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## The Oirats of Kyrgyzstan : Social, Cultural, and Identity Practices of the Sartkalmaks

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## **The Oirats of Kyrgyzstan: Social, Cultural, and Identity Practices of the Sartkalmaks<sup>1)</sup>**

**B. Z. NANZATOV (Ph.D)**

*Senior Research Fellow,  
Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies,  
Siberian Division, Russian Academy of Sciences*

This paper presents the results of ethnographic research in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2011. Today, Kyrgyzstan is home to many ethnic groups of Mongolian origin, like the Sartkalmak—representatives of the Oirat peoples. This paper highlights the most significant aspects of the life of the Sartkalmaks: their settlement on the territory of Kyrgyzstan, their ethnic composition, their abundance, their genealogy myths, and their religious and ethnic identity. The relevance of this study is defined by the significant “gap” of 36 years in the ethnographic research on this group of Mongolian origin.

**Key words:** Sartkalmak, ethnic identity, Islam, Mongolian people, documents connected

1. Introduction
  - 1.1 Geographic distribution
  - 1.2 Population
  - 1.3 Ethnonym
  - 1.4 Folk etymology
2. Ethnic composition
  - 2.1 Ethnogenetic legends
  - 2.2 Foundation of Chelpek
  - 2.3 Foundation of Boru-Bash
  - 2.4 Bayan Bahy
  - 2.5 Khara-bator
3. Religion
4. Language
5. Ethnic identity

## 1. Introduction

Sartkalmaks are a small group of people of Oirat origin, now living in the Kyrgyz Republic. This Mongolian ethnic group has rarely been studied by anthropologists. The present study is based on the author's field materials, collected in 2011, and represents the most current trends in the development of the ethnic group.

### 1.1 Geographic distribution

The Sartkalmaks of rural Kyrgyzstan settled compactly in four villages—Chelpek, Burma-Suu, Tash-Kiya, and Boru-Bash—in the Aksu district of Issyk-Kul province. The first three villages form a single administrative unit called “Chelpek.” The villages of Boru-Bash and Cherik form the Boru-Bash administrative unit. These villages are located in close proximity to the regional center, the town of Karakol. Chelpek and Tash-Kiya merge with Karakol in the southwest and south and with Boru-Bash in the northwest. The agricultural lands of Chelpek and Boru-Bash are connected to the west of Karakol. The Sartkalmaks also live in Karakol. One region of the city, commonly known as the “Smorodina,” houses mostly Sartkalmaks resettled from Chelpek. At present, the boundary between Chelpek and Smorodina has almost been erased.

Also in the Aksu district, there are three more villages—Cherik, Kerege-Tash, and Sarykamys—where clans of Oirat descent live as one Kyrgyz tribal unit of Bugu, excepting the Sartkalmaks.

### 1.2 Population

The last official last census counted 5,824 Sartkalmaks in Kyrgyzstan. Some documents record another number, about 8,000. According to informants, however, Sartkalmaks were not included in the list of Kyrgyzstan's peoples. Instead, their number was estimated using the populations of the Chelpek and Boru-Bash administrative units.

A significant number (between two thirds and three quarters) of Sartkalmaks are documented as Kyrgyz, a fact that renders the census result inaccurate as well. The Sartkalmaks believe that their number now stands between 15,000 and 20,000.

### 1.3 Ethnonym

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, the Oirats have many endoethnonyms and exoethnonyms. The most common self-designations are *Kalmak*, *Sartkalmak*, and *Oirat*. Elders still remember the other ethnonyms *Khotun-halimag* and *Khoton*. Most of the neighboring peoples, like the Kyrgyz, Uighur, Dungan, and Russians, use the term *Kalmak* (*Kalmyk*). The word *Kalmak* (*Kalmyk*) exists in most Turkic languages whose speakers—like the Uighur, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek peoples—have interacted with Oirats.

