

G. J. Ramstedt as a Recorder of Khalkha Epics

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The ethnographer Grigorii Potanin (1835–1920) seems to be the first scholar who systematically collected Mongolian folklore, although only paraphrases in Russian, and he published this collection in 1881–83 and 1893. The Buriat teacher Matvei Khangalov (1858–1918) detected the epic tradition of his own people in 1890–1903 and Boris Vladimirtsov that of the West Mongolian Oirats in 1908 (publ. 1923, 1926). Tsyben Zhamtsarano's and Andrei Rudnev's lithographed edition of Khalkha texts (without translations) was published that same year.

In 1900, during his first journey to Mongolia, G. J. Ramstedt (1873–1950) noted down ten Khalkha epics and on his second trip, in 1909, six more. This collection was published posthumously in 1973 on the basis of his field notes (see Ramstedt 1973). This late year of publication notwithstanding, Ramstedt must be considered the real pioneer in the field of Khalkha epics and folklore because of his early and phonetically accurate field notes in the original language.

Ramstedt took down the epics by dictation. We must assume his field notes to be reasonably reliable, since there are hardly any signs indicating that the speed of the dictation may sometimes have overrun his ability to follow. For ascertaining the intended sense of an oral text, an immediate scrutiny together with the singer would reveal most of the blunders inevitably occurring during a single hearing, but, unfortunately, we do not know how frequently Ramstedt was able to conduct this kind of examination. It is hard to say whether the corrections in his field notes are due to such an examination with the singer or to his own later reasoning. Dictation was in any case necessary, as we know at least about one case when he had the opportunity to listen to a bard performing through the whole of the night a most wonderful and extensive epic about the *Shikshüütei Mergen*, but to his great annoyance the bard would not thereafter dictate it for any price.

After his expeditions Ramstedt began in 1913 to prepare his epics for publication. This work resulted in eight refined and linguistically more or

less normalized transcripts, four of which were followed by tentative translations or sketches in German. Being an active poet himself, Ramstedt did not see anything wrong in slightly emending and altering his texts, relying upon his superb command of spoken Mongolian. It is understandable that the poetic unevenness of the epics—usually performed by nonprofessional singers or just ordinary people—presented a temptation hard to resist for a man of such poetic and linguistic talent, one who was educated in the spirit of Elias Lönnrot, who artistically composed the epic *Kalevala* out of authentic materials. Ramstedt’s concept of Mongol epics had developed on the basis of his increasing familiarity with their general contents and poetic form. Major changes in the plot were naturally excluded, but quite often he considered it desirable to insert words or verses or alternately to delete something.

A comparison between (1) Ramstedt’s field notes of his epic No. 1, *Aguulan Khaan*, from August 1900 and his (2) unpublished final version of the same may sufficiently illustrate the main features of his manipulative technique.¹ The quotations are rendered in simplified transcription.²

I. Morphological adjustments involve a seemingly deliberate adding or dropping of possessive and reflexive-possessive endings, case markers, or the intensive verbal form in *-tshi-* (used against the rule even of transitive verbs), an interchange between the imperfect gerund in *-dzh(i)*, *-tsh(i)* expressing an action performed simultaneously with the main action and the perfect gerund in *-aat* (*-eet*, *-oot*, *-ööt*) expressing an action completed before the main action starts, and between the imperfect preterite form in *-dzhi* (emphatically *-dzhää*) and the perfect preterite on *-wa* (*-we*, *-wo*, *-wö*), *-w* (emphatically *-waa*, *-wää*, *-wee*), e.g. *xeledzhää/xelewee*:

(1) *aguuliing xaang*, (2) *aguulang xaang*

The name of this Khan is problematic; the field notes repeat several times an apparent genitive form *aguuliing* that Ramstedt has normalized to *aguulang* throughout. Other epics present name forms like *Agi(n) ulaan xaan* “The Artemisia-red Khan” (the stalk of Artemisia is really red, but the flowers are not) or *Aguu ulaan xaan* “The Gigantic Red Khan.”

(1) *urit erte tsagt*, (2) *urit erte tsagt-aa*

“once upon a time;” the lengthened vowel (or reflexive-possessive case ending) is added to match the closing verb (1) *baidzhää*, (2) *baedzh-ää* three verses later.

