NAME-GIVING AMONG THE MONGOLS
AN ETHNOGRAPHICO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

BY

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In many parts of the World, the reliability of the statement "nomen est omen" is trusted. According to the belief of the Mongols, name influences or may influence its holder’s life, and fate. The mystical connection supposed to exist between a person and his name, appears even in the question *Tany něř čhěn ĝělêg vê?* “What is your name?” [lit. Who is your name called], an everyday inquiry after a stranger’s name.¹ This same connection will be referred to later in relation with changing the name and taboo of names.

*Name-giving*. According to the belief in the fate-affecting role of names, special precautions are taken by the parents in selecting an adequate name for their child and in arranging the name-giving ceremony. Two types of name-giving are considered to have existed among the Mongolian nations: the Lamaistic ceremony and the more ancient custom surviving from pre-Lamaistic times. On the basis of the data in previous special publications it may be supposed that the Buddhist ceremony existed parallel to the ancient name-giving custom even from the Yüan Era on, among the different Mongolian nations, and continue to exist even today.

According to the more ancient ceremony, the name is given by the parents (formerly probably by the mother, later by the paternal side of the family cf. Besse 1983. p. 87) or by a respected (in most cases: elder) person (Jagchid-Hyer 1979. pp. 76—78). Its traces are preserved in numerous data of the special literature.

According to the records of Georgi, the Kalmouck commoners were giving names to their children in an arbitrary way at the end of the 18th century (Georgi 1780, p. 412). According to the informations given by Kozlov, the Tsaidam Mongol parents named their children themselves (Kozlov 1950,

At the end of the 19th century, Pozdneev offered the most detailed information on the sacred "washing" ceremony and, in connection with it, on the ceremonial part of name-giving and the methods of name determination as well (Pozdneev 1887, pp. 412—426).

The naming ceremony was connected to the ritual washing of the child. The general rule was that it would not be carried out earlier than the third day after birth but according to the common Mongolian practice it was held in the first month. First, the father went to an astrologer, a monk whom he informed about the exact time, date and circumstances of the birth and asked him to determine if the child was born under a lucky star and to set up the day, and the necessary ceremonies, the persons participating in them and the holy books to be read. For this, the astrological book Vaidūrya dkar-po and the medical work Glan-thabs were used.

The child would have a fortunate fate in the following cases:
- if he is born in a proper way
- if he falls on his back after getting out from the womb
- if the navel string is rolled up around his chest
- if he begins to cry out loud directly after birth
- if the crown of his head is high
- if the bones of his skull are hard
- if the top of his head is not large
- if his hairs stand upwards
- if his body is clean
- if his ears jut out
- if he sucks strongly and trembles during sucking.

The lack of these omens or their manifestation in an insufficient measure and especially the birth with inborn teeth (which is a sign of Shamanic abilities) were considered as bad omens and so special, additional works had to be read beside the common prayers in order to avoid misfortune. The number of the participating Lamas was also determined by the astrologer. According to the basic rule, the participation of four gelongs was needed with the condition that one of them must be the astrologer visited. On such occasions it sometimes happened that about 100 monks gathered at the residences of well-to-do Khans but the commoners tried to reduce the costs by inviting 1 Lama from the monastery and 3 wandering monks or by inviting only the astrologer.

Reading prayers determined according to the küli of birth was followed by the washing ceremony. Water and milk were mixed in a bowl and some holy grasses were sprinkled on them. After reading some prayers, the mixture was blessed by reading some dhāranis and placing a holy book on it. First, the Lama sprinkled some drops of this mixture into the mouth of the child three times with the middle finger of his left hand and then poured some
drops of this liquid into the right hand and washed the child's face and head thus cleaning him from the crimes committed in previous incarnations. According to the 8 skalts a special dhāranī was assigned to the child.

