

## Article

# A Comprehensive Analysis of Barga Folk Songs: Morphological Structure, Socio-Cultural Functions, and Thematic Taxonomy

BiLa Ga <sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

\* Correspondence: BiLa Ga, Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

**Abstract:** The song tradition of the Barga people holds an important place in Mongolian musical heritage. This article examines the musical characteristics of Barga folk songs, their linguistic and melodic features, socio-cultural functions, and main thematic classifications, highlighting their role in shaping ethnic customs and worldview. Barga folk songs are generally classified into two main musical forms: long songs (urtiin duu) and short songs (bogino duu). Barga long songs are distinguished by expansive spatial imagery, broad breath organization, and a wide melodic range, while short songs are more practical in use, with clear rhythmic structures closely tied to daily life. Furthermore, various thematic categories—such as praise songs, homesickness songs, love songs, wedding songs, military songs, and lullabies—express the deep cultural layers of Barga society. This study provides a systematic analysis of these songs from both musical structural and thematic-content perspectives to elucidate their significance within the broader framework of ethnic cultural heritage. The findings suggest that Barga folk songs constitute a unique and invaluable component of Mongolian ethnomusicology, serving as critical primary material for future scholarly research.

**Keywords:** Ethnic culture; melodic structure; rhythmology; thematic studies; oral tradition; nomadic lifestyle; cultural layers; Barga folk songs; ethnomusicology.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background: The Barga People and Their Historical Trajectory

The Barga are an ancient and significant subgroup of the Mongolian ethnic community. Their traditional culture has evolved over centuries, influenced by their nomadic lifestyle, the natural environment of the steppe, and the social and psychological patterns of their society. Historically, the Barga people have followed a unique migration path that has left a deep imprint on their collective memory and artistic expression. As pastoral nomads inhabiting the vast eastern steppes, their history is marked by periodic resettlements and movements due to socio-political changes, military service, and the search for viable pastures. This migration is not just a geographic fact, but a foundational element of their ethnic identity, which impacts all aspects of their oral tradition. As such, Barga folk songs are more than forms of artistic entertainment; they represent a sophisticated cognitive system that mirrors the daily life, customs, aesthetic values, and worldview of the clan.

### 1.2. Problem Statement: The Need for Structural and Semiotic Depth

Although Mongolian music, particularly the UNESCO-recognized "Long Song," is well-documented in international ethnomusicology, the distinct nuances of the Barga regional style still require further scholarly attention. Existing literature tends to generalize Mongolian music as a whole, yet the Barga tradition has unique morphological characteristics, both in its long songs (urtiin duu) and short songs (bogino duu), that differentiate it from other Mongolian styles, such as those of the Khalkha or Western

Received: 02 February 2026

Revised: 25 March 2026

Accepted: 06 April 2026

Published: 10 April 2026



**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Mongolian regions. Specifically, the "expansive spatial imagery" and unique "breath organization" in Barga long songs offer a specialized field for semiotic analysis, where musical intervals and melodic contours serve as representations of the physical landscape. Additionally, there is a gap in the academic literature regarding how the linguistic phonetic structure of the Barga dialect influences rhythmic flexibility, and how these musical structures act as a repository for ethnic customs, which are at risk of fading in the modern era.

### *1.3. Objectives of the Study*

The primary objective of this research is to provide a systematic, scientific analysis of Barga folk songs through two primary lenses: musical structural morphology and thematic-content taxonomy.

- First, the study aims to analyze the dualistic nature of Barga musical forms, contrasting the expansive, polyphonic qualities of the long song with the compact, rhythmic pragmatism of the short song.
- Second, the research seeks to categorize the vast thematic diversity-including praise, nostalgia, wedding, and military songs-to elucidate their socio-cultural functions.
- Finally, this article intends to demonstrate how these musical genres serve as a comprehensive portrayal of the multifaceted cultural identity and worldview of the Barga people, highlighting their role in reinforcing social cohesion and national consciousness.

## **2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1. Historical Context: Foundations of Barga Ethnomusicology*

The scholarly investigation into Barga folk music is closely connected with the broader study of Mongolian historical trajectories and clan-based cultural structures. Barga songs are recognized as an important sub-style within the Mongolian musical tradition, reflecting herding culture, historical events, and social life, and evolving over time in response to nomadic production and environmental conditions. These musical forms also express ecological and social experiences shaped by natural landscapes and mobility practices, serving as cultural markers that articulate collective identity, heritage, and historical memory [1].

