197–213

Łódzkie Studia Etnograficzne • 64 • 2025
ISSN 2450-5544 • https://doi.org/10.12775/LSE.2025.64.11

Dagnosław Demski
d.demski@iaepan.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3977-0294
Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology

Maralmaa Nagaanbuu
Maralmaan@mas.ac.mn
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6553-7843
Mongolian Academy of Sciences
Institute of History and Ethnology

Bunchuk
Tracing the symbol across cultures and centuries

Buńczuk
Ślad symbolu w różnych kulturach i stuleciach

Setting the scene

This study[1] investigates military and ritual emblems found across the Eurasian steppes and Slavic regions – specifically, shafts topped with a ball or spearhead and decorated with horsehair. These include the *tug* and *süld* in Mongolian traditions and the *bunchuk* in the Polish context. Rather than viewing these objects as passive artefacts spread through trade, conquest or cultural borrowing, this research approaches them as active cultural forms re-imagined within distinct socio-political and ritual frameworks.

1 This article was written as part of the Polish–Mongolian project *Cultural Heritage of Mongolia: Contemporary Challenges in Ethnology, Museology, and Tourism (2022–2024).*

Drawing on Roy Wagner's concept of "metaphorical extension" (Wagner 1981; 1986), which challenges the idea of culture as a system of fixed, inherited meanings, we emphasize cultural invention: the creative processes through which meanings are transformed and differences articulated. In this light, objects like the *bunchuk*, *tug* or *süld* are not relics of shared origin or mere indicators of diffusion, but symbolic inventions that reflect how societies express authority, identity and sacred presence.

This paper also brings together two understudied scholarly traditions, the Polish and the Mongolian one, by engaging with their respective academic literatures. Through this comparative lens, it identifies historical moments and symbolic convergences that suggest mutual influence or parallel invention, contributing to a broader understanding of how cultural symbols travel, adapt, and acquire new meanings across Eurasia.

To ground this approach, the study draws on both historical and ethnographic evidence. It explores how these standards have been employed by actors ranging from local communities to imperial powers, and how they continue to serve as markers of collective memory, ritual authority and political legitimacy.

Wagner's theory offers a framework for rethinking symbolic transmission – not merely as geographic diffusion, but as movement through radically different conceptual worlds. While the resemblance between the *bunchuk* and the *tug* might suggest a shared origin, the more important insight lies in how these symbols are reinterpreted within their unique historical and cultural settings. In Mongolia, the *tug* or *süld* remains spiritually potent and integrated into contemporary political and ritual life. In contrast, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Poland saw the *bunchuk* shift from martial implement to ceremonial emblem, embodying historical memory and military prestige.

This concept helps move beyond lineage-based models of transmission. Though physical similarities may imply derivation, the key anthropological question is how such objects are continually reinvented to meet evolving ontological needs. In modern Mongolia, *tugs* remain central to state ceremonies and spiritual practice, despite some now being preserved in museums. Ethnographic work (Humphrey, Laidlaw 2007; Humphrey, Ujeed 2013) confirms the *süld*'s ongoing ritual power. In contemporary Poland, it turn, the *bunchuk* no longer holds ritual significance but has been re-signified as a symbol of national heritage and military commemoration.

Comparative symbolism: the *bunchuk*, *tug* and *süld* Poland: the *bunchuk* as a historical emblem

Despite the vast geographical distance between Poland and Mongolia, which historically limited direct interaction,[2] the emergence of strikingly similar symbols in both

2 Distance between Warsaw and Ulaanbataar is around 8 000 km.

regions prompts us to consider whether convergent cultural logic or indirect transmission might explain these resemblances.

In Poland of today, the *bunchuk* (Polish: *buńczuk)* is viewed as part of the nation's military heritage, representing historical power, martial glory, and war trophies. In Polish military tradition, the *bunchuk* emerges as an emblem of command, visibility and prestige. Initially introduced through contact with Turkic and Tatar military systems, it was appropriated within the framework of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, where it served as a signifier of the hetman's authority.[3] Over time, it evolved from a practical battlefield tool and became more of a ceremonial artefact, a visual condensation of military honour and national glory.

Although Polish historiography lacks a comprehensive study dedicated specifically to the *bunchuk*,[4] several publications address the hetman's insignia and military symbols of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Zdzisław Żygulski, drawing on source-based analysis, suggests a likely Turkish origin for the hetman's emblem (Żygulski 1986: 42). Karol Łopatecki, in turn, while not focusing explicitly on the title of *hetman* for chief commander, provides significant insights into the visual and material culture of command, particularly in the context of the Commonwealth's eastern military campaigns. In particular, he notes that many Polish terms related to military insignia are of Turkish provenance (Łopatecki 2005: 74), citing the examples of *buława* and *buzdygan* (the latter derived from the Turkish *bozdogan*, meaning "baton"). He likewise traces the etymology of *bunchuk* to a Turkish root meaning "mark" or "insignia". Although shaped by diverse cultural influences, the hetman's emblem, according to Łopatecki, ultimately acquired a distinctly local character, symbolizing military authority within the eighteenth-century Commonwealth (Łopatecki 2005: 76).

