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## Chekar and Churas Kalmyks in the policy of the Oirat Derbet Dalai Taishi: preliminary results of the study

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**Abstract.** The author studies the problem associated with the appearance in Russian archival documents of the second and third decades of the 17th century of references to people called *Chekars*, as part of the Oirat Derbets who were dwelling in southern Siberia. The points of view of specialists who previously drew attention to this problem (S.K. Bogoyavlensky, V.P. Sanchirov, V.T. Tepkeev) are considered, their achievements and failures are noted. Basing on a comprehensive study of the sources, it is concluded that the *Chekars* were the representatives of the *Chahar* Mongolian people, who found themselves in the troops of the Altyn Khans even before the fall of the *Chahar* Khanate (1634) and took an active part in the battles with the Oirats. After the death of the (*Chahar*) Khagan Ligdan, they were also seen in the detachments of the Oirat Derbet leader Dalai Taishi, who used them to attack other Oirats — Torgut rulers with the aim of subjugating them. At the same time, to combat the growing influence of the Elet (Dzungar) Taishi Khara-Khula, Dalai Taishi tried to revive his old family name, the same as that of Khara-Khula — *Choros* (*Churas*). This family name was associated with the *Churas* people in Moghulistan and its representatives who created the *Choros* dynasty as rulers of the Oirat state (first half of the 15th century). It is stated that Dalai Taishi's activity, as well known Oirat leader, at the discussing period was complicated and aimed to return his previous authority. With his death in 1637, the issue of *Chekars* and connected the *Churas* peoples disappeared forever from the Russian archival documents. The author presents the article as the problematic one and believes that its further study should be supported by the comprehensive analyze of the history of the Oirats and Eastern Mongols of the late 16th — first third of the 17th centuries.

**Keywords:** Chekar, Chahar, Chakar, Choros, Churas, Dala Taishi, Kho-Orluk Taishi, Oirats, Kalmyks, Derbets, Dzungars, Altyn-khan, Chokur Taishi

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Чекарские и чураские калмыки в политике ойратского дербетского Далай-тайши: предварительные итоги исследования

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**Аннотация.** Изучена проблема, связанная с появлением в русских архивных документах второго и третьего десятилетий XVII в. упоминания о людях, названных чекарами, в составе ойратов-дербетов, пребывавших в южной Сибири. Рассмотрены точки зрения специалистов, ранее обративших внимание на эту проблему (С.К. Богоявленский, В.П. Санчиров, В.Т. Тепкеев), отмечены их достижения и неудачи. На основе комплексного исследования источников сделан вывод, что чекары — это представители монгольского народа чахаров, оказавшиеся в составе войск Алтын-ханов еще до падения Чахарского ханства (1634 г.) и принявшие активное участие в боях с ойратами. После гибели ( чахарского) хагана Лигдана они были замечены и в отрядах ойратского дербетского лидера Далай-тайши, использовавшего их для нападений на других ойратов — торгутских правителей с целью подчинения их себе. Одновременно для борьбы с возросшим влиянием элетского (джунгарского) тайши Хара-Хулы Далай-тайша попытался возродить свое давнее родовое имя, одинаковое с тем, что было и у Хара-Хулы — чорос (чурас). Этот род связан с народом чурасов в Могулистане и его представители со-здали чороскую династию как правители Ойратской державы (первая половина XV в.). Констатируется, что деятельность Далай-тайши, известного ойратского лидера, в указанный период была неоднозначной и нацелена на возвращение прежнего авторитета. С его кончиной в 1637 г. тема чекаров и связанных с ними чурасцев больше не прослеживается в русских архивных документах. Автор подает материал как проблемный и считает, что его дальнейшее изучение должно тесно увязываться с комплексным анализом истории ойратов и восточных монголов конца XVI — первой трети XVII вв.

**Ключевые слова:** чекар, чахар, чакар, чорос, чурас, Далай-тайши, Хо-Урлюк-тайша, ойраты, калмыки, дербеты, джунгары, Алтын-хан, Чокур-тайша

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## Introduction

The history of the Oirats features many pages that still require meticulous scrutiny and clarification. This might refer to literally every period of their turbulent history. One example is the fact that Russian archival documents spanning the 1620s to the 1630s all of a sudden started recording references to people called *Chekars* and *Churas*, a phenomenon that, despite its significance, has eluded the focal point of dedicated scholarly investigations and remains unclear. We have employed a synthesis of problem-historical and chronological methodologies, which allowed us to trace developments of events and processes in combination, based on reliable sources and informed perspectives of specialists. These methods allowed skipping exhaustive examination of discrete elements of the issue (such as the role of the Kazakh noble Yangir or military engagements involving the Oirats and the Altyn Khans), while others (the state of affairs within the Chahar Khanate and the role of the *Choros* (*Churas*) factor) received sufficient coverage. In general, it can be stated that these ostensibly trivial names and designations may actually serve to reconstruct a pivotal moment within the Oirats' history, which, as is evident, not only bolstered the advancement of progressive trends but also held the potential to be used in the pursuit of individual objectives.

