

## The Last Yugur Shaman from Sunan, Gansu (China)

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*In Gansu Province of Northwest China, there lives a small minority, called Yugur. They consist of two distinct groups: the Kara Yugur who are the descendants of the Orkhon Uighur Empire and speak a Turkic language, and the Shira Yugur who are one of the so-called White Mongol tribes from the Amdo Region of Tibet. The Mongolic-speaking Shira Yugur follow Tibetan Buddhism while the Turkic-speaking Kara Yugur have preserved their shamanic traditions practiced by a specialist (elči) until recent times. The earliest information collected on Kara Yugur shamanic traditions date back to the beginning of the 1900s. In 2011 and 2013, I visited the Western Yugur and collected data on Korgui, the last elči to conduct the yaka ritual. I also recorded a short myth from his daughter on the emergence of the first shaman. The present article seeks to shed some light on the Kara Yugur shamans and their vanishing shamanic practices, as well as their relation to Tibetan Buddhism and the Shira Yugur religious traditions.*

In August, 2011, I visited the Yugur minority of China in Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, Gansu Province.<sup>1</sup> We travelled 433 kilometres from Xining, the center of the Qinghai Province (Amdo)<sup>2</sup> by car across the picturesque Qilian Mountains and the Biandukou Pass (3,500 m). The Yugurs number around 15,000, and the majority of them live in Sunan

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<sup>1</sup> On my first trip, I was accompanied by former director of the Institute of Ethnology (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Mihály Hoppál.

<sup>2</sup> Amdo was the traditional name for the region in Tibetan. The current name Qinghai comes from the Chinese name of the great lake of the province (Köke-Naur in Mongol and Co-Ngoin in Tibetan meaning 'Blue Lake').

County.<sup>3</sup> The center of Sunan is Hongwansi (红湾寺 Red Bay Temple) and four townships, Minhua, Dahe, Kangle, and Huangcheng (明花、大河、康乐、皇城) have a significant Yugur population (map 1). The Yugurs are linguistically not homogeneous: the Western Yugurs speak a Turkic language (in Minhua and Dahe), while the Eastern Yugurs (in Kangle and Huangcheng) speak a Mongolic language. Western Yugur has some 4,000 speakers, while Eastern Yugur has around 2,000 speakers.

The term “Yellow Uighur” is used in scholarship to designate the Yugurs (Hahn 1998). During our visit, our informants told us that the Western group was called Kara (Black) Yugur, or simply Yugur, and only the Eastern (Mongolic) group was called Shira (Yellow) Yugur.<sup>4</sup> The Turkic Yugurs are believed to be descendants of the Orkhon Uighur Empire (744–840) (Golden 1992, 155–188) and its successor states (idem, 163–9) that existed here in Gansu (848–1036) with towns, like Ganzhou, Suzhou and Dunhuang. Later the Gansu Uighur state was conquered by the Tanguts and the Mongols. The Mongolic (Eastern Yugur) group is also called *inggar*,<sup>5</sup> and they are probably a Monguor (Tuzu) tribe that migrated here from Amdo during the Manchu Era in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was these Yugur groups that Hungarian Tibetologist Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842) wanted to visit, but he died during his trip to Lhasa (Ligeti 1931). The so-called Modern Uighurs (Chinese 维吾尔 *weiwu’r*) of Xinjiang Province in northwest China only adopted the ethnic name “Uighur” in 1921, and they are not directly related to the Yugurs of Gansu.

The Turkic-speaking Yugurs are also divided into two distinct groups: the Mountain (*taghg*) Yugur in Dahe and the Plains (*oyhg*) Yugur in Minhua between Jiuquan (Suzhou) and Zhangye (Ganzhou).

