

A Semiotic Analysis of the *Yurt*, Clothing and Food Eating Habits in Kazakh Traditional Cultures

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Abstract: The development and preservation of national cultures requires adequate forms for archiving not just the historical traditions, but also the values and communal significations associated to them. It also depends of the effectiveness of dissemination and other mechanisms that contribute to give international visibility to a particular culture. However, Kazakh society has encountered several problems in achieving this goal. In its most recent past, Kazakh's traditions were assimilated to those of the Soviet Union. Since independence, the government of Kazakhstan has encouraged a number of research programs and activities that seek to recover the pre-Soviet heritage. Other difficulties arise from the fact that Kazakh culture was nomadic.

In the absence of the constructions proper of urban cultures, Kazakh nomad lifestyle allows for the study of semiotic patterns preserved in musical traditions, oral legends, household artefacts, clothing and housing, all of which reflect the mythological consciousness of these ancient cultures, their nomad lifestyle, values, behavior and world view. Thus, this paper explores the semiotic codes behind the design and installation of *yurts* (the circular dwellings of nomad groups), Kazakh clothing and finally, food traditions. Our aim is to bring attention to the cultural importance of nomadic groups in Central Asia and their role in shaping the consciousness of Kazakhstan's national identity today.

Key words: Kazakh culture, clothing, food, rites of passage, semiotics, symbolism, Tengrism, world view, yurt.

The acquisition of the status of a sovereign state in Kazakhstan occurred also in the context of many economic, political and social reforms. The government encourages all forms of research associated to the recovery of Kazakh historical memory and traditional culture. The constituent elements of cultural hermeneutics paradigm have been identified as a holistic system of signs with information not only about the facts of traditional life of the ethnos, but also with multiple semiotic echoes that recreated the values and social habits of given communities as well as their vision of nature and of the cosmos. Thus, parameters such as their housing style, clothing, food, rites of passage (birth, stages of maturity, death) began to constitute anthropological points of inquiry and analysis.

One of the main artefacts of nomad's material culture is their folding-slatted housing made of cloth and called *yurt*. The *yurt* represents not just the way of housing in the lifestyle of traditional Kazakh nomad culture. It also functions as magical macrocosmic model of the Universe in the mind of the Kazakhs. The yurt is rightly recognized as one of the best forms of the portable dwelling. It is easily assembled, disassembled and easy for transportation as horseback cargo. This is due to the fact that it consists of wooden components. The wooden jamb-door and felt coating base is the *tuyrlyk*; the cover dome or *uyik*, and *shanyrak*, all covered by the *tundik*.

Kazakhs's view associated with the *yurt* has an anthropomorphic character. The frame of the *yurt* is called the *uidin suiegi*, the "skeleton" or "backbone". The center of the yurt is called the *kindik* or "umbilical cord". On the top of the *kindik*, shaped as a grill-dome, rests the yurt's smoke-hole also called the *thekoz* or "eye". The yurt front part is called the *aldy* or "front", and the back is the *arkasy*, which stands for "back". The lateral lattice is the *zhanbas* or "pelvis" (also "pelvic bone").

¹All translations in this paper are by Nurlykhan Aljanova (Al Farabi Kazakh National University).

The installation of the *yurt* functioned according to male and female respective roles in society. Placing the dome circle or *shanyrak* of the *yurt* was considered a male activity; the rest of the work was carried out by women. This often explained the severity of the *shanyrak*, which in large *yurts* was installed on horseback. The most detailed explanation about these customs is found in the monograph by Marat Mukanov (1981) *Kazakhskaya yurta*, where the author offers a detailed description of structure of these nomad houses, their interior and their colorful decorations.

According to Mukanov, the *yurt* and its interior decoration have a common genetic root in the cultures of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, even if the features of historical development of each nation have been different (Mukanov 1981: 23). As for the Mongols and the Turks of Southern Siberia, for the Kazakhs the space of the *yurt* was divided in semantic sectors: the left-right had a male-female character; the sacral half or *tor*, was situated opposite the entrance, and profane space near door. The center of the *yurt* was also the hearth or *oshak* below the dome circle or *shanyrak*. In contemporary scholarship, the *yurt* is considered a model of the universe; the microcosm of the nomads.

