

On the shamanic concept of Qara 'black' in Turkic

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In Ancient and Middle Turkic, the word *qara* "black" occurs in titles, proper names and so on, being used as an adjective. The first case we will examine is where the word was used in titles: Qara Arslan "black lion", Qara Songor "black hawk", Qara Bars "black tiger", Qara Han "black ruler", Qara Čor "black general", etc. Secondly, the word was used in famous Turkic place names such as: Qara Qum, Qara Xočo, Qara Balgasun, etc. A third example may be observed where the word was used with natural objects: Qara İgač "black tree", Qara Su "black water", Qara Tag "black mountain", etc.

The first time the word *qara* occurs in the Hunnic title *qaraton* in the Byzantine source, referring to the first of the Hunnic kings, about 412 (Moravcsik BT 2: 341). Vambery (1882: 45) took *Xaraton* for the Turkic word *qara ton* meaning "black mantle". However, Maenchen-Helfen (1973: 416-7) objects to his theory, pointing out that we can not be sure that the word *ton* was a Turkic word as early as the 5th century AD. In addition, he believes the generally accepted theory that Uighur *ton* is borrowed from Khotanese or a related dialect: *thauna*, later *thaum*, *thau* "piece of cloth, silk". In my opinion, this is the proto-Turk-Hunnic word *qara ton* as Vambery suggested. The word *qara* has the same meaning as that used in many Turkic names, i. e. *qara han*, *buyra qara Xaqan*, *qara korum*, *qara bodun*. As for the word *ton*, the word *ton* [同] occurs in Ancient Chinese sources, with the meaning "a barbarian's clothes, a foreigner's garment". This word originally might be a Turk-Hunnic word which passed into Ancient Chinese. Therefore, the original meaning of the name *xaraton* is black clothes or sacred

clothes, and it was probably used also for the name of a Turk-Hunnic ruler.

We should than ask, why did the ruler take *qara ton* "black mantle" for his title? I would suggest the answer may be found in that the people might have associated *qara*, or black, as being 'sacred, strong' and therefore the ruler might have worn a black mantle as a symbol of his authority. I suspect that this concept may have something to do with the shamanism of the ancient period. In Korea, it is well known that priests used to wear a long and black mantle in old ages, and this in turn should be related with the clothes of shaman. Lee Og (1984: 171) maintains that throughout the history of shamanism in Korea, the color black has stood as a symbol for existence of the shaman. It is interesting that in Japan the person that presided in the village ceremony, wore black hemp cloth. There is another example which shows how the color black is related with shamanism. In the Chayin district of Kangwon, Korea, every year on the 5th of May according to the lunar calendar, the village people march in a group holding a four meter pole with a black cloth hanging in front of them.

From these examples, we can deduce that *qara* or black was religiously related with the shaman or shamanic performance. Accordingly, we can also suppose that black was considered 'holy, sacred' among the people and was used as a shamanic agent to attract the favour of a supernatural being or Heaven in their religious performances.

On the other hand, Bilge Qagan, one of the Uighur Qagans, was called *qutlug bilge kül qagan*, as well as *buq-qiklyen* or *muq-qiklyen* 默棘連 which is supposed to refer to Turkic *qara qiklyen*. The word *qutlug* in the Qagan's name was translated into ACh. *māk* 默 meaning 'dark' (Karl. 68) in Chinese. The meaning of the word *qutlu* is 'blessed, sacred'. The original meaning of the word is 'having the favour of Heaven'. This shows that *qara* or black has a shamanic relation with being *qutlug* 'having the favour of Heaven'.

In connection with this, an interesting ceremony of enthronement which was observed by Kōk Türks and the Turkic T'o-pa is mentioned in the Chinese sources Chou-shu and Pei-Shih. According to W. Eberhard (1949: 158), all the accounts we have point to the fact that the new emperor was lifted on a rug of black felt. Only in

the case of the ceremony, as Boodberg points out, were the seven officials of T'o-pa Hsiu's court covered by a black felt rug on which the new emperor made obeisance to heaven. Eberhard, pointing out that the preference of 'black' among the T'o-pa can not be explained so easily, stated that the Kitan emperor travelled in a black tent, and that the walls of his palace were decorated with black dragons and that the banner was black.

It is well known that in ancient times people believed that those who had access to the throne should be approved by heaven or their own god. For this reason, all coronation ceremonies had certain religious elements which reflected their own religious thinking. From this point of view, I think that the preference of 'black' in the enthronement ceremony also had something to do with the above mentioned 'Qara shamanism', i. e. that qara or black helps people to have the favour of Heaven.¹

1 According to Shamanists, on the other hand, shamans have the mighty to mediate between men and gods and spirits. Although men can offer sacrifices and hairs to some spirits, fires which protects their family, and earth-water gods by himself, they can not offer directly to mighty and bad spirits alone. Bad spirits are the worst enemies. Making men and domestic stocks ill, the bad spirits wants 'tolu-tolug' or sacrifices. Men must conform to all their desires, but common people can not know what the bad spirits want. Shamans who took spiritual power from heavens or spirits of ancestors can know it.

