

Old Songs of Arrows

Ever since taking a bow at age of eight, J. Sukhaabatar never parted with it. Now, aged 60, he is known as the nation's best bow making master and marksman.

"We are archers in the eight generation. I am happy that my children and grandchildren will continue our family tradition.," says he.

Archery was an inseparable part of Mongolian history ever since it was invented some 20,000 years ago. But during the opscalist times when when communist party reigned, this ancinet tradition was almost disrupted because the rulers discouraged this sport for being "too militant" to suit young people. In early 40s they went as far as to ban archery from the annual Naadam Festival.



An elder teaches archery.

Since the time primordial along with wrestling and horse racing, archery was one of the main tournaments of this national festival more known as Three Manly Games.

During two decades of suppression, the archery tradition was preserved only thanks to efforts and the faith of such devoted fans as J. Sukhaabaatar who thought his duty to pass on the family tradition to new generations.

He learned archery in childhood from his father Jambaa, and another marksman, Ish Choidov helped him to polish the shooting technique.

"My father used to make arrows. When he passed away, there was nobody to teach how to make them and I could find no books on the subject. That is why I decided to learn how to make bows and arrows."

"Mongolian bows are very durable, but even the best bow has its time. The ancient art of bow making was being forgotten, and I devoted all my time learning the craft from elders before it is gone forever," says Sukhbaatar.

"There are now very few bow masters left. A. Tseveen and Bat Orshikh in Ulaanbaatar, Choidorj in Dundgobi province, Batsukh in Selenge- probably that is all. They all make bows using traditional techniques and what they make is hardly enough for the archers."

Being hereditary archers, almost all members of Sukhabaatar's family participate in the Naadam Festival. Sons and grandsons of Sukhbaaatar take part in the archery tournament along with their father, as their ancestors did for centuries.



Sukhbaatar's family dreams of reviving the old time archery contests.

Next year they plan to hold a far, 200-300 meters long distance contest in Selenge province where they live.

They also want to revive the tradition of shooting while galloping on horse at full speed, the skill that made Mongols unbeatable warriors.



The family members are very enthusiastic about these ideas and younger members regularly exercise in bow shooting.

Meantime, one of Sukhbaatar sons dreams of unlocking some of ancient secrets of bow making. "I will not sit back until learning all the secrets of this craft," says he.



In 1995, together with his sons and their friends, Sukhbaatar set up a small workshop making bows for adults, children and also as a souvenir.

"Once a pair of huge wild goat horns were brought to me. It was pity to use this magnificent horns for a standard bow and we decided to make a special one, "*Darkhan Bow*," a copy of a huge one used by most strong man in the past.

It took us almost two years to complete one. Now it hangs on a wall inside the Government Palace as a symbol of the statehood and the past glory," says Sukhbaatar.

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In the past there were different types of archery contests such as Khalkha, Buryad, Uryankhai, out of which khasaa become the main and most popular at Naadam Festival.

Within these there are also some differences. For example, at *sarampai kharvaa* contest people shoot target, usually a large bull skin with a drawing, while riding a horse at full gallop.





Another form of this is "*bombog namnakh*" or "ball shooting." Leather balls are placed atop of a wooden poles at some distance from each other. The task is to hit the ball while riding a horse, the first one when approaching, the second when passing by, and the last - after passing the target and shooting back.

"I tried "ball shooting." The main challenge there is to control the horse. I think that is why Chinggis Khaan warriors would tie the horse reigns and knot it to the saddle, " says Ts. Huderchuluun, two times champion of the Naadam Festival.

A standard set of weapons by Medieval warriors, including a bow and five sets of 30 arrows of different type.

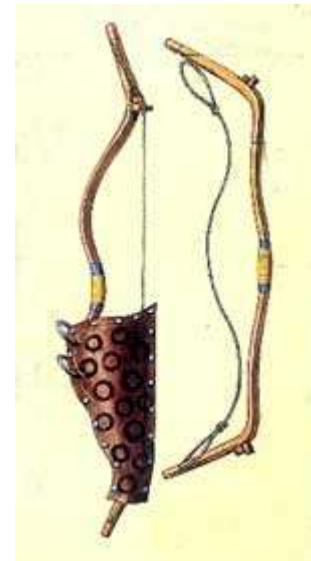
"A stone monument raised during Chinggis Khaan times states that a marksman named Esunkhei hit a target at 355 ald or more than 500 meters distance. People of that time were very strong and bows were well made. Nowadays, shooting half of this distance would be a top record. To shoot that far, one would need special lightweight arrows. Today we use 60-72 gram arrows and this is 10 times heavier than those needed for distant shooting. With proper arrows it will be possible to shoot for as far as 350 meters," says Suhbaatar.

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"In 1959 several archers came together and decided to set up an Association. That time the tradition was almost forgotten as the powers banned archery contests in mid 40s.

Our main goal was to preserve the tradition, at least among few devoted fans," shares he. "Now it is reviving with many contests held throughout the year, and the ranks of archers growing."

The last contest of the year, called "otgoo" is held in September. After it bows are loosened and stored. At the closing of the contest children conduct a "befriending" ceremony at which they put offerings to the shooting range and chant various archery songs.



"No archery contests are held during winter as bows become too stiff to pull. On the hot summer days bows also become too flexible and it is hard to aim the target because of air flow. Therefore, an archer must always take into account the temperature and such weather conditions as wind. Also one can not maintain sharp eye for several hours. For example, after shooting four arrows, one would need to concentrate again in one hour to shoot the same target," shares his secrets Sukhbaatar.





An old bow and arrows.

Each song by coaches has different tune and meaning. When archers begin to aim, coaches start a low tune in humming voice which allows to concentrate.

Once the arrow hits the target, coaches raise their hand and signal the result by high tone, "uuhai" or "scores' tune.

The person in charge of recording the results, deciphers the "uukhai" tune and responds with "sambaryn" or "records" tune.

The singing does not distract archers. On contrary, it helps them to concentrate and learn the shooting results.

There is different types of team contests, for example, "hasaa" or "hana tsuvaa," the most challenging one. Each team consisting of 10 to12 archers knocks out targets. In case, the team archer fails to hit the target, the team moves back by one step for each score lost.

