

# CURRENT STATUS AND SAFEGUARDING MEASURES OF ORAL TRADITIONS AND EPICS IN MONGOLIA

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Central Asia is a region that has served as the centre of social and economic, in particular cultural interrelations of East and West. The nations of this region have a rich cultural heritage and ancient traditions like any nation in the world.

The nations of Central Asia - Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan - make up a unified cultural space, defined by great grassland steppes and famous mountains, nomadic culture and common history, relics and traditions. Throughout this region we find petroglyphs, keregsur, steles, ruins and other monuments attesting to the mingling of peoples in the Central Asian steppe since prehistory. The territory of our own nation, Mongolia, has indeed been the centre several nomadic empires at various stages in history, established by different peoples of Central Asia sharing a similar cultural origin - Hunnu, Khitan, Turks, Uighurs, Kyrgyz and Mongols. The peoples of Central Asia do distinguish with their unique way of life, rituals, belief and worship, customs and traditions, oral traditions and folk arts derived from nomadic culture and civilizations. One of such precious intangible heritage of Central Asia is the epic traditions. The great epics of Central Asia such as *Geser*, *Jangar*, and

*Manas* have united the nomadic people through its similarities of origin, form, structural composition, and content, and have gathered us here in Tashkent.

Thus it would naturally be extremely valuable for us to increase our cooperation in studying and protecting our common Central Asian heritage. UNESCO has already supported a number of activities in this direction, including the international symposium festival on Central Asian epics held in 1997 and 2013 in Mongolia as a follow up to the UNESCO Declaration and Convention on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, and a series of scientific conferences and expeditions within the 'Silk Roads: Roads of dialogue' and 'Steppe road' projects and the festival of Central Asia's countries titled *Cultural diversity of Central Asia and dialogue* held at Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris (2005). We hope this Tashkent meeting may serve as an impetus for a more systematic organization of joint scientific research and expeditions involving all Central Asian States, and for the establishment of joint policies for protecting our valuable intangible heritage - including language, oral traditions, nomadic folk knowledge and technologies, folk music and dance, and epics. A regional approach to such actions, supported by UNESCO and our national governments, would help us to strengthen our common heritage while promoting better awareness of our diversity. Therefore I look forward to more discussions and meetings in the context of this meeting which I hope will lay the ground for productive dialogue and cooperation.

There are today around seven thousand languages spoken on earth. They are divided into twenty six language families. The Mongolian language belongs to the Altaic language family, together with the Manchu and Tungus languages. This language is, in fact, an inexhaustible treasure that reflects the subtle inventive thinking and creative skills of the Mongolians.

This thinking is expressed in the Mongolian oral traditions, traditional arts, customs, and habits, which have been transmitted through many generations to our own.

According to the views of scholars, this abundant treasure of folklore can be divided into several types: oral poetry without melodies (spells and incantations, words of libation and anointment, words of propitious omen, Mongolian triad, proverbs and aphorisms and riddles so on), oral traditions, accompanied by melodies (words accompanied by melodies to cause a mother animal to accept its young, benediction, odes, epics, so on) oral prose literature traditions (folk tales, real life legend so on)<sup>1</sup>. Mongolians created great epics, such as the *Secret History of Mongols*, *the Gêsér*, *Žangar* and *Han Haranguj*, among others. These epics feed the romantic, adventure-seeking, and aesthetic needs of present day audiences.

There are some very interesting and special oral traditions in Mongolia. For example:

The charm and spell is one form of the ancient oral traditions which endeavours to achieve one's ends by the supernatural powers of words, sounds and gestures<sup>2</sup>.