## Chekars

In the first third of the 17th century, the Oirats, who had migrated to southern Siberia half a century earlier, faced an arduous challenge of repulsing their adversaries — eastern Mongols and Kazakhs — while simultaneously grappling with persistent intra-tribal feuds. During the clashes, several taishis, notably Kho-Orluk (Oirat-Torgut leader), Dalai (Oirat-Derbet leader), Chokur (one of Oirat-Khoshut leaders), Khara-Khula (the Oirat-Elet (later known as Dzungars) leader) and others grew in prominence. The feuds reached their peak in 1625–1635, when the power of the former leader — Dalai Taishi of Derbet — gradually declined, while the advance of Oirats-Torguts to the west, toward the Volga, intensified. S.K. Bogoyavlensky wrote, “In the spring of 1635, Orluk underwent two invasions, perpetrated by the Chekar Kalmyks, along with Yangir — the sovereign of the Kazakh Horde — when many people of Orluk Taishi's uluses defeated and captured. The Chekar Kalmyks are repeatedly mentioned in Russian documents, implying military contingents under the command of Dalai” [1. P. 72].

The *Chekars*, also identified as *Chekar Kalmyks*, are once again referenced in historical archives concerning the Kalmuk populations that roved in the vicinity of Astrakhan. Notably, in the summer of 1635, “there occurred a significant assembly on the Buzan River, near Astrakhan, which convened representatives

of both Russian and Kalmuk confidants.... The Kalmyks<sup>1</sup> expressed their wish that the Russians send ‘military men with fire-arms...’ against the Chekar Kalmyks. This ended the assembly” [1. P. 73].

Who were those *Chekar Kalmyks*?

One of the latest scholarly contributions to the topic of *Chekars* within the history of Kalmyks is a monograph titled “Kalmyks in the Northern Caspian Region in the Second Third of the 17th Century” [2] authored by V.T. Tepkeev. His work, however, is subject to methodological scrutiny and critique regarding his interpretation of archival material. Firstly, he uses the word *Chakars*, despite the fact that the sources refer to these people as *Chekars*. Secondly, the work does not offer any explanations as to why and when the name in question appeared, merely positing a phonetic resemblance to the Persian numeral four (chakhar) and a proximity to the Mongolian lexemes signifying “servant” or “bodyguard”. For some reason, the author is sure that Russian documents by the term in question implied “a group of Oirats who roamed the steppes of southwestern Siberia” [2. P. 13], yet fails to provide any corroborative evidence to substantiate this assertion. In this “group” (also called “northern”) he includes practically the entirety of Oirats (mentioning almost exceptionally the Derbets and Khoshuts), who typically roamed in the southern expanses of Siberia, with the exception, as repeatedly emphasized, of the Torguts and Dzungars. However, the primary source of confusion arises from the author’s interpretation of the archival materials: Tepkeev arbitrarily manipulates the data; for instance, within the aforementioned monograph, the term *Kalmyks/Kolmyks*, which appears in the original source material, is substituted with *Chakars*.

S.K. Bogoyavlensky and V.P. Sanchirov took a more responsible approach to the topic, noting that *Chekars* were Kalmyks, former subjects of Chokur (i.e. the Khoshuts of Chokur’s ulus), who in the wake of his defeat found themselves dominated by Dalai Taishi of Derbet [1. P. 72; 3. P. 14]. Following their logic, we can assume that they derived the etymology of the word *Chekars* from the name Chokur, an assertion that does not seem entirely justified. In addition, it remained unclear why these so-called Chekars suddenly grew so combative and anti-Torgut, notwithstanding their prior coexistent migration with Torguts and the fact their leader Chokur was the father-in-law of the aforementioned Daichin Taishi of Torgut, in whose nomadic camps he had sought refuge from the pursuits of Dalai Taishi and Güshi Khan of Khoshut.

In our opinion, both etymological roots of the term at hand and historical conditions as to when and why it was adopted (where the *Chekar* people came from) should be sought in a broader historical perspective.

The Oirats, a confederation comprising the Derbets, Torguts, Khoshuts, and Elets among others, collectively known as the Kalmyks, in the second half

<sup>1</sup> These were the subjects of Daichin Taishi of Torgut.

of the 16th century undertook a significant migration to southern Siberia from the eastern periphery of the Dzungarian Basin and Western Mongolia, fleeing the raids of their eastern Mongolian adversaries and the Turkic inhabitants of Moghulistan. Having found themselves in constrained circumstances, they perceived a strategic imperative to migrate further westward, an arduous decision first made by Kho-Orluk, the leader of the Torguts.

