

**Nomads under arrest:**  
**The nation-building and nation-destroying of Kalmyk nomads in Russia**

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**Abstract**

Nomads are positioned outside of the modern conception of nations, which is based on a traditional or modern hierarchical model (Kuzio 2001) which tends to “dehistoricize and essentialize tradition” (Chatterjee 2010: 169). Using an analysis of the narrative construction of nomadic Kalmyk nationhood, particularly through historiography and culture, it demonstrates that in spite of nation-destroying efforts from the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, the Kalmyk nation has been flexible with reinventing cultural strategies in charting the nomadic national imaginary from Chinggis Khan to the Dalai Lama. It argues that nomadic nationhood contains a deeply imaginary response to nomads’ cultural and intellectual milieu which provided a way of freeing itself from Tsarist and Soviet modular narratives of national imagination, demonstrating how nomadic nationhood exists as a non-modular form of nationhood.

**Keywords: Kalmyks, nomads, nation-destroying, Russia, Eurasia**

## **Introduction**

With cultural and political identities which transcend fixed territorial boundaries, nomadic populations have always represented an obstacle to efforts of state consolidation (Scott 1999). Attempts to anchor the nomads resemble Walker Connor's (1994) idea of 'nation-destroying' which occurs when states seek to consolidate and assimilate varying groups residing within its territorial borders. The claims to the right of nomadic nationhood, sovereignty, and territoriality are not the focus of existing nomadic studies and neither has much consideration been given to the forms and dynamics of nomadic nationhood in respect to nationalism studies. Yet, nomadic forms of nationhood have been writ large in the process of nation formation in different regional contexts and our understanding of nomadic conceptions of nationhood have been limited. This article seeks rectify this by offering an interpretative account of nomadic nationhood through an analysis of the narrative construction of nomadic Kalmyk nationhood by focusing on Kalmyk historiography and culture.

The Republic of Kalmykia is a steppe region of modern nomads, the remnants of the Mongolian Empire in South European Russia. Despite the geographic (nearly 6,000 km) and political isolation (over four centuries) from Mongolia (including Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, and Buryatia), Kalmyks sustained, though with a different degree of success, their political autonomy, demographic balance, and culture. Perhaps no other modern population in Europe or Russia has been linked to the native Mongolian transcontinental governance of Chinggis Khan as closely as the Kalmyk nomads. Positioned between the Manchu and Moscow rising powers, Kalmyks, known as Western Mongols (Jungars) and Oirats (in medieval and early modern historiography), were the last nomads who held transcontinental sovereign power in the Eurasian steppe (Kolesnik 2003, Perdue 2005). The essence of nomadic nationhood (sometimes

adapting to quasi-national forms) persisted, while ranging from such forms as the Jungar and Kalmyk Khanates in the seventeenth century to the post-Soviet Kalmyk Republic.

In academic research, nomads and their cultural construction of nations is a neglected theme, since existing studies of nomadism work from a modernisation perspective (Ginat and Khazanov 1998, Krajin 2006, Perdue 2005). In international journalism, reliable information about the Eurasian nomads is difficult to obtain, since Moscow and Beijing “exercise what to all intents and purposes is an overlordship,” keeping the Eurasian nomadic populations closed to the outside world (Serebrennikov 1931). Within this context, the questions which require addressing are: (1) what did the Kalmyks themselves narrate about the importance of nomadic nationhood and transcontinental governance? (2) why are these nomadic narratives significant for a conceptualisation of nomadic nationhood? (3) how is nomadic nationhood distinct from conventional forms of nation statehood? With a focus on nomadic nation-narration, the article proposes a different interpretation of nomadic nation, revealing it as a deeply imaginary response to nomads’ cultural and intellectual milieu, particularly to Eurasian geopolitics following the collapse of the Chinggis Khan, Romanov, and Soviet Empires.

According to Connor (1994), past research on nations and nationalism has paid little attention to the evidence of nation-destroying. Connor stated that scholars employ such term as ‘nation-building’ in discussing ethnically homogeneous case studies. For example, in Germany the leaders of nationalism can evoke mass loyalty to *Deutschland* [the state] and to *volksdeutsch* [the nation], triggering the same associations between the state and the nation in the popular psyche. Similar convictions appeal to the Han Chinese, as they perceive the state of China as the state of their particular nation. On the other hand, the symbol of one united nation evokes different associations among Western Mongols, Tibetans, and Uighurs in the name of China, as

well as Crimean Tatars, Kazan Tatars, and Kalmyk-Mongols in the name of Russia. These observations, which perceive their nation and the state as two distinct entities, are neither weak nor merely outliers in the analysis of nations and nationalism. Rather, these observations need to be included in the analysis if we are to assume that nations are a generalizable social phenomenon beyond the sedentary world.

Connor (1994: 42) argued that theories of ‘nation-building’ tend to present the matter of national identities, including the claims to the right of self-determination, superficially as a minor obstacle to effective state integration. The semantic ambivalence between ‘state’ and ‘nation’ substantiates the improper utilization of the key term ‘nation-building’ when instead it is ‘state integration’ with the true goal of ‘nation-destroying.’ The distinction between state and nation is clearly manifested in the nomadic cultural resilience against ‘nation-destroying’ by the Tsarist and Soviet state policies.

Nomadic nations are defined here, beyond the tangible characteristics (a common descent, language, religion, territory, etc.), as “a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all nonmembers in a most vital way” (Connor 1994: 197). The durability of conviction of being a nomadic nation stems not from an ‘identity’ but instead from ‘difference’ (Chatterjee 1993: 5) with the ‘modular narratives’ of nations and nationalisms prescribed by the Tsarist and Soviet (hereafter Russian) state regimes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of ‘modular nationalism’ refers to perceived specific models and forms upon which nationhood is premised. Within Nationalism Studies scholars have understood this as European/western modular form of nationhood linked to the process of modernisation which has been diffused globally (Kedourie 1993, Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983). Indeed, one critique from post-colonialist scholars of nationalism is that the diffusion of Western and European modular processes and narratives of nationhood leaves non-Western nationalisms with little left to ‘imagine’ (Chatterjee 1993: 5).

