

Kalmyks, Oirat Descendants in Russia : a Historical and Ethnographic Sketch

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-06-05 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Bakaeva, E.P. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002401

Kalmyks, Oirat Descendants in Russia: a Historical and Ethnographic Sketch

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This article is a historical and ethnographic sketch devoted to the Kalmyks, the ethnic descendants of the Oirats. The author examines the basic scientific opinions on the etymology of the term “Kalmyk” (modern Kalmyk “Hal’mg”; in Oirat script “Halimag”), the reasons for the Oirat migration to Russian territory in the 17th century, and the reasons for the migration of most Kalmyks to Dzungaria in 1771 and its consequences for their ethnos. The author also discusses the stages of the group’s history and analyzes its culture’s specificity.

Key words: Oirats, Kalmyks, ethnic descendants, transformations of ethnic structure, specificity of culture

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1. Introduction

The Kalmyks are the ethnic descendants of the Oirats who left Central Asia and settled in Russia at the beginning of the 17th century. The Republic of Kalmykia is well known in Europe as a Buddhist region that differs from neighboring nations in ethnic, anthropological, and confessional terms.

2. Etymology of the term “Kalmyk” (modern Kalmyk “*Hal’mg*”; in Oirat script “*Halimag*”)

The ethnonym “kalmyk” (*hal’mg*) has existed for several centuries. The first mention of the Oirats (or Kalmyks) in a Russian text dates to 1574. The anonymous “Stroganov story,” written in the first half of the 17th century, refers to an order of Tsar Ivan IV dated May 30, 1574. The subject of this order is the tax on free trade with Kalmyks, Bukhars, and Kazakhs (History of Kalmykia 2009 V.1: 258). The Oirats who settled in the Ural and Volga regions were first called “Kalmyks” in Russian documents in the 17th century. However, they did not use this name when Kalmyk history began. The adoption of this ethnonym differed among the various ethnopolitical groups (Torghut, Derbet, and Khoshut) that afterward melted into one ethnicity: the more intensively a group and its leaders interacted with Russia, the more the name was used. In the 17th century, around 50,000 Torghut¹⁾ families (nomad tents), 4,000 Derbets²⁾, and 4,000 Khoshuts³⁾ migrated to Russia. Some other minor ethnic groups, such as 2,000 Tsoros⁴⁾ (Choros or Dzungar)⁵⁾, migrated as well. Altogether, about 270,000 people (Bakunin 1995: 22–25; Avlyayev 1994: 164) settled north of the Caspian Sea. According to Kolesnik (Kolesnik 1997: 28), the total population of the settlers was about 71,000 families (320,000 people)⁶⁾ by the end of the 17th century. The leader of most of the Oirat’s uluses, Torghut tayishi Kho-Orluk, was appointed the chief tayishi. He also founded the dynasty of the Kalmyk Khans. This explains the fact—described by a Russian administrator, Bakunin, in 1671—that Torghuts used the word “kalmyk” to refer to their uluses as well as to those of the Khoshuts and Derbets; however, Torghuts note that this word does not originate in their language but was lent them by the Russians. On the other hand, Khoshuts and “Zengors” (Tsoros or Choros) refer to all Kalmyks as Oirats. By the 17th century, the word *hal’mg* (“halimag”, or “kalmyk” in Russian) was being used in correspondence among Khans and Noyons, along with the names “Torghut,” “Derbet,” and “Khoshut” (Sanchirov 2010: 37). After a while, these Oirat groups consolidated into one ethnos and accepted the new name. The famous mongolist Kotvich notes that a group of Oirats living along the rivers Volga, Don, and Ural embraced the new name “and forgot the old name ‘Oirats’” (Sanchirov 2010: 35). The new ethnonym *ha’lmg* was used in conjunction with the definition *Ulan Zalata* (“the red-tasseled ones”) because of the compulsory red tassel (or brush) on their headwear.

The etymology of the word *kalmyk* has been studied by a number of researchers. Generally, the word’s meaning is derived from a Mongol or Turkic source.

The famous folklorist A. Kichikov suggested that the word *halimag* means “swift” (Kichikov 1968: 133) and was part of the name *hal’mg öörd* (“the swift Oirats”) used among Oirats. The Kalmyk national poet Kalyaev supported this hypothesis. He traced the name’s origin to the Kalmyk word *hal’h*, meaning “to fly above the earth,” or “to ascend” (Kalyaev 1994: 3). Monraev suggests that, while the Kalmyk version of the ethnonym *hal’mg* originated from the Kalmyk verb *haal’h*, meaning “to resettle” or “to migrate,” the ethnonym “kalmyk” is Turkic (Monraev 2002: 34). Darbakova relates the word *hal’mg* to the word *hol’h* (“to mix”) (Darbakova 1967: 31), citing the complex composition of the Oirats who made up the new ethnos.

The majority of scholars believe that the name “Kalmyk” is of Turkic origin. They note



Photo 1 Kalmyks on camels in the Kalmyk steppe, late 19th century

that the word can be traced back to before the Oirat migration to Russia. According to Kalmyk historian Batmaev, the ethnonym “kalmak” was used in Arabic and Turkic quarries beginning in the 14th century to refer to the gentiles (non-Muslims) populating the eastern part of the Golden Horde. (Batmaev 1993: 16–18). In the 19th century, Kalmyk chronicler Batur-Ubashi Tumen’ writes in his *Story of the Derben Oirats* that the name *hal’mg* was given by the Turkic people and means “the rest” (Lunnyi svet 1993: 128). Many scientists and researchers therefore relate the ethnonym to the Turkic word meaning “remnant,” “the remaining ones,” or “the separated ones.” There are a number of theories concerning who these “remnants” were and where and from whom they were separated, but they seem to have stayed firm in their beliefs (in Shamanism or Buddhism) (Pallas 1773; Nominkhanov 1958: 99; and others).