The evolution of the *bunchuk* reflects broader transformations in military organization. As cavalry-based warfare declined and commanders increasingly travelled by carriage – which was the case especially from the reign of Augustus II onward – the practice of carrying the hetman's sign behind a mounted leader gave way to placing the *bunchuk* in front of the carriage. This shift, both functional and symbolic, signalled the growing prominence of the *bunchuk* as the principal emblem of military command, while earlier insignia gradually receded in significance (Łopatecki 2005: 78).

Functionally, the *bunchuk* served as a prominent visible marker of a commander-in-chief's presence on the battlefield. Its distinctive form, often featuring a white horse tail, ensured visibility amidst the tumult of combat, offering a more conspicuous alternative to conventional banners (Łopatecki 2005: 79). Given that commanders were expected to remain mobile, directing and motivating troops rather

3 The title of a hetman was assigned to a chief commander of the army.

4 Some studies focus on the wider context of Polish-Turkish war (Pajewski 2003).

Fig. 1. *Bunchuk*, seventeenth century (circa 1670–1680 at the latest), Turkey. Wood, horsehair, copper alloy, iron. Height: 236.2 cm; upper section: 95.5 cm. Pauline Monastery at Jasna Góra, Częstochowa, St. Roch Bastion. Photo by J. Kozina (public domain). Acquired from: https://wilanow-palac.pl/pasaz-wiedzy/wota-sobieskich-bunczuk-z-klasztoru-paulinow-na-jasnej-gorze.

than engaging directly in combat, such symbols played a vital role in both identification and the maintenance of morale. From the fifteenth century onward, particularly under the military reforms associated with King Władysław Jagiełło, Polish commanders increasingly operated from the rear of formation to maintain strategic oversight (Łopatecki 2005: 83). The loss of a *bunchuk* in battle was regarded a serious dishonor, as the standard not only signified command authority, but also embodied the moral prestige and symbolic power of its bearer.

Today, while contemporary Polish sources emphasize the historical association of the *bunchuk* with high military office, the symbol has largely lost its former vitality. Though it persists as a military attribute, its role has become primarily ceremonial, typically limited to small units participating in military parades. It also appears primarily in historical reenactments, as well as within the cultural tradition of the Polish Tatars,[5] where it serves as a marker of ethnic identity and historical legacy. In this way the term *bunchuk* has been appropriated in non-military contexts, such as the naming of folk dance groups, reflecting its transformation from an active symbol of military command to a broader emblem of cultural heritage.

Detailed descriptions of the *bunchuk* are found in Polish museum records referencing objects of the Turkish origin. The Ottoman *tug*, also referred to as a *bunchuk*, consisted of a horse's tail attached to a lightweight cylindrical shaft made of soft, hollow wood. A symbolic ornament, typically made of metal, or occasionally a crescent moon was mounted at the top. Below this,

5 It is the name of the Tatar song and dance ensemble in Poland.

the horse's tail, either straight or braided, was fastened and dyed in vibrant colours such as blue, red or black. The junction of the tail and shaft was wrapped in a dyed horse and camel hair, often woven into elaborate patterns. The shaft itself was decorated with intricate oriental designs.

Mongolia: the *süld* as a living force and *tug* as its material expression

Turning to the Mongolian context, we encounter a rich and ancient tapestry of symbolic tradition extending thousands of years into the past. Mongolian sources suggest that even in early periods, dating back over 2 200 years to the founding of the Xiongnu Empire, the peoples of the steppes attributed profound spiritual significance to banners resembling the *bunchuk*. Bronze and rock carvings across Mongolia, some over two millennia old, depict warriors carrying long, hair-tufted standards, which indicates their ritual significance as early as the Xiongnu era (Tseveendorj 2003). These objects were not merely martial insignia, but were deeply embedded in the rituals and belief systems of the time.

Archaeological discoveries in the regions such as Bayankhongor, Khövsgöl and Dornod provinces provide further support for this interpretation. Petroglyphs and bronze items from these areas frequently feature stylized standards resembling the *süld.* While early emblems often incorporated solar and lunar motifs, evidence also attests to the sacred status of white and black banners – symbols of the dual forces such as purity and power. This duality is consistently reflected in Mongolian epic traditions and ritual texts, where white and black *süld* are invoked as embodiments of divine presence and sovereign authority (*The Secret History...* 2006).

In 2000, during research at the Bichigt rock-art site in Bayangovi Soum, Bayankhongor Aimag, the Mongolian-Russian-American Joint Paleolithic Expedition documented a striking depiction of a mounted horseman holding a raised banner (Tseveendorj 2003). This remarkable discovery suggests that, as early as the Bronze Age, banners crafted from horse manes were already in use and imbued with spiritual significance. Such emblems appear to have been closely associated with the protective force of the clan and the veneration of warrior ancestry (Byambasüren, Gantulga 2011: 95), reflecting early expressions of the symbolic and ritual functions later formalized in the Mongolian *süld* tradition.