In this article, the emphasis on the process of nation-destroying instead of nation-building highlights critical aspects of the different catalysts to which nomadic consciousness responds with cultural ingenuity for national survival. Fuelled by the state's modular narrative, a nation-destroying bureaucratic machine gradually takes control of nomadic nations through the removal of the nomadic ownership of symbolic cultural narration. Despite the Russian modular interpretation of nations, the Mongol-Turkic nations and their distinct national identity came into existence long before the fall of imperial power or transferal from Tsarist to Soviet and post-Soviet regimes. The contemporary nations of Eurasia were the result of both nation-destroying, through a modular narrative of imagined identities, and the cultural resilience of a nomadic narrative of imagined difference.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first outlines how the Russians and Soviets understood nomadic nationhood. The article begins with the argument that past research of nomadism only works from a modernisation perspective. Nomads are positioned outside of the domain of modern nations, which is based on a traditional/modern hierarchical trap (Kuzio 2001) to "dehistoricize and essentialize tradition" (Chatterjee 2010: 169). Past accounts describe the Kalmyks as tribal people in perpetual transition, never fully reaching a more civilised, Christianised, urbanised, industrialised condition (Kolesnik 2003, Perdue 2005). In this socio-political formula, Kalmyks are viewed as nomads who are not capable of governing and building their versions of states and nations. However, nomadic writings and archaeological evidence challenge this perspective suggesting the Mongol-Tatar imperial origin of modern nation-states in Eurasia. Nomadic governance and institutions persisted long after the nomadic empire disintegrated.

The second section discusses how the Kalmyk nomads narrated their nomadic nationhood conveying the myths of territorial affinity with the Great Steppe of the nomads, as well as political practices of statehood, organisational knowledge, governing models, and symbolic traditions. The third section highlights the Tsarist and Soviet regimes deliberate process of nation-destroying where their aim was to marginalize the distinct nomadic culture and silence nomadic political claims of nationhood. It is important to note that the Tsarist and Soviet nationality policies targeted not only the Kalmyk nomads. Other minorities were persecuted and displaced. Thus, Kalmykia is not the only case of nation-destroying, but rather nation-destroying is revealed through this one particular case study of Kalmykia. The case of Kalmykia raises larger issues in the debate on nationhood by highlighting that ‘being a nation’ does not mean being a static and fixed entity, but rather a continually changing psychological force of conviction that depends on the dynamic tension between the narration practices of nation-destroying knowledge and the cultural resilience through a nation-narration of imagined difference.

A re-examination of nations from the position of nomadic narration sheds light on the cultural limitations of our understanding of nations and nationalisms in contemporary politics. The misinterpretation of understandings of nomadic nationhood can be related to some conflicts that arise in respect of contemporary claims of self-determination in disputed centre-periphery conflicts in the post-Chinggisid Eurasia such as in Xinjiang<sup>4</sup>, Tibets<sup>5</sup> and Tatar Crimea<sup>6</sup>. Hence, it

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<sup>4</sup> After the disintegration of Chinggis Khan’s Empire, Jungar [Western Mongol] leaders held power in steppe, including Xinjiang, until the destruction of the Jungar Khanate by the Manchu empire in 1760. The Jungar land, including the area of Xinjiang, was left empty for a state-sponsored social and demographic expansion.

<sup>5</sup> Compared to the massacre policies toward the Jungars, the Manchu leaders did not eliminate completely the Tibetan lamas of the Yellow Teaching (Perdue 2005: 285). The nation-destroying policies in Tibet were postponed until 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled his country from the Chinese Communist regime.

<sup>6</sup> In 1783, Empress Catherine II declared the end of the Crimean Khanate, a successor of the Mongol-Tatar Horde. The Khanate’s territories were annexed into a new re-imagined social space ‘Tavrida Oblast’ under the Greek Herodotus toponymy project of the Russian colonial imagination (Hakan Kirimli 1996).

becomes important to recognize the ‘anchoring’ signs of the state against the signs of nomadic nations and their proclaimed sovereignty. Our understanding of nations will benefit from the analysis of the modular stability of cultural and political institutions that operate on the traditional assumptions of the sedentary narrative (Bhabha 1990). In positioning the debate from the contrasting narrative of nomadic nations allows us to articulate the crossing and interdependence of cultural boundaries.

### **Russian and Soviet understanding of nomadic nationhood**

Past research on the varieties of modernisation of nomads by sedentary states acknowledged the deficiencies of modernisation theory as a sedentary narrative of socio-economic and political development, which was ascribed to other nations (Ginat and Khazanov 1998, Kradin 1992). Nevertheless, scholars have still suggested nomads “must be accepted as full-fledged citizens of modernising states” and “benefit from their membership in society at large” (Ginat and Khazanov 1998: 3). Moreover, they have argued, that – despite the detrimental paternalistic policies toward nomads that doomed them to be economically and politically dependent – nomads “can not be left alone” and “their own resources are too meagre to be sufficient for spontaneous modernisation” (Ginat and Khazanov 1998: 3). The cultural complexity of nomads is commonly measured against the cultural performance indicators of sedentary societies, such as fixed residence, urbanization, a density of population, and technological specialization (Kradin 2006). Despite these methodological limitations, hidden narratives highlight the nomadic cultural ingenuity in their national adaptation over time under the pressures of technological advancement (Perdue 2005: 21).



