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**STEPPE AS A SYMBOL OF LIVING SPACE IN KALMYK ETHNO-
AXIOLOGY**

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Abstract

This study focuses on the multi-layered nature of the steppe as a key symbol in the cultural and value picture of the Kalmyk world. A detailed semantic and culturological explication of lexical and phraseological units associated with this theme is carried out on the basis of the materials of the Kalmyk-Russian dictionary. This analysis is extended by a multidisciplinary reading in historical, cultural and sociolinguistic contexts. The work demonstrates that for the Kalmyk people, the steppe transcends geographical understanding, becoming a complex symbol in which historical memory, spiritual reference points and value attitudes are intertwined. The aim of the study is to stimulate further research on ethno-axiological aspects in Kalmyk culture and methods of their linguistic representation. The research also develops the unique cultural and linguistic algorithms underlying the symbols and images that form the national identity of the Kalmyks. The article covers different types of sources – from academic articles to ethnographic observations – to explore traditional representations of the steppe that are not only preserved but also adapted to the contemporary reality of the Kalmyk people. The study's conclusions emphasise the key role of the steppe in the dynamics of Kalmyk culture, tracing its evolution from its original status as an ecosystem and space for nomadic lifestyle to its contemporary significance as a symbol of national dignity and a factor of identity. The work concludes that the steppe acts as a fundamental element of the collective memory and cultural heritage of the Kalmyk people.

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1. Introduction

Every culture has certain symbols that serve as the basis for spiritual traditions, cultural norms and relationships with the real world. In this context, the steppe, providing a continuous link between the historical past, present and future of this ethnos, is a key element in the cultural vocabulary of the Kalmyks.

The present study seeks to decode the steppe as a fundamental symbol in the cultural discourse of the Kalmyk people, as well as to explore the multi-layered semantic nuances acquired by this element at different stages of evolution. Unlike other ethnic groups, for whom other natural phenomena may be the dominant cultural symbols, the steppe for the Kalmyks acts as a dominant cultural indicator, which opens up prospects for further scientific analyses (Mele, 2022; Nikulin, 2023; Rawel, 2022).

2. Problem Statement

The study leads to an understanding of the unique contribution of the Kalmyk ethnos to global historical and cultural trends, especially in the context of nomadic societies. These findings can serve as a starting point for additional research in the fields of ethno-axiology, cultural studies and social anthropology. They may also be useful for creating new methodological approaches to the preservation and actualisation of the cultural code of the Kalmyks in the era of globalisation and cultural transformation (Collet-Sabé, 2023; Manakbayeva, 2023; Sheveleva, 2024).

3. Research Questions

Emerging from the intertwining of ethnology, axiology and cultural anthropology, ethno-axiology serves as a tool for in-depth analysis of the value orientations of different ethnic groups. While, originally, its task was to highlight the unique values of specific ethnic groups, now, in the era of globalisation and migration waves, the focus has shifted to the study of the dynamics and adaptation of these value systems.

4. Purpose of the Study

In the cultural panorama, the symbol acts not simply as a sign or object; it incorporates a complex network of meanings that transcend its direct perception. This element becomes a centre in the gravitational field of national and religious rituals, embodying the basic moral and spiritual principles of a people.

5. Research Methods

In terms of "living space", the term extends well beyond the mere geographical area in which a given ethnic group is located. The concept also encompasses the ideational level, where key beliefs and values are formed, which, due to cultural and historical factors, can be subject to a variety of interpretations.

Analysing these three concepts opens up a multifaceted way to explore both static and dynamic aspects of cultural and value systems.

The relationship between a symbol and the cultural matrix of a people

The significance of symbolic elements in constructing the cultural code of an ethnic group is extremely high. These components possess deep semantic layers that transcend mere interpretation. They play a key role in the transmission and preservation of cultural attributes.

6. Findings

A cultural code is a complexly organised system of beliefs, rituals and canons that defines the identity and characteristics of a given nation. This code is the basis on which collective consciousness is formed and it guides everyday actions, worldviews and interpretations of reality.

Symbols act as keys to decipher this code, creating a link between past and current cultural practices. They activate sociocultural solidarity and strengthen the sense of belonging to a particular cultural or national group.

The example of state symbols, such as coats of arms, anthems or "holiday dates", can be used to demonstrate how symbols embody the canons and beliefs of a nation, becoming reference points in the complex space of intercultural interactions.