According to Pozdneev (p. 416) the astrologer determined the name by two methods described in the 12th chapter of Vaidārīya dkar-po in accordance with the date of the birth. Both methods (that of the 5 yarāys and that of the 28 constellations) are detailed in the footnotes of pp. 416–419. This data was adapted by other scholars (e.g. Žambalsüręn and others) although only a brief reference to these methods could be found in the 419th chapter of a printed Vaidārīya dkar-po deriving from Mongolia, which is kept under Reg. No. B 9164 in the Tibetan Collection of the Leningrad Section of the Institute of Oriental Studies, on the basis of a short examination carried out under the auspices of the Soviet Tiberologist L. S. Savickij. It can be supposed that the detailed description was based on oral information put down by the Russian scholar on the spot, although some written sources must have existed on the matter. Because of their importance, revealing these written materials deserves further research.

After the name-giving, the name of the child's protective deity, and the colour of the horse to be sacrificed on his behalf were made known by the astrologer. After the washing ceremony, the child had to wear the five bus, small slips of paper with the proper dhāranis as protection against mischievous spirits.

Among the Khalkhas (Njambu 1976, p. 125), Kalmouks (Darbakova 1970, p. 238; Monraev 1971, pp. 63–64; Ėrdeniev 1970, p. 203), Khorchins (Kuo-yi Pao 1966, p. 420), Alar-Buriats (Basaeva 1980, p. 90) and Chakhaars (Vreeland 1957, p. 175) name-giving was arranged with the assistance of a holy Lama most usually together with the “washing” ceremony (Khalkha: Vreeland 1957, p. 74; Njambu 1976, p. 125; Kalmouck: Darbakova 1970, p. 236–237; Mingat: Sonomicėren 1975, pp. 60–61; Chakhar: Vreeland 1957, p. 175) or separate from it (Darkhat: Badamchatan 1965, p. 177). Among the Buriats name-giving takes place simultaneously with the ceremony skgëdë oruulcha (Basaeva 1980, p. 89). Among the Dagur Mongols the child was given his final name at an age of 7 at the same time as the hair-cutting ceremony took place (Vreeland 1957, p. 256). Concerning the Khorchin Mongols, according to the memories by Kuo-yi Pao neither a special name-giving nor special hair-cutting ceremony was existent about the 30-ies of this century (Kuo-yi Pao 1966, pp. 419–420).

The name of the ceremony appears in different forms among the different Mongolian nations: Khalkha chuvşid ugañach/arbaalach “to wash the child/in holy water” (Njambu 1976, p. 125), Kalmouck melgaudyn churim “the fest mülanyuul” (Darbakova 1970, pp. 236–237), Chakhar sarlin ùi “the jubilee of the first month” (Vreeland 1957, p. 175).

In general, a name was given three days after birth (Khalkha: Vreeland 1957, p. 74; Kalmouck: Pallas 1776–1801, p. 242; Ėrdeniev: Mostaert 1934, p. 10), 3–6 days after birth (Kalmouck: Darbakova 1970, p. 236), 7–16 days after birth (Khalkha: Njambu 1976, pp. 125–127), in the first month (Kalmouck: Şalchakov in Kül’tura i byt kalmykov 1977, p. 80; Rubeł 1957, pp. 121–122; Chakhar: Vreeland 1957, p. 175; Monguor: Schram 1954, p. 100) or in the first year (Caidam Mongols: Kozlov 1950, p. 138) and, as previously mentioned, at the Dagurs at an age of 7 (Vreeland 1957, p. 256) in the framework of a more or less rich festive banquet.

What kind of name was bestowed on the Mongolian child at that special occasion? The Mongols had only one personal name traditionally (Żukovskaja 1980, pp. 9–10), and the majority of the personal names consisted of s. c. “speaking” names, i.e. they were of common noun origin, thus being understandable and commentable among the Mongolian speaking population. According to Č. Sodnom (1964, p. 39) two main types of name existed and still exist among the Mongols: the desiderata and the category of protective names.

Protecting names. After longer childishness (barreness) or after the deaths of earlier born children in infamy, the new-born in general was given names that could deceive the demons harmful to the child. These names refer to the following misleading precautions (1) the child does not belong to his parents (Khalkha: Rintchen 1956, p. 22); (2) the child is not a human being (Khalkha: Rintchen 1956, p. 22; Vjatikna 1966, pp. 233–234; Chakhar: Popatin 1956, p. 133; Buriats: Aldarova 1967; Kalmoucks: Monraev 1971, pp. 64–65; Khorchins: Kuo-yi Pao 1966, pp. 418–419); (3) the child is not a male one (Khalkha: Rintchen 1956, p. 22; Buriats: Aldarova 1967; Kalmoucks: Monraev 1971, pp. 64–65; Monguors Schram 1954, p. 101; Khorchins: Kuo-yi Pao 1966, pp. 418–419). As a remarkable fact it should be mentioned that even geographical names were classified among protective names by Darbakova (Darbakova 1970, p. 239).

