

# Introduction

This translation presents for the first time in English the epic treasure of the Kalmyk nomads, *Jangar*. As nomadic artists of the Great Eurasian Steppe, Kalmyks have witnessed, memorized, and orally transmitted some of the greatest transformations, both victorious and tragic, in the history of civilizations. The significance of their art for the world literary heritage can hardly be overstated.

*Kalmyk* means “the remained”; they are the remaining Mongols of Genghis Khan’s empire in Europe. Today, Kalmyks still live in the territory that was once the Golden Horde, founded by Juchi, one of the sons of Genghis Khan, near the site of its capital, Sarai. Sarai, with its magnificent architecture, has long been covered by the sands of time inside the hills of the Great Steppe. But the Kalmyk nomads have managed to preserve the great treasure of their heritage, carefully transmitting their epic narrative across generations. The most vivid work of the Kalmyk people, the heroic model for life and death that has always inflamed hearts and incited tears, is the grand epic *Jangar*.

*Jangar* belongs to a genre of oral literature about extraordinary deeds from the heroic age. The basis of its creation is the unification of individual songs that are not connected by an overall plot but rather evolve around a central axis, the Bumba union of seventy kingdoms. In every song, a hero begins and ends his adventure in the Bumba banquet hall with drinking, feasting, and merrymaking. This cyclization reflects the Kalmyk collective processes in which the epic becomes

the cycle of life outside the perception of time, simultaneously the epic past, and a nonlinear projection into the future.

*Jangar* sings a tribute to the heroic deeds of the protectors of the Bumba union. The Bumba world of nomadic heroes is a world of centaurs, not in their physical form, but in an imagined united identity. When a hero is born, his heroic horse is born too. Together they recover from misfortunes and triumph in adventures. All heroes, humans and horses, share a passionate dedication to the Bumba union, as reflected in their oath:

We throw our lives to the edge of the spears,  
Devote our passion to the Bumba completely,  
Strip our torsos and rip out our hearts,  
To the people we give our blood to the end.

(Lipkin 1940, chap. 11)

As is typical of a heroic epic, in *Jangar* the days are compressed until the moment of heroic deed, when the hours become stretched. The heroes belong to a common treasury of culturally recognizable characters, each a model for a specific trait: Scarlet Lion Khongor for bravery, Shaman Golden Heart for wisdom, Handsome Mingian for sophistication, Serious Sanal for contemplation, Mediator Jilgan for diplomacy. Heroes' names are determined by the moment of their heroic deed. For example, Scarlet Lion Khongor, outwardly shy, is the bravest man in the universe: a roaring lion sleeps in his rib cage. When the moment comes for him to protect the Bumba union, Khongor transforms into a fearless lion. Khongor is also associated with different shades of red; in his heroic moments, his lion spirit shines with ecstatic scarlet sunbeams. Even in everyday life, Khongor is recognized from afar by his radiant red hair, which despite his grooming attempts look like a lion's mane.

The name *Jangar* (also transliterated as *Zangar*) is given to the heroes' legitimate leader and to the epic itself; its cultural meaning should not be underestimated. Scarlet Lion Khongor and *Jangar* are equals in their oath to protect the Bumba union. But what makes *Jangar*, rather than Khongor, a leader among all the scions of competing families is his virtuous character. *Jangar's* name denotes one who lives "by ethics" or "by honor" and reflects his call to lead. Living by honor is what holds the union of equal kingdoms together and makes it

invincible. *Jangar* as a concept links individual heroic deeds to a united destiny, to a community of honor and justice.

The *Jangar* epic varies in length based on the training of *Jangar* singers (*jangarchi*) and is usually transmitted by singing. The training of *jangarchi* Eelian Ovla (ten songs, 6,049 lines) and that of *jangarchi* Mukebyun Basangov (six songs, 5,803 lines) reflect the most prominent traditions of the Kalmyk epic. This translation is based on ten *Jangar* songs performed by the famed Kalmyk rhapsodist Eelian Ovla (1857–1920), who was born into a line of *jangarchi* stretching back over centuries. The epic is characterized by alliteration derived from a rich poetic tradition with prehistoric roots. Though not captured in this translation, in the Kalmyk, the stress falls on the initial sound, which is repeated in every line of the verse:

Sovereign Khan Jangar  
Striking with his looks like a moon  
Silk woven robes were chosen for him  
Stitched by selected highborn queens  
Sewn only by his wife.  
Sixteen-year-old Khatun, armed with her scissors,  
Signature robes of hers made only for her loving Khan.

Yet *Jangar* is not just a song; it is a passionate performance. The cycles, or episodes, are performed as a sung recitative in a structured way and accompanied by a musical instrument such as the two-stringed *dombra*, the three- or four-stringed *tovshur*, or the violin-like *biiv*. Eelian Ovla played the *dombra* and could sing multiple cycles in rapid succession, captivating his audience for an entire night.

All episodes begin with the same prologue song, which recapitulates the creation of the Bumba union and its protectors. Each episode focuses on one protector and his heroic deed. Eelian's favorite episode was about Serious Sanal, whose name denotes a person who contemplates or philosophizes. Before singing this episode, Eelian would fire up his audience: "Are you ready? Shall we send Serious Sanal, the son of Bulingir, on his glorious journey?" Their emotions running high, his listeners would often cry out or jump from their seats and throw their hats on the ground during particularly dramatic parts of the performance.

