

Inside a Mongolian tent

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Mongols have socially-designated places in their tents for people and objects. Gradually, as social changes take place, the old rigid divisions are breaking up.

When a Mongol woman buys a sewing-machine, she has an allotted place in her tent to put it, and this place is the same in every tent across the steppes. This fact may seem insignificant, but it is evidence that present-day Mongols persistently categorise objects in terms of their position in space. This characteristic of Mongol life was noted by travellers as long ago as the 13th century, and it was further observed that Mongols used this categorisation to define social positions. But in the 20th century, with rapid social change, there seems to be a paradox: how can new social roles and technologically new and foreign objects be given a place in this "traditional" system?

Mongolia was the first country after Russia to have a socialist revolution, and there have been remarkable changes since that time (1921). The slogan of party leaders was "Let us bypass capitalism!" (since they aimed to move directly from the pre-1921 state of feudalism to the goal of socialism). There have been many achievements: feudal Mongol society was transformed by the introduction of public ownership and the collectivisation of production; and the standard of living of the basically pastoral, nomadic population has been dramatically raised by electrical and coal industries, crop agriculture, modern medicine, and new means of communication. It is clear that of the goals seen by the fathers of the revolution, the material and administrative ones are steadily being achieved, but we know less about another aim of any socialist movement—changes in social relationships. One can get some answers by looking at new developments in the system of categorisation of objects.

Provided a system continues into the present-day, and evidence shows it does in Mongolia, then any deviation from, or addition to, the previous system is significant. One area of life where changes can easily be seen is in the family dwelling, the round felt tent, called *ger*—which is still used by most of the population. A young Moscow-trained Mongolian ethnographer, G. Tserenxand, has recently charted these alterations over the past couple of generations in central Mongolia.

Until recently, the family was not only the main unit of ownership and production in herding, but it also organised its life in an exceptionally rigid and formal manner, closely tied to the old social conditions. Categories of age, sex, genealogical seniority, wealth, and religious status were maintained by explicit rules and prohibitions within the domestic circle. The round tent was virtually the only dwelling known in Mongolia, apart from Buddhist monasteries, and it was the focus for relationships between people widely separated by daily occupations. It provided a space in which every category of person or object in the nomad's world could be located, and so became a kind of microcosm of the social world of the Mongols. (See figure 1, overleaf)

In practice, the system worked as follows. The floor area of the tent was divided into four sections, each of which was valued differently. The area from the door, which faced south, to the fireplace

in the centre, was the junior or low-status half, called by the Mongols the "lower" half. The area at the back of the tent behind the fire was the honorific "upper" part, named the *xoimor*. This division was intersected by that of the male, or ritually-pure, half, which was to the left of the door as you entered, and the female, impure, or dirty section to the right of the door, up to the *xoimor*. Within these four areas, the tent was further divided along its inner perimeter into named sections. Each of these was the designated sleeping place of people in different social roles and the correct storing place of various implements and possessions of members of the family. So closely were people identified with their objects that the wife, for example, might be known as "cooking-pot person."

It was considered a sin to move any utensil from its right place into another part of the tent. A woman's object was considered to pollute the men's area and a special ceremony might have to be performed to erase this. Men were not allowed to touch cooking and other "female" things, while women were forbidden even to step over a whole range of men's goods. There was no single place in the tent where a jumbled heap of things could be put indifferently. There was even a difference in the vertical heights at which objects could be placed: some things had to be wedged behind the roof-poles, some hung from pegs in the wall-lattices, and yet others were placed on the ground.

People could move above the tent, but they had to sit, eat and sleep in their correct places. Earlier this century, among the Mongol-speaking people of Tuva, guests would be fined a horse, with harness, for insulting a host by sitting in the wrong place in his tent. This applied whether the guest over-valued or under-valued himself: it was as bad for a mediumly-ranked guest to sit in the place of an important man, as it was for him to move down a place and sit in the spot appropriate for "clean" old people. The system was so explicit that it was possible in certain circumstances to manipulate it, as for example in the case of the lama, who, with false modesty, entered the tent on the women's side, only to provoke all the women to scream and flee from the tent and the hostess to plead, "Honourable lama, please move further up! Please accept a seat further up!"

