

# Hair cutting ritual<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the main character of the epic and its symbolic meaning

Nyamkhuu Narangerel

**Abstract:** This article discusses the “golden hair bun” cutting ritual of the Mongolian epic hero (child) and the extended and simple structure of participants to such ceremony. At the same time, it will explain how the character of the epic would develop features of a heroic man after having the hair bun cutting ceremony, in accordance with the theory of “The Rite of Passage” by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. Also, the meaning behind the Mongolians’ tradition of leaving a “topknot” hair during the hair cutting ceremony will be explained on the basis of the examples set in the epic.

**Key words:** Mongolian epic, epic characters, golden hair bun cutting ritual, a rite of passage, threshold, extended (divine) and simple (family) structures.

## 1. Golden hair bun (khonkholtsg) cutting ceremony

In Mongolian epics, prior to starting ad eighty-year long feast and a hundred-year long enjoyment to glorify the heroes who saved and protected their citizens, several ceremony are carried out- one of them is “Golden hair bun cutting ceremony”. This ceremony, which has been passed down to the modern Mongolians, is depicted in Mongolian epics with a very clear and broad symbolic meanings. In doing so, it shows that this ritual is not only related to the infants’ ceremony, but also to his lifelong haircutting and related traditions.

Among Mongolians, hair cutting ritual for young kids is named differently such as hair cutting, cutting off tangled hair, but the basic content is the same. Boys’ hair is cut at the age of three or five, and girls at the age of two or four. This is due to the traditional Mongolian notion that odd numbers symbolize “Method” (male energy) and even numbers “Wisdom” (female energy)<sup>2</sup> as clearly shown in epics. Hair bun or khonkholtsg is a matted or tangled hair of a little kid. According to the epics, heroic characters had golden or blonde hair buns. In the epic Danikhürel, it features that when the epic characters reach the age three, his King father would go to meet a wise man to select astrologically best date for conducting the hair cutting ceremony, and all people belonging to the kingdom are to be invited to the ritual ceremony. The epic “Danikhürel” reads:

When Danikhürel

Reached age three

His mother who is of age three hundred and seventy seven and

---

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the ceremony of an infant’s hair before the first cutting.

<sup>2</sup> Sampildendev, Kh., *Traditions and customs of nomadic herders*, Ulaanbaatar: UKhG, 1985, 151.

Övgön Dalai King – the February  
Rushed to see a honored guru of Vast Universe  
To check the best suitable date and time for hair cutting ceremony for  
The son Danikhürel and  
Took with him a eighty eight fathoms of khadag (offering scarf)  
Along with eight hundred lan of gold as gift... [Danikhürel 1986:18]

Here, first of all, we will see how important it is to check with a wise teacher or guru about the best astrological day for conducting golden hair bun cutting ceremony. When doing so, the father king goes with khadag and gifts to offer to the guru. Then, on the appointed day, the most honorable person will be the first to start cutting the hair bun of the child. “Among the Khalkh, Durvud, Bayad, Myangad, and Khotgoid communities, the child’s grandparents or the oldest person participating in the ceremony are the first to cut the hair or, while in Buryatia, a midwife or a person who attended the birth of the child is the first honorable person to touch the child’s hair with a knife or scissors”<sup>3</sup>. The epic “Danikhürel”:

“The very next day at dawn (at tiger hour)  
Sun sends it rays  
The guru of Vast Universe  
Touched the golden hair bun of Danikhürel  
With golden scissors ...” [Danikhürel 1986:23]

It shows that the guru started touching the hair of the boy. While in the epic named “Khashin Tsagaan Khaan” (trans. White Jade King) hair cutting ceremony for a boy named Eriin Sain Khair Khar (trans. Strong Man named Khair Khar):

“Blessed to be a monk  
The little boy’s hair  
Was to be cut by sharp knife  
The person who would touch the hair of the boy as first  
Was an old woman, wife of an old man named Aduuchiin Ag-Sakhal  
Holding a sharp knife  
Along with with long yellow khadag scarf...  
The father of the boy approached the old woman  
And offered the scarf to her asking  
Dear bellowed one

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Please touch the hair of our son

With this sharp knife”

In this part an old woman is asked to start the ceremony by touching the hair of the boy. All the example mentioned above show that honored and closely related people touch the hair, while in the epic “Zul Aldar King”:

Grand women took their seats

Also their fifty follower ladies took their seats

Zul Aldar King asked

Who is going to repeat the name of my beloved son?

