

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CHARACTER OF ALAN-KOA AFTER THE EXPANSION OF ISLAM

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DOI: 10.54503/1829-4618-2022.2(16)-6

Abstract

The attention towards Islam and studies on the cross-cultural problems related to it has recently arisen, especially considering the role of Islam, the pivotal events happening in the Islamic world and growing interest in them.

The main goal of this research is to reveal the similarities in Turko-Mongolian environment between the stories attributed to the Mongol foremother and the cornerstone, “bridging” figure in both Islam and Christianity, Virgin Mary.¹ We intend to discuss the transformations of the character of Alan-Koa after the expansion of Islam based on written sources.

Within the boundaries of the subject we set a goal to raise and solve the following problems:

- *To try to analyze and understand the transformations of the character of Alan-Koa after the expansion of Islam*
- *To understand how these transformations took place and whether it was a result of manifestation of coexistence or not.*
- *Make a comparison between Mary and Alan-Koa uncovering the similarities between the stories attributed to them*

Keywords: *Alan-Koa, Christianity, parallels, Virgin Mary, Light-Holy Spirit, tribal Islam, Wolf-Man, Symbiosis, Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Mongols.*

Introduction

The importance of the “bridging,” pivotal characters in the Islamic world and the Christian regions surrounding it, and of the role these figures have in understanding the relations between “the two worlds” first and foremost brings about the importance of revealing the mechanisms of regulating those relations. The best examples of these mechanisms are the cornerstone figures that include elements both from Christianity and Islam.

As it is known, after the Mongol invasion the Muslim world has undergone transformations. However, Islam in its turn had its impact on Mongolian empire and further on the development of the confessional images of specific uluses.²

¹ Khachatryan 2021.

² The term *ulus* is used in a variety of contexts for provinces, populations, and subjects of the khan in general. It is mainly used as an administrative unit of the Mongol Empire.

There emerged an image where Christianity (which was also well spread among Mongols³), Islam and ancient Mongolian belief systems were to create an interesting mixture, symbiosis which on its turn would have been expressed through the transformations and symbolic expressions of the cornerstone characters. Islam gradually took a dominant position among Mongolian *uluses* including Mongols themselves already beginning from the 14th century. It is important to notice that the process of the expansion of Islam started almost simultaneously with the division of *uluses* around different parts of the empire, in the Golden Horde, in Ilkhanate, etc. Nevertheless, Islam could not eliminate entirely Mongolian-Tatar belief system, especially as they were connected to the stories of the origins of Mongols. The spread of Islam in Mongolian-Tatar environment was also expressed differently.

A thesis is posed within this research according to which the character of the Mongol foremother Alan-Koa undergoes major transformations after the spread of Islam. It is as if the character of Mary that penetrated into Mongolian environment through Islam was synthesized with the beliefs attributed to Alan-Koa.

The Mongols that worshiped different religions and did not have a united belief system before converting to Islam, leaned towards this or that religion on behalf of political considerations or sometimes even inner urges.⁴ Apart from that, they were very tolerant towards Christians.⁵ And it is probable that as the Mongol rule was expanding over several Christian-populated regions it boosted the synthesis of stories on the foremother.

Especially eye-catching is the diversity of religions among the rulers and ilkhans of the Golden Horde: Batu Khan - shamanist-tengrist, **Berke Khan** - muslim, **Sartaq Khan** - christian. Another curious example of this diversity is when the **Mohammad-e Khodabande (Kharbanda) Öljaitü Ilkhan** (1304–1316) proclaimed Shia Islam as the official religion for a short period (The Hulagu's dynasty was already settled in the Near and Middle East during this period⁶). It would not be wrong to assume that this diversity brought about the existence of the characteristic similarities.

1. The genealogy of Mongols and the mystery of Alan-Koa: an analysis

When it comes to the genealogy of Mongols, according to the most popular opinion, they were considered to be the posterity of Alan-Koa.⁷ As the myth claims, after the death of her husband⁸ Alan-Koa never got married again. It raises a question among her elder sons and her entire tribe: whose children are the ones that were born

³ Margaryan 2020: 228–245, 232.

⁴ Juvaini, Ala-ad-Din Ata-melik 2004: 20.

⁵ Margaryan 2020: 228–245, 230.

⁶ In 1256, the Mongol hordes who under the leadership of Hulagu captured Iran, Iraq and in 1257, Armenia, Georgia, Aghwank (Albania) and other countries, founded the Mongolian state-Ilkhanate.

⁷ Rashid al-Din 1952: 152-153. Skrynnikova 2019: 180.

