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***The Epic of Jangar* – a Heroic Epic of the Western Mongols
and the Tradition of Its Telling**

Abstract

The *Epic of Jangar*, the heroic epic of the Western Mongols, is recognized as a masterpiece of the Kalmyk oral storytelling. The many-centuries-old epic cycle, believed to reflect Kalmyk nation's fight for their national identity has gained interest of the Western scholars. The long lasting research among the Kalmyks brought information on how the epic was transmitted by generations, forming a class of the storytellers, the so-called *Jangarchi*. Their repertoire often varied in its linguistic layer forming many different versions of the epic. Recitation of the songs was connected with different rituals and beliefs, accompanied with diversity of musical patterns and instruments. As late as the beginning of the nineteenth century their repertoire was being recorded and brought to the Western world. This in turn led to preserving this gradually fading cultural heritage.

The *Epic of Jangar* (*janggar*) is a heroic epic, which originated amongst the tribes of West Mongolia – the Oirats. The epic began forming in the fifteenth century at the time when the confederacy of the four Oirat tribes was formed. This confederacy was called *Dörben Oirat* – the “Union of the Four Tribes”. The term Oirat was the historic name of the Kalmyk people. At the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Kalmyk ancestors began their journey west of Xinjiang (the Uyghur Autonomous Region in West China today) and ultimately, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, ended their migration in the basin of the Don and Volga rivers.

The *Epic of Jangar* tells the story of the heroic actions of Jangar, ruler of the legendary state of Bumba and his 12 warriors. Similarly to other epics¹, it describes the life of the Mongol aristocracy. Their life was characterized by endless territorial wars, conquests of new lands, wars over beautiful women and great feasts.

The Kalmyks say that Jangar's fight with the enemy described in the epic symbolizes a hundred-year-long fight of the Kalmyk people for their national identity. At the same time it shows the hopes and dreams of the Kalmyks to achieve national independence.

The cycle can be treated as a heroic epic because it consists of versified songs about life, war journeys and heroic adventures of Jangar and his warriors. The songs can function as separate stories because each of them is dedicated to one of Jangar's companions. The introductory song² tells of Jangar, his childhood and stormy youth dominated by fights with demons. The song also describes his kingdom, the mythical land of Bumba – “the land of eternity without death, where spring is without winter, autumn without summer”,³ where Jangar's companions built him a magnificent palace. It also tells about his heroic fights as the king and of his beautiful sixteen-year old spouse, lady Sabdal.

The *Epic of Jangar* is described by many researchers as a masterpiece of Kalmyk traditional storytelling. It is characterized by the texts told from generation to generation mainly on the male line. Most of the bards were simple people who learnt the songs from their grandfathers, uncles and fathers by listening to recitations in shepherd's huts during long winter nights. The only way for them to tell the epic was in a spoken form because they were not able to write it down (due to their lack of schooling).

The popularity of this cycle, added to the fact that it had over 35000 verses, led to forming of a specific function or class of storytellers, the *Jangarchi*. *Jangarchis* were treated with respect among the Oirat community, and this honour was passed from generation to generation mainly through inheritance. Some researchers⁴ say that the first *Jangarchis* recited their songs in the late sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth century. According to one of the legends recorded by Chao Gejin during his field research among the Kalmyks, the epic of Jangar had 72 chapters and nobody was able to memorize it in full. Then appeared a man, who was able to memorize 70 chapters. His talent earned him favour of the local ruler who gave him the title of *dalan tobči* ('possessing the knowledge of 70 [songs]'). The title subsequently spread throughout the whole of the Four Oirat tribes' territory.

Researchers have not yet reached agreement as to the number of recited chapters. According to the legend mentioned above, 70 of 72 originally existing chapters have

¹ Another heroic epic is the *Epic of Geser Khan*, which was adapted by the Mongols from Tibet. The chronicle describing deeds of Chinggis Khan known as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which was composed most probably in 1240, is also considered by some scholars to be a heroic epic.