Over time, this form of reverence evolved, by the thirteenth century culminating in the banner's elevation to a symbol of statehood. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, "In the Year of the Tiger, they gathered at the headwaters of the Onon River, raised the nine-footed white banner, and bestowed the title of Khan upon Chinggis"

(*The Secret History...* 2006). From that moment onward, the banner became an official emblem of the Mongol Empire.

The white banner is distinguished by a tip shaped like a three-pronged fork, while the black banner (Tsevel 1966: 495) is topped with a double-edged spearhead. Scholars interpret these designs as reflecting Mongolian beliefs that associate banners with martial power and the spiritual force necessary for victory in battle (Galdanova 1987: 106; Boldbaatar, Humphrey 2007: 325; Weatherford 2004: 45–46).

With the founding of the Great Mongol Empire in 1206, the banner came to embody a dual role: as *süld*, the spiritual emblem of state authority, and as *tug*, the physical manifestation of that power (Maralmaa 2020). The traditional Great White *Süld* Banner of the unified Mongol Empire emerged as a powerful symbol of national unity, military victory and state honour, integral to the ideological foundations of thirteenth-century Mongol statehood. Venerated across generations, it was preserved well into the early twentieth century, particularly among Inner Mongolian communities and religious circles (Tangad 2013: 105).

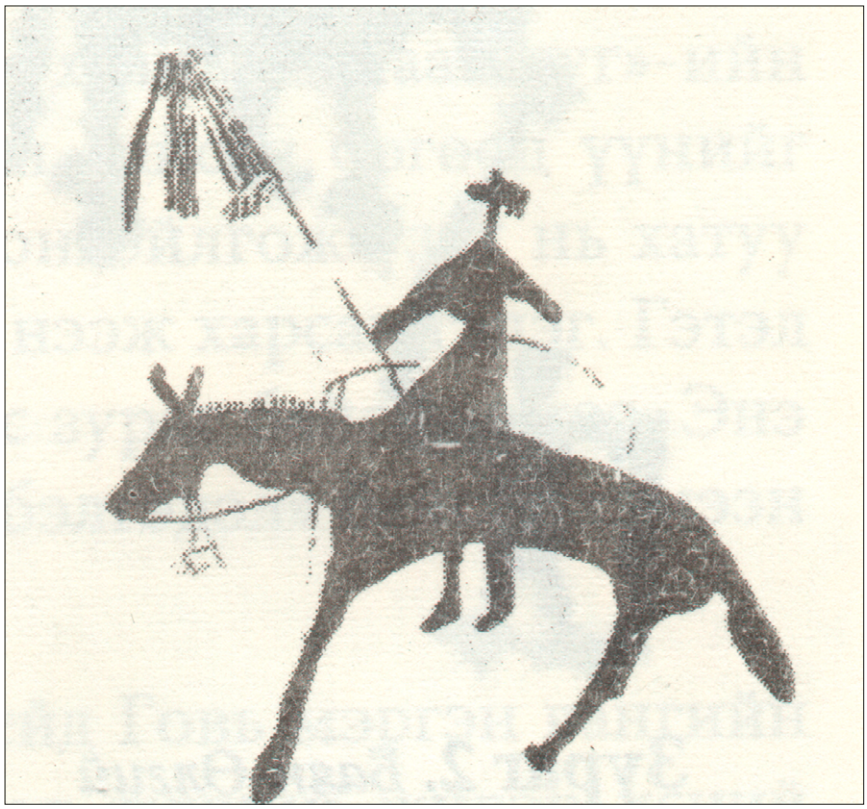

Fig. 2. A mounted horseman holding a raised banner, as seen in the Bichigt petroglyph dated to the Late Bronze Age (Tseveendorj 2003: 7).

Since the era of the empire, the ceremonial Nine-Footed White Banner (*Yusun Khökh Süld*) was raised during critical junctures of national importance: the convening of the Great State Assembly (*Ikh Khuraldai*), the enthronement of a khan, and major public festivals such as Naadam and other seasonal celebrations. In this contexts, the *süld* was invoked to ensure prosperity and cosmic harmony (*The Secret History...* 2006). Such ritual acts affirmed the banner's sacred status and its enduring role as a vessel of ancestral spirit and state legitimacy.

Mongolian white, black or multicoloured banners bear a striking resemblance to the *bunchuk* of Eastern Europe, reflecting a convergence of martial aesthetics and sacred meanings across Eurasia (Maralmaa 2020). However, the *süld* operates within a symbolic register where objects are not merely representations, but are imbued with living spiritual presence. It reflects a worldview on vital forces, the *sür*, that are manifested through relationships among people, society, the state and conceptions of authority.[6] Thus, *sür süld* relates to vitality, *töriin süld* to the emblem, *süld duulal* to national anthem, and *süld ödör* to an auspicious life-giving day.

In Mongolian cosmology, the *süld* is not a metaphor for vitality or ancestral protection – it *is* vitality; it *is* ancestral presence. It embodies the person of the ruler as the living representative of a community. Its appearance in warfare, state ceremonies and contemporary national iconography reflects the enduring vitality of ritual life, in which ontology is not a metaphorically displaced but actively and continuously enacted.

