

Urad Mongolian Wedding Long Songs as a Cultural Resource for Lifelong Learning: Musicological and Educational Perspectives

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is increasingly recognised as a resource for lifelong learning, offering structured opportunities for experiential, intergenerational, and identity-affirming education (UNESCO, 2003; Pillai & Achilles, 2015). This study investigates the musicological and ritual characteristics of the Urad Mongolian wedding long song (Urtyn Duu) tradition and examines its potential as an andragogical resource for lifelong learning.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study employs a qualitative ethnomusicological design combining ethnographic fieldwork in the Urad Banners of Inner Mongolia, historical-textual analysis of the eighteenth-century Buman Zarliq of Mergen Gegeen Luvsandambijaltsan, comparative musicology against the Central Khalkha standard, and structural analysis of the “Three-Three” (nine-fold) performance cycle. Findings are interpreted through Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and Knowles’s (2015) andragogical principles.

Findings: The Urad repertoire is structured around a non-repetitive nine-song liturgical cycle, grouped into three ceremonial movements, functioning as a sequenced experiential curriculum delivered across the wedding rite. Musicologically, the Urad style diverges from the melismatic Khalkha standard through a restrained register, limited shurankhai ornamentation, and a distinctive “connected” (khelkhee) melodic-linking technique. The didactic “81 Stanzas” attributed to Mergen Gegeen embed ecological ethics, ancestral reverence, and moral instruction directly within performance, constituting community-based intergenerational education operating in parallel with formal schooling.

Practical Implications: Reframing the Urad wedding cycle as a lifelong-learning resource supports its integration into community-based adult education, heritage-bearer mentorship, and formal curricula, consistent with UNESCO guidance on ICH

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and education for sustainable development (Pillai & Achilles, 2015). The study proposes strategies for digital archiving, curricular integration, and policy recognition.

Originality/Value: This study is among the first to analyse the Urad wedding long song through the lens of lifelong-learning theory, bridging ethnomusicological documentation with andragogical and experiential-learning frameworks, and contributing a transferable model for understanding ritual heritage as structured, community-embedded learning.

Keywords: Urad Mongols; Urtyn Duu; intangible cultural heritage; lifelong learning; andragogy; ethnomusicology; cultural sustainability.

1. Introduction

The Urad Mongolian wedding long song (Urtyn Duu) constitutes a profound ontological pillar of the nomadic rite of passage, serving as the liturgical core of traditional matrimonial ceremonies. As descendants of Khavt Khasar, the Urad people preserved a musical heritage that diverged from the Central Khalkha standard owing to specific historical migrations and the scholarly influence of Mergen Geegen Luvsandambijaltsan (Bayanjargal, 1992). This study documents these traditions as globalisation and urbanisation threaten the continuity of authentic regional performance, while asking a question largely absent from existing ethnomusicological accounts: what can the structure of this tradition reveal about heritage transmission as a form of lifelong learning?

Intangible cultural heritage has been recognised by UNESCO not only as an object of safeguarding but as a vehicle for education across the life course, supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4's commitment to lifelong learning for all (UNESCO, 2003; Pillai & Achilles, 2015). Community-based ritual traditions such as the Urad wedding cycle have historically transmitted ecological, ethical, and genealogical knowledge to participants of all ages through structured, repeated, embodied performance — a pedagogy that long predates, and parallels, the experiential and andragogical models now current in adult-education theory (Kolb, 1984; Knowles et al., 2015). Yet musicological studies of the Urad tradition have rarely been read through this educational lens, a

gap this study addresses by synthesising ethnographic fieldwork, historical-textual analysis, and comparative musicology with an educational reading informed by lifelong-learning theory. The study acknowledges the foundational works of scholars such as J. Enebish and A. Alimaa while identifying a critical gap in the comparative analysis of Urad-specific wedding cycles and their interpretation as lifelong-learning resources. Central to the Urad repertoire are the “81 Stanzas” of the Buman Zarliq, which integrate Buddhist didacticism with pastoral aesthetics; unlike the highly melismatic Khalkha style, Urad melodies prioritise lyrical intelligibility and moral instruction. The article argues that the Urad wedding long song is not merely an aesthetic display but a sophisticated social covenant and a sequenced educational system, contributing both to the preservation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and to understanding how heritage practices can be sustained as lifelong-learning resources.

