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## THE OIRAT-MONGOLIAN HEROIC EPIC

*Boris Ya. Vladimirtsov*

### I

The Venetian, Marco Polo, famous traveller of the 13th Century, telling about a battle, speaks in detail about how the Mongols played on musical instruments and sang songs before the fight. True, Marco Polo did not tell us what these songs were, no one overheard them then, but nonetheless we are able to form a judgment about these songs which the Mongols of that distant epoch sang, preparing for their famed attacks. It is not only Marco Polo who tells us about the Mongols. Extensive conquests brought the Mongols in contact with the most diverse cultured nations of Asia and Europe: Chinese, Georgians, Armenians and various representatives of the Islamic world; and the creation by the Mongols in the 13th century of a vast empire with a structured organization, an empire which linked cultural regions of the Far East and Central and Near Asia, aided still more the very close relations of the Mongolian conquerors with various civilized nations. Soon Europe too, one way or another, had to clash with this nation which had miraculously come from the unknown steppes of Central Asia. But the Mongolian campaigns to Russia, Poland, Hungary, on the one hand, and their wars with Islam in the Near East on the other, filled the soul of the Europeans of those days, now with fright, now with hope, a hope that a new fearsome force against unbelievers was rising up. They took a lively interest in the Mongols, sent them embassies, wrote books about them; stories made the rounds about them, sometimes magical, fantastic ones, which were frequently taken to be true, because they answered national expectations; sometimes too truthful, pensive ones, brought in by persons who had dwelt many years among the Mongols, as for instance Marco Polo; but the truth was frequently taken for tall tales, fantasy, because a man of those times, to whatever class he belonged in Europe, found it difficult to believe that [p. 8] somewhere far-off, in Asia, in the "pagan" world, there existed a state, at the head of which stood yesterday's nomads, children of the steppe, but which in a cul-

tural sense far surpassed Europe of those times; the country of the *Great Khan* of the Mongols also enjoyed a structured state organization, and well-ordered means of communication, a definite financial system, a proper regular army with a Guard Corps; they knew gunpowder and artillery, printing of books and paper money; the Great Khan was not a Christian, but in his realm, even in his tribe, among his guards, in his chancelleries he tolerated Christians, Muslims and Buddhists.

Thanks to the fact that the Mongols came to play a very significant role in the history of Asia and partly of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries, a vast literature about them grew up in different languages. On the basis of these data, among which must particularly be noted the works of the Persian historian Rashid-ad-Din (end of the 13th—beginning of the 14th) and an anonymous Georgian historian (of the 14th century), we can come to the conclusion that the Mongols of that time were living through a period of epic creativity. The epic moods and epic plots spread among both them, obviously, and other Asiatic nomads and hunters, were developing now, i.e., beginning from the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, in an uncommon fashion, being molded into definite, more complex forms: there began to be created bigger epic songs, byliny, and perhaps epic cycles. Not only just military campaigns, but vast conquests, all this martial life, military glory created conditions suitable for the development of epic plots. A more significant role in the given case was played by the circumstance that there was being formed a powerful social class which became the bearer and inspirer of epic moods. Under Chinggis Khan, one may say, there arose and grew strong a class of steppe aristocracy; it was organized by Chinggis, Chinggis indicated the ways of rule, organized a powerful aristocratic state. The Mongolian steppe aristocracy with its commander of genius, Chinggis, the one who expressed its aspirations, the bearer of its ideals, the ideal aristocrat, was creating this intertribal class, which permitted the one supporting it to quickly unite the different tribes, clans, "bones", and families of Mongolian or semi-Mongolian origin. The steppe aristocracy aided the creation of Chinggis' forces, it comprised his famed Guard Corps and followed its khan to any corner of the world, whether China or Persia, to realize the ideal of the true steppe-dweller and nomad. The Mongolian steppe aristocracy needed the free steppes and suitable places for its herds, it needed herdsmen; but as ones producing little yet have diverse needs, also needed people able to do smithy-work, to

prepare fabrics; this means they had to have with them in subjecting regions with a sedentary population which could serve their free nomadic lords. But even when they acquired all this, the steppe aristocracy understood that a similar position [p. 9] was possible only under a solid social order: it was striving for that which as it were the nomad in no wise was able to strive for—the creation of a firm state. True, this was a special state which the Mongolian aristocracy dreamed of, with its commander of genius Chinggis; it depicted it in the shape of an ancestral manor-seat, where they were the rulers and almost the entire world the seat.

And thus this class of Mongolian steppe aristocracy becomes the bearer and inspirer of epic moods; legends about them and their other leaders, of famed battles and cunning councils, the apotheosis of nomadic life, are especially pure and realistic, because the steady victories of the Mongols provide them with fertile pastures, open steppes and abundant booty—all this finds reflection not only in the core of the Mongolian aristocracy, but to a considerable degree is its direct creation. It is not only the preserver, the disseminator of epic legends, but also the creator. A Mongolian aristocrat both performs knightly deeds, and sings heroic legends, epic songs of famed heroes of his clan, about the wealth of his nomadic holdings. Thanks to a happy circumstance there has even come down to us a monument of the epic creativity of the Mongols of this epoch. Discovered by Orientalists, written down in 1240, it is a heroic tradition of the Mongols, partly remodelled into an "historic" tale. This undoubtedly most remarkable work of Mongolian literature, titled "The Secret History of the Mongols", reflects not only epic traits but also national self-awareness, evoked by the brilliant rule of Chinggis Khan, by vast conquests, a general exertion, unification and uplift of the Mongolian world. The Mongolian princes and aristocrats wish to hear not only the songs of individual heroes, of individual clans, they want a national epic, a national history; these concepts were not differentiated then. The Secret History is not a real epic anyway, it is not a Mongolian Iliad; for this it is too "historic", in places too prosaic; but it is not "history" either, nor in any event is the chronicle anything like that; the Secret History is too filled with an epic mood, with epic motifs, too mindful of the epic tale in its mentality, and in spite of some revision with a definite tendency to be a "history" of the clan of Chinggis, remains a real expression of the ideals of the Mongolian steppe aristocracy. And best of all, for the Secret History one settles on the definition,

*bogatyrskoe skazanie*, "a knightly legend", as W. Barthold does, the primary fixed character and significance of this curious monument of steppe creativity.

There have come down to us further some few epic works of ancient Mongolian literature, for example, the poem about the two steeds of Chinggis Khan, some fragments of chronicles and some other things, but this [p. 10] material demands great caution from us. The fact of the matter is we have absolutely no idea of the time these works were composed. And solely by general spirit, by distinct epic mood, by and at times according to motifs, approximating them to the corresponding passages of the Secret History, partly as regards language, can we state the supposition that these works date from the early period of Mongolian history, when the Mongolian people were living thru the epic stage of their development.

But now the once single and powerful Mongolian empire is unwinding into its parts; the Mongolian element in states formed by the Mongols in the western part of Central Asia is disappearing; their might in China too finally is inclining to a fall. Once more the Mongols are in their steppes. A number of years go past when the Mongols conduct internecine wars, raids on China, distant nomadizings and more wars and raids. There spreads among them Buddhism in that form in which it took hold in Tibet; the Mongols keep conducting internecine wars and wars with the Manchu-Chinese; again we see them executing distant nomadizings. And the 20th century finds them the same nomads which they were in the 13th century, but having lost along with their independence their entire scope, their former colorful wealth of a nomadic life, everything of theirs has grown smaller. And often to the eye of a European traveller these Mongols of the present seem primitive pastoral people, long ago having lost all the past, even the very memory of the past. An unprepared European traveller may not notice that this pastoral people has its own literature, its unique civilization, has Buddhist monasteries where people are busy not just with the cult but with the study of various provinces of knowledge. Such a traveller indeed would be surprised to learn that in Buddhist monasteries they seriously study the theory of knowledge and that it is not hard to find people there occupied with questions of the existence of the alien "ego", or the theory of poetry. Indeed, Mongolia in recent centuries, thanks to the influence of Tibet, has become a live old India in many respects; thanks to changed historical conditions the Mongols no longer have to

conduct wars, execute distant campaigns or to conquer rich regions.

What happened with the Mongolian epic? Did it die out? Did the Mongols forget their old heroic epics? Did their epic mood die out, which they once possessed, which created a certain *Weltanschauung*? To be sure, epics of other peoples have vanished; the French no longer sing the *Chanson de Roland*, about the exploits of Guillaume, there are no singers of the *Niebelungen* any longer, of the crafty Odysseus; epic songs are even vanishing among primitive peoples; it is harder and harder to find at present, for instance, a singer of heroic tales among the Altai Telengits. Finally, one and the same people over an extended period of their existence, established under differing historical conditions, creates completely [p. 11] different epics; there is nothing in common among the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and medieval and modern Greek epic songs. What do we find among the Mongols?

## II

Mongolian literature, beginning with the 14th century, gives us extraordinarily little material for any sort of judgment about this matter. Those few epic works, small ones, which have by chance come down to us, cannot at all characterize the situation of the epic, the position of epic tradition for the several hundred years of its existence. Their small numbers and limited distribution cannot serve even as an indirect proof of the decline of the heroic epic among the Mongols, because we know very well that the knightly epics often lived for centuries among the people, never written down, and remained completely alien to the literature of this people; the Russian *byliny* are an excellent example. But Mongolian literature in this regard was least of all suited for the creation of conditions, in which there might appear in it any tendency, to revert to national heroic songs.

After the fall of the Mongolian dynasty in China, after which the Mongols were again dispersed in their steppes and mountains, after new Mongolian tribes moved into the arena of history, ones who had up to now lived quite a primitive life, there arises a dark period of Mongolian history; the Mongolian people quickly loses all its acquisitions, in all branches of life there comes a quick regress, a decline. It seems the Mongols quickly reached that condition from which historical circumstances and the genius Chinggis Khan led them out in the 12th-13th centuries. Then from the end of the 16th century there

begins a Mongolian renascence proceeding under the spiritual leadership of Tibetan Buddhism. Literature arose among the Mongols rather rapidly, but this literature first and foremost served the Buddhist Church, and it in its subsequent development too becomes the propagator of Buddhist dogmatics and liturgy, of Buddhist views, Buddhist legends; it satisfies the new vital questions of Mongolian society, creates new ones, and aids the old ones to be expressed in a Buddhist spirit. There are quickly created external forms, forms of a new literacy language, which is made in a milieu where literacy is rather slightly developed, with steadfast norms it lays its imprint on to almost all types of writing. Mongolian literature responds to and serves only one aspect of the Mongolian soul: its Buddhist mood; Mongolian writing further serves, as required, state and society in various chancelleries; but it remains far from the broad life of the Mongol; the present steppe nomadic life finds no expression in it. Mongolian literature [p. 12] is a creation of the Buddhist monastery and the princely chancellery, the "aroma of the steppe" no longer wafts from it. It is of course possible with a more steady look to find other trends too, but these will be, we repeat, scarce and chancy. Hence it is to no avail to seek Mongolian epic works in Mongolian books and manuscripts, old or new; these, if they were preserved, are solely on the lips of the people, it is to them one must go and not to book depositories, but to the yurts of nomads, to listen to when and under what circumstances the Mongols sing and tell their knightly epic rounds.

For a very long time the view held sway among Orientalists that the Mongols of present time had forgotten their heroic epic, forgotten it completely. Some travellers and investigators showed, it is true, lyric-epic songs, which occasionally they found among this or that Mongolian tribe; the Orientalists even knew one epic encountered on the Kalmyk steppes, but nonetheless acknowledged that in general the Mongols at present had no heroic epic or epic songs; and those which they once had, had perished without trace. Such an opinion persisted until most recent times, when a new school of Orientalists appeared, who began to be more attentive to the life of the popular masses of the Orient from various points of view, when investigators of Mongolian life who paid special attention to the living language and popular creativity of various Mongolian tribes were found. Moreover at the same time there was growing up amongst the Buriats and Kalmyks a Mongolian *intelligentsiya* which enthusiastically turned to the study of

native national life, and collection of works of Mongolian national creativity. The mutual efforts of these investigations succeeded quickly in establishing that former opinions about the Mongolian heroic epic were wrong. It proved in reality that the Mongols had not forgotten their knightly songs; it turned out that in many places settled by Mongolian tribes the heroic epic still existed in full force in various stages of its development; there still exist Mongolian tribes where the heroic epic lives such a full life on the lips of professional bards that the epic tradition continues to develop up to this time: old epics are rearranged, new ones are created, the steppe aristocracy yields the more outstanding creator-bards and performers.

Now, after 20-25 years of intensive work in this field have gone past, when considerable material on the Mongolian living knightly epic has accumulated, been transcribed, collected moreover in various parts of Mongolia, when in general our concepts of Central Asia have been visibly widened, we can have a rather exact idea about where, how and to what degree and under what circumstances the heroic epic exists among the Mongolian tribes.

At the present time in the Mongolian world, as far as we know, there are three areas, three regions, where the heroic epic cycles live or still exist, where professional singers of tales are found, [p. 13] distinguished one from the other by many individual features. The bearers of these three types and forms of the Mongolian epic are the following Mongolian tribes: the Buriats both of the Irkutsk *gouvernement* and the Trans-Baikal district, the Volga Kalmyks (Oirats), together with those who in the second half of the 18th century nomadized out of Russia and now live in Dzungaria and on the T'ien-shan, and finally, the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, together with some Mongolized Turkic tribes. In each of these regions populated by one of these tribes, we find the heroic epic, organically mature, having its own definite history and being preserved or living at present in one or another characteristic form. Among other Mongolian tribes, for example among the Khalkhas who inhabit Central and Eastern Mongolia, among the Chahars and other tribes living in South and South-East Mongolia, and finally among the Khotogoitu who nomadize between the Khalkhas and Oirats in North-West Mongolia, there also crop up epic songs, epic cycles. Here and there among these tribes one can meet individuals belonging to the most diverse classes of society, of the most different status, who know and sometimes are able to sing individual short tales. But these tales are for the most part

episodic segments of larger epics once sung; they are not adapted to a particular region, are not an attainment of this or that tribe, of one or another clan or any specific school. Regarding all these parts of Mongolia one may state with more or less certainty that the heroic epic there has been forgotten, it has died out, but along with this one must add that there crop up there certain personalities who for this or that reason know certain epic songs, tales, for the most part selections. Finally, there still exist areas, Mongolian tribes about which our information in this regard is quite insufficient, and we can say almost nothing as to the position of the heroic epic there. What do we know about the heroic epic of Mongols nomadizing near Lake Koko Nur? Or about the Mongols in Tibet, about the Afghan Mongols? Nothing.

