



Visible and Invisible Ethnicity: Native Language and Religiosity Among the Kalmyks during the Years of Deportation, 1943–1956

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Abstract

This article is devoted to an important period, as yet insufficiently studied by anthropologists and sociologists, in the history of Kalmykia – the deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia (1943–1956) and its cultural implications. Its aim is to show how the stigmatization of the exiled Kalmyks in an unfavorable social and political environment influenced their linguistic and religious behavior. These issues are part of the process of creating a Soviet Kalmyk ethnicity, which began after the establishment of Soviet power on the Kalmyk steppe in 1920 and was a continuation in the realm of politics of the forced modernization of the people. Kalmyks in Siberia tried to hide ethnically marked forms of culture, abstaining from speaking Kalmyk in public and hiding their religiosity. The article uses field materials collected by the author in the form of interviews conducted between 2004 and 2019 and published memoirs about exile.

Keywords

Kalmyks – ethnicity – deportation – Siberia – punished peoples – Stalinism – stigma – exclusionary practices

1 Introduction¹

The Kalmyks have been living in Russia for more than four centuries. Their close links to Russia, within whose borders they have settled, were described

¹ This paper was translated from Russian by Elvira Churyumova.

by the historian Michael Khodarkovsky (1992) as a meeting of two worlds. The ethnic culture of the Kalmyks was previously described by Russian ethnographers in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The turbulent twentieth century saw a significant change in the term “ethnicity”, as well as in the status of Kalmyk statehood – the Kalmyks were a titular people in their autonomous republic, then they disappeared from the public space of the USSR along with their republic. The vicissitudes of the twentieth century also affected such ethnographic markers as clothing, cuisine, housing, gender relations, and family type, among others. Many of the changes are related to the processes of modernization and globalization, but this article will focus mainly on the period of deportation.

In this article, I show how the linguistic and religious behavior of the Kalmyks changed from 1943 to 1956, when the Kalmyk people were “punished” (Nekrich 1978) for the crime of alleged disloyalty toward the Soviet government, and the entire Kalmyk population of the republic was deported to Siberia only because they were born Kalmyks (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 19). Kalmyks were considered “enemies of the people” for 13 years. This period had a tangible effect on the group’s demography; whereas according to the 1939 Soviet census, 131,600 Kalmyks lived in the USSR, the 1959 census counted only 106,600 Kalmyks (Ochirov 2010, 61). In 20 years, the Kalmyk population declined by 25,000 people, or 19 percent.

I view ethnicity as a form of organizing cultural differences (Tishkov 2003, 105). To interpret the historical materials under consideration, I use Bart’s (2006) research on group boundaries and that of Goffmann (1963) on group stigmatization. The Kalmyks found themselves in Siberia in the extreme situation of outcasts: the state did not tell them what they were accused of, and there was a significant social distance between the Kalmyks and the local populations. This active rejection of the exiled Kalmyks by the locals as “enemies of the people” reminds us of what Martin (2011, 465) terms “the ethnicization of Soviet xenophobia.” The identification of the exiles was constructed based not on real differences but on differences that became socially significant, even if they were invented (Bart 2006, 16). The deportation of Kalmyks, like other groups in the USSR, was an example of internal colonization, which was manifested, among other things, in the confiscation of property based on one’s belonging to an ethnic minority (see Pohl 2014).

The example of the deported Kalmyks is used to show how the content of such important ethnic parameters as one’s native language and religiosity changed depending on the socio-political context dominated by the communist ideology underpinned by a dogma that “religion is the opium of the

people” and by a tendency to domination by the Russian language among ethnic minorities as the language of state power. Ultimately, the deportation was an attempt to control ethnic processes by the state. In 1956, charges and restrictions were lifted on the Kalmyks, Kalmyk autonomy was subsequently restored, and a process was set in motion whereby the Kalmyks began to return to their homeland.

The 13 years of deportation were a period that the Kalmyks wanted to forget, even after they had returned home. Still, people began to remember it publicly in 1991 following the adoption of the Law on the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples. Nevertheless, few studies are available on this period (Ubushaev and Ubushaev 2007, Guchinova 2005). It is also rare to come across ethnography in the English-language literature about exiled Kalmyks’ everyday life, religious practice, or linguistic situation, even in articles specifically devoted to this period (Grin 2000, Richardson 2002, Bougdaeva and Isaacs 2018).

Therefore, a special place is occupied by published oral histories, which can be analyzed from different research angles, including the study of survival strategies, generational differences in memory, or the storyteller’s discursive strategies. The value of oral evidence becomes more prominent in the absence of statistical data. Whilst there are no statistics available on the religious views of Soviet citizens, statistics on native language often did not correspond to the actual language competence of the respondents, and this box was ticked automatically in accordance with one’s nationality status.

In this article, I examine how the Kalmyk language and Buddhist practices were supported in the families of Kalmyk special settlers in Siberia. I examine the advantages of those Kalmyks who spoke Russian fluently as well as the difficulties that people encountered who did not speak Russian, for in the places of resettlement Kalmyks could communicate only in Russian with their neighbors, work colleagues, or security agency officials. Materials used include the author’s interviews collected during the project “Everyone has their own Siberia” in 2004–2018 in Kalmykia and Moscow,² some of which have not been published before, being marked as Author’s Field Materials (AFM), as well as the memoirs of Kalmyks who survived Siberia, published in the collections of Kalmyk memoirs entitled *We are Among Those Exiled Forever* and *The Pain of Memory*.