¹ Rudnev’s edition of 1908 is very close to version 2 and is therefore omitted here.

² The abundantly occurring orthographical improvements striving towards normalization are mostly due to the unstable nature of Mongolian short vowels (allowing a variety of syllable structures) and to the sometimes positionally conditioned opposition between voiced and unvoiced consonants. These kinds of emendations are irrelevant from the point of view of content and therefore not discussed here.

- (1) *xurdang xula morint*, (2) *xurdang xula morindaa*
 “to the/**his** swift tawny horse”
 (1) *jüim-sn-tshi*, (2) *jüim-san-dzhää*
 “so it is said to have been;” the emended form of (2) is normative.
 (1) *enggel-tshi-ügiee gor-uguee*, (2) *enggel-ügiüü gor-uguee*
 “it is of no avail to let it thus be undone”
 (1-2) *sait sanaa namaradzh suudzh*; this verse cannot be understood if not read
sait sanaan amaradzh suudzh, “he sat peacefully down in cheerful spirits”
 (1) *baruung dzüüing öwdögenees*, (2) *baruung dzüüing öwdögönees-in*
 “from the/**his** right and left knee”
 (1) *xurdang xula mori*, (2) *xurdang xula mori-n*
 “the/**his** swift tawny horse”
 (1) *dzuurdl tatadzh*, (2) *dzuurdl-in tatadzh*
 “pulled until it closed **itself** tightly”
 (1) *albat irgeniin abdzhi*, (2) *albat irgeng abdzhi*
 “he took **his** people of bondsmen”
 (1) *xoroston alagdaat tabtshidzh*, (2) *xorsdong alagdaat tawidzh*
 “he **continued to slap**/slapped vexedly”
 (1) *tüünii xaraat*, (2) *tüüniig xaraat*
 “having seen that;” the pronoun has been changed from the indefinite case into accusative
 (1) *arwang xuruunii üdzüüreer*, (2) *arwang xuruun üdzüüreer*
 “with his ten Fingertips;” the necessary genitive has been dropped
 (1) *adaguusiingxaa deet*, (2) *adguusiing* (finally changed to *aduusiing*) *deet*
 “as the leader of the/**his** animals”
 (1) *albatiingxaa deet*, (2) *albatiing deet*
 “the leader of the/**his** subjects”
 (1) *aawaiingxää tölgönt üdzesng*, (2) *awaiing tölgönt üdzeseng*
 “I have read in my **own** father’s divination book”
 (1) *öörüing bijint edelii gedzh* (2) *öörüingxää bijint edelii*
 “I will use for **my** own benefit, **he** said”
 (1) *ulaang luunii süüliing*, (2) *ulaang luugiing süülees*
 “(the Usun Yandar) of/**from** the red dragon’s tail;” this verse is put into the same pattern
 as the preceding two. The irregular genitive form *luunii* might be a mistake.

II. Words and expressions may be replaced by others with the same or different meaning, the replacement sometimes comprising a number of syllables better fitting the scansion:

- (1) *tsugladzh weedzh*, (2) *togladzh ween*
 “were gathering together/**playing around**;” this replacement is repeated in three
 subsequent instances; the fourth then, in fact, reads *toglodzh weedzh*.
 (1) *aexiingxaa exind*, (2) *aexiingxaa türiütsheer*
 “at the beginning of his fear”
 (1) *xumas dörwöng tuureegaa*, (2) *xumas saexang tuuraeegaa*
 “your four/**beautiful** horny hoofs”
 (1) *urit shara xadagaa* (2) *urta saexang xadagaa*
 “his long yellow/**beautiful** khadak”
 (1) *gedzh jawanaa* " *gedzh* (2) *gedzh jawadzh-weena-p*

“‘in order (to take) I am on the way,’ he said”

(1) *gedzh xeledzedzhee* (2) *xojuulang xeledzedzh weedzh*

“so they discussed / they **were** discussing **together**”

(1) *xaratee neg gujdii gedzh waenuu?* (2) *xortee neg gujdii gedzh waenuu?*

“so that you can whip me savagely/**furiously**?”

