

RESEARCH CONNECTION

The way of the Kalmyks: Early documentation of their culture

By Paul Shore, PhD



Why this research is important

The Kalmyks (sometimes spelled Calmuks) are a people indigenous to Southern Russia, having emigrated there in the early seventeenth century from Mongolia. Despite experiencing persecution and exile under Stalin's rule during Soviet times, they have preserved their language and many of their folkways, and today Kalmykia is a constituent republic of the Russian Federation.

How the research was conducted

Three hundred years ago, few Western Europeans had visited the Kalmyk homeland, then near the Sea of Azov, between the Russian and Ottoman Empires. In 1700, a Catholic Jesuit missionary of Czech background named

What you need to know

The Kalmyks are one of many Indigenous Peoples living in Eastern Europe and Western and Central Asia. They are the only Buddhist-majority nation in Europe. Their language, music, and folkways have endured despite colonialism, persecution, and deportation. Kalmyk culture is undergoing a revival. In 1700, a Christian missionary visited Kalmykia, where he found many things to admire about its inhabitants, including their generosity and high ethical standards.

Jan Milan, who had been working incognito at the court of Peter the Great, journeyed to the land of the Kalmyks, where he remained for many months. While he was there, he learned some of their languages, met people of all social classes, and had some hair-raising experiences, such as when an arrow flew out of nowhere and struck him in the arm, almost starting a war between two groups of Kalmyks. He observed their religious practices, their astronomical and mathematical knowledge, music-making, dancing, and feasting. He also learned how traditional spiritual practices had been combined with Buddhist beliefs.

Milan wrote an account of his encounter with the Kalmyks, which ended up in the National Library of the Czech

Republic in Prague. Several years ago, while working at Oxford University, I ran across the only scholarly article ever done on Milan and his visit to the Kalmyks, done by a Russian working in Prague during the Nazi occupation of that city (this is an intriguing story in itself!).

The article piqued my curiosity, and with the help of colleagues from Finland, Kalmykia, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States I have been able to put together a study of what Milan wrote and also of the pictures he drew of what he saw. This required reading the manuscript in Latin and analyzing the passages that reproduced Kalmyk language prayers and incantations. The artwork, which showed traditional Kalmyk dress, warfare, and daily life, as well as ancient tombs on the Crimean Peninsula, was also studied carefully.

What the researcher found

Milan's manuscript is not known to scholars of Kalmyk or Mongolian culture and is thus of great interest, especially since Milan's illustrations and documentation of Kalmyk written language are probably the oldest such records in existence. Of particular interest is Milan's description of Burchan, a deity fusing Buddhist and animist elements.

How this research can be used

By examining what Milan understood and reported on—as well as noting what he did not understand—we can gain insights both into the Eurasian Indigenous culture as it existed in 1700 and also into the approaches Westerners used when reporting on Indigenous cultures throughout the world, including in Canada.

About the researcher

Dr. Shore was the Stanley Knowles Distinguished Visiting Professor at Brandon University in 2010–11 and is adjunct professor of History at Brandon University. A Life Member of Wolfson College, Cambridge University, and a deacon in the Anglican Church, he is the author with Brandon University Emerita Professor Lynn Whidden of

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Publication based on this research

Shore, P. (in press). A Jesuit among the Kalmyks: An example of proto-ethnography in the eighteenth-century Society of Jesus. *Bulletin of the Kalmyk State University.*

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