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Original Article (Special Theme)

Food and Bodily Communication in Mongolia

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Introduction

This special issue is aimed at building a common understanding of the relationship between culture and individual bodily experiences involved in eating food (Ozaki and Kazato 2020). This paper is focused on bodily communication during eating and drinking, when individual bodily behavior and the social sphere intersect. The main foods in Mongolia are livestock products. Among them, previous studies have focused on dairy products, but one study emphasized the importance of meat (Kazato 2018). In Mongolia, body parts such as bones, flesh, and liver become metaphors for social boundaries (Yang 2020).

In this paper, we describe everyday food and drink, and eating and drinking behaviors, in a pastoral area of Mongolia, aiming to clarify Mongolian characteristics of bodily communication.

Materials and Methods

This research was carried out in Telmen district, Zavkhan aimag, Mongolia (Figure 1) over 65 days from July 12 to September 14, 2004. The eating and drinking behaviors of household members and their treatment of visitors are described and analyzed using anthropological participant observation.



Figure 1. Research area (Telmen district, Zavkhan aimag, Mongolia)

Herders' Livelihoods and the Securing of Food

Among edible livestock products, meat plays a major role as a source of nutrition and cultural significance. Every October, livestock are slaughtered and processed under an annual food plan for each household; the meat is then preserved and consumed throughout the year (Table 1). Milk and dairy products are produced every day by herders, although these days the young herders do not like to eat them. Non-livestock products are acquired from traveling merchants in exchange for cash or are bartered in exchange for seasonal livestock products [cashmere hair, meat, milk, dairy products] (Table 2).

Thus, the herders' diets and livelihoods are supported directly and indirectly by various livestock products.

Table 1: Livestock numbers and meat quantities consumed in a year

No.	House hold name	Age of husband	Family numbers	Livestock numbers slaughtered in October	Livestock numbers slaughtered in other periods	Annul total*		
						Number of head of animals	Quantity of meat (kg)**	Quantity of meat per person (kg)
1	hrl	20	2	Sheep 3, Goat 1, Cattle 1	0	Sheep3, Goat1, Cattle1	271.3	135.7
2	dwn	33	4	Sheep 5, Goat 2, Horse 0.5	Sheep1	Sheep 6, Goat 2, Horse 0.5	293.75	73.4
3	nsn	51	5	Sheep 6, Cattle 1	Sheep2	Sheep 8, Cattle1	381.3	76.3
4	mgm	52	6	Sheep and goat 10, Cattle 2	Sheep and goat4	Sheep and goat 14, Cattle 2	546.3	91.1

* From October 2003 to July 2004. Livestock could be slaughtered until October 2004.

** I calculated the quantities of meat as: mutton and goat 27.5 kg, beef 161.3 kg, and horse 147.5 kg by referring to Ts. Batsuh et al. (2013: 174-178).

Table 2: Price of livestock products and other products in Telmen, Zavhan

		Transaction by conventional units		Transaction by weight units	
		unit	price (tog)	unit (kg)	price (tog)
Livestock products	Meat	a head of sheep**	40,000	Meat, average	1,500
		a head of goat	30,000		
		a head of horse	n.d.		
		a head of cattle	200,000		
		a head of camel	180,000		
	Milk		Milk, average	500	
Dairy product			Aaruul**	2,500	
			Eezgii	500	
	Cashmere			30,000	
others	Flour	50-kg sack	24,000		480
	Rice	25-kg sack	15,000		600
	Tea leaf	2-kg package	2,500		1,250
	Sugar	25-kg sack	15,000		600
	Salt	50-kg sack	4,000		80

* Above data were obtained by the author's interview survey in Telmen district in 2004.

** Price of the maximum weight of a certain head of livestock.

*** Sugared aaruul sells for 2500 tog, but plain aaruul sells for only 700 tog.

Herders' Everyday Eating and Drinking and Their Treatment of Visitors

Everyday eating and drinking behavior among household members during the daytime is largely limited to hydration, especially in the busy summer season. Late in the evening, the women cook meat dishes, and family members eat them quickly before going to bed. In everyday practice, ordinary food and drink are provided to visitors with certain ritual behaviors, i.e., verbal and non-verbal greetings including approaching, touching, kissing, and exchanging Mongolian snuff bottles. Some food and drink are made exclusively for others rather than for self-sustenance. Below are two examples.

Case 1: Drunk people are supported by the local society (BT, 24-year-old female)

When vodka is left over from the previous day and you feel uncomfortable, drink it again the next morning and the discomfort will stop. This is called “suppressing heartburn” (shar darah), but its meaning is to have ‘a hair of the dog’, which provides a reason for drinking alcohol continuously. People who get drunk at a banquet, such as at a wedding, will then visit neighboring households begging for homemade milk liquor for several days afterwards, then participate in the next invited banquet when sober. Liquor lovers thus roam around local households all summer long.

When a visitor comes to our house, we serve homemade milk liquor. If you say “no” to drunk people, they may become violent. Additionally, every household makes alcohol and shares it with others, so you cannot deviate from the custom on your own.

During the summer, the many banquets associated with life's

rituals generate many drunk people. They wander from one house to the next to beg for alcohol, and they may violently attack the hosts and the residents if their request is denied and they get irritable (Cf. High 2008). For this reason, young women are constantly preparing alcohol as a measure against drunk people.

Next, I will show examples of dairy products made specifically for gifts and sales.

Case 2: Giving as not throwing away (the same as Case 1)

I do not make many dairy products, such as aaruul and eezgii, because our family and my mother do not eat them much. Recently, even selling dairy products is becoming difficult, as the amounts being distributed are increasing. I have milk every day because we have livestock, but it is considered bad luck to throw away milk and dairy products. Luckily, urban people like sugared aaruul, so I give them that when they give me sweets. Otherwise, I send my dairy products to the city.

Thus, some food and drink are only for visitors and not for self-subsistence. In particular, young herders do not consume much of the dairy products, but they do produce them as treats for visitors, gifts for relatives and friends living in city, and as commodities to sell in the market.

Some food and drink are not used for eating and drinking but are made specifically for religious sacrifices, treating injuries, and improving children's health. Such products are applied by hand to the bodies of those in need or by mouth.

Conclusion

Mongolian herders' bodily communication, expressed through everyday eating and drinking practices, conveys deep acceptance of others' bodies, which has a lot in common with the overall idea of hospitality (Kawano 2020). A herder's home ger is open to all, and visitors are treated to food and beverages. This can also be seen as being in accordance with the nomad philosophy of hospitality and risk management. Communication during eating and drinking incorporates verbal and non-verbal greetings, gifts, healing, blessings, and sacrifices. Bodily communication can be stimulated by material shortages or social taboos, and food and drink are habitually handled directly with the hands, mouth, and tongue rather than with implements.

Communication was accompanied by food and beverages, and herders exchanged livestock meat and secretions (milk), the human body and its secretions (saliva), and other objects as well as words.

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