2 A total of 30 in-depth interviews were recorded with Kalmyks, of both genders and ethno-territorial backgrounds, who had experience of exile.

2 Soviet Language and Religious Policy in Kalmykia in the 1920s and 1930s

2.1 *The Language Policy of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks*

Consolidated in the early 1920s on the Kalmyk steppe, Soviet power began to change the foundations of Kalmyk culture by cutting off society from such traditional values as its religion, writing system, nomadic economy, and housing, and replacing them with new ones. In 1924, the Kalmyk vertical script, invented by the Oirat educator and monk Zaya Pandita, was replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet. The old Kalmyk alphabet, referred to as “Clear Script” (Kalm. *Todo Bichig*), was the medium in which all Kalmyk historical and religious literature had been written. In 1930, Cyrillic was replaced with Latin script, and children were taught to read and write in this script at school. In 1939, the authorities reverted again to Cyrillic. After three changes of script in a decade-and-a-half, the Kalmyks stayed illiterate; in addition to changing the script each time the state also changed the number of letters. This new illiteracy of a person who finished school and, as a result of the reforms, lost his/her writing and reading skills, often had an adverse effect on people’s writing competencies and instilled uncertainty in their writing and reading skills.

However, during its strict nation-building project, the Soviet government continued to create the Kalmyk nation. A literary language was needed for the national press and the creation of Kalmyk Soviet literature. Three dialects were recorded in the Kalmyk language: Torghut, Buzava and Derbet, with the last being chosen as the basis for creating a literary language.

School education was also important. Since the Kalmyks were still nomads at that time, school-age children were collected in stationary boarding schools, where they lived separately from their families. In the 1920s, education in Kalmyk schools was conducted predominantly in Russian due to a shortage of Kalmyk teachers and Kalmyk textbooks. The Soviet government launched a program to eliminate illiteracy across the country, including in Kalmykia. Before this, Kalmyk boys could only learn to read and write at Buddhist temples if they wished to become monks. Textbooks in Russian also contained vocabulary from a life alien to non-communists. In Soviet schools, it was necessary to write new textbooks containing new class-based messages and no mention of monarchs or priests, and then to translate these textbooks into the languages of the peoples inhabiting the country. For example, in 1923 all school education in Kalmykia was conducted in Russian, and the Kalmyk language was not even taught as a classroom subject. In the 1925–26 academic year, 30 schools were opened where teaching in the first and second grades was conducted in Kalmyk, while in the rest of the Kalmyk schools the Kalmyk language

was taught as a special subject (Tashninov 1969, 114). By 1937, all elementary schools in the republic taught classes in Kalmyk from grades one to four, where Russian was taught as a special subject. Then from grade five to seven education was conducted in Russian, and the Kalmyk language was a special subject (Baranova 2009a, 25).

In the USSR, Russian was supposed to become the language of communication in a multinational country and a conductor of civic nationalism; it provided a unified school curriculum for young citizens and a unified understanding of political tasks through reading main newspapers. It was necessary to improve workers' knowledge in the national republics, raising the general level of professionalism in areas needed for the modernization of the economy and culture. Knowledge of Russian was a condition for completing military service successfully for all USSR citizens, regardless of their native language. Many doors opened for representatives of ethnic minorities who spoke Russian well, from career growth in the party to the opportunity to study at top universities. Since Russian was seen as prestigious, parents sought to teach it to their children. Native languages spoken mainly in rural places were looked down upon as "village" (Russ. *derevenskie*) languages.

2.2 *Religious Policy in Kalmykia until 1943*

In the early years, when their power in Russia was not yet firmly established, communists sought political allies, whom they would later brand as temporary. In this climate the communists tried to find common goals between the teachings of communism and Buddhism. Ideas, including the "mystical-religious trend," appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century among the Russian intelligentsia, some of whom switched from Marxism to religious views (Mokievskii 1999, 422, 427). The most influential adherent in Soviet Russia of the theory of "commonality" between Buddhist teachings and communist ideology was the Khambo Lama of Russia, Agvan Dordzhiev, who believed that the main Buddhist ideas of non-violence, compassion, tolerance, and love were close to the ideological principles of Marxism (Angaeva 1999, 83).

In the official Soviet lexicon, Buddhism, as practiced in the USSR and Mongolia, was termed Lamaism, a word that was used in the nineteenth century in relation to the teachings of Tsongkhapa. This was an attempt by the state to differentiate the Buddhist practices of Russia's peoples from those in other parts of the world, and to present a historically and geographically truncated version of their faith.

Having established themselves in power, in 1929 the communists declared war on all religions and adopted the resolutions "On measures to strengthen anti-religious work" and "On religious associations" (Sinitsyn 2013, 89), which

banned all religions, including Buddhism. The latter became the primary legal document to regulate the workings of religious institutions in the USSR until 1990. The state's fight against religion was manifested in the destruction of temples in Kalmykia. Whereas in 1917 in Kalmykia there existed the Buddhist university Tsanit Cherya and more than 100 Buddhist temples (both stationary and nomadic), by the beginning of the 1940s, not a single functioning temple remained standing (Baskhaev 2007, 180). Before the revolution of 1917 on the territory of some Kalmyk settlements, such as the 13 *stanitsas* (villages) where Don Kalmyks lived, there stood 13 temples and more than 20 prayer houses.