The figure of the *süld* appears frequently in both ethnographic and historical contexts, especially in relation to ritual practices and animal sacrifices. Caroline Humphrey (2013) situates these within broader "spirit cults", examining cases where "spirits of battle standards" are actively venerated.[7] In such contexts, fierce deities often coexist with, and sometimes merge into, ancestral warrior figures and the numinous presences embodied in battle standards or in the spirits of the land.

Material afterlives: museum and visual culture

To ground this discussion in material history, we turn to notable Polish examples of *bunchuks* preserved in museum collections, including trophies from key historical moments such as the Relief of Vienna in 1683. One such item was most probably

6 According to Oyungerel Tangad, Mongolian culture distinguishes at least three main types of life force – *am*, *süld* and *hiimor*. *Am* is vitality in sense of health, while *hiimor* is associated with optimism, success, energy and resolution (Tangad 2013: 111).

7 One such spiritualized battle standard (*tug*) is preserved in the Janghan Temple, lending tangible form to this convergence of religious, ancestral and martial symbolism. The most revered *tugs* in Inner Mongolia are preserved at the Chinggis Khan mausoleum in Ordos (Humphrey, Laidlaw 2007; Humphrey, Ujeed 2013).

donated to the tomb of St. John Cantius by King John III Sobieski on 2 February 1684. Except during the construction of the new church in the late seventeenth century and for much of the nineteenth century, the object has remained at the saint's tomb.

In Poland, the *bunchuk*, when displayed in institutions like a monastery, museum or in commemorative exhibitions, has become a symbol of a mythologized military past. These displays invite viewers not only to observe the artefact, but also to imaginatively engage with the symbolic world it evokes. In this sense, exhibition itself performs a metaphorical shift, transforming a once-functional object into a piece of national military heritage.

From Polish Romantic paintings to Mongolian historical illustrations, artistic renderings of the *bunchuk* and *tug/süld* reveal how visual culture shapes national identity. In Polish art, the standard becomes a visual metaphor for valour, sacrifice and historical endurance. This is especially evident in the works of nineteenth-century painters such as Juliusz Kossak and Józef Brandt, who frequently incorporated the *bunchuk* as a symbolic focal point. In Kossak's painting *Rotmistrz chorągwi pancernej* [Captain of heavy cavalry regiment], for instance, the banner features prominently within an imagined martial tableau, serving not just as a historical detail but as a symbol of heroism and national pride.

Historian Karol Łopatecki highlights another powerful image: *The Capture of the Grand Vizier's Banner*, an engraving by Dutch artist Romeyn de Hooghe (Łopatecki 2005: 74). Widely circulated, the print visually celebrated Polish victories over the Ottoman Empire and inspired later representations of military glory. King John III Sobieski is shown trampling the Ottoman enemy, with two dominant symbols: the hetman's sign raised behind the king and the collapsing Turkish *bunchuk*. Here, the hetman's insignia becomes more than a military emblem; it is transformed into a metaphor for divine favour and national triumph (Łopatecki 2005: 87).

In the course of their battles against the Ottomans, Polish forces often captured *bunchuks* as trophies, which were then displayed in churches associated with victorious knights. These trophies functioned as enduring symbols of military glory and communal pride. The *bunchuk* also influenced martial aesthetics: during campaigns against Turks and Tatars, Polish warriors adorned their sabres with horse-tail pendants crafted in gold, silver or gilt brass, and sometimes affixed similar ornaments to their horses' chests. Among these, the white horse-tail held particular prestige, signifying exceptional honour and elevated status.

Mongolian visual traditions, such as those found in *Mongolyn Nuuts Tovchoo* (*The Secret History of the Mongols*) and *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*), portray the *süld* not simply as a historical or political emblem, but as a metaphysical principle that embodies cosmic order and the philosophical essence of human existence. These images serve not only as records but as creative expressions that shape and reinforce the viewer's moral and cosmological worldview.

Fig. 3. Mongolian historical artworks, such as *The Hunt of Khubilai Khan* and the *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh* by Rashid al-Din, depict banners that closely resemble the *bunchuk*.

A notable example is the painting *The Hunt of Khubilai Khan*, originally housed in Beijing's Palace Museum (*The Palace Museum...* 2001), whose reproductions have become central to the study of Mongolian iconography. Likewise, the *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh*, compiled during the Yuan and Ilkhanate periods in the fourteenth century, offers richly illustrated depictions of banners in both ceremonial and military contexts. One particular image shows a standard structurally resembling the Eastern European *bunchuk*, suggesting a visual convergence – and possible transmission – of symbolic forms across Eurasia following the Mongol conquests initiated by Chinggis Khan.

From the early thirteenth century onward, the White Banner (*tsagaan tug*) and the Black Banner (*khara tug*) assumed central roles in Mongolian social, political and religious life. The White Banner symbolized purity, peace and unity, while the Black Banner represented martial valour, courage and protective strength. Miniature paintings from the era of the Great Mongol Empire depict rulers accompanied by banners and *sülds*, underscoring their vital role in statecraft and ceremonial life, as documented by multiple visual and textual sources.

