

History and ethnography of Mongolian-speaking peoples in materials of O.M. Kowalewski in library holdings of Vilnius University

Oksana N. Polyanskaya

Buryat State University

Abstract. The article is devoted to a famous diary that was written by Orientalist Osip (Józef) Michailovich Kowalewski and is being stored in the script department of the library of Vilnius University. This article is one of the first attempts to introduce it to the scientific field. The document, entitled *Diary of Pursuits in 1832*, is an important source of the history and ethnography of Mongolian-speaking peoples and is an essential supplement to well-known materials about these peoples.

Since its foundation, Vilnius University has trained renowned scientists and researchers who have made its name famous in various fields of scientific knowledge. One of the outstanding scientists who graduated from Vilnius University is Osip (Józef) Michailovich Kowalewski (1801–1878), a globally known Orientalist and the founder of the European school of Mongolian-specific studies. Kowalewski did not move from Vilnius voluntarily. Being a member of the clandestine patriotic Society of Philomaths, he was exiled to Kazan in 1824 without the right to return to his home country barring a special decree (Baziyants 1990, 126–7).

He nevertheless got facilities for scientific work in Kazan, in spite of finding himself in a tight corner. Excellent training in the field of classical philosophy in Kazan and proficiency in some European languages helped him achieve progress in his pursuit of Oriental studies, which started with him learning the Tatar language and history of the Tatar Khanate. Subsequently, he had to change the scope of his scientific research anew and became the founder of Mongolian-specific sciences. His works in Mongolian studies are extensive and multifaceted, touching upon Mongolian philology, history, ethnography, and religion (Girchenko 1939, 68; Ulymzhiev 1994, 5–6). His works are stored in various archives and libraries in Russia, Poland and Lithuania. Kowalewski's works, like the author himself, had a rocky destiny. Most of his manuscripts were not published, though they were considered to contain extremely interesting materials, and after his move from Kazan to Warsaw, the majority of the researcher's works were destroyed by fire in 1863. Those that remained, including

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woodcuts and manuscripts in Russian and Mongolian were transferred to Vilnius Public Library (Polyanskaya 2008, 15–38). At present the materials and manuscripts are stored in the archives of Vilnius University Library: about 40 manuscripts and woodcuts in Mongolian and Tibetan, including 35 manuscripts in the written language of Old Mongolian. The Mongolian manuscripts are presented basically as duplicates of the original. Being among the Buryat people from 1828 to 1833, Kowalewski and Aleksandr Vasilyevich Popov¹ purchased manuscripts and woodcuts in Mongolian and Tibetan and organised copying with the help of literate Buryats. Many of the works in Vilnius are Buddhist books, in particular extracts from the Kanjur and Danjur, Buddhist sermons, abstracts from Tibetan and Mongolian works dealing with cosmology and Buddhist dogmas, the history of Buddhism, and biographies of its reformers.² There is also fiction, narratives, and folk works, for example *Arzhy-Burzhy*, *Shidetu khuur*, *Shastra about Shirulzhin-khan*, and *Khaiby Dzhunai*.³ The manuscripts in Russian contain Buryat and Mongolian folklore and Mongolian sayings. Other works include ‘Additions and Comments to the History of Mongolians and Tatars’⁴ and ‘Buddhist terms’, interpretation of various terms written on 444 narrow sheets of paper (cards of 22×8.8 cm) in Russian and French.⁵ One of the folders contains a 1712 travel journal (diary) of Chinese envoy Tu Ly-shen (Tulushen—*OP.*), who was sent on an official trip to Russia via Mongolia to Khan Ayuka of the Kalmucks.⁶ The library contains Kowalewski’s work that is devoted to the Buryats and entitled ‘About Buryats’. It is a single volume of 214 12×15-cm pages with a hard cover.⁷

¹ Popov Alexander Vasil’evich, was a Kazan University student who was sent by the university with Kowalewski on a scientific assignment to East Siberia (1828–1833) for the purpose of studying the Mongolian language. He later became a famous Orientalist specialising in Mongolia and for some time worked at Kazan University. After transferring from Kazan to St Petersburg, he held the chair of the Mongolian language.

² VUB F11–15: ‘History of Buddhism’ (in Mongolian and other languages).

‘Kanjur’ (Tib. ‘translations of sermons by Buddha Shakyamuni’), collected Buddhist canonical texts translated from Sanskrit. There is difference in the number of Kanjur volumes; see vols 92, 100, 108. Not only is the number various, but also the content. It was translated into Mongolian in the 18th century.

