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Mongolian Proverbs : A Study in the Kalmuck Colloquial

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THE great division of the Mongol race which passes under the generic term Kalmuck, is composed of many different tribes and subsections. The name "Kalmuck" is accidental ; like many of the terms employed in connexion with Mongolian dialects and tribes, it is a Russian convention. Those Mongols who took up their abode in Europe were of the Khalimak division ; this word in Russian mouths soon became Kalmuck.

The home of the Kalmucks is Western Mongolia and with the exception of the wandering tribes which have made their headquarters in Russia or Turkestan, most of the Kalmuck subdivisions will be found spread over an area from 82° to 90° E., and 42° to 50° N. The tribes are bounded on the south by the people of Chinese Turkestan, and on the north by the Siberian Mongols (Buriats), and other races of Siberia. To the west are found many Turkish dialects which have exerted no little influence on the pronunciation of the Kalmuck. Eastward from the Kalmuck strongholds lies the bulk of Mongolia, and the nearest neighbours are the Khalka subdivisions of Jasaktu Khan, Sain Noiun, Chetsön Khan, etc. There is a striking dissimilarity between the phonetic systems of Khalka and Kalmuck, despite this juxtaposition.

The main subdivisions of the Kalmuck are as follows :—

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) Kalmuck proper. | (6) Ölöt (Eleute). |
| (2) Astrakhan Kalmuck. | (7) Charachin. |
| (3) Kobdoskie derbeti. | (8) Torgot. |
| (4) Khoit Kalmuck. | (9) Jungar. |
| (5) Khoshod. | (10) Caucasian Kalmuck. |

There are some subdivisions of different banners who give

to their speech a special name, but it is unnecessary to multiply dialectic designations. The ten idioms named above, all differ from each other in several important particulars, not merely presenting a local pronunciation. Moreover, the nearby speech, if it be of alien stock, frequently imposes some measure of its phonetic system and vocabulary upon the dialect, which accounts for its departure from the rules of standard speech.

Russian grammarians transliterate the Kalmuck according to regular principles, but it must be asserted that these transliterations appear very uncouth. This must also be the case in Roman alphabet transcriptions in some measure. Almost unpronounceable compounds present themselves at times, whereas a reference to the Mongolian script will show that the vowels of the compounds have merely been elided in pronunciation. The laws of vocalic attraction so carefully observed in the Khalkha and other Mongolian tongues, are often disregarded in the languages of Western Mongolia.

The phonetics of the Kalmuck language are as yet unrecorded. In the modern speech there is an amazingly wide range of vowels, a richness somewhat discounted by the constant process of elision. There are three strong vowels (i.e. *a*, *o*, *u*), and two weak (*i* and *e*). These are long (*ā*, *ō*, *ū*, *ē*), saving *i*, which is never long, or short (*ǎ*, *ǒ*, *ǔ*, *ě*), again excepting *i*, which, when short, is unheard. They are further modified by the diacresis (*ä*, *ö*, *ü*, *ë*), which is intended to indicate a guttural pronunciation of them. These vowels with diacritical marks are again lengthened (*ǟ*, *ȫ*, *ǖ*, *ë̄*).

In addition to these twenty-one vowel sounds, there is a variety of softened *a*, i.e. *a* as in "father", pronounced with a quickly followed *i* sound but slightly heard. This shall be represented by *a'*. The long guttural vowel *ä* has also this peculiarity, and shall be written thus, *ä'*.

The consonants are :—

b, ch, d, g, gh, j, k, kk, kh, l, m, n, r', r, s, t, v, y.

It will be seen that the Kalmuck, unlike most of the Mongolian languages, has a *v* (which is pronounced almost as in English). Sometimes this letter seems to resemble *f* or *w* in the modern colloquial, but usually it is the *v* of the English "vivid".

The consonants are pronounced as in English with the following exceptions:—

g is always hard.

gh is a very strong guttural, resembling in nature the Arabic "ghain", but much more rough in pronunciation.

kk is a guttural *k* formed by complete closure of the glottis.

kh is the *ch* of "loch". Russian *x*.

r' is a liquid sound difficult to describe. It is the normal sound of *l* occurring between *u* and *a*.

y is rare and is the same in value and function as *i*.