(1) *amr saexng dzhargadzhää* (2) *amtatee saexang dzhargadzh-ee*

“(and) he lived peacefully/**sweet** and well in prosperity”

III. Through changing the word order and/or adding expletives a verse may be elaborated to fit the scansion better or to form subsequent patched-up verses:

(1) *xojor uxaagiing araar nutaktee*, (2) *xojor saexang uxaagiing | xonggor araar nutagtee*

“he had his homeland along the **lovely** northern slopes of two **beautiful** plateaus”

(1) *enggedzh enggedzh dzüüdellää | gedzh mörgödzh xelee*

(2) *enggedzh enggedzh dzüüdellää gedzh | gujdz mörgödzh xeldzhää*

“‘I dreamt so-and-so,’ she said bowing herself **solicitously**”

(1) *aduu xeledzh*, (2) *aduu xaridzh xeldzh*

“the herd of horses spoke **in return**”

(1) *dariuu mende saexang jawaat ireerää*, (2) *mende saexang jawaat | dariuu butsadzh ireerää*

“having set out well and luckily come soon **returning** back”

(1) *orodzh ireet*, (2) *xaanaeet orodzh iredzh*

“having entered / entering **the Khan’s (palace)**”

(1) *baridzh neg sögdödzh*, (2) *baridzh irdzh neg sögdödzh*

“presenting (the khadak) he **came and** knelt down”

(1) *büdüüing xümeer sugduulaat mordodzhaa*, (2) *büdüüing xümeer sugduulaat | mordodzh jawadzhää*

“letting robust men support himself under the arms he mounted the horse **and set out**”

(1) *boldzootee boro tologoe deer gardzhi*, (2) *boldzootee boro tolgoeen deere | gardzh irewää*

“**having arrived** they climbed the hill of Boldzootee Boro;” note also the unnecessary possessive form *tolgoeen*

(1) *amitaniig xarasng*, (2) *amitaniig xaradzh suudzh*

“he **sat (there)** and looked at the animals”

(1) *uridaasaa dalang xojor tobtshiig taelaat*

dalae tshinee tsagaang tsheedzhiig

jaeraat ögdzhi

xaexarasn-tshi-ügiee xüreet iredzh.

(2) *dalang xojar tobtshiig*

uridaasaa taelaat

dalaeeng tshineeng tsheedzhiig

jaraadxadzhi ögdzhi

xaexarsang-tshi uguee

xüreet iredzh-ää.

“Having opened the 72 buttons on his front
and exposing the ocean-wide white chest,
(the enemy) arrived without him noticing it.”

— Later this description is repeated with almost identical wording:

(1) *dalang xojor tobtshi taeldzh*
dalae tshinee tsagaang tsheedzhiig
jaeeraat ögdzhi.

(2) *dalang xojar tobtshi taelaat*
dalae tshineeng tsagaang tseedzhiig
jaraat ögdzh-weedzh.

— The use of a genitive with the postposition *tshinee(ng)* (“of the size of”) is preferable, but no consistency can be found here.

(1) *xed nutag-tshin xaana?* (2) *xetiing nutak xaana-w?*

“Where (is) your native land?” / “Where **is** the land **of** (your) origin?”

(1) *andolae shara manggas bi waen*, (2) *andolae shara manggas* | **getshi bi waen-aa**

“I am **called** Andolae, the yellow ogre, **indeed**”

(1) **manggas**: *bi uridaar xarwaii* | *gedzh xeledzh.*

(2) *bi uridaar xarwaii* | *gedzh manggas xeldzh.*

“**The ogre** said: I’ll shoot first!”

(1) *manggas öglöönii ulaang naranaar tshigliüüleet*,

(2) *manggas ulaang öglöönii* | **mandaxa** *narnaar tshigliüüleet*,

“the ogre bent the bow at the red **rising** sun of the morning”

(1) *tashaagiin daeruulaat täw tsoxidzh*,
tamgaiin daeruulaat dzuu tsoxidzh.

morin: xang xung boloot . . .

(2) *tashaagii-n daeruulaat*

tüb gedzh tsoxidzh,

tamgaii-n daeruulaat

dzuu gedzh tsoxidzh.

xaang xüing boloot . . .