From the ancient Scythians to the contemporary Kalmyks, the nomads of Eurasia revealed remarkable stability with regard to political practices of statehood, organisational knowledge, governing models, and symbolic traditions (Khazanov 2003). Russian nation-formation clearly reflects the Mongol influence, such as in the use of the financial system (*kazna* [treasury]; *den'gi* [paper money]; *altyn* [gold currency]; *tamga* [commercial tax and customs]); in the development of sophisticated postal service for transmission of documents and information (Mongol *jam*, Russian *iam*); in the administrative apparatus design (*daruga* and *baskaks* governance management); in the organization of the periodic population census starting in 1257; in the organization of military and foreign affairs; and in political institutional continuity on a wide post-Mongol-imperial scale (Perdue 2005, Ostrowski 1998). However, as Russia matured as a nation, symbols of Mongol heritage required thorough work of censorship and reinterpretation in Tsarist and Soviet modular narratives.

In Russian and Soviet historiography and social sciences, the rise of nomadic nations was traditionally represented as extremely regressive and which brought a great negative impact on the conquered populations. As Perdue (2005: 7) argued: ‘mechanical theses of environmental determinism likewise deprived the Central Eurasians of any agency, tending to reduce them to mere biological actors’.

During Stalin’s totalitarian regime, this discourse was established by Communist Party orders in 1943 and 1945 that oriented scholars to interpret the role of the Mongol Empire in Russia as a source of negative influence, violence, and distortion (Dode 2001, 2005, Gallyamova 2014). For example, despite the fact that in 1907-10 Gorodtsev and Prozritelev found valuable archaeological materials among the ruins of the Mongol-Tatar city Madjar, all the archaeological research projects on the 13<sup>th</sup>- and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries nomadic culture were stopped for almost a

century (Babenko 2001). The costumes of a young elite couple discovered in the *kurgan* [hill] cemetery Djukhta-2, the Mongol-Tatar commercial centre of the Khanate of Juchi, combined with the Kalmyk epic narrative “Janghar” document Kalmyk nomadic cultural preferences, artistic styles and luxury possessions typical of this period (Dode 2001, 2005). However, what is significant, in the context of this study, is not just the symbolic meaning behind the archaeological artefacts, but rather the evidence of the state’s deliberate attempts to silence nomadic claims of nationhood.

The Mongol-Tatar Yoke stereotype was meticulously developed and violently intensified by the authoritarian regime. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 1944, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union adopted the order "On the status of the Tatar Communist party and the measures to improve the political and ideological work with the masses." The order determined a new orientation in the Arts and Humanities to disseminate the barbaric image of the Mongol-Tatar history. The name of Juchi’s Ulus was eliminated in all publishing materials. The order prohibited any research that reveals the Mongol-Tatar statehood and its positive impact on the cultural and political development of the Russian state (Gallyamova 2014).

The Mongol Imperial origin of the post-Chingissid khanates, including the Kalmyk, Kazan, Crimean Khanates, were rewritten. For example, the order mandated to establish the relationship between the Kazan Tatarstan and the Bulgars with an emphasis on the period before the Mongol-Tatar Horde. In literature, music, dramaturgy, Stalin’s censorship police targeted the Mongol-Tatar writers’ “tendencies toward a passionate display of the medieval times and their affinity with the oral heroic epics, upon which the modern plots and characters were based” (Gallyamova 2014). In Kazan Tatarstan, the publication of the Tatar heroic epic “Edigei,” which is named after the Mongol Chinggisid leader, was terminated. When Kalmyks were deported to

Siberia and the Kalmyk toponymy was erased from the cultural and political maps, Semyon Lipkin's (1947) adaptation of the Kalmyk epic "Jangar" for children was published without the authorship word "Kalmyk." Stalin policies intensified the colonial leitmotif conveying the "voluntary entrance" of the Kalmyk, Kazan, Crimean Khanates into Muscovy Russia and the Russian state's progressive impact on the backward Mongol-Tatar people (Gallyamova 2014).

It is evident that Tsarist and Soviet regimes dictated that scholars employ the obstruction and manipulation of factors that contribute to the outcome of 'being a nation.' Most scholars backed by these regimes disseminated the symbolic elements of their narration. These contents of the modular narrative are as follows:

1. Positioned in a traditional/modern dichotomy as traditional, nomads are outside of the realm of modern nations (Contents 1-4: Markov 1976, Kradin 1992, Ginat and Khazanov 1998).
2. As nomads, Kalmyks are placed in the evolutionary scheme "band-tribe-chiefdom."
3. Only with certain degree of sedentarisation may Kalmyks obtain the full features of chiefdom.
4. Kalmyk alliances are unstable and short-lived. They have no legitimate links to Chinggis Khan or his son Juchi's khanate.
5. The official origin of the Kalmyks begins in 1620 under the Russian Tsar Mikhail's guidance, who allowed the rootless nomads to roam along the Southern border pastures (Khodarkovsky 1992; Bichurin 1834). This date was commemorated in the Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet state sponsored events, school textbooks and academic writings.
6. The Central Eurasian steppe belt is not the locality of nomadic culture. All archaeological discoveries are strictly censored (Dode 2001, 2005, Babenko 2001).

What these elements of the modular narrative share is an imagination that nomads exist outside of the domain of modern nations. The relegation of nomads to the sphere of the traditional within this confined paradigm ensured the narrative was an effective and powerful instrument for the exercise of control of the vast territories of the Eurasian continent. The analysis of Kalmyk nationhood outside of these teleological linear interpretations (from traditional to modern, from bandits to tribes to chiefdoms, from nomadic to sedentary) enables us to conceptualize nomads without denying the historical possibility of cultural institutions and values that might not conform to the Christian, Communist, and post-Communist sedentary principles. We argue that the Kalmyk ingenuity of nomadic national survival stems not from a national identity based on these linear understandings of nationhood, but rather from a cultural difference within a modular narrative of controlled imagination. The myths of descent, golden age of civilization, and heroes of war and peace in readings of nationhood (Smith 1986) embody the imagined difference of an evolving Kalmyk culture that has sought its own ways of coping with modernity and freeing itself from a Russian modular narrative of controlled imagination.