A distinctive point of view has been brought forward by Kazakh scientist Dzholhanov. He proposes that the original source of the ethnonym was the word “kamlah” and that the root “kam” (meaning “shaman”) was joined to the affix “lah” (from the Yakut language) or “lyk” (a general Turkic affix). In this scenario, the meaning of the word “kamlah” would be “one who practices shamanism,” or “shamanism follower” (Dzholhanov 1998).

3. Reasons for the Oirat migration to Russian territory in the 17th century

In 2009, the Republic of Kalmykia celebrated 400 years of existence as part of Russia. The celebration date was determined by events that took place from 1606 to 1609. The first ambassador of Torghut Kho-Orluk arrived in the Russian town of Tara in 1606. Talks were not successful but representatives of a northwestern Oirat group comprised of Torghut and Derbet uluses met again with the Russians a year later. Early in 1608, negotiations with the Oirat ambassadors were held in Moscow, and on February 14, 1608, they were received by

Tsar Vasiliy Ivanovich Shuiskii (1606–1610). That year, the first ‘shert’⁷⁾ was issued. “The date when Kalmyks voluntarily became subjects of Russia is set as 1609. The Kazan’ Palace Order of August 20, 1609 to I. V. Mosalskii, the voivode of Tara, details the conditions of Russian citizenship for the two abovementioned Oirat groups” (Istoriya Kalmykii 2009 1: 265). However, this process was completed only forty years later, when all the sherts were signed (in 1655 and 1657).



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There are two approaches to explaining the Oirat migration from Central Asia in the scientific literature. The first links the westward migration with Mongol history (with the conquest of vast areas in Eurasia). Those who take this approach consider the Oirat migration an attempt to recreate the Mongol Empire and continue its policies of invasion. The second approach considers a variety of reasons for migration.

The concept of Oirat politico-military expansion has been suggested by Bichurin (Father Iakinf). He rejects the theory that dissent within the Oirat elite was the main reason for migration. Instead, he proposes that the Tsoros rulers’ rise to power and the Oirat population’s growth were the main reasons behind the plan to establish an empire similar to Genghis Khan’s (Bichurin 1999: 30, 31, 44). Pozdneev generally supports this concept, but he doubts that the “expansion” was well organized and even that any invasion plans existed at all (Pozdneev 1886: 142–143). Pozdneev argues that the assembly of Mongol and Oirat princes and clergy proposed a revival of Genghis Khan’s empire in 1640 and that this was the reason for tayishi Daychin’s aggressive policy towards his neighbors. Later, with the intensification of scientific research, this notion was criticized.

Proponents of the second theory have hypothesized various explanations for the Oirat migration in the early 17th century. Miller postulates that the main reason was the Oirats’

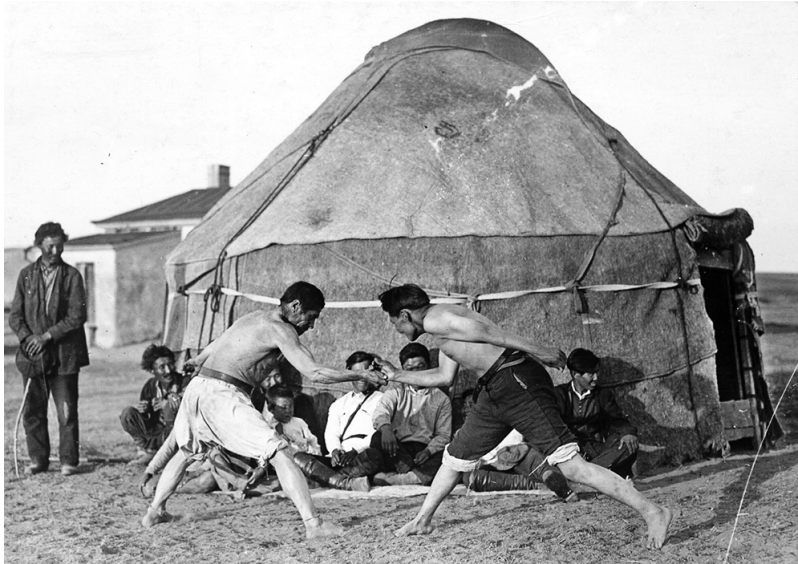


Photo 2 Traditional Kalmyk wrestling

defeat by the eastern Mongols and Kazakhs (Miller 2000: 108). There are several arguments in favor of this theory. For example, the treaty with Russia ensured its support in confrontations with the Altyn Khans, Kazakhs, and Nogays. A number of Russian researchers have supported the idea that the migration was caused by discontent among various Oirat groups yearning to evade their leader's centralized control (Rychkov 1887: 88; Lepekhin 1771: 448; Georgi 1778: 4; Nefediev 1834; Byuler 1846: 13; Kostenkov 1870; Novoletov 1884: 4–6). Thus, the theory of expansion has been heavily criticized and that of coerced migration advanced instead. After analyzing archives, Palmov concludes that the rationale for migration was the need for new grazing land (Palmov 1922). This hypothesis is shared by Zlatkin, who cites in its favor the socioeconomic and political crises resulting from livestock overcrowding and a lack of grazing land, the need for new markets, the need for feudal areas after unsuccessful wars, discontent within Oirat groups, and the active centralization policy of the Tsoros leaders (Zlatkin 1964). Preobrazhenskaya (Preobrazhenskaya 1980: 49–83) and M. Kichikov (Kichikov 1966) support this theory as well. Like Zlatkin, they focus their research on the Kalmyk history of the 1960s. Thus, their ideas became prevalent in Soviet historiography. The researchers also examined Russia's interest in settling the nomad Kalmyks along its southwestern border.

