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Eet Mergen Temene: Fairy Tale and Reality in Questions of Characters' Historicity

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Tenes-Mergen-Temene, who participated in epochal events, probably became a component of historical folk works when fairy and mythological motifs prevailed and fiction dominated. Information about Tenes-Mergen-Temene appears to be preserved in the traditional Kalmyk folk story of the wise Eet Mergen Temene. A preliminary analysis of the plot allows us to understand that what people remember and hold dear about Eet Mergen Temene emerges from a number of everyday phenomena that serve as landmarks and milestones in their history. One of these phenomena in the history of the Kalmyks is the spread of Buddhism, which was adopted by prominent political figures of the era.

Key words: Kalmyk oral folk, Dzunggar Khaganate, historical memory, outstanding people, Buddhism distribution

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1. Introduction

Kalmyks are Mongolian speaking people who live in the Republic of Kalmykia, a part of the Russian Federation. Their ancestors are Oirats, nomadic people of Central Asian origin who until the 17th century lived in Dzungaria, in northwestern China and western Mongolia. For several centuries they were part of the Mongol Empire.

After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty in China, Oirats gradually emerged from under the power of the Mongol khans. In the 16th century the Oirats' political and economic situation worsened considerably as external enemies began to invade more frequently, blocking access to exchange markets and capturing a number of territories on the eastern frontier of the Oirats' settlements.

Prompted by a lack of pastures and the necessity of going into foreign markets, some Oirats (including the main Taishi of Torghut Ho Urluk and Derbets Dalai Batyr) moved northwest at the beginning of the 17th century to the extensive steppe areas of Southern Siberia. The Russian government allowed them to roam from place to place on the "sovereign land" and to trade with Siberian cities in exchange for the acceptance of sherti and symbolic yasak. Half a century passed before the Oirats became part of Russia, however.

During the same period, other Oirats migrated from the banks of the Irtysh to the Yaik and the Volga. In the mid-17th century, the Russian government granted the citizenship to the Volga Oirats, giving them the land in exchange for military service to protect the southern steppe spaces. Domestic and foreign scientific literature referred to the Oirats who voluntarily joined Russia as kalmyks (ethnonym "Kalmyk"), and soon the people adopted the name for themselves as well.

2. Plot of the wise Eet Mergen Temene in Kalmyk folklore

Kalmyk folklore traditions were handed down by word of mouth through many generations and have survived as the historical memory of the people, reflecting their attitudes toward certain events and outstanding people. This oral medium expressed various events according to the folk tradition of the Kalmyk people and connected with the sacral features of crucial moments in the life of the ethnic group.

Among the sources of Kalmyk oral folk art stands the story of the wise Eet Mergen Temene (a variant of "Ees Mergn Temn"). It should be noted that different versions of his story emerged at various times and places among the three basic sub-ethnic groups of Kalmyks (Torghuts, Derbets, and Hoshut).

3. Role of Torgut Noyon Tenes-Mergen-Temene in the history of the Oirat at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th

In addition, for specialists in the history of Mongolia and the Dzunggar Khaganate, the name of the character Eet Mergen Temene is consonant with the name Torgut Noyon Tenes-Mergen-Temene, who played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism among the Oirat at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th.

Researchers have noted that he actively promoted the growth of Buddhism throughout the Oirat possessions. In 1604, Tenes-Mergen-Temene invited Tsagan-Nomin-Khan—perhaps Majdari Khutukhta, Ochir Dara Khutukhta, or Neidzhitojn (1557–1663)—a great missionary, preacher of Buddhism, and representative of the Dalai Lama, for a sermon. During the Oirat-Halhass War from 1617 to 1628, Tenes-Mergen-Temene remained in Dzungaria or in a nearby territory and took an active part in repelling the aggression of Sholoy-Ubashi-huntaydzhi

(Chugaev and Govorov 2009: 283).

In 1640, Tenes-Mergen-Temene, named in the preamble of the *Great Code* of Mergen Noyon, participated in Oirat congress work, activities of the Mongol princes, and the acceptance of the *Ick Tsaadzhin Bichig* (Chugaev and Govorov 2009: 301).

4. Plot of the wise Eet Mergen Temene: from the historical legend to the fairy tale

The real Tenes-Mergen-Temene who participated in these epochal events probably became the character in the historical folk works when fairy and mythological motifs prevailed and fiction became dominant. Information about Tenes-Mergen-Temene appears to be preserved in the traditional Kalmyk folk story of the wise Eet Mergen Temene.

A preliminary analysis of the plot allows us to understand that what people remember and hold dear about Eet Mergen Temene comes out of a number of everyday phenomena that serve as landmarks and milestones in their history. One of these phenomena in the history of the Kalmyks is the spread of Buddhism, which was adopted by prominent political figures of the era.

Over time, stories about one of the most ardent supporters of the new religion, Noyon Tenes-Mergen-Temene, gradually lost their factual basis and acquired the traits of artistic generalization, including anachronology and saturation with fantastic and mythological motifs.