The most beautiful temple was built in our *stanitsa* of Batlaevskaya. With the advent of Soviet power, all the temples and prayer houses were destroyed and the gold and silver decorations that were in the temples were confiscated by the state, and the utensils and sacred images were collected and sent off to Rostov-on-Don. The clergy was shot dead.

BUDZHALOV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2019b, 227

State pressure on the Buddhist establishment was reflected not only in the closure of monasteries but also in the repression of monks. In 1931, more than 60 monks were arrested among the high-ranking clergymen in Kalmykia, including the Shajin Lama of Kalmykia, Sharap Tepkin. Accused of trumped-up charges, they were sentenced to 10 years in forced labor camps. In 1932, the repressions continued, and other cases were opened. In 1935, the Buddhist university Tsanit Cherya was closed and turned into a children's pioneer camp (*Istoriya Kalmykii* 2009, Vol. 3, 336). In 1935–37, 1495 monks and 920 monastic novices were convicted without a court hearing (*Istoriya Kalmykii* 2009, Vol. 3, 340). In the language of the Communist Party, these actions were formulated as the destruction of the clergy “as a class.”

3 The Deportation of Kalmyks and Life in Exile

The Kalmyks were the second “punished people” from the greater Caucasus region, after the Karachays (exiled in November 1943), to be sent into exile. Groups deported later included the Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars (Nekrich 1978). The state punished entire groups for the “disloyalty” of some of their members toward the Soviet government. Kalmyks were punished for the actions of a military collaborationist formation called the Kalmyk Cavalry Corps (at most, five thousand collaborators composed mainly of

deserters from the Red Army who went on to cooperate with the German Army either in occupied Kalmykia or while in concentration camps in Germany). Most of the corps soldiers were repatriated to the Soviet Union in 1945, where they received prison terms (Guchinova 2004, 106; on repatriation, see also Churyumova and Holland 2021). Due to the corps members' betrayal of the motherland, other Kalmyks were also punished – the civilian population of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) and nearby regions – for their Kalmyk ethnicity.

According to the decree of 27 December 1943, the Republic of Kalmykia was liquidated, and its territory was divided among the neighboring regions. The capital Elista (meaning “sandy” in Kalmyk) was renamed Stepnoy. The word “Kalmyk” became taboo, and it disappeared from the public sphere. Articles on Kalmyks were removed from encyclopedias, and scientific literature about Kalmyks, fictional works by Kalmyk authors, and collections of Kalmyk fairy tales and proverbs were all removed from public access in libraries. Kalmyks disappeared from the public space of the USSR. Kalmyk children in Siberia could not prove to their peers that a people called Kalmyks existed (Sanchirov. Quoted in Guchinova 2019a, 554). The people became invisible to the citizens of the USSR.

Kalmyk people of all ages were deported to different regions of Siberia and Kazakhstan. In the early morning of 28 December 1943, soldiers entered every Kalmyk house and read out the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, “On the liquidation of the Kalmyk ASSR and the formation of the Astrakhan region as part of the RSFSR” (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 18–19). The soldiers gave people from 15 minutes to two hours to get ready and took them to population collection points, from where they were transported to the nearest railway stations in American Studebaker US6 trucks supplied by the U.S. government under lend-lease. In the evening, 46 train carriages transported approximately 93,000 people to the country's east (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 18, 118–119). Later, on 27 March 1944, Kalmyk groups from the Rostov region (1,300 people), the Stalingrad region (1,169 people), and Stavropol Krai (1,300 people) were deported (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 94, 101). In March–April 1944, Kalmyk soldiers were called out of the army and sent to the Shiroklag forced labor camp to construct a hydroelectric power station in the Molotov (now Perm) region (Guchinova 2019c, 7). The entire Kalmyk population was punished without trial for the guilt of a small group.

In exile, Kalmyks were dispersed, two to three families per settlement, in the Krasnoyarsk and Altai territories, and in the Omsk, Tomsk, and Novosibirsk regions. From there, many were sent further to the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous *Okrug* (district), Taimyr, Sakhalin, as well as the Kazakh and Kyrgyz

union republics. This dispersal made it difficult for families to survive on their own and prevented them from communicating with fellow Kalmyks in their native language.

Many people from stigmatized groups tried to indicate their ethnic identity as something else in the fifth paragraph of their passports or other documents. As anthropologist A. Baiburin wrote, “one of many effects of deportations based on nationality was a sharp increase in the number of fake entries in the ‘nationality’ column. The entries ‘German’, ‘Pole’, ‘Kalmyk’, etc. were most often changed to ‘Russian’” (Baiburin 2017, 301). The practice of excluding Kalmyks from the full membership of Soviet society was manifested in the way they were issued documents – a mirror of one’s civil status. During exile, many people did not take their documents with them. Those who did had their passports “confiscated in places of special resettlement to be issued certificates instead of passports” (Baiburin 2017, 414). Some Kalmyks had already encountered the problem of lacking documents necessary for employment in the 1930s. These were members of social classes deemed by the authorities as alien to Soviet society: *zaisangs* (aristocrats), priests, and kulaks. These people, who had already been repressed in the 1920s and 1930s based on their social origins, were better prepared for the difficulties of exile in 1943.