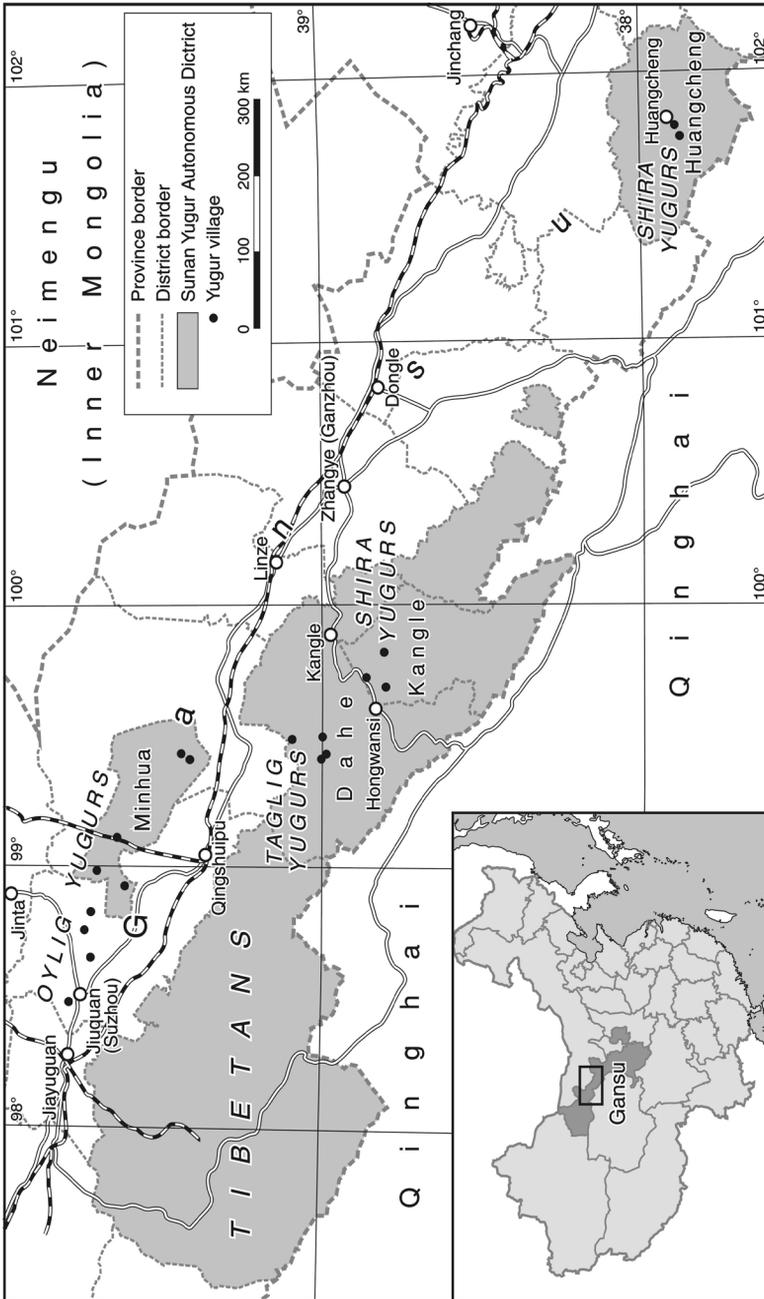
The center of Sunan, Hongwansi got its name after a Tibetan Buddhist temple that was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The town is situated by the Longsur (Mandarin Longche) River and

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<sup>3</sup> Sunan Yugur Autonomous District has an area of 20,456 square kilometres, its population is over 50,000: 10,000 Yugurs, 10,000 Tibetans, 30,000 Han and as well as some Khalkha Mongols, Monguors, Hui and Dongxiang. The Yugurs live mainly in Minhua (3,000), Dahe (3,000) and Kangle (2,500), Huangcheng (2,000) townships.

<sup>4</sup> See also Nugteren 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See also Hahn (1998, 397; Nugteren 2003, 265). The Yugur-Chinese dictionary gives three meanings for the word *inggar*: ‘hybrid calf (yak and cattle); foolish; Mongolic speaking Yugur’ (Lei 1992, 22).



Map 1. Yugur villages in Sunan Yugur Autonomous District. Drawn by Béla Nagy, 2016.

nowadays it is developing rapidly, giving way to an influx of the Han Chinese. Young generations of Yugurs switch to Mandarin, so both Turkic and Mongolic (Shira) Yugur have become endangered languages.

The Yugurs were first described in modern scholarship by Grigorii N. Potanin (1893). Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1911) visited them shortly in 1907, and mentioned some Buddhist characteristics of Yugur religious life, but referred to no shamans at all.<sup>6</sup> It was the Russian Turkologist, Sergeï E. Malov (1880–1957) who, in turn, collected detailed information on Yugur shamans, among other linguistic and ethnographic data and folklore texts, during his field trip of 1910 and 1911.<sup>7</sup> In an article Malov (1912a) gave a detailed account of his fieldwork on the *elči* shamans and their *yaka*<sup>8</sup> rituals, an even photographed the ritual. Matthias Hermanns visited the Yugurs in 1935, and published an article (Hermanns 1940–1941) on the Yugur along with some linguistic data and two pictures, nos. 5 and 6, and a drawing, no. 8 in the original, connected with the *yaka* ritual. Nowadays Chinese colleagues tend to think that shamanic traditions are forgotten among the Yugurs, though Zhong Jinwen (1995) attempted to recognize some traits of shamanism in Yugur folk tales.<sup>9</sup> So obviously I was curious about the current situation.

Having arrived to Hongwansi, I met two elderly sisters at a Yugur Minority social event: Chimitar (born 1939) and Renchirtan (born 1942). They were from the Yaglakar village (clan)<sup>10</sup> of Dahe Township. I asked them if they had ever heard of the *elči* shamans and their *yaka* rituals. Soon it became clear that they happened to be the daughters of the last Yugur shaman, Korgai, who died in 1977, just after the Cultural Revolution ended. When we met them in Hongwansi, they were just

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<sup>6</sup> Mannerheim's account was reviewed by Malov (1912b).

<sup>7</sup> For further details see Thomsen (1959) with a list of Malov's publications on the Yugur (idem, 1959, 565).

<sup>8</sup> Some Yugur words like *elči* and *yaka* are pronounced with a voiced pharyngeal consonant that produced the pharyngealization of the proceeding vowel. It is indicated with a ʕ sign in the IPA system, but in order to simplify the transcript, I have omitted it.

<sup>9</sup> It must be added that the Chinese author uses the term "shamanism" rather vaguely, what he speaks of in his article may better be classified as the "natural religion of the Yugur." Later Zhong and Martti Roos (1997) added some complementary linguistic notes to the data they published in their 1995 article.

