

E T H N I C S E R I E S



Dörvön Berkh

Four Shagai Bones

Masters of Mongolian Overtone Singing



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Dörvön Berkh can roughly be translated as “four sides”. In the Mongolian game of *shagai* in which four sheep or goat ankle bones are rolled like die, the term refers to when one of each side turns up in a single roll. It is extremely rare, but when it happens the roller receives good luck for the future. *Dörvön Berkh* is thus also used to describe when four people reach high social status together. For the first time, four greatly respected masters of Mongolian overtone singing have been brought together on stage to “roll” the four sides of overtone singing together.

Nanjid Sengedorj. Sengedorj was born in 1948, the year of the mouse, in Emgen, an area near Chandman, Xovd province, Mongolia. Retired since 2009, he ran and supported the drama theatre of Xovd City for more than 20 years. Sengedorj learned *xöömij* by himself through listening and imitating the singers he grew up around. Since the 1970’s, he has performed around the world including France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the USA, Russia, Korea, Japan, and Kazakhstan among others. He sings several kinds of *xöömij*: *xarxiraa* and *xargia xoomij* (deep *xöömij*) *xamriin xarxiraa* (deep nasal *xöömij*) and *Altain shingen xöömij* (*xöömij* of scattered tones associated with the Altai). “Baritone *xöömij*” is the name he gives to his personal style, which corresponds to his tessitura. Sengedorj plays the *tovshuur* (two-stringed lute) with a *zazal* libation sound head and the *tsuur* (open-ended flute) a rare instrument from the Altai region which few people play today. He learned how to play this flute from Narantsogt.

Sengedorj has few students because he doesn’t want to build “*xöömijch* factories”, as he has said, and prefers to focus on one or two at a time to encourage mastership. He doesn’t want to transmit everything he knows so that each student finds his own character and stands out from the others.

Baatar Odsuren. Odsuren was born in 1949 in the village of Aladarxaan, in the year of the cow, Zavkhan province, Mongolia. He lives in Ulaanbaatar where he is still the only singer to teach *xöömij* at the university. Odsuren first learned *magtaal* praise songs through Jamtsiin Choyin. His teacher encouraged him to learn overtone singing, which he taught himself, beginning with a *magtaal* singing technique somewhat similar to that of the drone used in overtone singing. He is most active in teaching, but has also participated in international concerts in France, Germany, the USA, Russia and Japan, among others. He sings twelve kinds of *xöömij*: *xarxiraa xöömij* (“deep low” *xöömij*), *xargia xöömij* (“deep medium” *xöömij*), *tsuurai xöömij* (“echo” *xöömij*), *yelzsen tsuurai xöömij* (“echo” *xöömij* with trill), *shuluun tsuurai xöömij* (“straight echo” *xöömij*) *xamriin tsuurai xöömij* (“nasal echo” *xöömij*) *dorgo xöömij* (“gargle” *xöömij*) *xerxeree xöömij* (*xöömij* in which the drone is made with the sound of hiccupping), *isgere xöömij* (“whistle” *xöömij*) *dangildax xöömij* (syllabic *xöömij*) *doshgiraa xöömij* (labial *xöömij* with vibrato) and *xosmoljin xöömij* (combinative or “mixed” *xöömij*). He plays the swan-headed *tovshuur*. Most of the new generation of professional overtone singers have been taught by him. He teaches *xöömij* at the



On stage in Les Saulnières Theatre, Le Mans, France, April 2009.

Mongolian National University and the University of Art and Culture in Ulaanbaatar. He travels regularly to Inner-Mongolia, China to teach due to an ever increasing demand.

Dashdorj Tserendavaa. Tserendavaa was born in 1955, the year of the sheep, in Chandman, Xovd province, Mongolia. He is one of the few singers who lives there to this day maintaining a nomadic way of life while still singing *xöömij* professionally. He learned to sing in his pastoral context but also by imitating the singers he grew up around. His diverse teachers and influences are Olmiibat, Maxanchuluun, Margad, Shagi, Sundui and Tsedee. Since the 1980’s, he has performed all over the world in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Portugal, the USA, Russia, and Japan, among others. He sings seven kinds of *xöömij*: *uruultin xöömij* (labial *xöömij*), *tagnai xöömij* (palatal *xöömij*)

with trill), *bagalzuurin xöömij* (“throat” *xöömij*), *xamriin xöömij* (nasal *xöömij*), *tseejni xondiin xöömij* (chest cavity *xöömij*), *xargia xöömij* (“deep” *xöömij*) and *xosmoljin xöömij* (combinative or “mixed” *xöömij*), an original style he created in which words and melody are sung simultaneously. Tserendavaa plays the *tovshuur*, the *morin xuur* (horse-head fiddle) and the *ekel* (two-stringed fiddle). He has transmitted *xöömij* to his children (particularly his second son Tsogtgerel, his third daughter, Azjargal, and his youngest son, Xasherdene), other family members, many nomads in his native area of Chandman, the province of Xovd, as well as to many foreigners.

