THE NAME UYĞUR

By Sir Gerard Clauson

For nearly nine hundred years Uyğur, the name of a Turkish tribe which played an important part in the history of Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan from the 8th until perhaps the 13th century, and spoke at any rate one of the Turkish dialects which have at one time or another been called Uyğur, has exercised a fatal fascination for those who like to find meanings for Turkish tribal and proper names.

Maḥmūd al-Kāšgārī, writing in the second half of the 11th century, had this to say about it in his Diwān lūgāti 'l-turk:—

Uyğur is the name of a country containing five towns. Dü'l-qarnayn (Alexander the Great) built them when he made peace with the King of the Turks. Niẓāmūl-dīn Isrāfīl Toğān Tēgin, the son of Muḥammad Çāqīr Tonqā Xān said, on the authority of his father, "When Dü'l-qarnayn approached the country of Uyğur, the Xāqān of the Turks sent 4,000 men to him; the wings (açniha) of their hats were like the wings of gerfalcons, and they shot arrows backwards as (accurately as) they shot them forwards. Dü'l-qarnayn was astonished at them and said (in modern Persian), Inān xwud xwurand, that is, 'These men provide their own food, because the game cannot escape them, and they eat as much as they like'. So the country was called xudxur. Then the (first) xā was changed to alif. This is what is done (in Turkish) to the gutturals (ḥurūfū'l-halq), they are interchanged, and especially xā into alif, and alif into xā'.

Maḥmūd, the author of this book, says, "It was for this reason that my ancestors the amīrs were called xāmīr, because the Oğuz could not pronounce amīr and changed the alif into xā and called it xamīr; my father who captured the country of the Turks from the Samanids was called Amīr Becergin (?; unvocalized and first letter undotted), and they interchanged the alif and xā as I showed you in the case of Uyğur. And when they changed the xā into alif, they changed the dāl in xud into yā. This is an important rule, that dāl is changed into yā. Then they made the xā in xur into ğayn; the change of xā into ğayn and ğayn into xā is permissible as witness (the Arabic verbs) xatara and ğadara. This country contains five towns, and their people are the strongest and best archers of the infidels. The towns are Sulmī:, which Dü'l-qarnayn built, Qoço,

1 The two verbs are practically synonymous, with the meaning "to betray, be treacherous".
Can Balık, Bėş Balık and Yanı: Balık”. (page 68 of the MS., I. 101 of the printed text, I. 111 of B. Atalay’s translation.)

The story and the etymology are of course both equally preposterous.

Kāşgarī’s great Diwān was one of the near casualties of the Mongol invasion, and we must be eternally grateful that one manuscript of it survived in Anatolia to provide modern Turcologists with a solid basis for their etymological studies, but it was completely unknown to mediaeval scholars. So far as the “meaning” of Uyğur is concerned a fresh start had to be made, and it was apparently Rašīdu’l-dīn Faḍlullāh al-Hamadānī who made it in his Cāmi’u’l-tawāřīx, written in the second decade of the 14th century. The relevant passages, in the original Persian with a German translation, will be found in the Introduction to W. Radloff, Das Kudatku Bilik des Yusuf Chasshadschib aus Balasagun, St. Petersburg, 1891, and in a Russian translation by L. A. Khetagurov in Rashid-ad-din, Sbornik Letopisey, Vol. I, Moscow–Leningrad, 1952. The first passage (page XVIII – page 83) can be translated as follows:—

“When that country had submitted to Oğuz, and the sovereignty over it was firmly in his hands, he erected a golden tent and held a great feast; he honoured his kinsmen and subordinate chiefs, and entertained his troops; those of his uncles and tribesmen who had allied themselves to him he called Uyğur, which means in Turkish ‘to join and help’ (ba-ham paywastan wa madad kardan).” The same story is repeated in much the same words in the next paragraph (page XIX – page 83), and in a later section of the book (page XXIV – page 146).

Abu’l-gāzi Bahādur Xān in his Şacaratu’l-aṭrāk, written in about A.D. 1663 in a Turkish language which can best be described as early Özbek, had a slightly different theory. The passage will be found in the original text and a German translation in Radloff op. cit., p. XXXVIII, and in an Osmanli translation in Abu’l-gāzi Bahadur Xan, Türk Şeceresi (Şacara-i Turk) translated by Dr. Riza Nur, İstanbul, A.D. 1925, p. 42, and can be translated as follows:—

