





## CHAPTER ONE

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## MONGOLIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE



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. The Mongolian language has many dialects, including *Mogol, Mongor, Dunsyan, Baoani, Shar Uigar, Daguur, Halimag, Ojrad, Buriad, Central Mongolian and Southern Mongolian*. These living Mongolian dialects have come down to us through folklore and oral literature. Mongolians have created innumerable intangible expressions in our own language. This language is, in fact, an inexhaustible treasure that reflects the subtle inventive thinking of the Mongolians. This thinking is expressed in the Mongolian folklore, traditional art, 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: folk oral literature, folk prose literature, drama, and festival folk literature. Mongolians created great epics, such as the *Secret History of Mongols, the Geser, Jangar and Khan Kharangui*. These epics feed the romantic, adventure-seeking, and aesthetic needs of present day audiences.

The first marvel of the Mongolian language is its ancient roots, which stretch back to a period when the ancient Sanskrit language was the language of Buddha and Mahavira, and of the Hindu gods Brahma and Vishnu of India. While over seven thousand other world languages have disappeared within the past four hundred years, the Mongolian language has survived and thrives.

The second marvel of the Mongolian language is its interaction with the languages of the Asian and European continents during the period of Mongol domination from the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries. Mongolian was as dominant a world language in the thirteenth century as English is today.

The third marvel of the Mongolian language is its phonemic, morphological and syntactic harmony, its flexibility, and its unusually rich lexicology.

The fourth marvel of our native language is its ability to embody the visionary ideas and notions. Scholars of the Mongolian language are committed to further reveal this language's subtle distinctions, which will be great contributions to Mongol Studies.

*The wondrous melody of the Mongolian language is harmonious to our ears;  
It is connected to the brilliant feats of our astute ancestors.  
The sound of the language inspires my pride and reverence;  
Every moment I admire and revere the genius of our ancestors.*





# ORAL POETRY

## 1. ORAL POETRY WITHOUT MELODIES

### SPELLS AND INCANTATIONS

Spells and incantations are the forms of ancient folklore. They endeavour to achieve their ends through the supernatural powers of words, sounds, and gestures. Mongolian spells and incantations can be divided into ordinary and special forms. Ordinary spells and incantations are those that can be enchanted by anyone; special spells and incantations, in contrast, can only be enchanted by the few people who specialize in these matters. These spells and incantations can influence those who wish to receive such a blessing.

Let's take a common example of these spells and incantations:

- When a fire doesn't light and instead only smoke arises, we say the following incantation as we pour grease on it:

*"Grow! Grow!  
I'll give you some grilled goat's meat.  
Glow! Glow!  
I'll give you some grilled goat's meat.  
Flame! Flame!  
I'll offer you a bit of oil."*

- As the camels and other animals graze in the pastures, a pair of scissors is bound and placed between the roof covers on the *ger's* western side, and then the following incantation is made:

*The benevolent beast,  
With golden molars closes its mouth.*

- When an animal's udder is swelled we shake a (brass) ladle and say:

*The head of the animal is up,  
The head of the swelling is down.  
Em dom em dom (It is soon be cured).*

- When we castrate animals, we burn juniper needles and say:

*Be as light as a feather,  
Cure quicker than a speeding arrow.  
Hurray, hurray dur, dur suuhaa.*

- When a raven or crow caws, we say:

*Glad tidings is welcome,  
Bad news stay away,  
Please have three white eggs and live three hundred years.*

- When an owl hoots, we say:

*Bring water in the stomach pouch of a young goat;  
Let's boil the head of an owl*

- When we see the meteor fall, we say:

*The meteor falls from the sky,  
But my star is still up. Pooh, pooh.*

- We can give examples of the mysticism expressed in these spells and incantations:

- There is the spell and incantation associated with the orphan, for example the Khalkha Mongolians call such a person a "*nüdnii tsagaa üleekh*"; Western Mongolians call this person a "*nüdnii bog ürekh*."

This means that glaucoma in the eyes can be removed. A person who has never seen his own father is one who has become fatherless and can recite this incantation and spell. A person who has seen his own father is not able to do it. He can whisper this incantation and spell into the ears of a person who is also orphaned and who has not seen his or her own father. The meaning of this incantation and spell is not clear to everybody.

*Do not think that I am blowing  
Think that a deity is blowing.  
From where did you come,  
Bother of my son's eyes?  
I did not see my father  
I did not see your glaucoma, either.  
I throw you over the seven mountains and  
Place you under the hummock.  
I saw neither my own father nor you.*

This is a genuine example of the incantation and spell. There are incantations and spells for people whose teeth and organs of locomotion are full. For instance, a person, whose



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teeth are full can enchant this particular spell. If that person's teeth fall out, he or she passes the duty to another person whose teeth are strong.

