HABITS AND CUSTOMS OF THE MONGOLS OF CHINESE TURKISTAN, ACCORDING TO SOME CHINESE SOURCES

In Chinese Turkistan, Where in the past a number of different civilizations flourished and came in contact with each other, today also there are a number of peoples and different customs.

Let us see the habits and customs of the Mongols (called Meng-ku by Chinese) from the Chinese points of views.

A- The way they live:

The Mongols live in tents made of felt which look like a caldron turned upside down. These are called Se-ko-la, which has not been translated. Chinese call them "Meng-ku-pao" (Mongol's tent). Their walls are made of willow. The roofs have no tiles, but are covered with felt. These tents have a window that can be opened when desired. A curtain, made of thick cloth is used as door. The inside of these tents are covered with rugs and carpets. In summer they use mats. The tents of the lower classes have only one room where their animals sleep too. The tents of the rich consist of many partitions which serve as rooms. The young girls sleep in separate rooms.

There is perfect co-ordination in their homes. In the morning, the eldest bride of the house, or the wife (if there is no bride) gets up first, opens

1 The Chinese sources classify these peoples as follows:

Han-tsu (Chinese), Man-tsu (Manchus), Meng-ku (Mongols), Ch’an-luei (Muslim Turks, Uighurs (Wei-wu-erh), Pu-lu-te (Kirghizes), Kan-lueis (Tungans, Muslim Chinese), Ha-se-ke (Kazaks), Ta-chi-ke (Tachiks), Lao-t’o-i (Ta-tan. that is one of the Mongol Tribes). Besides, there are white Russians whom the Chinese call Kuei-hua-na, and some Özbeks, Kalmuks, Solons, Hsi-pos and Dolonis.

The Mongols are the descendants of those Mongolians originally brought from their homeland after the Chingiz invasion. Today they live in Chen-hsi (North of Hami), Wu-su (West of Manas), Ta-cheng (Northern Turkestan and ili). Their number is about 100,000 and they are nomadic.

For these people see -

Hsin-chiang Feng Wu : Chu Yung-tse, Ch’ungking, 1944, p. 67-79.

2 Ch’ang Ch’un relates that ; on his way to visit Chingiz Kaan, he had seen Mongols living in black wagons and white tents (see, Waley! The travels of an alchemist, p. 67; and E. Bretschneider, Mediaeval researches vol. 1.p. 50).

Marco Polo also mentions these felt tents and the wagons covered with black felt (Yule: Travels of Marco polo, vol.I, p. Ö52).

It is said that, on the tents of the Mongols of the XIII th century there is a neck-like chimney and rafts, used for roofing the tents of some Mongol heros, made of animal bones. Some tents are even covered with animal skins (see, Viladimirstov: trans. A. İnan. Moğolların içtimai teşkilâtı. Ankara. 1944. P. 68).
the window, and gets the water from the well. After heating the water, she wakes up the rest of the household. They drink tea altogether. They put a little milk and salt in the tea. With the tea, they eat a kind of bread called Po-po. After breakfast everybody goes to his particular job. The lunch is practically the same. For supper they serve soup, meat, fried flour as well as tea and milk. Besides, they have a kind of drink made of milk (which might be the so called Kımız) which is only served for guests. They go to bed right after supper, at night they do not use any light at all.

Their clothing resembles that of the Manchus. The women's dresses are tight and long, open in front and nicely embroidered. They usually have a hem of green velvet on the skirt. Most of the women dress in red; they like make up and wear jewels. They plait their hair, wear embroidered caps with long tassels. Men wear leather jackets and trousers all through the year. They wear coats of hide in very cold weather. They always wear hats.

The Meng-kus (Mongols) are known to be very hospitable. When a guest comes they gather around him, greet him respectfully and always walk on his right. They offer him wine (must be Kımız), milk, tea and a kind of tobacco to clean the teeth. As long as the guest stays, a sheep is killed every day, it is considered a disgrace not to offer fresh meat to a guest. The sheep is shown to him before being killed. Half of it is offered to Buddha. Then all the relatives and neighbours bring different dishes; they all eat together, sing and dance. They consider it as good luck to have as a guest an important person, so they can do everything they can to please him. They are also very polite. When talking to somebody they look down and speak in a low tone.