² The introductory song of Jangar is presented and discussed in more detail in the article of Klaus Sagaster “The Prologue to the Jangar Epic” (Sagaster 1989/91).

³ See Sagaster (1989/91), p. 293.

⁴ Among others Gejin (2001), Vladimirtsov (1983–1984).

survived. Elsewhere that number is anywhere from 12 to 36 songs. It is believed that 12 is closest to the number of chapters because there were 12 warriors in Jangar's retinue.

The oral tradition of the epic is inseparably connected with the function of *Jangarchis*. One of them, Arimpil was born in 1923 in a Torgut family. His knowledge of 23 stories made him one of the most famous unschooled *Jangarchis*. As a child, Arimpil had a chance to listen to recitations of the songs about Jangar. However, his father, a Buddhist, thought that recitation of either Geser or Jangar epics, which are filled with blood and violence, could bring misfortune upon the reciter. Therefore young Arimpil was sent to a lamasery to receive Buddhist teachings. However, there were many opportunities for Arimpil to participate in recitations of the Jangar cycle. From 1950 to 1960, he himself recited the stories he had learned. In 1980 his stories were recorded by Professor Chojjiyab from the University of Inner Mongolia. In 1989 Arimpil was recognized for his contribution to the tradition of Jangar storytelling by the Ministry of Culture and in 1991 he was awarded the Xinjiang Jangar Society prize. He died in 1994⁵.

Another famous Jangar singer was Eelyan Ovla or otherwise Ovla Elyayev⁶ (1857–1920). His predecessors had been passing the epic's tradition from generation to generation for many years. Elyayev's father was not a singer, but the young man learned the epic from his uncles. He became a bard in 1880 and gained fame in later years. He knew 10 stories of Jangar, which became known to the wider audience in the years 1909–1910, owing to the scholarly efforts of the famous Polish Mongolist Władysław Kotwicz and to one of his Kalmyk students, Nomtö Ochirov⁷.

Since 1979, a project has been conducted in Xinjiang with the aim of collecting the data on all active *Jangarchis*, and of writing down their stories⁸. The research identified 106 active *Jangarchis* and their stories have been written down. The ability to recite at least one chapter of the epic in full was one of the criteria to recognize the singer as a *Jangarchi*. Amongst those 106 *Jangarchis*, 62 were schooled in their youth and the other 44 were illiterate. Another distinction that was drawn was of those *Jangarchis* who were members of families with many years of storytelling and thus were called *yasun-u jangarci* (*Jangarchis* with ancestry). It was commonly known that the songs they recited had a more traditional dimension because they were the result of a longstanding process of storytelling.

Up to the mid-twentieth century, the tradition of Jangar storytelling was still alive. However, in the course of the long-lasting epic tradition, there occurred a significant change in the epic's language, which differed from colloquial language. Even the method of recitation changed over time. Jongarab, the Jangar singer, once said that the language of the epic differed from colloquial language: "In the old days Mongols used to *haila*

⁵ See Gejin (2001), pp. 409–410.

⁶ The name is written in several different ways, e.g.: Obolain Eelee in the colophon of Jangar's version published in 1910 in St. Petersburg or Eela Ovlaa by Gejin (2001), etc.

⁷ See Tulisow (1986), p. 201. The article is dedicated to life and scientific inheritance of one of the most eminent Polish Orientalists, namely Władysław Kotwicz.

⁸ See Gejin (2001), p. 411.

Jangar. Now they narrate it". The term *hailahu* was formed by the Oirat people and was used in reference to epic singing. It means "to perform in verse and melody"⁹.

Today the storytellers rather recite than sing the stories. Earlier they sang them using the verse system with a musical accompaniment, certain expressions and linguistic adornments. Unfortunately, modern storytellers do not have this linguistic and artistic ability and tell the story using language similar to colloquial.

The tradition of Jangar storytelling is gradually fading. The greatest bards are getting older and young men are becoming less and less interested in folk tradition. Additionally, on the basis of his research performed among the Oirat communities, Gejin says that most of the young Oirat generation have never heard the epic being recited and have never participated in a singing ritual¹⁰.