Hence, symbols and cultural code are closely interrelated. Symbols act as agents of the cultural code, providing the means to articulate, interpret and reproduce the cultural heritage of a society.

6.1. Natural and climatic context of the Kalmyk ethnos

The study of the cultural and historical specificity of the Kalmyk people is impossible without taking into account the role of the natural environment in which they were formed. Located in the south of the European part of Russia, Kalmykia stands apart due to its Buddhist ethnos (Badmaev, 2021). This region, with its amazing nature, has become a cradle for the Kalmyks, whose life is inextricably linked to the steppe and the resources it provides.

The endless horizons of the steppe and its climatic peculiarities provided the Kalmyks with the opportunity to develop ways of subsistence aimed at nomadic animal husbandry. In such environment, a unique worldview was born, where the steppe acquired a status not only of a habitat, but also of a symbol of a spiritual path (Zhitetsky, 1893).

The cultural heritage of the Kalmyks is closely linked to their natural environment. Attitudes towards natural elements such as land, water and air are manifested in the folk culture, including language, traditions, mythology and religious practices (Esenova, 2019). These connections with nature emphasise the central place it occupies in the life and mentality of the Kalmyk people (Sarangaeva, 2019). The vocabulary of the Kalmyk language contains many lexemes characterising flora, fauna and natural processes, which confirms the close connection of the Kalmyks with the surrounding world. For example, the term "salkn" (wind) can symbolise not only an atmospheric phenomenon, but also life changes or new horizons (Bardaev & Muniev, 2019).

The attitude of the Kalmyks to the animal world, in particular to horses, is also reflected in the language. The term "mørn" (horse) in the Kalmyk language not only refers to a four-legged friend, but also reflects its role as an emblem of independence, power and movement. Kalmyks have the phrase "mørn gyyh" (lit. horse running), i.e. "to accompany luck". This noble horse is constantly near a man as a reliable comrade (Basangov, 1940).

The study of the spatial and natural features of Kalmykia gives us a key to understanding the deep cultural and historical heritage of the Kalmyks, as well as the role of the steppe in defining their identity and spiritual values.

6.2. Migration paths and historical evolution of the Kalmyk people

The transition of the Kalmyks across historical and geographical spaces, until their establishment on the lands of present-day Kalmykia, was influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from social to economic (Ochirova, 2019). These centuries-long movements were completed by the 17th century, leaving a trace in the cultural heritage of the people.

The main navigators of the European steppes for the Kalmyks were their nomadic traditions, which determined the peculiarities of their worldview and spiritual connection with the natural environment (Shilov, 2019). Cultural contacts with a number of ethnic groups, including Russian, Tatar and Kazakh communities, contributed to the dynamic formation of their ethnic identity (Imkenova, 1999).

In the context of changes in the Russian Empire and the reorganisation of state borders, the Kalmyks faced the need to rethink their socio-cultural position. However, despite external challenges, their cultural heritage, reflected in language, tradition and art, has shown remarkable resilience (Gachev, 1994). Thus, the Kalmyk way is a striking testimony to the preservation of cultural resilience in a world of change and cultural interactions.

6.3. Sociocultural peculiarities of the Kalmyk steppe

The steppes of Kalmykia bear a deep trace of the unique cultural and social heritage of the Kalmyk people. This area represents the cradle in which the basic values and beliefs of the Kalmyks were formed and developed (Golubeva, 2019).

The central thread of the cultural weaving of the Kalmyks remains their nomadic heritage. Their deep connection with nature permeate every aspect of their lives, making the land not just a haven but a source of their spiritual energy (Ayushova, 2020). It is not surprising that in the Kalmyk language the word "Khalmg" simultaneously means their nationhood and their native expanse (Bardaev & Muniev, 2019).

The visible attributes of their culture, such as snow-white yurts, serve not only as a refuge from the elements, but also symbolise a connection with their nomadic past and a deep respect for nature (Lamakina, 1975). The lexicon of the Kalmyk language relating to nature, steppes and wildlife is the basis of their cultural context. For the Kalmyks, the concept of "byur" (nomadism) is much deeper than mere travelling; it is a way of life that reflects harmony and unity with nature (Sarangaeva, 2019). It is important to note that it was in the steppe that the Kalmyk people formed their unique cultural fabric, weaving into it their traditions and beliefs born in close contact with the natural world.

