

Khoton Kalmaks of Ysyk-Köl

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1 Introduction

This paper is the result of three short field trips to the Khoton or Sart-Kalmaks of the Ysyk-Köl Region (Kyrgyzstan). The first took place in June, 1999 during my two-month fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan collecting folklore and folk music. In 2004 and 2006, I especially visited the Khotons to learn more about their ethnic identity and acculturation.

Khotons mainly live in the village of Chelpek just 5 km from the City of Karakol.¹ It is populated mostly by Kalmaks who used to speak a Western Mongol dialect. Local Kyrgyz people call them just Kalmak but they are most likely Khotons who accepted Islam in their former homeland in East Turkestan (Xinjiang, China).² This area is mostly populated by Uighurs and Dungans (Huizu or Muslim Chinese) in villages but there are also nomadic Oirats in the mountains of Tianshan. When in the 19th century the Dungan uprisings against the Manchu rule were suppressed³, most of the Khotons (Muslim Oirats) also fled to the Russian Empire in the 1880s along with the Dungans and Uighurs. They crossed the Tianshan by the 4284-meter-high Bedel Pass via Ak-Suu and Üch-Turpan to reach

¹ Karakol, Center of the Ysyk-köl Province, formerly Przhevalsk, named after Nikolaj Przewalski (1839–1889) a Polish explorer of the Russian Empire. In 1992 it returned to its Kyrgyz name after the local river Karakol (Mong. Qara-Γool „Black River”).

² They probably lived in the northern part of the Tarim Basin, near the Bayraş Lake (Uighur Qara-şähär) and the Uighur city of Korla. See Zhukovskaia 1985: 94.

³ Wen Jiang Chu 1966.

the Ysyk-Köl area inhabited by the Kyrgyz Bugu clan. This territory became a Russian colony in the 1870s,⁴ so here they were safe from the revenge of the Manchu troops, who killed millions of Muslims during the uprisings. These refugee groups settled down around Kara-Kol River where they found suitable lands for irrigation. In 1869, the Russians founded the city of Kara-Kol here, which later became the center of the local Russian administration. The Khotons founded villages on the two sides of the town, Kara-Kol in Chelpek and Börü-Bashy, but we only visited the village of Chelpek.

Chelpek is inhabited by about 3000 people. Its population is mostly Kalmak but there are a lot of Kyrgyz wives from nearby villages married to Kalmak men.⁵ The majority of the villagers work as farmers on the irrigated lands, just as they used to do in Xinjiang. Some of them attend cattle and sheep and even yaks, which were introduced by the Russians from the Pamir Mountains during Soviet times. Yak-breeding Kalmaks live far away from the village in the Alpine pastures of Sary-Jaz, Syrt-Jailoo but most of the Kalmaks live in the villages. The cattle of the village is lead by some shepherds to the nearby pastures and returned every day to their owners for milking. Nomadic life disappeared among them.

2 About the Name Sart and Khoton

The local Kyrgyz do not call these people Sart-Kalmak but just Kalmak, so in my paper I will call them the Kalmaks of Ysyk-Köl or Khotons. The Turkic word *sart* originates from Sanskrit *sārtha* which means „merchant”. The nomads generally called *sart* all the sedentary Turkic and Iranian (Uzbek, Uighur and Tajik) groups of Turkestan who were predominantly Muslim. On the other hand, Khoton (Mong. *qotong*) simply means Muslim but in the Mongolian Republic it is a name for an Oirat-speaking group in the Altai Mountains (Uws aimag, Tarialang sum).⁶ It is most likely that the Khotons of Mongolia are related to the Khotons of Kyrgyzstan but that their ethnic identity developed in different directions since their separation after the Manchu conquest of East Turkestan (Xinjiang).

In China, Mongols use *qotong* as the name of the Huiizu (Muslim Chinese) minority. Interestingly, Yugurs⁷ of Gansu call all Muslim groups of the Yellow River

⁴ Brentjes 1974: 145.

⁵ Kalmak women sometimes marry Kyrgyz men from other villages in which case they move to their husbands' households leaving the Kalmak communities.

⁶ The number of Khotons in Mongolia (Uws, Tarialang Sum) is around 10,000. They migrated there together with the Dörbet from Jungaria after they surrendered to the Manchus in the 1750s.

⁷ Yugurs are a small ethnic group in Gansu, Northern China. They are composed of the Turkic Kara-Yugurs and the Mongolic Shira-Yugurs or Ynggars. The Kara-Yugurs are related to Old Uighur people while Shira-Yugurs are a White Mongol (Tuzu or Khor) tribe of Tibet.

