

Tsagaan sar ...

By Delgermaa Ganbat

The traditional New Year has come. Together with it, the annual argument on New Year eve and date started. There are so many voices conflicting with each other and so many 'famous' astrologists are born. Everybody tried to prove that they were right. Whom to trust, whom to follow? Still the question remains unanswered and the argument continues. A doubtful celebration.

When did this argument begin? After democratic changes in 1990, as Mongolians had finally the right to celebrate it officially. As Mongolians gained the freedom to revive old traditions. The gap in the history caused it. During socialist times, Tsagaan sar wasn't allowed to celebrate nationwide and was called as herders' holiday.

We celebrate it as it has been one of the most important celebrations of Mongols for centuries, but how much do we know about it? Do we celebrate it not knowing the meaning and origin. Some historical recordings say that our ancestors used to celebrate the New Year in autumn, when the weather is warm, livestock are fat and the nature is beautiful.

The Secret History of the Mongols mentioned about Tsagaan sar that. In 1207, at the Mouse hour of the first day of the Year of the Red Rabbit, the Great Chinggis Khan, wearing all his new clothes, prayed to Blue Sky and Vast Land, paid respect to the elderly and visited his Oulen mother. In 1216, the year of the Red Mouse, the Khan issued a decree to award people on the day of Tsagaan Sar with gold and clothing materials taken from the State reserve. The Khan also decreed to award a special title to anyone who is over 120 years old and to release prisoners on the day of Tsagaan Sar except those convicted of the 5-cruelty case. And he played an important role to make *Tsagaan Sar* a State ceremony.

But still the date recorded in the Secret History remains confusing. Some say that the Secret History had several editing after Chinggis Khan's death due to political reasons. Some say Mongolians had their own astrology. Some try to define the date in Tibetan astrology.

Some people consider that Mongolians started to celebrate it in winter due to Tibetan astrology as Buddhism entered Mongolia in 16th century. Some say Tsagaan sar was moved to winter in 16th century due to denounce mourning of Agvaankhaidav, a high saint from Tibet.

As Tsagaan sar is not only a festival, but also plays symbolic role to clean people's mind from all bad things and start a new fresh clean life, Mongolian kings and khans gave importance to this celebration. In 1723, the Manchu stated in *Mongol Tsaaz* that all governors and noblemen were obliged to wear a "*Jinst Malgai*" (special ceremony hat of the Manchus) and a Manchu style deel with a collar during Tsagaan Sar. The Manchu clothing style remained as our traditional clothes.

In 1911, the political and religious leader of Mongolia Bogd Khan approved a new State flag featuring Soyombo and ordered that all government houses, ministries, the army and monasteries keep this flag raised outside their compounds from the 30th day of the last month of winter to the 15th day of Tsagaan Sar.

Despite restrictions of Tsagaan Sar during the communist time, thousand years old traditions were never given up and informal celebrations continued among family and relatives especially in the countryside.

The point is the chain of tradition continues, but some vital ties are lost. Due to time and social developments, it changes bringing new meanings and challenges. Most young people would not really like this event because of the overwhelming expenses to prepare lots of food, beverages and gifts (which actually is a symbol of being clean, rich and happy in the coming year) and extra travels to visit relatives. Plus, hard job to clean all corners of the house. Anyhow, we celebrate Tsagaan Sar as the day to express respect to elder people and relatives, renew friendship and sympathy to each other and reconfirm family ties. Tsagaan sar will remain as one of the main holiday of Mongolians. Now all the challenges and arguments have gone with the happy Tsagaan sar days until next lunar calendar new year.