In spite of the fact that we have no direct indications of any monuments, we can affirm that the heroic epic of the Buriat tribes, in that shape in which we find it today, is a heritage of ancient centuries. The Buriat epic existed long ago, developed and was subjected to one and another influence, and took on different layers, and was molded finally into the form of large epics and now evidently is beginning to decline, be forgotten and disappear. It is of course difficult at our present state of knowledge to imagine the exact history of development of the Buriat heroic epic. This is a task for the future, and perhaps not too distant, nonetheless an analysis of Buriat epics and comparative study of them together with epic works of Mongolian and Turkic tribes quite definitely [p. 14] shows that these, it seems, are primitive poems, created by primitive tribes, have lived for many centuries, and that they are the result of a lengthy creation, in which with regret one can establish that their further development has stopped; they have existed for some time in the fixed form, in which these epics are molded; they are already beginning to perish and be forgotten. When a few more years go past that which is now true for the Khalkhas and Southern Mongols regarding the heroic epic, will also be true for the Buriats.

The Buriat epic, in particular, the Buriat heroic epics, have thriven. Among the Buriats there were people who as early as the middle of the last century were interested in them and began to write them down. This was something later done by Russian investigators and by Buriats in Russian. But in a full sense the Buriat knightly epic was not found until there stepped forward to collect and study it Ts. Zh. Zhamtsarano, who later directed a whole host of his cohorts on this path. In the preface to the first volume of his collection of Buriat tales, which has

already come out, published by the [Russian] Academy of Sciences, Zhamtsarano gives an interesting and lively sketch of his native bylina poetry, which gives someone who does not know Mongolian the opportunity to get acquainted, if only in general outline, with this genre of native creativity.

At the present time among both the Irkutsk and Trans-Baikal Buriats, who are divided into various tribes and clans which are quite distinct from one another as regards language, religion and culture, the heroic epic appears in the shape of large structured poems, knightly epics, composed in verses, which for the most part are sung by rhapsodes or bards, sometimes to the accompaniment of musical instruments; and only very seldom or in exceptional circumstances or in certain specific regions, are they "told" or narrated. In its content the Buriat epics recall the heroic epic works of other nations, the Greeks, Germans, Slavs, Turks. The Buriats, like other peoples, celebrate in their tales the knightly deeds of their heroes, describe their adventures, delight in the beauty of their women, and describe with enthusiasm their clever and wise steeds. Similar to the heroic epic of other peoples the Buriat epics sometimes bring onto the scene of action fantastic enchanted beings which now harm and now aid the heroes. Gods too enter these epics, but for the most part from the primitive shamanist pantheon, sometimes even these and their sons are main heroes of the long epics, and the action embraces not only Earth but Heaven too and the Lower Regions.

But side by side with shamanist spirits, and pictures of the primitive life of hunters, the Buriat epics also have other personalities, showing another life. In general one may say that the Buriat heroic epic, Buriat epic cycles are for us astonishingly primitive, archaic, in spite of some later layers, easily distinguished, [p. 15] conveying us to the midst of a simple, primitive hunter's existence, sketching with unusual clarity and relief not only the external forms of this life, every possible occurrence and episode, but onto the spirit of a man of this life. On the one hand these epics sing of their heroes, not of kings, khans and commanders, but only of the strongest, bravest, best from among the hunting and nomadic people, "gentle as a colt"; on the other hand, these epics draw the listener into an ideal world, which can only seem a dream to a herdsman and hunter; rich pastures, open steppe, yurts where one can comfortably relax after the battle; and the knights keep and guard these riches, perform deeds in defense of their holdings or to acquire new herds, new nomadic territories. But just as the shamans

to the sound of jingling and tambourines draw one into another shadowy world of spirits and wondrous animals, these epics conduct the listeners from dreams of a herdsman-hunter paradise into a strange and fearful shadowy shamanist world. A naive primitive poetry creates this enchanted world in the same way as the surrounding taiga whispers—frightful unseen forms are often fearful only at first glance, fearful in words, in deed they are like everything round about; but nevertheless the striving of the human soul toward what is marvelous, what is beyond the pale, a striving to soothe or to frighten oneself with fantasy is clearly expressed in the Buriat epic cycles. In spite of its astounding primitiveness, in spite of the fact that they have been preserved with the most insignificant changes and layers from ancient, ancient times, the Buriat epics are the result of a prolonged creation, the result capping a long period of development in other forms.

Buriat epics are genuine epics; this designation for them is as applicable to them as to the creations of the French epos and epics. And of course, just like the latter, they cannot appear at once, but must be composed gradually, and be gradually molded into those forms in which we find them today. They, the Buriat epics, have remained primitive, rough in both plot and spirit, as well as in poetics; even in spite of the fact that they borrow, that they are stratified, their primitive nature is evident; nevertheless this is not a first original creation, but the result of a long and complex creative life; the Buriat knightly epic always dwelt in a simple milieu, its singers were always typical representatives of the people, owing to this or that circumstance having learned these sometimes lengthy epic cycles and having performed them for the common people. The Buriats actually had almost no aristocracy, and in those places where it arose, this aristocracy by its tastes and its style of life was no different from the mass of common people surrounding it. The Buriat heroic epic was never subjected to a literary re-working, to be clarified and refined; it remained primitive. This fact did not prevent it from creating splendid forms in the realm of verse and meter. Great influence of the Tungus is evident in Buriat epics; there are even traditions that the Buriats [p. 16] directly borrowed their heroic epic from the latter. Undoubtedly there was influence from various tales and legends borrowed by all Mongols in common from Tibet and through its intermediary from distant India. For instance, the name of one hero of a colossal Buriat epic far surpassing the Iliad in size, along with many motifs of this fabulous story, came to the Buriats through the Mongols from Tangutia, Tibet.

This is the famed Geser Khan, Tibetan *ke-sar*, the hero of vast tales, apparently created in Tibet and now widely dispersed in Tibet, Ladakh, Amdo, Mongolia, China and Manchuria; the name Geser-Kesar itself, as some think, is nothing other than the Greek *kaisar, kesar*.

If we now turn to the Volga Kalmyks and their kinsmen nomadizing in Dzungaria and on the T'ien-shan, then we get a completely different picture of the status of the heroic epic. First and foremost it is noteworthy that the Kalmyks (i.e., other Oirats, or Western Mongols) on the Volga have only one epic poem, the Janggar cycle. They do have, to be sure, other epic songs, as for instance the poem about Mazan-baatar, but these differ considerably from typical works of the heroic epic and are rather closer to the genre of the lyric-epic song, distributed to a certain degree among the early Mongolian tribes, the Khalkhas, Buriats, Khotogitus, the Oirats of Western Mongolia, and so on. In any event, these little poems of the Volga Kalmyks of the Mazan-Baatar type are distinguished by undoubtedly having been created in recent time, that they are "historical", and that their heroes are historical personalities who lived relatively recently. It is suitable to compare these Kalmyk poems with such Russian historical songs as those about Ivan the Terrible, Skopin, about Peter the Great, and their relation to the heroic tales will be the same as we find between the Russian byliny, (e.g., about Il'ya Muromets, about Aliosha-Popovich) and "historical songs".

Hence, our Volga Kalmyks have one heroic poem which they call by the name of its major hero, Janggar, the Janggar cycle or "The Janggar". It is impossible to say that it would have remained entirely unknown to European society—several times translations of extracts from this steppe poem have appeared in Russian and German, and Stasov used them in his well-known and ardent article about the origins of the Russian byliny. But a complete translation of the Janggar has not yet appeared in any language; indeed more than that, up until most recent times all the songs comprising the Janggar cycle were not recorded and only quite recently was this work finished by Nomtu Ochirov and Wl. L. Kotwicz, who also published a considerable part of the transcribed text.

Not so very long ago, according to testimony of persons in contact with the Kalmyks, travellers, researchers and according to deposition of Kalmyks themselves, lovers of the past, the Janggar was very widespread in [p. 17] the Volga steppes. Everywhere there used to exist and

be in rivalry among themselves the so-called Janggarchi's, i.e., singers of the Janggar cycle, who knew several songs of the poem, and often the entire poem. People loved to hear the tale of Janggar, and would ride from afar to good singers, inviting them to feasts, to weddings, and to public holidays. The Kalmyk aristocracy prized them still more, the princes, noyons and courtiers, dzaisangs, who sometimes permanently maintained at their place one or even several janggarchi's, and no festivity or a single feast in the noyon's headquarters could get by without the appearance of a Janggar-cycle singer. These singers almost always came from the ordinary people, who had learned to sing the national poem professionally, and then often lived by this art or at times performed the Janggar from love of this national attainment, for the sake of glory. But in recent times a sharp turn-about has occurred. The Kalmyk courtly society has diminished, new interests and cares have arisen among the people, life has quickly changed under pressure of new conditions, under the onrush of Russian settlers, and along with this, interest in the Janggar has quickly fallen off; people cooled toward it. The old Janggarchis have died off and hardly any new ones have appeared, and if there are enthusiasts, these are not supported by the general mood, have not perfected themselves, have forgotten what was studied, and the Janggar cycle has begun to die out on the Kalmyk steppes. Everyone there now knows about Janggar, has heard something about its heroes, but it is very difficult at the present time to find not only a good Janggarchi, but even someone knowing the entire poem more or less completely. As to what position the heroic epic now has among those Kalmyk-Oirats who nomadized from the Volga and now live in Dzungaria and the T'ien-shan, we have very little data. According to rumor, as might be expected, they took the Janggar too with them to the new homeland from the Volga; the poem is known, and up to now has chiefly been sung there where the Torgouts settled, one of the Kalmyk tribes which regarded the Janggar as its own national heroic epic cycle. Once on the western slopes of the southern Altai I ran into a young Torgout, a refugee from the Dzungarian Kalmyks; he knew fragments from the Janggar cycle and could sing them (rather dreadfully) to the accompaniment of the dombro. According to what he said, the Janggar was well-known in his homeland at that time, they were singing it at feasts and in the camps of princes, as well as in the yurts of ordinary people.

Now, what is this Janggar cycle, this heroic poem common to the Torgouts and Volga Kalmyks? We purposely did not call it an epic, because there are many peculiarities preventing its recognition as an epic. The Janggar cycle is a cycle of byliny, of poems, completely independent, mutually connected only by the fact that Janggar Khan appears in all the separate poems; the knights, heroes of the individual poems, all serve the one Khan, Janggar. The Janggar cycle consists of several songs, separate [p. 18] poems, usually reckoned at twelve, but which has been and is larger; in this regard these song-poems usually begin either with a description of Janggar's palace, his nomadic lands, his feasts, or with a description of his childhood and first feats as Khan Janggar; very frequently these become commonplaces and are repeated unchanged in all the songs.

Further, the song-poems proceed to their main topic through a description of the heroic feats of the knights of Janggar, and sometimes of Janggar himself. In general all songs are closely connected by dependence of their heroes on the Khan Janggar; Janggar himself in all his grandeur is one way or another present in every canto, and makes it a chapter, perhaps an independent one, but in any event a chapter of a cyclic poem.

In the Janggar cycle we have an instance, and a very clear one at that, of a heroic epic which has passed through all the stages of cyclization and is ready to create either one vast epic or several separate ones. But there the life of the epic shows one more possibility—there arises not a grandiose epic-cycle of the type of the Indian *Mahābhārata*, nor a cycle of epics of the type of the French cycle about William of Orange and his "line", but an epic cycle of a special type. But along with this the epic cyclization which we meet in the Janggar cycle differs strongly from the type of cyclization we know for instance from the Russian byliny. We know the byliny of the Vladimir cycle; this is a very powerful and shining cycle of the Russian knightly epic; here individual byliny, most diverse, of differing origins, distinct both in topic and in mood, are locked into a cycle by the fact that their hero-knights are grouped about Vladimir Krasnoe-Solnyshko, they ride to Kiev, to the court of the gracious prince.

At first glance it is very similar to what has just been said about the Janggar cycle. But at the same time there are still greater differences, showing that the Kalmyk epic in its development has passed through those forms in which fate left the Russian byliny. The fact of the matter is that the Janggar has far more internal similarity of action of

the separate song-poems; they are linked not only by internal connections (by one and the same Khan), each of them is a natural continuation, a development of the preceding; contradictions almost never arise; the singer performing any given song calls others to mind, he sketches them on a distant background. A real Janggarchi is one who knows and clearly presents the whole poem, this entire cycle and at the same time can perform for the listeners any song of the Janggar cycle in such a way that it is fully understood and produces a complete impression. Finally, the Janggar cycle differs from the Russian byliny cycle further by the fact that Khan Janggar is an actual hero, a major functioning figure of the poem; true, he turns up in some songs in the background, yielding place to this or that knight, but all the same is a functioning hero everywhere. Last, the songs are chapters of the Janggar cycle which were delimited before hand, made into a cycle by a definite [p. 19] quantity of knights close to Janggar, the heroes of the individual songs.