The majority of contemporary historians agree with Zlatkin, Preobrazhenskaia, and Kichikov, whose theory is based on a hypothesis put forward by a number of researchers in the 19th century. However, some aspects of the theory have been criticized in the literature. One of these is the idea that the migration was triggered by opposition to the Tsoros rulers. This understanding is based on the fact that “the Khoshuts’, Derbets’, and Torghuts’ uluses were bigger [and the] Choros themselves could not subordinate them at that moment.” Some



Photo 3 The “halmag” headdress for women. One version of the etymology of the ethnonym “kalmyk” (“hal’mg”) arose from the headdress’s name.

researchers therefore believe the main reason was the defeat by the Altyn khan: after their expulsion from the eastern Altai region in the west of modern Mongolia, numerous uluses of the Derbets, Torghuts, and Khoshuts migrated along the Irtysh River to southwestern Siberia at the beginning of the 17th century (Tepkeev 2011).

The *History of Kalmykia from Ancient Times to Our Days* attributes the migration to deep crises caused by defeats in battle, loss of land in Mongolia, growth in livestock populations, discontent among Oirat feudal lords, and a lack of grazing land—all of which occurred in the last decade of the 16th century (Istoriya Kalmykii 2009 1: 255). A specialist in Oirat history, Chernyshev, also notes the lack of grazing land in Dzhungaria, the search for new markets, and the “Torghut leader’s reluctance to obey Dzhungar Khan of Choros origin” (Chernyshev 1990: 77). As for, the migration itself, it lasted about four decades: the Torghuts initially tried to settle near their former territories but eventually reached the Volga a region that suited their needs due to its sparse population, good grazing land, and extensive opportunities for trade with Russia (Chernyshev 1990: 45).

The “lack of land” theory is opposed by other researchers, including Bogoyavlenski (Bogoyavlenski 1939: 87) and later Chimitdorzhiev, for whom the evidence for growth in livestock populations and competition for grazing land is insufficient (Chimitdorzhiev 1978: 15). Kolesnik also rejects scarcity of land as a reason for both the migration from eastern Mongolia in the early 17th century and the return migration of 1771. He considers the migration of the 17th century typical of societies transitioning from a classless system to a class-based



Photo 4 Kalmyk woman in “halmag” headdress

one. Such societies are characterized by crises caused by demographic booms, the ineffectiveness of traditional administrative methods, and growing social and ethnic differentiation—crises that are commonly overcome either by making the necessary social changes or by migrating in order to ease the strain on resources. Kolesnik rejects the common belief, proposing instead that the “Kalmyks’ migration westward was a war expansion ... Kalmyks did not wish to be citizens of Russia and there is no evidence of their being such” (Kolesnik 2003: 33–35). According to Kolesnik, the Kalmyk Khanate was established around the 1670s or 1690s, and its “distance from their native land guaranteed the sovereignty of the Volga Torghts⁸). Accordingly, Kolesnik does not fully accept the thesis that the Kalmyks voluntarily became subjects of Russia: “Ayuka transferred the center of the Kalmyk Khanate to the lower Volga region and widened its boundaries from the Emba to the Don rivers; thus the western part was brought inside and the eastern put outside the perimeter of Russia” (Kolesnik 2003: 37).

Kolesnik's view is quite vulnerable to criticism. In connecting the 17th-century Oirat migration with the conversion from a tribal to a class society, he is trying to explain the Oirats' search for new land as a search for territory that could support the newly appropriated practice of farming: "the Kalmyks were initially interested in the fishing and hunting lands in the forests." Trying to articulate his understanding of the phenomenon, he emphasizes the appropriating nature of economics even as he speaks of the stock-raising society of the Kalmyks. He also ignores the fact that, by the 17th century, the territory where the Oirats roamed had shrunk, with the northern border shifting south to Mongol Altai from northwest Mongolia (the area near Ubsu-nur lake). Moreover, most researchers do not share Kolesnik's view that Oirat society was transitioning from a pre-class society to a class-based one. Batmaev writes, "the Kalmyk society of the lower Volga region was socially stratified and had a well-organized social structure with a number of estates and social groups. Such societies were fairly past the stage of the tribal elders' council. In our opinion, as Markov correctly notes, it is clear that nomadic societies were neither primitive nor tribal but differentiated socially and property-wise; however, "there is no agreed-upon understanding of their essence." Describing medieval and modern nomadic societies, the author continues: "during these epochs the nomadic societies could exist and existed only in a state-like form. Indeed ... Mongols, Oirats, and therefore Kalmyks learned the state system by being a part of Genghis Khan's empire, the estates of his descendants and Oirat consolidation in the first half of the XV c. under tayishis Togon and Esen" (Batmaev 2002: 85–87). Kolesnik himself believes that the Oirats were a consolidated nationality, with Torghuts, Derbets, Khoshuts, Tsoros, and others as subethnic groups. According to the formational approach in ethnology, the tribe is an ethnic form of tribal societies; nationality, encompassing subethnic groups, is formed in class societies (e.g., in slaveholding and feudal systems). Kolesnik's hypothesis of military expansion, first proposed by Bichurin, has been criticized for a long time. Contemporary historians note that the migrations of Gushi Khan to Kukunor and that of Kho-Orluk and Dalay Batyr to the Volga region were not caused by the expansionist policies announced in 1640.

4. Formation and structure of the Kalmyk ethnos

The formation of Kalmyk ethnicity took place during the land reclamation. Consolidation was important for the establishment of Kalmyk statehood, which was in turn necessary for purposes of communication with Russia. However, there were a number of obstacles to consolidation: the existence of various ethnopolitical formations—three large ones (the Torghuts, Derbets, and Khoshuts) and many smaller ones (the Hoits, Zyungars, and others)—the ulus-based settlement distribution pattern, and the Kalmyk inheritance tradition.

Avlyayev, author of *The Origin of the Kalmyks*, links the closing stages of the formation of the Kalmyk nation to the period of the Kalmyk Khanate's prosperity (in the first half of the 18th century). Moreover, the events that followed (the migration eastward of most of the population in 1771, the elimination of Kalmyk statehood through Queen Ekaterina's rescript, and the formation of a new administrative and territorial system) caused ethno-evolutionary processes (Avlyayev 2002). According to Batmaev, Kalmyk nationality took shape in several stages. The first was the formation of an Oirat base, which was followed by the second stage:

the formation of Kalmyk nationality itself. The latter process was complete by the first half of the 18th century and coincided with the establishment of the Kalmyk state. The third stage encompasses the further development of two groups of people within the Kalmyk nation: those who stayed in Russia and those who migrated eastward to former Dzhungaria (Batmaev 2002: 112).