We learn about the ritual of *Jangar*'s performance in the epic itself, when Princess Gerenzel falls in love with Khongor and invites him to

sing about the Bumba heroes at a banquet. The extravagant party is thrown by her suitor Wrestler Tsagan, who arrives with five hundred knights, a show of force meant to remind the public of his engagement to the princess. Khongor sings until the first light of dawn, and the princess's glass palace, designed in the shape of an eagle, trembles from his energized voice. Khongor's masterful performance is rewarded in the morning, when he receives a thousand yellow-headed sheep. In real life, performances of *Jangar* were in high demand, and master *jangarchi* enjoyed elevated social status. Noble Kalmyk families were responsible for the financial support and organization of both private and public performances of *Jangar*.

It is important to note that the epic's oral transmission does not imply that the nomadic audience was illiterate. Up until the destruction of the Kalmyk Khanate in 1771, Kalmyks observed laws that promoted literacy among all rich and poor men. In fact, Kalmyk public education laws and practices were not only well codified, but also more advanced than comparable laws of other states. For example, the 1640 Civil Code of Criminal Laws, or Tsaajin Bichig (*tsaajin* means "criminal" and *bichig* denotes a written document) stated that if the sons of nobles were not attentive to reading and writing, a fine equal to the price of a three-year-old camel would be levied against the father. In addition, commoners were required to teach their sons reading and writing commensurate with opportunity and ability. Nobles assumed their own educational expenses, and any collected fines were distributed to cover the educational needs of the poor. Thus, *Jangar* was not a primitive oral tradition for illiterate nomads. It was a live artistic form that produced, rather than a static artifact, an ephemeral transmission of literary creation suitable to nomadic settings.

Following centuries of oral transmission, a written version of *Jangar* would become the Kalmyks' national literary monument. In 1908, during fieldwork in Kalmykia, Nomto Ochirov, a Kalmyk lawyer and philologist from St. Petersburg University, discovered Eelian Ovla, from whom he recorded ten songs (6,049 lines) that would form the basis of the first recorded and published version of *Jangar*. Nomto transcribed the songs using the original Kalmyk script and published the first print edition in St. Petersburg in 1910, establishing *Jangar* as a literary work. More importantly, when Nomto compiled a coherent body of ten cycles from the oral tradition, he successfully defended his

theory that *Jangar* is not a collection of individual songs but indeed the Kalmyk national epic in its artistic entirety and completeness.

In 1940, Semyon Lipkin, a Russian literary translator, published a poetic adaptation for a wider Russian audience. Only a few years later, Stalin deported the entire Kalmyk population to Siberia and eliminated Kalmyk literature from the published world. Nomto Ochirov was himself arrested four times for his intellectual convictions and deported to settlements in Kazakhstan and Siberia.

That the heritage of the Kalmyks and other nomadic peoples has survived repressive regimes at all is thanks to the unequivocal commitment of people—Kalmyks, Russians, and others—who value the ancient voices of humanity. In spite of their efforts, Stalin's repressive orders silenced nomadic voices for almost a century, rendering them mute in the global discourse of world literature. *Jangar* is a principal conduit of nomadic cultural transmission, and reading it opens the imagination to the Great Steppe, its inhabitants, and their heroes.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In medieval and early modern times, Kalmyks were known as Oirads. As stated in *Jangar*, the center of Oirad culture was Altai, the mountains of gold. According to the ancient classic *The Secret History of the Mongols* (written circa 1240), the Oirads' sociopolitical milieu dramatically changed in 1207, when Genghis Khan, recognizing the significance of the Oirad cultural heritage, married his two daughters to sons of the Oirad prince Khudukha-beki. The Oirads joined the army of Genghis Khan's son Juchi in his European expansion and the establishment of Juchi's kingdom on the Volga River.

In the thirteenth century, Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226–1283), a historian at the Mongol court of northern Persia, stressed the role of the Oirad (or Oirat) elite: "The Oirat are one of the best known of the Mongol tribes, and to that tribe belong most of the maternal uncles of the children and grand-children of Genghis Khan, the reason being that at the time of his first rise to power the Oirat came forward to support and assist him and vied with one another in their alacrity to tender allegiance, and in recognition of their services an edict was issued concerning that tribe to the effect that the daughters of their emirs should be married to the descendants of Genghis Khan" (Boyle 1958, 505).

Elevated by their imperial in-law status, the Oirad-Kalmyk political dynasties found a new calling in military and state-building leadership at the expanding western frontiers of the Mongolian empire.

After the fall of the dynasty of Mongols in China led by Genghis Khan's grandson Kublai Khan, the Oirads consolidated power under the talented commander Esen (1407–1455), who would lead them to dominate the Eurasian steppe road. The Oirads' last large territorial expansion took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when their realm covered vast expanses of Inner Eurasia, from the Caspian Sea steppes in the west to Tibet in the east, and from the forests of Western Siberia to the oases in East Turkestan (now Xinjiang in China). Consequently, the last nomadic empire built by the Oirads played an important role in the historical fate of many peoples of Eastern Europe, the North Caucasus, and Central Asia.

The establishment of nomadic empires would have been impossible without the participation of heroic women. Historically, women played an integral role in the military and political affairs of nomadic polities. The Ottoman writer Evliya Çelebi (1611–1684), whose *Book of Travels* entered the canon of global literature, captured the era when border hostilities in Central Asia were at their peak. According to Çelebi, warriors from Tashkent, raiding the area bordering Kalmyk country, captured some Kalmyk nomads. Kalmyk warriors immediately chased down and fought the Tashkent raiders. After the battle, when armor and clothes were removed from the fallen Kalmyks, it was revealed that they were women.

