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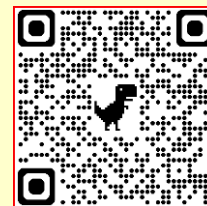
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Development and Existence of the Mongolian Tuuli: Historical Stages, Global Significance, and Preservation Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The Mongolian tuuli, or heroic epic, is a central element of Mongolia's nomadic cultural heritage, reflecting the nation's philosophical, ethical, and cosmological worldview. This paper traces the historical development of the tuuli from its ancestral origins rooted in Tenggerism and nature worship, through ancient, medieval, and late periods, to its contemporary endangered status. The study highlights the tuuli's unique features, including its cosmic spatial imagination, ethical teachings, and integration of oral performance with music and mnemonic techniques. It also emphasizes the global significance of the Mongolian tuuli, as one of the few living epic traditions worldwide. Finally, the paper outlines strategies for the preservation, revitalization, and international promotion of the tuuli, stressing its critical role in sustaining Mongolia's national identity and contributing to global intangible cultural heritage.

KEY WORDS: Mongolian tuuli, Heroic epic, Oral tradition, Intangible cultural heritage, Nomadic culture, Cosmology, Preservation strategies, Global significance

Introduction

The Mongolian tuuli (heroic epic) tradition represents one of the oldest and most profound expressions of nomadic culture. A tuuli is not merely a work of art; it embodies a cognitive and philosophical system reflecting how the Mongolian people perceive their connection with nature and the cosmic order. Tuulis encompass multiple dimensions of Mongolian cultural memory: ethical models, social norms, worldviews, and a philosophy of unity between humans, nature, and the heavens. Studying tuuls therefore provides a comprehensive method for understanding the Mongolian conception of the universe, spatial imagination, intellectual development, and historical culture.

The Mongolian epic was inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2009. In 2019,

it was recognized as an ancient heritage in a decree issued by the President of Mongolia, aimed at its protection and transmission. In contemporary times, amid globalization and the proliferation of information societies, Mongolian oral traditions are increasingly endangered. This makes the study and preservation of tuuls a critical task for safeguarding the living core of national culture.

I. Origins and Ancestral Stage of the Mongolian Tuuli

The origins of the Mongolian tuuli are rooted in Tenggerism, nature worship, and early cosmological concepts. In the worldview of the nomads, the universe was believed to have emerged from the "empty mass of darkness," or primordial vacuum, and was structured into

three layers of existence: the Upper Heaven, the Middle World, and the Lower Water Realm. This cosmological perspective is vividly reflected in ancient tuuls such as *Altan Undarga* (“Golden Stream”), *Khas Oron* (“Sacred Land”), and *Tengeriin Altan Üg* (“The Golden Word of Heaven”), which are classified as ancestral tuuls. These works address:

- The origin of the cosmos and the beginning of time;
- The structure of divine and celestial powers;
- The genesis of humans and nature, and their interrelationships.

The central figure of this era is the deity *Sögdör*, regarded as the primary cosmic force, “Heavenly Craftsman,” and the luminous originator of creation. These tuuls were traditionally recited exclusively by priests known as *Nashir* during special ritual ceremonies. During these recitations, the “Forty-Nine-Measure Fire Ritual” was performed, symbolizing the cyclical energies of the cosmos. Also, what contribution did the Mongolian epic, which is the great heritage of the oral tradition created by the nomadic herders of Central Asia, to the world epics it is also intended to introduce the breadth of their thinking to their compatriots, the region, and the world? I am writing this article to present at the conference with the deep hope that it will be a guide for those who are doing research in this field. The present study studies the epics that are intangible cultural heritage and classifies them into five categories: time, place, structure, contents, and linguistic patterns. It is necessary to enhance the epics studies by combining them with the achievements and methodological approaches of linguistics and other sciences such as archaeology, paleontology, ethnography, anthropology, musicology, history, etc. In addition, researchers should study the epics previously recorded, published, and those not scientifically examined and analyzed, and should conduct research from not only linguistics and oral literature but also ritual and mentality points of view. The space of epics deeply rooted in Mongolia is larger than that of other epics in the world. Heaven of the Middle Giants Creators:

- Heaven of great giants’ creators
- Land of the Unfathomable
- The land of the golden sky
- Beginning spread of heaven
- Star galaxy sky space
- The heavenly realm of great revelation
- The land of the full spread sky
- The great giants fill even the vast expanse of heaven.

