

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN THE MONGOL-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Ts. Baatar
Academy of Sciences, Mongolia

Ethnic groups are not primordial units of human relationship. They form, dissolve, and change both their boundaries and the bases of their group identity. This paper is about the Mongol-American community: it is about how, over the past fifty years and more, that ethnic group came to be, how it formed, the ways it has changed its shape, and the types of social glue which have held it together.

Mongolia, the only independent state of Mongolians, has a population of 2.4 million. The Kalmyk Mongolians (numbering about 175,000) and Buriat Mongolians (population about 425,000) live in Russia; the Inner Mongolians (about 3.5 million) live in China. Many people of Mongolian origin live also in Central Asia, India, some parts of Canada, Europe and in the United States.

The Kalmyks

The first Mongolian families and individuals to migrate to the United States did so in 1949. They were immigrants from Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia region of China. The Mongolian immigration was spurred by the arrests of high-ranking lamas, which resumed in 1935. At that time, some lamas left from Mongolia, and some emigrated from India.

The second Mongol group of immigrants came from Europe in 1951-52. This large group was Kalmyk Mongols. These Kalmyks had originally emigrated from western Mongolia, and had been living in southeast Europe, where they had had a state structure since the beginning of the 17th century—about 370 years. But the Russian Revolution in 1917 brought radical changes for most Kalmyks, who maintained their allegiance to the Tsar. Many showed their support by joining the White Army of General Denikin, which operated in the Don-Volga region during the period of civil war following the Revolution. In the chaotic period after the defeat of this army, close to 2,000 Kalmyks, along with other Russian nationals, fled Russia by way of the Black Sea ports. After disembarking in Turkey, they traveled to Yugoslavia and Bulgaria; some were further dispersed into Czechoslovakia and France.¹

Part of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was overrun during the German invasion of Russia in World War II. When the Germans retreated from this area in 1943, many Kalmyks were compelled to join the retreat as forced laborers. Toward the end of the war, most of the Kalmyks living in the Balkans moved into Germany. The Kalmyk refugees in West Germany (primarily Bavaria)—around 800 men—lived in the camps for displaced persons in Schongau, Krumbach-Niderraunau, Schleisheim, Ingolstadt; some families lived in Munich (part of the American zone).

In 1945, after the capitulation of Germany, during the years of her political and economic bankruptcy and anarchy, Kalmyk immigrants went through the most difficult times in their lives. At that time, on Badma Naranovich Ulanov's initiative, the organization "Kalmyk Representation in Western Europe" was founded. The leaders of this organization defended the interests of displaced Kalmyks, and negotiated with

American and international organizations so that Kalmyks could migrate across the ocean.

After five years of living in refugee camps old (since 1920) and new (since 1943-45), Kalmyk immigrants were in a desperate situation: without citizenship or jobs, hungry and cold, without any prospects for the future; yet they hoped for a better life. From 1941 to 1945, nearly all Kalmyk youth were denied an education.

However, in 1950-51, with the help of American friends, the Kalmyk Representation was able to found the "Special Committee on Kalmyk Immigration Affairs." Prominent representatives of American organizations became members of the committee. Some Protestant church organizations became members of the Immigration Committee, which was founded on the initiative of the World Church Service and the Tolstoy Foundation in Washington; the Committee members were successful. On August 31, 1951, the US Congress passed a law granting Kalmyks the right to immigrate as Europeans.² Between December 1951 and March 1952, 571 Kalmyks arrived in the United States, with additional families and individuals arriving later on. After a period of processing and orientation at one of the reception centers set up for them in Baltimore, Maryland and Vineland, New Jersey, they settled in two areas: a small crossroads community near Lakewood, New Jersey known as Freewood Acres, and a section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (An attempt to relocate some members of the group to New Mexico was unsuccessful.) Smaller groups of individuals also settled in New Brunswick and Peterson, New Jersey, and near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. There are now approximately one thousand Kalmyks in the United States, of which 300 are originally from the Astrakhan area—primarily Dorvet with a few Torgut—and the remainder are Buzava.³

This group was studied by cultural anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s (cf. Adelman, Paula). Since that time, the community has gone through generational change, and its host American society has also seen changes in mobility, economic development, child-rearing patterns, awareness of diversity, and so forth.

The Kalmyk Mongol community has not grown very much. The total population in the United States is still about one thousand Kalmyks. The main reason is that at the time of immigration, about 60% of the Kalmyks were elderly. Also, the present Kalmyk family has about two or three children. Families with five or six children are rare. Although there are still Kalmyks in Lakewood and Freewood Acres, New Jersey and in Philadelphia, many moved away, starting in the 1970s. They are now settled in New York, Washington DC, West Virginia, Florida, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, and California.