These historical perspectives establish that Barga folk songs are not merely artistic expressions but a cognitive system reflecting the aesthetic values and worldview of the ethnic subgroup. Furthermore, the Barga tradition is divided into two principal musical forms: long songs (*urtiin duu*) and short songs (*bogino duu*), which serve as central objects of analysis in modern research.

### *2.2. Contemporary Scholarly Context and Theoretical Framework*

To understand Barga music in a global academic context, one must apply contemporary ethnomusicological theories. Carole Pegg discusses the concept of "border aesthetics," which is crucial for analyzing the Barga, as their music often bridges the gap between different Mongolian regional identities while maintaining distinct spacious spatial imagery [2]. This spatiality is a hallmark of the *urtiin duu* form, which utilizes wide melodic ranges to mirror the openness of the steppe.

The technical foundation of these melodies is often associated with pentatonic structures prevalent in Central Asian nomadic traditions. These musical features facilitate sustained vocalization and complex ornamentation, contributing to the distinctive resonance and vocal texture of Mongolian long song traditions [3].

Furthermore, the preservation of cultural identity through music-a theme central to the Barga's history of migration-aligns with Humphrey's theories on how nomadic subgroups maintain social cohesion through shared oral traditions [4]. The community's history of nomadic migration and periodic resettlement has left indelible memories frequently memorialized in song.

Linguistically, the relationship between speech and melody is paramount. In Mongolian oral traditions, the phonetic structure of the language directly shapes irregular and flexible rhythmic patterns. In the Barga context, this is evident in how breath control and poetic meter dictate the undulating waves of the long song. Finally, Post provides a framework for ethnomusicological mapping, allowing us to see Barga music as a multifaceted cultural representation that functions as critical primary material for understanding ethnic cultural heritage [5].

### 3. Methodology

The methodological framework for this study employs a multi-disciplinary approach, primarily grounded in qualitative analysis and comparative musicology. To achieve a systematic, scientific analysis of Barga folk songs, the research utilizes the following strategies:

- **Morphological Analysis:** This involves a detailed examination of the musical structure, focusing on melodic contours, interval usage, and rhythmic patterns of both *urtiin duu* and *bogino duu*.
- **Comparative Musicology:** The study situates Barga musical characteristics within the broader framework of Mongolian ethnomusicology by contrasting them with neighboring traditions, such as Khalkha or Buryat styles. This highlights the unique "spacious spatial imagery" and specific "breath organization" that distinguish the Barga sub-style.
- **Thematic Categorization:** A systematic taxonomy is applied to the song repertoire, classifying works based on their socio-cultural functions and content, such as songs of praise, wedding songs, and military songs.
- **Linguistic-Melodic Correlation:** The research analyzes the integration of the Mongolian language's phonetic structure with musical phrasing, investigating how poetic meter and diction dictate rhythmic flexibility.
- **Socio-Cultural Contextualization:** Following the principles of ethnography, the songs are analyzed as a "cognitive system" reflecting the nomadic lifestyle, history of migration, and the Barga community's worldview.

By synthesizing these methods, the study aims to elucidate the significance of Barga folk songs as an invaluable component of ethnic cultural heritage.

### 4. Morphological Analysis of Barga Long Songs (Urtiin Duu)

#### 4.1. *Melodic Contours: The Sonic Mirror of the Steppe*

Barga long songs represent a distinctive sub-style within the broader tradition of Mongolian long songs, characterized by expansive stretches, extended phrasing, and melodies encompassing a wide tonal range. The morphological essence of these songs lies in their "spacious spatial imagery". A defining feature is the melodic opening, which often begins at a relatively high pitch and gradually descends through prolonged notes.

This descending sequence is not merely a musical preference but a mimicry of the physical environment; it uniquely conveys the vastness and openness of the steppe through musical expression. As noted by Pegg, such contours serve as a cognitive map of the nomadic landscape. The melodic structure is designed to mirror the visible horizon, where the high-pitched start represents the vast sky and the gradual descent simulates the rolling plains. This creates a "broad breath organization" that allows the performer to sonically occupy the environment [2].

#### 4.2. *Ornamentation (Shuranhai) and Resonant Qualities*

The technical complexity of the Barga long song is found in its sophisticated structural organization of melodies. While the principal tonal framework remains stable throughout the performance, multiple layers of ornamental movements, known as *shuranhai*, unfold around it. These ornaments are not mere decorations but are essential to the "polyphonic qualities" emblematic of the genre.

These multiple layers of ornamentation contribute to an acoustic richness that gives the Barga song its resonant character. According to Schimmelpenninck the use of the pentatonic scale in these ornaments allows for a fluid, shimmering effect that enhances the emotional depth of the performance. This structural density reflects the elevated spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities of the Barga people, embodying their refined artistic judgment.

