

Altaic Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Edited by
Géza Bethlenfalvy
Ágnes Birtalan
Alice Sárközi
Judít Vinkovics



Research Group for Altaic Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Department of Inner Asiatic Studies, Eötvös Loránd University

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This volume contains the papers read at the 33rd Meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference (PIAC), held at Budapest June 24-29, 1990. They mainly deal with the problems of Altaic religious belief and practices, but also with linguistic and other special features within the fields of Turkic, Mongolian and Manchu-Tungus studies and related Central Asian aspects.

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Inquiries about this book
can be directed to:
Research Group for Altaic Studies
Budapest, Izabella u. 46.

MANCHU WEDDING CEREMONY

Tatiana A. PANG (Leingrad)

This paper is based on one of the Manchu manuscripts from the collection of the Russian diplomat and orientalist Nikolai Nikolaevič Krotkov (1869-1919). He graduated from the Manchu-Chinese department (headed by V. P. Vasilev) of the Oriental Faculty, St. Petersburg University, in 1894. He was appointed a dragoman (i.e. interpreter) at the Russian consulate in Kuldža and the head of the consulate school of interpreters and translators. Later he became a secretary at the Russian consulate in Girin, Cicikar and Kuldža. At the beginning of the 1900s Krotkov was sent to the consulate to Urumči. As a diplomat Krotkov did not put his Oriental studies aside, paying much attention to the learning of the language, religion and everyday life of the Manchus. Thus his archives contain many Manchu manuscripts with the texts of songs and descriptions of different Manchu ceremonies and traditions. After Krotkov's death his archives were acquired by the Asian museum of the Academy of Sciences (now the St.Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences).

Among his materials there is a manuscript called "*Manju gusai boo banire niyaman jafara dorolon i bithe*" "The book of wedding ceremonies of the Manchu banner families". It consists of two notebooks kept under number A 116¹. The first notebook contains a Manchu text written in black Chinese ink with 14 vertical lines on each page. The second similar notebook has the beginning of a Russian translation made by Krotkov under the title "*Svadebnyje obrjady u znamennych mañčžur Ilijskogo kraja*".

Though the manuscript is titled "The wedding ceremonies of the Manchu banner families" it gives not only a description of the ceremony itself but more information about the everyday life of the Sibo-Manchu at the turn of the 20th century. One can find some description of the necessary arrangements in the event of the death of the family member, notes on filial piety, and a list of names of the relatives of wife and husband in a big Manchu family².

Here, this manuscript is used only to reconstruct the Manchu wedding ceremony (pages 1a-3b).

There are very few descriptions of Manchu customs, apart from some notes on the social life of the Manchus living in different parts of modern China³ and the description of a Manchu-style wedding in Liaoning province in 1989⁴. That is why the discovery of a new material about the Manchu wedding ceremony can help us to deepen our knowledge of ethnography of this nation.

¹ See also the catalogue compiled by Volkova M. P., *Opisanie mañčžurskich rukopisej Instituta narodov Asii AN SSSR*. Moskva, 1965, N 23.

² The facsimile publication of the whole text with transliteration and English translation is supposed to be published in "*Aetas Manjurica*", N 3.

³ *Manzu sheshui lishi diaocha*. Shenyang, 1985; Peng Bo *Manzu*. (*Minzu zhishi congshu*). Peking 1985; *Sibe uksuraj an tačin*. Urumči 1989. *Subo zu lishii yu wenhua*. Compiled by Tong Ke-dao. Urumči, 1989.

⁴ Sun Quili, A Manchu-Style Wedding: *China Reconstructs*. Vol. XXXVIII, N 4, April, 1989, pp. 53-54.

As with many peoples for the Manchus the wedding was one of the main ceremonies in an individual's life, like birth celebrations and death rites. But this event was important not only in the life of one person but in the life of the whole community. During the birth and funeral ceremonies a group of relatives would get in contact with the world of spirits, and respectively they would "receive" or "give" the treasure, i.e. receive person from or give person to the world of spirits. During the wedding ceremony there was an exchange of relations between two groups of people, as a result of which the family of the groom "received" the bride. The common character of this ceremony could also be seen in the role of people – the main role was played by relatives of the newlyweds, and even their parents played a secondary part to the relatives. Like the ceremonies of other Tungus-Manchu people, the most typical wedding ceremony consisted of three main parts: (1) betrothal, (2) the ceremonies in the bride's house, (3) the ceremonies in the groom's house. They are described in Krotkov's manuscript.

