

ASTROLOGY IN THE MONGOLIAN WEDDING RITUAL

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The long and complex Mongolian wedding ritual is subject to the exogamic rule. The exogamic unit can be defined as essentially, though not exclusively, agnatic. In the case of patrilineal descent, as observed by Mongols, it is the son who perpetuates his father's lineage. As for daughters, they are bound to leave their clan and go far away to live with their husbands' families and in this sense have patrilocal residence.

With the progressive weakening of the clan, its traditional function as identifier of an individual's origin was lost. The old clan names lived on until the mid-20th century when most of the Mongols had forgotten their clan of origin. That situation made it difficult for the exogamic rule to be observed and astrology started to play a more and more important role based also on the increasing influence of Buddhism. In ancient times, the shamans resorted to various divination procedures, like the physical appearance of the girl, the moment of her birth, a dream etc., in order to determine the favourable day and hour for the wedding (Jagchid & Hyer, 83).

During the Middle Ages the Mongols were very anxious about predictions and omens. Concern about the influence of the planets on human actions was present in their culture¹. After the introduction of Buddhism, the role of religion in the Mongolian society was extended to fields the shamans were rarely present in, and astrology assumed unprecedented scope. The lamas intervened widely in various ordinary laic rituals, such as birth, wedding, funerals, and also in everyday life through astrology. On the other hand, the lamas did not participate in person in the various ceremonies of the wedding ritual unless he was a close relative of the family (Jagchid & Hyer 89) .

Van Oost notes that a lama is never invited to preside over a wedding.² Under the circumstances, resort to Buddhist astrology in the matrimonial

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¹ "It is at New Moon or Full Moon that They [the Mongols] Start Everything they Want to do; also, they Call the Moon Great Emperor they Bow and Pray to", **Plan Carpin States** (1965, 40).

² Van Oost, 92. Here, the reason is not the role of the ecclesiastical institution in the laic rituals, but the fact that the presence of persons associated to infertility, single life, widowerhood is generally avoided in wedding rituals, it being considered to have a harmful influence on the fertility of the couple and the prosperity of the family. On the other hand, the participation of respectable men and women having a prolific descent is particularly looked for.

process is a key factor and would therefore be appropriate to analyse its function within the Mongolian wedding ritual.

Astrological Compatibility

Buddhism follows and coordinates step by step all the stages of the wedding ritual by means of astrology. The lamas took the place of the shamans and imposed their astrology which has a decisive role in the wedding ritual: the matchmaker, the spouse, the hour and the day of the wedding, down to the colour of the horse which is going to bring the bride in the bridal procession to her husband are decided by means of astrology.

All the moments of the ritual are governed by the lama-astrologer's decision after confronting the astrological elements on the young bride and groom to be with the Mongolian astrological books written according to the Tibetan-Buddhist tradition.

The manual of astrology edited by A. Mostaert is an example. It contains pages about the horoscopes of the future bride and groom (Mostaert, 1969).

We will present *infra* examples taken from similar works published in Mongolia.

Long before the wedding takes place, the parents of a boy who has reached the age for getting married and their close relatives start searching for a young girl which seems to them a suitable daughter-in-law. After identifying such girl they contact a lama-astrologer, offer him ceremoniously a ritual scarf, *hadag*³ and ask him to find out if the age, birth date, the eight elements⁴, the astrological signs are compatible or not with those of their son.

Within some Mongolian ethnic groups such as the Darigangas the investigation requested by the boy's family is extended to the girl's parents as well.

This thorough and discreet investigation which the lama-astrologer is asked to conduct may be extended down to the origins of the girl's lineage⁵, which doesn't have to be a breach of the exogamic rule. We can see that in this case the lama took over the place of the shaman who is traditionally the connoisseur of his groups' genealogy.

The astrological investigation is pursued based on the information supplied by the boy's parents, which traditionally includes the year, the month, the day and the hour of birth of both the bride and the groom to be.

³ Votive scarf in Tibetan tradition. This ceremony scarf is presented folded up in three lengthwise, with its open side towards the person it is presented to.

⁴ *Suudal*, litt "sit", designates also the series of eight elements considered in astrology: fire, the earth, iron, the sky, water, the mountain, the tree, the wind.

⁵ Actually the boy's family is searching the origin of the girl's family, her *jas ovog*, i. e. the patrilineal clan.

