

REVISITING SOME THOUGHTS ON THE KALMYK DOMBRA: TWO INSTRUMENTS IN ONE BODY?

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Abstract

This review is to add some details that are often overlooked in rather general classifications of musical instruments. The instrument in question is the dombra and the information added is its role among people playing it seen from the authors personal view.

Keywords: dombra, Kalmyk culture, organology, classification, playing practice

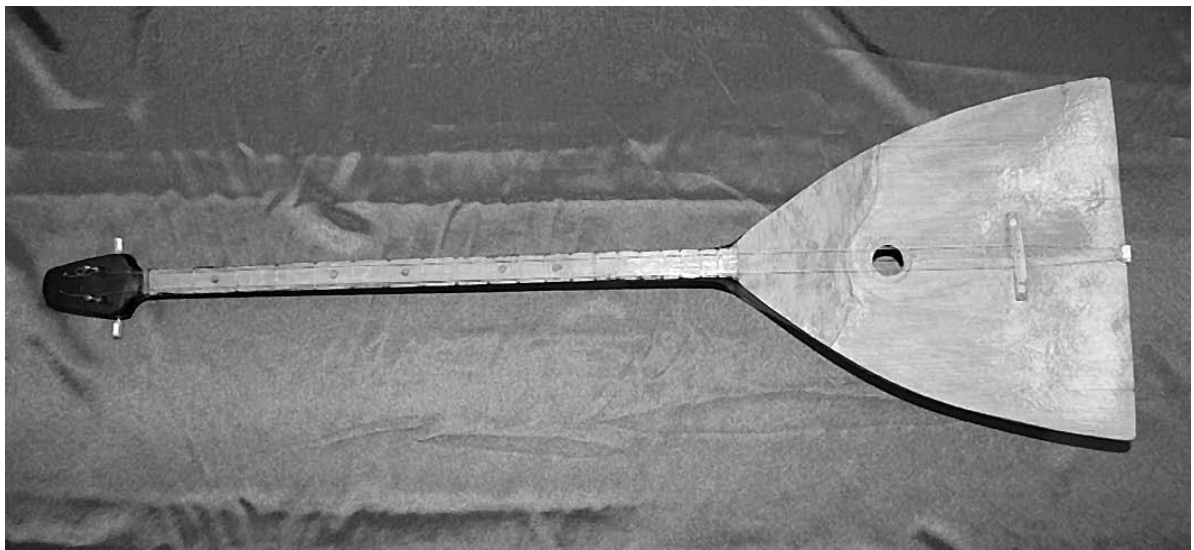


Figure 1: Dombra of the Kalmyks (photo by the author).

The dombra is the most widely used musical instrument among the Kalmyks. The two-string, long-necked lute under the term *dombra* was first mentioned in early ethnographical descriptions of the late 18th century.¹ Typically, it is an instrument with a triangular or trapezoidal glued body, with some rare mentions of an oval shape. The strings as well as tied-on frets made from the sheep's smaller intestine, later were replaced with the fishing line.

Although the Kalmyk musical culture is deeply rooted in the Oirad² traditions, in the new geographical and cultural environment the instrument developed a distinct local character and the new name *dombra* for the old instrument. The Kalmyk *dombra* and the Western-Mongolian *topshuur*³ have similar principles of construction and the same anthropomorphic approach to the instrument body with common terms for its parts such as *tolgha* (head), *chik* (ear), *elkn* (liver), *nurn* (back). The forms and genres of *dombra* music (*dombri kelkh* – to sing with dombra, *dombri tsokh* – to play dombra) represent the original picture with traces of earlier systems and obvious innovation.

¹ Pallas P.S. Travels through the southern Provinces of the Russian Empire, in the years 1793 and 1794. London, 1802, 2 volumes.

² Once living united in a compact area, the ethnic groups of Oirads were widely scattered and surrounded by a different majority in Mongolia, China, and Russia since the 17th century.

³ Also, it is in close relationship with the Altaian and Tuvian *topshuur/topshulur*.