Nergui Ganzorig. Ganzorig was born in 1974, the year of the tiger, in Zuunxaraa, Selenge province, Mongolia. He lives and works there as a *xöömij* singer in the local theater’s music

and dance ensemble. His work with the Altai Khangai ensemble, beginning in 1996, has sent him to several countries: Germany, where he resided for four years; the Netherlands for three years (there, he released *Naariits Biilye—Let's Dance : Mongolian khuuryuyn tatlaga* on Pan Records [2016CD]); along with selective concerts in France, Switzerland, Austria, the USA, Canada and Morocco.

He plays the swan headed *tovsbuur* and *morin xuur*. Ganzorig learned overtone singing by himself by listening to the radio as well as recordings of Sundui and Ganbold in particular. In composing new *magtaal* (praise songs) containing many formal and vocal innovations, he represents the new generation of professional *xöömij* singers in Mongolia. Ganzorig teaches *xöömij* to some pupils at the theatre of Zuunxaraa. In contrast to the other three group members, he does not give names to the techniques he has developed himself, aside from the two major styles of *xöömij* and *xarxiraa*.

The story

Since 2004, I have covered the steppes of Mongolia meeting *xöömijch* (or overtone singers) with my friend Otgonbaatar. Because of the many friendships we built with these musicians, we approached four of them – among the most well-known representatives of the art of *xöömij* (overtone singing)- with a proposition to work together on a new musical creation.

It was in 2006 that we contacted the select four: D. Tserendavaa, N. Sengedorj, B. Odsuren and T. Ganbold. Each had the same reaction: if there is funding and a stage, we'll do it. Christened *Dörvön Berk* by B. Odsuren, we thus began to roll the die together.



Dörvön Berk on the Dunkerque beach, France, April 2009

In 2007, with support from the Alliance Française of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar, Global Design, the mayor of Chandman, the Xovd drama theater and the region of Xovd, Routes Nomades was eventually able to realize its first concert. After two weeks of living and working together, the new project was to debut on the 7th and 8th of April at Modern Art Gallery's auditorium. However, unexpectedly due to health reasons, T. Ganbold had to leave the project just days before the first concert. Unexpectedly, we found ourselves with the difficult task of finding a singer who could replace him. That singer was N. Ganzorig, a talented singer from a younger generation.

For the first time, four major *xöömijch* with greatly differing views on a quite individualistic art form began to work closely together and talk about their tradition and its many contested subjects, such as the diversity of overtone singing techniques and particular historical issues. Though they still may not agree with each other, a group consciousness has emerged between them.

It is often said among Mongolians that nomadizing, moving together, reinforces and

weaves social links. This is exactly what happened at the next stage of the project. We later continued working together through a residency at La Fonderie, a performance space in Le Mans, France, on the occasion of a tour during the spring and summer of 2009. The musicians had the opportunity to spend much time together daily. Once back in Mongolia, all four of them expressed the desire to continue with *Dörvön Berk* highlighting the fact that they were actually beginning to agree on some aspects of *xöömij* – two years after having “rolled” the first *shagai*.

What exactly is Xöömij (overtone singing)?

Xöömij is a form of singing in which one singer can produce several notes simultaneously. The singer uses a particularly resonant drone with his voice to emphasize and manipulate harmonics with their lips, tongue and oral cavities thus forming whistle-like tones. Perhaps unusual for those unfamiliar to the technique, the singer contracts both their pharynx and diaphragm together to create the unique drone. The “whistling” quality of the overtones, which are used to perform melodies, is made through this pressure with the drone as a sonic base. Depending on the technique, one can hear two distinct notes, which may be accompanied by three or four formants (or clear pitch resonances) relative to the drone and the needs of the song. All these elements together form the aesthetic of *xöömij*.