Apart from the traditions of the higher realms

There is a custom that we must follow domestically

As an auspicious day fast approaching

To pass so quickly like winking

As time runs so fast as they talk

One of the group of old men abiding in the north west got up

Holding his long white beard at his chest

Twisting his beard at the corner’s of his mouth towards his ears

And said “I will repeat and validate the honored name of your son

I will touch the golden hair bun

As he said so, the Zul Aldar King looked towards

His ten warriors and ordered them arrange a seat for the old man

They placed a big black heavy durvulj (box for keeping firewood)

In the middle of the main seats in the eastern part”

[Epic sung by E.Baatarjav, great-grandson of Bayan-Altai 2015:181-182] in this verse it also came as a surprise that the old man offered himself to touch the hair of the “boy”. From these examples, it can be seen that a person who touched the child’s golden hair bun is well respected. This custom is still passed down among modern Mongolians.

From the above examples, we can see that the participants in the epic boy’s ceremonies are more extensive than we do today, inviting guests from the three higher astral realms, the sun earth, and the lower realms, and besides the hair ceremony they gave name and gave earring to the child.

	(Extended)	(Normal)
Guests	People from three realms under sun	People from middle realm under sun
Tradition (from where)	Higher astral realm	Domestic
Ritual	Cutting golden hair bun + Giving an earring+ Giving name	Cutting golden hair bun

Summarizing some of the items in the table above, the reason why this ritual in the epic is extended to include people from three realms is, firstly, that the epic hero is not the only one to get married to his wife of destiny, but to go to fight against enemies of his age. In doing so the boy will have to visit all these realms to accomplish his mission, therefore it should be considered that the purpose of the ceremony is to introduce the boy to the residents of those realms and to determine the size of the country featured in the epic.

This is called the “Law of the higher realms” in the epic. On the other hand, the statement “There are traditions of the higher realms, but there are local domestic traditions” reveals that besides the guests from higher and lower realms, there are guests from the middle realm or the earth. This ceremony takes place in ger (traditional dwelling), which has become a “model of the microcosm”, and the ger is divided into three sections, west, middle, and east, and the honored man who is to touch the hair of the child first is seated on the seat in the middle. The epic clearly states that their seats were semicircularly encircled in the ger, [epic Zul Aldar King]. It further said that even if there are guests from the higher realms and deities of nature, they all should “fit into the ger” showing their respect.

If the ceremony is performed in a normal or simpler context, it is just a ritual of hair cutting. And other ceremonys such as giving name and earring are performed in other times.

Brushing the golden hair of the Tuul hero is a symbolic act of taking the baby’s hair and becoming a human being. This is clearly reflected in most Mongolian epic poems. In some epics, such as Danikhürel, when the hero is three years old, the king’s father and queen mother perform ceremony in honor of the “family tradition”, while in some epics, almost immediately after birth.

The ancient Mongols believed that it was possible to walk, but not because the head had not been operated on. This is stated in the epic “Khashin Tsagaan Khan”:

“... My son  
 You are too young and fresh  
 Stay at home this year  
 Leave next year  
**Your hair has not been cut yet**  
**You still have not received a title of a human being**

Land surface is rough

Field mouse holes are tough..." [Khashin Tsagaan King 1989:55]

It is also said that if you do not have a name, you will not be considered a human being. During this ritual of the boy's ear is pierced, quick healing medicine would be given to him.

The concept named "liminality" described in the theory "The Rite of Passage" by French linguist and anthropologist Arnold van Gennep<sup>4</sup> refers to the phases of "transition" as the "preliminal phase", the threshold phase (liminal) and post threshold (post liminal) phase, which refers three stages: breaking away from the previous condition, switching between the two conditions, and joining the next condition.

The purpose, actions, and results of the golden hair bun cutting ritual will become clearer with this theory.

Preliminal period	Liminal period	Post liminal period
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He was not named a human being</li> <li>• Too young or freshman-not grown up completely</li> <li>• No hair cutting ritual performed</li> <li>• Body muscle and blood not developed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving name</li> <li>• Cutting golden hair bun</li> <li>• Earring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The human body is intact and a new life begins</li> <li>• Learn to tell your destiny sandalwood</li> <li>• Prepare clothing and weapons</li> <li>• Choosing a horse</li> <li>• Go on a journey to create heroic deeds.</li> </ul>

From the above, it is not possible to "recognize a hard door" if the ceremony is not performed in the epic. This is because Mongolians believe that the a child who has not reached the age of three has not yet found his true spirit and power. Mongolians talk that even in ordinary life, if a child's original hair bun is not cut by such ritual, the child will be prone to sickness or life threatening risks. According to Van Gennep, if no rites for passages are performed for a child, such negative consequences will be resulted. By performing hair cutting ceremony all the negativities are purified. The epic reads:

#### Celebrated hair cutting rituals

Of a heroic son again ...