The interaction between Kalmyk culture and its linguistic foundations is the source of a special conceptual system, which contains the unique values of the people. Language is not just a coded way of transmitting information, it is a mysterious key to the door of cultural heritage, behind which the foundations, rituals and philosophy of the people are kept.

It is noteworthy that Kalmyk folk sayings, rooted in the natural reality of the steppe and the peculiarities of nomadic life, reveal the philosophy of the people. Thus, in the sayings Kharach öndəkhle, örkəhig kəndədg (When the matitsa rises, the family's welfare increases); Kharach uga deglədn, khaaran khələx suuhv? (Where to look in a yurt without a smoke hole?) the word kharach is mentioned. Kharach means a hole (matitsa, circle) in the upper part of the dwelling is an important part of the kubitka; it can't be without it, as there will be no place for the smoke to leave the hearth, and so the young family, for whom a new kubitka was built, won't be able to live in it. The meaning of this proverb emphasises the importance of family ties and the role of each individual in the social hierarchy (Kotvich, 2022).

The Kalmyk understanding of the term "byyr" (nomad) in Kalmyk culture embodies not only physical movement, but also the complex concept of coexistence with nature and the need for flexible adaptation to steppe realities. This concept is central to the cultural doctrine of the Kalmyks (Yesenova, 2021).

By analysing the linguistic characteristics of the Kalmyk peoples, one can come to a deep understanding of their socio-cultural foundations and unique system of values. Language plays a key role in preserving the cultural values of a nation, and the Kalmyk language is a vivid example of this. Through it we can trace the unique features of Kalmyk life and thinking, and their perception of the world around them.

- i. Usn (water): in the conditions of steppes, the water resource acquires a special significance. For the Kalmyks, Usn is not just an element, it is a life-giving force, a symbol of prosperity and a life-giving element (Kichikov et al., 1964).
- ii. Chal (fire): in Kalmyk traditions, fire is seen not only as a source of light and warmth, but also as an image of family comfort and protection. Religious and cultural practices of the Kalmyks reflect the veneration of fire (Ayushova, 2020).
- iii. Khazr (land): for Kalmyks, the land is a symbol of homeland, the natural world and the space of life. It represents basic values, and the word "hazr" is often mentioned in Kalmyk to emphasise attachment to one's roots (Yesenova, 2021).
- iv. Teg (steppe): this word personifies unlimited expanses, freedom and harmony. For the Kalmyks, the steppe represents not only geographical terrain, but also an inner state of mind, a combination of movement and inner freedom (Ukhtomsky, 1891).

In the Kalmyk linguistic sphere, there is a diverse categorisation of space. According to L.A. Lidzhieva's research, a "landmark" functions as a central element forming the surrounding space, which, in turn, is subdivided into various subcategories of localisation (Lidzhieva, 2019). Specific afterwords in the Kalmyk language indicate the geographical position of objects and subjects:

- i. deer refers to the vertical plane: deer kyrtil harv (ascended upwards);
- ii. deed denotes a superior status position: Deedbiy (place of respect), usually applied to burhans;

- iii. dotr captures the spatial interiority: chora dotr (indoors);
- iv. Khaza indicates external coordinates: har nydnæskæskymrhaza (the significance of the eye exceeds that of the eyebrow), with other spatial lexemes like hazahas, hazahur, hazahur, hazad and so on being derived from haza;
- v. Tal reflects directionality: Tan tal (in your direction).

In general, the Kalmyk language is a repository of unique linguistic constructions and phraseological units that are a reflection of the cultural and historical context, providing us with tools to analyse the Kalmyk cultural identity and code of values.

6.4. The steppe as a symbol of living space in Kalmyk culture

For centuries, in the heart of the Kalmyk people, the steppe has been not just a geographical space, but a deep symbol reflecting their cultural and spiritual aspects. This open landscape epitomises their history, identity and spiritual heritage. In literary works, the steppe is often depicted as a portal to the infinite, where individuals encounter spiritual depth and the cosmos (Yesenova, 2021). Paintings usually depict it as a place for introspection, seeking and interacting with the transcendental (Sternin, 2018).