5. Fairy tale motifs in the plot of the wise Eet Mergen Temene

The basic folkloric plot tells of how Eet Mergen Temene acquires a bride from the Khan. The struggle for the bride and the solution of difficult problems for the bride's father are plot motifs. In the fairy tale "Sornts Lomb Khan," Eet Mergen Temene takes part in five contests—determining the root of a stick of sandalwood, choosing between a mare and a foal, sliding thread through a shell, drinking one hundred buckets of Araki, eating the meat of one hundred sheep, and manufacturing one hundred skins—in order to recognize the daughter of the Khan out of five hundred girls (Altn zγn temn 1995: 78–79).[1)]

All variants of the contest for the Khan's daughter end with her being recognized among the five hundred (or one hundred) girls. Some versions describe how Eet Mergen Temene puts an old man (or old lady) in a cast-iron pot, covers it with a lid, takes a silver pipe, and listens for signs of the bride through a copper pipe; in the yellow oracle book *Bichig*, it is said that a man with a silver mouth will give a sign of the Khan's daughter to the person with copper ears. Angered, the Khan orders someone to throw away the book, and its pages, carried by the wind across the steppe, are eaten by sheep. Their letters appeared on blades of grass, and that is why they began to tell fortunes (Sedklin kyur 1960: 19–20)[2)]; (Khalmg tuuls 1968: 190–198)[3)]; (Khalmg tuuls 1974: 236–247)[4)]; (Altn zyun temn 1995: 78–79).[5)]

The second version of the story tells how Eet Mergen Temene was with the Khan, the bride's father, pretending to be sick. He asked to be healed by a cup of medicinal blood taken from the peritoneum of a sheep and a handful of ashes from a sandal tree. Thus he exterminated the sheep and sandal trees about which the Khan had boasted (Sedklin kyur 1960: 19–20).[6)]

Sh. V. Boktaev relates how Eet Mergen Temene, having traveled in a wedding procession, remained with the Khan, the father of the bride, because it was then necessary for the person to give his daughter in marriage (Eet Mergn Temn 2000)[7)]—probably a fragment of rituals associated with early Kalmyk marriage.

In a third plot, Eet Mergen Temene, released from the supervision of two giants, makes up a wedding procession and, having told the bride that the Khan's breath smells like the jaws of a leopard, sends news of the approaching wedding train. Having warned the Khan of the bride's hare lip, Eet Mergen Temene pays for his lie with his eyes and is expelled (Sedklin kyur 1960: 19–20)[8)]; (Altn zyun temn 1995: 78–79).[9)] This behavior explains why the groom's and bride's years of birth did not match: it was the so-called "harsh" and inconsistent actions dictated by a lie told by Eet Mergen Temene. This trouble was later removed (Eet Mergn Temn 2000).[10)]

In T. S. Tyaginova's version, Eet Mergen Temene declares that the Khan and his bride are crippled and that they share with him blame for the fact that the Khan has ordered the tearing and throwing out of the sacred oracle book.

This plot includes a description of the building of a Buddhist temple syume (a palace in some versions), which collapses after every wall is constructed. One of the Khan's subjects finds out from Eet Mergen Temene how to ensure that a syume does not fall: he says to bury a horseman alive. After this is done, a syume is built. Eet Mergen Temene then moves a stone covering a rush of water, causing the syume to be destroyed by flood.

Only after the Khan and Khatun ask for forgiveness and restore his sight is the water source stopped up with a rock and the flooding prevented (Sedklin kyur 1960: 19–20)[11)]; (Altn zyun temn 1995: 78–79).[12)]

The fact that a human offering was required to resolve the problem of the temple syume indicates that the Khan was the man who had to build the syume. However, the temple was built only after the cause of its failure—the need to bury a horseman alive—was identified. In some variants of the plot, the victim is in white clothes and on a white horse, recalling the senders of the pre-Buddhist Kalmyks, the so-called "Bo" who wore white clothes.

This person had to have been born in the year and month of the Horse in the lunar calendar (Eet Mergn Temn 2000).[13)]

In the plot included in the *Sedklin kyur* cycle of fairy tales, it is noted that a three-year-old boy and a three-year-old saddled black horse with three white feet and a beautiful oblong star on his forehead should be the victims, each buried at a depth of nine elbows (Sedklin kyur 1960: 19–20).[14)]

The year of the horseman's birth is not specified in one variant of the plot, but it is noted that the victim must be of a foreign nationality.

This plot is saturated with fairy-tale motifs. Nevertheless, it cannot be classified as a traditional fairy tale.

First, the name of the protagonist, Eet Mergen Temene (a variant of "Ees Mergen Temene"), distinguishes the story from canonical fairy tales, in which the name of the hero is unknown but connected to a ceremony of initiation (when the neophyte gets his name after a ceremony of transition) or to some peculiarity of his appearance.

Second, the title characterizes Eet Mergen as a noyon, a vassal of the Khan or a dignitary

(tyushml). This is not common in the fairy-tale tradition, whose heroes as a rule come from lower social strata and attain higher status only at the end of the story.

Third, the detailed description of human sacrifice as a solution to the syume problem is not typical of a fairy tale.

6. Mythological motifs in plot of the wise Eet Mergen Temene

Tyaginova argues that Eet Mergen Temene is mythologized and stands for Erlik Nomin Khan, whom the Mongol-speaking peoples of the world perceive as the master of the world of the dead, managing the court of dead souls.

The mythological motif of the yellow oracle book is also included in one of the plots. Because its sheets were eaten by sheep, it is customary to practice divination on a ram's shoulder before passing out meat to guests.

Understanding the image of Eet Mergen Temene presented in the folklore tradition of the Kalmyk requires careful analysis of the entire corpus of folkloric works that include this character, particularly the variants prevailing in Sintszjan.

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