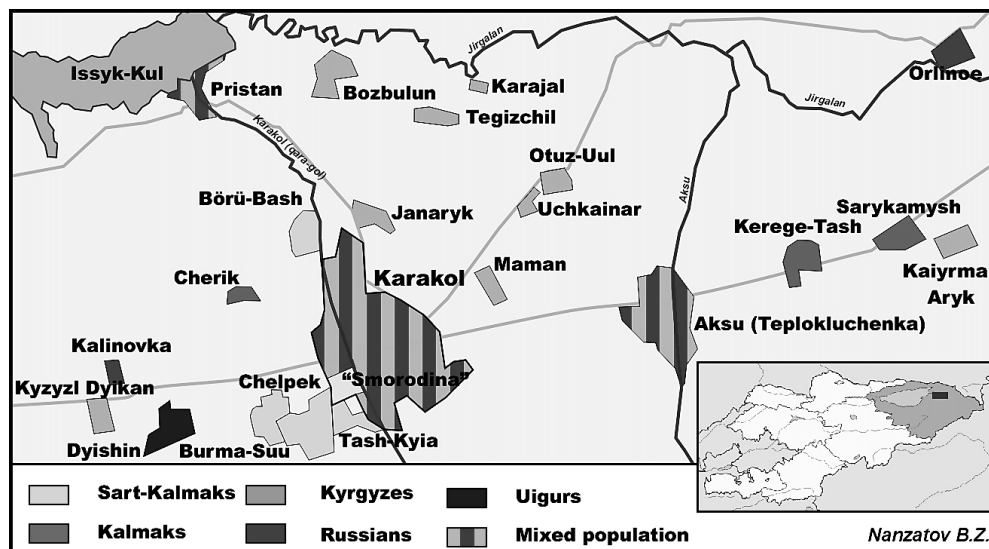
There is special term for differentiating among Issyk-Kul and Kulja Sartkalmaks, the Kalmyks of Russia, and the Oirats of China. For Sartkalmaks, this term is *Sartkalmak*, *Khotun-Khalimag*, or *Khoton*, but for Oirats and Kalmyks it is *Kharagolyn Khalimag*.

#### 1.4 Folk etymology

The origin of the ethnonym *Sartkalmak* is directly related to a genealogical legend of one of the biggest tribes, which says that the Sartkalmaks originated from mixed marriages between Olod-Oirats and Uzbeks. In the Oirat language, Uzbeks are called *Khotun* (*Khoton*); thus, the progeny of such marriages were called *Khoton*, *Khoton-Oold*, or *Khoton-Oirad* (Nanzatov 2011). Later, the term “*Khoton*” became “*Sart*” in Turkic languages as, in the Kirghizian language, “*Uzbek*” is “*Sart*.” There is another version in which the term “*Sart*” is derived from the kalmykian “*sarta*,” meaning “with Moon,” referring to the Muslim religion of the Sartkalmaks.<sup>2)</sup>

However, in our opinion, the term “Sartkalmak” is an exoethnonym, given to the Oirat population by their Turkic neighbors. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century East Turkistan, the local population did not have one single ethnonym (like “Uighurs”) and referred to themselves mostly as “Muslims” or “Turks.” Since then, many micro self-identifiers have been used, including *kashgari*, *urumchi*, *hami*, and *taranchi*. In northern Kyrgyz, the exoethnonym for the settled Turkic population was “Sart.” In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were designated the ancestors of the contemporary Uzbeks and Uighurs.

However, with the revival of the ethnonym “Uighur” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term “Sart” narrowed to denote only the Uzbeks (for more about the term “Sart,” see Abashin, 2004). Thus, the term “Sart-Kalmak” could denote the Oirats of East Turkestan in the Kirgizian language, or it could refer to the Muslim Oirats, just as “Kalmak-Kyrgyz” was used for the Buddhist Kyrgyz people.