When an udder of an animal is swelled we shake a (brass) ladle and speak:

The head of animal is up  
The head of swelling is down,  
Èm dom èm dom (soon be cured)

When we castrate animals, we burn juniper needles and carry this animal cross bar and speak:

Be as light as a feather,  
Cure quicker than the speed of bullet,  
Hurray, hurray dur, dur suuhaa

Mongolian oral tradition is referred to our customs and habits. One of the remarkable examples is the words of libation and anointment. The libation is the offering of the first drops of milk or of any dairy product to heaven, spirits of shamans, souls of progenitors, or mountain and water spirits, we make this milk libation on choosing a day that is auspicious to the powerful heaven. There are words of libation:

Vault of patronage, Ambrosial nymph, Life-giving planet,  
Blue-sky,  
Clouded earth, Both are the best Twinkling stars, Round  
sun, Crescent moon

The Mongolian triad is referred to the Mongolian preference of symbolism - number three which is traditional. In other words, a triad is an expression of triple destitutions in oral literature. This kind or genre is not common in the literatures of other nations. The composition of most triads consists of upper, middle and low realms or organic, inorganic and human objects which display universal phenomenon, for example:

In three destitutions of the universe,  
Sky is destitute of pillars (upper realm), Mountain is  
destitute of girdle (middle realm) Ocean is destitute of  
lid (nymphic realm)

Three riches of the universe,  
Sky is rich in stars (upper realm),  
Earth is rich in roots (middle realm) Ocean is rich in  
water (nymphic realm)

Three lovelinesses of the universe,  
The full moon is lovely (inorganic universe), The flowers  
are lovely (organic universe)  
The maxims of parents are lovely (human universe)<sup>3</sup>

Traditions and rituals related to animal husbandry hold a major position in the Mongolian traditional practices and customs. One of the most important is the singing meant to cause a mother-animal to accept its young. This special practice relies upon a unique form of psychological relationship between humans and their domesticated animals. The practice calms animals with harmonious singing and lyrical music, which is meant to form or strengthen the bond between the mother and its offspring (or an unrelated orphan offspring).

My pure-white ewe,  
Why do you reject your lamb? The smell of your milk is  
In his tail!  
Hos! Hos! Hos! Hos!  
Prosperous summer will arrive  
The world will be verdant  
Your nipples will be caked  
Who will suck them?  
Toig! Toig! Toig! Toig!<sup>4</sup>

## Mongolian epics

One of the richest legacies developed by Mongolians for many centuries is the lengthy heroic epics. An epic is the largest genre of poetry, and it was formed in the process of folklore development. The art of reciting the Mongolian epic thrived until the beginning of the twentieth century. These epics can be enormous - *the Zangar epic* consists of several thousands of lines of text - and several of the most famous Mongolian epics, such as the *Zangar*, *Geserijn Tuuz*, *Khan Kharanguj*, and *Bum-Erdene* epics, have become the subject of studies at the worldwide level nowadays. Over 280 epics are registered at present.

Today there are about ten minstrels of different ethnic groups, including the Urianhaj, Durvud, Bajad and Halkh nationalities in different parts of Mongolia. These artists have inherited the rare cultural legacy of several thousand years of history and they are making contributions to revive the epic reciting traditions and bequeath them to the young generations. The epic reciting art is called 'tuul' hajlah'. A person who is skilled at reciting epics is called a 'tuul'c'.

Everybody is interested in how and when the epics originated. These magnificent expressions of the cultural legacy of Mongols likely originated as tales that spoke about the gallant deeds of our ancestor-chieftains and brave warriors. According to researches, the main type of heroic epic of Central Asia, specially of Mongolian heroic epic was formed in the 1st century A.D.<sup>5</sup>

The ambitions of ancient nomadic people who seek to live in harmony and quest for peace are reflected in the actions and views of the epics. Famous specialist of Mongolia J. Vladimirtsov noted that Mongolian epics are strongly linked to life on the steppe. The epics are national poems gracefully expressing nomadic views and dreams. The subjects of Mongol

epics include gallant knights, beautiful damsels, romances, trusty steeds, marriages, and struggles<sup>6</sup>.