Steppe-based melodies integrate the sounds of nature, such as wind or birdsong, to create a sense of connection with the land (Ayushova, 2020). In a lexical context, a word such as "Teg" is simply translated as "steppe", but its significance for Kalmyks extends much further, representing a complex set of feelings and associations (Basangov, 1940). The image of the steppe in the visual arts of Kalmykia represents it as a place where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible are erased, turning this landscape into an almost unbelievable space (Golubeva, 2019). The steppe for the Kalmyks is not just a physical place. It is the epicentre of cultural, spiritual and historical values, permeating every part of their cultural heritage, be it language, art or music (Zhukovskaya, 2022).

6.5. The role of the steppe in the rituals and festivals of the Kalmyk people

Let us consider the steppe space as the most important core of the Kalmyk cultural heritage. This majestic terrain transcends its role as a mere landscape, becoming a carrier and interpreter of the spiritual values and philosophical views of this nation.

In the numerous Kalmyk customs aimed at granting grace or fertility, the steppe appears not just as a geographical point, but also as the epicentre of the connection between the mundane and the supernatural (Esenova, 2019). Here it personifies the spiritual dimension, the bridge between humanity and the invisible world.

Ceremonies marking the change of pastures emphasise the deep connection of the Kalmyks with this vast area and its gifts (Imkenova, 1999). Terms like "Teg" and "Belchr" show the depth of respect for this space and its importance for the life of the people (Basangov, 1940).

Religious aspects are also immersed in the symbolism of the steppe. Prayer works and chants that appeal to the higher powers for the welfare of livestock and the entire community emphasise the unbreakable bond between the Kalmyks and their native land (Lamakina, 1975).

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unbreakable bond between the Kalmyks and their native land (Lamakina, 1975). In conclusion, it can be said that for the Kalmyk people, the steppe is not only a setting for their rituals and festivals, but also an active element that reflects deep spiritual beliefs and enriches the cultural heritage of this people (Golubeva, 2019).

6.6. Ethnoaxiological analysis of the steppe as a symbol of living space

The majestic expanses of the steppes have long defined the socio-cultural dynamics of the Kalmyk ethnos, acting not only as a resource for existence, but also as a mirror of their spiritual essence. For the Kalmyks, the steppe is not just a geographical concept, but also a metaphysical space symbolising harmony, cosmic balance and tradition (Esenova, 2022).

When we consider steppe peoples as a whole, we find similar parallels in their attitude to the steppe. Let us consider the Mongols: for them, the steppe is a symbol of infinity and unity with the universe, a place where nature and the human spirit unite (Zhukovskaya, 2022). Nevertheless, in the Kalmyk perception, the steppe also serves as a repository of national memory, where every element of the landscape keeps stories about the past (Ochirova, 2019).

From a linguistic perspective, certain terms such as "Teg" (steppe) or "Belchr" (pasture) in the Kalmyk language acquire a special meaning, reflecting a complex mosaic of cultural and spiritual concepts (Basangov, 1940). These concepts not only describe the environment, but also open the door to the world of beliefs and traditions on which life in the steppe is based.

By studying the ethno-cultural peculiarities of the Kalmyks' perception of the steppe in the context of other steppe civilisations, it is possible to identify both common threads and unique shades. This analysis provides a key to understanding the value orientations of steppe cultures and the supreme status of the steppe as a central element of their cultural and spiritual identity (Gachev, 1994).

6.7. Linguistic analysis of the steppe as a symbol of living space

For the Kalmyks, as well as for other peoples living in the steppe, its space is not a mere natural element. It reflects the cultural and philosophical aspects of their lives, deeply rooted in their spirituality:

- i. *Zam* in translation from Kalmyk is a path, a route through the steppe expanses. But behind this word there is a deeper meaning associated with the path of life, search for meaning and spiritual development (Basangov, 1940).
- ii. *Shavshl h* is the horizon, which for the Kalmyks symbolises not just the boundary between earth and sky, but also between the known and the unknown, the terrestrial and the superterrestrial (Bardaev & Muniev, 2019).
- iii. *Khypə hazr* can be interpreted as uninhabited space or deserted land. Although at first glance the word may seem to be associated with emptiness, for the Kalmyks it is a symbol of the primordial beauty of the steppe, a space for spiritual reflection (Basangov, 1940).
- iv. *Adrgta hazr* means an elevation or a small hill in the vast steppes. These hills serve not only as landmarks in travelling, but also as metaphors of overcoming and life trials (Kotvich, 2022).