We also know of some other types of cyclization of the heroic epic, and one of them must be mentioned because we meet it among a people very near to the Kalmyks both ethnically and by language, as well as in conditions of life, a people with whom the Kalmyks ultimately clashed not [just] once, namely, the Kazakhs. One must further direct attention to the Kazakh epic and its cyclization because in all probability the Kalmyk Janggar, the Kalmyk knightly epic, went through a similar stage of development and relatively recently too. Among the Kazakhs, among whom the knightly epic is developed and dispersed to an uncommon degree, it is, as such an outstanding investigator and collector of national literary production of Turkic tribes as W. W. Radloff shows us, in the form of various song-poems, one way or another connected with the single hero Manas; side by side with this exist songs connected with the heroes Yoloi and Teshtük. These are as it were three cycles, but it is impossible to imagine the Kazakh knightly epic in the form of these three cycles, as it is in general impossible to imagine this entire epic as it lives among the people.

There exists a series of song-episodes from life, e.g. the Manas, but these songs are constantly changing on the lips of the people, are entwined among themselves, forming new episodes, increasing or decreasing, and what remains common and constant is only the picture, an epic picture of life, reflecting epic moods of the people, displaying epic motifs, disseminated among the people, known to them and beloved by them. The beloved heroes, e.g., Manas, besides the epic

poetics and language, stay the same. By many tokens, it seems to me, we have the right to presume that the Kalmyk knightly epic went through a similar stage in its development. But then individual episodes on the lips of skilful professional singers began to take on a more and more definite character, began to be fixed; on the one hand the listeners grew more and more accustomed to a definite sequence of known and loved topics; on the other hand, the singers began to lose the ability of poetical improvisation and replaced this with a more careful setting, and concern about the structure. As a result of these processes there arose the Janggar poetical cycle, which is not a combination of song-episodes from the life of one hero, but a chain of poems, closely connected among themselves into one circle.

The Kalmyks are a nomadic people, but far from primitive; they have lived through much since the time that historical circumstances moved them into the arena of history. They experienced life as separate, fragmented tribes, and they went through the stage of developing a state (tribal union) and made attempts to create a powerful nomadic kingdom. In their farflung nomadizing it fell to them to see many lands, to clash with many different peoples, with Chinese, Kirghiz, with Caucasian mountaineers. The Kalmyks too, like other Mongols, were in their time subjected [p. 20] to the influence of Buddhist, Tibeto-Indian culture, they were unable to join with their nomadic way of life certain cultural acquisitions, as for instance a national script, the beginnings of education. Stratification of society among them took place long ago, they have an extensive aristocracy, and also experienced different conditions. All these conditions of life of the Kalmyks ought to be reflected and were reflected in their national heroic works, in their poem about Janggar. This is no longer a primitive, albeit magnificent, attractive, at times beautiful in verse, but still primitive epic of the Buriats, an epic of a primitive taiga-dweller. The Janggar cycle reflects a far more complex nomadic life, a life not only of the nomad but of a nomadic state. Far more clearly than in the Buriat epics there lies before us the picture of a nomadic way of life.

Here is a real apotheosis; clearly and definitely, quite realistically and lively the Janggar-cycle depicts the ideal of a nomadic, the ideal of this abundant steppe life, of a full unique poetry. From the song of the Janggar cycle there wafts the "aroma of the steppe" in a genuine fashion, not created according to some style, but in a versified yet strengthened style. This ideal, moving image of nomadic life appears before us as both complex and varied; it is evident that there is

dreaming about this not a people, half-hunter and half-nomad, who have abandoned their solitary yurts at the feet of wooded hills, as in the Buriat epics, but a people who have seen the showy camps of mighty steppe khans surrounded by the hitching-lines of the Khan's warriors, courtiers and menials, a people who have lived the life of an organized nomadic state.

The Janggar cycle must be acknowledged as an amazing expression of the national spirit, of the strivings of the people, its hopes; it depicts its genuine world, this is its real daily life, but elevated into an ideal one; it is actually a national poem. The Janggar has very little of enchantment or marvel; fantastic motifs are almost entirely absent; the description of miraculous qualities of the heroes and their miraculous strength is rather figure of speech, hyperbole, than an actual description of magic qualities; even the fairy-tale beings, the dreadful devil-spawned "shulmus" and "mangus", are imperceptibly converted into simply fearful, frightening enemies; the poem indeed does impart to them at times magical qualities, but at the same time forces them to live and nomadize exactly like the subjects of the famed Khan Janggar. We do not find here any completely shamanist deities, common in this strange shamanist world of the taiga and dreams of primitive man; in this respect there lies a wide chasm between the Buriat epics and the Janggar cycle. In the Janggar cycle Buddhist influence is considerably more evident, although purely internal; thus Janggar and his knights are depicted as adherents of Buddha, and here and there figures of the Buddhist pantheon are mentioned, they speak about Buddhist monasteries; in descriptions of princely camps and furnishings, and also in description of one or another locality lies a layer [p. 21] of Buddhist culture; if not of a Buddhist *Weltanschauung*, then in any event of a Buddhist manner of expression.

In establishing this, we approach a very difficult and now completely unsolvable question about the elements of the Janggar-cycle borrowed from alien peoples; namely, which motifs and perhaps plots too entered the Janggar from outside, what were these sources and by what routes did they get into the Kalmyk poem? Then the question comes up about the most fundamental motif of the poem, whether it is borrowed or not. Whence came these details, the palaces, these descriptions of combats and banquets; does all this belong to the long period of its creation on the lips of singers; the Janggar must have been subjected to different changes, re-workings and layerings. How, in what way, under influence of what unwritten poetics was all this

worked out? These are very difficult questions for any epic, but, in connection with the Kalmyk heroic epic they are all but insoluble because there has yet been insufficiently studied the life, the living past, the history of the Kalmyks and nations surrounding them; the comparative ethnology of Central Asia and the comparative study of literature is in too much of an initial state.

But nonetheless, however little we know at the present time, we can in any event not just pose questions but note some solutions. Thus for instance even now we can presume with a large degree of probability the influence of the Persian epic, *Shah-nama*, on the Janggar cycle. Naturally, this influence was not direct, but took place through Turkic nationalities with whom the Kalmyks had to constantly clash, to live together and who themselves had for a long time been subject to the influence of Iranian culture. Even more influence had these same Turkic peoples who like the Kirghiz and Kazakhs lived under conditions almost exactly like those of the Kalmyks. The very name Janggar is a borrowing from the Persian *Jihan-gir*, "Conqueror of the World". There is doubtless also influence to be discovered in the Janggar cycle from the heroic tales of Geser Khan, which was mentioned in the preceding.

This tale, which apparently originated in Tibet, is particularly beloved by the Mongols; it was early translated into Mongolian; this story also exists in the Oirat-Kalmyk script. The tales of Geser Khan were widespread among all the Oirat tribes, including among the Oirats nomadizing along the Volga. Parallel to its dissemination by a literary path this much-loved Central Asian tale was disseminated also orally, by oral re-telling, because there always were and are expert tellers who were in a position to convey almost literally, and sometimes (as I myself was personally able to witness) absolutely literally the famed tale about the sacred hero, Geser Khan. And thus different features of this foreign tale, which is foreign, but firmly grafted to Mongolian soil, are reflected in the Janggar. This influence [p. 22] is revealed not so much in any motifs as in various details, as for instance in descriptions, descriptions of battles, in descriptions of weaponry. Many commonplaces of the Janggar, its epithets, are direct borrowings taken from Geser Khan. This influence also comes out in the general structure of the poem, in the manner it develops its actions, in the entire poetics of the Janggar. Actually, the singers of the Janggar cycle always had before them the model, beloved by all, of a heroic tale, dedicated to that selfsame Buddhist church, because

Geser Khan is not only a Tibetan but also a Buddhist hero, although it does fall to him to battle with one *genius*-spirit of the Buddhist pantheon. They involuntarily began to borrow from it different features, and transfer them to their Janggar; they did this all the more easily since Geser Khan also penetrated into the soul of the Mongolian people, was acquired by them, as it were, as a national property.

The Janggar is usually sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, most often the dombra, a kind of balalaika. In the shape in which it has come down to us, known from old and new records, it has a special rhythm, but the verses are verses from a Mongolian point of view, i.e., with initial rhythm, a kind of acrostic, often interspersed with prose. In this sense the Janggar cycle is similar to the Irish heroic poems.

Now, having briefly surveyed the heroic epic of the Buriats and Kalmyks, we must proceed to the third center of the Mongolian knightly epic, to the Oirats of North-West Mongolia. Since the body of this volume [to which this essay is an Introduction] contains translations of the epic works of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, among whom I chanced to live for quite a long time, to transcribe and analyze their heroic epics, it falls to my lot to dwell in more detail on the description of this type of Mongolian knightly epic. I am stirred too by the fact that nowhere in Mongolia does the epic attain such a perfection, such development, as among the Oirat tribes of North-West Mongolia, and nowhere exist those special conditions which enable the preservation and the [continuing] life of the heroic epic, as in its homeland, on the Altai and Khangai, the present nomadic grounds of the Oirats.

### III

The Oirats, now dwelling in the Kobdo region of North-West Mongolia, have been living in these places since recent times, the middle of the eighteenth century, having migrated to their new homeland from Dzungaria and other localities of Western Mongolia. The Oirats of North-West Mongolia, divided into separate tribes, very near in all respects to one another, live under conditions generally similar to the conditions of life of other Mongols, even the Khalkhas. But nonetheless it is impossible not to observe significant peculiarities. Thus, the majority of the Oirats of the region we are studying [p. 23] have preserved up to this time their tribal way of life with exogamy; thanks

to this, and to other circumstances as well, the entire antiquity has been preserved far better, there is a fresher memory of the recent past, more than the more famed past, when the Oirats tried to create and created a vast nomadic state, more powerful is the belief that the famed kingdom, "The Four Oirats" will be reborn anew and life will again flow smoothly and peacefully as the old tales sing. Among the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, however much their life today may have degenerated, their conditions of existence approach the general Mongolian ones, there is a lively recent past, about which they tell tales and sing songs, the ideals of which up to this time are near and dear to the wide popular masses; and there is a future, a fantastic one but passionately loved and desired by the people, a future which is depicted by the glorious past in all its splendor; and in that future, as they believe in the past, they talk about it, tell tales, compile legends about it, they seek traditions about it in ancient byliny.

Among the Oirats of North-West Mongolia are disseminated not only different legends and tales and lyric-epic, "historical" songs, but also heroic epics, living on the lips of special singers, known to all the people, who love them, regard them as a national attainment; heroic epics, which replace history, in which they believe, which satisfy the higher esthetic requirements of the soul. The Oirats of the region we are examining up to now have not completely come out of their "epic" period; up to this time the "epic" moods, the "epic" storehouse of life, if they do not quite possess them, in any event they are close to them, understand them and love them.

Heroic epics are disseminated among almost all the Oirat tribes of North-West Mongolia, but they have a special development and dissemination, on the one hand, among the Baits and the Dörbets, who nomadize in the mountains and valleys in the neighborhood of Lake Ubsa, and among the Oirats who nomadize along the Bulgun River, on the other side of the Altai range, the Mongolized Uryangk-hais, the Torgouts and the Khoshouts. And from these regions the heroic epics extend among other Oirat tribes of Western Mongolia and are sometimes borrowed by other Mongols, for instance the Khalkas, the Khotogoitus, since sometimes the Bait knightly epic can turn up far from Mount Khan-Khukhei, the Bait homeland, and remain by various circumstances to inhabit that region.

The heroic epics of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, having their minor peculiarities independently of the places where they are found, from tribes which are their bearers, all possess one and the

same general traits, peculiarities which definitely distinguish them from the epic works of other Mongolian tribes.

The Oirat epic ("*tüli*") is always a large firmly delimited poetic work, composed in distich strophes, the meters of which differ according to different conditions. The knightly epics of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia are never [p. 24] narrated, they are always sung; they are sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, a balalaika (the "*tobshür*") or, much less frequently, a fiddle (the "*khür*"). The melody, like the singing itself and the accompaniment is varied depending, first on the region, the tribe, among whom this or that epic exists, and second, depending on the contents of that epic, on the course of development of its topics and action.

The knightly epics of the Oirats of Western Mongolia are usually performed by professional singers, the "*tuulchi's*", but nonetheless the heroic byliny are very often known to ordinary amateurs, even to women, who sometimes venture to perform them in a rather narrow, intimate circle. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the dividing line between amateur and professional singers. Among the Oirats of the Kobdo district the heroic epics are sung on the most diverse occasions, in quite varied circumstances. The knightly byliny are sung both at public and private parties, at holidays, even at chance banquets; they are performed under favorable circumstances, at any gathering or assembly, at the time of a trip which is either long or with a lot of people, at watchposts and in military camps. But more often than not, the Oirat heroic epics are performed in the camps of princes, besides more ceremoniously, and with the observation of all ancient rules and practices.

The Oirat princes, and very often the neighboring princes of other Mongolian tribes, generally display particular interest in the heroic epic, they constantly invite well-known singer-*tuulchi's* to their camps to sing byliny, not only on holidays or the occasion of any special event, but often simply at a very ordinary time. Very often the princes themselves are excellent connoisseurs of the knightly epic, and are greatly interested for this reason in new byliny or ones that are unknown to them or in new variants; they love to interpret the various oddities of this or that epic with the singers and other persons knowledgeable about their ancient native poetry.

Finally, the princes themselves sometimes are skilful performers of heroic epics; naturally, owing to their position as rulers of districts, it is unsuitable for them to appear in public to perform byliny, but this

does not interfere with their singing epics at home, in an intimate circle of friends and members of household. Every somewhat well-known singer-tuulchi is proud of the fact that he is constantly invited by this or that powerful or mighty prince, appearing as it were as his "court" singer; on the other hand the princes too consider that they acquire fame as ones who love and esteem the native epic knightly poetry, and thus in every way attract well-known singers to themselves. The professional singers come from various classes of society, from the ordinary people, from amidst Buddhist monks, from the ranks of the hereditary aristocracy, the taiji's. The position of the singer of heroic epics is respected, from whatever class he may have come, everywhere and all over he is received with respect, with honor, and his calling of singer-tuulchi he bears like a famous title. [p. 25]

The Oirats of Western Mongolia never under any circumstances look on their singers of knightly byliny as hirelings; on the contrary, they consider them people of a higher breed, endowed with supernatural strengths, to support and preserve the traditions of a glorious past, to preserve the true spirit of the Oirats. Both princes and people regard themselves under obligation to the singer-tuulchi's for their gift, they, these singers, bestow weal, and for this reason it is the duty of everyone to honor them, and make them presents; this is not a payment for singing, one does not have to "hire" a singer; this is an honorary gift, and the gift is a sign of respect and gratitude.