His interest in the Volga first translated into action in 1618. As noted in the “History of the Kalmyk Khans” (written in the first half of the 19th century), Kho-Orluk “in the year Shoroy Morin (i.e. 1618 A.D.) … sent good people to scout out the shores of the Caspian Sea”, and then, “having learned for certain that the lands were unoccupied” [4. P. 113], he decided to relocate his ulus there. Earlier, in 1613, a 4,000-strong Kalmuk army crossed the Yaik river for the first time and attacked the Nogai people, who fled all the way to the right bank of the Volga [1. P. 57]. Although the Kalmyks soon left, they would carry on periodical raids in the region. Thus, in 1619, they once again attacked the Nogais and retreated across the Yaik, a raid conditioned by the outbreak of battles against Altyn Khan and the Kazakhs. The next incursion carried out by the warriors of the Khoshut Taishi took place in 1622, but they quickly retreated across the Yaik [1. P. 61]. According to Gaban Sharab, “in 1628 Louzang<sup>2</sup> informed the Oirat rulers of his intention to leave them” [5. P. 106].

Meanwhile, a discord that transpired among the Khoshuts in the year 1625 escalated into a large-scale civil war that affected the entirety of Oirats [3. P. 6–12] and caused a significant decline in their general power.

In 1626, the ulus of Chokur of Khoshut, within which his son-in-law Daichin, Kho-Orluk’s eldest offspring was sojourning, in concert with the Torghut Taishi Tenes Mergene’s ulus spent about a year in the Volga and Yaik interfluvium, though they did not reach the Volga. After the defeat of Chokur (one of the instigators of the feuds) and his allies, the raids of Kho-Orluk’s Kalmyks towards the Volga against the Nogais carried on [1. P. 67]. The uluses of Louzang also came to the Volga-Yaik interfluvium. As B.-U. Tyumen wrote, “in 1629 (Louzang) effectively retreated, in 1630 he crossed the Yaik and the Volga, and conquered the Tatars. In the same year, Kho-Orluk and Daichin came to the Yaik, in 1631 they came to the Volga” [5. P. 106].

According to V.P. Sanchirov, Kho-Orluk had to go westward due to the pressure from Dalai Taishi of Derbet, since relations with him seriously deteriorated following Chokur’s debacle [3. P. 13]<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Louzang was the son of Kho-Orluk, who studied at the Tibetan monastery of Drepung Gomang, and held a spiritual title of Toin.

<sup>3</sup> Chokur took refuge with his son-in-law, Daichin, who refused to obey his father’s demand to hand over his father-in-law (Chokur) to Dalai Taishi, which led to Dalai’s warriors attacking the people of Kho-Orluk’s ulus.

In our opinion, in addition to the aforementioned circumstance (Dalai's aspiration to subjugate Kho-Orluk), another factor should be kept in mind. The lands of Chokur and his allies were occupied by the Torguts led by Kho-Orluk's sons — Daichin and Louzang — who controlled Kalmyks' relations with the Nogays and the Russian authorities in southern Russia. This state of affairs was probably not very pleasing to Dalai Taishi. Another reason could be the death of the Khoshut leader Baibagas towards the end of 1629, when the Khoshuts began to steer away from their allied relations with Dalai, who in his turn in order to uphold his influence increased pressure on the Torguts. Thus, the Torguts' migration to the west was conditioned not only by land constraints, but also by threats from Dalai Taishi. This was also observed by Bogoyavlensky, who pointed out that by 1625 "a feud had arisen between Dalai and Orluk, which was only resolved with Dalai's demise" [1. P. 64]. Indeed, the death of Dalai Taishi (In 1637) allowed the *Chekars* to establish relations with the Torguts: the *Chekar Kalmyks* were mentioned in a document of December 1638 as being in a state of "contact and peace" with Daichin and his kin [1. P. 77–78].

The first recorded reference to the *Chekars* in connection with the Kalmyks likely originates from 1621, a period marked by military engagements involving the Oirats and the eastern Mongolian sovereign Altyn Khan, who established his domain in the northwestern region of Mongolia. Here is how the story unfolded: upon the cessation of hostilities between the Oirats and Khalkhas, Laikhur Khan, the leader of the Khalkha right flank, in the 1590s installed his cousin Sholoy Ubashi-khundaiji as a ruler of the region adjacent to the Oirats. This was Altyn Khan, "prince of Khotogoyt", referred to in Russian archival documents as "Altyn Tsar". His subjects were mainly the Khotogoyts (presumably descendants of the Oirats-Khoysts) and the Uriankhais; his realm emerged in the vast expanses between the lakes Ubsu-Nur and Khubsugul (northwestern Khalkha), reaching the Sayan Mountains in the north and the foothills of the Mongolian Altai in the south.