It is important to understand that in the USSR, social sciences were dominated by the Stalinist definition of nationality, from which a biosocial understanding of ethnicity followed (Malakhov 2003, 536), according to which, certain characteristics in people depended on one’s belonging to certain ethnic groups and on the nationality of one’s parents. Therefore, if Kalmyks as a people were declared traitors, then all its members were also declared traitors, including babies born after the war. The ethnic identity of Kalmyks, as a form of organization of their cultural differences, reacted to an unfavorable social situation. In the Kalmyks’ situation, it was necessary first of all to survive, while issues related to ethnic culture became of secondary importance.

The children of special settlers born in Siberia were not even entitled to a birth certificate indicating the date and the names of the child’s parents, which was needed for applying for a passport, an important and unique document, at the age of 16. Instead of a birth certificate, such children were issued a birth paper, which was not regarded as a proper document.³ This suggests that the

3 A birth certificate (*svidetel'stvo o rozhdenii*) is the registration of the fact of one's birth, whereas a birth paper (*spravka*) contains birth-related information. A birth certificate is recognized in judicial practice on its own merit, whereas a birth paper has to be confirmed by witnesses. A birth certificate is indefinite, whereas a birth paper has an expiration date. A birth certificate is issued on an official paper with watermark and numbers, whereas a birth paper is issued on plain paper with a stamp. A birth certificate does not include an addressee

authorities wanted to punish members of deported groups, and even children born after 1943 were considered guilty.

The only thing that my mother told me about later on was that when I was born, she went to apply for my birth certificate. And she was not issued one. She was given a paper, but a birth certificate was not issued. Mother said: "Well, I am guilty, it's my fault, though I don't know what for. What is my child's guilt? He was born here." They answered her: "No, the exiled settlers are not allowed [to have a birth certificate]." So they issued a paper. I received my birth certificate only in 1955.

SANCHIROV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2019a, 559

Despite the 1948 decree saying that "the Chechens, Karachays, Ingush, Balkars, Kalmyks, Germans, Crimean Tatars" were exiled "in perpetuity, without the right to return to their former places of residence" (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 224–225), the Siberian exile for the Kalmyks lasted for 13 years. Three years after Stalin's death, in March 1956, decrees were issued by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "On the removal of restrictions on special settlement for Kalmyks and their family members" and "On the removal of restrictions on the legal status of Kalmyks and their family members located in special settlements" (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 236). Finally, on 9 January 1957, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a long-awaited decree, "On the formation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Region as part of the RSFSR" (*Ssylka Kalmykov* 1993, 241). After that, the Kalmyks began to prepare for their journey back, and in 1958–1959 the majority returned to the Kalmyk Autonomous *Oblast'* (region).

In the extreme conditions of Siberia, significant changes took place in the ethno-cultural image of the people. It was a kind of reforging – social conditions were such that young people quickly abandoned their native language and ignored religious practices. For a Soviet schoolchild, it was easier to abandon their tradition rather than resist an atheistic (often "militantly atheistic") society, and parents also wanted their children to be integrated into Soviet society without undue difficulties. Also, older people in Siberia no longer had much influence on the youth. If we use the concept of internal colonization (Pohl 2014) in relation to the Kalmyks, the adoption of the imperial language by youth was to be expected.

During exile, a line of separation was formed between the older generation, born before the Revolution and who neither spoke Russian nor accepted

and is eligible for presentation in any organization, whereas a birth paper is issued for presentation to organizations whose address it contains.

modernization, and their grandchildren, who were born before exile. In Siberia, it became shameful to speak the Kalmyk language or be a Kalmyk, and it also became necessary for Kalmyks to learn Russian. Between these two generations was a generation that grew up during the Soviet modernization period who studied and worked using Russian. This generation were bilinguals who knew Kalmyk and Russian equally well. The war started when they were young: the men went to the front to defend their motherland, while their families and women were sent to Siberia, where they looked after their elderly and children. My grandmother, who did not speak Russian, belonged to the older generation. Born in 1921 between me and her, my parents were, generationally speaking, typical Soviet people. Since my childhood and adolescent years, I had been a completely Soviet person, and I changed my views significantly after perestroika. Similar transformations occurred in every Kalmyk family.

4 The Kalmyk Language and Religion in Siberia

4.1 *The Kalmyk Language*

Exile changed the linguistic situation among the Kalmyks. As their Siberian experience showed, the Kalmyks, who lived in rural areas of the republic and did not have a higher education, spoke Russian poorly, while the older people did not speak Russian at all. Even on the day of exile, when the soldiers came to the Kalmyk houses, many older adults did not understand what was happening and went to the assembly points clad in light clothes, without money or documents, confident that they would return home soon. By contrast, families whose members spoke Russian could find a common language with the soldiers, get ready properly, and were better prepared for the upcoming tribulations.

My grandmother, Bayan Badmaevna Sogdaeva, with whom I grew up in the same apartment, was born in 1897 and was illiterate. She practically did not understand Russian and could not read or write. She survived in Siberia because she always had one of her younger relatives by her side. She did not work, and it was her children who communicated with the authorities. My grandmother prayed silently in her room in the morning, wore a traditional dress that she sewed, and did not wear clothes bought in stores.