They have great respect for the Lama. If there are three sons in family, at least two would become Lama. This, however, more or less depends on the youngsters' wishes. One who wants to be a Lama, first gets written permission from the chief of the tribe. Then he goes to the temple, prays before Buddha. While the drums and gongs are played, he is given the title of Lama. When his father dies, if there is no one to take care of his mother, he then leaves the temple and returns home to look after his family.

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3 Ch'ang Ch'un states that; "The married Mongol women wear a head dress of birch-bark, some two feet high. This generally cover with a black Woolen staff; but some of the richer women use red silk. The end of this head dress is like a duck; they call it Ku-ku" (see Waley, same book p. 67; and E. Bretschneider, same bookvol. I, p. 52).

4 Cha'ng Ch'un relates that; "Mongol, men wear hides and fur coats, and their hair in two plaits that hang behind the ears" (see Waly: same book p. 67. And see also E. Bretschneider, same book, vol I, P.52).

5 For the living customs see:
   Hsin-chiang Li-suu Chıch : P. 2-4 ab
   Hsin-chiang Chi Yü : P. 190.
   Hsin-chiang Feng Wu : P. 70
B- Marriage customs:

The groom sends a go-between with sheep, wine and Ha-ta (valuable presents like silk and woolen materials and small statue of Buddha) to the house of the girl of his choice. The go-between explains the purpose of her visit. If the girls' family approves the marriage, they accept the presents and immediately kill a sheep which would mean an acceptance of the proposal. Then they fix the wedding date.

On the wedding day, the go-between takes the groom to the bride's home again with many presents. These presents include glue which is supposed to bind the couple together. The bride then distributes presents among her friends and relatives. The bride's dress is red and very elegant. She wears red boots and a cap with red tassels. When she is ready to leave the house the Lama comes and pray for her. in accordance with customs, she covers her face with her skirt and weeps and does not want to go, then, her father or her brother comes and puts her on a horse. Ali the relatives and the people of the house go the groom’s house. There the Lama meets them at the door. He cuts a lock of hair from the groom and the bride, and praying he ties them together, so that the couple would be tied to each other fore ever. The sister-in-law takes the bride in, changes her dress, plaits her hair into two pigtails. This indicates that, she is now a married-woman. Then the whole family prays before Buddha.

Guests are invited for dinner. Tea and Kımız are served. They sing and dance through out the night.

For three days, following the wedding, the bride neither goes out, nor works at home. Following this period she starts doing every type of work and can go out only with somebody from home.

For those who cannot afford to marry, everybody helps by collecting enough money for their marriage.

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6 “it is said that, in ancient Mongols, when the bride is introduced to her mother-in-law, a certain religious service is made and the bride offered her presents (Shidkul) given by her mother” (see; Viladimirstov, trans. by A. Inan, same book p. 78).

7 it is known that, the ancient Mongols have Levirat (The custom of taking a deceased brother's wives or step-mothers). But the Mongols of the XI-XIII th century used to go to distant places and try to get into touch with the tribes for marriage purposes, Polygamy is a recent custom among them (see: Viladimirstov, trans. A. Inan, same book, P. 76).

Marco Polo also mentions the marriage of Mongols to their brothers' wives and step-mothers (Yule, same book, P. Vol. 1 253).

Prof. Dr. Eberhard had found evidence about the marriages by kidnapping among ancient Mongols (See Dr.W.Eberhard : Çinin şimal komşuları, 1942, Ankara, p. 64).

For the marriage customs see :
Hsin-chiang Li-su Chü : P. 4b-5a.
Hsin-chiang Chi Yü : P. 191
Hsin-chiang Feng Wu : P. 71
C- Burial customs:

In the ceremonies for the dead a marked difference is observed between the rich and the poor. When a rich man dies, they shroud him and put his body on a sofa with some wood under it. Then the Lama comes. He sets fire to the wood and prays until the corpse is burned. If the body burns completely, it is believed that he had no sin. Then they collect the ashes, mixing them with earth and some medicine and make of it a small statue of dead man and then bury it. This place is covered with earth high enough, so as to be considered his grave.