The fact that they often come from the hereditary nobility, the taiji's, from the ranks of nomadic aristocracy, often even from the family of ruling Oirat princes, contributes to this position.

Contemporary Oirat society in North-West Mongolia, though divided into various classes, though long ago historically differentiated in a class sense, nonetheless in general, thanks to the peculiarities and positions of their culture, these live one and the same life, have one and the same ideals, spiritual requirements and possibilities of their satisfaction; the major difference is their material status, but the conditions of nomadic way of life and tribal structure in this sense enormously influence in a levelling fashion; a man rich today by dint of this or that circumstance can become a pauper tomorrow, and a perfect pauper can quickly secure a medium or even a wealthy status. Hence one can say that everyone in Oirat Western Mongolia, whether rich, poor, noble or lay, of rank or ordinary, lives one and the same life and almost has no opportunity to get out of the prescribed milieu, since the nomad-herdsman cannot go beyond the bounds of his

restricted nomadic area, unless he wishes to completely break loose from his homeland. Nonetheless in spite of such unity in Oirat society, one may observe a certain selection of limited families, who by inheritance consider themselves and are considered "the best"; these for the most part are the steppe aristocracy, the taiji's, and the old families, filling the ranks of officials, and born from the ruling princely families; lastly, the princely families themselves in the narrow sense of the word, because all courtier-taiji's of a given tribe or division are considered one related family.

Among these "best" people, among this Oirat aristocracy, hereditary and so to say in public service, vastly better than the remaining popular masses do they support the old traditions, the memory of the past, more lively forms of the past; more accessible, nearer and more comprehensible are the former famed personalities, because all came from their same milieu, the milieu of the nomadic aristocracy, and their present descendants, and those who for a long time thanks to their fate were linked with them, are supporting and guarding traditions, the spirit of their class, of their tribe, and the feudal structure, up to now not yet destroyed by life, continued to nourish and nurture these strivings. The Manchu-Chinese [p. 26] government for the last century and a half exerted much effort to convert the Mongolian feudalists into officials, and steppe feudalism into a hereditary bureaucracy and in many places attained considerable success in this regard. But in Western Mongolia, in this "dark corner" of Mongolia, in these recesses of the Altai and Khangai, feudalism remained untouched and only in most recent times has it begun an evident decline.

"The best people" of the western Mongolian Oirats, this steppe aristocracy as guardian of the testaments of the past, seems also to be the purveyor of the heroic epic. It either produces from its midst professional singers of byliny, or supports and protects them; it considers that the old knightly epic cycles sing its heroes, relate its ideals, views of life, it considers the heroic epic not only a national-Oirat but before all else "its" attainments, an attainment of its class, of its kind. Whom do the ancient knightly songs sing, whether its predecessors or the steppe aristocrats; who were these knights, heroes of the epics, whether leaders, princes, aristocrats?

In the heroic epics the Oirat "best people" recognize themselves, i.e., see themselves with a halo in the apotheosis of might, wealth and glory, these are ideal ones, true, they, in any event they are people of the "white bone", by fate predestined to lead the people of the "Four

Oirats". That from this, that now, in this difficult and woeful time, when past knights have departed from life, when it has fallen to the Oirats to leave their happy home, Dzungaria, when the kingdom of the Oirats fell, that from this, that now the native nomadic aristocrat, perhaps even the ruling divisional prince himself, leads the same life as his simple neighbor and subject, similarly pasturing horses, being concerned about the loss of a pair of bulls, is humbled—in any event he is a descendant of a famed tribe, preserver and continuer of its traditions, and the major thing is that he is predestined by fate itself to stand at the head, he was born with this right, he knows this right and recognizes certain positions of obligations arising from it. Their knightly epic cycles are also an expression of the spirit, the strivings, the hopes and ideals of the Oirat aristocracy. They are not national, they belong to one class; but this very class, the class of steppe aristocrats are and were earlier, maybe even to a larger degree than now, an expresser of national character, of all national life. The steppe aristocrat-nomad not only now but earlier as well, in the period of greatest flowering of Oirat feudalism, always was, under the conditions of nomadic life, close to the people, always lived with the people, as today too they live with them, sharing one and the same sorrows and joys. Thus he is not only the leader but the representative of the simple people, its living voice. And the creations of the nomadic aristocracy are thus made creations of the whole tribe, of all the people; they belong not just to one class, but to the whole society, all the tribe or people. And actually, the Oirat heroic [p. 27] epic cycles in N. W. Mongolia, so clearly expressing the spirit of the steppe aristocracy, supported most greatly in the princely-courtly society, are none the less loved and dispersed among the common people as well. The ordinary people likewise consider these knightly epic-cycles their national and cherished attainment, they love them, breathe their spirit, listening to their performance, and with emotion following the adventures of the knights, likewise they are enraptured by them, nurtured by their ideas, their lively guiding force. Similarly, just as from the midst of the aristocracy, from the ordinary people come the inspired singers of heroic epics, and they in this regard bring in nothing of their own, change nothing, and completely follow the instructions of the old aristocratic school. All this is possible because up to recent times among the Oirats of N. W. Mongolia the aristocratic-feudal structure, with its way of life in clans, was unshakable, because the ordinary people and the aristocracy were an indissoluble

whole and the princes are actually the national leaders and representatives of their people. The heroic epics, created and supported by the Oirat aristocracy, we repeat, in N. W. Mongolia are not just class works, but also national works.

The Buddhist monasteries play a rather significant role in the matter of disseminating the heroic epic among the western Mongolian Oirat tribes. Their chief role consists in the fact that they do not and did not persecute the knightly byliny loved by all, but rendered and continue to render them shelter by hospitality. The Oirat monasteries, not only just in N. W. Mongolia but in other places too, settled by Oirats, always had some effort to protect the national intellectual run of things. This feature is revealed in the relationship of the Western Mongolian Oirat Buddhist clergy to the heroic epic. In contrast to the Buddhist monasteries of other Mongolian tribes the Oirat monasteries did not try to do battle with the knightly byliny, the monks never considered it their duty to disdain and keep watch from on high on these national poetical works, to consider them sinful, to forbid their performance in their presence. On the contrary, the Oirat Buddhist monks of monasteries in N. W. Mongolia fully shared the love of the people for the heroic epic cycles, very frequently, at certain times, inviting well-known singers to perform byliny in the monastery; there are many instances when monks themselves, particularly those of lower rank, were performers, even professional singers of heroic epics. But the Oirat monasteries went still further on this path of protecting the national epic poetry. In some monasteries of N. W. Mongolia they tell legends that one or another knight, well-known from this or that epic cycle, has now been reborn as a holy lama, in this or that Buddhist monastery; for instance, there is a story that the well-known knight Daini-Kürül, an enormous epic-cycle of which [p. 28] he is the hero, and which is unusually disseminated among the Baits and the Dörbets, has now been reborn in the Bait monastery of Pe-jelin [hpel-rgyas-ling], where he bears the title of *bakshi-gegen*. Such an acknowledgment, the enlightenment by this Buddhist church of the Oirat heroic epic cycles gives them, in the milieu where Buddhism rules herds and minds unrestrictedly, even superfluous support and might.

The heroic epic cycles of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia, whatever area they belong to, whether Bait, sung on the Tes River and in the Khan-Khukhei mountains, or Uryangkhai, which the bard sings in the gorges of the Bulgun and Chinggil Rivers, all are distinguished by

their complexity, their complex and perfected structure. Every epic even on the lips of a not particularly skilful and expert singer is a strictly-defined poetical composition, in which the theme is developed in a harmonious way, in which all parts are constructed in accord with a general plan, in which lies a clear impression of a creation according to some kind of definite, unwritten poetics. In this respect the Oirat heroic epics of N. W. Mongolia are strongly distinguished not only from the poem-songs of the Kalmyk Janggar cycle, but also from the Buriat heroic epics.

Oirat knightly heroic cycles are even more "literarily" isolated, still more structured and elegant works, and are, in comparison with the Buriat, a further step ahead on the road of epic development. The western Mongolian Oirat heroic epics clearly reflect the fact that they were created, were transformed and are being transformed in a relatively cultured milieu, that they are an intellectual treasury of the ruling class of the hereditary and reigning aristocracy; the trace of their existence in the steppe princely camps lies on them. This is first of all indicated in their more perfected work-out, in their complex and definite poetics and finally, in their language. All these peculiarities of the heroic epic being analyzed compel one to think that what we now have before us on the lips of the Oirat singers of N. W. Mongolia, existed for long centuries, was put together gradually, developed in the course of many centuries, being subjected to this and that influence, and finally emerged in the shape of large, complex and structured heroic epics, in which we find them at present. Sometime, perhaps even not in such a distant time, the history of development of this knightly epic will be written; until then we have to restrict ourselves to a more or less detailed analysis of its present status and to explanations of the conditions of its existence, and its life; naturally, we can now make some judgments about its past, about one or another layering and influences revealed in it, about the general course of its development, but we repeat, a detailed history of the development of the Oirat heroic epic is a task for the future.

The Oirat heroic epics of N. W. Mongolia, devoted to descriptions of knightly feats, glory, wealth and might of their [p. 29] knights, to pictures of their military and civil life, are always complex in content; very often the topic of the epic is made so complex and involved that the epic is converted so to say into a heroic novel, but in no way losing all the distinctive features of the knightly epic. The Oirat Western Mongolian heroic epics are usually occupied with the poetical history

of just one hero, nevertheless their themes are very complex, because the epic usually gives a description of a considerable portion of the life of its knight, quite often beginning with his birth, conducting him to different countries and kingdoms compelling him to experience different events, to overcome all possible obstacles, and to contact different personalities.

The subject matter of the epic is made still more complex if it is devoted to an entire "line" of heroes, if it gives a poetical history of a whole knightly family, father and son at least. Describing the birth, youth, first deeds of its hero, the Oirat knightly epic merely prepares the listener for a description of the major, most important portions of its subject matter, for a description of the wedding of the hero to a marvelous beauty, whom he obtains only after a long struggle, after a series of efforts and diverse events. Sometimes events are complicated by the interference of magical super-natural forces, or the main topic takes on side issues, developing and sketching them in considerable detail. And in spite of all this, of such complexity, and Oirat heroic epics reflect their structured organization, their harmonious composition; they are always composed in such a way that the course of action gradually and attractively develops the main topic of the epic for the listeners, through separate episodes and distinct motifs more clearly depicting and sketching the most important aspect. In this regard, in the structure of the majority of Oirat heroic epics, one cannot fail to see a certain somewhat exhaustive schematization, because it constantly appears in all epics with unchanged features.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that almost all the Oirat heroic epics which one can now hear in N. W. Mongolia are constructed according to one plan, one identical common scheme. Details are strictly held apart, descriptions of one or another episode in the life of the heroes are distinguished, the knights themselves are differentiated, but the scheme of the epic remains the same, and a very rare epic will display the reverse phenomenon. Hence very often the Oirat heroic epics appear to us to be precisely created by one person, and do not seem to be a "popular" work, but the creative work of a single personality. Even more than this, it seems that all the Oirat epics of North West Mongolia come from the same school, from one group of poets, individual creators, but connected by a unity of method of composition in their works.

As indeed already stated above, the professional singers of heroic epics, the tuulchi's, of the Oirats of North West Mongolia, are people

of the most diverse standings, coming from all classes of society. Strictly speaking, it is not quite proper to denote them "professional" singers, [p. 30] because very seldom does it happen that anyone of them makes his living by performing knightly epic cycles, and lives his profession. But despite this fact the tuulchi's *are* "professional" singers, because they study their art especially, attend a certain school, because having begun to appear in public, they acquire the public designation of singers, and obtain this calling as a title and bear this calling of tuulchi-singer like a title or rank, well and definitely indicating their position in society. "Singer-tuulchi" among the Oirats of North-West Mongolia refers only to such a performer of heroic epics, who is known and recognized as such by the other outstanding old singers and connoisseurs of the native past, from whom one can expect performance of the knightly poetic tales according to centuries of dedicated tradition. A singer-tuulchi as it were is a voluntary representative, a defendant of an entire class, a whole school of similar ones, singers like him, linked by a common destiny among themselves.

The heroic epics among the Oirats in North-West Mongolia are usually studied during one's younger years. More often than not it happens that a person who has felt an interest and a love for these works of national creativity, begins for fun to perform individual extracts from epic cycles, imitating his acquaintances and the singer-tuulchi's often listened to by him. Then the young Oirat, if he finds within himself a talent, ability and love to become a singer of knightly tales, turns to any well-known singer and undertakes instruction from him. Frequently the singer-tuulchi's themselves seek out their successors, having been observing youth, to see whether there might not be among them one such who might transmit the wonderful gift of performing these magnificent tales. After starting his study the young man first of all strives to master the subject matter of any epic beloved by him, from the course of development of action. At the beginning he gets acquainted, first in a practical way and then theoretically, with the scheme, the plan of one epic, and later of epic cycles in general. He learns to break apart the epic into its component parts, so as to orient himself: into introduction, main part and subsidiary episodes; he learns to separate different descriptions, for instance, of localities, horses, beauties of a princess from descriptions of the deeds of heroes in the epic, its main topic. After mastering this and firmly remembering the course of development of action in the epic, the young pupil

begins to study the "common passages" and the "ornaments", of the figurative expressions. One who wishes to become a singer of Oirat heroic epics must master for himself the fact that specific places in the epic are constantly repeated, that they may be encountered in other epics; together with this the pupil cannot fail to notice that a good experienced singer at these frequently repeated passages is able to bring in certain nuances, to vary them and enliven them in every way.