Altyn Khan was a formidable warrior who by 1620 grew capable of raiding the Oirats off down the Irtysh River as far as Lake Yamysh and further to west-south as far as the Elikty mountain range, making the Oirats (mostly Derbets) pull off across the Ishim River, closer to the Ityk Mountains (the Ulytau mountain range). According to G. Miller, in 1621 "the Mongols chased the Kalmyks away as far as the Irtysh steppes. Advanced Mongol detachments, made of the Chagars, and several lesser Kalmuk nobility were embroiled in a perpetual state of conflict" [6. P. 94].

Thus, we formulate a hypothesis that the *Chegars* referenced to in Russian historical documents are, in essence, identical to the *Chagars*, otherwise known as the southern Mongols-Chahars, who for various reasons ended up serving under Altyn Khan's military leadership and then subsequently aligning with the forces commanded by Dalai Taishi.

## Chahars

Russian sources, as early as since 1629, had been recording a threat to southern Siberia from a Mongolian ruler, transcribed as Duchun-kan, Chegir-kan or Chagir-kan [7. P. 146, 147, 175], the leader of Chahars.

The Chahars are southern Mongols whose rise can be attributed to administrative reforms of Batumongke (Bātúméngrkè)<sup>4</sup>, who became known as Dayan Khan (ruled in 1480?–1543)<sup>5</sup>. He relocated his command center from the environs of the Kerulen and Orkhon river valleys to the Chahar region and designated the rulers of Chahar to lead the Mongols henceforth, making the Mongols recognize them as *khagans*. He and his wife Mandukhai Khatun smashed the Oirats and Uighurs; by 1510 the Oirats were defeated, their institution of Taishi eradicated<sup>6</sup>, and a semblance of unity reinstated among Mongol tribes under Chahar leadership.

Dayan was succeeded by his grandson Bodialag (Khagan since 1544), who only managed to retain centralized power solely among the Chahars themselves. Then in 1548 his son Daraisun became Khagan. Under Daraisun's son Tumen-Dzasaktu Khan (Khagan since 1558) the influence of khagans experienced a marked decline even within Chahar itself.

An attempt to regain control was made by Buyan-taiji (Tsetsen Khan), who had reigned as Khagan since 1594. However, this endeavor did not yield a desired outcome. Subsequently, in 1604, Ligdan<sup>7</sup> ascended to the throne, harboring the intent not to merely curtail the autonomy of aimag rulers “but also to eradicate any insubordinate vassals who dared to oppose their sovereign. Embittered by this struggle and oppression the aimag rulers adopted a strategy of comprehensive desertion, seeking refuge from Ligdan’s relentless incursions” [11. P. 115–116]. A.S. Martynov wrote, “It is commonly acknowledged that the matter of status constituted a significant factor behind the overtly adversarial relationship that existed between Nurhaci<sup>8</sup> and Ligdan Khan of Chakhar. In 1619, Ligdan Khan sent envoys to the court of Nurhaci with a letter full of threats in which he presented himself as ‘the sovereign of the Mongolian realm with forty tens of thousands of people, Batur Genghis Khan’ and demanded that armed raids into the territory of the Ming Empire be stopped” [12. P. 65]. This was not surprising: by that time,

<sup>4</sup> He was the great-grandson of Esen Taishi of Oirat (Choros), grandson of his daughter Tsetseg [8. P. 37], and on his father's side, he was one of the last representatives of the Borjigin lineage.

<sup>5</sup> J. Elverskog writes that Dayan died sometime between 1524 and 1543 [9. P. 73, note 10].

<sup>6</sup> It was returned to the Oirats by Tumet Altan Khan around the 1580s.

<sup>7</sup> The principle of primogeniture stipulated that the ruler of the Chakars was recognized as the legitimate ruler of the Mongols as the direct male heir of Genghis Khan. Even Dayan Khan, in order to consolidate his position, married Manduhai, the widow of the former Chahar ruler Mandugul. However, by the mid-16th century, the authority of these rulers had declined so much that they were no longer called Mongol khagans, but Chahar khans [10. P. 448].

<sup>8</sup> Nurhaci (1559–1626) — leader of the Manchus, Chakars’ closest neighbors, Khan since 1616.

the *Chahars* had become “loyal accomplices of the latter [the Chinese], and on the one hand they guarded the borders of China, and on the other, supplied the Chinese with horses from their fine herds for cavalry and artillery” [11. P. 124].

Those dissatisfied with Ligdan’s policies established relations with the Manchus and his other opponents [10]. The Manchus also had marital ties with “some aimags in eastern Mongolia”, and began to “interfere in the internal affairs of the Chahar House” [13. P. 200].