### **How did the Kalmyks understand themselves as a nomadic nation?**

In *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, Thomas Allsen (2001), a professor of history at College of New Jersey, stated that the rise of the Mongol nomads has been traditionally associated with non-ethnic Mongol human agents, recruited for their foreign governing capabilities and talents. However, existing nomadic narratives on nomadic agents of cultural and political transmission challenge past theories that the Mongol nomads were not capable to govern the Mongol Empire and build their versions of states and nations (Allsen 2001, Perdue 2005). Kolesnik (2003) emphasised that Kalmyks were known for their great

transcontinental migrations, their mastery in transcontinental governance, and the establishment of their own sovereign nation-state (Kolesnik 2003, Perdue 2005, Allsen 2001). The aim of this section is to explain how the Kalmyk nomads perceived themselves as a nomadic nation through collective ties expressed in myths, historical accounts, legal codes of laws, and human agents of national governance (Smith 1986). The intensity and political importance of nomadic sentiments are discussed here against symbolic contents of the nation-destroying modular narrative of the Russian and Soviet state regimes.

### *Myths of Descent*

The nation-destroying modular narrative dictates that Kalmyk alliances are unstable, short-lived and that they have no legitimate links to Chinggis Khan or his son Juchi and his khanate. However, the mythical origin of hereditary noble dynasties has been a symbolically significant element in the narration of nomadic national difference. The original name of the Kalmyks was the Dorben-Oirat confederation based on two major hereditary noble dynasties Dorben and Oirat (Zlatkin 1983: 13, Grum-Grzhimailo 1896, Banzarov 1849). Grum-Grzhimailo (1896) emphasized that the coalition between these two political dynasties was established during the years of Chinggis Khan. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Kafarov 1866; Kozin 1941; Cleaves 1982), written two decades after Chinggis Khan's death in the 13th century, the Dorben [meaning four] were descendants from the four sons of Duva Soqor, a mythical figure with one eye, who could see across three pastures. Duva Soqor found the beautiful Alan-Goa and married her to his young brother Dobun-Mergen. The descendants of Alan-Goa, including Chinggis Khan's dynasty of Bordjigin, became the primary hereditary nobility of the Mongol nomads from the Middle Ages to the present time.

While the Dorben hereditary lineage shared the same myth of origin with Chinggis Khan's noble dynasty, the Oirats had a humble origin. As stated in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, they were the descendants of the forest people of the Yenisey River. In 1207, however, the socio-political role of the Oirats changed. Quduqa-beki, the prince of the Oirats, was the first to accept the alliance under the leadership of Chinggis Khan. The Khan recognized the military might and large size of the Oirat army. He named Quduqa-beki *kurgen* [in-laws] and married his two daughters to Quduqa-beki's sons. The Confederation of Dorben-Oirat joined the army of Juchi in his European expansion and the establishment of Juchi's Ulus (the Golden Horde) on the Volga River.

In a nomadic society, the nomadic political elite based on the *kurgen* [in-law] status, a matrimonial lineage to Chinggis Khan, should not be underestimated (Arapov 2003, Boyle 1958, Kolbas 2006, Landa 2016). In spite of Chinggis Khan's effective social transformation of a nomadic society from familial ties to decimal governing units, Chinggis Khan's in-laws, the Oirats, maintained their familial unity and became an alternative nomadic force in a post-Chinggis Eurasia. Elevated by the imperial *kurgen* status, the Dorben-Oirat political dynasties found a new call for a military and state-building leadership at the expanding frontiers of the nomadic cultural transmission.

What concerns us here is not the myth of origin and formation itself, but rather how the cultural durability of nationhood is encoded in the myth of defiant imagination against a particular modular narrative: namely, that of the regime-backed commemoration of the Kalmyks' origin only in 1620 and censure of the Mongol imperial origin of modern nations in Eurasia. The myth of one-eyed Duva Soqor and *The Secret History of the Mongols* highlights the ancient origin and long-lived nomadic alliances of the Dorben-Oirat confederation that can be traced

back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Directly connected to Chinggis Khan through a matrimonial lineage, the Dorben-Oirat in-laws became an alternative force in the modern Eurasian geopolitics. The sheer fact that no other modern nations have been linked to the Mongolian-speaking native empire of Chinggis Khan, nomadic transcontinental governance, civilization, and literary culture as closely as the Kalmyk nomads has been a potent element for their defiant imagination and an antidote to both the Russian and Soviet modular nation-narration.

### *Agents of Governance*

Nomadic narratives on the agents of cultural and political transmission challenge past accounts that Kalmyks are not capable of governing and building their versions of states and nations (Allsen 2001, Kolbas 2006, Landa 2016). The transmission of the Mongol nomadic governance and culture was connected with direct human agencies and capabilities; in this transmission, the Kalmyk noble dynasties Dorben and Oirats were positioned to become direct agents (Allsen 2001, Kolbas 2006, Landa 2016). The original name of the Kalmyks was the Confederation of Dorben-Oirat dynasties. While Chinggisids, linked to Chinggis Khan through a patrimonial lineage, moved imperial personnel, subject peoples, and nomadic state specialists from one cultural zone to another, Chinggis Khan's *kurgens* Dorben-Oirats became the principal conduit of the nomadic governance and cultural transmission (Allsen 2001). The Persian statesmen and historians Rashid-Ad-Din (1247-1318) and Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226-1283) provided extensive contemporaneous accounts of the role of Dorben-Oirats in the nomadic strategic governance and operation throughout the Middle Eastern and Eurasian lands. Notably, they wrote about two well-known cultural and political intermediaries: the governor Bolad and the Emir Arghun Aqa (Boyle 1958, Allsen 2001, Kolbas 2006; Lane 1999). We will focus on

these two cultural figures here who both illustrate the power of endogenous agency in the narratives of nomads.