From the above examples, it is clear that the connection between the Kalmyk language and steppe culture is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the nomads. The lexicon associated with the steppe landscape illustrates not only its physical attributes, but also reveals a wide range of philosophical and spiritual ideals characteristic of life in such unique terrain (Yesenova, 2021).

From B.B. Mandzhikova's research we learn about unique Kalmyk floristic terminologies, such as "buurldata, tsahan øvstə tag" and "ø-modta tag", which categorise varieties of steppe landscapes. The first category, characterised by sagebrush and wormwood, acts as a microcosm representing ecological sustainability and diversity. In this context, from the point of view of the ethno-axiology of the Kalmyk people, it takes on an additional meaning, emphasising the harmonious balancing between different forms of life in the steppe. On the other hand, the term "ø-modta tag" serves as a hybrid to focus the plurality of ecosystems, thus forming a symbolic platform for the Kalmyk ethno-axiological understanding of the integration of diverse life values. The lexeme "sul", which is translated as "oats", represents an additional factor of interest. This term not only categorises a particular type of vegetation, but perhaps also indicates the economic and nutritional importance of the steppe as a source of subsistence and resources.

The terminology of flora reflects not only the vegetative reality of the landscape, but also deeply rooted value ideas about how different forms of life and cultural practices can co-exist in harmony. These terms become not just means of categorising the natural environment, but also complex symbolic structures through which Kalmyk culture expresses its basic axiological principles.

By studying the lexical units associated with the concept of steppe in the Kalmyk language, we can not only categorise the various forms of this landscape, but also gain a deeper understanding of the value orientations of the Kalmyk ethnic group, enriching our understanding of their culture at several levels. Guided by the historical dictionary compiled by P. Smirnov in 1857, we can conduct a linguocultural analysis of the steppe as a symbolic element in the Kalmyk value system, focusing on the time frame when these lexemes were first recorded (Smirnov, 1857). In this matrix, "keer" or "khazad khazr" acts as the key concept identifying the steppe, thus emphasising its centripetal role in the Kalmyk cultural and value space.

Using a diachronic method, we concluded that such terms reflect enduring value attitudes in Kalmyk culture. Therefore, despite socio-cultural changes, since 1857, these lexical units remain relevant today, creating a link between the historical and contemporary perception of the steppe as a multifunctional space.

In the dictionary edited by B. D. Muniev, published in 1977, the steppe occupies an important place in Kalmyk vocabulary and cultural symbolism. The term "tag" is the basic designation for the steppe, but its modifications are also of interest, allowing us to speak of different aspects and characteristics of this space. For example, the expression "bargdshgo Orgn teg" (limitless wide steppe) not only attests the physical characteristic of the landscape, but also, perhaps, metaphorically emphasises its importance in the cultural and spiritual space of the Kalmyk people. This "boundlessness" may reflect the infinite possibilities and potential that ethno-axiological attributes to the steppe. Another example – "køvchərn kədət uldgut shar adrhñ Dzhangar" (a long yellow bow with a bowstring resting on the steppe) – highlights not only the ecological but also the mythological component of the steppe, associating it with heroic legends and notions of courage. The term "Iḵlin ergndk teg" (Privolzhskaya steppe) introduces

geographical differentiation, indicating that the steppe is not a monolithic space, but has various local features that may be axiologically significant. The linguistic analysis of the steppe in the context of Kalmyk ethno-axiology, made on the basis of the Kalmyk-Russian dictionary edited by B.D. Muniev, reveals a number of interesting aspects concerning this key element of the Kalmyk cultural and ecological paradigm. The word "ik teg" (vast steppe) focuses on the spatial characteristic of the steppe, emphasising its grandiose size and probably symbolising the boundless life opportunities it offers. Even more multilayered is the term "keer", which, in addition to the basic meaning of "steppe", also has connotations associated with uninhabited and unspoilt places. It suggests wild, untouched nature, which in Kalmyk culture can be associated with freedom, spirituality and the opportunity for self-fulfilment. The interesting verb derivative "keerlh" (to withdraw into the steppe) can be interpreted as an act of free or necessary retreat into this living space. In this context, it could reflect a desire for self-isolation for meditation, reflection, or for seeking refuge and resources, including "mal keerlhdharch" – instances where cattle retreat deep into the steppe, perhaps in search of pastures.