The effect of all this was to make the rank of each social category absolutely clear by dividing it from other categories. This process was analysed by the Soviet ethnographer S. A. Tokarev. The separation of individuals within the family tent was related to the rigid division of labour in the world outside. The work of maintaining the herds and the family itself was divided more or less arbitrarily into tasks, almost all involving the use of implements (the bridle, the lasso, the milking-pail, the needle and thimble, the dung-collecting rake, the branding-iron). It is therefore not surprising that it was these items of working equipment which were used, when being stored, to symbolically differentiate between groups of people. These, and

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wider divisions of Mongol society, were seen in the careful seating of guests from the "upper" to the "lower" parts of the tent. The hierarchy was then reinforced by semi-obligatory rituals being carried out before any ordinary conversation could begin -- for example, the presentation of a silk *xadag* scarf by the junior to the senior. Meals were equally formal, and women usually ate at different times from men.

Since the revolution, there have been fundamental changes. Not only have most of the old social categories gone, but new ones have appeared like factory worker, school teacher, party official, veterinarian, or truck-driver. Yet comparison can still take place since people still live in family groups in the felt tent. (See figure 2.)

It seems to me, and Tserenxand's material also shows this, that the basic structure has remained, in the sense that the Mongols still have socially designated places in the tent for people and objects, and give them values. Some manufactured objects are simply merged into traditional categories. These are always objects whose function is equivalent to a traditional function. Suitcases, wardrobes and chests-of-drawers made in east Europe replace the old bags and painted chests; chrome-plated bedsteads take the place of felt or wooden bunks; and iron buckets and china crockery are becoming more common than wooden pails and silver-lined root-wood bowls. Modern furniture is very different in materials and glossiness from Mongols' things, and it has to be squeezed into place in the low round tent, but conceptually it presents no problems.

Even if an individual herdsman's family is prosperous and has fitted out its tent in luxurious modernity, the time has not yet come when past arrangements can be forgotten. Tserenxand remarks that it is common for herdsmen on the collectives to have two tents: the "larger *ger*" with carpets, radio, chrome beds, and so on, and the "small *ger*" for large-scale cooking, domestic work, and storage. This small *ger* has, classically, a brazier in the centre, skins on the ground, and dripping bags of sour-milk along the south west lattice wall.

But if this old pattern is at the back of people's minds, the recent changes in behaviour in relation to certain key objects seem all the more striking. The Buddhist altar, which formerly was the culmination of the entire honorific arrangement reserved for men, is now virtually never seen: it is replaced either by a children's bed or by a shelf with family photographs and ornaments. Only radically modern families take the first of these alternatives. More traditionally-minded people find reasons ("draughts from the door") to put children elsewhere. They reserve the *xoimor* for honoured images, often substituting photographs of revolutionary leaders, heroes, or family members, for pictures and statues of Lamaist deities. Children traditionally slept on the ground, beside their parents' bed. But this is now thought to be inadequate. In Mongolia today, as in other socialist countries, children are given priority in welfare and health spending: large families are encouraged; and young people are given pride of place in marches and parades, since they symbolise the future.

During the daytime, when there are guests, children are expected to stay by their mother on the east side of the tent, or go outside. The *xoimor* is again occupied by adults, usually men, with honoured guests such as officials of the collective or party sitting to the host's right. The ranking of visitors from the *xoimor* to the door is retained.

Some occupations are given more respect than others: administrators, or herdsman seem to be given a higher place than artisans, people in service industries, or working women, but this matters less than the attainment and age of the individual. Thus a wise and senior herdsman or milkmaid would be given precedence over a young party official, who had yet to prove himself. But the rituals showing clear differences in rank, such as the presenting of the *xadag*, are now thought to belong mainly to the past, or to very formal occasions. On the other hand, rituals by which Mongols visiting one another used to establish mutual friendly relations are still virtually obligatory: the exchange and mutual admiring of snuff-bottles is still so common that everyone keeps a bottle even if they do not like snuff.

These examples are about a change in social roles, but this use of material culture may be changed by a different evaluation of traditional objects. Take books, for example. In former times, books were appropriate only for lamas and senior men, since they were seen as holy receptacles for religious truth and sacred history. They were kept in the senior male part of the *xoimor*, if not on the Buddhist altar itself; and, wrapped in several layers of silk, they were read only on special occasions. Women were forbidden to read them. There was a saying "For a woman to look at a book is like a wolf looking at a settlement." But, since the revolution, literacy has been one of the most important government policies and now virtually all families possess some books. These are kept together in a shelf by the head of the parents' bed on the woman's side.

Then, finally, there are objects which by their very existence transform the old categories inside the tent. An example is the washstand. Washing used to be almost non-existent, perhaps because of a scarcity of water in the steppes, and it was also regarded as ritually wrong, since it might pollute the spirits of water. The idea that there might be special equipment for washing, and that all the family might wash at the same place, is a completely new one in Mongol culture, but it has recently been pressed strongly by public health authorities. Many people now have a washstand (a portable tank of water with an outlet over a basin), which is placed next to the door on the left -- i.e. in the male half and opposite to the place where the wife wipes her dirty utensils. The saddle and harness which used to be kept in this place are either moved further up the wall, or put in the small *ger*. By its presence the washstand creates a space which is available to all -- and this is new.

