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**WOMAN'S IMAGE AS A REFLECTION OF FEMININITY IN  
KALMYK LINGUACULTURE**

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*Abstract*

The article is devoted to the images of Kalmyk women in the social roles of mother, wife, daughter-in-law, grandmother, mother-in-law and daughter. Kalmyk proverbs and sayings are used as reference material, since, being chunks of language developed in ancient times, they have reflected the ethnic vision of femininity. The article shows that paroemia reflects patriarchal insight into a lower status of a woman as contrary to that of a man, outlining her role within the family framework, although society recognizes the merits of a woman as a continuer of the human kind. In proverbs and sayings, a woman in the role of mother and grandmother has a positive assessment, whereas a woman in the role of stepmother and mother-in-law is negatively evaluated. Daughter is considered as a temporary member of the family, who after getting married becomes a member of her husband's family; she is regarded as a free labor source in her new family. In Kalmyk linguistic culture a woman is endowed with communicative qualities (politeness, reverence, modesty), while her mental and organizational skills are not highly appreciated. Politeness and modesty are considered the greatest advantage of a Kalmyk woman. Paroemia most often gives a woman a negative characteristic. The exception is mother and grandmother who are given a uniquely positive assessment. They are endowed with the best human and feminine traits including kindness, patience, ability to work hard and wisdom. The androcentrism of Kalmyk environment manifests itself in the images of women and the assessments of their roles.

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**Keywords:** The Kalmyks, paroemia, woman's images, femininity.



## 1. Introduction

In each society, there is a specific interpretation of “masculinity” and “femininity”, since the notions of “masculinity” and “femininity” reflect ethnic features of linguistic culture, in particular the world view related to gender characteristics. To understand gender-sensitive representations, it is necessary to study typical images delivered by linguaculture, which are formed primarily under the influence of social structure and the family as its basic unit.

## 2. Problem Statement

Historical and ethnographic literature (Bühler, 1846; Erdniev, 1985; Zhitetsky, 1893; Avliev, 2012) suggests that traditional Kalmyk society was arranged in conformity with the strict gender principle, i.e. male-female dichotomy under the masculine primacy, as reflected in the proverb “*муха болвчн – утх, му болвчн – эр залу*” that means ‘though dull but a knife, though bad but a man!’.” The gender-related principle can also be traced in the Kalmyk manner to develop an area. Thus, traditionally, dwelling was partitioned into a male (left) and female (right) half; agricultural supplies, household utensils and personal items were placed subject to the gender of their owner. The way men and women used to share their place of living was also strictly fixed, namely, women were allowed to occupy only the female (right) half of a house, whereas men occupied the male (left) half. Gender also determined the succession of people in space: abiding by certain norms and rules women were positioned strictly after men. Gender also established certain standards of behavior when entering a house and leaving it, securing primacy for men. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting from the transition to a sedentary lifestyle, many elements constituting the material culture of the Kalmyks changed. In particular, the Kalmyks rejected yurts, typical dwellings of nomadic pastoralists, and now live in fixed-site houses. In this regard, the order of sharing the place of living, based on the gender principle (male-female, left-right), is not respected. However, if it is an important occasion related to the history of a family (wedding, funeral, engagement, commemoration, etc.), people obey this principle: women are positioned in a room strictly after men, men lead all activities.

Gender was vividly embodied in the custom of *хадмлнн* ‘prohibiting a married Kalmyk woman to pronounce the names of her husband’s older relatives’, which shaped the specific speaking activity of Kalmyk women. This enables some linguists to believe that Kalmyks have a female language (Ramstedt, 1957), a female dialect (Aalto, 1961), female words (Ochirov, 1910; Bitkeeva, 1976). In addition, Kalmyk notions of “masculinity” and “femininity” are reflected in the images of a man and a woman, who are vividly embodied in folklore.

## 3. Research Questions

The paper is concerned with the women’s images, embodying the Kalmyk visions of femininity. As a matter of fact, some aspects of the topic were covered in Mongolism, though (Bitkeeva, 1976; Shalkhakov, 1982; Aalto, 1961; Zhalsanova, 2009; Badmaeva, 2008; Dashiyeva, 2011; Enkhtsetseg, 2010, etc.), the images of men and women as a reflection of the Kalmyk idea of masculinity and femininity have not been the subject of special scientific research yet. This determines the novelty and relevance of the paper.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

The paper aims to study the women's images represented in folklore (based on proverbs and sayings), which conveys the ethnic idea of how Kalmyks understand femininity in a concise but comprehensive form.