The extent of the spatial thinking of the Mongolians is that they were able to expand beyond the mountains, water, and the earth and explain the many dimensions of the universe. The linguistic characteristics of ancestral tuulis feature cryptic words, symbolic invocations, and ritualistic compositions. They were not merely literary expressions but served as mnemonic codes and cognitive transmissions, conveyed from master to disciple in a direct “mind-to-mind” teaching method.

II. Ancient Heroic Tuuli (3rd century BCE – 9th century CE)

Tuulis of this period are often referred to as “foundational epic cycles,” rooted in ancestral traditions. They provide early

philosophical interpretations of the relationships between humans, nature, and animals, as well as the origins of human society, hunting culture, and moral norms.

For example:

- The *Senkher Mandal’s Duurlag* tuuli emphasizes that human intellect has the capacity to “navigate” within nature.
- The *Soyot Maakhuur Kharvaach* tuuli interprets distinctions between humans and animals within the framework of time, asserting that “one year corresponds to the cycle of life in nature,” reflecting an early natural-philosophical perspective.
- The *Yasan Tsagaan Mört Kiiten Kök Orchon* tuuli presents an anthropocosmological view, where mountains, rivers, and the earth itself are believed to originate from human life force and spirit.

This period represents the earliest stage of human cognitive awareness and historical consciousness. The tuuls of this era contribute uniquely to world culture by offering a philosophy of human existence harmonized with nature.

III. Medieval Heroic Tuuli (11th–16th centuries)

This period corresponds to the formation of Mongolian statehood and societal structures, during which the tuul tradition flourished. The central heroes of these epics symbolized national unity, protecting the homeland, family, and sacred social bonds.

Notable examples include *Jangar*, *Erin Sain Khetsüü Berk*, *Arslan Tiv*, *Bukh Altan Nudram*, and *Khargil Khar Baatar*. These works transcend mere storytelling, embodying social philosophy, state ideology, and ethical principles.

The structure of tuulis matured in this era, characterized by:

- Rhythmic patterns and poetic metrics for structured oral performance;
- Dual meanings and allegorical literary devices;
- Cultural archetypes blending royal authority, heroic virtues, and the idealized qualities of women.

B.Ya. Vladimirtsov observed that 13th-century Mongolian tuuls reached the pinnacle of literary eloquence, attaining a scale comparable to global epic traditions.

IV. Late Heroic Tuuli (17th–20th centuries)

From the 17th century onward, the Mongolian tuuli tradition entered a new phase influenced by religion and culture. Buddhist concepts of enlightenment, moral discernment between good and evil, and ethical philosophy were increasingly incorporated, transforming the heroes of the tuuls into figures of inner struggle and psychological conflict.

During this period, a new artistic form known as the *huur’s uliger* or *bens’s uliger* emerged, integrating tuuli recitation with musical accompaniment, rhythm, and song. This innovation significantly enhanced the performative power of the tuul, representing a major development in Mongolian folklore.

V. Contemporary Status and Endangerment of the Tuuli

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, the traditional practice of tuul recitation has become extremely rare. Today, the number of individuals capable of orally performing the full texts, melodies, and ritual structures of numerous tuuls can be counted on one's fingers. In the Altai, Uvs, Khovd, and Bayan-Ölgii regions, only a few elder tuul practitioners continue the tradition. Among them, I myself, as a researcher and bearer of the epic tradition, have personally collected and documented more than 270 epics over the past 30 years in written, audio, and visual formats. However, the process of transmitting this heritage to younger generations has become increasingly fragile. The traditional apprenticeship system has nearly vanished, posing a serious threat of cultural discontinuity.