The beginner studies and masters the various repeating "common passages", for instance, the "onsets", singing about the hero's native land, the description of his [p. 31] horse, the picture of the battle of two knights. He then masters a series of poetical expressions, figures, epithets, and tries to adjust all this to the known subject matter. Here the young singer-pupil usually often begins by removing himself to isolated spots, in the steppe and mountains, and here with tobshuur in hand makes his attempts to sing through the epic he is studying in a way becoming to a genuine singer, i.e., leaving nothing out, not omitting a single episode, successfully varying the "common passages" of description and ornamenting them favorite epithets and other figures. In possession of a good memory, love and inspiration, which in this affair are especially prized, the young man may learn to sing very quickly following the instructions of his mentor, and to sing not too badly, a large heroic epic, encompassing four to five thousand verses. But this is still just a beginning; for such a young singer, who has taught himself to sing some epic, still has a long way to go to procure the general designation of a real singer-tuulchi.

A real singer of Oirat heroic epics, a tuulchi, is obliged to know several epics, he can begin to forget one or another epic from his repertoire, but then it is also easy to acquire knowledge of new ones. Then a real singer carries with him a large stock of all possible "common passages"; descriptions of various localities, praises, descriptions of battles and disputes as well as a rich stock which represents his poetics, and with a generous hand he strews his "embellishments" where needed. A real singer-tuulchi, now by inspiration, now completely consciously, by skilful calculation can display his abilities, his wealth in the reproducing of epics. All his art now appears in his skilful means of using, in a way appealing to the listeners, of the "common passages" and the "embellishments". The singer now strings them like beads, extending and stretching out the various episodes, and now makes his description dry and steep, and conducts it quickly, swiftly. One and the same heroic epic may be

sung by an experienced singer in one night, or in three or four, in which connection all the details of the subject matter remain the same. The Oirat singers never allow themselves to shorten, change the subject proper of the epic, or to cast out this or that episode; this is regarded as an unworthy deed, even sinful. No, the subject matter of an epic is steadfast, it is impossible to change it, but then everything remaining depends on the singer himself, on the strength of his inspiration, on his ability to utilize poetic means.

### Biography of the Singer, Parchen

In order better to present an image of a singer-tuulchi, I permit myself to relate the biography of one famous story-teller from the Bait tribe, Parchen, with whom I was in rather close contact and from whom I transcribed all the heroic epics he was able to sing. He told me a number of times different episodes from his life, describing in detail how he became a singer-tuulchi. Finally, I was able to observe Parchen myself for a number of years.\* [p. 32]

Parchen Taiji, well-known all throughout the Kobdo district of North-West Mongolia as a singer of heroic epics, was born in 1855; he belonged to the Bait tribe and descended from the princely clan of the Tsoras "bone". Parchen was the uncle of the ruling prince Tümen-Bair. As the youngest son, he was destined to become a monk and was sent to the local Bait monastery for some ten years; prior to that time he lived in a family, herding sheep.

Even as a nine-year-old boy he remembered well a heroic epic, the Ergil-Türgül, the performance of which he got to hear at the camp of his prince. The epic and its performance produced a very powerful impression on the lad and later he strove to remember the bylina and to sing through it, imitating the real singer. Immediately after this the young Parchen succeeded in learning one more small epic, which he also tried to perform like a real singer-tuulchi.

When Parchen attended the Buddhist monastery and was consecrated with the monastic degree of *getsüł*, another happening left a bright mark on all his future life. There came once to the Bait monastery to sing knightly epic cycles the singer Bürul-Sesrin, well-known at that time, by birth a Bait from the Narin River. Young Parchen first

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\* A.V. Burdukov, the investigator of North-West Mongolia, kindly supplied me with much material for a biography of Parchen.

listened to the good bard perform a big heroic epic, namely the Bum-Erdeni, which after hearing it with emotion he remembered at once and immediately undertook to sing it, first sitting at his place, and then strolling to the doors of monks he knew. When Bürul-Sesrin heard the stories that young Parchen, who was then 13-14 years old, was trying to sing byliny, he called him in and ordered him to sing something. Then Parchen performed before him as he was able the Bum-Erdeni epic he had just learned, which dumb-founded the old bard extraordinarily. Bürul-Sesrin listened to the performance with tears, moved; at the end of the bylina he presented Parchen with a ceremonial scarf, a khadak, called him his successor and expressed his delight that his beloved epics would not die with him. From this time on Parchen had the title of "tuulchi", a singer of heroic epics; he was then fourteen years old.

Soon after this Parchen, in his capacity of a real singer, was invited by the Bait prince Da Beise to his camp to sing byliny: Parchen thus became an officially recognized bard. At the prince's camp Parchen lived almost the entire winter, singing byliny and in constant intercourse with Da Beise. Undoubtedly this consorting with the Bait prince had enormous significance for Parchen as a singer of heroic epics. Prince Da Beise, a rather important feudal lord, belonged to a family in which of old by tradition they particularly esteemed and preserved the past, loved their national literature both in books and live or popular. In this princely family they also occupied themselves with literary work, collected manuscripts, and with particular love [p. 33] related, naturally, to their national heroic epics. Da Beise himself fully imparted the traditions to his family, especially did he love the historical traditions and legends of the Oirats and their knightly epic. The prince paid heed to the young monk, who gave promise of becoming an outstanding singer of byliny, and was moreover intelligent, adroit, easily mastered things, and was of noble origin. Parchen received from Da Beise a great deal relative to the Oirat past, drawing much valuable information about the Oirat heroic epic, about the structure and poetics of the knightly epic cycles. But the main thing was that at the court of this prince the young bard could get particularly closely acquainted with the old spirit of the Oirat aristocracy, with its ideals. Living at Da Beise's place, our Parchen had the chance to learn another heroic epic, the Khan Kharangui, which he studied in manuscript. Taking leave of Parchen, Prince Da Beise awarded him various gifts and bestowed a ceremonial scarf, a khadak, with the

words, "Become a tuulchi (bard) and sing our native epics!"

When Parchen then returned to his monastery, the monastic life did not set well with him, things went badly for him studying the obligatory prayers and the sphere of knowledge in general required of each Buddhist monk who had taken the full vows. Parchen constantly withdrew from the monastery under various pretexts, living thus in the steppe for long months at a time. During one of these stays he succeeded in learning another large knightly epic, one of the most remarkable of the Oirats of N. W. Mongolia, the Daini-Kürül. This bylina was known by one Sherib, also a monk living in the steppe, by birth a Bait of the same princedom-division as Parchen himself. Sherib agreed to teach Parchen this epic on condition that Parchen would furnish him with fuel during the period of learning. Parchen joyfully agreed, and they lived together. By day our young bard gathered fuel and rested, and by night, listened to the performance by Sherib of the Daini-Kürül epic, penetrating it, inquiring and remembering. Seven days and seven nights passed in this way and Parchen turned out to have mastered this vast famous epic.

After this he definitely became the best-known singer of epics, or tuulchi, in the entire district. The Bait and Dörbet princes constantly invited him to sing knightly epics in their camps, particularly in winter, a time boring for the nomad. As a real singer-artist, Parchen always willingly proceeded to the princes to sing his epics; the fact that the princes richly rewarded him may also have attracted him, and he often returned home from such trips leading several horses presented him, bearing gowns of silk and other offerings. Moreover, these gifts did not improve his material circumstances: a light-hearted fellow and a great spendthrift, Parchen usually quickly used them up in living. At this time he learned [p. 34] another three heroic epics, including one from a well-known connoisseur of the Oirat heroic epic, the father of one of the present important Bait princes.

At this time Parchen completely withdrew from the monastery; passing his life in constant travel, he more and more began to get into the life of a worldly man, and a light and happy spirit attracted him to society; he began to drink steadily, chiefly in the summer time, when the Mongols have a lot of liquor, home-brewed. Then Parchen's parents decided that he did not have to become a lama-monk, that the life of a worldly layman was more suitable for him. Parchen himself also completely accepted this opinion and making use of a favorable chance, left the monastery completely, abandoned his queue and

became a layman, a "black man" as the Mongols say. Soon after this Parchen married and lived the comfortable life of a steppe-dweller, embellished by his gifts as a singer. His origin as well as extensive contacts enabled him to become a rather important person in the social life of his principedom to which he took great pleasure, constantly participating in courts, cattle round-ups, trips on various kinds of affairs to different authorities, in search of cows and such. He lived in a passionate enthusiasm somewhat unusual for a Mongol.

When the war for independence from China began among the Mongols in 1912, Parchen went on campaign with the Oirat militia against Kobdo, assuming an important military post, and participating in the storming of the fortress. They say that once during the siege, which drew out rather long, some Dörbet or other began to sing in the camp the Bum Erdeni heroic epic, sang it badly, with no frills and distorting a great deal. Hearing such a performance of his beloved bylina Parchen flew into a powerful rage, seized the singer's balalaika, tuned it up and began to sing the same epic, the Bum-Erdeni. The Mongolian warriors of whom many were gathered there, quickly understood who they saw before them. Parchen succeeded in not only displaying his art, revealing the beauty of the Mongolian epic, but in animating his listeners, to raise their military ardor. They say that all the Oirat troops who were there in the camp then experienced a moment of most powerful inspiration, and were ready at once to go storm the fortress, swearing they would root out the Chinese lair. Hearing this episode one can not help being reminded of the story about how a singer aroused the military zeal of the Normans before the Battle of Hastings by performing the *Chanson de Roland*.

Returning after a successful campaign for the homeland, to his customary life again, Parchen in 1913 at my request composed a heroic epic about the taking of Kobdo by the Mongols; this new epic was sung by him to a relatively sizeable circle of listeners, many of whom had taken part in the battle with the Chinese and the campaign for Kobdo, and it evoked general delight and amazement [p. 35].

#### IV

I had occasion to meet various Oirat singers from different localities of N.W. Mongolia; they were different kinds of people, their lives had been quite varied, but every bard repeated in his biography the story that he studied and learned the heroic epics, and one way or another

was influenced by the epic and aristocratic spirit. Naturally, inspiration among the Oirat tuulchi-bards plays a great role, and it is impossible to become a good real singer of epics if a person is incapable of being inspired, to sing, to perform a bylina, even though at times with a sincere inspiration, in which the epic, the epic images do not evoke clear emotional experiences; nonetheless a real singer first and foremost must know his subject well, know the epic cycle, and then be able to convey it so that it produces an effect on the listeners, to be able to use various poetical means for that.

The Oirat heroic epics went through various stages of their development and now are cast in a form of definite, structured poems, composed according to the plan of some poetics. The modern Oirat heroic epic it is impossible to include in the so-called "artless" popular creativity; on the contrary, the heroic epics of contemporary Oirats of Western Mongolia are tasteful and artistic works, and their performers must study them like real literary works. Indeed, the heroic epics of the Oirats are nothing other than real literary works, only not written down, preserved not on paper or parchment, but in the memory of professional performers. The professional singers of Oirat byliny either themselves came from the ranks of the nomadic aristocracy, or were closely linked with it, served it, were completely imbued with its ideals, and mostly lived a life completely the same as it. But we know that the Oirats are a historical people, long ago having come onto the arena of history.

The unwritten poetics of the Oirat heroic epics are naturally also a product of their creation, life and development among a rather cultured society, which had lived thru certain literary influences. As external, Tibetan, Buddhist influence is particularly strongly evident in epic poetics. This influence may come directly from Tibetan Buddhist compositions, a considerable quantity of which were translated into Mongolian and Oirat, from Tibetan compositions of the kind of stories about Geser Khan, about whom we have already spoken above. Buddhist tales, legends and stories, poems and odes had vast influence on the living national literary output of all Mongolian tribes including the Oirat; the creations of distant India and Tibet filled up Mongolian folklore, and [p. 36] made their way into the heroic epics too and brought with them many features of Indian poetics.

But besides Indian poetics there appears in the created works of the Oirat epics another more indirect image. The fact of the matter is that Indian poetics, as a theory, is studied in the Buddhist monasteries of

Tibet and Mongolia, and shows its influence on works written in Tibetan both in Tibet itself and in Mongolian. Indian poetics through the medium of the Buddhist monasteries shows a certain influence on the Oirat epic cycles because the Oirat lamas, in contrast to the Buddhist monks of other Mongolian tribes, protected the national epic cycles, because from their lama milieu there came connoisseurs and singers of Oirat heroic epics. The influence of Indian poetics is mostly revealed in the tropes and figures, all figurative expressions; in short, in everything that the Oirat heroic epic singers call "embellishment" (chimeg), known as the *apparatus poeticus* of their byliny. The Indian, Sanskrit name of poetics, *alāmkara*, also literally means "adornment". Sometimes in Oirat epics one encounters epithets and other figurative expressions which are directly translated from Indian, from Sanskrit.