In the summer of 1626, Ooba Khuntaiji, the leader of an eastern Mongolian tribe called the Kharachins, accepted Nurhaci’s patronage “in order to protect himself from rival Mongol factions” [14. P. 14], since several of his tribal nobility had been killed by the Chahars and Khalkhas. *Meng-gu-yu-mu-chi* (“Notes on the Mongolian Wanderings”) uncovers the situation in more detail: representatives of the Kharachins (Kartsins) complained to the Manchu ruler of Ligdan’s “lawlessness” and offered help in the fight against him. “By decree, an envoy was sent for personal negotiations with the Kartsins. In the 7th moon, the Kartsins sent a lama with 530 people to the court. Then the princes of the 3rd order, Ajige and Shoto, were ordered to meet them, treat them to a feast and slaughter a white horse and a black cow for the oath. In the 9th moon, the emperor personally set out on a campaign against the Chahars” [15. P. 200, note 103]. According to “Altan Tobchi”, a white horse (for Heaven) and a black bull (for Earth) were sacrificed [16. P. 296].

A major military campaign against Ligdan was undertaken by Khuntaiji, the son and successor of Nurhaci. Ligdan’s army was defeated, and Khuntaiji “pursued retreating adversaries all the way to the Khingan Mountains” [17. P. 501]. The advance of the Manchu troops forced Ligdan to retreat westward. In 1627, he subjugated the Tumets and Ordos, occupied Hohhot (Kokehot) and posed a formidable threat to the Khalkhas, including Altyn Khan, and even the Oirats. “And that king Chagir-kan<sup>9</sup> says, “When I reach the Russians, I shall send my ambassadors to them, to the Russian people, and I shall emerge victor over the Altyn Tsar and subdue both the White and Black Kalmyks” [7. P. 311–312]. The report by A. Dubensky, the Krasnoyarsk governor, to the Tobolsk office also reads, “...In the present year of our lord 137 [1629], on the eleventh day of May... Ivashko Timofiev and his fellowship came forth from the Matara lands and spoke in the office, A tsar of an unknown name is coming from beyond China, and they call him Dyuchun-kan, though his name they know not; he hath conquered the Chinese realm and the Labin state, and defeated Altyn Tsar, and he shall war with the Mughals. And he saith, ‘I am the Tsar of all indifel (*neverny*) tsars<sup>10</sup>; one great

<sup>9</sup> Russian documents also refer to Ligdan as Chegir, Dyuchun, and Dyuchin (see above).

<sup>10</sup> An interesting phrase (“the Tsar of all pagan (*neverny*) tsars”) aired in 1629 is an important historical fact that clearly indicates that even then, Ligdan considered himself the supreme ruler over all “indifel” (*neverny*) (i.e., Buddhist) rulers. In other words, the religious factor did play a role in these processes.

sovereign is Tsar of Russie, and I am another Tsar, there is no sovereignty greater than the two of us. And he would fain go unto the cities of Rus" [7. P. 146].

However, his plans, whatever they were, failed to be realized — in May 1633, Khuntaiji once again embarked on a military campaign against Ligdan, who abandoned his capital (Hohhot) and moved southwest, intending to "flee to the Tanguts [Tibetans], but died prematurely of smallpox<sup>11</sup> in Sharaveigur" [17. P. 502]. P. Schwieger believes that the Tsang (Tibetan) ruler Karma Tensung could have turned to Ligdan for help (at that time, tensions were escalating in Tibet due to the struggle between different Buddhist schools of thought), and the latter "could really consider Tibet as a possible place of escape [15. P. 41]. According to B. Vladimirtsov, in the early 17th century, the Mongols found themselves facing growing power of the Manchus and Oirats as well as a progressive decline of the Ming dynasty's hegemonic grip. The question was whether to seek alliance with the Oirats or the Manchus. Ligdan chose a third path — to restore the "Mongol Genghis Khan State", yet he did not live to witness its fruition [10. P. 263–264].

The above-mentioned document on the persecution of the Oirats by the Chagar Mongols serving in the troops of Altyn Khan gives ground to conclude that in the 1610s, individual clans of the Chahars were already leaving southeastern Mongolia towards Khalkha. Upon their arrival, however, they encountered a less than hospitable reception, which made them go further all the way to the lands of Altyn Khan, who, apparently, sheltered them on condition that they would join his forces in military actions against the Oirats. Perhaps this was the reason behind Ligdan's assertion of his intent to "beat Altyn Tsar and the White and Black Kalmyks" (see above). The Chahars were famous warriors, they together with the Khalkha and Uriankhai formed a preeminently bellicose left flank of the Mongolian forces. Their presence helped bolster Altyn Khan's military might, to such an extent that his legions were frequently designated as *Chagar* or *Chegar* by both Kalmyks and other Siberian ethnic groups [7. P. 120].

Thus, several years prior to the inception of the Chahar-Manchu War, contingents comprised of Chahar forces appeared within the troops of Altyn Khan. In the early 1620s, Altyn Khan was a formidable force, and the presence of Chahars in his army posed a serious threat to the Oirats — by and large, it was like the troops of the Khagan himself opposed them. The same name (Chahars) is found among the troops of Dalai Taishi of Derbet, as evidenced by Russian historical records originating from the mid-17th century. We believe that there could be at least two ways through which these people (detachments, in Bogoyavlensky's words) came to serve Dalai Taishi. The first is individual exodus of Chahar leaders seeking refuge from Ligdan's oppressive regime, the second is a consequence of Ligdan's demise, which occurred in the late 1633 or early 1634. In both cases, separate units of Altyn Khan's troops, made up of Chahars, inexplicably defected to the

<sup>11</sup> According to B. Vladimirtsov, he died in September 1634 on his way to Kukunor [10. P. 265].