The situation was the same with many old people born in the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century who continued to adhere to old rules, socialized mainly within the circle of relatives, and did not work outside their homes. Many old people found themselves cut off from the public sphere during the Soviet years because they did not speak Russian:

When my grandmother was alive, I went with her to the store [because] she did not speak Russian. After she died, whenever I heard Kalmyk speech, I would become hysterical. [I would think to myself] How is it so? My grandmother is no longer around, but someone speaks Kalmyk? In my presence, people stopped talking Kalmyk. I gradually forgot the Kalmyk speech. I only remembered the language when I went to an intensive training course in Kalmyk (in 1990). Then my spoken Kalmyk returned. The older generation is different; they only spoke Kalmyk.

BERDENOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2008, 201

Everyone who did not speak Russian wanted to learn Russian fluently. Whereas children had such a chance at school or on the playground and working people on the collective or state farms, old or sick people who could not work did not have much opportunity to practice their Russian.

I remember I heard a story about a Kalmyk woman who didn't speak Russian. She was told that to learn Russian she should lick the tongue of a Russian person. She caught a Russian girl and wanted to lick her tongue, but the girl screamed at the top of her voice that everyone around thought that she wanted to kill and eat that girl. Later on, we laughed at it.

KACHANOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2020b, 792

Elderly Kalmyks recall that those who could speak Russian tried to speak Russian among themselves when in the presence of Russians. Otherwise, their neighbors would suspect them of criminal intentions (Baranova 2009a, 26). It was also the case that some old people, who did not speak Russian, knew other languages spoken in the USSR.

I had a grandmother, a Ural Kalmyk, who did not speak Russian but knew Kazakh well. I don't know how she communicated with her Russian neighbors in her broken language, using gestures and various words.

SANCHIROV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2020a, 551

If old people could manage without Russian, the knowledge of the Russian language was important for their children, and its social significance was evident to Kalmyk children. The main group they interacted with were schoolteachers and activists who wanted Kalmyk children to speak, read, and write confidently in Russian. The linguistic spheres were divided as follows: in the family, Kalmyk children spoke Kalmyk with their parents and other Kalmyks, while they spoke only Russian with their peers on the street or at school. As

a result, Kalmyk became a language of communication at home, whereas Russian became the language of education and high culture. If the parents had a higher education, they spoke Russian at home with their children.

At the same time, Kalmyk, which marked its speakers as special settlers, was rejected by many children in this traumatic situation. Even local Siberian residents noticed that Kalmyk schoolchildren were embarrassed when their parents spoke Kalmyk among themselves in front of Russian children. Many adult Kalmyks also deliberately did not speak their native language and did not hide it from their fellow Kalmyks to whom they would say: “I don’t understand Kalmyk at all”.

Some people pretended that they did not understand Kalmyk. “*Toruts halmgar meddgov*” – I don’t understand Kalmyk at all. And now this same woman [who used to say this] speaks Kalmyk perfectly. I asked her: “When did you learn to speak [so well]?”.

ADIANOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2008, 212

The woman whom Adianova talks about did not admit that she knew Kalmyk when in Siberia. In a favorable environment, once in Kalmykia, the same people who used to say “I don’t know Kalmyk at all” would “remember” their native language and would no longer be ashamed of it.

My first language was Kalmyk. My mother was very worried about it. She would say: “My son is growing up with his grandmother and speaks only Kalmyk. How is he supposed to have a good life when he’s grown up?” My grandmother would calm my mother down: “What are you worried about? We all live among Russians. How could he not learn Russian? After he starts walking, he’ll go out and learn Russian just like everyone else.” And so it happened. Thanks to my grandmother, I have a good command of conversational Kalmyk. At home, my mother and grandmother spoke Kalmyk among themselves. We heard Kalmyk speech when we visited other Kalmyks or at home. Otherwise, people spoke only Russian.

SANCHIROV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2019a, 553

In educated Kalmyk families consisting of three generations in which parents were fluent in two languages, Russian also became the language of family communication, especially with children, while Kalmyk was used when communicating with the grandparents. Kalmyk children who spoke Russian well studied better at school, were more confident in themselves, and more engaged in social work. They were more likely to enter university and have

more successful careers. One's knowledge of Kalmyk often depended on that person's biographical circumstances; if there was a grandmother in the family, the chances of knowing the language increased significantly, whereas a child who ended up in an orphanage was unable to maintain his/her native tongue (Baranova 2009b, 67).

Knowledge of Russian helped people survive and became a means of social rehabilitation. It was the language of power, in which one could appeal to the authorities or write letters about the plight of the Kalmyks and ask for urgent help. Sometimes letters worked, and such examples show how knowledge of the Russian language enhanced the speaker's social prestige, even if it were a child, as recounted in the following story.

After long conversations in which old people complained about the difficult living conditions and the famine that had just started, one respectable old man said: "If there were someone among us who knew Russian well enough, then he could have sent that person to the authorities to ask for help. It can't be that they [the authorities] won't help us, since we are dying before their very eyes ... " I turned 15 in December 1944. Still, I had already been working as an adult for two years, despite my age, and so I got into the conversation and offered my help: "I know Russian well. Let me try to write a letter. You say what to write in Kalmyk, and I will translate it and write a letter to the plant director". So they did. In a letter to the director of the Kansk hydrolysis plant, we wrote everything as it was: we had not received our salaries for three months, children and old people were dying, etc. Everyone signed, and I handed the letter to the head of the coal department. He passed it on to the plant's management. After some time, by order of the head of the plant, Cherepanov, all Kalmyks working at the plant, including their family members, received 10 kg of potatoes each. This timely assistance helped many survive.

