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“Stone Camels and Clear Springs” The Salar’s Samarkand Origins

Abstract

The Salar are a Turkic-speaking Islamic people who live primarily in Xunhua County in eastern Qinghai. Their origins are uncertain, but the Salar themselves maintain that during the thirteenth century their ancestors left Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan and eventually settled in their present location. This accords with current historical hypotheses, and is suggested in the *döye oyna*, a type of play that contains elements relating to the Salar’s migration. The present article describes the background of this play and gives an English translation.

Key words: Salar—Samarkand—*döye oyna*—white camel

THE SALAR ARE A Turkic-speaking Islamic people who numbered 87,697 in 1990 (Han 1994, 40).¹ Most Salar reside in Xunhua² 循化 Salar Autonomous County in the eastern part of China's North-western Qinghai Province (Koko Nor), in adjacent Hualong 化隆 County, and in Gansu Province's Linxia 臨夏 County. The Salar maintain that during the thirteenth century their ancestors left Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan and eventually settled in what is now Xunhua. This accords with current historical hypotheses. Mi Yizhi, for example, presents several explanations of the origins of the Salar and the route of their migration from Central Asia to China's modern-day Qinghai Province (1990).

1) The Salar were once an Oghaz tribe called Qaluer. The Oghaz descended from the eldest son of Dagh Khan, one of the six sons of Oghaz Khan (from whom the people's name was taken). Between the ninth and twelfth centuries the Saluer (the group from which the Salar later came), following other Oghaz tribes, moved from the Saihun River basin, Yili, and Rehai (Isighgol) to Hezhong (Transoxania), Hualazimo (Khorarim), Huluoshan (Khorasam in Northern Iran), and eastern Anatolia. During the Seljuk Empire (1055–1258) the Saluer were forcibly dispersed, and most moved westward. Those who stayed in Marou and Sarakhs (in today's Turkmenistan) are known to history as the Turkomans. Between 1370 and 1424 certain Saluer crossed through Samarkand, the Turpan Basin (in present-day Xinjiang), and Suzhou, finally reaching the Salar's present home in the area known today as Xunhua (Mi 1990, 9–11).³

2) Citing Mula Sulaiman's Investigation of Hui Origins,⁴ Mi suggests that the brothers Kharaman and Akhman⁵ lived near Salark, located in today's Turkmenistan, and moved east to Qinghai with 170 households of their tribe.

3) Linguistic similarities between Salar, Turkoman, and Uzbek suggest a close relationship at some time in the past.⁶

DÖYE OYNA⁷

The *döye oyna* is a type of play that relates directly to the Salar's migration, reminding them of their ancestors' trek from Samarkand and helping them remember their Central Asian origins.

According to one knowledgeable Salar informant, the cast of the play during the 1920s consisted of two imams (Salar, *ahong*), a camel (played by two men in coats with the fur lining turned inside out),⁸ and a man costumed in Mongol (Salar, *Mengu Kxi*) fashion (figure 1). The play, which lasted thirty to forty minutes, was performed in great seriousness exclusively by males, with little variation in content and execution.

Our informant maintained that *döye oyna* was at its peak in the 1920s and has been in decline ever since. It was utterly forbidden during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). As far as our informants knew, the play has vanished as a folk village performance.

It was only with revival efforts following the end of the Cultural Revolution that the performers attempted to dress in Central Asian apparel. In 1994 the *döye oyna* was performed on stage before an audience during the official celebrations commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of Xunhua Salar Autonomous County. In this staged performance significant changes had taken place. One female participated, and there were attempts to add humor with such statements as, "We reached Beijing, but our silver would not buy grass for our animals there."

What little that has been written about the *döye oyna* in English contains elements that are superficial and misleading. ZHANG and ZENG, for example, write:

In some areas of Xunhua County a peculiar ritual used to be performed, especially at weddings. Two men acted like camels, wearing their fur coats inside out, while two other men played the roles of a Salar ancestor and an aboriginal tribesman (either a Tibetan or a Mongolian). The Salar ancestor, wearing a turban and robe, led the camels, and they all danced and sang while asking and answering questions related to the history of the Salar nation. (1993, 68)

In actuality, the *döye oyna* involves little dancing or singing, and movement by the camel is minimal. In the version presented below the *döye oyna* is primarily a recounting, with the requisite ethnic characters, of the route taken by the Salar ancestors. The places traversed in the trek from Samarkand are named, and the story is told of how the "sublime" white camel bearing a Quran (Salar, *Khuran*, *Khur'ani*) turned to stone as an indication from Allah of where they should permanently settle.

