

Influence and Traces of Buddhism on Traditional Beliefs of the Kyrgyz
People

Budizmin Kırgızların Geleneksel İnançlarındaki Etkileri ve İzleri

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Abstract

While Shamanism predominantly shaped the spiritual life of the Ancient Türks, Buddhism, as the first religion to spread among them, also exerted a significant influence in later periods. Although Buddhism waned among the ancient Türks and the Kyrgyz, it left traces within the boundaries of Turkestan, eventually fading among the contemporary Kyrgyz. The Buddhist inscriptions discovered in the Tian-Shan

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region and the beliefs associated with Buddhism in Kyrgyz history have been relatively understudied until recently. The introduction provides a brief history of Buddhism's expansion into Central Asia. Based on the first-hand sources, its dissemination among the Türk and Uyghur States and the information about the influence of this religion on other communities and the Kyrgyz were examined through comparative research. The first section explores Buddhism's decline following Islam's spread in Turkestan, as documented in *Dīwān Lughāt al-Türk* by Mahmud Kashgari. The second section examines the development of Buddhism in Central Asia and the Junghars' (Qalmuq) aspirations to conquer Turkestan. In conclusion, this article offers a comparative analysis of written sources concerning Kyrgyz history, tracing the key phases of Buddhism's influence on Kyrgyz people and Kyrgyzstan. Lastly, the study delves into the etymological origins of terms like "Manas", "qut", "chatyr", "cherik" and "eshtek" suggesting their Sanskrit roots through Buddhism in the culture and spiritual beliefs of Kyrgyz, shedding light on the preservation of ancient beliefs of the Kyrgyz's.

Keywords: Buddhism, Burkan, Manas, chadyr, lama, qut.

Öz

Eski Türklerin manevi hayatını ağırlıklı olarak Şamanizm inancı şekillendirirken, aralarında yayılan ilk din olan Budizm de sonraki dönemlerde önemli bir etki yaratmıştır. Budizm eski Türkler ve Kırgızlar arasında azalmış olsa da Türkistan sınırları içerisinde izler bırakmış ve nihayetinde çağdaş Kırgızlar arasında da kaybolmuştur. Tanrı Dağları eteklerinde keşfedilen Budist yazıtları ve Kırgız tarihinde Budizm ile ilişkilendirilen inançlar yakın zamana kadar nispeten az incelenmiştir. Makalenin giriş bölümünde Budizm'in Orta Asya'ya yayılmasının kısa bir tarihi verilmektedir. Birinci el kaynaklara dayanarak, Kök Türk Kağanlıkları ve Uygur Kağanlığı arasında yayılması ve bu dinin diğer topluluklara ve Kırgızlara etkisi hakkındaki bilgiler mukayeseli araştırmalarla incelendi. Birinci bölümde, Kâşgarlı Mahmud'un *Dīwānū lughātī't-Türk* adlı eserinde de görüldüğü gibi, İslam Dini'nin Türkistan topraklarında yayılmasının ardından Budizm'in gerilemesi incelemeye ele alınmıştır. İkinci bölümde, Budizm'in Orta Asya'daki gelişimini Cungarların (Kalmuk) Türkistan topraklarını fethetme arzularıyla bağlantılı olarak ele almaya çalışılmıştır. Sonuç olarak bu makale, Budizm'in Kırgızistan'daki ve Kırgızlardaki etkisinin ana aşamalarının izini sürerek, Kırgız tarihine ilişkin yazılı kaynakların karşılaştırmalı bir analizini sunmaktadır. Çalışmada son olarak "Manas", "küt", "çatır", "çerik", "eştektek" gibi terimlerin etimolojik kökenlerini araştırarak, bunların Sanskritçe köklerinin Budizm aracılığıyla Kırgızların kültüründe

ve manevi inançlarında bulunduğunu öne sürüyor ve Kırgızların eski inançlarının korunmasına ışık tutulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Budizm, Burkan, Manas, çatır, lama, ut.

Introduction

Buddhism is one of the oldest religions in the world, originating in the 6th-5th centuries BC. The region of its origin is considered to be Northern India, and its creator, *Siddhartha Gautama*, better known as *Shakyamuni Buddha* (Enlightened One), preached dharma - the unique laws of existence. In the first century BC, there was a division of Buddhism developed in two directions represented by two different groups: *Hinayana* (Small Vehicle) and *Mahāyāna* (Great Vehicle). Subsequently, a third trend of Buddhism - *Lamaism* or *Vajrayāna* (Tantric Buddhism or Diamond Vehicle), which originated in the territory of Tibet in the 7th century AD, was singled out. At the early stages of the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia, the Mahayana current had priority, whereas since the Mongol invasion, and especially during the period of domination of the *Junghgar Khanate* (1635-1757), a third current, *Lamaism*, came to the fore.

A distinctive feature of Buddhism is the rejection of the eternity of the soul and the omnipotence of God. The foundation of this religion was the Four Noble Truths: 1. The truth of the unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*); 2. The truth of the cause of the unsatisfactoriness (*samudāya*); 3. The truth of the cessation of the unsatisfactoriness (*nirodha*); 4. The truth of the way leading to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness (*mārga*).¹ According to the Buddhist worldview, life is a continuous progression toward death, followed inevitably by rebirth.