In order to understand the origin of Kalmyk nationality, it is important to establish whether the Torghuts, Derbets, and Khoshuts were independent nationalities or Oirat subethnic groups. A number of Russian scientists believe that the Oirats formed a nation during the period of Oirat union. Thus Sanchirov and Batmaev write about an Oirat nation, part of which formed the Kalmyk nation (Sanchirov 1990; Batmaev 2002: 78). In contrast, Chernyshev considers the Oirat tribes separate and notes that four Oirat tribes governed by a common Khan formed the Dzungar Khanate (Chernyshev 1990: 57). Kolesnik's work is also quite unclear. On one hand, he links the development of the Kalmyk Khanate to the change from a pre-class to a class society, suggesting that there was no Oirat nation but rather several separate Oirat tribes (*i.e.*, ethnoses). On the other hand, he considers the Torghut, Derbet, and Khoshut to be subethnic groups, which means that they must have formed a nation. Such lack of clarity calls for further research. Sometimes the ambiguity is explicit: Batmaev writes that 16th-century Oirat society was "either a yet-to-be-consolidated nation or a nation whose subgroups still defined themselves as separate ethnic groups"—as Zyungars (Dzungars), Torghuts, and Derbets (Batmaev 2002: 108).

Such ambiguity results from a lack of ethnological research. Usually, contemporary studies focus on historical events and are based on written material. Investigations into ethnicity are complicated by a lack of appropriate sources.

Conceptual frameworks and methodologies (class or pre-class society, unified nationality or tribes in the 16th century) therefore influence researchers' conclusions. There is no academic literature specific to this topic in Russia, but the mass media there are beginning to address the subject. The website *Hamag mongol*, created by anthropologist and geneticist Khoit, states that the Oirats are a unified nation even today, one that includes the Oirats of Mongolia and China as well as the Kalmyks and Altais of Russia—despite the fact that the Altais speak a Turkic language.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Kalmyk nation was formed through the consolidation of a large ethnopolitical grouping of Torghuts, Derbets, and Khoshuts. According to Batmaev, these groups exhibited several features of ethnoses: ethnic self-consciousness, a name for themselves (ethnonym), and dialectal differences among their languages (Batmaev 2002: 110–111). Batmaev accepts another scenario, however—one in which all these groups were a part of a bigger ethnos, the Kalmyk nation: "in principle, it does not matter that Torghuts, Derbets, and Khoshuts did not accept the new ethnical consolidation as well as the new name instantaneously... Only through affiliation with their subethnos and only with it did they name themselves Kalmyks" (Batmaev 2002: 111, 118). As mentioned, at the time of Bakunin's work (1761), Khoshuts and Zyungars (Dzungars) did not accept the name "Kalmyk" but called themselves "Oirats." In contrast, the Torghuts used the new ethnonym for all three ethnopolitical groups. However, they noted that this name was not "from their language" (Bakunin 1995: 22). In 18th-century census lists, "Kalmyk owners and people" are listed as

Torghuts, Derbets, or Khoshuts.

The structure of the Kalmyk ethnos was different during the Kalmyk Khanate and after its dissolution (in 1771). In the 17th century, around 250,000 Torghuts, 20,000 Derbets and Khoshuts, and 10,000 Zyungars migrated to Russia, totaling “about 80,000 warriors and 200,000 plebs and captives” (Ocherki istorii 1967: 88). The group’s composition remained the same though the first third of the 18th century, so that an 1733 registry lists 3,000 Khoshut families, 4,000 Derbet families, and 51,500 Torghut families (Ochirov 2009). In 1771, most Kalmyks migrated eastward, and the Khanate was dissolved. The structure of the ethnos then changed. In the 19th century, the clerk Kostenkov created a “List of Kalmyk Clans and Aimaks.” In it, he counts around 8,000 Derbet kubitkas or nomad tents (*i.e.*, families) in the Maloderbetovski ulus, 13,000 Torghut kubitkas, and 1,500 Khoshut kubitkas (Mitirov 1998: 323–329). About 700 kubitkas were also counted among the Bolshederbetovski ulus (Mitirov 1998: 329).

In sum, the Torghuts formed the majority of the Kalmyk ethnos in the first half of the 18th century as well as the majority of those who migrated to the lands of the defeated Dzungaria in 1771. A small number of Khoshuts also migrated. The number of Derbets did not change significantly.

The ethnic composition of the Kalmyks in the first half of the 18th century was as follows. The Torghut uluses had between 41,000 and 44,000 kubitkas:

- The Keryad (Keret or Kereit) and Tsaatan uluses had between 9,000 and 10,000 kubitkas,
- The Erketeni ulus had between 3,000 and 4,000 kubitkas,
- The Tsohur ulus had between 6,000 and 7,000 kubitkas,
- The Bagut ulus (and other ethnic groups of this ulus) had 6,000 kubitkas,
- The Khabuchin ulus had 3,000 kubitkas,
- The Abun-otok (Torghut) ulus had 10,000 kubitkas,
- The Shakur lama’s shabiner had 4,000 kubitkas,

The Derbet ulus had 4,000 kubitkas;

The Khoshut ulus had 3,000 kubitkas;

The Zyungars had 1,000 kubitkas.

There were many smaller groups in addition to these (Ochirov 2010: 50).