Map 1 Sartkalmaks of Kyrgyzstan

## 2. Ethnic composition

The Sartkalmaks of Kyrgyzstan are members of the Oirat tribe called “Olet,” “Olod,” or “Oold.” There are currently many ethnic divisions among the Sartkalmaks, called *yasun* in Kalmykian and *uruu* in Krygyzian: bayyn-bahy, khara-bator, shonkur, solto, jediger, monkush, hudan (hodon), kerem, sarypaldy (sarybaldy), karakoz, kuykun uulu (kyuyukyuyunun), orbendik (orvondik) jaryn orku, chagan, mool-mamed (mongolmamed), jyl-mamed, chimid (chumot), bejinsharyp (beijinsharyp), chirik (cherik), mongoldor, tavan-talha, and tavan-har (Nanzatov 2011).

The Kyrgyz people have undergone three major stages of ethnic development as a group. In the first stage, the Khitan, early medieval Mongolian tribes had a large tribal union, called *kytai*, which had existed since the time of Kara-Khitan or Western Liao in the territory of Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan. Next came the Mongol era, when tribes such as the kungrat, naiman, merkit, bargy, noigut, katagan, and baaryn arrived and the Kyrgyz ethnos was formed (Abramson 1971: 47–50). The last stage was the Oirat formation, which existed from the fall of the Junggar Khanate until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During that time, groups of Oirats stayed in the Dzungaria dependent territories, while the Muslim-Oirat newcomers from the territories of Gulja, Kashgar, and Tekes under Xinjiang governorship moved to Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Much of the Oirat population remained in Kyrgyz lands and joined the Kyrgyz people as Kyrgyz Kalmaks. In Kyrgyzstan, the Kalmaks settled across the entire territory. Large arrays of Kalmaks have been observed in the north, in the Chui Valley, in Naryn, and around Issyk-kul. In the south, Kalmaks live on the Krygyz-Tajik border in Batkkend and Osh, and in Tajikistan among the Karategin Kyrgyz. In addition, in the immediate vicinity of Kyrgyzstan, Kalmaks live in the Ferghana Valley and Bukhara among the Uzbeks (Nanzatov 2011).

### 2.1 Ethnogenetic legends

The largest sartkalmakov clans are the bayyn-bahy and hara-bator. There are legends about the origin of these tribes and the formation of the Chelpek and Boru-Bash.

### 2.2 Foundation of Chelpek

Oirats headed by Mamun-Ata and Oshur-Ata returned from Tekes to the valley of Karakol in the 1870s.

Upon their arrival, the Sartkalmaks gathered and sacrificed pinto, each person dipping his hands into the blood and swearing that the Sartkalmaks would not disband and would always live together in this area (Nanzatov 2011).

### 2.3 Foundation of Boru-Bash

The people of Chelpek also remember a legend about the appearance of the Sartkalmak settlement Boru-Bash: after the Olod founded Chelpek, the next wave of Oirats came to their relatives from the area of Gulja and Tekes. After some time, the Oirats from Chelpek discovered that Kyrgyz warriors had attacked, smashed, and looted the new Oirat settlement and enslaved its inhabitants. The population of Chelpek collected money and went to buy the

people of their clan out of Kyrgyz captivity. They then asked the Russian authorities for land for the Oirats in the same valley of Khara-gol. Thus a Sartkalmak village, Boru-Bash, was established in the valley of Khara-gol (AA, Chelpek, 2011).

#### **2.4 Bayan Bahy**

The merchant Bahy arrived in Urumqi with Olods from Namangan. He was Uzbek in origin and spoke an Oiratian language, Hoton. He married an Olod woman, and his children were also married to Olods. Thus a new clan, the Bayyn Bahy (which means “rich Bahy”), arose. They lived in Gulja and Tekes and moved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the valley of Khara-gol (Kirgh, Karakol) near Lake Tumer-Nuur (Kirgh, Issyk-kol). This tribe is now one of the biggest among the Sartkalmaks (Nanzatov 2011).