VI. Global Significance of the Mongolian Tuuli

The philosophical and cultural value of the Mongolian tuuli is distinctive when compared with epic traditions of other nations:

1. **Cosmological Spatial Imagination** – Mongolian tuuls uniquely depict the universe on a galactic scale, preserving a one-of-a-kind oral cosmology.
2. **Unity of Nature and Humanity** – Tuuli heroes are portrayed not as conquerors of nature but as beings in harmonious coexistence with it.
3. **Ethical Teachings** – Concepts of justice, compassion, and social unity are emphasized more broadly than in many other epics, directing attention to the inner moral development of individuals.
4. **Oral and Mnemonic Art** – Tuulis are transmitted not merely through words but through a performative “bringing to life,” inseparably connected to Mongolian music and oral poetic traditions.
5. **Rare Global Phenomenon** – Only twelve nations in the world retain living epic traditions, most of which are now preserved in written form with very few living performers. Mongolia remains one of the last countries where the tuuli is still actively performed. Whereas most nations preserve only one to three epics, Mongolia has documented 274 tuuls, with estimates suggesting that 500–700 previously existed before being lost along with their performers.

VII. Strategies for Preservation and Transmission of the Tuuli

The tuuli is a “living heritage.” Preserving it requires not only documentation but also active revitalization, learning, and intergenerational transmission. Key strategic directions include:

1. **Oral Heritage Documentation and Digital Archiving**
 - Complete recording of elder tuul practitioners' performances, including video, audio, and annotated text.
 - Establishment of an audiolinguistic center to study vocabulary, melody, rhythm, and vocal techniques.
2. **Institutionalization of Tuuli Education**
 - Creation of a *National Center for Tuul Studies*, integrating traditional methods with academic curricula.

- Appointment of elder tuuli performers as master-mentors to train younger generations.
3. **Integration into the Educational System**
 - Incorporation of Mongolian tuuli philosophy, narrative structures, and artistic forms into primary, secondary, and tertiary educational programs.
 4. **International Promotion and Cultural Diplomacy**
 - Collaboration with UNESCO, ICHCAP, and other organizations to promote Mongolian tuuls globally.
 - Inclusion of the tuuli as a central theme at international forums such as the *World Epic Heritage Forum*.
 5. **Application of New Research Methodologies**
 - Employing artificial intelligence, linguistic data analysis, and ethnomusicology to advance tuuli studies.

Conclusion

The Mongolian epic (*tuuli*) represents a unique component of humanity's oral cultural heritage, embodying the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic unity between nature, humankind, and the heavens. The research findings demonstrate that the *tuuli* has continuously evolved in terms of time, space, structure, content, and linguistic form, and its development can be categorized into five historical stages. The earliest *tuulis* are based on cosmological concepts of celestial origin; the medieval heroic *tuulis* express ideas of statehood and social unity; and the later *tuulis* incorporate Buddhist and psychological-philosophical elements. The study confirms that among the twelve nations that still preserve living epic traditions, Mongolia remains one of the very few where the *tuuli* continues to exist in oral performance. To date, 274 *tuulis* have been documented, with estimates suggesting that 500–700 once existed, illustrating the vast scope of Mongolia's oral tradition. The results also show that as the knowledge of elder epic performers faces extinction, it is essential to fully record and digitize the melodies, verses, and expressions, to establish a digital archive and a national research center, and to integrate *tuuli* studies into the education system. The Mongolian *tuuli* makes a significant contribution to the world's epic culture through its unique spatial imagination, harmonious view of nature and humanity, moral philosophy, and distinctive oral performative art. The study concludes that integrating *tuuli* research with linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, musicology, and history, as well as applying modern technologies such as artificial intelligence and acoustic analysis, provides a new methodological foundation for preservation and revitalization. As a result, the Mongolian *epic* can continue to exist not merely as a cultural memory but as a living heritage an enduring symbol of national identity and an invaluable part of the world's intangible cultural legacy.

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6. Epic recordings collected during tours across Mongolian tuurgatans between 1997–2002.
7. Photographs, audio, and video recordings from performances in 107 countries between 1993–2019.
8. Legal and normative documents related to intangible cultural heritage.

Primary Research Materials:

1. Theoretical works of prominent researchers in epics, mythology, and linguistics: Ts. Damdinsüren, T. Dugersureng, Kh. Sampildendev, Tsooloo, B. Katuu, S. Dulam, L. Tuyabaatar, T. Bayasgalan, E. Baatarjav.
2. Collections of the National Center for Cultural Heritage, field recordings, audiovisual materials.
3. A collection of over 130 tuulis compiled by E. Baatarjav over 30 years, including works of more than 30 performers.