Oirats. It is worth considering, however, the possibility of these units having been taken captive rather than voluntarily switching allegiance. The Oirat leader who recruited them was Dalai Taishi of Derbet, who faced a crisis in his power and probably counted on the Chahars to bolster his political standing. In fact, this crisis can be traced back to the mid-decade of the 1610s, when Khara-Khula of Elet embarked on an ambitious endeavor to unite the Choros and Elets under his rule.

## Choros

Following the Congress of the Oirat rulers, Dalai Taishi experienced a significant decline in power, as the Khoits — long subordinate to the Derbet leaders [19. P. 128] — regained their equal status with other members of the Oirat confederation. This effectively put an end to Dalai Taishi's sovereignty over them<sup>12</sup>. Meng-gu-yu-mu-chi makes the following observation, “The generation of the Khoits, whose surname is Ihe-Mingan<sup>13</sup>, initially were part of the Durbot aimag; however, following the Torguts' migration to Russia in 1636<sup>14</sup>, they became one of the four Oirats” [15. P. 115]. Thus, after most Torguts relocated to Russia, the Khoits ascended to the status of one of the primary (four) Oirat ethnic groups [20. P. 6; P. 81, note 204]. This transition is believed to have occurred at the close of 1634, coinciding with Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama's representatives' visit to the Oirats. The Khoits were, in fact, a formidable group: N. Sukhbaatar and D. Bayarsaikhan, who have conducted a detailed historical research, assert that “the Khoit aimag constituted a pivotal element within the Dzungar Khanate” [21. P. 128].

Moreover, Dalai Taishi was no longer able to resist the growing power of Khara-Khula of Elet (Dzungar), who in 1616 declared the birth of Dzungars as Defenders of the teachings of Tsongkhapa, founder of Tibetan Gelug school of Buddhism [23, p. 177]. Evidently, Khara-Khula rapidly accumulated such a substantial degree of influence that Altyn Khan himself began to fear his might. As early as the spring of 1619, he composed an epistle to the Russian Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich,

“And my request is that envoys do travel between us, and that the road to thy realm for our merchants and to ours for thy folk be plain. And that good work be thwarted between us by the Kalmuk Karakuly-Taishi, yet they be few in number, and thou, great Sovereign, knowest this. And thou, great Sovereign White Tsar,

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the very fact of such a decision testifies to the decline of Dalai-Taishi's influence.

<sup>13</sup> The Khoits consisted of four otoks: Ikh Myangan, Öl Tümen, Alag Gulz, and Tsagaan Tug. The latter clan was revered as the closest to the Mongols, since the descendants of Khudukha-beki (the first Oirat leader who submitted to Genghis Khan, revered as the progenitor of the Khoits) had married women from the Golden Clan for three generations in a row [22. P. 524].

<sup>14</sup> As noted above, the Torguts began moving towards the Volga River two decades before the year in question, reaching the river itself in 1631–1632.

shouldst send thy command to the folk of Tomsk, Tobolsk, and Tarsk, that all thy Sovereign's warriors, together with mine, should wage war upon those thieves — Karakuly-taisha and his folk; thy sovereign's warriors shall go against them in thy name, and I shall send mine own against them in mine own name, so that no thieves be among us and the road be clear. And when the road be cleared of those thieves, thou, Sovereign, shalt have much profit and good fortune" [7. P. 78–79].

By this time, the security of recently acquired borders in Siberia had become a cause for concern in Moscow, due to ongoing clashes between the Oirats and Mongols. This was further exacerbated by the Derbet Dalai Taishi inability to exercise control over individual Oirat leaders, and allegations of *Altyn Khan*'s secret ties with China. "We, the great Sovereign, have decreed with our *boyars* that there shall be no keeping of accords with Altyn Khan and the Chinese kingdom" [7. P. 97]<sup>15</sup>. Under these circumstances, the Tsar turned his attention to the Dzungar (Elet) chief Khara-Khula.

Mutual interest on the part of the Russians and the Dzungars resulted in the arrival of the first Dzungar embassy in Moscow on 10 January 1620. Notably, Khara-Khula's envoys exclusively expressed his individual stance, stating, "Kolmytsky Karakuli-Taishi, with his brethren and his bairns and nephews, commanded to bowe himselfe unto thee, o great Sovereign, that he, Karakuli Taishi, with his brethren, bairns, nephews, and all his uluses, have submitted themselves to the hand of Thine Imperial Majesty and have sworn allegiance afore thy Sovereign's folk" [7. P. 93]. In response, in May 1620, the Tsar issued his letter of privilege, "We, the great Sovereign, have graciously admitted thee, Karakuli Taishi, and thy folk into our royal mercy and protection, and we would fain keep thee in our royal service and under our protection; and we have commanded our Siberian captains to defend thee from thy foes" [7, p. 99]. Thus, Khara-Khula established a secure position in the rear, thus enabling him to continue his policy of uniting the Oirats under his leadership. Seemingly, he placed great emphasis on his *Choros* lineage, as evidenced by the appearance of another new name in Russian archival documents around the same time (In the 1630s): *Churas* or *Choros*.

