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PhD Thesis

Ambiguity and Abstraction in Mongolian Riddles: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis
Dvojznačnost a abstrakce v mongolských hádankách: etnolingvistická analýza

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Abstract: The aim of this thesis is to create an ethnolinguistic analysis of two corpuses of Mongolian riddles (Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990 and Ölziikhutag 2013).

The work contains over one hundred riddles appended with translations and morpheme-to-morpheme glosses. The riddles are further analyzed on a phonetic level, including descriptions of specific sound patterns and alliterations, as well as their lexical and semantic properties. This complex analysis, in conjunction with findings gained in field research, renders possible the description of a specific language of Mongolian riddles, characterized by the frequent occurrence of borrowings, the presence of semantically and phonetically ‘damaged’ words, ideophones, metaphors and many specific cultural expressions. The language of Mongolian riddles also often skilfully exploits overt abstractions, allusions, and lexical and morphological ambiguities, in addition to other techniques which facilitate conceptual mapping and cognitive blending. This linguistic analysis makes possible a description of the various aspects of the worldview of Mongolian nomads concealed in these riddles, including the characteristic linking of the ‘sacred and profane,’ as well as the relationship of these riddles to mythology and religious ideas.

Keywords: Riddles, Mongolian riddles, ethnolinguistics, spatiality and folklore, phonetic erosion, ideophones, mythology and Buddhism in Mongolian folklore, Deleuze and Guattari, nomadic oral literature, nomadology

Abstrakt: Cílem této disertační práce je etnolingvistická analýza dvou korpusů mongolských hádanek (Lovor a Ölziikhutag 1990 a Ölziikhutag 2013).

Práce obsahuje přes sto hádanek opatřených překladem a morfematickými glosami. Hádanek jsou dále podrobeny analýze na úrovni fonetické, kdy jsou popsány specifické zvukové vzorce a aliterace, a lexikálně sémantické. Komplexní analýza ve spojení s poznatky získanými během terénního výzkumu tak umožňuje popsat specifický jazyk hádanek vyznačující častým výskytem výpůjček, sémanticky a foneticky „porušených” slov, ideofonů, metafor a specifických kulturních výrazů. Jazyk mongolských hádanek také často obratně využívá zjevné abstrakce, narážek a lexikální a morfologické nejednoznačnosti, mimo jiné k usnadnění konceptuálního mapování (conceptual mapping) a kognitivní integrace (cognitive blending). Jazyková analýza následně umožňuje popsat různé aspekty obrazu světa mongolských kočovníků, jenž je v hádankách ukryt, včetně charakteristického propojení „posvátna a profánní”, a vazbu hádanek na mytologii a náboženské představy.

Klíčová slova: hádanek, mongolské hádanek a etnolingvistika, prostorovost a folklór, fonetická eroze, ikonopoetická slova (ideofony), mytologie a buddhismus v mongolském folklóru, Deleuze a Guattari, nomádská orální literatura, „nomadologie“

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Prohlašuji, že jsem dizertační práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

Mgr. Rachel Mikos, 30 března 2020

List of Linguistic Abbreviations Used in This Thesis¹

ABL.	ablative
Chin.	Chinese
COP.	copula
CV.CONC.	<i>converbum consessivum</i>
CV.COND.	<i>converbum conditionale</i>
CV.IMP.	<i>converbum imperfecti</i>
CV.MOD.	<i>converbum modale</i>
CV.PRF.	<i>converbum perfecti</i>
CV.TERM.	<i>converbum terminale</i>
DAT.-LOC.	dative locative
DM.	definite marker
DEV.NOUN.	deverbal noun
DIM.	diminutive
ENCL.	enclitic
EXCL.	exclusive
fig.	figurative
GEN.	genitive
hon.	honorific
INCL.	inclusive
INS.	instrumental
INT.	intensifier
inter.	interrogative
IP.	interrogative particle
INT.	interjection
lit.	literally
MOD.PTCL.	modal particle
Mo.	Mongolian
NEG.	negation, negative
NOM.	nominative
NF.	<i>nomen futuri</i>
NI.	<i>nomen imperfecti</i>
NP.	<i>nomen perfecti</i>
NZ.	nominalizer
NU.	<i>nomen usus</i>
POSS.	possessive

¹ These terms are taken from Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, except where otherwise noted.

PL.	plural
PN.	pronoun
PRS.IMP.	<i>presens imperfecti</i>
PRS.PRF.	<i>presens perfecti</i>
PRT.IMP.	<i>preterium imperfecti</i>
PRT.PRF.	<i>preterium perfecti</i>
POST.	postposition
P3	3rd person pronoun (encl. form)
PTCL.	particle
rel.	religious
SG.	singular
SOC.	sociative
SP.	spatial
WM.	written Mongolian
VOC.	vocative
VOL.	voluntative
ZERO.ACC.	zero accusative
2SG.	second person pronoun

Note: In this thesis, examples from modern Khalkha are written in the Mongolian Cyrillic alphabet. For WM. I use the academic transcription system outlined in Poppe 2006.

The riddles in this thesis are derived from riddle collections generated and collected in modern Khalkha, with the exception of the Riddles 62, 63, 99 and 113 which were collected in Ordos by Antoine Mostaert (Mostaert 2010).

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Introduction

Riddling: A Venerable Form

The phenomenon of the riddle is a form of oral folklore that has been known to every human culture that has ever existed. As Kevin Crossley-Holland comments:

We know that Egyptians, as well as Greeks, liked riddling, and there are riddles in the first sacred book of the Brahmans, the Rig Veda. One of them depicts the year as a twelve-spoked wheel upon which stand 720 sons of one birth (the days and nights); and a comparable riddle turns up in an early Persian collection which describes knights (the days of the month) riding before the Emperor. These Time-Riddles are one of a number of universal riddle motifs – which is why they are also called ‘World-Riddles’ – and find their counterpart in the twenty-second riddle of the Exeter Book, ‘The Month of December’. There are riddles in the Koran, too, and in the Bible there is, inter alia, the impossibly difficult riddle that Samson asked the Philistines at Timnah: ‘Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.’ Delilah seduced Samson into telling her the answer (a honeycomb in the carcass of a dead lion) and paid Samson out by passing it on to the Philistines.²

Like that of myth and storytelling, the emergence of riddle-telling seems synonymous with the emergence of language itself. The very earliest recorded riddles have a very distinguished pedigree: they were carved into cuneiform tablets in the 18th century BC and are not too dissimilar from what could pass for a riddle today.³ And of course, over time, various cultures have used deliberately a kind of riddling or enigmatic language as a kind of gatekeeping function. Early Tibetan riddles, for example, called *lde’u*, were sung by a type of specialist, “because the correct recitation of legends of origin was a religious act.”⁴ Coded language ensures that the message remains within an approved group of insiders. In this sense, riddling is an enigmatic form of utterance that requires extra work to reach the goal of deciphering the referent. And yet — as we will see in the case of Mongolian riddles — the goal is to communicate a much broader and deeper message, while simultaneously imparting what can be termed a *metaphoric cognitive function*.⁵

² Crossley-Holland 2008, 7.

³ See Civil 1987.

⁴ Stein 1972, 195.

⁵ See Oberfalzerová 2006 for a detailed study of the use of metaphors by Mongolian nomads in everyday speech.

The subject of this dissertation emerged out of my own increasing fascination with Mongolian riddles, as my competency in the language (under the expertise of my instructors' tutelage at the Seminar of Mongolian Studies at the Institute of South and Central Asia at Charles University) grew through study and I became more familiar with both the written and oral literatures of Mongolia. The purpose of this thesis is thus to enact an ethnolinguistic analysis drawing upon two corpuses of Mongolian riddles (Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990 and Ölziikhutag 2013). In this thesis, I translate and append linguistic glosses to over one hundred riddles, with the following aims:

- a) to examine distinctive sound patterns and alliteration;
- b) to observe and examine the morphology of each riddle with a view to highlighting certain linguistic phenomena;
- c) to explain the lexical (semantic) content of each riddle.

Within, or concomitant to the above-mentioned analyses, my further goals are:

- d) to capture the meanings and ethnographic realities contained in Mongolian riddles that seem unclear and might otherwise with the passage of time fall away (it should be noted that the precise meanings of certain riddles remain unclear to some informants);
- e) to reveal the specific Mongolian nomadic ethno-pedagogy,⁶ as well as the world and cosmologic views that lie beneath these riddles; and
- f) to employ Mongolian riddles as a kind of language laboratory for examining the wide variety of linguistic phenomenon they manifest — including the rich use of loanwords, the widespread occurrence of semantic and phonetic (and highly creative) erosion,⁷ the use of ideophones,⁷ the frequently attested qualities of abstraction and of lexical and

⁶ The term 'ethno-pedagogy' tends to vary from country to country: in English, there are the terms 'intercultural education, multicultural education, interethnic education;' in German, *interkulturelle Pädagogik*, 'intercultural pedagogy' in Russian, *ethnopedagogika* 'ethno-pedagogy'; in Czech, the term is understood as a partial equivalent of such terms as *multikulturní/interkulturní výchova* 'multicultural/intercultural education' (Průcha 2002, 195.) Overall, the term ethno-pedagogy is understood as "a totality of knowledge and skills pertaining to socialization of children that are transmitted through ethno-cultural traditions, folk poetry, fine arts, through patterns of communication and interaction with each other and the adults." (Quoted in Suleymanova 2020, 105). In this thesis, I employ the term according to this definition as well as in the sense employed in Oberfalzerová 2006. Ethno-pedagogy thus refers to the way in which children are taught about their own culture and its mores through language and how it is used. The terms ethnoscience, ethnolinguistics, and ethnosemantics are related: see Atran 1991, 597.

⁷ Mark Dingemans defines an ideophone as "a member of an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery." (Akita and Pardeshi eds., 2019, 16). "They imitate a broad range of sensory experiences that involve auditory, visual, tactile, or other types of perception." (Ibid., 1). Also, as Akita and Pardeshi note: "Due to the influential Saussurean principle that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (de Saussure 1916), ideophones, including onomatopoeia, have long been viewed in modern linguistics as peripheral, negligible, immature, or extra-linguistic. Ideophones indeed do not appear to be abundant in most European languages, which have been the primary focus of theoretical linguistics. However, studies of individual

morphological ambiguity, their functions of conceptual mapping cognitive blending — just to list some of the most important topics.

To a larger degree, the characteristics named in points d), e), and f) are intertwined, mutually informing and reinforcing each other, and it is not always that easy to separate them out or discuss them in isolation. And, it must be said, everything about Mongolian culture (and its oral folklore) with its strong emphasis on the collective, and equally strong de-emphasis of atomizing separate components would seem to work against a methodology that would classify and atomize — and perhaps even work against the spirit of the riddles themselves.

Perhaps it should also be mentioned with the present work is not. Although an important part of my research led to the designation of a certain class of ‘ruined’ words, this dissertation is not intended as an overall classification of Mongolian riddles, nor is it intended as an overview of riddle scholarship as a whole.⁸

For research purposes, I have turned to two large collection of Mongolian riddles, both assembled in the mid-twentieth century. They contain riddles (14,000 in total from both volumes) from all regions of Mongolia proper.⁹ One of the great advantages of these collections is the period in which they were assembled: Ölziikhutag gathered his archive of over 10,000 riddles during the years 1954-1964. He travelled to at least ten different provinces (*aimag*), asking: What riddles do you tell here? In addition, in 1951, 1962, 1963, he asked schoolteachers and educators to collect riddles.¹⁰ Schoolchildren were asked to collect riddles from their elders; the riddles were mailed in from all over the country.¹¹ Thus the riddles hail from the older generation who could remember life before the Revolution of 1921 and the establishment of the Mongolian People’s Republic.

The long-lived communist regime in Mongolia came to an end with the first free elections in 1990. In its early decades, the communist regime was responsible for the introduction of such institutions as the first modern hospitals and schools; and responsible as well for dire repressions of religious and cultural memory, with the purges of the late nineteen thirties perhaps only the most extreme example of such. These savage repressions targeted both

languages in the past century have revealed that every major continent has some languages with a developed ideophonic lexicon.” (Ibid., 1-2.)

⁸ For a good summary of the history of Mongolian riddle collecting, see Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 4-8. See as well Mészáros (undated—accessed January 20, 2019).

⁹ See Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990 and Ölziikhutag 2013, Vols. 1 and 2.

¹⁰ Ölziikhutag, 2013, Vol. 1, 14-16.

¹¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

shamanism and Buddhism; equally targeted was the folk culture (identified by Communists with the “backwards and feudal” *ancien régime*). Nonetheless, the years after the Revolution saw many Mongolian riddles published in collections, grammars, school readers, and so on.¹² The legacy of communism in Mongolia cannot be viewed in starkly black-and-white terms: as mentioned above, it brought both widespread education, broad access to modern healthcare, and the erasure of illiteracy; and yet it also introduced censorship into the everyday lives of Mongolians. Generally speaking, however, in the experience of the author, this era is viewed largely positively by many Mongolians.

To a not inconsequential degree, however, the forced cultural and religious lacunae of the communist era have been exacerbated in recent decades by newer challenges — the modernity of the late twentieth century and early first millennium with its technological incursions, economic globalization and relentlessly homogenizing media. Clearly this is something with which every oral folk culture worldwide must contend.

During my own experience with field research in Khövsgöl aimag in the summer of 2013, riddles, although clearly highly valued as a part of Mongolian oral tradition, did not appear to form an integral part of daily interchange among family members. The smallest member of the family (then a schoolchild), was asked to come up with some riddles which he had presumably learnt at school. Some of the most famous Mongolian riddles seem to be known by all. But even when engaging friends and acquaintances in casual conversations about riddles, acknowledgement that Mongolian riddles are “actually very difficult” was frequently made, along with the admonishment, “Ask me an *easy* riddle!”

And of course, the presence of even a vast corpus of riddles, coupled with high linguistic proficiency, does not necessarily ensure access to this fascinating material.

It would appear that not that many, or even very few riddle collections from non-European cultures have ever asked informants for riddle commentary. To take one example from outside the Altaic linguistic sphere, the anthropologist Ian Hamnett writes, in reference to a Sotho riddle:

Some riddles are a great deal more complex. A good example from the Sotho is: ‘an ox from my mother’s bridewealth with a lump in its belly. - The grindstone and millstone’ (App. 3). This riddle, clearly ‘non-oppositional’ and metaphorical, calls for a rather more lengthy analysis. Grinding corn is women’s work. It is ground by hand, the corn being placed on a large flat stone and rubbed with a small grindstone which is rubbed backwards and forwards. The ‘lump in the belly’ is the small grindstone, the ‘ox’ is the large flat millstone. Since the two stones are associated with women, the ‘ox’ in question is a bridewealth best. The riddle could thus be transformed into: ‘Why is a

¹² Ibid, 14.

bridewealth-ox like a set of grinding-stones? – Because they are both associated with women’, though with a greatly impoverished result. The compression and ellipsis of the original make the riddle almost impossible to answer in the abstract, but when question and answer are taken together, they yield an expression of great elegance and concision. The opposition is explicit only when the riddle is impoverished by reductive analysis, but it is inherent in the authentic version, where however it is more elliptically presented. The ‘point’ of the riddle does not depend upon the respondent’s ability to solve it – clearly almost impossible if the answer is not already known - but in the recognition of a subtle, even far-fetched, congruence between items that when ordinarily regarded might seem to be either antithetical or at least disjointed. *Understanding riddles, in the sense of seeing their ‘point’, is thus an exercise in intellectual agility of a modest but nonetheless real kind.*¹³

It’s unclear, from this passage, as to whether the “exercise in intellectual agility of a modest but nonetheless real kind” is meant to refer to the riddle-teller or riddle-collector, but it appears evident that the researcher passed up a valuable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the nucleus of the riddle — which no doubt would entail an examination of the metaphorical pairs *ox/lump in belly : grindstone/millstone*. The author admits that his ‘transformation’ of the riddle impoverishes it, but perhaps doesn’t realize exactly how: in baldly rephrasing it, the metaphorical cognitive work demanded by the riddle of its auditor(s) has been suppressed and eliminated. Research performed with nomadic Mongolians has shown the vital ethno-pedagogic role of such metaphorical speech. The linguistic formations in which information is passed on to children in such a milieu are equally as important as the message being imparted.¹⁴ (In this regard, worthy of note as well is the extreme closeness of the riddle “genre” to that of the proverb, as well as of the triad¹⁵ — all of these short genres forming an important part of the oral didactic literature of Mongolian tradition.)

In all of the Mongolian collections I have consulted except for one, the riddle-and-answer pairs have not been appended with explanations.¹⁶ This dissertation is therefore one of the first works to attach detailed explanatory texts to Mongolian riddles in a Western language, in close consultation with informants. Commentaries to previously existing texts form a centuries-old and justly venerated tradition in Mongolian religious texts (sutras) and classical literature stemming from Buddhist tradition. While a spoken riddle that has been collected is clearly a very different kind of text than that of a Buddhist sutra, it is surely no less worthy of

¹³ Hamnett 1967, 387 (my emphasis).

¹⁴ Oberfalzerová 2006, 114.

¹⁵ “The triad consists of the artistic grouping of three phenomena, which are unconnected except for their stated possession of the one quality which it is intended to illustrate.” (Bawden 2004, xxix). The Mongolian triad, the proverb and the riddle, are all extremely terse forms, true marvels of linguistic economy.

¹⁶ The one exception is the group of riddles created by the Belgian Catholic monk and missionary Antoine Mostaert (1881-1971), who appended brief explanations in Mongolian of certain to accompany certain riddles, largely to explain difficult or uncommon words. See Mostaert 2010.

commentary — and, as mentioned above, can afford us invaluable insight into the world, linguistic and otherwise, of Mongolian nomads.

Much of the commentary and linguistic analyses generated in this thesis would not have been possible without the generous and kind cooperation of Docent Jügderiin Lubsangdorji of the Seminar of Mongolian of Studies at the Institute of Asian Studies at Charles University. Docent Lubsangdorji has guided me (and many other generations of students, many of them eminent researchers in the field) through the linguistic world of Mongolian and patiently answered my many questions concerning these riddles. I have also been greatly influenced by the work of my instructors at Charles University — PhDr. Mgr. Alena Oberfalzerová, Ph.D., Mgr. Veronika Zikmundová, Ph.D., Mgr. Veronika Kapišovská, Ph.D. — who have made it their life’s work to uncover the deep thought that underlies verbal manifestations of Mongolian. In particular, Mgr. Veronika Kapišovská, Ph.D. has assisted me with many invaluable counsels in the completion of this thesis.

In addition to my discussions with docent Lubsangdorji and other informants, I have consulted a number of works by eminent linguistics in the field, such as N. Poppe, B. Ya. Vladimirtsov, and so on; regarding oral literature of Mongolia, early Mongolian society and culture, as well as important literary historians and theorists such as Ts. Damdinsüren, as well as the eminent specialists in oral literature, the language of oral literature, and folklorist S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig. At the same time, I have also drawn upon my own background, which is primarily literary and focussed on translation, deeply indebted to French theory, particularly with regard to the work of the structuralists, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze (no matter how contradictory those thinkers may seem to be). Their contribution is particularly valuable in terms of prompting the researcher to examine not only the object of her study, not only the methodological tools employed, but the underlying assumptions as well. I find the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to be particularly edifying, despite the fact that they were not “genuine” anthropologists. Not only do they graft Western thinking itself onto a “nomadic” paradigm in order to upend Western categories, but their explorations around the idea of *nomadology* are uncannily prescient when trying to think about and describe the world of Mongolian oral folklore.¹⁷

To sum up the overall structure of the work: in Chapter 1, I examine some of the theoretical underpinnings of the linguistic considerations of these riddles, more precisely I look at questions of ambiguity and abstraction in language as a whole, and (generally speaking) in

¹⁷ See Mikos 2012.

Mongolian. As a Western researcher, it is necessary to account for my own linguistic background and influences in approaching a riddling culture hailing from a nomadic, Mongolian-speaking milieu. The question of the riddle in English is briefly touched upon: its genesis, and etymology differs greatly from its development in Mongolian. I look at the grammatical aspects of Mongolian that allow for lexical and morphological ambiguity, as well as the overall syntactical structure of many of these riddles which greatly enhances these qualities of ambiguity. Crucial for understanding the function of the Mongolian riddle is an understanding of the etymology of the Mongolian word for ‘riddle’ (*оһьсогдо*) as analyzed in the work of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig. S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig persuasively demonstrate that the functions of the Mongolian riddle are closely tied with those of the tale (*үлгэр*) and mythology. I also introduce some basic concepts concerning Deleuze and Guattari’s *nomadology* which are applicable to the understanding of Mongolian riddles.

In Chapter 2, I examine a peculiar linguistic phenomenon in the two riddle corpuses — that of ‘deteriorated’ words. In a great number of riddles, it was clear that certain key words had undergone a process of linguistic erosion — a metaphor which aptly expresses the sense of the archaeological layers buried in these riddles. There is a prevalence of loanwords from Tibetan, Chinese, Sanskrit, as well as the Turkic (Uyghur) languages, subject to the same processes of linguistic erosion. Certain patterns of changes also seem to point to a kind of semi-deliberate aesthetic distortion, a spontaneous phonetic moulding (or, in some cases, moulting) of the language. Some words occurred which were to be found in no dictionary anywhere, and yet proved capable of signifying to my informants. I came to view these words as constituting a slightly fuzzy but singular lexical category within the Mongolian riddle corpus: as ‘ruined word[s]’ – *эвдэрцэн үг*.

In Chapter 3, I examine riddles that take up the sacred: in the Mongolian context, this means riddles having to do Buddha, Buddhism and deities as a whole. The riddles that take the Buddha, lamas, and other sacred themes give us a vivid picture of the religious life of nomads in the attitudinal sense. Often votive objects, such as those that are present on the household shrine, are metaphorically blended with livestock imagery, expressing the down-to-earth aspect of Mongolian religiosity which never lacks for an earthy perspective and gentle ironic humour. At the same time, the sense of the sacred is unmistakable, even as it is combined with profane subjects, reminding us that the division between the sacred and the profane which we experience as ‘normative’ in Western culture looks very different from the perspective of Inner Asian steppe nomadic life.

In Chapter 4, I look at the topic of movement and stasis in Mongolian riddles. The riddles present us with many instances where a still object moves, or moving object is envisioned as being perfectly still. The altar place is often envisioned as a kind of miniature version of the grasslands, with the offering cups standing in for a camel caravan. Certain tropes of movement are extremely reminiscent of the rhizomatic ‘anti-organization’ of space hailing from Deleuze and Guattari’s previously-mentioned formulation of *nomadology*. And yet a road is not just a road in these riddles, but a path that metaphorically can lead to the Ultimate (Nirvana). Movement between the three realms of the nomadic worldview — the Lower Realm, our world, and the Upper Realm — is not impeded, very much in the sense of Deleuze’s ‘smooth’ space, as opposed to ‘striated’ space, replete with walls and barriers that impede movement.

In Chapter 5, I examine riddles having to do with fire: not surprisingly, when viewed within the ethno-linguistic context, many Mongolian riddles about fire will reflect the views of its ritual sacred purity, as well as its position at the very centre of the family hearth. Many riddles reflect the nomads’ sharp observation of the physiological realities of everyday life on the steppe: a series of riddles about fire describes its biological life from inception to drifting away as smoke toward the sky, toward Tenger.¹⁸ Mongolian riddles about fire often echo the wording and the imagery of centuries-old ritual texts, which themselves place the family and the Mongolian nation within the fire, symbolically speaking, the sacred continuity of the lineage of Chinggis Khan. These connections well illustrate the thesis of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig concerning Mongolian riddles: they are intimately connected to origin stories and mythic texts.

In Chapter 6, I examine how the structure of the cosmos itself is represented in these riddles, often as a ‘hidden’ or ‘second’ metaphor — one that needs to be abstracted or inferred from the riddle, creating a riddle within, or beyond, the riddle. As previously mentioned, the pedagogic function of these riddles lies equally within how they teach one to think in terms of the nomadic way of metaphor. The humblest objects in the ger may stand in for the entire cosmos. The riddles containing these concealed metaphors of cosmos are particularly illustrative of how Mongolian riddle thinking facilitates conceptual blending using the image schemata of ideophones. This is a topic that calls out for further research by cognitive linguists

¹⁸ In this thesis, I will be using *Tenger* as a loanword into English, as no one English term can capture its manifold meanings of ‘deity, sky, higher force(s), weather, highest, best’ (Bold et al. 2008, 2145-2146); ‘*TNGRI* [= *tenggeri, tegri*] n. Heaven; god; sky; weather’ (Lessing 1960, 794); ‘*TNGRI* Tib. *lha*; Skt. *deva*. Denizen of Heaven, god.’ (Ibid, 1136).

who have a strong tendency to remain within the English language sphere. As formulated by one group of non-Indo-European cognitive linguists:

In view of the apparent potential of Cognitive Linguistics as a general theory applicable to all languages, we are surprised by what appears to be an increasing dominance of representation from English and other IE languages in Cognitive Linguistic forums. We feel strongly that the representation of non-IE languages must be expanded so that our framework early-on establishes a broad base of expertise with all of the world's major language families, thereby avoiding the insularity for which generative linguistics was so strongly criticized in its early years. If Cognitive Linguistics is to progress, it must also go beyond reformulating hypotheses based solely on the study of IE languages and, like Role and Reference Grammar, think about what a linguistic theory would look like if it were equally based upon Cora, or Tagalog, or Djirbal...¹⁹

In Chapter 7, I examine the spatial aspect of Mongolian riddles. It should be no surprise that in a language as intensely visual as Mongolian, that spatiality plays such a strong role in its oral folklore and especially in these riddles. Among kinds of spatiality that dominate in the riddle corpus is a steppe or layered spatiality — a striated space which nonetheless is overcome movement inherent within what Elli Köngäs Maranda referred to as the ‘riddle image.’ This posited movement moves along horizontal or strictly upward axes. Another dominant image of that of containment, a trope which has a radically different connotation in the Mongolian riddle corpus. The ‘secret’ riddle image envisions the universe as being contained, a kind of imagery that could well harken back to archaic matriarchal tropes of the womb.

In the Conclusion, I attempt to draw the many linguistic, symbolic, metaphorical and cultural-religious threads together, and suggest directions for further research.

¹⁹ Casad and Palmer, eds. 2003, 3. (My emphasis).

Chapter 1

Ambiguity, Abstraction and the Morphology of Nomadism

1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to look at some of the more general linguistic features of Mongolian riddles, including their strong propensity to ambiguity and abstraction (as well as a general look at these terms). How should we understand ambiguity and abstraction in the context of Mongolian grammar and Mongolian oral folklore, in particular considering the background of Western linguistic tradition that tends to describe ambiguity as a negative phenomenon? What are the grammatical features of Mongolian that lend itself to these linguistic characteristics? I also examine these features in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadology.²⁰ Finally, in Section 1.5, I look at the analysis of the etymology of the word 'riddle' in Mongolian (*оһьсого*) in the analysis of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig, who convincingly argues for the mythological and ritual origin of Mongolian riddles.

1.2 In Praise of Ambiguity

It is perhaps unwise to discuss a topic such as 'ambiguity in language' (whether lexical or syntactical) without at least briefly accounting for the theoretical background associated with this term in the English language, and more broadly, in Western culture as a whole. This is the background which, for better or worse, has influenced the present researcher. This background, which can be in some respects helpful, in others more akin to a set of blinders, has nonetheless informed the vast majority of scholarship on the topics of riddling, linguistics, and even the ethno-linguistic analysis of non-European cultures in Western languages.

1.2.1 Aristotle on Ambiguity

To begin at the beginning — in terms of Western thought — it was Aristotle who first posited the principle of non-contradiction, “a principle of scientific inquiry, reasoning and

²⁰ Nomadology is a concept developed by Felix Guattari (1930 – 1992) and Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995) in their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987); most generally put, it is based on the opposition between sedentary and nomadic cultures. See Section 1.6 for a fuller discussion of nomadology.

communication that we cannot do without.”²¹ This essentially led to “the fundamental questions that one encounters in the dialectic treatises, as well as the philosophical treatises, of Antiquity and the Middle Ages.”²² Ambiguity was studied by Greek orators in order to emphasize the importance of clarity of spoken communication — although obscure speech might be desirable on certain occasions, that did not preclude the need for its study.²³ The difficulty of deciphering such difficult texts as the *Iliad* also meant that the study of ambiguity was seen as necessary by the *grammatikoi*.²⁴ Aristotle needed to treat the question of ambiguity in order to create a dialectical philosophy for use in syllogistic constructions.²⁵ He recognized that there were ambiguous terms, and indeed there had to be, as “the number of simple and complex expressions is limited ... whereas the number of things is infinite.”²⁶ Therefore, certain things ended up sharing a similar name: “Sounds became signifying words, and attached themselves to certain things, their *significata*. This was called ‘the imposition of names.’”²⁷ Subsequently, in the works of Apollonius, ambiguity is “implicitly treated as a malady of language.”²⁸ Ambiguities needed to be ‘surveyed,’ all the better to eliminate, that is, to disambiguate them.²⁹ The Aristotelian approach remains predominant in Western epistemological frameworks in ways that do not require too much more elucidation here.

1.2.2 Ambiguity Today

In the Western context today, ambiguity is usually treated in a bifurcated fashion: either as a deliberately ‘aesthetic’ strategy of language (such as in poetry, literature etc., which is almost always considered as the product of one individual ‘author’); or it is discussed in terms of colloquial speech, and then more often than not limited to a discussion of puns or its undesirability. For example in his influential monograph *The Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson states: “And ambiguity, in ordinary speech means something very pronounced, and as a rule *witty or deceitful*.”³⁰ Empson qualifies his ‘seven types’ (which we need not examine in detail here) to be “intended as stages of advancing logical disorder,”³¹ derived from the written ‘literary’ texts of the English-language canon. Note as well the phrase

²¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-noncontradiction/> Accessed January 16, 2019.

²² Cerquiglini 1988, 11.

²³ Cerquiglini 1988, 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cerquiglini 1988, 26.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 36.

²⁹ Ibid, 40.

³⁰ Empson, 1991, 1 (My emphasis).

³¹ Ibid., 48

logical *disorder*, the assumption that ambiguity disrupts language that should be rights be *orderly*.

In spoken English as well, ambiguity is associated with potentially dishonest speech, seen as a means of evading truth-telling, and thus can be qualified as morally dubious. In this sense, the following paragraph is fairly typical:

Principles of effective communication would have us avoid *vagueness* and *ambiguity*. This would mean eliminating *all potential lexical ambiguity* by creating a context that forces *only one possible interpretation* of every word. Difficult to achieve, many a verbal dispute hinges on the confused multiple meanings of key terms. But sometimes ambiguity is desired and explicitly fashioned. Puns, for instance, require not only that two (or more) meanings be active simultaneously but that the reader recognizes the ambiguity: *Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana*. Intentional ambiguity is not just for humour. Everyone is familiar with the politician who uses ambiguous or fake terminology in the service of diplomacy, equivocation, or the evasion of difficult questions. And sometimes potential ambiguity just does not matter and is not worth the effort to resolve because either reading is acceptable (e.g., *book* or *national*).³²

To summarise, the Western concept of ambiguity in language is based in its pragmatics: ambiguity as a strategy for a specific desired effect (aesthetic, humorous, deceitful...) – rather than as a property within the language’s relation to the world around it.

Ambiguity is widely viewed as being a kind of ‘trick,’ not as an inherent and crucial function of language.

1.3 Ambiguity-Related Phenomena in Mongolian

Ambiguity, in the Mongolian linguistic context, is very closely connected to polysemy, semantic indeterminacy and vagueness, questions of lexical slippage and poly-referentiality — and all these are not disconnected from the question of linguistic abstraction. As Suzanne Winkler remarks: “Ambiguity must be distinguished from vagueness, although it is not always easy to decide whether a specific case of unclear meaning is one or the other. Ambiguous expressions have more than one distinct meaning; vague expressions have a single meaning that cannot be characterized precisely.”³³ Whereas—as we have just seen—ambiguity has tended to receive something of a negative cast in the traditions of Western philology, recent research in cognitive linguistics has drawn great attention to the functional importance of polysemy in language, particularly with regard to metaphor and metonymy in everyday language use. As Brigitte Nerlich and David D. Clarke write:

In recent years, research in cognitive semantics has shown that the lexicalized meanings of polysemous words can be explained in terms of basic conceptual and cultural metaphors, the polysemy is motivated partially by or metaphorical metonymical structuring of experience, especially of our bodily experience [...] Words do not

³² Allan, Ed., 2009, 226. (First three emphases mine).

³³ Winkler 2015, 32.

accumulate meanings at random, but follow certain cognitive pathways or patterns that are natural to human cognition and that structure acquisition of experience, knowledge and language. So, to understand the emergence and structure of polysemy, we have to understand the nature of metaphor and metonymy, and insight familiar to those studying semantic change a century ago [...]³⁴

The functions that ambiguity, abstraction, polysemy, and expanded “fuzzy floating reference sets”³⁵ fulfil in Mongolian are not, however, necessarily only linguistically functioning categories but also mythical, worldview-forming and quasi-ritual ones (see, for example, Riddle 84 on p. 147, or Riddle 83 on p. 143 of this thesis). In this regard, statements such as the following become problematic:

If polysemy is an intrinsic quality of words, then ambiguity is an attribute of text. Whenever there is uncertainty as to the meaning that a speaker or writer intends, there is ambiguity. *So, polysemy indicates only potential ambiguity, and context works to remove ambiguity.*³⁶

Here as well, ambiguity is seen as a quality to be *subtracted* from a given utterance or text. But there may well be instances where a potential ambiguity (or polysemy, indeterminacy, and so on) does not represent a linguistic quality to be *removed*, but, to the contrary, *an inherent quality with its own worth and ethno-pedagogical function*. Similarly, there may well be situations where the addition of ‘context’ does not remove ambiguity but increases it, and even where context may be layered upon context, creating a contextual ambiguity or polysemy (see, for example, Riddle 89 on p. 153 of this thesis).

Both indeterminacy and vagueness have been greatly researched as both philosophical *and* mathematical topics. Vagueness, for example, has been discussed in terms of whether it is caused by semantic and epistemological considerations (known as the ‘argument from semantic indeterminacy’), ontic or ‘really existing’ causes (‘the argument from ordinary objects’), or by the nature of quantum particles themselves (the ‘argument from quantum mechanics’).³⁷ The complex philosophical aspects of this inquiry would lead this dissertation away from its linguistic goals; interesting to consider, however, is whether the certain terms or phrases such as *Бурхан-Халдун өвөр*³⁸ ‘the area to the south of the mountain Burqan-Khaldun’ (see Section 1.4 below) could be considered as referring to a ‘vague object’ in philosophical as well as linguistic terms.

³⁴ Nerlich 2003, 7. See as well Lakoff 1987.

³⁵ Nerlich 2003, 15.

³⁶ Allan 2009, 226. (my emphasis).

³⁷ Ken Akiba also notes that “according to the currently orthodox Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, there is much indeterminacy in the world of fundamental particles.” (Akiba and Abasnezhad 2014, 6).

³⁸ The term ‘god, deity; image of Buddha’ (*бурхан*, WM. *burqan*) will in this thesis be used as ‘Burkhan.’

With reference to semantic vagueness, however, Nora Kluck states:

Vagueness may still appear as the “philosopher’s nightmare” to those philosophers who see it as their task to solve the logical problems that vagueness has caused. There is no question that these difficulties exist and that, depending on the intensity of the argument, they can certainly lead to nightmares.

However, to discredit vagueness as *a defect of natural languages* leads too far. It makes valuable contributions in everyday communication. And it has to be measured by its success - and not by whether it helps formal logicians to sleep soundly.³⁹

A related linguistic feature is ‘under-specification,’ which itself must be viewed as a strictly culturally contextual category. As Filip Devos writes in his comments on Hungarian and Polish kinship terms: “...in some linguistic communities and cultures some specifications are less important, or not at all important.” (The example he gives is that Hungarian finds it necessary to specify whether a brother or sister is older or younger than the speaker, whereas English does not).⁴⁰ What might seem under-specified — and hence linguistically ‘lacking’ — to a person from one language (or language group), will seem perfectly normal to a speaker from another language or language group; conversely, one language may seem overly detailed and even ‘fussy’ to the speaker of another language, depending on its overall need for context and specification. Devos also mentions that

[...] the actual interpretation of the notion [of vagueness] is often strange. Vagueness, together with homonymy, polysemy, generality, even metaphor and metonymy, is mentioned under “general shortcomings of language” (Ullmann 1962:118-127), “insecurities of language” (Sadock 1986), or “vagaries of reference” and “indeterminacies and irregularities of reference” (Quine 1960:125), all terms with which an intuitive lack of precision or uncertainty of word application are indicated. Some other confusing terms found in the literature are: open texturedness, incompleteness, semantic extension, indeterminacy, lack of specificity, approximation, lack of clarity, insecurity, ambivalence, context-dependence; *Unbestimmtheit*, *Inexaktheit*, *Unschärfe*, *Verschwommenheit*.⁴¹

Devos takes the opposite view of Ken Akiba, quoted above, maintaining that vagueness can only exist in language. While it is not the purpose of this dissertation to explore whether language is vague or objects are vague, there can be no question that semantic indeterminacy, polyreferentiality (‘floating or shifting referents’), polysemy, ambiguity, and vagueness, whether ontic or epistemological, all represent crucial lexical, morphological, aesthetic and philosophical strategies employed by the crafters of Mongolian riddles, a series of anonymous authors whose collective work (and subsequent and continual re-editing and re-fashioning),

³⁹ Kluck 2014, 170 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰ Devos 2003, 133.

⁴¹ Devos 2003, 122-3.

ranges over a period of at least one millennium.

1.4 The Uses of Abstraction

The researcher Michael Fortesque usefully identifies two main types of linguistic abstraction:

It has in fact at least two different senses that have often been confused. On the one hand there is the more traditional sense of ‘disembodied from specific sensory features’ (let us call this ‘abstract₁’), and on the other there is the sense of ‘simplified or generalized across instances’ (let us call this ‘abstract₂’). A typical dictionary entry, corresponding to our everyday use of the word, such as the following from Chamber’s 10th edition (2006), does not resolve the confusion: “Apart from actual material instances, existing only as a mental concept, opposite of concrete, away from practice, theoretical, denoting a quality of a thing apart from the thing, e.g. ‘redness’.” ... It remains to be seen whether anything at all can be salvaged of the vague distinction between ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’.⁴²

And yet, for our purposes — an examination of how abstraction functions in the context of Mongolian riddling — even these more careful and detailed definitions can seem problematic. Of course, Mongolian employs abstract nouns in Fortesque’s sense of ‘abstract₁’ — ‘disembodied from specific sensory features’ in words such as *ухаан* ‘intelligence, reason,’ and so on. His second definition (‘abstract₂’ — ‘simplified and generalized across instances’) is closer to how many of the abstract words found in these riddles work.

Some of the most abstract words in Mongolian are ideophones.⁴³ This type of word has been described in terms of many different categories in the English-language literature: they function as a kind of *visual onomatopoeia*, in that they create images through sound mimesis (and thus give evidence to a certain level of synesthesia). We will encounter them frequently throughout this work, as they are quite abundantly represented in the Mongolian riddle corpus, as in the spoken language itself. Ideophones are abstract in the sense of being ‘generalized across instances’ and yet they are anything but simplified, as even a quick study of them demonstrates. For example, the word *хонхор* designates ‘a pit or depression, [something] having become chasm-like, the state of something having fallen in,’⁴⁴ which is in and of itself a remarkably detailed image, and in point of fact not abstract at all in its exact description of a specific type of physical formation (and this is true of all ideophones in Mongolian, which always require detailed paraphrase in English). What makes it abstract (in the definition given above) is the way this one word can be generalized across a number of instances, casting a potentially infinite referential net that could summon up a vast range of objects (thus creating a

⁴² Fortesque 2017, 3.

⁴³ See definition of ideophone in footnote 7 on p. 13 of this thesis. See as well Oberfalzerová 2009 and 2010; and Zikmundová 2002.

⁴⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 2554.

signifier with an unlimited number of signifieds), theoretically ranging from a humble item in the ger, to a feature of the landscape, or a physiological characteristic. Mongolian ideophones function as free-form mental and visual templates which can be applied to any real-life or hypothetical situation as long as the conditions of the Peircean iconic diagram are met.⁴⁵

In terms of cognitive linguistics, ideophones qualify as a manifestation of a more complex ‘image schema,’ a structure in the brain, how brain makes sense of reality, in other words “a schematic version of a sensory image, a representation of ‘embodied’ experience,” as Fortesque puts it.⁴⁶

A good example of Mongolian ‘nomad’ abstract thinking as it occurs in the Mongolian mentality or way of thinking (*нүүдэлчний сэтгэлгээ* ‘nomadic mentality’)⁴⁷ outside of the riddle literature occurs in the *Secret History of the Mongols* §107 in the spatial description *Бурхан-Халдун өвөр*,⁴⁸ (indicating an area lying to the south of the mountain Burqan-Khaldun). This is rendered by Cleaves as “in front of Burqan Qaldun”⁴⁹ and by de Rachelwitz as “on the southern side of Burqan Qaldun”⁵⁰ (the phrase is meant to indicate the whereabouts of the movements of Tooril-Khan and Temüjin on their way to the Onon River to attack the Merkid). The term *өвөр* itself is a characteristic example of the intersection of ambiguity and polysemy in Mongolian stemming from metaphorical expression: it can designate ‘the southern side of something, the front part of someone’s dress or body, breast, lap, the inner space of a belted traditional Mongolian robe or kaftan (*дээл*):⁵¹ a natural pocket is formed out of the wide front

⁴⁵ “Hypoicons may be roughly divided according to the mode of Firstness of which they partake. Those which partake of simple qualities, or First Firstnesses, are *images*; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are *diagrams*; those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors*.” (Jappy 2013, 112). “Peirce’s basic definition of diagrams was that they are iconic signs concerning intelligible *relations* (in contrast to images which represent simple qualities and metaphors which concern representative character of signs)... Diagrams do not necessarily resemble their objects in looks, but only in respect to the relations of their parts... Diagrams represent relations in between their own parts which are supposed to be analogous, i.e. similar to relations of parts within things represented...” (Paavola 2011, 3). This is the closest definition I have found in Western linguistics that describes the function and dynamics of Mongolian ideophones.

⁴⁶ Fortesque 2017, 29.

⁴⁷ This is the phrase used by Lubsangdorji. He uses the term as the polar opposite of *суурин сэтгэлгээ* ‘sedentary mentality.’ (Consultation, 2019). The term *сэтгэлгээ* derives from the word *сэтгэл*, which does not refer exclusively to mind or to heart, but instead encompasses the entire range of human affect and thought: ‘thought, feeling, sensibility, heart, soul, mind...’ (Kara 1998, 411). Lubsangdorji also views the Mongolian nomadic mentality as being primarily *horizontal* in nature, as opposed to vertical, and associates it with the idea of the wide open steppe, flat spaces, a landscape that lies flat (*хэвтэж байгаа*) as opposed to rising up. (Consultation, 2019.) Interestingly, quite a few of the ideophones in Mongolian often describe an object or body, whether static or moving, that deviates from this (perhaps nomadically normative) state of horizontality, either by being rounded or bulging or by popping up from a flat horizon.

⁴⁸ Lubsangdorji 2019, 43.

⁴⁹ Cleaves 1982, 43.

⁵⁰ Rachelwitz 2015, 36.

⁵¹ For the remainder of this thesis, this term shall be referred to as ‘deel.’

panel of the garment. The term *өвөр* also appears in such expressions as to share a blanket with someone (*өвөрм орох*)’ — and it is also used in many expressions and as the base for many further nouns and verbs.⁵² The expression *өвөр ээрүүлэх* ‘for [two people] to have their bosoms facing [crossed]’ metaphorically designates the act of two people making love to each other.⁵³ It would appear that the corporal meaning of *өвөр* appeared first; then it was employed to refer to the southern slope of the mountain or mountain range.⁵⁴ In Mongolian culture and language, every part of the mountain is personified: every part of the human body is linguistically and metaphorically mapped onto the southern-facing or northern-facing mountain slope: as with every aspect of nature, it is a living entity for Mongolians.⁵⁵ In Lubsangdorji’s view, the spatial determination expressed in *Бурхан-Халдун өвөр* refers in fact to a much broader area — encompassing a radius of as much as 100 kilometres. The ‘nomadic mindset’ is such that geographical determinations, generally speaking, are extremely broad (by so-called ‘normative’ Western standards).⁵⁶ The expression *Бурхан-Халдун өвөр* is just one example of how spatial thinking is generated in Mongolian; this sense of broadness and of generalization — which can be expanded further or even narrowed to suit the speech pragmatics of the circumstance at hand — is extremely characteristic of the language on the whole.

1.5 The Grammar of Ambiguity and Abstraction

In the section, I briefly enumerate how these qualities of ambiguity (polysemy, indeterminacy, and so on) and abstraction are reflected in the mechanisms of Mongolian grammar itself. These syntactical and morphological qualities are as follows. (These characteristics all refer to modern spoken Khalkha):

- there is no grammatical gender in modern Mongolian⁵⁷
- plural marking is not obligatory⁵⁸
- there is a high occurrence of zero case endings⁵⁹

⁵² Kara 1998, 340, Bold 2008, 1549, Kapišovská 2003, 111-112. Pelliot was of the opinion that the word *өвөр* (WM *ebür*) came from the same root as the word *өмнө* (WM. *emün-e*) ‘south, front.’ (Kapišovská 2003, 90.)

⁵³ Bold et al., 2008, 1549.

⁵⁴ Veronika Kapišovská, consultation, 2020.

⁵⁵ Pegg 2001, 98-99. She also notes: “Mongols do not talk of nature as if it is in structural opposition to culture.” (Ibid., 98.)

⁵⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁵⁷ Janhunen 2010, 119. Janhunen notes, however, the presence of some gender distinction in the suffixes for colours of animals.

⁵⁸ Janhunen 2010, 99; Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 7.

⁵⁹ Janhunen refers to this as the *casus indefinitus*, or indefinite case, noting, in reference to “generic objects:” “When a nominal is accompanied by no indicator of its status with regard to either definiteness or specificity, it is normally interpreted as generic, which also means that its number is not specified ... A generic object is normally unmarked.” (Janhunen 2010, 2006; Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 32).

- verbal morphology is non-marked for person or number⁶⁰
- there is a certain ambiguity around word classes⁶¹
- the unspecified or ‘generalized nature’ of many aspect of the tense system (verbal roots with the suffix *-ha*⁴ of the *presens imperfecti* represent a generalized ‘present-future’;⁶² *nomen usus* with suffix *-daɣ*⁴ can be considered to be a kind of tenseless verbal form);⁶³ *nomen perfecti* with suffix *-cah*⁴ denotes a completed action rather than a temporal ‘past’;⁶⁴
- the high occurrence of substitution words or *vicaria* (including nouns and *verba vicaria*);⁶⁵
- the dative-locative case is expressed using two alternating morphemes, *-ɔ* and *-m*⁶⁶

Above and beyond these grammatical features, which apply both to the colloquial and standard language (in other words, without even taking into consideration the particularities of the poeticised language of oral folklore), there are other considerations as well, such as the overall ethnolinguistic characteristics of Mongolian, including its frequent use of metaphor, which functions for all intents and purposes as a kind of code into which one has to be initiated or study thoroughly if one wishes to communicate effectively.⁶⁷

While it might seem as if I were making an argument for some version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of the inevitable determination of language by thought (ideas which originally hailed from the German Enlightenment thinkers Herder and Humboldt),⁶⁸ this is not

⁶⁰ “The grammatical categories marked on verbals by means of inflectional morphology include tense-aspect, mood, nominalization and converbialization.” Janhunen 2010, 143. “The verb form of the respective tense remains the same for all persons and for both numbers.” Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 34.

⁶¹ Janhunen notes that “Word classes, or parts of speech, in Mongolian can be distinguished on the basis of several different parameters, each of which yields a different set. The principal division is normally done on the basis of inflectional morphology, which allows all unbound lexical elements in Mongolian to be divided into three principal categories: *nominals*, *verbals* and *invariables*.” (Janhunen 2010, 58; emphasis mine). In reference to the overlap between certain word classes, N. Poppe writes: “There is no morphological difference between substantives and adjectives; all adjectives occur in only one constant form. All words expressing things can function as adjectives and all words expressing qualities can function as substantives, e.g. *modun* ‘tree’ and ‘wooden’, *mayu* ‘bad’ and ‘evil.’” (Poppe 2006, 40.) Also, “There is no formal grammatical difference between an **adjective** and a **substantive**.” (Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 7).

⁶² Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 34.

⁶³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Janhunen 2010, 146. Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 62.

⁶⁶ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 8. The dative is also used to express possession in Mongolian. (Ibid.) Janhunen notes, “Altogether, it has to be concluded that the Mongolian case system is characterized by systematic multifunctionality. This is understandable since the relatively small number of cases is used to express a great variety of both grammatical and non-grammatical relations.” (Janhunen 2010, 104-105).

⁶⁷ See Oberfalzerová 2006.

⁶⁸ Whorf never stated this hypothesis in such bald terms, but did state, on one occasion: “The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language . . . is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions . . .” (Penn 1972, 14). See as well Oberfalzerová 2006, 17.

the case. My aim is to work from an ethnolinguistic foundation as such, as a discipline “concerned with the relation between language and culture.”⁶⁹ As James Underhill has noted, “the study of the relationship between languages and the communities they help is often marginalized and forgotten about in mainstream linguistics.”⁷⁰ In any event, it is clear that the ethnolinguistic approach — encompassing “the communication behaviour of various communities, the manner of perception, and experience of the world of a certain society, and its reflection in language, and the rules of its use in society, and in the norms of its interpretation”⁷¹ yields the most insightful results when dealing with the many deep complexities surrounding Mongolian riddles.

1.5.1 The Syntax of Ambiguity and Abstraction

To return to our discussion of ambiguity and abstraction in action, we can now take an overall look at how the Mongolian riddle corpus employs the above qualities while even enhancing them further.

Many of the riddles are extraordinarily terse, comprised of between four and six words. There are longer verse-like riddles; for the most part these are ‘composed’ (*зохиосон*) riddles, and while of interest, do not form the great bulk of our examination here.

One point of interest is that Mongolian riddles, as a rule, do not ask a question, but merely state facts about one or more things. Out of the entire 15,000 riddles in both collections, only a handful conclude with the formulation “What is this?” (*Тэр юу вэ?*). Thus, the overwhelming majority of Mongolian riddles function as terse enigmatic statements. This feature as it were helps to further erase the boundary between the perhaps rather artificial genre definitions of riddle and proverb (*зүйр үзэгдэн үг*) in Mongolian: from the viewpoint of structure and syntax, they are extremely similar, with the exception that proverbs tend more to include verbs and tend to be more syntactically complex; in any event, this is a subject beyond the scope of this thesis, and much deserving of wider study. As mentioned in the Introduction, both are part of the tradition of oral didactic literature generally known as *сургаал үг*, although this category would apply strictly only to proverbs. Lubsangdorji, however, characterised many riddles as enunciations that are ‘designed to make [the auditor] think,’ and similarly having a quality of *гүн ухаан* ‘philosophy.’⁷²

Ellipsis is one of the strongest syntactical features of the Mongolian riddle corpus under

⁶⁹ Bauerová and Tolstoj 2016, 7.

⁷⁰ Underhill 2012, 16.

⁷¹ Oberfalzerová 2006, 17.

⁷² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

consideration here. Just about every single one of the riddles under study elides at least one of the parts of the sentence, if not more (as understood in Western ‘normative’ usage). Of course, one would not expect a form of artistic speech such as a riddle to necessarily conform to ‘standard’ language use. In terms of these riddles, it makes more sense to look at clause, rather than sentence, syntax, as the vast majority of the riddles are comprised of sentence fragments. Normative clausal syntax in Mongolian is described by Janhunen:

A clause-level syntactic structure is here understood as a sequence that contains, or that can contain, two principal arguments, which in Mongolian normally correspond to the dichotomy between subject and predicate (grammatical relations), but which can also involve the interrelationship between agent and action (thematic roles), or topic and comment (pragmatic functions). Each of the principal arguments functions as a separate phrase-level entity, which may or may not contain modifiers of its own. There are also modifiers that pertain to the entire clause, as exemplified by several types of clausal particles. The relationship between the subject and the predicate in a clause is basically one between two equal constituents, though it can be argued that the predicate is the more crucial of the two, while the subject could be viewed as its modifier. However this may be, a clause must always have a predicate, while the subject can be absent (or latent) under certain circumstances.⁷³

Janhunen defines five types of clauses in Mongolian:

- finite clause with a verbal predicate
- finite clause with a nominal predicate
- existential clause: the predicate is expressed by an existential copula
- passive and causative clauses, with a transitive or ditransitive verbal predicate
- epistemically modified finite clauses (epistemically modified versions of the above four types).⁷⁴

Janhunen notes the existence of ‘irregular’ or ‘syntactically incomplete’ sequences “that may also be classified as entities of the clause level.”⁷⁵ He notes the common patterns of suppression of the parts of the sentence in everyday life:

Other exceptions from the regular pattern of the basic finite clause are formed by clauses in which either the subject or the predicate is incomplete or even absent. The absence of the subject is particularly common if the subject is a personal pronoun that can automatically be deduced from the context.⁷⁶

What is clear is that the bulk of the riddles under study in this work would fall under the classification of being comprised of ‘syntactically incomplete clauses:’ most often they contain between two and four such incomplete clauses, although often enough are comprised of just

⁷³ Janhunen 2010, 223.

⁷⁴ Clause types described in Janhunen 2010, 224.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 225.

one. This state of apparent ‘incompleteness’ is a misnomer, however, as it is, paradoxically, precisely these suppressions and ellipses that allow the metaphorical functions of these riddles, rooted as they are in ambiguity and polysemy, to blossom.

I will now take a more detailed look at one grouping of riddles in the two collections: that of riddles having to do with Tenger,⁷⁷ sun, moon and stars. Almost all Mongolian riddle books are arranged with the first category being that of “Heavenly objects” (*Тэнгэрийн зүйл*).⁷⁸ While it could be argued that this category of riddles is inherently broad and vast, and thus potentially abstract anyway, the tendencies shown in these sections remain in evidence for the entire riddle corpus under study here.

All the riddles in this thesis will be appended with morpheme-to-morpheme glosses. However, for the riddles in the following section I will also be attempting a brief analysis of grammatical structures, breaking the riddles down into their grammatical elements or parts of speech. In this way, I intend to demonstrate and draw attention to two further essential aspects: the skeletal structures of some of these riddles, specifically the syntactical patterns that occur repeatedly across the riddle corpus, as well as the narrative progression or ‘movement’ that these riddles — for all their linguistic economy and terseness — indisputably contain. Beyond the semantic explications, this structuralist analysis will allow us to abstract the grammatical patterns inherent in the riddles.