The written tradition of the Jangar epic cycle is very young because songs about Jangar were only written down as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century. The development of this tradition is strongly connected with the interest of the European researchers. It was their doing that caused several episodes of Jangar's adventures to be written down in the original language. This in turn led to the beginning of research on Jangar. A German translation of two epic songs, done in 1804/05 by a German traveler Benjamin Bergman, was an impulse to begin researching the Jangar cycle scholarly. Unfortunately the author of the original storytelling still remains unknown.

Noting down of the 10-chapter Jangar version from a telling done by Ovla Elyayev was also very significant to scientific research. One of Kotwicz's students, Nomt Ochirov met Kalmyk *Jangarchi* Elyayev and made efforts to write down the story of Jangar in phonetic transliteration from his recitation. As Kotwicz stated in one of his letters: "...That discovery was a big sensation.[...] Plans of the publication of the texts were discussed. In 1910 I decided to go to the steppes myself, and in the summer, with Proskurakov's help, I found Elyayev and read with him Ochirov's notes"¹¹. The Epic of Jangar was then published in St. Petersburg in 1910 probably by another of Kotwicz's students, S.A. Kozin¹².

Numerous manuscripts and later modern printed versions were the effect of the tradition of writing down the epic. As most storytellers were unschooled, the text of their recitation was put down in writing by people who knew how to write. Some researchers say that the tradition of writing down the songs of Jangar began with the introduction of the Oirat written language (the so called "clear script – *todo üseg*") in 1648 and ended in 1650. Oirat manuscripts were created mainly on the rulers' order. Stenographers were employed for this purpose. In rare cases, when a singer was schooled, he wrote down the text of the songs himself. During the period of heightened activity of the European researchers, songs were written down either by the travelers themselves or by people who knew the language in which the recitation was performed for the researchers.

⁹ See Gejin (2001), p. 420.

¹⁰ See Gejin (2001), p. 411.

¹¹ See Tulisow (1986), p. 201–202.

¹² See Tulisow (1986), p. 202.

Modern written versions of the epic were created after the publication of Bergman's notes (1802–1803). The most famous, consisting of a 10-chapter version of Jangar epic by Ovla Elyayev was written in the Kalmyk language in 1910¹³.

Several versions of the cycle depended on a given storyteller's level of schooling and his recitation abilities. It can be said that new storytellers introduced many linguistic innovations to the epic text. This was caused by two things: firstly lack of schooling meant that the singer was unable to write down his songs and secondly, the songs were so voluminous that during the act of passing on the tradition, the descendant was unable to memorize the exact storytelling of his ancestors. Throughout the centuries, these seemingly minute changes led to major modifications of epic's linguistic layer. This assumption, however, demands further research and proof by analyzing the lexical structure of the available versions of the epic cycle.

Recitation of the songs of Jangar is connected with certain rituals and beliefs. They were recited in military camps, during caravan trips, in sheep camps and at royal courts. The Oirats, mostly proud of their epic heritage, spent whole days listening to the songs. In the original epic tradition the long winter nights were the most proper time for the shepherders or traders to sit down by the fire and listen to the stories about Jangar. In later years, the epic was recited to a wider audience during contests organized by rulers and recently by the "Jangar Office"¹⁴.

Several orders and bans are strictly connected with the reciting tradition. As Gejin reports¹⁵, in some regions people say that reciting the epic by day can incur the wrath of the gods and thus cause certain disasters upon the community and even cause death of a storyteller. Therefore, the most favoured moment for storytelling is at sunset. There is also a strong belief that the songs of the epic may not be recited in fragments because that would incur the wrath of Jangar. The hero, according to Kalmyk beliefs, lives forever and comes back to life during the recitation of the Jangar chapters, gifted with supernatural powers.