This symbolism was deeply intertwined with the destiny of the Great Mongol Empire. Although after the middle of the sixteenth century the banners ceased to function as official state standards, they remained potent symbols of Mongolia's imperial legacy. Among both commoners and the aristocracy, small-scale rituals and court ceremonies continued. This tradition began to wane only after Mongolia's declaration of independence in 1911.

The most significant disruption occurred during the socialist era, particularly from the 1930s onward, when Soviet-influenced policies suppressed traditional customs and spiritual practices such as *süld* worship. These efforts to enforce atheistic ideology led to the decline, often the outright cessation, of public *süld* rituals. Some practices were driven underground; others disappeared entirely.

Despite these threats, key elements of this heritage were preserved thanks to the efforts of scholars from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and other cultural institutions. Figures such as Byambyn Renchin and Tsendiin Damdinsüren played pivotal roles in collecting oral testimonies, safeguarding ritual knowledge, and relocating physical artifacts from private homes and monasteries to museums, thereby protecting them from destruction.

One of the most significant preserved artefacts was the Chinggis White Süld, kept until 1919 in a small, highly restricted shrine at Shankh Monastery (Baruun Khüree) in Kharkhorin, Övörkhangai province. This banner, characterized by its three-pronged finial and concealed beneath dense silk (*khadag yandaar*), was guarded with great reverence. According to oral tradition, the shrine was dismantled in the 1930s by Russian soldiers, who transported the *süld* on a cart with its silk covering intact. In addition to the Shankh *süld*, the Iljigen White Süld from Iljigen, Uvs province, was also preserved under similar circumstances. This artefact now resides in the National Museum of History and has been transferred to the Chinggis Khaan Museum, as confirmed by the hereditary banner keeper.

Historian Dendev documents another example near Erdene Zuu Monastery, where a white-haired banner, wrapped in a *khadag yandaar* and bound by iron chains, was protected by monks. Three prongs extended from the silk covering, and a Chinggis military drum was placed nearby. Monks performed rituals and recited prayers in veneration of the banner, suggesting that over time, monastic custodians replaced hereditary keepers – a shift likely influenced by the suppression of shamanistic and Tengriist practitioners during the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Outer Mongolia.

Although relocating *süld* artefacts into museums ensured their physical preservation, it interrupted their ritual life. Nonetheless, ethnographers and researchers were able to collect extensive oral histories and document ritual practices, preserving a body of intangible cultural knowledge. In many communities, this tradition continued through oral transmission, maintaining a living link to ancestral spirituality

despite political constraints. These acts of preservation helped form a cultural bridge between past and present, ensuring the survival of key elements of Mongolian heritage. They laid the foundation for the revival of *süld* rituals and banners in state ceremonies following the democratic revolution of the 1990s.

After the adoption of a new democratic constitution in 1992, the ceremonial and spiritual status of the *süld* was officially restored. Article 12, Clause 4 of the Constitution states: "The traditional Great White Banner of the unified Mongol state shall be the ceremonial symbol of the Mongolian State and shall be recognized as the state banner of Mongolia. It shall be crafted from the mane and tail hair, not less than 80 cm in length, of white stallions specially selected from the herds of all provinces" (Byambasüren, Gantulga 2011: 95).

This legal recognition reflects a broader societal desire to reconnect with traditional expressions of statehood, identity and spirituality.

The Nine-Footed Great White Süld now stands as a symbol of sanctity, prosperity, eternal continuity and national unity. A sacred fire affixed to the top of the banner signifies reverence and spiritual illumination. While *süld* worship had largely declined in Outer Mongolia by the 1960s, certain traditions persisted in Inner Mongolia. Drawing upon oral histories, ethnographic records and surviving iconography, the banner was reconstructed in the post-socialist era using traditional forms and symbols.

Historically, the primary martial and spiritual standard was the Four-Footed Black Süld, carried by Mongol warriors into battle. Topped with a double-edged steel spearhead and a star symbolizing eternal victory, it was traditionally made from the coarse black hair of war horses and designed to evoke awe and fear. During the Manchu period (from the seventeenth to early twentieth century), leaders of the tribes (Khotgoid, Oirats and Öölds) each possessed and venerated black banners in their resistance against foreign domination. After their defeats, the tradition was largely lost or suppressed, remaining dormant until its revival in 1992.

This revival was marked by a major ceremonial event held on 7 June 2011 at Tsonjin Boldog (near the site traditionally associated with Chinggis Khan's birthplace). The ceremony was attended by President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj and senior Ministry of Defense officials, who served as standard-bearers of the Black Süld and were appointed its guardians.

Reconstructing the Black Süld required significant symbolic and material investment: 180 grams of pure gold and 300 grams of sterling silver were allocated by the State Treasury. The foundation stone was sourced from Karakorum, and birch wood for the pole was gathered from Chinggis Khan's birthplace, reinforcing the banner's spiritual and historical connection to Mongolia's sacred geography.