“Uyğur means yapışɡur (‘adhering’); one says sīt uyudi (‘the milk coagulated’); when it is still (fresh) milk, (the solids in it) are separate, but after it has coagulated they are no longer separate, it has coagulated, that is, adhered (yapIŞTI). Also they say imāŋa uyдум (‘I followed the imām’); when the imām sits down they sit down, and when he stands up they stand up, that is they are his adherents (yapışkani).”
One further Persian authority can conveniently be quoted, since it sums up the official doctrine of eastern scholars on this subject. Muhammad Mahdi Xan has the following entry in his Sanglax, written in a.d. 1759:—

"Uyğur. They say that at the time when a dispute about religion broke out between Oğuz Xan and his father and uncles, some of his kinsmen (aqrabā) took the side of Oğuz and (entered) his service. He gave them the title Uyğur, that is 'he joined us' (ba-mā paywast). The author of the Zafar nāma said that the meaning of Uyğur was 'to join and conclude a treaty with one another' (paywastan wa bā yak-digar 'ahd bastan), and the author of the Ta'rīx-i Ḥabībul-siyar, when describing the affairs of the Idqqt, the ruler of that tribe which which was in allegiance to Čingiz Xan, spelt the name Ayğur with a faṭḥa on the alif. To sum up, it is the name of a tribe of the Özbegiye Turks, who belong to that section (firqa) and are the noblest (ancab) of the tribes of Özbeg." (E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, New Series XX, facsimile fol. 92v. 8).

Thus the standard mediaeval theory in the East was that, in modern terminology, uyğur was a deverbal noun in -ğur, from a verb uy- meaning "to join, make an alliance with", but Abu'l-ğazı derived it from a verb uyu- meaning "to adhere, coagulate", which he seems to have been unable to distinguish from uy-.

Leaving aside for the moment the validity of the theory that the second syllable was a Turkish deverbal suffix -ğur, either theory, or at any rate the first, would be valid if the same kind of Turkish as was spoken in and after the 14th century had been spoken an unknown number of centuries before the 8th century, at the time when the Uyğur got their name. In the 14th century a verb uy-, meaning "to follow" and the like, was current in all the Turkish languages of which specimens have survived including Çağatay, the Kipcak dialects, and the Oğuz dialects (Türkmen, Old Osmanli etc.). Equally, at any rate in Abu'l-ğazı's time, there was a verb uyu-meaning inter alia "to coagulate", but this meaning seems to have evolved fairly recently. The verb, the original form of which was uḍr-, originally meant literally "to go to sleep"; it then came to mean metaphorically (of a limb) "to become numb" (in English we use "to go to sleep" in exactly this metaphorical sense) and finally (of blood) "to clot" and (of milk) "to coagulate".

We can safely leave Abu'l-ğazı's theory out of account; the other requires more serious consideration, more particularly since some scholars still accept it as valid. It was Pelliot who first saw the
fatal objection to it. In a footnote on p. 229 of his posthumous work, *Notes sur l'Histoire de la Horde d'Or*, Paris, 1950, he pointed out that the mediaeval verb uy- “to follow” was merely a later form of *ud*- , the form which that verb had in Uyğur and Xākānī (and which in fact survived, probably as late as the 13th century, in the *Atabatü'l-haqā'iq*). Unfortunately he was a confirmed addict of the theory that Turkish tribal names have discoverable meanings, and so promptly set out to find a way round this objection. Even more unfortunately, he was misled by an entry in Brockelmann’s Index to Kāşgārī into saying “Kachgari enregistre déjà la forme ui- ‘se mettre à la suite de’,” and on the strength of this put forward the theory that the name Uyğur came into existence in a dialect of the North West in which *ud*- had already become *ui*- , and which was not the dialect later spoken in Turfan. This will not do for two conclusive reasons. The first is that Brockelmann’s entry is a simple error. His reference is to a phrase quoted under the translation of *ka:b* (*Atalay* III, 146) *ol meniğ birle: uya: ka:b ol* “he is my kinsman as if the two were born in a single caul (*ka:b*)”. *Uya:* is here the noun *uya:* , translated in *Atalay* I, 85 “brother, kinsman”, which has no etymological connection whatever with *ud*- “to follow”. The second is that *ud*- was not used merely “in the dialect of Turfan”; it was the standard form used in all the early Turkish languages from 8th century Türkü onwards. Moreover there is a fatal illogicality in the theory. It is perfectly true that by the 11th century the voiced spirant sound -d- was beginning to disappear, and later did disappear from all Turkish languages; in most it became the semi-vowel -y-, in some the voiced sibilant -z- and in one or two the voiced plosive -d-. Indeed in some languages, especially those in the Oğuz group, it had already become -y- by the 11th century, but Uyğur was not one of those languages. It must surely be obvious that the name Uyğur came into existence among the people who called themselves Uyğur and spoke the language which they, and we, call Uyğur. During the whole period during which that language was in current use the voiced spirant -d- retained its character, and in the language of the Sariğ Uyğur (“Yellow Uyğur”) of Kansu, who are universally admitted to be descendants of the historical Uyğur, it has become not -y- but -z-. The word *ud*- “to follow” is now obsolete in that language, but *ud*-: “to go to sleep” has become *uzu-* (see S. Ye. Malov, *Yazyk zhëltykh Uygurov*, Alma-Ata, 1957, p. 129).