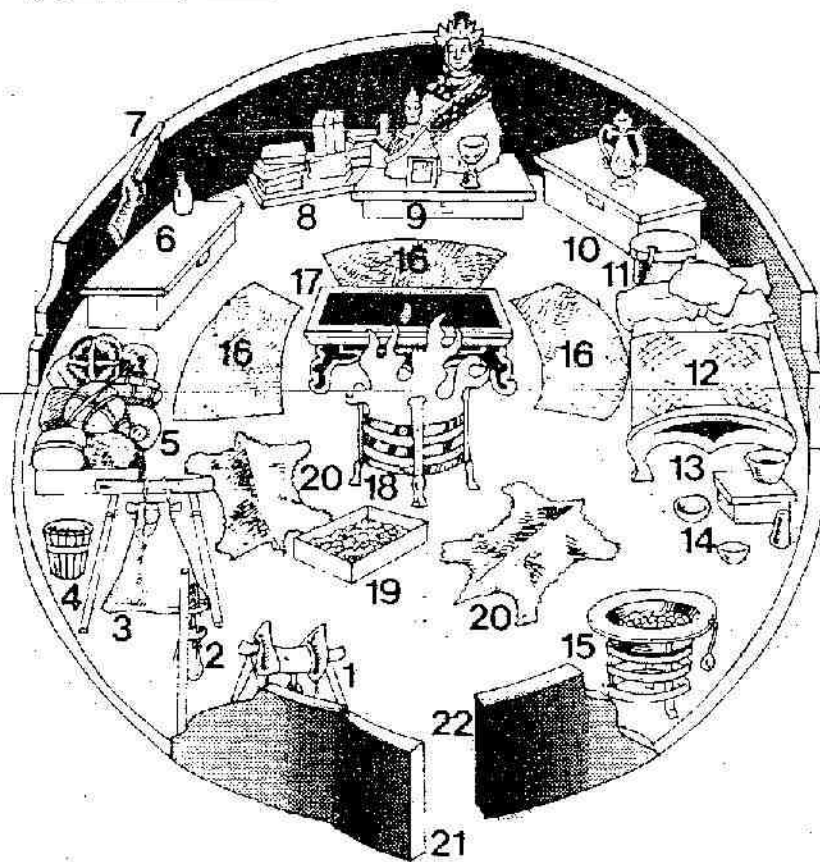
It is because the practice of categorising social relationships by manipulating objects in the space of the tent still occurs, that we can know certain social changes are taking place: the evaluation of certain occupations has changed, the attainment of individuals, including women, is valued over occupation, and children are given increased and symbolic importance. Mutual respect rather than hierarchy is emphasised with guests, and within the family there are many more occasions on which individuals act together -- for instance, in communal meals. Some of the old divisions seem destined to disappear, like the rigid distinction between the men and women's sides of the tent, but others characteristic of the new society may take their place. Whereas, in our society, the presence and distribution of objects indicates class and other differences, in Mongolia, they now show that a family is, more or less, "progressive."

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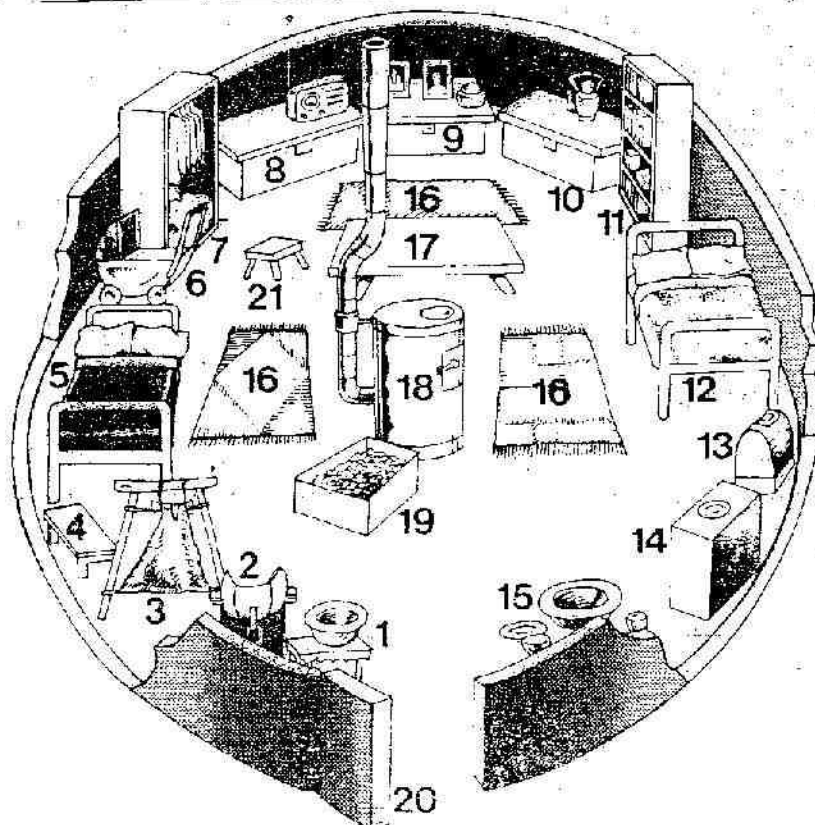
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Fig 1: The traditional tent