Today, the *süld* functions as both a revered cultural relic and a living national symbol. The Mongolian state observes a formal schedule of rituals that blend pre-modern

ceremonial traditions with contemporary expressions of identity. This ritual reintegration affirms the enduring power of the *süld* as a medium through which the Mongolian people assert continuity, sovereignty and spiritual legitimacy.

From the 1930s to the 1990s, state policy under the socialist regime actively rejected traditional religious beliefs and national symbols. As a result, the worship of banners and related ceremonial practices was officially suspended (Dashnyam 2002). Although the Nine-Footed White Banner was no longer used in state contexts during this period, several physical representations of it were preserved in museums and cultural institutions.

Following the adoption of the new Constitution in 1992 and broader democratic reforms, the Nine-Footed White Banner was legally restored as the official ceremonial symbol of the Mongolian state. It was once again enshrined in the State Palace, marking its return not only as a national emblem but also as a vital part of state ritual life.

Traditionally, the White Banner is crafted from the manes of white horses selected from herds across all Mongolian provinces. It symbolizes peace, unity and the enduring strength of national harmony. The white colour connotes purity, sacred customs and ancestral blessings, establishing the banner as the supreme emblem of the state.

Fig. 4. Black Banner, thirteenth century. Collection of the National Museum of Mongolian History, Ulaanbataar. Photo by Maralmaa N. (2018).

Fig. 5. White Banner, thirteenth century. Collection of the National Museum of Mongolian History. Photo by Maralmaa N. (2018).

Fig. 6. Black Banner, seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Collection of the National Museum of Mongolian History. Photo by Maralmaa N. (2018).

In contrast, the Black Banner, made from the coarse manes of black horses, signifies martial valour, protective power and spiritual force. Its colour reflects shamanistic beliefs, representing the power to repel evil and danger. This symbolism is deeply rooted in Mongolia's traditional religion and customs.

In 1992, the Ministry of Defense also revived the Black Banner, incorporating it into official ceremonies and rituals – a significant milestone in the revitalization of Mongolia's cultural and spiritual heritage. While the White Banner serves as the ancestral emblem of the state, reinforcing peace and unity, the Black Banner embodies pre-Buddhist shamanistic traditions and protective power. Together, these two banners represent an inseparable part of Mongolia's historical, cultural and religious identity, forming a foundational element of state ceremonial life.

Linguistic trajectories

The use of the term "flag" or "standard" as both a physical emblem and a symbolic title or military rank is a cross-cultural phenomenon in both Eastern and Western traditions. In many languages, the same word refers both to the banner itself and to the individual who bears it. To explore these linguistic and symbolic overlaps, this section begins with Polish sources.

In Polish, the emblem of power is known as *bunchuk* (Polish: *buńczuk*) – a term with layered meanings that reflect its evolution from a foreign military insignia to a symbol of national heritage. Though it originated in martial traditions, its significance expanded to evoke cultural memory and historical resonance. It can refer to a physical object, such as a tuft of horsehair once attached to armor or a lance, or symbolically, to military prestige and tradition.

While now largely obsolete in everyday speech, *bunchuk* appears in nineteenth-century encyclopedias. According to Aleksander Brückner's *Etymological Dictionary of the Polish Language* (1927), the word *buńczuk* derives from Turkish *buncuk*,[8] meaning "mark", referencing horse tails mounted on shafts to denote rank. The term likely entered Polish via Ruthenia (Little Russia). Related Polish adjectives *buńczuczny*,[9] *buńdiuczny*, describing someone bold, combative or boastful, and the verb *buńdziuczyć* evolved from it.

The etymological relationship between *bunchuk* and the Mongolian *tug* is complex. Scholars advocating for the Altaic language family (Starostin, Dybo, Mudrak 2003)

8 Starostin lists the word *bōnčok* as a proto-Turkic derivation, meaning small beads or balls as decorations, and gives examples of versions of this word in Caucasian and Turkic languages: in Old Turkic *monču*q, but for example in Turkish – *bonžuk*, and in Gagauz – *bonžuq*. More information in: Starostin, Dybo, Mudrak (2003).

9 See also the painting *Buńczuczny* [*Bunchuk*-Bearer] by Józef Brandt (1885), www.pinakoteka.zascianek.pl/Brandt/Images/Bunczuczny.jpg.

identify two contact zones, one being the Turko-Mongolian one, which led to extensive lexical borrowing. They argue that shared terms like *tug/tuğ* may result from both loanwords and a hypothesized common ancestor of Turkic and Mongolic languages.

A diachronic comparative study tracing the term across Turkic and Slavic languages reveals how its form and meaning shifted with socio-political contexts. *Bunchuk* appears in various languages: Ukrainian (*бунчук*), Belarusian (*бунчук*), Slovak (*bunčuk*), Russian, and Crimean Tatar (*bunchug*), all denoting a horsehair-adorned staff symbolizing authority, especially from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. In English, the transliteration *bunchuk* is occasionally used.