#### 5. Research Methods

The research of women's images as Kalmyk ideas of femininity is methodologically based on the principle of consistency, which consists in a holistic overview of a set of characteristics, typical of a person, in one image or another, as a representative of a certain ethnic group and gender. The analysis of language material is determined by the objectives of study. The analysis and interpretation of linguistic materials were performed through statistical, comparative, descriptive and linguacultural methods. The evaluation of materials addressing the specificity of the Kalmyk linguistic culture, an integrated approach was used based on the comparison of scientific data available in linguistics. Kalmyks proverbs and sayings about a woman, extracted by continuous sampling from the most complete and authoritative source (Todaeva, 2007), were used as language material.

#### 6. Findings

According to the Kalmyks, the mission of a person is to establish a family, and marriage is a necessary stage in a person's life. Marriage, along with all preceding events, is one of the most important milestones in human life. According to the Kalmyk family ethics, each person should start a family, seek and find a spouse, because the life of a lonely person is worse than that of a stray dog '*гергн уга кун йовач нохач доор*'. The Kalmyks believe that it is only after the wedding that a young couple is able to move to the next life stage – *кун болх* that means 'become people'. Such evaluation of marriage corresponds to the concept of the Kalmyks concerning the family institution, in which each child is brought up being aware of the importance and necessity of marriage. This is particularly true of a woman who finds protection within marriage, because, according to the stereotype, her father supports and protects her when she isn't married, and her husband – when she is. In any case, the unacceptability for a woman to be a single and independent unit is emphasized.

The life of a traditional Kalmyk family was strictly organized; there was a certain range of household chores defined for each member. Thus, women were responsible for doing the housework and feeding households, while men were in charge of household management (cattle grazing, preparing woods, livestock food, drinking water, and other kinds of hard work). Owing to the gender-sensitive distribution of duties, a range of regular tasks were gradually assigned to children, which they obviously adopted in their own newly-born families. With respect to moral and ethical qualities developed in a family, modesty, obedience and respect were instilled from birth into girls, while rigor, responsibility and demanding – into boys. These qualities are necessary when men and women perform different social functions, and it is these qualities that society expects from its members.

Girlhood refers to an important stage in the life of a woman. During this period, a girl receives the necessary education, skills required for future family life. This is a short period of time full of carelessness, universal love, respect and care, because after marriage a girl must begin a difficult life full of exhausting

work in a new social medium she is completely unfamiliar with. At the same time, this is a period of preparation for the main mission of a woman – to be mother and wife. Any society expects a girl to possess such qualities as modesty, kindness, thrift, diligence, health and respect for people.

A Kalmyk girl was raised by her mother from an early age. Education was built on labor and personal example. A girl from early childhood was engaged in the housework guided by her mother or grandmother. With a view to observing common decencies a girl must go to bed later, and wake up earlier than the others, as stated in the proverb: “*оньсиг уудлад шинжлэдг, күүкиг өрүнд шинжлэдг* that means 'the lock is checked when opened with the key, the girl is examined in the morning', *күүкиг гертнь шинжлэдг, көвүг кеер шинжлэдг* that means 'the girl is examined when she is at home, the young man is examined when he is working in the steppe' ”.

In society, a girl should behave pursuant to etiquette. She cannot contradict or express her opinion, she should show respect and reverence for elderly and men. Sincerity and respect are highly appreciated. The girl is loved and respected by the entire family. “None of the males could utter any indecent words if the girl can hear. The Kalmyks do not even dare to say or do something bad to her. Brothers are extremely polite and correct to their sisters, always being their advocates and assistants. Maternal grandparents and cousins treat the girl equally well. They take all measures to ensure that girls are always pleased with them”. This attitude arises from Kalmyk belief that a girl is a paragon of purity and virtue. In turn, a girl should look after her honor and that of her relatives, since it is believed that “*күүкнэ алянь цогцан геедг, көвүнэ алянь жүрһлэн геедг* that means 'a wanton woman quickly gets out of shape, while a young man with uncontrolled sexual behavior loses his happiness' ”. Girl’s friendliness and cheerful disposition are highly valued: “*нарта хур кү норһдг, нээрч күүкн седкл байрлулдг* means 'the rain on a sunny day refreshes you, and a cheerful girl uplifts your spirits' ”.

A Kalmyk girl does not attract attention by being physically fit. Admittedly, physical characteristics are not crucial but internal qualities are. According to the Kalmyks, modesty is an important trait of the girl’s character. A girl cannot be noisy and talkative, she should always be “neatly and decently dressed, an untidy girl will be criticized by everyone. Girls must be graceful, slim, with a fit belly. The smaller their waist, the more they satisfy the aesthetic sense of the Kalmyks”. The girl's clothes included a belt (History of Kalmykia, 2009, pp. 48) showing off the girl’s slim and lovely figure.