2. Theoretical Framework: Heritage Transmission as Lifelong Learning

The 2003 UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as their heritage, transmitted from generation to generation (UNESCO, 2003). Subsequent UNESCO guidance explicitly connects this safeguarding mandate to lifelong learning, arguing that ICH integration helps learners of all ages acquire knowledge relevant to sustainable development, and that intergenerational transmission is itself a

form of continuous informal education within communities (Pillai & Achilles, 2015). This framing positions the Urad wedding cycle not merely as an artefact to be archived but as a living curriculum already embedded within community life.

Knowles's theory of andragogy holds that adult learning is most effective when self-directed, experience-based, and oriented toward the practical roles adults face in their social lives (Knowles et al., 2015). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle similarly describes learning as proceeding through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Both frameworks privilege learning embedded in lived, participatory experience rather than abstract instruction — closely matching the participatory structure of ritual wedding performance, in which guests of varying ages engage directly in vocal competition and ceremonial performance rather than passively observing it. Research on oral tradition-based communities further documents that knowledge transfer across generations relies heavily on storytelling, song, and ritual, shaping identity and cultural continuity over time (Zhang, 2025); applied to the Urad context, this suggests that the wedding cycle functions simultaneously as ceremonial art and as a structured pedagogical occasion through which ecological, genealogical, and moral knowledge is transmitted by elder heritage bearers. Recent curricular research similarly shows that structuring ICH content around experiential learning stages improves learner understanding relative to conventional instruction (Binbin et al., 2024), supporting the argument that ritual heritage can be translated into formal lifelong-learning curricula without losing cultural integrity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnomusicological design combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical-textual analysis, and comparative musicology, with findings interpreted through an educational lens drawn from lifelong-learning theory. The primary method involved extensive field research in the

Urad Banners of Inner Mongolia, conducted intermittently over a fourteen-month period (March 2023–April 2024) across four wedding ceremonies in the Urad Right, Middle, and Front Banners, with direct observation of authentic wedding rituals, including the sequence of ceremonial phases and the roles played by heritage-bearing elders in guiding younger participants. Twelve recognised heritage bearers (Өвлөн уламжлагч) and family elders were purposively selected as key informants on the basis of their active role in officiating or performing the “Three-Three” cycle, and were engaged through semi-structured interviews, supplemented by informal conversations recorded as field notes; all ceremonial performances were audio- and video-recorded with a digital field recorder and camera, and transcribed melodies were cross-checked against the recordings to ensure transcription accuracy. A substantial portion of the research analyses historical manuscripts, particularly the eighteenth-century Buman Zarliq by Mergen Gegeen Luvsandambijaltsan, to trace the literary and philosophical foundations of the “81 Stanzas.” Comparative musicology delineates stylistic and structural differences between Urad and standardised Khalkha traditions, with particular attention to register, ornamentation, and melodic linkage, while structural analysis examines the “Three-Three” (nine-fold) performance progression and the “connected” (khelkhee) melodic technique as a sequenced learning structure. Regional melodies were transcribed into international staff notation to support technical assessment of vocal ornaments and pentatonic scales, and specialised ritual and musical terms used in Urad matrimonial ceremonies were documented to preserve their cultural context for future educational use. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to interviews and recordings, with the purpose of the research, the intended use of recordings, and the voluntary right to withdraw explained in advance; the study followed the host institution's ethical guidelines for fieldwork involving human participants, and no identifying personal information beyond publicly performed ceremonial roles is reported.

To minimise researcher bias and strengthen the credibility of interpretive claims, findings were triangulated across three independent sources — field observation, informant interviews, and historical-textual analysis of the Buman Zarliq — and preliminary interpretations were shared with two senior heritage bearers for member-checking prior to finalisation.

Primary research materials included Khasbiligt's (1999) "Selections of Mongolian Weddings," which systematically examines ancient, Ordos, and Urad weddings, and Naranbat's (1982) "Urad Weddings" and related ethnographic studies of regional wedding customs. A broad spectrum of secondary literature — including studies of Mongolian customs, the multi-volume history of Mongolian music, and technical treatments of long song aesthetics and vocal tone documented in the reference list — further informed the research, with evolutionary studies of long song as lyrical poetry and comparative perspectives on Oirat and Barga traditions enriching the comparative analysis below.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Ritual Taxonomy and the Wedding as Rite of Passage

The investigation reveals that the Urad — descendants of Khavt Khasar — represent a vital ethnographic isolate that has maintained archaic Mongolic traditions despite centuries of migration to the Bor Tokhoi region. The Urad wedding is a multi-stage rite of passage consisting of distinct ceremonial phases, each carrying a distinct educational function:

- The Bride's Feast (Khuukhen Talyn Najr): focused on maternal lineage and the Hair Parting (Us Khagalah) ceremony, introducing younger participants to genealogical knowledge and the emotional register of transition.
- The Shanty Feast (Shaantyn Khurim): a pre-nuptial vigil involving competitive vocal performance and riddles, in which the groom's party must demonstrate intellectual and musical prowess — an

explicitly participatory, evaluative learning occasion.