In early Turkic usage, *tuğ* (or *tuy*) referred to a standard made from horse or yak tails affixed to a pole – an object associated with military prestige, spiritual force and tribal identity (Clauson 1972). These standards were not merely practical tools of coordination but carriers of spiritual legitimacy.

Zygmunt Gloger (1978: 215), a Polish encyclopaedist, proposed an alternate origin, tracing *bunchuk* to the Persian *mendzhuk*, meaning "a lance with a golden knob", and the term *bendzhuk* in the Multan-Vlach language. According to him, these variants gradually merged into *bunchuk* and spread through Eastern Europe.

In Mongolian, a clear distinction exists between *tug* and *süld*. While *tug* denotes the physical standard or flag, *süld* refers to its spiritual essence or soul. The modern Mongolian *tug* – borrowed from Old Turkic *tuğ* – refers to both secular flags and sacred military standards. Today, *tug* retains dual significance: it functions as both a national symbol in state ceremonies and a sacred object in pre-Buddhist rituals, reflecting its enduring political and spiritual relevance.

Conclusion: from transmission to invention

This study has traced the symbolic trajectories of the *bunchuk*, *tug* and *süld*. Though their visual similarities may suggest a shared origin, their meanings, functions and cultural roles diverge sharply. In Poland, the *bunchuk* survives primarily as a symbol of historical memory. In contrast, in Mongolia, the *tug* and *süld* continue to function as living sacred objects.

Cultural symbols such as these do not simply migrate; they are continually re-imagined and reconstituted. What may appear as continuity, as Wagner argues, often reflects acts of symbolic innovation. The *bunchuk* and *süld* demonstrate that symbols shape not only what societies remember, but also how they conceive of themselves in the present.

The *tug*, associated with military victories, operates as both a marker of historical achievement and spiritual triumph. As Humphrey notes, these associations are central to how Mongolians navigate questions of history, identity and sovereignty.

The *tug* (battle standard) is the primary material form of the *süld*, serving as a sacred rallying point and emblem of political order. In pre-Buddhist times, it signified military strength and ancestral authority. Under Buddhism, it was absorbed into pantheons as a fierce protector deity (Humphrey, Ujeed 2013). Under modern regimes – both the Communist and the post-socialist ones – *süld* rituals were suppressed, transformed, and ultimately reasserted as expressions of ethnic and cultural identity.

The *süld* is not merely a "spirit" in the Western sense but a dynamic spiritual force linking life and afterlife, the individual and the collective, the human and the divine. It embodies invincibility, honour and sacred charisma, often associated with leadership and sovereignty.

Comparing these emblems as symbolic life-forces reveals key contrasts. The *bunchuk* is closely tied to martial masculinity, command, and historical authority; its significance largely confined to the past. The *süld*, by contrast, is more expansive and inclusive. It can be borne by warriors, rulers, hunters, wrestlers, and even women. It operates within both ritual and political spheres, embodying vitality and spirit. The absence of comparable ritual usage in Poland highlights the divergent symbolic evolutions of these emblems.

Ultimately, the story of the *bunchuk* and *süld* illustrates more than a shared visual lineage; it reveals how cultures continually reinvent symbols to serve distinct values and needs. As Wagner emphasizes, cultural transmission is never passive but a creative, interpretive act. Each adoption redefines what a symbol is and does. These emblems are not static relics but metaphors in motion –instruments through which societies construct, contest and express collective identity. This study contributes to anthropological theory by showing how symbolic forms generate ontological novelty, reshaping cosmologies, political imaginaries, and historical consciousness.

Bibliography

Boldbaatar, J., Humphrey, C. (2007). The process of creation of national symbols and their adoption in the 1992 Constitution of Mongolia. *Inner Asia*, 9(2), 317–345.

Brückner, A. (1927). *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*. Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza.

Byambasüren, G., Gantulga, T. (eds.) (2011). *Mongol töriin üüsel, yoslol khündetgel, beleg temdeg ba ulamjlal* [The origin, ceremonies, symbols, reverence, and traditions of the Mongolian State]. Ulaanbaatar: Admon.

Clauson, G. (1972). *An etymological dictionary of pre-13th century Turkish*. London: Oxford University Press.

Dashnyam, G. (2002). Chingisiin ongonyg ekh nutagt n' zalakh gesen negen oroldlogo [An attempt to bring Genghis Khan's shrine back to his homeland]. In: Ch. Dalai (ed.), *Chingis khaany mendelsnii 840 jiliin oid zoriulsan erdem shinjilgeenii khurlin iltgelüüdiin emkhetgel* [Proceedings of the academic conference dedicated to the 840th anniversary of the birth of Genghis Khan] (pp. 10–23). Ulaanbaatar: Orbis.

Erdenesüren, N. (2011, 08 June). Mongol ulsyn yesön khölt tsagaan tugiig dakhin manduulsan tüükh [The History of rehoisting the nine-footed white banner of the Mongolian State]. *Mongolyn Ünen (daily newspaper)*, 3(21850).