Firstly, according to Rashid-Ad-Din (Verkhovskiy 1960), Bolad, a Dorben noble, a senior figure under Kublai Khan held many important positions which contributed to the development of state craft including the establishment of the Office of State Ceremonials, the retraining of the imperial guardsmen, the maintenance of bridges, canals, irrigation, pastures, and agronomic farming and the development of the military (Verkhovskiy 1960; Allsen 2001: 76).

Secondly, Arghun Aqa's career alludes to the Dorben-Oirats' capabilities in building and governing transcontinental states and nations (Boyle 1958, Lane 1999; Kolbas 2006). Ata-Malik Jovaini, a historian at the Mongol court of Northern Persia, stressed that Arghun Aqa held the principal role in the Mongol transcontinental governance as an Oirat *kurgen* (Boyle 1958: 505):

'The Oirats are one of the best known of the Mongol tribes, and to that tribe belong most of the maternal uncles of the children and grand-children of Chinggis Khan, the reason being that at the time of his first rise to power the Oirats came forward to support and assist him and vied with one another in their alacrity to tender allegiance, and in recognition of their services an edict was issued concerning that tribe to the effect that the daughters of their emirs should be married to the descendants of Chinggis Khan.'

The Oirat Emir Arghun Aqa administratively shaped the western lands of the Mongol Empire.

As a professor of history at Miami University Judith Kolbas (2006) highlighted, Arghun Aqa had military, financial and, above all, political acumen that allowed him to have his finger on the pulse of every major event for thirty-two years. Moreover, Mongol power in its transcontinental scale cannot be understood without appreciating his immense role in establishing it (Kolbas 2006).



These nomadic counter-narratives, through the bibliographic description of these key figures, provide the perspective from the nomads themselves, suggesting that the Eurasian nomads were not only positioned to build, govern, and operate transcontinental early empires, but also were culturally complex and politically capable of building their versions of modern states and nations. In the process of cultural construction, nomadic nations sought heroes of war and peace of transcontinental scale to inspire and guide them through the times of modern disenchantment.

### ***Written Records***

By the end of the 16th century, the Torgut hereditary princes gained power in the Dorben-Oirat Confederation. The name *Tourgout* means ‘elite guard troops’ of the Mongol Khans, reflecting Chinggis Khan’s effective social transformation of a nomadic society from familial ties to decimal military units (Guchinova 2006, Avlyayev 1984). After the disintegration of the Chinggis Khan’s empire, Tourgouts led the Dorben-Oirat forces in their ambitious projects. The Torgut leader Kho-Orluk (*orkuk* means knight/general) convinced the Dorben-Oirat political elite that he would rejuvenate the nomadic dominance in Eurasian steppe.

The account of Kalmyk transcontinental governance and nation formation under the leadership of Kho-Orluk was documented in *The History of Kalmyk Khans*, written by Prince Tyumen in 1819: “In 1618, Kho-Orluk Khan sent his people to see the shores of the Caspian Sea. When he learned that this land was not occupied, he took the people under his power – Torgut, Qoshot, and Dorbet, altogether 50,000 smokes (or tents), and followed by his six sons in 1628 left his settlement in the Jungar Khanate and started his move to the West.”

Another historical document *The History of Dorben Oirats*, written by *Emchi* (Doctor of Medicine) Gaban Sharab in 1737, signals Kalmyks' sovereign political decision in the establishment of the Kalmyk Khanate: "From the Ural Mountains to the Volga, from Astrakhan to Samara Kho-Orluk Khan spread his settlements for permanent pastures. Even though this country belonged to the Tsagan-Khan (White Tsar) and Kho-Orluk had a friendly relationship with him, Kho-Orluk obtained this country, which he liked, without acknowledging the Tsar or subordinating to him."

The nomadic narration of nationhood remained the cultural currency of political negotiation in Kalmyk nation formation. It reinforced the Kalmyks' perspective that the Eurasian steppe belt was a traditional locality of the Eurasian nomads and their choice to establish the Khanate in the Great Steppe was based on a strategic goal of transcontinental sovereign governance. Initially, the Kalmyk Khanate was situated on the territory of Juchi's Ulus, however, by the end of the seventeenth century, Kalmyks' transcontinental governance encompassed the land from the Caspian Sea in the West to Alashan in the East and from the Ural Mountains in the North to the Indian borders in the South (Zlatkin 1983, Guchinova 2006).

Other notable narratives written in Oirat Script include "*How the Oirats Defeated Mongolian Ubashi Khun-Taiji in 1578*" (unknown author; discovered in Prince Tyumen's archive in 1858) about the three wars for the establishment of Oirat sovereignty; "*The Moon Light: The Life of 'Rabdzhamba' [Doctor of Philosophy] Zaya Pandita*" written by Padnabhadra in 1691 about the founder of the Oirat literary language and national literature; and "*The Great Oirat-Mongol Law*" written in 1640 (Golstunskiy 1880, Badmaev 1968, Guchinova 2006). This Kalmyk historical literature highlights that nation-narration is never complete. This inevitably bred a reaction among the Kalmyk intellectuals to intensify a unified Kalmyk language and

historical literature. In the process of nation narration, not only must nomads be founded upon the nomadic cultural core; they must also update their nation-narration within a nomadic cultural structure.

### ***Legislature***

The Eurasian nomads continued to maintain their political and cultural practices in accordance with Chinggis Khan's governing system long after their nomadic empire had disintegrated. Since the times of Chinggis Khan, nomadic governance consisted of the legislative (*khurultai*), executive (*khan*), and judicial (*zargo*) branches. The *khurultai* (the All Nomadic Congress) played a great role among all nomadic nations. The most important political decisions were resolved by the *khurultai*-congress that served as "an organ maintaining the state" (Arapov 2003: 158; Gurliand 1904). *Khurultai*-congresses enacted legislation, rejected or confirmed the Khans, authorized major coalitions and wars.