<sup>10</sup> Yaglakar was the leading tribe of the Orkhon Uighur Empire founded by Kutlug Bilge in 744.

visiting Renchirtan's son, Tümen Jastar (杜成峰 Du Chengfeng, from Sunan, Dahe), who lives in that town with his Tibetan wife.

### *The Elči Specialist*

The following day I visited Chimitar and Renchirtan in Jastar's home in Hongwansi (figs. 1, 2), where they showed me a picture featuring their father,<sup>11</sup> and explained to me that there were two, or, more precisely, three types of *elči*. The *em elči* was a sort of healing shaman, while the *kam elči* performed rituals and evoked spirits.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there was also a third type of shaman, called *pör elči*, who could perform both the healing and the spirit invoking rituals. Chimitar's and Renchirtan's father was a *pör elči*.<sup>13</sup> (I consider *elči* a title of respect—like Old Turkic *tarqan* and Old Uighur *baqši* from Chinese *boshi*—given to different religious specialists: *qam* 'shaman' and *emči* 'healer'.)

Chimitar and Renchirtan also showed us their father's shamanic paraphernalia (*dorvun*),<sup>14</sup> which closely resembled the headdress of some Tibetan Bonpo specialists (figs. 3, 4).<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note here that Malov (1912a, 63) remarks that Yugur shamans did not use any special attire, and that they performed ceremonies in their everyday dress.

Korgui could not pass on his tradition to his son—Malov also mentions that the Yugur shaman Sanišqap planned to pass on his knowledge to his twelve-year-old son (1912a, 61) and that it often happened that shamans' sons followed their fathers in their profession (idem, 1912a, 64)—due to the political situation during the Cultural Revolution, so the last Yugur shaman died having no pupils. Her daughters had only a limited knowledge of shamanic traditions and the *yaka* ritual, since girls were not allowed to participate at religious ceremonies. Only sons

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<sup>11</sup> I took a picture of the old photograph, but its quality is too poor to be reproduced here.

<sup>12</sup> See also Lei (1992, 27).

<sup>13</sup> Malov (1912a, 63) explains that *elči* and *qam* were two different terms for the same shaman.

<sup>14</sup> Malov also mentioned an object, called *torvun* (1912a, 63) saying that it was some kind of "magic bag," hanging on the wall of the shaman's house, but did not report anything about its usage.

<sup>15</sup> Bon is a religious tradition of the Tibetans that developed alongside Buddhism from the eleventh century and it was practiced by the *tertön* specialists.



Fig. 1. Daughters of the last Yugur *elči*, Korgui: Renchirtan (left) and Chimitar (right) in Renchirtan's son, Tümen Jastar's home (Hongwansi, Gansu, China). Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.



Fig. 2. In Tümen Jastar's home (from left to right): Chimitar, Renchirtan, Tümen Jastar and his Tibetan wife, and our Yugur guide (Ay-Kading or Zhong Li). Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.

could inherit the secret knowledge of the shamans but, fortunately, in our case, the daughters heard about the myth of the first *elči*, who was a shaman. During my visit I also met an old man, Bai Huanzar (b. 1910), who took part at *yaka* ceremonies before 1966 (fig. 5).

Before giving the recently collected Yugur text here, it seems to be useful and convenient to quote Malov's text of the same myth as he noted it down from his Yugur informant, Saniškap from the village of Šar-Gudir on February 4, 1911:<sup>16</sup>

*Mıntan pırınta yuğur bolıyan qan deñir taqıyık tro. Yıñ pırınta pu qan deñir tattıy işke barıandıro. Tat mundako qan teñirni yus kürgök tro. Xorwe wučin a<sup>b</sup>tu kıştau, Zor taqqa öndüüristergen dro. Qan deñir mañō pēr qol işke kergendro, kerges yrılayın dro. Yırlısa, qolaqqa pēr at kistegen aynalıandıro. Andaqqan tügete:*

*“o! men mında kışelıy yerge yetkendaı.”*

*Kan deñir ya<sup>b</sup>qası Zurıya častayın dro altırı Pay güzge tüskın dro. Pay küzde bēr anika war midro. Anika sütün yaya-yaya uzuıyan dro. Or<sup>b</sup>q tarqo (?) qam tüskındro; qarnın alğas palıqqa tarduster-gendro. Andaqqan tügete qarnın işteki yaı palqa palıqqa šukop qalıyan-dro, čüçaqı šäzdıyaš, šanıyan-dro. Andan la qan deñir šäzdıqqa tüskın-dro, ksiler šäzdıqqa čalıyan-dro. Anı la ksiler anday dep-dro:*

*“Mıs šäzdıqqa čalıyımıs ere,” anday dep-dro. Anın (anıñ ?) yürse wužın, lom bučin yer ksege küčirgen-dro. Andaq qan tügete le wosa erener ilči wolyan-dro, ilči wosa, qan deñir tüsse, qamnayık-tro. Qamnatu qamnatqaš, qarı ilčiler ezertkeš yürgetkek-tro, pēr yıl mer işke yıl mer yürgetkeš. Am bosa, kep kise yumutu, yurmesın alyaq-tro. Alyan tügete am wosa pu pezik elči bop-tro. (Malov 1967, 134)*