(1) The betrothal could be made in the early childhood when children were 2-3 years old. On an appropriate day named by a soothsayer, boy's family sent an old man as a matchmaker to discuss the engagement. For this ceremony the matchmaker took a sheep, wine and a piece of fabric (in case the girl had already grown up). After this engagement nothing could change the agreement and from this moment the two families were supposed to keep in touch and help each other if necessary.

This engagement was strengthened by another ceremony: sending matchmakers to the girl's house when she was either 17, 19, 21, 23, or 25 years old. On the lucky day of the new year's first month the witnesses came to the bride's house with a bottle of *arki*. If the parents did not agree to give away their daughter that year because of her young age the groom had to wait for another fixed year. But if a girl was given away the groom's relatives brought her a small sum of money (not more than 20 *yuan*s in silver), *arki*, 2-4 sheep for the future feast and 2-3 dresses⁵. Shortly before the wedding the groom's family sent a piece of fabric to make a wedding dress. The tailors took the bride's measures, cut out the material and took pieces away to sew the dress. This dress would be brought to the bride on the day of the wedding. The manuscript says that the custom had existed since the times of Shen-nong-han, who laid down the laws for husbands and wives; "and since this rule exists we cannot change it." This was the last ceremony of the first period⁶.

⁵ Another of Krotkov's short notes states that "poor people usually send 20-30 jin of *arki*, 2 sheep, and a dowry of not more than 10-15 silver lian. Rich people send 50 jin of *arki*, 4 sheep, 2 pigs and a dowry of not more than 20=30 silver lian" — See Archives of Orientalists, Krotkov fund N 32, Opis' 1, ed. hr. 8, p. 16.

⁶ During the Manchu betrothal in Dawujiazi village (Aihun district, Heilungjian province) matchmakers visited the bride's house three times, each time bringing a bottle of *arki*. Only on the third time did they get an answer. Thus there is a proverb: "You might or might not manage it, but 2-3 bottles of *arki* are emptied." If the betrothal was arranged the two families exchanged presents. — See *Manchu sheshui lishi diaocha*, Shenyang, 1985, p. 219. The day before the wedding the Manchus in Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region sent to the bride's house 2 don of rice, a pig and a sheep to be sacrificed to the spirits of ancestors and to open "the lock which frightens away an evil spirit". This lock (in fact a chain) was worn by a girl from the time she was born until her wedding day when she took it off to start new life in a new family. — See *Ibid*, p. 173.

(2) The wedding ceremonies in the bride's house and her transference to the groom's house.

As has already been mentioned, the wedding was an event for the entire community, in which all the relatives and friends of newlyweds took part. From among them *doro jorire ama eme* ("father and mother who had the ceremony") were appointed. Two days before the wedding they sat in a cart together with *okdoro ama eme* ("meeting father and mother") and moved towards the bride's house. They carried *arki* and a sheep which had earlier that morning, been sacrificed to the Heavens. The groom rode on a horseback in front of the cart. He wore new clothes and a military cap was fixed to his belt.

Next morning all relatives of the bride gathered for the farewell feast. On that day the groom was not supposed to leave the bride's house. He was introduced to the relatives of the bride and kowtowed to the elders. In the late evening the bride's girl-friends brought their presents and after the bell struck 12 the bride was put into the cart. A girl-relative of the bride was allowed to accompany her. The groom rode on horseback in front of the cart. Two men armed with swords, bows, and arrows rode on horseback on each side of the cart.

(3) The wedding ceremonies in the groom's house.

When the procession reached the groom's house it was met with three gunshots that were meant to frighten the evil spirits away from the newlyweds and their future house. The bride was allowed to step on the ground, and she descended from the cart onto a red carpet.

Everyone turned to the south to pray to Heaven, kowtowed to the four sides of the world and then headed to the house where a Buddhist lama read sutras. The groom prayed inside the house while his bride prayed outside.