Xöömij (lit. “pharynx”) can refer to Mongolian overtone singing in general or to one of its two major stylistic categories. As one of the two major styles, *xöömij* has many derivatives: *isgeree xöömij* (or whistle-like *xöömij*), *nariin xöömij* (“high” *xöömij*), *Altain shingen xöömij* (*xöömij* of scattered tones associated with the Altai), and *uyangiin xöömij* (melodic *xöömij*). It is performed with

a drone of “medium” to “high” tension through which bright overtones may form melodies heard over everything else. One can clearly identify two distinct tones, though rarely more. When the singer lowers his drone tension to “medium” or “low”, the timbre changes considerably. The sub-styles of *tsuurai xöömij* (“echo” *xöömij*), *shuluun xöömij* (“straight” *xöömij*), *dorgo xöömij* (“gargle” *xöömij*), which are marked by their rich resonances, are performed in this way. The other major style is called *xarxiraa* (lit. “small river”, which is also the name of a species of black crane). It is a sort of “deep” *xöömij* characterized by the presence of double bass tones generated by the vibrations of the vocal chords and the arytenoid cartilage which closes off the throat. One can hear the spacious drone (made with the vocal chords) and a tone an octave below it (made with the arytenoid cartilage’s vibration). *Xarxiraa* techniques are various and their timbre also changes depending on the pitch of the drone.

To each style there can be added a great number of techniques which vary in timbre the *xöömijch* actively selects or their ornamental aspects. Some of these are *tagnai xöömij* (palatal *xöömij* with a trill), *uruuliin xöömij* (labial *xöömij*), or *dangildax xöömij* (syllabic *xöömij*).

According to the legends of western Mongolians, this vocal technique was derived from imitating the wind, the sounds of water, and the songs of birds...

From the steppes to the stage

In Mongolia, the traditional music we know nowadays is situated between its original practice, among the nomads in the steppes, and a practice which has become a professional spectacle for the concert stage. In each context, it has experienced several historical and social transformations

resulting in an important identity quest.

For many centuries in the Altai mountain region, then from thirty years around in the rest of the country, overtone singing was transmitted orally. Originally, *xöömij* wasn't a spectacle for concert performances. Performed in pastoral contexts, nomadic herders used it to imitate and communicate with nature, as well to pass the time watching their herds or to enliven an evening in the *ger* (or "yurt", a tent-like home). This pastoral context still survives. But alternatively, in the 1950's the first herders got on the stages of theatres to perform their art. Some of them became the pioneers of a new professional practice of overtone singing. They in turn opened the door for others, mainly their students, who created genuine schools recognized in the tradition today. Among other such later singers, Tserendavaa, Šengedorj, and later Odsuren, have contributed greatly to this development. Working outside of the domestic context of transmission from father to son or daughter, they in particular are the teachers who expanded the transmission of this vocal technique along with Ganbold, Toivgo, Bapizan and Davaajav especially¹.

Tserendavaa is one of the few herders who maintains a nomadic lifestyle, thus continuing his Altaic tradition, while still performing around the world. Šengedorj teaches overtone singing in the city of Xovd among other activities with the local theatre. Odsuren is still the only one of them who teaches *xöömij* in an institutional context at the university in Ulaanbaatar. Other classes exist in the capital city which were recently started by Zulsar, Tsogtbaatar and Ganbold. It is because

of the professionalization of the genre that these parallel developments are important. *Xöömijch* want to distinguish themselves from each other. To this end, they have developed their vocal techniques individually, have researched timbre, and thus have created their own individual styles.

Ever since these developments, the younger generations have learned -not created- their vocal technique solely in order to become professional singers, creating ensembles which tour the world and produce CD's but following in their teacher's footsteps.

To understand the reasons for such changes, a brief discussion of Mongolian social history is necessary. Mongolia has known three important historical stages which have greatly influenced its music. Before 1921, the country was practically a feudal state not altogether different from the imperial state of its proud past which once ruled the biggest empire the world has ever known, created by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. From 1921 to 1990, the country became communist. Under the repression of numerous prohibitions, the different ethnic groups maintained their traditions in secret as symbols of their identity. Nevertheless, because of the totalitarian Soviet regime, some aspects of their nomadic culture have been lost or greatly transformed despite their continued practice. Since the democratic revolution of 1990, Mongolia has completely opened itself to globalization upon converting to a brutal capitalist system regime. And yet Mongolians have suddenly found themselves in an impressive socio-cultural boom as well.