When making a match, the Kalmyks follow the rule: “*экинь хэлэж күүкин ав, эцкинь хэлэж күүнд од* that means 'proposing to a girl, look at her mother, getting married to a man, look at his father'. Fiancé’s parents first need to check how fiancée’s dwelling and housekeeping are arranged, because this is what she will be responsible for in her future family life. The material welfare, both of the family and all relatives as well as girl’s behavior, character, her ability to keep home is addressed. In addition, a great importance is attached to her mother’s character, behavior and qualities, as she shapes her daughter’s identity from the very childhood. Meeting the girl’s family “*кичгэс бэрсн ноха, күүкнэс ханьлси энкр* means 'a dog that you took as a puppy is better, as with a girl you’ve known from your childhood' ”.

In accordance with Kalmyk customs, after marriage, daughter becomes a stranger for her family, as from that moment she belongs to her husband’s family. Any girl finds it difficult to sustain such attitude both physically when spatial links with her family are lost, and morally without the support of her beloved,

being among people she does not know, closely monitored by her new relatives who believe that “*күүнә күүкнә күзүн бат* that means 'the neck of a strange girl will endure everything' ”

Kalmyk mindset, while acknowledging the institution of marriage, emphasizes the desirability for a woman to get married to a man she truly loves (“*ажрһ унш өдрин деегүр эңкр авш жилин деегүр*”), though, earlier she usually married someone whom her relatives chose. In the paroemia nothing is said about love, which indirectly confirms the idea that marriage was based on an economic component. Basically, marriage did not stem from the emotional attachment of two people. It tended to be a union of two people identified by their parents as a married couple.

Widows and widowers also got married because “*um komn er uga bolvl, biidән ezn uga, er komn em uga bolvl, gertә* 'if a woman is left without a husband, she has no master, if a man is left without a wife, he has no mistress in his house’”. In Kalmyk family ethics, the first spouse – *аваль* – proves to be particularly valuable. The loss of the first spouse is regarded as a great misfortune, because with his/her departure happiness leaves a person: “*замин дундас мөрнәсн салх, насни дундас аваясн салх* that means 'to remain without a horse in the middle of the way is the same as without a spouse in the middle of life’”. The Kalmyks believe that only those people who have lived in the first and only marriage until the end of their lives can be considered truly happy.

The largest number of Kalmyk proverbs and sayings are devoted to the social roles of wife and mother, considered as the most important among the roles intended for a woman. In proverbs, the wife is endowed with both positive and negative characteristics. The ability to keep the house is thought to be the most important and desirable quality to reside in a wife. According to the Kalmyks, the well-being of the family depends on the wife: “*эмәл мөрнә кеерүл, гергн жирһлин кеерүл* meaning that 'a saddle is the decoration of a horse, while a woman is the decoration of a house’”.

The image of an ideal wife can be found in proverbs and sayings. It is not physical description that seems to be of utter importance, but some practical skills, as well as human qualities. The values of lenience, thrift, and the contribution of the wife to the well-being of her family are positively evaluated. A great emphasis is placed on the conflict-free nature, which may affect the domestic harmony. A good wife is thought to be a woman who is busy all day being wholly occupied with the housework and is not bored with a monotonous, isolated life. Regarding her family life she is the one who follows her husband’s will, does not show her independence and has a docile nature. It is considered a great success for a man to have an obedient spouse as his wife: “*келәрн тәәлдг хоста бол, үгәрн болдг гергтә бол* means 'purchase boots that are easily taken off, get a wife who is under her man’s sway’”. A wife is considered bad if she controls her husband and lets her tongue say. The disadvantages of a bad wife also include a wicked, angry nature.

In paroemia, the main responsibility of a wife involves setting up home and raising children in accordance with societal moral principles. Succeeding in her duties is viewed as a great virtue of a woman. An unhappy alliance is considered as bad luck when a man gets a bad mistress: “*татвр уга күүкд кү буулһхин ормд, үктлән белвсн йовсн деер* means 'it is better to be single than to be married to an untidy woman’”, a woman who does not respect her husband and his relatives is “*күүкн күн уята эс болсн хөөн дун угань сән, көвүн күн задһа эс болсн хөөн дуутань сән*”.