The *yurt* was divided into four parts: "*tor*", "*esik*", "*on zhak*", "*sol zhak*". Thus, the cultural horizon of the *yurt* in two-dimensional plan is a quadrangle (square) enclosed within a circle, an idea of perfection also found in the Greco-Roman tradition in Europe, and exemplified by the well-known Leonardo Da Vinci's "Man of Vitrubio". As in other ancient creeds, the connection between the *uyk* and the *shanyrak* within the *yurt* symbolized the link between earth and Heaven. This division into four internal parts in the layout of the *yurt* was consistent with ideas about the analogies between life on the earth and its location with the general structure of the universe. The *yurt* was considered the *imago mundi* or model micro-cosmos, and situated in relation and analogy to the greater macro-cosmos.

Phrases characterizing the integrity, safety and sustainability of the wooden skeleton of the *yurt* and its felt covering symbolized the prosperity of the family and community. For example, the Kazakh phrase still in use "*bosagan berik bolsyn!*" means "wishes strong, solid home, well-being to the family." The main semantic purpose of the *yurt* was to ensure the health, fertility, growth, and the well-being of its inhabitants. In order to achieve these goals, all ritual practices of nomadic society were devoted to the *yurt*, and moral, ritual, cultural and religious traditions were connected to it.

It is essential that the right (male) side (*on zhak*) was the most sacred part of the Kazakh home. It was the venue of the ceremony, marking the most important key stages of life-cycles. The right side *on zhak* carried connotations of the place of the "marriageable" daughter. Upon reaching the age of marriage, women, who previously occupied the left side near their mothers, moved to the right side of the *yurt*, the male side, where their sleeping area was enclosed by a particular curtain named *kosege*. In Kazakh traditions, as in almost all of the Turkic-Mongolian people's, the *yurt* of newlyweds was prepared by the bride's relatives.

In the cultural view of nomad Kazakhs there existed a relation between the *shanyrak* and the ability of women to bear children, that is, to fertility rites. If the children born within the *yurt* died immediately after birth, the placenta, together with the seven black stones, were wrapped in a white rug and hung from the *shanyrak*. A wand containing the cervical vertebrae of sacrificial lamb, slaughtered on the day of delivery, was also hung from the *shanyrak* during the first forty days of the baby's life, as it was believed that its preservation promoted the rapid fixation of the cervical vertebrae of the baby (Shakhanova 2004:35).

All these artefacts, acting as semiotic signs that preserved the cultural values of the nomad peoples in the interior of the *yurt* also added color. In the Kazakh *yurt*, as in any other houses in rural and urban settlements all over the world, ornamentation was also left to the women. In the absence of solid furniture, too difficult to transport, among the nomad and semi-nomad groups, this ornamentation consisted on carpets, curtains, decorative strips of cloth and embroidered materials. The color red was dominant, as it was associated to fertilization, reproduction and the physical human growth. Among the most important places was the *zhuk* with bedding textiles

termed *tor* that referred to bed clothes. It had a complex vertical structure which followed a strict sequence of layers and was folded in a special way, again connected with idea of fertility, wealth and happiness.

There were a number of Kazakh prohibitions associated with the *zhuk*: *zhuktin ustine shykpa*, it could not be stepped over or otherwise all happiness and welfare will disappear (*bak kein ketedi*), and the household will become poor (*kedei bolasyn*). This prohibition was also related to sacred aspects since climbing over a pillow, for instance, was considered a sin (*obal bolady*). The etymology of the word *zhuk* carries these connotations associated to something that must be 'treasured' as well as 'carried'. Pillows, folded blankets, and any other bedding equipment were associated to procreation and pregnancy, emphasizing the correlation of the area denominated *tor* with a woman womb.

For proper separation of the male and female parties within the *yurt*, it should be borne in mind that the anchor or central point, the place of honor is the *tor*, located in the center when facing the door. On the right male half, all male apparel was stored - saddle, bridle, hunting equipment and so on. On the left half of the *yurt*, the female side, there were clothes and bedding, tableware, small cabinets and vessels for food, drink and so on.