Torghuts: According to Ochirov, the Torghut ulus were mainly comprised of the Keryad (Keret or Kereit), Erketen, Tcaatan, and Bagut (the Tsokhur were a mixed group). Kostenkov, on the other hand, counts such groups as the Barun, Zyun, Keret, Tsaatan, and Zyungar (Mitirov 1998: 321). This ambiguity is clarified by Batmaev and Tchurumov, who notice that the term “Zyun” (literally “left”) stands for the left part of the Torghut uluses, subjects of Ayuka Khan’s elder son Chagdordzhab. The term “Barun” (literally “right”) encompassed the tabun-otoks of Dordzhi Nazarov, and the Khan’s uluses were central (Batmaev 2002; Tchurumov 2007).

It is generally believed that the basis of the Torghut group was Keryad; these people were joined by the Bagut (who probably originated from Baatut⁹⁾) and the Tsaatan (now believed to have originated from Khoit). The origin of the Erketen is not well understood. One hypothesis proposes that their name derives from tayishi Mergen-Erketu. During his

reign in the 15th century, the Torghuts joined the Derben Oirat union; their origin could thus be traced back to Keret. Another hypothesis links the group's origin with Irkit. Altai ethnographer Kleshev argues that the Altai Irkit are descended from the Khoit-Oirats (Kleshev 2009: 350–351). Note that, in the Buryat ethnos, the Irkit are part of the Soiot, a nation that has only recently been recognized.

Derbets: The core members of the Derbets were Tugtun, Burul, Zyun (including Chonos, Bukhus, Khashkhaner, and others), Shabiner, and Abganer (Mitirov 1998: 321).

Khoshuts: These included the Khoshuts of Khoshut-Donduk and the Lekbei and their sons.

Kostenkov notes that, after most Torghuts and some Khoshuts migrated in 1771, the remaining Torghuts and Khoshuts preserved the former division between them. There were exceptions, however: the Tsaatan and Keryad (Keret) tribes transferred to the Khosheutovski ulus, and the Khoshut and Erkenen tribes transferred to the Ikitcokhurovski ulus. Among the Derbets, the changes were introduced during the creation of those aimaks who belonged to zaysangs.

The following table shows the ethnic composition before and after the 1771 migration.

	Torghut population	Derbet population	Khoshut population
	[families]	[families]	[families]
First third of the 18 th century (Ochirov 2009)	51,500	4,000	3,000
Beginning of the 19 th century (Mitirov 1998: 323–329)	13,000	8,000 in the Maloderbetovski ulus; about 700 in the Bol'shederbetovski ulus	1,500

It is clear that, within that period, the Torghut and Khoshut population decreased while the Derbet population increased. After the migration of 1771, some Torghut groups were reassigned to Derbet and Khoshut owners. Thus, part of the Khabuchin of Ekretenevski ulus (Torghuts) moved to the Maloderbetovski ulus. However, their descendants still remembered their origins. In 1771, most of the Khoshut ulus migrated back to the Dzhungaria area. Those remaining were small groups of Iki-Khoshut and Baga-Khoshut. However, according to Kostenkov, the Khoshut ulus was peopled mostly by Torghuts: 185 Khoshut, 58 Khoit (comprised of Telenghit and Urankhas), and 1,174 Torghut kubitkas (including those of the Erketen, Keryad (Keret), Tsaatan, and Shabiner ethnic groups) (Mitirov 1998: 319). In reality, more Khoshut kubitkas (386) were in the Torghut Ikitcokhurovski ulus (Mitirov 1998: 338).

In general, after 1771, the changes in the ethnos's internal structure and the relative populations of its three subethnic groups could not but reflect on its culture.

5. Reasons for the Kalmyk migration from Russia to Dzungaria in 1771

What led to such a turning point in the history of the Kalmyk ethnos? Scientists have various opinions on why the Kalmyks moved to Dzhungaria in 1771.

Writers as early as the beginning of the 19th century debated this point. In the 1830s, it was thought that the Kalmyks were to blame for the deterioration of Russian-Kalmyk relations and that the nature of government intentions regarding the Kalmyks was “philanthropic.” The clerk Nefedyev, missionary Bichurin, and University of Kazan professor Popov noted the intrigues among Kalmyk proprietors, the inexperience of the Khanate governor Ubashi, and even the irresponsibility of the Kalmyk people. The missionary Guriy (Stepanov) claimed in no uncertain terms that the Kalmyks had always maintained a liaison with Dzhungaria but been unable to align themselves with the Russian authorities.

As with the question of why the Oirats migrated to Russia in the 17th century, some tried to explain the 1771 migration as a Kalmyk attempt to establish their own state on Dzhungaria territory. Among these was Bichurin, who investigated Chinese sources (Bichurin 1999: 109). However, to his mind, the most important subjective factor was the intrigue among the aristocracy, who cheated the commoners. Bichurin (Iakinf) wrote that many Kalmyks realized the “hastiness” of their deed and wanted to come back but did not manage to do so. According to Byuler, their return migration was intended to release their historical motherland from the Manchzhurs; however, the migration was triggered by oppressive practices on the part of administrators (local and regional ones, not the Russian government in general) (Byuler 1846).

Some articles blame the Russian system in general for the Kalmyks’ departure. For example, Yur. Kostenko (Kostenko 1869) argues that the commoners were unhappy due to oppression by the aristocracy and the policies of the Russian clerks. Novoletov, author of a historical overview of the Kalmyks, disagrees, holding the Kalmyk elite “responsible” for the fact that their people left (Novoletov 1884: 33–59). Pozdneev shares this opinion (Pozdneev 1886).

The historian and archivist Palmov also cites (among other factors) the social crisis, Russian policies, the secret intentions of aristocrats who cheated the people, and close ties to the historical motherland.

Soviet historiography often mentions socioeconomic factors such as crises, reduced roaming grounds due to the government’s colonization policy, diminished autonomy, intensified noyon exploitation, and poverty. However, the same sources also mention connections to the historical motherland, religious relations, and the defeat of the Dzhungar Khanate, where the Kalmyks intended to settle, as possible causes of the return migration.