One does not have to reside long among the Kalmyks to notice that their social relationships are primarily with other Kalmyks. Whatever the amalgam of culture traits (a mixture of Russian, American, Eastern European and traditional Kalmyk) displayed, their existence as a bounded social entity, distinct from the larger host society, is clearly marked. From the point of view of social interaction, this unit appears as a network of interacting individuals and family units defined by two boundaries: frequency of interaction with the host culture, and a low rate of intermarriage. The social interaction that does occur with the host culture is primarily a result of the necessary participation of the Kalmyks in economic and politico-administrative institutions. In essence, these communities serve to shield the immigrant from the larger host society, thereby enabling

him to perpetuate his heritage in many respects. Yet, while these communities do mitigate the shock of transition into a foreign culture, they also prolong the period of acculturation.

However, the younger generation of Kalmyk Mongols—educated in American schools, exposed daily to the media, and interacting more frequently than their parents and or grandparents with native white Americans—are increasingly abandoning many aspects of their ethnic heritage, and are adopting more Americanized attitudes and behavior. This can be seen in the more frequent occurrence of interracial dating and marriage, the adoption of Americanized standards of beauty and fashion, and the gradual disintegration of Kalmyk Mongol families and communities.

This, however, is not a simple process of exchanging one heritage for another, nor is it a process which is common to all second and third generation Kalmyk Mongols. The price exacted from this young people for the transition often entails a high level of disorganization, and the complete abandonment of their own cultural tradition.

The second and third generation Kalmyk Mongols generally are in prestigious occupations in the professional community. There are physicians, professors, teachers, engineers, social workers, professionals in health and the medical fields, executives in government and commercial undertakings, owners of small business and construction contractors. Most Kalmyks are willing to work within an American national framework.

Kalmyks usually live in their own homes. Many families live in new ranch-type or split-level American style houses, with four to eight rooms which contain all the latest electrical appliances. In most cases, the Kalmyks have built these new homes in their spare time with the help of relatives and friends, using the knowledge and experience that they have gained in their employment in the construction industry. This type of assistance is evidence of the continued maintenance of the mutual aid relationships traditionally maintained between actual as well as fictive kin relations. Kalmyks living in older houses have, in many cases, rebuilt the outside so as to present a more modern appearance, while the older interior remains the same.

Mongolian cultures grant the elderly a very much more important position in the familial and social structures than that generally accorded the elderly in the United States. One of the results of the Mongolian concept of family is that the elderly are assured until their deaths of an environment in which they exert a great deal of influence, and their needs (food, clothing, medical care) are provided for.

Family concerns are foremost in the minds of Kalmyk Mongols. The Kalmyk Mongol group is worried about the problems of raising children at a time when values and standards are constantly in flux. Problems perceived in this area are those of maintaining discipline among children without the benefit of cultural or institutional support; lack of manners and respect for the elderly; the effects of television, with its emphasis on sex and violence; and drug abuse.

Kalmyk Mongols desire a close relationship with parents. They, to some extent, wish that their parents would live with them. This would ensure, they believe, a sense of cultural continuity between the generations, helping to develop the identity and character of the children.

While families wish their children to retain their national identity and heritage, most recognize the inevitability of their children being different from those reared in their erstwhile homelands. Kalmyk Mongolian children are subject to a massive cultural

infusion from America. The parents earnestly hope that their children would cultivate the best of both the cultures.

An important aspect of quality of life is the satisfaction or dissatisfaction people experience in interacting with others in various social groupings. It is of considerable importance to immigrants whether or not they experience a hospitable social environment, and able to form and maintain cultural and social affiliations with the local population - especially if the immigrants are of a different ethnic background. Tolerance and acceptance from the host population can enrich the quality of life for immigrants while intolerance and social rejection generate bitterness and alienation.

Most of the Kalmyks have American friends, but they visit each other only occasionally. Social interaction usually takes place in the context of parties, when someone throws a party and the Kalmyks are invited. There is still very little interaction by way of visits to one another's home.

Kalmyks are very social. Even though busy, they try to see each other frequently. Most of them visit some other family at least once a week. Apparently, they are friendly to each other and eager to help. Traditional Kalmyk hospitality is still a part of the life of the second and third generation, continuing unchanged. They like visitors, and their doors are always open. Any visitor to the household is immediately seated and served, at the very least, coffee or Kalmyk tea and cookies.

Most of the interview respondents placed themselves in the middle class, because that is where they think they are in terms of job and income. In the new society, only a modicum of success and prosperity had been achieved.