⁸ The husband of Alan-Koa, Dobun Mergen (The Secret History of the Mongols 1982: 2; The Secret History of the Mongols 2015: 2; Rashid al-Din 1952: 152.

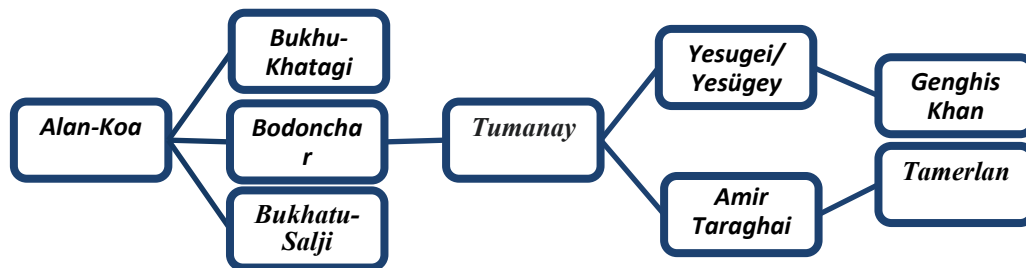
after the death of her husband? Alan-Koa tells the story of a blond man⁹ who entered her tent every night. His origin was divine as no one except from Alan-Koa had seen him. From here the conclusion was followed that her three sons¹⁰ also had divine origins. The tribe of Alan-Koa believed this story which most probably was weaved by her.

There is a mention of this myth on the tombstone¹¹ found in the mausoleum¹² of Tamerlane. It reaffirms the idea of Alan-Koa being the foremother of Mongols and her sons having divine origin which is quite similar to the story of Virgin Mary.

The Arabic record found in the mausoleum of Tamerlane reports the following:

This tomb is the tomb of the nobleman Sultan Khaqan amir: Amir Timur “Gurakan¹³”, the son of Amir Taraghai, the son of Amir Barghul ... [Here] the origin of Genghis Khan¹⁴ got separated from this root. And the nobleman [the sultan] was buried in this glorious and conspicuous tomb. Genghis Khan, the son of Amir Yesugei Baghatur... And the father of this high-born was not known.¹⁵ What is known is his mother, Alan-Koa, the same Alan-Koa.¹⁶

What follows is a listing of the ancestors of Timur. It is interesting that here the lines of origins of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane intersecting through a mutual ancestor finally form separate lines.



⁹ Kozin 1941, § 21, p. 81.

¹⁰ Kozin 1941, §10, p.80. The three sons were: **Bukhu-Khatagi**, **Bukhatu-Salji**, **Bodonchar**. The Secret History of the Mongols 2015: 3; The Secret History of the Mongols 1982: 3.

¹¹ Margaryan 2018, § 69-72, p. 72.

¹² The mausoleum of Timur was often mentioned in sources as the Guri Emir after his death. Many points of view regarding the name have been voiced, and the question of the names Guri Amir /Gur-i Amir/ or Guri Mir /Gur-i Mir/ has been discussed in particular. McChesney 2021: 17-21.

¹³ The title *Küregen* or *Gurkānī* Timur received after he became associated with the Genghisid dynasty, becoming the son-in-law of the dynasty, he took the name Timur *Gurkānī* (Timur Gurkani, Gurkan). As the "son-in-law of the Genghisid dynasty" bearing this title, he legitimized his power. (Timūr Gurkānī, Gurkān mongolian *k̄yr̄gen* or *kh̄yr̄gen* is the Iranian version of "son-in-law". Stephen F. Dale 2018: 23; Barthold 2002: 44; Semenov 1948: 53; Slatyer 2014: 318.

¹⁴ According to another Mongolian myth, Genghis Khan also descended from one of the sons of Alan-Koa, Bodonchar. Myths of the Peoples of the World 1987: 80 and also Myths of the Peoples of the World: Encyclopedia 2008: 150-151.

¹⁵ Since, according to the myth, Alan-Koa's husband died and after his death she had children. Her relatives and elder sons have doubts about who the father of these children is? The answer to this question was known only to Alan-Koa. Later, she tried to prove the divine origin of his children with her statements. Curtin 2008: 5.

¹⁶ Semenov 1948: 53.