#### **2.5 Khara-bator**

A childless Kirghiz took in a boy of two or three named Kharki. The boy did not know he was Olod. Once, when he was a teenager, he pushed an old slave woman collecting firewood. She scattered the twigs and angrily told him he was Olod like she was, not Kyrgyz. She also said that his parents had been killed by Kyrgyz.

After conversing with his stepfather, Kharki went to the mountains with stolen horses. There he found some Olods who had escaped from Kyrgyz captivity and formed a band to help Oirats in bad situations. After that time, he became known as “Khara-Bator” (or “Kara-Batyr” in Kyrgyzian). His descendants formed a tribe called khara-bator, to which the hodon (hudan) and sarypaldy tribes also belonged (Nanzatov 2011)

### **3. Religion**

Religion plays a major role in Sartkalmak self-identification. The Kalmaks consider themselves devout Muslims whose ancestors began to practice Islam even before the Kyrgyz encountered it. There is a mosque in Chelpek dating to 1889, one of the first in the Issyk-Kul region, that the Sartkalmaks point to as proof that they were the first to adopt Muslim culture.

The Sartkalmaks link themselves with Islam unconditionally and do not permit anyone to convert. Appealing to a different faith is not even feasible in the Islamic environment of Kyrgyzstan. The Oirats of Kyrgyzstan have tended to maintain a relationship with the Kalmyks of Russia. Contemporary Sartkalmaks keep cultural contacts with and study in the schools and universities of the republic of Kalmykia. Russian Kalmyks are well known as followers of the “yellow faith,” Buddhism, and one might think that living so close to them might spark an interest in other religions. However, none of the male Sartkalmak respondents claimed ever to have had any relationship with Kalmykia (despite having studied, worked, or lived there), and all refused to renounce Islam, though none insisted that their spouses or children adopt their faith.<sup>3)</sup> In contrast with their attitude toward Christianity, respondents did not have negative feelings toward Buddhism.

This rejection of other faiths is most likely due to a fear of losing their Islamic culture, traditions, and lifestyle—essential components of religion—and perhaps to the foreignness of Buddhism, which was not familiar to the nearest ancestors of the Sartkalmaks. The



**Photo 1** Boru-Bash Mosque

contemporary Sartkalmaks of Kyrgyzstan realize that their people originated in an ancient land, East Turkestan, where Islam had spread by the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries among the ancestors of the Sartkalmaks, the Olods. Those Olods, an Oirat people, had no relationship with Russian Kalmyks. Islam is for Sartkalmak society a stable component of the traditional worldview, a phenomenon that illuminates ancient Kalmak tradition, and an implicit hint to the Kyrgyz majority, which is Muslim, in the Issyk-Kul region. Being a “real Muslim” is important to the Sartkalmaks in Kyrgyz society. To the Kyrgyz people, the Kalmaks seem more religious and more likely to visit a mosque, perform prayers, follow the precepts of Islam, and refrain from consuming alcohol.

However, Sartkalmak religiosity, and that of the entire Issyk-Kul population, is very superficial. Local people rarely pray five times a day. They justify this by citing their lack of free time: “It’s better to work in the garden than to lose so much time praying and asking God for help.” Mosques have been built in every village but are empty most of the time. The only day of the week when the mosque is alive is Friday, when older men usually try to gather for Namaz (prayer). Mullahs are invited to houses after deaths and for children’s events (such as circumcisions).

One of the main indicators of religiosity is the ability to read the Quran (or “Kuran” in the local lexicon). Most older people read the Suras, but few people can understand the essence of the prayers. Though the everyday lives of believers flow from this book, which is written in Cyrillic, the contents of the Quran have not become accessible. Indeed, the holy book is not found in every home. Keeping the Quran requires compliance with certain requirements and prohibitions, and not every family can observe them. The Salah also requires ritual adherence to personal purity. When someone is unable to look after himself because of illness or old age, he is relieved of the ritual.





