

**SCTMG 2020****International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the  
Context of Modern Globalism»****ON THE ISSUE OF STUDYING THE KALMYK NATIONAL  
WRESTLING “BEK BARILDAN”**

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***Abstract***

The article gives a description of the Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek Barildan” based on ethnographic materials of the XVIII–XIX centuries. The Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek barildan” is one of the varieties of belt wrestling and has its own characteristics. Like other types of wrestling of Mongolian origin, it externalized itself into an independent form of wrestling in ancient times, and so far has undergone changes related to etiquette, technique of performing wrestling moves, tactics of conducting a wrestle and the rules of the competition, but at the same time has not lost its unique tradition. Works of the authors of the XVIII–XIX centuries were mostly descriptive, they noted the smallest details of the wrestle, starting from the selection of wrestlers and ending with a description of the presentation of the award to the winner. On the whole, their compositions contributed to the accumulation of knowledge about life, customs, mores, and Kalmyk sports competitions. At the end of the article, the authors conclude that further study and publication of ethnographic materials about Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek Barildan” will make up for many gaps in the study of the traditional Kalmyk culture.

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**Keywords:** Kalmyk wrestling, Bek Barildan, sports, Kalmyks, ethnography.



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## 1. Introduction

Kalmyk national sports have been formed and improved over many millennia. Physical education was directly related to labor, moral, aesthetic education and hardening. Thanks to the impact of the physical education system, the young generation acquired, developed and strengthened physical and mental qualities, as well as motor skills that were used for labor and military purposes. One of the widespread sports among Kalmyks is the national wrestling “Bek barildan” (Kalmyk бөк бәрлдан – literally: “wrestling”). “The Kalmyk national wrestling“ Bek barildan ” (Figure 01) is one of the many martial arts that have passed historical selection and are based on objective laws of human development (morphofunctional, physical, mental, moral and spiritual), as well as the laws of theory, methodology and practice of sports training” (Tsandykov, 2009, p. 35).



**Figure 01.** Kalmyk wrestling. Illustration from the book "Illustrations de Les peuples de la Russie" (Paris, 1812–1813)

## 2. Problem Statement

To date, there is no complete comprehensive study of the Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek Barildan” as an element of the traditional culture, taking into account ethnographic sources. Earlier, articles about the Kalmyk national wrestling were written by Zhemchuev (1982) Amaev (1997), Tsandykov (2008), Proshkin (2008), Gabunshchin, Dzhandzhiev, and Erdni-Goriaev (2017), as well as monographs by Zhemchuev (1975) and Tsandykov (2009, 2011, 2013).

The first attempts to describe the Kalmyk national wrestling from the point of view of historiography were made by Zhemchuyev in 1975 in the monograph "Wrestling". The author cites observations of the famous ethnographer, historian Nebolsin (1852), who visited the Kalmyk steppe in

1852: “Kalmyk wrestling is an extremely curious phenomenon, in our times we will not find anything like that in other tribes neighboring Kalmyks. This is a very interesting semblance of ancient Olympic games, the victory at which crowns the winner with glory unshakable and quickly spreading throughout the whole Kalmyk world.” It should be noted that Zhemchuyev for the first time developed the rules of competitions in Kalmyk wrestling (eight weight categories, time – 8 minutes, etc.).

Amaev’s study “Kalmyk National Wrestling” attempts to describe the Kalmyk national wrestling in the history of Kalmyks, as well as to determine its role and significance in Kalmyk society. “According to ancient oral folklore, among the Mongol Oirats, the wrestling in its early development was of military importance. It was most likely a measure, a determination of the power of one clan or another, or a tribe” (Amaev, 1997).

The book of Tsandykov “Kalmyk national wrestling “Beki barildan”: history and modernity” discusses the history of the Kalmyk national wrestling, as well as literary sources that describe or mention this type of martial arts.

### **3. Research Questions**

The essence of the scientific problem lies in the study and description of the Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek Barildan”, taking into account ethnographic information. Ethnographic articles from printed periodicals of the 19th century (newspapers, magazines), as well as books retrospectively describing traditions, rules, techniques and methods of the Kalmyk wrestling, were used as the material for the study.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the study is to study and describe the Kalmyk national wrestling “Bek barildan” as an element of traditional culture, taking into account ethnographic sources. This goal determines the solution of the following tasks: to reveal the genesis of the Kalmyk national struggle and to characterize its features.

### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological basis for the study, conducted in this article were the principles set forth in the works of the Russian researchers Dashinorboev (1997, 1999), Kodzokov (1997), Ivankov (2007), Khabibullin (2008), Badmaaniambuu Bat-Erdene (2015), Kalmyk researchers Zhemchuev (1982, 1975), Amaev (1997), Tsandykov (2008, 2009). The semantic analysis of the Kalmyk national struggle “Bek barildan” is based on a systematic approach that makes it possible to cover the studied object, in its entirety, based on the integrated use of ethnographic materials.