As regards the language of the Oirat heroic epics of N. W. Mongolia, in this respect these epics attract attention. Actually, in all regions of N. W. Mongolia, wherever knightly byliny are found among Oirat tribes, these heroic epics are performed not in the ordinary spoken dialect, but in a special language, in a special dialect. Listening to the singer, singing an Oirat knightly epic, it is very easy for everyone acquainted with the Oirat dialects of Western Mongolia, to observe that the singer sings it not in his native dialect, nor in any other Oirat or even Mongolian dialect, but in a kind of special language; a dialect different from the language of everyday speech, but at the same time different from the literary language, both Oirat and Mongolian. What kind of an epic language is this? Among the dialects in which their carriers usually speak, there exists a special language, distinct in its grammar and vocabulary, used by them on ceremonial occasions, at the moment of affectation, when a person wishes to speak elegantly, elevatedly or movingly, when one simply wishes to find special application in the works of national literary output, in songs, tales, proverbs and sayings, it is used predominantly in heroic epics. Hence this special language may quite justifiably be called a living oral literary language. This oral literary language, distinguished by major archaisms, is neither similar or identical to the present living dialects of the Oirats of N. W. Mongolia nor their Oirat literary language and its dialectical variants. We repeat, this is a completely special [p. 37] language; it is preserved by tradition, being transmitted with this or that work of national literary output; in spite of the different Oirat dialects and speech of N. W. Mongolia, this oral literary language is

almost identical on the lips of representatives of different Oirat tribes or more correctly possesses one and the same peculiarities. This living literary language, preserved by tradition, is very indefinite and unstable and has its own very diverse shape; it is applied in works of national literary output in differing ways. Everything depends on the art, on the talent of the performer, on the degree to which he is imbued with this special literary language, to what degree he has mastered its turns and vocabulary. A special application is the living oral literary language in the heroic epics, these most significant, best-loved and respected, most emotional works of the Oirat national creativity. But nevertheless it is impossible to imagine that all the Oirat epics in N. W. Mongolia were without exception composed in this language; no, this oral literary language constantly appears only now and then, according to the desire of the singer, desirous of giving a nuance to this or that episode, a high point of the epic cycle, or the singer involuntarily, by chance, by habit or under the influence of inspiration or affectation. The Oirat heroic epics, this means, are sung in a mixed language, consisting of the elements of any Oirat dialect and the oral literary language.

The professional singers of the Oirat epics, both in reference to the structure of the bylina and in respect to poetic style, held to one rule: to strive to master what was commanded as well as possible. Nonetheless it is not possible to consider the Oirat heroic epic singers as simple performers of material studied by heart, merely repeating what was learned by rote. No, for them in many senses it remains a creative beginning; instruction, a school could only aid this creativity to appear. A genuine singer, a "tuulchi", bears within himself reserves of various "common passages" and of figurative expressions and rhythms, as well as plans, schemes of different descriptions and motifs, combining and assembling these elements in every performance of epics in different ways; depending on the mood and make-up of the listeners, the singer "creates" the epic, places different colors on the canvas of the story. Herein lies for the most part the creative force of the singer. So as to get into a state of aroused inspiration, when the words of the epic are deposited quite by themselves in regular measure, when the rhythms follow one another in structured fashion, when one picture is replaced by another and this is lightly conveyed to the listeners in the customary literary figures; a corresponding situation is needed for the singer. The singer-tuulchi has to feel that he is the center of general attention, he needs a circle of lis-

teners, who are listening to his execution with rapt interest, even expressing their delight with loud cries of approval. Then under favorable circumstances the Oirat singer [p. 38] is quite overcome, forgetting everything around him and everything is given over to the process of creation. The Oirats of N. W. Mongolia thus regard their singers; they acknowledge that different supernatural forces, spirits inspire the singers at the moment of ecstasy in forms of images, these resounding strophes, they present them the forces to endure fearful tension. This is what, for instance, Parchen-taiji often related about one well-known Oirat heroic epic singer, Eten-Gonchik, by origin from the Bait tribe.

As a small boy, Eten Gonchik herded sheep on the steppe, as was customary. Once in the summer he saw a giant on a dragon riding up to him. The boy later was never able to explain whether he had seen this vision while awake or asleep. The giant rode up to Eten Gonchik, who was scared stiff, and asked him whether he wanted to become a singer of epics, whether he wanted to learn to sing knightly epic cycles. The boy replied that he long had greatly wanted to learn to sing byliny. Then the giant declared that he would teach the boy to sing different epics, if he would give him a large "consecrated" goat for the king of the dragons. The boy joyfully agreed. The giant then tapped Gonchik on the shoulder and disappeared. After some time the boy came to himself and looked about: round about was no one, no giant of any sort, but not far away a wolf was devouring a large goat choked by him, just as the giant in his vision had stated. From this time Eten-Gonchik felt in himself the ability to sing heroic epics, became a noted bard and acknowledged that he had received this gift from the king of the dragons himself, who had appeared to him in the guise of a giant.

One singer of heroic epics, Jilker of the southern Uryangkhai, whose father and grandfather were also professional storytellers, told me that when learning an epic, after he had listened to its performance, he first tried to repeat the content in private, to remember the proper names and to adjust to a new fable, to a new topic his "common passages" which he always held ready. After thinking over any epic, about its subject matter, he usually saw it in a dream, and then the episodes were properly remembered. Jilker saw in this the favorable aid of spirits and of the knights of the byliny themselves.

All the singers I saw ascribed tremendous significance to the balalaika, the tobshuur, saying that without it it would be very diffi-

cult, almost impossible to be inspired, and be put into an impassioned state. The Bait bard once was dictating to me, and noting the peculiarities of this bylina; one action, no different epic details, repetitions, and glorifications. But, added the storyteller, if had to *sing* this epic with a *tobshuur*, then probably he would insert much more in the way of side issues, under the influence of inspiration, i.e., the usual "common passages" would have appeared, adapted to this or that high point [p. 39] of the epic, to the steed, the homeland of the knight, to battle, etc. The bards are so accustomed to execute their epics with the *tobshuur* that at times it is extraordinarily difficult for them to "tell" the bylina, and even more to dictate it. Many times the following scene ensued: a singer was dictating a heroic epic to me, knew it masterfully, dictated it excellently, and suddenly some circumstance, a minute mis-recollection and the thread of the tale was broken; then the bard would take up his *tobshuur* and sing the last few lines just dictated to me, and at once the further passage would come to mind, and he again could continue to dictate the bylina for some hours, until a new similar mishap. For the Oirat singer the heroic epic is linked with accompaniment, with the *tobshuur*, in an unbreakable association; the accompaniment and the words of the epic for the Oirat singer are one and the same thing, one fused and unbreakable whole.

Actually, melody in the Oirat epic plays an enormous role, surpassing meter and tempo. For this reason it is difficult even to talk about the epic versification of the Oirats outside of melody. Real verse is revealed only through singing, when the epic is sung with accompaniment of a musical instrument. Everything remaining plays a secondary role, both tempo, i.e., the sole quantity of time necessary to pronounce parallel verses, and meter, i.e., verses of six, seven, or eight and more syllables. Rhythm is frequently absent, a unique rhythm of Mongolian verse, drawing attention not to the end but the beginning of the verse; Oirat epics usually rime at the beginning of two verses, forming one strophe as a whole.

From all that has been said above it ensues that the heroic epic of the Oirats of Western Mongolia is bound by its existence to the aristocratic class, its traditions and to the singers' schools. These same epics are genuine literary works, but put into very special conditions. On the one hand they are already created, finished, have gotten their definite limits and are molded into a definite form; on the other hand, they are changing, not with just each new generation, with each new singer, but with every new performance by one and the same singer,

they are literally re-created anew, are formed again; new designs are placed on an old canvas, old drawings are sketched with new colors, and at times it is hard to analyze the old bases. The life of the heroic epics thus is most reminiscent of the life of a language, which each new generation strives to learn to speak like the elder, but introduces its own new element, which in the course of time is revealed more and more clearly. There are these high points in the life of various languages, when under the influence of different circumstances, mostly influenced by social changes, languages begin "to change" more quickly, begin to show innovations to a great degree within the space of a few years; opposite phenomena too are also observed in the life of languages. The same may be seen in the life of epics. When influenced by some circumstances, [p. 40], naturally chiefly social and historical, the class of professional singers changes, the conditions of their life change, as do their status and their ideals, quickly then the heroic epics too begin to change correspondingly; the bearers of which they are; in this regard, of course, not everything old, even contrary, harmful and incomprehensible to the new, disappears without a trace—just as in the life of languages, it is preserved, preserved stubbornly, sometimes evident, sometimes concealed.

The Oirat heroic epic singers in Northwest Mongolia exert all effort to remember and be able to present the national byliny in the way as they received them from the older generation, in which they came down, according to their ideas, from the ancient past. And all conditions for such "preservation" of the epics, as we see, are present: a patriarchal way of life, a traditional aristocracy, professional training of singers, and their social position. But nonetheless the Oirat singers do not succeed in preserving their old epics completely unchanged. The records of heroic epics, made by the Oirats themselves, are very interesting. Beyond all doubt, these records were made, as were the original notes of the old French epic cycles, for the use of the singer-tulchi's, so as to enable them to remember better, not to alter the byliny transmitted from the ancient past about the glorious princes, ancestors, maybe even real princes, knights, who have not become saints and *genii*. Naturally more often than not such epics are written down, the subject matter of which for some reason evoked different fears, fears that something evil would come from this distortion. In general, as the Oirats of today think, to alter the epic in any way is a great sin for which one can be punished by the *genii*-preservers and by the knights themselves, who are sung of in one or another epic. Gener-

ally one may say that they resorted to the records very seldom, there were no special urgencies for this, once the conditions described above were present. Similar copies of the heroic epics are almost exclusively compiled at the camps of princes, lovers of the past and the national epic, very jealous of its alteration. At the present time it is unheard of for epics to be written down by the Oirats on their own initiative anywhere in Western Mongolia.

Every experienced singer, I repeat, easily learns a new epic, which he finds pleasing to him, but to create one himself, to compile a new epic no one is able; and a similar thought seems never to have entered the head of anyone in Oirat Western Mongolia. The heroic epic is the result of a centuries-long life, this is an old, old literary work. But recently in the region we are interested in, a completely new bylina was created, and although it was compiled under particularly unusual conditions, completely distinct, nonetheless it is very interesting for deciding and illuminating different questions connected with the heroic epic of the Oirats of Northwest Mongolia [p. 41].

In the fall of 1913 I turned to the Bait bylina-teller Parchen, whom we spoke of before, with a request to describe the Oirat-Mongolian campaign against the Chinese and the siege and taking of the city of Kobdo, which took place in 1912; Parchen himself was not only a witness, but even a participant to these events. The bard agreed. After thinking for a while, in the course of which he got considerably drunker than usual, Parchen turned up at my place with a finished work, a completed bylina, which he first sang before a large gathering, and the next day dictated it to me all the way through; two or three months later, by his own admission, he had already completely forgotten his work.

The bylina composed by him was not large, around 800 verses, but very structured. Parchen bravely stepped out of the usual plan of the Oirat heroic epic, inasmuch as the topic by no means permitted this. Hence he described the participants in the Kobdo campaign, adroitly utilizing commendations, then the battles for Kobdo, the storming and the return of the prince-warriors to the homeland, laden with booty. The war with the Chinese he presented as a youthful raid, he sang of daring and pillage, but at the same time strove to give the action the character of a battle to reestablish the famed kingdom of the "Four Oirats"; the chief hero of heroic epic is the bearer of these ideals. Parchen's bylina turned out to be similar to an individual episode of an ordinary Oirat heroic epic. But with respect to its technique it

completely derived from any epic, sung by a tuulchi-storyteller in the confines of Oirat Northwest Mongolia. The exact same language, this special living literary language, the same turns of phrase, the same "common passages" and epithets, in short, the same choice of means of unwritten epic poetics. It fell to Parchen to make it with great art, to adjust it all to the modern situation, unusual for a heroic epic, although it was "small", it was about modern warfare and current events and present-day details.

From this example we can see what force, flexibility and what scope a clever singer of Oirat heroic epics of Northwest Mongolia has with the techniques studied by him, all the "poetics" of the heroic epic.

The Oirat heroic epics of Northwest Mongolia sing of knights, knightly deeds, sorrows and joys of famed warriors, they sing of that famed world of great heroes. The content of these epics, if rather diverse, the heroes and their steeds, the adventures and surroundings, differ; nonetheless in almost all heroic epics of the region under observation these features can be noted. Almost every epic begins with a description of the youth of the main hero and proceeds then to describing his first knightly journey, which is tied into the issue of his further adventures. In general, the Oirat epics of Northwest Mongolia are divided into three groups by content, subject matter and *dramatis personae*.

In the first group we must place those in which the main heroes, or if not then all the important personages, are [p. 42] heavenly forces, spirits; the heroes wage battles, obeying the commands of heaven; they themselves are either sons of that heaven, heavenly spirits, or spirits reincarnated on earth. Obviously, epics of this sort still preserve echoes of an old, shamanist Oirat mythology, perhaps even one of Common-Mongolian times. Besides, only a very small number of byliny of this kind were kept, and preserved poorly. It would be more correct to say that they poorly preserved these old elements, the description of struggles of the heavenly spirits. With the decline of shamanism and the expansion of Lamaism this kind of heroic epic began to be forgotten and altered; the shamanist spirit vanished from them as did the personages of the shamanist pantheon, which gradually began to transform to genii, spirits and saints of Lamaism who were closer, more understandable and beloved. At times this change took place quite mechanically, clumsily, and thus it happened that a Buddhist saint was linked to a quite unusual role. Sometimes these changes are displayed to us in the unaffected spirit of the nomad,

who had only just cast off his "black faith" of the shamans, and, moved, was beginning to believe in Buddha; and then at times the Oirat heroic epic introduces Shakyamuni Buddha himself, who is far from similar to the Buddha of numerous and famous legends known to all; this is a special Oirat Buddha, a Buddha of the nomads of the steppes and mountains of Western Mongolia, such as he was first represented to them, the figure of whom astounded their imagination. Further, in spite of the fact that concepts about Buddha, and his biography were also disseminated among the Oirats, this first image of byliny remains as before on the lips of the singers, though they themselves are Buddhist monks, like a legacy of the past, dear and beloved. Still more often the personages of the shamanist and Buddhist pantheons become entangled in the heroic epic, features of one are transferred to the other in such a way as now to make it difficult to define this or that figure exactly. In general, one may say, that Oirat heroic epics of the first kind are coming closer and closer, losing their "mythological" features, to the group of epics which sing exclusively of a world of knights, of people, though naturally in this world one constantly encounters supernatural forces, and spirits sometimes crop up too. It is at times difficult to draw a distinction between the epics of these two groups, to decide assigning an epic to one or another group. Nevertheless this difference was undoubtedly more marked in past years, but even now good singers and connoisseurs of the heroic epic in Northwest Mongolia consider it possible to assign epics, in which heavenly forces are active, to a particular definite group.