Indeed, Kalmyk women were legendary both on the battleground and in government decision-making. Orghina Khatun, the granddaughter of the Oirad leader Khudukha-beki and Genghis Khan, had fiscal control over the rich Fergana Valley and ruled in Central Asia for almost a decade (1251–1260). Examples of women's autonomy echo throughout *Jangar*. For example, in cycle 2, the council of nobility accepts Princess Gerenzel's proposal to join Jangar's khanate when she takes the offspring of livestock as a wedding present:

If our princess takes  
the livestock offspring  
To faraway lands,  
Animals will follow their offspring,

Owners will follow their herds,  
Nomads will migrate to Jangar's Khanate.

In *Jangar*, Bumba as the union of kingdoms mirrors the confederation of the Oirad khanates. The strength of the Oirad union was especially marked in 1640, when the political elite from the Kalmyk Khanate on the Volga River, the Khoshut Khanate on Kokonor Lake, and the Jungar Khanate in the Altai Mountains gathered at a congress of the Oirad and Mongol political dynasties. The representatives discussed political unity and adopted the Civil Code of Criminal Laws, or Tsaajin Bichig.

The state builder of the Kalmyk Khanate, Ayuka Khan (1669–1724), seems to have exemplified the union of Oirad khanates through family coalitions and transcontinental migrations. Ayuka Khan was the progeny of a marriage between members of two familial dynasties from the Kalmyk and Jungar Khanates. As a child he traveled more than two thousand miles from the Kalmyk Khanate to the Jungar Khanate to live with his maternal grandfather, Batur Hun-tuichi, scion of the House of Choros (the Choros being the leading Oirad dynasty at the time). All Oirads considered the House of Choros and the legendary state-builders Khudukha-beki (thirteenth century), Esen (fifteenth century), and Batur Hun-tuichi (seventeenth century) to be of the sky with divine right in the process of political leadership and cultural transmission.

Batur Hun-tuichi's teachings about state building were not in vain. After Ayuka's return to the Volga River, the Kalmyk Khanate reached its peak under his leadership. By the 1680s, Ayuka had expanded the power and prestige of his khanate across the Eurasian steppe. When the Jungar Khanate was destroyed in 1758, many Jungar families under the House of Choros migrated to the Kalmyk Khanate, strengthening their family coalitions in the Volga region. Until the Russian Revolution in 1917, the descendants of Khudukha-beki, the Tundutov dynasty from the House of Choros, were the custodians of *Jangar* and other nomadic cultural and political traditions.

Today, despite the destruction of the Oirad union of khanates, the Jungar Khanate in 1758 and the Kalmyk Khanate in 1771, Kalmyks sustained, though with a different degree of success, their political autonomy, demographic balance, and culture. The Kalmyk national epic

*Jangar* is intertwined with the life of Kalmykia and its heroes. Even the life of Nomto Ochirov, who brought *Jangar* to the academic world, becomes a heroic introduction to *Jangar*. Nomto Ochirov's childhood name, Nokha, was associated with the animal spirit of a dog. By finding his calling and becoming a cultural model, he earned his heroic name, Nomto (scholar).

His father worked for the Tundutov family, and Nomto Ochirov was born in 1886 on the Tundutov estate. Princess Elzata (Ölzätä) raised both her son Danzan Tundutov (1888–1923) and her son's friend Nomto Ochirov in the epic tradition of *anda*, or sworn brotherhood friendship, represented by *Jangar* and *Khongor*. After completing their studies in St. Petersburg, the two young men were actively involved in the cultural and political affairs of Kalmykia. Like many Kalmyks, both fought on the side of the White Army in the Russian Civil War. Following a defeat by the Red Army in 1919, a small group of Kalmyk troops and their families managed to escape on French and British ships leaving Black Sea ports. The two friends would last meet in a port in Crimea. Prince Danzan boarded a ship while Nomto Ochirov stayed behind, pointing to his abandoned Kalmyk countrymen and saying, "If you are going to suffer, suffer with your people; if you are going to die, die with your people" (quoted from the short film "Prince Danzan Tundutov and Nomto Ochirov," directed by Mikhail Zakrevskij, written by Gennadij Korneev, and featuring Badma Pyurveev and Vyacheslav Khurgunov, "RIA – Kalmykia" and "TV Channel—Khamdan").

Prince Danzan Tundutov could not find peace in exile in Paris and returned to Russia in November 1922, where he was arrested by the GPU (a forerunner of the KGB) twice, upon his arrival and later, in April 1923. By the decision of the GPU court session on August 2, 1923, Prince Tundutov was sentenced to be shot. The decree was carried out on August 7, 1923. For many decades, until the corresponding archives were declassified, the place of execution and the place of burial remained unknown. Only recently a group of activists found that Prince Danzan Tundutov was killed outside Yauzskaya Hospital in Moscow. In his last letter before execution he wrote, "Those who know how to fight, know how to love and forgive" (E. Gerson, *NTV*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.ntv.ru/video/1870880/>; born in the EU, Pushkin's descendant submitted his documents for Russian citizenship).



Fortunately, Prince Danzan's family had remained in France. In 2020 Baron Serge Graevenitz, a descendant of the Tundutovs and of the family of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, settled in Kalmykia and brought with him the flag of the Kalmyk emigrants in Europe. Nomto Ochirov's niece managed to preserve, through the Kalmyk deportations to Siberia in 1943, the flagpole topper of the House of Choros. The biographical accounts of scholar Nomto and prince Danzan highlight how, inspired by *Jangar* (which means one who lives by "ethics" and "honor"), Kalmyks repeat the scenes of friendship, love, and heroic adventures in their real lives.

### NOMAD AESTHETIC

As performed across the Eurasian steppe, *Jangar* includes countless songs that represent the old boundaries of the union of Oirad khanates. They reflect the fate of the Oirad-speaking nomadic peoples who were consolidated in vast geographic and historical settings: the Kalmyk Oirads in today's Russia, the Western Mongol Oirads in today's Mongolia, the Xinxiang Oirads in today's China. To understand the epic scope of *Jangar*, one must consider nomadic sensibilities rather than modern national boundaries.