BUDZHALOV. Cited in GUCHINOVA 2019b, 260

Former soldiers, who went to the front straight from the school desk and perhaps spoke good Russian but did not write well enough, had to return to the school desk again if they wished for career growth.

My father worked during the day and studied at night. His Russian was poor, and he read aloud to understand better what he read ... So, he was eager for knowledge and education. He finished a seven-year school, then a ten-year school, then a radio technical school, then an institute.

MANDZHIEV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2020a, 214

The Siberians' hostile attitude toward the Kalmyks, especially initially, was a kind of confirmative act for the Kalmyks, which consolidated their solidarity as outcasts. Scattered across Siberia, Kazakhstan, the North, and the Far East, the Kalmyks overcame local identities that mattered in life before exile. Whenever Kalmyks met one another in Siberia, such parameters as one's place of birth, residence before exile, or clan affiliation ceased to matter. What mattered was whether a person was a Kalmyk or not.

The middle-aged and older generations, who retained their native language, created a common Kalmyk language devoid of dialectical variations. As the sociolinguist Vlada Baranova correctly noted, the linguistic biographies of the Kalmyks show that the deportation led to the consolidation of the ethnic group, and the Kalmyk language was one of the consolidating factors in the formation of a common Kalmyk (supra-dialectical) identity (Baranova 2009, 71).

Unfavorable social conditions resulted not only in various local identities fading into the background but also in a temporal amnesia of status differences between people. The Kalmyk people have never been as united as when they were scattered across the eastern part of the USSR.

For the Kalmyks, these years were devastating in terms of losing their language and culture. Nevertheless, there was also a positive moment: those Kalmyks who had not previously had contact with Russians gained experience living in a different ethnic environment. A younger generation grew up who could survive in a Russian environment. That is, those who passed through Siberia. But this also led to the loss of their native language.

SANCHIROV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2019a, 562

After reinstating the Kalmyk republic, the Soviet state set out to restore scientific and cultural institutions destroyed in 1943. According to a census, the level of knowledge of native language among Kalmyks had not decreased much: from 99.3% in 1926 to 91% in 1959. Evaluating these figures, Pohl (2014, 12) concludes that the statistics speak more about the ethnic identification of the respondents than about their actual knowledge of their native language. Indeed, in the census questionnaire, after the nationality question, the answer to the following question about native language automatically followed from the understanding that one's language is an attribute of one's "nationality".

At the same time, among a small Kalmyk community in the United States (in the states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, roughly two to three thousand), Kalmyk continues to be a language spoken at home by the families of the first and second waves of emigration (Guchinova 2004, 220). This is the

case despite the absence of specialized Kalmyk classes at school, but because Kalmyk retained significance in the emigrants' families, who often live in households housing three generations where children did not go to kindergarten but stayed at home with their grandmothers. But most importantly, the language retained significance for Kalmyk-Americans because their ethnicity was not stigmatized, and they did not spend 13 years being second-class people due to their ethnic belonging. However, one cannot say that nothing threatens the Kalmyk language in the United States, but the speed with which it is disappearing may be a generation slower than in Russia.

4.2 *Religious Practices*

On the eve of exile, monks who had renounced their vows no longer shaved their head, did not wear red monastic robes, but walked in ordinary clothes, blending with the rest of the population. Former monks, who were forced to disrobe and, in some cases, to marry, continued to cure people with the methods of Tibetan medicine. Since few former monks were practicing medicine in hiding, their presence among the exiled was remembered: "There were monks among us, and they read prayers. This had a positive effect on many, especially the elderly" (Ulyumdzhiev 2000, 60).

When reading newspaper articles about the deportation of the Kalmyks, I occasionally came across stories about some deportees who were searched. If soldiers found religious objects, they would take these objects away.

I remember one very old woman well. She was dressed very lightly. They found an icon that she kept close to her chest, and they took it away. The soldier mockingly declaring that she no longer needed the icon, smashed it on the bumper of a truck and threw it into a fire.

NAMRUEV 2000, 193

In these moments of parting with their native place, some old people tried to tell their grandchildren about the most important thing for their family: the names of the Buddhist deities that protected their family.

Remember this and tell others so that they know. We are Iki-Bagutovtsy or Khalvga Baguts. And our clan's call is this:

Chagchvin Gegyan is our Almighty,

Manyd Gyurme is a deliverer.

Our (clan) call is the motherland,

Maani Dyarke is our virtue!

BEMBEEV 2003, 198

During the 13 years of exile, the religious sphere not only became a private affair but also was significantly reduced. Perhaps only a few dozen people continued to practice Buddhism in secrecy. People's memory has preserved reminiscences about *matsgta emgchud*, or old women who observed fasting.

In Siberia, I remember, three times a month, according to the lunar calendar (on the eighth, fifteenth, and thirtieth days), old Kalmyk women secretly gathered to read prayers and perform religious rites, maybe not quite as they were supposed to be done, but still. After the prayers, they drank Kalmyk tea and talked, and the main topic of their conversations was the death of their relatives and friends, the bitter fate that befell them in old age, and longing for their native land.

