



Turco-Mongolian Curses and Obscenities

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TURCO-MONGOLIAN CURSES AND OBSCENITIES:—Apropos recent contributions to the *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* on the obscenity of various peoples, it may be interesting to report some eclectic gleanings from the folklore of the Turco-Mongolian (Altaic) peoples still inhabiting large areas of the Soviet Union.¹ As one might imagine, little ethnographic study or linguistic research has been conducted among these peoples for several decades; consequently, one can study this topic only by discovering curses and obscenities in the available collections of Turkic and Mongolian folk literature. I do not propose to establish standards or to define obscenity among these Altaic peoples nor to draw parallels, since for the most part these will be obvious.

Among Turco-Mongolian peoples, the worst thing in general that can be said to one's adversary is an imprecation against the interlocutor's mother or father. Chief among these is the Mongolian curse */ecegē alsan/* (written as *ečige-ben alaysan*) "(you are) one-who-has-slain his-own-father," or "Father-killer!" The corresponding curse involving the *mater familias* is */eχē oχsan/* (written as *eke-ben oquysan*) "You are) one-who-has-had-intercourse with-his-own-mother," the same as our own supreme opprobrium "Mother-fucker!" Among the Turks, a slight variation on the first is seen with the phrase */başıja sigim/* "I urinate on your head" (among the Mongols usually given as "I urinate on your father's head"), to which, as the insult *par excellence*, one may add the former remarks about the mother, and make the grand curse of "I urinate on your father's head and have intercourse with your mother!"

Incidentally, a knowledge of the foregoing enables us to interpret an otherwise obscure passage in one of the major Mongolian historical chronicles (Sagang Sechen's *Erdeni-yin Tobči* of 1662, p. 112, line 4 of Schmidt's 1829 edition). This reads "With a curse of three or four words and the exclamation */ecegiin/* . . ." The form */ecegiin/* (written *ečige-iyen* in the Mongolian text) is the genitive singular, "of a father." Viewed in the light of the foregoing, it is obviously a shortened form of the aforementioned curse, comparable to our colloquial "Ah, yer father's . . ." in which the final word remains ominously unsaid.

A fairly ordinary curse, which would not strike an American as particularly dreadful (but note the British horror of *bloody*) is the Mongolian expression */cusārās/* (written as *čisun-iyar urus*), literally, "Flow with-your-own blood!," i.e., "Bleed to death!" (cf. "Drop dead!"). Almost casual by comparison is the Mongolian */jolikh čin/* "You scape-goat!" using the word for an object important in sacrificial ceremonies which assumes sins, hence, "You fool, you idiot!" With the Mongolian reliance on the supernatural comes the Buriat-Mongol curse */žaldamar/* (written as *ejen-iyen aldamar*), literally "(May you be) one who might lose his own lord (or master)!," i.e., may you be one who loses his protective support and go unprotected by a superior temporal or spiritual power. It is equivalent to our "Damn you!" The Turks consider it the height of revulsion to call someone by the term */osruq/* (from the verb *osur-*) "a particle ejected when breaking wind."

Perhaps pertinent here is the story of AM GOT, the alphabet organization that never was, thanks to the sharp eye of someone who knew Turkish. This was to have been the *American Military Government of Occupied Territories*, until it was advised that *am* is Turkish for the female sexual parts (cognate with Mongolian *aman* 'mouth, opening'), and that *göt* is the anal opening. The effect of both used simultaneously would perhaps have squared rather than doubled the shock.

Proverbial expressions are proverbially down to earth, and Altaic lore is no exception. One which in fact illustrates the idea of getting to the heart of a matter is the Turkish saying */amunu buldun; kılını mı arıyorsun/*, which we may render as "You have located the female parts; why are you searching amidst the hairs?"; in other words, stop beating around the bush.

Lastly, in epic folklore one may occasionally find scatological references. One such makes use of echo words which in themselves have no meaning but which are created for the

nonce. First, a staid example, a Buriat poem in which a maiden steps, and flowers of various colors spring up.

/g^uwar, gurwar/ and flowers of three (/gurwan/) colors spring up;
/dö^over, dö^over/ and flowers of four (/dörwen/) colors spring up;
/tavar, tavar/ and flowers of five (/ta^uwun/) colors spring up.

In other words, the echo word is formed to rime with the chief word of the phrase. When the villain of Mongolian epics, the many-headed *manggus*, a coarse, frightful, uncouth creature, comes clumping along, he is described thus:

/bar bar bās aldād,
šēr šēr šēs aldād./

He came defecating with the noise /bar, bar/; (rimes with /bās/ 'defecation')

He came urinating with the sound /šēr, šēr/. (rimes with /šēs/ 'urine')

The above examples will give some idea of the nature of curses and scatology among the Turco-Mongolian or Altaic peoples. A far more extensive collection could be garnered by systematic research.

NOTE

1. The Altaic peoples include the Turks, Mongols, and Manchu-Tungusic peoples. Of Turks, there are not only those in Turkey proper, but about 25 million Turkic speakers in the USSR, including Bashkirs, Chuvash, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Nogays, Tatars, Turkmens, Tuvinians, Uzbeks and Yakuts, to mention a few. All of these people share a generally similar type of language and have similarly structured folklore and folk-poetry.

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"BELLY WASH."—It is surprising that only two of fifty-four undergraduates at Northwestern University had ever heard of "belly wash." It is also curious that it is not listed in Mathews' *Americanisms*, which includes soda pop, soda fountain, and soda jerk(er), but not belly wash. The latter term is a bit cruder, or was in our town in northwestern Pennsylvania, where, forty years ago at least, we would go to the drugstore and ask the soda jerk(er) for a soda or a soda pop, but never for belly wash. However, outside the more impressive precincts of the drugstore, belly wash was as frequently used among the boys of our town as was any of these other terms. We never used the euphemism "B.W.," which Very reports for a California boys' school in the 1930's.

Belly wash may be missing in Craigie and in Mathews, but it is listed by Wentworth and Flexner, who define it as "almost any commercially prepared beverage or other drinkable liquid, (such as) whiskey, beer, coffee, tea, soft drinks, or soup." Not so in our community, where it always referred to bottled soft drinks or "pop," and was never used for any other potable. We had a plant in our town which bottled pop, and we boys would go to the "belly-wash factory" in the hope, usually realized, of being given free "belly wash."

The term was so common in our town that I supposed that it was used everywhere and that everyone understood its meaning. Apparently not, however. I notice also that modern dictionaries (the abridged ones, at least) include such "colloquial" or "slang" terms as bellyache, belly button, bellyful, and belly laugh, but omit belly hole and belly wash. Are these latter terms less frequently met with in folk speech, or are they too crude for inclusion in these compendia?

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