The version of the *döye oyna* below was related by Ma Paixian (b. 1920) of Hanping Village, Mengda (Munda) Township, Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, to Han Zhanxiang and Ma Jinglie. Ma Jinglie then offered this version in written form in ANONYMOUS 1989 (15–28).

The Salar *döye oyna*, which is usually translated erroneously as “camel dance,” consists of three sections. The first depicts the ancestors of the Salar conversing with a Mongol. The second part portrays the hardships experienced in the Salar migration from Samarkand to the present Xunhua Salar Autonomous County; during this part the performers recite verses. In the third portion the camel dances and, in the performance’s climax, scatters walnuts that the audience scrambles after.

Five males participate in the Camel Dance, two in the roles of the legendary Salar ancestors, Kharaman and Akhman, one as the Mongol, and the other two as the camel.

The *döye oyna* was historically performed in threshing grounds and family courtyards. The only musical instrument was a small bell that was jingled to represent a camel’s tread. The *döye oyna* was characterized by few movements and dance steps, belying the common title “Camel Dance.” Most movements imitated the rituals of Islam and of daily life. Imam Kharaman gives what is virtually a monologue. In the version given here Imam Akhman says practically nothing. The Mongol seems a comparable “prop,” reminding listeners of a Mongol presence in the area before the arrival of the two imams.

THE PLAY: *DÖYE OYNA*⁹

Time: Dusk

Occasion: Wedding

Place: A family courtyard

Characters: Imam Kharaman—The Imam is dressed in a long white robe with his head wrapped in a turban. His right hand grips a wooden cane, while his left hand and arm press a Quran against his left side. He wears mid-calf boots. Kharaman appears sincere, grave, and amiable.

Imam Akhman—A red sash is tied around the Imam’s white undershirt, which is covered with a green-lined jacket. A purple cloak is draped over his shoulders. He wears both a turban and a pair of mid-calf boots.

The Mongol—The Mongol is dressed in a long robe and wears a warrior’s helmet and mid-calf boots. His demeanor suggests he is courteous.

The Camel—The two males who play the camel cover themselves with a fur robe turned fur-side out. One holds a sleeve high in the air to represent the camel’s head, while his partner lowers the other sleeve behind to

suggest the tail. Their heads protrude underneath the fur robe, resembling the camel's humps. In another variation the two performers throw a large piece of cloth over their bodies.

Audience: The audience participates by asking and answering questions, adding extra spirit to the occasion.

Props: Props consist of a long narrow woolen bag (*dalian*), a scale, a small bottle filled with water, a small cotton bag containing a bowl of soil, a Quran, a torch, and a cotton sack of walnuts (figure 2). Before the performance the scale, bottle, cotton bag, and torch are placed inside the *dalian*, which is put over the camel's humps. One camel performer attaches the sack of walnuts to his clothing.

Music: A bell is jingled to resemble a camel's rhythmical tread.

Part 1

(Kharaman holds a Quran and walking stick as previously described and stands without moving. Akhman walks with difficulty, suggesting that he is exhausted from his long trek from Central Asia. He walks around the courtyard one time, leading the camel with its lead rope. In his other hand he carries a long-spouted kettle [Salar, adama] that is used for washing. After one revolution, he gazes back at the way he has come and then looks into the distance stretching in front of him.)

Mongol (*comes up and shouts*): "Imam, Imam."

Kharaman: "Oh--yes!" (*Facing the Mongol, he removes the cane from his right hand and holds it horizontally in his left armpit. He moves his right arm across his abdomen, touches his abdomen with his palm, then bows.*)

Mongol: "My friend, how are you?"

Kharaman (*Walks with great effort around the courtyard. He stops at the center and, while bowing slightly, says*): "How are you?"

(The Mongol makes a slight bow in return and raises his right hand to his forehead with the four fingers together and pointing toward the center of his forehead (figure 3). After Kharaman and the Mongol salute each other, Kharaman puts the Quran into the dalian. Next he places the walking stick in a horizontal position behind his back and holds each end with his hands.)

Mongol: "Where are you from?"

Kharaman: "We are from Samarkand. It's a very distant place!"

(Camel sways, wags its tail, paws the ground with its front hooves, and shakes its head.)

Mongol: "Imam! Imam! What is the name of that animal you are leading?"¹⁰

Kharaman: "This is a camel I'm leading."

Mongol: "What's that on the camel's back?"

Kharaman: "The camel is carrying water, soil, a scale, and our scripture."

Mongol: "Where are you carrying these things to?"

Kharaman: "We are going to China [Salar, *Suyini*] to settle!"

Mongol: "Please tell us your story, since you've experienced such extraordinary difficulties over tens of thousands of *li*!"¹¹

Audience: "Yes, that's fine!"