BUDZHALOV. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2019b, 227

Young Kalmyks, who grew up in an atheistic society, preferred not to pay attention to the “remnants of the past” – to religion and its representatives – which were invisible anyway. But suddenly, someone would fall ill, and it was far to go to the hospital, and they would need permission from the commandant to do so, and this required going to see him by transport which was not always available, not to mention the fact that one had to take time off from work. In such circumstances, people would recall that an old man who was one's neighbor once studied medicine in a monastery, collected herbs in Siberia, and prepared medicine. They would appeal to such a doctor of Tibetan medicine, and he would cure the patient. Such stories are told in many memoirs.

The following story is about Erdniev Ulyumdzh in Taimyr, whose monastic name was Chyorig Aav and who cured the narrator's mother, who had bad legs due to hypothermia. There was no doctor at the nearest first-aid post in Novoletovo:

He was a well-known monk in the past. He had a religious education ... Whenever he cured someone, he used his own methods. People said that all medicines that he used he prepared himself according to the old Kalmyk recipe. He gave my mother some kind of mixture to partake as well as ointment for her legs. From time to time, he read a prayer. Gradually, the disease began to go away, and my mother literally got on her feet ... and went back to work ... Many of us who lived in Taimyr owe their lives to him.

TSEBEKOVA 2000, 130

Doctors of Tibetan medicine were in especially high demand in remote places with no hospitals or pharmacies. Doctor-monks collected herbs in the taiga

and prepared drugs themselves. The most skillful of them were known not only among Kalmyks or local Siberians, who would often come to see them for medical help, but also among the commandants of special settlements.

My mother always said that faith in God and adhering to the traditions of our ancestors helped her and her father survive in difficult Siberian conditions and to continue their lineage ... it just so happened that I was born a weak and sickly child ... Fortunately ... one old woman told my mother to urgently take me and travel to Novosibirsk to see a monk to perform a ritual needed to save my life. Kalmyk families in Ubinsk, two hundred kilometers from Novosibirsk, had many good things to say about the monk ... When my father returned home, a week later, I felt better and began to grow and gain strength ... Fate brought me to monk Dordzhiev more than once, who was better known as Dordzhin Shagdzhi.

SHIROKOVA 2003, 186

Another activity performed by monks, which was in high demand, was making predictions. Former monks were sometimes joined by laypeople who had intuitive knowledge or clairvoyance as a shamanic gift.

Before exile, Ochir-Garya Mandzhiev was a responsible worker (he worked in party and state organizations) and had nothing to do with such activities (making predictions) ... At the beginning of 1947, when he was 40, he had a dream. In the dream, he was told that he was bestowed with a gift for prophecies from that moment on. Now he must use it to help people ... He began to have prophetic dreams, and based on them Ochir-Garya predicted the future for people. People believed him because his predictions turned out to be true. After seeing one particularly colorful dream, he said that the Kalmyks would receive good news – a return home and a blessed life in their homeland.

TSEBEKOVA 2000, 131

It was tough for pious old people to live in Siberia and conduct Buddhist practices daily. They could not even openly read prayers at home because their grandchildren were growing up as pioneers and, therefore atheists, and could blurt out about their grandparents to strangers, which would bring trouble to the whole family.

For example, I have not heard the word “Buddha”. Now I understand how difficult it must have been for my grandmother. She never read prayers before me, although she had a rosary. She waited until we fell asleep so

that she could read prayers. Now I understand what it was like for her never to pray aloud. She was protecting us. She was afraid that we might blurt out something at school, and then we would not be accepted into either the pioneers or the Komsomol. At that time, children from religious families were not accepted into these organizations. “Om mani padme hum”, she would say. “Khyarkhn” (Gods!), she said. When angry, she said, “Tengr, tsok!” (Heaven, send a punishment!). She never told us about her beliefs. I never suspected that there was a god called Buddha. I was friends with Russians and went with them to the church and celebrated Easter and other religious holidays.

BERDENOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2008, 201

In the story recounted above, the respondent says that she even celebrated Easter with her Russian schoolmates in Frunze (today, Bishkek) in the early 1950s, but she knew nothing about Buddhist and Kalmyk holidays. This was the case in almost all Kalmyk families, especially if the parents were educated: “We didn’t have Buddhas. We were atheists” (Klara Sel’vina). That said, invisible Buddhist practices would occasionally come out during the holidays of Zul (Kalmyk New Year) and Tsagan Sar (end of winter celebration) when traditional lamps, made from dough or potatoes, were lit, and the first portion of food, *deezhi*, was offered to Buddhist deities.

We celebrated Soviet holidays. But did our parents know about Kalmyk holidays? (If they knew), maybe only Zul and Tsagan Sar – *deezhi orgyad* [a ritual of offering *deezhi* to deities]⁴ – and that’s it. Our grandmother took the Buddha statues with her (to exile), and she prayed. My mother-in-law used to pray a lot.

ADYANOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2008, 214

In recent years (the 2000s), when monks proliferated, people began to celebrate all religious holidays, conduct prayers, and get accustomed to all this. Back then (in the Soviet period), my father was a communist and my mother a schoolteacher – perish the thought if we tried to celebrate the Kalmyk holidays!