Band (including Huizu, Dongxiang and Bonan/Bao'an) Sart while Sarta/Santa is a name used as an autonym by the Dongxiang (Mongolic Muslim group in Gansu).⁸

3 The Term Kalmak

In Turkestan the term Kalmak was a designation for those nomadic tribes who were not converted to Islam (Arabic *kāfir* meaning „infidel or non-Muslim”). The Oirat clans of the Zöün-Γar (Dzungaria) and the Torgūd, Dörwöd clans who migrated to the Ijil⁹ were also called Kalmaks in Central Asia. The word *kal-mak/qalmaq* comes from Turkic¹⁰ and its Mongolic form is *qalimay* adding an extra *i* after the *l*.¹¹ Its modern pronunciation is *xal'mäg* and the Kalmaks of Ysyk-köl also pronounce it that way. Oirat living in the territory of the former Soviet Union (Kalmykia, Kyrgyzstan) use *xal'mäg* as an autonym (self-designation) but the Oirat of Mongolia and Xinjiang prefer to be called Western Mongol or Oirat (*öörd*) and consider *xal'mäg* derogatory.¹² So the term Sart can be identified as being the Mongolic equivalent of Qotong, thus meaning “Muslim” while Kalmak means “Pagan”. In that case we can declare that Sart-Kalmak is a misnomer probably introduced to ethnography by scholars who studied them. The two words mean just the opposite, thus making it impossible for the members of the Khotons to identify themselves with this name.

4 About the Fieldwork

One of the male relatives of my Kyrgyz friend in Kara-Kol married from the Kalmaks so their clan became an in-law clan (*quda*)¹³ with that clan of the Kalmaks. We visited the father-in-law of that Kyrgyz boy who himself was only half Kalmak. His father married a Kazan Tatar lady on his way back from the front of World War II. Kalmaks long had been bilingual (Turkic and Mongolic) and for the Tatar wife learning Kyrgyz was very easy. Kyrgyz became the common language in their family, so their children could hardly speak Kalmak. In general, the majority of the Kalmaks in Chelpek use Kyrgyz for communication and only very old people prefer Kalmak when they talk to each other. People over 60 understand Kalmak well

⁸ See Christopher Atwood (2004): *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*: „Khotong was originally the Mongol designation for Muslim oases dwellers and in Inner Mongolia designates the Hui or Chinese-speaking Muslims”.

⁹ Ijil is the Mongolic name for the Volga River while its Turkic name is Edil.

¹⁰ The word *kal-mak* comes from the *kal-* „to stay” root and it marks people who remained non-Muslim or infidel (*kāfir*). Shi'a Muslims (Qizil-bash) are also called *kalmak* sometimes.

¹¹ Compare Turkic *alma* with Mong. *alima*.

¹² According to my own fieldwork material collected in Boro-tala (Xinjiang, China).

¹³ The Kyrgyz *quda* is a Mongolic element which illustrates the mixing of Turkic and Mongolic clans very well. In-law clan members related to each other through the marriage of two person from two different clans. See Abramzon 1971: 56.

but use Kyrgyz with their children. People over 80 are good speakers but very few of them are still alive.

The Kalmaks of Chelpek have great respect for Russian Academician Aleksei Vasilievich Burdukov¹⁴ who visited the village and took pictures of the local Kalmaks.¹⁵ After his death some copies of his pictures were sent to Chelpek by her daughter on the request of a local historian. On one of the pictures there are movements from an Oirat dance (*bi*). On another picture the father of that man – who preserved his instrument – can be seen playing his *dombār*. The Kalmaks of Chelpek are proud of their ancestors and they feel sorry that their language is disappearing. One of them conducts research on the history of the Kalmaks and another publishes a newspaper of Chelpek in Kyrgyz language. An old Kalmak who spoke the language fluently started to compile a Kalmak-Kyrgyz dictionary in their local dialect.

5 Ethnic Identity and Linguistic Assimilation

Following our host's advice, we visited the shepherd next door Gokā who apparently was the best speaker among the younger generation (around 60). Gokā received us with hospitality and he not only spoke fluently in Kalmak but he could sing folk songs too. He told us that his father was a strict man and did not allow them to speak Kyrgyz at home. Other youth in the village started to speak Kyrgyz within their family even in childhood and they learned in Kyrgyz at school too.¹⁶

The assimilation process had probably happened during Gokā's childhood in the 1950s. It seems that the Kalmaks of Ysyk-Köl are irreversibly on the way to language extinction. The acceptance of Islam and their isolation from other Oirat groups lead to their assimilation (acculturation) losing not only their language but other ethnic peculiarities like folk dance and dresses. Older generations used to dance Oirat dances (*bi* or *bilelyen*) accompanied by a double-stringed instrument called *dombār*. A middle-aged teacher of Chelpek preserved his father's old *dombār* instrument and was able to play some simple tunes on it.

¹⁴ See Burdukov 1935: 47–78. and Burdukov 1987. Aleksei Vasilievich Burdukov (1883-1943) was a Russian philologist of Mongolic studies. He was born in the town of Borovaja (Tjumen' Region) into a peasant family. Later he worked in Biisk (Altai Region, Russia) then in Khowd Region (Mongolia) as a shop-keeper. He spent 19 years in Khowd and mastered the local Oirat dialect.

¹⁵ Russian Altaic philologist Tenishev also visited the Sart-Kalmak and wrote an article about their language, see Tenishev 1976.