In the fundamental text *History of Kalmykia from Ancient Times to our Days* (Istoriya Kalmykii ... 2009, 1), the authors cite a number of objective and subjective causes.

Objective factors include: the limits placed on the Kalmyk Khanate’s independence by external politics, interference in issues of governance, the reorganization of the Zargo Court, the subordination of the Kalmyks to Russian law, the policy of Kalmyk Christianization, the colonization of southern Russia, the social crisis, the movement of the poor into Russian cities and villages for economic reasons, the introduction of new economic activities, the

increased influence of the Russian population, and changes in authority. The reduction in roaming grounds caused by colonization confined the Kalmyks to the most unfavorable and driest regions. One reason Kalmyk noblemen considered moving to the unoccupied territories was the defeat of the Dzhungar Khanate.

Subjective reasons for the 1771 migration include: the young age of the ruler, Ubashi; the unsatisfied ambitions of noyon Tsebek-Dordzhi¹⁰; the position of noyon Sheareng, who appeared in the Kalmyk Khanate after the defeat of Dzhungaria; and support for the move from the religious head of the Kalmyks, Louzang-Dzhalchin. Contemporary scientists also attribute special importance to an (unauthenticated) letter from the Dalai-Lama in support of eastward migration.

Factors such as the severe winter of 1768, the decimation of livestock, intensive military recruitment, and participation in the wars also contributed to the decision to leave.

Recent works also mention such phenomena as national mentality and ethnic solidarity. In general, Dordzhieva's book focuses on socioeconomic factors and the Kalmyks' affiliation with the Oirat ethno-cultural community. At the end of her monograph, she mentions a feature of Kalmyk psychology: so-called "sanamr" ("carelessness" or "serenity") (Dordzhieva 2002: 161–162). This perspective is not justified by the facts. It reminds one of theses regarding the "carelessness" of the Kalmyks that were proposed in the 19th century.

Kolesnik's point of view differs from all those mentioned above. For him, the Kalmyk migration eastward brings to a close the period of great migrations. He believes that the return migration was prompted by a crisis caused by an increasing population and an increasingly ineffective system of traditional social governance. Overcoming this crisis would have been possible (1) with socioeconomic and political reforms or (2) in the traditional way of "dividing the ethnic community according to the sub-ethnic principle" and orchestrating a return migration of the "weakest uluses to the new lands" (Kolesnik 2003). According to Kolesnik, only the second option was viable because Russia was questioning the sovereignty of the Kalmyk Khanate, and the Dzhungar's defeat created the illusion that it would be possible to establish a new khanate on its territory. We find Kolesnik's thesis unconvincing, however.

The division of the ethnos into two parts and the migration eastward of one of those parts had great consequences. Those who left for Central Asia began a new chapter in their history. For those who stayed, the migration was a tragedy, partly because their population decreased by 75% and partly because they thought of the steppes along the Volga river as their motherland.

The *History of Kalmykia from Ancient Times to our Days* states: "many dozens of years have passed since the times when Kalmyks appeared on the steppes along the Volga River. Those Kalmyks who were born and grew up on the banks of the Volga River were more than confident that the steppe was their motherland. Such a view was popular not only among working people, but also among most of the nobles as early as the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century. Tchakdordzhab wrote a letter about his brother's Sanchzhab (Sanzhip) departure for Dzhungaria in 1701, addressing himself to Peter the 1st in 1719: 'As for me, I could not leave my motherland and migrated near the Volga with success'" (Istoriya Kalmykii ... 2009: 1).

The Kalmyk national song about Ubashi Khan (*Uvsh Khan*), devoted to the return

migration of 1771, includes the words *Mana noyn han Uvsh manigan jahtha gismb? Shargad harsn torghut hamaran odv gihv? Hovng, Idjl hoornd harvh baran yzgdhsh, Homndj nydyg torghut hamaran odv gihv?* (Did our Khan-noyon Ubashi think about us? What should we say? Where did the Torghuts, making such a noise, go? There is not a single silhouette seen between Kuban and Volga. What should we say? Where did the migrating Torghuts go with their belongings?). The disregard for traditional nomad grounds associated initially with the Khan is criticized: *Ulastn gidg golyg uslur muuta gismch? Harm gidg golyg havrdjng muuta gismch? Nyarn gidg golyg namrdjn muuta gismch?* (Torskn Gazrin Dud 1989: 36–37). (“Did you really think the watering point on the River Ulastn is not worthy? Did you really think the spring nomad grounds on the River Kharm are bad? Did you really believe the autumn nomad grounds on the River Nyarn are bad?”). The people’s attitude toward the departure of Ubashi and his counselors, who ignored the ancestors’ decision, is reflected in the words *Urđk syadudig uha tatuta bolgsmch? Haana cagin syadudig halamdj tatuta bolhsmch?* (“Did you really think the former nobles not intelligent enough? Did you really think that the nobles of the khan (in earlier) times were not clever enough?”).

We can feel the sorrow in the simple words of this folk song about the loss of a national identity (the autonomous Kalmyk Khanate) due to an abrupt reduction in population and territory, a decrease in economic potential, a reduction in military and economic activity, and numerous losses in the cultural sphere.

6. The problem of the specificity of ethnic Kalmyk culture

The song about the Kalmyk migration was written shortly the events it narrates occurred. Note that it uses the ethnonym “Torghut” instead of “Kalmyk.” This fact raises several interconnected questions that require additional research. The first is whether we should date the appearance of the Kalmyk ethnos to the first half of the 18th century or to the last third of the same century (was it an ethno-evolutionary transformation of the social structure or was it ethno-transformational)? The second issue is whether to identify those who migrated to Central Asia as Kalmyks or Oirats. Chinese sources call the newcomers to the territories of Qing China according to their ethnic affiliation—Torghuts or Khoshuts (O perehode torgutov ... 1820; Men Gu Mu Yu Dzi 1895). Kalmyks refer to the Oirats of China as the *sintsyanzki Kalmyks* (“Kalmyks of Xingjiang”). But scientists refer to the “*sintsyanzki Kalmyks*” as “the Oirats of China,” reserving the name “Kalmyks” for Russian Kalmyks. The third question is whether Batmaev is right to state that, after 1771, two segments of the Kalmyk ethnos developed separately in different parts of Eurasia. Perhaps the formation of the Kalmyk nation took place on the Volga River after 1771, and a completely different nation formed in China.