The second group of heroic epics of the Oirats of Northwest Mongolia contains the biggest number of byliny, disseminated and inhabiting all localities of the Kobdo district, most characteristically representing the modern heroic epic of the Oirat tribes. Epics of this group sing of famed knight-aristocrats, sketching their lives for us [p. 43], their deeds and adventures, at times wondrous, fantastic, describe their battles with various adversaries and enemies, at times enchanted ones, or magical; the spirits and saints are helping them, giving them advice. In any event the world described and depicted in these epics is a world of people, the same world in which now live the descendants of these famed and mighty warriors. The peak moments of action of the epics of this sort, are the battle, the battle to obtain the famed name of Knight for oneself, to get a beauty, a marvelous wife, to seize fertile pastures, herds and people, to defeat and destroy hostile

enemies near by and to establish peace and prosperity. The epics of this type always conclude with a description of the peaceful, calm and abundant life which came about as a result of the battle and activities of the hero-knight, when he is able to unsaddle his fighting steed, releases him at will, because it is no longer necessary to make incursions; his beauty with him, her white and sable-skin camp rises there; his subjects, his incalculable herds, there are no wicked unfriendly people near by, and he and the people can enjoy peace. Feasts and diversions, a peaceful abundant life of the nomadic feudal lord—this is now his portion.

The byliny-Novelle are the third and last group of Oirat heroic epics of Northwest Mongolia. There are not many of these, they are not so beloved, they do not evoke at their performance such powerful emotions in the listeners, as the "real" heroic epics. But for this reason they are usually distinguished by a high degree of structure and beauty. These are the same heroic epics as the byliny of the second group; the same heroes, the same descriptions, the same spirit, the same moods. Only there are no descriptions of combat, of battles, struggles with opponents and different monsters. Epics of this kind are devoted to descriptions of pictures of a peaceful life, they merely call their heroes knights and princes, but do not compel them to display to the listeners their fearful strength; the listener should believe thus, in effect, conclude from the description the attainments of the hero, his wealth, his position, that this is no simple man before him nor even a steppe aristocrat, but a genuine knight. More often than not, such epic-Novelle describe the birth of the hero, praise him, his homeland, describe then his trip to a distant land, which ends in his marriage to the wondrous beauty. Some of these epic-Novelle are nothing other than a detailed and moving poetical description, the depiction of an Oirat wedding, of all the troubles of a marriage scene. But just as an impression of "heroic" deeds lies in the different high points of this action, so too are many rites mentioned, symbolizing the struggle and victory of the suitor, and the epic-Novelle has to introduce a description of a "battle" of its hero. But more often such a "battle" is simply downgraded to the simple fulfillment of one or another commission, the divination of this or that action of the bride's parents, the solving of cunningly thought-out questions, and so on. If a rival crops up here, he usually yields to the knight, being [p. 44] overcome by one glance from him, or the knight easily vanquishes him in single combat, not even ending in the death of the defeated. This is no fight, just a "struggle", a contest.

The major heroes of the Oirat byliny of Northwest Mongolia, to whatever groups they may belong, are knights, and without them, without these personages there can be no epic, can be no heroic epic. All these heroes, all these knightly figures of Oirat epic cycles are astoundingly like one another. Whether the epic is sketching for us Prince Daini-Kürül, this fortunate handsome fellow, endowed with supernatural strength who is able to hold out in battle after battle with different enemies, people and spirits; whether we encounter the Knight Bum-Erdeni, who clashes with the dread shamaness; or with Khan Kharangui who calls the son of heaven into battle, we always have before us one and the same person, merely assuming different names. Even Kiiten-Keke-Zeve, whose history is so unusually poetic for the Oirat epic; even he in general is little distinguished from the ordinary knight of byliny.

The knights of the Oirat heroic epics differ only in strength, might and abilities, in their status, finally in their wanderings, but not by spiritual qualities, not by peculiarities of character; if one reads the records of separate epics in sequence, one can get the impression that the story is about one and the same person, one and the same hero-knight. In this regard the Oirat epics sharply differ from the classic types of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and partly approach the picture presented by the Old French heroic epic. At the same time it is impossible to say that the character, the type of a bylina knight is sketched weakly in shadow, or in insufficient relief in the Oirat epic. On the contrary, the knights of the Oirat epics of Northwest Mongolia are depicted clearly and definitely, these are living people, true they are mighty, powerful, unusual, but always people, with their weaknesses, despite their vast attainments and the cooperation of supernatural forces. And in this lies the particular charm of the Oirat heroic epic, its great living force; the hero-knights it depicts are not shadowy fantastic forms, but living real people, of whom it is true we have none today, but who were, who "could" still be, people whom it is easy to imagine, if one would strive to evoke an image of a modern man, merely abandoning his pettiness and weakness. But this powerful, living and lively type comes forth everyplace and everywhere, he is the same in all the Oirat epics.

The Knight, or *bogatyr* (Mongolian "bātar", or "ere") of the Oirat heroic epic of N. W. Mongolia is the personification of a national ideal of a man; the "Best of Men" is the usual epithet of the Oirat epic. He is obliged to be of noble origin, the son of a steppe khan or prince, a representative of the steppe aristocracy; he possesses [p. 45] fearful

strength and might, magical qualities, he is rich, surrounded by steppe luxury, he has a knightly steed equally so powerful as his master; the famed name of knight even in his youth resounded throughout the Altai and the Khangai. But all this is still insufficient to become a genuine knight; it is little to be strong, powerful, noble and rich. A real prince is he who acknowledges, who felt himself a knight, who took up his knightly calling, who openly entered on the path of "knighthood". Thus the knight must be not only strong, but unrestrainedly brave, brave and steadfast in attaining the set goal, he must not know hesitation; firmness, verity in thought or deed, the first is a virtue, an excellent quality for the knight of a heroic epic. The goals which the bylina hero sets himself, are to make his name famous through creation of such a life, when peaceful happiness, a truly lovely tranquil way of life would be affirmed everywhere, when everywhere the nomad would see the fulfillment of his sacred dreams. To attain the goal set himself the knight goes a straight path, acting unswervingly and unrestrainedly. If it falls to his lot to employ cunning, this is merely temporary, so that with greater zeal he moves toward the intended goal. Besides, far from all knights turn to cunning; in this it is, alas, possible to see their differences, the differences in their character; but then all knights of the Oirat epic condemn cunning, considering that this is not their affair, to vanquish dishonorably by cunning, their lot is open battle, an open form in action.

The knight of the bylina is simple and straightforward, he knows naught of subtle feelings, he sees bright colors rather than shadings. There is the evil mangus, a fearful and rich monster; this means it is necessary to destroy him and appropriate his cattle; the knight hears that somewhere a magical beauty lives; this means he has to acquire her for himself as a wife, and if he encounters an opponent, then to slay him. He sees that his fighting horse has grown thin, he is anxious about it, even weeps; if the hero turns up for a banquet, he is happy and drinks himself drunk. If he gives his word to slay his enemy, "to drink his red blood, to devour his dark flesh", he is ready to put his thought into action, despite anything, despite even the fact that his opponent is vanquished, that he has proved worthy to become his foster brother, despite the intercession of his knightly steed. What was thought, is done; what is said, is also done. On the other hand, the knight of the Oirat epic casts himself with such ardor and straightforwardness into various dangers to save or aid his friend, his foster brother; he defends the weak, is gracious to subordinates. He is

proud, irascible, unrestrained in anger, but steadfastly faithful. The epic Oirat knight also should be a model of fulfillment of duty, must hold honor high. Moreover, the Oirat heroic epics stress with particular clarity and perseverance the most egoistical traits of the knights, their completely [p. 46] utilitarian view of life. More often than not the Oirat epic delights in having its hero get a wife who is a beauty for himself with a rich dowry, acquire subjects and herds, be jealously concerned about the successes of his attainments.

Very often alongside the knight, the main hero of the epic, there appears in the Oirat epic the figure of another knight, a friend of the main hero. Very often in one or another epic this figure is presented to us sketched very nicely and in relief, his character is excellently delineated, the epic relates many different details to us about this subsidiary hero. This special epic type—a knight-friend of the main hero, turns up exactly to give shading to the entire rigidity of the main hero, to stress his will which is invincible in attaining the goals set by him. Usually this subsidiary hero is made a friend of the main knight, his foster-brother after a duel, in which he loses the fight after a stubborn and fearful struggle. He is also powerful, strong and manly, this second knight, he too is a "Best of Men", he also owns a soothsaying battle steed. Finally he is a son of a nomadic prince, a steppe aristocrat. We may speak of this subsidiary hero as of one person, since in these epics where he appears, he is always more or less identical, similar to the main hero of the epic, everywhere presenting the same face. Again we may determine as fact his different peculiarities, according to the bylina—one is stronger, another is more clever, still another has such and such a steed, and yet another this and that exploit. But in general he and the same type is before us again, a type of the "second" hero of an Oirat epic, a type of knight-friend of the main hero; such are for instance Zambulin in the Daini-Kürül epic, Khajir-Khara in the Bum-Erdeni epic. Particularly interesting in this type of knight is the fact that the heroic epic of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia surrounds these secondary personages with a kind of special halo. These "number two" knights remain the same epic knights as the "number one", nevertheless they possess considerable intellectual agility, more subtlety of nature. They are to a very great degree subject to feelings of love and jealousy; they are not so unrestrainedly greedy and egotistical; at times the epic draws for us their moving intellectual pulses, depicting them one may say with poetic natures. But the sympathies of the epic singers and the people natural-

ly is on the side of the number-one heroes; they are steadfast, they are victorious, they grant the welfare of a happy life although by this they distract their own life.

There is one circumstance which compels attentively looking at this number-two knight-friend of the main heroes of the Oirat epics, which does not permit seeing in the bringing onto the stage of these personages an art, of literary reception, which has become a pattern, stressing the most necessary traits of personality of the main hero through contrast. The fact of the matter is that in the most ancient [p. 47] Mongolian epic, written down in 1240, although in a form somewhat redone for certain purposes, in the "Secret History of the Mongols", about which we spoke earlier, side by side with the main hero, Chinggis Khan, there steps forth his friend and opponent Jamuqa, the form of which is surrounded by a kind of special halo. He too like the number-two knights of the Oirat heroic epic of North-West Mongolia is in contrast to the unswerving Chinggis Khan, steadfastly striving to create a nomadic empire, from a poetic feeling of friendship he can even harm himself, harm his affair. Future investigators will have to decide the question of how much Jamuqa of the Secret History corresponds to a historical opponent of Chinggis Khan and what historical traits, what conditions created the epic type of the "number two" hero of the Oirat epics of Western Mongolia.

As regards other personages of the epic under survey, they are usually outlined in the epics not in such relief, not so distinctly. Hence they are all alike and the same types in all the Oirat epics, distinguished among themselves only by details or often by external circumstance, among which they chance to operate. They, like chess figures, have always one and the same image, and move in only one direction. Such subsidiary personages for instance are the father or grandfather of the main hero-knight, his horse herdsman, invariably in all the Oirat epics of North-West Mongolia bearing the Turkic name Aq-saql (White-Beard), and such princes and khans whom the hero chances to contact.

The "Father" of the knight for instance, when he appears, is always presented to us as a type, well-known in various epics of different peoples, a classic example of which is the Tsar Kaukaus of the Iranian Rustam cycle, or Vladimir Krasnoe Solnyshko of our [Russian] byliny. The "father" of the hero is also called a knight, but his knighthood is not displayed, only talked about. Quite the contrary, he is weak and timorous, weak in spirit, often covetous and envious;

nevertheless these or other good or weak actions are ascribed to him, he is father and khan anyway. Drawing close to this type is the image of the father of the hero's bride, often repeated in Oirat epics.

On the contrary, the Oirat bylina dwells with special love on the "Best of Horse-Herders", old man Aq-Saqal, who with such zeal is concerned about the main attainments of the hero, about his horse-herds, which aid him to find a worthy knightly steed. Sometimes this horse-herder directly replaces the hero's father, and reduces him to a figure in the rear of the stage; he gives advice to the knight, the hero honors him and respects him as a father. In the aristocratic bylina it is done clumsily, and it brings Aq-Saqal into the ranks of the aristocracy, makes him a relative e.g., the uncle of the hero. This is a manifest innovation; the form of the "horseherder" is clear for us, [p. 48] and we can definitely show which historical conditions created him; the epics themselves give us this material.

Besides his foreign name the horse-herder at times has another nickname, "Khoton", i.e., a Turkestani, a Turki from [East] Turkestan. In certain epics, very few it is true, this "horse herder" directly betrays the hero, and hands over his knight. Obviously in this form the "horse herder" of the Oirat epics we have a reflection of historical prisoners and vassals, who, as more civilized types, turn out to play a greater role in the economic life of the nomads.

Female types are rather uniform and also in insufficient relief or clearly drawn in the Oirat epics of North-West Mongolia, since their role is not large and they show up for the most part passively. Even major heroines, these magical beauties, or "dagini's", to obtain whom the knights betake themselves to distant lands, even they act very little in the epics, they are not "knightesses", they are not similar to the warlike maids of the Buriat epic. The Oirat epics describe their marvelous beauty, their charm and magical qualities, their splendid wealth; they always (and this is interesting to note) are devout adherents of the Buddhist saints, they take with them to the homeland of the hero the golden Kanjur and Tanjur, the Buddhist canon. Seldom do the Oirat epics describe feelings, give romantic pictures or sing of love. Such scenes as we find in the Daini-kürül epic, scenes of when the knight and the beautiful Toli-gua first get acquainted and fall in love, in which the beauty plays no passive role, are rare and unusual in the Oirat heroic epic. Secondary female figures are not usually characterized by anything.