It is important to stress that the laws and practices of the Mongol empire were not only well codified but also more advanced than comparable laws of other nations. The legislative structure protected the rights of women, migrants and religious minorities, as well as supported a merit-based professional service and the advancement of sciences. Jean de Joinville (Smith 2008), a chronicler of medieval France, emphasised that the *Yasa* law code declared the death penalty for sexual misconduct or harassment of a Mongol woman regardless of the marital status, ensuring woman's security and social order during their peaceful migrations and military expeditions. The *Yasa* also ordered to support individuals of certain professions and exempt them from taxes. These professions were "lawyers, doctors, scientists, people who were fully dedicated to religions and funeral services" (Gurliand 1904; Vernadskiy 1953). The power of the

*Yasa* of Chinggis Khan was based on the discipline, cultural and religious tolerance and established a peaceful stability allowing for travel and trade throughout China, Turkestan, Persia, and Russia within the Mongol empire.

With the fall of the Chinggisid dynasty, the Kalmyk political elite, the Confederation of Dorben-Oirat, consolidated nomadic power in the Eurasian steppe. In 1640, following the nomadic legislative order, Kho-Orluk from the Kalmyk Khanate, Gushi from Tangut, Tushetu from Tibet, Dzasaktu from Eastern Mongolia, and Ochirtu-Tsesen and Batur-khong-tayiji from the Jungar Khanate gathered at the *Khurultai* Congress in Western Mongolia. The Congressmen agreed to discuss the political unity and to codify a set of laws for all Mongol people. The All Mongol Congress in 1640 called upon the khanates to adopt the Mongol-Kalmyk Code of Laws entitled “*Tsaadjin Bichig*” (Golstunskiy 1880). The Mongol-Kalmyk Code of Laws followed the nomadic social order and was based on the *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan of the XIII century, as well as legal materials such as *paidzi* and *yarlyk* (Gurliand 1904). The Law established Buddhism of the Dalai-Lama as an official religion for all Mongol nomads (Zlatkin 1983).

The organization of the *Khutultai* Congress in Western Mongolia and the adoption of the Law Code “*Tsaadjin Bichig*” were attributed to the political activity of the philosophy scholar Zaya-Pandita (1599-1662) (Padnabhadra 1691, Badmaev 1968). Over the period of twelve years from 1650 to 1662, Zaya-Pandita developed the Kalmyk script and philosophical terminology. Todo-bichig, which means ‘a clear script’, became the official language in academic, administrative, and foreign affairs. Under the leadership of Zaya-Pandita, Kalmyks established their distinct national culture: the national code of law “*Tsaadjin Bichig*” and the national language and literature. But most importantly, the major role of Zaya-Pandita was his successful

political mission to build a nation based on the institution of the Dalai-Lamas, a new legitimating symbol of power, an alternative to the patrimonial descent from Chinggis Khan.

Resistance to the nation-destroying modular narrative spurred a revival of national consciousness among nomadic intellectuals. While their narration of legislature and literature was not original work, it was a reform that aimed to intensify the inherited regulatory policies of their Mongol imperial predecessors. It was within this crucible, the Mongol imperial governing and operational system, that national consciousness was captured and revived among the Kalmyk nomads and the wider nomadic community of the Great Steppe.

### ***The rise of the nation***

Kalmyk nationhood reached a peak under the leadership of Ayuka Khan (Kho-Orluk's great-grandson). A progeny of a marriage between elites in the Kalmyk and Jungar Khanates, by the 1680s Ayuka had accumulated power and prestige in the Eurasian steppe with new symbols of sovereignty for the Kalmyks. By the beginning of the 1700s the Dalai-Lama, the Ottomans and the Russians recognized the Kalmyk sovereign title of Khan which Ayuka had bestowed upon himself. However, in nomadic terms, the recognition by the Russians or Ottomans was not considered as a diplomatic act of symbolic power, compared with the recognition by the Crimean Khan, the last Chinggisid of the Eurasian steppe. The Crimean Khan Giray was one of the first to acknowledge Ayuka as a Khan (Khodarkovsky 1992). The rise of the Kalmyk Khanate under Ayuka was possible through the narration of an imagined community that believed in the alternative myth of legitimacy through Chinggis Khan's matrimonial lineage and the Dalai Lama's institution of sacred reincarnations.

Nation-narration is never without a hero (Smith 1986) and nomadic nation-narration is never without a heroic khan. The rise of Ayuka the Khan enhanced the myth of national creativity and durability: the nomads once capable of leading transcontinental governing systems and creating agents of governance like Arghun-Aqa, Bolad-Aqa, Zaya-Pandita, must have human capabilities to create heroic khans like Ayuka and future treasures of governance. While *khan* was an important symbol of the nomadic governance, not every khan was a national hero. The significance of a heroic khan in his own locality of the Great Steppe and among his nomadic community lies in his role to sum up a nomadic cultural milieu, which in its highest moments exerted a powerful appeal to sovereign unity free from external constraints.

### ***Nation-destroying***

After Ayuka-Khan's death in 1724, the Kalmyk political elite became increasingly concerned with the Russian state's interference in the internal affairs of the Kalmyk khanate, especially in the election process of the next Khan (Bichurin 1834: 189). In collaboration with Ayuka's wife Darma-Bala, the Russian state confirmed Tseren-Donduk as first in line to succession, who was one of Ayuka's weakest sons and was known for his alcoholic tendencies. However, the Kalmyk legislative members unanimously confirmed their own candidate Donduk-Ombo, Ayuka-Khan's grandson.

Political instability, and tension between the two candidates, continued until 1735 when Tseren-Donduk could not resist the pressure from the Kalmyk political elite anymore. After almost ten years, Donduk-Ombo returned from exile in Kuban. Within two years, Donduk-Ombo brought military and economic stability to the region and in 1757 he earned the title of sovereign, Donduk-Ombo-the Khan (Bichurin 1834: 219). However, the political stability of the Kalmyk

Khanate did not last long. The Russian state intensified the colonial regime through the policies of Christianization, crime forgiveness, mass relocation of Russian villagers to the Kalmyk pastures, and the restructuring of the Zargo judicial institution (Pozdneev 1886, Kostenko 1870).

