

COMMENTARY

OBSERVATIONS AMONG KIRGHIZ REFUGEES FROM THE PAMIRS OF AFGHANISTAN SETTLED IN THE TURKISH REPUBLIC

Of the Kirghiz of the Pamirs approximately 1,000 have been resettled in eastern Turkey since 1983. They are temporarily housed in the village of Karagündüz, in individual cinder-block houses, some thirty miles north of the city of Van (which is situated about fifty miles west of the frontier with Iran). Their permanent settlement village is currently (1984) under construction at Altındere, almost twelve miles from the northern tip of Lake Van.

The location of their permanent settlement appears to have been selected by the Turkish government with an eye towards climate and terrain compatible with their previous home in the Pamirs. The Kirghiz, in private as well as in public, have expressed their approval of their new environment, which is entirely suitable for raising sheep, most of the grass around Altındere being of a variety with which they are familiar from the Pamirs. The grazing area allocated to the Kirghiz by the Turkish Government at Altındere to tend the herds of sheep they will receive upon moving there adds up to several thousand acres of rolling land at an altitude of roughly 6,000 feet above sea level.¹ During the past year they have also been experimenting

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¹ A Coordinating Committee, with representatives from all relevant government departments in Ankara, is functioning under

with sedentary agriculture, the seeds of various vegetables having been provided for them. On the whole they expect to become largely self-sufficient in the near future - once they have moved to Altındere - and hope to engage primarily in sheep-raising, as they have done for centuries. This positive view is largely supported by the extensive and long-established practice of animal husbandry in and around Van province.

All Kirghiz children under the age of eleven attend classes in the village school, staffed by assigned teachers. Only the boys appear to be going on to middle- and high-school education, as boarding students in Turkish institutions 35 miles away. Most of these young men are desirous of going on to university, medicine ranking high among careers they hope for. The literacy rate is quite high across the total group, albeit in the Arabic script. Shortly after arrival in Karagündüz they were given individual instruction in modern Turkish orthography (based on the Latin alphabet), and they are now able to read local newspapers. Language difficulties among individuals up to the age of 35 are basically non-existent, as they all have nearly total fluency in modern Turkish. The older people are able to comprehend spoken modern Turkish, but their responses are intelligible only to the trained ear. A large majority are able to follow Turkish television and radio broadcasts with ease. A limited number of the older men are proficient in Farsi, due to their dealings with Afghan officials during the past three decades.

The birth rate, according to the records of resident Turkish health officials, is high, with 97 births to nearly 250 females in the 14 to 55 age-group in the first twelve months of resettlement in Turkey. The elders indicate that in the Pamirs it would have taken up to seven years to have this many surviving children.

The Kirghiz now in Turkey are members of one particular tribe. They are adherents of Sunni Islam and had their own *hojas* (clerics) in the Pamirs, all three of whom were educated in *medreses* (seminaries) in Bukhara.² The *hojas* did not engage in *tarikats* (Muslim religious sects, e.g. Sufi mystical practice) work among their kinsmen, although it is believed that the *hojas* themselves were either adherents of, or at least familiar with, some of the orders. The Kirghiz in Karagündüz are under the leadership of Hacı Rahman Kul,³ who is not a hereditary ruler but

the chairmanship of the Governor of Van to ease the strains of resettlement. Also, a private organization, the Van and Environs Development Foundation (headed by Dr Ahmet Akyurek, who is a member of the Coordinating Committee) is channelling private contributions to this end.

² One of these *hojas* died in Pakistan, shortly after the group's escape from the forward elements of the Soviet army.