- There is a spell for a person with extra fingers. When a boy or girl's fingertips are swollen, a person with six fingers pretends to cut the air with a pair of scissors and recites the spell, "I cut you off, I cut you off!" saying it seven times.
- There is a spell to put an emphasis on one's kin. This is recited only by the maternal or paternal uncle. When a child suffers from thrush, Mongolians place a bridle with the straps sticking through the space between the base of the roof felt and the frame of the *ger* door. The strap is then placed in the mouth of the suffering child and an incantation made.
- "The child got a thrush in order to test the wealth of the paternal uncle, and the ear of the child became ill in order to test the wealth of the paternal uncle." Generally, when children suffer from ear infections, the paternal uncle must make an incantation. When a child suffers from thrush, the maternal uncle makes an incantation.
- According to the *Bayad* tribe, there is a spell which em-

phasizes a progenitor. For example, there is a spell used while the thunder sounds. There are many variations of this spell among each Mongolian clans and tribes. For instance, when thunder sounds, the *Khariad sharnuud* tribe says:

*I am descended from the great haan.  
I am Hariad, of the Buriad line.  
Phew, phew, phew, phew.*

But the *Borjigin sharnuud* tribe makes incantations like:

*I am descended from the great haan.  
I am of the jasper button rank.  
I am descended from Blue Heaven.*

But the *Uriankhai chonod (chonnut)* tribe incants the following when people are frightened by thunder:

*Strike a mountain with lightning if you need the tallest,  
Strike the steppe with lightning if you need widest,  
Strike me with lightning if you need one who is alone.  
Strike me to pieces with lightning if I eat spleen.  
Strike me to pieces with lightning if I eat omasum.*

There were many secret spells which were very difficult to learn because of the tests that took place while they were learned.



## ❖ WORDS OF LIBATION AND ANOINTMENT

Mongolian oral literature refers to our customs and habits. Remarkable examples of this include 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, according to the established tradition and custom. The words of libation and anointment is classified into two forms defined by their own nature. The poetic words of libation is said when Mongolians venerate father heaven and mother earth. They make milk libations to them in such a manner. The milk libation is made on a chosen day that is auspicious to the powerful heaven.

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

It is accustomed that the large group of horse-riders headed by the nine white horse-riders to around the *gers*, tethering-lines and livestock animals three times in a clockwise direction and make milk libations.

## ❖ WORDS OF PROPITIOUS OMENS (WELL-WISHING)

The Mongolian oral literature has propitious omens, and below are some examples of ones that Mongolians often say. Propitious omens are not empty promises. If they were, this would be a bad omen. The words of propitious omens



(kind wishes) may be formed by propitious thinking. They have similar meanings and contents to well-wishes. But the words of propitious omens typically are shorter and different from the aims of well-wishes. The words of propitious omens can be employed as part of routine work. They are terse and clear. But the words of well-wishes can be recited at festivals and rituals, like weddings. A person who is well-skilled in this kind of formal ceremony and way of reciting can perform it. This person can be called a minstrel in English. He recites the word of well-wishing at the request of the audience and while holding an honourable scarf and a silver cup full of boiled milk or a bowl of fermented mare's milk.

The benediction begins with a denouement and ends with other epithets. It is long and can be recited with a melodic formula. But the words of kind-wishes, in contrast, have no long structure. Nor are they recited with a melody. However, those words are poetic. The words of kind-wishing are related to the nomadic herder's routine work in content and it is constantly repeated.

- If we encounter a person writing, we say:  
*May your brush sweep the paper!*



- When a baby is born to a family, we say:  
May your chubby babe nine lives!  
May your bleating sheep grow into the thousands!  
Let it be!  
May your babies be like marmot litters!

- When we enter a ger where a family is churning fermented mare's milk, we say:

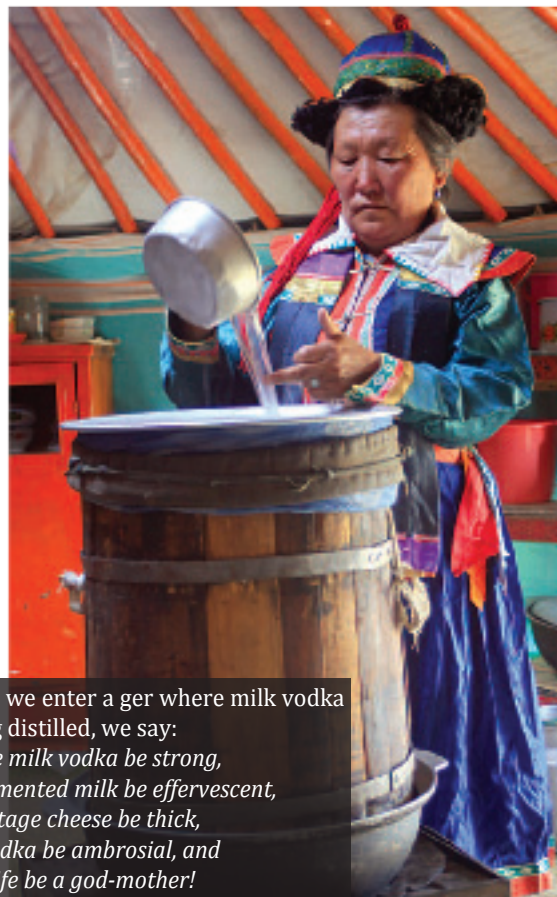
*May the ghee be produced.*

- When somebody is erecting a ger, we say:

*May the ger be in a nice shape.*

- If we encounter a person doing needle-work, we say

*May your sewing be fancy*



- When we enter a ger where milk vodka is being distilled, we say:

*May the milk vodka be strong,  
The fermented milk be effervescent,  
The cottage cheese be thick,  
Your vodka be ambrosial, and  
Your wife be a god-mother!*



- When we enter a ger where a family making tea, we say:  
*May your boiled tea be sweet and  
My the family I am visiting be well-off!*



- When someone is milking a cow, we say:  
*May the milk fill the brim of the pail!  
May your plan be accomplished!*

Well-wishing often incorporates the quality of the materials being made and the skills of maker:

- *May you see hundred autumns  
By aging hundred years.*
- *Be a master of animals and fermented milk.  
Be a master of thousands of animals and large vessels.*
- *May your Virtues be infinite,  
Your funds be inexhaustible, and  
Your happiness be consummated  
As you wish it.*





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## ❖ MONGOLIAN TRIAD

The Mongolian triad refers to the Mongolian traditional preference for and symbolism surrounding the number three. This triad is expressed in oral literature in ways that are very unique to Mongolia. The cosmos is often portrayed as existing in three parts: the upper, middle and lower realms or organic and inorganic life.

### In the three levels of the universe,

The sky is the level of pillars (*the upper realm*),  
The mountain is the level of the girdle (*the middle realm*), and  
The ocean is the level of the lid (*the spiritual realm*).

### In the three rich realms of the universe,

The sky is rich in stars (*upper realm*),  
The earth is rich in roots (*middle realm*), and  
The ocean is rich in water (*nymphic realm*).

### In the three beauties of the universe,

The full moon is lovely (*inorganic universe*),  
The flowers are lovely (*organic universe*), and  
The maxims of one's parents are lovely (*human universe*).

### In the three sacredness of the universe,

The growing juniper is sacred,  
The burning incense is sacred, and  
The flowing water is sacred.

### In the three swiftness of the universe,

The clouds of the windy sky is swift,  
The thinking of a witty person is swift, and  
The gait of a good horse is swift.

### In the three provenances of the universe,

Tea is the provenance of food,  
The khadag scarf is the provenance of material, and  
Fish is the provenance of animals.

## ❖ PROVERBS AND APHORISMS

Proverbs and aphorisms are very similar to idiomatic expressions. They are picturesque descriptions of reality. They are products of many witty people and have been tested by the nomadic ways of life. They are the results of philosophical speculations, and are typically terse and very pointed.

They speak about the universal cycles of time.

*Time is apt to change.  
The iris is apt to discolour.*

*Colour loses its lustre.  
The green of the grass is apt to turn to yellow.*

The difference between proverbs and aphorisms is that aphorisms define the quality of things from a scientific point of view, while proverbs express metaphorical ideas through literary devices. Aphorisms have deep meanings and are often very witty. Proverbs are typically picturesque and descriptive.

The Mongolian proverbs and aphorisms clearly reflect the condition of life, conscience, psychology, morality, customs and habits of the nomadic herders. Proverbs and aphorisms are pedantic teachings in one sense. They clearly

Let's see examples of Mongolian proverbs and aphorisms:

- *Withstand the difficulties,  
Instead of indulging  
("Curiosity killed a cat").*
- *The senior is unprincipled,  
The junior is lax  
("Good masters make good servants").*
- *An experienced older woman is better  
Than a doctor-lama who does not know practical treatment  
("Experience is the mother of wisdom").*
- *When your father is alive, make acquaintances;  
When you have geldings, go far away  
("Make hay when the sun shines").*
- *You can become a champion by defeating a champion.*
- *The soul of the neighbouring family is one  
(The intention of the neighbouring village is one).*
- *If you blurt something out, it is totally irredeemable;  
But if you lose a horse, you can catch it again;*
- *If you are aware of yourself, you are a real man.  
If animals adjust themselves to their pasture, they are domestic animals.*
- *A spoiled child is pigheaded.*

reflect ancient history, the thinking of remarkable people, religions and ethics, and the realities of modern social life.