On the other hand, among the Altay tribe, there were two kinds of kam or shaman, i. e. Aq qam 'white kam' or Qara qam 'black kam'. Qara qams worshiped all spirits and offered bloody sacrifices. They wore a special robe and used a drum in their performances. In contrast to Qara qam, Aq qam worshiped only clean and good spirits, refraining from bloody sacrifices. They neither wore a special robe, nor used a drum. According to A. Inan (1954: 201), however, Aq qams' activities were not successful. For the tribes living in mountains and being engaged in hunting were not afraid of clean and goods spirits or gods, but of bad or black spirits or gods. They had to protect themselves from the qara or black spirits. The people believed that only Qara qams could protect them from the qara spirits or gods. For the reason, the people were always under the influences of Qara qams. Consequently, I think Qara shamanism might have originated from people's fear to the qara or black spirits. It does not seem to me that qara or black originally was symbolic of hlyness or strongness. As Qara shamans used black colored things as instruments during their practice in order to communicate with qara spirits or gods, or to have the favour of them, qara at first might have had been the symbol of qara spirits or gods. Later, it might have become the symbol of Qara qam or shaman as it was seen in Korean shamanism.

It is very interesting that one of the oldest Chinese dictionaries Shuo-Wen Chieh-Tzu indicates 天 'heaven' is the same as 元 'beginnings', as well as 黑 or 玄 'black or qara' in the meaning.² As it is well known, Chinese rulers used to wear a black formal dress, as well as a black crown, probably as a symbol of 天子 'the son of Heaven'. This must also be related to the Qara shamanism in the Altaic tribes. Although the concept that 天 'heaven' semantically is the same as 元 'beginnings' might be of Chinese origin, in my opinion, the concept of 天 'heaven' or 元 'beginnings' relating to 黑 'black' should be of Altaic origin. In other words, the Chinese dictionary contains the concept which might have prevailed over northern China and the environment where the Altaic tribes, i. e. Ancient Turkic-Hunnic people, the Maek tribe,³ etc. lived.

On the other hand, the word qara occurs in the phrase qara bodun in the oldest Turkic Orkhon inscription. Most scholars considered the adjective qara designating "common, humble", comparing the phrase *aq beg* "white subordinate chief" which was believed noble and aristocratic class, and translated the phrase *qara bodun* "common people".

However, İ. Kafesoğlu (1988: 229) argued that, to the contrary, the adjective *qara* originally determines "great, holy, high, noble", referring to the article of O. Pritsak (1955: 259) where the author discussed the symbolism of qara with many examples. Kafesoğlu proposed that *Aq Beg* might be a tribe name in the text and so the two phrase *qara bodun* and *aq beg* could not be contrasted.

In the Ongin inscription, there is a sentence *süsi kälti, qarasin yirdim, bägi qaçti* "their army came, I terrified their common people, their ruler fled". It is obvious that in this sentence the word *qara* means common people, not a tribe name. Although the adjective *qara* was used in the meaning of "common" in the phrase

2 For this knowledge of mine, I am indebted to an eminent Turkish Sinologist Prof. Dr. P. Utkan.

3 The Maek tribe is considered Proto-Koreans who migrated from the homeland of Altaic tribe in Central Asia to the northern parts of Korean peninsula in pre-history approximately before the 4th century BC. This name of Maek tribe appears as the form of *bök* in the phrase of *bök eli* "the country of Bök people" in Orkhon inscription referring to a tribe living in the east of Göktürk Empire.

qara bodun, I don't think this is an original meaning.

It is well known that, in the earlier ages, those who ruled over a primitive society was not only a shaman but also ruler among Altaic tribes. As the society developed and religion and politics was separated, the shamanic function of a ruler was getting weaker, while the political function of a ruler was growing bigger. I think the concept of Qara was semantically changed getting the concept 'strong', as the society was developed in the earlier ages. It is also a well-known fact that the concepts 'strong' and 'sacred' are closely related to each other in primitive religions.

Accordingly, the concept of Qara in the old titles might have been 'strong', while Qara in the old place names might have had the original meaning 'holy'. For instance, the word qara should be 'strong' in the title Qara Han which is the father's name of both Oğuz-Han and Alman-Bet, while in the geographical name Qara Qorum which the Ancient Turks considered sacred place Qara should be 'holy or sacred'.

We also find the word qara was used as the meaning of a tribe or people. In Suv. 192: 20, the word *qara* occurs having the meaning of tribe or people in the form of Hend. *bodun qara; bodunuy qarayküyü küzätü tutmaqingız cın kertü erür-mü* (Doerfer III 1440; Drev. 108). From this, we can know that the word *qara* "black" was not only used with the meaning "holy, sacred or strong" but also used as a name designating and describing the brave and noble Turkic people or tribe.⁴

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⁴ Actually, there is an example in Turkic of colour being adopted as the name of tribe, Kuman. As is well known, the tribe name Kuman has its origin in the word *kuban* meaning "white, yellow".

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