Based on this, the present article examines the influence of Buddhist philosophy on the worldview and daily life of the Kyrgyz people in the context of the history of the spread of this world religion in Central Asia during the medieval period.

Historical Background

In the middle of the 2nd century, the Kushan Empire expanded into Central Asia and reached Kashgar, Khotan, and Yarkend in Tarim Hollow, modern Xinjiang. As a result, cultural exchanges expanded significantly, and Buddhist missionaries from India began ascetic activity in the southern and southwest regions of Central

¹ *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol. 1 A-L, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., Editor in Chief, Macmillan Reference USATM, Thomson&GaleTM 2004, p. 296.

Asia, where they especially distinguished themselves by their translation of the Buddha canonical texts into local languages. From Central Asia, the teachings of the Buddha, together with the ideas and works of Indian and Central Asian scholars, artists, and craftsmen, spread to Eastern Turkestan and further to the East, enriching the material and spiritual culture of Central Asian peoples².

During the years of Tibetan domination in Eastern Turkestan in the 8th and 9th centuries, Buddhism became firmly established in Tibet. The Tibetans were able to get acquainted with the most prominent Chinese Buddhist center in Dunhuang and learn about the organization of library work and reproduction of Buddhist texts. In about the same period, there was a penetration into Eastern Turkestan and South Siberian Kyrgyz, which already in the 8th century appeared in areas north from Kuku-Nor and north-east of Tibet among Tuyuhun tribes in the area of Khaza³. In the second half of the 9th century, Kyrgyz managed to establish their control over the town Penchul for a while, located at a place corresponding to the present Uch-Turfan⁴. The Kyrgyz ancestors also seem to have first become acquainted with the basics of Buddhism here.

Some information about the Yenisei Kyrgyz's introduction to the Indo-Buddhist culture in their historical homeland in Southern Siberia is provided by the monuments of material culture. So, in Tuva, on the lands of the former Uighur (8th-9th centuries), then Kyrgyz (9th-10th centuries) Khaganates, as well as in Mongolian time there were Buddhist temples with square halls and monumental sculptures of Buddha and bodhisattvas, chapels and pagodas, pictures of deities painted on rocks, which were revered by the Kyrgyz who lived there along with Mongols and Buryats. This reverence for the Indian gods was preserved among the Kyrgyz in the following centuries⁵. As written monuments of the ancient

2 *Vostochnyi Turkestan v Drevnosti i Rannem Srednevekovye*, Pod Redaktsiei B.A. Litvinskogo, Nauka, Moskva 1992, p. 427; Konuralp Ercilasun, *Ch'ing Hanedanı Zamannında Kâşgar (19. Yüzyıl Başına Kadar)*, Ankara University Institute of Social Sciences, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ankara 2003, p. 24; Xavier Trembley "The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia: Buddhism among Iranians, Tocharians and Turks before the 13th Century", *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, Leiden-Boston 2007, pp. 75-129.

3 Frederick Thomas, "Tibetan Documents Concerning Chinese Turkestan II: The Sa-cu Region", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 817.

4 Vasily Barthold, *Sochineniya*, Tom II, Ch. 1, Nauka, Moskva 1963, p. 492.

5 Valentina Goryacheva, *Gorod Zolotogo Verbyuda (Krasnoreçenskoye Gorodishe)*, İlim, Frunze 1988, p. 39.; Hayrettin Erkoç, "Pre-Manichaean Beliefs of the Uyghurs II: Other Religious Elements", *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 47/No. 4, December 2023, pp. 586-587.

Kyrgyz show, during the same period Buddhist motifs appeared in the Kyrgyz epitaphs on Yenisei steles⁶.

In this regard, of great interest is the report of the Persian author of the 11th century that "...The Kirghiz, like the Hindus, burn the dead and say: fire is the purest thing, everything that falls into the fire is purified"⁷. Although the ritual cremation of the dead by the Kyrgyz of South Siberia existed much earlier before the spread of Buddhism in that region, Gardīzī's reference to the connection of this tradition with the Hindus hints at the possibility of a certain influence of Buddhism on the culture of the Kyrgyz in 9th-10th centuries when they came to the wide expanses of Central Asia, including the East Turkestan region⁸.

The cult of Zoroastrianism was very developed in Central Asia before the advent of Buddhism, so the Indian religion was closely intertwined with the Iranian belief in fire-worshippers. Common traditions with Zoroastrianism were found in the *Hinayana* trend of Buddhism, which flourished in Bactria, Sogdiana, and Kucha. According to experts, Buddhist missionaries were probably active in Mongolia already in the era of Rouran Kaganate⁹, which adopted a mixture of Khotanese Buddhism, strongly influenced by Iranian culture and Zoroastrianism¹⁰.

In the middle of the 6th century, the Rouran Kaganate fell to the onslaught of the Kōk Türks. New rulers of Central Asia have kept the religion which they have found within the limits of the conquered state. At the same time, Buddhist temples appeared in the territory of the Turkic Khaganate, where many Buddhist texts were translated into the ancient Turkic language. In the earliest monument of the Turkic statehood, the Sogd speaking *Bugut* inscription, the Taspar-Khagan created "a great new Sangha", i. e. the Buddhist community. According to Turkolog S. G. Klyashtorny, in Buddhism, the Turk khagans saw a form of a universal religion that could help to create an ideological community in a power very heterogeneous in its ethnic composition¹¹.