“He whipped (the horse) in passing on the flank with a slam! He whipped it in passing on the brand with a bang! The horse (said): Have you become a princely man (in order to) . . .”

(1) *daeraatxaxiing türiütsheer* | — — — —

(2) *daeradxaxiing türiütsheer* | **manggas gujdzh-weedzh**

“being (so) stricken **the ogre** first **begged**”

(1) *tsaashi jawaat xüreet otshidzh.* (2) *tsaashi jawaat* | *xüreet otshidzhää.*

“he rode further and arrived there”

(1) *altang shireenü öndzegen deer* | *aalits tshinee exener suudzh.*

(2) *altang shireen deere* | *aalitsan tsineeng* | *exener suudzh.*

“on the **corner of** a golden throne | there sat a woman the size of a spider”

(1) *enggedzh suud-uguee* | *xemeg dewsiidxedzhee.*

(2) *enggedzh suud-uguee gedzh* | **xöleerää ösgildzh** | *xemge dewsidxedzh-ää.*

“she should not sit this way! **he said** | (and) **trampled with his foot** | stamping it into pieces”

IV. Words that are felt to disturb the verse structure may be simply dropped:

(1) *xatang bas daxing dzüüdeledzh*, (2) *xatang daxing dzüüdeldzh*
 “But the queen dreamt **once** again”

(1) *tendee neg üjmeldzedzh waedzhee*, (2) *tende neg üjmeldzedzh*
 “they **were** there swarming/swarmed there around;” (this verse is made to match its parallel that lacks the final verb)

(1) *xurdang xula mori xeledzh waedzh*, (2) *xurdang xula mori xeldzh*
 “the swift bay horse **was** speaking/spoke”

(1) *guaa xara gedzegiig | gurw ileet buudzh iredzh*, (2) *guaa xara gedzegiig | gurw ileet buudzh*.

“stroking the beautiful black queue thrice he **came and** stepped down”

(1) *iredzh jawan gedzh*, (2) *iredzh jawanaa*

“(he) is approaching, **they say**”

(1) *xumas dörwöng tuuraeegaaraa | xöröstö altang delxiig shüürüüleet*,

(2) *xumas dörwöng tuuraeegaaraa | xöröst delxiig shüürüüleet*,

“with its four horny hoofs | having touched the crusty **golden** ground”

(1) *galdzuu ulaang tamixiig | gantsxng xojor sewsedzh suudzheeää*,

(2) *galdzuu ulaang tamixiig | gantsaxang xojar sewsedzhää*,

“**he sat (there)** puffing out just once or twice of the intoxicating red tobacco”

(1) *dajaar dzüün xoet tewiig*, (2) *dzüüng xoet tewiig*

“(born to rule over) the **entire** northeastern continent”

(1) *manggas buruu xaradzh ujlawää*, (2) *buruu xaradzh ujladzh-zh-waa (> ujlawaa)*

“**the ogre** cried by looking to the left”

(1) *araee-tshi güjdzheldee-ügiee jawadzh*, (2) *araee-tshin güjtseldee-ügiee*

“he **galloped**, closing on (the ogre) from behind”

V. Sometimes faultless and elucidating verses are dropped, perhaps mistakenly:

(1) *xaang gardzh xaradzhi | aguulang xaanii xotiig*,

(2) *xaang gardzh xaradzhhää. | — — — — —*

“the Khan went out and looked **at the city of the Aguulan Khan**”

(1) *buruu dzüw xojoriig-tshin | buursh-ügiee bujanii-tshin*,

(2) *— — — — — | buursh-uguee bujanii-tshin*

“**the wicked as well as the correct in you**, | your indestructable virtue”

A scrutiny of the 391 verses in Ramstedt’s final transcript of his epic No. 1, *Aguulan Khaan*, reveals altogether 107 verses (27 per cent) with more or

less significant adjustments. His epic No. 8, *Khiiren Mergen Baatar*, of 623 verses shows in its final state 242 manipulated lines (39 per cent).