³ According to Turkish law, all the refugees have adopted family

was informally and tacitly accepted as Khan of the tribe by all its members.⁴ Perhaps because they were brought into Turkey as a unified and largely intact group, and are living as such, the Kirghiz are able to maintain their tribal customs, dress and values without much difficulty. The HRK (Hacı Rahman Kul) tribe has claims on land, houses and fortified defensive positions which they inherited from their fathers and grandfathers, and which are currently under Chinese administration in Eastern Turkestan, at scattered locations as far east as Urumchi.⁵ A number of HRK tribe members, as well as Hacı Rahman Kul himself, spent time many years ago among the Uighurs of eastern Turkestan, fleeing from the Soviet Union in the 1920s. It is in fact from that date that the Kirghiz settled in the Pamirs. They still have distant relatives in this area - both Uighur and Kirghiz - but no widespread contacts with them have been reported since the communist revolution in China.

The Kirghiz tribes that remain in the Soviet Union east of Tashkurgan, Kahsha and further to the south-east (from where the HRK clan members originally hailed before the 1920s) speak the same dialect, according to HRK tribal informants. North and west of the Tashkent-Alay line, they claim, the Kirghiz dialect

names. Hacı Rahman Kul chose the old Turkic word Kutlu as his surname, meaning 'auspicious', 'fortunate'. This is derived from the word Kut, as in Kutadgu Bilig, the title chosen by Yusuf Has Hajib for his celebrated book in 1071.

⁴ A biography of Hacı Rahman Kul Kutlu is currently being edited by Dr Nazif Shahrani at The Humanities Center, Stanford University. Shahrani worked as the anthropological consultant with Dr André Singer, of Oxford Ethnographic Films, in the making of a film in 1979 on the flight of the Kirghiz from the Soviet-occupied Pamirs.

⁵ For a history of their migrations and cultural background, see M. N. Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Close Frontiers*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 1979; Remy D'or, *Si tu me dis chante! chante!...: Documents pour servir à la connaissance et l'étude de la tradition orale des Kirghiz du Pamir Afghan*, Paris 1981; idem, 'Orature du Nord-est Afghan: Les Kirghiz du Pamir', *Turcica*, Vol. VIII (1976), pp. 87-116; Arthur Hatto, 'The Marriage, Death and Return to Life of Manas: A Kirghiz Epic Poem of the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Turcica*, Vol. XII (1980), pp. 66-94 and Vol. XIV (1982), pp. 7-38; idem, 'Koz-Kaman', *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. XV (1971), pp. 81-101 and pp. 241-83; idem, *Memorial Feast for Kokotoy Khan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977. For the settlement in Turkey of the Kirghiz see Deborah Denker, 'The Last Migration of the Kirghiz of Afghanistan', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. II no. 3 (1983), pp. 89-98; M. N. Shahrani, 'Afghanistan's Kirghiz in Turkey', *Cultural Survival*, Vol. VIII no. 1 (1983), pp. 31-4.

changes once again. This latter assertion may be viewed, however, with a certain amount of scepticism, since when I passed to the elders a printed copy of the *Alpamysh* (the Central Asian *dastan*, or epic, written in Turki, which has been the literary language of Central Asia since the fourteenth century), they were able to read it with ease. Yet this text contains material that was compiled from the very area which, according to the same elders, possesses a different Kirghiz dialect.

This discrepancy, between perception on the one hand and practice on the other, may also provide a clue to the large-scale linguistic unity found among the various tribes. The written language, especially because it is set down in the Arabic script, conceals the distinctions between the phonetics of various tongues. Thus one basic language, complete with its grammar, vocabulary and syntax, may masquerade as many when spoken with different accents. This phenomenon of 'different languages' or the creation thereof was encouraged, indeed enforced, and their 'existence' propagandized by the Soviet authorities, and prior to that by their Tsarist predecessors.⁶

