

Tribal Identity and Tribal Migration in Mongol Eurasia: the Oyirad Case

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Human migrations were among the crucial processes that accompanied and shaped Mongolian rule in Eurasia. The mass migrations of Mongol tribes, which took place as the result of the Chinggisid conquests and policies, resulted in new connections and influences between groups of different origins throughout the Mongol political realm. However, the original cultural and religious identities of the tribes, which were dispersed throughout Eurasia during the 13th and 14th century, were not predestined to extinction as the result of tribal relocation or encounter with other populations. As the case study of the Oyirad tribe shows, one can point out a much more complex picture. In the different parts of the Mongol political realm and beyond it (from China and Mongolia to Palestine and Cairo) the Oyirad tribal identity went through different modes of preservation and change in the period under discussion. In the realm of Greater Iran the Oyirad tribe went through the process of islamization and almost completely disappeared from the sources after the fall of the Ilkhanate, around the end of the 14th century. However, it seems probable that until the end of the 13th century a significant amount of tribesmen kept their shamanistic beliefs, their cultural and even their ethnic identity. This can be seen from the example of another Oyirad group of about a tūmen, which escaped from the Ilkhanate to Mamluk Syria in the AH695/CE1296 and was seen by the Mamluk observers as a coherent distinct non-Muslim group with its own ethnic and cultural characteristics. At the same time, very different developments took place in Western Mongolia and China. Parts of the Oyirad tribe not only survived the disappearance of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, but became a predominant political player in the Mongolian realm since the end of the 14th century. In general, the complexity of the development of the Oyirad identity in the different areas of Mongol Eurasia can be seen as being connected to the complexity of the Oyirad relations with the Golden lineage in those respective areas, whereas the strong bilateral relations of Oyirads with the ruling clan can be seen as one of the probable obstacles for the preservation and the further development of the tribal cohesion.