

APPLIQUÉ ARTISTIC TRADITION AND THE WAR GOD BEGTSE'S SIGNIFICANCE IN MONGOLIA

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Fig. 1 Jügdür (fl. late 19th–early 20th century); *Begtse*; Yekhe Khüriye, Mongolia; early 20th century; appliqué and embroidered thangka; 88 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 69 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (224 × 177 cm); Bogd Khan Palace Museum, Ulaanbaatar

BEGTSE MONUMENTAL APPLIQUÉ

Yekhe Khüriye, Mongolia
late 19th–early 20th century

SUMMARY

For thousands of years, Central Asian nomads have sewn fabrics together to create carpets, garments, and textile images. Colossal appliqué tapestries are hung on mountain sides and exterior monastery walls during festivals. Art historian Uranchimeg Tsultem introduces Mongolian ancient appliqué traditions with the image of the protector and god of war Begtse created by the renowned artist Jügdür and a team of women artisans. Begtse is a special protector for the Mongols.

This thangka of Begtse (also known as Jamsran) is a work by Jügdür (late 19th–early 20th century), a prominent artist of Yekhe Khüriye.¹ That city, now called Ulaanbaatar and currently Mongolia’s capital, was the main seat of the ruling Jibzundamba reincarnations (Khutugtus). It was also an important cultural center and a base for many eminent artists. Jügdür was in the Zoogai *aimag* of Yekhe Khüriye’s thirty *aimags* (monastic units).² The Eighth Jibzundamba Bogd Gegeen (1869–1924) commissioned Jügdür to paint a new map of Yekhe Khüriye; several other images by Jügdür are also extant, including a set of *Three Deities of Longevity* and some drawings.

Begtse is a popular worldly protector deity in Tibet and Mongolia. Practices and texts including this protector date to the eleventh century in Tibet.³ Images of Begtse are especially widespread in Mongolia. Begtse’s name means “hidden coat of mail”; he is also known by the name Jamsran (from Tibetan Jamsing), meaning “brother and sister.” As a worldly protector, he is worshipped as residing within this realm and occupies the position of war god.⁴ He resides in his Marutse cemetery abode in the northeast and is surrounded by a group of wrathful deities, known as “butchers who wield swords,” who are often depicted in Begtse images, as evidenced in a contemporaneous thangka from Yekhe Khüriye (fig. 2). Begtse rules as lord over demons and spirits, and vanquishes all the enemies and obstacles that keep devotees away from enlightenment.



Fig. 2 Gendendamba (late 19th–early 20th century); *Begtse (Jamsran)*; Mongolia; late 19th century; colors on cotton; 60¼ × 42½ in. (153 × 108 cm); The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar

As one of ten protector deities, Begtse manifests in a wrathful form and stands on a sun disc. With two hands and one face, garbed in armor, he sports a golden mirror on his chest that displays the Sanskrit seed syllable *bram* for recitation of his mantras and prayers; he wears a garland made of fifty freshly severed human heads and a crown

with five skulls, which represent the five defilements on the path to liberation. He tramples the corpse of a horse with his right foot and the corpse of a human with his left foot. His hands hold attributes: a sword with a handle in a shape of a black scorpion in his right hand, and the heart and kidneys of enemies of the faith in his left hand. He also clutches a bow and arrow, a trident, and a banner in the bend of his left elbow. As is typical for Mongolian appliqué thangkas, jewels, such as coral beads, are used extensively in this thangka. In the textual description, Begtse is standing atop a copper mountain that emerges from the “lake formed by the blood of men and horses”;⁵ here he is surrounded by the majestic flames dominating the entire composition.

Above Begtse, two teachers—the First Jibzundamba Zanabazar (1635–1723) and Tsongkhapa (1357–1419)—are depicted in the two corners of the top register, alluding to the importance of the Geluk tradition’s teachings and the Jibzundambas in Mongolia in general, and for this production in particular, as it was most certainly made under the patronage of the Bogd Gegeen (who ruled as Bogd Khan 1911–1924). This Begtse also has attendants on both sides: to his right is his son, the Red Master of Life, holding a spear and a noose with a human corpse, and riding a gray wolf;⁶ to Begtse’s left is his sister and consort Rigpai Lhamo, or Goddess of Life, whose head is red and body is blue, and who holds a sword and a ritual dagger (*purba*) in her hands and rides a bear biting into a human corpse. There are auspicious symbols, such as jewels and elephant tusks symmetrically distributed on both sides of a plate with offerings of the Five Senses to Begtse.

