



The American KALMYKS

By FRED ADELMAN with photographs by CARLETON S. COON

After an odyssey of more than three centuries a group of Mongolian Buddhists has come to Philadelphia and nearby New Jersey to settle. Their name for themselves is *mana khalyamik emtn*, "our Kalmyk people," but they have accepted the westernized versions, Kalmyk, Kalmuk, or Kalmuck. The forebears of the Kalmyks came from the pasturelands of Jungaria, between the Altai and the T'ien Shan ranges in western Inner Asia. Their early history was interwoven with that of other Turco-Mongol horse-riding peoples who lived in round felt tents, herded sheep, cattle, goats, horses, and Bactrian camels, reckoned their genealogies through males, owed fealty to members of a militant caste of nobles, and practiced the Buddhism of Tibet or adhered to the Faith of Mohammed.

The ancestors of the Kalmyks were known as Oirat or Dörben Oirat, "The Four Oirat." They were Western Mongols, who arose as a confederacy after the fall of the Mongol Empire in the fourteenth century, to contest dominion over Inland Asia with the principal powers in the area—the Eastern Mongols, who were led by Genghis Khan's descendants, and the Chinese of the Ming and succeeding Manchu Empires. The Western Mongols sought for themselves the imperial glory that had once belonged to the house of Genghis. The Oirat, together with the East Mongols, accepted Tibetan Buddhism in the sixteenth century. Their descendants ever since have devoutly adhered to this faith.

A number of Oirat tribes left the Inner Asian borders of China and formed a new coalition on the Central and Southwest Asian margin of Russia. They gradually occupied the steppes north of the Caspian Sea between 1630 and 1770. The Kalmyks thus emerged as a separate people during the period when the American nation was coming into being.

Their orientation to Russia became final in 1771. On January 5th of that critical year the Kalmyks living a nomadic life east of the Volga (nearly half their total number), fled back to Jungaria to escape impending threats of Russian control over their way of life. After an embattled trek, eloquently celebrated in Thomas DeQuincy's *Flight of a Tartar Tribe*, a decimated fraction of the emigrants rejoined their Oirat kinsmen under the aegis now of the Manchu Empire. The people located between the Volga and the Don to the west remained behind. (Legend has it that the river ice had been too soft for men and animals to cross.) These people became the Kalmyks proper, a subordinate minority within the Tsarist Empire. By degrees their way of life became a composite of aboriginal and Russian patterns.

Russian influence, however, had differential effects within Kalmyk society. As a consequence, two main cultural divisions developed. These came to be known as the Astrakhan and Don groups. The more numerous Astrakhan Kalmyks, practicing pastoral nomadism on the steppe and semi-desert nearer the Volga in the Province of Astrakhan, had less frequent contact with the Russians and changed but slowly until the Bolshevik Revolution. The Kalmyks of the lower Don, on the other hand, experienced extensive change. They became officially a part of the Cossack Host of the Don, and by the end of the nineteenth century had made a partial shift to agriculture and had settled in Cossack-type villages. Mikhail Sholokhov's novel of the Cossacks, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, is a good picture of the way of life adopted by the Don Cossack Kalmyks—though they still retained their Mongolian language and Buddhist religion.

Despite their differing histories, a common response to Russian influence on both groups was the emergence of a Russianized intelligentsia. A small aggregate of teachers, veterinarians, engineers, lawyers, scholars, and musicians developed. They were, however, careful to preserve the Kalmyk language and religion as beloved sources of Kalmyk cultural identity, whatever else was

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changing. Otherwise, they sought to exemplify to the basic Kalmyk population of peasants and nomads the best of European culture as they saw it. Thus, there were Kalmyks assimilating East European ways before any of them settled in Europe.

Today the differences between the descendants of Don Kalmyks and of Astrakhan Kalmyks in the United States are minor and mostly sentimental. For a generation following the Russian Revolution, however, certain members of the two groups lived in different political worlds. When the Red Army defeated an offensive launched in South Russia during early 1920 by the army of the White Guard, which included Kalmyk Cossack regiments, several hundred Don Cossack families and a handful of Buddhist priests fled with thousands of other Russian emigrés by way of Istanbul to the Balkans.

These Don Kalmyk emigrés spent the years between the World Wars as Stateless Persons, carrying a League of Nations, Nansen, passport and settling according to opportunities for employment and the relative closeness of kinsmen, old friends, and a makeshift Buddhist temple. The larger Kalmyk groups were located in Belgrade and Sofia. Prague and various cities in France contained smaller colonies. The emigration to eastern and western Europe seems to have brought about a more marked change in the Kalmyks than their later move from Europe to the United States. In Europe they adjusted from a rural to an urban mode of life. In America they have largely conserved the style of life that they had worked out in post-World War I Europe.