Raşidu’l-din’s etymology therefore breaks down on the ground that at the time when the Uyğur adopted their name they did not
pronounce the word for "to follow" as uy-. Nor is there any other
known old Turkish verb of such a form from which it could have
been derived. It is obviously not derived from oý- "to hollow out"
(for example "to dig the flesh out of a melon"), and the only other
known verb of this form, uy- "to knead, squeeze" is a dubious
secondary form, recorded only in Kaşgarî (Atalay I, 176), of the
well-known verb uv-, which in one form or another survives in a
number of modern languages, in Osmanli/Republican Turkish as
oğ-/ov-. If Uyğur really was derived from a verb uy- that verb was
already obsolete by the 8th century and we have no clue to its
meaning.

This naturally brings into question the validity of the theory
that there was in the historic period from the 8th century onwards
a native Turkish deverbal suffix -ğur/-gür. There is no trace of such
a suffix in Türkü, either kind of Uyğur, Xâkânî, Kipçak, Oğuz or
any other Turkish language known prior to the Mongol invasion.
It does however appear in Çağatay and we can infer from Raşidu’l-
din’s etymology of Uyğur that it was known to him in the 14th
century. In his grammatical introduction to the Sanglax, which
has the separate title Mabânî’l-luğat, Muḥammad Mahdî Xân
devotes the fourth Chapter (bâb) of the first Book (mabnâ) to the
ism-i fâ’il, “Nomen Agentis”. It falls into two Parts (qism). The
first Part lists:—

(a) regular suffixes:
   (1) -ğušt/-güçi
   (2) -çšt/çi

which are normal Turkish suffixes of the deverbal and denominal
Nomen Agentis respectively.

(b) irregular suffixes:
   (1) ul/-ül, which is actually a normal Mongolian deverbal
       suffix of the Nomen Agentis that found its way into
       Çağatay on the tail of some Mongolian loan-words.2

1 There is nothing surprising in this; his work is full of false etymologies,
   for example the Mongolian name or title Otçigîn which he explains as a Turkish
   phrase "prince (têgin) of the (domestic) fire (ot)"; whereas it is actually a Mongolian
   phrase, ot, the basic form of ortan (diminutive) "youngest" (Kowalewski
   p. 390) çtgin (from Turkish têgin) “prince”.

2 There are in fact two forms of this suffix, taken from different Mongolian
dialects, -ul/-ül and -gül/-gül, which in some Turkish languages became -kul/-kül,
and alternative forms of the same Mongolian word appear in different Turkish
languages. For example a word quoted in the Sanglax, karâ’ul “sentry”
(dida-bân), has survived in Republican Turkish as karakol, the change in
the third vowel probably due to a false etymology from karâ “black”, kol “arm”.
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(2) -ağan/-egen, a normal deverbal suffix connoting frequent or repeated action.

(3) -çak/-çek a deverbal suffix of uncertain significance in Çağatay.

(4) -çı/-çı as a deverbal suffix.

The second Part lists:

(a) regular suffixes:

(1) -r, correctly described as the Aorist participial suffix;

(2) -ğan/-gen, actually the Present participial suffix, though not so described,

(b) irregular suffixes:

(1) -ğur/-gur discussed below;

(2) -ğun/-gün, a normal deverbal suffix usually intransitive or passive in character, for example olğun "ripe" from ol- "to become ripe" and tutğun "prisoner" from tut- "to take, hold".

What is said about (1) is:

"The first is -ğur/-gур, as in uçğur 'flying swiftly', tınğur 'resting', ötgür 'piercing' and oyğanmağur 'not being awake' (the last illustrated by a quotation from Nawă'î). And in some words the meaning is that of a Nomen Actionis (ism-i maşdar) as is stated in the first Chapter relating to the Nomen Actionis" (facsimile fol. 7r. 9 ff.).

In that Chapter the suffix is mentioned and exemplified by čıkğur and tmınağur, both illustrated by quotations from Nawă’î. (facsimile fol. 5v. 9 ff.).