One of the elements taken into consideration when the decision is made and which also refers to the twelve-year cycle (represented by twelve animals in the lunar calendar) is the age gap between the future spouses. According to the Mongolian astrology requirements, the bride and groom to be should belong to the same generation i. e., the age difference between them should not exceed a twelve year cycle because they would be considered as belonging to two different generations.

The persons born within the same duodecimal system are considered as being “of the same generation” *üje sacuutan/negen üjeijnhen* or “of close generation” *ojr üjeten*. But if the gap is over 13 years Mongols would say that “the generations broke up” *üje multarč bajna*: litt. “the joints are dislocating” and in this case the wedding is not advisable (Gongor 1976: 202).

Besides belonging to the same generation, the years of birth of the boy and the girl have to be compatible within the cycle of twelve years⁶. The lama-astrologer also surveys the combination of the nine *menge*, “birth mark, mole, beauty spot”. It is a matter of nine marks used in the establishment of a horoscope. Each group from 1 to 9 is associated to a colour (which may be repeated). So, for instance 1 is white, 2 is black, 3 is blue, 4 is green, 5 is yellow, 6 is white, 7 is red, 8 is white, 9 is red.

The expression *menge n'golloh* designates the recurrence of the same *menge* every nine years, which is assumed to be the beginning of an ill-fated period.

If the lama-astrologer’s answer on the astrological compatibility of a young couple to be is unfavourable, the wedding will not take place and his work ends here. However, if the parents absolutely wish this wedding, it is possible to bend the verdict, by making a payment to the astrologer, or to ward off ill fortune consequences of such a union by asking that prayers be offered⁷. But if the horoscope and the astrological signs do match, the wedding is declared possible and can be accomplished (*bolž бүтне*).

As soon as this is stated, the interventions of the lama-astrologer will continuously be needed in order to set the right time for each stage of the wedding ritual. It will be his task to find out with the help of astrology books the appropriate day for the wedding which should coincide with the appropriate day to do the girl’s hair with the particular headdress and ornaments of a married woman. Also, the lama will indicate the appropriate day to cut the fabric for the girl’s elaborate dress, the appropriate colour of such fabric, the right time to attach the hair ornaments and wear the jewels of a married woman, all while advising on the auspicious time of giving the girl and taking her (by the parents-in-law): certain days have to be avoided because they could be inauspicious to the future couple.

⁶ The compatible years are called *iveel žil*.

⁷ Aubin, 1975, 532, note 15.

Also, when the boy takes the girl to bring her at his place, he can do so but only along the way indicated by the astrologer. Thus, the groom has to follow the ritual called *zöv züig garah* “to go in the right direction”⁸ according to the indications of the astrologer.

So minute is the investigation of the lama–astrologer that it even points out the auspicious hours for such or such ritual.

This is the case of the first fire lighting in the hearth of the new yurt, one of the most important moments of the wedding ritual as the symbol of perpetuation of the lineage. The same goes for pronouncing the “words for blocking the felt door”, a dialogue put into verse between girl’s party and the boy’s party, which occurs before the bride crosses the threshold of the yurt of her parents-in-law to bow in front of their fire. This verbal jousting between the two parties continues until the master of ceremony breaks the dialogue in verse and announces that “the hour of the snake has passed, and this is the hour of the horse”⁹. It is indeed the hour considered as auspicious for the bride to enter for the first time in the yurt of her parents-in-law. Thus the verbal jousting should end immediately no matter when it started because nobody would like to let slip the lucky hour.

But the work of the astrologer doesn’t stop at investigating the bride and groom compatibility and fixing the lucky hours, days and months which should match as important moments of the wedding. He has to investigate also the astrological compatibility of other important characters involved in the ritual such as the matchmakers, the *bergen* of both parties, the groom’s accompanying persons on his way to taking the bride away as their birth dates should be “compatible” *iveel* with that of the groom they represent before the bride’s parents.

Even the colour and the age of the horses which the grooms party provides to the bride’s family as part of the “matrimonial compensation” *süj beleg* or those which the bride will ride in order to go to the family in law, are specifically stated by the astrologer.

Nothing, not even the smallest detail should be neglected or left to chance and all along the ritual, the ceremonies chain up accurately, as Mongols follow to the letter the indications and recommendations of the lama–astrologer.