After that everybody washed their hands with specially prepared water called *aršan*⁷: men washed the upper side of their hands, while the women washed their palms. Finishing this, the groom lifted up the thick covering from the bride's head with the help of a whip. Only then was the bride led into the house where she bowed to Buddha's house temple. She was led to the *kang*, where she sat behind a curtain, so that nobody could see her for the whole of that day.

At nine o'clock in the evening a feast began in the groom's house. The main guests, being five aged men and five aged women from the bride's side, were met by the same number of aged people from the groom's side. Everybody was seated according to their age at a long table laid with food and wine; they sang wedding or harvest songs.

Usually, different competitions were organized. Krotkov's manuscript says that during the feast the newlyweds sat on opposite sides of the table. Nearby sat young men called "the young brothers". A boiled sheep bone was put in the middle of the table and after that wine cup has passed around three times both sides tried to seize the bone. It was believed that if the groom's side seized the bone, he would be the head of the family. If not, then vice versa. After that "the younger brothers"

⁷ The word *aršan* is derived from a Sanskrit word *raśayana* "ambrosia, elixir of life". In Uighur it is *rašayan*, in Mongolian is *rašīyan/rašān/aršan*. The Buriats and Mongols use this "holy water" during different ceremonies. The water becomes "holy" after a certain Buddhist prayer is read over it. It came to the Manchus with the Buddhist religion.

ate the meat of this bone.

The Manchu wedding ceremony described above took place at the beginning of the 20th century and shows both the national Manchu customs and the great influence of Chinese culture. The typical Manchu features are easily recognised by the wedding ceremonies in the bride's house and her arrival at the groom's house. Special people from the groom's relatives were appointed to accompany the bride. They had special names – *doro jorire ama eme* and *okdoro ama eme*. The bride was taken in a cart, which was typical for the Manchus, and not in bridal chair as with a Chinese wedding. The groom rode on horseback, wearing a belt and military hat. In the times of the Qing dynasty the groom had to wear the whole costume of a Manchu warrior: a military dress, a belt, boots and a hat with a red silk tassel. Those who accompanied him were armed not only with swords but with bows and arrows as well. It is known that the art of riding a horse and shooting an arrow were among the necessary things that Manchu had to learn.

Having arrived at the groom's house after the prayers, everybody used *aršan* water to wash themselves, and the groom used whip to take off the thick covering from the bride's head. The competitions during the feast (seizing the bone – a symbol of the head of the family –, and sometimes horse races) also have Manchu character.

Nevertheless, the Chinese influence on Manchu life was very strong. We should note that the newlyweds prayed to Heaven and the spirits of their ancestors. The legendary Chinese ruler and patron of fertility *Shen-nong* is mentioned in the description of the engagement. He is also included into the pantheon of Gods and spirits to whom the Manchus prayed. The Buddhist lama was specially invited to the ceremony. He read sutras when the procession arrived at the groom's house. As Krotkov stated, the Sibo-Manchus professed Buddhism and asked for shamans only in the case of illness⁸.

Like the Chinese, the Manchu bride was not allowed to step directly onto the earth – she had to descend from the cart onto a red carpet. After she had arrived at the groom's house and greeted everyone, she was seated behind a curtain. This Chinese custom is called *zuo fu* ("to hatch the happiness") and was described by R.J. Doolittle in his "Social life of Chinese"⁹.

Thus the described manuscript, which was brought to light by the Russian diplomat N.N. Krotkov at the beginning of the 20th century, illustrates the influence of Chinese culture on everyday Manchu life. In addition to the already published research work of Chinese scholars on the social life of the Manchus, this is a new description of the Manchu wedding ceremony. It also shows the natural interference of the cultures of two peoples living in constant contact.

⁸ Krotkov N. N. *Kratkie zametki o sovremennom sostojanii šamanstva u sibo, živuščih v Ilijskoj oblasti i Tarbagatae*. – See *Zapiski Vostočnogo otdelenija Imperatorskogo Russkogo arheologičeskogo obščestva*. T. XXI, vip. 2-3, St. Petersburg, 1912, p. 119.

⁹ Doolittle R.J. *Social life of the Chinese: with some account of their religious, governmental, educational, and buisness customs and opinions*. In two volumes. N.Y., 1865. Vol. 1, p. 83.