As mentioned, the center of the dome or *shanyrak*, located in front of the door and where the hearth was also placed, was one of the most sacred parts of the *yurt*. Most of the religious and cult ceremonies celebrated by the family took place here. As indicated, the hearth was a symbol of procreation, so that the welcoming proverb "*oshagynnyn oty oshpesin*" (let the fire not be extinguished within the hearth) had great importance. Respectful attitudes and prohibitions were associated with the worship of the hearth. For instance, it was not allowed to step over it or spit in it. The clothing of the upper *shanyrak*, symbol of procreation, was part of the family heirloom, passed from generation to generation. When the last representative of the genus died, the *shanyrak* was left his grave. The *shanyrak* was inscribed with a sign bearing the form of a cross divided in four paths, all enclosed within a circle. This sign meant nature's perpetual motion in relation to the sun, symbol of life in Tengrism (sometimes also known as Nestorianism), the ancient Central Asian religion characterized by features of shamanism and animism. *Khukh* and *Tengri* literally mean "blue" and "sky".

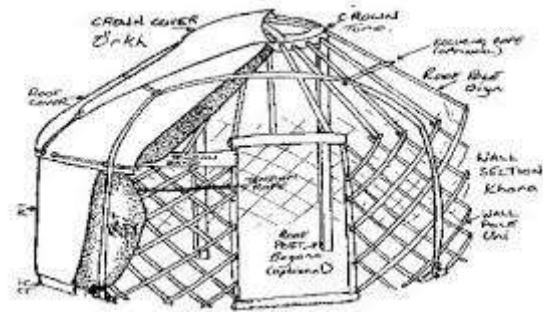
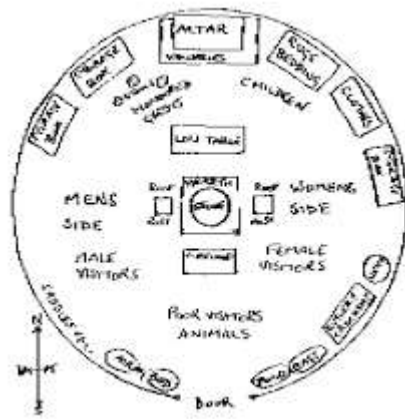
In today's Kazakh language there are many proverbs related to the *shanyrak* that show. The following are extracted from Smet Kenesbayev (1977: 549) *Frazeologicheskii slovar' kazakhskogo yazyka* (*Phraseological dictionary of the Kazakh language*):

"*Shanyragyn biik bolsyn!*" – "Let the *shanyrak* of your yurt be raised highly!" This proverb meant goodwishes for the installation of new yurt and the formation of a new family.

"*Shanyrak koterdi*" – "erected, installed *shanyrak*." This saying was intended for a man who became the head and leader of a new independent family.

"*Shanyragy ortasyna tusti*" – "the *shanyrak* fell into the middle of the yurt". This alluded to destruction of the home and family, and to the loss of well-being associated to it. Thus, it also meant unhappiness.

"*Kulagan shanyragyn kaita koterdi*" – "Raise again the fallen *shanyrak*". This meant wishes for a new marriage and family restoration.



Another aspect of *yurt* semiotics is the symbolization of social and marital status. There are many phrases in Kazakh for denoting the marriage age. For instance, “*on beste – otau iesi*”, literally means “in fifteen years – owner, father.” The word “otau” also denotes a wedding tent, so that the sentence means that the person addressed would become a father and thus the owner of his own *yurt*.

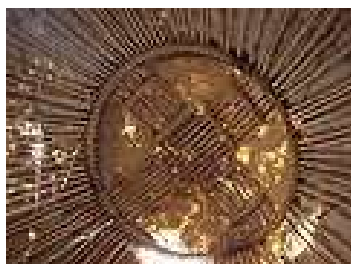
As mentioned above, sheep were sacrificed in honor of the installation of the wedding *yurt*, and also after the birth of a new member, when a wand with the cervical vertebrae of the sacrificial lamb was hung from the *shanyrak*. Women also participated in the construction of the new *yurt* and received gifts from the mother of the groom for helping in lifting the dome circle (*shanyrak koterer*). These gifts included the floor coverings *otau zhabar* and *otau korimdik* (Altynsarin 1976: 14).