The idea that a married couple should tackle their family affairs themselves with no outsiders to meddle is highlighted in a number of proverbs. In general, the tendency to peaceful settlement of disputes

resides in the Kalmyk communication culture (Esenova, 2015). Mother, as an educator to her children, first of all demonstrates non-conflict behavior, because “*сүргэсн зулсн бух кецү, керүлд дурта эм кецү*” meaning 'a frightening bull is the one to run away from a herd, a terrible woman is the one to enjoy quarrels'; *утхан бүлүдсн залу – мах иддг, келэн бүлүдсн гергн маля үздг* 'a man who is sharpening a knife, will eat meat, a woman who is sharpening her tongue, will try a whip (will be horsewhipped)’. Looking to avoid quarrels and conflict situations, showing tolerance are the values to be preached by Buddhism as well. Undoubtedly, it has a great impact on the Kalmyk mindset. In public, a wife tries to uphold her husband’s social status, since, according to Kalmyks, her husband is gauged by his wife: “*эр сээтэ эм номһн, эзн сээтэ мөрн номһн*”. Greed is viewed as a negative trait of a woman’s character (“*ховдг гергтэ күн хорһта шөлу удг уга*”).

Such values of a woman as commitment, protection and thought for her children and all members of the household are revealed in the image of mother. This thematic subgroup of proverbs tends to express different points of view. On the one hand, the heavy female burden associated with being a mother and raising children is broadcast through the image of mother as such. It is a matter of mother’s ongoing anxieties about her children throughout the entire life, regardless of their age, of her great responsibility for their fate. On the other hand, mother’s labor and her contribution to raising and educating children are evaluated through the children or the public. The impartiality should be stressed here. It is especially valuable that the evaluation is conveyed as a shared collective opinion: “*ээжсин ачиг кезэчигн хэрүлжэ болиго*” that means 'mother’s care can never be paid back’. A. A. Potebnya in due time paid attention to the generalized nature of paroemias: they “do not go beyond the volume specified by their sum total, nevertheless, they generalize the particulars involved, treating them as a single entity thus attributing to them just common features” (1968, pp. 415).

In the image of mother, a woman does not have any negative qualities; there is not a single proverb saying that the mother is quarrelsome, talkative, stupid, etc. Her behavior is not regarded wrong. According to K. Jung, “such qualities as maternal care and sympathy are strongly related to the archetype of mother; as with the magical power of a woman; wisdom and spiritual exaltation beyond the limits of reasoning, any human instinct or impulse; everything that is attributed to kindness, commitment or support, and encourages growth and fertility” (Jung, 1996, pp. 218).

A Kalmyk mother embraces the best human and female qualities. It is not fortuitous to find in the paraoemia the statement that the maternal function is the main female role, and motherhood is the main mission of a woman. Her main value is fertility. The proverb figuratively says that a woman who gave birth to 9 sons is sitting solemnly in a big house: “*йисн көвү харһсн эж ик герт суудг*”.

A few proverbs are devoted to the daughter’s role, since Kalmyk daughter is considered a temporary member of her family; after marriage she leaves her parents’ house and becomes a member of another family. The proverbs depict the heavy burden of daughter in her new family. In Kalmyk proverbs, the image of daughter-in-law is ambiguous. On the one hand, she should behave respectfully towards her husband’s relatives (“*тоолад келлэ бергнэ зөв, тоомжад келлэ берин зөв*” that means 'speaking after careful consideration the elder daughter-in-law is right; whereas speaking respectfully the younger daughter-in-law is right’), on the other hand, she take short views. Thus, she is excited to see her relatives sharing property, because she fondly believes that she will get something. In addition, special attention is paid to

the relatives of daughter-in-law, on whom her role in the new family is dependent: “*хад сээтэ үгэн бардм, хадмуд сээтэ күргн бардм* that means 'a happy fox lives near beautiful mountains, a son-in-law is lofty when his wife's relatives are rich'”. A married girl's relatives are not able to help her, though (“*өгсн күүкнд төркн түслдг уга*”).

The Kalmyks consider procreation as an important human mission pursued through the entire life. The son is considered a transmitter of his father's family, while a daughter is the continuer of the human kind. It may be no accident that the Kalmyks consider “*тохм таср!* implying 'Let your people be terminated'” a terrible curse. In this regard, a childless woman is considered by the Kalmyks as not fulfilling her main mission. The paroemia describes the gloomy fate of a childless woman, in particular, it says that “*үрн уга күүнэ чееж харһу* 'a childless woman has a dark soul', *үрн уга эк эцк махн уга ясн мет* 'parents without children are like boneless meat', *уг ардгин үкр хусрң, уг тасрдгин бааша хусрң* 'whose wife is childless has his kind terminated', etc.

