

The Return of Naadam: A Celebration of Intangible Heritage in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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After being cancelled in 2021 because of the rising cases of COVID-19, this year Ulaanbaatar and the other provinces of Mongolia saw the grand return of *Naadam*, one of Mongolia's oldest and most celebrated cultural events. Over the last two years, the absence of *Naadam* has been sorely felt, and this summer there was a palpable sense of excitement and anticipation in the build-up to the celebrations. The pandemic changed much of the world in a very short amount of time; in many aspects of our lives, we had to learn to adapt and overcome these changes, and intangible heritage was no exception to this.

Intangible heritage relies upon "actors" and "agents" to practice, maintain, and transmit this cultural knowledge, in many cases depending upon people and groups gathering together to share and celebrate cultural traditions. The festival consists of distinct features of Mongolia's nomadic culture and traditions. Unlike many events which could be adapted onto an online platform, *Naadam* did not translate appropriately to such forums. *Naadam*, like many other intangible cultural heritage events, requires the congregation of people, and the act of togetherness is as important as the games themselves.

Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010, *Naadam* is a three-day event, the origins of which date back to the Mongol period. *Naadam* is a celebration of not only Mongolian culture and heritage, but of nature and the relationship the Mongolian people have with their environment. The event consists of three main traditional sporting events: horse riding, archery, and wrestling. Included within the celebrations and events of *Naadam* are traditional singing, dancing, artistry, and food. In preparation for the games and events of *Naadam*, the participants prepare and finely hone their skills over many years. Traditions, skills, and knowledge are transferred from generation to generation, and in more recent years schools have emerged in which young Mongolians can train for participation in the events of the festival. Steeped in cultural and historical significance, the events of



Fig. 1 (left): Boy participating in horse race at Naadam in Mongolia. Public domain Wikipedia.

Naadam are evocative for observers, as seen in the brightly coloured traditional garments, the ceremonies, and the sense of monumentality that comes with the occasion. In all these things, *Naadam* itself is deeply symbolic, promoting feelings of solidarity and togetherness – feelings that have only become more appreciated over the last two years.

A true amalgamation of many intangible cultural traditions, practices, crafts, and sporting events, *Naadam* can be seen as encapsulating the spirit of entanglement that connects people and landscapes across vast distances from the farthest provinces from all corners of Mongolia. Intangible heritage events and festivals have many different facets and elements which emphasise their importance, from the reinforcement of social bonds within and between groups to the perpetuation of skills, knowledge, practices, living traditions,

and shared cultural memory. Not only is *Naadam* a celebration of the cultural history of Mongolia, but it is also a celebration of its people, their lifeways, and the deep tether that connects them to their environment.

Increasing numbers of Mongolian people are now living within cities such as the bustling Ulaanbaatar. Through the celebration of *Naadam* and the facets which constitute this great event, the Mongolian people gather and take a step away from their everyday lives to celebrate, maintain, and preserve this connection to the past. With the growth of cultural tourism within Mongolia, many have returned to the country this year to enjoy and observe the events of *Naadam*. Through this, Mongolian culture is celebrated and stands proudly on the global stage. As Mongolia continues to grow and change, *Naadam* is an opportunity to celebrate heritage, and as the world becomes increasingly globalised, the

importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage has only become more apparent.

Whilst COVID-19 remains in many ways a large part of our lives, it is encouraging to see a return to a greater degree of normalcy, wherein events such as *Naadam* can be celebrated, maintained, and safeguarded by current and future generations in their full capacity once more. The return of festivals and large-scale events such as *Naadam* has been an important part of the celebration of culture and heritage. Since the days of the early nomadic states who traversed the steppe, valleys, and mountains of Mongolia, *Naadam* has been the thread that connects the modern Mongolian people to their ancient past.

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Fig. 2 (right): The start of a Naadam horse riding event (Photo with permission of Joshua Wright).