Symbolism associated to rites of passage are extremely complex and reflected in the *yurt*. However, almost all *yurt* symbolism is associated to death. It was easy to distinguish the tent where someone had died by its appearance. The first thing to be seen was the funeral flag. In his essay *Ocherk obychaev pri pokhoronah I pominkah kirgizov Orenburgskogo vedomstva* (*Essay on customs for funerals and commemoration of the Kirghiz of the Orenburg Department*), Ybyray Altynsarin describes mourning in the Kazakh *yurt* as follows: “A long spear as a sort of limo is visible on the left side of the yurt. On the top of the spear a large scarf is bound. If the deceased was a young person, the scarf is red; if middle-aged its color is black, and if the deceased is an old man the scarf is white.” (Altynsarin 1976: 30).

The death of a wife was considered a great misfortune among the Kazakhs. The widower was called *uii synyk* which meant “the man whose yurt was destroyed,” expressing the relation between life and the *yurt*. In mourning, women stood with back to the hearth, facing the grids of the *yurt*, an undesirable position in normal situations since the focus and semantic center of the yurt was the center. This position marked the particular negative connotations of the event, which included other spatial markers such as the fact that the body was carried out of the yurt not through the door, but pulled out from the central hole of the *yurt* skeleton. In the event of death of two or more people, one of them was handed down through the door while the second was carried out by lifting the lattice basis of the *yurt-zhabyktan shygarady*. Because human life was viewed as starting from the right, male part of the *yurt*, it was supposed to be completed also in the same side, so that the circle of life would be closed. Thus, the ritual of the placement of the dead body and its removal for burial usually started from the right side of the dwelling. This is still the case in contemporary urban Kazakh houses. After the death, several etiquette norms forbid the entrance into the *aul* or village on a galloping horse (*aulga karap shappa, zhugirme*). Strict rules also regulated the ceremonial rite. The entrance into the *yurt* of the deceased was performed in individual procession, one person after another. Simultaneous entrance was deprecated and only permitted during the funeral and memorial rites. Another sign of death rite within a *yurt* was the destruction of the wooden skeleton, especially of door jambs. This tradition is still related to the prohibition of standing under the threshold, leaning against the door jamb, or

holding on to the doorpost, as attested by the proverb “bosagaga turma zhetim bolasyn” (do not stand under the threshold or you will be orphaned) (Shakhanova 2004: 54).

Yurt sizes varied, from 60 square meters to 120 square meters, depending on their purpose. There were *yurts* for guests, for honeymoon celebrations, and for performing funeral rites, among others. Thus, the *yurt*, being one of the ancient forms of nomad dwellings in the great belt of steppes, embodies complex ideological and cultural experiences related to the living traditions of the people in Central Asia in general, and of the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan in particular. It also has great importance as it semiotically mediates the features of the nomad worldview, also providing insight in more general studies on nomadism associated to pre-historical settled societies throughout the world.



Shayraak



Emblem of Kazakhstan

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Another aspect of the complexity and richness of *yurt* associated symbolism that offers interesting insights into life-sustainability in ancient societies are the artefacts associated to the household. Clothing, for example, is a basic element in human life, and the types of clothes used of particular interest for anthropological and cultural study of the Kazakh peoples. Clothing had an important role beyond the necessary protection of the body from external influences. As in many other cultures, it performed certain semiotic functions related to the visibility of the communal aspects of the group or nation. In Kazakh culture, the changing use of clothes from childhood to adulthood operates according to specific functions within the community, and is associated to worldviews, permissions and prohibitions.

Clothes reflected the specificity of nomadic lifestyle as well as the class and age level. Basic materials used were cotton, wool, fur, leather and felt. Leather was the most ancient material from which the ancestors of the Kazakhs sewed coats, hats, vests, trousers, shoes and other clothing. Furs were mainly for the manufacture of fur coats and hats. The set of men's clothing consisted of underwear shirt, top clothing swing robe or *shapan*, and a hat in the hot summer days called *takia*. Winter hats or *boric* had a fur edge. Adult Kazakhs always wore a round hat tight hat over their heads, even inside the house. Other hats were placed on top of this one when they were outdoors (Shakhanova 1998: 50).