Through out these social changes from feudalism to communism then capitalism -altogether quite rapid ones- the creation of theatres around the whole country, the establishing of state ensembles, and more recently private

theatres, has increased and encouraged the patronage of the arts. Unfortunately, depending on the tradition, they have either grown poorer in quality or, conversely, have become increasingly enriched. Incorporating the Western staged concert format has contributed towards the development of *xöömij*. In contrast, the repertoire of *urtiin duu* or "long-song" has been reduced greatly.

In Mongolia, the stage has quickly become a real creative reservoir for all artistic genres be it contemporary or classical music, rock, pop, hip-hop or neo-traditional music, dance, drama or fine art. Moreover, overtone singing interacts with all of these genres and this pushes singers to develop their technique even further than their predecessors. In some cases the stage can be a place for preserving tradition. But overall in the Mongolian context, its usage is starting to deter the conservation of Mongolia's heritage. It has become the symbol of a national post-communist identity in breaking with the recent past. Mongolians are trying to reassume their ancient history, from which only Genghis Khan has been resuscitated, their new source of national pride. Torn between the steppes and Ulaanbaatar, a capital city in abrupt and total conflict with nomadic culture, living traditions are becoming pure folklore, transformed outside of their context. Currently, *xöömij*, a timeless vocal technique of the Altai region's nomadic herders, has become an emblem to the whole world thanks to the stage, even if a common foreign spectator might just hear music instead of its deeper content.

Before Dörvön Berk's première in Ulaanbaatar, the general public's reaction was marked by such comments: "We already know them. They are 'the seniors.' It isn't necessary to go to the show!" Also: "Four on stage? We'll be bored! Why don't they play with a great orchestra behind them?" In

restricted numbers, the public that came both nights still appreciated the performance. The group now needs to come abroad to receive the reception they deserve. Listening to their voices allows us to participate in the encouragement of this tradition. After them and their entire generation of singers, we will never be able to hear such timbres of overtone singing because the tradition is quickly falling apart. Younger singers don't have the same motivation and do not strive towards the same aesthetics under the influence of Ulaanbaatar situated so far from the steppes of the Altai.



N. Ganzorig, near Zuunxaraa, Selenge Aimag, Mongolia, August 2009.

¹ Dörvön Berk's CD continues some twenty years of research started by Pan Records with its release, *Jargalant Altai: Xöömij and Other Vocal and Instrumental Music From Mongolia*. PAN 2050, with archival field recordings of Tserendavaa, Šengedorj, and Davaajav in particular.

The repertoire

- 1 Xöömij Uria Duudlaga** (Diphonic Calls). Through different overtone singing techniques, the singers “call and meet” each other in an improvisation evoking the nature of the infinite spaces of the steppes through the echoing of their voices.
- 2 Altain Magtaal** (Altai Praise Song). There are several versions of *Altain Magtaal* which refers to the Altai mountains in Mongolia. Here, the musicians sing an old version taken from the Urianxai ethnic group using their dialect, *Xalk*. Today mostly an independent form, it was formerly performed before epic performances. This praise song can be sung before nomadizing, after settling one’s *ger* in a new location, or on the occasion of favorable days to obtain the blessings of local master spirits.
- 3 Xöömij Magtaal** (Praise Song to Overtone Singing). Composition and text by N. Ganzorig (2005). Praise songs are usually dedicated to natural subjects and other highly revered topics. In this piece Ganzorig evokes his love for overtone singing. He gives a nice demonstration of the overtone singing techniques he knows.
- 4 Xöömij Tsuur** (Improvisation with *tsuur* flute and *xöömij*). Sengedorj and Odsuren improvise a duet in which overtone singing timbres and the play of the *tsuur* mingle together. The *tsuur* has a *xöömij*-like quality with its guttural drone vocalized into the flute’s shaft. The aesthetic is not too different from overtone singing as Sengedorj plays a melody with the flute over

the drone. Tserendavaa supports them with a background drone.

- 5 Tooroi Bandi** (*Urtiin duu* long song sung with *xosmoljin xöömij*). Tserendavaa says that he invented *xosmoljin xöömij* (combinative *xöömij*). He combines words and melodic overtone lines at the same time or passes from one overtone singing technique to another. Tooroi Bandi was a Mongolian Robin Hood. He used to steal horses, livestock, gold and silver from the rich to give to the poor. He eventually went to jail and could not see his wife, so they communicated by singing to each other.
- 6 Xurдан Morinii Magtaal** (Praise Song to Race Horses). Using the theme of the traditional popular song *Xotgoid Unaga* (The Foal of Xotgoid), Tserendavaa sings extracts of *tsol* (an improvised song form which praises winning horses during *naadam* festival races) recalling to mind the celebrations which animate life on the steppes during summer.