AFM: Otto Churyumov

4 This is a custom of offering the first portion of food to gods and deities.

Despite being forced to disrobe, some monks who had religious education continued to carry out their mission, helping Kalmyks perform rites. They were invited to homes where they read prayers for the dead, performed rites to prolong life, and cured people. There were few former monks around, and in places where they did not live their place was sometimes filled by lay individuals who had minimal understanding of Buddhist practices. Here is how a Kalmyk who was exiled to the Tyumen region reminisces about such an individual:

She lived in the second village. We called her “divine grandmother” ... She used to travel to Kondinsk, where there was a large hospital, and, therefore, many Kalmyk patients. She would come, read a prayer at a patient’s bedside, touch his forehead with a rosary ... The doctors allowed her to come. Like a queen, she went from ward to ward. She did not as much treat the patients as morally support them. She had everything: a rosary, a prayer book, Buddhas. There was not a single pious person in all the six villages under the Kondinsk special commandant’s office. Because young people were settled there.

MUCHIRYAEV. Quoted in IVANOV 2014, 153–4

Some swindlers went from Kalmyk house to house under the guise of visiting monks, handing out amulets that were supposed to contain prayer texts. Paradoxically, Kalmyks believed that monks could wear a military uniform – to such an extent that they had become disassociated from what a Buddhist monk looked like:

Once when we lived in Yarki someone came to us wearing the uniform of a Red Army soldier. People said he was a monk. All people around heard of the news, came running and gave him whatever they had so that he wrote down *bu* [protective mantras] for them. And he wrote down something on paper to everyone. Later on, someone unfolded the *bu* at home only to see small words “two-three, two-three” written on it.

KACHANOVA. Quoted in GUCHINOVA 2020b

During exile, the religiosity of the Kalmyks was consigned to the private sphere. Therefore, it became invisible not only to foreign eyes but also to those of their secular grandchildren. This distinguishes Kalmyks from other exiled groups, such as Poles in Kazakhstan (Shapoval 2016) or Chechens in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Pol 2008), among whom the role of religion and religious leaders was key to preserving identity and strengthening group solidarity.

However, the Buddhist teaching, with its attitude to life as suffering, its call for patience and subduing one's ego, with the principle not to hold a grudge, helped the Kalmyks survive. Being pioneers, Komsomol members, communists, or non-party individuals, the Kalmyks were overwhelmingly Soviet people: they did not know prayers and did not make prostrations. Despite this, they were born and raised in religious families. They retained Buddhist ethics, tried to get along without conflict, reconciled with their lives:

Now my parents are no longer around – they died, like many exiled people, without groaning, complaints, or resentment....

BOLDYREVA 2003, 126

The indoctrination of the younger generation helped them integrate into wider society. They encountered the glass ceiling in careers only when they had achieved outstanding results. They were not given gold or silver medals at school, despite their high grades; they were not accepted into universities, even though they might have received marks above the required threshold; and, if they were accepted to universities after 1955, even excellent students and those at the top of the class did not receive a Stalin scholarship.

5 Conclusion

Ethnicity as a social organization of cultural differences always depends on the socio-political climate that dictates cultural standards for a given group. A generation of Kalmyk children born between 1915 and the 1920s, who were socialized in Soviet schools, came to regard religion as a relic of the past. Despite this, they knew colloquial and written Kalmyk based on the Cyrillic alphabet well, and spoke, wrote, and read Russian fluently. In Siberia, it was easy for them to communicate with the owners of the houses in which they were settled, and with the authorities and neighbors. They quickly found opportunities to earn extra money.

The socio-political context, where the state labelled the entire people as “enemies of the state”, dehumanizing them in the eyes of other Soviet citizens, was a decisive moment in discrimination against everything Kalmyk. Kalmyk ethnicity was stigmatized, and the ethnonym “Kalmyk” was often used as an offensive nickname. Children began to be ashamed of their ethnicity; hence distinguishable elements of their culture and language as the main markers of ethnicity became invisible. The children were faced with a choice – to choose between either Soviet holidays or religiously colored Kalmyk ones, to choose between either Russian, the language of the street and school, or their native

Kalmyk, which indicated the low status of the Kalmyks. They chose in favor of values shared by the entire Soviet community – atheism and the Russian language. The social context influenced people's language use, but the most devastating effects on the language were observed in later generations.

For the generation born in the 1940s, matters of religion were more distant than for their parents and were perceived as the habit of illiterate old women. The level of one's parents' mastery of Russian depended on many things, including the kind of education they had, whether they worked in a large team, whether the father worked on a collective farm, whether the family lived in a suburban place or a distant village. When these children, who grew up speaking Russian with their parents in exile, returned to Kalmykia, they themselves spoke Russian with their own children. Children from rural areas who spoke Russian poorly and whose parents did not understand Russian spoke their native language with their own children and preserved Kalmyk.

Ethnicity, which the Kalmyks tried to hide during the years of stigmatization, is now being openly emphasized. One's belonging to the Kalmyk people stopped being a crime in 1956. In the twenty-first century, Kalmyks wear their traditional clothes during holidays, and large groups of pilgrims from the republic that travel to attend the Dalai Lama's teachings try to present themselves before their Teacher in traditional costumes and read prayers in Kalmyk, proudly demonstrating their ethnic belonging.

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Otto Churyumov, born 1936, interviewed in Elista in 2004.

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