#### *4.3. Rhythm and Breath: Linguistic Determinism*

The rhythm of Barga long songs is fundamentally non-metrical and irregular, eschewing a strictly fixed tempo in favor of undulating, dynamic waves. This flexibility is a direct result of the integration between language and melody. Specifically, the rhythmic patterns are determined by the phonetic structure of the Mongolian language, breath control, and poetic meter.

In Mongolian oral traditions, musical expression is closely intertwined with linguistic phrasing. In the Barga context, the "long breath" required for *urtiin duu* is shaped by the natural flow of speech and the expressive intent of the performer. The breath acts as a bridge between the physical act of singing and the spatial imagery of the lyrics. Consequently, the rhythm is not dictated by a fixed beat but by the internal logic of diction and the emotional "waves" of the narrative. This produces a musical form that is both an aesthetic achievement and a deeply personal emotional expression [6].

### **5. Structural Dynamics of Barga Short Songs (Bogino Duu)**

#### *5.1. Rhythmic Regularity: Syllabic Meter and the Rhythms of Labor*

In stark contrast to the expansive and non-metrical nature of long songs, Barga short songs (*bogino duu*) exhibit a compact structure characterized by relatively fast rhythms and clearly defined melodic lines. The morphological foundation of the short song is rooted in rhythmic regularity, where medium and small intervals predominate. This creates a musical framework that is inherently practical and action-oriented, making it well-suited to the demands of daily nomadic life.

The rhythmic patterns of Barga short songs are fundamentally connected to the physical world of the Barga community. As noted by Pegg, the syllabic meter of these songs often mirrors the cadences of physical labor, such as pastoral herding, milking, or the rhythmic movements of traditional dances. This synchronization between music and movement allows the songs to serve a dual purpose: providing entertainment and coordinating communal activities. The even meter and predictable phrase structures facilitate collective participation, ensuring that the songs can be easily performed during weddings, festivals, and other social gatherings [2].

#### *5.2. Linguistic Integration: Repetition and Phrasing as Oral Pedagogy*

The structural integrity of Barga short songs is heavily dependent on the organization of the lyrics, where the logical flow of phrases and clarity of diction are paramount. Unlike the melismatic stretching of vowels found in long songs, short songs prioritize the syllabic delivery of the text. Repetition and segmented structures are key features that define this stylistic character. These elements are not merely aesthetic; they function as essential pedagogical tools within the Barga oral tradition.

Through the use of repetitive melodic motifs and rhythmic segments, short songs become highly memorable, allowing for the efficient transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. This "segmented" phrasing aligns with the didactic nature of many traditional celebratory songs, which often incorporate proverbs, moral precepts, and philosophical reflections on life. By embedding these cultural layers into a repetitive and rhythmic structure, the Barga people ensure that the community's history, aesthetic values, and social norms are preserved and easily recalled. Thus, the linguistic integration within the short song serves as a vital bridge between individual expression and the collective preservation of Barga ethnic identity [7].

### **6. Thematic Taxonomy: A Socio-Cultural Perspective**

The thematic scope of Barga folk songs is extensive, with content rich enough to encompass the full spectrum of Barga life, consciousness, and social customs. This section categorizes the repertoire into functional and symbolic layers that define the Barga worldview.

#### 6.1. *Songs of Nature and Praise: Reverence for the Sacred Landscape*

Collectively referred to as "songs of praise," these compositions celebrate the vastness of the homeland, the deeds of heroes, and the superior qualities of swift horses. For the Barga people, glorifying their native land and its wide expanses is a primary artistic direction, reflecting a deep-seated reverence for the natural world. These themes often envision a prosperous future and an idealized vision of life. Within the pentatonic framework, these melodies act as a sonic mirror of Central Asian nomadism, reinforcing the landscape as a sacred entity that sustains both the physical and spiritual life of the clan.

#### 6.2. *Ritualistic and Social Songs: Mechanisms for Cohesion*

Barga social structures are reinforced through specific ritualistic genres, most notably wedding and military songs.

- **Wedding Songs (Ber buulguulah):** Barga wedding ceremonies follow a rigorous sequence—from engagement to the bride's return celebration—where songs are predominantly performed in the *urtiin duu* (long song) form. These songs serve a dual purpose: they provide ceremonial structure and act as a didactic tool, incorporating parental advice and expressions of gratitude to reinforce familial bonds [8].
- **Military Songs:** Historically situated in a center of martial activity, Barga men frequently participated in warfare to defend their territory. Military songs emerged as a vital genre, expressing courage before battle and a collective desire for peace. By performing these songs across generations, the Barga reinforce their national consciousness and valorous character.