**Photo 2** Bektur-aji Mansurov kharabatur

Categorically defending the incompatibility of a Muslim and an Orthodox living in the same house, respondents cannot explain what specific stumbling blocks may arise in such situations. The main differences in confessional practices they cite are still food taboos and preferences: “Russians eat pork!” while others, like the Mongols, “improperly slaughter animals without spilling blood on the ground; it is a sin.” What the essence of sin is, the respondents cannot explain. Some give examples of particular etiquette: Muslims take their food using only the right hand (but do not realize that most people around the world eat the same way, unless they are left-handed); a devout Muslim goes to and away from a toilet by the left foot. As should be clear, the population’s ostensibly high “religiosity” is more about appearances than about the content of people’s minds.

More highly educated people separate religious fanaticism from faith. They downplay the ritual side of religion and do not consider religious differences to be insurmountable obstacles in interpersonal relations: “We are not fanatics, I have a brother married to a Russian, a sister married to a Russian; they live normally. Not all Russians eat pork, and not all Muslims do not eat pork ... Muslims with TB eat pork and are cured. It is not a sin for them” (Nanzatov 2011).

The pilgrimage to Mecca is important to all Muslims, Sartkalmak men included.<sup>4)</sup> It is also generally obligatory, but for much of Kyrgyzstan’s population, the financial costs of the journey are prohibitive. Broadly, informants estimate the trip’s cost at between \$3,000 and \$4,000. Many postpone it for a variety of reasons: “I don’t want to go to Mecca right now. It is too early for me. It would be necessary to observe many restrictions—no drinking, no smoking, no talking loudly, etc—after the Hajj. I’m not ready for it” (Nanzatov 2011). A significant number of pilgrims are middle-aged people—such as officials and businessmen—but the Hajj does not change them. After visiting Mecca, they do not adhere to the prohibi-



tions: “Our deputies go to Mecca almost every year, but what’s the point? They continue to drink and walk as usual” (Nanzatov 2011). For middle-aged people, rooted in an atheism inherited from the Soviet era, the journey to Mecca is an attempt to assert themselves in the eyes of their countrymen and obtain the respected status of *adji* (or *hadji*).

#### 4. Language

According to the Kyrgyz, Sartkalmaks forgot their native language long ago and use only the Kyrgyz and Russian languages now. This is generally true; only the older Sartkalmaks speak their native language. Old men feeling nostalgic for lost traditions prefer to communicate in the Kalmak language, which is also used as a “secret language” when conversants wish to keep information to themselves or discuss an issue privately.

Young people do not know the Kalmak language, but they are willing to study it. The older generation blames itself for the younger’s ignorance. The tradition of native-language communication was interrupted in Sartkalmak families during the postwar years. There were objective reasons for this. During the Second World War, Russian Kalmyks were deported to Siberia. The fact that the Sartkalmaks belonged to the Oirat community and their genetic relationship with the Russian Kalmyks attracted the attention of intelligence agencies. The commonality with the Kalmyks did not lead to massive repression, but it did have a number of negative consequences for the Sartkalmak people, whose kinship with “enemies of the Soviet people” and “traitors” could not go unpunished. Soviet distrust of the Sartkalmak meant that people were used as soldiers throughout the remaining war years. After the war, the persecution continued, complicating Sartkalmak education, employment, and promotion. Soviet stereotypes of whole nations have been very stable for a long time. These stereotypes still exist, layering on top of existing negative images imposed by Soviet authorities. Their persistence is a product of the traditions of the Soviet era, during which Soviet xenophobia played a fundamental role as an instrument of ideological and political mobilization and control for the authorities; xenophobia was also needed as a mechanism of psychological compensation (Dyatlov 2011: 453). The Sartkalmaks were forced to conceal their ethnic identity, indicating their nationality as Kirghiz on passports and refusing to use their native language even among family.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sartkalmaks spoke their own language. The traditional ways of life adopted by the people of Kyrgyzstan, along with a relatively secluded life within their ethnic community, helped them preserve that language. Integration into a single community of “Soviet people” facilitated the forgetting of minority languages. Education in schools and institutions of higher education were conducted in only the Kyrgyz and Russian languages. Aleksey Burdukov has written about the Sartkalmaks’ loss of their native language in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: “Caught in the Kyrgyz-Russian environment, they naturally began to forget their writing. The Arabic and Russian alphabets won over Zaya Pandita’s alphabet” (Burdukov 1935: 72).