6 Firaya Arslanova-Sergey Klyashtorny, "Runicheskaya nadpis' na zerkale iz verhnego Priirtys'ha", *Tyurkologicheskij Sbornik*, 1973, p. 315; *Vostochnyi Turkestan.*, p. 339.

7 Vasilij Barthold, *Sochineniya* Tom VIII, Nauka, Moskva 1973, p. 48.

8 Anvarbek Mokeev-Amantur Zhaparov, "Evolyutsiya Pohoronnyh Obryadov Kyrgyzskogo Naroda", *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Istorija*, №. 75, pp. 148-156.

9 Tibor Porció, "Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Buddhism", *Mongolica Pragensia 15. Linguistics, Ethnolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, Vol. 8/No. 2, 2015, p. 19.

10 Xinru Liu, "Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 22/No. 1, March 2011, pp. 55-81.

11 Sergey Klyashtorny, "Drevnetyurkskaya Pis'mennost i Kul'tura Narodov Tsentral'noy Azii",

The first steps for the official introduction of Buddhism into the religious practice of the Turks were made by Mukhan-khagan (553-572)¹². However, only Taspar-khagan gave the Buddhist mission a scope that could provide supporters of this religion with cultural and political priority in the Khagan's stakes. Under him, Sogdians translated into the Turkic language and wrote down separate sutras¹³.

Research drew attention to the role of the ruling elite of nomadic people in Eurasia in the spreading of world religions in the steppe. In this regard, A. Khazanov notes that the transition of ordinary nomads to a new universal religion occurred only after its adoption by the nomadic elite, which required quite a long period and, as a rule, was accompanied by sharp internal strife on religious grounds¹⁴. This can be illustrated by the example of the ideological struggle between the ruler of the Second Eastern Turkic Khaganate Bilge-Khagan, and his wise counselor, Tonyukuk, regarding the spread of Buddhism among the nomadic Turkic tribes. From foreign policy considerations, the Bilge-Khagan supported the patronage of the Buddhist monks from China, while Tonyukuk believed that Buddhism did not correspond to the military spirit and lifestyle of the nomads and, therefore, could not be a basis of the state.¹⁵ In this case, Bilge-Khagan followed the reasonable advice of Tonyukuk, and the dispute was resolved peacefully; at the same time, Buddhism began to take root in the Western Turkic Khaganate, where the process of transition of Turkic tribes to settled and urban life under the influence of numerous colonies of Sogdian population was underway. The origin and development of Old Turkic stone *balbal* sculpture were greatly influenced by canonized images of Buddhist art, which largely had prevalence, primarily in Sogdian art. According to archaeologists, the ancient Turkic pictorial canon has its roots in Buddhist iconography, where each gesture has a certain meaning¹⁶.

Tyurkologicheskij sbornik, 1973, p. 263; *Vostochnyi Turkestan*, p. 339.

12 Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, "Buddhism in Turkish Central Asia", *Numen*, Vol. 37/Fasc. 1 Jun., 1990, pp. 53-69.

13 Sergey Klyashtorny and Vladimir Livshits, "Sogdiyskaya Nadpis' iz Buguta", *Strany i Narody Vostoka*, Vol. 10, 1971, p. 140.

14 Anatolii Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes", *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic*, Papers Prepared for the Central and Inner Asian No. 1, ed. Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlepp, Toronto 1994.

15 Petr Dashkovskiy, "Slujiteli Kul'tov u Tyurok Tsentral'noy Azii v Epohu Srednevekovya", *Izvestiya Altayskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*, 4-1(64), 2009, p. 68.

16 Vladimir Kubarev, *Drevnyurkskie Izvayaniya Altaya*, Nauka, Moskva 1984.

The Influence and Traces of Buddhism on the Traditional Beliefs of Turkestan

There is no consensus among the researchers as to the main agents of Buddhism in Semirech'e (present-day southeastern Kazakhstan and northeastern Kyrgyzstan, a translation of the Türks Jetisu "seven rivers"). Some scholars suggest that Buddhist pilgrims from Northern India played a major role in this, while others give preference to the Sogdian colonies along the Great Silk Road. We believe that this role played more, argued the opinion of T. K. Mkrtichev, who believes that the victory of Arabs over the Chinese in the battle of Talas in 751 had a fatal importance not only for the Chinese policy in the Western region, but also for a large Buddhist community in Sogd¹⁷.

In spreading Buddhist culture to the north and west, the Chinese authorities tried to use various means. In this respect, the following news from the Chinese sources is of some interest. According to the desire of one of the Turk khagans, the emperor of Northern Qi ordered a Buddhist monk to translate into the Turkic language the "Nirvana sutra" and to distribute its translation among the Turks in order to facilitate converting them into Buddhism in 574¹⁸. As can be seen, the religious propaganda among Turks was carried out not only by missionary way, but also through the translated literature compiled obviously in Sogdian and Turkic languages at the request of literate representatives of the political elite of the Turkic Khaganate.