Aesthetic tastes were significantly determined by the cultural habits of the community, having extremely rich semantic layers that, as in the case of the *yurt*, were related to aspects of fertility and infertility, male and female, as well as sacred and secular, bearing also specific spatial orientations such as right-left and top-bottom. For example, the shoes, which covered the anatomical bottom part of the body, were correlated with notions of origin in relation to the earth. They could not be lifted too high (*ayak kiimdi zhogary koiuga bolmaidy*) and not above head-dress. It was forbidden to enter the *yurt* wearing shoes. Raising the legs up was also forbidden, as this gesture, known as *kokti tebu*, was considered as “kicking the sky or heaven”, associated to the place of God in Tengrism.

The transmission of fertility and tradition from the old to the young is evidenced in several customs. For example, the first shirt worn by the child is called *it koilek*, literally meaning “dog shirt”. It was made of a colored fabric in the shape of a tunic-shirt, with straight sewn sleeves and a vertical slit in the front. The *it koilek* was sketched on the head of the family puppy or dog

before putting it on the baby. If a family had suffered the death of several children, the clothing of the first born was made from a seven-flap fabric obtained from different family houses (*zheti zherden zheti kurak*). The distinctive feature of this archaic costume is the fact that it was not sewn with a hem or edges in the sleeves. The way clothes were worn was another indicator of life experiences. If the child was sick with measles, for example, he would wear the clothes seams on the outside because it was considered that the disease was less likely to spread.

Newborn clothing also contained fabrics of the older generations in order to transmit health to the offspring. For instance, a newborn with swaddle in the grandfather's pants or grandmother's skirt, and in winter a premature baby would be cradled in the grandfather's headgear. Infertile women's clothing was considered negative, while contact with the clothes of healthy fertile women was desirable. Clothes were also considered to bear traces of the attributes of their owners. The term *kiim alurefer* to a form of begging for the clothes of someone considered to have special graces. For example, a childless woman would beg for the clothes of another who has had many children. The word *kut* referred to luck and clothes were considered to pass on the good or bad *kut* of their owners. The proverb *kutty bolsyn!* means "good luck" as passed on by clothing. Also a mirror and a comb were placed under a pillow of a cradle *zhuzi zharyk bolsyn* so that the child's face would be clear and bright.

Besides the role of clothing, another important aspect of traditional Kazakh life and of the power system that operated in ancient times were the customs associated to food eating and table manners. These habits also evidence the existing social relations and the strict regulation of Kazakhs world order. It should be noted that in the past festive ritual meals among Kazakh nomad communities were organized on the basis of sex and age divisions. The types of food served at each occasion had primarily a symbolic and sacred value, associated to the magical rites of Tengrism. Many of these traditions have survived until today, a fact that shows the natural resilience of many customs.

For instance, seating depended always on the age and social status. Position at the table was determined by the system of kinship and property, as was the distribution of meat during a meal. Thus, there was a complex classification of meat parts, from the carcass to the tender pieces. Foreign guests were considered the "gift of God", placed at the most important position at the table, and granted the best pieces. The guest's visit was considered a special grace. When several guests were present, they were seated according to their degree of prestige. Other members were accommodated according to sex and age. First, the male groups, starting with the elderly men, then the adult men (over 20 years), and finally boys and adolescents (15 to 20 years). The second group was formed by the female, beginning with the older women, the middle-aged women, and followed by the young married women, and finally the unmarried women (Shakhanova 1998: 91).

Most of the Kazakh rituals were, and still are, associated with food. Communal meals have a sacred purpose. The animal's sacrifice was a way of establishing communication between the sacred and secular worlds. These sacrifices were offered for the ancestors, for other spirits and saints and for God. The preservation of the remnants of food for friends and peers was termed *kurdas* and *kurby* and it was meant to make peers take an active part in the rites of the family cycle.

The central idea was to provide *kut*, a term of Turkic origin that has several meanings. On the hand it refers to the soul and spiritual life forces. On the other, it represents happiness, blessing, grace and prosperity, all connected to the basic necessities of life -abundance of food and cattle, health, fertility, and a good family. It was believed that performing these rites helped to reach the goal and contributed to the timely execution of requests of the applicants. The word *kut* also meant good luck and success.