Changing the name. Believing in the fate-influencing effect of names, some serious illnesses in succession, and bad luck were assigned to the “not real” name by the Mongols, so severely ill children were given a new name in the framework of some special ceremonies with the intention of securing recovery for him (Khalkha: Żukovskaja 1980, p. 14; Buriat Basaeva 1980, p. 89; Kalmouck: Şalchakov in Kül’tura i byt kalmykov 1977, p. 84; Dagur Onon 1972, p. 12; Shirongol Potanin 1950, pp. 412–413).

Some cases from the Yuan Era are quoted by V. V. Barthold on the compulsory change of name for the namesakes after the death of an illustrious man (Barthold 1970, p. 200). This phenomenon can be connected with the taboo of names of the dead. The Bulgarian researcher, Tafradžiyska cites a change of name realized on the basis of the ruler's command at the 13th century (from Jirgo'adai to Jebe Tafradžiyska 1974, p. 291). In general, we
can state that greater rise in rank or accession to the throne were accompanied by a change of name (see e.g. the name Činggis). Having arrived to the home of her father-in-law, the Kalmouk bride was given a new name at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Darbakova 1970, p. 240; Erdniev 1970, p. 199).

As in other religions, the Lamaist monks of Mongolian descent at the beginning of their holy career changed their names when making the ubasii oath (Vreeland 1957, p. 109). The brief description of this latter ceremony can be found at Pozdneev (Pozdneev 1887, p. 128).

**Taboo of names.** This was a very common custom among the Mongols. In the various Mongolian languages and dialects it was called by different names (in the 13th century: goruq. Khalkha cée, the person the name of whom is tabooed: hécáu nért; Kalmouck berlixa, bernjxx, zudmáx, kadmalgan; Ordos nere odáa). The pronunciation of a name was prohibited in case of death (Barthold 1970, p. 206) so the names of the ancestors are tabooed, too (Erdniev 1970, pp. 268–269).

For the children it was prohibited to call their parents or elder relatives by name (Khalkha: Žambalsüren 1970, p. 18; Inner-Mongolian: Montell 1945, p. 44, p. 53; Dagur: Vreeland 1957, p. 253; Onon 1972, p. 46; Chakhar: Vreeland 1957, p. 173), moreover the married couples, were also not allowed to call one another by name (Mongol: Šalchakov in Khultura i byt kalmykov 1977, p. 73; Kalmouck: Šalchakov in Khultura i byt kalmykov 1977, p. 74; Dagur: Vreeland 1957, p. 253). The names of the husband's elder relatives were tabooed for the new wife (Khalkha: Žambalsüren 1970, p. 18; Buriat: Basaeva 1980, p. 55; Kalmouck: Darbakova 1970, pp. 240–241; Erdniev 1970, p. 200; Monraev 1970, pp. 65–66; Ordos: Mostaert 1957, p. 258) together with the common nouns corresponding to them. As a result of this custom the so called čerükél came into being, which means a change or distortion in the phonetic form of a given word and the usage of synonyms instead of the common noun proper (cf. Aalto 1959, 1971).

The general appearance of inequality in social life was accompanied by the appearance of titles and ranks, too. Soviet researcher Žukovskaja mentions examples on the personal-name-replacing usage of them from the 13th century (Žukovskaja 1980, pp. 9–10). On the basis of a disputable concept, the personal-name-replacing usage of titles and ranks in the 16th and 17th centuries is traced back to the Shamanistic prohibition of the pronunciation of names (Žukovskaja 1970, pp. 231–234; 1980, p. 10). The above quoted phenomenon is illustrated through precedents from the lives of religious and secular personalities as well (Žukovskaja 1970, pp. 231–234; 1980, p. 10), although by citing the further lot of Činggis Khan’s name, an example of the contrary case is presented, too (Žukovskaja 1970, pp. 234–236).

