

THE KAZAKH YURT

By Daniyar Baidaralin and Susan Saxon

Kazakh Aul of the U.S., Association for American & Kazakh Families

Yurt....There is so much in this simple word, for like so many Kazakh words, “yurt” has several levels of meaning. There are four major definitions:

1. The physical structure of the yurt itself—its walls, dome, skylight, and doors. This definition is the most commonly used, but the least correct.
2. Literally translated, *yurt* means a geographical site, a settlement’s physical locale, or a living area.
3. Household, as in the American notion of the word. For example, Zhanat Baidaralin moved his *yurt*—his household, including his wife and two sons—to the US. Zhanat’s title is *Yurt-Basy* – head of household.
4. *Yurt* also can describe an extended family or kin. Like Shakespeare’s “House of Capulet,” we can say that Daniyar and Bakhtiyar are men from Baidaralin’s Yurt. Used in poetry and literature, it is the least commonly used definition.

These definitions are not mutually exclusive, as if we are being presented with a list from the Merriam-Webster English dictionary. Instead, the Kazakh view is that one or more meanings may apply, depending on the situation. In order to understand what the yurt represents to Kazakhs, one needs to understand how native Kazakhs view their world and everything in it. The traditional Kazakh world view is very different from the western world view.

In the West, we tend to think on a linear basis, where one thing leads to the next and definitions are cut and dry. However, the native Kazakh approach is essentially an East Asian perspective. Kazakhs view their world in a sphere- or web-like, holistic, manner. Each element of the whole contributes to a deeper level of understanding.

The Kazakhs are descendants of a very ancient civilization, the legacy of which remains in today’s modern cultural sensibility. Nomadic life has always been a social organization that combines harmony with nature with high social and cultural achievements, including a complex tribal and social structure (that has lasted through the centuries), a rich mythology and oral tradition, effective economy, practical engineering, and a military machine.

Nomadic society was complex. Groups of auls survived within a complex social structure called an *Orda* (Horde) ruled by Khans. Inside auls, people lived in nomadic homes – yurts - which were the building blocks of the auls. A group of auls consisted of members of extended families, forming a *Ru* or *Roo-Kaz* (tribe), which was the next level in the social structure of the *Orda*. A group of tribes formed an *El* (a Turkic word meaning nation, or a people), the *Orda*.

Respect for everything in the world predominated. The Kazakhs considered themselves to be a part of nature, not rulers of nature. Animals, humans, nature, the universe, and material objects were all part of One Whole. As such, there was no divergence between the existences of humans and nature, people and society, men and women, or between generations. Kazakhs struggled with nature in the manner that animals did; without destruction, and only taking from nature what was necessary to live. Their grappling with nature was a collective struggle for survival, which to them was the whole point of existence.

Science teaches that humans and other mammals have many similarities. But the nomads went further. They believed that everything in the universe has the same structure: trees, stones, mountains, rivers, grass, animals, humans, fish, insects, stars, the sun, moon and even Mother Earth. All of these were believed to have a similar metaphysical body, an aura or spirit that is not a part of the material world.

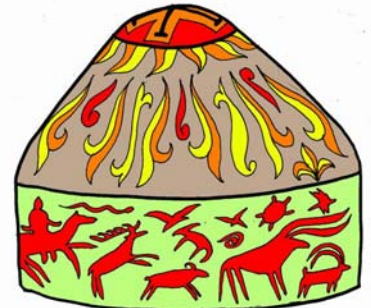
Nonetheless, the nomads didn't separate the material and metaphysical worlds; they believed that the two combined to form one universe. They thought of the world as a dwelling with an endless amount of materialistic and non-materialistic creatures, and tried to match this notion of the universe with everything they produced. If you take a closer look, you will notice that every single item produced by Kazakhs is a model of the universe.

For example, the structure of the yurt symbolizes the three levels of the Universe:

The walls of the yurt (*Kerege*) represent the Lower world, where humans and animals live their lives.