Many food prohibitions were associated to food, which was considered sacred. It was forbidden to step on food or over it, to throw on the ground, to leave the food remains on the tablecloth, and uncovered dishes overnight. Anyone entering a *yurt* was supposed to taste food in it, but it was forbidden to have the smell of food in the *yurt* as a proverb indicated that “only animals smell food”.

Other prohibitions were related to fertility and pregnancy. For example, from the beginning of pregnancy, a woman had to adhere to a system of food prohibitions and restrictions. It was forbidden to eat camel meat for it was believed that the pregnancy would be delayed up to twelve months, as it happens with the camel. It was undesirable for a pregnant woman to eat a fish or the child could be dumb. In the first months of pregnancy, when the woman suffered a period of toxicosis and gustatory whims known as *jerik*, it was considered essential to meet her food whims because they explained the needs of the unborn child. Also, visits to pregnant women could not be carried out without bringing a food gift. Empty handed visitors were believed to bring a number of maladies, such as an inflamed throat or *tamagy isedi*. A similar prohibition extended to nursing mothers who would suffer *emshegi isedi* (inflammation of the breast).

Food sharing also preserved the traces of sex and age division among the Kazakhs nomad communities. Key features of the early periods of human life cycle such as infancy and early childhood, childhood, adulthood, and old age were prominent within the celebrations which also served as socialization mechanisms during which the protagonist was taught instrumental activities, principles of kinship and social ties and so on. Thus, meals were present in ceremonies celebrating the biological development of the new born as well as the aspects related to socialization of members of the community.

There were several rules considered mandatory when cooking. Women preparing food must be wearing a ring, as a common Eastern belief associated cleansing power to rings. There is a Kazakh proverb that states *Tamak adal bolu ushin, kolda zhuzik bolu kerek* (“to have clean food one must wear a ring”). Certain kinds of food also had protective functions. For example, the semantic role of sheep as a talisman that kept the person safe from hostile forces was strongly expressed in these ceremonies, also associated to magical rituals such as the preservation of the cervical spine of sheep for its connection with cervical part of a child.

The feast celebrating the first independent steps of a child was called *tusau kesu*, literally, “cut ties”. It was done when the baby was little more than a year. This ceremony was magical in nature and aimed to stimulate the child's ability to walk. According to popular notions, if this rite was not performed the child would stumble in later life. The ritual was performed by an energetic woman (*zhuirik*) who tied a black and white woolen cord or *ala*, purposely woven in two different directions around the child's legs. A cup with food was placed in front of child and the woman performing the ceremony would later cut the child's ties saying: “be fluid like me” (*zhuirik bol*) and holding the child's hand she would encourage him/her to walk. Then the cord was thrown into the fire as symbols of the liveliness of the child's energy, like that of fire. The performer of the rite brought a dish of meat called *zhilik, kuiryk*. Women participating in the rite also brought goodies and gifts. After the ceremony all present were invited to cooked meat. With the aim of teaching children to speak more quickly, they were fed with the remnants of food from the plate of an eloquent person.

The coming of age of a person, and certain stages of his or her life were accompanied by various food celebrations. The meal categories included: *kursak toi* - luncheon in honor of the pregnant daughter-in-law; *kalzha, shildekhana* - meal marking the birth of a child; *besik toi* - dedicated to putting the baby in the cradle; *kyrkynan shygaru* - the end of the first forty day of babies' life; *tusau kesu* - in honor of the first steps of the child; *atka mingizu* - to put the boy on a horse for the first time; *sunnet toi* - the celebration of the Muslim rite of circumcision; *tokym kagar* - in honor of the first departure of a young man on a long journey; celebrations associated to the changing role of a young woman, from her wedding headdress *saukele* to her married headdress *kimeshek* (Shakhanova 1988: 78). The transition to *kimeshek* or married status was usually celebrated in the first months of pregnancy, when it was considered indecent that the

young woman would go about in her unmarried clothing. Refreshments were offered by the mother-in-law, and the older women and relatives of the husband were invited. *Kimeshek* was also associated to class status and represented in the richness of the decorations.