Malov gives a Russian translation of this Yugur text (1967, 135–6), and he published a summary of the myth in his main article on Yugur shamanism (Malov 1912, 62).<sup>17</sup> I herewith attempt to give an English translation of it, based on Malov's Yugur original text:

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<sup>16</sup> Malov published his data on Yugur shamanism in his first article (1912a), where he gives the most detailed description of his subject including some scattered linguistic data embedded into his Russian text, as well as Russian translations of some prayers (Malov 1912a, 67–72 and 74). However, his original Yugur texts were only published by Édgar R. Tenishev much later (Malov 1967). There is a whole chapter of shamanic texts in the book (Chapter 5, pp. 134–160). Malov's dictionary and grammar of the so-called 'Yellow Uighur' (1957) also encompasses a shamanic vocabulary.

<sup>17</sup> Malov also published another version of the same myth collected two years later in 1913 (Malov 1967, 137–8), which slightly differs from the previous version.



Fig. 3. RENCHIRTAN and her son, JASTAR examining the headdress (*dowun*) of the last YUGUR shaman. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.

Earlier all the Yugurs venerated Kan-Deñir.<sup>18</sup> Even earlier this Kan-Deñir went to the Tibetans, but the Tibetans treated him badly. They were shooting at him with slings and chased him to Mount Zur. Kan-Deñir went away and entered a valley, then started to cry. When he cried, his ears heard the neighing of a horse: “It seems that I have reached a place [inhabited] by humans.”

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<sup>18</sup> Kan-Deñir is the deity or spirit of the Sky that was widely venerated by Turkic and Mongolic peoples of Inner Asia. The word *deñir* means ‘sky’ and it is not an almighty god or creator, just one of many deities.



Fig. 4. Tümen Jastar even put the *dorwun* on his head.  
Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.

Kan-Dejir settled down on the edge of Mount Zur and he went down to Bay-güz. In Bay-güz there lived an old woman. The old woman was just churning milk, and she fell asleep. Kan-Dejir turning into a *kam* came down and took her container,<sup>19</sup> and threw it against the wall. The butter in the container stuck to the wall, the curd spilled on the woman. Kan-Dejir thus ascended [the ability] to the woman, so people venerated her but then they said:

“We should not venerate a woman,” so they said. So by faith (*nom*) [the ability] was transferred to males. After that males started to become *elči*. Having Kan-Dejir ascended [the ability] the *elči* became a *kam*. To become a *kam* they follow the old *elči* who teaches them. One year or two years he teaches and

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<sup>19</sup> A container, made of a bubble of the tripe or rumen (*karın*) of a sheep, used for storing liquids.



Fig. 5. Bai Huanzar, the oldest man from the township of Minhua (Sunan, Gansu), remembering the *yaka* ritual. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.

then a lot of people gather. They accept his sacrifice [*yürme*]<sup>20</sup> and he [disciple] becomes the big *elči*.

Now let us see the version in my own translation of a simplified philological transcription, as told by Renchirtan at August 20, 2011. I recorded her account in her native Yugur tongue, and later her son, Jastar helped me to transcribe and translate the recording.

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<sup>20</sup> The *yürme* was a sacrifice performed in exchange of initiation by the spirits (Lei 1992, 281).

*Am la düyü-tu bir Kaŋgay digek bir yerde bar edi, ertele bir aniga alton gaş yasagan, anigaga bir ogul bar edi, künerite xos süüt sagırgan nime-di, bu süüt sagırganda la aniga ortakka yel-sıgırtkı kelgende ürkitke, anika mundakka titirege çamlap kırıptı, andan la anika bagayasın alınga, yüge esik biyen kirge, bagayanı altırakka salmas nime-di, altırakka saluwetke le . . . . degen edi:*

*“Uzaktan kelgen uzut bolsa, kaydan kelseñ, kaygama, birkan bolsa niyler bolsa maga lar et!” andan la örü bir karaganda küñsümnüñ bašta kök kus tüske olırgan edi, özi birkan dadıp keldi. Andan la aniga manın alıp aška la ogılğa bolgay, andan kartı elçi la ogılğa bolgay, andan yugur yaka bitirgen edi.<sup>21</sup>*

In old times there was a place called Khangai. A long time ago there was an old woman in her sixties. The old woman had a son, the whole day she was milking animals. While she was milking, suddenly a strong wind started to blow and frightened her. So the old lady started to shake and shiver. Then the old lady took her milking bucket. She entered the house by the door. She had never dropped her bucket. But this time she dropped it . . . and said:

“If you are a demon (*üzüt*)<sup>22</sup> from a distant place, go back where you came from, if you are a Burkan, tell me what you want!”

When she looked up to the top of the tent, a blue bird was sitting there. It was a Burkan. Later the old woman passed on her shamanic ability to her son. When the shaman (*kam elçi*) became old, her ability passed to her son. Since then the Yugur perform the *yaka* ritual.