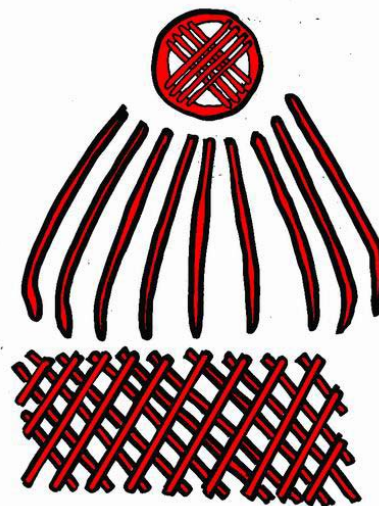
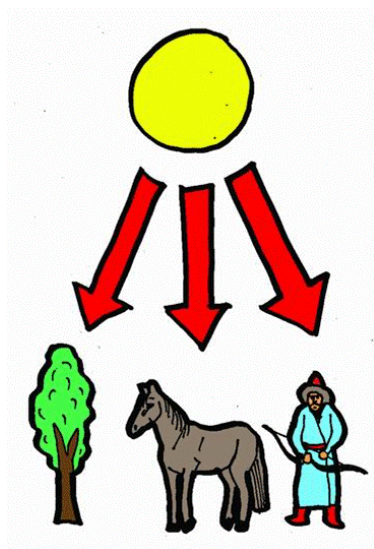
The dome structure of the yurt (*Uysks*) represents the Middle world, where spirits live.

The *Shanyrak* at the top of the yurt symbolizes the Upper world – the world of the Sun; a source of life energy, and the highest spirit.



These beliefs are rooted in an ancient myth called the World Mountain, the World Tree and the World Ocean. The World Tree grows on top of the World Mountain, which stands in the middle of the endless World Ocean. The World Mountain is so tall that it goes through all of the Worlds in the Universe (Lower, Middle and Upper). The shape, structure, and symbolism of the yurt was designed to match the representations contained within this myth, and thus, it is also a model and a symbol of the World Mountain. (Egyptian and Indian Pyramids are also examples of this same myth).

When you scrutinize the symbolic significance of the yurt, you can see how this is all works together: the Sun (represented by the *Shanyrak*) in the Upper world sends its rays (represented by the *Uyks*) to the Lower world (represented by the *Kerege*), thereby giving life energy to all living creatures. Within the yurt, this myth comes alive as sunlight and its life energy enters through the *Shanyrak* to reach the people who live in the Lower world, coexisting with the spirits of ancestors that are believed to live in the dome of the yurt in the Middle world. As a symbol, the nomadic home exists within the greater and more powerful world of nature.



When a yurt is raised, we also experience the symbolic representation of another ancient myth, "Chaos to Order," common to all early Central Asian nomads. According to this myth, all the chaotic elements of the universe and the world were born and then came together in an orderly fashion, remaining that way only until the cycle began again and they reverted to chaos and then to order once again, and so on, forever. This is the life cycle of the yurt: always in motion packed and unpacked, raised and then taken down and moved to the next site,—an endless cycle of chaos and order.

In sum, the structure of the yurt, the process of raising it, and the life inside, represent much more than the daily existence of the nomads, for every aspect of the nomadic home was enhanced by mythology and traditional beliefs of the Kazakh people. In turn, every aspect of the meaning of the word *yurt* impacts Kazakh sensibility in modern times. Today, when people take part in erecting a yurt, they are building a home and simultaneously taking part in ordering their world by building structure out of the chaos of many pieces. For the Kazakh, this act signifies the eternal unity of humanity and the universe, where all creatures live and where everything is a part of a greater whole. We are very lucky that we can still participate in this ancient ritual today in the 21st century!

A note about the linguistic origins of the word “yurt:”

Although yurt is the most common English translation for the nomadic home, linguistically, the term is not correct. Yurt is a Turkic word; in Kazakh, the word is “Zhurt,” and it means settlement, encampment, living place/area, territory. Thus, yurt/zhurt actually means the site or place for a yurt, but not the structure itself. The more accurate name for a Kazakh home is “Ui,” or “Kiiz ui” which means felt home. Nonetheless, yurt remains the most common term used today because over time through scientific articles it replaced the original name. Moreover, ui now has general meaning and is the Kazakh term for a home or house of any structure.