APPLIQUÉ THANGKA TRADITION AND PRODUCTION

The technique of appliqué was held in special favor in Mongolia, and it has remained a favorite traditional medium used by nomadic artists and craftspeople since early times. Carpets and rugs, handmade with felt and decorated with appliqué and embroidery,

were used by nomads in their portable dwellings (known as yurts), and some extant early examples date to Xiongnu nomads (third century bce–first century CE).⁷ During the Mongol imperial period, silk and appliqué were also used in making lavish tapestries, royal garments (fig. 3), imperial portraits, and Buddhist images, as evidenced in a splendid Vajrabhairava thangka and in recent archeological findings. In Buddhist monasteries in Inner Asia, appliqué thangkas were often made in various sizes, and remarkable examples of colossal appliqué thangkas still exist in Himalayan art.



Fig. 3 Detail of a nobleman's robe; Delgerkhaan soum, Khentii Province, Mongolia; Mongol Imperial period, 14th century; appliqué, embroidery, silk, cotton; dimensions unknown; National Museum of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar

A team of artists, including women, were involved in the production of these monumental thangka scrolls. As Yekhe Khüriye artists reminisce,⁸ Jügdür was also among the artists who produced other appliqué thangkas, such as a colossal *Thirty-Five Buddhas of Confession*, one of the most ambitious projects of Yekhe Khüriye, given its grandiose dimensions (fig. 4).⁹ The production of these monumental appliqué images typically involved a team led by a master artist.¹⁰ The master artist, usually a male, created the drawing based on the system of proportions and iconographic details; his team, often including women, would cut Chinese silks and brocade pieces into shapes, then render them based on the drawing and stitch them to create the composition. Artists fastened gold-wrapped horsehair to the appliqué with small stitches (known as gold couching) to create the details.



Fig. 4 Chimed, Gendendamba, Jügdür, and Khasgombo (all active early 20th-century Mongolia); *Thirty-Five Buddhas of Confession*; Mongolia; ca. 1914; appliqué, embroidery; 6 ft. 4¾ in. × 16 ft. 2 in. (1.95 × 12.5 m); The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar

In Mongolia, appliqué thangkas were lavishly encrusted with jewels, such as seed pearls, turquoise pieces, and coral beads (fig. 5).¹¹ In Mongolia, the medium of appliqué was used most exclusively for monumental thangkas, and as this image of Begtse demonstrates, the artists kept the compositions simple (fig. 6), with the main deity dominating the space and the top and bottom registers either absent or kept at minimum scale. Colossal appliqué tapestries were often unfolded outdoors and hung

on mountain sides and exterior monastery walls (fig. 7) during important Buddhist rituals (fig. 8) and celebrations attended by the entire community, such as the Lunar New Year, the Great Prayer Festival, and the *tsam* masked dance ritual.



Fig. 5 Pelden Lhamo; Mongolia; late 17th century; appliqué, embroidery, jewel insertions; 54³/₄ × 46-7/8 in. (139 × 119 cm); The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar



Fig. 6 Tsend, Tavkhai Bor, Danjin, Baldangombo, and Khasgombo; Vajrapani; Mongolia; late 19th century; appliqué, embroidery; 47 ft. 7 in. × 36 ft. 9 in. (14.5 × 11.2 m); The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar



Fig. 7 Appliqué Cloth Thangka of Maitreya, based on sketch of Sonam Peljor; Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet; 1437–1439; colored silk embroidered on silk; 73 ft. 10 in. × 73 ft. 10 in. (22.5 × 22.5 m); image after Henss 2014, fig. 727



Fig. 8 D. Damdinsüren (1909–1984); *Ikh Khüree Tsam*; Mongolia: 1966; colors on cotton; 31¹/₂ × 47¹/₄ in. (80 × 120 cm); The Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar

LOCATION AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEGTSE IN YEKHE KHÜRIYE