Even if nowadays – and especially in town – the long and complex wedding ritual was simplified, we ought to note that the investigation of the astrological compatibility of the future spouses remains a major concern, without exception.

⁸ **This ritual is not confined** to wedding only, it is performed particularly on the first day of the new lunar year, *Cagaan sar* when the astrologer shows the right direction to be taken at the first exit from the yurt, in order to have an auspicious year.

⁹ *Mogoj cag n’öngöröv, morin cag n’ bolloo* (Jadamsüren 1968, 76). The hour of the snake corresponds to 9: 40-11: 40 and is followed by the hour of the horse, from 11: 40 to 13: 40 (Ar’yasüren & Nyambuu 1992, 678)

Astrological Constraints Relating to Wedding from a Mongolian Astrology Textbook

The books of astrology provide detailed information concerning various aspects of the wedding. We shall refer to a first illustration of the principles of this astrological tradition in a recent work *Mongol zurhaj bujuu hün sudlal* [Mongolian Astrology or the human study], compiled by D. Cerendežid, and published in Ulan-Bator in 1999. This manual of astrology intended for the general public was sold out in record time and is at present circulated in photocopies from one person to another. This testifies to the strong demand for this type of publications nowadays and to the attention the Mongols give in their everyday life to the constraints as determined by traditional astrology.

Compatible years

The 12 years of the duodecimal cycle, represented each by an animal, are divided in four groups of three years considered as compatible between them; within each group the order of the years (animals) may vary. This compatibility does not concern the year of birth of the future spouses alone, it may consider the professional life, the economic relations, when to establish associations, collaborations etc. These four groups of compatibles years are as follows:

1. Rat, dragon, monkey
2. Ox, snake, hen
3. Tiger, horse, dog
4. Hare, sheep, pig

Incompatible years

The twelve years are otherwise divided in three groups of four years each, considered as incompatible between them; within each group the order of the years (animals) can vary. The three groups of incompatible years are as follows:

1. Rat, hare, horse, hen
2. Ox, dragon, sheep, dog
3. Tiger, snake, monkey, pig

The incompatibility holds for relations by marriage more particularly, and does not affect strictly professional, associative or other collaborative relationships.

Male years, female years

When the lamas and the astrologers¹⁰ are searching in order to find out if the years of birth of the boy and of the girl are compatible, they also take the male and female character of the year into consideration. In this sense, Mongolian astrology classifies the twelve years into six male years and six female years.

¹⁰Nowadays lay people also practise astrology with the help of manuals (textbooks).

The male years are: rat, tiger, dragon, monkey, dog.

The female years are: ox, hare, snake, sheep, hen, pig.

It is advisable for persons born in a male year to marry persons born in a male year, too and vice versa. However, if a person born in a male year marries a person born in a female year, the union may be successful in the particular case where the girl is born in a female year and the boy in a male year. On the other hand, a girl born in a male year may not¹¹ marry a boy born in a female year.

If the young people we would like to get married are born in the same year of the cycle, viz. both are born either in the same male year or the same female year, marriage is not recommended, because their lives would be a continuous fight for the dominant position therein. There is only one exception for those who are both born in the year of the pig, a female year. In this case alone, marriage is highly auspicious.

This is how the Mongolian book of astrology defines precisely the incompatibilities of marriage between individuals born in the same year of the duodecimal cycle of the lunar calendar.

1. If both are born in the year of the rat they will be poor, even if they have many sons;

2. If both are born in the year of the ox, their children will have health problems at birth or afterwards;

3. If both are born in the year of the tiger, they will have an unstable place of residence, each of them on one's own ;

4. If both are born in the year of the hare, their children's lives will be at risk;

5. If both are born in the year of the dragon, theirs will be a difficult lifetime of poverty and suffering;

6. If both are born in the year of the snake, the marriage will be unauspicious at first and only improve eventually;

7. If both are born in the year of the horse, they will experience much suffering in marriage and will have very few children;

8. If both are born in the year of the sheep, they will be happy at the beginning of their marriage, but unhappy at the end;

9. If both are born in the year of the monkey, their children, daughters or sons will have serious behavioural problems: they will be either alcohol-addicts or thieves;

10. If both are born in the year of the hen, they will have problem sons and they will be poor;

¹¹ *Ceerleh*, "to observe a ban"; the terms "taboo, ban" correspond to the Mongolian concept conveyed by *ceer*.