Another crucial aspect of these riddles of course is their sound patterning, particularly that of *толгой холбох* ‘alliteration’ (discussed below and in somewhat more detail in Chapter 2). I would contend that the sound patterning of Mongolian riddles (alliteration, phonetic patterning and repetition, and so on) work in conjunction with these grammatical and structural patterns: they both reinforce each other in order to create the linguistic micro-universe of the riddle.

As opposed to an interlinear gloss, the structural analyses will be performed in terms of the grammatical units listed below, which apply to the riddles in question. It will employ the following values:⁷⁹

ATTR.	A
PRIV.	B
NOUN (sg.)	C
NOUN (pl.)	C+

⁷⁷ See footnote 18 on p. 19 for a definition of ‘Tenger.’

⁷⁸ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1 21.

⁷⁹ See list of linguistic abbreviations on p. 8 of this thesis.

DAT.-LOC.	D
GEN.	E
ACC.	F
CV.	G
PRT.PRF.	H
PRS.IMP.	I
POST.	J
DM.	K
SP.	L
PN.	M
NUM.	N
SOC.	O
NP.	P

Many riddles employ a parallel structure (which is very typical for Mongolian oral folklore as a whole), as seen in Riddle 1 (beginning with a morpheme-to-morpheme gloss):

1)	Эн-гүй Measure-PRIV. ⁸⁰	торго silk
	Эрээн Dappled	торго silk
	Зах-гүй Edge-PRIV.	торго silk
	Задгай Opened	торго silk
	– Тэнгэр ⁸¹ Sky	
	‘Measureless silk Dappled silk Limitless silk Opened silk – Sky’	

The Mongolian riddle characteristically employs the well-known oral-poetic device of alliteration: the use of the same vowel consonant to begin a line or unit. The use of the privative suffix *-гүй* in the first and third lines creates a parallel as well; and, of course, each line is

⁸⁰ See p. 8 for a list of linguistic abbreviations.

⁸¹ *Ölziikhutag* 2013, Vol. 1, 21.

comprised of four syllables, creating a further aural boundedness of the riddle unit. Here, not only the location of the silk is elided—forming the point of the riddle—but its verbal predicate is missing. And yet, the missing verbal predicate is precisely the point of the riddle: this wondrous silk does not have to *do* anything, it merely has to *be* — forming the heavenly vault over the Middle (our) World. Its existence goes far beyond any one single action or verbal predicate. As previously mentioned,⁸² the term *Tenger* refers not just to the sky or the heavens, the Everlasting Blue Heaven (to suggest one potential translation into English), but to the Supreme Deity as well—its abode and its beingness in the universe are indicated simultaneously, indivisibly.

Also worthy of note is that the word *задгай*, in the riddle’s last line, cannot be translated by one single word in English, and is thus an excellent example of the wide semantic range of many Mongolian nouns: ‘open, open, uncovered, standing open, loosened, wide, disordered, scattered, disheveled, unclaimed, dissolute, loquacious, not hiding secrets...’⁸³ Clearly, for this riddle, the given context — that of the Sky, or heavens— would exclude the more pejorative meanings.

The body of the riddle can be analyzed in a structuralist, grammatical way as follows, by assigning alphabetic letters to each grammatical element, as mentioned above:

1a)	Эн-гүй <i>NOUN-PRIV.C-B</i>	торго <i>NOUN C</i>
	Эрээн <i>ATTR.A</i>	торго <i>NOUN C</i>
	Зах-гүй <i>NOUN-PRIV.C-B</i>	торго <i>NOUN C</i>
	Задгай <i>ATTR.A</i>	торго <i>NOUN C</i>
	– Тэнгэр ⁸⁴ <i>NOUN C</i>	

This results in the following grammatical pattern:

C-B	C
A	C
C-B	C

⁸² See footnote 18, p. 19.

⁸³ Kara 1998, 189.

⁸⁴ Ölzikhutag 2013, Vol. 1 21.

A C
C

The parallel grammatical structuring of the riddle mirrors and reinforces the parallelism of its content. The absence of spatial determination (location) and verbal predicate (copula) contributes to the extreme terseness of the riddle.

A similar riddle reads:

2)	Төмөр Iron	тогоо pot
	ТҮМЭН Ten thousand	хадаас-тай nail-SOC.
	–ТЭНГЭР, Sky	од ⁸⁵ star
	‘Iron cauldron With ten thousand nails – Sky, stars’	

In terms of grammatical patterning:

2a)	Төмөр <i>ATTR.A</i>	тогоо <i>NOUN.C</i>
	ТҮМЭН <i>NUM.N</i>	хадаас-тай <i>NOUN-SOC.C-O</i>
	–ТЭНГЭР, <i>NOUN.C</i>	од ⁸⁶ <i>NOUN.C</i>
	A	C
	N	C-O
	C	C

The Mongolian riddle corpus evidences a high frequency of variations for almost every riddle, the phonetic and morphological progressions of which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Another common structure is to list ground and figure, both with the privative suffix, as seen here (with an interlinear gloss):

3) Эрэг-гүй далай

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Shore-PRIV.	ocean
Эзэн-гүй	ямаа-д
Owner-PRIV.	goat-PL.
– Тэнгэр,	од ⁸⁷
Sky	star

‘Ocean without a shore
Goats without a master
– Sky, stars’

In terms of grammatical patterning, this riddle reads:

3а)	Эрэг-гүй	далай
	<i>NOUN-PRIV.C-B</i>	<i>NOUNC</i>
	Эзэн-гүй	ямаа-д
	<i>NOUN-PRIV.C-B</i>	<i>NOUNC+</i>
	– Тэнгэр,	од
	<i>NOUNC</i>	<i>NOUNC</i>

The grammatical patterning of the body of the riddle, expressed on a formal level, then becomes:

C-B	C
C-B	C+
C	C

Interestingly, the above riddle is also given with the answer “fish.”⁸⁸ The relatively high number of similar riddles with different answers demonstrates that an internal cognitive function of the riddle corpus is to find underlying structural similarities in the world. (This will be discussed in greater detail in the Conclusion).

The shortest riddles are only three words long. The following riddle is typical for another common construction:

4)	Заваг-т	
	Gap between wall and roof of ger-DAT.-LOC. ⁸⁹	
	Зандан	аяга
	Sandalwood	cup
	– Нар ⁹⁰	

⁸⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 33.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁹ In this thesis, I will be using the Mongolian term ‘ger’ (гэр) for yurt (pl. ‘gers’).

⁹⁰ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 23.

Sun

‘Sandalwood cup
On the gap between the wall and roof of ger
– Sun’

The Mongolian word *завал* is one of many that requires elaborate paraphrase: it refers to the gap between the roof structure and the ger’s walls.⁹¹ This gap is also often used as a kind of shelf.⁹²

This construction can be described in terms of the following grammatical elements:

- 4a) Заваг-т
*NOUN***C-DAT.-LOC.D**
- Зандан аяга
ATTR.A *NOUN***C**
- Нар⁹³
*NOUN***C**

Which then becomes, expressed as a formula:

C-D
A C
C

The most literal version of this abstracted micro-narrative, following the Mongolian as closely as possible, would read: “On something / something [exists].” In the Mongolian, the copula or verb of existence is elided, which indeed can be characteristic of the spoken language, but at least in my own experience this elimination of the copula isn’t as frequent as in, for example, spoken Hungarian, and certain informants have confirmed that the elision of the copula is partially what makes the riddles unusual. The lack of the specificity of the exact relation of this ‘something’ to the location where it exists is a given with the broad mandate of the dative-locative case in Mongolian, as mentioned above.

In quite a few riddles the subject or agent of the riddle is elided:

- 5) Алт/ан аргамж-ийг
Golden rope-ACC.
- Эвхэ-ж яда-в
Fold-CV.IMP. unable-PRT.PRF.

⁹¹ Lessing 1960, 839.

⁹² Kara 1998, 187.

⁹³ Ölziiхutag 2013, Vol. 1, 23.

– Нар-ны	туяа ⁹⁴
Sun-GEN.	ray

‘The golden rope
can’t be folded
– Ray of sun’

The structure of this riddle can be expressed by the formula:

5a)	АЛТАН	аргамж-ийг
	<i>ATTR.A</i>	<i>NOUNC-F</i>
	ЭВХЭ-Ж	яда-в
	<i>CVG</i>	<i>PRT.PRF.H</i>
	– Нар-ны	туяа ⁹⁵
	<i>NOUNC-GEN.E</i>	<i>NOUNC</i>

Or, in terms of grammatical patterning:

A	C-F
G	H
C-E	C

This riddle is interesting in that the verbal formation, using a serial verb sequence (here, a converb plus the terminative past),⁹⁶ as if to suggest that a specific someone or something was trying to fold the ray of sun, and gave up. Since the subject of the verb is elided, it isn’t known if it was a person or perhaps another force of nature. This would seem to create more of a general or impersonal subject, although usually clauses with such an impersonal subject tend to function differently, for example, using the *nomen usus* (verbal root plus suffix *-даг*⁴). A ‘general’ or ‘impersonal’ subject, however, need not be expressed only with passive or causative constructions in Mongolian, or with the *nomen usus*.

Another example of a ‘missing agent’ riddle is the following:

6)	Цэнхэр	арслан-д
	Sapphire	lion-DAT.LOC.
	Сэмж	ачаал-на
	Omentum	load-PRS.IMP.
	–Тэнгэр	үүлши-х ⁹⁷
	Sky	become overcast-NP.

⁹⁴ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 33.

⁹⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 33.

⁹⁶ Janhunen 2010, 157.

⁹⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 22.

‘Omentum⁹⁸ loaded
 On the sapphire lion
 – Sky becomes overcast’

Or, in terms of grammatical analysis:

6a)	ЦЭНХЭР <i>NOUN</i> C	арслан-д <i>NOUN-DAT-LOC.</i> C-D
	СЭМЖ <i>NOUN</i> C	ачаал-на <i>PRS.IMP.</i> I
	–ТЭНГЭР <i>NOUN</i> C	үүлши-х <i>NP.</i> P

Which results in the grammatically expressed formula:

C	C-D
C	I
C	P

The omentum ‘the layer of tissue around the stomach and intestines’ (*сэмж*) makes its appearance in quite a few riddles, particularly as a contrasting element to the spinal column (*сээр*). As a metaphor, it can also refer to something that has an omentum-like shape. A sheep omentum has a gossamer quality, especially when pulled away from the rumen, leading to the expression ‘fleecy clouds’ (*сэмжин үүл*).⁹⁹ In this riddle, the metaphor is that of omentum being loaded onto the blue sapphire of the sky; the subject of the riddle is suppressed. Clearly this is due to the fact that clouds ‘are loaded’ onto the sky without any apparent agent (or by an invisible one, the wind). The suppression of the subject evokes the invisibility of the wind in the syntax of the riddle as a ‘second’ riddle hidden within the overt one.

Another kind of riddle seems to have, if not a completely elided subject or agent, then a somewhat unclear one:

7)	Агт Gelding	нь DM.	гадаа outside
	Аргамж Rope	нь DM.	гэр-т ger-DAT.-LOC.
	– Нар, Sun	түүн-ий PN.-GEN.	туяа ¹⁰⁰ ray

⁹⁸ Omentum refers to the fat around the intestines.

⁹⁹ Bold 2008, 1837.

¹⁰⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 33.

‘Its gelding is outside
 Its tether in the ger
 –Sun, ray of sunlight’

This can be expressed in the narrative formula:

7a)	Агт <i>NOUN</i> C	Нь <i>DM.K</i>	гадаа <i>SP.L</i>
	Аргамж <i>NOUN</i> C	Нь <i>DM.K</i>	гэр-т <i>NOUN-DAT.-LOC.C-D</i>
	– Нар, <i>NOUN</i> C	түүн-ий <i>PN.-GEN.M-E</i>	туяа ¹⁰¹ <i>NOUN</i> C

Which, pared down to its grammatical patterning, becomes:

C	K	L
C	K	C-D
C	M-E	C

The metaphors in this riddle are quite vivid. They are comprised of the pairings: *sun : gelding / ray of sunlight : tether*. There are more than a few sun riddles containing this paradigm (in some it is a rutting male camel that is outside, while its lead is inside the ger);¹⁰² in certain riddles in this sub-group, the animal and its lead are possessed by an elided subject, in others they aren’t.

Another frequent structure is spatial in character, as seen in this riddle:

8)	Хаан Khan	үүд door	
	Хаан Khan	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана beyond
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд door	
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана beyond
	Явжигнуур Yammering	отигон shamaness	

¹⁰¹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 33.

¹⁰² Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 34.

– Уруул,	шүд,	хэл ¹⁰³
Lips	teeth	tongue

‘The Khan’s door
 Beyond the Khan’s door
 The Bone door
 Beyond the Bone door
 A yammering shamaness
 – Chin, teeth, tongue’

In terms of its grammatical structure, this riddle can be expressed in the following way:

8a)	Хаан <i>NOUN</i> C	Үүд <i>NOUN</i> C	
	Хаан <i>NOUN</i> C	Үүд-ийн <i>NOUN</i> C-GEN E	цаана <i>POST</i> J
	Ясан <i>NOUN</i> C	Үүд <i>NOUN</i> C	
	Ясан <i>NOUN</i> C	Үүд-ийн <i>NOUN</i> C-GEN E	цаана <i>POST</i> J
	Явжигнуур <i>NOUN</i> C	отигон <i>NOUN</i> C	
	– Уруул, <i>NOUN</i> C	шүд, <i>NOUN</i> C	хэл <i>NOUN</i> C

This results in the following grammatical patterning:

C	C	
C	C-E	J
C	C	
C	C-E	J
C	C	
C	C	C

In other words, the parallels created by the semantic content of this riddle—that something exists beyond something else to which it is nonetheless related, and that pattern becomes echoed yet again—are perfectly paralleled or mirrored in its grammatical structure.

This type of riddle largely emphasizes the spatial configuration of an object or series of

¹⁰³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 132. This riddle is also discussed as Riddle 92 on p. 163.

objects as being stepped or layered. The riddle creates a sense of movement *across* an apparently striated object or series of objects.

It should be noted that these preceding types may not necessarily exhaust every single kind of grammatical structure seen in the Mongolian riddle corpus; they do, however, rank as some of the most frequent, clearly demonstrating the propensity of this oral form to abstraction and ambiguity.

1.6 Vague Essences and Nomad Morphology

As mentioned in the Introduction, throughout my research into Mongolian oral literature, I have found the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to be eminently salutary. These two thinkers were not anthropologists, but philosophers, and while it may be true that they may have never met any Inner Asian steppe dwellers in person, the perspicuity with which they describe the nomadic milieu is truly uncanny. Some of the more important concepts evolved by Deleuze and Guattari (further Deleuze) in relation to the study they designated as *nomadology* include smooth and striated space (terms which originated from nomadic musical practice, but which apply to physical space and time as well), rhizomes and rhizomatic ‘anti-structure’, deterritorialization re-territorialization, and becoming.¹⁰⁴ Of particular, indeed striking relevance to the present discussion is their treatment of vague essences, contained in Chapter 12 “1227: Treatise on Nomadology — The War Machine” of their volume *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.¹⁰⁵ As a part of their discussion of the body (*corps*), Deleuze introduces Husserl’s notion of protogeometry, and describes it as something that “addresses vague, in other words vagabond or nomadic, morphological essences.”¹⁰⁶ Deleuze continues:

It could be said that vague essences extract from things a determination that is more than thinghood (*choséité*), which is that of corporeality (*corporéité*), and which perhaps even implies an esprit de corps.¹⁰⁷

Deleuze posits a kind of ‘nomadic subjecthood’: “The proper name fundamentally designates something that is of the order of the event of becoming, or of the haecceity. It is the military men and meteorologists who hold the secret of proper names, when they give them to a strategic operation or hurricane. The proper name is not the subject of a tense but the agent of an infinitive. It marks a longitude and a latitude. If Tick, Wolf, Horse, etc., are true proper

¹⁰⁴ For a fuller description of these terms see Mikos 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 367.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

names, they are not so by virtue of the specific and generic denominators that characterize them but of the speeds that compose them and the effects that fill them; it is by virtue of the events they are in themselves and in the assemblages...”¹⁰⁸ Deleuze reformulated the term *haecceitas* ‘thisness,’ originally coined by the medieval philosopher John Duns, also known as Duns Scotus (c. 1266 – 8 November 1308), as *haecceity*. It is an entity without sharp boundaries, described as

... the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate ... it is this assemblage that is defined by a longitude and a latitude, by speeds and effects, independently of forms and subjects, which belong to another plane. It is the wolf itself, and the horse, and the child, *that cease to be subjects to become events*, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life.¹⁰⁹

While it might seem contradictory in the extreme to link Deleuze’s writings about nomadology to the structural analysis that preceded it, I believe that nonetheless it serves to underline and prove the assertion that his and Guattari’s thoughts on nomads were fundamentally correct. It is my observation that Deleuze’s philosophical investigations do, at times, closely match empirically gathered ethnographic data from nomadic cultures – and, conversely, offer guidelines for the researcher from the background of a settled culture (not restricted to the Global North) towards the crucial task of a genuinely culturally grounded understanding. For example, the many syntactical suppressions and ellipses in the riddles serve to create a kind of nomad morphology and syntax that ultimately serve the cosmic function of these riddles (see, examples, Riddle 85 on p. 148.) Some of the entities in the Mongolian riddle corpus correspond very closely to Deleuze’s definition (or anti-definition) of a *haecceity*.

1.7 Enigma, myth, and the function of riddles

To return briefly to the riddle in Anglo-Saxon culture (as an eventual point of comparison) and its relationship to our subject in this chapter, ambiguity: the development of the riddle form in Old English is described as having emerged from “the genre of the *aenigma*, first composed by English scholars (in Latin) in the seventh century.”¹¹⁰ The word *aenigma* is borrowed from Ancient Greek *αἴνιγμα* ‘dark saying, riddle, taunt, ambush.’¹¹¹ Latin *aenigma* designates ‘that which is enigmatical or dark in a figurative representation, an allegory; that which is dark, obscure, or inexplicable; a riddle, enigma, obscurity; a mystery; a mystical

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 264.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 262 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁰ Tiffany 2001, 72.

¹¹¹ Liddell and Scott, 1940, 39.

tenet or dogma in religion.’¹¹² Aristotle described it as one kind of metaphor; whereas Aelius Donatus¹¹³ classified enigma as one of the seven species of allegory, as a “statement that is obscure because of some hidden resemblance of things, for example, “My mother bore me, and soon was born of me,” which means that water goes into ice, and then goes back out of it.”¹¹⁴

In other words, in terms of Western thought of antiquity and the Middle Ages, enigma was something swathed in obscurity, difficult to seize by immediate cognition, whereas ambiguity referred to something that could not fit into narrow categories of true and false, and thus remained morally ambiguous and even possibly somewhat dangerous.

The Latin genre of *aenigma* served as a springboard for a great flourishing of the riddle-poem in Old English.¹¹⁵ Although the earliest (pre-eleventh century) Old English riddles that remain to us grew out of statements of possession and ownership, comprised of such bald statements as “Godric made me;” inscribed on personal objects, they soon became lengthier and more enigmatic: “Cross is my name. Once, trembling and drenched with blood, I bore the mighty king,” and often ending with the command: “Say who I am.”¹¹⁶

This passage from an introduction to the Exeter riddles (one of the earliest surviving anthologies of English poetry, dating from the eleventh century and written in Old English) indicates the functions of the early English riddle:

The word ‘riddle’ derives from the Old English *rædan*, to advise, to counsel, to guide, to explain. And in a wide sense a riddle does teach: it presents the old in new ways. To men sitting at the mead-bench, listening to the professional poet or taking the harp and themselves improvising, the riddle redefined the familiar. The Anglo-Saxon cast of mind and literary mode seems ideally suited to the metaphorical riddle when one considers that the entire body of Old English poetry is packed out with mini-riddles; they are known as ‘kennings’ and are in fact condensed metaphors. The sea is described as ‘the swan’s riding-place’, ‘the ship’s road’ and ‘the whale’s path’; a sail is spoken of as ‘a sea-garment’, a poet as ‘a laughter-smith’ and a wife as ‘a peace-weaver’. Setting aside puns and conundrums and catch questions, of which there are only a handful in the Exeter Book, what is a riddle but an extended kenning?¹¹⁷

Some English commentators, including Northrop Frye, claim a magical role for the Old English riddle, that it worked as a kind of ‘charm’ (for example, against ailments and illnesses).¹¹⁸ He saw ‘charms and riddles’ as being connected genres, if not one genre. One example of a ‘charm’ (this one purported to work against against wens, or tumours) is the

¹¹²<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=aenigma>. Accessed January 16, 2019.

¹¹³ Donatus was a famous grammarian of the fourth century A.D. and the teacher of Jerome. (Cook 1998, 27).

¹¹⁴ Cook 1998, 271.

¹¹⁵ Tiffany 2001, 73.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Tiffany 2001, 73.

¹¹⁷ Crossley-Holland, 2008, 8.

¹¹⁸ See Frye 1982.

following:

Wen, wen, chicken-wen,
Build no house to enter in,
No town to hold. Go north, wretch,
To the neighbouring hill where your brother waits
With a leaf for your head. Under the wolf's paw,
Under eagle's wing, under eagle's claw,
May you shrivel like coal in the catch of fare,
Disappear like dirt on the wall, water in a bucket,
Tiny as linseed, smaller than a hand-worm's
Hip-bone, smaller than something that is not!¹¹⁹

While this verse has clear riddling elements, it seems more reminiscent of a poetic curse meant to drive away an undesirable phenomenon. Another charm, meant for a swarm of bees, is appended with instructions to throw earth under one's right foot with one's right hand while reciting:

I catch it underfoot — underfoot I find it.
Look! Earth has power over all creatures,
Over grudges, over malice, over evil rights,
Over even the mighty, slanderous tongue of man.

Afterwords as they [the bees] swarm, throw earth over them saying:

Settle down, little victory-women, down on earth —
Stay home, never fly wild to the woods.
Be wise and mindful of my benefit,
As every man remembers his hearth and home,
His life in land, his meat and drink.¹²⁰

Apart from the fact that this was clearly composed well before scientific inquiry had unveiled the gender of worker bees, and that the throwing of dirt might indeed have a genuine repellent effect when encountering a beeswarm, this 'charm,' while its poetry is rather delightful, has little that is genuinely riddle-like or even enigma-like about it. Important to remember as well is that Northrop Frye was ascribing these functions to the English riddle retroactively, by a time span of approximately half a millennium.

Needless to say, the view of the natural world reflected in these 'charms and riddles greatly differs from the Mongolian one.

The enigma carried strong associations of darkness for a long time after its early definitions among the Roman grammarians. Eleanor Cook quotes George Puttenham (referring again to the ice-riddle quoted above) in *The Arte of English Poesie*, a work that dates from the late fifteenth century:

¹¹⁹ Williamson 2011, 184.

¹²⁰ Williamson 2011, 184-5.

We dissemble againe under *covert and darke* speaches, when we speake by way of riddle (*Enigma*) of which the sence can hardly be picked out, but by the parties owne *assoile*, as he that said:
It is my mother well I wot,
And yet the daughter that I begot.¹²¹

Even it had been true that such ‘magical’ functions had attached to the origin of the English riddle, as claimed by Frye and others, then with the passage of time, it would appear, the sense of magic has faded away. One riddle scholar tellingly writes of the feeling of ‘disappointment’ at end of European riddles:

We might point, for example, to the common feeling of deflation and disappointment that emerges with the solution to a riddle: What has golden hair and stands in the corner?... When we discover, with more or less equal delight and dismay, that our princess is a broom, we may be left to wonder: Is anything left over from the initial movement of enchantment?¹²²

The feeling of disappointment that arises at the end of the riddle in English originates from the seemingly inevitable semantic and symbolic narrowing of the field of referential possibilities ensuing upon the revelation of the solution to the riddle. The object with golden hair, standing in the corner, is just a broom, and thus can no longer be a princess. The “initial movement of enchantment” has been narrowed down to a commonplace every day utilitarian object with little of the cosmos, mythology or fairy tales attached to it. The situation is rather different with the Mongolian riddle.

1.8 The Mythic Origins of Mongolian riddles

The analysis of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig, with regard to Mongolian riddles, is crucial to a correct ethnographic understanding of these riddling forms. Their discussion of riddles proceeds from a consideration of the root *онь* in the Mongolian word for *оньсого* ‘riddle.’ As he notes, in the Mongolian etymological dictionary, the word *онь* (WM. *oni*) can refer to a small notch or bifurcation at the tip of something (as in the notch of an arrow, or the notch in the ear of livestock); a gap on the bridge of a mountain pass; the sights of a gun; the particularly important part of a certain affair or event, its kernel; figuratively, the beginning of something; or the next postal relay [obs.].¹²³ In addition, the root (WM.) *onisu* refers to the essence of an affair; a lock or bolt (on a wooden chest or a gun), whereas (WM.) *onisuya* refers to a grouping of words the meaning of which is dense or difficult to surmise.¹²⁴ S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig

¹²¹ Cook 1998, 271 (emphasis mine).

¹²² Hasan-Rokem and Shulmin 1996, 5.

¹²³ Dulam and Nandinbilig 2007, 154.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 155.

summarize:

One, concerning the etymology of the word *оньсого* (riddle), on the basis of the explanation given in *Dictionary of Mongolian Lexical Roots*, the meaning “to find the essence (of a thing)” is cited; **two**, the words *үлээр* (story, tale) and riddle (*оньсого*) have always been, since ancient times, connected; they share a common origin; **three**, the term *үлээр* in the context of our discussion is not a ‘story’ or ‘tale’ in the general sense of the word, but instead concerns origin myths, that is, the events surrounding the existence of the gods (*тэнгэр*) and other demi-gods (*асар*); **four**, the true task and intention of the riddle is to direct the agency of non-human forces co-existing among man and beast and yet invisible to them: to gladden and appease them, to frighten them, and to render them harmless...¹²⁵

It is interesting that the root of the word for riddle in Mongolian is connected to the idea of the notch, or an opening, and yet, at the same time, the notion of closing (lock or bolt). This is the paradoxical movement that simultaneously seems to withhold and allow access to the kernel of myth hidden in the riddle as analysed by S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig. It perhaps would not be too much of an exaggeration to connect the roots of this paradoxical etymology (which nonetheless makes sense, because most forms of locking or bolting involve some kind of notching in the material used for the lock) to the sense of taboo around the deities and the Earth Spirits in Mongolian. In other words, the deities and the Earth Spirits must be treated and spoken of with respect, and appeased. They are ever present, their power unmistakable and frequently the cause of some fear, and yet not immediately accessible to humans. (In the author’s experience, offerings to them are made with gratitude and a full heart, a sense of their inevitable importance, and yet not without a sense of pragmatic economy as well.)¹²⁶

The analysis of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig of the origin of the Mongolian riddle is in stark contrast to the riddle as it is viewed today in English. For example, in *The Language of Riddles*, the authors Peppicello and Green write:

...the contextual frame for riddling is one of performance, as opposed to the normal communicative frame in utilitarian speech. The latter is highly contextualized, and its goal is to facilitate the flow of information; *the former suspends normal context, and its goal is to impede the flow of information for the purpose of outwitting the riddlee.*¹²⁷

As mentioned previously, the ethno-pedagogic function of the Mongolian riddle cannot be overstated. It forms a part of what has been termed “university of the nomads” along with all other genres of Mongolian oral folklore, including the proverb and the triad. The solving of

¹²⁵ Dulam, S., Nandinbilig, G., 2007, 155.

¹²⁶ Once when asking the older lady of a household in Khövsgöl aimag as to what to do with the remnants of some left-over milky tea, the response came “Offer it to Khangai [the mountain]!” (“Хангайд өргөө!”). (Fieldwork, 2016). Another time, making a stop on a car trip up to the Selenge River, one of the passengers simply tossed a piece of dried kiwi toward the nearby forest (but up toward the sky) as an offering. When the author did the same, she was admonished that this was not necessary, as the offering to the Earth Lords had already been made. (Fieldwork, 2013).

¹²⁷ Peppicello and Green 1984, 5. (Emphasis mine).

the riddle — of understanding the metaphorical speech inherent in Mongolian oral folklore and, for that matter, and everyday life — entails important metaphorical cognitive work (as do the correct comprehension of the proverb and triad). In deciphering many of these obscure-seeming riddles, the metaphorical work required to properly comprehend them is also unveiled. As opposed to the example in the riddle above, where the princess in the corner was reduced to an everyday utilitarian broom, and thus creating a feeling of disenchantment, many Mongolian riddles seem to create the opposite movement — from the humblest object in the ger to an image of the entire cosmos. They impart a sense of man in the universe, the deep-seated connectedness of all phenomena, the lack of boundaries between the supposedly animate and inanimate, a profound love and respect for the natural world.

Not only riddles, but words and language themselves have a completely different function in Mongolian nomadic culture. This too forms an important part of nomadic morphology — words do not have the ‘unbearable lightness’ they often seem to have in the global North but carry something of the weight of reality with all of its majesty and fearfulness.

As previously mentioned, a linguistic category such as ‘under-specification’ is highly relative. What might appear to be under-specification in the Mongolian riddle is not a closure or deficiency of language but represents an opening to a deeper cosmic metaphorical comprehension. Grammatically, lexically, and syntactically, the prominent traits of linguistic ambiguity and abstraction—nomadic morphology— in these riddles work to forge an indelible but essential link to the early nomad mythology and worldview of the Inner Asian steppes.

Chapter 2

Residual Signification: Linguistic Erosion, ‘Ruined’ Words and Modified Phonemes

2.0 Introduction

As mentioned in the Introduction, many riddles in the Mongolian riddle corpus have undergone considerable linguistic ‘erosion,’ a geological metaphor that nonetheless aptly points to the many layers of hidden meaning latent in these fragmentary yet deeply eloquent oral forms. In this chapter, based upon two papers first published in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia*,¹²⁸ I examine such words in the riddle corpora examined in the present thesis. A riddle may employ a word that is unattested in any dictionary or lexical work: this turned out to be a rather common occurrence, and the informants reacted to the culturally grounded significance of the given word. In other cases — also very frequent in number — a word had ‘disintegrated,’ or had become partially ‘eroded,’ meaning that it had undergone a phonemic or other distortion in the course of oral transmission over the decades. In some cases, these distortions led to further semantic development within the riddle. After many sessions with one informant, I realized that these words constituted a kind of category of their own: *эвдэрсэн үг* ‘ruined words,’ as they were constantly termed—these were words that had undergone a series of transformations, at times making them nearly incomprehensible, and yet somehow, they still conveyed a meaning, existing in a kind of in-between territory of signifiers requiring a different kind of interpretation.¹²⁹ Clearly, this kind of phonetic shift or slippage can be taken as a strong feature of the culture of oral transmission, as well as a strong proof of its robust (and indirect, as well as direct) creativity.

First, I will provide a brief explication of the term ‘ruined words’ as employed in this thesis. In coining this term, I relied upon my experience with Hungarian literature, as well as

¹²⁸ See Mikos 2014 and Mikos 2015.

¹²⁹ In English, one of the very few instances of signifying ‘nonsense’ words one could point to would be the last stanza of Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*: “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; / All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe.”

the reactions of one of my informants, Lubsangdorji, to the many words in the riddle corpus that could not be located in any modern dictionary.

The term ‘ruined language’ or ‘corrupted language’ was first used in Hungarian with reference to the incorporation of foreign words into Hungarian (‘the distortion of the originality of a language by means of foreign elements being mixed into it’)¹³⁰ in the nineteenth century. Later on, in the late twentieth century, this term was appropriated by modern poets as a rebellion against ‘official norms’ in language, but this also included rebellion against so-called ‘poetic norms:’¹³¹ the expectation placed on poetic language to fulfill certain expectations placed on it by society, as well as to be conventionally ‘beautiful.’ The term, as used in Mongolian (*эвдэрцэн үг* ‘ruined word[s]’) comes from the verb *эвдрэх*: ‘to become ruined, to break apart, to become spoiled’ are among its meanings.¹³²

Among my informants, Lubsangdorji repeatedly applied the term *эвдэрцэн үг* ‘ruined word[s], eroded word[s]’ in explicit reference to the words in the riddle corpus that could not be located in any modern lexical works: the meaning of these words could not always be easily deciphered. Lubsangdorji is, to my knowledge, the first to apply this term to such a category of words in Mongolian oral literature. The presence of the Mongolian phenomenon of these ‘ruined or eroded words’ was frequent – almost as if these words were natural formations exposed to the elements. Their phonetic characteristics demonstrate a kind of deviance, yet intriguingly not necessarily impeding their comprehension or interpretation. At the same time, it became clear that this category of words exhibited a number of internal variations: not all were ruined in the same way; certain ruined words seemed to be deliberate phonetic variants, requiring a close level of ‘hearing’ from my informants.

It should also be noted that in no way does this designation bear any negative connotations. The presence of many ‘mutated’ words itself bears witness to the high degree of creativity inherent in the ongoing process of oral tradition. As opposed to the Western episteme, endlessly in search of the Ur-original of any given work, the presence of these words in the Mongolian riddle corpus make us aware of the importance of distinguishing and recognizing the concept of nomadic oral practice, which does not refer to an exclusively oral tradition, but, following the Mongolist Ya. Vladimirtsov, should be referred to instead as an ‘oral-written’ tradition.¹³³ The so-called ‘erosion’ of these words is in fact a generative principle of

¹³⁰ Mór 1998, 341.

¹³¹ Szabó 2016, 98.

¹³² Kara 1998, 722.

¹³³ “The language of [oral folklore] is rarely purely vernacular, as for the greater part it is enriched with the elements of literary Mongolian.” (Vladimirtsov 2005, 450).

composition (see, for example, Riddle 18 on p. 68 of this thesis).

Certain riddles demand of the auditor a level of highly enhanced cognitive abstraction. And, as mentioned above, these ‘ruined phonemes,’ in opposition to their initial appearance as mere ‘nonsense syllables’ were still clearly perceived as capable of generating a potential signified or referent.

2.1 A Preliminary Categorization of ‘Ruined Words’

The words that can be characterized as “ruined” generally fall into the following categories:

1) *Loanwords* subjected to a degree of ‘deformation’ (from very minor distortions in which the words are still very recognizable up to severe distortion rendering the original word impossible to identify with complete certainty). This category includes the following sub-classifications:

a) *Proper names* and nouns

b) *Camouflaged* proper names (seemingly phonetically distorted borrowings from other languages).

c) *Fragments* of Buddhist mantras (in the case under consideration here, in Sanskrit).

2) *Phonetically modified words*, for the purpose of making the riddle more phonetically ‘bounded.’

3) *Ideophones*, also phonetically modified to make the riddle more phonetically ‘bounded.’

4) *‘Meaningless’* words: words that no longer bear status as a lexeme: such words may be archaic, but not always.

5) *‘Culturally grounded phonemes’*: these words, according to my informants, suggest a potential referent or category of referents through the phonic imagery they create.

In some cases these categories overlap, or no single category can be defined with absolute certainty.

2.1.1 Loanwords

One group of riddles stands out for their borrowings from other languages (particularly Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese). In some cases, the word is clearly recognizable; in others it has become rather distorted, as in, for example, Riddle 16 on p. 65.

Needless to say, all foreign words in Mongolian undergo a certain process of phonetic transformation, whether through the introduction of vowel harmony to the word, regressive

assimilation, or abbreviation.¹³⁴

2.1.2 Deformed Proper Nouns or Names

Several riddles employ words that may be proper nouns or names. These two word categories frequently overlap in Mongolian.

For example, in the riddle:

9)	Сээр-гүй Spine-PRIV.	ягнаа <i>yagnaа</i>
	Сэмж-гүй Omentum-PRIV.	ягнаа <i>yagnaа</i>
	– Загас, Fish	туулай ¹³⁵ rabbit
	‘ <i>Yagnaа</i> without a spine <i>Yagnaа</i> without omentum ¹³⁶ – Fish, rabbit’	

the presence of the word *ягнаа* is unattested in any dictionary I have been able to consult. This resulted in two different, but equally compelling readings of the riddle. To begin with, the entity *yagnaа* (*ягнаа*) is clearly a noun in the function of a proper name: it ‘names’ the subject of the riddle, the unknown creature with neither spine nor intestinal fat. The simultaneous phonetic mirroring and contrast of the words ‘without a spine’ (*сээргүй*) and ‘without an omentum’ (*сэмжгүй*) is related to the two very different properties they indicate, as well as to one’s being a mammal, and the other not. *Yagnaа*, however, is both fish and rabbit.

Considering the various grammatical alternatives, it is possible that the long ‘a’ vowel at the end carries a kind of vocative function. (A long ‘a’ vowel is also common at end of proper names). As well, ‘-наа’ mimics the suffix *-на*⁴ of the *presens imperfecti* with the final vowel lengthened for emphasis, as one hears frequently in the spoken language, or even the *nomen imperfecti* suffix *-аа*⁴.¹³⁷ It seems unlikely that the word *ягнаа* would act a verb in this case, but the point is its seeming mimicry of a second grammatical function, as if hovering between two categories. In the extremely terse linguistic universe of the Mongolian riddle, every individual phoneme bears increased linguistic weight.

This riddle stimulated much speculation as to the common factor between fish and rabbits. The answer, however, emerged quickly: both are capable of extremely quick

¹³⁴ See Kapišovská 2011, as well as Lubsangdorji 2002 and 2004.

¹³⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 87.

¹³⁶ See p. 39 for a definition of omentum.

¹³⁷ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 83.

movement. Why, though, would fish and rabbit both be designated as *yagnaа*? According to Lubsangdorji, the strongest association was with the word *ян(г)* ‘chanting of religious texts’¹³⁸ (WM. *yang*) < Tib. *dbyangs*: ‘a metrical rhyme, melodious song, tune, melody.’¹³⁹ In Mongolian, *yang* can also refer more broadly to the melodies of religious ceremonies.¹⁴⁰ An immediate association arose between the quicksilver, hard-to-grasp movements of fish and rabbits and the sound environment of a Buddhist temple with its many varied chants and instruments resonating simultaneously.¹⁴¹

It was as if the movements of these creatures suddenly formed a kind of visual embodiment of the radically decentred sound environment of a Mongolian Buddhist temple when prayers or ceremonies are in progress, the sounds of which are difficult to ‘seize’ as individual components. One could therefore state that on the level of perceptual cognition, these sounds actually share a great deal with the elusive, mercurial physical nature of fish and rabbits. In this sense, they can be considered a subset of ‘quickly moving objects [in sound or in space], difficult to bring to clear cognition, or objects for which the individual components cannot be clearly cognized all at once.’

A clear element of synaesthesia—a fairly common attribute of many of the riddles under consideration in the two corpuses—allows two elements from two different spheres of existence (sound and vision) to be brought together and considered as one subset.

While this four-word riddle may appear deceptively simple at first, the philosophy of perception underlying it could very easily match the sophistication of one of the passages from the Buddhist canonical work, the *Abhidharma*, regarding the phenomenology of cognition.

And yet, at the same time, there is an alternate, equally compelling explication of the word *ягнаа*. While *ягнаа* is not to be found in any modern dictionary, *ягнаач* is defined as ‘one who enjoys festivities [eating and drinking]’¹⁴² — it is therefore possible that *ягнаа* could be constructed as a forgotten word denoting ‘festivity’ or ‘something to be eaten at a festivity.’ (The suffix *-ч* is agentive).¹⁴³ Both fish and rabbits are eaten by Mongolians. In this second interpretation, the riddle would read:

‘Food at a festivity — without a spine
Food at a festivity — without omentum
— Fish, rabbit’

¹³⁸ Lessing 1960, 427.

¹³⁹ Chandra-Das 2004, 913.

¹⁴⁰ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

¹⁴¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

¹⁴² Bold et al. 2008, 3247.

¹⁴³ Janhunen 2012, 100.

And, it should be noted, following this interpretation, this riddle could also be placed into the fourth category mentioned on page 51.

2.1.3 ‘Camouflaged’ or ‘Mimicked’ Proper Names

Another riddle employs the name of an ‘unidentified’ – and very possibly unidentifiable – deity, *Beri dana* (marked in bold):

10)	Га, ха, на	үсэг-тэй
	Ga, ha, na	letter-SOC.
	Гарди	шувуу
	Garuda ¹⁴⁴	bird
		хүзүү-тэй
		neck-SOC.
	Бэри дана	бие-тэй
	Beri dana	body-SOC.
	Биндэрьяа	дуу-тай
	Beryl	sound-SOC.
	– Хонх ¹⁴⁵	
	Bell	

‘With the letters *ga, ha, na*
 With the neck of a garuda
 With the body of **Beri dana**
 With the sound of beryl
 – Bell’

The bell is an implement used during Buddhist ceremonies, and traditionally was cast from bronze or bell metal.¹⁴⁶ The term *Гарди* ‘Garuda’ is an example of an adapted loanword from Skt. via Uyghur *garudi*.¹⁴⁷ *Биндэрьяа* ‘beryl’ is likewise borrowed from Skt. *vaidūrya* ‘brought from Vidūra’).¹⁴⁸

The ritual bell employed in Buddhist ritual and ceremonies is distinguished by its rather long neck, with the *vajra*¹⁴⁹ placed on top, and graceful body below. As Robert Beer writes, “The bell, as the deity’s mandala, is usually perfectly proportioned, with an equal measure given to the height and base width of the casing and to its bronze handle.”¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, traditional

¹⁴⁴ A Garuda is “the mythical Lord of the birds in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions,” and has traditionally been seen as the mythological enemy of snakes and *nagas*. (Beer, 2012, 74).

¹⁴⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

¹⁴⁶ Beer 2012, 92. “The ritual set of a *vajra* and bell essentially represents the practitioner’s main personal or *vidam* deity, and the deity’s mandala” (Ibid.)

¹⁴⁷ Tömörtogoo 2018, 36.

¹⁴⁸ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 38; Skeat 1980, 46; Kara 1998, 58. Vidura is a main character in the Mahabharata: Yama, who was cursed, “took birth as Vidura, the uncle of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who despite his worthy qualities could never be king.” (Pattanaik 2006, 56).

¹⁴⁹ See p. 86 of this thesis for more about the word ‘vajra.’

¹⁵⁰ Beer 2012, *ibid*.



Fig. 1. *Dril bu* (bell) and *dorje* (vajra), 19th century, Tibetan. (*Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments: Gallery 27. 1, 61.*)

images of the Garuda seem to depict it as a bird-like creature with a very short neck.¹⁵¹ The letters *za*, *xa*, and *na* clearly refer to the beginning of the Tibetan alphabet (*ka kha ga nga; ka kha* ‘alphabet’),¹⁵² phonetically evoking how Tibetan was (and is) taught to monks in Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia.¹⁵³ One of the letters (the third) was dropped; this was possibly to maintain a syllable count of the lines (6 -7 - 6 - 6). According to informant Byambaa, the area on the handle on the other side of the deity image often bore the mantra syllable ཧུམ (hum).¹⁵⁴ In addition, the upper part of the body of the bell is usually inscribed with an eight-petaled lotus, each pedal of which contains a Tibetan syllable symbolizing offerings to the deities.¹⁵⁵

The ‘sound of beryl’ refers to the sound when the bell is struck. Beryl is not usually used to make bells: in the idea of the sound of a bell made of beryl, a certain quality of synaesthesia is manifested, as with Riddle 9 on p. 52. Byambaa also felt that perhaps when beryl is struck it sounds very beautiful, and that the riddle was making in association with that sound and the sound of the ritual Tibetan bell.¹⁵⁶ ‘Beri dana’ refers to a deity (the body of a bell is in many riddles compared to the body of a sitting or meditating lama),¹⁵⁷ but as to which one it could be, Byambaa, a Buddhist monk, confirmed that there was no deity that he knew of by the name of ‘Beri dana.’ The deity’s ‘fictive’ name has thus been fashioned to create alliteration and assonance with the name of the precious stone *Биндэрьяа* ‘beryl.’ Given the Tibetan syllables in the first line of the riddle, it is also very likely that the two syllables *da na* in the name ‘Beri dana’ refer to the third line of the Tibetan alphabet *ta tha da na* as taught in

¹⁵¹ Beer, *ibid.*

¹⁵² The first line of the Tibetan alphabet is rendered in Mongolian as *za* (WM. *ya*), *xa* (WM. *qa*), *za* (WM. *ya*), *a* (WM. *a*). The Tibetan letters are named after words they begin with in Tibetan, for example, *jarliy-un ya* ‘the *ya* of command,’ from Tib. *bka* ‘word, speech, hon. command’ or after their visual form: Tib. *ka* is called *qayaraqai ya*, ‘split *ya*.’ (Otgonbaatar and Tsendina 2014, 94-95).

¹⁵³ Goldstein 2001, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020. *Hum*, either from the well-known mantra or is ‘as a mystic expression of wrath from the lips of a frightful deity’ (Chandra-Das 2004, 1328).

¹⁵⁵ Beer, *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁵⁶ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Riddle 35 on p. 92 of this thesis.

Mongolia: *᠔a* (WM. *da*), *ma* (WM. *ta*), *᠔a* (WM. *da*), *᠋ᠨᠠ* (WM. *na*).¹⁵⁸

This short riddle of four lines of six or seven syllables each thus reveals a truly masterful sense of wordplay, in which syllables of the Tibetan alphabet are grafted onto the first and third lines in order to evoke the seed syllables inscribed onto the body of the ritual bell, and at the same time, alliteration is used in order to bind the syllables of the third and fourth lines together and simultaneously to create the name of a plausible-sounding but ‘non-existing’ deity.

The idea of a ‘non-existing’ deity must not be interpreted in a negative sense, but instead as a principle of abstraction and generalization in oral creation. The name ‘Beri dana’ evoked the *general idea* of a deity: thus, it functions as an *abstract phonemic image* of the potential or possible name of a bodhisattva in Sanskrit, denoting ‘bodhisattvahood, the state of being a bodhisattva.’¹⁵⁹ This obscuring of referential specificity casts the referential scope, or potential referential set, of the designation ‘Beri dana’ much wider (as opposed to name of one deity, or one potential deity, it could potentially include any deity). This is an excellent example of how linguistic abstraction works in Mongolian: as opposed to the generalized abstraction that would be created by such a word as, for example, ‘deityhood’ (i.e. “the state of being a deity, divinity”), the Mongolian ‘made-up’ deity designation of ‘Beri dana’ functions as *abstract and generalized mimicry*. It is not an abstract noun in the linguistic sense that one would expect, but it functions as one. The category it describes is in of itself quite specialized (the name of a Buddhist deity in Sanskrit) and yet is completely generalized in nature.

Thus the name ‘Beri dana’ is a kind of ‘fictive distortion,’ a made-up word referring to the name of a Buddhist deity, yet here ‘camouflaged’ as a distorted Sanskrit loan word, perhaps as well evoking a mental image of a half-remembered name. Nonetheless, in its skilful mimicry, the constructed appellation ‘Beri dana’ poses a subtle linguistic analysis of what, to a Mongolian lay person, may sound like the name of a Buddhist deity adapted from Skt. (lack of vowel harmony, a certain singsong quality, nasalized vowels, and so on), even suggesting that this unknown word has passed through the adaptive phonetic mechanisms of borrowing into Mongolian.

As such, ‘Beri dana’ evokes, in four syllables, a complex picture of the *sacral at a remove*, transmitted into lay Mongolian speech as a reflection of the liturgical language, into which Buddhist vocabulary from Uyghur, Sanskrit and Tibetan was borrowed over the centuries.

¹⁵⁸ Otgonbaatar and Tsendina 2014, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013. One somewhat similar example, in a purely secular context, would be the name ‘John Doe’ in English, which conjures up the idea of ‘Everyman.’

2.1.4 Redeployed Mantra Fragments

Certain riddles employ speech fragments—in this case, fragments of mantras (*манги*)—which are then nominalised. These speech fragments have undergone further distortion, and often are only partially recognizable. In addition, they may have suffixes added to them. The following riddle employs fragments from two fairly well-known mantras:

11)	Ум <i>Um</i>	мааниа <i>maania</i>	уна-в ride-PRT.PRF.	
	Юмаа <i>Yumaa</i>	хумаананаа <i>humaananaa</i>	сундла-в ride pillion-PRT.PRF.	
	Юмаа <i>Yumaa</i>	гэлэн/г <i>gelong-ACC.</i>	хөтлө-в lead-PRT.PRF.	
	Даваа <i>Davaa</i>	багш Teacher	нь DM.	туу-в drive [livestock]-PRT.PRF.
		– Сар, Moon,	од, star,	нар ¹⁶⁰ sun
	<p>‘<i>Um maania</i> was ridden <i>Umaa humaahanaa</i> was ridden pillion [on horseback] <i>Gelong Yumaa</i> was led Teacher [<i>Lama</i>] <i>Davaa</i> drove [livestock] – Moon, stars, sun’</p>			

As in many Mongolian riddles, the subject (or subjects) are elided. The names of each of the four ‘protagonists’ of the riddle carry lexical meanings: *ум мааниа* clearly refers to the first three syllables of the well-known mantra *om maṅi radme hūṃ*; *юмаа хумаананаа* makes reference, in its first syllable, to Tib. *yum* ‘mother (honor.),’¹⁶¹ as well as echoing the mantra of *om āḥ hūṃ*,¹⁶² the title of *gelong* refers to a fully ordained monk *гэлэн* (WM. *geling*),¹⁶³ while his name *Yumaa* (*Юмаа*) once again echoes Tib. *yum*; *Lama Davaa* means *Lama Moon* (*даваа*, from Tib. *zla ba*).¹⁶⁴ *Yum* can also refer to the *prajñāpāramitā*, the corpus of Mahayana Buddhist wisdom.¹⁶⁵ *Юмаа* can also be derived from the Tibetan loanword ‘sun’ (*ням*, from Tib. *nyi ma*). *Багш*, while generally meaning ‘teacher,’ is a common designation for a monk or lama. The verb *сундлах*, as mentioned above, denotes a second person seated behind another

¹⁶⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 36.

¹⁶¹ Chandra-Das 2004, 1139.

¹⁶² The use of deformed or distorted mantra fragments is certainly not unknown in Mongolian recorded literature. For example, at the conclusion of each of the ‘Enchanted Corpse’ (*sīditū kegür-ün üliḡer*) cycle of tales, the Corpse utters a mantra-like utterance in a combination of broken Sanskrit and Tibetan (see Mikos 2012, 86–89).

¹⁶³ Kara 1998, 122. Bold et al. 2008, 580; from Tib. *dge slong* (Goldstein 1986, 196).

¹⁶⁴ Kara 1998, 127.

¹⁶⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014. *Yum* is also defined as a designation for the *Abhidharma*, the *Mātrikā* (Chandra-Das, *ibid.*).

on a horse.¹⁶⁶ *Хөтлөх* is a general term for leading a person, child, or animal, whereas *туух* denotes more specifically driving livestock.¹⁶⁷

At the same time, each of these names carries, in addition to these primary lexical meanings, considerable cultural and linguistic ‘echoes:’ the syllables appended to *юмаа хум*, -*аананаа*, created associations of *эзэн* ‘master, leader’ or *хүн* ‘man, person’ due to the phonetic echoing of the word *хаан* ‘khan.’¹⁶⁸ At the same time, the entire sequence *Юмаа хумаананаа* evoked, at least for the present author, many memories of Mongolians’ gentle mockery of lamas reciting mantras, which to the lay person can evoke a series of mumbo-jumble syllables.

As mentioned above, the subject, or subjects, of the riddle are elided. This primarily can be deduced by the possessive suffix¹⁶⁹ *-аа*⁴ and accusative suffix *-г* appended to the names contained in the first three lines (underlined below). These suffixes tell us that *Ум мааниа*, *Юмаа хумаананаа*, and *Юмаа гэлэнг* are objects:

<i>Ум мааниа</i>	possessive accusative suffix
<i>Юмаа хумаананаа</i>	possessive accusative suffix
<i>Юмаа гэлэнг</i>	accusative suffix
<i>Даваа багш нь</i>	determinative (enclitic poss. suffix 3rd person)

Therefore, we can determine that someone or something else is ‘riding’ or ‘riding pillion [on horseback]’ upon the entities *Ум мааниа*, *Юмаа хумаананаа*, and *Юмаа гэлэн*. Lama Moon is driving them or leading them (as herds are driven to or from pasture).

For my informant Lubsangdorji, this was indeed the interpretation of the riddle, although he perceived *Ум мааниа*, *Юмаа хумаананаа*, and *Юмаа гэлэн* and Lama Moon as the grammatical object of each of the four phrases, with the unexpressed subject postulated as the first person in the singular or plural (‘I, we, all of us.’) In this reading, the chief metaphor of the riddle emerges: *Ум мааниа*, *Юмаа хумаананаа*, and *Юмаа гэлэн* and Lama Moon are the celestial bodies, as well as the heavenly and metaphorical vehicles of Buddhist wisdom upon which we ‘ride’ or ‘travel:’

<i>Ум мааниа</i>	was ridden upon [by me, us]	Moon
<i>Юмаа хумаананаа</i>	was ridden upon [by me, us]	Stars
<i>Юмаа гэлэнг</i>	was led [by me, us]	Sun
<i>Даваа багш нь</i>	was driven [by me, us]	Moon

It must be pointed out that the *-г* suffix on the noun *гэлэнг* is not unequivocal: it could

¹⁶⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 1783. The term ‘riding pillion’ in English is slightly misleading, as the pillion actually refers to the pad, seat or cushion behind the saddle in front. It originally designated ‘a long robe made of skin, also a covering for a saddle.’ (Skeat 1980, 392).

¹⁶⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 2642 and 2089.