After the 7th century, when Muslim Arabs came to the region, Buddhism gradually began to lose its position, giving way to Islam. With time, when Islam became the state religion in the Qarakhanid state in the mid-10th century, the rulers of this Khaganate launched a holy war against the infidels (gazavat) of the nomadic tribes living in the east of Semirech'e, as well as the Uighur-Buddhists of Beshbalyk region with the center in Turfan (Kucha) city. Some details of this war are given in the work *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* by Mahmud Kashgari, according to which the Qarakhanid armies made campaigns to the *Minglak* region and to the town of *Qatun Sim* located on the border of the Tangut state. According to the author, during these campaigns, *Kocho* city was taken and Uighur Buddhist temples were

17 Tigran Mkrtichev, *Buddiyskoe Īskusstvo Sredney Azii (I-X vv.)*, ĪKTS Akademkniga, Moskva 2000, p. 42.

18 Dmitriy Vasilyev, *Graficheskiy Fond Pamyatnikov Tyurkskoy Runicheskoy Pis'mennosti Aziatskogo Areala (Opyt Sistemizatsii)*, Nauka, Moskva 1983, p. 11.

destroyed¹⁹. It seems that it was then that the centers of Buddhist culture in the Chui and Ili valleys of Semirech'e also declined.

Nevertheless, the centers of Buddhist culture continued to exist in Semirech'e even during the Mongol period²⁰. In the middle of the 13th century, Guillaume de Rubruk, the ambassador of Louis IX to the Mongol khan Möngke, reported about three Buddhist temples in North-Eastern Semirech'e. In these temples, worship was performed by Uighur-Buddhists²¹. As archaeological materials and written sources show, the revival of Buddhism in Semirech'e in the pre-Mongol period was associated with the invasion of the Qarakhitai and then the Naiman, led by Kuchluk, from Mongolia²².

However, the strongest upsurge in the spread of Buddhism in Semirech'e refers to the short period of rule here of the Naiman prince Kuchluk at the beginning of the 13th century, who seized power from the Qarakhitai Gurkhan. The author of the 16th-century work titled *Tārīkh-i-Rashidī* Mirza Muhammad Haidar, with reference to *Tārīkh-i Jahāngushāy* by Juwaynī (13th century), describes a fierce struggle between Kuchluk and Gurkhan of Qarakhitai in which the first gained a victory. Kuchluk captured Kashgar and Khotan; his tribes settled in Emil and Qayaliq²³. He then forced the inhabitants of these regions to abandon the religion of Muhammad and choose another religion. Muhammad Haidar writes, "...The

19 Sergey Klyashtorny-Tursun Sultanov, *Gosudarstva i Narody Evrazijskikh Stepey: Ot Drevnosti k Novomu Vremeni*, Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, Sankt-Petersburg 2009, pp. 156-157; Robert Dankoff, *From Mahmud Kaşgari to Evliya Çelebi: Studies in Middle Turkic and Ottoman Literature*, Gorgias Press, Istanbul 2009, p. 27; Reşat Genç, *Karahanlı Devlet Teşkilâtı (XI. Yüzyıl) (Türk Hâkimiyet Anlayışı ve Karahanlılar)*, T.C. Ministry of Culture Publications, Istanbul 1981, pp. 58-59; M. E. Zeren, "Conception of God and Universe Among Turks in Buddhism and Islamic Sufism", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 13/2, Winter 2018, pp. 127-144; Michal Biran, "Islamic Expansion into Central Asia and Muslim-Buddhist Encounters", *Buddhism in Central Asia III Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines*, Edited by Lewis Doney Carmen Meinert Henrik H. Sorensen Yukiyo Kasai, Brill, Leiden, Boston 2023, p. 13-89.

20 Goryacheva, *agm.*, 48; Philip Slavin, "A rise and fall of a Chaghadaid community: demographic growth and crisis in 'late-medieval' Semirech'ye (Zhetyisu), circa 1248-1345", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Volume 33, Issue 2, April 2023, p. 540.

21 Vasilij Barthold, *Sochineniya*, Tom V, Nauka, Moskva 1968, p. 108.

22 Michal Biran et al., "The Kök-Tash Underground Mausoleum in North-Eastern Kyrgyzstan: The First-Ever Identified Qara Khitai Elite Tomb?", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 33/ Issue 3, July 2023, p. 1-33.

23 Konuralp Ercilasun, *Ch'ing Hanedanı Zamanında Kaşgar*, p. 34-35.

people chose Chinese clothes”, i. e. Buddhism²⁴. Apparently, the construction of the Buddhist temple in Qayaliq also dates to that time²⁵.

According to the information of the author of a Persian language book *Montakab al-tavāriq-e Moʻini* by Moʻin-al-Din Naṭanzi, even in the first half of the 14th century the ruler of the Chagatai ulus Jenkshi arranged mobile temples in the horde, and with permission of the Uighur scribes (bahshi) ordered to install images of idols in all mosques in Maverannahr and Uighuristan²⁶. He also actively patronized the Buddhist priests and had relations with the Chinese government²⁷. Reports from sources about the role of the Uighur bakhshi in organizing mobile idol shrines in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan, as well as about Jenkshi’s close ties with China, clearly show the intentions of this ruler to raise the status of Buddhism in the region to the benefit of the nomadic elite of the Eastern Chagatai ulus.

Such a religious policy of Jenkshi aimed at raising the status of Buddhism among other religious confessions in Semirech’e was dictated by the fact that he came to power after another palace coup in the Chagatai ulus arranged by the nomadic elite, which resisted the growing influence of sedentary culture and Islamic religion. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, in the second half of the 14th century, there was a revival of the religion of Islam in the state of Mogolistan, which included the territory of Kyrgyzstan, where a significant part of the nomadic Kyrgyz tribes of that time continued to preserve the ancient beliefs of Shamanism, Manicheism and Buddhism²⁸.