Hence, the linguistic analysis confirms the fact that the steppe is not just a physical space, but a complex symbol with multiple axiological, cultural and ecological dimensions in the Kalmyk worldview. The analysis allows us to deepen our understanding of the steppe as a multidimensional symbol in Kalmyk ethno-axiology by integrating the geographical, ecological and cultural-mythological dimensions of this concept.

In the Kalmyk linguistic context, steppe, or "kədə", does not simply represent a desert terrain or field. It is a concept in which various aspects of life and culture are centred. The example "əxgo ermtsakhan kədə" ("deserted, burned-out steppe") illustrates the steppe's characteristic atmosphere of simultaneous loneliness and stark beauty, perhaps implying both a spiritual thirst and a test of survival.

The verbal form "kədadh" ("to go round the steppe") may indicate active interaction with this space: its study, pastoral or even spiritual use. It is not just a space, but a place that requires active interaction and understanding.

The phrase "Kədlmsh kək chon bish, kədə orzh, gyyh uga" (work is not a wolf – it will not run away to the steppe) introduces a new dimension into the analysis, linking the steppe to the notion of work or duty that cannot be avoided or postponed. Here, the steppe metaphorically becomes a symbol of life's inevitable duties or trials, which cannot simply be ignored.

As a result, linguistic analysis shows that in the Kalmyk ethno-axiological system, the steppe is not just a geographical object, but also a powerful symbol that summarises various aspects of human life, from social and ecological to spiritual and metaphysical.

In the context of Kalmyk culture and language, the concept of steppe acquires a multidimensional character, functioning as a living space with a variety of semiotic and axiological meanings. Let us consider, for example, the verb "kəəh" ("to chase, drive away"). In the combination "tag tal mal kəəx harhkh" ("to drive cattle into the steppe"), we see the active interaction between man and the steppe: the steppe here is not just a passive background, but also a place that provides resources for pastures and, consequently, for life activity.

The adjectival phrases "manurtsnhalmg teg" ("blue Kalmyk steppe") and "nytsklh teg" ("bare steppe") represent different aspects of this living space. "Blue" steppe may symbolise dreaminess or even

spiritual emptiness, whereas "naked" steppe is perhaps a space devoid of shelter or resources, but opens up to freedom and unlimited possibilities.

In this connection, the linguistic analysis reveals the fact that in the Kalmyk language and culture, the steppe is not an unambiguous or static concept. It functions as a complex symbol integrating various axiological, ecological and even metaphysical aspects of life. Vocabulary and phraseological units associated with the steppe enrich the understanding of this key element in Kalmyk ethno-axiology.

Linguistic analyses of the concept of "steppe" in the Kalmyk culture and language continue to emphasise its multifaceted nature. We can consider the phrase "ohnehn tag" ("untouched steppe"). Here, "pristine" can serve as a metaphor for primordiality, purity and freedom, and in a broader axiological context for the value of nature conservation and cultural heritage. The term can also implicate the idea of the steppe as a "long uninhabited" space, which adds a touch of mysticism and mystery to it.

Another interesting phrase is "tag talvahad bəənə" ("the steppe spread out"). In this expression, the steppe is represented as an active participant of events, capable of action ("spread out"). This representation can symbolise the grandiosity and capacity of the steppe, its ability to be a living space for different forms of life, including humans.

Linguistic analysis of the Kalmyk understanding of the steppe reveals the complex axiological layer in which this term functions. For example, the expression "khalmgərgn u teg" ("wide Kalmyk steppe") includes not only a geographical characteristic ("wide") but also an ethnicity ("Kalmyk"). This emphasises the deep connection between the people and this space, making the steppe an integral part of the Kalmyk identity.

The term "əjgo ermtsahan tag" ("deserted steppe") adds an element of loneliness and isolation to the picture, perhaps emphasising its harshness and severity, but at the same time its pristine and untouched nature. In the context of ethno-axiology, this may symbolise the need to adapt and survive in inhospitable conditions, as well as respect for natural resources.

"Kək tərŋc šidrk tər" ("Caspian steppe") indicates a specific geographical zone, adding another level to the understanding of the steppe – regional. This may reflect differences in the perception and use of the steppe depending on its location.