The epic is sung not in ordinary vocal sounds, but in overtone singing similar to throat singing that manipulates the resonance through vocal folds, which might even be related to religious rituals. It's substantial to consider the epic melodies are similar to the shamanist calling of ancestral spirits and Buddhist mantra chanting in bass voice. We say in Mongolian not 'singing epic', but 'to tune epic', because the epic is recited in different sound than singing. It's interesting that this feature of singing overtone has been formed, transmitted and developed in its classical form only among nomads.

They are performed by a minstrel who is gifted at relating stories or in speech-art and can accompany themselves with a tuneful melody on a horse-head fiddle, *tovsuur* (two-stringed lute), *ekil* (western Mongolian fiddle with two strings), or *huucir* (four-stringed bowed instrument) according to established rules and customs.

There is a very strict rule not to change a hero's name or to reorder the actions of the epics. Nor is it acceptable to recite an epic at every place. The recitation of an epic is acceptable only at solemn state ceremonies, weddings, Naadam festivals, children's hair-cutting ceremonies, child-naming ceremonies, ceremonies held before hunting, mountain-worship and cairnworship ceremonies. They symbolize the good future for coming generations<sup>7</sup>.

Some epics can be recited in summer. For instance, it is forbidden to recite the epic Han Haranguj in summer. The reason is that the hero of the epic rebelled against heaven and earth and rescued the populace from lighting. Thus, Mongolians believe that if one recites the epic Han Haranguj in the summer, lighting may strike. It is unacceptable to recite epics on ordinary days in one's household. The head of the household brings the *tovsuur* to

one's home and places it in the honourable part of the home, and it spends several nights there. Then the minstrel is invited to the household. A ghee lamp is kindled. The offerings are prepared. The epic is selected by discussing with the people there. If one wishes to have a child, the epic *Erhnacin* harcaga ('Spoiled tierce-hawk') will be performed; if one wishes to be without misfortune, the epic 'Han Haranguj' will be performed; if one wishes to be fortunate, the epic *Bajan cagaan övgön* (Rich white old man) will be performed. If one wishes to exorcize evil spirits, the epic *Talyn har bodon* (Black boar of the steppe), and *Hürèl arslan magnaj* (Forehead of bronze lion) will be recited.

The recitation of an epic should begin at the moment when the stars appear at night. The Mongolian epics are very lengthy. There is a tradition among minstrels (*tuul'c*) in Mongolia, totune (sing) 'Ode to Altai Mountain' as prelude to singing epics. The recitation of epic breaks several times during the night. Some epics are recited for several nights. There is a forbiddance to make a noise while minstrel starts reciting an epic. If you knew one or two epics, you were not recognized as *tuul'c* or minstrel. There was a custom to eulogize the rich resources of the local mountains, rivers and game before a minstrel starts reciting an epic.

Mongolian epics consist of from hundreds to thousands of lines of text. To become minstrel (*tuul'c*) it is necessary for a person to have a good memory, good imagination, and great interest in reciting epics. This is the skill which can be taught by minstrels and obtained with one's own efforts. Mongol *Tuuli* was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2009.

There were considerable obstacles to the evolution, development, preservation and conservation of the Mongolian intangible cultural heritage in the long span of its history<sup>8</sup>. Since the collapse of their Empire, Mongols

have split and warred with each other many times. The Mongol nation came under the rule of the Manchu empire for two hundred years. These events restrained our spiritual and aesthetic sense, including the development and prosperity of the national intangible cultural heritage. In addition, Mongolia was subjected to the world communist ideology. Because of this, there was a forward step in certain fields of society. But under the motto of 'Proletarian new culture', traditional culture, customs, and national sentiment were suppressed as old, backward, obsolescent, and superstitious. The ideological campaigns against nationalism worked to interrupt the natural succession of the intangible cultural heritage. National items were mostly ignored. The folklore, folk art, traditions, customs, folk knowledge and traditional technologies were banned or destroyed. It was great tragedy for the Mongolians. It is not exaggeration to say that the practices of good national rituals, customs, ceremonies, and festivities were limited or fell in oblivion in that period.