In 1771, Kalmyks seeking to escape the Russian state decided to migrate from the European part of Russia to Western Mongolia. Khodarkovsky (1992: 232) called this journey “the last known exodus of a nomadic people in the history of Asia”. 150,000 people (30,909 tents) started a journey that is memorized as a collective tragedy. Almost 100,000 Kalmyks were killed or died in the inhospitable climate of the steppes and deserts. In 1771, the Kalmyk nomads lost their independence. The Kalmyk Khanate was abolished, and the remaining 11,198 Kalmyk tents were assigned to the Astrakhan governorate of Russia. With the loss of the Khanate, the Kalmyk nomads became Russian subjects.

The tension between Russian control and the resistance to its power among the Kalmyk nomads is reflected in well-documented census records exposing the ‘nation-destroying’ process between 1618 -1959. The Kalmyk Khanate recorded 50,000 households in 1618 or, if a household on average had four people, approximately 200,000 people. The first census of the Russian Empire in 1890 registered 190,648 people.

The census records provide an account of at least three major atrocities in the Russian nation-building process: the abolishment of the Kalmyk Khanate in 1771, the sedentarisation of nomads in 1897-1926, and deportation to Siberia in 1942-1957. Demographic engineering resulted in the physical annihilation of the nation: the Kalmyk nation was abolished twice in 1771 and 1942 and the proportion of the Russian settlers increased from 11 to 56 per cent in 1926 and 1959 respectively (table 1).

Table 1. The Population of the Kalmyk Khanate/Republic by Ethnicity, 1618-1959

Ethnicity by Year	1618	1890	1926	1939	1959
Kalmyks	200,000 (n/a)	190,648 (n/a)	107,026 (76%)	107,315 (49%)	64,882 (35%)
Russians	n/a (n/a)	n/a (n/a)	15,212 (11%)	100,814 (46%)	103,349 (56%)
Source	Gaban-Sharab	Census	Census	Census	Census

After the 1917 revolution, the Soviet reform of nationalities began. To consolidate Soviet power over the disintegrated people and territories, Lenin drafted a new ideology for nationalities based on the principles of the Declaration of People's Rights. Since 1771, when the Kalmyk Khanate was abolished, Kalmyks were administered by the Russian guberniya of Astrakhan. With the establishment of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, Kalmyks regained their autonomy, forming the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast in 1920 and advancing the status to the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic in 1935. The Soviet state was successfully transformed into a federative union of national republics. Local elites everywhere were confident that the new state would grant them ethno-territorial autonomy and supported the Soviet regime. However, Lenin's promised freedom and social justice for all nationalities was short-lived.

During the Stalinisation of the Soviet system, many of the republics populations were deported to Siberia, their autonomous status was eliminated, and neighbouring Slavic oblasts consolidated control over newly claimed areas. Deported peoples such as Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, and Crimean Tatars were settled in special conditions to die. Thus, in the Novosibirsk



oblast, mortality among deported Kalmyks was 57 deaths per 1000 population and in rural regions mortality reached 80 people per 1000 population. Among all deported nations Kalmyks had the highest toll of mortality: 44,125 deaths were recorded in August 1948 (Guchinova 2005, Bugai and Gonov 1998).

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1943, Decree number 115/144 of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR entitled “On the liquidation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the formation of Astrakhan Oblast within the RSFSR” was adopted and ordered to transfer nine territories of the Republic of Kalmykia to Astrakhan Okrug, two Kalmyk territories to Stalingrad Oblast and two remaining to Rostov oblast. The Decree ordered to identify all ethnically Kalmyk people of the former Kalmyk Republic and physically disperse them over the vast lands of Siberia: 25 thousand to Altai Krai, 25 thousand to Omsk Oblast, and 20 thousand to Novosibirsk Oblast (Guchinova 2005, Bugai and Gonov 1998).

In 1944 “Operation *Ulusy*” [in Kalmyk: ‘nation population’] led to 93,139 Kalmyks being loaded onto 46 special trains. Most of the Kalmyk men were Army conscripts, thus the operation was realised without any resistance. Kalmyks had less than half an hour to collect their belongings; they were loaded into cattle train wagons and were forcibly sent to an unknown destination. During Khrushchev's thaw, in 1958 the autonomous status of Kalmykia was regained.

### ***The rise of the intelligentsia***

In Soviet Kalmykia, the nomadic transmission of cultural values shifted from the institution of the Dalai Lama to the moral stratum of intellectuals and professional specialists. Two leaders became collective agents in the revival of the nation: the poet David Kugutinov

(1922-2006) and the General Gorodovikov (1910-1983). Both stressed Kalmyks' cultural uniqueness and political sovereignty.

The distinction between the rational state policies and the non-rational core of the national identity was expressed in a poem written by David Kugultinov in his response to Stalin's deportation of the Kalmyks to Siberia. In 1944 Kugultinov was convicted by clause 58/10 for his nationalist poetry and was sent to Norilsk State Special Regime Camp in Siberia. The poem "I have not renounced the truth [that I am Kalmyk]" became a cultural symbol of the Kalmyk national resistance against the Russian attempt to destroy the Kalmyk nation.

### **I have not renounced the truth**

At that time unjust and savage rule

Suppressed us...

The light was lost for us

And even the word "Kalmyks"

People were afraid to pronounce.

Then, with my words of poems I affirmed

To friends I wrote, I consoled

Those who were banished from their homes...

I said to them: this squall will stop

All that gnaws our souls will disappear, --

Lenin's enlightenment cannot be dimmed!

Despite the facts I swore:

Not only young and old -

But the entire Kalmyk nation will return  
To our ancestors' graves and dear land.  
I saw how faces become younger,  
How an enlightened tear falls  
On a bronze and weather-beaten face,  
How hearing kindness rendered them kind,  
That was my highest sacred prize.