The Kirghiz of Van express a strong affinity with the Chaghatay dialect, referring to it as Turkistani, or simply Turki. In fact, the first response of the elders, upon laying eyes on the text referred to above, was to declare its language to be Chaghatay. They are aware of the dual labelling of this single tongue; over the last 600 years, all authors who had utilized it, such as Babur, Navai, Ulug Bey, Timur, etc. have termed it Turki. However, the elderly gravitate toward the Chaghatay designation, whereas middle-aged men prefer 'Turkistani', or Turki, perhaps due to their reverence towards the Turkistan Soviet Socialist Republic of the 1920s, which was the predecessor of the contemporary 'Republics' of Central Asia. The tendency to refer to all of the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Uighurs as Turks is strong. There is practically no memory of contact with the Tajiks in the Pamirs. The only unprompted reference to the latter that I noted during my stay amongst the Kirghiz of Van came about in the following manner: during a set of wedding festivities which I happened to witness, a Kirghiz boy of seven was spotted riding a horse. Immediately he was chided for 'riding like a Tajik'. The remark may have been made in a jocular manner, but there was no doubt that the Kirghiz style is felt to be much more refined and that this un-Kirghiz style of novice horse-riding was not to be tolerated. The elders then apologised to me on behalf of the boy, excusing him for having been forced to leave his homeland before he could learn this traditionally vital skill.

After the forcible closure of the Soviet borders, which the HRK clan members trace back to 1938, trade relations with their kinsmen in eastern Turkestan flourished. It seems that the

⁶ See Nadir Devlet, 'A Specimen of Russification: The Turks of Kazan', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. II no. 3 (1983), pp. 79-88.

Chinese knowingly aided these cross-border transactions between eastern Turkestan and the Pamirs during the 1920s, the 1930s, and the early part of the 1940s. These links were at their peak when the Soviet Union helped the Chinese Communists with their revolution and physically participated in impeding all such traffic. Communications along this route have been sparse ever since.

During the 1930s, a rebellion led by Hoja Niyaz, starting around Komul, was suppressed by the Chinese with extensive aid from the Soviet Union.⁷ The objective of the insurgency was to recover the Kirghiz home territories and re-unite eastern Turkestan. For the most part, this event was classified by Russian chroniclers as one of the Basmaci movements.⁸ The word *basmaci*, as employed in the Turki dialect, was coined by the Russians to designate and denigrate the insurgents as 'bandits'. The official Soviet view is that the Basmaci are nothing but looters, renegades and outlaws. It is true that *basmaci* is the correct term to describe such people as defined by their activities, but it hardly portrays the notion of resistance fighters, which the Basmaci actually were. The Basmaci themselves, namely those who were fighting the invading Russian armies, called those of their kinsmen who collaborated with the Russians *dördüncü*. These traitors accepted bribes of all kinds from the Russians and were composed of individuals from amongst the Kirghiz, Chaghatay, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen - in short, of various origins. According to the *mollas*, the *dördüncü* would not learn, teach or perform the religious rites, but on the contrary believed in and perpetuated heresy. The *basmaci* were called *mucahit* by the Kirghiz, presumably because they were carrying out a *cihad* (Arabic *ji had*, or holy war) against the invading Russians. But they had their shortcomings, to a certain degree not respecting the private property of their kinsmen and neighbours. These *mucahit* (cf. *mujahideen*) would forcibly appropriate horses, clothing, food, women, etc. according to their needs or whims, without compensation or consent.⁹ In an

⁷ Isa Alptekin's ancestors, an extended family that fought its way out of China, were closely involved in this uprising.

⁸ To place the Basmacis in perspective, see Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979.

⁹ This brings to mind the contrast with the old Chinese guerrilla maxims and practice based on the concept of 'fish in the water'. During the period of Communist Chinese guerrilla activities, it was usual for each fighter to be quartered in a household in the vicinity of his operational area. Mao had issued strict orders to his guerrillas, requiring them to leave their hosts with more than they had found on arrival, and forbade such wanton personal satisfaction. If the guerrillas could not leave behind anything

effort to discredit the Basmaci further, the Russians employed widespread propaganda, declaring them to be without any religious belief, scruples or loyalty to their own tribes. This was a continuation of the long-standing policies of Tsarist military and civilian officials in promising independent and totally autonomous republics to all of the tribes, in which nomadic traditions would be preserved unimpeded.¹⁰ These two factors, it seems, contributed greatly to the eventual suppression of the revolt led by Hoja Niyaz.