### **6. Findings**

Records and publications about the Kalmyk national struggle began in the 18th century. Some descriptions of Kalmyk sports can be found in archival materials and publications by I. Unkovskii

“Embassy to the Zyungar hun-taichi Tsevan-Rabtan, by artillery captain Ivan Unkovskii and his travel journal for 1722–1724” (St. Petersburg, 1887), Bakunin “Description of Kalmyk peoples, Torgouts in particular, and the deeds of their khans and possessors, composed by councilor of state Vasilii Bakunin "(1761), N. Nefediev" Detailed information about the Volga Kalmyks" (St. Petersburg, 1884), Nebolsin" Essays on the life of the Kalmyks of the Khosheutov ulus "(St. Petersburg, 1852), etc. Analysis of the works of these authors suggests that subsequent scientific research without relying on their studies would be difficult or even impossible.

The earliest mention of the belt wrestling in Russian is contained in the notes of the Russian diplomat Ivan Unkovskii, who briefly described the wrestle in Urga (in the camp), which was attended by the Dzungarian khan Tsevan-Rabdan (1663–1727), his son Galdan-Tseren (1693?–1745), zaisangs, noble Kalmyks and many people. “*The wrestle was in 3 and 4 pairs in this way: the left side was kept under the pledge by Kontaysha, the right side – under the pledge of his son, Goldan Cheren. And so on both sides naked fighters come out, just in trousers above the knees. And not having reached each other about four sazhen, they will raise their hands up, and squinting their eyes (revealing themselves to be frightening), they slowly approach each other; and, coming together and leaning, grab their pants and break and turn one another with great power*” (Unkovskii, 1887, p. 25).

By the beginning of the XVII century, after the passage of the Oirats to Russia, the Kalmyk wrestling began to acquire its civic nature. Not burdened with constant military campaigns, as was the case with them in Dzungaria, Kalmyk feudal lords, having settled within the Russian boundaries found a more peaceful life. From the history of the Kalmyk people, we know that Kalmyks took a considerable part in the wars of Russia, but this participation, in comparison with past wars, looked to them like not burdensome raids on various tribes and nationalities that were at war with Russia, with the exception of the Russian war with Napoleon (1812). The calm and free life of the Kalmyk elite: the khan, noions, zaisangs and the clergy forced to develop the spectacular Kalmyk art such as national wrestling, competition of archers, taming of horses, etc.

Since the national wrestling was the property of the Kalmyk elite, naturally, in the first period of stay in Russia, it did not have mass character. New court wrestlers began to appear at the courts of taishas, noions, zaisangs, the clergy – at the khuruls – starting from the XVII-XVIII centuries, “*Wrestling, replacing knightly tournaments for the Kalmyk people, often brings cases [when] you see extraordinary strongmen, some of whom acquire the most famous in all Mongolian tribes name of batyr, i.e. hercules*” (Nefedev, 1834, p. 46).

In the days of great festivities, after successful campaigns, on the occasion of the "Miaidr" or the birth of a child, especially a boy, a large feast was convened, where the Kalmyk national wrestling was one of the most fascinating spectacles. This is evidenced by the manuscript of the ethnographer, the founder of Kalmyk studies Bakunin “Description of Kalmyk peoples, Torgouts in particular, and the deeds of their khans and possessors” (1761, p. 39), which is currently stored in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts in the “Kalmyk Affairs” fund (case no. 1), as well as articles published in domestic newspapers and magazines of the 19th century. (“Astrakhan diocesan records”, “Horse breeding and hunting”, etc.). The articles under consideration describe the Kalmyk national wrestling at the holidays of the princes of Tiumen (Astrakhan province) and the Tundutovs (Maloderbetov ulus of the Astrakhan

province). E.g., in an article by Znamenskii (1888), the festival of Tseren-David Tsandzhinovich Tundutov, noion of Maloderbetovo ulus (1860–1907), on the occasion of the birth of his hereditary first-born son Danzan Davidovich Tundutov (1888–1923) is described in detail. *“Last month, on August 16 (according to the Kalmyk numeration, and, according to the Russian one, on August 8), the possessor of Maloderbetovo ulus, noion (in our words, a sovereign prince) David-Tseren Tundutov had his first son born, whose birth was supposedly predicted by the Dalai Lama ... The birth of the princely son was marked, first of all, by gifts from the poor and rich Kalmyks of the local region. Solemn prayers were also instituted, both on the spot, in the noion’s house (at the “Solianka” tract, not far from the Sarepta colony), and in the khuruls (Kalmyk chapels). In the end, namely on the 3rd of September, horse races and martial arts were organized at the “Amta-Burgusta” tract in honor of the newborn, completed with a large, though not exquisite feast and national dances”* (Znamenskii, 1888, p. 240).