One peculiarity of the Kalmuck vowel must be constantly borne in mind in speaking or trying to understand the modern speech. Almost any vowel (saving generally *a*), can degenerate into the "indeterminate vowel" of Indonesian linguistics and the Hottentot languages, represented in the former case by *ẽ*, and by the German grammarians of Hottentot tongues by *e*, *o*, *u*, *i*, etc. When this occurs, the vowel is very often elided altogether, and this leaves a collection of consonants of formidable appearance. A literal transcription of sounds heard from Kalmuck speakers follows.

chr as a medial sound. (*ch* as in "church".)

sn as a final and medial sound.

gdk as a final and medial sound.

ddk as a final sound. Both *d*'s distinctly heard.

ltrchi as a final sound.

lgn as a final sound.

dve as a final sound.

ln as a final sound.

These are by no means rare or peculiar sounds, they can be heard daily in the conversation of the Kalmucks. If the

indeterminate vowel sound be inserted between the consonants a fairly close approximation to the actual enunciation will be obtained. Practice only can bring the native felicity with these compounds. The excellent grammar (in Russian) of the Kalmuck by Bobrovníkov (Kazan, 1849), is still the best for a study of the structure of the language, although the phonology has undergone many changes since it was written.

As is the case with the other Mongol languages, the spoken idiom differs widely from the written, or classical language. The Kalmuck tends yearly to become simpler, already many of the case-endings are dropped in the colloquial. So far as regards the colloquial in present-day use the following notes will be sufficient as a sketch of the grammar.

The plural is very little used. Should it be absolutely necessary it is formed by adding to the root *-ül*, *t*, or *s*.

There is but one declension. The following are the case-endings, but not only is the nominative frequently used for the accusative, but the other cases also drop their distinctive suffixes at the will of the speaker.

Genitive.	After vowels and <i>y</i> .	<i>yn</i> or <i>gn</i> .
	After consonants.	<i>u</i> , <i>un</i> , <i>ain</i> .
Dative.		<i>tur</i> , <i>du</i> , <i>da</i> .
Accusative.	After vowels.	<i>iki</i> .
	After consonants.	<i>i</i> .
Locative.	v. sup. Dative.	
Ablative.		<i>acha</i> , <i>cha</i> , <i>a</i> .
Conjunctive.		<i>la</i> , <i>lar</i> .
Instrumental.		<i>bar</i> , <i>kar</i> , <i>iyar</i> .

There is also sometimes in use the general Mongolian " reflexive " suffix to nouns. This denotes possession by the doer of the action named by the verb. This suffix, following the requirements of euphony, is *-iyan*, *-iyen*, or *ban*.

The adjectives are not declined and precede their nouns. In cases where the copula is implied, the adjective following the noun expresses at the same time the correct tense of the

verb "to be". *Unu muri sayin* will mean "this horse is good", but "a good horse" will be *sayin muri*.

The pronouns are as follows :—

<i>Bi</i>	= I.	<i>Chi</i>	= thou.	<i>Tr</i>	= he.
<i>Bda</i>	= we.	<i>Ta</i>	= you, pl.	<i>Tdu</i>	= they.

The possessives are :—

<i>Munu</i>	= mine.	<i>Chni</i>	= thine.	<i>Trnu</i>	= his.
<i>Mana</i>	= ours.	<i>Tnu</i>	= yours.	<i>Tdnu</i>	= theirs.

The indefinite pronouns are :—

<i>Nnu</i>	= this.	<i>Tru</i>	= that.	<i>Allyi</i>	= which ?
		<i>Iugu</i>	= what ?		

The numerals are :—

<i>Neg</i> , 1.	<i>Durbo</i> , 4.	<i>Dala</i> , 7.
<i>Khoyir</i> , 2.	<i>Tab</i> , 5.	<i>Naym</i> , 8.
<i>Girba</i> , 3.	<i>Jurgga</i> , 6.	<i>Uss</i> , 9.
	<i>Arba</i> , 10.	

The ordinals are formed by the addition of *dog*, or *dug* (*dok*, *duk*), to the cardinal numbers, as—

Negedug, the first. *Hoyidug*, the second, etc.