Their lack of native language skills and use of the Kyrgyzian and Russian languages are not reasons to identify the Sartkalmaks as Kyrgyz. According to the local Kirghiz population, a Kalmak can always be identified when he talks. It is noteworthy that there is a Kalmikian

accent and dialect in local Kyrgyzian. This dialect is used by all the settlers of Chelpek, Boru-Bash, Tash-Kiya, and Burma-Suu, even by young men who have never spoken Oiratian: “When Kalmaks speak Kyrgyzian, their speech sounds rough, and some sounds are rendered as ‘k’ instead of ‘g’.” This is an interesting situation: the Oirat language will not “forget about itself,” as it is uniquely manifested in the speech of the second generation, even though they have never spoken it.

Most Sartkalmaks speak Russian fluently in Kyrgyz society: “Kalmaks often live near Russians; that is why they speak Russian well” (Nanzatov 2011) An excellent knowledge of Russian facilitates higher education and contributes to successful careers.

Russian is a factor that contributes to the mobility of the Sartkalmaks. The development of the Russian Federation is less painful for them than for many Kyrgyz and other ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan, such as the Dungans and Uighurs, who rarely go to Russia for work.

Thus Kalmaks from Kyrgyzstan trade in the markets of Tuva and Khakassia, where, according to long-settled Kyrgyz in Tuva, they form the majority of traders from Kyrgyzstan, mostly because of their fluent Russian, which the Kyrgyz lack (Nanzatov 2011).

## 5. Ethnic identity

Earlier, we analyzed various aspects of contemporary social life among the Sartkalmaks of Kyrgyzstan. As studies have demonstrated, the Sartkalmaks’ unique culture and worldview are manifested in everyday economic practices, language, and social relations. Nevertheless, as with many other nations, ethnicity is the most relevant and conscious facet of their identity, satisfying a collective demand and acquiring special significance in a polyethnic society, where one among multiple identities is preferred (Buryatskaya 2004: 9).

Contemporary Sartkalmaks express their ethnic identity by selecting the Kalmak nationality on their civil passports. Not everyone dares to do this. A significant number of young Sartkalmaks prefer to be listed as Kyrgyz—not only those from families in which one parent is Kyrgyz but also those with two Kalmak parents. It is simpler to be Kyrgyz in contemporary Kyrgyz society than to be Kalmak, and educated and ambitious people understand this particularly well. Many Kalmaks educated in Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev cannot fulfill their academic potential at home and move to Russia, Kazakhstan, or elsewhere. However, some Kalmaks still choose to indicate their nationality, challenging their society and their fortunes: “I am Kalmak. Even though I do not speak the native language and I observe Kyrgyz traditions, I feel myself a Kalmak. Something inside me does not allow me to forget that I am Kalmak” (Nanzatov 2011). This interviewee could not explain what formed the basis of his ethnic identity. The neighboring Kyrgyz have their own interpretation of Kalmak identity: “Now, Kalmaks are practically Kyrgyz. They have nothing left of Kalmak culture. They speak Kyrgyz. They have the same rituals, such as for weddings or funerals. Nevertheless, they separate themselves from the Kyrgyz. In the past, the ancestors of the Kyrgyz fought against the Kalmaks, forcing them from land. They still remember this. For example, we harvest wheat with combine harvesters. Near us, the Kalmaks work in their fields. We offer them our help to harvest their wheat. They do not accept it, saying they can do it themselves. Such strange people they are. On the one hand, it seems they have completely forgotten their

language and culture, but on the other hand they remain Kalmaks” (AA, Karakol, 2011).