*Jangar* captivates us with its boundless sense of belonging. In the epic's conflicts, enemies are intentionally unidentifiable, as today's enemy may have been related to your family in the past crossroads of migration. Moreover, time as a linear concept is intentionally dropped from the narration. Thus, *Jangar* is a timeless reimagining of the collective lived experience of the nomads, and a model of united being.

*Jangar* extends its roots into many distant epochs. Trying to pinpoint the era of its creation will never enable us to understand its true depth, complexity, and power. It is not surprising that the duration of its existence is disputed. On the one hand, the official Soviet celebration of five hundred years of *Jangar* took place in 1940. This was based on Sergei Kozin's (1879–1956) hypothesis that the cyclization of the epic songs originated in the fifteenth century, when the Oirads reached the peak of their power under Esen.

On the other hand, Mikhail Gryaznov (1902–1984), whose archaeological discovery in 1929 of the Pazyryk early nomadic culture in the Altai Mountains attracted worldwide attention, highlighted an earlier

period. Gryaznov argued that the heroic epic tradition of the region first originated in the third to first century BCE, evolving from generation to generation for more than two thousand years and coming down to the present as a modified oral transmission. Gryaznov emphasized that archaeological artifacts from that era included images consistent with *Jangar's* heroic-age elements, creating a coherent system of intelligibility that allowed the nomadic carriers to mediate the world around them.

Of particular interest to Gryaznov were two bronze belt plaques from Ordos in Inner Mongolia. They depict a battle between two dismounted horsemen of the third to first century BCE. The images on the two plaques are identical in every detail: the number of leaves on the trees, the position of the horses, the arrangement of plaques on the horse harnesses. However, the two plaques are not a mechanical reproduction of the same image but handmade artifacts. The proportions and sizes of individual parts of the plaques do not exactly coincide, and one plaque is made as openwork, whereas the other is a solid plate. According to Gryaznov, these two artifacts were likely made at different times, in different places, and by different craft men. Thus, the depiction of the wrestling combat was not an isolated case, but an example of the type of socially significant theme that was reproduced repeatedly in a coherent system of cultural intelligibility.

The scene on the Ordos belt plaques is reflected in the description of the wrestling combat of heroes in *Jangar*:

“Let’s not torment our herbivorous friends.  
A shoulder against shoulder  
A chest against chest,  
Shall we try out our hero’s power,  
a human gift from our mothers and fathers?”

Two knights dismounted,  
Tying their horses to the saddlebows,  
They changed their attire.  
Togya rolled the kulan skin pants  
Above his knees.  
Lion Khongor rolled the deerskin pants  
Above his calves.

Here we see how the Oirads, through the collective use and circulation of formulaic tropes, preserved their canon of archaic rituals. The

burden of sustaining the collective memory was not placed solely on the *Jangar* singers. Everyone, from the artists and craft men who created the belt plaques to the audience members who wore them, was familiar with these ritual tropes. In fact, *Jangar* brought no burden to the Kalmyk collective memory, but rather an uplifting lightness from shared sensibilities of honor, love, and vulnerability.

The wrestling depicted in the unearthed plaques and in *Jangar's* narration reveals the degree to which the nomad aesthetic honors ritual: the wrestling match is divided into certain visual and sensual moments (stripping a muscular torso, putting on and rolling up soft scarlet pants, tying a silk sash) that intensify and slow the passage from mortal human to timeless hero on the verge of death. It is clear that for the Oirads it was important to follow the ritual of wearing and rolling up long pants before a wrestling combat. According to Gryaznov, this ritual was preserved among the Oirads but lost among the Mongols in Mongolia. (The change in ritual is documented in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which notes that the famous wrestler Buri-Bokho wore a leather loincloth during the 1201 wrestling competition organized by Genghis Khan.)

From *Jangar* we know how to wear belts with plaques, how to show our status by wearing them, and how much such belts are worth:

Over a gauzy undershirt  
And three fine silk robes  
He put on three layers of peacetime  
And unique battle armor  
Over the *ludang* silk,  
He fastened the iron belt  
Equal in cost to seventy horses.

Indeed, from a nomadic perspective, you are what you wear. The nomad aesthetic regarding belts, robes, pants, and boots has changed remarkably little over time. We can fast-forward from the Altai region in the third to first century BCE to Altai in the seventh to eighth century CE and find classic nomadic style intact. For example, in burial mounds in the Oirad autonomous oblast in Altai (the former territory of the Jungar Khanate), Soviet archaeologist Sergei Kiselev unearthed a fine inventory of the aristocratic strata of Altai society of the seventh and eighth centuries CE. The central figure in one of the burial mounds

was a wealthy man. He was lying at the bottom of the excavated pit, stretched out, with his head to the north. Following Altai fashion, the man wore layers of fine silk robes, tightened with a silver belt made of sixty-five plaques. There were no pockets in the robes; three silk pouches were attached to his belt. A birch-bark quiver with Hunnu-type “whistling” arrows was also attached to the belt. The man’s leather boots were elegantly fastened with buckles and straps around his ankles.

The Oirads’ aesthetic survived their dramatic move in 1207 from Altai to the Golden Horde on the Volga River. A major find in excavations of Jukhta burial mounds in the Golden Horde that date to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE was a noble mounted warrior attired in layers of silk robes, a belt with plaques, two pouches instead of pockets, and soft leather boots.