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<sup>21</sup> When she finished the myth, Renchirtan continued by telling another short text. In the following, I give its transcription I made with the help of her son, Jastar. However, the meaning of these lines is not clear to me, and it was not understandable even for Jastar. I hope to be able to clarify this text in the future:

*Uzı bası tüinde baştı altı, kaska kaştan kasık altı,  
ak üleden yıgaş altı, (ursañ baştan) ursañ duganadan dun altı,  
yazı belden yastık altı, baka baştan konuk altı,  
gorgulıgdan dorwun altı, kara yüsten yüsük altı,  
çañ dartıp, deñ dartıp, peş dartıp, Kaŋgayga kelgen kam elçi.*

<sup>22</sup> Besides the numerous deities or spirits of nature (*burkan*) there are two additional types of spirits mentioned in the Yugur materials: *üzüt* (cf. *üzüt* ‘zloı dukh; evil spirit’, Malov 1957, 132a) or *uzut* (cf. *uzut* ‘dusha umershego cheloveka; a spirit of the deceased’, Malov 1957, 129a) is a harmful spirit or demon, while *yil* (cf. *yil* ‘veter, vdokhnovenie, dukh – pomoshchnik shamana; wind, inspiration, the shaman’s helping spirit;) is a spirit that helps the *elçi* during its rituals and healings (Malov 1957, 40).

*Regarding the Yaka Ritual*

Again, let me give a short summary of Malov's account on the *yaka* ritual (1912a, 65–72).<sup>23</sup> Malov describes the *yaka* as the only ritual performed by the *elči*. It was performed at the request of a family at their home on a designated date of the year, the second month according to the Chinese calendar.<sup>24</sup> One week before the ritual the hosting family prepares a small tree that symbolizes the mythical *yaka* tree decorated by ribbons (*čüwek*). The *yaka* tree consists of four branches of a thorny bush (*tiken*). The branches are inserted into a hummock covered with grass, called *soka*.<sup>25</sup> The four branches are decorated with three different colors (green, white, and blue). The longest branch is called *yasıl yığaš* 'green tree' having seven green ribbons. In front of it, there is the *ak yığaš* 'white tree' with white and blue ribbons. The blue ribbon (*kök čüwek*) is also called *tır* "Milky Way." There is another small branch called *buržek* 'corner' connected to the white tree by four threads. In front of the *buržek* is the last branch of blue colour (*kök yığaš* 'blue tree') with two blue and one green ribbons. The blue tree is also called *tır* "Milky Way" like the blue ribbon of the white tree. There are carvings on each of the three branches (seven on the green, five on the white, four on the 'corner' and three on the blue tree).

The *yaka* is performed in the house of the family arranging the ritual. It is not a community event and only a few neighbours are invited by the hosting family. The *elči* sits in front of the *yaka* tree that is placed in the house by the wall facing the entrance, where the Buddhist altar can also be found usually in a niche. A dish filled with cereals (*sokpa* and *tarıg*) is placed on the ground in front of the *yaka* tree. Nine Buddhist butter lamps (*marmi/marme* from Tibetan *dkarme* or *yula* in Yugur) are put on the top of the cereals. When the *elči* arrives, the lamps are lit,

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<sup>23</sup> The name of the ritual comes from the name of a mythological tree that connects the Middle World inhabited by human beings to the Upper World of the deities. It is called *yaka yığaš* in Yugur, and its name in Mongolian is *jaqa-yin modun* 'tree of the edge'. Mongolian *jaqa-yin mundun* can be found in epic tales (Vladimirtsov 1926, 19).

<sup>24</sup> It is the second month (*eryue* 二月) after the Chinese New Year (*chunjie* 春节) according to the lunisolar calendar (second new moon after winter solstice between 21 January and 20 February), so it starts in February or March.

<sup>25</sup> In Yugur-Chinese dictionary *soka/soga* is a type of needle-grass belonging to the genus of *Achnaterum*, called *čiy* in the Kypchak-Turkic languages.

and the shaman starts to sing a song to Altan Khan<sup>26</sup> and throws some bits that were previously cut from the four branches on the hummock. Afterward follows the sacrificing of a sheep. The animal is standing on a felt rug (*yonak*) or a sack (*sumal*) spread on the ground, and the *elči* sprinkles “white water” (*ak su*) on the animal from a big spoon (*čot kazdik*). The “white water” is a mixture of water and curd (*čužak*). If the sheep shakes itself, it means that the spirits accept the sacrifice. The sheep is killed by cutting a hole into its chest and then tearing apart its aorta by hand. The *elči* starts sprinkling milk towards the sky, while the killed sheep is carried into the house to the altar. Then the participants of the ritual take it back to the courtyard, cut off its main parts including the head, the neck, the lungs and the ribs (*pogsi*),<sup>27</sup> and cook them separately, and put them on a dish to the ground in front of the *elči*. The shaman washes the head with “white water” and rubs it with butter. The forehead of the sheep symbolizes Sumeru Mountain (*Sumur tag*),<sup>28</sup> its eye-teeth Azgash Khan and the four legs Pagdash Khan, while its tail represents the “deity holding a whip” (*čalig tutkan*). Then the shaman sings a song to the spirits and gives the *pogsi* to the *burkans*.<sup>29</sup>