Galdanowa, G.R. (1987). *Dolamaistkie vierovania Buriat* [Pre-lamaists beliefs of Buryats]. Novosibirsk: Nauka Novosibirsk.

Gloger, Z. (1978) [1900–1903]. Entry: "buńczuk". In: *Encyklopedia staropolska ilustrowana.* Vol. 1 (p. 215). Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.

Humphrey, C., Laidlaw, J. (2007). Sacrifice and ritualization. In: E. Kyriakidis (ed.), *The Archaeology of ritual* (pp. 255–276). Los Angeles: Costen Institute.

Humphrey, C., Ujeed, H. (2013). *A monastery in time. The making of Mongolian Buddhism*. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press. DOI: //https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226032061.001.000.

Łopatecki, K. (2005). Znak hetmański: geneza, funkcje, symbolika. *Studia i materiały do historii wojskowości*, 42, 59–93.

Maralmaa, N. (2020). Mongol ulsyn töriin süld: ulamjlal, shinechlel (XX zuund) [The state emblem of Mongolia: tradition and transformation in the 20th century]. In: T. Khökhbaatar, F. Hiroshi, S. Chuluun (eds.), *The Mongolian world in the 20th century: Retrospective reflections, proceedings of the Mongolian Studies Association Asian Conference in Tokyo* (pp. 159–168). Ulaanbaatar: Admon.

Pajewski, J. (2003). *Buńczuk i koncerz. Z dziejów wojen polsko-tureckich*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.

Starostin, S., Dybo, A., Mudrak, O. (2003). Entry: "*bōnčok". *Etymological dictionary of the Altaic languages*. Leiden–New York–Köln: E.J. Brill.

Tangad, O. (2013). *Scheda po Czyngis Chanie. Demokracja po mongolsku*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio.

The Palace Museum. The complete collection of treasures of the Palace Museum: Paintings of the Yuan Dynasty (2001). Hong Kong: Commercial Press.

The Secret History of the Mongols (2006). Sh. Choimaa, A. Tsanjid (eds.), Mongolian Historical Sources Series 1. Ulaanbaatar: Admon.

Tseveendorj, D. (2003). Bayanligiin khadny zarim zurguud [Some rock images of Bayanlig]. *Khar Süld*, 1(2), 7–12.

Tsevel, Y. (1966). *Mongol khelnii tovch tailbar toli* [Concise explanatory dictionary of the Mongolian language]. Ulaanbaatar: Ulsyn khevleliin gazar.

Wagner, R. (1981). *The invention of culture: Revised and expanded edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wagner, R. (1986). *Symbols that stand for themselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Weatherford, J. (2004). *Genghis Khan and the making of the modern world*. New York: Crown.

Żygulski, Z. (1986). *Broń wschodnia. Turcja, Persja, Indie, Japonia*. Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza.

Żygulski, Z. (1978). Trofea wiedeńskie. *Studia Wilanowskie*, 3–4, 109–114.

Online sources

Tatarski Zespół Taneczno-Wokalny Bończuk: bunczuk.pl/.

www.pinakoteka.zascianek.pl/Brandt/Images/Bunczuczny.jpg

Summary

The article offers a comparative study of the *bunchuk* and *tug/süld* – symbolic objects that, despite their formal similarities, underwent complex processes of diffusion across Eurasia. Originating from the nomadic traditions of Central and Eastern Asia, these symbols were later adapted into military cultures of Eastern Europe, highlighting the significance of long-term cultural transmission. The study traces their evolution, from sacred banners imbued with ancestral and religious meanings in Mongolia to military insignia and symbols of national memory in Poland. The authors emphasize the role of intermediaries, such as the Tatars and Turks, in the spread of these symbols, while also examining local processes of semantic transformation and reappropriation of meanings. The article explores the dynamic relationships between material objects, authority, and collective memory, underscoring how symbolic objects mediate between ritual, political power, and the formation of identity.

Keywords: *bunchuk*, *tug*, *süld*, cultural transmission, military emblems, state ritual, Poland, Mongolia

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi porównanie buńczuka i tugu/süldu – symbolicznych obiektów, które pomimo swego podobieństwa formalnego przeszły złożone procesy adaptacyjne w Eurazji. Wywodzące się z tradycji koczowniczych Azji Środkowej i Wschodniej, symbole te zostały adoptowane w wojskowych kulturach Europy Wschodniej, dowodząc znaczenia procesów przekazu kulturowego. Przeanalizowane są zmiany ich funkcji, od świętych sztandarów w Mongolii przez insygnia władzy w Polsce po symbole pamięci narodowej. Autorzy zwracają uwagę na rolę pośredników, jak Tatarzy i Turcy, w przenoszeniu symboli oraz lokalne procesy ich reinterpretacji. Artykuł bada relacje między obiektami materialnymi, władzą i pamięcią zbiorową, podkreślając ich rolę w kształtowaniu tożsamości i dziedzictwa.

Słowa kluczowe: buńczuk, *tug*, *süld*, transmisja kulturowa, emblematy wojskowe, rytuał państwowy, Polska, Mongolia

Translated by Authors