Some of the words cited in the Sanglax still survive, though usually in a slightly altered form. Uçğur, for example, now usually uçkur, is noted as existing in three South Siberian languages, Altai, Teleut and Baraba (Radloff, Wörterbuch . . . , I, 1730, 1740), Kazax (I, 1905) and Kazan Tatar (I, 1329), and ötkür in much the same range of languages. There is therefore no doubt about the existence of the suffix -ğur/-gür in these languages, though not necessarily, or even probably, as a suffix still in active use for forming new words, but its origin is not far to seek. There is no reasonable doubt that, like -ul/-ül/-gul/-gül, it is a Mongolian suffix which found its way into Çağatay and other languages heavily infested with Mongolian loan-words and forms at the time of the Mongol invasion and is no part of the original Turkish system of suffixes.
Proving that Uygur never had any of the etymological meanings which have been attributed does not of course prove that it never had an etymological meaning, but it does force us to do some new thinking about the whole question of Turkish tribal names and their possible meanings.

Before doing this, however, it will be useful to consider briefly the whole question of Turkish nomenclature. In this context I shall say nothing of geographical nomenclature, since that raises quite different considerations, merely remarking that while some names of towns like Yağ: Balık “new town” have obvious Turkish meanings, others like Balasagun, and names of rivers like Selege: and Tögl:ə:, have not, and are probably not Turkish at all. It is clear from the Tuvan (usually called Yenisei) inscriptions which were erected in the 9th and following centuries, supposedly by Kırıgz chiefs, that at any rate in that tribe every male child was given a personal name on birth, and another name, called erat “adult name”, when he grew up. We do not know what the relationship between these two kinds of name was, but presumably the adult name was more dignified than the childhood name, which at any rate in some Turkish communities was chosen for the oddest reasons, for example because it was the first word uttered by one parent or the other after the child’s birth. It should be added that when a man became a kağan he assumed a royal title instead of his personal (or adult) name and that at any rate members of the higher ranks of Turkish tribal society probably did the same thing when appointed to high office; but normally such a person had a full name composed of three components, the name of his tribe or clan, his personal name and a title either native, like tarkan or çor: r, or foreign (Chinese) like ciği:ə. We have in various authorities and from various periods a large repertoire of Turkish personal names. Many of them, probably the majority, have obvious meanings in the language spoken by the persons who bore them, names for example like Ak bars “white leopard”, Ay demir “moon iron” Ay doğd:ə, “the moon has risen”, the last perhaps because the child was born at moon-rise. But side by side with these names which have obvious meanings there are, especially in the earliest period for which we have information, other personal names of which there is no such easy explanation, names for example like Bumn: and Eştemi:ə, the names of two of the earliest Türkü kağans. These really fall in the same class, etymologically speaking, as the tribal names.

Tribal names, like personal names and surnames in modern
times, are some of the most archaic elements in any language, since they tend to become, so to speak, "fossilized" and so to survive in their original form much longer than ordinary words current in the language at the time when they were adopted, since these latter are subject to the constant wear and tear of daily use and suffer a slow but steady phonetic and semantic change. The earliest substantial remains of the Turkish languages go back to the 8th century A.D. but we have Chinese transcriptions of known Turkish tribal names from a substantially earlier period, and even without this evidence we could infer that they must have existed, probably in much the same form, very much earlier than the 8th century. It therefore seems to me to be a little perverse to try to find "meanings" for such names from the ordinary vocabulary of 8th century Turkish, let alone later stages of the language, when a moment's thought would show that most, say, English and French personal names and surnames have no "meaning" in contemporary English or French. Admittedly a Mr. Smith owes his name to the fact that one of his ancestors, probably remote, was a smith, but neither, say, Paul nor Pelliot have any meaning in contemporary French nor Gerard nor Clauson in contemporary English. It is true that in dealing with modern European names we can usually find some meaning for them if we track them far enough back into the past, very likely into some foreign language (perhaps Latin, Greek or Hebrew) from which they were originally acquired. Paul for example can be tracked back to a Latin original, and very possibly the English surname Faber is the Latin word *faber* "smith"; but this is not possible in the case of Turkish names, because there is no means of tracking them back beyond the 8th or at best (and then only in foreign authorities) the 6th century or a little earlier.