‘Danzhur’, ‘Dandzhur’, ‘Danchzhur’ (Tanjur)—a collection of texts translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan explaining Buddha’s homilies. It consists of 225 volumes. In the 18th century, it was translated into Mongolian.

³ VUB F11–45, F11–46, F11–47, F11–48.

⁴ VUB F11–4: ‘Dodatki i obiasnieniya do dziełow mongolskich i tatarskich’ (in Polish).

⁵ VUB F11–2. There are 444 cards in the box. Most likely these articles dealing with explanations of Buddhist terms were written by Kowalewski for Adolf Pluchart’s edition. The articles are very interesting and rich in content. They could be considered an encyclopaedia of the history of Buddhism. For instance, cards 15–19 are devoted to Emperor Ashoka, card 31 to Bodhisattva, and card 164 to the history of the diffusion of Buddhism in the world.

⁶ VUB F11–24: ‘Tulushen’s journeys’ (in Mongolian). The translation from Chinese into Mongolian was done by Mr Frolov. Frolov was a translator of Mongolian at the frontier administrative office. He served there as a translator for a police official of the 10th Russian spiritual mission in China.

⁷ VUB F11–24: ‘About Buryats’ (in Mongolian).

‘Notebooks’, part of the Kowalewski holdings, are of substantial interest.⁸ They contain extracts from Russian and foreign writings on Oriental studies and the history and culture of Eastern nations, works on Russian and Eastern European history, and extracts from periodicals (Russian and foreign). The extracts were basically taken from books published in the middle of the 19th century. Notebooks written in Russian, Poland and French comprises drafts and sketches about various subjects and issues right up to fiction. Only the ordinal number was indicated on the spine. No one knows how many notebooks originally existed. Although there was no systematisation of material, there is an index at the end of each notebook. Index entries are written in Russian, Polish and French. Unfortunately, Kowalewski did not always mention the source. Often he gave a title to the extract, for instance, ‘On Siberia’, ‘On the Uighur people’, ‘On the Tatar Language’, ‘On community’, ‘On philosophy in the 18th century’, etc. ‘Notebooks’ provides an opportunity firstly to get an idea about his fields of interest and secondly to more exactly define his attitude to social and political issues in Russia and Europe.

‘Diary of Pursuits in 1832’ is an important source about the history and ethnography of Mongolian-speaking peoples; this document was written by the researcher while spending time among the Buryats of Trans-Baikal.⁹ The scientist’s diary of 1832 has not been introduced in scientific research yet and is stored in Kowalewski’s holdings in the Science Library of Vilnius University. The document contains information about the Buryat people and about Kowalewski’s activity among the Trans-Baikal Buryats after his return from Beijing.¹⁰ The name of the author is not mentioned anywhere in the diary, but the handwriting is similar to Kowalewski’s: minute and very legible. The format of the journal is 12×20 mm in leather binding, and the notes were made with ink. The diary comprises 370 pages, with the first note written in May 1832. The notebook was written in Russian, but there are insertions in English¹¹ and Mongolian.¹² Some sheets were left blank, evidently to leave room for supplement.¹³

The diary contains much of interest, not by chance concretely defining information. After returning from China, the Orientalist asked permission to prolong his and Aleksandr V. Popov’s assignment to Trans-Baikal for the purpose of mastering the

⁸ VUB F11–11: vols 1–10 of ‘Notebooks’.

⁹ VUB F11–3: ‘Diary of Pursuits in 1832’

¹⁰ **During an academic mission to eastern Siberia, Kowalewski, as a member of a Russian spiritual mission (1830), managed to make a trip to Beijing.** The researcher’s well-known diaries reflect his trip to China via Mongolia (the first journal, 1830), his trip from Beijing to Russia (the second journal, 1831), and his pursuits among the Buryat people after returning from China. The article thus deals with the third diary.

¹¹ VUB F11–3: ‘Diary of Pursuits in 1832’, pp. 111–30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 131–5.