Interestingly, sources link the presence of *Choros* people among the Kalmyks to the Derbets. It is noted that Dalai Taishi had people who bore a "distinct clan name of Churas." In the late 1631 — early 1632, these Kalmyks (about 150-strong) together with Kuchum descendants reached the Irtysh River and attacked Tebenda, Kourdak, and other territories there. "Upon learning of the defeat of his Churas warriors, Talai Taishi claimed that the raid had been carried out without his consent or prior knowledge" [6. P. 102]. However, in a conversation with Semen Poskochyn, the envoy of the Tyumen voivode, Kho-Orluk "rightly attributed all the blame for the past hostilities to Talay Taishi and said that the latter together with Kushay (otherwise known as Kuysha) and Taigush still intended to continue their

<sup>15</sup> This decision was made back in the summer of 1619, although it only became known a year later.

raids on Russian territory. “Orlyuk himself”, as Miller noted, “had not taken part in the attacks, conversely, had long desired the honour of receiving the Russian embassy” [6. P. 103]. In June-August 1632, servicemen from Tobolsk, Tyumen, and Tara were waging a campaign against the Kalmyks. But the Kalmyks and Kuchum descendants roamed much further afield and did not suffer any major loss. The servicemen “defeated several Kalmyk advanced detachments stationed near Konkaragay on the Ishim.” There is documental evidence that ‘the defeated Kalmyks were the very people who had previously attacked Tyumen: the Talay Taishi clan, who bore the name of Churas [6. P. 108].’ This clan is mentioned again in an archival document of 1636–1637, which refers to the *Churas* as Dalai’s subjects [6. P. 585].

Among the Oirats, only the Derbets and Elets (or rather their rulers) could claim relation to the *Choros*, the clan that led the Oirats in the 15th century. We believe that it was the struggle for influence between Dalai and Khara-Khula in the 1630s (or possibly earlier) that brought the name *Choros* (or *Churas*) to the fore. Here, too, it is necessary to briefly consider the historical context.

The first Oirat leader to be mentioned in sources, with the exception of Munke Temur (Mongke Temur), is Khutkhai Tafu (Hu Khai Dayu), who is believed to be a representative of the *Choros* clan. It is highly probable that this conclusion was reached retrospectively, given that the subsequent rulers of the Oirats — Mahamu, Toghon and Esen, respectively the son, grandson and great-grandson of Khutkhai-Tafu — are known as *Choros*. [24. P. 174; 25. Pp. 126–127]. We agree with that conclusion: the *Choros* were of Turkic origin and could be related by blood to the *Churas*, a Turkic ethnic group of Moghulistan. For example, “*Tarikh-i Rashidi*” notes that “the emirs of the *Churas* and *Barin* tribes went to the son of Isan Taishi Amasandzhi Taishi, to the *Kalmaks*” [26. P. 104]. This refers to the fact that the *Churas* and *Barin* ethnic groups, due to yet another feud in Moghulistan, found refuge with one of the Oirat leaders, Amasandzhi, the son of Esen-Taishi. Most likely, this happened circa the mid-15th century, when the Oirats were on the rise.

The kinship between the *Choros* and *Churas* is evident and acknowledged by scholarly consensus as an axiom. For instance, K. Etwood writes, “Esen and his predecessors had close relations with Moghulistan to the west, in which their own clan, the *Choros*, was prominent” [27. P. 420]. In the 16th century, a prominent figure in Moghulistan was Shah-Mahmud Churas, who authored the renowned “*Chronicle*” on the history of this state [28]. However, even before him, one of the leaders of Moghulistan in the mid-14th century, also a *Churas*, gained fame. The following account of this moment is found in Mirza Haydar’s “*Tarikh-i Rashidi*”: Khan Tugluk Timur of Moghulistan and Maulana Arshad ad-Din, who instructed him in the tenets of Islam, devised a strategy for disseminating and propagating Islam effectively. They planned to summon each of the emirs individually and compel them to embrace Islam. In the absence of compliance, they would invoke

the verse from the Holy Quran, “Fight all the idolaters” [26. P. 30]. The tribal leaders were invited to the khan’s tent in succession and encouraged to convert to Islam. It was discovered that some of them were already Muslim. Churas, however, a notable exception, refused to convert to Muslim faith. In a display of defiance, he challenged the mullah to a wrestling match with his strongest wrestler, a “kafir” who could lift a two-year-old camel, and promised to convert to Islam if the preacher won. Ultimately, Maulana easily defeated the strongman three times, and “on that day, 160,000 people shaved their heads and became Muslims. The khan performed on himself the rite of circumcision. The rays of Islam absorbed the darkness of unbelief, and Islam spread throughout the yurt of Chagatai Khan” [26. P. 31]. That happened in 1353.