(1) saddle, lasso, hobbies; in winter this area might be used for young animals; at night time beggars, widows, old bachelors and ill people might be allowed to sleep here; (2) bridle, halter and other harness hanging on peg; (3) preparation of sour mare's milk in leather bag; (4) preparation of yoghurt; in front of this place sat 'clean' (ie. having taken a vow of sexual abstinence) old men and women; (5) the place for storing felt, skins, blankets, bought food-stuffs; in front of this sat junior male guests towards the door and middling guests towards the *xaimor*; (6) one or two chests belonging to the male head of the household containing his clothes, footwear and other possessions; the more valuable things in chest towards *xaimor*, less valuable things and sometimes children's clothes in chest towards the door; honoured guests sat in front of these chests; (7) gun and other hunting equipment; (8) Mongol and Tibetan books; a distinguished lama would sit in front of this position; (9) this is the centre of the *xaimor*, which extends to numbers 8 and 10 on either side; the Buddhist altar, with paintings and statues of deities, prayer wheels, offerings, candles, lamas, perhaps holy books; in the chest under the altar were kept the most valuable things, like money, silk, jade-snuff-bottles, silver cups; (10) chest with valuable things of the wife; in front of this chest sat the male head of the household when receiving guests; his pipe, steel and flint, knife and a teapot might be kept here for him; (11) a box for hats; children of the family sat here; (12) the marital bed, made of wood or felt; at the lower end of it there might be a pen for very young children; this was the place of the mistress of the house; (13) the wife's saddle and bridle were sometimes put here; (14) wooden bowls, plates and stores of food; daughters of the house sat here; (15) cooking pot, brazier stand, ladle, cleaning rag and bunch of grass; the youngest daughter would sit here; (16) felt mats; (17) low wooden table for serving tea and other food; (18) brazier; (19) metal box for dried dung fuel; (20) skins on ground; (21) door; (22) this was the 'lowest' place in the tent and barely counted as being inside it; nothing was put here except perhaps women's boots or dirty underclothes; 'black people' (ie. people who had committed a sin, killed an animal, or were in some way polluted) sat here; dogs sat here if they were allowed into the tent at all.

Fig 2: The present-day tent



(1) washstand; this is now called the 'hygienic corner'; (2) saddle and harness, otherwise kept in 'small ger'; (3) preparation of sour mare's milk in leather bag; (4) preparation of yoghurt; in some families a writing desk is put here; (5) the children's bed, with goods stored under it and on it; the bed may have a lace cover and a curtain for privacy; in front of this bed in most families sit middling-respected male guests, but in some families when there are no visitors the whole family may sit together here; (6) child's pram and toys; (7) wardrobe with clothes; (8) chest for the clothes and goods of the master of the household; this chest should be one of a pair with the chest at 10; a radio and ornaments may be kept either here or on the chest at 13; (9) chest with valuable bought things, money, silver things, electrical parts, batteries or children's bed; if there is a chest, they put framed photographs of famous people, heroes and family members here, also ornaments, prizes, diplomas; (10) chest with women's clothes, mirror, perhaps teapot for the master of the household, who usually sits in front of this place; (11) book case; (12) the marital bed; in front of this, at the head, sits the wife with her children round her; female guests sit below, or if they are greatly respected, on the opposite side in front of the wardrobe; (13) the portable sewing-machine; (14) cupboard with china crockery; (15) cooking pot, utensils for cooking and washing-up; (16) wool rugs; (17) low table for serving tea and other food; (18) iron stove, with door facing east—ie. towards the wife's place; the chimney goes up through the smoke hole if the cooking pot is not on the stove, there is a lid; (19) iron box for dried dung fuel; (20) door; (21) low stool or tiny chair for guests.