requires more attention to preserve this intangible inheritance in its original nature for the young generation.

The nature of the hair-cutting ceremony is integrated with many other Mongolian cultural rituals, and it has been preserved in the contexts of both Mongolia and Inner Mongolia despite facing various cultural influences. Specific differences exist between the two contexts regarding the celebration of the ceremony. However, the central meaning and symbolization persist, fostering mutual understanding of culture even in different social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.

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