

## FOLKLORIC ACCOUNTS ON *HÖÖMEY*

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**Abstract.** This contribution focuses on a Dukhan legend about the origin of *Höömey*. The legend, told by Gombo in 2009 in the taiga areas of northern Khövsgöl region in northern Mongolia, describes how a poor orphan boy learned throat singing by imitating the sound of the Höömey River to win the hand of a rich man's daughter in marriage. The author analyzes the terminology used in the legend: *höömey* (a Mongolic loanword serving as the generic term for throat-singing) and *Gargiraa* (possibly related to Mongolian words for “waterfall” or “grey crane”). The text traces the etymological connections of these terms across various Turkic and Mongolic languages.

**Keywords:** *höömey*, *gargiraa*, legend, *dukkha*, *Khuvsgul lake*, folklore

**For citation:** Ragagnin, Elisabetta (2025). Folkloric accounts on *höömey*, *In Khoomei and Cultural Heritage of the Peoples of Central Asia*, no. 2(3), pp.19-23. DOI: 10.24412/3034-5944-2025-23-19-23



## ФОЛЬКЛОРНЫЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЯ О *ООМЕЕ*

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**Аннотация.** В данной статье основное внимание уделяется легенде народа дукха о происхождении феномена хоомей. Легенда, изложенная в 2009 году стариком Гомбо в таежных районах северного региона Хувсугул в северной Монголии, описывает, как бедный мальчик-сирота научился горловому пению, подражая звуку реки Хоомей, чтобы завоевать руку дочери богатого человека. Автор анализирует терминологию, используемую в легенде: хоомей (монгольское заимствование, служащее общим термином для горлового пения) и

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гаргираа (возможно, связано с монгольскими словами, обозначающими «водопад» или «серый журавль»). В тексте прослеживаются этимологические связи этих терминов в различных тюркских и монгольских языках.

**Ключевые слова:** хоомей, гаргираа, легенда, дукха, озеро Хубсугул, фольклор

**Для цитирования:** Ragagnin, Elisabetta. Folkloric accounts on höömey // Хоомей и культурное наследие народов Центральной Азии. 2025. № 2(3). С. 19-23. DOI: 10.24412/3034 - 5944-2025-23-19-23

Throat singing or overtone singing is nowadays a world-wide known music style, in which “a singer produces two simultaneous voices: a continuous drone and a melody of overtone above it” (van Tongeren, 2023: 9).

This musical practice is most prominently found among Turco-Mongolic peoples of Inner Asia, first among Tuvans and Western Mongols. Secondary manifestations occur among neighbouring Siberian populations, including Khakas, Altai and Buryat peoples, as well as the geographically more distant Bashkirs in the Volga region and Kalmyks<sup>2</sup>.

As for its origin, it has been suggested that it may have originated within the bilingual Tuvan-Mongol cultural milieu, where the practice is known as *khöömey* (Tatarintsev, 1998). However, this hypothesis remains unconfirmed, and the question of its true origins continues to be debated. Historical documentation offers limited evidence regarding this phenomenon, leaving folklore as the primary available source for investigation<sup>3</sup>.

I wish to present here a legend that Gombo – a Dukhan<sup>4</sup> friend who was well-versed in oral history and traditional narratives<sup>5</sup> – told me one sunny autumn day in 2009, sitting outside of his *alaji-öy* (lit. pole-dwelling, i.e. tepee-like dwelling) in the East Taiga in northern Mongolia.

Once upon a time, in a far away taiga there was a river called Höömey. Dukhan *ails*