The categories of food marked the transition from one age-stage to another, and were included ritual meals as part of many ceremonies. There were meals accompanying the most important ceremonies of infancy, regardless of the sex of the baby, and marking certain stages of socialization. For the males, rituals associated to socialization were *atka mingizu*, *sunnet toi*, and *zhora boza*. For the women, *kursak toi*, *kalzha*, *bastangy*, *kimeshek* and *belshalgysh*.

Further analysis of the wedding meal of Kazakh nomads reveals the following points about traditional marriage law. For example, the presence of ritual meals like *kuiryk bauyr*, where slices of boiled liver and sheep fat are eaten in strict alternation completes the official matchmaking and it was 'proof' of courtship, having a legal value attached to it. Another example is the separation of the groom from the bride's relatives until he was officially invited to the yurt in a ritual meal with *tostik* or lamb brisket. At all stages of wedding celebrations the brisket was intended for the bridegroom, and it remained his "share" in the future. The breast was reserved for the groom and it meant the recognition of his new social status and family role. The bride was also kept apart from the groom's relatives until the ceremony known as *asbet ashar* or "opening the face of the bride". All these means had a magic ritual function and were meant as initiation ceremonies for the new family formed by the bride and groom. In the rite of consecration of the *yurt* of the new married couple a sheep was sacrificed. The ritual of the bride's exchange for nine dishes of food symbolized the nine months pregnancy (*togyz tabak*). Food was included in the ritual actions and at all the stages of the life of individuals and it served as another element of the semantic function of these ceremonies.

Food was primarily treated as a grace from God, and associated to happiness, wealth and well-being. It was believed that those travelling and leaving home would carry with them the happiness of their original home. Thus, before departure, for instance in the examples above, when the bride had to leave her community and move to that of the groom, or before the removal of the deceased from the *yurt*, rites of passage for the transference of happiness were performed. Most of these involved food ceremonies.

In the last part of this paper, we shall refer to funeral and memorial rites, which in the case of Kazakh communities are characterized by their complexity and syncretism. For instance, the presence of pre-Islamic elements such as ancient Tengrism is further complicated with the introduction of Muslim rites, such as prayers or the participation of priests in rituals. Gleb Snesev has indicated that some rituals can also be connected with Zoroastrianism, as the presence of ancient Iranian demonology images at a number of modern nations (Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and others) indicates, and that this syncretism was the result of the complexity of the ethno genesis of these peoples (Snesev 1969: 64).

The study of the food associated with burial and funeral rites allows the reconstruction of pre-Islamic beliefs about the soul, death and the afterlife. For instance, if the dying person experienced a long suffering in his or her death, a sheep was sacrificed in a ceremony called *zhan sadaqa* (literary "the victim, alms for soul"), intended to calm the person and facilitate his/her passing. All other food was taken away from the room and even from the house of the dying person. The family of the deceased did not cook for three days, being supplied with food by their relatives and neighbors.

The funeral was accompanied by refreshments arranged on the third, seventh, and fortieth day after the death, and then at subsequent celebrations throughout the year(s). These numbers were also associated to other ritual ceremonies in Tengrism. Every Friday, seven thin cakes with a diameter of about 20 cm would be prepared by frying in hot oil at the house of the deceased. Six of those were given other *yurts*, while they kept one, called "*sadaqa nan*" (sacrifice of alms and bread). It was believed that in the days of this celebration, the soul returned home guided by the smell of cooking. Therefore, the presence of bread fried in oil in funeral rituals was not accidental.

To conclude this paper, the authors hope to have shown how the traditional ancient cultures of Kazakhstan were rich in semiotic and symbolic content and provide extensive information about the lifestyle of these communities. The ethical and aesthetic preferences, and the sacred and cosmological views associated to their portable homes or *yurts*, their clothing and their rituals provide a rich field for the study of social relations, including gender and age roles and class relationships, the importance of visiting guests and of fertility among nomad cultures, and the centrality of food in many communal ceremonies, related also to the sacred. All these aspects bring to the fore psychological and sociological aspects that still constitute a fundamental part of Kazakh national identity, linking the sacred and the profane, private and public life in complex and syncretic ways that show the richness of Kazakh heritage.

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