The combination of culture, language, 17th- and 18th-century territorial affiliation, state formation as an autonomous part of Russia, and Bakunin’s evidence that a new ethnonym was used (though not by everybody) in the first half of the 17th century proves that the Kalmyk nationality formed very actively. Subethnic relations were close, and endogamy was characteristic of almost all Kalmyks.

The issue of the ethnonym’s acceptance has not been adequately investigated. Written correspondence from the 17th century illustrates the views of Oirat ethno-political representa-

tives. The Derbet Laban-Donduk, who did not obey governor Donduk-Dashi, wrote this in his letter to Tatischev: *torghuud dorbod gedek, bidn hojor angi njerjetjej ulus bishuu* (“indeed Torghuts and Derbets do not belong to one and the same clan,” or more literally, “those who are named Torghuts and Derbets, aren’t we the two parts of one the same nation?”) (Natsionalny archiv Respubliki Kalmykia. F. 36. C. 180. L: 287; Batmaev 2002: 95–96). The use of ethnonyms linked to the names of ethno-political amalgamations indicates a sense of unity. There is an ancient word for Kalmyks, “turg’ut” (“Torghut”) (Temirova 2001: 93–101), in the Circassian language. Participants in the 1921 revolution in Mongolia were called “Torghuts” even though they included representatives of various Kalmyk subethnoses. The issue of national identity formation during the 1771 return migration is described by the historian Batmaev: “Only by means of their national identity to their subethnos did they recognize themselves as Kalmyks” (Batmaev 2002: 118).

A number of issues surrounding the ethnic origins of the Kalmyks have not been fully investigated. For example, it is generally believed that one literary language was common to all Oirats, because Zaya-Pandita created a specific written language in 1648. However, there are many points of view in the literature on the status of the original Oirat language. For example, the *Nations and Religions* encyclopedia issued by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the RAS (Russian Academy of Sciences) says that the Oirats of China use a western dialect of Mongolian, the Derbets and Zakhchins of Mongolia speak Mongolian, and the Torghuts of Mongolia speak the Torghut dialect of the Oirat language (Zhukovskaya and Reshetov 1998; Zhukovskaya 1998). The Kalmyks speak the Kalmyk language, in which we

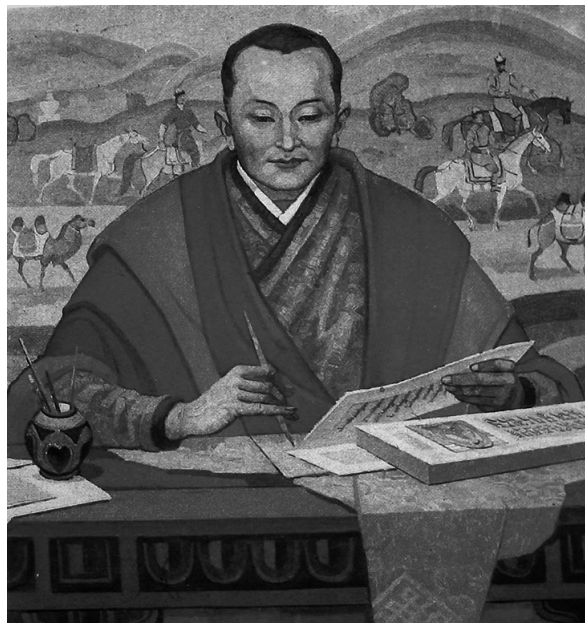


Photo 5 Zaya-Pandita. Painting by G. O. Rokchinsky



Photo 6 Kalmyk family (1925)

can identify dialects and subdialects. However, it is the Kalmyk language that the Oirats of Mongolia call “our native language.”¹¹⁾

The Kalmyks’ culture has been heavily influenced by the nomadic lifestyle of their Oirat ancestors (Bakaeva (eds.) 2010), whose traditional dwellings, clothing, and food were preserved in the material culture of the Kalmyks until the 20th century. A special feature of the Kalmyk dwelling tent was its orientation along the north-south line, similar to the Mongols’. This traditional Oirat characteristic was reproduced in nomadic temples, which were traditionally aligned along the west-east line with the entrance on the eastern side (Bakaeva and Sangadzhiev 2005).

Kalmyk clothing was influenced by an older cultural type (Bakaeva 2008b). Female clothing traditionally included the *terleg* and *tcegdec* dress types for married women and the *biiz* dress type for young girls; the men’s robe was called the “*beshmet*.” The latter exhibits a specific cut characterized by spacious sleeves (similar to those of the women’s *terleg*), a hem with numerous pleats along the waistline, and no wrapover (with a clasp in the middle). The pattern of this robe distinguishes Kalmyks from the Oirats of Mongolia and China, whose typical clothing is a robe with an overwrap closely resembling that of the Mongols. It is highly probable that the Kalmyks’ ancestors wore a special type of shoes.¹²⁾ In the warm climate, however, leather boots became the traditional footwear. The essential element of Kalmyk headwear was the red tassel (or brush); hence the people’s name for themselves: *Ulan Zalata Hal’mg* (“Kalmyk with red tassel”).

Their spiritual culture is related to the cultures of other Oirat peoples (Kalmyks 2010). The epos *Dzhangar* is the gem of Kalmyk folklore. Various folklore genres have parallels in Oirat folklore. The Kalmyks, like others, used the “clear script” (*todo bichig*) writing system created by the philosopher Zaya-Pandita. Traditional Kalmyk beliefs include elements of the

worship of nature, astral objects, and animals and aspects of totem and trade cults and zoology. Their life cycle and calendar rituals resemble those of the Oirats.