One can only assume that an event such as Khan’s imposition of Islam in Moghulistan could have prompted some *Churas* (*Choros*) leaders to defect to the Yuan Mongols. With 15 years to the fall of the dynasty, there was ample opportunity to demonstrate leadership qualities, gain entry to the emperor’s inner circle and then take control over the Oirats.

As for the name itself, it dates back to earlier times, and there are serious grounds to believe that the *Choros* are not only of Turkic origin, but also share at least some common ancestry with the Uyghurs. There are legendary accounts of their common descent from a child found under a crooked tree, hence the name *Tsoros/ Choros* (Mong. čoryo), i.e. “crooked” [5. P. 88]. H. Okada maintains that the *Choros* (Dzungars and Derbets) and Uyghurs are what remained left of the Naiman Khanate, based on their shared legend of a single progenitor [29. P. 201]. Rashid al-Din described the origin of the Naimans as follows: “The king of Naimans was called Inanch Bilge Buka Khan. In ancient times, Buka Khan was a great ruler whom the Uyghurs and many other tribes treated with great respect, saying that he was born from a tree” [30. P. 139]. A similar story can be found in the legendary history of Kipchaks [31. P. 44]. G.I. Ramstedt linked the term *Tsoros / Choros* with the Kyrgyz ethnonym *choro* [32. P. 550–553], which was used in early Turkic states to refer to the leaders of associations [33. P. 39]. The *Choros* managed to lead the Oirats, a term which refers not only to the Oirats as such, but as a politonym also covers other ethnic groups who had joined the Oirat confederation.

Sources claim that Dzungar rulers were descendants of Esen’s younger son, Esmet-Darhan-noyon, while the Derbets descended from Boronakhal, Esen’s older son [34. P. 53, 55]. This notion is supported by a seminal Manchu work which says, “Esen had two sons. His eldest — Boronakhal — was the progenitor of Durbots, while the second — Esmet-Darhan-noyn — was the progenitor of Dzungars [15. P. 137]. Esmet-Darhan-noyn was also known as Ash-Timur (Amasandji).

Further history of the Derbets and Elets, and of the Oirats in general, from the mid-15th century (the collapse of the Esen state) to the late 16th century (migration

to southern Siberia) is known in broad outline and requires further research. A study of references to the *Choros* (*Churas*) in Russian archival documents from the 1630s, particularly in the period following Khara-Khula's death in 1634, provides new opportunities for a deeper understanding of the far-reaching impact of processes and phenomena that initially emerged two centuries earlier and nevertheless retained enough potential to subsequently give rise to the Dzungar Khanate.

## Conclusion

The *Chekars* (*Chekars* Kalmyks) referenced to in Russian archival records dating back to the 1630s were troops of warriors from the *Chakar* ethnic group, whose khanate was located in southeastern Mongolia. In the years 1620s–1630s, they came under the dominion of the Manchus. For the first times they came under the leadership of Altyn Khans at the beginning of 1620<sup>th</sup> and subsequently played an active part in the inter-Oirat conflict, aligning with Dalai Taisi of Derbet. As a rule, they attacked the Torgut uluses on the formal pretext of extraditing Chokur Taishi of Khoshut for punishment, although in reality the objective was to subjugate the former (Torguts) to the Derbet leader. By that time, the Torguts en masse had already migrated to the Volga region.

A study of Chahar history reveals that in the period in question, apart from mutual disputes between Ligdan Khagan and the Manchu rulers Nurhachi and Khuntaiji, there also were less-known episodes of interaction between the Oirats and eastern Mongols. Fleeing from the Manchus, Ligdan could not rely on his kinsmen, the Khalkhas, and headed towards Tibet, but his formidable name as the all-Mongol khagan had a certain influence on both Russian authorities and the Oirats. Perhaps these imperial-era reminiscences may have catalyzed the resurgence of historical consciousness among the Oirats. Specifically, it evoked recollections of their zenith under the Oirat statehood achieved by Esen-Taisi, whose *Choros* lineage subsequently established dynastic continuity through his descendants ruling the Derbet and Dzungar people. However, Dalai Taishi's endeavors to reclaim his declining authority — through winning over the *Chekars* (*Chekars*) and turning to the legacy of the *Choros* (*Churas*) — proved ultimately futile. The Derbets grew weaker and were later forced to submit, for the most part, to the Dzungar rulers and, to a lesser extent, to the Torgut rulers as part of the Dzungar and Kalmyk khanates.

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