The Kalmyk nobility often liked to boast of their wrestlers when they were visited by the dignified envoys of the Russian tsar, provincial officials or the arrived ambassadors of some foreign khan. For example, upon arrival of the Secretary of Kalmyk Affairs at the Collegium of Foreign Affairs Bakunin (1761), the Astrakhan provincial Prosecutor, ethnographer Nefedev (1834), Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Governing Senate, member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society Nebolsin (1852) and others.

Usually wrestlers of the khan or taisha were exhibited at feasts. Their wrestlers were divided into two parties and wrestled among themselves, since the wrestle was carried out inside the khan's court or taisha on the occasion of events related only to them. But if the feast was an official ceremonial, then the wrestlers were exhibited by two opposite sides (from khans, taishas, noions, zaisangs, clergy, or from the ulus or aimak).

It is difficult to determine exactly when the national wrestling gained its mass character, however, judging by the degree of development of culture, economy and even political situation, it can be said that the Kalmyk wrestling began to gain its mass nature from the second half of the 19th century. From this period, wrestlers begin to appear everywhere, not only at the courts of the Kalmyk elite, but also in aimaks and hotons. Competitions of wrestlers begin to take place at every opportunity (wedding, prayer "йөрәл", name day, etc.). In the ethnographic sources of the 19th century, the Kalmyks often describe the fight between ulus wrestlers (P. Nebolsin, “Sketches of the Kalmyks’ life of the Khosheutov ulus”, Znamenskii, “A celebration of Mr. Tundutov, the noion of the Maloderbetov ulus (1860–1907) on the occasion of the birth of his hereditary firstborn son”, etc.).

In any competition wrestlers were awarded big prizes, sometimes even cattle and small livestock. Until the last period – the first half of the XIX century – the designated prizes were delivered to the owner, that is, to those who presented wrestlers. In some cases, wrestlers were delivered only insignificant handouts of the owner. From the second half of the 19th century, prizes began to be awarded to the wrestler himself, which created a condition for the development of the wrestling itself.

There is a scene in the “Sketches of the Kalmyk life of the Khosheutov ulus” (1852) where, at the end of the wrestle, the possessor of the Khosheutov ulus rewards the winner: *“Noisy shouts of the people covered the winner with fame; on behalf of the possessor, they brought an expensive horse to him and presented a new chekmen made of cloth and some money. Several people jumped out of the crowd of the*

party to which the young man belonged, they threw themselves into the wrestler's arms, put a new hat on him, hung him with robes and shawls, lifted him up in his arms, and surrounded him with attention and reverence for his feat, brought him out of the arena with loud exclamations" (Nebolsin, 1852, p. 61). In the article by Znamenskii the winner from Ikitsokhurov ulus is given presents by the noyon Tundutov, zaisangs, the clergy: "At the end of the wrestle, this hercules again made, in the same order, three ground bows; a blue silk "beshmet" was brought by one of his servants from his wagon right away and put on the hero. But this was not the ending. After serving him with the same servant of one wooden cup, with a capacity of a tea cup, of the Kalmyk "arak" or "warm" (i.e. national vodka, made by Kalmyks from horse or cow's milk), the noion, all zansangs and the Kalmyk clergy who were present began to give the winner money, of which he collected about 150 roubles. After that, the same servant brought out a still-furious coat, which was put on him over the silk beshmet. In addition, two horses presented to him as the trophies of his victory were donated: one by the noion, and the other by the ruler of Ikitsokhurov ulus."

For any kind of wrestling, the following types of wrestling organization exist: selection of wrestlers, training them, determining the category or order of wrestles, choosing an arbiter and making a wrestling attribute. For the first and second performances, famous wrestlers who were in every ulus, aimak passed peremptorily. Often, training was carried out by each of them at his own discretion. Training wrestle was carried out without practicing individual moves. The wrestling began with the most eminent and ended with weaker wrestlers. In June 1851, in the Khoshoutov ulus, a wrestler who missed the day of the general test, by the decision of the Mediator Court was permitted to fight with the first number, since he was the "first wrestler" known in the ulus.

The ethnographic literature reflects very well how the wrestlers were entering the arena and their wrestle (moves). Referees on both sides led their wrestlers covered in bedspreads. As soon as the bedspreads were removed from them, one by one they approached the noion and made three ground bows to him with the application of both hands, then they walked through the arena bravely several times in different directions in a circular pattern, looking menacingly at each other, started to fight. The course of the wrestle is described in great detail by Nebolsin (1952) in "Essays on the Life of Kalmyks of the Khosheutov Ulus."

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of ethnographic materials leads to the conclusion that the Kalmyk national wrestling "Bek barildan", like other types of national belt wrestling of the Mongolian and Turkic peoples, arose in antiquity. Wrestling in Kalmyk society was not just a spectacular contest. It was a martial art, as applied to military operations. Over time, it has changed, becoming competitive. Further study and publication of ethnographic materials about the Kalmyk national wrestling "Bek barildan" will make up for many gaps in the study of the traditional Kalmyk culture.

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