¹⁶⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

¹⁶⁹ “This suffix is used in case forms or after the zero-ending accusative.” (Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 80).

be the accusative suffix or a recollection of the spelling in WM.¹⁷⁰ If *-z* designates the accusative suffix, it would mean that *Юмаа Гэлэн* is *also* being led. The last line, interpreted in the same fashion, would then indicate that *Даваа Барш* is being driven (continuing the livestock metaphor). It is not impossible that the accusative marker was simply left off in the last line.¹⁷¹

In this reading, *Ум мааниа* and *Юмаа хумаананаа* metaphorically embody the moon and stars upon which *we* ride: “We move through [by means of] the stars, the stars sit behind us [upon the moon and sun]” was the eloquent explanation, metamorphizing the moon and the stars as steeds — ‘vehicles’ in the literal sense, ‘vehicles of the Teaching, the Dharma’ — as well as being the Teachings themselves *and* the deities who gave rise to these teachings. The sun, in the context of this riddle, was described as a *deity-horse* (*бурхны морь*, a ‘steed of the Buddha’, ‘deity-horse,’ and so forth).¹⁷²

The metaphorical sequence thus created becomes a circular mapping of ideas:

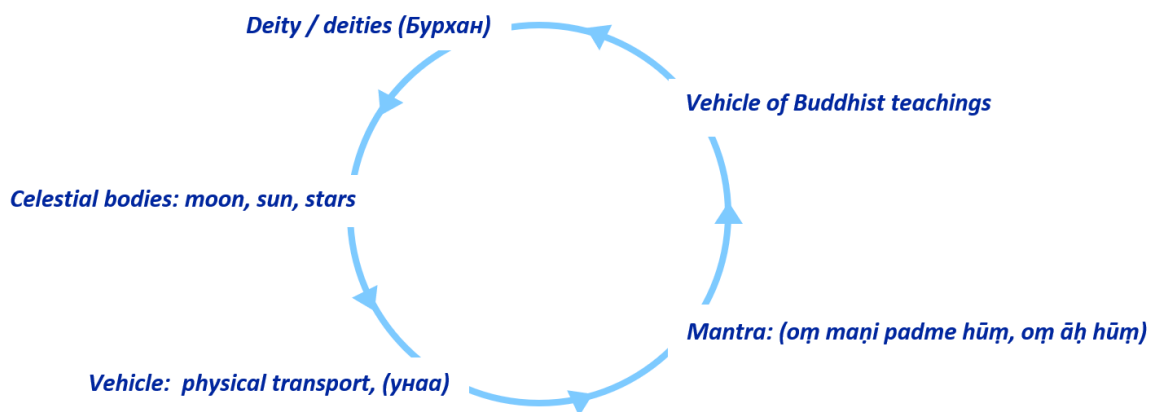


Fig. 2. Diagram of cyclical relations in Riddle 11. (Diagram by author.)

This image schema is evocative of many associations: the cycle of *saṃsāra*, the movements of the heavenly bodies, the movement of circumambulation around a monastery, the movement of counting beads on a rosary, or the recurring cycles of time or epochs in Buddhism. At the same time, a somewhat different interpretation of the riddle may ensue: the moon, Lama Moon, with the stars in his wake, ‘drives’ the sun, Gelong Yumaa, away (as evening approaches), and so on. In this interpretation, the entities Gelong Yumaa and Lama Davaa once again resume their role as agents, with the stars more or less as onlookers.

In that case, *Юмаа Гэлэн* and Lama Moon would be the celestial bodies being ‘led’ and

¹⁷⁰ WM. *gelüing* (Bold et al. 2008, 580). A certain number of riddles in the two corpuses employ spellings from the classical language, which is not surprising if we consider that they were collected from the older generation in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁷¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

¹⁷² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

‘driven’ either out to the grazing lands or back to the family settlement (*айл*); at the same time, following the parallel ‘hidden’ reading of the riddle, they too represent Buddhist teachings given striking visual form through the evocation of the nomad’s everyday surroundings and daily life of herding livestock.

In the interpretation of Byambaa, the invocation of the Sun and Moon in the riddle refer to the two Tibetan honorific terms *yab* ‘hon. father’¹⁷³ and *yum* ‘hon. mother’ as mentioned above. This is symbolic between the relation of a deity and his female consort, which themselves are symbolized by the Sun (the male principle) and Moon (the female principle).¹⁷⁴ They are both driving their ‘livestock’ (the stars), which Byambaa saw as embodied in the third line of the riddle.

To sum up, this riddle thus creates an elegant metaphor:

vehicle of Buddhist teachings : celestial bodies

through the use of mantra fragments, in which the fragments themselves are personified as entities appearing in the everyday life of a herder. The fact that one informant perceived *Юмаа Гэлэн* as herder to the stars, and another informant perceived *Юмаа Гэлэн* is being driven by an elided first person subject points to a certain level of ambiguity between subject and object which in and of itself seems to impart a kind of non-dualistic message which needless to state is one of the most profound teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. The metaphors at play in this riddle are deeply expressive and eloquent.

2.1.5 Phonetically Modified Words

An example of phonetic modification in Mongolian riddles is found in a variation of Riddle 12 below.¹⁷⁵ In some cases, as when the original riddle and its variants have been recorded, the path of alteration can be traced with a certain degree of accuracy. Such riddles contain what can be referred to as *авиа тоглоом* ‘phonetic play’,¹⁷⁶ as below:

12)	ЭНЭ PN.	тэнгэр heaven	
	ЭНЭ PN.	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Хун ¹⁷⁷	тэнгэр	

¹⁷³ Chandra-Das 2004, 1129.

¹⁷⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ See Riddle 91 on p. 160 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

¹⁷⁷ The word used in the printed variation of the riddle, *хун* ‘human, man’ would appear to be a spelling mistake. It could also mean that at one point the word *хун* shifted from the back vowel word *хун* ‘swan’ to the front vowel

Swan	heaven	
Хун	тэнгэр-ийн	цаана
Swan	heaven-GEN.	POST.
Худай	баян	
Khudai	wealthy	
– Улаан хоолой,	ходоод ¹⁷⁸	
Esophagus,	stomach	
‘Beyond this heaven		
Swan heaven		
Beyond swan heaven		
Wealthy Khudai		
– Esophagus, stomach’		

Худай does not seem to be a lexicographically documented word, or at least it is not a part of any dictionary I have been able to consult. *Худай* was almost certainly formed to phonetically resonate with *хун* ‘swan,’ in other words, reinforcing the alliteration in the riddle. At the same time, the suffix *-дай*, which along with *-хай*, which is a vocative-diminutive suffix, has clear associations of fond designations of people or children.¹⁷⁹ In this riddle ‘Wealthy Khudai’ is the human stomach (made ‘wealthy’ by the tasty dairy products its owner has ingested), who is here given a humorous personification. He is to be found beyond the esophagus, or in the ‘swan heaven.’ The association of the esophagus with a swan lies in the visual similarity between the throat of a swan and the human esophagus. (The two riddle corpuses under consideration here are marked by just such a deep acquaintance with the anatomy of both animals and humans.)

A related version of this riddle has been translated by the folklorist Archie Taylor in his collection of Mongolian riddles:

On top is the Denji River
Nearby is the Yuldai River
Below is the Khuda-Khuda River
Grass [*bambakhai*] of the well water

word *хун* ‘human, man’ due to the influence of the predominantly front vowel character of the preceding two lines, in which only the word *цаана* ‘beyond’ is a front vowel word. This kind of phonetic assimilation is quite frequent in the riddle corpus, and clearly can lead to some confusion or distortion of meaning, while at the same time potentially forging rhizomatic paths of new meanings. Riddle 90 on p. 160 repeats the same structure as the riddle above, with the answer ‘boiled milk:’ in that riddle, the repeated lines referring to the swan heaven are not altered: *Хун тэнгэр / Хун тэнгэрийн цаана*. See p. 162.

A parallel can be drawn between the world of oral transmission and that of scribal transmission, when, due to a scribal error or a misreading when a manuscript is being copied, the plot of the narrative itself becomes altered. (Mikos 2012, 106).

¹⁷⁸ Ölzikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 104.

¹⁷⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

There is an almost identical version of this riddle in one of the Mongolian collections:

13)	Дээр-ээ Above-POSS.	дэнж-ийн Denj-GEN.	гол river	
	Дэргэд-ээ Nearby-POSS.	шанд-ын Shand-GEN.	гол river	
	Худ Khud	худ-ын Khud-GEN.	гол river	
	Худаг Well	ус-ны water-GEN.	бумбаа-хай vessel-DIM.	
	– Тогоо Cauldron	нэрэ-х, distil [vodka]-NF.	жалавч, pot [used in distilling]	
	бүрхээр-ийн funnel-GEN.	тосгуур, tray	цорго, valve	лонх ¹⁸¹ bottle

‘Above, the Denjii River
Nearby, the Shand River
The Khud-Khud River
Well water vessel
– Distilling brandy, pot and cone [used in distillation], valve, bottle’

To begin with Riddle 12, there is a clear alteration between the created appellation ‘Wealthy Khudai’ (*Худай Баян*) in the riddle above and the variant ‘Wealthy Khundai’ (*Хундай Баян*) found in Riddle 90 on p. 160. Both clearly are phonetic variations of the word *хун*, in the phrase *хун тэнгэр* ‘swan heaven.’ This riddle demonstrates well the inherent phonetic playfulness of this oral genre, as well as the mutations, or rather variations, that must have been created via oral transmission. The invented proper noun Khundai in Riddle 90 here has been modified to Khudai (*Худай*), a word which also has no inherent lexical meaning, but gains it within the phonetic and semantic play of the riddle, clearly echoing the *hu-* sound of the second and third lines. Khundai (*Хундай*) is most likely is related to *хундага* ‘small drinking glass for alcoholic spirits.’¹⁸² In the case of Riddle 90, the riddle operates according to visual symbolism; it is also possible that *хунд-* forms a stem of an ideophone. In Mongolian folk belief, the ‘white throat’ (*цагаан хоолой*) goes to the lungs, whereas the ‘red throat’ (*улаан хоолой*) goes to the

¹⁸⁰ Taylor 1954, 348. This riddle was drawn from the collection of A. D. Rudnyev, published in 1902. (Ibid., 412).

¹⁸¹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 167.

¹⁸² Bold et al. 2008, 2692.

stomach (*xo᠔oo᠔*).¹⁸³ The image of a full stomach is a pleasant and auspicious one for the nomads of the steppes, and thus is personified as ‘Khudai, the Bountiful One.’ The culminating movement of the riddle is found in the bounty of the stomach, the recipient of nourishment and food.

The syllable ‘Khud’ (*xy᠔*) appears in the version translated by Archie Taylor, now reduplicated and used for the name of an imaginary river as well. Perhaps it is meant to imitate the sound of water dripping. The ‘rivers’ of this riddle are metaphors for the flows of vapor and spirits in the process of distilling brandy in the ger (every ger in the countryside has its own distillation equipment). The nomadic tripartite division of space, into the Upper Realm (the realm of Tenger and other deities), the Middle Realm (the world of human beings), and the Lower Realm is vividly pictured;¹⁸⁴ this is the case for many Mongolian riddles dealing with boiling milk and distillation. Rudnyev’s version uses the word *bambakhai*, which is probably the Buryat word *бамбаахай* ‘fluffy, soft; lamb.’¹⁸⁵ In the Mongolian shown in Riddle 13, *бумба* ‘vessel, cup’ (<Tib. *bum pa*)¹⁸⁶ is appended with the suffix *-хай* to make *бумбаахай* ‘dim. vessel.’¹⁸⁷

2.2 Modified Ideophones

2.2.1 Ideophones with Modified or Suppressed Vowels

There are many riddles that employ ideophones with modified or suppressed phonemes: their modification can make them at times difficult to identify, as in Riddle 14 below:

14)	Дэмбэ Bulging	дээвэр roof
	Хамба Silk	хаяа-тай edge-SOC.
	– Тэнгэр ¹⁸⁸ Heaven	
	‘A bulging roof Edged with ornamented silk – Sky’	

The word *дэмбэ* does not appear in any modern dictionary; it is, however, related to such ideophones as *дүмбийх* (< *түмбийх* < *төмбийх* < *төмбөгөр болох*, ‘to become

¹⁸³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

¹⁸⁴ Pegg 2001, 171.

¹⁸⁵ Cheremisov 1951, 90.

¹⁸⁶ Būrnee and Enkhtör 2009, 328.

¹⁸⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

¹⁸⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 30; Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 23.

protuberant’),¹⁸⁹ *дэмбийх* (for the bottom part of something to protrude),¹⁹⁰ or *дүмбээгэр* (‘a rounded object with a protuberant top’),¹⁹¹ or *дүмбэн*.¹⁹² (See as well Riddle 89 on p. 153 of this thesis which makes use of the modified and related ideophone *дэмбэн* which also does not appear in any modern dictionary.)

The word *дэмбэ* ‘bulging’ is used here as a signifier referring to both the top, rounded part of the ger *and* the shape of the sky. A cosmological equivalence is thus created between the two. *Хамба хаяатай* refers to the sky or heavens being edged (*хаяатай*) with a fine silk known as *хамба*, which is ornamented with large rounded patterns.¹⁹³ The image of the sky edged with these rounded patterns creates a vivid image of the sun coming up from or sinking down behind the horizon. The ‘ornamentation’ of the sun as it sets and rises at the edge of the sky is thus like the decoration on the border of a silk deel. At the same time it evokes a closely related term, the *хаяавч* ‘a narrow band of felt or square wooden boards joined to form a belt for covering the bottom part of the yurt in winter.’¹⁹⁴ This can also refer to insulation placed all around the bottom part of the ger formed of hardened sheep droppings (*өтөг*), built up to a perimeter of about 10 to 15 centimeters high, and reinforced with earth and sand (this is not used in the summer, when the bottom edges of the felt coverings of the ger can be lifted to provide ventilation within the ger). This insulation is known as *хаяа манах* —‘to protect the edge.’¹⁹⁵

2.2.2 Ideophones with Inserted Zero Phoneme

In the following riddle, the abbreviated ideophone *цод* appears:

15)	Залтас-ны	чинээ-хэн	ч	гэ-лээ
	Wood shaving-GEN.	[of this size]-SUFF.	PTCL.	say-PRS.PRF.[even though]

Цод	хий-сэн	ухаантан
Full	do-NP.	one possessing wisdom

–Ном¹⁹⁶
Book

‘Although the size of a wood-shaving
Full of wisdom it was made
–Book’

¹⁸⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014; Bold et al. 2008, 2045.

¹⁹⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 805.

¹⁹¹ Bold et al. 2008, 771.

¹⁹² This refers to a rounded, bulging-out shape. (Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014).

¹⁹³ Kara 1998, 551.

¹⁹⁴ Lessing 1960, 915.

¹⁹⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014

¹⁹⁶ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 152.

In this riddle, the relative ‘smallness’ of the physical size of a book is contrasted to its state of containing much wisdom. The meaning of *цод* as expressed in this riddle is evocative of fullness, something that is replete and not empty, like a filled container of some kind. *Цод*, in terms of its dictionary meaning, corresponds to ‘checkmate;’ it also designates the sounds of the cries of a small animal or person.¹⁹⁷ It would appear to be related to *цодзор*: ‘[the state of] a person or animal being small and yet having a protuberant stomach,’ (which paradoxically may also carry negative connotations); *цодзор* is related to *цондзор*.¹⁹⁸ The reduction of syllables in the word (the application of the zero phoneme to the word *цодзор*) phonetically replicates the physical smallness of a book in relation to what it contains. The syllable *цод* however, was itself enough to evoke the image of something full and replete.¹⁹⁹

2.2.3 The Purpose of Phonetically Modified words in Mongolian Riddles

The sheer lexical variability one encounters in Mongolian riddles may bring to mind the well-known statement of the linguist Roman Jakobson, terming literature to be “organized violence committed on ordinary speech.”²⁰⁰ While not wishing to present this frequency of phonetic variability as ‘violence’ against language, one can easily see it’s inherent poetic function. The ‘distortions’ often serve to ‘tie’ the words and the sounds more forcefully to each other, even beyond the habitual Mongolian use of alliteration in oral folklore. Phonically, this makes each riddle more of a self-contained sonic universe, more of an aural ‘container’ for the often cosmological message contained within. Each riddle can be considered as a separate ‘fictive world,’ albeit one subject to further potential phonemic variation.

2.3 ‘Meaningless’ Words

In the following riddle, a word of seemingly unknown provenance (*дайл*) occurs:

16)	Айл-ын Settlement-GEN.	гадаа outside
	Дайл-ын Dail-GEN.	шувуу bird
	– Хийморь ²⁰¹ Prayer flag	

¹⁹⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 2907.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Eagleton 2008, 2.

²⁰¹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 256.

‘Beyond/outside of the *ail*’²⁰²
 Silky bird
 – Prayer flag (Tib. *lung rta*)’

Here, it is quite difficult to identify the word *дaйл*, which does not occur in any modern dictionary. The Mongolian words using *дaйл-* as their root seem semantically unconnected, as the spectrum of meanings has a wide range, from: ‘attack; feast’ (both *дaйлал*; one is a Chinese loan word), ‘to attack someone; to receive someone as a guest’ (both also *дaйлах* in the modern language), ‘to strengthen or reinforce planks or boards with transverse timbers.’²⁰³ *Дaйл*, however, is clearly a noun in this riddle, with the genitive suffix (*-ын*) attached.

It turns out, however that *дaйл* is a phonetic adaptation or distortion of the word *даалин*, which refers to a small silk bag for carrying the traditional snuff bottle (*хөөрөг*).²⁰⁴ A phonetic analogy can be found in the term *Da Qing ulus* ‘the Great Qing Empire’ > *Daičin ulus* ‘the Warrior State.’²⁰⁵

In this case, a certain amount of dedicated sleuthing was required to uncover the origin of the word *дaйл*.

2.4 Semantically Evasive Words, Indiscernible Words, Altered Phonemes

A further category of ‘ruined words’ is formed by words which no longer carry any clear semantic referent (or possibly never did) and yet still conveyed meaning to my informants through the phonetic picture or the sound imagery that they create, as in Riddle 17 below:

17)	Хай <i>Khai</i>	мод wood
	Хашаа Fence	хороо [Livestock] enclosure
	Эй <i>Ei</i>	мод wood
	Эвсэг Pleasant	тал steppe
	–Мод/он Wooden	ор ²⁰⁶ bed
	‘ <i>Khai</i> wood [Livestock] enclosure	

²⁰² An *айл* refers to one ger or a small settlement of gers. (Bold et al., 2008, 54). Henceforth it shall be referred to as ‘ail.’

²⁰³ Kara 1998, 132; and Bold et al. 2008, 637.

²⁰⁴ Tsevel 1996, 174.

²⁰⁵ Tömörtogoo 2018, 42; Elliott 2001, 402.

²⁰⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 199.

Ei wood
Pleasant steppe
–Wooden bed’

The two words ‘khai’ (*xaï*) and ‘ei’ (*эй*), both referring to the wood or kind of tree used in the construction of a traditional wooden bed within a ger, cannot be easily identified. *Xaï* can refer to an interjection, a sound used when calling livestock, the sound of a human when crying, or ‘acquaintance.’²⁰⁷ *Эй* does not figure in any lexical works at my disposal: it may be a misspelling for *эе* ‘friendship.’ In consultation, the first impression created was that both refer to two different kinds of wood: in other words, one kind of wood was used for the back part of the bed, and another was used for the flat plank forming the main part of the bed.²⁰⁸ The two words *xaï* and *эй* could also refer to the name of some kind of ‘unknown wood,’ in the view of one informant.²⁰⁹ What should be noted is that these morphemes were perceived as pertaining to a referent or potential referent(s), even though, for all intents and purposes, they nearly appear to be voided phonemic syllables.

In addition, the words *xaï* and *эй* were also seen as creating a conceptual opposition on the basis of their phonetic opposition, with *xaï* perceived as the ‘standing up’ (*босоо*) part of

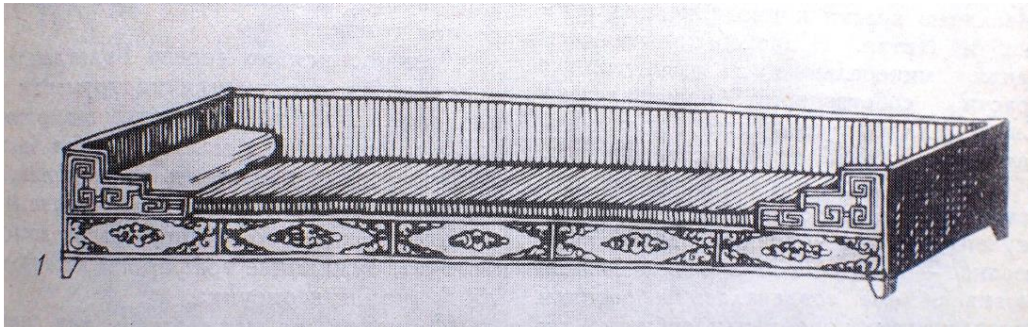


Fig. 3. Traditional Mongolian wooden bed. (Kocheshkov 1979, 49.)

the bed, whereas *эй* was perceived as the ‘flat’ (*хэвтэй*) part of the bed.²¹⁰ The ‘enclosure’ named in the riddle, known variously as *xaуaa*, *xaуaa xopoo*, and *xom*,²¹¹ is formed by the space that is ‘enclosed’ on three sides by means of the foot and head of the bed, as well as by either the wall of the ger along one side of the bed, or by a wooden plank running along that side. The ‘pleasant steppe’ is the flat part of the bed where the inhabitants of the ger (or their

²⁰⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 2391.

²⁰⁸ In contrast to Western-style beds, traditional Mongolian beds are always single beds with a narrow set of drawers at the foot and head of the bed; the bed may have a plank along one side of the bed. (Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014).

²⁰⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

²¹⁰ The *монголйн адвдэр*, literally, ‘head chest,’ and the ‘foot’ (*хөт*), the set of drawers at the foot of the bed); the main part of the bed is known as the *хэвтэр*. (Lubsangdorji, consultation; Süld-Erdene 2014, 187).

²¹¹ See the discussion of contained space in Mongolian riddles on p. 167.

guests) can sit or lie down. A humorous metaphor is also created whereby the wooden bed in the ger, surrounded as it is by ‘fencing’ on three sides, is likened to the livestock enclosure outside.

A paired opposition of perpendicular (standing): horizontal (flat) is also established, corresponding to the axes of sky and earth, *тэнгэр* and *газар*.²¹² The parallel is hence created:

Standing/ Perpendicular: *partially enclosed*
 Flat/Horizontal: *unenclosed*

One represents the vertical principle, symbolic of the Sky, and the other represents the horizontal principle, symbolizing the Earth, and thus the syllables *хай* and *эй* come to embody the cosmologic worldview of the Mongolian nomad.

2.5 Progression of Phonemes

In the following riddle and its variants, a progression towards a kind of ‘unclear or vague’ phonetic state can be observed. The original riddle states:

- 18) Ирэг, сэрх-ийн арьс
 [Castrated] ram [castrated] goat-GEN. skin
- Эн чацуу
 Measure same
- Тэнгэр, газар²¹³
 Heaven, earth
- ‘Skin of [castrated] ram and goat
 The same [in size]
 –Sky, earth’

Sky and Earth are defined as ‘the same’ in size or scale. *Эн чацуу* renders ‘equal, the same [in measurement or scale].’²¹⁴ They are similarly characterised and spatially equal in their ‘boundedness;’ as well, they are both perceived as being ‘flat’ (*хавтгай*), hence the

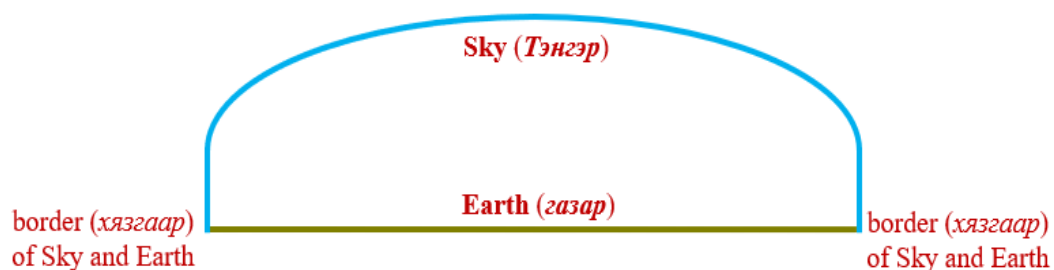


Fig. 4. Diagram of spatial relations in Riddle 18. (Diagram by author.)

²¹² Oberfalzerová 2006.

²¹³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 31.

²¹⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 3199.

resemblance to the skin of an animal.²¹⁵ A visual rendering of the spatial reasoning inherent in the riddle might look something the diagram in Fig. 4 on the previous page.

This riddle was seen as referring to a very early cosmology by one informant.²¹⁶ This viewpoint is backed up by the analysis of the scholars Sh. Gaadamba and Kh. Sampildendev, who state as well that in this riddle, in the depiction of the gigantic skins of the two animals, referring back to the early myths of the excessively gigantic goat and bull, there is revealed an image from early Mongolian cosmology.²¹⁷

A riddle which is presented as a variation of this one demonstrates its phonemic transformation:

19)	Эрээ, 'Eree'	сэрээ 'seree'	хоёр-ын two-GEN.
	Эн Measure	чацуу same	
	–Тэнгэр, Heaven,	газар ²¹⁸ earth	
	‘The two: <i>Eree</i> [and] <i>seree</i> [Are] the same [in size] –Sky, earth’		

In this riddle, two other entities named ‘Eree’ and ‘Seree’ are also presented as being ‘the same,’ although it seems that both of these are phonemes do not have much to do with their dictionary-assigned lexical meanings. Upon hearing this riddle, for at least one informant, ‘Eree’ and ‘Seree’ did not function as lexical words.²¹⁹ The dictionary meanings would appear to have little to do with this riddle: *эрээ* ‘proper conduct; school of fish,’²²⁰ and *сэрээ*, ‘fork, harpoon.’²²¹ Rather, their phonetic assonance and rhyming (*eree-seree*) is the primary factor.

In this case, the path of phonemic transformation can be traced. If we look at the orthography of the words that were used in the presumably earlier form of the riddle, *урээ* ‘castrated ram’ and *сэрх* ‘castrated male goat’ in WM., we find the two words *irge* and *serge*.²²² The two words *эрээ* and *сэрээ* thus most likely evolved in the following fashion: Mongolian

²¹⁵ The story from the Tibetan ‘Enchanted Corpse’ series in which the skin of a slaughtered ‘magical’ horse transforms into an entire landscape—its hairs, for example, turn into various forests—comes to mind. (Mikos 2012, 44-50).

²¹⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

²¹⁷ Gaadamba and Sampildendev 1988, 145.

²¹⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 31.

²¹⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

²²⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 3221.

²²¹ Bold et al. 2008, 1850.

²²² Bold et al, 2008, 1124, 1848.

Script *serge* ~ *seree* and Mongolian Script *irge* ~ *eree*.

As mentioned above, the two nouns are transformed into phonetic equivalents: both words contain two syllables comprised of a front vowel *e*, a liquid consonant, followed by a long front vowel *e*. The two words mirror and parallel each other, thus linguistically re-enacting the ‘sameness’ of Sky and Earth. At the same time, the riddle metaphorically hints at the ‘equality’ of Sky and Earth, the two forces—Father Sky and Mother Earth—with which the nomadic herders must live in alignment.²²³ Their size—metaphorically, their ‘weight,’ their significance—is the same. Although, in this case, it is possible to reconstruct the two unknown words *эрээ* and *сэрээ* it should be noted that in a context of everyday usage, the provenance of these ‘mutated phonemes’ would probably remain a mystery. At the same time, the transformation of *урээ* and *сэрх* to *эрээ* and *сэрээ* provides us with a salient example of how the interface of oral transmission and the written word function in the nomadic setting of Mongolian riddles and their phonemic transformations.

A further variation of this riddle reintroduces the notion of a container more emphatically:

20)	Ирг-ийн [Castrated] ram-GEN.	гүзээ stomach	үс-гүй hair-PRIV.
	Сэрх-ийн [Castrated] goat-GEN.	гүзээ stomach	үс-тэй hair-SOC.
	–Тэнгэр, Heaven,	газар ²²⁴ earth	
	‘[Castrated] ram’s stomach — without hair [Castrated] goat’s stomach — with hair – Sky, earth’		

The tactile opposition, which can also be observed in Riddle 119 on p. 210, of

Sky: *hairless*
Earth: *hairy, having hair*

is an extremely frequent one. As in the riddle above, both are perceived largely as ‘surfaces,’ and yet surfaces which are contained within a larger vessel (*цав*) of definite proportions. Both of them are containers themselves as well.

2.6 Conclusion: ‘Ruined’ Words?

The presence of phonemes or groups of phonemes unlisted in any lexical works (such as in Riddle 19 above) is fairly widely attested in both the corpuses of riddles under discussion. In

²²³ See Oberfalzerová 2006.

²²⁴ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 31.

some instances, the mere sound of the phoneme created certain associations for informants with deep knowledge of the nomadic herding life- and its rich folkways. In other cases, the word could be traced back to another word-base, often related to an ideophonic word. Yet even when the word remains fully unidentified, as in the case of ‘*yagnaа*’ (*ягнаа*), it still becomes the locus of a complex semantic web. In the case of the appellation of a mysterious Sanskrit deity (‘*Beridana*’), the name itself functions as a kind of abstract noun designating an abstract state of *bodhisattvahood* or *deityhood*. Finally, the abbreviated and slightly distorted mantra fragments *Um Maania* and *Umaa Hum* are transformed into true entities of the narrative of the micro-fictional universe of the riddle.

These ‘altered phonemes’ do more than just assuring the performative disguising of the subject of the riddle: they function to bind the riddle closer to itself through its own sounds, turning it into an aurally sealed ‘container’ for the hidden referent (the answer). Some of these ‘ruined words’ function as empty or floating signifiers as, for example, in Levi-Strauss’s sense of the term,²²⁵ capable of embracing a wide range or even infinitely open subset of referents.

The high frequency of distorted loanwords from Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, at times so altered as to be nearly unrecognizable, attests to the vast multitude of borrowings into Mongolian from other languages, as well as to the cultural influences these words carried with them. Even more intriguing is the presence of ‘camouflage loanwords,’ words that look like loanwords but that actually ‘mimic’ loanwords. The analysis in Theodore Levin’s study of the crucial importance of mimicry in the musical forms of nomadic peoples can serve as a starting point for linguistic discussion of phonetic mimicry, as seen in the examples above.²²⁶

Such linguistic mimicry should be viewed not only in terms of onomatopoeia and ideophonic words but should embrace as well the mimicry of the historical memory of a language and its syncretic incorporations, as well as the mimicry of a collective cultural memory reaching back centuries.

The words examined in this paper, described as ‘ruined,’ proved yet capable of generating a rich web of associations—a condition perhaps abetted by their necessarily fragmentary state, rather than impeded by it. In this respect, these riddles can also be approached from the viewpoint of a poetics of fragmentation, as is the case in certain modern European literatures. The status of these words as broken, deteriorated, or ‘ruined’—compare, for

²²⁵ “A signifier without a specific signified... Also known as an ‘empty signifier’.” (Buchanan 2010, 173). This definition in many respects can be applied to Mongolian words such as *Тэнгэр* ‘sky, heaven’ and *бурхан* ‘deity, image or statue of deity.’

²²⁶ Levin 2006, 73-124. See as well the research of the relationship of animism and mimesis among the Yukaghirs in Willerslev 2007.

example, the discussion of ‘ruined language’ (*rontott nyelv*) in contemporary Hungarian literature (see Introduction to this chapter)—deserves further examination, as rather than limiting the word’s semantic scope, the distortions appear to widen it.

The presence of phonetically modified ‘ruined syllables’ serves to create a strong sense of aural ‘boundedness’ within the micro ‘fictive world’ of the riddle, tenaciously adhering to an open set of potential or putative referents despite the apparent ‘voidedness’ of these phonemes. The aural ‘boundedness’ of many of these riddles linguistically re-enacts the cosmological thinking inherent within them of the universe as an enclosed space, a manifestation of the contained space of the Earth (*газар*) and the Sky (*тэнгэр*).

Chapter 3

The Sacred and the Profane

3.0 Introduction

As we have seen, the theme of the sacred is not one that is missing from the riddle corpus. An essential component of the sacred, in the Mongolian context is, of course, that of Buddhism. While even a brief sketch of the history of Buddhism in Mongolia — including the steppe territories inhabited by the pre- and proto-Mongol tribes — would be far beyond the scope of this thesis, we can note that Buddhism in Mongolia has a history stretching back beyond two millennia. Although the ‘official’ beginnings of Buddhism can be traced to the adoption of the religion by the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)²²⁷ and what is known as the ‘first spread’ of Tibetan-influenced Buddhism, its presence on the Central or Inner Asian steppe reaches back nearly to the inception of the religion itself in the fifth century BCE: monks travelling across Central and Inner Asia between India and China, Sogdian traders making their way the territory, not even to mention the Northern Wei (386 CE–534 CE) and Liao (Khitan, 907 CE–1125 CE) dynasties, all the creation of which can be termed as the ‘steppe Buddhism’ of Mongolia.²²⁸ The presence of these layers of ‘older Buddhisms’ can be strongly felt in these riddles, as, for example, in the presence of Uyghur words (for example, the word *базар* ‘Vajra’ in Riddle 50 on p. 108, or *чавганц* ‘nun’ in Riddle 32 discussed on p. 87). Hence, in this chapter, I develop ideas based on a paper first presented at the conference “Mongolian Buddhism: Past, Present, and Future”

²²⁷ Or a couple of decades before, in 1246. (Srba and Schwarz 2015, 360).

²²⁸ “Later, from the sixteenth century, Lamaism [a term for Mongolian Buddhism-RM] became the predominant religion... which absorbed the system of good and bad omens in almost unchanged form. This became a kind of purifying institution, whose chief task (mainly that of lamas) is to remove the consequences of wrong deeds, to neutralize evil, and to purify a person of it.” (Oberfalzerová 2000, 29). While this is a topic clearly far beyond the scope of this thesis, it is also worth mentioning that researchers such as Johan Elverskog have addressed the “architectonic narrative of Buddhism that in many regards undergirds the relationship between the Tibetans and Mongols,” taking note of the fact that “in most historical accounts, the Mongols are simply ciphers within a well-scripted play, one in which they are invariably on the receiving end of Tibetan or Manchu greatness.” (Bulag and Diemberger, eds. 2007, 61).

held at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in 2016, and subsequently published in 2017.²²⁹

3.1 Aspects of Buddhism in Mongolian Riddles

The religious and cultural traces of Buddhism are manifested in the Mongolian riddle corpus through three main linguistic phenomena:

- 1) Loanwords or distorted loanwords (from Uyghur, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese)
- 2) Fragments of mantras, deity names
- 3) Reference to Buddhist practise and ritual (votive) objects

For the purposes of this chapter, I will be focusing on those riddles that bring the categories of the sacred and the profane into sharp relief within the context of the riddle.

Of course, it is perfectly fair to argue that the ‘sacred and profane’ are predominantly Western categories, initially introduced by Emile Durkheim and since then subject, not unjustifiably, to criticism. I would argue, nonetheless, that these categories are helpful for allowing us — as Western or Western-trained scholars — to comprehend the categorical leaps of thought that are required to successfully comprehend the cosmological implications of Mongolian riddling. In early Western tradition, shaped by both equally by classical and Christian hierarchies, a strong division between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ styles — i.e., between the categories of the tragic and the comic, which roughly correspond to the sacred and the profane — was maintained.²³⁰

3.2 Livestock Imagery and the Natural World

Many of the riddles under consideration here employ livestock and nature imagery, which, given the religious context, might appear to be contradictory, but, as we shall discover, isn’t at all.

The following riddle describes what appears at first to be a purely profane situation:

21)	ТЭНГЭР-ийн Heaven-GEN.	тэх mountain goat	цоохор mottled
	Дөрвөн Four	хөл leg	нь P3
			майга цоохор bandy mottled

– Бурхан ширээ²³¹
Deity throne [altar]

‘Heaven’s motley mountain goat
His four legs are mottled, bandy

²²⁹ See Mikos 2018.

²³⁰ “In the process, Cicero (and likewise Quintillion) gives an exact formulation of stylistic differentiation: ‘*in tragoedia comicum vitiosum est, et in comoedia turpe tragicum* [in tragedy the comic is faulty, and in comedy the tragic is indecent].” (Auerbach 2003, 566).

²³¹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 189.

Here, Tenger is evoked as a principal of the sacred, which embraces all other forms of specific sacrality, including Buddhism, within itself. At first glance, the association of a deity or Buddha throne with a mountain goat (*мэх*) would seem to be rather unusual. In addition, the description of its four ‘mottled bandy legs’ (*дөрвөн хөл нь майга цоохор*) would also hardly seem to fit with the description of an altar or Buddha throne. The goat, however, who likes to climb mountains and stand on a high cliff is associated with the celestial principle of the divine — Tenger — by virtue of its high vertical placement. It thus ‘belongs’ to Tenger. The goat has steady feet and stares off into the distance, absolutely unmoving, like a statue of the Buddha.²³² Its ‘bandy’ legs are sturdy and unmoving like the legs of an altar table. The word *цоохор* refers to its colouring; here the attribute is used as an affectionate noun. It also vividly references the elaborate decorations of the wooden altar table, as well as the colours of various offering bowls and lamps.

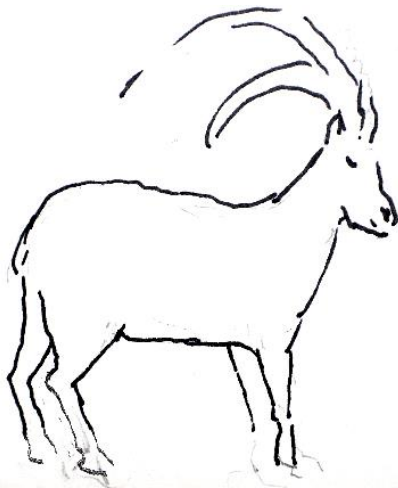


Fig. 5. Mountain goat with its ‘bandy legs’ (sketch by author).



Fig. 6. Бурханы ширээ ‘altar or shrine table’. (Kocheshkov 1979, 50.)

The word for throne is a metaphor: *ширээ* can be throne, chair, or even a small low table (a small low table used for purposes of an altar which becomes a throne because Buddha is sitting upon it). The ‘bandy legs’ refers to the both goat and to the ‘legs’ of the throne with the shape of the legs: they curve outward, as seen in Figs. 5 and 6 above. But the association of ‘goat’ and ‘throne’ goes beyond the visual similarity of the respective legs of goat and throne: in the imagination of nomads, goats are associated with noble bearing and dignity. There is, for example, a legend about the *янгир* (mountain goat): There is an old goat, and the time has come to die. The goat wonders how it should die. It stands on a high cliff, and then finally it falls into

²³² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

the valley below. This legend can evoke great emotion in Mongolians.²³³ There is also a very well-known poem related to this theme by B. Yavuukhulan entitled *Тэхийн зогсоол* ('Wild Mountain Goat Peak').²³⁴ The association of—to the Western mind, it must be stressed—of a 'lowly' livestock animal, a goat, with the deity-realm may at first seem like the collusion of two completely unrelated categories, but in the cosmology of the Mongolian nomad, is anything but. The mountain goat is considered to be a free and proud animal.

In the following riddle, the image of a row of offering bowls being arranged upon an altar is compared to that of a camel caravan being led by a lama:

22)	Гавьж Gavj	лам-ын monk-GEN.	тэмээ camel
	Ганц-хан Single-DIM.	зам-аар road-INS.	цув-на file-PRS.IMP.
	– Тахил Offering	өрө-х ²³⁵ arrange-NF.	
	‘The camels of Lama Gavj Proceed one after another in a straight line – To arrange offerings [on an altar]’		

The title *гавьж* is a misspelling, probably originating from a phonetic variant, of *гавж*, a monk who has passed the examination of Tib. *dka' bcu*, 'the ten hardships.'²³⁶ The plural has been elided in the singular use of *тэмээ* 'camel,' which is extremely common in Mongolian.²³⁷ The 'single straight line' refers to the row of offering bowls and how they are placed carefully one after the other on the altar. The verb *өрөх* designates arranging objects in a line, but it is also a near-homonym of *өрзөх*, 'to raise up, to offer, to make an offering.' Placing the offering bowls, usually containing water or fresh grains, and oil lamps before the Buddha (*Бурхны өмнө*) in a single row creates an effect visually similar to that of the camel caravan. The rounded bumps of the grain offerings—each bowl must be as full as possible to symbolize the abundance of the offerings—also visually allude to the humps of the Bactrian camels that were often used for

²³³ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

²³⁴ In the poem, the poet's father directs him to look up to a nearby peak, where a proud and blackish mountain goat is standing. The realization occurs that, just as the goat will one day cease to be and will no longer be a part of this 'colourful world' (*өнгөт орчлон*), so too the poet's father will one day not be here. The poem describes with great poignancy how the goat turns to gaze one last time on 'the land that became his mother' (*Эх болсон нутгаа сүүлчийн удаа / Хардаг юм гэнэлээ*; Yavuukhulan 2012). See Simon Wickham-Smith's discussion of this poem and the work of B. Yavuukhulan in his essay "A Whisper of Something More: The Poetry of Begziin Yavuuhulan" (<https://thebestamericanpoetry.typepad.com/files/yavuuhulan-1.pdf>).

²³⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

²³⁶ Kara 1998, 95; Chandra-Das 2004, 50.

²³⁷ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 7.

transport in Mongolia. The reference to the animals as “Lama Gavj’s camels” is quite affectionate and humorous. In addition, note in the riddle how movement has been



Fig. 7. Offering bowls in a monastery lined up along the ‘bank.’ Khövsgöl aimag, 2014. (Photograph by author.)

superimposed onto a static situation, a quality which characteristic of many of these riddles—the inversion of movement and motionlessness (this topic is explored in detail in Chapter 4). The humps of the camels, usually in motion, are here static. And yet it is important to note that within Mongolian nomadic culture, the altar offerings themselves *did* nomadize. They were often carried in a small cloth pouch known as a *᠔ax* (a kind of coat); in effect, a kind of ‘mini

travelling-ger’ for the offering bowls and their contents; when they were taken out, they were rubbed clean with a cloth, and placed one by one on the altar.²³⁸

In the following riddle, the offerings on the shrine are envisioned as a flock of a lama’s sheep ‘grazing’ on the altar place:

23)	Эмч Doctor	лам-ын monk-GEN.	хонь sheep
	Эрг-ээ Bank-POSS.	дага-н follow-CV.MOD.	бэлчи-нэ graze-PRS.IMP.
	– Тахил ²³⁹ Offering		

‘The sheep of the lama doctor
Grazing along the bank
– [Shrine] offering(s)’

The ‘bank’ (*эргэ*) refers to the horizontal space created on top of the wooden chest (*авдар*), placed in the northern honorific section of the ger (*хоймор*), which hold the most important family items and the top of which often serves as an altar.²⁴⁰ This wooden chest often had another horizontal shelf or glassed-in low vitrine placed on the surface to the back, which

²³⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

²³⁹ Lovor and Ólziikhutag 1990, 252.

²⁴⁰ See Fig. 32 on p. 154 of this thesis for a photograph of a modern-day northern honorific section of the ger (*хоймор*).

could contain sacral statues, images, books and sutras. The offering bowls are often lined up rather closer to the outer edge of the shrine table or surface, therefore they appear to be as if perched upon a riverbank²⁴¹ (see Fig. 8 below). The lama is the owner (эзэн) or herder of the sheep, which ‘graze’ on the ‘steppe’ before the statues or images. While the riddle possibly refers to a doctor lama, it is also quite likely that the attribute ‘doctor’ (эмч) was inserted in order to create alliteration with эрэг ‘bank [of lake or river]’. The seemingly unbounded space of *outside* the ger, of the steppe is thus metaphorically transposed onto the *interior*, finite space of the ger. As Carole Pegg notes, “The structure and internal area of the tent is understood by



Fig. 8. Young girl praying, 1938. Young girl praying in front of the ger altar, decorated with offering cups, holy images to the left and an ewer with holy water (бумба) to the right. Above is a small thangka. National Museum of Denmark Digital Collections. (Photo: Lena Tidemand.) Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/ES/asset/354440>

Mongols as a microcosm of the spherical universe.”²⁴²

While the following riddle does not exactly contain a reference to ‘livestock,’ it does visualize a clear reference to the natural world:

24)	Довон Hill	дээр POST.
	Долоо/н Seven	ялаа fly
	Доошоо Downward	хар-сан look-NP.
	Ганц Single	ялаа fly

²⁴¹ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

²⁴² Pegg 2001, 171.

– Тахил-ын цөгц²⁴³
Offering-GEN. bowl

‘On a hill
Seven flies
One fly
Looked down
– Offering bowls’²⁴⁴

Usually, the Mongolian Buddhist altar will have eight offering bowls,²⁴⁵ although in a nomadic ger, the number can vary. According to one informant, in this riddle, the bowl looking downward has been placed with its mouth facing down. It may also refer to something else on the altar that may seem to be ‘looking’ down, such as a bag of grain: grain is a common offering.²⁴⁶ It is common practice to place the bowl facing down on the altar if the offering bowl is empty.²⁴⁷ According to another informant, the ‘single fly’ refers to a *балин* (WM. *baling* < Skt. *balim*)²⁴⁸ ‘food offering to deities, usually made of dough kneaded into various (often

pyramidal) shapes’; Tib. *gtor ma*).²⁴⁹

The balin or dough offering may appear to be looking downward as it sits on the altar (see Fig. 9 to the left).²⁵⁰



Fig. 9. Row of offering bowls with bowl containing *балин*, ‘balin, dough offering’ at end in monastery. Ulaanbaatar, 2014. (Photograph by author.)

What is not stated explicitly in the riddle, but which is strongly implied, is that the seven flies in the second line are looking *up* at Tenger. The trope of directionality of the gaze upward or downward is visualized in the image of the altar bowls, here rendered as animate

²⁴³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

²⁴⁴ There is another variation of this riddle collected, according to A Taylor, by Zhamtsaranov and Rudnyev: ‘On the hill/There are seven flies./One single fly/looks downward. – Offering cups on the altar’ (Taylor 1954 323).

²⁴⁵ This is in reference to the Eight Auspicious Symbols: “In Buddhist tradition these eight symbols of good fortune represent the offerings presented by the great Vedic gods to Shakyamuni Buddha upon his attainment of enlightenment.” (Beer 2003, 1.) The Eight Auspicious Symbols are the umbrella, the vase, the fish, the lotus, the conch shell, the eternal knot, the banner of victory, and the wheel of dharma. (Bold et al. 2008, 1322).

²⁴⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

²⁴⁷ Personal observation in Mongolian Buddhist temples, 2011–2016.

²⁴⁸ Tömörtogoo 2018, 20.

²⁴⁹ Lessing 1960, 80.

²⁵⁰ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

beings, namely flies. It is quite likely that the visual metaphor of *offering bowls* : *flies* occurred to the creator of this riddle due to the relatively large shape of the eyes of flies, as well as their bulging shape and roundedness.

This ‘movement’ of the gaze of an animate or personified object creates a ‘hidden’ metaphor in the riddle: the vertical axis which connects the Earth to the Sky and its deific principle as Tenger — the realm of the Sky and *бурхан тэнгэр* ‘the god Tenger,’ the deity residing in the sky.²⁵¹ This trope of the directionality of gaze appears in other riddles as well. See Section 7.3 of this thesis for more about upward directionality in Mongolian riddles.

In another riddle, a small vessel on the altar, used in blessings, is envisioned as having been formed from its share of the tripartite sacred landscape:

25)	Манай Our	нутг-ийн place of birth-GEN. ²⁵²
	Магнаг-ийг Silk brocade-ACC.	өмс-жээ put on-PRT.IMP.
	Сүмбэр <i>Sümbər</i>	уул-ын mountain-GEN.
	Өвс-ийг Grass-ACC.	ид-жээ eat-PRT.IMP.
	Сүн Milk	далай-н sea-GEN.
	Ус-ыг Water-ACC.	уу-жээ Drink-PRT.IMP.
	– Бумба ²⁵³ Vase [on Buddhist altar]	
	‘Clothed in the silk brocade of our place of birth, It ate the grass of Mount Meru, It drank the water of the Sea of Milk – Vase [on Buddhist altar]’	

The vase (*бумба*) is ‘clothed,’ as such vases are often wrapped with silk brocade on the altar of a Buddhist monastery.²⁵⁴ The grass that it eats is the *зүү* ‘sacred grass’ < Tib. *ku sha* < Skt. *kuśa*.²⁵⁵ The grass itself comes from *Сүмбэр* ‘Mount Meru’ (WM. *sümbür*, also written

²⁵¹ Lessing 1960, 794.

²⁵² See p. 164 for the term *нутаг* ‘homeland, place of birth.’

²⁵³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 253.

²⁵⁴ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

²⁵⁵ Chandra-Das 2004, 18-19.

variously in Mongolian monuments as *sumur, sumir, sümer, sümür*)²⁵⁶ < Skt. *meru, sumeru*.²⁵⁷ In Buddhist cosmology, Mount Meru, the ‘great World Mountain,’ rises at the centre of our universe.’²⁵⁸ The *сүн далай* ‘sea of milk’ is the mythical sea surrounding Mount Meru.²⁵⁹ The past tense used in the riddle, the *preterium imperfecti* employing the suffix *-жээ/-чээ*, refers to a past action which has not been witnessed by the speaker; it features frequently in fairytales and legends.²⁶⁰ The grass in the vase is dipped in consecrated water and sprinkled, thus it has bestowed blessings: *адис хийсэн*.²⁶¹ Also notice the way in which the vase is envisaged as an animate being that eats and drinks the sacred grass of the sacred cosmological mountain and the sacred water of the Sea of Milk.²⁶²

Yet another riddle visualizes the arrangement of the vessel with the sacred grass in it as a Tibetan:

26)	Баруун-тай-гаас West-SOC-ABL.	ир-сэн come-NP.	
	Бавгар Bearded	хар black	тангад Tibetan
	Сээр-ийн Spine-GEN.	мах-тай meat-SOC.	
	Сэмж-ийн Omentum-GEN.	дах-тай coat[with fur outside]-SOC.	
	Мөлгөр Rounded	хамар-тай nose-SOC.	
	Мөнгө/н Silver	аяга-тай cup-SOC.	
	– Бумба, Vase	гүш ²⁶³ [sacred] grass	

‘Came from the West
A full-bearded, black Tibetan
With a spine of meat
A coat of omentum
A rounded nose
And a silver cup
– Vase, sacred grass’

²⁵⁶ Sühbaatar 1997, 173.

²⁵⁷ Beer 2003, 82.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 82-83.

²⁵⁹ Lessing 1960, 744.

²⁶⁰ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 218.

²⁶¹ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

²⁶² In Indian cosmology, the churning of the oceans turned the water into milk (Beer 2003, 231).

²⁶³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 253.

The noun *баруун* ‘west’ uses a double case,²⁶⁴ here the sociative and the ablative. In the context of this riddle, ‘the West’ means Tibet, the ‘land of religion’ (*шашны орон*).²⁶⁵ The expression *тангад* ‘Tibetan’ is slightly derogatory according to one informant.²⁶⁶ The spine referred to is the lower part of the grass, which at such times would be wrapped around with a *хадаг* ‘a long narrow piece of silk or other cloth especially made for presentation on formal occasions as a mark of respect’ (Tib. *kha btags*);²⁶⁷ it is used to make a kind of ‘handle’ (*баруул*) to hold the grass for the monk granting the blessing.²⁶⁸ The term ‘omentum’ (*сэмж*) functions here as a metaphor for ‘covering’ (omentum is the covering for a sheep’s stomach) and refers to the ‘clothing’ of the vase, mentioned in Riddle 25 as its ‘silk brocade;’ the vase on the altar is also sometimes ‘clothed’ (i.e., wrapped) in a *хадаг* as well.²⁶⁹ The ‘rounded nose’ of the vessel refers to a slight protuberance above its neck below its opening; the ‘silver cup’ is, of course, the body of the vessel itself.²⁷⁰

The following riddle visualizes a prayer wheel as a goat:

- 27) Хурдан банди
Quick novice monk
- Ном эргэ-нэ
[Buddhist] teachings turn-PRS.IMP.
- Хув ямаа
Small-eared goat
- Худаг эргэ-нэ
Well turn-PRS.IMP.
- Хүрд²⁷¹
Prayer wheel
- ‘Quick little monk
Turns the [wheel of] Dharma
Small-eared goat
Turns the well
– Prayer wheel’

In this riddle, the *хүрд* ‘prayer wheel’ is being turned quickly. The rapid turning of the wheel symbolizes swift transformation as a



Fig. 10. Prayer wheel at Gandantegchinlen Monastery, Ulaanbaatar 2016. (Photograph by author.)

²⁶⁴ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 216.

²⁶⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2015.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Lessing 1960, 902.

²⁶⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2015.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 255-256.

result of the teachings of the Buddha:²⁷² *НОМ* ‘religious teaching, law’ < Sogd. *nwm* < Greek *νόμος*.²⁷³ The four wooden handles of the prayer wheel (in Fig. 9, to the left, only two are visible) are like the short ears of a goat. The prayer wheel itself is likened to a well that is spinning around due to the quick motion of the goat.

3.3 References to Materiality

A certain group of riddles makes explicit reference to the physical materiality of votive objects. On one level, these riddles might be viewed as refuting or denying the sacrality embodied in the object they describe but in actuality they depict the very grounded and quite down-to-earth comprehension of Buddhism and its rites among Mongolians.

- 28) Өвөр нь алт
 Front DM. gold
- Ар нь шавар
 Back DM. mud [clay]
- Бурхан²⁷⁴
 [Statue of] deity
- ‘Its front [is] gold
 Its back [is] mud
 – [statue of] a deity/ Buddha’

This riddle makes reference to the fact that votive statues were traditionally made of clay and not painted in the back. The front of the statue was often painted in gold or in various colours, but, in previous times, in the back, no colours or paints were used; that is why ‘its front is gold, its back is mud’ in the words of informant Byambaa. Such religious statues were often produced by means of molds. Even if color was added to the back of the statue, it was never gold, it was usually painted red or yellow. Gold was reserved exclusively for the front of the statue.²⁷⁵ It also alludes to the fact that what is presented frontally may not be true for the situation of a being or object in the back.²⁷⁶ This has a parallel in many Mongolian riddles and proverbs about the human mind and thought, which emphasize that they cannot be immediately seen: see, for example, Riddle 103 on p. 182 of this thesis.

The next riddle conflates two seemingly incompatible categories—celestial beings and the inside of a horse’s mouth:

- 29) Тэнгэр-ийн басга-д
 Heaven-GEN. daughter-PL.

²⁷² Beer 2003, 14.

²⁷³ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 148.

²⁷⁴ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

²⁷⁵ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

²⁷⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

Төмөр	бохь	зажлах
Iron	resin	chew-NF.

– Амгайвч-тай	морь ²⁷⁷
Bit-SOC.	horse

‘Heaven’s little daughters
Chewing iron resin
– Horse with a bit’

The term *бохь* refers to the resin that flows from coniferous trees at times chewed recreationally by nomads; today, it is a term for chewing gum.²⁷⁸ The ‘daughters of Tengri’ (*басгад* is the plural of *басган*, meaning small girl or daughter)²⁷⁹ are the teeth of the horse chewing on the ‘iron resin,’ i.e., the bit. It is very possible that the attribute ‘iron’ (*төмөр*) was added so as to create alliteration with the noun *тэнгэр* ‘heaven’ but we can also recall that bits are usually made of iron, so that the ‘phonetically motivated’ simile might have worked the other way around.