The ritual ends at this point for the day. The head and the legs of the sacrificed sheep are placed in front of the *burkans*, the rest is consumed by the shaman and the participants at the ritual—this happens in the evening. After the meal the shaman goes to sleep; the ritual is finished on the following day, usually not too early. The *elči* goes to the grasslands outside the house and its courtyard, and while sprinkling milk to the sky, he sings another song. The participants of the ritual bring another sheep and a harnessed horse and make them stand on a felt rug spread on the ground in front of the house. The *elči* smokes the animals with

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<sup>26</sup> The name means “Golden Khan” in Mongolian. Altan Khan (1542–1582) was the leader of the Tümed Mongol State (founder of the city of Köke-qota). He proclaimed Tibetan Buddhism as the official religion and gave the title of Dalai Lama to the Tibetan theocratic leader in Lhasa.

<sup>27</sup> A similar custom exists among the Mongols who call these parts of the sacrifice *jülde*.

<sup>28</sup> The Sumeru or “Great Meru” Mountain is a mythical sacred mountain in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist tradition. Sumeru is the highest mountain and the polar centre of the mandala-like flat Earth, a complex of mountains and seas.

<sup>29</sup> Malov (1918, 64–5), referring to Saniškap as his source again, writes that the Yugur had thirteen spirits or deities (*birkan* or *burkan*) of the skies. Second rank deities number nine. Malov mentions the following deities by name: Pagdaš Khan, Azgaš Khan, Surei Khan, Mongol Khan and Ktai Khan.

some joss-sticks and offer the two animals to the spirits. The sheep is let loose immediately, but the horse is tethered in the courtyard, as it will be needed later. Afterwards, all go back to the house, where the shaman sprinkles milk on the wall and the *yaka* tree, and starts to sing again. Then the shaman sprinkles liquor with another song. Finally, the rest of the meat is consumed and all the participants of the ritual go out to the courtyard and sit down on the felt rug. The shaman also comes out from the house, holding the *yaka* tree in his hands, while one of the participants brings a tray with two cups on it: one filled with liquor mixed with black tea (*kara arakı*), the other filled with red liquor (*kızıl arakı*), liquor mixed with some reddish ingredient. The shaman makes a libation with the drinks, and touches the head of each participant with the *yaka* tree. One of the young men takes the tree and mounts the richly dressed up horse, while the women throw themselves down in front of the tree. The young man gallops out and throws the tree away outside. The *elçi* enters the house and examines the lamps to find out whether the deities (spirits) have accepted the sacrifice.

And now, let us see Rençintar' account about her father and how he performed the *yaka* ritual before 1966. Since the two daughters were young girls in those days, their father did not pass on to them his spiritual knowledge, but they saw him perform the ritual several times.

(1) *elçi la yaka bitirgende bir yılda altayda layuerdiñ altayda yaka bitirge le nime-di, yaka bitirgende la nige-gul bu sokanı turgak kazıp kelge(n), üş yıgaştı: kök, yasıl, ak yizdi oraga, ak yüñni oraga(n), o nige sokanı üzeseñge tüyge(n), andakkala yaka bitirge nime-di, biri-kusin la yaka bitirgek nime-di, soñıs kun la bir goy öliргеk nime-di, goynı moyını uñın öliрmes, goynı özegek, özeğende bu töstiñ uraga, nige gul bıçak biyen tilge, munda bir sız yonğa(n), sızdı mundakka bu yüreкке düйip берек, yüreкке düйip бергенде la goy ölip kaptı, andak kandan la goynı yene kiçig su uyn nige gul yun tanla azuz-isti, yun tanlaga kiltir-etke, am la bo goynı yakasın, içkisin alıs etke, am la goyga nokta tolaga, nokta-çilbir tolaga, am la dorwin dorwınnı gunda dümdiktin gundan kuzı aska la dorwin altınğa salga, am la bu elçi yaka bitirgek nime-di, bitirğenden la yırlaga, lar-etke . . .*

(2) . . . *am yakanı bitirge la bir xondurga la, soñıs küni la yene bir yıgaş mañdurgak nime-di, yıgaş mañdurganda la esikti bözik aška, am la künden bir eren am la bu yıgaştı bir alay-alay la elçiğe бергенде, elçi bu yıgaştı öri-öri le uñşığa, kisi omanı baş xoga mundakka tiygirge, andakkandan gul yakta bir eren kisi çökıy olırganda yıgaştı бергенде la, am la dogır kisiler la goynıñ tösti alınğa, mundakka kurıy-kurıy*

la ardında arakı mañdırtı nime-di, am la ça kawačık alıñan nime, süüt alıñan nime, yun aldırğan nime, mindakka kuryı la kirgek nime-di, kuryıga kirgende la elči ma andakka kač agıs söster, anda degende la yıgastı ündergek nime-di, etti şartka, yıgastı yene uzakka etke, anda barga.

