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Tradition and Modernity in Kazak Nomadism in Mongolia

Abstract

The paper presents some thoughts on the present-day life of the Kazakh stockbreeders who still migrate in Mongolia's westernmost province, Bayan Ölgii. Some basic features of their life and professional activities are typical of nomadic patterns, but many aspects of life in yurt have changed with the progress in modern technology. Children of nomadic stockbreeders all go to schools and they stay in the steppes with their parents only in the time of summer vacation and holidays. Car has become a normal means of migratory transportation and camel is rarely used for that. In winter, some people stay in permanent flat-roofed stone houses at the foot of mountains. The methods of stockbreeding are traditional. The livestock grazes in the open air throughout the year and only some winter quarters have fences and sheds. The paper also presents the most up-to-date general information on the Kazakhs in Mongolia.

1. General remarks

As is known, outside Kazakhstan, where they make up approx. 59% of the population, the Kazaks inhabit nearly all neighboring countries: Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan,¹ China and, just on the other side of the Altai, Western Mongolia. In the past some small groups of Kazaks also migrated to Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Kashmir.

¹ Some Kazaks migrated to those regions at the time of Russian dependence and other groups fled Kazakhstan in the years of famine in the Soviet Union. In Masanov et alii's (Масанов 2001: 376) view, the number of Kazaks who took refuge to other parts of the Soviet Union in 1926–1939 increased two and a half times and reached 794,000. Omarbekov, a more careful scholar, says that an estimated 240,000 people took refuge in the republics of the Soviet Union across the border by 1933 (Омарбеков 2003: 262).

From Pakistan and Kashmir they finally moved to Turkey in 1952.² Little is known about the Kazaks in Afghanistan and Iran, from where, as well as from other post-Soviet states such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, many of them repatriated to Kazakhstan in the 1990s. Whereas the Kazak minority in Xinjiang was the subject of some thorough studies (the most comprehensive being Benson and Svanberg eds 1988), the Kazaks in Mongolia attracted less attention (Benson and Svanberg 1988: 7, Finke 1999: 103). It is Finke's paper that is probably the most detailed study on the Kazaks in Mongolia. At this point it should be said that there are also some studies published by the Kazaks in Mongolia. For an outline of earlier publications see Benson and Svanberg (1988: 7), for some more recent studies see Сарай (1991), Кэмалашұлы (1995) and Омарұлы (et alii 2002). There are also some studies done in Kazakhstan (for the references see Смағұлұлы, Бекетайқызы, Оразақызы 2003).

Today the Kazaks in Mongolia basically inhabit the westernmost province Bayan Ölgii, but there is also some Kazak population in the Kobdo province,³ and an increasing share of them in Ulaanbaatar. In Bayan Ölgii they inhabit eight districts: Tolbo, Delüün, Bulgan, Bayannuur, Sagsay, Altantsögt, Tsengel and Nagoonuur (Баянтөр, Нямдаваа, Баярмаа 2004: 67).

Most studies stress that the exact time and details of the appearance of Kazaks in Mongolia are not quite clear, but nearly all indicate the 19th century as the time of their emergence. According to Finke, the migration started in the 1860s (1999: 109); Норре provides the year 1864 as the date of Kerei migration to southern Altai (Норре 1999: 203); according to Смағұлұлы, Бекетайқызы, Оразақызы the migration should be dated to the 1870s (2003: 30). The number of emigrants was then around 10,000 (Смағұлұлы, Бекетайқызы, Оразақызы 2003: 30), but the population steadily grew to attain the highest number of 120,506 in 1989. Some Kazak groups also abandoned Xinjiang in the 1930s and 1940s in the aftermath of riots and settled in Mongolia (Finke 1999: 110).

In the years 1991–1994 an estimated 50,000–60,000 Kazaks migrated to Kazakhstan from Mongolia after the declaration of independence. The emigration stopped in 1994, and after that approximately 10,000–20,000 Kazaks re-migrated to Mongolia (Finke 1999: 114–115). Now the situation is stabilized and only some individuals may migrate for personal reasons. The 2000 census showed 102,983 Kazakhs in Mongolia (4.35% of the whole population in the country).⁴ An estimate for 2007 indicates over 140,000 people. Table 1 shows statistical data of the Kazak population in Mongolia based on censuses:⁵

² See Çağatay 1961: 5. Modern Turkey was the place of migration for many Turkistanis and other Turkic peoples.