Another point worth raising is that, to prevent the wrath of the gods, storytellers often perform animal sacrifices. In some regions, a white sheep is chained to the gate during recitation of the 12-chapter version of the epic. It is believed that by the end of the recitation, the sheep should die of stomach failure. If that does not happen, disaster strikes the storyteller himself. A similar ritual is not required if only some of the 12 songs are recited. Another ritual requires a lama to recite ritual formulas to several gods using incense before commencing the recitation of the epic. Gejin's research revealed¹⁶ that another belief is that the epic might have a major influence on nature. Certain songs of Jangar recited before going hunting were used to bring a successful hunt.

Musical accompaniment is connected with the recitation. Several communities have their own musical patterns characteristic to their regions. Already Arimpil pointed out

¹³ See Gejin (2001), p. 407.

¹⁴ See Gejin (2001), p. 414.

¹⁵ See Gejin (2001), p. 415.

¹⁶ See Gejin (2001), p. 417.

that only the most famous *Jangarchis* had their own melody in their repertoire and they created new musical patterns¹⁷. The most frequently used instruments were the *moriin khüür* and *tobshur*. These instruments, along with the rituals preceding the recitation, created a unique “magical” atmosphere of the ritual being an attempt to save the spoken form of the Mongol hero epic.

The storytelling tradition, although found less frequently now than in earlier times, still remains an important part of the Kalmyk folk culture. Its greatest asset is saving of the epic national legacy of the Kalmyk people up to this day. Its greatest failing is, that due to many centuries of storytelling, various modifications have been made to the extant text in its linguistic layer and form. This in turn had influenced the epic’s evolution in its written form. Hence, to this day many different versions of several songs have formed with various inconsistencies in their lexical layer.

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Taki zula xāni üldül tangsak bumba xāni aci üžing aldar xāni köbün üjein öncin žangyariin arban bölök, St. Petersburg 1910.

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¹⁷ See Gejin (2001), p. 417.

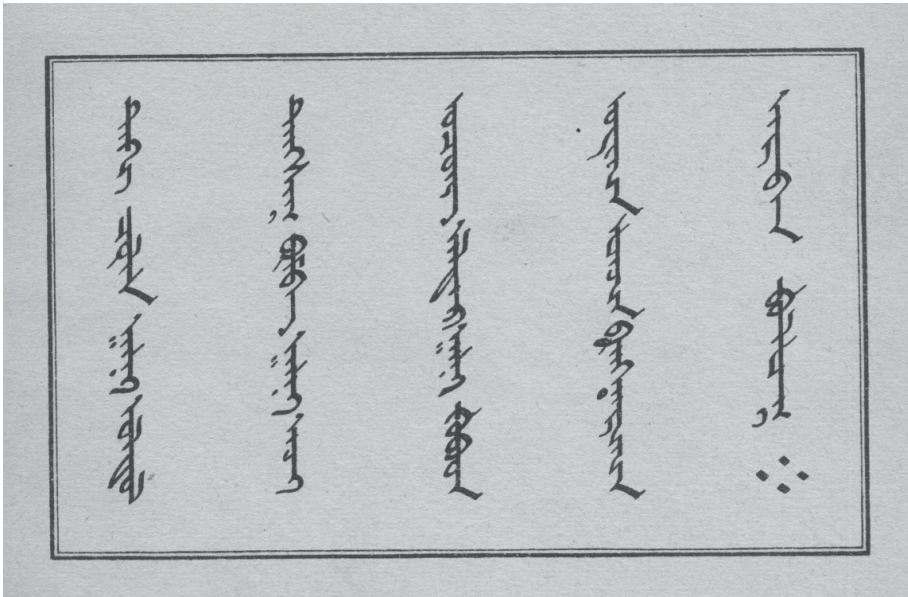


Photo 1. Cover page of the 10-chapter version of *The Epic of Jangar* written in Oirat script and published in St. Petersburg in 1910. Preserved to the University of Warsaw



Photo 2. Photo of the famous Kalmyk *Jangar* singer Ovla Elyayev (1857–1920) from the Collection of Prof. W. Kotwicz in the Archives of Sciences of PAN and PAU in Kraków, registered as: „K III-19, j.a. 129, fot. nr 6316”