[Epic sung by E.Baatarjav, great-grandson of Bayan-Altai, 2015:71]. It is fully acknowledged that a boy becomes a 'man' when his father handed him the weapon and immediately continued to melt the clothes. After the first person touched the golden hair bun, all the other guests will take turns to touch the hair with scissor and say blessing word. In the epic there is a blessing reads:

<sup>4</sup> Bum-Ochir, D., Mönkh-Erdene, G., *An Introduction to Socio-Cultural Anthropology*, Ulaanbaatar: Admon print, 2012, 145.

“... My son  
May you become a big hero named  
Eriin Sain Khair who  
Rule five million people  
Conquer fifty vast areas...”  
[Khashin Tsagaan King 1989:57]

In modern times this tradition is kept.

“... May you live  
Long and happy life  
Be a good son to your parents  
Be a good states man  
Be a leader of the people” [Sampildendev 1985:152]

In other words, while blessing to be a hero who conquered the whole land in heroic times, I wish to be a leader of the people today. At the end of the rite of passage, there is a big party and the hero of the epic goes to his destination.

## 2. Hair charms and bandages of an epic character

In Mongolian epics it is described that after cutting hair bun a ponytail of hair was left on the top. It is named *teveg*. Sh.Gaadamba, researcher, wrote “This was a common custom among Mongolians to leave a ponytail which is ‘a symbol of being lay man or a statesman’<sup>5</sup>. This ponytail would grow long till the child become an adult. It is believed the back of the head of a man is his most special part of his body where his spirit or soul abide, would not be touched by knife of scissors, so that ponytail hair grow there.”

In ancient times, however, this is described to be one of the most important parts of a warrior’s body and was also aesthetically pleasing. In the epic:

“...Looks pleasing  
*Teveg* hair  
Decorating the cheeks of the man  
Well grown *teveg* hair  
Measured and styled carefully  
Beautifully braided long *teveg* hair  
Charming the others

<sup>5</sup> Gaadamba, Sh., “The meaning of the word ‘tonog’ in the Secret History of the Mongols,” *Language and Literature*, Volume V, Ulaanbaatar, 1968, 74.

When the warrior crosses the rivers and waters..."

[Epic sung by E.Baatarjav, great-grandson of Bayan-Altai, 2015:70]

“...Braided the *teveg* hair

Blessing it by holy water from a golden vase

Combing by golden brush

Making sure it was symmetric

...” [Eriin sain Khetsüü Berkh 2015:347]

It shows that hair was a key lifelong ornament for warriors and was quite long. One clear example of this is the hair of Arslan Arag Ulaan Khongor in the Jangar epic:

“...Arag Ulaan Khongor

Has a long black hair

That was cut when he was little

And grown long ever since

His hair bangs the collars of his yellow coat

Making a whispering sound

Hovering around

The long thick hair

Could cover a big camel

The long black hair

Can be seen disheveled from afar

...” [Zhangar I 2012:93]

The epic character's ponytail shows how the hair fits and expresses beauty. In the above examples, it is often said that the hair is braided and tied to the antlers. In windy, windswept Central Asia, nomadic tribes have traditionally rode horses and braided their hair to make it as convenient as possible for them to move. Instead, they braided their hair to make it as comfortable as possible. G. Sükhbaatar, researcher, translated the content of a book named *Qianhanshu* as “the Huns tied their hair like a hammer” and explained that “it is clear that the Huns tied their hair like a hammer”. [Sükhbaatar 1980: 137] “As a result, you can see there are differences in the shape of Chinese and nomadic ponytails. The Chinese had a long tradition of styling their hair, which is piled high on the top of the head and worn with a hat shaped to fit it. Nomads, on the other hand, had their hair braided and this tradition passed down throughout various stages of history in its multiple forms.” [Erdenebat, Bayar 2011:162]

You can see how this multi-stranded hair is depicted in the heroic epic from the description of Dankhürel's hair.

“...Danikhürel

When caught seventy eight braids of black hair

That was ss big as a camel ...” [Danikhürel 1986:74]

Before you wrestle, you have to do your hair. Epic characters would wrap their long, beautiful hair in a variety of bandages. The “black bandage with gold ornaments” and the “flaming black bandage” are described in detail in the epic. Ponytails tied in this way are also described as “golden ponytails”.