The verb is simplicity itself. The auxiliary "to be", *bukhu*, *bolhu*, is used more in conjunction with other verbs than by itself. All the verbs of Mongolian end in the infinitive in *hu* or *khu*, and replacing this termination by *na*, the present indicative is obtained. The verb form does not change for person or number.

The insertion of *da* between the root and the *hu* of the infinitive makes the passive form of the verb. *Ujhu* to see, *ujdehu* to be seen.

The insertion of the infix *l* in the same position makes the causative. *Ujhu*, *ujilhu*, *uilhu*, "to show."

The present indicative is also used for the future.

Another auxiliary verb commonly in use is *baikhu*, pres. indic. *baina*, past or perfect *baiba*. With these forms of the auxiliary merely and the present tense of the main verb, most of the common locutions of daily life can be formed.

A few adverbs are :—

Hed == how many ?

Kha == where ?

Hejje == when ? What time ?

Yamar == how ? In what manner ?

Yuunda == why ?

It may be definitely asserted that in colloquial Mongolian of the present day, rules of grammar and style are almost entirely disregarded. An elaborate study of Mongolian accidence and syntax can be of use only to the research student, the traveller in Mongolia will be better without it ! In metaphors and proverbs drawn from written books some classical allusions and constructions appear, but for the most part the proverbs are in common colloquial style.

The locutions and proverbial sayings which follow have been collected by me at different periods during the past two years from Kalmuck-speaking Mongols. These represent only a small part of all I have accumulated, some are too coarse for presentation in English while others are so obscure to those not versed in the classical tongue that it has been considered advisable not to print them here. The classical and literary allusions would need several pages of notes to make the meaning of the proverb clear, and, moreover, the style of such pieces is not representative of the modern colloquial.

1. *Etsäg uga kövün jeldn,*

Ek uga kükün jeldn.

1. A young man without the influence of a father becomes
dissolute,

A young girl without the influence of a mother becomes
a loose woman.

Note.—The Mongols are nomads, and family life as we understand it is unknown to them. None the less, as attested by their proverbs, of which the above is a good example, they are conscious of the need for strict supervision of the young. When lengthy journeys are to be undertaken it

often happens that the father will take his sons with him, leaving his daughters in camp with their mother to await his return.

2. *Ügě medshūga kün dü*
Ügě kelkhin ormdū
Ükrin övör dēr
Tarā tsalsa.

2. To talk to one who does not understand your words
 is like sprinkling corn over the horns of a cow.

Note.—One or other of the first two lines is frequently used (as a contraction for the whole), in the sense of "fool".

3. *Kün bolkhu bagāsan,*
Külük bolkhu unghunāsan.

3. Is the man apparent from the child?
 Can you judge from the foal if the horse will be
 good?

Note.—This locution is self-explanatory and will serve to emphasize the observation that the Mongol is a very cautious individual.

4. *Urunlā*
Udū bichgā bulālda.

4. One does not argue with the expert.

Note.—This proverb is capable also of another interpretation. It is used as a parallel to our "a good workman does not quarrel with his tools". The general meaning of the saying, however, is as above, "the master's word is law."

5. *Ūr biyy sovātschi*
Ūla möri sovātschi.

5. Anger tortures the mind.
 As hills distress a horse.

Note.—The Mongol possesses a plentiful supply of naive philosophy, although not usually of the kind found in learned treatises. He is, it must be added, a practician of what his proverbs preach. It is a rare thing to see a Mongol carried away by anger, he will try all other methods of achieving his ends before losing his temper.

6. *Chikin khudlchi,*
Nüdn ünchi.
6. (Heard by the) ears, misleading (illusory, deceptive),
(Seen by the) eyes, reliable.
“ Believe nothing you hear, nor half you see.”
7. *Samk sdytedü saghsn khurdk,*
Sang sdytedü kün khurdk.
7. Fish assemble where there is plenty of good mud,
People are drawn by good manners.