(*Mongol withdraws.*)

Part 2

Kharaman: "Well, since all of you want to hear it, I'll tell you all about our difficult journey. Now listen carefully. We chose an auspicious Friday,¹² put a Quran on our white jade camel, and set off for China to settle down. By the time of first prayer the next day we were following the sublime camel."

(*He rests his cane on the ground and stands still with both hands fully extended and his palms touching his thighs. Next he slowly raises his hands, palms facing up, and touches the earlobe region of each ear with fully extended thumbs. The fingers of each hand are fully extended. Then he returns his hands to their former position, with the palms touching either thigh. He raises his hands, palms held up, again touches his forehead with his open palms, and then lightly runs his hands down his cheeks [figure 4].*)

"We reached Jingzha 金扎 and Mingzha 明扎, weighed the soil and water, and it was just what we were looking for. Oh, this was surely a good place! Still, though, it was within the territory of Samarkand and we were determined to reach China to settle there." (*To audience:*) "Well, what do you think?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman: "At another time of first prayer (*repeats the action described above*) we reached Turpan.¹³ The wind and sandstorms there were terrible and the desert was boundless. We looked for water and found some, but it was scarce. We weighed the soil, but it was not the same weight as what we had brought with us. In winter we were sure that the sand would bury us alive and that in summer the sun would burn us to death. Oh, that was not a place to live. So we continued our journey. What do you think?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman: "At another time of morning prayer (*repeats the action described above*) we reached Ganjiatan 甘家灘.¹⁴ Now that was a marvelous place to raise livestock and live! We weighed the soil and measured the water. The weights were almost the same as those we brought with us. Unfortunately, there was no place to buy food with gold and silver. Although livestock can live on grass, what can man live on? Oh, this was not the place for us to settle. Don't you think so?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman: "At another time of morning prayer (*repeats the action described above*) we reached Fire Mountain [Salar, Otuz]. At the time of eventide prayer, as we were washing ourselves in preparation for prayer..." (*At this moment, Akhman places the camel's lead rope between the camel's humps. Both Kharaman and Akhman withdraw.*)

(*Camel turns its nose to the sky, shakes its head, wags its tail, and then walks around the courtyard in a circle from right to left. It takes three steps forward, three steps backward, several more forward steps, then finally stops at the left side, suggesting that it has wandered away from the two men. Kharaman and Akhman return to the courtyard. Realizing that the camel is lost, Akhman holds up a torch to look for the camel and comes to the center of the courtyard, where it stops.*)

Kharaman: "To make sure those searching for the camel could return without difficulty, we lit a bonfire on the mountain slope. Tongues of flame reached toward the sky, dyeing the mountain red and illuminating the mountain track. That's why this mountain is called 'Fire' and why the mountain slope is called 'Fire Slope'. Even today it is still known and celebrated by this name. Is that right boys?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman (*approaches the camel*): "The very next day, in brilliant morning light, those searching for the camel discovered a gurgling spring¹⁵ in an auspicious place. The sublime camel was peacefully kneeling there. It had become stone! This was a message from Allah that this was the exact place for us to settle! What do you think, boys?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman: "Now, unload the camel. (*As Kharaman speaks, Akhman puts the washing kettle on the ground. He removes items from the dalian one by one.*) Let's weigh the soil and water. O Allah, by virtue of your generosity, all is as we anticipated. When we gaze into the distance, we behold a towering mountain and tall trees. What an ideal place for cutting wood and hunting. Gazing in the other direction, a river appears broad before us, a comfortable home to all kinds of fish. Looking before us, we see a spacious riverbank, a good place for calling people to prayer and forming lines for funeral services.¹⁶ Looking behind us, we see a broad valley, which is surely a rich land for raising livestock, white wheat, and red barley. And the sublime camel rests by the clear spring. We have been guided, in the name of Allah, to this place, which was surely chosen for us to settle. Don't you think so, boys?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Kharaman: "Towering Mengda 孟達 Mountain is covered with trees jutting into the sky! The first son will live by cutting wood and hunting animals. Broad is the Yellow River at Senger [Chin. Qingshui 清水]! The second son will live by cutting wood and rafting the river on animal skins. Gejdzi,

where our sublime camel rests by a spring of clear water, is the place where we shall establish our roots. The third son oppresses the rich and helps the poor, strengthening our root. The fourth son shall raise livestock and raise crops on Suzhi's vast fields and big grassy mountains! Is this right, boys?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Part 3

Mongol (*shouts from outside*): "Hey! Imam! Today you've performed for a long time. Now please tell us why you do this. We'll listen attentively."

