

The Main Problems of Study of the Written Heritage of the Kalmyks of Russia and the Oirats of Mongolia and China

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Each nation has its own history, customs and traditions, worldview and, of course, its own language. The latter is the most important monument of national culture, its quintessence and syncretic expression.

Mongol-speaking peoples inhabited the vast territory, which for a long time remained a “white spot” on the world map. The main goal of this paper is to introduce the role of the national script in preserving, expansion and actualization the priceless written historical and cultural heritage and rich vocabulary of the Kalmyks in the past. This work is devoted to the review and linguocultural analysis of written sources on “todo bichig” (“clear script”).

It is necessary to emphasize the importance of collections of source material about Kalmyks including manuscripts on “todo bichig” found in archives and libraries, their preservation for future generations of scholars and transmission to a wider audience.

These issues in the context of Russian-Mongolian-Chinese-German-Hungarian scientific cooperation have recently attracted more and more attention of researchers (Reckel 2015, 2016, 2020; Birtalan 2011; Birtalan/Omakayeva 2020; Rákos 2002, 2015).

The fact that the Mongolian Nomads had its own national script, on which literary monuments have been created, is of great importance for the full characterization of a particular people or ethnic group (Kara 1997; Omakaeva 2000). The unified Mongolian written tradition collapsed in the middle of the 17th century, when the Oirats began to use their own writing system, called *Zaya-pandit*, after its creator, an Oirat monk of the Hoshut origin. New script “eliminated the many ambivalent spellings of the old Uiguro-mongolian script and closed the gap between spoken and written language” (Reckel 2020). This script underwent certain reforms both among the Kalmyks, who used it officially until 1924, and among their relatives in Mongolia and China (Nominhanov 1976; Omakaeva 2010). It has been preserved as a functioning writing system only in China: The Oirats use it to this day, although the Old Mongolian script is used in the education system.

The Kalmyks, the Mongolic people living on the lower reaches of the river Volga, have a rich traditional culture. The Oirat ancestors of the Volga Kalmyks, some Oirat tribes (Torguds and Dörbeds), left Jungaria for the Caspian steppes in the early 17th century. They became known as the Kalmyks (Rubel 1967). “The Mongolian Kalmyks or Oirat may be living in Europe, but they are still culturally a part of Central Asia” (Reckel 2016, 10). Although closely linked with the other Central Asian nomadic peoples, the Kalmyks have historical and ethnocultural peculiarities which distinguish them from their eastern relatives. Arriving in their new land, the Lower Volga area in Russia, they changed their environment in all respects: climate, way of life, linguistic surroundings. In 1771, the main parts of the Kalmyks, especially Torguds, migrated back to the historical homeland, where they still live today.

As is well known, *Zaya-pandita Namkai Jamco*, 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 ancient manuscripts. In the 1930s, however, many manuscripts were burnt. Therefore, only very small collections of Oirat sources are preserved today in Kalmykia itself. Many valuable manuscripts are held outside of Kalmykia (Kara 1972; Luvsanbaldan 1975; Rinchen 1999; Sazykin 1988; 1996; Uspensky 2001; Annotated catalogue: 2004– 2005; Gerelmaa 2005; Tsendee 2005; Erdemtû 2011; Turanskaya/Yakhontova/Nosov 2018; Altan-Ochir/Yakhontova/Yampolskaya 2021).

Archival sources on «Kalmyk» subjects can be divided into four large groups:

- Linguistic sources (dictionaries, grammars, etc.);
- Literary sources (written Oirat Buddhist and secular works and bilingual works in Tibetan with Oirat line-by-line translation);
- Historical sources (documents, letters, etc.);
- Folkloric and ethnographic materials (recordings of the ancient beliefs, the epic, tales, songs, sayings and proverbs, riddles, signs, blessings, good wishes, etc.).

It should be emphasized that linguistic sources from the funds of the Kalmyk archives cover the century. The materials of an earlier time are in the archives of Germany (Gerngut) and St. Petersburg, since the beginning of the systematic collection of linguistic material and the purposeful study of the Kalmyk language was laid by the Gernguters, descendants of Czech or Moravian brothers, who in 1765 founded the German colony of Sarepta, 28 versts south of Tsaritsyn by the highest command of Catherine II. In 1836, Zwick managed to take out about 70 manuscripts.

The collection of I. Schmidt disappeared during a fire in Moscow in 1812. I. Schmidt is known as a publisher and a translator into German of Oriental sources (Kulganek 2014). He published a number of texts in Tibetan and Mongolian with a translation of sutras into German [Der Weise und der Thor, 1843]. The archive in Gerngut contains his personal correspondence of 1800–1810 with Erdeni-taishi Tundutov, noyon Jimbya Tundutov, Tsebek, noyon Serebjab Tyumen and other Kalmyks (Kalmyk Old-script Documents of Isaac Jacob Schmidt 2002).

Among old-script historical documents of XVIII century there are letters of the governor of the Kalmyk Khanate Ubashi (Letters of the governor of the Kalmyk Khanate Ubashi 2004). There is a considerable corpus of letters of the Kalmyk khan Ajuka (Susejeva 2009).