Despite the humorous and indeed ‘profane’ visual associations evoked by this riddle, the presumed whiteness of the horse’s teeth nonetheless yet evokes the purity of the daughters of Tenger. We can also recall that the term *Тэнгэрийн охин* ‘daughter of Tenger,’ is another expression for ‘*dākinī*’. The visual multiplicity of the horse’s teeth evoked by the riddle evokes the multiplicity of many minor deities swirling around the main deity in much of Mahāyāna Buddhist visual imagery as often seen, for example, in thangkas.

3.4 References to Modern Life

A certain subset of riddles, clearly hailing from the early to mid-20th century, create vivid visual imagery and metaphors from the technological advancements of modern life. In these riddles, the sacral is colluded with images of the everyday.

30)	Бух	тэрг-ээр
	Bull	cart-INS.

Бурхан-ы	орон	оро-в
Deity-GEN.	land	enter-PRT.PRF.

– Эрих	тата-х ²⁸⁰
Rosary	pull [read]-NF.

‘Entered the deity’s land
By locomotive
– Reading a rosary’

²⁷⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 257.

²⁷⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014; Dr. Veronika Kapišovská, communication, 2020.

²⁷⁹ Bold 2008, 252. *Басгад* ‘small girls, daughters’ is from Buriyat. (Tsidendambaeva, ed. 1954, 118).

²⁸⁰ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 286.

Note that in this riddle as well, the subject is elided: we don't know who or what is entering the deity's land. *Бух мэрэг* 'bull's cart' is an expression dating from the 1950s,²⁸¹ when the railroad first was connected from beyond the Russian frontier to the Sino-Mongolian border station of Erenhot, or Erlian. In reference to the history of Mongolian rail, Alan Sanders writes:

Development of [Mongolian] railways was prompted in the late 1930s by the need to transport coal from Nalaikh to the power station in Ulan Bator and then in eastern Mongolia by preparations to face the threat of Japanese invasion. Ulan Bator had no rail links with the outside world before the construction of the Ulan Bator Railway, first from the Soviet border to Ulan Bator (1949) and then from Ulan Bator to the border with China (1955). This became an important freight transit route between the USSR and PRC.²⁸²

Even today, the railcars must have their bogies exchanged at the Sino-Mongolian border. The word *бух мэрэг* 'bull cart' refers to the locomotive: it is strong like a bull, with steam coming out of its 'nostrils.' Other expressions for 'train' are *төмөр зам* (lit. 'iron road') or *галт мэрэг* ('fire wheel'). The 'bull' is the head rosary, while the other beads are the many cars behind the locomotive. There is a certain amount of humour in associating the head bead of the rosary with a locomotive; and yet the metaphor of *rosary : vehicle : spiritual vehicle* is eloquent and apt, referring as it does to the Mahāyāna, or the Great Vehicle, the branch of Buddhism practised by Mongolians.²⁸³ As mentioned, the subject in the riddle (the one riding or driving the train/rosary) is completely elided. This clearly places the emphasis in the riddle onto the movement of the rosary as it is being read.

This riddle does, however, 'update' a very traditional riddle motif concerning rosaries. Many earlier riddles refer to reading a rosary as a form of travel — as, for example, crossing a mountain pass. This is seen clearly in Riddle 31:

31)	Олон Many	даваа mountain pass	дав-ж pass through-CV.IMP.	боло-х become-NF.
	Очир Vajra	даваа mountain pass	дав-ж pass through-CV.IMP.	боло-х-гүй become-NF.-NEG.
	– Эрих, Rosary,	эрих-ний rosary-GEN	хүйс ²⁸⁴ head bead	

‘Through many mountain passes one can pass
Through Vajra’s Pass one cannot pass
– Rosary, the head bead’²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

²⁸² Sanders 2010, 700.

²⁸³ See as well the *vehicle : spiritual vehicle* metaphor in Riddle 11 on p. 57 of this thesis.

²⁸⁴ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 255.

²⁸⁵ This riddle is translated by A. Taylor as: ‘It is possible to go over many passes / It is not possible to go over the diamond pass.—Rosary and the end (head) of a rosary’. (Taylor 1954, 351).

The word ‘vajra’ originally designated, in Vedic India, the weapon or ‘thunderbolt’ of the God Indra; in Buddhism, it later came to symbolize “the impenetrable, imperishable, immovable, immutable, indivisible, and indestructible state of absolute reality, which is the enlightenment of Buddhahood,” just as its original tridents were bent to form a ‘peaceful spectre.’²⁸⁶ *Очир* is the Mongolian phonetic adaptation of Skt. *vajra* that was transmitted to Mongolian via Uyghur as *včir*;²⁸⁷ the term *базар* ‘vajra’ was transmitted via the Tibetan pronunciation of Skt. ‘vajra.’²⁸⁸

This riddle refers very specifically to the movement of the Buddhist rosary as it is ‘read’ in the hands of a layperson or monk. The rosary is ‘traversed’ by the right hand as it moves through the thumb and index finger. When the head bead is reached, however, it is forbidden to keep on reading the rosary by going ‘over’ the head bead; it is necessary to turn the rosary around and go back in the other direction: see Fig. 11 below. Even the Dalai Lama must do so. Passing ‘above’ the head bead of the rosary is similar to symbolically passing above the head of a venerated teacher or lama in real life — it would be a bad omen as well as an act of grave disrespect.²⁸⁹



Fig. 11. A Buddhist monk holding a rosary as his hand reaches the head bead. (Photograph by author.)

Очир даваа is the largest bead on the rosary; the head bead is the ‘Vajra’s Pass.’ This designation does not refer to an actual vajra as being part of the head bead, instead, the head bead is a symbol of ‘our lama and teacher’ (*бид нарын лам багш*), similar to a Buddhist monk or a deity. It also is evocative of a symbolic and honorific name (*бэлэгдлийн нэр, хүндэтгэл нэр*) for a religious teacher or deity.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Beer 2003, 87.

²⁸⁷ Төмөртогоо 2018, 84.

²⁸⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014; Лувсандэндэва 2001, 334; Төмөртогоо 2018, 84.

²⁸⁹ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

²⁹⁰ Byambaa, consultation, 2020. In addition, *Очир даваа* can also metaphorically refer to *малгайн очир*, a kind of traditional knotted button on the top of a nobleman’s hat which indicated his rank during the period of Manchurian rule. (Luvsandendev 2001, 699; Bold et al. 2008, 905). See as well Riddle 50 on p. 108 on this thesis.)

The ‘many mountain passes’ of the riddle refer to the spaces in between the beads of the rosary: the rosary itself, seen from the side, creates the image of a miniature mountain ridge with many passes (see Fig. 12 to the right).



Fig. 12. The ‘mountain passes’ of a rosary. (Photograph by author.)

As in Riddle 46 on p. 102 of this thesis, movement in place is re-interpreted as linear or progressive movement. The relatively static activity of reading a rosary is compared to the dramatic progression of moving through a mountain pass, and the veneration felt for a Buddhist deity and/or one’s own teacher is expressed through the prohibition of passing over the ‘Vajra Pass’ (the head rosary).

3.5 References to monks, nuns and religious authority figures

In the following riddle, a nun is evoked:

- 32) Бурхан-ы өмнө
Deity-GEN POST.
- Бундгар улаан чавганц
Plump red nun
- Зул²⁹¹
Oil lamp
- ‘In front of the deity
[There is] a plump red nun
– Oil lamp’



Fig. 13. Oil lamps of various sizes in a Buddhist monastery, Ulaanbaatar, 2014. (Photograph by author.)

According to one informant, the word *чавганц* could refer to a woman as well as to a Buddhist nun.²⁹²

Бундгар ‘rotund’ is an ideophone.²⁹³ It is related to the words *бондгор*, meaning *бомбогор* ‘a rounded form’²⁹⁴ and *бумбагар* ‘the state of being rounded.’²⁹⁵ These ideophones, used to describe people or objects of rounded shape, often have an ironic connotation when applied to human beings,²⁹⁶ and so are frequently used in riddles referencing religious or other authority figures, creating a humorous impression. They may imply that the shape of the person described is somehow ‘ill-fitting’ with or excessive in relation to his or her surroundings.

²⁹¹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

²⁹² Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

²⁹³ For more on this class of words in Mongolian, see Zikmundová 2002, Oberfalzerová 2009, and Oberfalzerová, 2010.

²⁹⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 298, 297.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 361.

²⁹⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

The following riddle describes the encounter of two lamas:

33)	Яндаг Yandag	лам lama	ягуур-аа <i>yaguur</i> -POSS.	бари-ад hold-CV.PRF.	ирэ-в come-PRT.PRF.
	Дондог Dondog	лам lama	цахиур-аа flint-POSS.	бари-ад hold-CV.PRF.	ирэ-в come-PRT.PRF.
	– Товч Button	товчло-х ²⁹⁷ button-NP.			

‘Lama Yandag came holding his *yaguur*
Lama Dondog came holding his flint
– Doing up a (Mongolian-style) button’



Figs. 14a & 14b. The front of a traditional Mongolian deel with buttons (*товч*) unbuttoned and buttoned. (Photograph by author.)

In this riddle, two lamas meet, one bearing flint (*цахиур*), and the other bearing a ‘*yaguur*’ (*ягуур*). In terms of the logic of the riddle, one lama is, metaphorically speaking, the round, knotted part of the button (*товч*), whereas the other is the long ‘limb’ (*шилбэ*): this is the longish loop that is placed around the button (*товч*) to fasten the front panel of the Mongolian deel (see Figs. 14a and 14b above). Flint, in a traditional Mongolian flint-and-steel set, was carried in small quantities in a small leather pouch with a semi-circular steel edge used to strike the flint (see Fig. 15 on the next page). The leather pouch, which also held small amounts of tinder material, such as dried roots, was hung from the belt or sash (*бүс*) by a decorative chain.

It is a rather unclear—due to the lexical uncertainty of the word ‘*yaguur*’ (*ягуур*)—what exact simile is at play in this riddle. For example, if the chain holding the ‘flint’ (*цахиур*) is meant to be the equivalent of the button loop, then what would be the knotted part of the button? One possibility, according to informant Lubsangdorji, is that *ягуур* actually refers to the *гаанс*, the Mongolian long-stemmed traditional pipe, which men may tuck into their boots when not

²⁹⁷ Ölzikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 276.

smoking. In this case, the pipe itself would be the equivalent of the long loop, and the small concave disc located at the top of the chain of the ‘flint’ (*yaхиур*) would be the ‘button;’ they ‘meet’ like the two lamas, when the kindling material is placed inside the rounded disk near the pipe bowl and the flint and steel are struck to ignite the tobacco.²⁹⁸

Both of the lama’s names, *Yandag* and *Dondog*, are based on Tibetan names: *Дондог* is the Mongolian version of the Tibetan name *don rtogs*; *Yandag* is based upon the Tibetan name *yang dag*.²⁹⁹ *Don rtogs* means ‘to comprehend the meaning; also to reflect on the sense of the

term or passage or on any subject;’ *yang dag* means ‘actual, real, the very.’³⁰⁰ The two names were clearly chosen because of the rhyming second syllable (-*dag*, -*dog*). To a Mongolian ear they may conjure up a playful image of the two lamas ‘embracing’ each other or otherwise meeting. At the same time, the image the riddle creates can be seen as a reference to the Tibeto-Mongolian custom among lamas of respectful greeting known as *мөрзөх* ‘to butt [of animals]:’ “when a lama greets a fellow lama, a monk or a high-ranking lay person softly butting his forehead to the other person’s forehead.”³⁰¹

The word *ягуур* is unattested in all dictionaries I have been able to consult. The closest word, lexically and phonetically, that I have been able to locate is *ягур* ‘very hard, hard like bone,’ ‘to have a quarrelsome nature [of men and animals]’; *ягур ягур хийх* ‘to make a sound like whetting on iron.’³⁰² Concerning the first definition, hardness certainly would certainly describe a quality of the steel to strike the flint with, and the second describes the sound of a whetstone scraping against steel. If, however, *ягур*

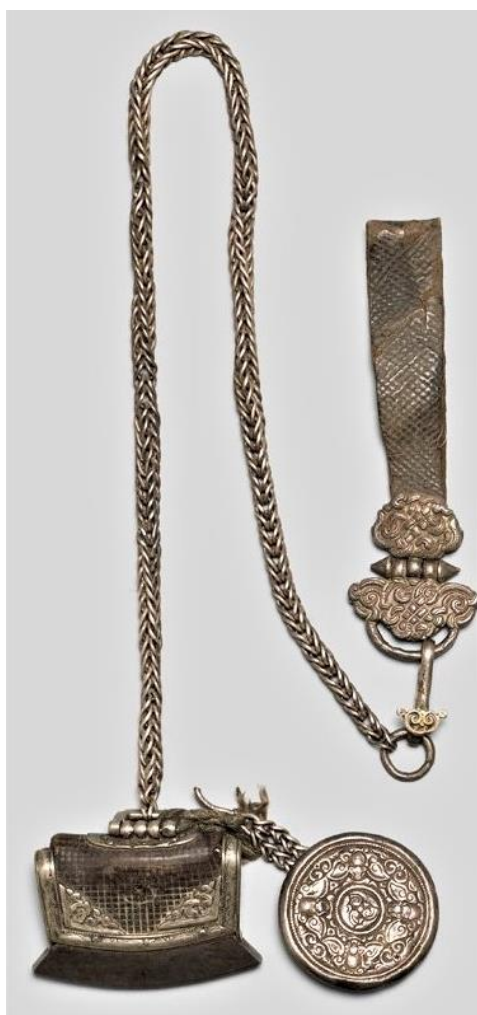


Fig. 15. Traditional *yaхиур* (flint, kept in the small case) with strap for hanging from belt. (Braae 2017, 272.)

²⁹⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

²⁹⁹ Choimaa et al., 2013, 524, 699. For the phonetic changes that occur to Tibetan words adapted into Mongolian, see Lubsangdorji 2002.

³⁰⁰ Chandra-Das 2004, 644, 1126.

³⁰¹ Kollmar-Paulenz 2012, 14.

³⁰² Süld-Erdene 2013, 719; Bold et al. 2008, 3247.

originally featured in this riddle, then it underwent phonetic modification to create more of an assonance with the word ‘flint’ (*цахуур*); and, as we have seen, such phonetic modifications are certainly not infrequent in the Mongolian riddle corpus. The multi-directional assonance of the word ‘yaguur’ (*ягуур*) could also lead one to think that it is in fact a word created within the very specific phonetic context of this particular riddle. The ratio of phonetic parallelism, mimicking the semantic parallelism of the riddle, is very high (the assonant syllables are here underlined):

Яндаг лам ягуураа бариад ирэв
Дондог лам цахиураа бариад ирэв

The view of informant Byambaa regarding this riddle was that ‘yaguur’ (*ягуур*) may well be a phonetic distortion or abbreviation of the phrase *язгуурын гурван бурхан* ‘the three root Buddhas.’ The three root Buddhas are *Манишур* ‘Mañjuśrī’, *Мигжэд Жанрайсиг* ‘Avalokiteśvara’, and *Очирваань* ‘Vajrapani.’ In this interpretation, the word *цахуур* is a distortion or phonetic modification of *сахуус* ‘protector deity’ (also termed as *чойжин* < Tib. *chos skyong*).³⁰³ In other words, in this riddle, Lama Yandag comes holding the three root Buddhas: Mañjuśrī symbolizes wisdom, Avalokiteśvara symbolizes a compassionate mind and heart, and Vajrapani symbolizes strength and ability. Lama Dondog comes holding his spirit protector deity.³⁰⁴

Although it is of course impossible to state this with precision, it is quite likely that the riddle started off as informant Byambaa describes it: describing two lamas ‘holding’ their precious deities and spirit protector, and in the act of the button being buttoned up, these deities become merged or joined together, which of course, is a founding principle of Tantric Buddhism (in which one must, in the course of practice, visualize oneself as merging with the Deity). In this interpretation, the riddle creates the following metaphor:

button / buttonhole : lama with three root Buddhas / lama with spirit protector

It is very possible that at one point the word *сахуус* ‘spirit protector’ was transformed into the word *цахуур* ‘flint’ either by deliberate oral authorship or by merely substituting and unknown word for a known one connected to an object of everyday usage by a herder. This ‘edit’ then created a new metaphor:

button / buttonhole : flint / whetstone

And yet, as can be seen, the ‘previous incarnation’ of the riddle was still present for at

³⁰³ Kara 1998, 688.

³⁰⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

least one of my informants, existing as a kind of *oral palimpsest*.

This riddle is an excellent example of the degree to which words can become distorted or aesthetically transformed in the Mongolian riddle corpus; this is in fact a generative principle of what I would term *nomadic oral riddle creation and transformation* (see Conclusion).

The next riddle is very typical of an entire class of riddles that employ ideophones to depict the humorous attitudes or postures of authority figures such as lamas, abbots, and officialdom (this latter group usually reflects the former Manchu bureaucracy).

34)	ГЭЛЭН Gelong ³⁰⁵	лам lama	
	ГЭДГЭР-ЭЭ Leaning back-POSS.		суу-в sit-PRT.PRF.
	– Өрх Roof wheel cover		тата-х ³⁰⁶ pull-NF.
	‘Gelong lama Leaning back – Pulling back the <i>өрх</i> ‘roof wheel cover’		

At night-time, the *өрх*—the roof wheel covering, usually a square piece of felt—is closed. It lies flat across the opening by night, and, by means of ropes or cords, is pulled into a triangular shape by day, allowing light to enter into the ger. There are many riddles which reflect the daily transformation of the *өрх*. For example: *Өдөр гурвалжин, Шөнө дөрвөлжин* ‘A triangle by day, a square by night,’³⁰⁷ or *Наранд гурвалжин, Саранд дөрвөлжин* ‘A triangle by the sun, a square by the moon.’³⁰⁸

The expression *зэдгэрээ суув* describes sitting while leaning back, with one’s head thrown back, and emanating a rather a haughty attitude.³⁰⁹

According to another informant, however, it mainly emphasizes how the lama—or, theoretically, any other Buddhist clergy or representative of ‘officialdom’—sits still, seemingly doing nothing for long periods of time, and especially not engaging in any activity that would require movement (such as going out to watch the livestock), which to a herder can seem rather odd.³¹⁰ According to Byambaa, the monk in the riddle is sitting leaning back. Visually, as the ‘monk’ leans back, the ger itself becomes his rather corpulent ‘stomach.’

A pamphlet from the Soviet era cites a riddle very similar to this one, indicating the

³⁰⁵ See p. 57 of this thesis for a definition of ГЭЛЭН/*gelong*.

³⁰⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 193.

³⁰⁷ Süld-Erdene 2014, 139.

³⁰⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 192.

³⁰⁹ Bolor Dictionary. <http://old.bolor-toli.com/index.php?pageId=10>; accessed Sept 12, 2015.

³¹⁰ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

word *зэдзэр* ‘something tilted back, fig. arrogance, conceit’³¹¹ as proof of the inherent aversion of the ‘Mongolian people’ to lamaist clergy.³¹² This analysis is, however, questionable, not least due to its clearly ideologically motivated nature. It demonstrates, however, how the abstraction inherent in Mongolian ideophones can become malleable and open to rather forced interpretation. The riddle cited might well have originally intended to somewhat mock a high lama but should not be considered as proof of any ‘inherent aversion.’

The way in which clergy could be gently mocked is amply seen in the following riddle:

35)	Гэгээн-ий Holy man-GEN	морь horse	
	Гэдэс-гүй Belly-PRIV.		
	Гэндэн Genden	цорж vice-abbot	
	Бөгс-гүй Bottom-PRIV.		
	– Бурхан-ы Deity-GEN.	ширээ, throne [altar]	хонх ³¹³ bell
	‘Holy man’s horse: No stomach Vice-abbot Genden: No bottom – Altar, bell’		

Гэгээн ‘holy’ was frequently used as an expression for Tib. *rin po che* in Mongolia.³¹⁴ In the spoken language, it has connotations of ‘sacred, divine, light, holiness.’³¹⁵ The ‘holy man’s horse’ is the altar in the riddle: a small decorative low table on which to place offerings, as seen in Fig. 6 on p. 75 of this thesis. This horse, though, has ‘no belly.’ For living horses, nomads usually check the belly first of all to examine its health. ‘Mounted’ on the horse is the ‘bell’, the vice-abbot Genden < Tib. *dge ldan*, ‘with virtue, having virtue.’³¹⁶ In terms of the imagery of the riddle, the bell is personified: the little handle at the top is like a head, the upper body of the bell is the *үзэж* ‘chest’, and below, as the bell is open, as it has no bottom. In the interpretation of one informant, he understood the phrase ‘no bottom’ as meaning that the vice-abbot’s backside was not very large.³¹⁷

³¹¹ Bold et al. 2008, 577.

³¹² Bazardorj 1973, 19.

³¹³ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 189.

³¹⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

³¹⁵ Bold 2008, 576.

³¹⁶ Chandra-Das 2004, 271.

³¹⁷ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

The metaphor *monk : bell* is quite frequent in the two riddle corpuses, as seen in the next section.

3.5.1 Monks as Handbells

The motif of a monk or high-ranking lama as a handbell is evidenced in the following riddle:

36)	Бурхан Deity	цээж-тэй chest-SOC.
	Бунхан Crypt	бөгс-тэй bottom-SOC.
	– ХОНХ ³¹⁸ Bell	
	‘With the chest of a deity With the bottom of a crypt – Bell’	

Burkhan (*бурхан*) refers to a god, deity, buddha or the Buddha, it can also refer to the image or statue of one.³¹⁹ The word *бунхан* (< Tib. *spungs khang*)³²⁰ refers to a crypt, a mausoleum, a tomb, or even sanctuary. High lamas, after their deaths, were sometimes mummified or buried in a sitting position in stupas or in special shrines (*шарилын сүм*). The chest or upper body of the bell (*цээж*) refers to the top part of the bell with the handle, in the form of a ‘vajra’ (*очир*). The lower part of the bell, i.e., the backside, ‘buttocks’ (*бөгс*)³²¹ is compared to a crypt. In terms of the terminology used by lamas, the two parts of the bell (top and bottom) are referred to as the *цээж* ‘chest’ and *бөгс* ‘bottom.’³²² In this riddle, a visual spatial metaphor is created, in the sense that the inner hollow part of the lower portion of the bell is likened to a hollow crypt. The rounded form of the burial mound is reminiscent of the rounded form of the bottom part of the bell,³²³ a second visual metaphor in the riddle. The word *бунхан* has a broad semantic range, designated generally as the resting place of a deceased noble or high-ranked person.³²⁴ The directionality embodied in this riddle is very stark: *цээж* ‘chest’ — traditionally the place of memory and heart for Mongolians³²⁵ — is identified with the upper, deity realms,³²⁶ whereas the lower part of the bell is identified with the lower realms

³¹⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

³¹⁹ See p. 24, footnote 38.

³²⁰ Kara 1998, 76.

³²¹ Many if not all, rounded objects in Mongolian are formed from the root *бө-*, such as *бөөрөнхий* ‘round-shaped’ and *бөмбөгөр*, ‘round in shape’. (Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2015).

³²² Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Bold 2008, 362.

³²⁵ Oberfalzerová 2006, 101.

³²⁶ This is a usual association as the upper part of body is valued in traditional Mongolian culture. (Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014).

of the earth, or what lies beneath the earth. As in many other riddles embodying a vertical principle, the vertical axis of above: heavenly realm, the realm of Tenger, as opposed to what lies below: the human realm.

There is another variation of this riddle:

- 37) Бурхан цээж-тэй
 Deity chest-SOC.
- Бүрхээрэн³²⁷ бөгс-тэй
 Funnel bottom-SOC.
- Хонх³²⁸
 Bell
- ‘With the chest of a deity
 With the bottom of a funnel
 – Bell’

In this variation, the metaphor for the bottom half of the bell is now a *бүрхээр* ‘funnel used for distilling vodka.’ In premodern times, it was made of wood; in any event, it is wide and conically shaped, thus resembling the bottom part of a bell.

Another variation of the metaphor of *monk* : *bell* is seen in this riddle:

- 38) Ааль-гүй лам
 Behavior-PRIV. lama
- Алиа зан-тай
 Cheerful nature-SOC.
- Тонтгор бөгс-өө хөдөлгө-х
 Protruding bottom-POSS. move-NF.
- Бондгор хэл-ээ бүүвэйл-нэ
 Chubby tongue-POSS. cradle-PRS.IMP.
- Хонх³²⁹
 Bell
- ‘A playful lama
 With a cheerful nature
 Moving his protruding bottom
 Cradling his chubby tongue
 – Bell’

Both *монтгор* and *бондгор* are ideophones, both referring to something that is protruding and chubby. The movement of the bell as it rings is compared to that of a ‘playful’ lama. The following riddle, however, has a somewhat more ribald tone:

- 39) Банди-йн боов
 Novice monk-GEN. pastry [penis]

³²⁷ See as well Riddle 13 on p. 63 on this thesis.

³²⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

³²⁹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

Банзал-д-аа багта-х-гүй
 Skirt-DAT-LOC.-POSS. fit-NF-NEG.

– Хонх³³⁰
 Bell

‘The pastry of the little monk
 Doesn’t fit in his skirt
 – Bell’

‘Pastry’ (*боов*) expresses a metaphoric code for ‘penis,’ particularly with regard to young children.³³¹ The ‘pastry’ refers to the tongue of the bell. *Банду* (Tib. *ban de*)³³² traditionally referred to a novice monk. In the course of the twentieth century, it came to refer to any young boy. *Банзал* (Skr. *pañcāla*) refers to the traditional lama’s skirt (the lower part of the robes).³³³ For one informant, this riddle conjured the image of the tongue of the bell dangling slightly down below the bottom edge of the body of the bell.³³⁴

The next riddle paints a vivid image of a handbell being struck:

40)	Балдан Baldan	банди novice monk	балцгана-х waddle-NF.
	Бас нэг Also one	банди novice monk	алцгана-х waddle-CV.IMP.
	– Хонх Bell	цохи-х ³³⁵ strike-NF.	

‘Little monk Baldan waddling
 Also another little monk waddles
 –Bell is struck’

Балдан, a proper name meaning ‘perfect ember’³³⁶ < Tib. *dpal ldan* ‘glorious, one possessed of glory’³³⁷ is the handbell, personified.³³⁸ As the handbell is being struck, it is slowly swung up and down in the hand of the monk: this is visually similar to the slow ‘toddling’ or waddling movement of a corpulent person walking along.

³³⁰ Ibid, 254.

³³¹ Oberfalzerová 2006, 113. It should be noted as well that generally speaking, there was little to no embarrassment in discussing these riddles with my informants (with the exception of one young man from Inner Mongolia, who was somewhat scandalized by this riddle). To a certain degree, this can be seen as stemming from a culture of deep knowledge and intimacy with the anatomy of both humans and livestock in the countryside.

³³² Lessing 1960, 82.

³³³ Sūkhbaatar 32, 1997.

³³⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

³³⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

³³⁶ Choimaa, 2013, 493.

³³⁷ Chandra-Das 2004, 790.

³³⁸ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

One informant relayed a variation of this riddle:

- 41) Балдан бандагна-ж
Baldan waddle-CV.IMP.
- Балдан/г-ийн доодох санжигна-х
Baldan-GEN lower part dangle-NF.
- Хонх цохи-х³³⁹
Bell strike-NF.

‘Baldan waddles
Baldan’s lower part dangles down
– Bell being struck’

Доодох ‘what is lower down’ is another euphemism for a man’s penis.³⁴⁰ It visually resembles the tongue of a Buddhist handbell. According to one informant, the verb *бандагнах* was evocative of slow movement, like a monk’s hand slowly ringing the handbell, as mentioned above in Riddle 40.³⁴¹ The verb *бандагнах* does not appear to be in any modern dictionaries, but it is certainly a variant of the verb *бандганах* ‘a fat person or animal moving’³⁴² It would appear to be linked to the ideophone *бандгар* ‘fat, plump.’³⁴³ The verb *санжигнах* ‘to dangle’ would appear to be related to the ideophone *санжгар* ‘the state of a long thing hanging down.’³⁴⁴

In this riddle as well, the bell is visualized as the body of a monk:

- 42) Богд лам
Holy lama
- Борви-ор-оо дуугар-на
Achilles tendon-INS.-POSS. make sound-PRS.IMP.

Хонх³⁴⁵
– Bell

‘Holy lama
Makes sound with his Achilles tendon
– Bell’

The lama is ‘ringing’ the bell with his Achilles tendon, because the bottom of the bell’s

³³⁹ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

³⁴⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 712.

³⁴¹ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

³⁴² Bold et al. 2008, 229.

³⁴³ Bold et al. 2008, 229.

³⁴⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 1707.

³⁴⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

tongue, as it is struck, strikes the lower edge of the bell.³⁴⁶ This attribution of human anatomy to different parts of the bell, as seen above, as well as in Riddle 36 on p. 93 of this thesis, is very similar to the attribution of human anatomy to formations in nature, such as mountains.³⁴⁷

43)	Бор Grey	банди novice monk		
	Бондгор-оор-оо Chubby[thing]-INS.-POSS.		ТОГЛО-НО play-PRS.IMP.	
	– ХОНХ ³⁴⁸ Bell			
	‘The grey little monk Plays with his chubby thing – Bell’			

This riddle as well contains a scatological reference to the penis of a small monk, which here is metaphorically the tongue of the bell swinging back and forth. It also references the fact that a small boy might tend at times to play with his member.³⁴⁹

There is of course a strong resemblance between the physiognomy of a Buddhist handbell and that of a human being. Particularly with the image of the face of the Buddha on one side of the handle, to a certain degree the entire bell seems animated. Even though such riddles are humorous, they still reflect that principle of personification: the idea that spirit and divine principle can wholly pervade a material object, animating it.

3.5.2 Itinerant Monk

The final riddle of this chapter paints a very humorous portrait of the traditional figure of the itinerant monk, the *badarčın*. The *badarčın* (< *бадар* ‘monk’s bowl for alms’ < Uyghur *badir* < Skt. *pātra*)³⁵⁰ is a well-known figure of Mongolian folktales.

44)	Тангад Tibetan	Ловон Lovon	тав/ан fifty	цэн <i>tsen</i>
	Таарцаг Felt	уут bag	хоёр two	цэн <i>tsen</i>
	Таяг Cane	мод wood	нэг one	цэн <i>tsen</i>

³⁴⁶ There is a similar riddle in A Taylor: ‘A naked lama hits his groin. — Sound of the bell used in religious services’ (Taylor 1954, 342).

³⁴⁷ See p. 28 for more on this topic.

³⁴⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 254.

³⁴⁹ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

³⁵⁰ Kara, 1998, 43.

– Бадарчин³⁵¹
Badarčin

‘Tibetan Lovon [weighs] 50 *tšen*
His felt bag [weighs] 2 *tšen*
His walking stick [weighs] 1 *tšen*
– Badarčin’

According to one informant, ‘*Lovon*’ is a humorous name for a monk,³⁵² but it also refers to a functionary in a monastery, such as a preceptor (ловон < Tib. *slob dpon*).³⁵³ The *цэн* is an old Chinese measurement equivalent to about four grams. As can be seen, this riddle uses exaggeration to make its point: the monk Lovon weighs altogether about 200 grams, his bag is only eight grams, and his walking stick weighs a mere four grams.

3.6 Conclusion: The Sacred and the Everyday

As we have seen, livestock imagery is very prevalent in riddles related to Buddhism (as it is throughout the entire corpus), meaning that categories or riddle subsets from both the original indigenous religious and the sacral traditions and Buddhism become overlapped or merged. Religious categories and themes are integrated into the images and activities of everyday life, such as herding. The inherently nomadic trope of simultaneous movement and motionlessness³⁵⁴ is evident in many of the riddles.

The riddles which take Buddhist nuns and clerical authority figures as their subject are gently mocking in nature, using an abundance of ideophonic words. Despite certain efforts during the Soviet era to portray these riddles as anti-clerical, my informants did not interpret them as such. Perhaps, though, something about the inherent elasticity of this class of words—particularly within the linguistic landscape of exceptionally terse ellipsis—makes them more vulnerable to further polysemic, even politically motivated interpretation.

In the riddles dealing with Buddhist subjects in these two corpuses, the sacred is integrated into the senses and images and objects of the humblest everyday reality. This lack of a clear sacral-profane dichotomy strongly suggests the reciprocal nature and ever-evolving of the relationship between man and the divine as embodied through images of his interactions with the natural world—a vision which intensely resonates with indigenous Mongolian cosmological views.

³⁵¹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol 1, 128.

³⁵² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

³⁵³ Kara 1998, 240.

³⁵⁴ See p. 101.

Chapter 4

Movement and Stillness, Speed and Intensities

4.0 Introduction

Keeping in mind the traditionally nomadic culture and way of life of Mongolia, we should expect to find abundant tropes expressive of movement in its folklore and in the riddle corpus.

In this regard, we follow the analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, who wrote:

... even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfil the function of the sedentary road, which is to *parcel out a closed space to people*, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares. The nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it *distributes people (or animals) in an open space*, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating.³⁵⁵

Deleuze and Guattari define movement through a nomadic space as contrasting greatly to movement through settled (striated) space:

The nomad distributes himself in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle. It is therefore false to define the nomad by movement. Toynbee³⁵⁶ is profoundly right to suggest that the nomad is on the contrary *he who does not move*. Whereas the migrant leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile, the nomad is one who does not depart, does not want to depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advances, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge. Of course, the nomad moves, but while seated, and he is only seated while moving (the Bedouin galloping, knees on the saddle, sitting on the soles of his upturned feet, “a feat of balance”).³⁵⁷

In the two riddle corpuses, we come across many images of movement *and* stillness, images of movement where we might expect to find stillness, and vice versa. Generally speaking, the trajectories of movement in the riddle corpus respect the nomadic division of

³⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380.

³⁵⁶ Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975); British historian and philosopher of history.

³⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 381.

space into horizontal and vertical axes (Father Sky: *Тэнгэр* — and Mother Earth: *газар дэлхий*), and yet many other riddles also demonstrate Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of lines of flight. The translator of the work, B. Massumi, summarizes it thus:

FLIGHT/ESCAPE. Both words translate *fuite*, which has a different range of meanings in either of the English terms. *Fuite* covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a *point de fuite*. It has no relation to flying.³⁵⁸

Movement and stillness in the Mongolian riddle corpus combines the original nomadic horizontal and vertical sacred axes, along with images of rhizomatic movement and Deleuzian *intensities* of movement. This chapter is based on a paper first presented at the conference “*Cesta, cesty, putování* [Path, Paths, Pilgrimage]” held at Charles University in 2016.

4.1 Merging Subjects

The following riddle combines sacral imagery and images from the everyday life of a herder (as we saw in Chapter 3), a frequent overlapping of two ostensibly contrasting subsets:

45)	Буурал Grey	морь horse	будан fog	тата-н pull-CV.MOD.
	Бурхан Deity	багш teacher	ядам <i>yadam</i>	тата-н pull-CV.MOD.
		– Сан Incense	тави-х ³⁵⁹ place-NF.	

‘Grey horse draws the fog
Buddha draws the *yadam*
– Burning incense’

This riddle seems straightforward at first glance, but several of its grammatical categories remain rather ambiguous. It is but one of many Mongolian riddles that uses livestock imagery of the herders’ everyday life to paint a picture of a votive scene (see, for example, Riddle 23 on p. 77 of this thesis). In the view of Lubsangdorji, the grey horse refers to the small round three-legged traditional incense burner known as a *шанлуу* or *шанлав* (WM. *šanglu* < Chin. *xīāng lú*),³⁶⁰ which is a regular votive item on Buddhist altars in the home and in the shrine: see Figs. 16a and 16b on next page. The incense holder is ‘pulling’ the smoke of the incense.³⁶¹ In the view of Byambaa, a Buddhist monk, the ‘grey steed’ is the incense ‘juniper’ (*ару*), used in a

³⁵⁸ “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi).

³⁵⁹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 287.

³⁶⁰ Sükhbaatar 1997, 220.

³⁶¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

powdered form in Mongolian monasteries and home altars. The fog is thus the smoke that emerges from the burnt incense.³⁶² The riddle also makes use of the phrase *будан татах* ‘to draw, pull fog’ which means for a landscape to be covered in fog and mist. The double use of the verb *tamax* ‘to pull’ creates an assonance at the end of the line, which works with the alliteration between the two words beginning with the syllable ‘*bu*’ to bind the riddle phonetically to itself.



Figs. 16a & 16b. Three-legged incense burner *шанлуу* or *шанлав* with smoke coming out from burning juniper incense, seen from above and to the side. (Photograph by author 2020.)

Бурхан багш may refer to a monk, and not Buddha.³⁶³ *Ядам* is a loanword from Tibetan (*yi dam*)³⁶⁴ indicating a personal or tutelary deity (*чойжин* ‘deity protector’ < Tib. *chos skyong*).³⁶⁵ In this riddle, the phrase *ядам татан* refers to the tutelary deity being summoned through the recitation of prayers and mantras.³⁶⁶ Because the accusative marker is elided in the first phrase of the riddle (the elision of such zero accusative and dative cases being a common feature of both the spoken and written languages), it is not entirely clear what is pulling what, but the most likely interpretation is that the horse/incense burner is pulling the fog/incense smoke. This metaphorical movement occurs in parallel with the action in the second part, where it first appears that Buddha is pulling the protector deity (to the altar). Yet the relatively clear designation of subject and object in the first line of the riddle is somewhat more unclear in the second line, where Buddha would not be exactly ‘pulling’ the protector deity as a separate entity but instead *becoming* the protector deity for the sake of the worshiper who lit the incense before the shrine. In the view of Byambaa, however, the phrase *Бурхан багш* should rather be

³⁶² Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

³⁶³ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

³⁶⁴ Būrnee and Enkhtör 2009, 439.

³⁶⁵ Byambaa, consultation, 2020; Kara 1998, 688.

³⁶⁶ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

interpreted as being a monk, and thus it is he who is ‘pulling’ (i.e., summoning, inviting) the deity. For Byambaa, the connection between the incense smoke around the altar and the intense fog that can occur in the Mongolian countryside, especially in the mornings, was viscerally clear.³⁶⁷ The surface of the altar is metaphorically equated to the wide open steppe.

This sense of movement in the riddle is somewhat paradoxical, as smoke — based on common knowledge — from burning juniper or incense usually floats upwards, although it also ‘immerses’ the censor in smoke. This would explain the curious sense in the riddle of the horse/incense burner pulling the smoke back down to the altar. And yet this paradoxical movement also demonstrates an instance of a kind of *regressive assimilation of directionality* because the main movement and the main focus in the riddle is that which describes the arrival of the protector deity to the altar — by dint of the worshiper’s (or lama’s) prayers and offerings, Buddha arrives, and transforms into a protector deity. The ultimate meaning of this riddle can only be found in something beyond its lexical, semantic and morphological designations.

4.2 Movement in stillness, stillness in movement

The following riddle envisions an ostensibly still object as animate and moving:

- 46) Мод-т-оос
 Tree-SOC.-ABL.
- Могой гара-х
 Snake emerge-NF.
- Үс сүлжи-х³⁶⁸
 Hair plait-NF.
- ‘From a wooded [hill]
 A snake emerges
 – Plaiting hair’

This riddle refers to braiding hair as such (not to to the traditional hairstyle of Mongolian women, in which a woman’s hair would be plaited into braids and styled in an upward curve emerging from the head.) The term *модтоос* ‘from a wooded [place]’ is an allusion to the phrase *модтой толгойгоос* ‘from a hill with trees.’³⁶⁹ The word *толгой* ‘head, hill, smaller mountain’³⁷⁰ is elided in this riddle, no doubt to create the alliteration of the nasal and consonant ‘*mo*’ between the first and second lines. At the same time, this elision means that the unmoving element in the riddle has been suppressed. The word *модтоос* is interesting in its use of a

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 130.

³⁶⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

³⁷⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 1990-1992.

double case suffix: *мод* ‘tree’ + *m* [an abbreviated form of the sociative case] + *-ооc*, the ablative.³⁷¹ Within a relatively static situation — the image of a tree root — a notably forceful movement is envisioned. The ‘riddle image’ (to use the term of E. K. Maranda)³⁷² has the intensity that Deleuze and Guattari ascribed to what they term ‘nomadic speed’: the tree root is taking part in the act of reterritorializing the ground around it, the “in-between [that] has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an economy and the direction of its own.”³⁷³ As they describe: “There exist tree or root structures and rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome. The coordinates are determined not by theoretical analyses implying universals but by a pragmatics composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensities. A new rhizome a form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a route, the crook of a branch.”³⁷⁴ It is not too difficult to imagine this riddle tree root burgeoning into a rhizome. Indeed, there is a similar movement in the following riddle.

4.2.1 A Mythical Tree

The following riddle depicts a mythical tree:

47)	Газар Ground	доогуур POST.
	Галбингаа <i>Kalaviñka</i>	нүү-в move-PRT.PRF.
	–Мод-ны Tree-GEN.	үндэс ³⁷⁵ root
	‘Under the ground A <i>kalaviñka</i> moved –Tree roots’	

This riddle envisions the roots of a tree as being the mythical *kalaviñka* bird. The *kalaviñka* bird hails originally from Indian Buddhist mythology; in Sanskrit, it can designate ‘sparrow,’ but in South Asian Buddhist mythology, its voice is associated with the voice of a Buddha or bodhisattva calling human beings to the path of enlightenment. The bird described in Chinese sources would seem to be very similar a bird known as the *drongo*,³⁷⁶ whereas the Indian equivalent has been likened to a real-life cuckoo bird. The Mongolian dictionary definition locates the *галбинга* ‘*kalaviñka*’ firmly among the fantastic realms: “This mythical bird, similar

³⁷¹ Poppe 2006, 77.

³⁷² Maranda 1971a, 116.

³⁷³ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 380.

³⁷⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 15.

³⁷⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 63.

³⁷⁶ Schafer 1963, 103.

to the Garuda, has a body comprised of five kinds of rainbow colours, with feathers of white hue below its jowl; it exists in times of peace and is not present in harsh times; this bird, the egg of which cannot be seen, gladdens beings with its voice in oral literature. Its male form is known as *гарьд*; the female is known as *галбинга*.³⁷⁷ (It should be also noted that the *гарьд* mentioned in this dictionary definition is the Garuda, which means that the *kalaviṅka* would be the female Garuda.) Another definition describes the *галбинга* (WM. *yalabingy-a*) ‘*kalaviṅka*’ as being very similar to the Garuda, with an unbroken egg and a melody that rejoices all those who hear it. It symbolizes the learning of pure custom, profound wisdom, and unparalleled purity.³⁷⁸ In Indian and Tibetan tradition, by contrast, “Garuda has always been the sworn enemy of snakes or *nāgas*, and this archetypal enmity between birds of prey and serpents is common to many mythological traditions.”³⁷⁹ *Гарди галбинга* also forms a lexical pair.³⁸⁰ The *kalaviṅka* is mentioned in the Chinese version of the Lotus Sutra: the Buddha’s voice is compared to the voice of this mythical winged creature.³⁸¹ Through the centuries, it has been depicted variously, usually as a more or less human body with wings.

The picture the riddle creates of a tree root ‘moving or nomadizing’ under the ground also calls to mind the equally mythic *nāga*, which traditionally is seen as an enemy of the Garuda. The *nāga* are the mythical half-serpent, half human-creatures of “incredible complexity and iconographical definition” in Tibetan Buddhist folklore.³⁸² In Mongolian Buddhist folklore, they form part of the “Lords of places —*ezen*, dragons and serpents of the Earth and water — *luu, mogoi, lus*... [to which] one has to constantly offer sacrifices as a sign of respect.”³⁸³

In addition to these important mythical illusions, this riddle also portrays a common and completely realistic botanical phenomenon: the roots of a tree literally can ‘move’—they can ‘travel’ very far looking for water. The verb *нүүх* ‘to move,’ is also the word used to designate the movement of a settlement of gers from one seasonal location until another, forming the root of the Mongolian word for ‘nomad’ (*нүүдэлчин*). Informant Byambaa perceived the tree roots as ‘moving’ or even ‘flying.’³⁸⁴

³⁷⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 463.

³⁷⁸ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 58. Informant Byambaa described the *галбинга* ‘*kalaviṅka*’ as having ‘a conch-like melody.’ (Byambaa, consultation, 2020).

³⁷⁹ Beer 2003, 74.

³⁸⁰ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 63.

³⁸¹ Kubo, 2007, 120.

³⁸² Beer 1999, 72.

³⁸³ Oberzerfalová 2006, 76.

³⁸⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.



Figs. 17 & 18. Two Tangut-Western Xia (1038–1227) *Kalaviṅka*-shaped architectural ornaments.
(Photo courtesy of Dr. Veronika Kapišovská.)

And finally, at the same time, a different kind of nomadizing is taking place in this riddle, because the mythical quality of the *kalaviṅka* bird has shifted, indeed ‘migrated’ to the tree itself. This additional movement was made very clear in consulting with Lubsangdorji: this is ‘a tree of heaven’ (*тэнгэрийн мод*), ‘a magical tree,’ (*шидтэй мод*), ‘a learned tree’ (*эрдэмтэй мод*), ‘a mythical tree’ (*домгийн мод*) that itself has the qualities of movement attributed to its own bird-like roots: it has traversed the three ‘worlds’ (*сансар*) — heaven/the Sky (*Тэнгэр*), our world, and the lower world. And yet the tree also moves beneath the earth, in the lower realm. In addition, a phonetic-semantic association was created between the mythical becoming of the roots of the tree and its potential name: it was suggested that this could be a *галбар* or *галбарваасан* tree³⁸⁵ (< Skt. *kalparvṛkṣa*, Tib. *drag bsam shing* ‘wish-fulfilling tree’).³⁸⁶ Such a tree, in the Mongolian Buddhist world, is associated with sandalwood, considered to be the most precious and purest of wood species.³⁸⁷ Only a magical, mythical tree could harbour such a magical, mythical creature at its roots. The animating magic of the *галбинга* ‘*kalaviṅka*’ bird has migrated into the tree.

4.2.2 Sheep Grazing on the Buddhist Altar

³⁸⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

³⁸⁶ Bayarsaihan 2001, 511; Sükhbaatar 1997, 58.

³⁸⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

Fig. 19 below is fairly typical of an altar place in the summer year. The herders usually store some of their possessions over the summer months, so the altar place may be less elaborate than the one seen in the winter ger. However, it is evident that other important items are placed there such as the smaller vitrine of departed family members, and the impressive display of metals, some of them of communist-era provenance and some more recent, as well as items associated



Fig. 19. An altar place in the summer yurt, Hovd aimag, 2011. (Photograph by author.)

with the upper part of the human body or the head such as the hair clip.³⁸⁸ The reasoning behind the latter is that in Mongolian culture, anything that relates to the higher realm or anything that is upmost is automatically connected to Tenger (the Sky, the Sky deity), what is ‘best.’ Indeed, the word for ‘the best of anything’ (᠔ᠡᠭᠡᠵᠢ, WM. *degeji*) — also the choicest part of anything, which is always what must be given as an offering to the earth or sky deities — is closely linked, through a wide system of cultural semantics, to the word for ‘upper’ *᠔ᠡᠭᠦ* (WM. *deger-e*). The human head, being the uppermost part of the body, is associated with wisdom and reason (*γхаан*), a belief reflected as well in many Mongolian riddles. The

lower part of the cabinet has also been employed to display more family photographs and the attractive packaging for a Mongolian brand of green tea used to make traditional milk-and-salt tea.

The summer ger altar place often contains statues and other images of deities within a small rectangular vitrine-like box, set to the back, with the offerings placed in a row in front. In Fig. 19, this place is occupied by a smaller *жааз* — the framed assemblage of photographs of relatives, including the deceased.³⁸⁹ The offerings are placed in front, hence the metaphor of sheep grazing along an embankment, as in Riddle 48:

³⁸⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Veronika Zikmundová for this insight.

³⁸⁹ See Delaplace 2009.

48)	Эмч Doctor	лам-ын monk-GEN.	хонь sheep
	Эрг-ээ Bank-POSS.	дага-н follow-CV.MOD.	бэлчи-нэ graze-PRS.IMP.

–Тахил³⁹⁰
Offerings (to the shrine)

‘Lama doctor’s sheep
[are] grazing along the bank
–Offerings (to the shrine)’

The medicine Lama *эмч лам* — here most likely designated as such for the purposes of alliteration with the word *эрэг*, ‘bank (of lake or river)’ — is the herder accompanying them to or from pasture.

This riddle is a very apt example of how high Buddhist imagery was incorporated into the everyday reality of the nomads through oral culture. It also provides a good example of a certain category of spatial riddles, in which the dimensional features of the inside of the ger are set in parallel to the landscape outside of the ger, with the accompanying cosmological and ethical implications. The sacred qualities inhering in the altar cannot be said to be ‘confined’ there, but permeate the surrounding environs as well (and of course, it must be noted that Mother Earth has always been sacred to Mongolians, even well before the advent of Buddhism).³⁹¹

4.2.3 Simultaneous Stillness and Motion

The following riddle eloquently captures the paradox of simultaneous stillness and motion:

49)	Суумал Sitting	бурхан deity
	Гүймэл Running	ширээ throne
	–Морь-той Horse-SOC.	хүн ³⁹² man
	‘Sitting Burkhan Gallop[ing] throne –Man on a horse’	

Бурхан ‘deity’ has a wide range of meanings.³⁹³ It can refer to any deity or be employed within the referential range for anything that is sacred or belonging to the Upper Realm. *Бурхан багш*

³⁹⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252. Riddle 48 is also analyzed in terms of its connections to Buddhism as Riddle 23 on p. 77 of this thesis.

³⁹¹ This is also strongly connected to the idea of *нутаг* ‘homeland, place of birth.’ See p. 164.

³⁹² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 128.

³⁹³ See p. 24, footnote 28.

‘Burhan the Teacher’ is a common designation for the Buddha, which, to a certain degree, follows the Tibetan designation of *ston pa* as Buddha,³⁹⁴ one difference being that *багш* also designates any kind of teacher.

Statues of deities in Mongolian riddles are often described in terms of their stillness or relative lack of movement (here, *сүүмал* ‘sedentary, sitting’), a relatively unusual and noteworthy stance from the viewpoint of a herder who is always on the move.³⁹⁵ The traditional Mongolian saddle — still in wide use — is made of wood, often highly decorated, and thus in its own way very much resembles a wooden throne that could serve as a base for a statue of the Buddha or as a seat for a high lama. In this riddle, man is compared to a deity: he is like a ‘deity’ (*бурхан*) because he has reason (*ухаан*) and his body is the same shape as that of a deity.³⁹⁶

The following riddle invests a sacral object with the image of temporarily stilled movement:

50)	Газар Ground	доор POST.
	Базар Vajra	эрх rosary
	–Ич-сэн Hibernate-NP.	могой snake

‘Under the ground
The vajra rosary
–Hibernating snake³⁹⁷

Базар ‘vajra’³⁹⁸ was transmitted orally from Sanskrit through Tibetan,³⁹⁹ in WM. it was transmitted through Uyghur as *včir*.⁴⁰⁰ However, *базар* referred to not only ‘vajra’ but ‘diamond,’ leading to lexical pair *очир алмаас* ‘diamond.’⁴⁰¹ In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 3, *очир* also referred to the designation of rank on a peaked top, known as the *жунс*, a button or knot indicating rank on the top of a nobleman’s hat during Manchurian times;⁴⁰² hence the association with the head bead of the rosary.⁴⁰³ The genitive suffix to *базар* ‘vajra’ is elided.

Snakes are part of the ‘family’ of *nāgas*.⁴⁰⁴ In Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the five

³⁹⁴ Bürnee and Enkhtör 2009, 220.

³⁹⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2015.

³⁹⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

³⁹⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 84.

³⁹⁸ See Riddle 31, p. 85.

³⁹⁹ Tömörtogoo 2018, 84.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Bold et al. 2008, 1542.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 905; Lessing, 1960, 1058. See as well WM. *vacir malaya jin* ““thunderbolt” on top of hats worn by priests of rank.” (Ibid. 1213).

⁴⁰³ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2013.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

castes of *nāgas* play an important role in the iconography of such wrathful deities as Vajrapāni, Vajrakīla, Hayagrīva, and Garuda.⁴⁰⁵ In the view of Lubsangdorji, the term *базар* ‘vajra’ refers to Vajrapāni, thus it is the rosary of Vajrapāni that is under the ground.⁴⁰⁶ Vajrapāni is a major figure in the ritual *цам* ‘tsam’ (Tib. ‘*cham*) dance in Mongolian Buddhism.⁴⁰⁷ Snakes tend to curl up whilst hibernating, thus they look very similar to rosaries.

4.3 Moving Walls

To the European or sedentary imagination, the notion of walls that move could be rather alarming, evoking, for example, the Edgar Allan Poe story, “The Pit and the Pendulum,” in which the walls of the prison begin to move in toward the prisoner, trapping him (and notably visualized in Jan Švankmajer’s short film of the story made in 1983). In the following riddle, however, the walls of the ger are portrayed in terms of their innate ‘lines of flight’ — not only are they continually shape-shifting, but they are also constantly ‘on the move.’

- 51) Эрвээ-лжин
Pointy ‘saddle’-NZ.
- Хорвоо-лжин
Curl-NZ.
- Атгаа-лжин
Gather-NZ.
- Сунгаа-жин
Stretch-NZ.
- Хана⁴⁰⁸
Wall
- ‘Pointy ‘saddle’
Curling up
Gathered up
Stretching out
–Trellis wall [of ger]’

This riddle is an excellent example of how deverbal nouns function in Mongolian. Each of the nouns is based upon an ideophonic verb in Mongolian. The noun *эрвээлжин* is related to the ideophonic verb *эрвий-* ‘to bristle, to jut out unevenly:’ this refers to the top part of the walls of the ger, which

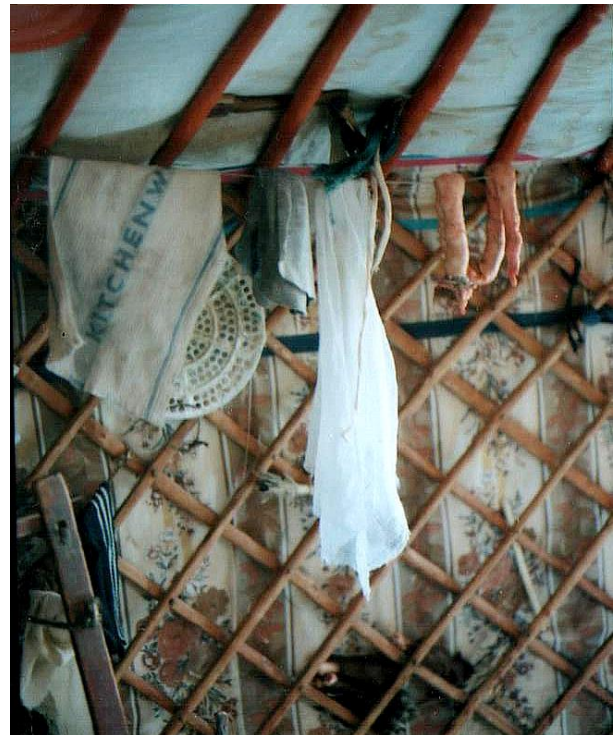


Fig. 20. Trellis wall (*хана*) of a summer ger, showing the lower part of the roof poles (*унь*). Hovd aimag, 2011. (Photograph by author.)

