On the Cultural and Social Significance of Airag in Mongolia – and beyond

Airag (Mongolian айраг) is fermented mares’ milk, a slightly alcoholic drink and one of Mongolia’s traditional dairy products. It is also found in other parts of Central Asia where it is widely known as kumys (for example in Kazakh: қымыз). However, the Mongolian traditional methods and rituals belong to the most notable cultural possessions, and in 2019, the “Traditional technique of making Airag in Khokhur and its associated customs” was inscribed on UNESCO’s “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”.

In this talk we explore the importance of airag culture in Mongolians’ social life. We focus on traditional and local methods of production, consumption as well as symbolic roles as a health-giving, pure and beneficial drink in the daily lives of herders. We also introduce some religious and ceremonial rituals concerning airag. The presentation is made with special reference to Saikhan sum, a pastoral area of Bulgan province in Mongolia. We will discover what makes Saikhan sum unique in producing a national ‘brand’ of airag, and discuss the economic role of airag in the lives of rural herders and on the markets nationwide. The research is based on interviews with representatives of airag producers, the speaker’s firsthand experience as an inhabitant of Saihkan district of Bulgan province, and related written materials.