The Oirat heroic epic does not depict a fantastic, cloud-sketched world, but a realistic world, completely defined, and described in

clear colors. The Oirat epic from North-West Mongolia does not strive to draw the listeners far from this work-a-day life into a distant world of dream and fantasy—No! it unwinds before us images of a well-known, actual life, gives a very living, prominent and succulent depiction of day-to-day existence. Life as shown in the heroic epic is the same kind of nomadic, native familiar life with all its joys and reverses, but a transformed one, illuminated by a specially happy light of joyous abundance, fortified by the knowledge of its fresh forces and powers, this same nomadic life, but presented in an ideal light, about which it tells in a moving and exalted manner. In the depiction of various scenes of nomadic life in the Oirat heroic epics they show better and more clearly than in anything else the national Mongolian ideals, hopes, national representations of the “real” beautiful life. With a special love, with special art and imagination our epics describe the herds of their knights, these sources of nomadic prosperity. Hence [p. 49] there proceed the colored descriptions of nomadic resettlements, where with unusual detailedness they relate all the minor features, even telling how the camels snort, even how they wave their tails, and for all these descriptions they select resonant and appropriate expressions, gentle epithets; the description of minor details does not ruin the general full picture. The epics also draw other scenes, other pictures, so familiar to the nomad by awesome reminiscences, but this time they are transformed, converted to deep dramatization. Every steppe-dweller knows when his steed suddenly begins to “get in trouble”, to grow thin in the dry Gobi. And in his epics he finds with enjoyment poetic descriptions of similar cases and with fainting in his heart it follows that the mighty knight comes out of misfortune. And the other picture, so often developed in the Oirat epic, and at the same time so familiar as so painfully experienced by the present-day nomad; the knight returns to his homeland, he is ready to see his high white yurt, around which neighboring yurts cluster, there stands his hitching line, he is about to see herds from afar—his consolation, when suddenly instead of all this, there is wasteland, on the spot where his yurt stood grass is growing, the droppings are all dried out, everyone has nomadized away, but to where and why?

One after another in the Oirat epics of North-West Mongolia there follow pictures of the nomadic life, a life actual and real; there is the driving-off of horses, and the pursuit, there is the bold race, further comes the colorful description of the feast, wedding, there they are catching untamed horses. The epics embrace all the life of the steppe-

dweller, give it a full, live all-encompassing representation, developing it in all details. Together with this they extol, and glorify this life, in spite, give strength to endure the ravages of existence. Actually, this simple nomadic life can be so beautiful and full, that it is like the heroic epics depict it—we add—in an ideal sense. With such clarity and definiteness is a way of life sketched in the Oirat heroic epic cycles, with such relief contours and fullness are depicted all social relations. According to the Oirat heroic epic one can judge about the life of the bylina society with such detailedness, as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* about the life of the Achaeans, and considerably better, than in the Old French chansons about the feudal medieval structure.

The Oirat heroic epics never name peoples or tribes, even clans, from which their heroes spring, never name either names of the tribes subject to them. It is stated only that the action takes place on the Altai and Khangai, but often it can be noted that these geographic names are used nominally; they are often nominal on the lips of the contemporary Oirat from Western Mongolia. But the singers and the people believe and know that their epics sing of their ancestors, of the Oirat princes, the Oirat Nation, because this is all so and dear to them, all so comprehensible. [p. 50]

According to the heroic epics the world is a vast nomadic kingdom, divided into separate independent provinces of various khans and simple steppe aristocrats. Here and there live fearful many-headed manguses, dreadful monsters—who eat people. But they too, in spite of their quite fantastic nature, are the same as steppe aristocrats, have their nomadic grounds (“nutuk”), their herds, their subjects, of whom many are persons, simple dead people. A steppe aristocrat, whether he be powerful khan or simple robust knight, is always more or less the lord of herds; for this reason he always has vassals, who serve him in his camp, and pasture his cattle. The more powerful the aristocrat, the braver and more successful, the more vassals he has, and he may even speak of his own subjects, of his own people. With such a steppe feudal lord, or khan there may appear assistants to govern the people, officials of his own kind, his menials get organization, and he has bodyguards and cupbearers, and female servants.

A steppe aristocrat, whether he is khan or a simple fellow with a small number of vassals, is not subject to anyone and recognizes no one as higher than himself, unless his neighbor, a steppe aristocrat like him, subjugates him and converts into his vassal or even to a slave. At times the steppe aristocrat gets into a bond with someone of his closer

or further neighbors for defense or for some sneak raid; such a union frequently turns into a kind of unification of two aristocratic families, who thanks to this or other gains begin to nomadize together, and naturally then their vassals and subjects nomadize together too. Or unified families at times begin to form a clan, and then arises a more powerful and numerous clan, with a large quantity of herds and subjects; and directing this aristocratic clan is not the eldest, but the most powerful, he who is braver and more intelligent than all, who has taken the greatest efforts in the matter of family unification, and is transmitting authority by inheritance to his son. In the same manner also arise vassal-aristocrats who appear in the same way because independent but none too successful aristocrats sometimes turn up at the more powerful and mighty ones, and join the ranks of their vassals.

The steppe aristocrat is related to his people, to his subjects, as to his property, to his livestock. A people must unconditionally fulfill the will of its leader, at a single word from him they must abandon their cozy spots and nomadize to a distant land. A feudal lord can present subjects to his friends, give them to his daughters as dowry. The subjects moreover are obliged to support their lord, to furnish him victuals for his feats, to serve in his camp and on nomadic rounds to furnish their ruler with the best of weaponry, to sew his clothing, prepare his various provisions. But even in such a position, under conditions of absolute dependence of subjects on the will of their feudal lord, one can still observe forms [p. 51] of norms of connections of the steppe lord with his subjects and vassals. Steppe aristocrats acknowledge their obligations with respect to their subjects. The steppe feudal lord is obliged to defend his subjects from external enemies, is obliged to be concerned about security of the nomadic grounds, must expend efforts to get the best pastures and rest spots to be at the disposal of his vassals. Hence war and military glory are a major province, a chief concern of the nomadic aristocrat. The ordinary people in these battles and raids play a passive role, readily going from hand to hand of the aristocratic lords. The ordinary people sometimes provide a militia, but they, this militia, play almost no role in the battles of the knights, and are readily beaten off by an aristocrat-knight who is better armed, better inspired by a thirst for fame and booty, a genuine warrior.

The Oirat epics of North-West Mongolia reflect clearly and fully that period or periods of life of the Mongolian people, when they lived

in separate clans, individual tribes, at the head of which stood a steppe aristocracy which had recently arisen and was continuing to increase in strength. In such a circumstance a considerable quantity of Mongols were found in the epoch when Chinggis Khan was born amongst the nomads. The Secret History of the Mongols sketches for us and sketches extraordinarily clearly a picture of the social life unusually close to that which develops in the modern Oirat heroic epics of Western Mongolia. It has the same forms and norms of common life, the same ideals and hopes. And the Oirat epics are for this reason direct descendants, continuations of that "literary" current, which so beautifully appeared at the dawn of Mongolian history. A direct thread links the Mongolian epic of the 13th century with the heroic epics of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia.

There is still one extraordinarily interesting feature observed in the epics of the area under observation, also reflecting conditions of a past way of life, now completely vanished. The Oirat epics very frequently and quite detailedly sketch for us a fondness in which as one may surmise, a preoccupation with pleasure was one of the chief things for this society, which is depicted in the epics. The byliny of Western Mongolia frequently relate that the headquarters of this or that knight were constructed of horns and bones of wild animals and stretched with skins. One may almost certainly assume that in the given instance, in the case of similar descriptions, we have before us echoes of a distant past, of a distant state of the Mongolian tribes. Actually, we know that the Mongols and in particular the Oirats, before becoming herdsmen, a nomadic people, were hunters and animal catchers for a long time.

In some epics of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia battles of bylinic knights with shamans are described. Instances of such descriptions are not many in the heroic epic of the Oirats, but for instance in the Bum-Erdeni epic a similar motif is developed rather extensively. It is interesting [p. 52] to note in this connection the fact that the knight Bum-Erdeni, like other epic knights of other epics, fights with shamans, but not in the name of Buddhism, nor in defense of the Buddhist faith, nor indeed from any religious motivations. The shamans of some Oirat epics are the same steppe aristocrats, they are now "mangus"-monsters, and now people; they also live in nomadic camps, have subjects, and tend to their nomadic grounds and herds. It is hard to say under influence of what relations, what historical and chance events such tales of the Oirat epics were put together. In any

event one should not forget the fact that at times the shamans among the Mongolian tribes both acquired political significance and began to play the role of leaders. On the basis of the Secret History we know that Chinggis Khan got into a fight with one shaman who tried to transform himself into a leader.

The new world sketched by the Oirat heroic epics of North-West Mongolia, settled by the knight-aristocratic leaders of khans, struggling with various monsters, and with steppe aristocrats like themselves, a world like an ideal world of nomadic life, has long since passed from reality, it has become a dream, a "past". But it is extraordinarily close and comprehensible and dear to the contemporary Oirat of North-West Mongolia because to a considerable degree the conditions of his present life have not departed from those which are depicted in his heroic epic. The Oirat epics represent a world in which the people firmly believe in reality; they correspond to its ideals, its illusions.

But in spite of all this, of all these conditions, it is impossible not to note the fact that the heroic epic of the Oirats of North-West Mongolia is clearly falling into decline. The famous old singers are dying out, and they are not transmitting their epics to successor-singers, youth does not want to learn them; more and more seldom do professional singers rise from the ranks of young people. Interest in the heroic epic among the people too is beginning to fall off. The princes, the old supporters of the long-past Oirat spirit, are gradually passing from the stage, the young persons succeeding them seldom invite to their camps the singers of heroic epics, they no longer interest them. A general apathy towards epic poetry is gradually beginning to be observed everywhere, among all the Oirat tribes of North-West Mongolia. Probably in another decade, some years, both in the Altai and Khangai, on Mount Khan-Khukhei, on the River Tes and in Ulan Gom, where now it is still possible to hear performances of heroic epics on ceremonial occasions, amidst inspired listeners, they are beginning to forget the knights of the byliny, the professional singers are disappearing, and only somewhere, as today in Khalkha or Southern Mongolia, will this or that epic motif be remembered, and separate selections of structured and majestic epics be preserved. The Oirats of North-West Mongolia themselves know this well, both the singers and lovers of the past, and the simple people, that "nothing in the world is forever." [p. 53]

The Oirat heroic epic of Western Mongolia thus is one of the most

interesting among the epics of other Mongolian tribes. A more detailed study should cast light on resolving the most diverse questions of national literature, history, ethnology and linguistics of the Mongolian world. But in addition the study of the Oirat knightly epic, who has lived through some centuries and up to now is rather alive, must naturally exert a great influence also on the realm of general questions connected with epic poetry in general, of all times and peoples.

The translations here presented, the first in Russian, indeed in any European language at all, of Oirat heroic epics were made as close as possible to the originals. In this regard the translator would like to warn the reader that to a considerable degree the charm of these byliny, these creations of the forces of waving steppes, is lost in translation. The text of the epics, as can be imagined on the basis of what was stated above, presents vast difficulties for translation into Russian, difficulties often unsurpassed. The translator, well acknowledging that his work is merely a first attempt, decided in any event to publish his translation, because there is no certainty that better translations will appear in the near future.

The texts of these Oirat heroic epics were transcribed by the translator from various bards during the time of his travels to Western Mongolia in 1911, and in 1913-1915, and were intended to be printed in the series, *Obraztsy narodnoi slovesnosti mongol'skikh plemen* (Examples of the National Literary Output of Mongolian Tribes), published by the Russian Academy of Sciences.

BORIS VLADIMIRTSOV

## POSTFACE

The preceding essay originally appeared as an introduction to Vladimirtsov's translation into Russian of six Oirat-Mongolian heroic epics. It gives a good survey of the heroic epic of the Western Mongols, and is a precursor to N. Poppe's later "Heroic Epic of the Khalkha Mongols" (which recently appeared as a Mongolia Society publication in a new edition: Occasional Paper Eleven, 192 pp., 1979). Vladimirtsov was particularly interested in the reflections of social structure as revealed in works like the Secret History of the Mongols, and in the heroic epics and historical chronicles. Indeed, this is the

theme of his later work, "The Social Structure of the Mongols" (*Le Régime social des Mongols*, originally in Russian). The reader should thus bear in mind that Vladimirtsov at times advances his own views and interpretations, and that it is possible to make other judgments from the same body of material.

I have translated both *epos* and *epopei* as "epic", though the latter can also be rendered as "epic song". The word *bylina*, so bound with Russian tradition, I have also kept as *bylina* (*byliny*), or at times "tale". Another word with Russian connotations, *bogatyr*, I have rendered as "knight", being conscious of course that these are not European knights. If the reader is thus aware of what I have done, it will assist him in remembering that this usage refers to differing circumstances and background.

Vladimirtsov's essay is followed by about 200 pages of his epic translations: *Bum-Erdeni* (47 pp.), *Daini-Kürül* (87 pp.) and four shorter ones of 13, 12, 15 and 20 pages. It is tempting to think of translating these, as a way of increasing the stock of epic material available in English; but in the absence of the original Mongolian texts, it places too much reliance on the author's analysis. I would rather expend effort on working with known epic texts, such as the *Khan Kharangui* (which I have partly translated for another volume of folklore) which exists in several versions.

In conclusion, one or two brief comments on some problems of style in the translation. First, Vladimirtsov wrote extremely long paragraphs: I have broken these into smaller parts. He was very fond of the word "vsë-taki" (anyway), but I found it smoother to drop this word most places. Last, he uses many phrases in apposition or series, but I felt uneasy about constantly adding "and" or "or", when it was not in the original.

Last, I have to thank Prof. Felix Oinas and his assistant, Mr. Peter Voorheis, for a reading and discussion of terms.

Translation from the Russian  
and Postface by John R. Krueger