³ According to Омарұлы (et alii 2002: 7), the Kazaks first appeared in the Kobdo province relatively late. Their predecessors fled Bayan Ölgii in 1921 in fear of the refugees from the Russian White Army and settled in Bulgan district of this province.

⁴ http://www.ses.edu.mn/books/ptrc/ptrc_10.pdf.

⁵ Slightly different data for the years 1956–1989 are provided in Finke 1999: 111.

Table 1. Kazaks in Mongolia according to censuses

1956	1963	1969	1979	1989	2000
36,729	47,735	62,812	84,305	120,506	102,983

Although the Kazaks make up only 4.35% of the total population of Mongolia, 78% of them live in Bayan Ölgii province where they constitute an overwhelming majority. According to information delivered to me by my Kazak informants in 2008, they form 92% of Bayan Ölgii's population, other main nationality groups being Uriankhais and Dörbets. Similar figures were shown by Finke (1999: 111), who indicated that the Kazaks account for 91.1% of the province's population.

It is an established fact that the Kazaks moved to Mongolia from China. Although the major movement from Kazak provinces to China took place in the 19th century, the migration started in mid-18th century (Сапай 1991: 13). There were also some major migration movements in the 20th century from Kazakhstan, such as an exodus after the 1916 revolt against Russia and the subsequent migration waves in the 1920s and the 1930s (Olcott 1987: 125, 149, 170).⁶ Hoppe (1999: 203) says that large groups of Kazaks from the Russian territory moved into the Altai region.

Because of their ratio to the Mongols, the Kazak minority plays an important role in Mongolia, at least in Bayan Ölgii. It is not comparable to China, although the number of Kazaks in China is much higher and in 1982 it reached 907,582⁷. Despite the fact that 903,370 Kazaks inhabit Xinjiang (Benson and Svanberg 1999: 10), their percentage in relation to the Chinese and Uighurs is low.

2. Nomadic and sedentary

The researchers demonstrate that apart from urban Kazaks the majority of those who live in Mongolia make their living by stockbreeding (Benson, Svanberg 1988: 8). The livestock is herded in the migratory system that is traditionally termed nomadism. Nomadism as a form of life is recessive throughout the world. In Kazakhstan it did not disappear as a consequence of social change, but was rooted out by the cruel Soviet policy in the 1920s and 1930s at the cost of many lives, estimated at more than one and a half million people.

The most updated information on the traditional life of Kazaks and stockbreeding is provided by Finke (1999: 121–137). Despite common roots, the migratory patterns are not identical with those in China, as presented by Hoppe who studied the Kazaks

⁶ From the examination of check-point reports, Omarbekov established that the numbers of Kazak refugees to China in 1931–1932 were equal to 52,267 people. He added that the study has not been completed yet (Омарбеков 2003: 272).

⁷ Now the Kazak population in China is estimated at 1.2 million.

living in Bogda, northern part of the Xinjiang province (Hoppe 1988: 201–239). Differences are caused by political reasons as well as by weather, soil and physiographical conditions. Scholars, including Hoppe, stress that the migratory cycle may change depending not only on weather conditions, but also on individual choices. In the following, I will present two migratory cycles, one provided to me by a young Kazak researcher, Ömürbek Kämalaşulu (1), and another, by Asqabil Bağzıyulu, an elder herder from Sagsay (2).⁸

Migratory cycle 1:

1. *qıstaw 2* ‘second winter camp’ January/February–June (4 months)
2. *caylaw* ‘summer camp’ June–September (3 months)
3. *küzöw* ‘autumn camp’ September–November (2 months)
4. *qıstaw 1* ‘first winter camp’ November–January/February (3 months)

Migratory cycle 2:

1. *qıstaw 1* October–15 June (8.5 months)
2. *caylaw* 15 June–15 September (3 months)
3. *küzöw* 15 September–1 October (0.5 month)

The winter period, which is very long, falls into three sub-periods:

- 1.1. 1 October–20 February (4 months and 20 days)
- 1.2. 20 February–20 April (2 months), this is called *mal tuwğuzatın cer* ‘livestock breeding’, when part of a family stays in flat-roofed stone houses (rarely adobe houses) at the foot of mountains, another part moves up to southern sunny slopes.
- 1.3. 20 April–15 June (ca 2 months), when the family and the herd reunite and people prepare for summer quarters.