Kyrgyz society does not allow a forgetting of the fact that Kalmaks are not Kyrgyz. Both the political elite and common folk regularly address this topic. When a large group of researchers, specialists, and amateurs painstakingly researched and published the genealogies of state bureaucrats of various ranks, newspapers were replete with headlines such as “Till when should we obey a Sartkalmak?” “Will Sartkalmak Kaptagaev turn Kyrgyzstan into Kalmakstan?” “Is Otunbaeva a Kalmak?” and “Is it possible that Sariev is also Kalmak?”

Non-Kyrgyz origins plague almost every political figure and state bureaucrat. Most often, these are Kalmak origins, and this fact terrifies some Kyrgyz “patriots”: “An Usupbaev, a money-bag from the Talas clan *Kytai* and a big genealogy buff who studies the origins of the Kyrgyz, found the following: it turned out that Otunbaeva herself is a member of the Bash-Moyun clan from Saruu. People from the Talas Bash-Moyun say, ‘We came from Alai and we are among the thirty sons.’ The connoisseurs of genealogies studied the Bash-Moyun from top to bottom and came to the conclusion that they had ancient Kalmak blood. Oh my! We made Akaev a Kalmak, or a Kazakh, and Bakiev a Dungan, and now our contemporary president turns out to be Kalmak. When will a pure-blooded Kyrgyz ascend to the ‘throne’?”<sup>5)</sup> The study and reconstruction of genealogies, what one newspaper calls the “headache,” became common throughout Central Asia after Kyrgyzstan became independent. Now, “the experts of ‘Sanzhiry’ (genealogies), who thoroughly research the genealogies of big bosses and politicians, are anxious.”<sup>6)</sup> What causes the negative attitude of the Kyrgyz majority toward the presence of Kalmak blood in the genealogies of important persons? The answer can be found in the national Kyrgyz heroic epic *Manas*. This epic is hugely important in the lives of the Kyrgyz, most of whom perceive it as a reliable historical source, and recounts the life of a real hero, ancestor, and leader of the Kyrgyz named Manas-ata. The text is a reference book for each Kyrgyz family. Excerpts from it are learnt by heart, and there are people who can reproduce the entire epic from memory. There is even a special organization devoted to studying the epic: the Center for Manas Studies and Art of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. The question of including *Manas* studies in the mandatory high school and university curricula, perhaps instead of other subjects, is being discussed.<sup>7)</sup>

According to the epic, Manas-ata found these blessed lands and led his people to the Issyk-Kul. The text contains information about people whom the Kyrgyz had to fight on the way to their new home. Also described are the territories, with names very similar to those of lands that the contemporary Kyrgyz inhabit. The *Manas* also speaks of the Kalmaks, whom it represents negatively. The Kalmak ancestor, the mighty hero Kongurbai, kills Manas. This episode determined the fate of the Sartkalmaks in Kyrgyz society, as there are regular references to bad Kongurbai, from reproaches to open accusations of Manas’ murder: “Because of this, we had and still have so many problems”; “Our ancestors beat up the Kyrgyz well and the Kyrgyz are now offended” (AA, Chelpek, Karakol, 2011) There is information to suggest that the contemporary version of *Manas* (with its negative characterization of Kongurbai) was developed by students of the text who were told correct the original, in which a Chinese, not Oirat, man was the negative character. The replacement of the Chinese antagonist with an Oirat one may have been a tactic to avoid complicating Soviet-Chinese relations.