Nomads knew their silk. In *Jangar*, it is widely described as being used for robes, capes, palace decorations, and bedroom interiors. Silk was greatly appreciated not only for its sleek softness and elegance, but also for its incompatibility with the activity of body lice, considered the most dangerous pathogen at the time and blamed for epidemics of typhus and other infectious diseases.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, dramatic transcontinental migrations brought a novel development in the textile industry and introduced a new luxury commodity, *ludang*: “Over the *ludang* silk, he fastened the iron belt.” *Ludang* silk was so significant that the term was added to *Jangar*’s aesthetic canon. *Lu* means “dragon,” and *dang* means “overall” or “throughout.” The *ludang* textile from the Jukhta burial ground was silk woven with gold and covered with repeating images of roaring dragons hunting down helpless geese. It displays a harmonious synthesis of Persian, Chinese, and Central Asian styles, yet the predominant aesthetic is that of the Hunnu, the powerful confederation of nomadic peoples who glorified the spirit of animals and the laws of nature.

In today’s Kalmykia, silk robes, belts with plaques, and soft leather boots are worn for traditional Kalmyk dances that draw a million views on YouTube. The popularity of Kalmyk culture can be attributed in part to Russian choreographer Igor Moiseyev (1906–2007), who despite Stalin’s persecution of the Kalmyks dared to include their dance in his signature character dance repertoire. Of experiencing Kalmyk culture through dance, Moiseyev stated that “the spiritual

wealth obtained through the arts and culture is the only thing that can be transmitted over time. This is what feeds people's souls. After death, people do not lose it, and in another epoch they are born with the spiritual wealth that they acquired earlier" (Korobkova 2016).

## NOMADIC STATECRAFT

*Jangar* is rooted in the Great Eurasian Steppe and its nomadic empires. To understand the heroic-age statecraft depicted in *Jangar*, it is important to highlight its continuity with early nomadic multilingual polities in the regions of the Altai Mountains and the Yenisei River, particularly the Hunnu (Xiongnu) empire. By controlling the Great Steppe Route in the third to first century BCE, the Hunnu established a blueprint for successive nomadic empires. One among many such polities was the Oirad union of khanates, which used the Hunnu model in its political and cultural processes. The cultural ties and sensibilities reflected in *Jangar* were greatly influenced by the Hunnu statecraft and aesthetic, which was dominated by motifs of horses and archery.

The standard description of the Hunnu bureaucracy, which was divided into left and right wings, is given in the *Shi Ji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) of Sima Qian (145–86 BCE):

Under the *shanyu* there were  
*Tuichi* (Hunnu princely lineage) of the left and right wings,  
*Lu-li* (*Elu* familial lineage) of the left and right wings,  
 Generals of the left and right wings,  
 Commanders of the left and right wings,  
 Household administrators of the left and right wings.

Through oral narration, Kalmyks have managed to preserve their archaic vocabulary, in particular, the state nomenclature used in early nomadic empires. *Shanyu* is an early old Oirad term combining *shan* ("state," or, in the archaic language, "exchequer") and *yu*[-*n*] (authority). Vowel harmony (soft or hard) is a foundational rule in the Mongolic languages. Following the soft harmony rule of reading, the word is *lu-li* pronounced as "elu-eli." Elu (or Yelu) was one of the most powerful dynasties in Inner Asia. *Eli* is a term for "elite."

Historically, nomadic polities in Inner Asia replaced the term *shanyu* with *khan* during the khanate of the Rourans (380–555CE). It

is important to note that Oirad leaders such as Batur Hun-tuichi preferred the political term *Hun-tuichi* (*Hun* denotes Hunnu and *tuichi* means prince) over *khan* (king). This preference signified their cultural continuity with the Hunnu nomadic empire. The translation of *Hun* in the Oirad dictionary of archaic words is “magnanimous.” In the Hunnu tradition, state builders were expected to exude charisma, bear trouble calmly, disdain meanness and pettiness, and display a noble generosity. Thus, holders of the *Hun-tuichi* title were held to a very high standard in the Oirad political community.

As we learn from *Jangar*, for socially significant terms to endure, they must be simple. The original name for the Oirad homeland was Jungar. The term *oirad* simply denotes neighboring or adjacent populations, and *jungar* means “left wing” and refers to the left- ing position of the Oirad population. These terms are derived from the early statecraft of the nomads and highlight the territorial, rather than ethnic, foundation of the Oirad polities. In *Jangar*, the political organization is divided into left and right wings commanded by an elected supreme leader. It was not a tribal council; each key position had clearly defined administrative functions. For example, *Jangar* presents a detailed account of the office of the justiciar, which was second only to that of the khan:

In charge of the Right Wing of the court  
Was the wise noble Golden Heart Shaman.  
Who knew the history over ninety-nine years,  
Who forecast the future for ninety-nine years to come.  
He governed the administrative jurisdictions  
Of the union’s seventy khanates,  
Regulated both civil and religious affairs  
And, without Jangar’s supervision,  
Resolved the most complicated judicial matters.

The justiciar performed judicial (*zarge*), civil (*tyor*), and religious (*shajin*) functions. The justiciar was a noble of great wealth and was highly educated. Unlike all other officers of the court administration, the justiciar was not one of the khan’s military or household administrators (*sengche*). This was the only office whose holder was not expected to engage in military action, whereas other positions at the khan’s court were required to possess both civil and military skills. The

justiciar position was superior to that of any household officer except the general in charge of the left wing.