Mongolian language, adding to their Russian–Mongolian and Mongolian–Russian dictionaries, specifying information about the influence of Buddhism on the world outlook of the Buryats, studying Buryat ceremonies thoroughly, and continuing their work of copying Mongolian books. The researcher spent much time among the Selenga Buryat: ‘For continuation of my studies in the Mongolian language, I moved from Troitskosavsk to Selenginsk and stayed with the English missionary Yuille, with the view of finding more comfortable means contiguous to Buryat nomadic camps and manuals containing information’, thus Kowalewski started one of the main parts of ‘Diary of Pursuits in 1832’.¹⁴

One of the most important subjects in works by Kowalewski is Buddhism, starting from the history of its dissemination and legends connected with this event in the history of mankind¹⁵ and ending with various manifestations of Buddhist doctrine in the everyday life of the Buryat people.

The Orientalist placed much confidence in the institution of Lamaism, convinced, as many examples proved, that it was the lamas who demonstrated to ordinary people the right attitude towards faith. Buddhism was widely recognised, due to hermits, who had put themselves on deprivations; and in every possible opportunity Osip Mikhailovich met with them. During pursuits in the spring of 1832, the traveller got acquainted with Dzakirokchi, a lama who had spent six months in solitude with the aim of ‘being cleansed of his sins by means of reading sacred literature, meditating, confessing, fasting, and being alone, removed from people and all secular temptations’.¹⁶ As Kowalewski noted, all the Buryat and Russian people who knew this lama praised him highly, saying that ‘he was living an exemplary life, dedicating all his time to reading books and divine contemplation ... he shunned the behaviour of some of the lamas he was acquainted with...’.¹⁷ The researcher agreed with him about condemning the conduct of some lamas, pointing out that the number of Buddhist clergy was increasing.

A thorough approach to field research is a characteristic feature of the scientist’s documents. Consequently, dealing with the everyday, spiritual and religious rites of the Buryat people, Kowalewski draws their ethnographical peculiarities very precisely,

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 169–79. From Yuille’s notes, which the missionary wrote from English journals.

¹⁵ English missionaries Robert Yuille, Edward Stallybrass, and William Swan arrived in Buryatia in 1819 on the assignment of the London Missionary Society with the aim of the Christianisation of the local people. They translated books from Latin into Mongolian, wrote a Mongolian grammar, and attempted to teach some Buryats reading and writing. The first meeting of Kowalewski and Yuille took place on 19 April 1829 during the researcher’s first visit to the Trans-Baikal Buryat people, when he was together with A. V. Popov, a student at Kazan University, and Aleksandr V. Igumnov, a teacher of Mongolian from Irkutsk. Their meetings were repeated.

¹⁶ VUB F11–3: ‘Diary of Pursuits in 1832’, pp. 217–8.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 220–1.

in detail. At the same time, the scientist is extremely attentive to characteristic ethnic features and to their changes under the influence of other cultures.

When describing national holidays and religious rituals, the Orientalist demonstrated the beauty, skill, and craftsmanship of Buryat people. Kowalewski in particular admired Buryat women. In this very diary he was delighted by horsewomen: 'The women, distinguished by the gorgeousness of their costumes and the stateliness of fast ambers under fine carpets and saddles... Steppe horsewomen have big silver rings with a long stone pendant instead of earrings. They have four plaits, black as ink, letting out two in line ... weighted with expensive headgear made of rosy coral ... The brow is decorated with an expensive headband (*tatur*) strewn with corals and pearls visible under a fur hat with its band covered with beaver or sable fur. The top of that hat is decorated with a scarlet tassel. Silver over-sleeves (*bogobchi*) are hardly perceptible under the cuff. The dress is of black velvet, coloured silk, or brocade... Sometimes they cast down their eyes on companions with a sweethearted smile, easy and candid. Is there any need to describe the skill in horse riding of these offspring of the steppes?' the traveller exclaimed.¹⁸ Such colourful descriptions are there in number in Kowalewski's journal, and it can certainly be said that the researcher's diaries are an abundant ethnographic source of Mongolian-speaking nations. Confirmation can be found on the pages from the 'Diary of Pursuits in 1832' devoted to detailed descriptions of Buryat wedding ceremonies,¹⁹ funerals,²⁰ everyday culture and the interpenetration of the Buryat and Russian people,²¹ and festive occasions that included religious rites, songs, and sports competitions, which were compared by the author with the Olympic Games.²²

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¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–5, 207–12, etc.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194–6, etc.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 198–9, 220, 149–50, 158, etc.

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Oksana Nikolaevna POLYANSKAYA, Ph.D. (polgrab@mail.ru), associate professor, chair of World History, Department of History of Buryat State University

✉: Aeroport 25–51, Ulan-Ude 670018, Russian Federation