Even when there is an apparently clear case of a tribal name having a meaning, the facts may not be as simple as at first they appear to be. There is a well-known Turkish tribal name *Kağlı:*, which is known from a sufficiently early period to exclude the possibility that the second syllable is the possessive adjectival suffix, since at the earliest date at which the word is known that suffix was still -lıq and had not yet lost its final consonant. In the enigmatic mediaeval (13th or 14th century?) text contained in the Bibliothèque Nationale manuscript Supplément Turc 1001, published by Bang and Rachmati in *Die Legende von Oghuz Qaghan*, S.P.A.W., Berlin, 1932, which incidentally contains other pseudoetymologies of tribal names, there is a story (lines 277 ff.) about a man who made and used
“waggons”, kanğa, which leads up to the invention by Oğuz Kağan of the name Kanğalûq, i.e. Kağlı: for him and his tribe, a story which so greatly impressed Prof. Marquart (a scholar so interested in the etymological meanings of surnames that in his old age he changed the spelling of his own name to Markwart to make its meaning clear) that he said that the story “kann sehr wohl richtig sein” (Über das Volkstum der Komanen, p. 163, in Bang and Marquart Osttürkische Dialectstudien, A.K.G.W. Göttingen, N.F. XIII, 1, Berlin, 1914). The odd thing about this is that this is the earliest text in which the word for “waggon” is kanğa (kaňa); in the earlier languages, Uyğur, Xâkânî, Çağatay and Kipcak it was, like the tribal name, kaňlı:, and it has usually been assumed that the tribe got its name, like the earlier confederation called by the Chinese Kao-Ch’ê, “high waggons”, because they used waggons to transport their families and possessions. But it is surely equally possible that the waggon got its name kaňlı: because it was the Kağlı: tribe that introduced waggons of this kind into the Turkish world. Such waggons are known in Central Asia from a much earlier date than the Turks. For example, a vehicle of this kind, probably of the 4th century B.C., used by Iranian peoples in the region of the Altai, was found in one of the Pazyryk kurgans and is now on show in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. It would be quite normal to give vehicles names in this way. Of all the horse-drawn vehicles which transported me in my youth before they were displaced by motor-cars, four, the brougham, hansom, phaeton and victoria, were called after individuals; three, the coach, landau and landaulette, after places; three, the four-wheeler, dog cart and governess cart (the last two much alike, but socially very different) had descriptive names; two, the barouche and cab (cabriolet) had foreign names; and only two, the cart and waggon, had good old English names.

Pelliot, in his Notes sur l’Histoire de la Horde d’Or already quoted, devoted enormous efforts to the search for meanings of Turkish tribal names, but on the whole his suggestions are unconvincing, and it seems to me obvious that, for the reasons already given, such a search is likely to be extremely unrewarding. This does not mean that the etymological study of such names is a sheer waste of time. Like all other languages, the Turkish languages are a living organism which is constantly evolving and changing. In the earliest form of the language to which we have access there were, in addition to the ordinary stock of basic words and words made up of basic words and suffixes in current use, numbers of words made up of basic
words (nouns or verbs) in current use and suffixes which were by then obsolete, others made up of suffixes in current use attached to words which were no longer current in the unsuffixed form, and other words which are clearly made up of basic words and suffixes, but neither the unsuffixed forms nor the suffixes were still in current use. It seems reasonable to suppose that the tribal and personal names which have no obvious meaning are morphologically of the same character as the words of the ordinary vocabulary, that is that at any rate most of the monosyllables and many disyllables were originally ordinary common nouns, which at one time had a meaning but had become obsolete as common nouns before the 8th century, so that their meanings have been completely forgotten, and that most of the remaining disyllables and longer words were originally basic words (nouns or verbs) carrying suffixes. It is of course possible that some proper names were always merely proper names and never had any meaning as common nouns, but it is very improbable that there were ever any suffixes which were used only in proper names. It may well be that if, by morphological analysis, some proper names could be broken down into basic words (nouns or verbs) and suffixes, some of these elements could be found also in early Turkish common nouns which have hitherto resisted morphological analysis, but the subject is one of no more than marginal interest.

What we really have to consider in the field of Turcological studies is the most economical use of a scarce resource, the application of philological expertise to the problems of the Turkish languages. Philologists have been working on the "classical" languages, Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic and the rest, for centuries, but still find that there are new facts to be discovered. Compared to such languages the Turkish languages are almost a virgin field, and the number of qualified philologists capable of working on them is miserably small. It would surely be more reasonable for Turcologists of the next generation or two to devote themselves to the study of the actual languages, to the publication of critical editions of the texts, particularly the early ones, and to working out in detail the history of the ordinary vocabulary and grammar of the various languages, rather than to attempt to discover the meanings of obscure tribal and personal names, which may very well elude them until the ordinary vocabulary of the languages at their earliest discoverable stages has been fully worked out.