

Kalmyk history and traditions as reflected in Oirat manuscripts

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The Kalmyks, the Mongolic people living on the lower reaches of the river Volga, have a rich traditional culture. Although closely linked with the other Central Asian nomadic peoples, the Kalmyks have historical and ethnocultural peculiarities which distinguish them from their eastern relatives. The Oirat ancestors of the Volga Kalmyks left Jungaria for the Caspian steppes in the early 17th century. Arriving in their new land, they changed their environment in all respects: climate, way of life, linguistic surroundings, and even religion.

As is well known, Zaya Pandita, the author of the *Todo* script, played a crucial role in the introduction of Buddhism among the Volga Kalmyks. Subsequently, Buddhist temples and monasteries used to be the most important centres of Kalmyk culture and education. In the 1930s, however, the temples were destroyed, and monks arrested or even killed. Many ancient manuscripts were burnt during that time. Therefore, only very small collections of Oirat sources are preserved today at learned institutions like the *Kalmyk Institute of Humanities and Applied Sciences* and the *Kalmyk National Museum* in Elista.

The present paper consists of two separate surveys, each of which focusses on an actual sample of Oirat manuscripts. The first section, written by Ellara Omakaeva, concentrates on manuscripts pertaining to the ancient beliefs and rituals of the Kalmyks. The second section, by Tamara Esenova and Nina Kokshaeva, presents an analysis of selected letters written on behalf of two historical Kalmyk Khans. Both samples illustrate the significance of manuscript materials for various types of diachronic and synchronic research.

Sources on Kalmyk traditional beliefs

The ancient beliefs of the Kalmyks are closely connected with the worship of fire, ancestors, and celestial bodies: the Sun, the Moon, stars and constellations. These beliefs are reflected by the rituals performed during the important events of human life: birth, marriage, and death. For instance,

when a child is born, the Kalmyks traditionally perform various magical ceremonies. The most important ritual concerns the purification of the new-born child, usually connected with the rite of name-giving. The ritual of purification must be performed within the first month after birth. The parents go to the astrologer to ask him to define the destiny of the child and to fix the day for the ritual.

While many such rituals are today falling into oblivion, manuscripts offer a source for the verification of field observations, and, possibly, even for the revival of the rituals. An example of an important manuscript connected with a specific ritual is *Berin bolog* «Chapter of the bride» (F. 15, op. 3, ed. 297, the archival numbers refer to the collection of the Kalmyk Institute of Humanities and Applied Sciences). Dealing with the wedding ceremony, it gives prescriptions concerning the hour when the bride must leave her home, the man who must seat her on the horse, the colour of the horse, the prayers to be read, and so on.

Funeral rites and ceremonies are described in the *Ukugseni bolog* «Chapter of the Dead» (F. 15, op. 3, ed. 293). This ritual text is known among Mongolists under the name *Altan saba* «Golden Vessel». The Oirat manuscript, however, has a different name. When the funeral rites for the corpse have been concluded, the people return home and perform a ceremony of purification. The purpose of this ceremony is to avoid misfortunes, which may have been emitted by the spirit of the deceased. The verbal part of the ritual is the prayer text *Amida-ecce xagacan ulegsen dalaha* (F. 15, op. 3, ed. 301).

Calendar rites and festivals are very important sources for the study of the Kalmyk traditional culture. The Kalmyks have three types of calendar systems: the ancient seasonal calendar, the 12-year animal cycle, and the 60-year cycle. These calendar systems used to play an important role in the life of the Kalmyks. Relevant rituals include *jilin yasalga* and *mengin yasalga*. The former is performed periodically every 12th year—at the age of 12, 24, 36, and so on. The latter, on the other hand, is performed every 9th year—at the age of 9, 18, 27, and so on. Interesting information concerning the origin of the latter ritual is given by a manuscript titled *Menggiyin gol* (F. 15, op. 3, ed. 303):

«In India there lived a khan whose name was Nakbo. He had a daughter. He had a large and magnificent palace, as well as wise officials. By birth he was of the year of the Tiger. When he was twenty seven years old, the year of the Dragon arrived and everything changed. His palace became small, his family decreased. In his dream he heard a voice: «Your misfortunes come from the fact that you fell under nine yearly eyes and nine cow eyes [?]. To the east of you lives Gyanze, the ruler of the Black Chinese. Send your officials to him and ask him to burn up all your misfortunes and sufferings». When the khan woke up, he did accordingly.»