**Bearing several names.** Although it was true in general, for any representative of the different Mongolian peoples that he has one name only, at the meeting points of different religions and cultural spheres binomia could be encountered, too. Among the Kalmoucks the official name was given by a Lama or a Pravooslav priest, the other name being a nickname used in the family, Kalmouck by origin bestowed by the father or an elderly relative, or perhaps by the midwife (Šalchakov in Khultura i byt kalmykov 1977, p. 80; Spravočnik 1979, p. 227). Among the Buruats binomia appeared synchronously with Christianity. According to Darbeeaa, this phenomenon seems to be disappearing as a result of the spread of bilingualism. Cf. also Aldarova 1976; and Mitrošina 1981.

Among the Mongolian nations of the Soviet Union, a surname was formed from the name of the father according to Russian pattern in the 19th century. In the 20th century even the usage of a special patronym has also become common (Darbeeaa 1969, pp. 52–43). In the Mongolian Peoples’ Republic the usage of the patronym has appeared as a consequence of the demands of the new times (Žukovskaja 1980, p. 11).

The folklore and popular wisdom related to personal names show its importance and multiple role.

**Proverbs and wise sayings**

_Duudach neri jügei ęh n’._

_Duursach neri jügei ęroó,3 (Khalkha)_

The name by which one is called, is given by his parents.
The name by which one is remembered, is earned by himself.

_Ńer nēgítjın ęh n’ nēg,3 (Khalkha)_

Those, who wear the same name, have one ear.

_Ńer nēgítjın ęch nēg_ _Nūgēl nēgítjın tam nēg,4 (Khalkha)_

Those, who wear the same name, have one ear.

Those, who have the same crime, have the same hell.

_Zuun ńunii jūs uźeččér_ _Nēg ńunii nēr tōgtoo,5 (Khalkha)_


4 Mongol ardym on’ego otčen ūg. Ulaanbaatar 1982, p. 163.

5 Gaadamba—Čerėsodnom, op. cit., p. 15.
Instead of knowing hundred persons superficially
Have only one friend!

Caasan dêêr nêrtêj
Caasan dêêr mörtej,⁶ (Khalkha)

He has a name on paper
And footprints in snow.

Chêltâlê jaxach nêr
Chêltâlê chocroch jas³ (Khalkha)

After death one’s name spreads from mouth to mouth,
One’s bones remain lying motionless after him.

eme k’erûi săe gewutâi
unisenêsen têçâsâkâ mör-wugûi
unurûi gânzârt’u nere-wugûi :
ere k’erûi mû gewutâi
 toppân nêre’ê’ti
lik’i p’un albo’tâ săn-imâb (Ordos)

Had a woman been very good
she would not have had traces besides her mortal remains, and
would not have had a name even at a place of one day’s walk.

Had a man been very bad
his name would have been enlisted in the military recruiting
registers.

sân ere ouwutû nere’ê’ti
sân eme unisenêsen têçâsinân unurûi gânzârt’u nere-wugûi.⁹ (Ordos)

A good man has a fame all over the country
A good woman has no name at a place of one day’s walk from her
mortal remains.

Nêrêlê bodoj jav.
Bjaraa môtêj orgâ.¹⁰ (Khalkha)

Live always thinking on your name
Lift anything in knowledge of your bodily strength.

¹¹ Gaadamba—Cêrênsdnom, op. cit., p. 16.
¹² Gaadamba—Cêrênsdnom, op. cit., p. 16.
¹³ Gaadamba—Cêrênsdnom, op. cit., p. 16. Luvsandendêv, A. Mongol oros tol’.
Moskva 1957, p. 286.
¹⁵ Mongol ardyn zâjir âg. 1956. p. 76.
¹⁷ Cêvél, op. cit., p. 399.
¹⁸ Kalmycko-russkij slovar’, p. 376.
The above survey was devoted to dealing only with strictly ethnographical data of previous special publications available to the author. Other aspects of studying personal names are to be included in other publications.

**Literature**


Tatar Fose, M. (1979), The Khotos of Western Mongolia. AOH XXXIII, pp. 1–37.