2. The reports of Armenian sources on the origins of Mongols and Alan-Koa

There are mentions on the divine origins of Mongols in Armenian sources as well. As an example, in his *History of Armenia (Patmut'iwn hayots)*,¹⁷ Kirakos Ghandzaketsi refers to the divine origin of Mongols. Mentioning about the impregnation from an unseen light [the Light person] he writes:

"... a light came from an unseen, entered through the garret window and told the mother [you will get pregnant and give birth to a monarch-son]. And they considered him to be born out of this."¹⁸

As the author claims, it was told by a prince from the Mamikonyan family named Grigor who heard it from an old man called Ghutun. Considering this we come to the conclusion that this mention is yet another testimony of the divine origin of Mongols and that their foremother gave birth to a monarch-son who then became the great Mongolian Khagan Temüjin, that is to say, Genghis Khan.

A similar mention can be encountered later in a study by Buzand Yeghiayan. Speaking on the origins of Mongolian-Tatar tribes the author mentions a part from a family myth referred by the Mongol narrator Sanank-Sietsen [Սանկանկ-Սիէթսէն]. The latter states that Mongols originate from "the blue wolf"¹⁹ which according to the author can be a totemic archetype. Further he underlines that according to another tradition the forefather of Mongols is someone called Butandzar (it is about Bodonchar, the second son of Alan-Koa showcased on the chart above who was considered the ancestor of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane). He was the son of the widow who magically got impregnated. And the father of Genghis Khan, Yesugei, was from the 8th generation of that ancestor (the son of Alan-Koa).

In his study *A History of Armenian Emigration*, Arshak Alpoyachian (Alboyadjian) already mentions the foremother of Mongols as Alan-Koa or the Light Deer²⁰ reaffirming that Genghis Khan has descended from her.

Both in the case of Ghandzaketsi and Eghiayan the name of the foremother is not mentioned. It is, however, present in Alpoyachian's work. In conclusion, generalizing the mentions in Armenian sources one can claim that these testify to the same mysterious origin. It is the story of the mysterious impregnation of Mongolian foremother that gave birth to the Mongol forefather.

3. An analysis on the similarities between the characters of Mary and Alan-Koa

The following excerpts from the record on the tombstone found in the mausoleum of Tamerlane are related to our topic and are interesting from this perspective:

¹⁷ Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1982.

¹⁸ Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1982: 196.

¹⁹ Yeghiayan 1989: 150.

²⁰ Alpoyachian 1955: 5.

And as it is told and attested, [the pregnancy] was not promiscuity on the part of Alan-Koa but the consequence of the pure light.²¹

Comparing this to the Biblical story of the impregnation of Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit it is obvious that both characters and the stories attributed to them are undeniably affected though distorted in “Mongolian” version.

Excerpt from the record on the tombstone found in the mausoleum of Tamerlane	Excerpt from the Quran	Excerpt from the Gospel of Luke
<p>“It is said that she is righteous, unblemished, and pure in her essence. He [the light wolf-man²²] impregnated her [Alan-Koa] from the light²³ [which] entered from the above door and appeared in front of her in appearance of a perfect man.”</p>	<p>“And [remember] her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for all peoples. ...and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations and was one of the devout [servants].”²⁴</p>	<p>Hail, full of grace, The Lord is with thee... The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.... Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word....²⁵</p>

As in front of Mary appeared the Holy Spirit, there appeared the divine light²⁶ in front of Alan-Koa or as “the version of Tamerlane” states the pure light²⁷ which can be identical with the Holy Spirit from which she got pregnant. In front of her appeared the archangel Gabriel as a perfect man [it was a divine light in case of Alan-Koa] which then transformed to Ali²⁸ or his generations.

²¹ Autobiography of Timur 1934: 248-249; Korogly 1976: 75-76; Mukhamade 2017: 87.

²² The version about the light-wolf man: See Rashid al-Din 1952: 14.

²³ In other versions she conceived from a wolf (Korogly 1976: 75-76; Autobiography of Timur 1934: 248-249; Mukhamade 2017: 87). Another version mentions the golden man (Lococo 2008: 4).

Touching upon the hypothesis of pregnancy from the light of Mary, Tereza Amryan in one of her articles notes the following. According to one of the traditions accepted among the Yezidis living in Armenia, Mary became pregnant from the Divine Light. (nûra Xwedê, the literal "light of God") and gave birth to Jesus (Amryan 2019: 398).

²⁴ The Holy Quran... Sura 66, Ayat 12, p.

²⁵ The Gospel According To Luke 1931, Chapter 1:26-38, pp.151-152; The Holy Bible Translated From The Latin Vulgate Diligently Compared With The Hebrew, Greek, And Other Editions In Divers Languages, Douay-Rheims Version 1609, 1582. New Testament, 48 The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, According to St. Luke, 1:26-38.

²⁶ Angels, the Holy Spirit and Christ are identified with light, often represented as fiery spirit beings even in Christianity [Isaiah 6:4, see also Luke 24:31, Matthew 28, etc.]. In Islam, for example, angels, jinns, demons, Satan, etc. are considered disembodied spiritual beings.