Xosı minjar et yige, yıgastı anda döñgege salıwatka nime-di, am nime takı ma dun ayak bar edi, takı minıñ kire bir ayaktıñ işke sımak, süüt takı müñ, takı kan, am çok kasık, minıñ uzun kasık biyen la mindakka bir-bir yumırğa, yüğe le bu sımak mindakka sımak la kuryılaganya bözik mindakka yanla, elči artka karamas andak nime-di, yañ-yañ etti kök bözge tüygeške la, o minjar yigek nime-di, am la kuşkan etti tülge la, am la agıl-xolım bözik-kişiğ kisini kıydıp kelge, yigekti am la nijur kisi kelge, yüsi ma ola bitkek nime-di, andan takı bir marmı tamdırgak nime-di, marmıñ üstin biltiñ orınıñ beş yun kouxian bözik marmını kuzga la ola tamıruga la, am la oga o yaktı marmını elči karaga la nime-di, am la senin yüde nijik ürji kigiripti, kaydan ni optı, anı-xonı marmı işte karaga, takı bir yanız elči nigedir şuşu mañdırgak nime-di, kızıl öşküni öldiriwalga, dört aralgaga tilik aska, urdakka la pudege tañsıktırğa, nokta-čilbir ni kınaga, ezer, yunak kınaga, am la yene nige-gul uñşığaška la, dasıñga andakka bitinje daduwatka nime-di, bitinje daduwatka, onı la iş-kus yigergek nime-di, anda nime la kaş yanız bolıs-tır, am la bir nimesin undurup-tur oo.

(1) The shaman performed the *yaka* in the sixth and twelfth months of the year. When they performed a *yaka* they put up a *soka*. Three trees were wrapped with blue, green and white cloth and white wool. This was put up on the top of the *soka*. This way they performed the *yaka*, the first day of the *yaka* was performed there. Next day they killed a sheep, but not by cutting the sheep's neck. The sheep was killed by the diaphragm (*özek*), they cut it through the breast. They cut it by a knife or sometimes they also chipped a stake, the stake this way was stabbed to the heart. When they stabbed into the heart, the sheep died. Then the sheep was boiled in water to make some soup, they brought the soup. Now this sheep was taken to the *yakba*, its stomach was taken away. They put a halter (*nokta*) and a leading-rein (*čilbir*) on the head of the sheep. The shamanic paraphernalia was hanging down from the smoke-hole of the Yugur tent (*kara yüi*).<sup>30</sup> When the paraphernalia was taken off the shaman started to perform the *yaka*, when he performed it he was singing and talking.

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<sup>30</sup> See fig. 6.

(2) . . . when the first day of the *yaka* is over, the next day another tree is taken there. When they bring the tree, they open the door wide. Now that man takes the tree and passes it to the shaman. The shaman holds the tree up and prays. He touches the head of the all the people there. Then over there a man takes a seat and passes on the tree. Then all the people take the meat from the breast of the sheep. The (shaman) says *kurui-kurui*,<sup>31</sup> a spreads some milk liquor over his back. Now he takes a big spoon. They bring some milk and some wool too. He continues to sing *kurui-kurui*. When the shaman sings *kurui-kurui* he also says some words (but I have already forgotten). After saying them the tree is taken out (of the tent). They cook the meat and take away the tree and they go there. Everybody eats the meat, and they put the tree on a mound. They also take various bowls there. In one of the bowls there was kumis,<sup>32</sup> as well as milk, soup and blood. There was a long spoon (*čot kazdık*)<sup>33</sup> that they used to spray (the drinks). In the house they blessed the meat with a loud *kurui* song. The shaman was performing it by turning his back. All kinds of meat were put on blue cloth and they ate it. The meat was cut and then cooked. The whole village (nomadic camp), big and small was invited.

A lot of people came to eat the meat. They ate it by the house and by an *owoo* (*üle*).<sup>34</sup> Then they lit another lamp (*yula*). Instead of the wick of the lamp they used wool (口线 *kouxian*). They made a big lamp and lit it up. Now the shaman was looking into the lamp. He could see what problems you had in your family, what happened. He could see everything in the lamp. Sometimes the shaman also sacrificed the scapegoat (*šušu*).<sup>35</sup> The killed a red goat and they cut it into four parts. That meat was eaten by the dogs and birds. They performed all kinds of things. I might have forgotten some of them.

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<sup>31</sup> *Xurai* (*qurui*) is a magic word for invoking the spirits during a sacrifice in Mongolian, 'sámánénekek stb szellemidéző szava; spirit invoking word in shamanic songs' cf. Kara (1998, 616b).

<sup>32</sup> Kumis is the Russianized Turkic name for fermented mare's milk, but it is called *smak* in Yugur (Chinese 酸奶).

<sup>33</sup> Malov writes *čok-kazdık* but the Yugur-Chinese dictionary has *čot* for sacrifice of spray.

<sup>34</sup> Mongolian *owoo* 'heap' is a sacred cairn built for the spirits usually at mountain paths or other sacred sites. The Yugur name for it is *üle*.

<sup>35</sup> The *šušu* is a scapegoat or animal sacrificed to take away curses and demons (see Lei 1992: *tizuichu* 替罪畜).