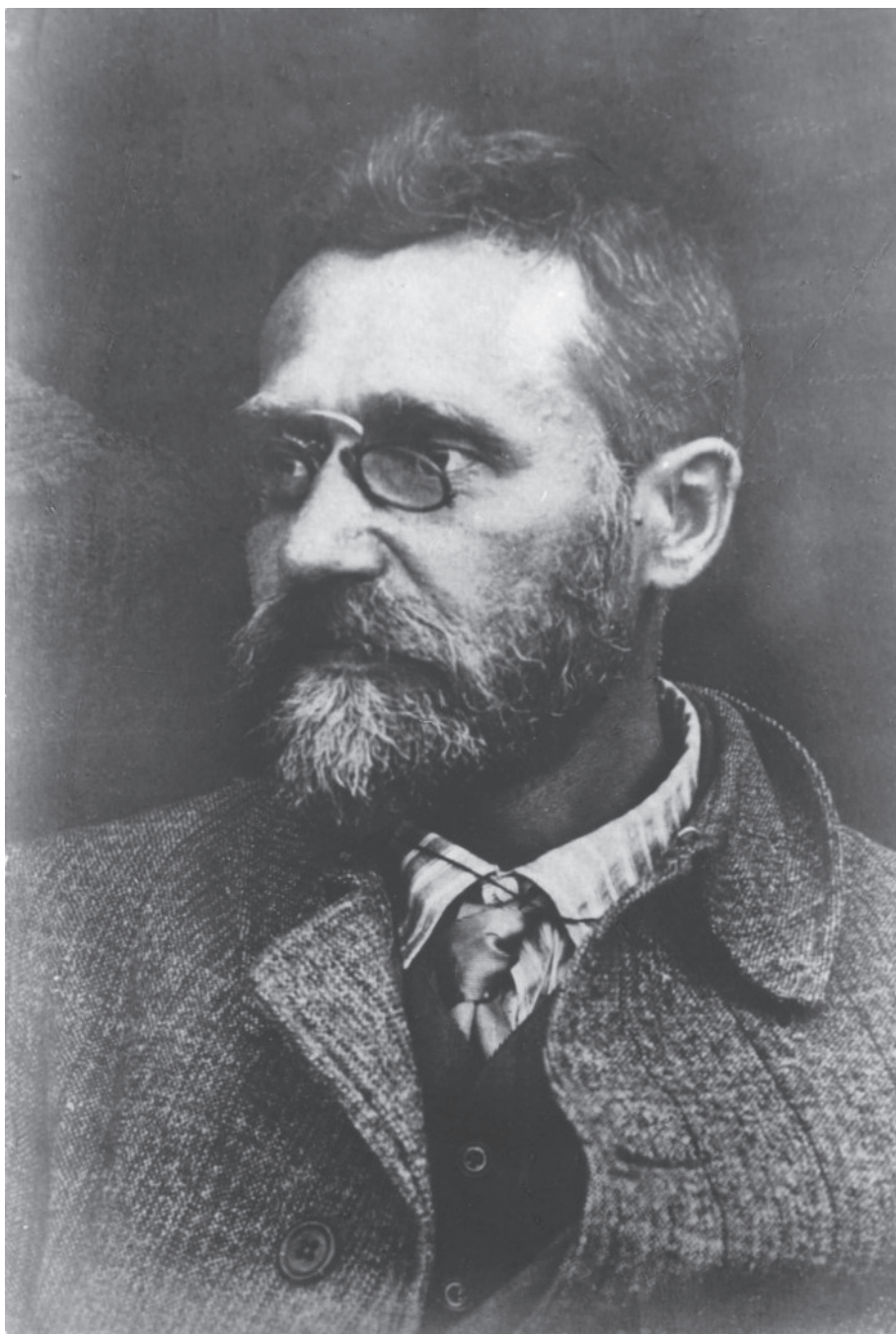


Photo 3. Polish Mongolist Prof. Władysław Kotwicz (1872–1944)
(from the *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1972, 2(82))