

Kalmykia 2012

A research expedition for the National Geographic Enduring Voices project, and Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

The Republic of Kalmykia in Russia sits at the southeastern corner of Europe. Though European in geography, Kalmykia—officially Buddhist and home to the westernmost group of Mongolic peoples—is an anomaly for that continent. In many ways, it is a miracle that the Kalmyk exist in any way as they suffered terribly at the hands of Stalin. Branding them collaborators with the Germans, one night in December, 1943, Stalin had *the entire Kalmyk ethnic group* (including all active-duty military) rounded up at gun-point, loaded up on cattle cars on trains, with families split apart and sent to extremely harsh conditions to remote and inhospitable parts of Siberia and Kazakhstan. Survivors were allowed to return only 15 years later to Kalmykia, to find their lands occupied by Russian and Ukrainian farmers.

The Enduring Voices team, including Dr. Greg Anderson, Dr. David Harrison, Chris Rainier, and Jeremy Fahringer, visited Kalmykia in May 2012. Our goals included: observing and reporting on language revitalization, meeting and interviewing Kalmyk culture experts, recording Kalmyk stories and songs, and recruiting participants for the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Prior to our expedition, NG Fellow David Harrison met with the Kalmyk diaspora community in Howell, NJ, and observed their success in maintaining their Buddhist religious practice, language, and culture.

Despite considerable odds, the Kalmyk language, culture and religion—all intimately connected with the Kalmyk's self-identity—have endured. Indeed, based on our 2012 field observations, a fascinating process of cultural renewal and linguistic revitalization is taking place in Kalmykia today. This grass-roots movement is spearheaded by teenagers and young adults. They express a renewed passion for traditional Kalmyk culture, and make vigorous use of the Kalmyk language in both public and private spheres.

The Kalmyk have a rich oral, musical and dance culture, centered around the epic song cycle known as *Jangar*. This hero tale celebrates the successful conquests of the leaders of the Kalmyk of 400 years ago, creating an empire that dominated a large region from western Mongolia across central Asia to eastern Europe. Indeed, the Kalmyks represent the last of the great westward expansions of Inner Asian nomads, having reached their present location west of the Volga river as recently as the early 17th century. Despite being Mongolic in origin and character, Kalmyk culture reflects its milieu at the eastern edge of the Caucasus, particularly in the traditional coats and dances of men.

The Kalmyk language is in a highly unusual situation, as there appears to be a genuine reversal of language shift underway. It is instigated by the younger generations, and linked explicitly with the renewal of Kalmyk traditional cultural

genres, e.g., dance, song, stories, and performative and material arts. Thus, we see a more hopeful and optimistic scenario for Kalmyk than is often the case with communities undergoing language shift.

Among the many cultural experts we interviewed, the following individuals stood out, both for their artistry, and for their ability to articulate the value of their language in the modern world.



Viktor Batyrovich Okchayev and Dmitriy Sergejevich Sharayev near Elista, Kalmykia. Photo Chris Rainier.

Dmitriy Sergejevich Sharayev (b. 1986) is a virtuoso performer of Kalmyk traditional instruments and song genres. Dmitriy's fingers fly across the neck of the *topshur* (dombura), a banjo-like two stringed instrument that inspires the listeners to move, and across the *mörnkhür* (Mongolian *mörin khüür*), or horse-head fiddle, a cello-like stringed instrument with a mournful and contemplative sound that is played with a bow. Kalmyk songs fall into several genres, and Dmitriy can demonstrate the differences among them and connect them with his language in a way only a person with such passion could.

Viktor Batyrovich Okchayev, despite his young age of twenty-one, is already widely recognized as one of the very best *topshur* players in Kalmykia. Viktor began at the age of three watching his grandmother play, also a fiery but private performer, and would sneak in time to play when he could, and this hobby eventually became his obsession. Viktor has the enviable ability all truly exceptional performers possess to turn the passion in his heart for the music of his Kalmyk people into the ethereal melodies and expert riffs that shoot forth from his instrument. As he describes it, the language of his soul and therefore his music is Kalmyk and could never be Russian.