Thus when 'hunters' from the Soviet side started appearing around HRK clan encampments in the Pamirs during the early and middle 1970s, these memories were very much in the minds of the Kirghiz elders. Since Westerners were also common in their area hunting the big-horned 'Marco Polo' rams,¹¹ the presence of hunters from other regions was not in itself something that should have created much concern. What caused consternation among the Kirghiz was that the approach of this group of hunters to the 'hunt' was rather different, moving about in groups of four, armed with AK-47 assault rifles, and more interested in asking questions than in chasing after game. They were also carrying maps, which they seemed to mark continuously as they looked around. Unlike Western hunting enthusiasts, they spoke Kirghiz and Tajik. Nor did their inquiries follow the usual line of 'Where can we find the rams?' The questions were directed rather towards discovering the locations of Kirghiz summer and winter camping places, the roads leading to them, the relations of the Kirghiz with their neighbours, the names and business of their visitors, and even the whereabouts of the nearest Afghan security forces. All the while, these 'hunters' were assuring the Kirghiz that the Russians were good friends of Davud Han (the King of Afghanistan at that time). Whatever their feelings towards Russians or Soviet hunters, the Kirghiz decided to leave the Pamirs upon spotting Soviet military vehicles on the frozen tributary of the Amu Derya river, which constitutes the border between the USSR and Afghanistan. Their former pastures are now occupied by Soviet military encampments.

In their new home in Turkey, the Kirghiz are undoubtedly facing a variety of changes in their domestic and traditional lives. That is not to suggest they are being forced to give up their

material, they would perform manual chores instead.

¹⁰ The Soviet Union has continually followed precisely this policy line since the 1917 revolution, without exception.

¹¹ Some big-game enthusiasts and collectors in the West were reportedly prepared to spend as much as \$500,000 to obtain a 'Marco Polo Ram' trophy.

identity or social customs.¹² On the contrary, the Kirghiz have been welcomed with open arms and fraternal ties. However, by the very fact of having been uprooted under the pressure of an alien power from one habitat and settled into another, albeit a very hospitable one, they will need to undergo a number of adaptations.

The first change that comes to mind is the issue of leadership. Will the Kirghiz choose a new Khan after the death of the present one? If so, will the new Khan command the respect that his predecessor presently enjoys? In answer to these questions, it seems quite unlikely that any new Khan would command the same respect, to judge from the deeds performed by Hacı Rahman Kul, especially within the environment in which he has discharged his responsibilities.¹³ As for making any new appointment at all, the answer here should be a guarded 'yes', for two reasons: first, because the force of tradition will compel the Kirghiz to elect a new Khan; and secondly, because under Turkish law each village must possess an elected *muhtar* or headman, and it can be expected that the new Khan will himself assume this post.

The same modern Turkish law also requires the election and establishment of a 'council of elders' for every village, to work with the headman. Perhaps this aspect of contemporary Turkish law will also cause the re-emergence of the old second ruling stratum, that of the former 'nobility' together with the 'lieutenants of the Khan'. Observed in ancestral documents, the concept of this second-stratum leadership does not seem to have had a clear-cut definition in recent memory among the Kirghiz. Historically, these second-stratum leaders consisted of individual males who performed valuable services for the good of the tribe, or to the Khan in his external relations (such as carrying ambassadorial messages to the rulers of hostile neighbours, or protecting the herds of horses from being stolen by marauders). The offspring of the ruling family may or may not take their places among their ranks, depending on whether or not they are men of courage.¹⁴ These new 'lieutenants' may well constitute the 'council of elders' in their new setting, whatever their contemporary titles or functions.

In the past, the selection of a Khan (or *Tekin* in Turkish) involved a series of rituals, some of which had strong ties with the symbolism of *Lebensraum*, etc. Raising the new Khan seated on

¹² See H.B. Paksoy, 'Oglak Tartis Tradition Among the Kirghiz', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (forthcoming).