11. If both are born in the year of the dog, their children's lives will be threatened and there will be conflicts between parents;

12. If both are born in the year of the pig, there is a good chance for their marriage to be successful, to have many sons and be a wealthy family.

Out of these twelve cases of marriage considered between young people born in the same year, one case only is seen by astrology as auspicious, all the others being clearly inauspicious, or indeed disastrous even, as the consequences extend not only to the spouses, but also to their descendants.

Combination of years of birth forbidding marriage

Year of birth		Consequences
Men	Women	
Rat	snake	The marriage will be unhappy because of the bad nature of the children and grandchildren, difficult to be educated and almost impossible to cure if they fall ill.
Ox	dragon	The couple will find itself ruined without house at the end of their lifetime
Tiger	snake	Although they have sons, they will be on bad terms, enemies and have a serious accident
Snake	tiger	Endless quarrels and material losses
Sheep	snake	Disagreements - spiritual, physical and professional
dog	sheep	The spouses will treat each other as an enemy, being at risk to die or separate (split up)
pig	rat	Endless insults, jealousy and conflicts
Snake	rat	They will meet various obstacles in their work
Hare	pig ox rat	Even if they have long lives, many sons and everything seems to go well, they will meet with all sorts of difficulties in their actions
Dragon	rat pig	Even if the parents will have long lives, their children will have an unhappy destiny

Incompatible years from a sexual point of view

rat – hare sheep – dog

ox – tiger horse - monkey

dragon – snake monkey - sheep

Forbidden directions for the groom to take when bringing his future bride home

It is compulsory to observe the way recommended by the astrologer, viz to “start out in the right direction” *zöv züg garah* and follow the movement of the sun¹² in order to find one's road and “arrive correctly [at destination]” *zöv ireh*. Inauspicious directions vary with the season and players in the wedding process.

¹² This means in the South-East-West direction, or clockwise. The right direction is also the one used to walk round the oboos (*ovoo*, cairn erected from stones as a dwelling for local deities) or temples.

Season	Spring	autumn	Summer	winter
Incompatible for in-laws	West-East	East-West	South	North
Incompatible for the couple	East	West	North	South

Auspicious days for cutting the deel

There are days assumed to be auspicious for cutting and sewing the *deel*, the dress of a married woman, for the bride.

The most auspicious days of the week are Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. The other days are considered as inauspicious, and as such forbidden for starting to make the bride's dress.

Auspicious days for adorning with the headdress and dress up the bride

This day is usually the same day as the great wedding party which is inevitably a favourable day set in advance by the astrologer.

Generally speaking, it is of good omen to adorn a new garment on Wednesdays, Thursdays or Fridays. Mondays are not particularly favourable; as for Sundays, Tuesdays and Saturdays, they are prohibited, *ceerlene*.

The day of the "monkey", as well as the eighth day of the lunar calendar are forbidden because they are unlucky.

The auspicious days for a married woman to put on the jewels for the first time are: Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays.

Auspicious days for erecting a new yurt

The days of the lunar month favourable for erecting the new yurt are as follows: 3, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, and 25.

Ill-advisable days are: 10, 20, 22, 30. Adding to them are Sundays which shall be avoided, as a rule.

Auspicious days for lighting the fire in the new fireplace

The favourable days for lighting the new fireplace are Sundays, Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are not advisable for this action.

The lunar calendar days 2, 7, 8, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, 23 and 27 are auspicious.

In spite of the fact that the successive ceremonies as part of the long and complex wedding ritual take place in the yurts of the bride's and the groom's parents, not in a Buddhist temple, the Mongolian wedding is entirely run by the lamas by means of astrology. Every step of the ritual depends on the astrologer's decisions. The above examples prove the omnipresence of the Buddhist religious institution in the Mongolian wedding ritual which is nevertheless basically secular.

While astrology has made a strong come back among certain Mongolian communities –in wedding, examination, haircut, establishment of an association, etc.– strict observance of the astrological prescriptions make wedding highly difficult, which is a paradox outlined by such Mongols today. There are some who even say that it is actually impossible to marry if all the requirements of the Mongolian astrology were to be met.

So the lama-astrologists would have to be called once again, only this time to help people out with the countless prohibitions which the Buddhist astrological tradition has imposed and take the necessary steps in order that nothing would harm a future couple.

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