Through the use of indigenous sources such as *Jangar* and the Oirad dictionary of archaic words, we can learn about the nomadic symbols of statecraft. Archery, for instance, was an ordinary act, and over time the bow and arrow became ineffective weapons. But archery's cultural status was elevated by the use of the Hunnu-style *kibir*, or "whistling" arrow. In *Shi Ji*, Sima Qian wrote about the Hunnu leader Modun (234–174 BCE) and his innovative archery training. Modun made arrows that whistled in flight, and used them to drill his troops in shooting from horseback. The sound was created by a bulb carved from deerhorn or wood and attached to the tip. In *Jangar*, there is an intentional emphasis on the term *kibir*, "to whistle":

Mangna Iron Head  
Released his *kibir*-whistling arrow  
From his intricately decorated blue bow,  
Made from a strong ash tree,  
As wide as a doorjamb.  
The arrow flew over the mountain pass,  
Penetrated Khongor's body,  
And reached his aorta.

The use of whistling arrows was widespread; they were known as *kabura-ya* among the samurai class in medieval Japan. In *Jangar* they are used by both the Bumba protectors and their rivals. The significance of the Hunnu aesthetic in *Jangar* suggests that the Kalmyk-Oirads recognized the Hunnu canon as their cultural capital and used the epic to preserve their nomad aesthetic over centuries, as their states fell and rose.

*Jangar* reveals the complex social milieu not only of a nomad, but also of a nomadic empire. In 1923, the Russian scholar Boris Vladimirtsev (1884–1931) emphasized that *Jangar* unearths from the past the apotheosis of nomadic statehood: the opulent encampments of the mighty khans, surrounded by imperial stables, administrators, traders, nobles, judges, knights, servants. *Jangar* is a poetic manifestation of the epitome of nomadic empire:

Jangar united four governing principles.  
The statehood he created was indestructible,

The glory of Bumba was uncontrollable,  
Spreading beyond its spacious land.

Nomadic empires are cosmopolitan in their social organization, and many of their material creations are valued precisely for their multicultural quality. In *Jangar*, after uniting seventy khanates in the Bumba union, the nomads turn to the collective project of building a palace. To build it, “the forty-two khans from the four continents brought the best six thousand and twelve masters with them.” Ethical and aesthetic values are considered, as are artistic ambitions, physical capabilities, and environmental conditions. Reminding everyone about the divine forces of nature, Shaman Golden Heart intervenes in the decision making:

It would be an empty undertaking  
To build the Khan’s palace  
Reaching the sky:  
Too much is desire,  
Too far is the sky.  
The shelter for the Great Khan  
Should be three fingers below the sky!

Nomads are ever mindful of the unforgiving forces of sky, earth, and water. In the epic, the Bumba palace is built on the exact site of the “earth-water” location, on the right slope of Maikhan peak in the Tsagaan-Olom Group, on the Shar-Teg ocean shore. In order to support the height of the palace, the masters first hammer out the rock foundation and drive five foundation piles deep into the ground. The Bumba palace becomes the highest point on the world map. At the center of the palace is the *torlok*, a round tower with a domed top, which is the formal seat of the khan. *Torlok* is a specific term in Kalmyk architecture and means “soar high to the sky.” The *torlok* is large enough for seven circles of six thousand and twelve heroes. Not surprisingly, its design resembles the *ger*, the nomads’ tent, with sunlight and moonlight beaming through the *toono*, the crown-shaped opening at the center of the domed roof. The dome is covered in sheets of gold, so as to shine across the distance of a three-week ride.

The interior of the *torlok* is lavishly decorated. The hero’s return home is often associated with the moment he enters the golden *torlok* court hall, “pushing fourteen jade-silver shutter doors, ringing five thousand door chimes.”



The boys made a gallant canter  
 Around the palace.  
 Pushing fourteen jade-silver shutter doors,  
 Ringing five thousand door chimes,  
 They entered the golden *torlok* court hall.  
 Great Khan Jangar greeted them warmly.

The floors are paved with coral, and the walls are covered with lion fangs, deer fangs, and pearls. The outside corners are framed with fire-red glass, the inside corners with steel. The roofs of the surrounding palace structures are covered with bright glazed tiles called *baarva*. The palace is set in the shade of a garden with five hundred sandal and poplar trees. In *Jangar* you are encouraged to find your own heroic calling and actualize that dream, including a dream of building a palace that reaches “three fingers below” the sky.

Rooted as it is in the Great Steppe Route, *Jangar* leads us into an exciting world of travels from east to west and back again. It shows not only how the steppe road was crucial to the accumulation of wealth though global trade, but also its strategic importance to the global flow of people. The quintessential elements of the Great Steppe Route were groundwater well (*ulgen*) stops, “tea and sleep” (*chai-honna*) stops, diners (*khotan*), soup kitchens (*sholun*) for monks and the poor, horse-exchange and postal stations (*yam*), watchtowers and storm shelters (*bolzatin boro*), golden and silver bridges over rivers, and jade gates marking the entrances and exits of khanates. *Jangar*’s detailed accounts of nomadic palaces, cities, and empires enable readers to imagine the world of nomads free from contemporary conceptual constraints and to reconsider our understanding of nomadic polities and culture.

## HERO, SPACE, TIME

In the epic tradition, a hero, or a hero-to-be, is a moving point in space. The act of becoming a hero unfolds in space, but not in time. Time in an epic is static:

After twenty-five years of age  
 The passing of time did not exist,  
 The death did not enter this place.  
 People did not know in Bumba  
 The fierce cold of winter,

The withering heat of summer.  
 Spring followed fall.  
 The wind was a reviving breeze.  
 The rain was a refreshing mist.

Yet the absence of time does not limit visualization. On the contrary, being in *Jangar*'s world is epically timeless and timelessly epic. *Jangar* compensates for the missing temporal dimension with spatial imagination. The hero is a point that moves timelessly relative to the earth-water existence. Thus, *Jangar* stresses the Kalmyks' affinity with the vast open space of the Eurasian steppe.