¹⁶ The same kind of language assimilation can be observed among the Turkic Toha of Khöwsgöl. Children under 20 years of age cannot speak Toha due to the influence of education in Khalkha-Mongol. Their older family members accepted that and started to speak with them in the local Darkhat-Mongol dialect. The Toha is a reindeer-keeping Tuva or Uriankhai group who pronounce their *tina* ethnonym as *toba*.

In the 1980s, Kalmaks from Elst (Republic of Kalmykia)¹⁷ also visited them and examined their dialect. They even sent some teachers from Elst to teach Kalmak to the children at the local school. The problem was, that the dialect of Elst taught at school was very different from the local dialect, so when children tried to speak Kalmak, elderly people of the village did not really approve it. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the teaching of the Kalmak language had stopped. Khoton-Kalmaks did not really mind because there was a conflict between the Buddhist (Kirghiz *kaapyyr*) Kalmak teachers and the local Muslim community. This religious difference really separates them from the rest of the Oirat-Kalmak communities in the World (Russia, China and Mongolia).

Some of the local youth went to Elst to learn Kalmak and to become teachers but none of them returned to the village. People in the village believe that in Kyrgyzstan local authorities do not support the Kalmak minority due to the hostilities between the Kalmak and Kyrgyz in the 17th and 18th centuries although some of the Kalmaks believe that they are a *burut* (the Kalmak name for Kyrgyz) clan who were assimilated by the Oirats during the era of Zöün-Āar Empire. Most of the Kyrgyz epics mention the Kalmaks as their enemies although some of those epics (e.g. *Manas*) are related to the Manchu invasion of East Turkestan, the common enemy of the Kalmak and Kyrgyz tribes.¹⁸

Although linguistically related to the other Oirat-Mongol groups the Khotons do not identify with them ethnically. Their Muslim identity is considered the stronger part when defining their ethnicity. Denying the Kalmak identity is also encouraged by the Kyrgyz oral tradition considering Kalmaks as pagans and general enemy of the Kyrgyz people. Oral knowledge among the Khotons suggests that they are Kyrgyz clans captured by the Jungar-Mongols during their invasions in the 17th and 18th centuries. Later they married Kalmak (Oirat) women and were assimilated linguistically but kept their Muslim faith and thus their ethnic identity. Actually, this oral tradition is supported by the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* where several *burut* (Kyrgyz or Muslim) clans were kept in captivity before *Manas* rescued them. *Manas* himself grew up in Kalmak captivity in the Altai Mountains. Some of the Khoton clans have Turkic names (Kypčak and Kara-baatyr) which supports their Turkic origin.

¹⁷ The Russian name of the Kalmak town Elst is Elista and it originates from Mong. *elesitü* „sandy”. It is the capital of the Kalmak Republic (Xal’mg Tangyč).

¹⁸ On this topic see Somfai Kara, Dávid: Kalmak – The Enemy in the Kazak and Kyrgyz Epic Songs. *Acta Orientalia ASH* 63 2010, pp. 167–178.

6 Religious and Ethnic Identity

In the case of the Khotons of Ysyk-köl ethnic religious identity (being Muslim) is the major driving force in the development of their modern ethnic identity and ethnicity. We see the same kind of situation among other Turkic and Mongolic groups of the region. The Altay-kizhi and Telengit groups of the Altay Mountains speak a language very similar to Kyrgyz but they identified themselves with the Oirat-Mongols who were culturally closer to them. Kazaks still call this Turkic group Kalmak while they autonym was officially Oirot prior to 1948 (now it is Altay similar to the name of the Mountain). In China we also find a small Turkic group in the Dörböljin district (Tacheng/Tarbagatai Prefecture, Xinjiang) who are Kalmak (Pagan) but were officially registered as Kyrgyz, a predominantly Muslim minority. Quite a few members of the younger generation among the so-called Kalmak-Kyrgyz now accept Islam as a means to harmonize their religious identity with their ethnic identity.

The same process can be observed among the Khotons of Khowd Province whose Muslim identity is giving way to a stronger Mongol ethnic identity forced by the majority of the Khalkha-Mongols who are predominantly followers of Tibetan Buddhism. So, these ethnic boundaries and identities are dynamically changing and influenced by different political and ideological convictions. Scholars should use them with great care, adjusting them to the current situation of their research.

7 Common Memory and Ethnicity

The “common memory” of a people and their ethnic identity or ethnicity are different things but they always influence each other. In the case of the Khotons of Kyrgyzstan ethnic identity is very complex as we have seen, and is influenced by modern nationalism (Manas epic and his war with the pagan Kalmaks) as well as religious movements. In Soviet times, Khotons, being linguistically related to Oirat, were considered officially Kalmak (Russian Kalmyk) who were a registered minority of Russia living west of Volga River (Kalmykia). Religious and nationalist aspects were never taken into consideration. To some extent, Khotons of Kyrgyzstan accepted the official version of their origin being the result of migration of an Oirat clan from East Turkestan (Dzungaria). Many generations from Soviet times started to change the common memory of the Khotons towards accepting an ethnic identity closer to Kalmaks than the Turkic Kyrgyz. But as the power of influences switched back to Muslim and Kyrgyz, their common memory (being one Kyrgyz clan who became Oirat-speaking) got more and more acceptance among younger generations.

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