The most common festivals of the Kalmyks are *Zul*, *Cagan Sar*, and *Urus Sar*. *Zul* «Candle» is a lamp festival with a religious content, celebrated on the 25th day of the first winter month. It may also be regarded as a kind of Kalmyk New Year, during which every woman becomes one year older. *Cagan Sar* «White Month» marks the Lunar New Year and is the spring festival, closely connected with the worship of *Okon Tengri*, an ancient goddess of Pre-Buddhist origin. The third festival is *Urus Sar*, a festival of summer. It is also known as *Urus Ova*, because it is closely connected with the phenomenon of *ova (obo)* veneration, the Kalmyk variety of mountain cult. Another important annual event is *Ukur Sar*, celebrated in November or December in commemoration of the death of Tsongkhapa.

The number of calendar rites and festivals used to be larger, but many of them are now almost forgotten. Two examples are offered by *Usun-Arsan* «Water Consecration» in September, and *Jilin Ezen* «The Lord of the Year» in December, when every man becomes one year older. The latter festival is connected with the worship of the «White Old Man», *Cagan Abu*. According to the Oirat manuscript *Gazar-usuni nomgodxan daruulan cidagci sudur* (F. 15, op. 3, ed. 163), the White Old Man is the ruler of all beings, the Holder of the Universe, who descends from Heaven on the 2nd and the 16th of every lunar month.

In the study of ancient beliefs and rituals, it is essential to give a pragmatic interpretation of the relevant verbal component. The verbal component of a ritual is a prayer. Kalmyk prayer texts can be divided into three main types:

(1) The first type involves *causative* texts, which are typically either blessings, *yorol*, with a positive meaning, or curses, *xaral*, with a negative intention. The purpose of this type of texts is to cause or create the desired state of things.

(2) The second type is formed by *sacrificial* texts, including such genres as offering texts, *takil*, invocations, *dalalga*, and insense ritual texts, *sang*.

(3) The third type comprises *preventative* texts, which are supposed to turn off or destroy the negative state of things, such as an illness. This third type is exemplified by manuscripts such as *Xara keleni bicig* or *Xara keleni urbagci sudur* (F. 8, op. 1, ed. 125), which is connected with the ritual of «Cutting the Black Tongue». There are many variants of this prayer text.

The analysis of early prayer texts reveals a wide variety of formal differences. The semantic interpretation of a text is actualized only in the context of the verbal ritual. Unfortunately, synchronic fieldwork on prayers is increasingly difficult in view of the rapid decline of traditional

culture. It is also difficult to make the results of the research available for the younger generations of Kalmyks, who lack a knowledge of the ancient writing system and, in many cases, of the Kalmyk language itself. Nevertheless, both fieldwork and manuscript analysis are going on, and it may be hoped that the emerging understanding of the traditional beliefs and rituals will help to preserve the cultural heritage of the Kalmyks as a symbol of Kalmyk ethnic identity.

Letters of the Kalmyk Khans

The name of Auka Khan is famous, but in the historical literature there are different opinions about his role in Kalmyk history. According to one opinion, expressed by Bichurin, Auka Khan was of use to Russia as a military leader but he harmed Russia with his recalcitrance and wish of independence. According to another Russian historian, Pal'mov, the glory of Auka Khan personified the glory of the Kalmyks. When Auka Khan died, his glory died and so did the glory of the Kalmyk people. However this may have been, Auka Khan was a remarkable person in Kalmyk history. The time of his government was a brilliant period in the political history of the Kalmyks under Russia.

If Auka Khan is a well-known man, his son Chagdorzhab is not as famous. He was the oldest of the eight sons of Auka Khan, and became a famous general as well as a skilful diplomat. Chagdorzhab greatly helped his father in the battlefield. Thus, he suppressed the Bashkir uprising in September 1710, took the field against the Kuban Sultan in 1711, conquered the Tatars of Kuban, and reconciled Sultan Bakhtu-girey with Auka Khan.