⁴⁰⁵ Beer 1999, 70.

⁴⁰⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2013.

⁴⁰⁷ Bold 2008, 1542.

⁴⁰⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 188-9.

form a zigzag pattern.⁴⁰⁹ At the same time, *эрвээлжин* can be lexically derived from *эрвээлж* ‘saddle (hon.):’⁴¹⁰ the top part of the trellis, with its V-shape, forms a kind of ‘saddle’ for the ‘roof poles’ *унь* of the ger (see Fig. 21 below).



Fig. 21. The roof poles rest on the ‘saddles’ at the top of the trellis wall. (Braae 2017, 215.)

Хорвоолжин is derived from the ideophonic verb *хорвойх* ‘to curl up.’ *Атгаалжин* is derived from the verb *атгах*, ‘to gather up’, and *сунгаажин* is derived from *сунгаах* ‘to extend out, to stretch out, to lengthen.’ This riddle effectively describes the movements of the circular wall of the ger during nomadic movement as a family rotates its place of settlement during the seasons: the spiky-looking top of the wall ‘bristles’ as the felt is taken down and its ‘spikes’ are uncovered

(but the spikes also form the ‘saddles’ for the roof poles); it then curls up as the ger is prepared to be moved to a new location, efficiently stored in a scroll-like manner for transportation; in the new location the wall once again extends itself and stretches out in order to function as a



Fig. 22. A ger being taken down at summer’s end: the long outer poles reaching from the tops of the walls to the frame for the roof wheel (*мооно*) have been dismantled, revealing the ‘bristling’ top edge of the circular contractable wall. Khovd aimag, 2011. (Photograph courtesy of Ondřej Srba.)

wall (see Figs. 22 and 23 on this and the following page). In this riddle, the wall of the ger is

⁴⁰⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2013.

⁴¹⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 3205.

anthropomorphized to become an actor in its own drama in the seasonal life of the nomad. In grammatical terms, the semantic effect is achieved through the deverbial suffix *-ЛЖИН*, which creates a verbal noun,⁴¹¹ which are quite frequent in these riddles.



Fig. 23. The walls of the ger are subsequently rolled up for transport to the new seasonal settlement. Khovd aimag, 2011.(Photograph courtesy of Ondřej Srba.)

This riddle also conveys, in an extremely condensed fashion (using only four words in total), a very strong sense of *simultaneous decentralized movement*.⁴¹² As such, there is a strong reflection of how Deleuze describes rhizomatic activity, as mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter.

In the following riddle, a ger that has been shifted to its new location is likened to an eagle that has taken flight:

52)	Бүргэд Eagle	
	Бүс-ээ Belt-GEN.	гээ-нэ lose-PRS.IMP.
	–Гэр-ийн Ger-GEN.	буурь ⁴¹³ base
	‘An eagle Loses its belt –Base of ger’	

Буурь means the circular imprint left on the ground by the ger’s having been there for a

⁴¹¹ Poppe 1937, 88.

⁴¹² Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2013.

⁴¹³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 183.

certain period of habitation,⁴¹⁴ its secondary meaning indicates the ‘base [of something],’ including the ground of the new seasonal settlement that the ger will be placed on.

All gers have at least one or more belts (*бүслүүр*) — these are thick straps circling the entire structure helping to keep the felt covering in place. The eagle has cast its ‘belt’ onto the ground as it has flown away. The world of human inhabitation is associated with the upper realms of the Sky, where the birds and Tenger dwells. The belt that surrounds the ger is assimilated to the circular imprint on the grass left by the ger that was there.

4.4 Sky Herders

The following riddle envisions a herd of horses running across the sky:

53)	Хар Black	морь horse	гүй- ВЭЛ run-CV.COND.
	Хязгаар-т-аа Edge-DAT.-LOC-POSS.		тул- ТАЛ hold-CV.TERM.
	Хангай-н Khangai-GEN.	адуу horse	үргэ- ВЭЛ startle-CV.COND.
	Хэмжээ/н-д-ээ Distance-DAT.-LOC-POSS.		хүр- ТЭЛ reach-CV.TERM.
	–Од харва-х, Star shoot-NF.	үүл cloud	нүү- Х ⁴¹⁵ move-NF.

‘Pure horse running
Up to the edge
Khangai’s herd of horses startled
Till the end of space
–A shooting star falls, clouds move [across the sky]’

The use of the word *xap* in the first line of the riddle does not refer to its colour, but rather to the purity of the horse.⁴¹⁶ An eloquent parallel between the movement of the heavenly bodies and the movement of livestock and horses is evoked. Each of the verbs in the riddle is in the converbial form:⁴¹⁷ the alternating conditional and terminal converbs create an A-B-A-B pattern in the riddle, indicated in bold above. The fact that each line ends with one of these converbs — which do not in and of themselves make full grammatical sense here — and that each

⁴¹⁴ Bold 2008, 378.

⁴¹⁵ Lovor and Ötziikhutag 1990, 38.

⁴¹⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015. See as well Bold et al. 2008, 2415, for the usage of *xap* as ‘unadulterated.’

⁴¹⁷ “Mongolian often uses verbal phrases, in which two or more verbal forms are juxtaposed — only the last one takes the ‘finite’ form or a verbal noun form. All the non-final verbs in the chain take the forms of various converbs (or gerunds). This is the manner of describing individual successive actions, which in most European languages would be expressed by way of the conjunction ‘and.’” (Lubsangdorji and Vacek, 2004, 83).

converb terminates with the consonant ‘/,’ creates a phonic ‘fence’ or boundary to mirror the boundary of space in the riddle. The words *зүйвэл* ‘if run,’ *тултал* ‘when hold,’ *үргэвэл* ‘if startle,’ *хүртэл* ‘when reach,’ are taken respectively from the verbs *зүйх* ‘to run,’ *тулах* ‘to hold up, support,’ *үргэх* ‘to be frightened, startled,’ and *хүрэх* ‘to reach.’⁴¹⁸ The vision of the universe in this riddle is one of a contained phenomenon — or, even if the universe beyond is seen as uncontained,⁴¹⁹ in this riddle, a part of it has been ‘fenced off,’ as if it were forming a contiguous part of the surrounding grasslands of the nomadic herders. The contrast with Blaise Pascal’s terrifying infinitudes (to cite one prominent instance of the Western episteme) is telling:

When I consider the short span of my life absorbed into the preceding and subsequent eternity, *memoria hospitis unius diei praetereuntis* [like the memory of a one-day guest] ... the small space which I fill and even can see, swallowed up in the *infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I am terrified*, and surprised to find myself here rather than there, for there is no reason why it should be here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who put me here? On whose orders and on whose decision have this place and this time been allotted to me?⁴²⁰

Хангай is a taboo word for mountain as well as “representing the mother, the female principle, that is, Nature, both living and non-living — the earth, water, mountains, forests, animals and other creatures.”⁴²¹ In this riddle, the heavens are envisioned as a kind of livestock enclosure (*хаушаа*) of the Upper Realm: the herd of horses are startled by something, perhaps by a wolf, and they run to the very end of space.

4.5 Camel without a Neck

The following riddle is a good example of how this oral form can remain mystifying even when the researcher knows the answer to the riddle (and there are many such riddles in the Mongolian riddle corpus).

54)	Хүзүү-гүй Neck-PRIV.	тэмээ camel
	Хүрээ <i>Khüree</i>	ор-но reach-PRS.IMP.
	–Зам ⁴²² Road	

⁴¹⁸ The word *хүртэл* ‘until’ is a postposition in its own right.

⁴¹⁹ See Riddle 3 on p. 35 of this thesis.

⁴²⁰ Pascal 1995, 26 (my emphasis).

⁴²¹ Oberzerfalová 2006, 29.

⁴²² Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 299.

‘Camel without a neck
Reaches *Khüree*
–Road’

It is rather difficult to imagine a camel without a neck, and what does a decapitated camel have to do with a road? As it turns out, the phrase ‘camel without a neck’ stands for the semantic unit ‘camel without a body;’ in other words, an invisible camel, an unembodied camel. The expression ‘camel without a neck’ functions as a metaphor, or more precisely as a *metonymy of absence*: the absence of the neck stands in for the absence of the *camel as a whole*.⁴²³ Yet the camel itself is perhaps not even that important (except as one of the most important forms of transport in the old days), except for the fact of its signalling *immateriality*.

The interpretation of another informant was rather different: he interpreted the ‘camel without a neck’ in a somewhat more literal sense.⁴²⁴ If one visualizes a camel seen in elevation, but missing its head and neck, it clearly evokes the image of a road as seen from the sky (see Fig. 24 to the right.)

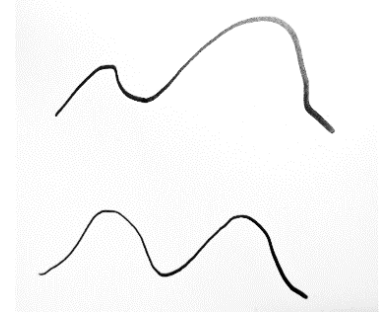


Fig. 24. The humps (*бөх*) of the Bactrian camel without neck and head as seen from the side. (Sketch by author.)

Another informant recalled a riddle evoking the humps of a camel:

55) Уул-ыг нь утс-аар хөдлө-нө
Mountain-ACC. P3 string-INS. move-PRS.IMP.

– Тэмээ⁴²⁵
Camel

‘Its mountains are moved by a string
– Camel’

In this riddle, the camel’s humps are visualized as mountains being moved by a string. The ‘string’ is the rope that nomads use to lead the camel, or the rope with which the camels in the caravan are tied up to one another. The fact of the great height of the camel’s body means that its two humps ‘loom’ over a person walking next to the camel like mountains in the near distance. What is very relevant to our discussion is that a usually immobile feature of the landscape (mountains) is visualized as a nomadizing element.⁴²⁶

Several new important asphalt highways have been constructed in Mongolia over the past few years, yet in surveying the landscape from a birds’ eye view what always strikes one

⁴²³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁴²⁴ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

⁴²⁵ Badamgarav, consultation, 2020.

⁴²⁶ This riddle also occurs in *Ölziikhutag* 2013, Vol. 2, 93.

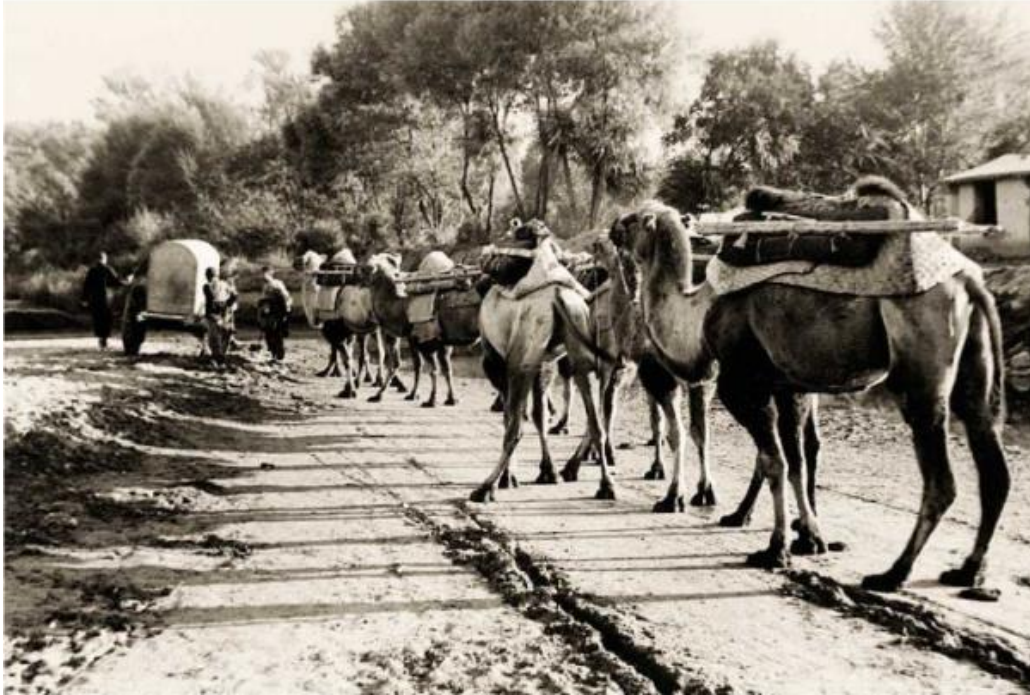


Fig. 25. Camels and caravan, Khuhko Khoto, 1938. National Museum of Denmark Digital Collections. (Photograph: Kaare Grønebech.) Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/ES/asset/354510>

is how few roads there really are. In trips across the Mongolian steppe, drivers followed paths that were, for all intents and purposes, invisible, but well known to those who regularly traverse the steppe. And yet roads, or paths, are incredibly important in nomadic culture — Deleuze and Guattari speak of ‘lines of flight:’ decentralized trajectories expressing a transition across smooth space of the nomad. *Замгүй газраар явахгүй* ‘[Mongolians] do not travel where there are no roads,’ as one informant stated. In the old days, roads and paths were recognized by the absence of grass or plants growing along their routes. But the path seemed to lead by itself: *Хаанаас хаашаа зам олдно*: ‘A road from one place to another will always be found.’⁴²⁷ There were, historically, also the natural paths created by livestock on their way to pasture. This mode of thinking provides us with a possible answer to Riddle 54: the road truly is like the camel without a body: it is immaterial, but it goes everywhere, it reaches everywhere. The road has no body, but it travels immense distances. Trajectories are known, but invisible.

And in this riddle, the road reaches *Хүрээ*. In consulting with Lubsangdorji, he devised many substitute expressions for this noun, which itself casts a huge semantic net, with the basic sense of something circular that is enclosed ‘circle; ring; district’, and the figurative meanings of ‘city district; fence, fencing; frame; fenced-in space; monastery; city.’⁴²⁸ *Хүрээ* can also refer

⁴²⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁴²⁸ Kara 1998, 629.



Fig. 26. Mongolian caravan, headed from Khuhko Khoto to Xinjiang, 1938. National Museum of Denmark Digital Collections. (Photograph: Kaare Grønebech.) Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/ES/asset/354539>

to at least three of the many earlier designations for Ulaanbaatar: *Их хүүрээ* ‘great monastic city,’ *Богдын хүүрээ* ‘monastic city of the Bogd,’ *Номын их хүүрээ* ‘great monastic city of the Buddhist teaching,’ *Хутагтын хүүрээ* ‘monastic city of the *Khutagt*,’⁴²⁹ and so on: the word *хүүрээ* ‘circle, ring, frame, monastic village or town’ was excluded from the designation for Ulaanbaatar only in 1924.⁴³⁰ As Krisztina Teleki notes, “Old monks talking about their old city say Bogdiin Khüree.”⁴³¹ It can also refer to another great monastery, or even to another universe or serve as a metaphor for any faraway place.⁴³² Reference to *Khüree* (*Хүүрээ*) in this and following riddle may remind one of the Western saying “All roads lead to Rome.”

4.6 Ultimate Destination of the Path

The following riddle seems to answer the question of the ultimate destination of the path:

56)	Энд-ээс Here-ABL.	харва-сан shoot-NP.	сум arrow	
	Эзэн Lord	Богд-ын Bogd-GEN.	Хүүрээ monastic city	ор-но reach-PRS.IMP.

⁴²⁹ *Khutagt* (*Хутагт*) ‘saintly, holy; Tib. *phags pa*; Skt. *ārya*. Holy, noble (as a title reserved for incarnate lamas).’ (Lessing 1960, 992, 1190).

⁴³⁰ Teleki 2015, 10-11.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

–Зам⁴³³
Road

‘The arrow shot from here
Will reach the Monastic City of Bogd Khan
–Road’

The road is like an arrow, and it reaches the monastic city of Bogd Khan (ruler of theocratic Mongolia 1911-1919). Even from here, from this worldly location, it may, metaphorically speaking, reach Nirvana, among other, more mundane destinations.⁴³⁴ And of course, one cannot discount the importance of *Богдын хүрээ* ‘the monastic city of Bogd Khan’ as the most important administrative centre of Mongolia.⁴³⁵

4.7 Conclusion: Nomads, Stillness and Movement

The riddles analysed in this chapter, focusing as they do on movement, brings us very close to the source of Inner Asian steppe nomadic thinking. We find movement where we might expect to find stillness, and vice versa. The movement depicted is often multidirectional or creating a kind of *circular intensity*— as seen in the riddle in which the walls of the ger become animated; or it can create a kind of *rhizomatic intensity*. Often, these paths are not explicitly named, but traced invisibly, causing us to rethink the notion of the loci of movement and stillness, within the context of settled cultures.

Movement between the three realms of the nomadic worldview — the Lower Realm, our world, and the Upper Realm — is not impeded, very much in the sense of Deleuze’s ‘smooth’ space as opposed to ‘striated’ space, replete with walls and barriers that impede movement.

The immense importance of movement in the Mongolian nomadic milieu certainly does not need to be emphasized. The intensive study of Mongolian riddles, however, taking into its scope the ethnographic as well as linguistic subtexts around the immediate framework of the words, can illuminate the linguistic means in which this importance is made palpable in the oral culture.

⁴³³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 299.

⁴³⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁴³⁵ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

Chapter 5

Traces of Ritual, Ironic Portrayal: Riddles on Fire

5.0 Introduction

Mongolian riddles on the topic of fire reflect the central position – both physical and symbolic – of fire in the hearth (*мулга*) of the ger as well as in traditional herders’ lives. In this chapter I examine symbolism in fire riddles, as well as their connection to certain fire ritual texts. The possibility of earlier Zoroastrian influences (Sogdian traders, for example, who were extensively present on the territory of today’s Mongolia) cannot wholly be excluded from the Mongolian fire cult. In any event, Mongolian fire-riddles are succinct oral expressions of the understanding of fire, the hearth, and its appurtenances in Mongolian nomadic steppe culture, creating a micro-narrative of the entire process of fire as an organic process. External patternings of relationships (familial, societal) found in fire imagery in riddles is not only a self-situating mechanism within the larger cosmos (cf. C. Atwood’s argument),⁴³⁶ and yet ultimately, as evidenced in the riddle corpus, all aspects of the nomad’s life are imaginatively centered in the sacred and sacralizing space of the fire. The centering of the image of the Khan and his Queen (the steel and the flint needed to spark the fire) in traditional fire-ritual texts is reflected in many riddles which paint the ‘fire family’ with ironic embellishments.

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5.1 Fire—from Dung to Smoke

The many riddles about every element in fire create an intensely visual narrative of its repeated creation in the hearth of the ger. They also attest to the close attention paid by the nomadic herders to the organic processes inherent in the phenomenon of the creation of fire. Riddle 57 describes the nomad’s observation of the source of the ‘raw material’ of fire:

57)	Тос-той	газр-аас	ир-сэн	хар
	Fat-SOC	place-ABL.	come-NP.	black

⁴³⁶ “By analyzing the fire ritual in this way, we can see that the point is precisely to identify the tent and the family with the dominant world-view of the time.” (Atwood 1996, 126).

Тос	өөх-ний	нүнжиг-гүй	хар
Fat.	lard-GEN	fat-PRIV.	black

– Аргал⁴³⁷
Dung

‘The black one from the fatty place
The black one, avaricious of fat
– Dung’

The designation ‘black’ is a noun which functions equally as an attribute (an important function in Mongolian grammar),⁴³⁸ here referring to dung, and of course in a rather comical usage. Dung emerges from a ‘fatty place,’ the stomach and intestines of the livestock that produced it. By the time it’s collected as fuel for the fire place or cooking area in the *ger*, it has completely dried out (otherwise it couldn’t be used as fuel),⁴³⁹ and thus no longer gives any grease or fat (*өөх тос*). The word *нүнжиггүй* (the privative of *нүнжиг*, ‘lacking in fat or oil’)⁴⁴⁰ also has the figurative meaning of being selfish or not having a good character.⁴⁴¹ *Нүнжиг* is derived from the Tibetan *snim* ‘jug ‘fatty, oily, greasy.’⁴⁴² *Нүнжиггүй мах* ‘meat that is not rich in fat,’ is considered to be of very low quality.

For Mongolian herders, one of the most important qualities of all is that of being rich in fat (*тосны чанартай, тос өөхтэй*). The association is that of being plump and well fed, crucial for livestock as well as herders in Mongolia’s cold climate.⁴⁴³ In addition, fat or oil are perhaps the most important offerings made to both the fire and the Buddhist altar.⁴⁴⁴

Riddles about steel and flint (*хэт цахиур*) are very plentiful in both corpuses. Traditionally flint was carried in a small leather pouch, the steel edge which was then used to spark the fire.⁴⁴⁵ The tinder, comprised of dry brambles, thistles, and other parts of dried-out plants, was also contained in the pouch.

58)	Хангай	мод-ны	навч
	Khangai	tree-GEN.	leaf
	Хайр	чулуу/н-ы	хагархай
	Pebble	stone-GEN.	broken [off]

⁴³⁷ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 168.

⁴³⁸ See footnote 61 on p. 29 of this thesis.

⁴³⁹ See as well the proverb: *нойтон аргал галын буг, нойрмог авгай гэрийн буг* ‘Wet dung—the fire’s devil, a lazy wife—the ger’s devil’. (Bold et al. 2008, 130).

⁴⁴⁰ Kara 1998, 303.

⁴⁴¹ Bold et al. 2008, 1416.

⁴⁴² Tömörtogoo 2018, 81.

⁴⁴³ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁴⁴⁴ See as well Riddle 110 on p. 190 of this thesis.

⁴⁴⁵ See Fig. 15 on p. 89.

Өргөн Wide	төмр-ийн iron-GEN.	өөдөс fragment	
Өлөн Hungry	буг-ын deer-GEN.	арьс skin	
– Уул, Tinder	цахиур, flint	хэт, steel	хэтэвч ⁴⁴⁶ leather pouch

‘The wide earth’s tree-leaf
A broken small stone
A wide iron fragment
The skin of a hungry deer
– Tinder, flint, steel, leather pouch’

The most elemental part of creating the fire — the spark, produced by the friction between the steel and the flint — is reflected in the fire ritual texts (see p. 142 of this thesis). *Khangai* is a word designating the earth and its plentitude.⁴⁴⁷ In this riddle, the leaves of the tree growing on the mountain form the tinder, the stone and the iron fragment are the flint and steel, and the deerskin is the leather pouch used to hold the fire-making kit. There are many riddles in which fragments, belonging to different domains, come together to form one constituent whole (see, for example, Riddle 26 on p. 81 of this thesis).

In the following riddle, the natural phenomenon of ashes being produced by the fire is observed:

59)	Гуули/н Brass	бурхан deity	
	Гулир-аар Flour-INS.	чацга diarrhea	алда-в lost-PRT.PRF.
	– Гал, Fire	үнс ⁴⁴⁸ ashes	

‘The brass god
Had diarrhea of flour
– Fire, ashes’

In this riddle, as in many others, the fire itself is envisioned as a deity (*бурхан*) on the altar: it is a brass statue, traditionally placed on the wooden chest (*авдар*) in the honorific area of the ger (*хоймор*). The description of the statue’s color and material ‘brass’ (*гуулин*) creates verbal parallelism with the word flour (*гулир*). As in much of Mongolian oral folklore, the deity is pictured in a humorous, down-to-earth manner, here suffering from the unpleasant stomach

⁴⁴⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 208.

⁴⁴⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 2436.

⁴⁴⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 202.

ailment of diarrhea. This riddle mixes the sacred and the profane (see Chapter 3 of this thesis) demonstrating that in Mongolian folklore, a sharp distinction cannot be drawn between the two and in fact can be considered as unnecessary. At the same time, this riddle is a micro-phenomenological description of what happens in the course of a fire burning on the hearth: ashes are produced during the process of combustion. It also points to the fact that ashes, in Mongolian nomadic culture, are not considered in any way to be sacred or special: usually they are discarded to the south-east area of the ger, which is not considered to be an honorific position.⁴⁴⁹

The following riddle reflects the last phenomenological feature that can be observed of any fire: its smoke as it drifts up toward the heavens.

60)	Муруй	муруй	хаана	очи-х	нь	вэ?
	Curve	curve	where	go-NF.	MOD.PTCL.	IP.
	Муу	ч	бол-сон	Хурмаст-ад	оч-но	
	Bad	PTCL.	become-NP.	Khurmast-DAT.LOC.	go-PRS.IMP.	

– Утаа⁴⁵⁰
Smoke

‘Crooked curvy one where are you going?
No one likes me, so I’m off to *Khurmast* (Tenger)
– Smoke’

Муруй is an ideophone⁴⁵¹ designating, in this case, a crooked curvy shape, something not nice and straight, and having a rather unpleasant connotation (all ideophones carry either negative or pleasant associations when referring to humans or something animate).⁴⁵² As in Riddle 57 about dung above, the reduplicated substantive *муруй муруй* ‘[something] wriggling here and there; the state of not being in a straight line’⁴⁵³ is personified. Here the smoke is addressed as a ‘crooked curvy [entity];’ perhaps even ‘Mr. Crooked.’ The smoke is addressed as if it were animate. “No one likes me” is a free translation of the phrase *Муу ч болсон* — it’s as if the smoke realized: “No one likes me, people say I sting their eyes, they don’t like my shape or how I look, so off I go to Tenger.”⁴⁵⁴ The smoke has feelings and thoughts, just like a person, and at the same time this riddle reflects its ‘role’ as a kind of bridge between Sky and

⁴⁴⁹ Also, in that position, they blow away from the ger. (Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2017).

⁴⁵⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 201.

⁴⁵¹ See footnote 7, p. 13 of this thesis for a definition of ideophones. See as well Zikmundová 2002, Oberfalzerová 2009, and Oberfalzerová 2010.

⁴⁵² Consultation, Alena Oberfalzerová, 2015.

⁴⁵³ Bold et al. 2008, 1273.

⁴⁵⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2017.

Earth (*Тэнгэр – Газар*).⁴⁵⁵

For another informant, this riddle did not evince a negative attitude toward the smoke.⁴⁵⁶

Муу ч болсон lit. ‘became even bad’ is also a colloquial variant of *ямар ч байсан* lit. ‘what [inter.] even was’ or *юу ч болсон* lit. ‘became anything’: both indicate ‘anyway, in any case.’

In this regard, an alternate translation of the riddle would read:

60a)	Муруй	муруй	хаана	очи-х	нь	вэ?
	Curve	curve	where	go-NF.	MOD.PTCL.	IP.
	Муу	ч	бол-сон		Хурмаст-ад	оч-но
	Bad	PTCL.	become-NP.		Khurmast-DAT.LOC.	go-PRS.IMP.
			– Утаа ⁴⁵⁷			
			Smoke			

‘Crooked curvy one where are you going?
Well, anyway, I’m off to *Khurmast* (Tenger)
– Smoke’

Smoke is the last visual phenomenon of fire. Once again, the sacred and the profane are combined: there is a humorous reference to the smoke drifting away when it becomes aware of its own unpopularity, and yet in its own way, even as the ‘unpopular one’ it seeks out a more sacred realm (the sky, the realm of *Khurmast*, the Zoroastrian God assimilated into Mongolian folklore.) And, of course, the actual tendency of smoke to drift upward is alluded to. Concerning *Khurmast*, Christopher Atwood writes:

With the conversion to Buddhism, the Mongols followed the Uighur example and used the term *tenggeri* as the name of the Hindu gods (*deva*). (In writing, the Mongols used the archaic Uighur spelling *mgri*, written without vowels.) In Buddhism these gods are not the creators or ultimate objects of worship but instead constitute simply one of the six births, mightier and more blessed than the human birth, but just as much in need of enlightenment. In practice, they are seen simply as supernaturally powerful and wealthy patrons of the Buddhist dharma. Of these Indra, already identified by the Uighurs with the Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda and written *Khormusta*, thus entered the Mongolian pantheon as the king of the gods.⁴⁵⁸

There is a Turkish variation on Riddle 60 (originating from the Yörük nomadic tribe) which is rather close in terms of content:

61) *Eğri Büğrü, nereye gidiyorsun?*
Tepesi Delik, sana ne?
Crooked one, where do you go?

⁴⁵⁵ See as well Riddle 84 on p. 147 of this thesis.

⁴⁵⁶ Consultation, Enkhjargal, 2020.

⁴⁵⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 201.

⁴⁵⁸ Atwood 2004, 532.

What business is it of yours, Pierced-on-Top?⁴⁵⁹

In this riddle, the smoke and the chimney are mocking each other, but there is no sense of the final destination of the smoke seeking out the Sky (the dwelling of Tenger). Still, the similarity is striking, particularly in how both riddles use personification and ideophones to depict the smokes' curving upward path. In the Turkish version in Riddle 61, the directionality of these two anthropomorphicized entities is doubled back upon each other, as opposed to the Mongolian variant in Riddle 60.

Taken all together, these riddles present a kind of micro-narrative of the process of the origin, process, and aftermath of fire, beginning with the fuel needed (dung), the act of sparking fire with flint and steel, progressing to the ashes produced by combustion, and finally ending with the fading wisps of smoke drifting upward toward Tenger. Every step of this process is presented with these elements strongly personified—not a process of inorganic matter, but a theater of animate beings.

5.2 Symbolism of Fire: The Family

In a very large number of riddles, the image of the family—comprised of mother, father, and one or more children—is projected onto, or depicted symbolically through the fire. These riddles typically exist with a great number of phonetic variations which themselves may lead to further variations in meaning. These riddles directly reference the fire-ritual texts which cite the Khan and his Queen as the source, creators, and bestowers of the fire (see Section 5.3).⁴⁶⁰

62)	Эрвэн Branchy	сэрвэн tufted	ээж-тэй mother-SOC.	
	Эрлэг Erleg	Хаан Khan	аав-тай father-SOC.	
	Лонтон Lonton	хар black	хүргэн-тэй son-in-law-SOC.	
	– Гал Fire	түлэ-х-ийг kindle-NF-ACC.	хэл-сэн speak-NP.	үг ⁴⁶¹ word

‘It has something branchy and tufted for its mother
It has Erlik Khan for its father
It has a son-in-law as black as lonton seeds

⁴⁵⁹ Basgöz and Tietze 1973, 865.

⁴⁶⁰ See as well Atwood 1996.

⁴⁶¹ Mostaert 2010, 313.

The challenges of translating ideophones into English are demonstrated by this riddle, although the phrase *эрвэн сэрвэн*, rendered as ‘something branchy and tufted’ (in Archie Taylor’s translation), is a good solution in that it creates a strong visual image (although perhaps inevitably losing the alliteration of the original). The words *эрвэн сэрвэн* are related to the ideophones *эрвэгэр*, *сэрвэгэр*, as well as *сэртгэр*;⁴⁶³ *эрвэгэр сэрвэгэр* also functions as a lexical pair, as in the expression *эрвэгэр сэрвэгэр мод* ‘branchy tree.’⁴⁶⁴ These particular ideophones reflect the visual appearance of something that is dishevelled, indicating light layers piled on top of each other, creating a pleasing and interesting sight.⁴⁶⁵ The verb *эрвийх* (WM. *erbeyikü*) is also described as ‘to bristle, to jut out unevenly, to wriggle (as an insect does with its legs when picked up)’.⁴⁶⁶ The symbolism of Erlig Khan — the Lord of Hell, the Mongolian version of Yamāntaka (Tib. *gshin rje gshed*) as the ‘father’ of the fire is a logical association, given the existence of the hot hells in Buddhist religion and lore.⁴⁶⁷ However, one must recall,



Fig. 27. *Sapindus mukorossi* (Wikipedia Commons.)
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waschnuesse.jpg>

that in Mongolian folklore, Erlig Khan is not necessarily always the terrifying figure that he may cut in Tibetan religious folklore.⁴⁶⁸ The ‘son-in-law’ or bridegroom is envisioned as the black *лунтан* < Tib. *lung thang* ‘*sapindus mukorossi*, Indian soapberry’; the seed of the tree, also known as soapberry, is used for making rosaries and also in medicine.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶² Taylor 1954, 345. A. Taylor also notes a ‘Samoyede’ riddle: “One of them is the son of the masters of stones, one of them is the son of the masters of dense forest, one of them is the son of the masters of iron. Among them they beget a child. — Steel, flint, tinder.” (Ibid., 389).

⁴⁶³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁴⁶⁴ Luvsangdendev 2001, 1304.

⁴⁶⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁴⁶⁶ Lessing 1960, 319.

⁴⁶⁷ There are eight hot hells (Tib. *tsha dmyal brgyad*) and eight cold hells (Tib. *grang dmyal brgyad*) in Tibetan Buddhism (Rigzin 2008 216, 39); Мо. *халуун там* ‘hot hells’ and *найман хүйтэн там* ‘eight cold hells’ (Bürnee and Enkhtör 2009 386, 106).

⁴⁶⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

⁴⁶⁹ Sükhbaatar 1997, 127.

The ‘daughter’ of the family is elided, or somehow got left out of the riddle, in which the mother is the kindling (wood), the father is the fire, and the son is the ashes (the soapberry seeds).

The following riddle, from the collection of Ordos folklore of Antoine Mostaert, is a close variation of the above riddle:

63)	Эрвэн Branchy	сэрвэн tufted	ээж-тэй mother-SOC.			
	Эрлэг Erlig	Хаан Khan	аав-тай father-SOC.			
	Бандан Bandan	хаан Khan	хар black	хүргэн-тэй son-in-law-SOC.		
	Гоо-той Beauty-SOC.	цагаан white	хүүхэн-тэй daughter-SOC.			
	– Гал Fire	түл-ж kindle-CV.IMP.	тогоо pot	угаа-х-ыг wash-NF.-ACC.	хэл-сэн say-NP.	үг ⁴⁷⁰ word

‘With a branchy and tufted mother
With Erlig Khan for a father
With black Bandan Khan for a son-in-law
With a beautiful white daughter
– Kindling the fire, washing out the pot’

In this riddle, similar to Riddle 60, the ‘branchy and tufted mother’ is the *түлээ* ‘firewood’ (although this can also include dung),⁴⁷¹ the father, Erlig Khan, is the fire, black Bandan Khan is the pot, and the beautiful white girl is the *угаазуур* ‘washbasin.’⁴⁷² *Бандан* ‘Bandan’ < Chin. *bānděng*, WM *bandang* means bench or plank-bed.⁴⁷³ At the same time, however, Mostaert lists the Ordos dialect word *bandang* ‘ramassé, trapu’⁴⁷⁴ ‘thickset, stocky’ which certainly fits quite well as an attribute of the pot.

The following version of this riddle contains a somewhat mystifying phonetic variation:

64)	Эрвэн Branchy	сэргэн tufted	цээж-тэй [ээж-тэй?] chest-SOC. [mother-SOC.?)
	Эрлэг Erlig	хаан Khan	аав-тай father-SOC.
	Ёндон	хар	хүргэн-тэй

⁴⁷⁰ Mostaert 2010, 313.

⁴⁷¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁴⁷² Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁴⁷³ Sükhbaatar 1997, 32; Lessing 1960, 81.

⁴⁷⁴ Mostaert 1968, 49.

Yondon	black	son-in-law-SOC.	
Буудай Grain	цагаан white	хүүхэн-тэй daughter-SOC.	
– Гал, Fire	тулга, hearth	хөө, cinders	үнс ⁴⁷⁵ ashes

‘With a tufty tously chest [mother?]
With Erlig Khan for a father
With Black Yondon for a son-in-law
With a wheat-white daughter
– Fire, hearth, cinders, ashes’

The other versions of this riddle begin with a description of the ‘tufty tously’ mother. In this version, the word ‘mother’ *ээж* has become ‘chest’ *цээж* by the addition of the consonant ‘ts’/ц at the beginning of the word. It is of course impossible to know if this was a deliberate change, a ‘mistake’ or a mere slip of the tongue: but in terms of referring to the ‘upper body’ of the fire as ‘tufty and tously,’ the riddle could still make sense, and in a very real way the word ‘mother’ (*ээж*) is still ‘hidden’ within the word ‘chest’ (*цээж*): phonically the two words sound almost exactly the same, with the exception of the sibilant at the beginning of the word ‘chest’ (*цээж*). This ‘slip of the tongue’ points to the phonetic lability that exists in many of these riddles, often with a resulting semantic lability (see, for example, Riddle 13 on p. 62 of this thesis).

Each constituent part of the fire is given a distinct role: Erlig Khan, the father, is the cauldron, the mother is the kindling of the fire, the son-in-law, “Black Yondon” designates the cinders created by the fire, and the daughter is envisioned in the metaphor of the ashes as white grains. *Ёндон* ‘Yondon’ < Tib. *yon tan* ‘attributes, good quality, excellence, taste, effect, virtue, accomplishment,’⁴⁷⁶ is also a frequent name for lamas. The entire family is thus symbolically embodied within the fire and collectively contributes to its existence.

The following riddle offers a humorous variant on the components of the hearth as members of the family:

65)	Хөх Grey	хангай-д Khangai-DAT.-LOC.	нутаг-тай homeland-SOC.
	Хөгшин Old	буурал grey	ээж-тэй mother-SOC.
	Хэдэр	хар	өвгөн-тэй

⁴⁷⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 169.

⁴⁷⁶ Choimaa 2013, 543; Chandra Das 2004, 1148.

Quarrel	black	old man-SOC.
Уцан Whiny	шар yellow	хүүхэд-тэй child-SOC.

– Гал⁴⁷⁷
Fire

‘In the land of the grey mountains
With an old grey mother
With quarreling black old men
And a whining yellow child
– Fire’

The first line refers to the earth in general, or rather the place where the action of the riddle is occurring. *Хангай* has many meanings, including ‘a region of mountains, forests, rivers, and abundance of vegetation, and soft black earth,’⁴⁷⁸ but even beyond that, it indicates ‘the world, the steppe, [all of] nature.’⁴⁷⁹ The *хөгшин буурал ээж* ‘old grey mother’ refers to the fuel for kindling fire, be it wood, twigs, dung, or branches from various bushes, and weeds: it is sapped of colour and grey from lying around on the steppe; it gradually dries out, then is found and gathered for fuel, just as in Riddle 57 on p. 118. The *хэдэр өвгөн* ‘quarrelling man~men’ refers to the four legs of the brazier (*тулга*): traditionally, the top of the four legs were curved downward, something like a bird’s beak, so that the cauldron or pot (*могдоо*) could be placed upon it.⁴⁸⁰ As the top part of the *тулга* ‘brazier’ looks something like four



Fig. 28. A traditional Mongolian *тулга*, or brazier (mongoltoli.mn).

disagreeable birds, this riddle continues the visual anthropomorphism to the metaphor of four

⁴⁷⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 203.

⁴⁷⁸ Bold et al. 2008, 2436.

⁴⁷⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018. “*Khangai* ... represents the mother, the female principle, that is, Nature, both living and non-living — the earth, water, mountains, forests, animals and other creatures.” (Oberfalzerová 2006, 29).

⁴⁸⁰ These ‘four ear-like pillars’ are known as the *момго* (Bold et al 2008, 2025).

legs of the brazier as four disagreeable old men bickering with each other. The *улцан шар хүүхэд* ‘whining yellow child’ is the child of the grey mother and (one of) the quarrelling old men; its eyes are slightly watering because it’s always crying and fussing.⁴⁸¹

In the following riddle, the sparks of the fire are identified as the daughters of the family:

66)	Цагаадай-н Tsagaadai-GEN.	охи-д daughter-PL.		
	Цагаан White	гүүр-ээр bridge-INS.	ирээ-гүй come-NI.-NEG.	
	Улаадай-н Ulaadai-GEN.	охи-д daughter-PL.		
	Улаан Red	гүүр-ээр bridge-INS.	ирээ-гүй come-NI.-NEG.	
		– Гал-ын Fire.GEN.	чандруу cinder	оч ⁴⁸² spark

‘Mr. White’s daughters
Didn’t get here by white bridge
Mr. Red’s daughters
Didn’t get here by red bridge
– Sparks, white ash from fire’

Цагаадай and *Улаадай* are two names formed from *цагаан* ‘white’ and *улаан* ‘red,’ Mr. White and Mr. Red. The daughters of Mr. White and Mr. Red have not arrived on foot (by bridge), but by flying (the sparks and ashes flying in and around and out of the fire in all sorts of directions).⁴⁸³ As they are sparks, there are many of them. The different kinds of fuel for the fire (the various kinds of wood or dung) produce different kinds of ashes and sparks.⁴⁸⁴ In that the sparks are envisioned as female elements, the image becomes reminiscent of that of a *ḍākinī* (Tib. *mkha’ ’gro ma*, Мо. *дагина*) flying through the sky. It is worth remembering that the feminine principle is — in contrast to many other cultures both West and East — highly valued in Mongolian culture, as is testified by the etymology of the word *охин* (WM. *okin, ökin*) and its relation to the word/root *охь* (WM. *oki*) ‘top; ornament on top of an object; symbol; superior, first; spirit, essence, substance; source’⁴⁸⁵ and ‘the best part of something,’⁴⁸⁶ as well as the

⁴⁸¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁴⁸² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol 2, 169.

⁴⁸³ Byambaa, consultation, 2020.

⁴⁸⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁴⁸⁵ Lessing 1960, 607.

⁴⁸⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 1541.

lexical pair *oki manglai* ‘the very best, excellent, superior.’⁴⁸⁷

It is also very possible that the name *Цагаадай* might also refer to a connection with the historical Chagatai Khan, the second son of Chinggis Khan (r. 1226–1242).⁴⁸⁸

The following riddle also praises the fire in terms of the feminine principle, in a manner almost approaching that of a praise-song (*магтаал*):

67)	Гайхал-тай Wonder-SOC.	улаан red	хөвгүү-д son-PL.	дотор POST.
	Галзуу Wild	гоё beautiful	Гандимаа Gandimaa	
	– Гал-ын Fire-GEN.	дөл ⁴⁸⁹ flame		

‘Amid the wondrous red sons
The wild beauty Gandimaa
– Flames of the fire’

This riddle names the flames of the fire with the female name *Гандимаа* < Skt. *kāṇṭi* ‘harmonious to the mind’⁴⁹⁰ followed by the Tib. *ma* (‘mother’), widely used in Mongolian names.

In the following humorous riddle, the fire is envisioned as being composed of three constituent parts, the hearth (the fireplace), the flames of the fire, and the smoke being emitted, all represented by a member of the family.

68)	Хүү Son	нь P3	урт long
	Охин Daughter	нь P3	улаан red
	Эх Mother	нь P3	бүдүүн thick
	– Утаа, Smoke	гал, fire	зуух ⁴⁹¹ hearth

‘Its son is long
Its daughter is red
Its mother is stout
– Smoke, fire, hearth’

In terms of the depiction of the fire, we can see in these riddles that dual- , tripartite- ,

⁴⁸⁷ Lessing 1960, 607.

⁴⁸⁸ I am grateful to Prof. Ágnes Birtalan for this insight.

⁴⁸⁹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 167.

⁴⁹⁰ Choimaa 2013, 463.

⁴⁹¹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 169.

and quadripartite-structured imagery are all employed. The number of riddles visually and metaphorically embodying the family within the fire, or as the fire itself, is quite high. Whereas, from a Western perspective, the imagery of a family being symbolically located ‘within, or as the fire’ could be perceived as rather alarming, in the Mongolian context these references can and should be interpreted as important ritual traces (with their own indelible sacred aura), originating and migrating from the old sacred fire-rituals, handed down through orally over time and through sutras (see Section 5.3 of this thesis).

5.3 The Symbolism of Fire: Aspects of a Nomad’s Life

5.3.1 Officialdom and Administrative Entities

In addition to the component organic processes inherent in fire, the metaphorical visual projection of the family onto the sacred principle of fire and the hearth, just about all other aspects of traditional nomadic life are also metaphorically and symbolically projected onto and merged into the fire: these include the state, livestock, mythical and invisible creatures, the surrounding environment, various officials and nobility, Buddhist clergy, and a deity or deities (*Бурхан*). See, for example the following riddle:

69)	Гэр-ээс Ger.ABL.	гар-даг-гүй leave.NU.NEG.	зайсан <i>zaisan</i>	гуай Mr.
	Гар-сан Leave.NP.	хойноо POST.	ир-дэг-гүй come.NU.NEG.	зайсан <i>zaisan</i>
				гуай Mr.

– Үнс⁴⁹²
Ashes

‘A *zaisan* who never leaves [his] ger [home]
A *zaisan*, who, having left, never comes back
– Ashes’

A *zaisan* was an imperial high-ranking official⁴⁹³ during Manchu times. The ‘*zaisan* who never leaves his home’ is a humorous commentary on the presence of an official in his place of residence, and his relative lack of activity, similar to ashes just sitting on the hearth, but also reflects the relative lack of worth of ashes.⁴⁹⁴ Once they are taken out of the ger, they do not return: they are placed in a direction to the southeast of the ger, so that the wind will blow them in the direction away from the ger.

⁴⁹² Ölziikhutag, 2013, Vol. 1, 184.

⁴⁹³ Kara 1998, 191.

⁴⁹⁴ There is an interesting parallel in European literature: in *The Dispossessed*, by Szilárd Borbély, the villagers refer to an unwanted tobacco stalk in a hand-rolled cigarette (thus prematurely extinguishing it), as ‘*the taxman’s leg.*’ (Borbély 2014, 21).

The following riddle employs the word *хүү* ‘son, boy’, but refers to the riders of the the postal relay stations established under Chinggis Khan, which remained in existence in Mongolia until the 1940s:

70)	Улаан Red	хүү boy		
	Улаа Relay horse	нэх-ээд chase [escort postal rider]-CV.PRF.		гар-сан leave-NP.
	Одоо Now	хүртэл POST [until]	алга [is] lacking	
	– Оч Spark	үсрэх ⁴⁹⁵ jump-NF.		

‘The red boy
Left on the postal relay
[But] he disappeared
– Spark jumping’

In this riddle, the *улаан хүү* ‘red boy’ is the postal relay rider. *Улаа* ‘relay’ is a historical term, as Christopher Atwood describes:

Ögedei in his first year as Khan (1229–1241) organized a formal *jam* (modern *zam*, Uighur pronunciation *yam*), or road system. Relay stations with attached households were set up every 45 kilometers (25 miles). The staff tended the station’s horse herd, supplied remounts to the envoys, and served specified rations to those on government business... Citizens near the stations ... [were] called *jamchi* or *ula’achi* (from *ula’a*, Uighur *ulagh*) [and] were exempt from other taxes.⁴⁹⁶

The expression *улаа нэхэх* refers to the rider that accompanies the postal relay so that the horse can be returned to the point of departure.⁴⁹⁷ In the riddle, the sparks fly out from the fire, but they can’t fly far away too far, perhaps only one metre. This rather comically refers to the fact that relay horses traveled only about twenty or thirty kilometers on to the next post.⁴⁹⁸ This humorous riddle refers to the fact that the postal relay has left, but never returned.

5.2.2 Livestock

The following riddle, symmetrical in structure, represents the presence of ashes both within the *ger* (in the hearth), and outside, once they are discarded. The attribute *хөх*, while indicating the color blue, indicates the color grey, as in, for example, Riddle 65. The ashes outside are by the

⁴⁹⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 183.

⁴⁹⁶ Atwood 2004, 258-259.

⁴⁹⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 1439.

⁴⁹⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2016.

өмөг, the dung pile, placed to the southeast of the ger.⁴⁹⁹

71)	Гадаа Outside	ч PTCL.	хөх grey	бух bull
	Гэр-т Ger-DAT.-LOC.	ч PTCL.	хөх grey	бух bull

– Үнс⁵⁰⁰
Ashes

‘Outside, a grey bull
In the ger, a grey bull
– Ashes’

In the following riddle, the hearth and stove (*зуух*) typically placed right below the roof wheel (*мооно*) in the center of the ger is envisioned as a grey bull; its tail is the chimney leading up to and out of the roof wheel. This riddle is clearly of a more modern date as it includes the detail of a chimney (*яндан* <Chin. *yān tong*, WM *yandung*),⁵⁰¹ which began to be used in Mongolia in the 19th century. Interestingly though, it mimics the spatial organization of the following riddle, which depicts the hearth and the smoke emerging from it as a lama and his belly.

72)	Хөх Gray	бух bull
	Хөндий Hollow	сүүл-тэй tail-SOC.
	– Зуух, Hearth	яндан ⁵⁰² chimney

‘Grey bull
With a hollow tail
– Hearth, chimney’

An interesting anatomical detail is that bulls and cows have bones in their tails which visually somewhat mimic the long narrow shape of the chimney. The word *хөндий* is an ideophonic word, which depicts the form ‘cavity, hollow’; it also designates ‘valley.’⁵⁰³ In many regards, the metaphor *bull’s tail* : *chimney* makes a profound statement about the

⁴⁹⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018. Due to the warmth it generates, livestock often like to sit on top of it in the winter (Ibid).

⁵⁰⁰ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 184.

⁵⁰¹ Tömörtogoo 2018, 134.

⁵⁰² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 181.

⁵⁰³ Kara 1998, 602.

relationship and the undividedness of the organic and inorganic worlds.⁵⁰⁴

5.2.3 The Landscape

In this riddle, the fire in the hearth is metaphorically envisioned as a mountain pass:

73)	Арагал-т-ын Dung-SOC.-GEN.		даваа-гаар pass-INS.	
	Далай-н Ocean-GEN.	улаан red	ямаа goat	давхи-на gallop-PRS.IMP.
		– Оч ⁵⁰⁵ Spark		

Through the Dung Pass
Seventy red goats gallop
– Sparks (from fire)

Арагал is a dialectical version of the word *аргал* ‘dung’. Here, it has a double case suffix (sociative and genitive).⁵⁰⁶ The term *далай* ‘ocean’ might originally have referred to the term *далан* ‘seventy,’ a symbolic number designating a large quantity.⁵⁰⁷ At the same time, this is a typical example of phonetic variation, ‘deterioration’ or ‘mutation’ in the riddle corpus, which attests to its oral transmission (see Section 2.1.5 of this thesis). Note that the surrounding landscape (here, a mountain pass) has been visually transposed onto the fire in the ger with a corresponding dramatic shift of scale. There is something deeply cinematic in these images and their swift progressions and shifts of location and scale. The sparks of the fire jumping around are visually reminiscent of goats playfully jumping around the mountain pass, until they disappear into the distance, or until the sparks die out.

5.2.4 Mythical Creatures, Spirits, Earth-Lords

Not lacking from the rich visual imagery of the fire-riddle corpus are images of spirits in mythological creatures, including the *савдаг* (< Tib. *sa bdag* ‘earth lords, world-ruler, earth lords, a ruler, world-ruler’),⁵⁰⁸ and mythological creatures, as seen in the following two riddles:

⁵⁰⁴ The interiors of gers, including the objects within them, before the advent of chimneys in the 19th century, regularly became blackened from the smoke from the fire. In the Secret History of the Mongols, Chinggis Khan praises his ‘smoky ger’— in reality, this refers to the lacquer-like black surface created by the absorption of smoke into the wood over the years. Lubsangdorji recalls being taken, as a thirteen-year-old, to the ger of an older lady, in order to be able to drink the milk from her goat and sheep for a period of two weeks or so, as his family’s milk supply had been requisitioned by the cooperative, and his amazement when he saw the ger’s wooden trunk (*авдар*), glistening black. (Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018; Lubsangdorji 2019, 472.)

⁵⁰⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 183.

⁵⁰⁶ Other instances of double cases are to be found in Riddle 26 on p. 81 and Riddle 46 on p. 102 of this thesis.

⁵⁰⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2016.

⁵⁰⁸ Chandra-Das 2004, 1258.

- 74) Савдаг
Earth owner
- Салхи урууд-на
Wind to be born along or down [on current of wind or water]-PRS.IMP.
- Утаа⁵⁰⁹
Smoke
- The Earth Lord
Born along by the wind
– Smoke

In the minds of Mongolians, the *савдаг* ‘Earth Lords’ are invisible, and can never be seized (*барьж болохгүй*). They are identified with the *лус*, the guardians of the earth, mountains, and rivers.⁵¹⁰ One is not aware of their presence. Every mountain, river, and lake has its own *савдаг*: some are beneficent and gentle (*зөөлөн*), others are fierce (*догшин*).⁵¹¹ In this riddle, the wind has agency, along with the Earth Lord: the former carries the latter to a further destination.

The next riddle features two dragons:

- 75) Гэр дээр
Ger POST.
- Хөх луу
Grey dragon
- Гэр-ийн дотор
Ger-GEN. POST.
- Хар луу
Black dragon
- Утаа, сүүдэр⁵¹²
Smoke shadow
- ‘Above the ger
A grey dragon
Inside the ger
A black dragon
– Smoke, shadow’

In Riddle 75 above a visual symmetry and indeed visual parallelism is evinced. The curvilinear forms of the wreaths of smoke, in turn evocative of the imagery of dragons, is very frequent in Buddhist iconography. The black dragon refers to the shadow within the ger: as the

⁵⁰⁹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 201.

⁵¹⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 1171.

⁵¹¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2017. See as well Obefalzerová 2006, 31.

⁵¹² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 185.

sun moves, the lighting inside the ger functions as a sundial, as Veronika Kapišovská describes:

The interior of the yurt works like a sundial in a way, as the sunlight falls through the roof-opening (*мооно*) all day long: the sunlight slides down in the right (western) half of the yurt in the morning, and having passed to the left (eastern) part in the early afternoon it slides up again. This way, time can be observed according to the movements of the sunlight by the different structural components of the yurt.⁵¹³

5.2.5 Buddhist Clergy

Images of Buddhist clergy are not infrequent in the fire-riddle corpus, more often than not humorously depicted (see, for example, Riddle 34 on p. 91 of this thesis).

76)	ГЭЛЭН Gelong ⁵¹⁴	лам-ЫН monk-GEN.		
	ГЭЭЭГ Pigtail	нь P3	гадагшаа SP.	
	– Зуух/Н-аас Stove-ABL.	утаа smoke	гара-х ⁵¹⁵ leave-NF.	

‘Gelong lama’s pigtail
[Heading toward] outside
– Smoke coming from the stove’

The spatial noun *гадагшаа* indicates direction outward: the humorous image is evoked of a monk’s pigtail (*гэээг*) extending out from his body and drifting upward. The image is rather humorous in nature, as well as the fact that traditionally, Buddhist monks always shaved their heads. Some of the word choices might have been determined by alliteration (the pattern of the consonant ‘g’ in *гэлэн* ‘monk’, *гэээг* ‘pigtail’ and *гадагшаа* ‘toward the outside.’ And yet, despite the humorousness of this riddle, it still reflects an important cosmological conception: the surreal image of the monk, with his hair drifting outside through the roof wheel, unifies inside and outside, the ger in a landscape that is beyond it, Earth and Sky (*газар —Тэнгэр*).