After this victimization of the Mongolian culture came urbanization and the spread of globalization into Mongolia. In these conditions, modern popular culture has come to occupy the spaces that traditional culture used to hold and to make traditional cultural ways increasingly irrelevant in the lives of our people.

The Mongolian intangible cultural heritage has survived this difficult road of development and continues to maintain its rich content and artistic and aesthetic value. It remains worthy of art and literature of Mongolia. Mongolian language, folklore, traditional art, craft, traditional treatment, knowledge and wisdom are still being maintained.

Since 1990, Mongolia has opened to the rest of the world and embarked on a new path of development. Our national pride has been revived. We have reanimated our traditional culture and heritage and there is now a favourable

condition to preserve and safeguard our national culture.

The Mongolian Parliament adopted the Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage. The President of Mongolia issued decrees on the reverence and protection of the horse-headed fiddle, long song, and *höömej*. The government also approved national programmes to develop folk art, the horse-headed fiddle playing, long song, *höömej* singing, *tuuli* (epic) and *bielgee* dancing, all of which play significant roles in developing folk art.

Since 1997 Mongolia has more closely cooperated with UNESCO. Mongolian experts and specialists actively participated in UNESCO programmes and projects to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage. The 'Central Asian Epic' international symposium and festival was held in Mongolia in 1998. At this moment, Mongolian cultural figures and artists established the National Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage and started truly virtuous activities for the registration of artists, audio and audio-visual recordings and other types of documentation in the newly established centre.

For the last few years, thanks to the generous support from the Cultural Heritage Administration of the Republic of Korea and the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO in the Republic of Korea, we have been implementing a series of projects aimed at safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Mongolia. Within the implementation of these projects, major measures have been taken to form a favourable legal background, establish an inventory fund of the ICH, and bring UNESCO's Living Human Treasures System into Mongolia.

In addition, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of Mongolia, the Cultural and Arts Committee, and other NGOs organize traditional art festivals as well as contests and exhibitions on traditional performing arts

and craftsmanship on a regular basis. These organizations have also taken other measures to promote traditional culture and the arts in all provinces and cities in Mongolia, which also shows progress.

The National Programme of Mongolian Epic has been implemented since 2011 and within the framework of this Programme, the Government of Mongolia made a decision to organize the 'Central Asian Epic', 2nd International Symposium and Festival.

'Central Asian Epics' Regional Symposium Festival II was held from the 5th to 7th of August 2013 in Ulaanbaatar. The Symposium II was entitled 'Means of the safeguarding the epic, reviving the living tradition of epic performance and ensuring viability' and involved more than 100 epic performers, researchers, experts, scholars and specialists from 15 countries, such as Mongolia, Buryat Republic (Russian Federation), Tuva (Russian Federation), Kalmyk (Russian Federation), Saha-Yakut (Russian Federation), Xingjiang China, Inner Mongolia, USA, Korea, Kazakhstan, Tajikstan, Kongo, etc.

The UNESCO project on 'Safeguarding and Revitalizing the Mongolian Traditional Epic' started in June 2013. The contract was signed with 9 trainers-bearers and started to conduct apprenticeship-method trainings for revival and transmission. Each home-tutoring apprenticeship training centre trains 2-3 students and transmits 2-3 epics along with the technique. Rituals and customs related to epic performance will also be restored - primarily, the tradition of reciting epics during public and family festive events and rituals.

The guidebook for epic practitioners with contents including particularly the various techniques of epic performance and traditional knowledge of transmission has been produced and published 1000 pieces. Its purpose is to provide them with a step-by-step complete guide on the techniques to learn epic.

Serial publications will be produced. They will cover every text of epics from various ethnic groups in Mongolia and existing materials abroad concerning the Mongolian epics. There is also a significant amount of research materials and texts of epics collected since the 1940s in Mongolia that has never been published before. These volumes will serve as important and main accessories for research, study, dissemination and transmission.

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