Until 1990, Kalmyks had contacts with their home country through only mail. However, in 1990 it became possible to visit Kalmykia, the homeland of Kalmyks, for the 550th Djungar Festival. A group of sixty people, both young and old, went to Kalmykia in Russia (then still the Soviet Union) on an official visit. They described it as the visit of a lifetime, a historic visit that was 70 years overdue. It was a visit not thought possible before the fall of Communism, and it opened the doors to communication between the two countries, which has brought many joyous reunions as well as many new unions. Since that time, the Kalmyk Mongol community visits Kalmykia every year. More than 30 young people have married spouses from Kalmykia.

The Kalmyk Mongols like American food, and only eat Mongolian food on some special days.

Kalmyk Mongols still celebrate the traditional religious and cultural activities. Although some ceremonies have been dropped, and others simplified to some degree, those traditionally deemed the most important—Tsagaan Sar, Urus, Zul and Gal Tjalgan—continue to be celebrated today. For several years the township of Howell has proclaimed “Kalmyk Day,” a day in which all are invited to come and see exhibits of all types of artifacts, literature, movies and Kalmyk song and dance performances, in order to experience Kalmyk culture and history first hand. The locally organized dance troupe has also performed at Howell's Kalmyk Day for several years.

For one decade, Mongol-Americans have celebrated the "Chinggis Qan Ceremony". It was the wish of the founders of the Mongol-American Cultural Association to observe this ancient ceremony, so that the current and future generations of Mongol-Americans would have the opportunity to know and participate in the

tradition. Also for several years, the Mongol-American Cultural Association has held a Mongolian Cultural Celebration.

In 1997, the Kalmyk-American Cultural Association was founded in Howell, New Jersey. Through this organization, classes have been formed to teach Kalmyk Mongolian culture, the language, and the community has come together for many functions along the way. This organization has not only brought young people together; but it has also shown them that they have inherited a rich culture.

The event that made "Kalmyk" a household word in Howell and its neighboring towns was the visit of two Kalmyk State Song and Dance Ensembles from the Republic of Kalmykia in Russia. These two forty-member troupes (the "Tulpan," and "Oirat") visited the US in 1995 and 1996. The organizing team scheduled the "Tulpan" troupe to perform at almost every school in Howell Township. The children of Howell Township were impressed by the performances and made friends with many of the artists. This brought a bonding of cultures, and a day that would not be forgotten for a long time.

Shortly after their arrival in the United States, the Kalmyks began the reconstitution of their religious system. A Khalkha Mongol, the living Buddha Dilowa Gegen Khutuktu, who formerly headed a monastery in Mongolia, came to the United States in 1949 as a political refugee. He was deferred to in all religious matters and was the final authority in religious decisions. There are now five Buddhist temples, home to elderly lamas coming from Mongolia and Inner Mongolia, those lamas transplanted from India, and young lamas from Tibet and India.

The Kalmyk Mongol community has managed to retain their cultural identity well, even in their adopted country. They report active participation in cultural and religious festivities of their own heritage; nevertheless, Kalmyks are certain about not returning to Kalmykia.

The Inner Mongols

The third Mongolian group to migrate to this country in a small numbers were the Inner Mongolians. In 1965, the United States accorded them an equal quota to Asian immigrants via the Immigration and Naturalization Act amendments. Since that time, some Inner Mongolian and Taiwanese Mongol individuals and families have migrated to this country. They are highly trained professionals, typically employed in prestigious jobs. These immigrants related well to the earlier Kalmyk immigrants, and they are much in connection with each other. Kalmyks and Inner Mongols have good interrelations and intermarry very often since they are very similar in customs and religion.

The Most Recent Immigrants

The 1990s have seen the most recent Mongol immigrants: those from Mongolia, the Republic of Kalmykia and Buriatia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This will provide a basis for comparison with the Kalmyk experience, since this group is interacting with present-day American society. There are Mongol-American communities of recent immigrants in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C, Philadelphia, and New Jersey. Numbering about one thousand, this group includes both family units and single individuals, with a full range of ages. The first generation of these immigrants are highly educated professionals, who ascribe to the ideology of success and high achievement. The next generation will be born and raised in the United

States, in the secular tradition of American schools and, probably, without the high achievement orientation of their parents.

In conclusion, a distinctive cultural heritage is being still maintained despite Mongol participation in many of the national institutions of the American host culture, including participation in economic and politico-administrative functions, and their adoption of major technological and other material and non-material traits from American culture. Mongolia is proud that the Asian-Americans of Mongolian descent, despite their small number (about two thousand), are forming an important integral part of the American community.

Notes

¹Paula G. Rubel (1967). *The Kalmyk Mongols: A study in Continuity and Change*. (Indiana University Press: Bloomington), p.18.

²Djab Naminov Burchinov (1997). *The Struggle For Civil Rights of the Kalmyk People*. (Elista Press: Elista), p.112.

³Paula G. Rubel (1967). *Ibid.*, p.20.