Only thanks to the active missionary activity of Sufi hermits of the powerful and ramified Naqshbandiya Order, an attempt was made to end the remnants of Buddhism and Shamanism in Eastern Turkestan. However, despite the efforts of devotees of Islam, a certain part of the nomadic population of Semirech’e remained for a long time under the influence of Buddhism and other traditional beliefs of antiquity²⁹.

24 Mirza Mohammed Haidar, *Istoriya Rashidi*, Vvedenie, Perevod s Persidskogo A. Urunbaeva, R. Dcalilovoy, L. Epifanovoy. Otv. red. V. Rahmanov. “Sharq”, Tashkent 2016, p. 396.

25 Barthold, *Sochineniya*, Tom V, p. 108; Gulmira Muhtarova-Boris Jeleznyakov, “Buddizm Iliyskoy Doliny XII-nachala XIII v.: O Nahodkah Predmetov Buddiyskogo Kul’ta Na Gorodishe Talgar I. I. Kopylovim”, *Narody i Religii Evrazii*, Tom 26/No. 3, 2021, p. 145-160.

26 Moʻin-al-Din Naṭanzi, *Montakab al-tavāriq-e Moʻini*, Edited by Jean Aubin. Tehran 1957, p.112.

27 Barthold, *Sochineniya*, Tom V, p. 77.

28 Anvarbek Mokeev, *Kyrgyzy na Altae i na Tyan-Shane*, Bishkek 2010, p.168.

29 Nazira Nurtazina, *Islam v Istorii Srednevekovogo Kazahstana (istoriko-kul’turologicheskoe issledovanie)*,

In the hagiographic work of the 16th century *Zıyya al-Qulub* by Mohammed Avaz, which describes the missionary activity of the famous Islamic leader Hoja Ishaq among the Kyrgyz tribes of Tian-Shan, there are noteworthy details, for example, about the pre-Islamic beliefs of the Kyrgyz. In particular, it is told about the worship of the Kyrgyz in front of an idol with a human face made of silver and hung on a tree. Around him were placed other two thousand idols carved from wood and stone³⁰.

The Influence and Traces of Buddhism on Traditional Beliefs of the Kyrgyz People

The next stage of the development of Buddhism is connected with the expansion of the Junghar Khanate (1635-1757) and the aspiration of Junghar feudal to conquer the lands of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Figure 1). The Junghars, being zealous adherents of the Lamaist trend of Buddhism, began actively building in the newly occupied territories defensive structures of brick and adobe buildings, which as a rule were used simultaneously as temples and joss-house (shrine), as well as living quarters for lamas - representatives of Buddhist clergy³¹.

However, judging from the field material collected by the Russian traveler and ethnographer P.S. Pallas among the Qalmaqs of the Volga region in the second half of the 18th century and published in his book “*Sammlungen Historischer Nachrichten über die Mongolischen Völkerschaften*”, Qalmaq monasteries and prayer houses were usually located in portable yurts made of lightweight structures³².

Farab, Almaty 2000, p. 80.

30 *Materialy Po Istorii Kirgizov i Kirgizii*, Vyp.1, Otv. red. V. A. Romodin. Nauka, Moskva 1973, p. 183.

31 Irina Erofeeva i dr., *Anyrakayskiy Treugol'nik: Istoriko-Geografičeskii Areal i Hronika Velikogo Srajeniya*, Daik-Press, Almaty 2008, p. 35.

32 Peter Pallas, *Sammlungen Historischer Nachrichten über die Mongolischen Völkerschaften*. Vol. I-II, gedruckt bey der Kayserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Saint-Petersburg 1776, p. 154-155, figure 2.

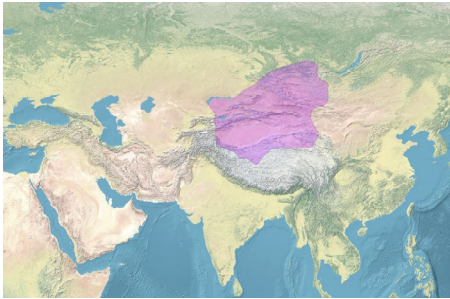


Figure 1: Map of Junghgar Khanate (1635-1757).

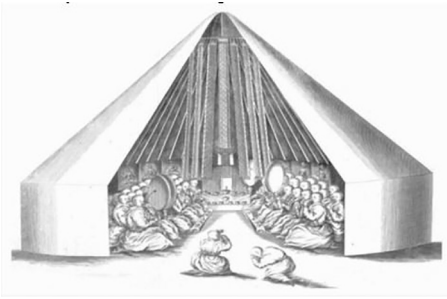


Figure 2: Qalmaq mobile monastery. Source: from the book Pallas.

According to authentic sources, the Junghgar rulers did not limit themselves to conquering new lands, but at the same time tried to convert to Buddhism the captured Kyrgyz children by entrusting them to the care of Lamaist monks. The author of the biography of a major Buddhist religious figure and educator of the Qalmaq people of Junghgaria Zaja Pandita Sakbon Radnabhadra when describing the results of another campaign of the Junghgar army led by Tsetsen-khan in the winter of 1652 against the (burut) Kirghiz of the Tian-Shan states: "... having conquered the burut, Tsetsen-khan arrived. In this campaign, at the age of seventeen, Galdamba defeated Yangir khan. In honour of his deceased mother, Tseten-khan ordered to collect 100 boys, 50 of which he presented to Hutukhta for initiation into bandi. Others he has presented to Achit Tsorgi and other lamas, to huvaraks has given in bandi 100 Burut boys from 100 otoks"³³.