In Yekhe Khüriye, monumental thangkas, such as this *Begtse*, hung in the Jibzundamba's Batu-Tsagan Assembly Hall (Tsogchin Dugang), and other temples. According to the Mongolian art historian Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem, the *Begtse* examined here was in Kalachakra Temple within the Yellow Palace, the central compound of the main temples in Yekhe Khüriye.¹² Regular rituals for *Begtse* were conducted monthly here and at the symbolic *ger* (yurt) known as Baruun Örgöö, raised by Abatai Khan (1554–1588) (fig 9).¹³ Baruun Örgöö was a large yurt, uninhabited but of a great ritual significance for the descendants of Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227) (an ancestry known as the “golden kinship”), who included Zanabazar's family of Tüshiyetü Khan, Abatai's great-grandson. Initially kept at Erdeni Juu Monastery, founded by Abatai Khan in 1586, this *ger* became part of Yekhe Khüriye, where it was maintained as a sanctuary to worship the ancestors and maintain the fire for the Mongol people day and night, overseen by a group of designated monks.¹⁴ These monks, who were themselves part of golden kinship, were appointed by Tüshiyetü Khan to conduct the rituals of *Begtse* three times every month in accordance with other rituals to *Begtse* simultaneously performed at the Jibzundamba's Assembly Hall in the Yellow Palace.

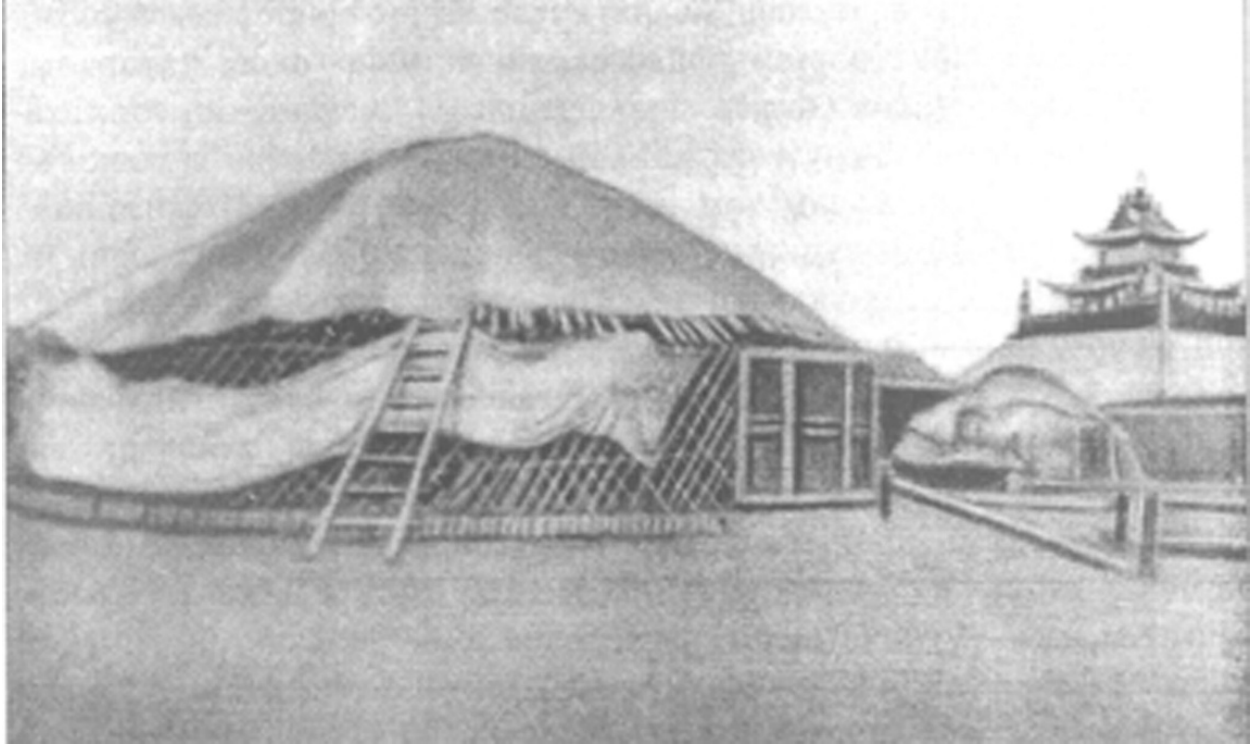


Fig. 9 Aleksei Pozdneev (Russian, 1851–1920); Baruun Örgöö, Abatai Khan's Yurt in Yekhe Khüriye; late 19th century; photograph; dimensions unknown