In their capacity of famous military and political leaders of the Kalmyks, both Auka Khan and Chagdorzhab had a wide correspondence with the Russian administration. Some linguistic aspects of this correspondence have been studied previously by Pavlov and Ubushaev: (phonetics), as well as Luvsanbaldan (morphology, phonetics). Nobody, however, has analyzed the letters from the point of view of etiquette, although etiquette is one of the most important features of traditional culture. Kalmyks, like all ethnic groups, use different expressional means for different situations of life, such as greeting, leaving, presentation, and gratitude. The verbal etiquette always includes some information about the age, sex, and social status of the communicator. But etiquette, being a very contextualized part of the culture is easily transformed during social changes and under alien cultural influences.

In order to study the traditional etiquette of the Kalmyks, we have investigated altogether ten letters of Auka Khan and thirteen letters of

Chagdorzhab. All these letters are preserved in the *National Archives of the Kalmyk Republic*, and they are analysed here for the first time. The letters are written on white paper by hand using the *Todo* script, and they date probably from the years between 1702 and 1715. Some of the letters are written very carefully, with spaces between words and phrases, and with the ends of the words indicated clearly. Some others are, however, written dimly in a rather unclear handwriting. It may be concluded that there were several scribes and copyists. All letters were written by «clerks», not by the khans themselves. This confirms the opinion that Auka Khan was an illiterate man.

All the letters are addressed to Mikhail Ilyich Chirikov, the mayor of Astrakhan, who was in charge of Kalmyk affairs. It is, however, interesting to note that the letters contain almost no direct statements concerning government affairs. Instead, in some letters Chagdorzhab asks for gun powder, lead, wine, vodka and tobacco. Vodka and wine were not mentioned directly, but the formulation was: «Send me what I liked» or «That was something that I liked very much». Only in two letters does Chagdorzhab inform Chirikov about political matters, such as a forced dislocation and movements of the Kalmyks.

Each letter typically consists of three parts: an introduction, a main part and a conclusion. Moreover, all letters have the same standard form for the introductory and conclusive sections. It is only in the main part of the letters that some formal differences can be found. All letters bear the seals of Auka Khan and Chagdorzhab. In this connection, Chagdorzhab used the seal of the Kalmyk Khans, given to him by Auka Khan. This was a seal originally sent by the Dalai Lama to Auka Khan, who in 1714 declared Chagdorzhab as his successor.

The beginning phrase of all letters is: *Auka Khan ende bidn mendu* «Auka Khan here, we are well», or: *Chagdorzhab ende bidn mendu* «Chagdorzhab here, we are well». After this, there comes a parallel phrase: *Tende Aidarqani Bayar mendu beyize* «There Astrakhan Boyarin, I hope, is [also] well». Then follows the main part of the letter, which is the section containing, or asking for, information. In one letter issued by Chagdorzhab there is an interesting statement: «If there are news, do not hide them, but tell them to us».

Throughout the letters, the tone of writing conveys the impression that Auka Khan and Chagdorzhab considered the «Astrakhan Boyarin» to be of a lower rank than themselves. No titles, neither of the Kalmyk Khans nor of Chirikov—with the exception of the term «Boyarin»—are mentioned: only the names are given. No self-humiliation, no servilities or self-elevations can be found. The conspicuous absence of long definitions of status, such as those used, for instance, in the Arabian and

Middle Eastern letter writing traditions, may be regarded as typical of the Kalmyk etiquette. This is a feature that survives up to the present day. The initial phrasing of modern letters has, however, been adapted to follow Russian examples.

The end phrase of all letters is invariably: *Elechin aman-du uge bei* «In the mouth of the servant there are words». This implies that besides the written message there was an oral one. There is no doubt that this oral message was the main content of the communication, and the written letter was only supposed to accompany it. There are many reasons why the message had to be kept in oral form. Times were uncertain, and military conflicts were not uncommon.

It may be recalled that oral letters were already favoured by the ancient Mongols. For instance, Chinggis Khan and Dзамukha passed oral letters before battles. This tradition was obviously retained by the later Kalmyk Khans. It allowed them to keep their written messages very brief and laconic. The average length of the letters is just 30 to 40 words. Perhaps this way of communicating was suitable for the Kalmyk national character, which even today is often considered to be somewhat reserved and unemotional.