Before the advent of Soviet power, the Oirats of Kyrgyzstan maintained relations with

the Xingjian Oirats. Some families retained kinship relations with the Oirats of China. Nevertheless, the Kalmyks of Russia are now perceived as closer kin, for several reasons. The Russian empire had a special attitude to the Kalmaks. The Russian Cossacks, who invaded the Issyk-Kul region, rendered assistance to Kalmaks who suffered from the Kyrgyz foray. All six somons of the Kara-Kalmaks (Olods) were accepted as Russian subjects. After the Russian-Chinese border demarcation in 1882, the Kalmaks had the choice of remaining on the Russian side or roaming to China. They chose to remain in the Russian empire, even rendering assistance during the construction of a Russian town named Karakol by transporting timber and firewood and providing meat and milk. Perhaps the Russians derived their trust in the Kalmaks from their previous experience with the Kalmyks, who served the empire faithfully. It is possible that the Russians associated the Kalmaks with the Kalmyks and that this formed the basis of the understanding that flourished during the Soviet era.

The Soviet period was an important factor. Russian became the *lingua franca*, and the “Iron Curtain” disrupted traditional Kalmak ties with the Oirats of China. The attitude of the Sartkalmaks toward the Kalmyks of Russia results from the fact that Kalmykia is the only Oirat state in the former USSR. Elista is the cultural capital of all Kalmyks from the former Soviet Union: “Although there are no close ties, we all know that we have our own Kalmyk republic” (AA, Chelpek, 2011).

The Republic of Kalmykia has shown interest in the Kharagolyn Kalmyks (the Sartkalmaks). Scholars from scientific centers and the university studied their language and folklore, while art and folk groups used to visit them. What the Republic of Kalmykia principally offers the Sartkalmaks is the possibility of studying not only in Kalmykia’s institutions of higher education but also in other cities of the former Soviet Union. The special desire for education that characterizes the contemporary Kalmaks was typical of Kalmak youth in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, A. Burdukov describes: “The desire of the young people to study is strong, but the problem is that, due to their small numbers and the squeezing of the Kalmaks into the general structure of the Kyrgyz population, there are few opportunities for further education.” Today, thanks to the CPSU Republic’s Committee of Kalmykia, Sartkalmaks have access to free higher education in Kalmykia, and in 2011, Kalmykia allocated 15 places for Sartkalmaks who want to study in Elista.

The Karakol Kalmyks were invited to the celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kalmyk incorporation into the Russian empire in 2009. However, not everyone managed to go to Elista. One of the interviewees was denied a business trip by the head of the region, who expressed his disapproval: “Why would you go there? You are like a wolf who is being fed but tries to escape into the forest anyway” (AA, Chelpek, 2011).

During the interethnic violence of 2010, the President of Kalmykia addressed the government of Kyrgyzstan and promised to accept all Sartkalmaks into his republic if the Kyrgyz government could not guarantee their safety. This statement was very much appreciated by the Sartkalmaks and inspired hope that they were not alone. Marriages now occur between Kalmyks and Sartkalmaks despite their religious differences.

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## Notes

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- 2) <http://forum.freekalmykia.org/index.php?showtopic=435>
- 3) Unlike the men, some Sartkalmak women have married Kalmyks, thus acquiring Buddhist relatives.
- 4) It is not necessary for women to visit Mecca in Sartkalmak society.
- 5) "Is Otunbayeva-kalmak"—*Отунбаева–калмак?* Газета «Асман press» № 17 от 12.05.2011/с.2 (<http://www.gezitter.org/society/2645/>)
- 6) "Is it real, that Sariiev is Kalmak" *Неужели вправду Сариев «калмак»?* Газета «Фабула» №48 от 15.07.2011/с.3 (<http://www.gezitter.org/society/3717/>)
- 7) "Student, 'Manas Studies' is waiting for you" Студент, тебя ждет «Манасоведение»; 08-06-2011 11:41 Автор:Александр Никсдорф (<http://comment.kg/national-interest/item/679-student-tebja-zhdet-manasovedenie.html>)