There are some dictionaries and grammars from the 19th and 20th century in Western European languages ([Zwick 1852; Doerfer 1965; Krueger 1978/84; Svantesson 2009; Rahmn 2012). Bilingual and trilingual dictionaries of the 18th–20th centuries are extremely important lexicographic sources for the study of the Kalmyk language in the past. Many valuable handwritten dictionaries of the 18th century are held outside of Kalmykia. For example, Cornelius Rahmn (1785–1853) from Sweden wrote a short dictionary and a grammar of the Kalmyk language, both preserved as manuscripts. He lived at Sarepta amongst the Kalmyks as a missionary in 1819–1823. The dictionary and grammar were published by Jan-Olof Svantesson.

The manuscript section of the Russian National Library in SPb contains a «Dictionary of the Kalmyk Language» from the 18th century. This is a handwritten manuscript (104 pages, 2,988 entries).

I came across this manuscript in the late 1990s in the Manuscript Department of the National Library of Russia. There are practically no Russian borrowings in

the dictionary, only the word *bencilgelan* ‘wedding, marriage’ is found. This is a verbal noun: the verb *bencide-* goes back to the Russian *венчаться* ‘to marry according to a church ceremony’, consists of the root *benc-* (*венч-*) and the verbal derivational affix *-de*, and the noun is formed from the verb with the help of the nominal derivational affix *-lgan* (the replacement of *в* by *б* is quite understandable).

It can be assumed that at least three people took part in the work on this dictionary: 1) the main compiler (the author of the Russian wordlist); 2) a bilingual informant whose native language was the Kalmyk language and who did not always adequately perceive the meaning of the translated words; 3) the third author, who could read the old Kalmyk graphics and transliterate Kalmyk words with signs of the Russian alphabet (obviously, one of the Russian orientalists, because if an educated and literate Kalmyk were in the place of the third author, then all transliterations of Kalmyk words would be replaced by transcriptions) (Burykin, Omakaeva: 1999).

Information about the “Dictionary of the Kalmyk language” is given in “Essays on the history of linguistics in Russia” [pp. 405–406], and information about the Russian-Tatar-Kalmyk glossary (1740) compiled at the Tatar-Kalmyk school in Samara by P. I. Rychkov and Makhmud Gabdrakhmanov is given in the work of M. Nogman (Nogman 1969).

On the eve of the departure of most of the Kalmyks in 1771 to their historical homeland, Adrian Sokolov compiled a German-Russian-Kalmyk dictionary. A.M. Pozdneev’s *Kalmyk-Russian Dictionary* (1916) is held in his personal archive in the Orientalists’ Archive at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts RAS (arch. 44).

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.

An example of an important manuscript connected with a specific ritual is *Beribolog* «Chapter of the bride». 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 soon.

Funeral rites and ceremonies are described in the *Ukugseni bolog* «Chapter of the Dead». 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-ece xagacan ulegsen dalaha*.

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 in the past and now.

Here it should be noted that Kalmyk holidays are calculated according to the lunar calendar. And the world lives according to the European solar calendar. That is why the dates of holidays, including the New Year, fall on different dates. Every year there is a difference between the lunar calendar and the solar calendar of several days.

The lunar calendar also has its leap years with 13 months. They happen when a double month is introduced into the lunar calendar once every few years for corrections. This year is the year of the Black Tiger. Kalmyks joined it at the end of November 2021 after the Zul holiday. 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 in the manuscript titled *Menggiyin gol*:

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 bum up all your misfortunes and sufferings.» When the khan woke up, he did accordingly.

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These samples illustrate the significance of manuscript materials for various types of diachronic and synchronic research.

The field materials also contain interesting dates and information. Joint expedition projects are being implemented. In 2007, for example, the joint Russian-Mongolian expedition project “Folklore and language of Western Mongols (Oirats) in the context of Central Asian oral-poetic and written traditions” (headed by academician D. Tumurtogoo from the Mongolian side, and prof. E. U. Omakaeva from the Russian side).

The choice a certain region of Mongolia (Kobdo and Ubsunuraimag) for the expedition study was due to many reasons. This region attracted the participants of the expedition primarily as a place of localization of the oral and written traditions

of spiritual culture of the Mongolian-speaking sub-ethnic groups of Mongolia, related to Russian Kalmyks and Oirats of China. The expedition carried out refers to the so-called “repeated” expeditions “following the tracks” of the previous gatherers.

The expedition has enriched our knowledge, which had previously been known to us through Vladimirtsov’s pioneering works. Oirat dialect belongs to the western dialects of the Mongolian language. It has many peculiarities in the phonetic system and morphological similarities with Kalmyk language. It is the work of the future to integrate the ideas brought to us by Vladimirtsov with more recent our understanding of the dynamics of changes in Mongolian languages.

So we are planning to fulfill a detail linguacultural description of collected texts provided with translation into modern Kalmyk and Russian to make acquainted the readers with rare samples. We have already published several papers in which we have used the material, both linguistic and folklore, collected during the expeditions of 2007–2014 (Omakaeva, Gedeeva, Gerelmaa 2008; Omakaeva 2014).

Therefore, there are many arguments behind the preservation and actualization of the written heritage of Kalmyks: scientific (research increase knowledge), political (symbolism), social and cultural (ethnic identity), economic (development of tourism in Kalmykia).

It is necessary to carefully study the various types of letters used by Kalmyks (Oirats), all their external and internal links, the relationship of writing with the history and culture, which will reveal the role and significance of written tradition not only in the history of a particular ethnos, but also in history of the nomadic civilization of the peoples of the entire Central Asian region. The study of the written tradition and the samples of writing is important not only for research itself, but also for the preservation of the written heritage of the past as a national treasure for future generations.

Literature

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