Kharaman: "Every time our elders are about to die, they tell us to perform this drama on the evenings of wedding days to recount their difficult journey over thousands of *li*, so that the younger generations will know about it. It also helps to make weddings joyous. Isn't that right, boys?"

Audience: "Yes! That's right!"

Mongol (*from outside*): "Well, since that's the way it is, why don't you lead the camel around to make everybody happy?"

Kharaman: "My camel has turned to stone. He can't stand and dance unless he eats food from Samarkand!" (*Pulls the camel, which remains motionless.*)

Mongol (*from outside*): "What kind of food did your camel eat in Samarkand?"

Kharaman: "In Samarkand, our camel ate hard bread [Salar, *kas-kas*]¹⁷ and stuffed dumplings [Salar, *bozi*; Chin., *baozi*]. Our camel shits walnuts after eating dates, stuffed dumplings, and fried bread [Salar, *sanzi*].

(*The master of the home then brings some fried bread and dumplings and gives them to Kharaman. He takes what is offered, then turns and hands the items to one of the audience. Next the bridegroom and one of his knowledgeable companions offer jujubes and fried food to Kharaman and Akhman. When they offer the food they say:*) "Greetings!" [Salar, *anseliemaleycum*]

Kharaman and Akhman: "Greetings!" (*They take the proffered food and put it in the dalian. The camel stands.*)

Audience: "The camel is standing! It's shitting walnuts!" (*The camel walks forward several steps, shaking its head and wagging its tail. It scatters walnuts among the crowd. The crowd rushes forward, with everyone snatching as many walnuts as possible.*)¹⁸

NOTES

* Ma Jianzhong, a Salar, graduated in 1994 from Shaanxi Teachers' University. He presently teaches English at Qinghai University in Xining, Qinghai. Kevin Stuart is a folklorist, ethnographer, and teacher of English who has lived in Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, and

Ulaanbaatar since 1984. His numerous publications have focused on North China minorities and Qinghai Han Chinese. He presently teaches English at Qinghai Junior Teachers' College in Xining.

1. There is a fair corpus of Chinese-language material related to Salar history and folklore, but little of it has found its way into English. One article describing the Salar people is LI and STUART 1990. For a recent collection of Salar language materials, see MA, MA, and MA 1993. See FENG and STUART 1991 for a review of recently published materials in Chinese on Salar folklore.

2. Salar: *Yāzi* (MA, MA, and MA 1993, 9).

3. Other writers argue for an earlier arrival in Xunhua, during the Yuan dynasty (1206–1369) (ANONYMOUS 1985, 14).

4. Mi does not give a complete reference, saying only that this work was published in Kaxgar in 1917 and was written in Turkish.

5. Kharaman and Akhman appear as the two imams in the play presented here.

6. These three languages are classified among the Turkic branches of the Altaic language family. In one piece of anecdotal evidence, a Salar informant stated that he had met Uzbeks with whom he was able to converse when he spoke Salar and they spoke Uzbek.

7. We thank Prof. Han Jianye of the Qinghai Nationalities Institute for his many helpful suggestions and for writing various terms in the Salar written system. *Döye* means "camel" and *oyna* means "play" or "recreation." Unless otherwise indicated, Salar transcriptions are those provided by Prof. Han.

8. Coats are worn fur-side out on other occasions as well, such as at certain moments at weddings. In each case, the coat worn in this fashion seems to call attention to the person so clad, since coats are normally never worn this way.

9. This is a complete translation. The instructions are those provided by Ma Jinglie.

10. As the camel is played by two men covered with a fur-lined robe, this seems a reasonable question.

11. One *li* is approximately one-half kilometer.

12. Zhuma, a time of prayer on Friday afternoon when imams give religious instruction.

13. East of Ürümqi in present Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

14. In Gansu Province.

15. Altiuli spring, in the present Majia Village, Gejdzi Township. A white stone camel can still be seen there even today.

16. During Salar funerals men form lines in either the cemetery or mosque behind the corpse. The imam reads from the Quran and subsequently performs religious ritual. In Salar this is called *zhemati*.

17. *Kas-ḳas* represents the sound of the bread being broken and eaten.

18. The ritual scattering of food would appear to have much in common with elements of the Mongol *dalalya* ritual studied by CHABROS (1992).

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FIGURE 1. From left to right: the Mongol, Imam Kharaman, Imam Akhman, the camel



FIGURE 2. Clockwise from left: Kharama's wooden cane, the Quran, a torch, an *adama* water kettle, a bottle holding water from Samarkand, a bag holding soil from Samarkand



FIGURE 3. The Mongol politely greeting Imam Kharaman



FIGURE 4. Positions of Imam Kharaman, the two to the right indicating prayer