The following dates demonstrate a traditional migratory cycle fixed once on the opposite western edge of the Kazakhstani territory in Mangystaw.⁹

Migratory cycle in Mangystaw:

1. *qıs qıstaw* ‘winter camp’ 15 December–25 March (100 days; mostly by the seashore or nearby semi-dry steppes)
2. *köktem* ‘spring camp’ 25 March–1 June (65 days; setting off for uplands)
3. *jaz jaylaw* ‘summer camp’ 1 June–10 October (130 days; migrating to the north-west, as far as the rivers Emba, Sagyz, Oyıl and Kobda)

⁸ The observations are based on my study conducted in August–September 2008 in two valleys, Sargol and Sogat in Bayan Ölgii province.

⁹ Better known as Mangyshlak. The four seasons are the following there: spring lasts two months in March–April, summer – five months, from May to September, autumn – two months in October–November, and winter – three months from December to February (Кекілбаев ed. 1997: 22).

4. *küz küzew* 'autumn camp' 10 October–15 December (2 months; grazing in the uplands, then approaching the winter camp).¹⁰

As the example of Kazaks in Mongolia demonstrates, in certain conditions nomadism may be quite durable. Now we shall point to these conditions. Firstly, nomadic life in Bayan Ölgii is unchallenged by sedentary life. Bayan Ölgii is a remote region, ca. 1,900 km away from Ulaanbaatar, and there are no other major cities in Mongolia that would attract people to a more comfortable, urban life. In the north and the east, the Bayan Ölgii area is closed by state borders, and there are no major cities across the border in Russia and China. The only major town in the region, Bayan Ölgii, does not boast any industry nor attractive jobs. Most people subsist on trade and smuggling with China, to which they have easy access. Therefore, possibilities in the town of Bayan Ölgii are limited. Secondly, nomadic livestock herding still does not have another pastoral alternative in the region, whereby its existence is not endangered, at least in the short perspective. Thirdly, because of harsh weather, lack of infrastructure, knowledge, tradition, and perhaps demand for products, a shift from stockbreeding into agriculture is unlikely in this region. The most important of these limits is weather which makes agricultural activities very difficult. As already observed by Levshin in 1832, the Kazaks cultivated lands wherever it was possible, i.e. on the southern and northern edges of Kazakhstan (Левшин 1996: 297–297). In the south, the Kazaks grew crops along Sir Daria, especially near Tashkent and the city of Turkistan, while in the north they scythed grass and produced hay to feed the stock in winter, just like the Yakuts in Eastern Siberia. On the other hand, it is unlikely that nomadism would substantially grow, although we know that in the 1990s there was some return to the steppes on the part of the impoverished urban dwellers who previously pursued nomadic life.

The steppe and the town need one another for multiple reasons. Stockbreeding and meat production are very important to urban population and the city dwellers need a resource basis in the steppes. Town is an important and indispensable place for nomadic pastoralists. They need it as a base for their children when they are at school. The herders also need a place to stay when going to town for various matters. It is very probable that most nomadic stockbreeders have relatives in town. Although we do not have sufficient data on the interrelationship between urban and rural population and we cannot assess the measure of balance between these two social sectors, it seems that there is some kind of durable balance. In particular, it is unknown if there is a sufficient free area of pastures for new stockbreeders. Naturally, a town has always more area to accept new dwellers, but if it becomes overpopulated, the migration leads to poverty. Without resort to town, there would be an enormous regress in nomadism, moreover, it probably could not even exist.

¹⁰ On the basis of Кекілбаев (ed.) 1997: 88.

3. Tradition and modernity

We may ask a question if nomadism, which is still present in Central or Inner Asia, e.g. in Mongolia and Tibet, may be modernized or if it must necessarily be substituted for sedentary life. To answer this question we have to make distinction between the methods of stockbreeding, household management and transportation.

The methods of dealing with horned cattle, horses and flocks are unchangeable. The livestock grazes in the open air throughout the year and only some winter quarters have fences and sheds. Herding, breeding, milking etc. is pursued without using new methods and tools.

