THE NAME UYĠUR

By Sir Gerard Clauson

FOR NEARLY NINE HUNDRED years Uyġur, 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 Uyġur, has exercised a fatal fascination for those who like to find meanings for Turkish tribal and proper names.

Maḥmūd al-Kāşġarī, writing in the second half of the 11th century, had this to say about it in his *Dīwān luġāti 'l-turk*:—

Uyġur is the name of a country containing five towns. Ḏū 'l-qarnayn (Alexander the Great) built them when he made peace with the King of the Turks. Niẓāmu'l-dīn Isrāfīl Toġān Tégin, the son of Muḥammad Çāqir Tonqā Xān said, on the authority of his father, "When Ḏū'l-qarnayn approached the country of Uyġur, the Xāqān of the Turks sent 4,000 men to him; the wings (*acniḥa*) of their hats were like the wings of gerfalcons, and they shot arrows backwards as (accurately as) they shot them forwards. Ḏū'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 *xuḏxur*. Then the (first) *xā* was changed to *alif*. This is what is done (in Turkish) to the gutturals (*ḥurūfu'l-ḥalq*), 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 ancesters the *amīrs* were called *xamīr*, because the Oġuz 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 Uyġur. And when they changed the *xā* into *alif*, they changed the ḏāl in *xuḏ* into *yā*. This is an important rule, that ḏāl is changed into *yā*. Then they made the *xā* in *xur* into *ġayn*; the change of *xā* into *ġayn* and *ġayn* into *xā* is permissible as witness (the Arabic verbs) *xatara* and *ġadara*.[1] This country contains five towns, and their people are the strongest and best archers of the infidels. The towns are Sulmı:, which Ḏū'l-qarnayn built, Qoço,

---

[1] The two verbs are practically synonymous, with the meaning "to betray, be treacherous".

Can Balık, Béş Balık and Yaŋı: 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.

Kāşğarī's great *Dīwān* 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 Raşīdu'l-dīn Fadlu'llah al-Hamadānī who made it in his *Cāmi'u'l-tawārīx*, 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-ğāzī Bahādur Xān in his *Şacaratu'l-atrāk*, written in about A.D. 1663 in a Turkish language which can best be described as early Özbeg, 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-ğazi 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 yapışğur ('adhering'); one says süt uyudı ('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 (yapıştı). Also they say imāmğa uydum ('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 (yapışkanı)."

One further Persian authority can conveniently be quoted, since it sums up the official doctrine of eastern scholars on this subject. Muḥammad Mahdī Xān 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 *Ẓafar nāma* said that the meaning of Uyğur was 'to join and conclude a treaty with one another' (*paywastan wa bā yak-dīgar 'ahd bastan*), and the author of the *Ta'rīx-i Ḥabību'l-siyar*, when describing the affairs of the Idıqut, the ruler of that tribe which which was in allegiance to Çiŋgiz Xan, spelt the name Ayğur with a *fatḥa* 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-ğāzī 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 Kıpçak dialects, and the Oğuz dialects (Türkmen, Old Osmanli etc.). Equally, at any rate in Abu'l-ğāzī'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 **udı:-**, 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-ğāzī'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 *Atabatu'l-ḥaqā'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 Kāšğarī 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 meniŋ 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 Sarığ Yuğur ("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 **udı:-** "to go to sleep" has become **uzu-** (see S. Ye. Malov, *Yazyk zhëltykh Uygurov*, Alma-Ata, 1957, p. 129).

Rašīdu'l-dīn'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-**.[1] 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 **o:y-** "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 Kāšğarī (*Atalay* I, 176), of the well-known verb **uv-**, which in one form or another survives in a number of modern languages, in Osmanli/Repùblican 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, Xākānī, Kıpçak, Oğuz or any other Turkish language known prior to the Mongol invasion. It does however appear in Çağatay and we can infer from Rašīdu'l-dīn'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 *Mabānī'l-luğat*, Muḥammad Mahdī Xān devotes the fourth Chapter (*bāb*) of the first Book (*mabnā*) to the *ism-i fā'il*, "Nomen Agentis". It falls into two Parts (*qism*). The first Part lists:—

(a) regular suffixes:

    (1) **-ğuçı/-güçi**

    (2) **-çı/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 *Otçigin* which he explains as a Turkish phrase "prince (tégin) of the (domestic) fire (ot)"; whereas it is actually a Mongolian phrase, *ot*, the basic form of *otqan* (diminutive) "youngest" (Kowalewski p. 390) *çigin* (from Turkish tégin) "prince".

[2] There are in fact two forms of this suffix, taken from different Mongolian dialects, -ul/-ül and -ğul/-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*, kara'ul "sentry" (*dīda-bān*), has survived in Republican Turkish as karakol, the change in the third vowel probably due to a false etymology from kara "black", kol "arm".

(2) **-aĝan/-egen,** a normal deverbal suffix connoting frequent or repeated action.

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

(4) **-çı/-çi** as a deverbal suffix.

The second Part lists:—

(a) regular suffixes:

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

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

(b) irregular suffixes:

(1) **-ĝur/-gür** discussed below;

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

What is said about (1) is:—

"The first is **-ĝur/-gür,** as in **uçĝur** 'flying swiftly', **tınĝur** 'resting', **ötgür** 'piercing' and **oyĝanmaĝur** 'not being awake' (the last illustrated by a quotation from Nawā'ī). And in some words the meaning is that of a Nomen Actionis (*ism-i maṣdar*) 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 **çıkĝur** and **tınmaĝur,** both illustrated by quotations from Nawā'ī. (facsimile fol. 5v. 9 ff.).

Some of the words cited in the *Sanglax* still survive, though usually in a slightly altered form. **Uçĝur,** 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 **-ĝur/-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/-ĝul/-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 **Uyğur** 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 **Yaŋı: Balık** "new town" have obvious Turkish meanings, others like **Balasagun**, and names of rivers like **Seleŋe:** and **Toğla:**, 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 Kırgız chiefs, that at any rate in that tribe every male child was given a personal name on birth, and another name, called **er at** "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 **ço:r**, or foreign (Chinese) like **çigşi:**. 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 doğdı:**, "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 **Bumın** and **Éştemi:**, 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 Kaŋlı:, 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 -lıǧ 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 **Kanğaluğ**, i.e. **Kaŋlı:** 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 (kaŋa)**; in the earlier languages, Uyğur, Xākānī, Çağatay and Kıpçak it was, like the tribal name, **kaŋlı:**, 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 **kaŋlı:** because it was the **Kaŋlı:** 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 dissyllables 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 dissyllables 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.