- The Main Feast (Ikh Najr): the liturgical apex at which the "Three-Three" song cycles are performed with strict ceremonial gravity, consolidating the ethical and genealogical instruction delivered across earlier stages.

4.2 The "Three-Three" (9-Fold) Liturgy as a Sequenced Curriculum

A primary result is the documentation of the "Three-Three" performance principle, a structural hallmark distinguishing Urad practice from the more flexible repertoires of Central Mongolia. According to the Buman Zarliq, songs must be performed in non-repetitive cycles of nine, grouped into three movements: Najryn Magnaj (Opening), establishing the sanctity of the ritual space; Najr Khögjöök (Development), celebrating the union of lineages; and Najr Jargaakh (Closing), culminating in ancestral blessings. Read through experiential learning theory, this progression functions as a sequenced curriculum: each movement presents a concrete ritual experience, invites reflective communal engagement, and culminates in internalisation of the associated moral and genealogical content — paralleling Kolb's (1984) cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and active experimentation, even though the Urad liturgy long predates this formulation. This rigour ensures the wedding remains a sacred covenant aligned with the Ten White Virtues of Buddhist philosophy, while functioning as a repeated, intergenerational pedagogical occasion.

4.3 Musicological Divergence and the "Khelkhee" Technique

Urad wedding songs diverge significantly from the standardised Khalkha "national style." While Khalkha long songs are defined by extreme melisma and high-register shurankhai (falsetto), the Urad tradition emphasises restrained register and linear simplicity — melodies typically exceed an octave by only a few tones, mirroring Western Oirat (Urianhai) styles — and melodic transparency, prioritising clear, majestic resonance over vocal gymnastics. This

intelligibility is a precondition for the moral and genealogical content of the songs to be absorbed by listeners of varying ages and musical training. The “*khelkhee*” (connected) technique — in which stanzas and songs are linked through specific melodic transitions — creates continuous narrative flow across the nine-fold cycle, reinforcing its curriculum-like character by ensuring that the content of successive songs is experienced as a continuous instructional narrative rather than disconnected performances.

4.4 Lyrical Symbolism and the “81 Stanzas” as Didactic Content

Analysis of the “81 Stanzas” attributed to Mergen Gegeen highlights heavy integration of religious-didactic themes. Songs such as *Gurvan Buyan* (Three Merits) and *Övgön Shuvuu Khoyor* (The Old Man and the Two Birds) serve as philosophical seminars on ecological ethics, ancestral honour, and moral discipline — the avoidance of the Ten Black Sins and the promotion of Buddhist virtues. Departure songs (*Mordlogyn Duu*) such as “*Talaa gej yavlaa*” are performed at the bride’s departure, transitioning the community from grief to acceptance; as lifelong-learning content, these songs model an accepted communal script for processing loss and forming new kinship bonds, rehearsed experientially at every wedding a community member attends across the life course. A field note recorded during the November 2023 Urad Middle Banner wedding illustrates this didactic function directly: an elder heritage bearer paused after the second stanza of *Gurvan Buyan* to explain its ecological message to a group of younger guests before the performance continued, a pattern of in-performance commentary observed at three of the four weddings attended and indicating that moral instruction is delivered not only through the song text itself but through the heritage bearer’s active mediation of it. For readers unfamiliar with Urad ritual vocabulary, “*khelkhee*” (melodic linking), “*shurankhai*” (high-register ornamentation), and “*ӨВЛӨН УЛАМЖЛАГЧ*” (recognised heritage bearer) are the three specialised terms most central to the analysis and are used consistently throughout in their Urad sense.

4.5 Synthesis: A “North-South” Cultural Bridge

The Urad tradition represents a unique cultural bridge, maintaining the archaic, linear melodic forms of the early Borjigin period while incorporating the sophisticated literary stanzas of eighteenth-century Southern Mongolian Buddhist scholars. This synthesis creates a noble, majestic style prioritising spiritual instruction over virtuosic display — evidence that the tradition has functioned as an adaptive, cumulative body of instructional content, absorbing and transmitting ethical material from multiple sources across centuries while preserving a stable pedagogical architecture.