Feliks Sanapovich Shorbayev (b. 1992) is another leader of the youth cultural revival movement in Kalmykia, who form a loose collective known as *Itkl*, and who promote the rebirth and propagandizing of Kalmyk language, culture,

customs, and national sports. A talented dancer, he cannot suppress his need to express himself when the music starts, his feet control his mind, and the uniquely Kalmyk dance style of rhythmic stomps and taps bursts forth. Talented in both song and dance, Feliks has mastered both ancient traditional songs, and spontaneously composes new ones according to the music at hand. He excels at a traditional 'teasing' genre, where the singers attempt to "one-up" each other in their improvised lyrics, much to the amusement of listeners.



Nyamin Songajieyavich Manjeyev and Nina Kochayevna Manjeyeva at their home in Komsomolsky, Kalmykia. Video still Jeremy Fahringer.

Nyamin Songajieyavich Manjeyev (age 91) and **Nina Kochayevna Manjeyeva** (age 85) are a married couple and the senior members and leaders of one of the most musically talented families in Kalmykia. Snowy-haired but spry, Nyamin's eyes sparkle as he sings verses from the famous Kalmyk epic, the *Jangar*—the twenty-seven epic song cycle performed only by men that constitutes the most revered part of the Kalmyk oral literature canon. While Nina expertly evokes the highs and lows of the action of the tale on the accompanying *topshur*, Nyamin sings, makes dramatic facial expressions, and moves his arms deftly to create the dynamic three-dimensional narrative space so crucial to the performance of Inner Asian epics, which gives the main characters and events a visual context as well.



Shard Nigryan Nasanka, an expert wood carver and instrument maker, in Yashkul', Kalmykia. Photo Chris Rainier.

Shard Nigryan Nasanka (aka **Aleksandr Nikolayevich Nasakayev**, b. 1965) is an expert instrument maker and wood carver, from Yashkul village, Kalmykia. He creates in addition to traditional Kalmyk musical instruments, wooden dancing horse toys, as well as complex wood and leather brain teasers, a sort of "Rubiks Cube" in Kalmyk culture, that provide many Kalmyks young and old with hours of challenging stimulation. He also carves wooden sculptures with traditional motifs from the Jangar epic and other aspects of Kalmyk living culture. Aleksandr/Shard's also carves decorated wooden long bows that the Kalmyk horsemen were rightly famous for, which would strike fear into their traditional enemies of the past.

Olya Semenovna Orgaeva (b. 1982) and **Ervena Semenovna Orgaeva** (b. 1979) are sisters who come from a long line of talented performers (their now deceased grandfather was a renowned *jangarchi* or epic-song singer). They are experts in the Kalmyk female singing genre of 'long' or protracted songs, with prominent syllables drawn out and extended over a full breath. Accompanied by the quick tempo of the dombura, the audience can't help but get up and dance to this crowd-pleasing singing and music style.



NG Fellow David Harrison consults with Buxin Bembin Gaavan Baatr about Kalmyk musical terms, near Elista, Kalmykia. Photo Jeremy Fahringer.

Baator Gavrilovitch Bukhaev, aka Buxin Bembin Gaavan Baatr, (b. 1977) is a recognized expert at the horse-head fiddle *mörn khür* (Mongolian *mörin khüür*). His fingers work quickly over the neck of this beautiful instrument as his bow evokes the mournful sound of a lonesome horseman riding across the fabled steppes of the Kalmyk republic.



Dorzhi Nandushov, a master horseman, in Ketchenery, Kalmykia. Photo Chris Rainier.

Dorzhi Nandushov, horseman and leather craftsman (born 1957) is from Ketchenery village, Kalmykia. Dorzhi is in high demand both for passing on the

Kalmyk traditions to the youngest generation of schoolchildren, and hosting culture expositions around the republic. He crafts traditional horse implements from leather, bridles, whips, saddles, etc. He is also an accomplished musician, storyteller, and dombura (*topshur*) performer.



*Anja-Gelung at the "Golden Abode of Buddha Shakyamuni" temple in Elista, Kalmykia.
Photo Chris Rainier.*

The Enduring Voices team will continue working with our Kalmyk experts in 2012 and 2013, to support language revitalization efforts, to create multimedia materials that help tell the story of Kalmyk culture, and to raise public awareness about the ongoing cultural and linguistic revival in Europe's only Buddhist region.



The Enduring Voices team (from left: Jeremy Fahringer, Gregory Anderson, K. David Harrison) interviews Badma Khalgayevich Tsebikov in Yashkul', Kalmykia. Photo Oliver Anderson.