For example,

“...A golden helmet

Decorated with corals, pearls and diamonds

Was placed on his gold shining black hair...” [Eriin Sain Khetsüü Berk 2015:347]

“...A black bandage decorated with thousands of tassels

Glamorized with four thousand ornaments

Covers his long gold shining black hair and was

Fastened with camel toe size silver pin

Engraved with an image of lion, and

Adjusted the pins along the hair...” [Khürel Altan Dösh 2010:689]

“...Braided with moon ornamented

Black leather strings and

Made into buns of hair...”

[Epic sung by E.Baatarjav, great-grandson of Bayan-Altai 2015: 146]

It describes the bandage worn on the hair. The fact that there are two types of this bandage, gold and leather, may indicate a difference in their status or degree.

There is an evidence that the ancient Mongolians used to hide their braided hair in such gold bandages and gold bags. “*Khitan officials wore felt hats decorated with gold ornaments, sometimes with pearls, swastikas, and feathers. The appearance of this hat is said to mimic the shape of a headband named ‘Buyaguani’ worn by people on the banks of the Liaoshui River during the Han and Wei dynasties. They wore small bandage bag braided of gold around their neck and hides a bunch of hair in it.*” [Erdenebat, Amartuvshin 2010: 56] “*The actual artifacts of such a bandage bags (hair case) were documented during the excavations of the tombs of Xiongnu aristocrats at Noyon Mountain near the Kharaa River in Tuv Province, Mongolia, as a large number of ponytails were found, and some of which had bandage cases*” [Rudenko 1962: table. XIX, LI-LII]

In our view, human ponytail hair has both external and internal symbols, for both men and women. **The external symbol** informs about the age of the people when they meet each other, and shows what kind of work they do, whether they are aristocrats or ordinary citizens. For example, in heroic epics, wrestlers always have different hair types when wrestling, which shows their origins and distinctive features. **The inner symbol**, on the other hand, refers to the fact that hair can give all the information about a person, so Mongolians have many taboos related to arbitrarily touching the hair on the head and not leaving the remnants of the ponytail in the open places.

The differences on the outside contain inner symbols, as evidenced by the fact that the heroes of the epic tie their hair with diamonds, decorate it as wings, and wrap it in piles.

## CONCLUSION

The epic of Mongolian heroism includes dozens of rituals that have long been forgotten, but one of the most traditional Mongolian ceremonies is the ceremony of “Cutting golden hair bun” of the epic hero when he is three years old (sometimes as soon as he is born). This ceremony is the beginning of many stories about the epic hero’s hair ritual, and we conclude as below.

- The fact that the guests from the three realms under the sun being invited to the ceremony of golden hair bun cutting of the epic character creates a more ‘expanded guests’ structure that aims to introduce the residents of the various realms to the epic character hero. This can be seen in the fact that this ceremony serves more than one function, not just a single ritual of hair cutting. Today, however, we have a simple structure, which is just a ceremony.
- The fact that the epic hero had to his baby’s hair or golden hair bun cut off in order to “recognize the hard gateway” is a major step as described by anthropologist Arnold Van Jenep in his theory of “The Rites of Passage”, which clearly shows the three stages of *separation, transition and reunion*.
- Further stories related to the epic hero’s hair and ponytail show many aspects of Mongolians’ respect for their hair and ponytail and their social status. We have categorized it as “external” and “inner” symbols, and we have clarified that each haircut has its own meaning, depending on how it is styled and how it is tied.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Sources:

Argil Tsagaan Övgön: *Famous storyteller S. Choisüren’s epics*, Compiled by B. Katuu, Ulaanbaatar: Shinryoprints, 2010.

*Danikhürel*, Compiled by B. Katuu, Edited by Kh. Sampildendev, Ulaanbaatar: UKhG, 1986.

*Epics sung by E.Baatarjav, great-grandson of Bayan-Altai*, Compiled by B.Katuu, Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo printing, 2015.

Eriin Sain Khetsüü Berkh: *Mongolian folk epics*, Edited by Kh. Sampildendev, Ulaanbaatar: UKhG, 1982.

Khashin Tsagaan Khaan: *Duutai Möndör*, Compiled by B. Katuu, Ulaanbaatar: Ministry of Education and Science's textbook and magazine editorial office, 1989.