This interesting fact of an authentic source about attempts to convert to Buddhism captured Kyrgyz children by the military-political elite of Junghgaria is indirectly confirmed in the epic "Manas", where in the story about the childhood of Manas it is said that the Qalmaq ruler, having heard about birth among Kyrgyz, of an unusual boy sent people to capture this baby-beast, probably for converting him to Buddhism³⁴. In one of the epic variants, "Manas", there is also a story where a close relative of the epic hero, who remained among Junghgarian Qalmaqs, accepts Buddhist religion: "...Usen changed his name, they called him *Közkaman*,

33 Radnabhadra, *Lumyi Svet. Istorija Rabdcam Zaya-Panditi*, Perevod s Oyratskogo G. N. Rumyantseva i A. G. Sazykina. Translitteratsiya Teksta, Predisloviye, Kommentariy, Ukazateli i Primeçaniya A. G. Sazykina, "Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie", Sankt-Petersburg 1999, p. 37; John F. Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, Vol. I, P. CLXVIII, Macmillan and Company, London 1912.

34 *Manas*, Birinchi bölük, 1 kitep, Kyskartylyp biriktirilgen variant, Zhalpy redaksiyalagan Red. Bolot Yunusaliyev, Kyrgyzmambas, Frunze 1958.

he accepted the faith of Qalmaqs and Burkan, who is in the corner, started to call him a god". As it follows from here, in the epos the term Burqan refers to an idol made of bronze, which was worshiped by some part of the Kyrgyzs, who accepted the faith of the Qalmaq people³⁵.

In this regard, it should also be noted that according to authentic sources, as a result of one of the Galdan-Boshokhtu-khan`s campaigns (1678-1697) against southern Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and urban population of Sayram and Andijan, held in 1683 during the battle the son of the Kazakh Khanate`s governor Tauke-khan was captured and sent by Galdan to Tibet to Dalai-Lama for the purpose of his conversion into lamaism³⁶.

As the above facts of sources show, the Buddhist monasteries of Jungharia and Tibet purposefully took as novices` children from the captured Muslim population of Semirech`e for the purpose of spreading Lamaism in Central Asia. The attempt to spread Buddhism in Kyrgyzstan by the Junghgar military and political elite and higher clergy was not limited to the education of captured Kyrgyz children in Lamaist monasteries in the spirit of the Buddhist religion. In the areas of Kyrgyzstan captured during military operations, the Lamai clergy was active in perpetuating the main tenets of Buddhist teaching and images of the Buddha by depicting them on stone boulders and rocks (Figure 3). These inscriptions carved on the stones contain the words "Om Mani Padme Hum" (*Praise to the Jewel in the Lotus* or *No grace above the lotus, which literally means- Oh! The pearl in the lotus flower*). On some boulders and rocks, in addition to inscriptions, there are also images of Buddha. Similar inscriptions and images were found almost everywhere in the Issyk-Kul and Chui valleys of Kyrgyzstan³⁷.

According to F. Poyarkov, some wealthy Tibetan Buddhists kept professional artels of lama-sculptors whose duty consisted in wandering around mountains, valleys and deserts with a chisel, carving the sacred saying "Om mani padme hum" on stones and rocks everywhere³⁸.

35 *Manas*, P. Karalaevdin Varianty. Tüz.: A. Zhainakova, A. Akmatallyev, Turar, Bishkek 2010, p.253.

36 *Materialy Po Istorii Russko-Mongolskikh Otmosheniü*, Vol. 4, Otv. red. N.F. Demidova, Vostochnaya literatura, Moskva 2000, p.344.

37 Chetin Zhumagulov, *Epigrafiika Kirgizii*, Vyp 2, Ilim, Frunze 1982.

38 Fyedor Poyarkov, "Iz Arkheologicheskikh Ekskursii Po Pishpekskomu Uezdu i Po Beregam Issyk-Kulya", *Pamyatnaya Knijka Semirechenskogo Oblastnogo Statisticheskogo Komiteta Na 1898 g.* Tom II,



Figure 3: The inscription on the stone with the Buddhist formula “Om mani padme hum”. Source: Photo by K. Belek.

The long political domination of Junghgars in the northern areas of Kyrgyzstan and the efforts of Tibetan lamas to spread Lamaist Buddhism among the Kyrgyz did not pass without a trace. A small group of Kyrgyzs from among the Kyrgyz tribes of *Munduz*, *Baaryn*, *Sarybagysh*, *Sart*, *Nayman*, *Sayak* and others, who at one time adopted Buddhist religion and for religious reasons joined the Junghgars, still live in Tarbagatai aimag of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the PRC³⁹.

However, the efforts of the rulers of the Junghar Khanate and the abbots of the Lamaist monasteries to spread the religion of Buddhism among the entire Muslim population of Kyrgyzstan apparently did not bring them tangible results. As the religious situation in Central Asia in the 17th-19th centuries shows, the Kyrgyz of Tian-Shan became zealous followers of Khanafi madhhab of Sunni Islam religion that was reflected in the epos “Manas” where the main hero declares holy war “gazavat” against Qalmaq of Junghgaria who confessed Lamaism interpretation of Buddhism.