When a poor man dies they do not shroud him. The Lama will look at the fortune of the dead man to fix the place of burial. During the night they put the body there. The Lama prays and they leave it there. This is called "Open burial". Usually the corpse is left open all night and eaten by the wolves and wild birds. If it is not eaten within three days, it is believed that he has sinned and might harm them. Those who live near, abandon their homes and move elsewhere. The dead man's relatives then call for the Lama to pray so that the beasts will eat the corpse. Besides this, they take all his clothings and belongings to K'un-lun, and give them to the priests as a present. Some of them even give money. For that reason all the priests there, are very rich.

There is one more ceremony before the burial takes place. The Lama lays the body on the ground and with a bone draws a certain figure as large as the corpse, and prays. it is believed that this would cleanse the body of its sins.

The son, for his father and mother, the woman, for her husband, mourns for hundred days. For the relatives, the mourning Period is forthy nine days. In this period they wear white and plain dresses. They do not comb their hair, do not give banquets or go out for entertainments. They even do not go out on the street. When the husband of a woman dies she never marries again.

They do not go to the temple to pray for the dead. But on the first anniversary of the death the family lights candles, puts drink and scent.

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8 K'un-lun is a temple, out of city, where the Lamas live. Here is the Lama attends certain religious and administrative affairs of the tribes.

K'un-lun is also a name of the capital of Kalka, one of the Mongol tribes. In the west it is called "Urga" (See Tzu Yüan).

9 Prof Dr. Eberhard relates that "in ancient Mongols the body was laid on the tree and burned the bones after three years (See: Çinin şimal komşuları, P. 64).

We also learn that during Chingiz's reign, when they are carrying the corpse to its grave, they used to kill everybody they met on their way and buried together (Here must have been told the burial ceremony of Kaans) (See: W. Barthold: trans. by A. İnan; Türklerde ve Mogollarda deiin merasimleri meselesine dair, 43 sayılı Belleten, Ankara 1947, P.525).

Marco Polo confirms that the Kaans were buried as expalined above (See: Yule, same book Vol 1. p. 246).
before Buddha, and prays. The richer take silver statues of animals to K’u-lun and present them to the priests. The poor give only clothing and have the priest pray for the dead. Aside from this anniversary, gifts in memory of the dead are taken to K’u-lun on New Year’s Eve. The children visit their father’s grave and call the Lama to pray for their father, and weep over the grave.

When the father dies, the son takes his place, if he had no sons, then one of his brothers or some of his relative takes his place. 10

D- Festivals and religious customs:

They have festivals in the fourth month of each year. Everybody goes to "O-po" an (O-po (Obo) is a place of 70-80 cm. high made of stones piled on each other), and offer presents”. The Lama comes from K’u-lun. They play music and pray. Then they kill a sheep and hang its head, feet and the tail on the O-po. They also decorate the O-po with the branches of plane trees and cloths. Then the chiefs of the tribe, the officials, soldiers and the people line up and walk around the O-po, from left to the right, one of them sings hymns, others accompany him. This ceremony is held for "Peace and order". After this ceremony, horse races are arranged among the young man. Whoever reaches the destination first, is rewarded with presents, such as silver cups or cloths.

They have another festival on the fifth month. This time they pray for the mountains and rivers.

On the tenth month they celebrate another religious festival, called “The long life festival”. The rich people go to K’u-lun and give presents to the priests. They call the Lama and have him pray for "Long life" for themselves. They also hang on the O-po a candle for each year of their life, and pray for long life.

The ancient Mongol tribes had been Patriarchal. However some customs which are regarded as the traces of Matriarchal relations can also be seen. As to the possession of property; when the property of mother and father are divided among the children, the main share is left to the youngest son. He would be the master of the whole family (See: Viladimirstov, trans, A İnan same book, p. 77-78).