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филологии, культурологии и литературы тюркских и монгольских языков и народов, а также исследования Шелкового пути, охватывающие обширную географическую область, простирающуюся от Ближнего Востока и Кавказа до Центральной Азии и Монголии. В рамках этого широкого круга интересов ее внимание сосредоточено на тюркской и монгольской лингвистике, особенно этнолингвистике, социоллингвистике и контактной лингвистике. Она провела обширную полевую работу по находящимся под угрозой исчезновения тюркским языкам и культурам Монголии и Ирана. Древние и средние тюркские источники, в частности трансрегиональные языки чагатай и аджеми тюркский, а также доклассические и классические монгольские литературные памятники также занимают центральное место в ее научных интересах. Кроме того, она проявляет широкий интерес к антропологии, этнографии и литературе, включая тюркскую и монгольскую кулинарную культуру, культуру кочевников Центральной Азии, шаманизм, тюркское и монгольское горловое пение, средневековую и современную оспорительскую литературу, а также тюркскую и монгольскую устную литературу и фольклор. Редактор (совместно с Ларсом Йохансоном и Бирселем Караочем) журнала “*Turkic Languages*” (Харрасовиц, Висбаден), главный редактор книжной серии “*Hilâl: Studi turchi e ottomani*, Edizioni Ca’ Foscari” (Венеция), заместитель главного редактора книжной серии “*Marco Polo: Studies in Global Europe-Asia Connections*, Edizioni Ca’ Foscari (Венеция), член редколлегии книжной серии “*Languages of Asia*” (Брилл, Лейден), член редколлегии “*International Journal of Eurasian Linguistics*” (Брилл, Лейден), член научного совета журнала “*Acta Mongolica*” (Улан-Батор), член научного совета журнала “*Türkologiya*” (Баку), член редколлегии журнала “*Tehlikedeki diller dergisi*” / “*Journal of Endangered Languages*” (Анкара).

<sup>2</sup> For detailed information on the distribution of overtone singing types world-wide, see van Tongeren 2023. Specifically on Tuvan overtone singing, also see Kyrgys 2002 and 2008, Levin & Süzükei 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Folklore materials on throat-singing are included in several publications, a.o. see Samdan 2013 and Ragagnin 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The Dukhan people inhabit the northernmost regions of Mongolia’s Khövsgöl region, an area bordering on the northeast with Buryatia and on the west with the Tuvan republic. Nowadays ethnic Dukhans number 704 individuals and are divided into two main groups: those of the East Taiga originate from Toja, whereas those of the West Taiga came from Tere-Khöl. On Dukhan language and people, see, a.o. Ragagnin 2011 and 2022.

<sup>5</sup> This legend was first published in Italian in Ragagnin (2010).

used to graze their reindeer over there. Some families were very rich and owned many reindeer whereas others were poor and did not have any cattle. Some families used to graze their cattle together. Some others used to tend to their cattle in far away and isolated areas. Among these peoples there was a young orphan boy. He did not have any brothers and sisters. He grew up following his own life principles. Not far away from where he used to live, there was the grazing ground of a very rich person. This rich person had three beautiful daughters. Among them the youngest was the most beautiful one. Just by looking at her, the young boy fell in love. He immediately did his best to get into contact with her. As soon as they met, love blossomed. They became inseparable. Meanwhile two years passed. The rich father of the girl got informed that his beloved daughter had fallen in love with a poor hunter. So he ordered his servants to take the boy to him. And so it happened. The boy was in front of the rich man and did not dare to answer his direct questions. But the rich man did know exactly what was going on. Thus, he said: "Listen carefully to what I am telling you. In the middle of the middle autumn month, a big *naadam* will be celebrated on occasion of my birthday. That day you will have to sing like the river *Höömey* that flows behind the high taigas. If you will manage to learn its singing art, you will get my daughter for wife. And with such words he dismissed the young boy. The young boy was given fifteen days. He did not lose time. He saddled his reindeer and headed for the magic river. He noticed immediately that the voice of the river was at its best early in the morning and late in the evening. He listened carefully to its melodious singing. He managed to find the exact place from where the most melodious notes could be perceived. Thus, from his perfect position, he started imitating the voice of the river. He went on imitating it for seven days. After seven days he had learned the *höömey* art. It was the day of the birthday of the rich Lord. The boy made his appearance in the party. He started to clear his throat. He had learned how to sing *höömey* and was there to show it...as agreed, on the day fixed by the rich Lord. He noticed that an old man was observing him. So he said: "Today the rich family will test me". The old man asked him to sing what he had just learned. The old man was impressed by his talent and by the beauty of the melody. He told him: "Boy, in this party there is nobody who equals you in the art of singing. But be aware! It does not mean that the rich Lord will give you his daughter! Sing! And don't forget that you are the one who went to the river *Höömey*". The birthday party was spectacular. There were music, songs and dances. Everything was magnificent. As the party was turning to its end, the rich Lord had the boy called. The poor boy presented himself. So the rich Lord said: "Have you forgotten what I told you? And the boy answered: "No, my Sir, I did not forget it." He stood up and started singing. Everybody was listening to him in total admiration. He kept on singing for three hours. Then the Lord told him: "It is enough. However, you can not take my daughter yet. You must come back in three days and sing again for me." And so it happened. The young orphan sang again like the river *Höömey* and the daughter of the rich Lord became his. In the middle of that month the young boy and the daughter of the rich Lord became husband and wife. They formed a new family. They gave birth to many children. All their children became masters of throat-singing. This is what the legend tells us. It was in the remote region of Toja that the art of *Höömey* "throat-singing" was first learned.