Ramstedt's Finnish translation of the *Aguulan Khaan* was published in his travelogue (1944). That version uses alliteration peculiar to traditional Finnish folklore, Kalevala metrics (trochaic tetrameter), and occasionally even rhymes—all of these features reflecting the artistic qualities of the Mongol original. Although meant for the general public, his translation must be judged a masterpiece. Unfortunately, he never had time to complete his scientific Khalkha transcriptions or translations into German. Instead, he continued during his spare time in the years 1900–19 to work on a Finnish translation of the *Odyssey*. During his university years he had made skillful translations of Sanskrit literature as well, including Shriharshadeva's play *Ratnavali* (completed in 1898) and some epic texts.

The problems are always numerous when preparing old field notes for a posthumous edition. Out of the total bulk of Khalkha folklore collected by Ramstedt in 1898–1912, comprising 16 epics, 6 heroic tales partly or wholly in prose, 59 tales, 61 songs, and 8 *jörööls* and *mörgöls* in addition to some riddles and proverbs, he himself had time only to complete a small part. As we have seen, examples of some of the epics demonstrate clearly his normalizing and creative input. How, then, could this work be continued by another? To a certain extent there is no difficulty in normalizing the language to correspond to standard dictionaries, but in any text one always comes across obscure words and expressions that cannot possibly be identified and normalized. Ramstedt proceeded according to the best of his ability or left such doubtful words or verses out. The important question is: if one starts to normalize, can the procedure be carried out with necessary consistency and reliability? I doubt that one can always succeed. An edited epic transcript, outwardly appealing through its elegant language and elastic form, may actually be a disguised skeleton covering sores and broken bones.

The idea seems tempting that a text should be edited with the greatest consistency in order to serve as a reliable source. But there is a great difference between attempting to represent an originally perfect text and an originally imperfect text. If scholars feel confident that they are codifying a correct text, then scansion, grammar, and syntax must be (or originally have been) regular. Where there is a doubtful form, word, or verse, or where the auditory impression can be interpreted in several ways, the authentic one is not necessarily the one that would permit correct scansion or meaning. Though they might not feel satisfied with their faithfully recorded version, having in mind future readers, they must help themselves by saving their text. In this task they are not completely at the mercy of

field notes, since comparative research certainly reveals common idioms, consistent patterns, and epic parallels that aid in restoring uncertain passages. When this approach fails, creative imagination combined with poetic talent is allowed to produce something that is put to serve the same purpose as authentic verses. Consciously or unconsciously, scholars may think that it is of no avail to publish a text not fully clear, beautiful, and enjoyable.

However, I thought such a procedure desirable and in fact the only way to reproduce Ramstedt's epics entirely on the basis of his own field notes without any attempt of normalization or emendation—his or mine. The texts are in the form of neutral and reasonably reliable raw material, that is, the authentic text in a simplified but by no means normalized transcription plus tentative translations. This decision was made consciously and at the cost of consistency and clarity. Professor Nicholas Poppe, whom I consulted many times on difficult matters, did not approve of this policy. He preferred a normalized language. Since we were unable to solve the meaning of certain unclear words and passages, his approach would, however, not have led to a transcription without problems. Only Ramstedt himself would have been able to continue as he began. A good and polished text certainly has its merits from the point of view of the reader, but it conceals the linguistic, metrical, and semantic problems inherent in practically any epic text. Subsequently, I naturally have detected erroneous or ill-formulated translations of my own, but now at least we have easy access to this valuable pioneering material, enabling us through comparative research to follow the evolution of the still living epic tradition of the Khalkha Mongols and to approach a fuller understanding of different kinds of performing skills.

Satisfaction in the reading experience is not solely dependent on the absolute correctness of the text. Here it might be appropriate to quote a personal letter from a well-known scholar in the field: "I have skimmed through some of the epics, the aesthetic side of which, as always, disappoints me, whatever the value for linguistics and general social history. To my mind (brought up on the *Nibelungenlied* and Homer and of course the splendid *Kalevala*), hyperbole of the sort that prevails in Mongol hero-tales and those of southwest Asia, virtually destroys human interest."³ This opinion cannot easily be put aside, but the Mongols themselves, for

³ The author prefers to maintain the anonymity of this scholar.

whom the epics are meant, certainly enjoy them as much as present-day youths enjoy the unbelievable deeds of action-film heroes.

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