5. Educational Implications and Strategic Interventions

Read against Knowles’s (2015) andragogical principles, the Urad wedding cycle exhibits features of effective adult learning: it is problem- and role-centred, situating instruction within the immediate social task of marriage and lineage formation; experiential, requiring direct vocal participation rather than passive reception; and grounded in participants’ prior life experience, since competence in the Shaantyn Khurim vocal competition depends on cumulative exposure to the repertoire across previous weddings attended. The tradition can thus be understood as a naturally occurring andragogical system that has operated, largely undocumented in these terms, for generations. Its transmission depends on a small number of recognised heritage bearers (*ӨВЛӨН УЛАМЖЛАГЧ*) who function as community educators, analogous to master practitioners in formal heritage-education programmes (Zhang, 2025); their gradual decline represents not only a loss of musicological content but a contraction of the community’s educational infrastructure.

The nine-fold liturgical structure suggests a concrete template for curricular design — a sequence of concrete engagement, reflective discussion, conceptual framing, and applied performance modelled on the Opening–Development–Closing movements — paralleling the six-element curriculum model (principle, goal, content, learning process, learning resource,

evaluation) recently proposed for ICH instruction in higher education (Binbin et al., 2024). In light of rapid urbanisation and cultural homogenisation, three strategic interventions are proposed. First, technical documentation and digital archiving: cultural heritage organisations should initiate systematic digital mapping of the Urad repertoire, with special focus on the *khelkhee* melodies most at risk, archiving high-fidelity recordings of remaining heritage bearers alongside professional staff-notation transcriptions. Second, educational and curricular integration: the didactic power of the “81 Stanzas” should be leveraged in local music curricula, structured around the experiential stages identified above, consistent with UNESCO guidance on integrating ICH and education-for-sustainable-development principles across disciplines (Pillai & Achilles, 2015). Third, institutional policy and ritual recognition: the Urad wedding ceremony should be formally nominated for regional and national Intangible Cultural Heritage registries, with policy support for cultural enclaves or festivals where the full nine-fold cycle can be performed in its original liturgical context, providing incentives for traditional singers to continue functioning as community educators.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. As a qualitative investigation grounded in fieldwork and textual analysis, its findings regarding the tradition’s educational function are interpretive rather than empirically measured; no formal assessment of learning outcomes among participants was conducted. The research is geographically bounded to the Urad Banners of Inner Mongolia, constraining generalisability to other Mongolic wedding traditions (Khalkha, Ordos, Bayad), and the sample of twelve heritage bearers and elders across four observed weddings, while sufficient for the qualitative aims of the study, reflects the small, declining number of recognised heritage bearers and limited the diversity of primary informants. Future research should employ pre- and post-exposure assessment, comparable to recent work on experiential ICH curricula (Binbin et al., 2024), to

test whether structured exposure to the nine-fold cycle measurably affects participants’ ecological, ethical, or genealogical knowledge; comparative ethnomusicological studies across Khalkha, Oirat, Ordos, and Barga traditions would help establish whether the andragogical structure identified here generalises across the broader Mongolic repertoire; and longitudinal research could evaluate whether digital archiving can offset the decline in living heritage bearers without displacing the tradition’s embodied, community-based character.

7. Conclusion

The wedding long songs of the Urad Mongols constitute both a historical relic and a living liturgical and educational system. Analysis of the “Three-Three” (nine-fold) structural principle and the didactic stanzas of *Mergen Gegeen* delineates the musicological markers that distinguish the Urad tradition from the broader Mongolic vocal landscape, while demonstrating that this structure can be productively read through andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The Urad *Urtyn Duu* represents a unique North-South cultural synthesis: its melodic structures share an ancestral affinity with Western Mongolian (Oirat) traditions, while its lyrical content is profoundly shaped by the eighteenth-century Southern Mongolian Buddhist Enlightenment — evidence that the tradition is a distinct evolutionary branch preserving archaic performance traits within a sophisticated religious and educational framework.

The omission of the nine-fold cycle in modernised weddings represents not only an aesthetic loss but a disruption of the Urad community’s long-standing infrastructure for intergenerational and lifelong learning. The tradition’s mathematical rigour, melodic restraint, and philosophical depth mark it as a masterpiece of human creativity and a structured resource for lifelong learning. Its preservation is therefore a vital effort to protect both the diversity of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and a functioning, community-embedded system of education — a documentation of a disappearing

art form and a call to action for the global ethnomusicological and lifelong-learning research communities alike.

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