*Winter returns with the bleat of a lamb.  
Summer returns with the sweep of the scythe.  
Spring returns with the bleat of a lamb.  
Autumn returns with the sweep of the scythe.*

These four lines represent a witty description of the Mongolian way of life, which is closely connected to the changing of the seasons in Mongolia.

*The horizon of the sky is clear.  
The top layer of the nimbus cloud is thin.*

*The nape of the rutted camel is open.  
The top layer of the sky is open.*

These aphorisms demonstrate that Mongolians have observed the sky and weather condition since ancient times and have concocted saying that relate to their observations and analyses.

- *A feast has a steward,  
A contest has a winner.*
- *Animals leave the grassy land,  
Human beings leave the favourable places.*
- *A baby can grow up by crying and crying,  
A young animal can grow up by bleating and bleating.*
- *A good man depends upon one's childhood.  
A good horse depends upon its foal-time.*
- *A bridle is heavy for a fatigued horse,  
Boots are heavy for an exhausted man.*
- *Laziness (sloth) starts from trifling activities.*
- *A hasty hare has muck on its hock ("Haste makes waste").*
- *Do not examine the teeth of gift-horse,  
Do not look the bed sheet of an elder sister-in-law.*
- *If you accumulate a drop, it can become an ocean,  
If you do not forget what you heard, it will become knowledge.*



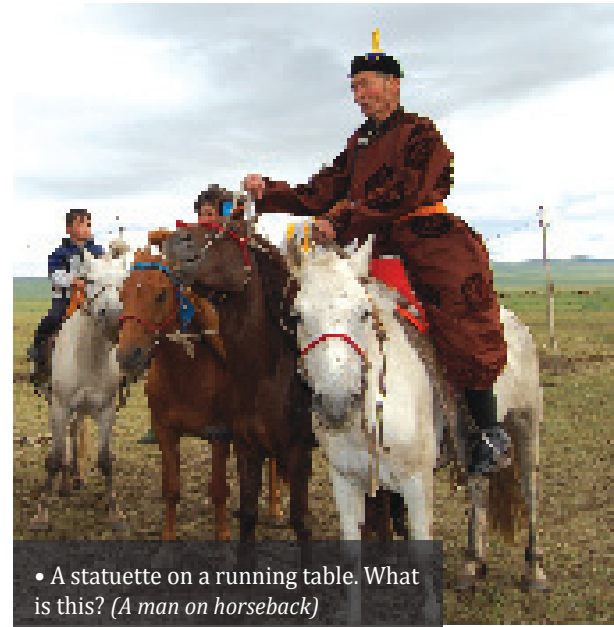
## RIDDLES

A riddle is a genre of oral literature that represents social and psychological phenomena of the human imagination and that is solved through puzzling questions.

*Brass that does not exist here,  
Brass that has no owner,  
Brass that is a span in size,  
Brass that is round. What is this? (the sun)*

This riddle describes solar illumination and demands knowledge of measurements, like the span. A riddle is a test of intelligence and thinking capacity.

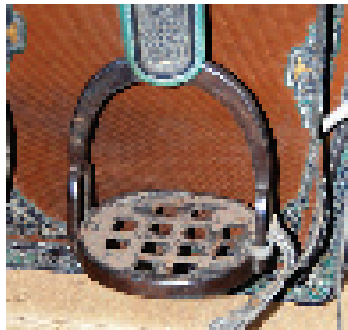
Let's take some examples:



• A statuette on a running table. What is this? (*A man on horseback*)



• It is possible to unfurl and furl this like cervical vertebrae. What is this? (*Lattice wall of ger*)



• It is smaller than you, but it can lift you. What is this? (*Stirrup*)



• An animal that has a pig tail on its back and has a big voice. What is this? (*Dog*)



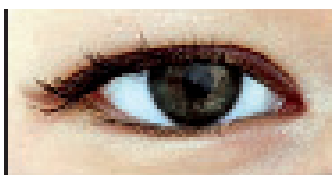
• The upper part is exactly yellow, The middle part is swan white, The lower part is rather grey. What is this? (*Clotted cream, milk and sediment of boiled milk*)



• It is near if you see, it is far if you bite. What is this? (*The palm of hand*)



• The trunk is full of curly-budges. What is this? (*Teeth*)



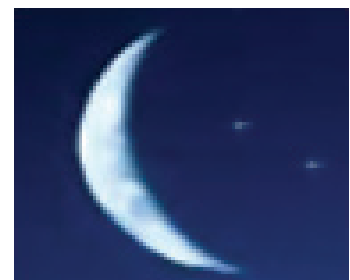
• If you clench it, It cannot fill your palm; If you unclench it, It can fill out a vast plain. What is this? (*Eyes*)



• They have the characteristics of yearling colts. What is this? (*Ankle or knuckle bones*)



• Sandal cups vie with each other on the road. What is this? (*Hoofs*)



• This is a silver cup on the ice. What is that? (*The moon*)