Certain riddles reflect a more critical view of clergy:

77)	Унзад Chanting master	нь DM.	улаан red	торго/н silk	дээл-тэй deel-SOC.
	Цорж Vice-abbot	нь DM.	шар yellow	торго/н silk	дээл-тэй deel-SOC.
	Худалч	нь	хувхай	цагаан	дээл-тэй

⁵¹³ Kapišovská 2004, 82.

⁵¹⁴ See p. 57 of this thesis for a definition of *гэлэн/gelong*.

⁵¹⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 167.

Liar	DM.	faded	white	deel-SOC.
– Цог, Ember	гал, fire	чандруу ⁵¹⁶ cinders		

‘The chanting master lama with a red silk deel
The vice-abbot with a yellow silk deel
The liar with a faded silk deel
– Embers, fire, cinders’

On one level, this riddle reflects a deeply philosophical view of impermanence: everything will end up as ashes. The word *хувхай* refers not only to a lack of color, but to a lack of qualities.⁵¹⁷ Although only the unspecified entity in the faded deel is criticized in this riddle as a ‘liar,’ this quality extends by osmosis to the chanting master and the vice-abbott as well. This riddle may be seen as an ‘ordinary person’s’ way of expressing criticism of Buddhist clergy,⁵¹⁸ in a somewhat hidden and indirect fashion. As such, it is not completely dissimilar to the kinds of jokes (always tinged with black humor), repeated about government authorities during communist times in Eastern Europe.

In the fire-riddle corpus, ashes are often associated with the idea of something that is impermanent or not worth too much.

5.2.6 Deities, Burkhan, Religious Imagery

The fire-riddle corpus is extremely rich in visual imagery of Burkhan, deities and many kinds of religious imagery.

78)	Наан-аас Front-ABL.	нь P3	хара-х-ад see-NF.-DAT.-LOC.	найм/ан eight	хээ-тэй ornament-SOC.
	Цаан-аас Back-ABL.	нь P3	хара-х-ад see-NF.-DAT.-LOC.	чамин exquisite	хээ-тэй ornament-SOC.

– Гал⁵¹⁹
Fire

‘Eight ornaments, seen from the front [my side]
Exquisite ornaments, seen from the back [your side]
– Fire’

The riddle directly echoes the first two lines of the *Гэрийн ерөөл* ‘Benediction of the Ger,’ a traditional oral blessing:

⁵¹⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 203.

⁵¹⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 182.

Зээ!
Цаанаа чамин хээтэй
Наанаа нанжин хээтэй⁵²⁰

Zee!
From the front, with exquisite ornaments
From the back, with beautiful ornaments

In this riddle, fire is praised as an object of beauty. The number eight could be viewed as a symbolic number, meaning ‘many;’ at the same time, the scholar S. Dulam points out that the number eight, in the symbolism of Mongolian folklore, including many Buddhist legends and epics, symbolically refers to ‘the sun-lit universe upon the earth, the middle continent or world’ in terms of the traditionally Mongolian tripartite view of the universe,⁵²¹ as well as symbolizing the eight universal directions (the four cardinal directions and their intermediate points).⁵²² Needless to say, the iconography of fire is very rich and variegated in Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and frequently associated with wrathful protector deities, such as the Dharmapalas, not to mention the three flames atop the national symbol of Mongolia, the Soyombo.⁵²³

Fig. 29 below depicts a stove (зуух); it is part of the furnishings belonging a Manchu-era ger preserved by the descendants of the original owner. The oven is rather more ornate than what one would see in use in the typical ger today; its eight sides (each decorated with one of the eight auspicious symbols (*найман тахил*)) means that the inhabitants of the ger would indeed be able to the ‘exquisite ornaments’ from all sides, meaning that in one important regard, the riddle-image is quite realistic.



Fig. 29. A Manchu-era stove in Ulaanbaatar, 2011. (Photograph by author.)

⁵²⁰ Gadamba and Tserensodnom 1978, 116.

⁵²¹ See p. 63 of this thesis.

⁵²² Dulam 2011, 127-129.

⁵²³ See Fig. 49 on p. 190 of this thesis.

In the following riddle, the imagery of the golden vajra is projected onto the fire:

79)	Бээжин/г-ээс Beijing-ABL.	ир-сэн come-NP.	
	Бэх-очир Strong-vajra		
	Бэлг-ийн Gift-GEN.	хариу/н-д response-DAT.-LOC.	ир-сэн come-NP.
	Алтан-очир Golden-vajra		
		– Гал ⁵²⁴ Fire	–
		‘From Beijing came A strong vajra ⁵²⁵ Given in return A gold vajra – Fire’	

Although the riddle mentions Beijing, the name of this city could also stand metaphorically for the idea of an object come, or traded, from another, foreign land. Mongolians traditionally made great use of products from China. *Бэх* ‘strong, upright’ refers to qualities traditionally associated with the vajra (*очир*), a symbol of indomitable strength. The top part of the flame looks very much like the top part of a vajra, with its tip pointing upward. In this riddle, fire is conceived as part of a ritual reciprocal exchange, in which it is given in return for the gift of the vajra. This riddle might originally have referred to an object that originally came from Beijing, such as a match, which was used to produce fire, in which case the riddle would be clearly of later provenance.⁵²⁶

The following riddle appears to evince an opposition between the earthly and the sacred:

80)	Лар Silt	шавар mud	
	Алт/ан Golden	очир vajra	
	– Зуух, Hearth,	гал ⁵²⁷ fire	
		‘Silt and mud Golden vajra – Hearth, fire’	

⁵²⁴ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 182.

⁵²⁵ For a definition of ‘vajra’ see p. 86 of this thesis.

⁵²⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁵²⁷ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 183.

This riddle clearly refers to an earthen hearth (*шавар зуух*), one formed with earth and stones.⁵²⁸ Usually the earth would be pounded down, and this kind of hearth would be more present in a building as opposed to a ger. The sacred principle is clearly embodied in the fire in this riddle, as in the following one:

81)	Бурхн-ы Deity-GEN.	гэр-т ger-DAT.-LOC.	ор-ж enter-CV.IMP.	боло-х-гүй become-NF.NEG.
	Буудай-н Grain-GEN.	гурил flour	идэ-ж eat-CV.IMP.	боло-х-гүй become-NF.-NEG.
		– Гал, Fire	үнс ⁵²⁹ ashes	
	‘The house of the deity cannot be entered The wheat flour cannot be eaten – Fire, ashes’			

In this riddle, the ‘house’ of the deity (*Бурхан*) is envisioned as being within the fire. Fire is helpful, and thus it is a god.⁵³⁰ To a certain degree, this riddle emphasizes a difference between the human world and the world of nature and that of the deities, in that some of the usual activities of herders and nomads (entering gers, etc.) are prohibited from the sacred field of the fire.

81a)	Гүн Deep	худаг well
	Гүмд Lotus	цэцэг flower
	Алт/ан Golden	хүрээ enclosure
	Аржгар Bristly	идэш food
	– Гал ⁵³¹ Fire	
	‘[In the] deep well The white lotus [In the] golden enclosure Bristly food – Fire’	

The well is used symbolically in other riddles as well, as, for example, a metaphor for

⁵²⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁵²⁹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 167.

⁵³⁰ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁵³¹ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 182.

the human eye. *Гүмд цэцэг* (also known as *гүмдаа*)⁵³² is a good example of a word in Mongolian that has been adapted directly phonetically from Skt. *gümuda*; WM. *gümuda* ‘white water lily.’⁵³³ It was quite typical for the names of fruits and flowers to be adapted directly from Sanskrit. The word *хүрээ* ‘enclosure’ has a wide semantic range (see pp. 115-116 of this thesis). Here, *алтан хүрээ* ‘golden enclosure’ refers to the fire itself, and its ‘meal’ of ‘bristly food’ is kindling and other fuel materials, including *аргал* ‘dung’ (note that in Riddle 65 above, the fire’s food is provided by ‘mother’). Note as well how the sacral imagery is firmly positioned within the fire, forming as it were both the ‘container’ and the ‘contained,’ the symbolic lotus at the heart of Buddhist faith, as well as the walls that surround and protect it.

The following riddle uses a diametric top-bottom opposition: although it does not mention the Buddha specifically, the visual image evoked is that of Buddhist statuary on the altar, as in Riddle 59 above on p. 120, which described the fire metaphorically as a brass statue of the deity with ‘flour’ diarrhoea:

82)	Гуули/н Brass	цээж-тэй chest-SOC.
	Гурил/ан Flour	бөгс-тэй bottom-SOC.
	– Гал, Fire	үнс ⁵³⁴ ashes

‘With a chest of brass
With a bottom of flour
– Fire, ashes’

The opposition of *цээж* ‘the chest, the upper part of the body’ and *бөгс* ‘a person’s bottom, the lower part of the body’ is not infrequent in Mongol oral literature.⁵³⁵ Traditional nomadic thinking views all natural formations — rivers, mountains, and so on — as living beings with their own ‘upper, middle, and lower bodies’ (*дээд бие, дунд бие, доод бие*).⁵³⁶ In the Secret History of the Mongols §96, Ong Khan states to Temüjin: “*bögöre-jin bögse-dür čegere-jin čegezi-dür atuyai*”⁵³⁷ A strictly literal —and ultimately inaccurate—reading of this couplet renders something like: “May the kidney remain in the lower part of the body / May the phlegm remain in the chest!” While there is not space here to analyze this couplet in full, in the

⁵³² Bold et al. 2008, 569.

⁵³³ Sükhbaatar 1997, 70.

⁵³⁴ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 167.

⁵³⁵ Oberfalzerová, 2006, 43. Note as well Riddle 36 on p. 93 of this thesis: *Бурхан цээжтэй / Бунхан бөгстэй* — *Хонх* ‘A deity’s upper body / A crypt’s bottom — Bell.’

⁵³⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2017. See as well p. 24 of this thesis.

⁵³⁷ Lubsangdorji 2019, 249.

analysis of Lubsangdorji, the word for ‘kidney’ (*бөөр*) metaphorically refers to the testicles of the male of the species. The message that Ong Khan is conveying with this proverb is that everything should exist in its proper place: what is found in the upper area should remain there, and so on. Metaphorically, this means that the Khan should remain in his residence, and the minister should remain in his residence.⁵³⁸ It is expressed, though, in relation of the axis of Tenger ‘Sky’ and *газар* ‘earth’ in terms of the relative microcosm of the human body.



Fig. 30. Seated Buddha Shakyamuni in Meditation with Hands in Dhyana-Mudra and with Flaming Shoulders displaying Gandharan influence. Gilt bronze; Gandhara type. East Asia, 3rd-4th century AD. (Cambridge]: Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop.) <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/204074>



Fig. 31. Seated Buddha 1st to mid-2nd century. Bronze with traces of gold leaf. Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara). (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art). <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381>

Finally, it is worth noting how many of the riddles placing *Бурхан* ‘the fire deity, the Buddha, or both’ at the very heart of the fire are deeply reminiscent of some of the earliest Buddhist iconography. Some of the first images of the Buddha produced in Gandhara, following the end of the aniconic period of Buddhism in the 1st century CE, depict a flame-like halo around Buddha’s head, or flames emerging from the back of the Buddha. The practice of a synthetic depiction of a deity or king merged with the image of fire or a fire-altar was not unknown in Gandhara, as such fire-sancitized imagery was well known there, and spread to

⁵³⁸ Lubsangdorji, 2019, 249. See this volume for a translation into modern Khalkha as well as a comprehensive analysis of the entire Secret History of the Mongols, with highly detailed ethnolinguistic commentary.

other countries as well. As Benjamin Rowland Jr. writes:

The attachment of the flames not only to Buddha figures but to the portrayals of sovereigns and Iranian deities on the Kushan coins suggests that this conception is a syncretic derivation from the Avestan cult of the Sacred Fire. It is impossible to say whether the flames or nimbus came first as a method of designating divine radiance, since both are found not only on the Kushan coins but on the Gandhara sculptures. The flames are perhaps to be derived from the anthropomorphic representation of Atar's personification of the Sacred Fire, and the nimbus from the Achaemenid iconography of representing Ahura Mazda as a human figure framed in the disc of the sun.⁵³⁹

Fig. 31 on the previous page shows an image of the Seated Buddha of a very early provenance (1st-2nd century). It is described as probably one of the earliest iconic images of Shakyamuni Buddha.⁵⁴⁰ The 'serrations' of the Buddha's 'unusual halo' are very flame-like indeed.⁵⁴¹

5.3 The Symbolism of Fire in Riddles and its Connection to Fire-Ritual Texts

Research of the Mongolian fire-cult has been addressed in detail by such scholars as Antoine Mostaert, Nicolas Poppe, Walther Heissig, C. R. Bawden, B. Rinchen, Lajos Ligeti, and Christopher Atwood, among others. While there is not space to examine these ritual texts in detail here, what is quite relevant for our present topic is the way in which the fire riddles echo the language of these sacral texts (and embellish them at times rather ironically).

As seen above, many of the fire riddles envision the fire and its various components, as well as what gives rise to it, as being members of one family. Much of the language is uncannily close to the formulations or epithets contained in the fire ritual texts. In these sutras, the fire is envisioned as having been granted with the assistance of the Father and the Mother of the fire, the Khan and his Khatan. To take one example:

I offer a pure sacrifice to the Mother *Odqan yalaqun*, kindled by the Blessed Lord Buddha and ignited by Qurmusta Tngri.
I offer a pure sacrifice to the Mother *Odqan yalaqun*, who has hard steel for a father, flint-stone for a mother, and elm-wood for kindling.⁵⁴²

The beginning section of the following Fire Offering depicts the sacred familial constellation of the fire:

Originating from the syllable RAM,
Consisting of teaching of the wise ones,
With pure and sacred quality,
The burner of hard materials,
Illuminator of darkness,

⁵³⁹ Rowland 1949, 14-15.

⁵⁴⁰ See: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/72381> (accessed Oct. 23, 2018).

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Quoted in Bawden 1963, 293.

With a Mother of small stone
 With a Father of iron,
 With help given by the air,
 With tinder of dried plants igniting,
 The Khan of the Fire, Miraaĵa:⁵⁴³ to say why, on this day,
 We pronounce your epithets,
 We narrate your origins:
 It is the instruction of the Great Exalted One,
 It is the example of the Exalted Queen.⁵⁴⁴

The fire originates from the syllable RAM,⁵⁴⁵ but it cannot come to life until the coming together of the Mother (the flint) and Father (the steel to strike the flint). The image of the fire as that which can vanquish any hard material is reflected as well in this riddle:

83)	Зөөлөн Soft	нь DM.	
	Хатуу-г-аа Hard-ACC-POSS.	ид-нэ eat-PRS.IMP.	
	– Ноцо-ж Ignite-CV.IMP.	байг-аа be-NI.	гал ⁵⁴⁶ fire
	‘The soft one Consumes the hard one – Ignited fire’		

While the family constellations reflected in the fire-riddle corpus are often humorous and ironic variations on the language of the sacred texts, this should not distract us from the symbolic significance of these images (and, of course, the ever-present coupling of the sacred and the profane). In the ritual texts, the fire deity is usually envisioned as a woman; as Christopher Atwood writes: “The fire goddess is dealt with essentially as a deity existing on the plane of conventional truth.”⁵⁴⁷ In Riddle 67 on p. 129 above, ‘the wild beauty Gandimaa’ was pictured as the flames of the fire.

The projection of the family onto the fire represents a sacral movement: Mongolians always worshipped fire, but after the 13th century, it became identified with the cult of Chinggis Khan. The fire is a symbol of the sacred continuity of the Chinggids, which, in the minds of many Mongolians, exists until this day. The fire-offering texts thus constitute a synthesis between the earliest fire-cults, the cult of Chinggis, along with later Buddhist additions. The

⁵⁴³ In the view of Lubsangdorĵi, the name of this deity can be attributed to the formation of a hybrid word comprised of Tib. *me* (fire) and Sanskrit *rāja(n)*. (Lubsangdorĵi, consultation 2018).

⁵⁴⁴ *ram üsüg-eĉe egüdügsen / arsis-un ubadis-iyar bütügsen / ariġun gegen ĉinartu / qatayū-yi tülegĉi / qarangyui-yi geyigülüĉi / qayir ĉilayun eke-tü / qatan temür eĉig-tü / kii salki köġilege-tü / köböng uula noĉolya-tu / ġal-un qan miraaĵa : ene edür / ündüsün-i ĉinü dayudajū / ülger-i ĉinü durdaqū siltayan yayūbi geküile : / sudu boyda-yin suryayuli / sutai qatun-u üliger bülüge ...* : (Damdinsüren 1959, 110).

⁵⁴⁵ This is the esoteric representation of fire in Tibetan Buddhism. (Beer 1999, 82).

⁵⁴⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 202.

⁵⁴⁷ Atwood 1996, 125.

Khan and the Khatan of the text are Chinggis and his Queen (*xaman*), bestowing fire upon the Mongolians: the Khan's children, are, symbolically, all the Mongolians, placed within the sacral space of the fire, their continuity thus blessed and ensured for now and all future generations.⁵⁴⁸

5.4 Conclusion: The Sacred Principle of Fire

We have seen, in many of these fire-riddles, that they depict the creation of fire (as well as its aftermath) in an organic, nearly biological interpretation, which testifies to the herders' sharp observation of the natural processes around them. An interesting parallel is formed by the many riddles having to do with the digestion of food; see, for example, Riddle 13 on p. 62 of this thesis. In this way, a micro-narrative is created, comprised of the mosaic of these riddles, from the organic elements of the fire: from the generation of fuel (dung) in the stomach of livestock, to the evocation of the steel and flint that spark it to life, to the combustion that makes ashes, to the fire drifting away as wisps of smoke toward Heaven. This verbal recounting in and of itself represents a kind of repeated fire creation myth, reenacted through the repeated telling of these riddles.



Fig. 32. Matches adhered to the back wall of Gandantegchinlen Monastery in Ulaanbaatar as offerings, 2016. (Photograph by author.)

Just about every aspect of a herder's life is projected onto the elements of the fire, in a display of protean imagery subject to frequent repatterning. If we accept the fire as a sacred principle, then many mundane and every day realities become symbolically centered — through

⁵⁴⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

the agency of speaking these riddles — in the sacralized and sacralizing space of the fire. And yet the constellation of the family — with the divine Khan and Khatan seen as creating the fire — is repeated frequently in the riddle corpus. Even through the sardonic or ironic descriptions, the sacred origin of this imagery is clear. The worship of the Fire is simultaneously a worshipping of Chinggis Khan (the origin of the lineage of Mongolians) and his children — by extension, all Mongolians. The echo of the prayer for the continued blessing of the Mongolians is distinctly felt in the riddle corpus. The ritual remnants inherent in these riddles support the analysis of the scholars S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig quoted in the Introduction, who writes about the integral connections between riddles, legends, and myth.⁵⁴⁹ In Mongolian fire riddles, the most important elements of the fire cult — itself still observable today in the Mongolian countryside — have been imprinted onto these texts of oral folklore.

⁵⁴⁹ See pp. 46-48 of this thesis.

Chapter 6

To See the Cosmos in a Wooden Box

6.0 Introduction

In the two collections of the Mongolian riddle corpus examined in this work, a high frequency is evident of riddles that make reference to the cosmos of the natural world surrounding the nomad: these riddles invoke the structuring principles of this cosmos. At times, a poetic metaphor or simile is drawn between two beings or objects and the primary division of the universe into the (male) vertical and (female) horizontal axes of *Тэнгэр – Газар* ‘Sky, Heaven — Earth.’ Other riddles use images of *Тэнгэр* ‘Sky, Heaven’ as an enclosed space like that of an upturned bowl (*аяга*), a ger, or a wooden trunk (*авдар*). These riddles go far beyond the typical functions of riddles in Western cultures in that they paint a picture of the entire cosmos through the humblest of everyday objects. While the English poet William Blake is justly well known for his poem “Auguries of Innocence:”

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...⁵⁵⁰

Mongolian riddles are noteworthy not only for how they envision the entire cosmos in a ‘grain of sand,’ metaphorically speaking, but create a cognitive mapping of the cosmos onto ‘ordinary’ objects used daily in the nomads life.

This chapter is based on a paper presented at the International Conference of Mongol Scholars conference in Ulaanbaatar, 2016, and subsequently published in *Mongolica* 51.⁵⁵¹

6.1 The Cosmos

6.1.1 Depiction of the Cosmos: Heaven and Man

The following riddle demonstrates the interrelationship between Heaven or the Sky and

⁵⁵⁰ Blake 2002, 88

⁵⁵¹ See Mikos 2017.

humankind:

84)	Тэнгэр Tenger (Sky)	тула-м touch-NZ.
	Төмөр Iron	багана column
	– Утаа ⁵⁵² Smoke	
	‘An iron column Touching [holding up] Tenger (Sky): – Smoke’	

In this riddle, the world of human beings and Heaven are seen as inextricably connected. In some respects, the image of a tree or a column, whether smoke or otherwise, holding up or reaching to the heavens or sky can be seen as fairly widespread across Central Asia and is even found in the folklore of cultures such as Hungary.⁵⁵³ The dictionary meaning for the noun *тулам* as a bag or container made of animal skin does not apply in the context of this riddle. *Тулам* is a special nominal form of *тулах* ‘to touch, to reach, to support’⁵⁵⁴ with the nominalizing suffix *-м*, which is an abbreviation of *-маар*⁴, which forms verbal adjectives.⁵⁵⁵ The word *тулам* is thus a verbal noun indicating ‘touching, reaching, support’. The use of the verbal noun *тулам* also means that each line has the same count of three syllables.

Fig. 33 below illustrates the cosmology of the riddle:

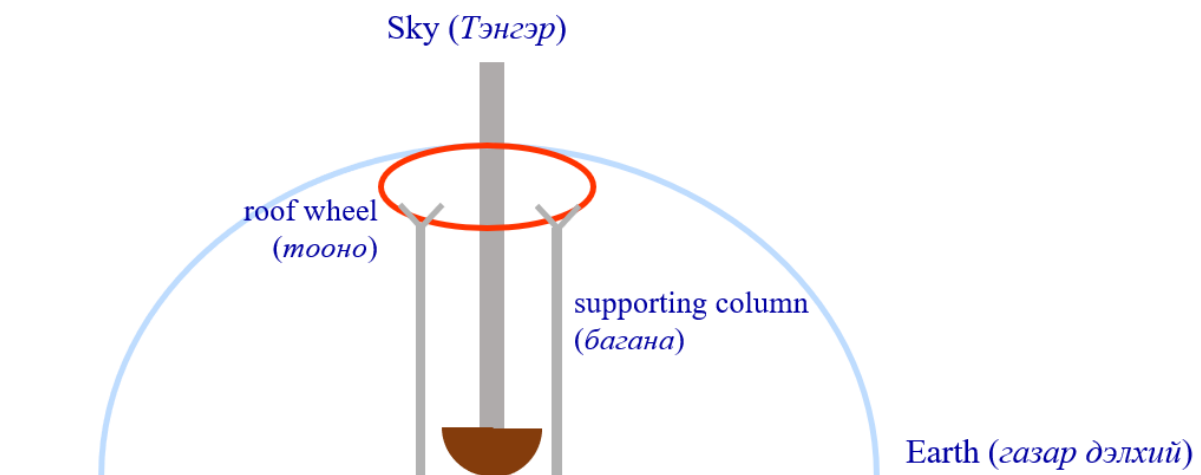


Fig. 33. Structural diagram of Riddle 84. (Diagram by author.)

⁵⁵² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol 1, 168.

⁵⁵³ A very common motif in Hungarian folk tales is the ‘tree that reaches the sky’ (*égig érő fa*): see, for example, Illyés 1977, 57.

⁵⁵⁴ Lessing 1960, 840.

⁵⁵⁵ Lubsandorj and Vacek 2004, 130.

What is also striking in this riddle is how the work of man — that is, in doing the work of building a ger — leads to a direct connection between Heaven and Earth, as the two wooden columns whose function it is to hold up the roof wheel (*мооно*) also hold up the Sky itself. In many Mongolian riddles, the activities of man or anthropomorphic forces actively support Tenger by holding it up. We can also recall the broad semantic range of the word Tenger.⁵⁵⁶ Thus, this riddle can be said to express a deeply held vision of the herders’ nomadic life in which Heaven and Earth are directly connected and must stay in balance with each other, a balance to which the intervention of man, through offerings and respect for nature, is essential. According to one informant, there is even a humorous aspect of this riddle, and that if man ceases to keep ‘holding up’ Heaven, it might fall down.⁵⁵⁷ Carole Pegg notes: “The structure and internal area of the tent is understood by Mongols as a microcosm of the spherical universe: the radiating rafters symbolize the overarching sky; the central pole (*bagana*) supporting the roofing, the cosmic tree that unites the three levels [of the tripartite universe]...”⁵⁵⁸ The central columns of the ger are also considered as an integral part of its sacred components.⁵⁵⁹

In addition, what is noteworthy is how Heaven, the Sky or Tenger is seen as being accessible from the viewpoint of our world. This is in great contrast to many depictions in Western folklore, in which Heaven or the Sky are seen as being frightening, remote, and inaccessible.

6.1.2 Microcosm of the Cosmos

The following riddle envisions the family ger as a microcosm of the cosmos itself:

85)	Дэлгэр Abundant	их great	дов mound			
	Дээвэр Roof	их great	хавхаг cover			
	Хоёр Two	гялгар shining	цонх window			
	Долоо/н Seven	мэдээч knowing	өвгөн old man			
	Зургаа/н Six	заваарч guide	самган old woman			
	– Газар,	тэнгэр,	нар,	сар,	долоо/н бурхан,	мичид ⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ See footnote 18 on p. 19.

⁵⁵⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

⁵⁵⁸ Pegg 2001, 171.

⁵⁵⁹ Oberfalzerová 2006, 65.

⁵⁶⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 59.

Earth sky sun moon Big Dipper Evening Star

‘An abundant mound
 A great covering roof
 Two shining windows
 Seven knowing old men
 Six guiding old ladies
 – Earth, Sky, Sun, Moon, the Big Dipper, the Evening Star’

A direct correspondence is created between the ger and the universe itself. The functions of parallelism in Inner Asian oral folklore are well-known: here, an inferred parallelism of imagery is created. The top covering of the ger, or its ‘roof’ (*дээвэр*), is the sky itself: the roof of our world as seen from within. The floor of the ger stands for our world, the entire Mother Earth. These two planes are connected by an invisible axis: the ger built by man connects them both.

A riddle such as this represents a very early cosmology. It shares some features in common with certain Mongolian origin myths, as reflected in this fragment:

At first there was no ground, there was fire and water, and wind, all mixed up together. Then Buddha took some soil, and put it down on the water, and then there was the earth, and plants: trees began to grow and spread, they say. Then Buddha made man too.

Although they say that then Buddha became the largest star of the constellation known as the Big Dipper (lit. Seven Gods).⁵⁶¹

The Earth — created by Buddha in this origin myth — was the first element to be defined out of the void of the cosmos. Then, however, Buddha himself is assimilated to a celestial light-giving body.

6.2 The Sun as Protector Deity

In the Mongolian nomadic mindset, the sun is revered for its life-giving powers.⁵⁶² This is reflected in the following riddle:

86)	Дээр Above	дэншиг tingsha	шиг POST.		
	Дэн Lamp	уул/ан-д mountain-DAT.-LOC.	гар-сан come out-NP.	юм PTCL.	шиг POST.
	Гуули/н Brass	морь horse	уна-сан ride-NP.	юм PTCL.	шиг POST.
	Гур/ван Three	ертөнц-ийг universe-ACC.	хар-сан see-NP.	юм PTCL.	шиг POST.

⁵⁶¹ Sampildendev and Shüger 1989, 38.

⁵⁶² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

– Hap⁵⁶³
Sun

‘Like a *tingsha* above
Like a lamp that came over the mountain
Like a brass horse being ridden
As if watching over the three worlds
– Sun’

In this riddle, the Sun is imagined as a series of objects having much to do with traditional Mongolian culture as well as with Buddhist culture. The sun is viewed metaphorically as a *tingsha* — Tibetan ritual small cymbals (see Fig. 31 below) — in the sky; then in the second line as something that is above a mountaintop, which is itself described as a lamp (metaphorically a source of light); the verb employed ‘came up’ (*зарсан*) suggesting that it has risen above a mountain. This metaphor indicates that the sun itself transforms the mountain into an offering candle, as it rises above it. The third line is deeply rooted in Mongolian indigenous culture. The Sun is like something that rides a brass horse. The brass horse could be the oil or tallow lamp (*зул*) which is always placed on the altar as an integral part of Buddhist offerings. The sun is like the flame of the oil lamp, here is assimilated to the image of a brass horse. In addition, the image of the brass horse must be thought of as standing in not just for a mount, however noble, but for all the spiritual protectors and deities.⁵⁶⁴ Similar to the many previous examples outlined in detail in Chapter 3, an image is evoked which one might expect to be static (an offering



Fig. 34. Tibetan small cymbals or *tingsha*, ornamented with the eight auspicious symbols. (Wikimedia Commons.)
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Tingsha.jpg>

chalice on an altar) and yet is fully imbued with movement.

Through the overall metaphor of the riddle, the image of the mountain with the sun rising above it is transformed into an image of an offering of an oil lamp to the entire universe, deeply evocative of the sacred image of Mount Meru (*Сүмбэр зул*) as a mountain of butter lamps, an image very common in Mahāyāna Buddhist prayer. The worldview of the Mongolian nomad is deeply evoked in the line ‘as if

⁵⁶³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 34.

⁵⁶⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2016.

watching over the three worlds’ (*гурван ертөнцийг харсан юм шиг*). The expression the ‘three worlds’ refers to the tripartite view of the cosmos — upper universe, the Realm of Tenger; the Middle World, the land of humans; and the Lower World, the hellish realms. The sun has not only seen the three worlds, but watches over them, establishing the image of the heavens as a protective force.⁵⁶⁵

The image of light in this riddle is deeply striking. One can find echoes of this imagery in Mongolian origin myths; and in particular, in the following myth fragment, in which the light of Man is gathered up by the deities to create the Sun:

In ancient times, man’s body was full of light, when one man was born, a fruit-bearing tree began to grow, they say. Each human being was filled with light, and each lived by eating the fruit of his own tree. Then, because from one of these trees, fruit was stolen, and it was the very first theft, an act of defilement had occurred. Then it happened that all kinds of trees became without fruit, and the being known as man became without light. Because of this, Burkhan gathered up all the light of those many people and made the Sun and the Moon. Because man gave the Sun its light, he worships the Sun, and he lives protected by the sunlight, they say.⁵⁶⁶

In strong contrast to the Judeo-Christian origin narrative, in which the first man and woman are punished for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the negative effects of the first ‘sin’ turned out (even if inadvertently) to have a positive outcome; it could even be argued that the defiled act of stealing the fruit from someone else’s tree was actually *necessary* for the creation of Light in the universe. The relationship between Man and the life-sustaining Sun is mutual.

6.2.1 The Sun as Cosmic Horse

In the following riddle, the sun is seen metaphorically as a cosmic horse:

87)	Гайхамшиг Wondrous	их large	бие-тэй body-SOC.
	Газар-т Ground-DAT.-LOC.	хүрэ-м reach-NZ.	дэл-тэй mane-SOC.
	– Нар, Sun	түүн-ий PN.-GEN.	туяа ⁵⁶⁷ ray

‘With a wondrously large body
A mane reaching to the ground
– Sunlight, ray of sun’

The horse’s mane is compared to the rays of sun that reach to our earth. The manes of stallions in Mongolia are usually left uncut. As in the case of Riddle 84 above, a verbal noun is created

⁵⁶⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2016.

⁵⁶⁶ Sampildendev and Shüger 1989, 44.

⁵⁶⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 34.

by use of the verb *хүрэх* ‘to reach’ with the suffix *-м*. In many other riddles, a horse or camel is pictured as being the sun, and the lasso as the ray of sun, as in Riddle 87 on p. 151 of this thesis, where the ray of sun forms part of the horse’s body; Tenger is the field where it abides.

In addition, this riddle expresses the very high esteem for horses in Mongolian nomadic culture. As one informant related to me, an older fast, strong, horse, for example a 20-year-old horse that was a good racer can become a ‘consecrated horse’ (lit. ‘heavenly horse’ *тэнгэрийн морь*). The mane of a horse consecrated to Tenger is not cut, the horse is no longer ridden. The expression for consecrating the horse is *сэтэрлэх* (< *сэтэр* Tib. *tshe thar* ‘to make immortal’⁵⁶⁸ or *тэнгэрт бэлэглэх* ‘to offer as a gift to Tenger’). When the horse is consecrated, mantras are prepared on small pieces of paper. Then the mantra is placed into a small hard cylindrical form, something made out of either leather or hide; it is wound into the hair of the mane and the tail in such a way that it is not really visible. The horse is then told what has happened, that it has become a horse of Tenger. After the horse dies, its head must be placed in a spiritually pure location. After a few years the skull becomes perfectly white (*цав цагаан*). After a century or so, the bones have disappeared, but the quality (*чанар*) of the consecrated horse remains in that place.⁵⁶⁹

6.2.2 Cosmic Herders

As in Riddle 87 above, Tenger is envisioned as a kind of vast pasture for horses (see as well Riddle 53 on p. 112). This riddle creates a similar image:

88)	Дал/ан Seventy	шувуу/н-ы bird-GEN.	өд-ийг feather-ACC.
	Далдгай Broad	бух/ан-д-аа bull-DAT.-LOC.POSS.	ач-аад load-CV.PRF.
	Авид Amitābha	бурхан Buddha	дагуул-аад lead-CV.PRF.
	Аюуш Ayushi	бурхан Buddha	туу-на drive-PRS.IMP.
	–Од, Star	тэнгэр, sky	нар, sun
			сар ⁵⁷⁰ moon

‘Seventy bird feathers
On the broad bull’s back loaded
In front leads Buddha Amitābha
In back drives Burhan Ayushi
–Stars, sky, sun, moon’

⁵⁶⁸ Sūkhbaatar, 1997, 176.

⁵⁶⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2016.

⁵⁷⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 37.

The seventy bird feathers represent the stars — seventy being a symbolic number signifying an unspecified large amount – loaded, and carried on the back of an ox. *Далдгай* is an ideophone signifying something that is flat and wide, related to the other ideophones *далгай* and *далбагар*.⁵⁷¹ The back of the ox is the sky, Tenger. As in the riddle above, Tenger is seen as a confined phenomenon with natural boundaries. What is normally the container for our human existence is itself contained. And yet Tenger itself is being moved through time and space. *Авид бурхан*, Amitābha (Tib. *'od dpag med* ‘immeasurable light’),⁵⁷² the Buddha of Immeasurable Light (in this riddle: the Sun)⁵⁷³ leads the sky, which is the broad bull’s back. Amitābha is also known as ‘the Buddha of the Western direction,’⁵⁷⁴ one of his qualities being ‘evening twilight.’⁵⁷⁵ The bull (the sky) is being driven from behind by *Аюуш бурхан*, the Buddha Ayushi, the ‘god of long life’⁵⁷⁶ (in this riddle: the moon).

This riddle provides yet another excellent example of the intersection of sacral themes with ordinary and ‘mundane’ imagery from a nomadic herder’s everyday life. From a European or Western perspective, this could be mistakenly interpreted as a ‘diminishment’ of the divine; instead, it should be read as a statement of a belief of the animating divine present in all phenomena: even while herding cattle, they are present, driving the cattle alongside one.

In terms of the spatiality of the riddle, the two deities — the Buddha Amitābha and the Buddha Ayushi — are simultaneously situated *outside* of the heavens: they are driving ‘the broad bull’s back,’ i.e., the sky, from in front and from behind, and yet they are also *inside* the sacred container, as the sun and the moon are within the sky. Their agency in ‘moving the heavens along’ envisages the daily migration of the sun and moon as nomadic. It also bestows deity-like agency to both the Sun and the Moon, or rather, bestows cosmic agency on the two Buddhist deities.

6.3 Cosmos as Container

The following riddle posits the cosmos as a container (wooden chest) found in every ger:

- | | | |
|-----|----------------------|--|
| 89) | Хөл-тэй
Leg-SOC. | дэмбэн
<i>demben</i> [huge bulging thing] |
| | Хөл-гүй
Leg-PRIV. | дэмбэн
<i>demben</i> [huge bulging thing] |

⁵⁷¹ Bold et al. 2008, 652.

⁵⁷² Chandra-Das 2004, 1119.

⁵⁷³ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 10.

⁵⁷⁴ Rigzin 2008, 244.

⁵⁷⁵ Beer 1999, 85.

⁵⁷⁶ Bawden 2010, 32.

Үс-тэй дЭМБЭН
Hair-SOC. *demben* [huge bulging thing]

Үс-гүй дЭМБЭН
Hair-PRIV. *demben* [huge bulging thing]

– Үхэг, авдар, газар, тЭНГЭР⁵⁷⁷
Chest trunk earth sky

‘Huge and legged
Huge and legless
Huge and hairy
Huge and hairless
– Chest, trunk, earth, sky’



Fig. 35. Two wooden decorated chests (*авдар*) next to each other in a summer ger, with the family TV to the right. On top of the chests are the family altar, a mirror, and the *жааз* (a framed montage of family members, including the departed). Hovd aimag, 2011. (Photograph by author.)

In asking Mongolian informants about this riddle, they were able to identify the word *дЭМБЭН* as something huge and unmoving, but otherwise found it very difficult to guess⁵⁷⁸ (see as well Riddle 14 on p. 63). One informant stated: “I don’t know what *дэмбийх* means. *Дэмбийх* means for something to thrust out or to have the shape of bulging out.”⁵⁷⁹ On a metaphorical-cognitive level, this riddle counts as among the more difficult ones today.

The word *дЭМБЭН* is not attested in any modern dictionary. It is, however, connected to many other ideophones, such as *дүмбийх* ‘to become stiffly rounded and paunchy.’⁵⁸⁰ *Дүмбийх* is or might be a variety of *түмбийх*,⁵⁸¹ which is related to *төмбийх*⁵⁸² ‘to become protuberant, spherical; to appear

⁵⁷⁷ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 189.

⁵⁷⁸ Fieldwork, Khövsgöl aimag, 2014.

⁵⁷⁹ Enkhjargal, consultation, 2020.

⁵⁸⁰ Kara 1998, 453.

⁵⁸¹ Bold et al. 2008, 770.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 2106.

protuberant, spherical.’⁵⁸³ It is also connected to the word *дүмбээр*, ‘a rounded object with a protuberant top.’⁵⁸⁴ It should also be noted that many variations on ideophones remain unlisted in any lexical works at all.⁵⁸⁵ *Дэмбэн* may as well be a dialectal variation of the ideophone *дүмбэрээ* ‘the top part of something having a swelled rounded shape.’⁵⁸⁶

The main quality of this ideophonic term is that it is something sticking out in a large, rounded fashion; big, unmoving and possibly humorously puffed out. *Дэмбэн* may also be considered as a phonetically modified ideophone (see Section 2.2 of this thesis).

The word *дэмбэн* or *дүмбэн* thus indicates an otherwise undefined bulging, unwieldy, and large shape standing in for the universe itself: it represents the earth and the sky, as well as the large wooden chest (*авдар*) placed in the northern section of the ger (*хоймор*), and upon which the photographs in frames (*жааз*) and the altar objects are placed. Its referential scope thus encompasses a minimum of four separate objects.

What is striking, however, is how one word — attributed as either having or lacking hair or legs — can stand in for so many things, creating overlapping subsets. All of these things—Sky and Earth, trunk and chest (*Тэнгэр, газар, үхээ, авдар*)—are put into relation with each other by means of the ideophone *дэмбэн* ‘huge bulging thing’ (see Figs. 36 and 37 on this and the next page).

The riddle also contains a metaphor or a riddle within the riddle: the wooden chest (*авдар*), is metaphor for the heavens (as it is as well in numerous other riddles). Simon Wickham-Smith, who has translated many works from Mongolian into English, mentions the notion of ‘containedness’ as

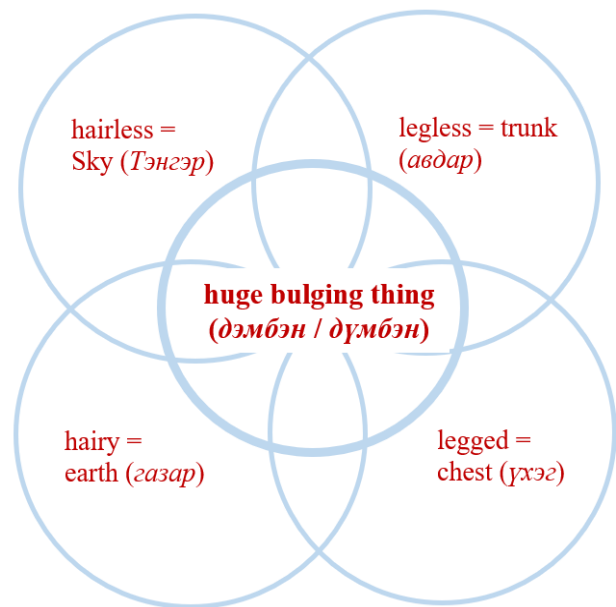


Fig. 36. Diagram of the attributive and lexical relations in Riddle 89. (Diagram by author.)

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 2045.

⁵⁸⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 771.

⁵⁸⁵ During the discussion with Lubsangdorji, the extreme difficulty of communicating the nature of Mongolian ideophones continually arose. Certain lexicographers came under criticism for explaining one ideophone by using a different ideophone, in other words, not really explaining the linguistic thinking that lies behind this category of words. As a brief experiment, I queried other Mongolians and all agreed that the two phonemes *demben* created an impression of something heavy and cumbersome, possibly due to the nasalized consonants and the dark-coloured vowels.

⁵⁸⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 771.

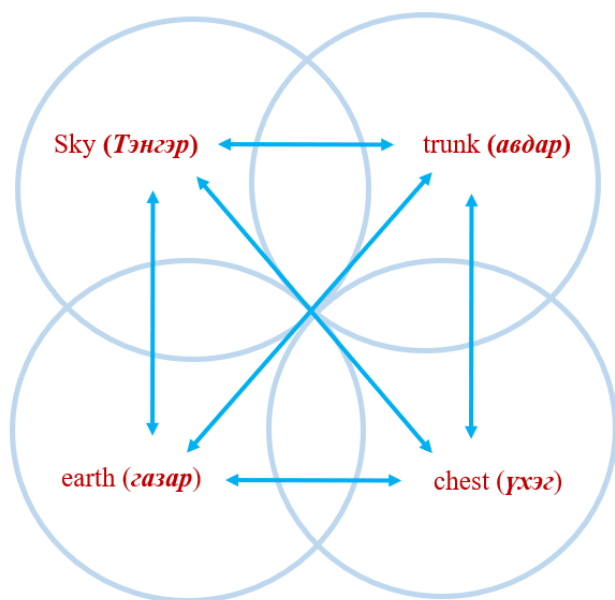


Fig. 37. Cognitive mapping in Riddle 89.
(Diagram by author.)

being crucial to the Mongolian psyche.⁵⁸⁷ The notion of the ‘container of the universe, the contained universe’ (*ертөнцийн сав*) holds within it the notion of one’s own birthplace, the region from which one hails (*нутаг*).⁵⁸⁸ The ideophone, in this riddle as in many others, serves an important polyreferential function: here, as *дэмбэн*, it denotes one big bulky, immovable, yet finite object which can stand for at least four different things which have two crucial elements in

common: the quality of being enclosed, of containing other things, and of bearing a similar spatial template. For ideophones, one single signifier can denote many signifieds or referents.

As we have seen, even though some of these riddles might appear to be extremely simple and indeed contain very few words, they often contain profound images which convey deep messages about the world of the nomads, indeed about our entire cosmos. In its sense of Tenger as home to the protective force of the sun, the emotive content of these riddles varies greatly from Western notions of heaven and the heavenly bodies as remote and unconnected to our world here below.

The extreme abstraction inherent in many ideophones facilitates the conceptual blending which allows these riddles to make such immense cognitive leaps, such as from an everyday piece of furniture in the ger to the entire cosmos. In addition, the presence of so many phonetically altered or distorted words in these riddles affords them a greatly vaster referential scope.

6.4 Conclusion: Semantic Expansionism

As can be seen, many of these riddles demand of their auditor(s) a highly developed sense of abstract cognition. The ideophone *дэмбэн* ‘huge bulging thing,’ for example, can stand for at least four signifieds, or referents: wooden chest, wooden chest, the earth and the sky, all of

⁵⁸⁷ “There is a way in which the nomadic worldview is a constant presence within the minds of even the most urbanised Mongol, a reminder of their connection with the land and with the ancestors who dwell in the land. And this, within the concept of the sealed container of the earth (*yertöntsín sav*), renders the world as it is as a paradise waiting to be remembered, waiting to be truly apprehended.” (Wickham-Smith 2012, 11).

⁵⁸⁸ See p. 164 of this thesis for more on the expression *нутаг* ‘place of birth.’

which inhere to one signifier (and there are perhaps even more signifieds that would adhere to this word, either in the spoken language, or in the oral folklore). The idea of *дэмбэж*—a large, bulky, unwieldy ‘something’ — thus functions cognitively as an abstract template, or specialized image schema. In evidence is a kind of ‘semantic expansionism,’ which in one sense contrasts greatly to the vast corpus of riddles in European (Indo-European) tongues, in which the basic aim is to narrow a potentially wider subset down to a narrower subset, or to a subset of one object. Of course, this is a vast topic, far beyond the reach of this thesis, but as mentioned in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.4), the relative ‘lack of grammatical specification’ in Mongolian as contrasted to grammatical *over-specification* in European (Indo-European) languages can be said to be one factor. Similarly, as mentioned in the Introduction, for some riddle analysts working within the European episteme, this eventual ‘narrowing down’ of the potential subset can result in a profound sense of disappointment.⁵⁸⁹ The case of a riddle such as this, in which the answer actually reveals such an open subset of referents, renders the riddle image itself a cosmological floating signifier. The humblest objects in the nomadic ger can stand in for the entire universe.

⁵⁸⁹ See p. 46 of this thesis.

Chapter 7

Riddle-Space of the Steppe

7.0 Introduction

In a language as intensely visual as Mongolian, it is not at all surprising to see a vivid spatiality reflected in the riddle corpus. In this chapter, I look at how spatiality is depicted and how it functions in Mongolian riddles. I examine various kinds of spatiality: riddles employing a layered or striated spatiality, riddles that reflect the traditional nomadic tripartite division of space, riddles that emphasize an upward direction, moving toward Tenger, as well as the abundantly-manifested visual tropes of containment: the container and the contained.

To tell a riddle is to cause a new, enigmatic space to be opened in the auditor's mind — an ambiguous, polysemous space, where one answer, which, at least in western ethno-cultural terms, will be referred to as the 'solution.' A riddle in and of itself creates a new mental space, an opening. And, at least in the mind of the present author, that is even more true when encountering the riddles of the nomadic steppe space of Inner Asia.

And so the spatiality inherent within and expressed by these riddles is itself eminently deserving of attention and examination. The abbreviated micro-fictional world that each riddle creates contains its own narrative space, structured and conveyed through various verbal, semantic and metaphorical means. This chapter will look at some of the characteristics of this 'riddle-space of the steppe,' as well as the linguistic means through which it is created. While Western literary theory largely examines the spatiality of texts that are consciously 'authored' by one or more discrete individuals (as opposed to anonymous creations of the 'folk'), and firmly situated within the context of what is known as the Western literary canon, it can nonetheless offer us valuable analytical tools for examining spatiality in Mongolian riddles. As Robert T. Tally Jr. writes:

An approach to narrative as a spatially symbolic act enables us to navigate literature and the world in interesting new ways, by asking different questions, exploring different territories, and discovering different effects. As writers map their worlds, so readers or

critics may engage with these narrative maps in order to orient ourselves and make sense of things in a changing world.⁵⁹⁰

Mongolians are justly famous for their spatial cognitive sense — just about anyone who has travelled in the countryside can attest to what almost seems to be a kind of inborn navigational aptitude, and, in addition, one based on absolute, as opposed to relative, orientation.⁵⁹¹ Through my own observations when traveling through the Mongolian countryside, and through reading the accounts of others, there is much to suggest that the traditional Mongolian perception of space has a great deal in common with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *nomadic space*, and other words an inherently unstriated, or 'smooth' space — one not replete with the proliferation of barriers and boundaries of sedentary, striated space (i.e., as one finds in European cities).⁵⁹² Even so, the space of the steppe, with its gers, settlements, pastures, administrative and religious centres operated (and operates) according to specific *spatial codes* (to use the term of Henri Lefebvre), employing a specific 'system of space,'⁵⁹³ or, perhaps more aptly, various simultaneously operating 'systems of space.' These spatial systems are derived and inherited from a variety of sources, from the original nomadic steppe inhabitants, imbued with the cosmic expressions of space inherent in their indigenous religions—shamanism (*бөөгийн шашин*), to the spatial regulations of the eventual local ruling nobility of tribal/clan and later state-formations (culminating of course in the Mongolian empire). These various spatial systems also include the hierarchical and organizational spatializations inherent in the more organized religions, such as Nestorian Christianity and the Buddhisms of Mongolia (Uyghur Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism of both the early Nying ma 'Red Hat' and later Sakya pa 'Yellow Hat' schools). While this subject can obviously only be touched upon very briefly here, it should briefly be noted that even the *unstriated space* posited by Deleuze and Guattari, once existing as a reality and not a theoretical construct, operated with its own very specific spatial and societal codes. It also presumes the existence of a 'really existing unstriated space' of the steppes, plausible in the view of the present author. To what degree these various intersecting spaces were smooth or unstriated — or even both simultaneously — would be the topic of further research. For now, however, my intent is to

⁵⁹⁰ See Robert T. Tally Jr., "On Literary Cartography: Narrative as a Spatially Symbolic Act." See: <https://www.nanocrit.com/issues/issue1/literary-cartography-narrative-spatially-symbolic-act>. Accessed Dec. 5, 2018.

⁵⁹¹ See Kapišovská 2003.

⁵⁹² See Deleuze's discussion of the differences between the games of chess and Go as examples of striated as opposed to smooth space. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 353).

⁵⁹³ Lefebvre 1991, 16.

investigate the traces of this steppe spatiality in the two riddle corpuses at hand.⁵⁹⁴

To turn to grammar for a moment, in looking at how the Mongolian language expresses spatiality, we see that the modern language (standard Khalkha) employs two allomorphs *-d* and *-t* to express the dative-locative;⁵⁹⁵ it also has a number of other of lexical units that function as spatiality and, as Janhunen describes, “postpositions with case-like functions,” although, as he notes, “the latter are rarely attested in other than concrete circumstantial [local and temporal] uses.”⁵⁹⁶ Sechenbataar refers to this category of words as *spatiality*.⁵⁹⁷

Such spatiality are often to be found in the Mongolian riddle corpus, in its oral literature as a whole, and across both the spoken and written languages: and yet of course it is also important to make a distinction between spatiality as a grammatical category, and the role they play in the overall structuring and creation of space in the micro-fictional mythopoetic world of these riddles. Let us turn to the various kinds of spatialities created in Mongolian riddles.

7.1 Kinds of Space in the Riddle

7.1.1 The Layered or Striated Riddle

In one rather common kind of riddle, an object or series of objects is presented as belonging to, or embodied by, a layered or stepped space. The progression contained within these riddles almost always points to a place ‘beyond’ (*цаана*), or ‘upward’ (*дээр*). The progression usually consists of two or three steps, resulting in a cumulation, whether cosmic or spiritual, resulting in the completion of a simple biological action like eating, or leading to the creation of a logical subset (for example, the parts of a mouth) which can create a further overall metaphor. These riddles are intensely cinematic, as each terse line enacts a vivid shift resulting in a different visual picture.

In the following riddle, the process of preparing boiled milk is visualized as a series of layered Tengerts that culminate in a picture of abundance:

90)	Энэ This	тэнгэр heaven	
	Энэ This	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Тэр That	тэнгэр heaven	
	Тэр That	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.

⁵⁹⁴ For an exploration of ‘really-existing nomadic space,’ see as well Miggelbrink 2013.

⁵⁹⁵ See as well Janhunen concerning “... the relatively small number of cases ... used to express a great variety of both grammatical and non-grammatical relations.” (Janhunen 2010, 105).

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ See Sechenbataar 2003.

Хун	тэнгэр	
Swan	heaven	
Хун	тэнгэр-ийн	цаана
Swan	heaven-GEN.	POST.
Хундай	баян	
<i>Khundai</i>	bountiful	
– Хөөрүүл-сэн	сүү ⁵⁹⁸	
Boil-NP.	milk	

‘This heaven
 Beyond this heaven
 That heaven
 Beyond that heaven
 Swan heaven
 Beyond swan heaven
 Bountiful *Khundai*
 – Boiling milk’

This riddle depicts the process that occurs when milk is boiled in the large cauldron heated over the stove in the hearth of the ger. The milk separates into several layers: at the very bottom will be the (*сүүний*) *хусам*: this refers to the layer of milk that remains stuck to the bottom of the pot. *Хусам* can also refer to the cooked residue of other foods on the pot. Then there will be the milk itself, after which there are two more layers, formed of cream (*цөцгий*), and the very top layer of cream known as *өрөм*. *Өрөм* is rather similar to English clotted cream, and is often eaten with bread for breakfast. The residue of the milk stuck to the bottom of the pot is often scraped off and given to children as a treat.⁵⁹⁹

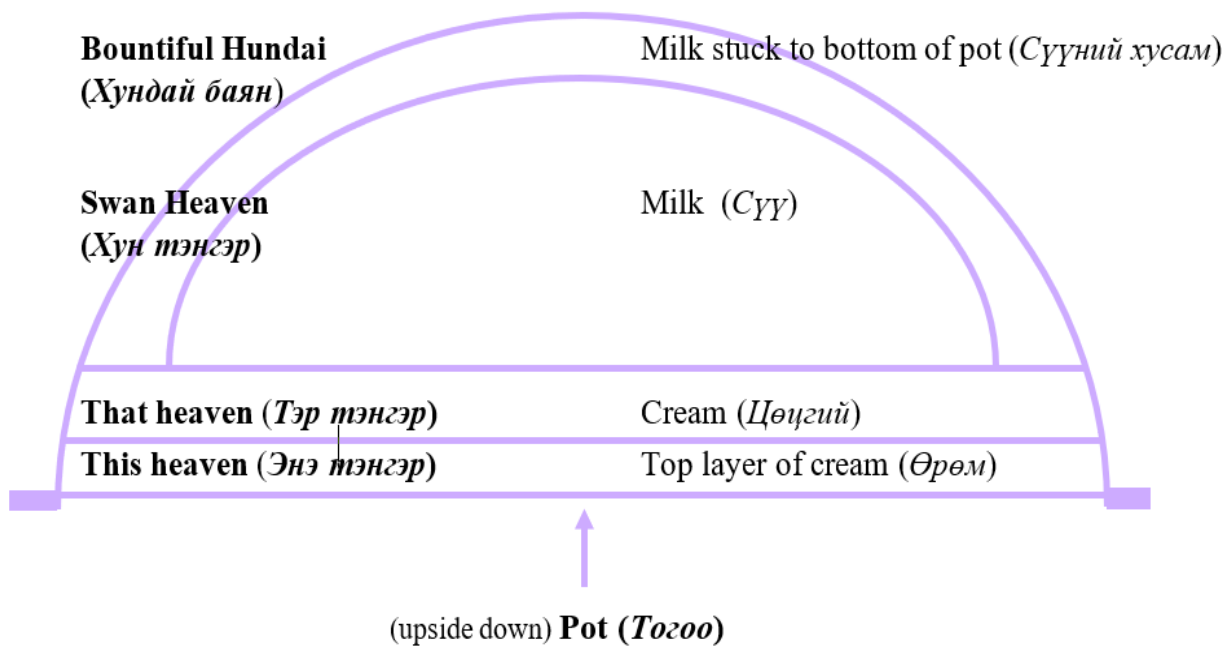


Fig. 38. Diagram of spatial relations in Riddle 90. (Diagram by author.)