A small, new Kalmyk emigration from Russia occurred during World War II. Of the Kalmyks who had remained in the Soviet Union, a few hundred from the Astrakhan region and a smaller number from the Don area came to Central Europe with the German retreat from Stalingrad in 1943. As Soviet citizens they had undergone the cumulative stresses of recovery from the Revolution, collectivization of agriculture, political arrests, and the suppression of the Buddhist Church. They had also experienced the benefits of a general rise in the level of health, education, and technology. In the case of the new emigrants, at least, disaffection outweighed loyalty.

Catastrophe struck the remaining Soviet Kalmyks. Along with six other minor nationalities, the Soviet Kalmyk population was deported *en masse* in 1943. They lost citizenship, and there was no further mention of Kalmyks in Soviet newspapers, books, or reference works. We now know that the deportees worked mainly at lum-

bering in the Altai region of southwestern Siberia. It is grimly ironic that they were located not far from the region in Inner Asia where they had had their historical roots.

The Kalmyks of eastern Europe and the Soviet Kalmyk emigrés came together in the Western Zone of Germany at the war's end. For several bleak years they languished in Displaced Persons' camps near Munich, while their spokesmen, working through the Tolstoy Foundation, Church World Service, and the Society of Friends, sought a place for them to settle. Their Mongolian background was against them, for it conjured up prejudicial stereotypes about Mongols in particular and Orientals in general. In 1951, however, the United States Attorney General's office was prevailed upon to admit them. The stated reason for the action was the linguistic view that Mongolian is a Ural-Altaic language, related to such western languages as Finnish and Magyar, and the historical fact that the Kalmyks had inhabited European Russia for three hundred years. Most of the present American group arrived between December, 1951 and April, 1952. Today the immigrants and their American-born children number around seven hundred. (The Kalmyks remaining in Europe number about five hundred eighty in France, one hundred fifty in Germany, and twenty-five to thirty in Belgium.)

Kalmyk settlement in Pennsylvania and New Jersey conforms approximately to the historical division between the Don and Astrakhan Kalmyks. Members of the Don group tend to live in north-central Philadelphia. They are to be found in scattered single families or small clusters of households. About fifty-five miles away in semi-rural Freewood Acres, on U.S. Route 9, New Jersey, live most of the Astrakhan Kalmyks. There are also a small Don Kalmyk colony in Freewood Acres and several lesser groups in nearby New Jersey communities.

Having participated in a variety of non-Kalmyk cultures — in Tsarist, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Soviet variants of the Slavic tradition, in German or French and now American culture—how have the Kalmyks managed to remain Kalmyk? They seem to have succeeded in not becoming assimilated by setting themselves apart in certain ways some of the time, while at other times they have flexibly, enterprisingly, and receptively kept open their channels of communication with the non-Kalmyk world.

In contrast, for example, to a largely self-isolating group like the Amish, the Kalmyks are caught up in the patterns and tempo of American society. There is thus no distinctively Kalmyk





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Two ranking monks, one (center) the reincarnation of a saint, the other (right) a learned Doctor of Tibetan Medicine, talk to members of the congregation.

way of making a living. They work in a variety of light industries, such as the needle-trades, cigar and candy manufacturing, food-processing, and plastics in Philadelphia, or in housing construction and (until the recent recession) in a carpet factory in New Jersey. A small but increasing number of young women, unhindered by the language problems which beset their parents, have taken office jobs or are going into nursing and teaching.

Kalmyks work hard. Their industriousness enables them to acquire some of the material content of our culture, such as cars, television sets, and household utensils. Their material style of life does not differ significantly in most instances from the northeast American low-income type, except for the presence of a Buddhist god-cabinet in the typical Kalmyk home. Nor does their diet differ strikingly, except for a short list of items such as "Kalmyk tea" (brewed with butter and perhaps a spice), *bortsak* (a deep-fried, twisted dough), and *budan* (soup, particularly of cabbage and lamb). They are like American middle- and upper-income groups in regarding public school education for their children as important and professional or scholarly training as desirable, rather than as a threat to their basic values.

The cultural factors by which the Kalmyks reinforce their separate identity are their West Mongolian language and the body of proverbs, riddles, songs, poetry, and oratorical traditions expressed in it, together with the proud belief that Kalmyk Mongolian is a complex and subtle medium; certain festive and romantic dance forms, performed periodically in native costumes; their Tibeto-Mongolian faith and ceremonial, which at times comprise their uniquely national religion and at other times link them to the Buddhist countries of Asia; the value they set upon maintaining relationships among a wide circle of kinsmen and old friends; and their belief that while they have often tolerated out-marriage, it is really a threat to the continuity of such a small group and is likely to bring personal unhappiness.