The presence of religious motifs in the epic tales of the Kyrgyz was first brought to the attention of V.V. Radlov. In this regard, he wrote that despite their poor knowledge in the tenets of Islam, they treat non-believers with more fanaticism than the Kazakhs (Qazaq), and their tales tell of wars for the faith. Such religious fanaticism of the Kyrgyz is explained by V. V. Radlov, who explains this religious fanaticism by the fact that they live in close proximity to the infidel Chinese and Qalmaq, who profess Buddhism⁴⁰.

Vernyi 1898, p. 61.

39 Ablabek Asankanov, *Kyrgyzy Sindzyana (KNR)*, Biyiktik, Bishkek 2010, p. 21.

40 Vasilii Radlov, *Iz Sibiri*, Nauka, Moskva 1989, p. 349-352.

Nevertheless, as a result of spread of Buddhism in the early history of Kyrgyzstan and neighboring regions of Central Asia, as well as in the late Middle Ages up to the mid-18th century, when there was an active promotion of Buddhism among the Northern Kyrgyz tribes of Tian-Shan, some terms of Buddhist teachings and certain concepts of socio-economic and cultural nature were reflected in Kyrgyz language and literature. For example, the Kyrgyz proverb “turmushuj eshek araba, tuulduj kaldyñ balaaga” *life is a hard thing, suffering begins at birth* reflects the Buddhist philosophy of *birth is a sin*.

In popular memory have survived the sayings of the medieval sage and steppe philosopher Asan Kaigy (Sorrowful Asan, who presumably lived in the second half of the 14th century), which are in line with the Buddhist compassion for living beings⁴¹. According to the legend, once when spring frosts accompanied by heavy snowfalls occurred in the steppe, in his philosophical verses, Asan Kaigy laments defenseless animals that may die due to severe frost and absence of shelter: *Qyrygu jok, July jok, qulan bayqush qantti eken. Boorunda butu jok, jylan bayqush qantti eken*. “Without a lush tail and mane, what is the position of the poor onagres. Without the leg on the belly, what is the position of the poor snake?”⁴².

Scientific literature suggests that the name of the protagonist of the prominent Kyrgyz epos *Manas* is derived from the Sanskrit word मन्स - mind, spirit, strength. In fact, the etymology of the name *Manas* cannot be explained through the resources of Turkic languages. However, it still remains unknown how and when this Sanskrit word entered the Kyrgyz language as the name of the main hero of the popular heroic epic of the Kyrgyz people. If the name *Manas* has something to do with the teaching of Buddhist religion, it most likely was borrowed by our remote ancestors at the early stages of the spread of this religion in Central Asia, which is shown by some ancient place names in Xinjiang (the town of *Manas* and the river *Manas*), the high peak *Manaslu* in Nepal, and also numerous sacred places in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the names of which are associated with the burial place or objects and attributes of the epic hero *Manas*⁴³.

The Kyrgyz language also has a number of words borrowed from Sanskrit or from terminology of Buddhist teaching: “aruu”: *pure*, “burqan”: *idol*, “but”: *Buddha, idol*,

41 Batma Kebekova, *Kyrgyz El Yrchyların Taryhynyn Ocherkteri*, T.s 1, Sham, Bishkek 2009, p. 496.

42 Togolok Moldo, *Chygarmalar Zhyinagy*, T.1, Kyrgyzstan, Frunze 1970, p. 124-126;

43 Anvarbek Mokeev, *Kyrgyzy na Altae*, p. 104.

“butparas”: *idolater*, “bakshy” - Sanskrit “bhikshu”: 1. *priest*, 2. *instructor*, “arashan”: *warm spring*, “kechil”: Qalmaq monk, “qut”: 1. *human figure made of lead or tin - amulet*. 2. *a small idol* among the Qalmaq people. According to ethnographic materials, “qut” survived among the Kyrgyz in the sense of a fetus of children and cattle, as among the Altai people. The “qut”, according to folk beliefs, fell from above through a chimney hole. The Kyrgyz also used this term to refer to idols made of lead or tin that were kept in the family of the eldest woman⁴⁴; “sart”: *merchant*, “törö”: *law, custom*, “tümön”: *ten thousand*, “manas”: *human mind*, “manzha”: *heel, finger*, “mechin”: 1. *monkey*, 2. *year of the monkey*, “misk”: *musk*, “chatyr” - Sanskrit “chatra”: 1. *tent, umbrella*, 2. *roof*, “cherik”: *army*, “eshtek”: *Kshatriya-rider*, “laanat”: *Buddhist deity*, “lailama”: 1. *Dalai lama*, 2. *deity with the Qalmaq people*, “ylama”: 1. *lama - Buddhists Lama*, 2. *the name of a district in the Djungal area of Kyrgyzstan* etc⁴⁵.

Most of these words, such as “aruu”, “bakshy”, “but”, “manas”, “manzha”, “mechin”, “misk”, “sart”, “törö”, “tümön”, “cherik”, “eshtek”, obviously were borrowed already in Ancient Turkic period through Tocharian and Khotan Saka languages of East Turkistan, which in 8th-10th centuries became a stronghold of Buddhism in Central Asia. The first Buddhist canonical texts were translated through these languages into Sogdian and Turkic languages of that time⁴⁶. At the same time separate words: “burqan”, “but”, “qut”, “kechil”, “ylama”, “lailama” connected with Jungharian Qalmaq and Lamaism, testify about remnants of the last stage of spread of Lamaism religion in Kyrgyzstan in 17th - first half of 18th centuries.