⁵⁹⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 164.

⁵⁹⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

Although it would appear, in terms of the spatiality of the riddle, that a progression is being realized from the bottom of the pot toward the cream-like surface at the top, in fact the opposite is true. The burnt milk at the bottom of the pot (which looks splotchy and white against the pitch-black cast-iron pot) evokes the image of stars against the night sky — that is the ‘bountiful Khundai.’⁶⁰⁰ The cauldron is rotated on a horizontal axis — the access of Earth (*газар*). The ascending layers (of Heaven and milk) can be diagrammed as seen in Fig. 38 on the previous page.

The visualization inherent in the riddle effectively turns the pot upside down in its cosmic depiction of bounty and plenitude projected onto the heavens. The invented name ‘*Khundai*’ is clearly formed from the the word *хун* ‘swan’ and the suffix *-дай / -дэй*, which functions as a diminutive, creating a sense of affection in relation to the given noun.⁶⁰¹ At the same time, the word *хун* ‘swan’ evokes connotations of whiteness and purity, evoking related expressions and pair words such as *хун цагаан* ‘completely white.’⁶⁰² In Mongolian Buddhist legends, praise songs (*магтаал*), and blessings (*ерөөл*), the image of the ‘Ocean of Milk’ (*сүүн далай*) is a potent image of purity and abundance: this riddle creates a ‘Heaven of Milk’ (*сүүн тэнгэр*). In addition, the riddle image of the ascending layers of Heaven evokes both the nomadic worldview of the 99 Tengri,⁶⁰³ as well as traditional Buddhist cosmology, in which, for example, *dhyāna* practitioners are placed in ascending order “above the realm of Gods” in many different taxonomies of heavens.⁶⁰⁴

In the following two riddles, a very similar kind of spatiality is evinced, here, though, the image of the riddle passes through a series of doors or gates:

91)	Хаан Khan	үүд door	
	Хаан Khan	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд door	
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Яриа Talk	удган shamaness	

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid; fieldwork, Khövsgöl aimag, 2014.

⁶⁰¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015. See as well Riddle 12 on p. 60.

⁶⁰² Bold et al. 2008, 2692.

⁶⁰³ “In recent centuries Mongolian peoples have traditionally spoken of 99 gods (now pronounced *tenger*), of whom the 55 in the west are helpful and the 44 in the east are harmful.” Atwood 2004, 532.

⁶⁰⁴ Sadakata 2004, 57-67.

– уруул,	шүд,	хэл ⁶⁰⁵
Lip	teeth	tongue

‘The Khan’s door
 Beyond the Khan’s door
 The Bone door
 Beyond the bone door
 A babbling shamaness
 – Lips, teeth, tongue’

In this riddle, the series of gates are placed within a human body — more specifically the lips and the mouth. The Khan’s door is the mouth, when it opens, the Bone door is seen (the teeth), and beyond that, the tongue, here envisioned as a shamaness — or an older woman — who is babbling rather (*яриа хүн* indicates someone keeps babbling on).⁶⁰⁶

In the following variation, the tongue is metaphorized as a kind of shamaness as well:

92)	Хаан Khan	үүд door	
	Хаан Khan	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд door	
	Яс/ан Bone	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Явжигнуур Yammering	отигон shamaness	
	– Уруул, Lip	шүд, teeth	хэл ⁶⁰⁷ tongue

‘The Khan’s door
 Beyond the Khan’s door
 The Bone door
 Beyond the Bone door
 A babbling shamaness
 – Lips, teeth, tongue’

The expression ‘shamaness’ need not be taken literally — here, it can also stand in metaphorically for the concept of ‘old woman.’⁶⁰⁸ The word *явжигнуур* is one which I have not come across in any other work of Mongolian oral folklore and does not seem to be attested in any modern dictionary. Its formation, however, can be traced: it is originally derives from

⁶⁰⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 120.

⁶⁰⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 3273; Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁶⁰⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 132. This riddle is also discussed as Riddle 8 on p. 40 of this thesis.

⁶⁰⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

яви- which gives rise to the verb *явиих* ‘to bark; to gabble; to make no secret of one’s intentions; to speak frankly;’⁶⁰⁹ ‘to speak *ab hoc et ab hac* [chaotically], without discernment, without knowing what one is saying.’⁶¹⁰ To the base *яви/ж* is added the verbal suffix *-гн-* (WM. *-čigina/-čigine* or WM. *-gina/-gine*)⁶¹¹ which creates an onomatopoeic verb expressive of babbling sounds. The suffix *-уур/-үүр* then creates a noun, similarly as in the word *явиуур*: ‘babbler; talkative, frank.’⁶¹² For one informant, the word *явжигнуур* itself evoked the sound and image of a tongue moving very rapidly, as when someone babbles on and on.⁶¹³

The word *отигон* is also of interest, as this is originally a Buryat riddle.⁶¹⁴ Although it looks very similar to the word *отгон* ‘the youngest son,’⁶¹⁵ it is a dialectical spelling of Mongolian *удган*, which refers to a shamaness, or, alternatively (in other pair expressions): the trotting gait of a horse (*удган хатураа*); a moth or butterfly (*удган эрвээхэй*); a spinning top (children’s toy, *удган эрүүл*); or a kind of perennial grass not used for feeding animals (*удган өвс*).⁶¹⁶ What connects all of these meanings, in the metaphorical sense, is the circling or bobbing movement common to them all embodied in the secondary meaning of *удган*: ‘swift-moving.’⁶¹⁷ A picture of the ‘swift-moving’ tongue of the shamaness is created. The word *удган* (WM. *nituyan*) is etymologically connected to the word for a person’s home region — *нутаг*: this refers to the immediate region where a person was born and raised, usually encompassing a radius of some twenty or thirty kilometres; however, as Lubsangdorji notes, the term *нутаг* is much more than a homeland. He writes:

The nomadic Mongols consider their homeland to be a ‘deity’. For them it represents parents, children, brothers and sisters, friends and their loves. In oral folk works, and all its donors, particularly in the ‘long and short songs,’ *нутаг* is the main topic. There is a pair word *эх нутаг*, which subconsciously evokes a connection to the old expression *эх этүгэн*.⁶¹⁸

As he states, the word *удган* ‘shamaness’ can be traced back to the expression *etügen*:

The word *Etügen* that has preserved the residue of the ritual meaning of the “origin” or “beginning” from Proto-Mongolian **edü-/etü-* > *edügen/etügen* (to begin, start, commence), was first discussed by Dorji Banzarov in 1846 as the “Goddess *Etügen* from times Memorial.” In 1929, B. Ja. Vladimirtsov wrote: “In the Mongolian Written language *etügen* ~ *itügen* means the

⁶⁰⁹ Lessing 1960, 240.

⁶¹⁰ Kowalewski 1844, 1849, 2266.

⁶¹¹ Poppe 1964, 66-67.

⁶¹² Lessing 1960, 420.

⁶¹³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁶¹⁴ From a book of riddles collected by the Buryat scholar N. O. Sharakhshinova. (Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 312).

⁶¹⁵ Bold et al. 2008, 1537-8.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 2184.

⁶¹⁷ Lessing 1960, 861.

⁶¹⁸ Lubsangdorji 2010, 97.

Goddess of Earth, the Earth (a shamanistic term), while in Eastern Khalkha dialects it occurs in the form **Егүгүн** ‘the Earth, the Ruling-Earth.’⁶¹⁹

In this regard, Riddles 92 and 93, describing as they do a horizontal trajectory through several gates toward the shamaness (even if depicted humorously), form an interesting counterpart to Riddle 90, in which the Bountiful Deity ‘*Khundai*’ is approached through the layers of Tenger.

7.1.2 Tripartite Division of Space

Many riddles reflect the traditional Mongolian tripartite conception of space (Upper world, Middle i.e. our world, Lower world). It can also be observed that in the previous section, the layered or stepped riddles also employed three steps in order to reach the goal of the riddle. In this category of riddles, three different locations, always along the vertical or horizontal axis, are defined, each being the location of a characteristic entity. The location of a given entity along this axis is one of the important clues the riddle provides about its subject. The strong emphasis on the two axes, horizontal and vertical, reflect the dual belief system in Mother Earth and Father Sky: in this way, these riddles ‘perform’ two different, but intrinsically connected spatialities at the same time.

93)	Хойдох [The one] to the rear/North	нь DM.	хонь-гүй sheep-PRIV.	баян rich
	Дундах [The one] in the middle	нь DM.	дуу-гүй sound-PRIV.	баян rich
	Өмнөх [The one] in the front/South	нь DM.	өө-гүй flaw-PRIV.	баян rich
	– Бурхан, Deity	тогоо, pot	хаалга ⁶²⁰ door	

‘The rich one in the back [to the North] has no sheep
The rich one in the middle makes no sounds
The rich one in the front [to the South] has no flaws
– Deity, cauldron, door’

The entities described in this riddle are defined by one noun ‘wealthy, rich’ (*баян*). *Хойдох* and *өмнөх* refer to the cardinal directions, as well as their meanings of ‘behind’ and ‘in front of.’⁶²¹ In terms of the topography of the ger, its northern section (*хоймор*) is always considered as the honorific part, where honoured guests are seated, and where the altar is located. The entrance of the ger always faces southward, with the sections immediately adjacent to the

⁶¹⁹ “*Ötüken* was “a forested mountainous area of Inner Asia which had a special religious and moral significance for the early Turkish peoples.” (Bosworth 2009, 231).

⁶²⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 252.

⁶²¹ Kapisovská 2003, 90-91.

doorway considered to be less honorific: this is where the kitchen utensils were often kept in the past and where, traditionally, servants slept.

The statue of a deity, most likely the Buddha (*бурхан*) is wealthy because many people love him, respect him and bring him offerings. Burkhan — the statue of the Buddha — has no livestock but is wealthy in esteem and love.

The pot or cauldron (*мозоо*) is mute (it doesn't speak), but it is wealthy because it receives, in the course of cooking, food, water, and tea, and milk. The door referred to here is not the wooden door used on modern gers, but a felt door, formerly widely in use, thus explaining its smoothness or lack of flaws; it is wealthy because people are always entering and leaving the ger through it.⁶²²

The trope of wealth all along the horizontal axis metaphorically refers to the bounty of Mother Earth (*Газар дэлхий*), as well as the bounty to be found within the ger, as a microcosm of Mother Earth's bounty.

The following riddle, which is one of several variations, also involves the processing of milk over the hearth as does Riddle 90.

94)	Дээр-ээ Above-POSS.	дэрдэн stiff	
	Дурд-аа Middle-POSS.	дундан silky	
	Доор-оо Bottom-POSS.	дардан hard	
	– Өрөм, Cream	сүү, milk	хусам ⁶²³ boiled [hardened] milk

‘On the top — the stiffened one
In the middle — the silky one
At the bottom — the hardened one
– Cream, milk, boiled milk (stuck to the bottom of the pot)’

Дэрдэн refers to something that has become hardened; it is related to other ideophones such as *дэрдийх*, ‘to be[come] stiff and projecting,’⁶²⁴ *дэрдэгэр* ‘stiff and projecting.’⁶²⁵ *Дэрдэн* conveys a sense of something having become dried out, and here refers to the relative hardening of the top layer of cream (*өрөм*).⁶²⁶ The root of these words is *дэгдэ-*. *Дэрдэгэр*, considered to

⁶²² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁶²³ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 164.

⁶²⁴ Lessing 1960, 253.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

be a ‘female’ word because of its front vowel harmony, has a ‘male’ back vowel counterpart,⁶²⁷ *дардгар*, ‘for a soft flexible surface to become hard and creased.’⁶²⁸ *Дунд* means ‘in the middle’; *дундан* as such is not attested in the dictionary, but seems clearly formed to create alliteration with the lines ending in *дэрдэн* and *дардан*. *Дурдаа* is also not lexicographically attested, but could well be related to *дурдан* ‘silk.’⁶²⁹ The ‘logical’ choice for the first word of the second line would be *дундаа*, but then the assonance with the consonant ‘*r*’ would be missing. The fact that this was an ‘invented’ word in no way impeded the comprehension of my informant. The fact that each word of this terse, six-word riddle begins with the consonant ‘*d*,’ each word containing two syllables, attests to its artistry; the consonant binds all the layers together in a holistic view of the three levels of milk in the pot, and by extension, the three levels of the universe.

7.1.3 Contained space

Many subjects in the riddle corpus are defined in terms of their conditions of containment: what contains them, how they are contained, what material or substance they contain within themselves. Words describing containment, as well as the many lexical pairs commonly in use formed by combinations of them, occur fairly frequently in the riddle corpus. These containers have wide semantic ranges. For example: *xom* ‘city, a group of gers (*xom айл*), enclosure for livestock, the lower part of a Mongolian clothing or *deel*’;⁶³⁰ *xauuaa* ‘enclosure for livestock, yard (courtyard)’;⁶³¹ *xopoo* ‘winter enclosure for livestock, city quarter, committee, fencing’;⁶³² *хүрээ* indicating an enclosed circular formation such as ‘circle; ring; district’, with the figurative meanings of ‘city district; fence, fencing; frame; fenced-in space; monastery; city.’⁶³³ Whereas English ‘city’ eventually emerged from the Latin expression *civitas*, the etymology of Mongolian *xom* ‘city’ might have more in common with Russian *город* (Czech *hrad* ‘castle’), terms which are also based on the idea of a walled-in or enclosed space.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁷ “[In Mongolian] two rows of vowels are differentiated:

- the front vowels *э, ө, ү* (called *эм эгшүүг*, i.e. ‘female vowels’)

- the back vowels *а, о, у* (called *эр эгшүүг*, i.e. ‘male vowels’)

The two series are mutually exclusive in any one word, i.e. only vowels of one series may appear in one word (vowel harmony) and the words are distinguished as ‘female’ (*эм*) or ‘male’ (*эр*) according to the vowels they contain.” (Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 3).

⁶²⁸ Bold et al. 2008, 675. See as well footnote 731 on p. 193.

⁶²⁹ Lubsangdorji did not see the connection with silk in this metaphor and interpreted the word *дурдан* as phonetic sound-play; on the other hand, however, milk, especially when freshly milked, can have a silky texture.

⁶³⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 2579.

⁶³¹ Ibid, 2495.

⁶³² Ibid, 2571, and Kara 1998, 589.

⁶³³ Kara 1998, 629.

⁶³⁴ See Old Slavonic **gōrdь* ‘fortification, town,’ in Derksen 2008: 178. Lubsangdorji also etymologically connects proto-Indo-European *gʰordʰ-o-* with such Mongolian terms as *хүрээ* (WM. *kūriy-e*) as an Euroasian-wide cognate. The Proto-Indo-European etymological root appears to have the same semantics as well: *gherdh-*

In the following riddle, the human body is envisioned as a series of adjacent enclosures, each characterized by what it uniquely contains:

95)	Наана	нь	ус/ан	хот
	In the front	DM.	water	city
	Цаана	нь	салхи/н	хот
	In the back	DM.	wind	city
	Дунд	нь	цус/ан	хот
	Middle	DM.	blood	city
	Тойр-оод		яс/ан	хот
	Go around-CV.PRF.		bone	city
	– Ходоод,	уушиг,	зүрх,	хавирга ⁶³⁵
	Stomach	lung	heart	rib

In front, a city of water
 Behind, a city of wind
 In the middle, a city of blood
 All around a city of bone(s)
 – Stomach, lungs, heart, ribs

Traditionally in Mongolian culture, the stomach is associated with water and other liquids. The position of the heart is reflected anatomically correctly as located between the lungs, and the ribs are accurately depicted as a meta-enclosure that envelops the other three organs: Riddle 95 displays a detailed knowledge of anatomy, both human and animal. The operational metaphor is of that of the human organ as ‘enclosure, city:’ the meaning of *хот* as ‘stomach’ is also metaphorical.⁶³⁶ The directionality of this riddle ultimately draws a circular form, the directionality of which posits an ‘invisible enclosed’ surrounding the human body, as seen below in Fig. 39:

2. Farther, beyond, yonder, in the back (цаана)

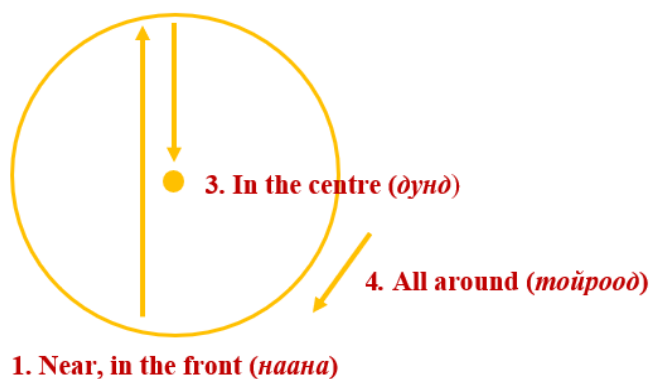


Fig. 39. Diagram of directionality in Riddle 95. (Diagram by author.)

and *gherdh-* ‘to encircle, to enclose,’ as in English ‘girdle.’ (Pokorny, 2007, 1228).

⁶³⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 104.

⁶³⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 2579.

Anatomical ribs as a metaphor for enclosure occur as well in the following riddle:

96)	Бөндгөр Rounded	өвгөн old man
	Жар/ан Sixty	хавирга-тай rib-SOC.
	– Гэр ⁶³⁷ Ger	
	A rounded old man With sixty ribs – Ger	

The word *бөндгөр* is an ideophone designating a general rounded shape (*бөөрөнхий хэлбэртэй юм*). This shape, in and of itself could refer to anything either animate or inanimate, a stone, a child, a girl, and so on: the emotional tenor of this word is that of something that is pleasant to look at.⁶³⁸ In this way, ideophones function as a linguistic or metaphorical templates for a wide variety of objects — and are thus signifiers with a potentially infinite number of referents of all objects of such a shape. The ‘ribs’ of the riddle refer to either the walls of the ger, or, conversely, to the roof poles (*унь*) of the ger: these are the poles that radiate out from the roof wheel (*тооно*) of the ger down to the walls, which can be expanded or compressed depending on whether or not they are being used or transported. As in many other riddles, the parts of the ger are anthropomorphized.

This riddle creates an abstract vision of both an old man and an old ger, both visually defined by their ‘ribs.’ The number sixty, as is also the case with the number seventy in Riddle 88 on p. 152, is symbolic, designating a large or even an uncountable quantity of a certain object. In the traditional ‘Benediction of the Ger’ (*Гэрийн ерөөл*) — a text that is declaimed with the intention of bringing blessings to a new ger or a new owner of a ger, the term ‘ribs’ is used as a metaphor for the walls:

*Made with the willow of the northern Khangai,
What the [ger's] ribs are made of ...*⁶³⁹

In some cases, a riddle can remain just beyond the border of comprehension, even to the most knowledgeable of informants. The following riddle is a demonstration of such, while at the same time it also evokes the visual metaphor of *human anatomy : enclosure* :

97)	Хуурай Dry	мод-оор wood-INS.	хуурцаг box	хий-в make-PRT.PRF.
-----	---------------	----------------------	----------------	------------------------

⁶³⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 181.

⁶³⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2017.

⁶³⁹ *Qoitu hangyai-yin buryasu-bar / Qabiry-a yayu-yi ni kigsen* (Damdinsüren 2009 Vol. 1, 347).

Хувхай	яс-аар	хана	хий-в
White	bone-INS.	wall	make-PRT.PRF.

– Өлгий-тэй	хүүхэд ⁶⁴⁰
Cradle-SOC.	child

‘A box from dried-out wood was made
 A wall from whitened bones was made
 – Child in a cradle’

Mongolian cradles were traditionally made from willow wood, and sometimes hung from the roof poles (*унь*); the cradle had a flat bottom and straps across the top to hold the baby in place, in addition there was a drainage system to ensure that the baby’s urine could drain out efficiently; this kind of cradle could also be carried (stabilized by hanging from a strap around the mother’s neck) while traveling by horse. Sometimes ashes were placed in the bottom of the cradle to keep the child’s bottom dry. The metaphor of cradle as a containing box is clear in this riddle: and, as in poetic thought, the cradle can serve as an external surrogate for the mother’s womb. A further inherent ‘hidden’ metaphor is thus expressed as *cradle / box : womb*.

The ‘wall of whitened bone’ is more difficult to decipher: in Riddle 96, the rib cage of a human being is compared to the trellis wall of a ger; in Riddle 95, it is envisaged as a container for internal human organs. The question is if the ‘wall of bone’ mentioned here could refer to the child’s ribs as a kind of container for the body or the organs. On the other hand, another kind of ‘wall of bone’ attached to a cradle can be observed among the objects collected by the Danish Central Asian Expedition under the leadership of H. Haslund-Christensen, which gathered items for the Danish National Museum in the late 1930s in Inner



Fig. 40. A Daghur cradle with swaddling clothes, collected in the 1930s in Inner Mongolia: an amulet of twenty-four rooster bones hangs from the back. (Braae 2017, 272.)



Fig. 41. The same Daghur cradle as seen from the back. (Braae 2017, 272.)

⁶⁴⁰ Ölziikhutag, 2013, Vol. 1, 127.

Mongolia. This particular cradle (see Figs. 40 and 41 on p. 170) collected from a Daghur family, shows a strap hanging across the raised back part of the cradle, with twenty-four rooster bones hanging from the strap. The rooster bones function as an amulet: metaphorically and spiritually, they form a protective ‘wall.’

Lubsangdorji, in discussing this riddle (before I came across the Daghur cradle), felt that it certainly referred to the use of small animal bones in the fabrication of children’s cradles, and that this riddle must be of early provenance.⁶⁴¹ Such cradles using bones as amulets have also been attested among the Evenki, as seen in Fig. 42 below.



Fig. 42. Evenki cradle with amulets and a string of glass beads and bone ornaments strung across the back. Grassi Museum, Leipzig. (Photograph by author.)

The string of bones which are described as deer’s teeth (*Hirschzähnen*) on the museum label, but which seem to be larger than deer’s teeth, form a kind of wall at the back of the crib, just as in the Daghur cradle seen above. These bones, strung together, also create a visual mimesis of the human rib cage, extrapolated to the

outside of the crib.

In the following riddle, the ‘city’ or ‘enclosure’ is envisioned as a place of movement during the human digestive act:

98)	Төмөр Iron	хот/он-д city-DAT.-LOC.	төхөөр-өөд slaughter-CV.PRF.
	Мод/он Wooden	хот/он-д city-DAT.-LOC.	яйруул-аад chop-CV.PRF.
	Яндуу/г-ийн Yanduu-GEN.	гол river	оруул-на cause to enter-PRS.IMP.
	– Хоол Food	идэ-х ⁶⁴² eat-NF.	

‘Slaughtered in the iron city
Chopped up in the wooden city
Sent to Yanduugin River

⁶⁴¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁶⁴² Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 235.

– Eating food’

The ‘iron city’ refers to the metal implements used in the preparation of meat. This includes the spoon (*халбага*), knife (*хутга*), a special ladle for cleaning out the sheep stomach and the removal of blood, and so on. The verb *төхөөрөх* refers to slaughtering an animal for food preparation; it has the lexical meaning of ‘prepare’ and is a taboo word for slaughter.⁶⁴³ The ‘wooden city’ is the wooden board used to chop up meat: this is usually a freestanding large wooden board similar to European butcher blocks but used as a work table while sitting down,⁶⁴⁴ as shown in Fig. 43 below.



Fig. 43. Wooden board and roller for making noodles. (Braae 2017, 301.)

Яндаа is a measure ladle for liquids (milk or *айраг* ‘fermented mare’s milk’), which gives rise to the verbs *яндах*, ‘to be ladled out,’ and the causative verb *яндуулах*, ‘to cause something to be filled up.’⁶⁴⁵ Metaphorically, this refers to the inside of the

human body: the first two syllables of the verb *яндуулах* have been ‘borrowed’ and used to create the invented proper noun Yanduu (*Яндуу*) which then gives rise to the phrase Yanduugin River, which could also be translated as something like ‘Ladled [filled up] River,’ or even, figuratively, ‘Satiated River.’

Meaningful as well is the personification of the river in this riddle: nomads must live within the proximity of a river in order to survive.⁶⁴⁶ The word *зол* ‘river’ is, in and of itself a polysemous word, meaning, in addition to ‘river,’ the ‘centre, the centre of something, the chief part of something, the spine, the most important thing,’ as well as the ‘aorta.’⁶⁴⁷ The river may not be disrespected: see, for example, the expression *золд ам гар*, ‘to let one’s mouth go out upon the river,’ which carries the metaphorical meaning of ‘thinking oneself above the river,

⁶⁴³ Kara 1998, 456.

⁶⁴⁴ Observation during fieldwork, Khövsgöl aimag, 2014.

⁶⁴⁵ Bold et al. 2008, 3266.

⁶⁴⁶ Some families now also exist in reciprocal exchange with a local administrative center (*сум*) and make use of an arrangement whereby they can receive water from the local well in the *sum* in exchange for a donation of meat from their livestock. (Fieldwork, Khövsgöl aimag, 2014).

⁶⁴⁷ Bold et al. 2008, 510-512. See as well the expression *золы нь таслах*, ‘to slaughter an animal by slicing its aorta.’ (Kara 1998, 108.)

thinking of oneself as being above water.⁶⁴⁸ The river is necessary for life, as well as being the dwelling place of the water- and earth-spirits (*лус савдаг*), who will become angry if disrespected.

Antoine Mostaert, in his work among the Ordos in the early 20th century, collected a similar riddle:

99)	Цалгай/г-аар		цавч-аад,		
	Bulging vessel-INS.		чор-CV.PRF.		
	Хулуу/г-аар		худх-аад,		
	Pumpkin-INS.		mix-CV.PRF.		
	Худаг	луу	бари-ад	хий-нэ	ээ.
	Well	POST.	take-CV.PRF.	make-PRS.IMP.	INT.
	(Хоол	идэ-х-ийг	хэл-сэн	үг) ⁶⁴⁹	
	(Food	eat-NF.ACC.	say-NP.	word)	

This riddle is translated in A. Taylor's monograph as:

In a bulging vessel it is chopped;
 With a *khuloo* it is mixed;
 He takes it and throws it into a well.
 —Eating.⁶⁵⁰

Archie Taylor does not translate the word *хулуу* < Chin. *hú lu* 'pumpkin.'⁶⁵¹ The object that is being referred to is a gourd made out of a pumpkin.⁶⁵² In my translation:

'Chopped up in a bulging vessel,
 Mixed with a pumpkin-gourd ladle,
 Taken and thrown into the well.
 – Eating food'

Also relevant are the interactions that often resulted when I asked one informant about a particular riddle. Lubsangdorji himself grew up in the countryside, with deep exposure to nomadic ways and customs, without the knowledge of which not a few of these riddles might remain inexplicable or subject to misinterpretation. And yet quite often, in discussing a riddle, Lubsangdorji would begin to 're-edit' it, at times creating another riddle on a similar theme, or recalling a riddle from his childhood; or, as in this case, engaging in a series of 'substitute expressions,' or perhaps more appropriately, 'riffs.' In the case of Riddle 98, Lubsangdorji

⁶⁴⁸ Oberfalzerová 2006, 57.

⁶⁴⁹ Mostaert 2010, 313.

⁶⁵⁰ Taylor 1954, 354.

⁶⁵¹ Tömörtogoo 2018, 115.

⁶⁵² 'A kind of gourd; a ladle with a long handle.' (Lessing 1960, 984.)

created a number of variations for its third line, improvising such phrases as “*Мангасын амьруу хийгээд*,” “*Мангасын голд хаяад*,” “*Яндуугийн голд хаяад, шидээд, явуулаад*,” and so forth. Riddle 98 was thus ‘rewritten’ or ‘re-edited’:

Slaughtered in the iron city / Chopped up in the wooden city / *Sent to the mouth of the Mangas*⁶⁵³
Slaughtered in the iron city / Chopped up in the wooden city / *Thrown into the Mangas River*
Slaughtered in the iron city / Chopped up in the wooden city / *Thrown into Yanduugin River*

These spoken variations became almost jazz-like improvisations or set of variations on the theme of the original, mimicking (inasmuch as possible in an academic setting), the act of spontaneous oral regeneration. This was nonetheless an apt demonstration that for Mongolians, these riddles are truly open texts, subject to the process of continuous evolvment and ‘becoming,’ in which each re-teller can lay claim to further collaborative authorship of the text.

In this series of riddles, the ‘internalization’ of food and nourishment is portrayed as a rhythm of cyclical movements through a series of ‘enclosures’ or ‘cities’—just as people, either on foot, or on various modes of transport, move through cities, or, for that matter, as livestock move in and out of their enclosures. The level of visual and conceptual abstraction in this riddle is striking; it functions as a kind of cinematic sequence mimicking the visualization of digestion, in the end becoming an allegory of digestion.

7.2 Other Spaces of Containment

In terms of the ‘ethnolinguistics’ of North American English, the mother tongue of the present author, it must be stated that the concept of ‘containment’ is one with almost universally negative associations, connotating restriction of movement, inhibition of freedom, military strategies (‘containment of the enemy’), institutional deprivation (isolation and enclosure), or even strategies of the ruling order to contain subversion (‘disciplinary functions of structure’ in the work of social theorists such as Michel Foucault).⁶⁵⁴ Containment is largely a matter of social control or of inhibiting an inimical force, whether it be an invading army, refugees, the so-called threat of terrorism, or perceived threats from within the society itself. It mainly involves pushing away or attacking a *foreign hostile body*, preventing it from *encroaching* upon our territories, as in the wide-spread alarm surrounding refugees and immigrants in both Europe and North America, or ostensibly attempting to *limit the extent of damage* from within, as in the case of the discourse around the opioid epidemic in the United States.

Containment, as viewed within the world of these riddles, is quite different — part of a

⁶⁵³ The ‘mangas’ (*мангас*), a familiar figure from Mongolian folklore, is a carnivorous ogre, most often depicted as female, and has a large number of heads.

⁶⁵⁴ Maryja Šupa, “Mapping Practices of Social Control: A Foucauldian Analysis of Urban Space.” DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15388/CrimLithuan.2015.0.8951>. (Accessed Dec. 11, 2018).

mythopoetic fictive world expressing the essential worldview of the nomads who created these verbal works of art. Containment, in this worldview, is not so much connected with threat, as with the sense of the contained universe, which is part of the Middle World, where we human beings live in the embrace of Mother Earth.

In the following riddle, the entire universe is envisioned as a chest (*авдар*) — the large wooden trunk placed in the northern, honorific part of the ger (*хоймор*).⁶⁵⁵

100)	Дэн	их	авдар	
	INT.	big	trunk	
	Хун	их	цоож	
	Concave	big	lock	
	Хулс/ан	хоёр	түлхүүр	
	Bamboo	two	key	
	– Тэнгэр, Sky	газар, earth	нар, sun	сар ⁶⁵⁶ moon

‘An enormous trunk
A concave lock
Two bamboo keys
– Sky, earth, sun, moon’

According to one informant, word *дэн* refers to something very enormous, as big as the



Fig. 44. Detail of the front of two wooden chests; the household altar is placed on top of them: Khövsgöl aimag, 2014. (Photograph by author.)

universe itself.⁶⁵⁷ *Дэн* is also an intensifier; *дэн их* means ‘enormous.’⁶⁵⁸ The word *хун* does not refer to ‘swan’ as in the modern lexicon, but rather describes a topographical feature: a slight depression, or an elevation rising from the ground. The word is attested in the Secret History of the Mongols as *gün/qun*.⁶⁵⁹

This is a very abstract

⁶⁵⁵ See as well Riddle 89 on p. 153 of this thesis.

⁶⁵⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 31.

⁶⁵⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁶⁵⁸ Bold et al. 2008, 807.

⁶⁵⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015; Lubsangdorji 2019, 180. It also appears in *Secret History of the Mongols* in the toponym *Quldayar yun/qun* ‘Quldayar Qun Mountain.’ Here, *yun/qun* has the meaning of ‘mountain.’ (Ibid., 47, 285.)

riddle, in which the wooden chest represents the sky, and the lock represents the earth with its hills. Traditional Mongolian locks had a different appearance from European ones (even today, they are often square in shape) with very long keys, although very different from the old European skeleton keys, and often richly ornamented.⁶⁶⁰

In addition, the lock fittings to the wooden chests in the ger's were often large and round: see Fig. 45 below. Visually, they refer to both the sun and moon due to their large round shape.



Fig. 45. Two lock fittings, one plain and the other ornamented. (Braae 2017, 279.)

The key metaphor in this riddle is expressed in how the sun ‘opens’ our universe at dawn (*Нар манай ертөнцийг онгойж байна*), and the night (and, by extension, the moon) ‘closes’ it with the withdrawal of light.⁶⁶¹ There is also a saying: *Зааны ам зангас хийнэ, замбуутив мэлтэс хийнэ*⁶⁶² ‘The elephant widely opens its mouth, suddenly the world is seen,’ referring to the breaking of dawn and how the world is suddenly lit, emerging from the darkness of night-time. Clearly elephants are not indigenous to Mongolia, but form a part of the living folklore, thanks to Buddhism and its origins in India. This also accounts for the rather anatomically disproportionate representation in the riddle (an elephant’s mouth is, in reality, relatively small).⁶⁶³ Perhaps Mongolians, having not seen elephants in person in the older times, assumed that the mouth of the elephant must have been large as well. Another possibility is that the largeness of the elephant was ‘metaphorically’ transferred to its mouth — given the prevalence of metaphorical thinking and imagery in Mongolian oral folklore and in the language as a

⁶⁶⁰ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁶⁶¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁶⁶² Bold et al. 2008, 1292.

⁶⁶³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

whole.⁶⁶⁴

There are indeed a great many riddles, such as Riddle 100 above, which envision the universe as a wooden chest with its lock and key. Riddle 101 below is one of many variations:

101)	Хар Black	авдар chest	
	Мөнгө/н Silver	цоож-той lock-SOC.	
	Алт/ан Golden	түлхүүр-тэй key-SOC.	
	– Шөнө, Night	сар, moon	нар ⁶⁶⁵ sun

‘Black chest
With a silver lock
And a golden key
– Night, moon, sun’

In this riddle, as with all Mongolian oral folklore, is important to understand the use of metaphorical and substitute speech: the black trunk does not necessarily refer to its colour, but rather its contents — it contains all the things in the world. The shiny objects in this riddle — the silver lock and the golden key — are the moon and the sun: these open up the box and create light. The silver lock and the golden key illuminate the darkness.

A wooden chest can serve as a metaphor not only for a book, but all the wisdom it contains inside.

102)	Баруун West	бие/н-ээс body-ABL.	ир-сэн come-NP.
	Бат Strong	цагаан white	авдар chest
	Бан/г-ийн Big-GEN.	цоож-той lock-SOC.	
	Сан/г-ийн Treasury	түлхүүр-тэй key-SOC.	
	Түүн-ий PN-GEN.	тайл-сан undo-NP.	хүн-д person-DAT.-LOC
	Буурал Grey	мори-о horse-POSS.	

⁶⁶⁴ See Oberfalzerová 2006.

⁶⁶⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 46.

Буу-ж өг-ье
Dismount-CV.IMP. give-VOL.

Булган дах-аа
Sable coat-POSS.

Тайл-ж өг-ье
Undo-CV.IMP. give-VOL.

– Ном⁶⁶⁶
Book

‘A strong white box
[That] came from a Western land:
With a strong lock
And the key to the treasury —
To the one who opens [unlocks] it
My grey horse
I’ll dismount and give [to them]
My sable coat
I’ll undo and give [to them]
– Book’

The word *буе* ‘body’ is used as a ‘vicarious or substitution word,’⁶⁶⁷ similar to ‘side’ in English; the ‘land of books’ was traditionally, for the Mongolians associated with Tibet. In contrast, the land to the south — China — is associated with tea, ink, silk, and other such items.⁶⁶⁸ The white colour of the box has to do with the relatively light colour of book pages. Books, before the onset of mass-produced movable type in Mongolia, were either reproduced in manuscript as sutras, or, later on, Chinese-bound notebook-style books, although the versatility of this riddle is such that it could also be used in a modern context. Many riddles emphasize the strength of the lock that guards the wooden chest. The key to the treasury is a metaphor for the key to wisdom and reason, contained in the book. It is not easily unlocked.

The second part of the riddle refers to a common formula that can be uttered at the end of a riddle. While it is playful, mentioning the gift of a grey horse and sable for the riddle-solver, it renders it even more of a work of verbal art, and increases the importance, for the auditor, of finding the right answer — reminding us again of the crucial ethno-pedagogic role of these riddles.⁶⁶⁹ The second, ‘hidden’ metaphor in this riddle also tells us that the riddle itself is like a box or a book full of treasures.

If riddles are being told, and there is someone who can’t figure out the answer, then a similarly playful rhyme communicates that, in exchange for the answer, the riddle non-solver

⁶⁶⁶ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 163.

⁶⁶⁷ Lubsangdorji and Vacek 2004, 62.

⁶⁶⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014; Kapišovská 2003, 93.

⁶⁶⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

is ‘sold’ to someone. This rhyme below was recited on such occasions:

Дөнжин Four-year old female [camel, cow]		дөнжин four-year female [camel, cow]	тэмээ/н-ээс camel-ABL.
Дөрв/өн Four	шуудай sack	шороо/н-оос dust-ABL.	
Гунжин Three-year old female [camel, cow]		гунжин Three-year old female [camel, cow]	тэмээ/н-ээс camel-ABL.
Гурв/ан Three	шуудай sack	шороо-ноос dust-ABL.	
Шар Yellow	нохой-н dog-GEN.	шаантаг shank bone	
Бор Grey	нохой-н dog-GEN.	борви/н-оос foreleg-ABL.	
Чамайг 2SG.ACC.	тэр that	хүн-д person-DAT.-LOC.	худалд-лаа ⁶⁷⁰ sold-PRS.PRF.

‘For some four-year-old cows [camels]
For four sacks of dust
For some three-year-old cows [camels]
For three sacks of dust
For the shank bone of a yellow dog
For the foreleg of a grey dog
I sold you to that person!’

The terms *дөнжин* and *гунжин* refer respectively to four-and three-year-old female camels or cows.⁶⁷¹ The duplication of ‘four-year-old cow’ (*дөнжин дөнжин*) and ‘three-year-old cow’ (*гунжин гунжин*) creates the plural.⁶⁷² As N. Poppe notes, the function of the suffix *-жин* (WM. *-jin*) is “to form nouns designating female beings.”⁶⁷³ According to one informant, this rhyme might have originated in the Arkhangai province of Mongolia, where there are few camels and they are not so much liked.⁶⁷⁴ The purpose of the rhyme is to gently poke fun at the person who didn’t know the answer to the riddle; they have been ‘sold’ for a number of worthless items (sacks of dust, bones in a dog’s leg, and so on) or rather disliked animals. The words ‘that person’ in the last line would have been, in the recitation of the poem, historically substituted with the name of a disliked local entity, perhaps a local noble, or, in more modern terms, someone who had committed a crime, someone who is perceived as being dangerous, a

⁶⁷⁰ Badamgarav, consultation 2020.

⁶⁷¹ Bold et al. 2008, 549, 729.

⁶⁷² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2020.

⁶⁷³ Poppe 1964, 42.

⁶⁷⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2020.

greedy person, or a Chinese merchant, using the name of ‘Luuhaan’ (*Луухаан*, a pejorative designation for someone of Chinese origin) and so on.⁶⁷⁵

At the same time, informant Badamgarav remarked, in relation to this rhyme: ‘Also, if [a child] doesn’t know the answer [to a riddle], the tradition of selling riddles is a lovely game, isn’t it? It develops the intellect of children, doesn’t it... As for that, it certainly turns [a child] into a human being [fig. raises a child];⁶⁷⁶ generally, as for riddles, all people know how to develop children, of course there is school, they also see [try] riddles in the smaller grades, it is part of the curriculum... [But] the most important thing is that in the years before school, in my time, in the years before school, we learned riddles really well, there were many riddles, not just a few, but all of them.... So that every day riddles were told.’⁶⁷⁷

The folklorist and scholar B. Sodnom also recorded a version of this poem:

Онъсого Riddle	мэд-дэг-гүй know-NU.NEG.		
Олий-сон Squint-NP.	сохр-ыг blind-ACC.		
Олн-ы Many-GEN.	дунд among		
Одоо Now	худалд-ъя sell-VOL.		
Гунжин, Three-year old female [camel, cow]		гунжин Three-year old female [camel, cow]	тэмээ/н-ээс camel-ABL.
Гурван Three	атга fistful	шороо/н-оос dust-ABL.	
Дөнжин Four-year female [camel, cow]		дөнжин four-year female [camel, cow]	тэмээ/н-ээс camel-ABL.
Дөрвөн Four	атга fistful	шороо/н-оос dust-ABL.	
Тайлаг, Five-year female [camel, cow]		тайлаг Five-year female [camel, cow]	тэмээ/н-ээс camel-ABL.
Таван Five	атга fistful	шороо/н-оос dust-ABL.	
Шар Yellow	нохой-н dog-GEN.	шаантаг/н-аас bone-ABL.	

⁶⁷⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2020.

⁶⁷⁶ *хүн болгоно*: This is an important expression that is the causative version of the phrase *хүн болох* ‘to grow up, to become an adult.’ Bold 2008, 295.

⁶⁷⁷ Badamgarav, consultation 2020.

Бор Grey	нохой-н dog-GEN.	богтос/н-оос radius bone-ABL.
Сэмэрхий Frayed	самбай/н-аас [cotton] khadag-ABL. ⁶⁷⁸	
Сэтэрхий Cracked	зүү/н-ээс needle-ABL.	худалда-на ⁶⁷⁹ sell-PRS.IMP.

‘The squinty-eyed blind one
Who doesn’t know the riddle
I now sell, among the many,
For some three-year-old cows [camels],
For three fistfuls of dust,
For some four-year-old cows [camels],
For four fistfuls of dust,
For some five-year-old cows [camels],
For five fistfuls of dust,
For the shank bone of a yellow dog,
For the radius bone of a great dog,
For a frayed *khadag*,
For a cracked needle, I sell [that person]’

Informant Byambaa also recited a short poem about not knowing riddles:

Онъсого Riddle	мэд-дэг-гүй know-NU.-NEG.	хүн person
Олий-сон Squint-NP.	сохор blind	
Үлгэр Tale	мэд-дэг-гүй know-NU.-NEG.	хүн person
Өлий-сэн Lift head-NP.	сохор ⁶⁸⁰ blind	

‘The one who doesn’t know riddles
Is squinty-eyed and blind,
The one who doesn’t know tales
Is conceited and blind’

The verb *өлийх* ‘to lift one’s head’ also has the fig. meaning of ‘to think much of oneself, to be conceited.’⁶⁸¹ Both of the above poems emphasize the importance of the knowledge of oral folklore. The one who doesn’t know it is metaphorically blind.

To return to the theme of wisdom being ‘stored,’ a similar intangible treasury is pictured,

⁶⁷⁸ See p. 82 for a definition of *хадгаг*.

⁶⁷⁹ <https://mongolstudy.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post.html>.

⁶⁸⁰ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

⁶⁸¹ Bold et al. 2008, 1571.

in the following riddle, as being located behind a grouping of objects:

103)	Бараа-ны Stored items-GEN.	ард behind	
	Баршгүй Inexhaustable	чихэр sweet	
	– Хүн-ий Person-GEN.	бодол opinion	санаа ⁶⁸² thought

‘Behind the stored items [next to the ger]
Inexhaustible sweets
– A human being’s thoughts ‘

The word *бараа* (WM *baray-a*) which in the modern language means ‘merchandise, goods for sale’ is also a homophone of *бараа* (WM *bara/baraa-a*) ‘silhouette.’ *Бараа* (WM *baray-a*) can also refer (as it does in this riddle) to a spot to the east of the ger, only a few metres or so distant, where a number of items would be kept, usually on top of a wooden board, and possibly in a wooden chest as well, and also usually with some kind of felt on top of it to protect items against the rain. Located in this ‘pile’ would be a number of necessary things, such as clothes, tools, and all manner of objects (*хэрэгтэй хэрэггүй юм* ‘things necessary and unnecessary’);⁶⁸³ in winter as well an *амбаар* (a kind of annex or shed) might be used, constituting, for all intents and purposes, ‘nomadic storage,’ which, if a pile of objects, would be secured with ropes and stones so as to not blow away in a windstorm. According to one informant, this is the ‘original’ meaning of *бараа*: the pile of objects and its silhouette;⁶⁸⁴ later on it extended further to the meaning of ‘goods for sale.’⁶⁸⁵ The image of the stored pile of items, visually similar to the top convex silhouette of a person’s head, creates the metaphor of *pile of stored items : human head*. The thoughts in that head are envisioned as not being ‘within’ the head, but ‘beyond’ it, in order to spatially emphasize the inaccessibility and unknowability of these thoughts, and the fact that this is part of a ‘store’ which is not easily exhausted.

Human wisdom is also seen as being a trunk or container full of inexhaustible treasures:

104)	Дэлгэр Wide	их big	авдар trunk
	Дэлхий World	их big	шастир religious writing[s]

⁶⁸² Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 116.

⁶⁸³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

⁶⁸⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2013.

⁶⁸⁵ Bold et al. lists the primary meaning of *бараа* as fabric (an object of trade). (Bold et al. 2008, 222-233).

– Оюун ухаан⁶⁸⁶
Intellect wisdom

‘Wide wooden chest
Writing big like the world
– Wisdom’

Although the word *шасмур* (< Skr. *śāstra*) carries the meaning of ‘tractate, history’⁶⁸⁷ (or ‘sutra’ as in the lexical pair *судар шасмур*), here, it refers metaphorically to books and writing as a whole, a text as massive as the entire world. The positive and necessary qualities of human wisdom are emphatically stressed throughout all of Mongolian oral folklore, and in many ways, the head is considered to be an honorific part of the body.

In the following riddle, the wooden chest acquires the function of a substitution principle:

105)	Авдар Trunk	дээр POST.	гар-аад go-CV.PRF.
	Адъяа Āditya	хаан-ыг khan-ACC.	дууд-на call-PRS.IMP.
	– Бурхан-д Deity-DAT.-LOC.	дээж ‘the best’	өргө-х ⁶⁸⁸ offer-NF.

‘Up upon the wooden trunk
The god Āditya⁶⁸⁹ is called
– Presenting offerings [дээж] to a deity’

As mentioned on p. 77, the wooden chest, placed within the honorific northern section of the ger, functions as an altar. The deity *Адъяа*, whose name came into Mongolian from Sanskrit (< *āditya*) through Uyghur,⁶⁹⁰ and whose name means both ‘Sunday’ and ‘sun,’ is being called to receive offerings (дээж ‘the best of something’).⁶⁹¹ This might involve, for example, some choice bits from a just-slaughtered sheep, placed within a small chalice upon the altar.⁶⁹² At the same time the entire riddle functions as a metaphor for the act of going to a high place to make offerings to a deity. The wooden chest is a metaphor for a high sacral space, even for — to take one example — which is the high platform (*индэр*), reached by stairs, to which a young monk ascends every morning to blow the horn to announce the start of services

⁶⁸⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 116.

⁶⁸⁷ Kara 1998, 703.

⁶⁸⁸ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 286.

⁶⁸⁹ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 15.

⁶⁹⁰ Kara 1998, 10.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁹² Fieldwork, Khövsgöl aimag, 2014.

at Mongolian Buddhist monasteries.⁶⁹³

7.3 Direction Upward

A great many riddles manifest an upward direction — toward the sky, toward Tenger. The following riddle describes a ger in very economical terms:

106)	Ац	мод
	Forked	wood
	Боди	мод
	Bodhi	wood
	Богд-ын	олбог
	Holy man-GEN.	pillow
	– Гэр ⁶⁹⁴	
	Ger	

‘Forked wood
Bodhi wood
Seating cushion of a holy man
– Ger’



Fig. 46. A photograph of a ger under construction: the top of the trellis wall can be seen. Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark.

Much is elided in this riddle: not only the copula, but the postpositions as well. It is quite possibly an abbreviated version of Riddle 107 below. *Aц* describes something that is forking off in two directions;⁶⁹⁵ here, it may refer one of two things: the two central columns of the ger that held up the roof wheel (*мооно*) until the ger was fully constructed, or the top part of the external trellis walls,⁶⁹⁶ as seen in Fig. 46 to the left, and Fig. 20 on p. 109.

Visually, the ‘forked wood’ quotes the image of a tree in its upward

spreading branches. Above the forked wood of the trellis walls is the ‘Bodhi’ (*Боду*) wood: its quality of ‘perfection (rel.), saintliness; enlightenment or illumination of a Buddha or

⁶⁹³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁶⁹⁴ Lovor and Ólziikhutag 1990, 181.

⁶⁹⁵ Kara 1998, 36.

⁶⁹⁶ Gaadamba and Sampildendev 1988, 155.

Bodhisattva⁶⁹⁷ refers to the roof wheel (*мооно*: see the explanation of the visual aspect in Figs. 47a–47c on p. 186). At the very top is the ‘seating cushion of the holy man.’ This cushion is the roof wheel cover (*өрх*): the square-shaped felt covering that covers the circular opening at the top of the ger, triangular during the day when pulled up, and lying flat in the square shape at night, which makes it reminiscent of a seating cushion (*олбог*). In earlier times, gers did not contain chairs, but people would sit on felt seating mats on the floor. Chairs largely came in with Western influence (from the mid-19th century onward, although, of course, nobility and high clergy always sat in thrones.). The visualization of the roof wheel cover (*өрх*) as a pillow means that spatially speaking, he sits upon the ger as his sitting cushion, his head touching Tenger. Metaphorically and spatially, the head of the holy man is contiguous with the sacred space of the heavens.

The same progression toward the the sky—as a series of steps progressing toward the Sacred—is described in this riddle:

107)	Ац Forked	мод wood	
	Ац Forked	мод-ын wood-GEN.	дээр POST.
	Авид Amitābha	мод wood	
	Авид Amitābha	мод-ын wood-GEN.	дээр POST.
	Бодисад Bodhisattva		
	– Гэр ⁶⁹⁸ Ger		
	‘Forked wood Above the forked wood Amitābha wood Above the Amitābha wood Bodhisattva – Ger’		

Very typical of Mongolian usage is how those names of Buddhist deities and saints borrowed from Sanskrit were adapted in the process of entering into Mongolian: Amitābha >

⁶⁹⁷ Lessing 1960, 109.

⁶⁹⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 181.



Fig. 47a. Picture of the Buddhist universe, or Wheel of Existence, displaying the six realms of existence, circa 1800. Applique and embroidery on silk. (Wikimedia Commons; Birmingham Museum of Art.)



Fig. 47b. Wooden roof wheel of the *sachinag* type typical of eastern and southern Inner Mongolia and the Gobi. National Museum of Denmark Digital Collections. Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/ES/asset/351834>.



Fig. 47c. The Wheel of Dharma, the dharmachakra. (Wikipedia Commons.)

WM *Abida* < Skt. *Amitābha*.⁶⁹⁹

Бодуцад is a borrowing from Skt. *bodhisattva*.⁷⁰⁰ This riddle becomes very close to being a praise song (*магтаал*) or blessing (*еpөөл*). Alliteration requires that the name of a deity beginning with the letter ‘a’ be used, to create the phonic



Fig. 48. Roof wheel of the *sarchinag* type, 1938. National Museum of Denmark Digital Collections. (Photo: Kaare Grønbech.) Courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. <https://samlinger.natmus.dk/ES/asset/354465>

repetition with the first line. The Bodhisattva of the ger is the roof wheel cover (*өpx*): it is the most highly placed object in the ger. It also has a desire to be helpful (*туслах сэтгэлтэй*): at night, it is closed, helping to keep the ger warm. In the morning, it is opened and the light streams in. In the riddle, the roof wheel cover (*өpx*) is personified as a helpful being with beneficent intent. In discussing this riddle, informant Lubsangdorji also referred to the roof

⁶⁹⁹ The deity Amitābha also makes an appearance in Riddle 88 on p. 152 of this thesis.

⁷⁰⁰ Sūkhbaatar 1997, 41.

wheel (*мооно*) as an animate being as if it were a member of the family: ‘манай гэрийн Абид’ ‘our own Amitābha.’⁷⁰¹

The fact that the roof wheel (*мооно*) is circular in shape (see Figs. 47–48 above) is also of great symbolic importance. Visually, there is a strong association with traditional images of the Buddhist Wheel of Life, which depicts the six classes of beings circling around in samsara,⁷⁰² as well as that of the Wheel of Dharma (*dharmachakra*). As Robert Beer writes:

Buddhism adopted the wheel as the main emblem of the ‘wheel-turning’ *chakravartin* or ‘universal monarch’, identifying this wheel as the *dharmachakra* or ‘wheel of dharma’ of the Buddha’s teachings... The wheel’s swift motion represents the rapid spiritual transformation revealed in the Buddha’s teachings.⁷⁰³

These associations are reflected as well in the previously-mentioned ‘Benediction of the Ger’:

With the precious chakra, the roof wheel
With precious jewels of the roof poles
With precious walls of jade
With a door of many precious [auspicious] symbols
With columns, the essence of lotus
With a strong iron hearth...⁷⁰⁴

In this Benediction, the main structural elements of the ger are endowed with qualities, many of which evoke images of precious jewels or images from the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism.⁷⁰⁵

The following riddle also demonstrates an upward directionality:

108)	Бургас/ан Willow	дээр POST.	нарс pine
	Нарс/ан Pine	дээр POST.	хус birch
	Хус/ан Birch	дээр POST.	хонь sheep

– Гэр⁷⁰⁶
Ger

‘Above willow, pine
Above pine, birch

⁷⁰¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2017.