#### 6.3. *The Psychology of Nostalgia: Migration and Displacement*

A central and poignant theme in the Barga repertoire is the "song of nostalgia" or homesickness. The community's history of nomadic migration and periodic resettlement has left indelible memories memorialized through song. Whether leaving for military service, weddings, or migration, the emotional attachment to family and the native land is expressed through melodies that convey "poignant sentiments". As Humphrey suggests, these expressions of longing serve as a psychological anchor, maintaining ethnic identity during periods of geographic displacement [4].

#### 6.4. *Domesticity and Gender: Lullabies and Maternal Registers*

At the most intimate level of Barga society are the lullabies, traditionally sung by women to comfort children within the household. These melodies are characterized by a gentle, flowing rhythm and a moderate vocal register, creating a soft and melodious quality. Imbued with maternal love, lullabies do more than instill calm; they serve as the first point of cultural transmission. Through these maternal registers, children are introduced to the distinctive rhythmic patterns and linguistic aesthetic of Barga culture, preserving family intimacy and care as foundational cultural values [9].

### 7. Discussion: Music as a Cognitive System

The examination of Barga folk songs reveals a sophisticated cognitive system that transcends mere artistic expression to function as a "living archive" of ethnic identity. By synthesizing the dualistic structures of long and short songs, the Barga community has historically blended aesthetic beauty with practical nomadic utility. Long songs (*urtiin duu*), with their expansive melodic ranges and complex ornamentation, serve as a spiritual and aesthetic mirror of the steppe's vastness, embodying the community's refined artistic sensibilities and "elevated spiritual sensibilities". Conversely, short songs (*bogino duu*) provide the rhythmic and functional framework necessary for daily labor, weddings, and communal activities, capturing the pragmatic aspects of the Barga lifestyle.

This musical heritage acts as a repository for the Barga worldview, where thematic categories-ranging from the bravery of military songs to the poignant nostalgia of migration-reinforce social cohesion and collective memory. These songs do not simply describe the Barga life; they constitute the very mechanism through which cultural layers, moral precepts, and philosophical reflections are transmitted across generations. Ultimately, Barga folk music remains a unique and "invaluable component of Mongolian ethnomusicology," providing a comprehensive portrayal of a multifaceted cultural identity that continues to evolve within the nomadic tradition.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Barga folk songs represent a dual expression of ethnic culture, with long and short forms capturing both spiritual sensibilities and the practical rhythms of nomadic life. Their thematic diversity-spanning praise songs, wedding rituals, military valor, and lullabies-offers a rich portrayal of Barga society. These songs are vital for understanding Mongolian ethnomusicology, highlighting the deep cultural layers and historical memory of the Barga people. However, to ensure their preservation and prevent cultural erosion, further field research and systematic digital archiving are urgently needed. By safeguarding these oral traditions, we can protect the unique identity of the Barga people and contribute to preserving Mongolian musical heritage. This work is crucial for maintaining the global value of these traditions, ensuring they remain an invaluable part of the world's cultural legacy.

## References

1. S. Gempil, and N. Delgerkhuu, "Analysis of the long song "Barga gurvan bor"," *Mongolian Journal of Arts and Culture*, vol. 26, no. 50, pp. 280-292, 2025. doi: 10.69561/mjac.v26i50.4438
2. C. Pegg, "Mongolian music, dance, & oral narrative: performing diverse identities," *University of Washington Press*, 2001.
3. T. C. Levin, and V. Süzükei, "Where rivers and mountains sing: Sound, music, and nomadism in Tuva and beyond," *Indiana University Press*, 2006.
4. D. B. Shimkin, "Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm," 1986. doi: 10.2307/25142637
5. J. C. Post, "Ethnomusicology: a contemporary reader," *Routledge*, 2013.
6. A. M. Karlsson, "Rhythm and intonation in Halh Mongolian," *Lund University*, vol. 46, 2005.
7. G. Chahan, and T. Suanmonta, "Analysis of Three styles of Mongolian, in China Long Tune Songs (Doctoral dissertation, Mahasarakham University)," 2024.
8. W. Wang, P. Boonsrianan, and S. Chuangprakhon, "Music Literacy in the Preservation of Inner Mongolian Wedding Folk Songs," *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 104-111, 2025. doi: 10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.13n.1p.104
9. K. G. Hutchins, "Like a lullaby: Song as Herding tool in Rural Mongolia," *Journal of Ethnobiology*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 445-459, 2019. doi: 10.2993/0278-0771-39.3.445.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.