For death customs see also:
Hsin-chiang Li-su Chih : P. 5a-7ab
Hsin-chiang Chi Yu : P. 192
Hsin-chiang Feng Wu : P. 71

In Central Asia the word of "Obo", is used to refer to a small hill where "The God of the Tribe" exists, and sacrifices are offered. Later it is used to refer to a family in Oğuz Turks, who gather around the "Obo", in ancient times the ceremony of offering sacrifices among Mongols was quite simple. The Kam used to describe where the 'The God of The Tribe' was, and then the Oymak piled some soil there and carried out the service. Thus, the 'Obo' in this case can be regarded as a temple. The people used to put horse hair or piece of cloth as vow. On certain days they used to gather in 'Obo', to offer sacrifices and pray. After they accepted Buddhism, this custom continued. (For Obo or Oba see; A. İnan; 'Obo, Oba' sözleri hakkında; Azerbeycan Yurt Bilgisi, İstanbul, 1933, vol.2, p. 377-379).
In the spring and autumn when the weather is good they take Buddha out of the temple. When Buddha is passing on the streets everybody comes out of their houses and by touching their heads to the Buddha’s feet ask for happiness. That day they wear their best dresses and they neither kill animals nor pick flowers, so that Buddha will not get angry.

Thus it is seen that, Lamaism still prevails in the religious ceremonies and festivals as well as in the burial and religious services of the Mongols today living in Chinese Türkistan. For example, instead of the customs such as, "putting the corpse on the tree and burning the bones after three years" which was exercised in the ancient Mongol tribes as well as the "burial of the body" which they have later adopted from the Turks; today the Buddhist (Lamaist) customs are dominant among them.

However, some religious services of the ancient Shamanism are still in existence to some extent. The 'Obo' which is related to these services are still considered as a religious cult. There is no any relation what so ever with Buddhism neither with the presents offered every fourth month of the year, nor with the ceremony held around the 'O-po's.

It is clear that, the cult of O-po's which is a remnant of the old Turkish religion among the Mongols, in spite of the vigorous antagonism of the Lamas, still exists. But in the matrimony, customs of kidnapping of the bride and of the boarding bridegroom (bridegroom living at the house of bride's parents), which is peculiar to old Mongol tribes do not exist at all.

12 Marco Polo relates that, the Mongols " have a Most High God of Heaven, whom they worship daily with thurible and incense, but they pray to him only for health of mind and body. But they have also a certain other God of theirs called 'Nagitay', and they say he is the "God of Earth", who watches over their children, cattle and crops. They show him great worship and honour, and every man had a figure of him in his house, made of felt and cloth; and they also make in the same manner images of his wife and children. And when they eat, they take the fat of the meat and grease the god's mouth, as well as the wife and children " (See Yule, p. 256-57). Marco Polo speaks of their new adoption of the Chinese Buddhism at the end of his book (Yule, p. 456-62). Many travelers speak that, the Mongols have the idols, made of felt in their tents (See, Barthold: Trans A. inan, same article, p. 532).

The Mongols who have accepted the Buddhism during the Chingiz invasion, after being driven from China (1368-69), did no longer respec Buddhism, they accepted Lamaism (sect of yellow caps, XVI th century). With this sect a higher civilization was introduced into the land. The Lamas were considered more cultivated than the Shamans. They intruduced various experiences and customs of life. And preached against sacrifices, savage habits and customs, but performed unusual religious ceremonies. Very soon after this, this sect spread and develop among Mongols (see : Viladimirstov; trans. A. inan, same book, p. 263-65).

For the festivals and religious customs of the Mongols see:
- Hsin-chiang Li-su Chih : P. 6-8 a b.
- Hsin-chiang Chi Yu : P. 192-93.
- Hsin-chiang Feng Wu : P. 71.

13 Waddel: Lamaim, see: P. 420-514.
14 Çinin şimal komşuları, P. 56, 59, 64.
16 Çinin şimal komşuları, P. 64.