⁷⁰² Beer 2003, 255.

⁷⁰³ Beer 2003, 14.

⁷⁰⁴ *Хорол эрдэнэ тоонотой / Норов эрдэнэ уньтай / Хааш эрдэнэ ханатай / Нацаг эрдэнэ хаалгатай / Бадмаанямбуу баганатай / Бат ган тулгатай юм байна.* (Gaadamba and Tserensodnom 1978, 116).

⁷⁰⁵ See footnote 243 on p. 79 of this thesis.

⁷⁰⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 181.

Above birch, a sheep
– Ger’

This riddle has an important pragmatic aspect, as it refers to the kinds of wood used to make a ger: it contains genuine instructional value.

Willow wood is often used to make the folding and expanding walls of the ger; it is very strong as well as being flexible. Pinewood is used for the roof poles (*унь*). Pine is lightweight and thus suitable for this use. Birch, also known as ‘white wood’ (*цагаан мод*) is used for the roof wheel. The ‘sheep’ at the very top is the canvas square that covers the roof wheel (*өpx*).

The following riddle also depicts a vertical trajectory as it describes the structure of a sacred object:

109)	Сайн Nice	зандан sandalwood	сайхан beautiful	зандан sandalwood
	Ягир Hard	зандан sandalwood	яс/ан bone	зандан sandalwood
	Түүн-ий PN-GEN.	орой top	дээр POST.	суу-сан sit-NP.
	Тогоо/н Pot	Тамжид Tamjid		
	Тосон Fatty	Тамжид Tamjid		
	Нуга Meadow	Тамжид Tamjid		
	Нугас/ан Vertabrae	Тамжид Tamjid		

– Суврага⁷⁰⁷
Stupa

‘Nice sandalwood, beautiful sandalwood
Hard sandalwood, bone sandalwood
Sitting on top of that
Tamjid the Pot
Tamjid the Fatty One
Tamjid the Meadow
Tamjid the Vertebrae
– Stupa’

Sandalwood (*зандан*) has something of a mythic status in Mongolian oral literature: sandalwood does not grow in Mongolia, but it is well known to Mongolians due to Indian

⁷⁰⁷ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol 1, 215.

Buddhist lore. It grows tall, like a stupa, although this riddle might have referred to a small ‘traveling’ stupa or a larger one, according to one informant.⁷⁰⁸ ‘Bone’ is used here in a metaphorical sense, meaning hard wood, and white (pure) in colour. The proper name ‘Tamjid’ was at one point a very popular name in Mongolia, particularly for women, as in Tamjidmaa.⁷⁰⁹ This word is a loan from Tibetan *thams ced*, ‘all, everyone, the

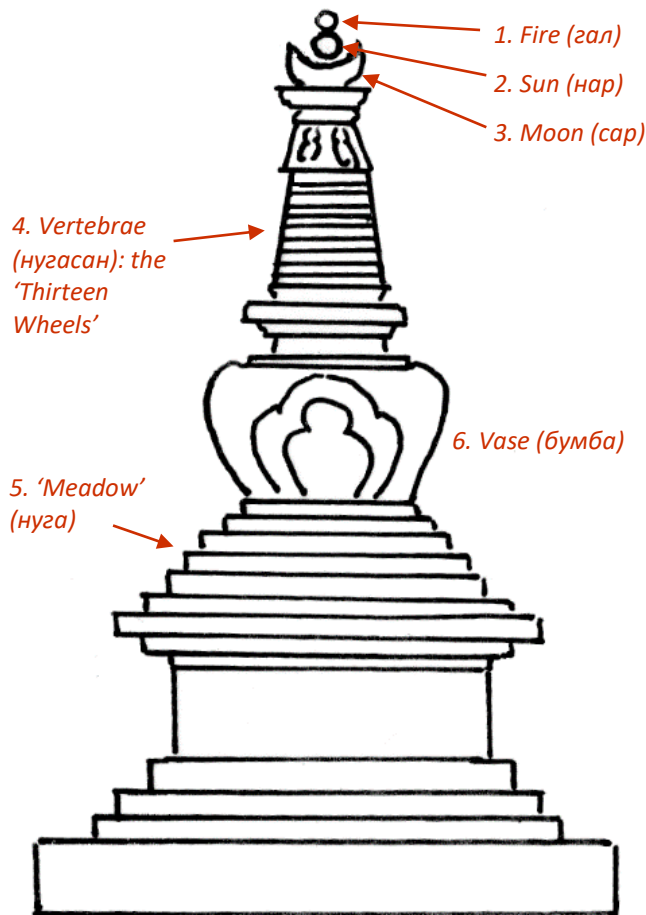


Fig. 49. Schematic sketch of stupa (суврага). (Sketch by author.)



Fig. 50. Soyombo (Соёмбо): the national symbol of Mongolia.

entire,⁷¹⁰ commonly invoked in such prayer-phrases as *sems can thams ced* ‘all sentient beings,’⁷¹¹ habitually translated into Mongolian as *хамаг амьтан* ‘all beings.’ The word *суврага* ‘stupa’ was borrowed into Mongolian from Uyghur.⁷¹²

Tamjid, is thus a proper name meaning ‘all beings’ but in effect it expresses the idea of ‘the liberator of all beings’ (*бүх*

амьтныг аврагч), ‘the one who sends all beings to Nirvana’ (*нирваан руу явуулагч*), or ‘the liberator of all’ (*бүхий гэтлэгч*).⁷¹³

In querying informants about this riddle, there was some divergence as to exactly which part of the stupa (see Fig. 49 on this page) each line of the riddle was referring to. In the view

⁷⁰⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2017.

⁷⁰⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2017. In one Mongolian reference work, the meaning of the name Tamjid is given as ‘all’ (*хамаг бүгд*); the female version of the name, Tamjidmaa, is given as ‘the mother of all’ (*бүхий эх*). (Choima 2013, 653).

⁷¹⁰ Chandra-Das 2004, 572.

⁷¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/y8zkplcp>. Accessed January 9, 2018.

⁷¹² Kara 1998, 394.

⁷¹³ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2017.



Fig. 51. Portable stupa, Western Tibet, made of brass, 13th century. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Eisenberg, 1982.) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/col/lection/search/39421>

of informant Byambaa, the phrase ‘hard sandalwood’ (*ягир зандан*) refers to the wooden pole (*гол мод* also known as the ‘axle pole’) inside every stupa.⁷¹⁴

The top three elements of the stupa mirror the top three elements of the national symbol of Mongolia, the Soyombo (*Соёмбо*), created by Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar (the First Khalkha Jebtsundampa Zanabazar) in 1686.⁷¹⁵ These are the elements of fire, the sun and the moon: see Fig. 50 on the previous page.

In one analysis, ‘Tamjid the Pot’ (*Тогоон Тамжид*) would refer to the very highest element in the stupa, of fire (due to the cooking pot, *тоогоо*, being heated by fire). Informant Byambaa associated ‘Tamjid the Pot’ with the middle section known as the vase (*бумба*), due to its visual similarity to a pot when seen in profile. The vase is the most important part of the stupa. Similarly, Byambaa associated ‘Tamjid the Fatty One’ (*Тосон Тамжид*) with the vase section of the stupa, due to the presence of lard and fat in the pot.⁷¹⁶ Informant Lubsangdorji, however, associated ‘Tamjid the Pot’ with the crescent moon, due to its pot-like appearance when seen from the side. In this riddle, it is also something like an offering bowl. Above this moon/pot floats the Sun, which, due to its circular appearance, has strong visual associations of fat and lard (*мос*).

Fat, or ghee, is one of the most important altar offerings in Buddhist religious culture. For Mongolians, fat and lard (*мос*) are the ‘best of all’ foods (*идээний дээж*)⁷¹⁷ — a fact which is emphasized in many riddles in which fat is directly compared to the sun, as seen here:

110)	АЯГ-ЫН Cup.GEN.	ЧИНЭЭ POST.	өөх/өн-д fat-DAT.-LOC.
	АМЬТАН Animal [being]	БҮХЭН all	шамда-на hurry-PRS.IMP.
	– нар ⁷¹⁸ Sun		

⁷¹⁴ Byambaa, consultation 2020; Dorjee 1996, 64.

⁷¹⁵ Bold et al. 2008, 1733. For a biography of the First Khalkha Jebtsundampa Zanabazar translated into English with annotations and transliteration, see Bareja-Starzyńska 2015.

⁷¹⁶ Byambaa, consultation 2020.

⁷¹⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁷¹⁸ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 34.

‘To the cup-sized lard
All beings hasten
– Sun’

For informant Lubsangdorji, there were strong associations of memories of circles of fat floating around on the top of a full steaming cauldron of soup: in the pot the fat is round.⁷¹⁹ For this reason, ‘Tamjid the Fatty One’ (*Тосон Тамжид*) was also associated with to the circular shape of the circles of fat, reminiscent of the sun in the sky. While, to the Western imagination, this metaphor might seem rather unusual, one can recall some of the riddles examined in this thesis in which an upturned pot represents Tenger, as in Riddle 90 on p. 160 of this thesis. In his poem ‘Dream of Gobi,’ which has also been turned into an exquisite long song,⁷²⁰ the poet B. Lhagvasüren writes: “The moon floats across my cauldron of milk.”⁷²¹ a similar poetic image that connects Tenger with the human sphere.

Following the interpretation of informant Lubsangdorji, ‘Tamjid the Meadow’ (*Нуга Тамжид*) also functions as a structural metaphor in this riddle: it does not refer to a literal meadow, but rather to the idea of a flat plane, or series of flat planes or layers atop one other: this is a visual metaphor for the stepped parts of the stupa (see Fig. 49). ‘Tamjid the Vertebrae’ (*Нугасан Тамжид*) refers to the activity of the people who come to worship at the stupa (as Burkhan is not complete without the worshiper), as they prostrate or place their heads gently upon the ledges of the stupa as they bow to it.⁷²²

For informant Byambaa, the two last lines of the riddle, ‘Tamjid the Meadow’ (*нуга Тамжид*) and ‘Tamjid the Vertebrae’ (*нугасан Тамжид*) both refer to the stepped part of the stupa. The vertebrae may also refer to the part of the stupa known as the ‘Thirteen Wheels’⁷²³ (see Fig. 49).

As described by A. Snodgrass in *The Symbolism of the Stupa*: “The stupa has three main functions: as a reliquary containing the Buddha’s ashes or some other symbol of his Dharma; as a memorial marking the location of an event in the Buddha’s life; and as a votive offering. In each of these functions the stupa acts as a symbol intimating concepts belonging to the metaphorical order of reality.”⁷²⁴ The stupa in Mongolian Buddhism as well carries and further

⁷¹⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015. There are three main kinds of fat in Mongolian nomadic culture: 1. *махны тос* ‘animal fat’ 2. *цагаан идээний тос* ‘fat from dairy products,’ and 3. *хонины сүүлийн тос* ‘fat from fat-tailed sheep indigenous to Mongolia, rich in minerals.’ The sheep tail is given to infants to suck on because of its mineral-rich properties. (Ibid).

⁷²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM7iT-vnJP>. Accessed March 3, 2020.

⁷²¹ *Тогоотой сүүнд минь саран хөвнө*. (Tüdev et al. 1994, 42).

⁷²² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2015.

⁷²³ Dorjee, 1996 51.

⁷²⁴ Snodgrass 1992, 353.

transmits double echoes of both Indian and Tibetan precedents, as well as having served as reliquaries for Mongolian Buddhist saints, a purpose that was renewed after 1991.



Fig. 52. Stupas, Gandantegchinlen monastery, Ulaanbaatar, 2016. (Photograph by author.)

The stupa first and foremost embodies the “symbolism of ascension”:
 “The central axis of the world is the pathway to Liberation. The central pole leads upward to the Gateway of Escape, the Sun Door that opens out of the cosmos. For Hindus and Buddhists alike the spiritual way is an ascension of the access of the world.”⁷²⁵ It is therefore interesting that in this

riddle, a downward progression seems to be taking place, from the Sun and Moon symbols at the top of the stupa to the worshiper below. At the same time, the symbolism of the upward ascent inherent in the ger riddles examined above in Riddles 107-109 seems clear. As Sandrine Ruhlmann also notes: “The hearth, the chimney (*yandan*), and the top opening form, in the middle of the ger, and axis of communication with the sky, the Buddhist affinities, the spirits of nature, and the souls of ancestors.”⁷²⁶ The sacred components of the yurt (the two central columns, the roof wheel frame, the stove, and the roof’s canvas covering, in other words the parts that form this vertical axis) are not crossed over even during its construction, nor are they ever touched with the feet.⁷²⁷

The mixing of the ‘sacred and profane’ is apparent in the next two riddles as well.

7.4 Mundane Containers of the Sacred

Certain riddles evoke seemingly ‘incidental’ or ‘mundane’ containers of the sacred, as here:

111)	Тал-д Steppe-DAT.-LOC.	тахил-ын offering-GEN.	цогц [цөц?] cup
	Зоо-д High plain-DAT.-LOC.	бамбар-ын [torch] flame-GEN.	аяга cup

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 274.

⁷²⁶ Ruhlmann 2015, 54.

⁷²⁷ Oberfalzerová 2006, 65.

– Болжмор-ын
Sparrow-GEN.

үүр⁷²⁸
nest

‘The steppe’s offering bowl
On the high plane, a cup with flames
– Sparrow’s nest’



Fig. 53. Baby sparrows with red throats in a nest. (Wikipedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesper_Sparrow,_Poocetes_gramineus,_nestlings_in_nest_begging_baby_birds;_AB_Canada.jpg)

This riddle demonstrates well the extreme terseness of the genre in Mongolian. The word *зоо* is in and of itself a culturally specific word, designating a high, plain-like space.’ It can also refer to a swelling plain on a mountain top.⁷²⁹ The original noun in the nominative in the first line, *цогц* ‘pile, agglomeration, set,’⁷³⁰ is probably an error,⁷³¹ and should read *цөгц* ‘[offering] bowl.’⁷³² It is likely that the vowel shift (from front vowel to back vowel, or from ‘female word’ to ‘male word’)⁷³³ occurred over time as a way of creating a greater phonetic synthesis within the riddle. The phrase ‘offering bowl’ (*тахилын цөгц*) is a common expression, whereas the phrase ‘offering pile’ (*тахилын цогц*) isn’t. The word *цогц* ‘pile, agglomeration, set’ still has an important connection with Buddhism, however, in that it translates Skr. *skandha*.⁷³⁴ The

word *бамбар* is usually not used in connection with religious offerings: here it means that the chalice is filled with butter or ghee (*мол*), and is lit.⁷³⁵ A bird’s nest, as seen from the side, also is similar in shape to that of a bowl. Yet another visual impetus to this riddle might well have been the image of baby sparrows begging for food from their mother in the nest, with their beaks wide open exposing the insides of their bright red (indeed, flamelike) throats contrasting sharply with the grey and dun colours of their plumage and the nest (see Fig. 53 above).

The symbolism of the bird’s egg is potent in both Buddhist and Mongolian culture. Vegetarian Buddhist monks will also regularly refrain from eating eggs,⁷³⁶ as it represents a potential life.⁷³⁷ The mythical ‘lord of the birds,’ the Garuda (*Гарду*, *Хангарду*), the enemy of

⁷²⁸ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 70.

⁷²⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁷³⁰ Kara 1998, 660.

⁷³¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁷³² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016; Kara 1998, 663.

⁷³³ See footnote 627 on p. 167 of this thesis for an explanation of male and female words.

⁷³⁴ ‘Tib. *phung po*; Skt. *skandha*. Mass, constitutive aggregate.’ (Lessing 1960, 1166).

⁷³⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁷³⁶ Barstow 2018, 52.

⁷³⁷ Stewart 2016, 94.

snakes and nāgas, hatched fully grown from an egg.⁷³⁸

The following riddle also finds a highly auspicious symbol in the everyday:

112)	Бурхан-гүй Deity-PRIV.	боло-вч become-CV.CONC.	
	Найм/ан Eight	сайхан auspicious	тахил-тай offering-SOC.
	Байлдаан-гүй Battle-PRIV.	боло-вч become-CV.CONC.	
	Хоёр Two	сайхан nice	жад-тай javelin-SOC.
	Морь-гүй Horse-PRIV.	боло-вч become-CV.CONC.	
	Нэг One	сайхан nice	ташуур-тай whip-SOC.
	– Үхэр ⁷³⁹ Ох		

‘He has no God
But he has the eight auspicious offerings
He doesn’t fight
But he has two fine javelins
He has no horse
But he has a fine whip
– Ох’

The fact that the ox — personified in this riddle as a human being — has no ‘God’ refers not to a lack of religion as a whole, but the fact that there is no reliquary box (Mo. *зуу*, Tib. *ga’u*) around the ox’s neck: these are small amulet boxes or reliquaries, containing images of deities. In pre-Communist times, noblemen would commonly wear these. The ox bears no statue or image of the Buddha upon its body. Worth noting in this riddle as well is the polysemous nature of the word *Burkhan* (*Бурхан*).⁷⁴⁰

There is also a similar riddle, originally collected by the Belgian missionary Antoine Mostaert in Ordos:

113)	Хээн Foppish	хүн person
	Хэт Tinderbox	хавтарга-үгүй. pouch-PRIV.

⁷³⁸ Beer 2003, 74.

⁷³⁹ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 269.

⁷⁴⁰ See p. 24, footnote 28.

– Бурхн-ы шуумал
Deity-GEN. statue

This riddle is translated in Archie Taylor’s riddle monograph as:

An elegantly dressed gentleman
Without tinderbox and tobacco pouch
– Statue of the Buddha⁷⁴¹

The ox is without a ‘Buddha,’ but the Buddha himself, although finally attired, as the riddle humorously points out, has no tobacco pouch.

Apart from the fairly clear components of Riddle 112 (the ‘two fine javelins’ are the ox’s horns, his ‘whip’ is his tail), the riddle has a rather mystifying component: the eight auspicious offerings refer to offerings on the altar - traditionally, an umbrella, a bowl, a fish, lotus, a conch, the endless knot (*өлзий*), the victorious banner, and the wheel). However, as concerns the word *тахил* (formed out of the verb *таху-* ‘to worship’ + nominalizer *-л*), it has two meanings. The first refers to the eight auspicious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism; the second meaning can be rendered as ‘a [filled] cup or bowl intended as an offering to Burkhan’ (*Бурхны тахилгад зориусан сав, аяга*). This kind of offering refers to seven, eight, or nine bowls placed upon the altar.⁷⁴² The number eight of the ‘eight auspicious offerings’ of Riddle 112 can refer to the imprints of the oxen hoofs, which are ‘doubled’ as its four hooves are cloven. At the same time, as in Riddle 113 on the previous page, the imprint of the oxen’s (or horse’s) hooves is itself reminiscent of the shape of an offering bowl as seen from above.

In his monograph, Archie Taylor quotes a riddle employing the metaphor *livestock hoof [imprint] : offering bowl*. It is similar to Riddle 112:

112a) He does not drink, but has eight red cups.
He does not drive a car, but has a whip [made of *Spiracea altaica*].
– Eight cow’s hoofs and a tail⁷⁴³

In his commentary to the riddle, Taylor notes the “comparison of the cow to a divinity or an idol.”⁷⁴⁴

The reference to an ox’s cloven hooves is also made clear in the following riddle:

114)	Найм/ан Eight	хагас half	аяга-тай cup-SOC.
	Дөрв/өн Four	сайхан beautiful	тулгуур-тай pillar-SOC.
	Ус/ан	хоёр	дэнлүү-тэй

⁷⁴¹ Taylor 1954, 340. See as well Mostaert 2010, 321-322.

⁷⁴² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁷⁴³ This riddle was originally collected by the researcher Bazarov. (Taylor 1954, 341).

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 387.

Watery	two	lantern-SOC.
Ургаа Growing	хоёр two	мод-тай tree-SOC.
Батгана Fly	хөө-х chase-NF.	гөвүүр-тэй rug-beater-SOC.
Бамбуу Large fly	тэжээ-х feed-NF.	будаа-тай grain-SOC.

– Үхэр⁷⁴⁵

‘With eight half cups
Four beautiful pillars
Two watery lanterns
Two growing trees
A rug-beater to swat gnats
And grain to feed the beetles
– Ох’

According to one informant, the ‘eight half cups’ refer to eight items of something concave (*найман хэсэг хонхор юм*). The ‘four beautiful pillars’ are the ox’s legs, the ‘two watery lanterns’ are the eyes, the ‘two growing trees’ are the horns, the ox’s tale is ‘something to swat gnats;’⁷⁴⁶ the ‘grain to feed the beetles’ refers to the cow’s manure.⁷⁴⁷

In the following riddle, the metaphor of *livestock hoof imprint : offering bowl* is very clear:

115)	Зам Road	доор below
	Хумбан Bulbous	аяга cup
	– Адуун-ы Horse-GEN.	мөр ⁷⁴⁸ hoofprint
	‘Below in the ground A cup for kumis – Horse’s hoofprints’	

A *хумбан аяга* is the term used for a small cup or bowl for drinking fermented mare’s milk (*айраг*).⁷⁴⁹ It is a low-rimmed bowl and somewhat bulbous in shape. *Хумбан* ‘bulbous’ is an ideophone.⁷⁵⁰ The horse’s hooves have left an indentation in the ground, creating a visual imprint and leading to the visual metaphor of *hoofprint: drinking cup*, creating the further allegory of

⁷⁴⁵ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 269.

⁷⁴⁶ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁷⁴⁷ <http://khsukhbaatar.blogspot.com/2010/01/blog-post.html>. accessed March 21, 2020.

⁷⁴⁸ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 1, 108.

⁷⁴⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

⁷⁵⁰ Bold et al. 2008, 2688.

hoofprint : *offering cup*, as in Riddles 112 and 114 above. Note how in all of these riddles, it is a spatially defined component that links the footprints of the horse and the offering chalice on the altar.



Fig. 54. A variety of wooden bowls and cups for tea, fermented mare’s milk, and food. (Braae 2017, 323.)

There is a clear ‘mixing’ of the sacred and profane (at least by Western dualistic categories):⁷⁵¹ but we can recall that for Mongolians, every upturned container represents a potential vessel for offerings of the sacred to Tenger and the deities. In the Secret History of the Mongols §103, when Temüjin is praying to Burkhan Qaldun for having saved his life,⁷⁵² he is described as having

“circled his belt (*бүс*) around his neck” (*büse-ben güzügün-dür(i)jen erigeležü*) and holding his hat in his hands upturned (*maqalai-ban ɣar-tur(i)-jan segežegiležü*).⁷⁵³ In other words, his hat, now an open vessel, carried like a basket on his arm,⁷⁵⁴ has become an immediate and appropriate vessel for offerings to the sacred deities of Sky and Mountain. The upturned hat is a symbol of offering something to the gods, even a small item — or maybe even nothing concretely material, but something as ‘immaterial’ as a thought or wish — because it is the symbolism and beneficent thought (*сайхан сэтгэл*) behind the gesture that matters more than anything else.⁷⁵⁵ The space of the steppe, which forms a part of Mother Earth, is the ever present, ever ready, plateau of offerings to the Sky, a theatre of the performativeness of the sacred. The mere imprint of an animal’s hoof may become a vessel for the sacred as well.

7.4.1 Mantle as Container

A container can also be something which wraps around one, or around an object. The metaphor of container as mantle or cloak is embodied in quite a few riddles as in Riddle 116 below:

116)	Бух	шиг	эвэр-тэй
	Bull	POST.	horn-SOC.

⁷⁵¹ See Chapter 3.

⁷⁵² See Section 1.3 regarding the mountain Burkhan Qaldun.

⁷⁵³ Lubsangdorji 2019, 257. This means that Temüjin was using his belt (*бүс*) as a kind of ad hoc rosary, metaphorically offering himself as a rosary to the mountain. (Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018).

⁷⁵⁴ Other translators, such as U. Onon, have interpreted this passage as Temüjin praying with his hat hanging down in his hands. (Onon 2001, 82).

⁷⁵⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

Бурхан шиг жанс-тай
Deity POST. mantle-SOC.

– Ходоод⁷⁵⁶
Stomach

‘With horns like a bull
With a mantle like a deity’
– [Sheep or goat] stomach’

The stomach of the sheep or goat (the reticulum or first stomach of a ruminant) is prepared as a separate food in nomadic households, not unlike Scottish haggis, but without organ meats: in Mongolian custom, the stomach (*ходоод*) is filled with various scraps of fat, blood, wild onion harvested near the ger, and salt. The ‘horns’ refer to a slim piece of wood — usually about the

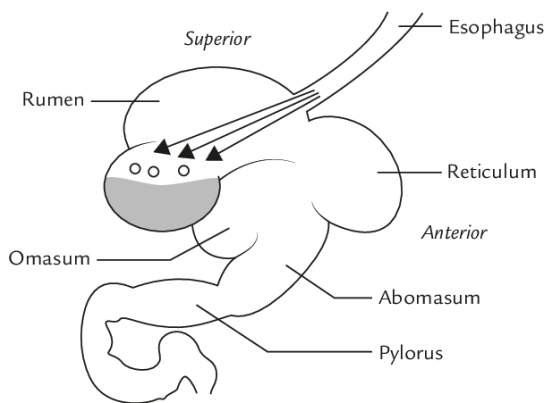


Fig. 55a. The parts of a sheep stomach.
(David et al. 2010, 24.)

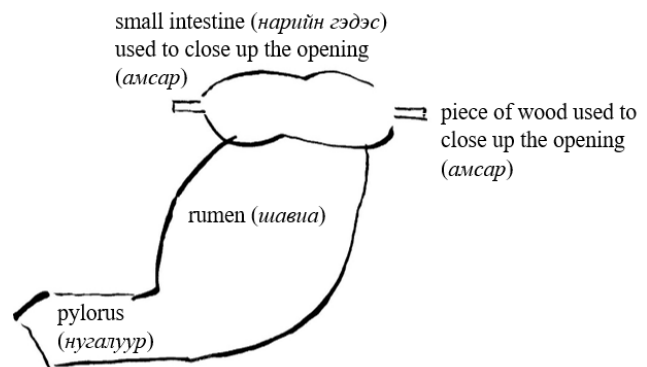


Fig. 55b. Schematic drawing of cooked sheep or goat stomach. (Sketch by author.)



Fig. 56. Sheep being transported in Mongolia, Khövsgöl aimag 2014. (Photograph by author.)

length of a pencil — used to tie up the mouth of the stomach after it has been cleaned and stuffed. The piece of wood is inserted through holes at the top of the stomach, then the small intestine is ‘woven’ around it, thus closing up the mouth of the stomach, and readying it for cooking over the hearth (see Figs. 55a and 55b on this page).

The main part of the

⁷⁵⁶ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 103.



Fig. 57. Statue, possibly of Amitayus, with mantle, in private shrine near Ulaanbaatar, 2011. (Photograph by author.)

stomach is called the ‘rumen’ (*шавиа*) whereas the pylorus emerging from the end of the stomach is called the *нугалуур*.⁷⁵⁷ In terms of the riddle metaphor, the piece of wood used to close up the opening (*амсар*) makes the stomach look like a bull with its two horns. After cooking, the piece of wood woven closed with the small intestine is cut off as a separate piece of food and offered to the person who slaughtered the sheep. The tip of the pylorus (*нугалуур*) is cut off and given as an offering to the fire, (*галт өргөн*), because it is said that the Fire Lord (the Fire God) likes this part of the stomach (*Галын бурхан,*

галын эзэн нугалуурт дуртай гэнэ).⁷⁵⁸ (This section of the stomach does not contain blood). Young girls may not eat the *нугалуур* or pylorus: *Охин нугалуур идвэл нутаг сахина*.⁷⁵⁹ ‘If a girl eats the pylorus, she will guard her own home region (*нутаг*).’⁷⁶⁰ This important role of ‘watching’ (fig. guarding) the home land falls exclusively to the son(s) of the family — the daughter must move to her husband’s home region upon marrying. This custom is reflected in §65 in the Secret History of the Mongols, when Da Sečen says to Yesügei, the father of Temüjin, as he offers his daughter Börte to Temüjin as a bride (amending the translation of Cleaves):

[As for] our boys,
They guard our home land,
[As for] our girls,
[Their] beauty is beheld.⁷⁶¹

The last line figuratively conveys that the girls’ beauty is beheld, and they are thus chosen.⁷⁶²

The stomach must be cleaned out before cooking; as a ruminant stomach, it has many

⁷⁵⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁷⁵⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁷⁵⁹ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁷⁶⁰ For a definition of ‘homeland’ (*нутаг*), see p. 164 of this thesis, and Lubsangdorji 2014, 49.

⁷⁶¹ Cleaves 1982, 17. This passage is translated into Khalkha by Lubsangdorji as *Нухан хүүхэд маань нутаг хараюу / Охин хүүхэд маань өнгө үзэгдэюү* ‘Our membered boys watch over our homeland / Our girls’ beauty is beheld.’ (Lubsangdorji 2019, 28 and 218).

⁷⁶² Lubsangdorji, consultation 2018.

inner layers (*давхарга*): the visual aspect of these many fabric-like layers form the basis for the metaphor of *sheep stomach : lama's mantle*. The stomachs of ruminants also can look fabric-like from the outside as well, with their many folds. The mantle mentioned in the riddle refers not only to the mantle of a human lama or monk, but to the cloaks (*нөмөрлөг*) often placed around Buddhist statuary in temples and home shrines (see Fig. 57 on the previous page).⁷⁶³

The term *жанч* ‘mantle’ can also refer to a sutra cover (*судрын жанч*),⁷⁶⁴ which forms the theme of the following riddle:

117)	Хайрт Beloved	ээж-ийн mother-GEN.	минь mine	
	Хий-ж Make-CV.IMP.	өг-сөн give-NP.		
	Хар Black	баринтаг sutra cover		
	Хаана Where	ч PTCL.	яв-сан go-NP.	хамт together
	– Суудэр ⁷⁶⁵ Shadow			

‘The black sutra cover
My beloved mother
Made for me
Went everywhere with me
– Shadow’

The term *баринтаг* refers to a sutra cover (*номын баринтаг*): these are square-shaped pieces of fabric, crafted from beautiful silks and often lined with cotton, hemmed at the edges, and



Fig. 58. A sutra being wrapped in a sutra cover (*баринтаг*). (Photograph by author.)



Fig. 59. A sutra is stored in its cover (*баринтаг*). (Photograph by author.)

⁷⁶³ See as well Riddle 25 on p. 80 of this thesis, which mentions a vase (*бумба*) wrapped in ‘brocaded silk.’

⁷⁶⁴ Bold et al. 2008, 874.

⁷⁶⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 33.

used to wrap up sutras; they are secured with a piece of string or cord that is sewn into one of the corners. Important sutras are often wrapped in more than one cover. The term *баринтаг* is also used as an honorific word to describe the deel worn by children and nobles.⁷⁶⁶ The figurative meaning of the word is that it is a ‘robe, cloak’ for a sutra.

Like many other riddles, this one has many elided terms in it, and the words ‘my beloved mother’ in this riddle function as a substitute element which could be replaced with any number of precious or sacred entities such as ‘my sacred mother, ordained/granted from nature’ (*байгалаас заяасан бурхан ээж минь*).⁷⁶⁷ The phrase essentially functions as a poly-referential seme. *Хийж өгсөн* ‘made [for me]’ refers metaphorically to what the speaker was born with. In the last line of the riddle, in the phrase *хаана ч явсан хамт* lit. ‘went anywhere together [went everywhere with me]’ the words ‘with me’ are elided, as is quite common in spoken Mongolian as well. This elision, as well as the one in the second line (the modal verb *өз-* ‘to give’ conveys the directionality and benefit of the action toward the speaker), serve to nearly fully elide the speaking subject, who, however, is still alluded to in the first line *хайрм ээжийн минь* ‘my beloved mother.’ The *contained* element in the riddle is the human being. The elided elements serve to emphasize instead the *container* of the human (expressed in the metaphor of *sutra cover : shadow*), created or bequeathed by the beloved mother, or, in the interpretation of one informant, Burkhan, nature, and so on.⁷⁶⁸

The ellipsis of this riddle is perfectly natural and customary in Mongolian. By the same analogy as above, one could ask if the metaphor *sutra : human being* would also apply to the *contained* in this riddle, but given the traditional respect conveyed to human wisdom in all of Mongolian folklore, and the way in which so much of that folklore animates supposedly inanimate objects, not to mention those of sacred provenance, such a metaphor could well apply. Once again, as well, a phenomenon of supposedly mundane significance (one’s own shadow), is imbued with the nomadic sacred, reminding us that Mother Earth always enwraps and surrounds us like a comforting blanket.

In honorific expressions, the term *баринтаг асаах* ‘to be clothed in a deel’ refers to an honoured individual putting on their deel. The verb *асаах* ‘to light, to spark, to ignite, to cause to climb upward’⁷⁶⁹ is a little confusing here; most likely it developed from the phrase *нум сум агса-* ‘to hang a quiver [from one’s belt].’⁷⁷⁰ It is possible that over time, the *-з-* became silent

⁷⁶⁶ Bold et al. 2008, 244.

⁷⁶⁷ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2014.

⁷⁶⁸ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2014.

⁷⁶⁹ Bold et al. 2008, 151.

⁷⁷⁰ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

with the progression *агса > аса > асаа*. The causative *-а-* was formed by the duplication of the vowel *-а-* (as a sutra cannot wrap its cover around itself).⁷⁷¹ The verb *агса-* ‘to hang a quiver [from one’s belt]’ also has the meaning of ‘to turn the upper edge of one’s deel outward,’⁷⁷² which can also be seen as being connected to the motion of wrapping a sutra in its cover.

The term *баринтаг* ‘sutra cover’ is also used in certain contexts to refer to frozen ice on the river (as in the term *гол баринтаглах*)⁷⁷³ ‘the river is completely frozen over with ice:’ this means it can be safely crossed. This is a respectful way of speaking of the river, pleasing to the Earth Lords (*лус савдаг*), who, if they hear such speech, will think well of people speaking in such a way, and thus will not bring them harm.⁷⁷⁴ Nomads, in general, are rather apprehensive of the Earth Lords, deeply aware of the need to propitiate and respect them. The term *баринтаг тайлах* (‘the sutra cover [of the river] melting’) — indicating that the ice covering the river is melting, usually around April — is also very respectful.⁷⁷⁵ The ice is, metaphorically speaking, a sort of cloak, or a deel for the river, one that is repeatedly donned and then shed.

7.5 Spatiality of Death

The Mongolian riddle corpus also contains a unique expression of the spatiality of the journey from this life to the next:

118)	Хангай-д Forested mountain-DAT.-LOC.		ор-сон enter-NP.	цас snow	
	Хайла-х Melt-NF.	нь P3	бэрх hard		
	Харуул-д Guard-DAT.-LOC.	морд-сон ride-NP.	хүн person		
	Ирэх Come-NF.	нь P3	бэрх hard		
	– Үс Hair	цай-х turn grey-NF.	ба and	үх-сэн die-NP.	хүн ⁷⁷⁶ person

‘The snow on the forested mountain
So hard for it to melt
The one who’s ridden off to guard
So hard to return
– Hair turns grey, deceased person’

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Bold et al. 2008, 151.

⁷⁷³ Bold et al. 2008, 244.

⁷⁷⁴ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2018.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 222.

This riddle is closely connected to a well-known proverb: *эрийг нас уулыг цас дарна* ‘Age weighs down a man, snow weighs down a mountain’⁷⁷⁷ *Khangai* is a taboo word for forested mountain. As in many riddles, this one as well demonstrates an exact parallel structure. The first line of the riddle refers to the fact that the snow at the top of the mountain never fully melts; also, because it is under tree cover. The ‘one ridden off to guard’ is someone who has passed away, who has gone to Tenger. Where has he gone? He is standing by the border of Nirvana, guarding it. This image may also have a real-life parallel with the duty of guarding borders historically in Mongolia: this usually meant lifetime service. The temporal inevitability of death and the passing on to the next life — a journey equalled only in importance by the journey into the site — is expressed in an eloquent spatial metaphor.

7.6 Conclusion: The Space of the Nomad

In many regards, the Mongolian riddles that involve these vivid depictions of space seem to teach the auditor as much about space itself as the ostensible riddle subject. They certainly tell us a great deal about how nomadic Mongolians perceive space: the striations of this riddle-space can be passed through without obstacle, creating a further *smooth space*.

The layered or stepped riddle can also be seen as having a certain counterpart in the ‘chain’ folk song of European culture, for example the Hebrew or Aramaic *chad gadya* “One Little Goat,” the goal of which “is to illustrate the point that God is the Lord of the entire universe; everything begins and culminates with Him.” (This nursery song originated in the Middle Ages in Germany, and was eventually adopted by Jewish culture).⁷⁷⁸ In Czech folk culture, there is a well-known nursery rhyme *Byl jednou jeden domeček* ‘There Once Was a House,’ which begins with the invocation of a simple house, a table within and a bowl of water containing a fish, and linking a series of organic events until it ends with the lady of the house buried in the nearby cemetery.⁷⁷⁹ The Aramaic rhyme proceeds with a number of domestic animals who are slaughtered by the *shohet* (the ritual slaughterer), the *shohet* is slaughtered by the Angel of Death, whereupon the Angel of Death is smote down by The Holy One. The Aramaic rhyme circles back to the goat; the Czech folk rhyme depicts the inevitable conclusion of human life in an unemotional and matter-of-fact manner, whereas the upward trajectory of many of the Mongolian riddles create a performative directionality pointing only toward Tenger.

⁷⁷⁷ Bawden 2010. John Krueger translates it as: “Snow is a burden to a mountain: Age — to a man.” (Krueger 1967, 66).

⁷⁷⁸ Borbély 2006, 200; Borbély 2019, 162-163.

⁷⁷⁹ Konárková 2017.

The many riddles featuring containment as a prominent trope — defining an object or a spatial configuration by what it contains, or defining another object by the state of its containment — provide an education in the nature and condition(s) of space itself. I would suggest that the overriding metaphor for all the ‘containment’ riddles examined here is that of the womb, the human container *par excellence*. There are certain indications (including the examination of the etymology of the term ‘homeland,’ *нутаг*) to indicate that Mongolian society was originally strongly matriarchal; in any event, the equality of the male and female principles (of the horizontal and vertical axes, Mother Earth and Father Sky) is abundantly attested, in these riddles as in Mongolian folklore as a whole and the many studies of indigenous Mongolian religion. These riddles tell us what it is like to move through the landscapes of nomadism: an instructive ethno-pedagogy radically diverging from theistic morality. The universe seen as One, safely contained in the embrace of the Mother’s womb.

Conclusion

A Grammar of the Cosmos

As seen in the preceding pages, the number of topics and questions raised by the study of Mongolian riddles is truly vast, and thus difficult to summarize in a few paragraphs or pages.

Mongolian riddles have been collected in great abundance, as mentioned in the Introduction.⁷⁸⁰ In that regard, researchers of Mongolian oral folklore are exceptionally fortunate to have such a large corpus of riddles with which to work, based upon, for example, the outstanding work of twentieth-century researchers such as Sh. Gaadamba, G. Lovor, Ts. Ölziikhutag, as well as their precedents, and many others.

Until now, however, very few works have appeared which offer explanations to these riddles, many of which are highly enigmatic. These riddles are extremely terse, not least due to the lexical and syntactic features of Mongolian that lend qualities of abstraction and ambiguity to many enunciations, both written and spoken, and their deeply culturally grounded qualities means that the collaboration of a Mongol informant is required in order to fully understand them; in the case of this thesis, one of the informants, Lubsangdorji, is a professor, a linguist, and another, Byambaa, is a professor and a practising Buddhist monk. Badamgarav grew up in a herding family in the countryside. This dissertation is one of the first works to append over 100 riddles with detailed explanations arrived at with the collaboration of Mongol informants and placed within the context of Western riddle study without imposing Western academic categories that may be less than fully useful in the world of Mongolian folklore.

Mongolian riddles show us that the ethos of Mongolian ethno-pedagogy, as outlined in the work of such researchers as Alena Oberfalzerová,⁷⁸¹ is not in the least missing from the riddle corpus either. Mongolian riddles are not only syntactically and grammatically very close to both proverbs and triads, but their educational purpose is the same: to teach the auditor(s) about the world around them, the relationship between man and nature, man's place in the

⁷⁸⁰ See p. 13.

⁷⁸¹ See footnote 6 on p. 13 of this thesis.

cosmos, the relationship between Mother Earth and Father Sky (*Газар дэлхий, Тэнгэр*)—deities of the Mongolian steppe.

At the same time, the prevalence of mythic elements in the Mongolian riddle corpus more than amply confirms the assertion of S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig that Mongolian riddles are deeply connected with the specific myths, rituals, and legends of the Mongols.⁷⁸² To understand the world of these riddles, we also need to understand the mythology that, in many cases, prompted them. The riddles echo, and in some cases ironically ‘mimic’ these myths, origin stories, and rites. And thus these mythic and religious fragments clearly themselves form generative principles in the riddle corpus. As S. Dulam and G. Nandinbilig have written:⁷⁸³ each answer to a riddle prompts a story (*үлгэр*) or a form of mythic narrative. The picture is a good deal more complex than the notion that the ‘riddle image’ should be seen as being comprised of the riddle and the answer, as proposed by E. K. Maranda, ‘an interrogative that contains its own goal’.⁷⁸⁴ In the case of Mongolian riddles, each riddle is connected to an endless signifying chain which takes us into the mythic past, and, in many cases, the mythic present. It is not a question of ‘romanticizing’ this past or present, but of recognizing its generative principle in matters of oral folklore, the nomadic steppe values it inculcates, of recognizing the fragments for what they are. They are indeed inextricably linked to the signifying myths of Mongolian nomadic culture, which means that even to try to view this or that riddle in atomistic isolation already constitutes a betrayal of their function and message.

Many or most Mongolian riddles contain a riddle within the riddle, or what could be termed a ‘secret second metaphor’ which can be deciphered only upon reflecting upon the riddle: this is an essential part of their pedagogy.⁷⁸⁵ These metaphors themselves create a ‘grammar of the cosmos,’ incorporating, as mentioned just above, origin myths, mythic elements, and Buddhist elements. They also form a series of nomadic assemblages in the Deleuzian sense of the term. These ‘meta’ or ‘secret metaphors’ are, at least on the formal level, something like a philosophical counterpart to the ‘secret consonant *-n*’ that appears at a number of many nouns:⁷⁸⁶ an element that is ‘hidden,’ yet there, and appears when needed. The secret metaphors of these riddles act intensively to facilitate sophisticated cognitive blending. And, it should be stressed, the kind of cognitive mapping and blending that takes place in

⁷⁸² See Introduction, Section 1.8.

⁷⁸³ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁴ Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, 1996, 42.

⁷⁸⁵ Lubsangdorji, consultation, 2015. See as well the commentary to Riddle 102 on p. 177 of this thesis.

⁷⁸⁶ Also known as “*unstable /n.*” (Janhunen 2010, 82).

Mongolian riddles needs to be researched by fields such as cognitive linguistics in much greater depth than has occurred thus far.

To take one example of a structuralist approach to riddle research, the Finnish riddle researcher E. K. Maranda applies transformational grammar to Finnish riddles with the conclusion that any riddle can be analysed to generate such transformative rules. She uses, for example, the riddle “A virgin grew on a hill / her hair hanging on her shoulders. — Birch tree.”⁷⁸⁷ This riddle is mapped out in the following manner: maiden / grows / hairs / branches or leaves / birch tree,” and presented with a number of transformations such as: bride > bridal dress > leaves, flowers > tree; or: woman > children > berries > wild cherry tree, and so on.⁷⁸⁸ There is no denying that this transformational model can be applied to Finnish (and other) riddles as well, but it can also be argued that some of the transformations that can be demonstrated to have occurred in Mongolian riddles stray from this pattern, or demonstrate a completely different generative mode altogether. This is partially due to the transmission method of these riddles – until very recently, largely oral — yet in itself, this pragmatic aspect also implies that the rules of transformational generation, and the linguists who work with them, need to take into account such cases that diverge from so-called ‘normative’ cultures and languages.

The Finnish riddle about the birch tree has all the parts of a sentence (as considered as ‘normative’ in English, for example): a subject (the birch tree), a predicate (growing on a hill), as well as an adjectival determination. As we have seen, Mongolian riddles are formed from clause fragments (sometimes just one), the tersest of which can be reduced to the following formulation: an object > [elided verb of existence] > a location: see, for example, Riddle 4 in on p. 36 of this thesis. Some riddles lack a subject; others a predicate. Overall, the riddles in the two corpuses evince a rather high degree of ellipsis.

The ‘re-editing’ process of Riddle 98 on p. 174 of this thesis might seem to respect the rules of ‘generative riddling,’ but the whole point is that it doesn’t: there are many examples where phonetic sound-play and variation in a riddle means that the riddle ends up following a rhizomatic ‘non-path’ as opposed to generating a systematic set of orderly substitutions. One example is Riddle 63 on p. 125 in the first line where the phrase *Эрвэн сэрвэн ээжтэй* (‘with a branchy and tufted mother’ [the kindling]), suddenly becomes, in a variation on that riddle: *Эрвэн сэрвэн цээжтэй* (‘with a branchy and tufted chest’). In transformative riddling rules, we would expect the substitute element to be of a kind, i.e., another family member or such.

⁷⁸⁷ Maranda 1971a, 126.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid., 127.

The word for ‘mother’ (ээж) has transmuted into the word for ‘chest’ (үээж): it is very likely this occurred through the creation (whether inadvertant or otherwise) of a desired alliteration between the sibilants ‘s’ and ‘ts’ in *цэргэн* ‘tousled, tufted’ and *үээж* ‘chest’. While on one level, this could be considered a ‘mistake’ or ‘error’ due to oral transmission, or even a slip of the tongue, I believe a shift such as this should be viewed as *rhizomatic generative principle* in its own accord. In addition, the idea of the fire having a ‘a branchy and tufted chest’ makes complete sense, especially when we consider that in Mongolian, all natural bodies, such as rivers and mountains, for example, are considered to have bodies and are spoken of in those terms.⁷⁸⁹ It is not at all difficult to imagine that there might exist even more variations of this riddle that derive from the kindling of the fire pictured as part of its body, as opposed to its mother. In essence, the oral phonetic shift sends the riddle off on a completely different trajectory, semantically and metaphorically speaking.

The following series of two riddles, both of which have the subject of ‘man on horseback,’ also demonstrates a different a kind of transformational principle:

117)	Төмөр Iron	шат step
	Мах/ан Flesh	даваа [mountain] pass
	Суу-х Sit-NF.	бурхан deity
	Гүй-х Run-NF.	ширээ throne
	– Морь-той Horse-SOC.	хүн ⁷⁹⁰ person
	‘Iron stair Mountain pass of flesh Sitting God Running throne – Man on horseback’	

The ‘iron stair’ is the stirrup. The ‘mountain pass of flesh’ is a rather humorous reference to the horse’s back which the rider ‘crosses’ with one leg as he mounts the horse. The sitting deity, or Burkhan, is the rider, whereas the running (four-legged) throne is the horse. The powerful metaphorical image in this riddle is that of INCREASE IN HEIGHT : INCREASE IN SACREDNESS — reflecting precisely the cosmology of the steppe. Even though the riddle is

⁷⁸⁹ See p. 24 of this thesis.

⁷⁹⁰ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 264.

humorous, it describes the movement of how as one climbs a mountain, one grows closer to Tenger, and one must show appropriate respect to the deities that reside there (as well as the deities of the mountain). The ‘hidden’ metaphor of the riddle is that a man on horse is that much closer to Tenger, not least because he is raised from the ground; a man on a horse is similar to a deity on a throne.⁷⁹¹

In a variation of this riddle, the metaphorical image of INCREASE IN HEIGHT : INCREASE IN SACREDNESS has been replaced with an image of static equality.

118)	Эв Pleasant	ноён nobleman
	Хав Valiant	ноён nobleman
	Суу-х Sit-NF.	ноён nobleman
	Гүй-х Run-NF.	ноён nobleman
	– Морь-той Horse-SOC.	хүн ⁷⁹² person

‘Pleasant nobleman
Powerful nobleman
Sitting nobleman
Running nobleman
– Man on horseback’

In this riddle there is no progression ‘upward,’ but horse and man are praised as ‘pleasant’ and ‘valiant.’ Also of interest is that the two words *эв хав* ‘pleasant, valiant’ form a lexical pair (*хоршоо үг*) meaning ‘harmony, concord.’⁷⁹³ This lexical pair has been broken up over the two lines of the riddle, but the two words still resonate with each other, echoing the harmony of horse and rider. This riddle is closer in function to a praise song (*магтаал*), in which horse and man are equated as ‘noble.’

The principle of the divine or sacred is reflected in Mongolian riddles through upward directionality, as mentioned above. Clearly this has much to do with Lakoff’s category of positive qualities (health, good mood, etc.) as being expressed by the orientational metaphor of UP.⁷⁹⁴ What is not reflected, however, are the culturally specific ramifications and taboos around these metaphorical directions in Mongolian, which are also an integral part of these riddles, as

⁷⁹¹ Lubsangdorji, consultation 2016.

⁷⁹² Lovor and Ólziikhutag 1990, 264.

⁷⁹³ Bold et al., 2008, 2355.

⁷⁹⁴ Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 15.

in, for example, in Riddle 118 above, where the spatially determinate metaphor of upward movement toward Tenger seen in Riddle 117 is replaced with a spatially indeterminate and relatively static one. Metaphorically, Riddle 118 is much closer Riddle 19 on p. 69, which emphasizes the ‘equalness’ of the skin of a castrated ram and goat, echoing the equality of all forces in nature.

Rather than the metaphors in these riddles being driven by ‘universal human categories’ the metaphors in these riddles are determined — both in terms of their image schemata and their structural qualities — by the cultural specific needs of ethno-pedagogy and the cosmology they express.

Indeed, many riddles demonstrate almost the exact same wording for different answers. In the following riddle:

119)	Үс-тэй Hair-SOC.	ДЭМБЭН <i>demben</i> [huge bulging thing]	
	Үс-гүй Hair-PRIV.	ДЭМБЭН <i>demben</i> [huge bulging thing]	
	– Үхр-ийн Cow-GEN.	ЭВЭР, horn	ЧИХ ⁷⁹⁵ ear

‘Hairy *Demben*
Hairless *Demben*
– Horns and ears of cattle’

the same wording is used as for Riddle 89 on p. 153 describing the wooden chest (*авдар*), the Earth, and the Sky. Many riddles describe the sky as ‘hairless’ and the earth as ‘hairy,’ an easy-to-understand metaphor, given the presence of grasses and trees on the earth and their absence in the sky or heavens. The order of the riddle above might seem to have been mixed up — the horns of the cattle are hairless, and its ears are hairy. At the same time, however, clearly the oppositional pair *hairy* : *hairless* here as well stands in for the relationship of Earth and Sky. The metaphorical connection is that the horns point upward towards heaven, emphasizing the vertical male principle, whereas the ears are more visually ‘flat’ with the rest of the cow’s body (cows in Mongolia usually have horns). The cow thus becomes the bearer of the entire universe, as seen in Riddle 88 on p. 152, where the sky is carried on the ‘broad bull’s back,’ driven by two Buddhist deities. The metaphorical connections between Riddle 88 and Riddle 119 are subtle and do not necessarily obey the rules of ‘transformational riddling.’ These many *hidden*

⁷⁹⁵ Ölziikhutag 2013, Vol. 2, 96.

resemblances tell us that on a macro level, the Mongolian riddle corpus is seeking to perform yet another ‘hidden,’ yet equally crucial function: to establish a system of resemblances throughout the entire cosmos, to convey the message of the connectedness of all phenomena — a message that is at once respects the teaching of the nomadic steppe dwellers, based on centuries of existence in rugged circumstances; a worldview that is profoundly Buddhist in character, but that also reflects a deeply creative and productive syncretism in terms of the earlier layers of the Mongol understanding of the cosmos and mythology.

In addition, many riddles convey the message of structural similarity between fairly divergent phenomena, as seen in the following riddles: Riddle 90, discussed on p. 160, and Riddle 8, discussed on p. 40:

90)	Энэ This	тэнгэр heaven	
	Энэ This	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Тэр That	тэнгэр heaven	
	Тэр That	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Хун Swan	тэнгэр heaven	
	Хун Swan	тэнгэр-ийн heaven-GEN.	цаана POST.
	Хундай <i>Hundai</i>	баян bountiful	
	– Хөөрүүл-сэн Boil-NP.	сүү ⁷⁹⁶ milk	

‘This heaven
Beyond this heaven
That heaven
Beyond that heaven
Swan heaven
Beyond swan heaven
Bountiful *Hundai*
– Boiling milk’

8)	Хаан Khan	үүд door	
	Хаан Khan	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана beyond
	Яс/ан	үүд	

⁷⁹⁶ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 164.

Bone	door	
Яс/ан Bone	үүд-ийн door-GEN.	цаана beyond
Явжигнуур Yammering	отигон shamaness	
– Уруул, Lip[s]	шүд, teeth	хэл ⁷⁹⁷ tongue

‘The Khan’s door
Beyond the Khan’s door
The Bone door
Beyond the Bone door
A yammering shamaness
– Lips, teeth, tongue’

Both of these riddles employ the rather frequent structure, mentioned in the Introduction (see p. 41), of *something existing beyond something else to which it is nonetheless related*. What appears to be posited as striated space, in Deleuzian terms, is breached easily and indeed in the manner of traversing barrierless ‘smooth’ space. These riddles seek to find structural equivalence in the world, attesting to a different kind of embodied cognition than the one often discussed by cognitive linguists. The ‘embodied approach to meaning’ has a different sense altogether in the Mongolian context, where language itself is seen as having a force capable of impinging upon reality; this is something that must be taken into consideration by linguistic researchers when approaching Mongolian from a cognitive viewpoint.

The approach embarked upon in this dissertation and the forms of linguistic analysis employed can also be applied to other forms and genres of Mongolian oral literature, such as proverbs. Such methods, employing ethno-linguistic research, can be very fruitful, particularly given the vulnerability of such oral forms in the modern technological world.

⁷⁹⁷ Lovor and Ölziikhutag 1990, 132.

List of Informants

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Ragčaagiin Byambaa, b. 1957 in Adaatsag sum, Dund Govi aimag, Buddhist monk and university professor.

M. Badamgarav, b. 1942 in Batsengel sum, Arhangai aimag.

Enkhzargal Holaková, b. 1962 in Ulaanbaatar. Museum administrator.

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