²⁷ Rashid al-Din 1952: 152.

²⁸ Semenov 1949: 51.

*“He said that he was one of the faithful sons and heirs of **Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib** and the claims [assurances] directed towards her [Alan-Koa] that he is [the son **Alī**] confirm its truthfulness many times.”²⁹*



Picture 1. Alan-Koa in the manuscript of Mu'izz Al-Ansab of the XIX century.

Especially interesting is this transitional episode which purports that the Mongol forefather has later been “Islamized”. If in Islamic and Christian biblical stories there appears the archangel Gabriel, in case of Alan-Koa, it is the wolf. Both of them present themselves in human form. As opposed to the Islamic and Christian narratives where there is no mention of any man, here the appearance of one of the well-known Islamic figures, **Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib** is obvious: a fact that is probably not incidental. Presenting Ali as their forefather would attest to their Muslim origin, being the descendants of the Prophet and their correlations with Shia Islam.

There is a tendency revealing itself here according to which the genealogy of Mongols is being intertwined with Islam. The forefather of Mongols is being presented as one of the descendants of the fourth pious caliph **Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib**... The choice of Ali specifically gives us room to think that it could have been conditioned by Timur’s policies of wooing the Shia Islamists and disseminating Shia Islam amongst Mongols (*Öljaitü Khan, Turkmenian Qizilbash [Kizilbash] tribes, the worship of Islam amongst Shia Kara Koyunlus*). Ali himself is the agent of Shia Islam. Thus, it turns out that the Mongol forefather was Shia Muslim and the foremother was Mongol. And the specific choice of Ali as the Mongol forefather attests to the fact that Turko-Mongolian Islamic world was trying to represent and propagate a genealogical link between themselves and the Prophet Muhammad as well as his descendants. It is also not incidental that Timur was usually accused of being Shia but presenting himself as Sunni.

The same tendency of turning towards Islam is traceable in a picture attributed to Alan-Koa from a manuscript called Mu’izz Al-Ansab. This manuscript is stored in the British Library, it is usually referred as “the book glorifying genealogy” and the picture of Alan-Koa found in it is presented as a “portrait.” We see here a Mongol woman – Alan-Koa – in an Islamic fashion: she is painted wearing a hijab which was not a common headwear amongst Mongols. Mongolian women never wore hijabs and it is not common to their iconography even in the Middle Ages.

²⁹ Semenov 1948: 58.

CONCLUSION

According to written sources it can be concluded that the character of Mongol foremother Alan-Koa has undergone through pivotal transformations after the expansion of Islam. The character of Mary that came to the Turko-Mongolian environment through Islam has been synthesized with the belief system attributed to Alan-Koa. It can be stated that the character of Alan-Koa includes elements both from the Pagan belief system and from Christianity as well as Islam. These facts in their turn attest to the conclusion that despite the denominational diversity amongst Mongols the expansion of Islam could not remain inconsequential. The result of these interactions is the specific mixed symbiosis in the stories attributed to the Mongol foremother, the outcome of which are the distinct characteristic similarities.

The studies of the character and significance of Mary in both Christian and Islamic worlds shows the existence of features attributed to her in the stories on Alan-Koa. In the case of Virgin Mary it is said that the Holy Spirit showed itself to her appearing as the archangel Gabriel who was surrounded by a bright light (the Holy Spirit) which thereafter turned into a human character in order not to frighten her. In one of the versions of the story of Alan-Koa it is the wolf or the wolf-man. If Mary got impregnated through the Holy Spirit, in the "Timurian version" of Alan-Koa's story the pure light is mentioned as the source. If in the first case the biblical stories both in Christianity and in Islam there appears the archangel Gabriel, in Alan-Koa's case it is the wolf: both of these characters take a human form in the stories. Unlike the Christian and Islamic stories where there is no mention of a man, the name of **Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib** appears in the Mongolian version which cannot be accidental.

In conclusion, one can state that already in the 15th century the character of Alan-Koa included elements both from Christianity and from Islam. The best example of this is the impregnation of Alan-Koa by the Light or the wolf-man which has its parallels to the Holy Spirit. This Light or the wolf-man under the influence of Shia Islam thereafter turns to be one of descendants of **Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib**.

We can thus firmly state that after the expansion of Islam in Turko-Mongolian environment the character of Alan-Koa undergoes pivotal transformations.

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The article was delivered on 11.08.2022, reviewed on 29.11.2022, accepted for publication on 06.12.2022.