*Jangar* pinpoints the Altai Mountains as the original homeland of the Oirad-Kalmyks. In the epic, the Kalmyk word for "homeland" means simply "earth-water" (*gazar-usun*). For nomads, the earth-water spatial positioning is vital. In *Jangar*, the empire is fictional, but the original home of the Kalmyk ancestors (the Oirads and the proto-Oirads) is located quite precisely:

At the navel of the sky and the earth,  
 The mountain Tsagaan Olom Maikhan,  
 Shining in the sunrise,  
 Rose magnificently from afar.  
 The primeval ocean Shar-Teg,  
 Glowing like a sacred lotus,  
 Flowed its currents shallow and deep.

Today, geoscience considers the Altai glacial mountain called the Maikhan-Uul Formation of the Tsagaan-Olom Group to be the largest area of Phanerozoic (current-era) continental crustal growth in Central Asia. Thus elements of *Jangar* reveal a geographic knowledge that can be matched to today's geological maps.

As with the Maikhan peak, there is nothing mythical about the primeval Shar-Teg ocean. The Shar-Teg in southwestern Mongolia is one of the most diverse Jurassic fossil deposits in the world. Preserved in its sediment are fossils of aquatic plants, mollusks, crustaceans, insects, fishes, and amphibians. Though recent paleontological findings are inconclusive, the epic imagination tells us that this was once an ocean. As a long-lived epic, *Jangar* is deeply tectonic in its creation. It is, after all, the creation of the Altai, developed by multiple layers of terrains of different origin.

Beyond earth-water, “eternal sky” (*tengri*) is the highest force and the one that determines the order of nature and drives nomadic life and consciousness. The majestic mountains, in their proximity to the sky, emanate the divine force of nature. Nomads referred to the Tian-shan range as Tengri-Khan, Sky the King. The name Tengri-Khan has disappeared from modern maps, but the great mountain knot with its ancient glacial forms is still called the Eren Habirga (Motley Ribs) Mountains. From above, the range looks like a dry carcass of ribs. The name for the Ole Mangna Tsagan Mountain has also survived. *Tsagan* means “white,” and *ole* denotes a specific type of snow; the closest comparison might be the white fluffy fur of the winter hare.

*Jangar* traces the ancient paths of the nomads from the Indian Ocean to Mount Elbrus. The name for Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe, is Mingi, or Thousand Mount (in Mongolic and Turkic languages), and in cycles 6 and 7, Handsome Mingian claims that he was named after Mingi. It is in the Caucasus that you can enjoy drinking the cold, fresh mountain waters of Dombay Ulgen. *Ulgen* means “a drinking stop for caravans,” and a *dombay* is a long-necked drinking pitcher. In the east of the Eurasian steppe route are the Himalayas, where “in the green valleys of the mountain Samba, a herd of forty thousand dappled-gray horses, agitated, grunted and groaned as they sensed the presence of Jangar.” The Rikha Samba Glacier is located in the Hidden Valley in the Mustang District of Nepal. The use of archaic words in *Jangar* highlights its transmission of geographic knowledge over time. For example, the word for “steel” in modern Kalmyk is *bold*, but in archaic Kalmyk it is *ganga*. The archaic name for the Indian Ocean is Ganga, or the Steel Silver Ocean. In *Jangar*, after passing the Himalayas, Scarlet Lion Khongor encounters the ocean:

There was the Ganga Silver Ocean,  
Ninety-nine-spears deep at the coast.  
The Ganga Ocean's silver waves  
Flashed like the sword edges against the sun,  
The rocks giant like bulls,  
Rolled back and forth,  
And crashed, igniting the fire.

The ode to the Ganga shows how nomadic movements, whether in search of silver and steel or a love partner, are borderless in the Kalmyk collective memory and identity.

In heroic adventures, there is a constant movement. If the construct of time is missing, how does the epic conceptualize the boundaries of movement? Distance becomes a relational construct:

Kyuder's Khanate  
Is southwest of here.  
If you send a three-year-old straw saker,  
With a thin layer of fat on her syncroup  
And three fingers of fat under her wing,  
In her journey, she would lay eggs  
And hatch chicks three times,  
But still would not reach the khanate.

*Jangar* presents detailed descriptions of plants, birds, and animals that are found from Siberia to the Volga River, exposing us to the nomad aesthetic that stressed unity with nature, the glory of animal freedom, and an assimilation of human nature with the nature of birds:

The gyrfalcon placed her two black chicks  
On her *ole*-fluffy white wings.  
She sat, facing the sun,  
And kept her chicks warm.  
The gyrfalcon said:  
"In Badmin Ulan's Khanate,  
My hatchlings died three times  
Over the last three years.  
I heard that in Bumba Khanate  
The passing of time does not exist,  
Death does not enter the place.  
I will migrate to Bumba to save my chicks."

This verse reflects the spirit of the nomads, moving freely across the Eurasian steppe like migrating birds.

The rich poetic imagination of the nomads and their intimate connection with nature are also shown, for example, in the description of Jangar Khan's horse's ears: his "marvelous ears were scissor-shaped, their tips meeting in the middle," a trait of a unique breed. This breed, now almost extinct, is a fading trace of the nomadic empires. Horses with curly ears were legendary warrior steeds known for being loyal

and able to find their way home, carrying an injured rider over long distances and through harsh weather.

*Jangar* also includes lush descriptions of trees and flowers:

Mingian collected *za*-shrubs,  
 And starting a campfire,  
 Boiled a sandalwood red tea.  
 Then he set up a bright-red tent.  
 In its shade, stretching out like a resting belt,  
 Warming up, pink like a *sukha* flower,  
 He fell into a deep sleep.