The oldest layers of Kalmyk culture can be traced to the Oirat period as well. They reflect the specific legacy of ancestors who inhabited the taiga. Thus, the Kalmyks keep the tradition of celebrating the New Year during the winter solstice (the *Dzhilin Ezn* holiday) and the *Uryus sar* holiday during the first summer month.

We presume that these are relics of the ancient two-season calendar system and relate to the ancient myth of the sun, deer, and bear (Bakaeva 2009). There are several specific attributes of the Tsagan Aav custom, including the existence of the protector of all Kalmyk people, both forms of which are linked to the *Dzhilin Ezn* and *Uryus sar* holidays. The unique iconography of Tsagan Aav, based on the earliest depictions, is observed only in Kalmyk culture. The early Kalmyk calendar preserved traditions going back to the hunting period of Oirat history. The sacrifice to fire is still practiced to ensure fertility (for a clan), to heal sicknesses, and for other reasons (Bakaeva 2009). This ritual goes back to ancient hunting and



Photo 7 The Kalmyk deity Tsagan aav



Photo 8 The Kalmyk Buddhist Temple near Volga. The beginning of the 20th century

fishing rituals and has totemic attributes. It is indeed fascinating that, though the Kalmyks were nomads by the time they became one nation, we still find traces of deer and bear cults among them (Bakaeva 2009). Their preservation of ancient pre-shaman traditions can be explained by the struggle against shamans declared in the laws of 1640. Two other factors contributed to the preservation of certain elements of ancient Oirat culture: (1) the Kalmyks' ancestors were relatively isolated from their kindred Mongol tribes, while the influence of neighboring peoples was insignificant due to numerous cultural differences (lifestyle and language); and (2) the Kalmyks' ancestors migrated from Central Asia in the 17th century, and Oirat culture developed in close contact with kindred cultures, facilitating ethnocultural exchanges.

The current state of Kalmyk culture is conditioned by its 20th-century transformations. During the first third of the century, a nomadic lifestyle was replaced by a settled one, a change reflected in aspects of their material culture. In Soviet times, Soviet ideology and atheism led to the loss of components of Kalmyk Buddhist culture; many temples were closed or destroyed, and art objects and cultural documents were lost. In particular, the policy of creating a “new historical community—the Soviet people” inspired intercultural exchanges with Russia and other nations. Two wars, the Civil War and WWII, caused human and cultural losses as well. Between 1941 and 1943, about 43,000 inhabitants of Kalmykia went to



Photo 9 The new Buddhist Temple “Burhn-bagshin Altyn Sume” in Elista. 2005

war. In 1943, the Kalmyks were falsely denounced and deported to the eastern USSR. Unlike some other exiled nations, the Kalmyks were scattered from the Aral Sea to Sakhalin and from Issyk-kul to Taymir. In 1957, Kalmyk autonomy was restored, and the people returned to their homeland. The consequences of their exile, however, were devastating: population shrinkage, an economic rollback, a lack of educated cadres, and a language crisis.

The last decades of the 20th century saw a revival in Kalmyk national culture. The strongest signs of this revival were religious. There were no Buddhist community or Buddhist temples among the Kalmyks before 1988; now there are temples in every district of the Republic of Kalmykia, and stupas are also being built. Two major Buddhist centers (the Syakysn Sume and the Burhn-bagshin Altyn Sume) have been established in Elista, and the Republic of Kalmykia has become a well-known Buddhist center. The success of the national revival is reflected in popular interest in history and the Oirat legacy. Many social organizations now focus on the revival of the national culture and language.

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Notes

- 1) The Torghuts migrated during the 1630s and 1640s with tayishi Kho-Orluk.
- 2) The Derbets were led by tayishi Solom-Tceren and arrived in the Volga region in 1673. However, Derbets were also included in the uluses of Kho-Orluk. According to M.L. Kichikov, the fact that the migrating Derbets were led by Solom-Tceren and that he later became the head of all Volga

Derbets is indirect evidence that he was Kho-Orluk's grandson on his mother's side (Kichikov 1994: 99).

- 3) Three thousand Khoshut kibitkas (nomad tents) were led by tayishi Kundelen Ubashi in 1663. One thousand more migrated in 1670, led by Dordzh Araptan, widow of the Dzhungar ruler Ochirtu-Tecen Khan.
- 4) Kalmyks use the term "Zyungar" for migrants from Dzhungaria. Among these were Tsoros (Choros), who were called by that name as well.
- 5) Tsoros, or Choros, who were also called "Zungars" (and "Dzhungars" by the Kalmyks), migrated in 1686, led by tayishi Tcagan-Batur.
- 6) The author made these calculations based on an average annual growth rate of 0.1–0.6%.
- 7) 'Shert': the oath of allegiance to treaties with Russia.
- 8) According to Kichikov M.L., the Kalmyk Khanate was formed in the 1650s (Kichikov 1966).
- 9) The uran (call) of Kalmyk Batuts reads: "Tuula toha urata, bag mongol yasta"; that of Tsaatan reads "Tuula toha urata, shar mongl yasta."
- 10) Tcebek-Dorzhi was the grandson of Khan Donduk-Ombo by his elder son, Galdan-Norbo. He thought of himself as equal to Ubashi, the son of Donduk-Dashi.
- 11) Information gathered during the research expeditions of KIGI RAN to western Mongolia. 2007, 2008.
- 12) The Torghuts of Mongolia remember that, in 1771, their ancestors wore woolen shoes called tooku (Bakaeva 2008 a: 24–31).
- 13) Lunnyi svet. Kalmytskiye istoriko-literaturniye pamyatniki. (Moonlight. Kalmyk historical and literary treasures.). Elista, 1993.
- 14) Nationalny arhiv Respubliki Kalmykia. F.36. D.180. (National archive of the Republic of Kalmykia (NA RK). Fund 36. Case 180.).