Such devotion to Begtse's worship in Yekhe Khüriye went back to the Second Jibzundamba (1724–1757). Believed to be a special protector for the Mongols, the Second Jibzundamba, the legend goes, was miraculously saved from lightning by Jamsran, who showed himself to the reincarnation from the Baruun Örgöö.¹⁵ Even the first Mongolian revolutionaries, who stood up to fight for Mongolia's independence from the Qing Empire in 1911, came to receive blessings from Jamsran at Baruun Örgöö. In 1912, shortly after Mongolia became independent, the Bogd Khan and the Mongol nobles performed another special ritual to Begtse, vowing their service to the newly independent state before an image of Jamsran. One wonders if this monumental appliqué thangka could be that special image of Begtse.¹⁶

FOOTNOTES

¹ See also Zara Fleming and J.Lkhagvademchig Shastri, eds., *Mongolian Buddhist Art: Masterpieces from the Museums of Mongolia, Vol. 1, Thangkas, Appliqués and Embroideries, Part 2* (Chicago: Serindia, 2011).

² The word *aimag* denotes two things: (1) a province in Mongolia, and there are twenty-one aimags in modern-day Mongolia; and (2) Geluk monasteries in Mongolia organize their monks into units called *aimags*, which often follow a model of Tibetan regional houses *khangtsen* (khang tsan).

³ Amy Heller's research has shown that Begtse first appears in eleventh-century Tibetan textual sources. He was also the personal protector of the Third Dalai Lama (1543–1588) and the guardian, together with Palden Lhamo, of Chokhorgyel Monastery, the main seat of the Second Dalai Lama (1475–1542). Amy Heller, "Early Textual Sources for the Cult of Beg-ce," in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Fourth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Schloss Hohenkammer, Munich 1985*, ed. Helga Uebach and Jampa L. Panglung (Munich: Kommission für Zentralasiatische Studien Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1988), 185–95; also Patricia Berger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, eds., *Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan*, Exhibition catalog (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 244.

⁴ René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

⁵ René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 90.

⁶ Patricia Berger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, eds., *Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan*, Exhibition catalog (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 246.

⁷ There were several steppe empires prior to the rise of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The Xiongnu, also known as Huns, established the earliest steppe empire in the territory of modern-day Mongolia.

⁸ D. Dariima, *Dursgakhyn Buyantai Burkhan Zuraach* [The Monk Artist of Praiseworthy Memory] (Ulaanbaatar: BIT, 2003), 91.

⁹ One-fourth of this colossal appliqué thangka tapestry made for the Batu-Tsagan Assembly Hall in Yekhe Khüriye is displayed in the Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum.

¹⁰ In case of *Thirty-Five Buddhas of Confession*, which dates to 1914, head artists included Erdeni umzad (Tib. *dbu mdzad*, *chant master*), Chimed, Gendendamba, Jügdür, and Khasgombo. See Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 138.

¹¹ Yekhe Khüriye's abbot Agwang Khayidub (1779–1838) mentions many artworks of his time in the city's temples. See Ngag dbang mkhas grub (Agwang Khayidub), "Ri Bo Dge Rgyas Dga' Ldan Bshad Sdrub Gling Gi Skor Tshad," in *The Collected Works of Nag-Dban-Mkhas-Grub, Kyai-Rdor Mkhan-Po of Urga: Reproduced under the Instructions of the Ven. Gliñ Rin-Po-Che from a Set of MSS. and Xylographic Prints from the Urga Blocks*, ed. Nag-dban-mkhas-grub, vol. 5 (Ladakh: S. W. Tashigangpa, 1972-74), vol. 5, fols. 589–618.

¹² See discussion in Patricia Berger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, eds., *Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan*, Exhibition catalog (London and New York: Thames and

Hudson, 1995), 246. ¹³ The Russian scholar Aleksei Pozdneev visited Baruun Örgöö during his trips to Yekhe Khüriye in 1877 and in 1892. He writes about the impressive size of this yurt, which, he maintains, could easily hold three hundred people. Aleksei M. Pozdneev, *Mongolia and the Mongols*, trans. William H. Dougherty, Reprint, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1896-98) 1977, 91–92.

¹⁴ O. Pürev, *Mongolyn uls töriin töv* [Mongolian political center] (Ulaanbaatar: Mana, 1994), 21.

¹⁵ Aleksei M. Pozdneev, *Mongolia and the Mongols*, trans. William H. Dougherty, Reprint, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1896-98) 1977, 91–92.

¹⁶ See A. Ochir and B. Enkhtüvshin, eds., *Mongol Ulsyn Tüükh* [History of Mongolia], 5 vols. (Ulaanbaatar: Academy of Sciences, 2003), vol. 4.

FURTHER READING

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Tsultemin, Uranchimeg. 2020. *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 130–38.

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