Most activities concentrate on the yurt and what is around it. The shape and construction of yurt has not changed,¹¹ but its equipment and kitchen utensils have. The open fireplace is now replaced with iron stoves, sold in bazaars.¹² Old wooden dishes and containers made of leather were replaced with new ones sold in town. I have seen only one wooden pail for milk, all others were made of metal. *Saba*, the well-known leather bag for kumyss is now sewn of canvas, see photo 1. In addition, people use PET bottles and plastic bags. However, it is electric energy supply that is most striking and noticeable. Almost every yurt has solar panels (less frequently fans) that charge a 12-volt power cell battery, an ecological source of energy, see photo 2. Owing to power thus obtained, people light their yurts with energy saving lamps, watch television, video films, listen to the radio, use computers (although this is rare), charge mobile phones, and allegedly even operate washing machines and refrigerators, although I have not seen those appliances as unpractical.

Satellite dishes enable access to sky channels. Due to the proximity of Russia and China, people can watch Russian and Chinese programmes, in addition to a local Mongol TV. Access to Chinese sky channels enables watching Kazak television channel XJTV 3 which broadcasts 24 hours in Kazak. Watching Far Eastern Korean and Japanese channels as well as multiple English programmes is not popular because of the incomprehensibility of these languages on the side of simple stockbreeders.

A great progress and change was done in transportation. Camels, which in the past were used for the transportation of the yurt, household equipment and other belongings (Левшин 1996: 296) are nowadays rarely used as beasts of burden, and nearly all stockbreeders use cars in the steppes. Despite this, holding a camel gives more safety to the herder, see photo 3. Herdsmen ride on horseback during their everyday activities, but often drive cars when going to town. Nevertheless, many people go to town on horseback, see photo 4.

¹¹ The Kazak yurt was described by many travelers and researchers, one of first descriptions being by Левшин (Левшин 1996: 295).

¹² According to Левшин, the Kazaks did not have stoves in their yurts in the 19th century (Левшин 1996: 305).

The garment of a stockbreeder and his family also changes. Only elder people use national clothes and nearly all youngsters and kids wear dresses sold in the town shops and bazaars. However, in winter the handmade fur caps are still indispensable. The local Mongol Uriankhais and Dörbets are seemingly more traditional, for the use of *deel* 'gown' is common among them, although their children also wear what comes into fashion worldwide.

Diet is very traditional. It principally consists of milk products and meat. The Kazaks drink a lot of salted milk tea (*çay*), sour milk (*ayran*), and kumyss – 'fermented mare's milk' (*qımız*). Butter (*sarımay*), dried cheese or curd (*qurt*), less frequently *irimçik* (white cheese) are also available on a dining table. The Kazaks eat a lot of fat mutton and meat, which is very important to survive in the harsh climate. Meat is stewed with little vegetables (mostly carrot, onion, potatoes) or none, and bullion acquired in this process is drunk separately. Flour is used for *bawırsaq* or 'small pieces of dough, fried in grease', and sometimes for *nan* 'unleavened flat-bread', and rice for *palaw* or 'rice stewed with boiled meat and mutton'.

Another sign of modernity is in fact breaking with nomadism. It is schoolchildren who do not migrate. They learn and stay at boarding schools or live with their relatives in towns and return home only for summer vacation, holidays and feasts. Young Kazaks gain only elementary education, i.e. they finish the so-called middle schools where education lasts eleven years. Very few continue studies at high schools or universities. After completion of education, they mostly settle in towns and pursue trade or small businesses. At least one boy takes over his father's duty as a herder.

One may deliberate on the perspectives of further modernization of nomadic life. As we can see, a great change has occurred in transportation. Stockbreeding methods will probably remain unchanged as long as migratory herding will be practised. The interior of yurt may also be modernized to meet modern demands of life. Major changes may be done in permanent winter houses, but this falls in fact beyond the scope of nomadism.

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Photo 1. Canvas kumyss bag and kitchen utensils purchased in bazaar



Photo 2. Solar panels, satellite dishes, cars and horses are at present common around the yurt



Photo 3. Despite cars camel gives a sense of safety to his owner



Photo 4. Many people still go to town on horseback