*Za*, or saxaul, is the main arboreal cover in the Eurasian steppe and is used as firewood. *Sukha* flowers, also known as Siberian meadowsweet, grow in Eastern Siberia, the Far East, and Mongolia. Sandal and poplar trees, which are glorious in bloom, are common in the landscape of the epic. These trees are planted along the endless roads in the open steppe: “In the shade of magic sandal and poplar trees, five hundred maiden-witches approached Mingian. Offering him drinks and delights with ninety-nine hidden spells, they lured him.” The trees are also planted around palaces, so heroes can dismount their horses “in the shade of sandalwood and poplar trees, grown next to the wall of the dark bronze palace.” Thus, the many tales of *Jangar* unfold in the ecosystem of the Great Steppe Route.

#### GODS AND SLAYERS OF THE GOD OF DEATH

Given the precariousness of nomadic life, it would have been impossible for nomads not to contemplate the concepts of being and time. In *Jangar*, time is captured in relation to memorable events, such as a nostalgic identification with the primeval earth-water or a compelling call for a heroic act. The heroic act as a formal and contextual category defines all epic characters—men, women, and horses. In the absence of time, the nomadic imagination charts a conceptualization of space that evolved out of a long oral history, first following the *tengri* (sky or outer space) as the cosmic principle, and later following the Indo-Buddhist philosophical tradition known as the Nalanda school of reasoning.

Nalanda University (450–1197 CE) led the most sophisticated and important philosophical debates of the day and had an enormous influence on academic development in Inner Eurasia. The world's first residential university, it accommodated over ten thousand students and two thousand teachers and attracted international visiting scholars. In its heyday, the Great Steppe Route transmitted not only material goods but also the leading ideas of Nalanda professors.

Until very recently it was believed that Mongolic literary and Buddhist traditions originated in the thirteenth century, during the empire of Genghis Khan. However, in 2014 an international team of scholars decoded the Brahmi script of the Bugut (circa 585–587 CE) and Khuis Tolgoi (604–620 CE) rock inscriptions found in Mongolia. The language behind both Brahmi inscriptions turned out to be Mongolic. The significance of this discovery is twofold. First, it moves the time line of a Mongolic literary tradition back six hundred years. Second, it highlights the spread of Buddhist practice among the Mongolic-speaking populations, including the proto-Oirads, in the sixth century, situating them in the milieu of the Rouran (380–555 CE) and post-Rouran khanate periods.

The Oirad dictionary of archaic words and the epic of *Jangar* trace how the concept of the Buddhist meditative protector, or *yidam*, took root in the nomadic imagination. In the epic, Scarlet Lion Khongor is described as having special attributes: “the force of Mahakala was concentrated in the center of his forehead,” and “the strength of Ochirvani was concentrated in the top of his head.” The perfect physical training and cultural education that was passed down to heroes as “a human gift from our mothers and fathers” was not sufficient for them to be victorious. Heroes also needed to meditate to train their minds. In Sanskrit, Mahakala is the deity who overpowers the “great time-death,” Yamantaka is the “slayer of the god of death,” and Ochirvani is one who “holds the thunderbolt” of power. During meditation, the heroes of *Jangar* visualize *yidams*, protective deities such as Mahakala, Yamantaka, and Ochirvani, to gain the single-minded concentration needed for their heroic transformation.

*Yidam* is defined in the Oirad dictionary of archaic words as “sacred protector.” Historically, the word carried two meanings, one physical and one transcendental. In the transcendental realm, *yidams* assume wrathful forms to vanquish Yama, the god of death. These two sides, material and transcendental, are revealed in each hero's journey. Heroes

fight each other physically until they realize that the real battleground is their internal world, where the god of death must be defeated.

The Nalanda University masters Shantarakshita (725–788 CE) and Kamalasila (740–795 CE) explained in *The Stages of Meditation* how to visualize becoming Mahakala or Yamantaka, and how to cultivate the force needed to slay the god of death. In the transcendental realm of sacred protectors, everything, including selflessness and impermanence (emptiness itself), is ever changing. Meditators tune their mind to a wave of protective devotion or compassionate feeling toward others and transform that wave into impermanence. *Jangar* echoes the Nalanda masters' positive outlook and rejects the negative perspective. Heroes contemplate selflessness rather than the negation of self-existence and view impermanence as transient.

A transient nature has its order. In *Jangar*, fallen heroes, women and men, transition into other forms of being. However, they leave behind their helmets, which they liked to elegantly wear “slightly tilting to the left temple.” Archaeological finds of Oirad helmets highlight the significance of the *yidam* concept of the sacred protector. The golden damascened decorations on the helmets feature Yamantaka or Mahakala in the center of the forehead. The brow of one helmet is encircled by a series of mantras, including invocations to Yamantaka. In the center of the brow is a monogram composed of ten Sanskrit syllables of the Kalachakra (wheel of time) mantra. From *Jangar*, we know how commanders wore these helmets and showed their leadership on the battleground:

Mangna Khan sped up his horse Arak Manzin Burul  
And raced to meet Khongor.  
In front of Khongor he slowed down,  
Pulling back the silver reins in his hands,  
Gracefully turned his horse around,  
And elegantly fixed his golden helmet,  
Slightly tilting to the nape.  
The fight began.

In wearing the high-crowned helmets with the golden damascened decorations, Oirad commanders understood the power of spectacle in front of their troops that often determined the outcome of war. The *yidam* meditation helped the commanders to tune their mind to a wave of compassionate feeling toward others (their people, troops, country)