Note.—This will be, to many people, a surprising because unsuspected aspect of the Mongolian character. It would be difficult to explain how the idea that the Mongol was uncouth gained currency. Apart from a number of almost inaccessible works in the Russian language, reliable studies of the Mongol, his language and psychology, are almost non-existent. The modern Mongol differs in many important particulars from his mediæval ancestors, as will readily be imagined by any student of history. Despite his rough outdoor life. the Mongol of the present day has many rules of conduct which constitute the basis of his civilization ; these points of etiquette are taught to the growing children partly by means of proverbs similar to that quoted above, and partly by means of stories (cf. Ramstedt, *Kalmuckische Marchen*, Helsingfors, 1909). The Mongol's “scheme of things” is not by any means elaborate, or even complete from our point of view, but he is eminently successful in living up to the full extent of his vision. He has been gravely slandered, misunderstood, credited with many characteristics completely alien to his nature ; it is but fair that he should be allowed to speak for himself.

8. *Tūli umshütsi nomdāi bolkhügē,*
Tughül untai būrēd kūrkhügē.
8. Riding astride a calf does not make one a nomad,
Reading romances does not make one a scholar.
9. *Akhān aldā Kündül,*
Dügen delm kündül.

9. If an elder brother should (go) seven feet, then the younger brother may be expected to traverse three feet and a half.

Note.—This is a statement of the relative positions of brothers. Probably borrowed from the Chinese, this system of precedence has spread all over the Far East. In matters of inheritance, as in matters of responsibility, the correct proportions are clearly laid down and are invariably and scrupulously observed. A man would as readily question his existence as the justice of these decisions of a hoary antiquity. As shown in the above popular saying, the younger brother's share is one-half of that enjoyed or borne by his elder brother.

10. *Erül ugay dë*
Seril ugay.

10. From a fool (expect not) sensible thoughts.

Note.—Another example of epigrammatic wisdom! This is also used on occasion as an exclamation of disgust after a fruitless period of argument. The Mongol is usually a man of few words, hating to use his time in idle discussion. He is not slow to talk if he can see a profitable end to the discussion, but he is not so tenacious of a bargain as his neighbour, the Chinese. It must not be assumed that he is hasty or petulant; many of his proverbs would on superficial inspection lead one to such an opinion; he is, on the contrary, deliberate and slow, both in speech and judgment. Should bargaining be carried to a great length, however, he seems to suspect the other side of playing with his dignity, and withdraws with some such remark as that quoted above.

11. *Tsetsn neg ümküchi,*
Ergü khoyir ümküchi.

11. The wise man tries (his luck) once,
The fool—twice.

Used especially of games of chance, particularly to and of Chinese, whose love of gambling is proverbial.

12. *Khudl du ünün uga,*
Khop tu säyin uga.
 12. From a comrade no truth,
 From lies no good.

A cynical locution of the type beloved of the Mongol. A parallel saying is sometimes heard—"Trust none but thyself."

13. *Chorādu ökön uga,*
Alādu amr uga.
 13. An (eternally-)ambling horse puts on no fat,
 A licentious person has no peace.
 14. *Khudül khöynēn tsüktä,*
Unün ömnēn tsüktä.
 14. A lie is sooner or later found out,
 Truth is always glorified.

The much-maligned Mongol shows possession of a distinct moral sense! Cf. the following :

15. *Sansn sanān khudlchi,*
Sākšn burkhān ünchi.
 15. Lies are melancholy thoughts,
 Truth is angelic (of the angels of God).
 16. *Khōmā kün*
Khoyir ködmöshtä.
 16. The careless (or negligent), man
 Has to do everything twice.
 17. *Tolghā бүрүн болхулā,*
Khoto chigi oldkhu.
 17. Wherever there is a head (sc. mouth)
 There is food to go into it.
 18. *Zalkhūgīn gertü tülēn uga,*
Zalgidagīn gertü khot uga.
 18. Lazy at home—no fuel,
 Gluttonous at home—no food left.
 19. *Kūküü künd üsni utū, ukhāni akhr.*
 19. Young women have long hair but little intelligence.

20. *Erě nigě endürdk,*
Ergi nigě nurdk.
20. Man makes his first mistake,
This is the beginning (of the descent) of a declivity.
21. *Sāyin zalū zargā du unsn,*
Tsaghān mörn balchik tu unsn metü.
21. A good man brought to a court of justice
Is like a white horse fallen in the mud.

January, 1926.