Each of the discussed terms adds certain nuances to the general understanding of the steppe in Kalmyk ethno-axiology, forming a complex and multidimensional image of this key element of the cultural and physical landscape.

In the Kalmyk cultural and linguistic picture of the world, the steppe occupies a multifaceted and symbolically rich space. Let us consider, for example, the expression "endrktegegenbuuliav" ("I will sing my favourite song, I will glorify today's steppe"). Here the steppe is not just a physical space, but also an object of an emotional and cultural perception that deserves poetic praise. This indicates that the steppe is considered an integral part of cultural and spiritual life in Kalmyk ethno-axiology.

The term "Ermtsakhan tag" ("bare steppe") adds an additional layer of interpretation. The word "bare" here can have an ambiguous character: on the one hand, it indicates the absence of human activity and the primordial nature, on the other hand, the possible harshness and inhospitable nature of this space. In the ethno-axiological context, it can denote both respect and awe for nature and awareness of the difficulties of living in such conditions.

The steppe in the Kalmyk linguistic picture of the world is not just a geographical term, but a significant cultural and axiological symbol. It combines the ideas of natural beauty, spirituality, historical memory and socio-cultural specificity, which makes it a key element in the structure of Kalmyk ethno-axiology. Hence, each phraseological and lexical unit associated with the steppe reveals new aspects of this key symbol in Kalmyk ethno-axiology. The steppe is not just a geographical object, but also a complex symbol that incorporates a variety of socio-cultural, ecological and philosophical meanings.

6.8. The Role of the Steppe in Contemporary Kalmyk Culture: Preservation of Traditions and New Interpretations

The Kalmyk steppe is not only a geographical space, but also a powerful cultural symbol serving as a source of ethnic identity and heritage. Its importance in the cultural dynamics of the region is undeniable.

Ts.N. Ayushova emphasises the concept of "Motherland" in the Kalmyk mentality that is closely connected with the steppe as a symbol of immensity, independence and eternity (Ayushova, 2020). These silent expanses represent for the Kalmyks something that cannot be replaced or duplicated.

In the historical perspective, the Kalmyks preserved the genetic memory of the steppe, adhering to the nomadic rhythm of existence. According to J.N. Sarangaeva, the nomadic lifestyle is not only a physical movement, but also a mental heritage that permeates the consciousness of the Kalmyks (Sarangaeva, 2019). Thus, nomadism and the steppe have become key pillars of the identity of this people.

Cultural manifestations of the connection with the steppe range from art to literature, where the steppe is at the centre of attention. According to E.V. Golubeva (2019), many aspects of the Kalmyk culture, such as folk songs and rituals, are inextricably linked to steppe motifs.

However, modernity brings new facets to the perception of the steppe. In the past, its role was limited primarily to the nomadic way of life, but now the steppe is acquiring new functions, becoming the centre of tourism, ecology and cultural initiatives.

Linguistic features confirm the deep roots of the steppe in the Kalmyk culture. In particular, the Kalmyk language has sayings reflecting its significance, such as: "manurtsnkhalmg teg", which is translated as: "the bluish Kalmyk steppe" Teg boln khalmgud – neg əmn, aldchign teg bəəkhlə, tend khalmgud bəənə (Kotvich, 2022). As a result, we can say that the steppe is an integral element of the Kalmyk cultural heritage, serving as a bridge between the past and the future.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can emphasise the complex and multidimensional role that the steppe plays in the Kalmyk cultural and linguistic context. It is not just a topographical element, but also a meaning-laden phenomenon concerning various facets of the Kalmyk value system. Our analysis of the verbal material demonstrates that in various discursive situations, the word "steppe" can function as an allegory of a life route, a symbol of freedom and limitless prospects, as well as a representation of untouched nature that demands respect and awareness of its irresistible energy.

The studied lexical and phraseological components reveal not only the specific representations of the Kalmyk culture about the steppe as a living environment, but also highlight its role in shaping their cultural and spiritual self-identity. Consequently, our linguistic overview of the steppe is not limited to a simple list of linguistic data; it serves as a tool to decode a complex set of value orientations that construct the ethnic identity of the Kalmyk people.

Through the linguistic prism, we have penetrated the essence of how the Kalmyk value system interprets the steppe as a complex symbol that incorporates elements of spirituality, traditionality, historical memory and cultural uniqueness. This broadens our understanding of the relationship between language and culture, forming the basis for further academic research.

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