In 2013 I revisited Sunan with Mongolist Zsolt Szilágyi. During our short stay in Hongwansi we could not meet the two old Yugur women, but we met again Renchirtan's son, Tümen Jastar, who had hosted us two years earlier and had shown us his grandfather's shamanic dress (*dorwun*) (figs. 3, 4). We also had the opportunity to meet a local Yugur researcher and writer Khawar—his Chinese name is Dalong Dongzhi 达隆东智—who was from the inggar or Eastern (Mongolic) Yugur group and thus could not speak Western, or Turkic Yugur. However, he is an enthusiastic collector of both Western (Turkic) and Mongolic (Eastern) Yugur folklore with the help of the local native speakers. He also publishes the journal named Yovhur puchig (pronounced *yoyur pučig* 'Yugur Culture') in Chinese (尧熬尔文化 *Yao'ao'r wenhua*)<sup>36</sup> with texts of Western and Eastern Yugur folklore transcribed in the Pinyin Latin alphabet. Mr. Khawar explained to us that only the Turkic Yugur (whom they called Khara Yugur or Black Yugur) had shamans (*kam elči*) and Eastern Yugur (or Yellow Yugur/Shira Yogur as they call themselves) had no word for such religious specialists. The Yellow Yugur migrated to the Gansu from Tibet during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). They are related to the so-called White Mongols (Monguor, Chinese 土族 *tuzu*) of Huzhu County.<sup>37</sup> These Mongolic tribes were called Khor in Tibetan.<sup>38</sup> Later these White Mongol groups were conquered by the Manchu in the eighteenth century and administered by the same governor (*amban* in Manchu) together with the Yugurs of Gansu. In order to differentiate themselves from the mostly non-Buddhist Western Yugurs they started to use the term Yellow or Buddhist Yugur (coming from the color of the Tibetan Gelug<sup>39</sup> Buddhism). The Mongolic-speaking Yugurs only have a legend that the Tibetans captured the Yugur deity Kan-Deñir and confined him to the Nechung Monastery, the site of the

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<sup>36</sup> 尧熬尔 *yao'ao'r* is different from the official Chinese name 裕固 *yugu* for the Yugurs.

<sup>37</sup> Mongolist Mátyás Balogh (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) who studied the Shira Yugur and Monguor languages also confirmed that the Huzhu dialect of Monguor was closer to Shira Yugur than the Minhe dialect of Monguor, which in turn related to the Bonan language.

<sup>38</sup> The Tibetan word *khor* means 'foreigner' and it was used to designate the Turkic and Mongolic peoples of the region (White Mongols/Tuzu and Yugurs) but not the Muslims.

<sup>39</sup> Gelug means 'yellow hat,' which the lamas of the reformed sect wear. The sect was founded by Tsongkapa (1357–1419) in Amdo (Kumbun Monastery) and became an official religion of Tibet and Mongolia in the sixteenth century.



Fig. 6. Traditional Tibetan-type nomadic tent (*kara yü*) (on the right) with grazing sheep and yaks behind it in the Qilian Mountains. Photo: Dávid Somfai Kara, 2011.

state oracle not far from Lhasa.<sup>40</sup> Even though the Shira Yugurs do not have any *elči* specialists and they follow Tibetan Buddhism (Gelug-pa) sometimes, in case of disease and other misfortune, they used to order rituals from the Kara Yugur shamans.<sup>41</sup>

### *A Summary*

Malov (1912a, 62) rightly wrote that the Mountain Yugurs (*taglig yugur*) had better preserved their traditions than the Yugurs living in the

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<sup>40</sup> Nechung was the residence of Pehar, a deity of the Khor, who lived to the east of Lake Köke-naur. According to tradition, he is held to have been originally brought to Samye Monastery by Padmasambhava who bound him to protect the *dharmā*. According to a legend, the Nechung Oracle or Pehar was brought to Tibet by a Bon general, Tara Lugong, who took possession of the meditation school near Ganzhou of the Khor-pa (a tribe of Uighurs), about the end of the eighth century A.D.

<sup>41</sup> A similar cultural exchange can be observed among the sub-ethnic groups of Altay Turkic people, the Altay Kizhi and the Telengit. The Altay Kizhi religious tradition (*ak jang*) strictly prohibits the activity of the *kam* 'shaman' but in case of serious illness and disasters the Altay Kizhi also visit a Telengit *kam* secretly (Somfai 2014, 153–4).

plains (*oylig yugur*). Among the Yugurs of Plains in Minhua, we could find only the 90 year-old man, Bai Huanzar (fig. 5), who remembered the *yaka* from his childhood (1920–30s), while Korgui from Dahe continued performing the ritual until the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Korgui, who also possessed the traditional paraphernalia (*dorwun*), had been converted to Buddhism. While the sedentary Yugurs of the plains lived in Chinese type adobe houses (*balık*), the Mountain Yugurs were nomadic and used the Tibetan type tent (*kara yüi*), where the *yaka* ritual took place (fig. 6).

The Modern Yugur minority is a creation of the People's Republic of China, when Turkic Yugurs and Mongolic *inggars* (Shira Yugur) were designated as one ethnic group, although they were linguistically and culturally distinct. Mongolic Yugurs use the term Shira (Yellow or Buddhist) Yugur to differentiate themselves from the Turkic Yugurs, who were not Buddhist thus called Kara Yugur.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The same distinction can be found among the Altay Kizhi and Telengit (*ak* and *kara jang*) or the Khori Buriad (*šarın* and *xarın šazan*).

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