DOMBRA AND EPIC SINGERS

Dombra is the main instrument to perform the Kalmyk epic *Jangar*, which is an exclusively male tradition. Also, there are few archival recordings of the violin as an instrument supporting the narrators, and few mentions about the *hur* (bow string instrument). Among some Western-Mongolian groups *topshuur* is used primarily to accompany the heroic epics *baatarlag tuul*⁴. According to my observation during my fieldwork in Hovd aimag, Altai Uriangha *tuul'chi* (epic singer) Baatrin Urtnasun⁵ kept his *topshuur* adorned with the blue *hadag* (ritual scarf) in the revered place of the *ger* (house) on the right male side. In old Mongolia, women were prohibited from playing *topshuur*.⁶ The performance of epic tales and praise songs with the accompaniment of *topshuur* were meant to ensure a successful hunt. Moreover, there was belief in the healing power of the *topshuur* sound.



Figure 2: Dmitriy Sharaev, Kalmyk jangarchi, 2018 (photo by the author).

DOMBRA AND DANCE TUNES

Altai Urianghai, Zakchins and Torguts used to accompany *bii* (dances) on *topshuur*⁷. However, the vigorous, impetuous, and colorful *dombra* dance tunes became the dominant part of the Kalmyk music in the 19-20th centuries. The famous Kalmyk *jangarchi* Mukebün Basangov, in his epic songs often repeats a poetical formula which describes a girl playing *dombra* and a boy dancing. Indeed, in the near past to play festive music and to accompany virtuoso male dances during *när* (celebration or feast) became the girls' and women's duty.

The old Kalmyk dance *Savarding* with leading upper body and hand movements was mentioned in 19th century descriptions (Deping, 1884: 141)⁸. Nowadays Western-Mongolian groups represent *Savarding* as a symbol of their culture, while the Kalmyk dances are characterized by swiftness, advanced leg

⁴ Pegg, Carol (2001). *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities* (Donald R. Ellegood International Publications). Washington: UWP: 81.

⁵ Baatrim Urtnasun, 73 years old, recorded by the author on 25th of July, 2003 in Balkhuun gazr Duut somon Khovd aimag.

⁶ Pegg, Carol (2001). *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities* (Donald R. Ellegood International Publications). Washington: UWP: 172.

⁷ Pegg, Carol (2001). *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative: Performing Diverse Identities* (Donald R. Ellegood International Publications). Washington: UWP: 39.

⁸ Original source: Депинг Г.Б. Историческое обозрение нравов и обычаев всех народов, содержащее сравнительное описание обыкновений, обрядов, жилищ, пищи, одежд, свадеб, похорон, игр, празднеств, войн, суеверий, каст и пр. у древнейших и новейших народов различных стран, предшествуемое аналитическим оглавлением. Спб., 1886, с. 141.

work, and rapid pace with steady *accelerando* through entire performance of a tune. It should be presumed that chronologically the new dancing style appeared in parallel with the innovations in Kalmyk male traditional clothes when Mongolian *deel* was replaced by *beshmet* (outerwear, tightly fitting the chest and waist). One of the outcomes of 17-19th centuries' military conflicts on the southern borders of the Russian empire was the spreading of some Islamic peoples' features (male dress, male dancing temper) into neighboring warring male populations, among them not only Kalmyks but Russian Cossacks. Probably, it was also the period when the old name *topshuur* was supplanted by the Turkic word *dombra*.⁹



Figure 3: Portrait of A.N. Haruzina in the year 1887. (Photo by A.B. Kyselvekaya, public domain).

Although P.S. Pallas assumed borrowing of the term *dombra* from the Kazakhs, it seems more likely that the new word was taken from the people with whom the Kalmyks were bound by a persistent and fierce war of many years – Turkic Nogai or Nogai Horde settled in the Caspian steppes until pushed from their by the Kalmyks and Russians. Probably, the alien origin of the term may explain some of the negative connotations associated with the word *dombra*: ‘*kenä boln chign dombrt biilkh*’ (dance

⁹ Although some researchers argue the Iranian origin of the term *dombra*, Kalmyks assimilated the word rooted in the language of the Turkic-speaking people.

under someone's tune or to lose self-reliance), '*dosk dombr bolkh*' (turn into the board of dombra or lose everything, go broke).

To conclude a brief review, I would like to note that older forms of the *dombra* playing music were connected with the earlier beliefs and female practices, among them imitating dances, including crane dances, game-dance *Tek* (the goat dance), and milk songs. These texts require the special consideration.

This writing is based on my field recordings made in Kalmykia in Russia, Uvs and Hovd aimags of Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia in China.

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