Kugultinov's nationalist poetry appealed to non-rational emotions and assisted in transforming the tangible pieces of the nation into the emotion-charged power of national unity. A spiritual bond between a scattered people through their emotions of collective trauma triggered the powerful workings of an imagined united nation.

This emotional and psychological underpinning of Kalmyk nationhood derived from Kugultinov's poetry coincided with the rise of a new Kalmyk leader: General Gorodovikov. There were two favourable conditions for the rise of Gorodovikov: his general elite status that he earned during the war; and Khrushchev's thaw that allowed him to govern the Republic as the first non-Russian leader. Gorodovikov mobilized sufficient resources to rebuild Kalmykia through his negotiations with Moscow. During his leadership 1961-1980, Kalmykia developed new infrastructure – major trans-regional roads, train stations, airports, hospitals, schools, the National Kalmyk State University, the National Kalmyk Drama Theatre, but most importantly, collective farms based on traditional Kalmyk livestock (revived ancient breeds of Kalmyk camels, horses, cows, and sheep).

Kalmykia became an economically prosperous region of the Russian Federation and one of the main producers of wool in the country. Gorodovikov formed a new Kalmyk elite out of top university graduate students and charged them with responsibilities to revive their community. However, in 1980, Gorodovikov was accused of the pro-Kalmyk nationalist propaganda. He was forced to resign and since then the Russians have occupied leading positions. However, the Kalmyk elite, created by Gorodovikov, continued to work as leaders of collective nomadic farms and build their careers in the thirteen regions of Kalmykia.

In post-Soviet Kalmykia, the narration of a nomadic nation was reinforced with the old cultural and political symbols against the dominant Russian Orthodox culture. As Zaya-Pandita in the seventeenth century, Telo Tulku Rinpoche became a contemporary agent of the imaginary workings of the nomadic unity. Born to a Kalmyk Mongolian family in the USA, he studied at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in South India at the age of seven, when the Dalai Lama recognized him as a reincarnation of Mahasiddha Tilopa. Similar to Zaya-Pandita, who was sent to the Tibetan monastery in the seventeenth century, in the 1980-90s Telo Rinpoche spent thirteen years in Drepung Gomang monastery studying Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Buddhist philosophy under the guidance of famous Tibetan masters.

In 1991, during his first visit to Kalmykia with the Dalai-Lama, Telo Rinpoche decided to stay among the Kalmyks. In 1992, elected as Spiritual Leader of Kalmykia by the Kalmyk people, he was entrusted to lead the process of cultural restoration. Over his career in Kalmykia, Telo Rinpoche rebuilt over twenty-seven Buddhist temples that had been destroyed during the communist era, including the Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni, the largest Buddhist institution in Russia and Europe. In 2015, the fourteenth reincarnation of the Dalai-Lama confirmed Telo Rinpoche as the spiritual head of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in Kalmykia,

Mongolia, and Russia. Once again, the rise of the nomadic national unity is manifested through the historical transcontinental connection of two strategic nomadic centres, Tibet on one side and Kalmykia on the other side of the Eurasian steppe belt, where the nomadic cultural symbols emphasize their sovereign narration of nations, backed by the institution of the Dalai-Lama and political legitimacy through reincarnations.

## **Conclusion**

The forms and dynamics of nomadic nationhood represent an important category of contemporary geopolitics and are the outcomes of both developments: nation destroying, through a modular narrative of controlled imagination, and cultural resilience, through a nomadic narrative of imagined difference. Nations, using Connor's (1994: 197) definition as "a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all nonmembers in a most vital way," are also determined by the cultural intermediaries between the nomadic imaginary community and the wider imaginary world of moral humanity. Nomadic nation-narration presents the intricate plot of a myth of honour and humanity, embedded inside the determinist structure of nationhood that, from the hero of war Chinggis Khan to the hero of peace Dalai Lama, contains a deeply imaginary response to nomads' cultural and intellectual trajectory and resonates with the broader moral audience. This study demonstrates that nomadic nations are extremely adaptable to power conditions, flexible with reinventing cultural ideas and governing strategies, and determined by the cultural intermediaries between the nomadic imaginary community and the wider imaginary world.

The absence of the nomadic actors in the global discourse of nationhood adds to the debate on nations, as Bhabha (1990) and Chatterjee (1993) emphasized in their analyses: whose

nation-narrations are we reading if we account for the evidence of the regime's deliberate obstruction of nationhood? The right to narrate sovereign narratives does not belong to the politically marginalised nomads. Nomadic epistemologies are considered to be mere myths, hidden in the forever immature underworld away from the possibility to contribute to the global discourse of nationhood. Russian and later Soviet research on the nomadic 'nation-destroying' exemplifies the subjective interpretation, as illustrated when historians speak of the origins of nations as a sign of modernity.

The examination of nomadic nations from the position of their own narration opens a space for debates on the modular stability of cultural and political institutions that operate on the traditional assumptions of the sedentary modular narrative. Positioning the debate from the contrasting narrative of the nomadic perspective allows us to imagine nomadic nations with their own heroic protagonists, the principal conduits of the nomadic cultural transmission. This case study of the Kalmyk nomads may contribute to further understanding contemporary geopolitical issues in the Caucasus and Central Asia, especially Tatar Crimea, Tibet, Xinjiang and Hazarajat (Bamyan, Afghanistan) whose populations all share their nomadic past with the Mongol Empire. The engagement in the so-called "Great Game" (Clubb 1971) which is re-enacted through the Russian "Eurasianism" policy, the Chinese "Belt and Road" strategic initiative, and the US "New Afghanistan War Strategy" poses predictable traps to the Russian-Sino- American triangle in the region known as the "graveyard of empires." The outcome of these strategic manoeuvrings will inevitably benefit from attention to the cultural and political institutions of the nomadic players and their construction of nation-narration. Their inclusion may ensure greater regional stability by preventing cultural misinterpretation, conflict, and the attendant economic burden and loss of human life.

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