¹³ See Shahrani, *The Kirghiz*, op.cit., for details of the conditions under which he was selected and 'ruled'.

¹⁴ In larger tribes or confederations of tribes, this group traditionally included individual 'champions' (of contests or competitions) and high-ranking officers of the army.

a suitably large white felt seven times over the heads of the 'lieutenants', and his shooting of an arrow to the four winds were two such prominent practices. It is possible to discern both in the Orkhon Tablets of the 8th century AD¹⁵ and the Oguz Khan *Dastan*.¹⁶ The origin of the latter very likely predates the former, also providing scholars with some idea about how the second-stratum leaders were sometimes 'created'.

Owing to the migrations forced on the Kirghiz for external reasons over the centuries, not all of their election rituals have maintained their vigour. On the other hand, the *Kengeş*¹⁷ tradition will no doubt be rejuvenated, spurred on by the Turkish law referred to above. The *Kengeş* may well serve as a platform for future leaders, continually providing the basis of village council deliberations in the new environment. Whether the *Kengeş* will involve every member of the tribe or only the elite cannot yet be determined. There is a possibility that tribal members will tacitly or explicitly designate the second-stratum leaders to represent them at the *Kengeş*. This would then be tantamount to a two-tier election, designed by the tribe itself, and providing a system of checks and balances. (It is possible to identify a precedent for this in the Orkhon Tablets.) The 'lieutenants' of former times seemed to have been charged with the duties of parliamentary deputies in a democratic society. It must be noted that there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that this system was influenced by outside currents; the traces of this institution found in the documents and literature referred to point to an internal evolution.

Another issue involves marriage. The Kirghiz were traditionally exogamous, there being another Kirghiz tribe, living three days' ride away in the Pamirs, from which men of the HRK tribe selected their brides. In return, the men of the second tribe married the women of the HRK tribe. Now that the HRK tribe are in Turkey, with the second Kirghiz tribe still in the Pamirs, the former faces the problem of where to look for spouses when possible pairings within the group are exhausted. They may first

¹⁵ H. N. Orkun, *Eski Türk Yazıtları*, Istanbul: TDK 1936. These tablets were first 'decoded' by Wilhelm Thomsen in 1896. For details and an English translation, see Tablet Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 1968.

¹⁶ See A. Z. V. Togan, *Oguz Destanı*, Istanbul: Ahmet Sait Matbaası 1972.

¹⁷ Literally 'assembly', and also known as *kurultay* in other Turkic dialects, this is the gathering which requires the members of the tribe to vote for a leader when the previous one has died. The *Kengeş* was also used by the ruler as a council of elders convened on his order, and enabling him to obtain advice from experienced men on issues confronting the larger body.

of all explore marriage possibilities with members of other recent emigré groups settled across the Turkish Republic.¹⁸ The implications of this issue are probably more profound than the leadership question, for a certain amount of cultural dilution seems inevitable.

As a final point, it is worth mentioning the effects that a modern, higher education will have on the general attitudes of the younger members of the HRK tribe. A university course, which at least some of the young men are looking forward to, is bound to alter their perceptions of their traditional life-style, including marriage and cultural integrity. It should be possible to measure the degree of any such transformation by the return of the young men to the village after the completion of their courses at university. This assumes that such students will read a subject directly applicable to the rural setting, which may well provide yet another index, a ratio between adaptation and a stubborn adherence to tradition. A subsidiary set of indicators that could be examined involves the visits of city-dwelling members of the tribe to the village. Will parents send their children back to the village during the summer vacations? Will they attempt to provide cultural continuity for future generations? For the present, one can only ask these questions and prepare to observe events, for it may require several years before any appreciable transformation takes place.

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¹⁸ These include Turkmens, Uzbeks, Uighurs and Kazakhs, each of which has been resettled by the Turkish Government along the lines offered to the Kirghiz. Members of these groups have remained in contact with one another in Turkey, as formerly in Pakistan.