A holiday, such as the one celebrated by the Don Kalmyks photographed in May, 1959, puts all these ethnocentric elements into effect. The lay congregation consists of members of one of the three Buddhist temples serving the ritual well-being of the Kalmyks. The priests, however, represent all three temples. The next day they will repeat the same rites for the congregation of the second Don Kalmyk temple which is located in Freewood Acres, New Jersey. It is the Buddha's doctrine, not his congregations, that matters.



The sacred part of the day is over and family groups fall to for the picnic. As the eating and drinking get under way, there is much moving about to pay respects and drink with kinsmen and old friends.

The celebrants are holding a dual outdoor ceremonial, traditionally held on successive days but now combined and held, for convenience sake, on the first weekend following their calendar date. The first rite is called *ürüs*, which literally means "increase." It is a pre-Buddhist growth and fertility ceremony combined with honoring Mader, who is better known by his Sanskrit name, Maitreya, the Buddha who is to rule the next cycle of the universe. The second ceremonial is *ová*, "cairn." While no pile of stones is evident, the meaning of the ceremonial remains—to placate the Khan of the Dragon Spirits, whose malicious minions come in early summer, visiting misfortune and disease upon the sentient world. In order to be together in this symbolic context, the celebrants have literally isolated themselves from American society. They have come to a tract of land corporately owned by their welfare society in the New Jersey countryside. They have been hoping to build a temple and a small community around it there.

Around a table sit the priests in their robes, holding Tibetan bells, small cymbals, or "thunderbolts." Their prayer recital, partly in Tibetan, and partly in classical Oirat, addresses itself to the development, health, and fecundity of herds and men and to the salvation of all sentient beings under Mader, the future Buddha. Dominating the proceedings is Mader in the form of a large Tibetan painting, framed with multi-colored bunting and flanked on either side by a tier of umbrellas, the symbols of royalty. Mader's emanating power is reflected in a globular mirror set in a pan on the table before the priests. Saffron-tinted water poured over the mirror by the head of the temple from a ewer topped with peacock feathers absorbs Mader's emanations and becomes blessed. On and around a low table in front of the painting of Mader are foodstuffs, such as cookies, butter, and tea brought by the laity to absorb blessedness.

There is a fair amount of active lay participation in the ritual. Two boys hold the poles supporting the tiered umbrellas. A children's choir, an innovation instituted long ago in Belgrade, augments the priestly prayer recital at certain points. When the priests have finished "pacifying the malicious," as their refrain goes, three laymen make a libation of milk, one of them holding the bowl as a second flips the sacrifice from a green plant and a third leads their prayer recital. Throughout the ceremonials of *ürüs* and *ová* the older members of the congregation count their rosaries and pass a prayer wheel among themselves. Others stand or sit by reverently.

The sacred part of the day is over when people come to the altar before Mader, make obeisance, leave a contribution, and go to a priest to be blessed and receive the blessed water in their hands to drink and rub into their hair. Then they fall to for a picnic.

They sit in family groups according to their old territorial memberships in the Don region, but, as the eating and drinking get under way, there is much moving about to pay respects and drink with kinsmen and old friends from other territories. These are people whom they will visit and bring gifts to on other holidays and see on any other convenient occasion; for whom they have or will help defray the expenses of a wedding, donating dowry if they are kin to the bride and money if to the groom; and to whom they will give moral and material aid in case of need. For Kalmyks like to be with one another, they will tell you, and they maintain as wide a circle of relationships as possible. The group is like a network of mutually felt obligations, often generously fulfilled.

The traditional entertainment accompanying the Increase and Cairn festivals has changed in form but persists in essence. On the steppes long ago, young Kalmyk men would have displayed their prowess at such sports as horse racing, archery, and wrestling. Today someone may organize a foot-race and wrestling matches for young boys or a volley-ball or soccer game may develop. Older people may break out in a spate of traditional dancing. Eventually these activities give out, and people return to simply drinking and talking together for the rest of the afternoon. Human relationships are important.

Participating in a common language, religion, and network of social relationships are not the only consolidating features of Kalmyk life in America. These people are also sensitive about being racially distinctive, and they have a deep sense of having had a tragic history. Despite Kalmyk involvement in American customs, all of these things are at work enough of the time to charge a Kalmyk's identification of himself with value.

Until now, the Kalmyk way of life has survived successfully as a composite. While change, dilution, and loss of many of its features are probable, it is far too meaningful to become extinct. The Kalmyk population will probably recover from the decimation of the war years and increase. Prediction is hazardous. The past and present suggest that future generations of this remarkably adaptable people will continue to weave their changing composite way of life into a fabric that they feel is distinctively their own. 24