Odsuren in the auditorium of the Modern Art Gallery, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 7 April 2007.

- 7 Temeen Jingiin Tsuvaa** (The Camel Caravan). In this collective performance, with the support by the drones and overtones of the group Sengedorj sings two traditional melodies. The first one, *Shiliin Davaa* (The Mountain Pass) was sung in his family’s area and would be performed for his father. Sengedorj used to hear the second song, *Goviin Öндөр* (The Great of the Gobi) during his childhood when his maternal grandfather would sing it to him on hot days when working outside. This is how Sengedorj learned it. The musicians wanted to relate the atmosphere of camel caravans in their youth going across the mountains, steppes and deserts. Travelers would sing the song to pass time and give each other energy. Without singing, the caravan could not go too far.
- 8 Ser Xargain Suuder** (The Shadow of the Larch). A popular song from the Torguud ethnic group sung both in Mongolia’s Altai region and China’s Xinjiang region. Composed before Xinjiang became Chinese, its story line takes place in this part of the southern Altai. Interpreted by Sengedorj and Ganzorig, the text tells the story of a rich man who loved a poor woman. Nobody in her region wanted them to be together. Her family had already promised her when she was young to someone else. Although their love might have lasted, they were never able to marry.
- 9 Xöömijni Töröluud** (Kinds of Overtone Singing). To appreciate the uniqueness of each member, one by one, Tserendavaa, Ganzorig, then Odsuren and Sengedorj demonstrate several kinds of overtone singing techniques using traditional melodies. For five minutes in the above order, the singers perform the popular



Sengedorj playing the *tsuur* flute near Buyant Gol River near Xovd City, Xovd Aimag, Mongolia, August 2009.

song (*ardiin duu*) *Dörvön Nastai Xalion* (Four Year Old Dun Horse). To conclude, they sing in unison the popular melody *Gooj Nanaa* (the name of a famous figure) sung with *isgere* *xöömij* (“whistle” *xöömij*).

- 10 Jangar** (Extract from the Jangar epic). Odsuren relates the beginning of the epic *Jangar*, one of the oldest epics of Central Asia. The poetic text describes this hero and his life. Jangar fought evil in the name of the good. In beating the forces of evil, he created a paradisiacal country.

Ser ser gesen salxитай
Shiver shiver gesen borootoi
Ovolgui namaraaraa
Xavargui zunaaraa
Burxan bumbiin orniiг бii болгосон

“Ser Ser”, the sound of the wind
 “Shiver Shiver”, the sound of the rain
 Not Winter, always autumn
 Not Spring, always summer
 Made a paradise country.



Tserendavaa singing *xöömij* in front of a waterfall (on the legendary birthplace of *xöömij*) inside the Jargalant Altai Mountain, Chandman's area, Mongolia, August 2009.

Odsuren then Tserendavaa eulogizes a series of *᠙ᠷᠠᠭᠤᠯᠠ*, blessings given in an improvised poetic style usually addressed to the sponsors or organizers of celebrations or ceremonies among the nomads. Here is the refrain:

Morin xuur xöömij egshig tei, Mongol gazar torson yum bi!
 (I was born in Mongolia, the country of the melody of *xöömij* and horse fiddle!)

14 Improvisation.

All four singers improvise *xöömij* in nature listening to the sounds of water, the breath of the wind on the steppe, or the songs of birds. To bring us this energy and moments of intimacy between man and nature, the “Four Shagai Bones” improvise together by interweaving several overtone techniques.

Johanni Curtet

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Cover photographs

- Compilation, clockwise, starting top left:
- Odsuren performing in the Black Forest for an ovoö ceremony organized by the Mongolei Zentrum, Germany, July 2009.
 - N. Ganzorig, near Zuunxaraa, Selenge Aimag, Mongolia, August 2009.
 - Tserendavaa performing Altain Magtaal praise song, in front of the Xar Nuur Lake, Chandman's area, Mongolia, summer 2005.
 - Sengedorj playing the tsuur flute near Buyant Gol River near Xovd City, Xovd Aimag, Mongolia, August 2009.

This CD contains a PDF with the liner notes in the French language. To view the contents, put the CD in a computer and double-click to open PDF. Ce CD contient un document PDF avec le livret traduit en français. Pour voir le contenu, insérer le CD sur un ordinateur et double-cliquer pour ouvrir le PDF.



Jergalant Altai Mountain, Chardumai area, Mongolia, August 2009.

PAN 2100