Few proverbs are devoted to the image of spinster. They speak about a heavy burden carried by a single woman: “*көгшин күүкнд өр удан цээдг* that means 'the dawn comes longer for a spinster'; *күүкнэ тун төркндән төрнэ тун ездән* 'the worst of the girls stays with her parents until old age, while the worst of the horses – with its owner'; *үмсн өтхлэ һулмтин зуд, күүкн өтхлэ герин зуд* 'old ash is a trouble for a trivet, while a spinster is a burden for her family'” and many others. In paroemia, the status of married women is opposed to single marital status. It is noted that a single woman is unprotected and inferior: “*агтин бийд – эр талтң, авалин бийд – эм талтң* that means 'as long as there is a horse, a man is self-confident, as long as a legitimate husband is alive, a woman is self-confident'”. It is not fortuitous that there were no divorces among Kalmyks, family life with the first and only spouse was particularly valued. Historical and artistic Kalmyk literature describes the bitter fate of such women who rarely dared to leave their husbands. A divorced woman did not find sympathy either among her relatives or in society and was forced to live with indelible shame until the end of her days, because it was believed that, figuratively speaking, no one inhabits the place that used to be a cattle camp (“*буусн бүүрдән буудг уга, хэрүлсн экирән авдг уга*”). Furthermore, another point of view on the second wife is presented, specifying that life with her is sweeter than lamb (“*хөөт гергн хөөнэ махнас эмтәхн*”).

Stepmother in Kalmyk proverbs and sayings is assessed as negative, because she fails to be compared with birth mother in the depth and sincerity of feelings. She is cold with non-native children: “*эврән ээжсин келн элсн тоңһргин ир, күүнэ ээжсин келн күцц төңһргин ир* that means 'words uttered by a birth mother are like the blade of a dull razor, words uttered by a stepmother are like the blade of a sharp razor'”.

In the Kalmyk language there are just a few proverbs about the widow. The fact is that the Kalmyks used to practice Levirate marriage, the custom decreeing a dead man's brother to be the preferred marriage partner of the widow. Levirate marriage was one of the ways to continue the clan of the deceased. They say that the widow goes to her husband's brother: “*ах үкхлэ – бергн герәсн, агт үкхлэ – арсн герәсн*”.

In the Kalmyk linguistic culture, mother-in-law is portrayed as a woman whose mood can turn on a dime: “*хаврин боран халста хуһста, хадм ээж нарта цаарта* that means 'spring rain suddenly starts and stops, mother-in-law is one day friendly, another day she is not'”. Meanwhile, there are proverbs

detailing that mother-in-law the son-in-law value each other's respect: “*күргн хадм эх хойр күндлх ик үнтэд тоолдг* that means 'son-in-law having mother-in-law is calm'”.

Kalmyk proverbs and sayings depict the image of an elderly woman who, despite having lost her social and physical adequacy, enjoys well-deserved respect and reverence in society. Kalmyk grandmother is highly valued in society. It is a tribute to her role in raising children and transferring folk wisdom and life philosophy. In paroemia, the failure to repay the maternal virtue is conveyed: “*ээжин ачиг кезэчиг хэрүлжэ боли уга* that means 'mother's care can never be paid back'; *ээжин ачиг альхн деерэн мах чанжэ өгвчигн хэрүлжэ боли уга* 'mother's duty cannot be repaid, even if a piece of meat is fried and served on your palm’”.

## 7. Conclusion

A woman in the Kalmyk linguistic culture is endowed with communicative qualities (politeness, reverence, modesty), whereas her mental and organizational skills are not highly appreciated. Politeness and modesty are considered the greatest values of a Kalmyk woman. In this regard, paroemia most often gives a woman a negative characteristic. The exception is mother and grandmother who are given a uniquely positive assessment. They are endowed with the best human and feminine traits including kindness, patience, ability to work hard and wisdom. Mother's role to be a continuer of the human kind is particularly emphasized. In the Kalmyk view, a wife should combine a variety of qualities: housekeeping skills (dexterity, housekeeping, ability to work hard, economy), communicative qualities (obedience, respectfulness, calmness, friendliness, non-conflict nature), moral qualities (kindness, responsiveness, compassion, warmth), pedagogical skills (the ability to get on well with children, cultivate the best human qualities in them). Equally important is the ability to establish calm atmosphere and well-being in the family and to assist her husband. The remaining social roles of women can have either negative (for example, mother-in-law), or both positive and negative (for example, widow, mother-in-law) assessment..

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