In this legend – that Gombo told me to have heard in Toja – the mimesis of the sound

produced by the flowing of the waters of the river called *Höömey* is credited with the origin of throat-singing<sup>1</sup>.

Regarding throat-singing terminology, in this legend two terms occur: *höömey* and *Gargīraa*.

The term *höömey* is a Mongolic loanword and occurs in this legend as the generic term with reference to ‘throat-singing’. Whereas in Dukhan as well as in the rest of Sayan Turkic the term *höömey* specifically refers to this musical phenomenon, Khalkha-Mongolian *khöömiy*, besides meaning ‘throat-singing’ also refers to (1) ‘back of the mouth, pharynx’, and (2) ‘strip of fur along the belly of an animal’ (Bawden, 1997: 461b; Ceval, 1966: 713b). Moreover, it should be noticed that written Mongolian *kөгemey* (Lessing, 1995: 479b) does not include “throat-singing” in its meanings but merely refers to (1) ‘fur on the throat or belly of an animal; dewlap of bovines’ and (2) ‘pharynx, throat’. The mongolism *kөmegey* occurs in other Turkic languages of the eastern areas of the Turkic speaking world, not denoting throat-singing. For instance, Jakut displays two lexemes that go back to Written Mongolian *kөmegey*, namely *kömögöy* ‘the front part of the neck’ and *küömey* ‘throat, larynx, voice’ (Tatarintsev, 1998: 65; Sleptsov, 1972: 177b). In Kirghiz the terms *kömöy* and *kömököy* are used as synonyms with reference to ‘uvula’ (Iudakhin, 1965: 421b).

As for the other term occurring in this legend with reference to throat-singing, namely *Gargīraa*, it may be etymologically related to the Oirat Mongolian lexeme *xarxiraa*: ‘vodopad’ or ‘zvuk, proizvodimyj vodopadom’, as proposed by Tatarintsev (Tatarintsev, 2004: 109–110). (cf. Khalkha-Mongolian *khürkheree* ‘waterfall’), In addition, a formal and semantic contamination with the Mongolic term *qarkira* ‘grey crane’ (Lessing, 1995: 940a) – cf. Khalkha-Mongolian *xarxiraa* ‘a kind of grey crane with a loud voice when flying’ (Ceval, 1966: 667b) – should not be excluded. Cognates of this item are widespread among Central Asian Turkic languages (Räsänen, 1969: 238a). “Kharkhiraa” is also the name of a range of mountains in Uvs province of Western Mongolia. C. Pegg (Pegg, 2001: 63) stresses the importance of this fact in connection with throat-singing, since Mongols place much importance on the relationship between music and landscape.

Finally, in this legend, both *höömey* and *Gargīraa* get verbalized with the addition of the denominal verbal suffix {LA}: *xöömeyle-* and *Gargīraala-* both bearing the general meaning ‘to perform throat-singing’ without any reference to a particular style.

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<sup>1</sup> On the importance of sound mimesis, see Levin & Süzükei (2006: 73–124)

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