Regarding the influence of the Buddhist philosophy of reincarnation (rebirth of the human soul) on the Kyrgyz worldview, several fairy tale legends describe the transformation of a living person into an animal for grave sins through curses by parents or other family members who have been humiliated or insulted by their children or close relatives.

44 Leonid Potapov, “Umay - Bojestvo Drevnih Tyurkov v Svete Etnograficheskikh Dannyh”, *Tyurkologicheskij sbornik*, 1972, Nauka, Moskva 1973, pp. 256-286.

45 Konstantin Yudahin, *Kirgizsko-Russkij Slovar'*, T. 1. Glavnaya Redaktsiya Kirgizskoi Sovetskoi Entsiklopedii, Frunze 1985. See the article by Jens Wilkens, “Uyghur Buddhism and the Impact of Manichaeism and Native Religion: The Case of Religious Terminology”, *Buddhism in Central Asia III Impacts of Non-Buddhist Influences, Doctrines*, Edited by Lewis Doney Carmen Meinert Henrik H. Sørensen Yukiyo Kasai. Brill, Leiden, Boston. 2023, pp. 90-122.

46 *Vostochnyi Turkestan*, p.6-31; 157-193.

For example, the daughter-in-law of two old people because of a family quarrel, starts secretly feeding her father-in-law and mother-in-law with milk diluted with water; and when her pranks are discovered, the old men curse the daughter-in-law; as a result of which she turns into a goat-herder and constantly chirps ‘sutak’ (pure milk). The wayward son of another elderly married couple, after his parents curse him for his licentious lifestyle, turns into a groundhog who has begun to cry pitifully in a human voice.⁴⁷

While the first legend has a purely didactical character, aiming to ensure that daughters-in-law treat their elderly parents-in-law with respect and perform their household duties honestly and diligently, the second legend traces its roots to the era when the ancestors of the modern Kyrgyz consumed marmot meat, which is a carrier of the bacteria responsible for the deadly plague epidemic. The moral here is that, since the marmot is believed to have originally been a human who was transformed into an animal by the curse of his parents, its meat is strictly forbidden. Thus, in the context of the above-mentioned stages of the spread of Buddhism among the Kyrgyz, we can note a certain influence of the theory of reincarnation on the daily life and worldview of the Kyrgyz people, who used this philosophy in the sphere of folk pedagogy, as well as to prevent the pandemic of various contagious diseases. In this regard, it should also be noted that Mongolian people who profess the Lamaist sect of Buddhism use the term *qubilyan* in the sense of ‘reborn’, while in the modern Kyrgyz language the word *kubulgan* means to change, to transform.⁴⁸

Conclusion

To summarize the above mentioned, one may note that dissemination of Buddhism among the Kyrgyz’s and in Kyrgyzstan began in the epoch of ancient Turkic states, and if in the initial period its propaganda was coming from India through East Turkestan, then already in the ancient Turkic period the influence of the Chinese variant of Buddhism has increased. Moreover, along with missionary activity, distribution through written translations of the canonical Buddhist sutras into Turkic languages began.

47 Aigerim Dykanbaeva, *Kyrgyz Ulamyshтары*: Bishkek 2005, p. 346-348.

48 *Etimologicheskij slovar’ mongolskih yazikov*. T. 3, IV RAN, Moskva 2018, p. 63; *Kirgizsko-Russkij Slovar’*. T. 1. p. 436.

Despite the gradual weakening of the influence of Buddhism after the active spread of the religion of Islam in Central Asia in the 8th-11th centuries, the spread of Buddhist doctrine in Semirech'e during the period of Mongol rule was further developed to a certain extent. Although during the short-term domination of the Naiman ruler Kuchluk there were attempts to force the Muslim population to convert to Buddhism, in general there was no evidence of forcible imposition of Buddhism in Kyrgyzstan during the early medieval period.

The last stage of active spread of Lamaism relates to the period of expansion of the Junghgar Khanate into Central Asia in the 17th - first half of 18th centuries when the strategy of conversion into Islam of the Muslim population of the region by force of arms and active propaganda among peaceful population met stiff resistance from the Kyrgyz against the Qalmaq Junghgaria under slogans of Islam in the form of holy war - *gazavat*, which in no small measure helped to maintain Islamic self-identification of the people.

In general, it can be noted that the almost thousand-year history of Buddhism has left a definite trace in the material and spiritual culture of the Kyrgyz people, and the current generation should carefully preserve it and use the heritage of Buddhist teaching wisely to strengthen cultural and humanitarian cooperation of Kyrgyzstan.

Author Contributions

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Conceiving the Study | Author-1 (%30) - Author-2 (%40) Author-3 (%30) |
| Data Collection | Author-1 (%30) - Author-2 (%35) Author-3 (%35) |
| Data Analysis | Author-1 (%35) - Author-2 (%35) Author-3 (%30) |
| Writing up | Author-1 (%40) - Author-2 (%40) - Author-3 (%20) |
| Submission and Revision | Author-1 (%30) - Author-2 (%50) - Author-3 (%20) |

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