Khürel Altan Dösh: *Famous storyteller S. Choisüren's epics*, Compiled by B. Katuu, Ulaanbaatar: Shinryoprints, 2010.

*Zhangar I-II*, Translated from the Kalmyk language by T. Dügersüren, Ulaanbaatar: SB Print, 2012.

**Research works:**

Bum-Ochir, D., Mönkh-Erdene, G., *An Introduction to Socio-Cultural Anthropology*, Ulaanbaatar: Admon print, 2012.

Elikhina, Yu. I., *Treasures of Noyon Mountain in the Hermitage Museum*, Edited by S. Chuluun, Ulaanbaatar: Bitpress, 2017.

Erdenebat, U., Amartüvshin, Ch., *The rock burial of Dugui Tsakhir* (X-XII centuries), Ulaanbaatar: Bembi Foundation, 2009.

Erdenebat, U., Bayar, D., "Xiongnu ponytail hairstyles and costumes," *Studia Archaeologica*, Tom. XXXI, Fasc. 11, Ulaanbaatar, 2011, 161-182.

Gaadamba, Sh., "The meaning of the word 'tonog' in the Secret History of the Mongols," *Language and Literature*, Volume V, Ulaanbaatar, 1968.

Rudenko, S. I., *Kul'tura khunnov i noinulinskie kurgany*, Moskva, 1962.

Sampildendev, Kh., *Traditions and customs of nomadic herders*, Ulaanbaatar: UKhG, 1985.

Sükhbaatar, G., *Ancient ancestor of the Mongols*, Ulaanbaatar: UkhG, 1980.

Van Gennep, A., *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge, 1960.

# 叙事詩の英雄の髪削儀式とその象徴的意味（要旨）

N. ナランゲレル

モンゴルの叙事詩では、領民を救い保護した英雄を賛美する80年の長い饗宴と100年の長い楽しみを始める前に、いくつかの儀式が行われる。その一つは「黃金色の髪束を切る儀式」である。現代のモンゴル人に受け継がれたこの儀式は、モンゴルの叙事詩に非常に明確で広い象徴的な意味を持って描かれている。そうすることで、この儀式は幼児の儀式だけでなく、彼の生涯の髪削<sup>かみそぎ</sup>及びそれに連なる伝統にも関連していることを示している。

モンゴル人の間では、幼児のための髪削の儀式は、「髪削」、「髪束を切り落とす」など異なる名称を持つが、基本的な内容は同じである。男子の髪は3歳か5歳で切られ、女子は2歳か4歳で切られる。これは、叙事詩に明確に示されているように、奇数は「方便」(男性のエネルギー=「陽」)、偶数は「知恵」(女性のエネルギー=「陰」)を象徴するという伝統的なモンゴルの概念による。髪束（モンゴル語でホンゴルツォグ）は、幼児の絡み合った髪を言う。叙事詩によると、英雄は黃金色またはブロンド色の髪束を持っていた。

モンゴル英雄叙事詩にはすでに忘れられている数多くの風俗習慣が反映されているだけでなく、モンゴル人が現在まで継承してきた慣習も反映されている。叙事詩の英雄が3歳になると（ある時は生まれると）すぐ行う髪削（黃金色の髪束を切る、алтан хонголцгийг нь үргээх）儀礼、あるいは風習がその一つである。この儀礼や慣習は叙事詩の英雄の髪にかかる多くの議論について考察するうえで手がかりになる。それについて本論で行った考察の結果は次の通りである。

叙事詩の英雄の髪削儀式に「日の当たる3つの土地」の人々が招かれるのは、叙事詩の英雄である少年に彼らのことを知らせるためで、それにより、より「拡大された」構造を生成している。それは風習として単一ではなく、かなり多くのアクションが重層的に行われることから見て取れる。しかし現在、われわれは一般的構造、すなわちただ髪削儀礼のみを行うようになっている。

叙事詩の英雄が「困難な出口を知る（хатуу хаалтын ам таних）」ために、幼児の髪すなわち黃金色の髪束を切ることが必要であることを、人類学者アーノルド・ヴァン・ジェネップがその「通過儀礼」において大きな移行であると論じ、分離、過渡、統合の3つの段階を明らかにしている。

叙事詩の英雄の髪にまつわるその他の議論には、モンゴル人が髪を大事にし、髪の整え方に社会的地位が示される現象が多く反映されている。それを本論では「外的」及び「内的」な象徴と分類し、髪をどのように整えたのか、どのような結び方をしたのかが、それぞれ特定の象徴性をもつていることを明らかにした。