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ÜRLÜKSÜZ NOMLAR IN THE “MANICHAEAN POṬHĪ-BOOK”

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Abstract

In the article the author deals with the meaning of the Buddhist-Uyghur term *ürlük-süz nomlar* in a passage of the so-called “Manichaeen Poṭhī-book”. As many specific Buddhist terms *ürlük-süz nomlar* can be found in no other Manichaeen-Uyghur texts and has to be translated in this context as “momentary elements of consciousness”.

In the so-called “Manichaeen Poṭhī-book” in lines 182–183 [according to the numbering in Clark (1982: 186), which corresponds to lines 142–143 in Bang, v. Gabain (1930)] we come across the *ürlük-süz nomlar*, which were interpreted by W. Bang Kaup and A. v. Gabain as “die vergänglichlichen Lehren” (“transitory doctrines”). The passage in question (*ürlük-süz nomlarig bükünüp • üç yavlak yolka k[o]rkinçin • ü[s]tünki yeg oronta tuggalı üç tamgalarig bütürt[i]*) is translated as follows:

Die vergänglichlichen Lehren verwerfend und aus Furcht vor den drei üblen Wegen • erfüllten sie, um auf dem höchsten Orte (im Götterlande) wiedergeboren zu werden • die drei Siegel. (Bang, v. Gabain 1930: 199)

This interpretation was erroneously adopted by L. V. Clark in his edition of the Poṭhī-book from the year 1982 and recently again in his re-edition of the “Great Mani-hymn” (Clark 2013) [“Recognizing the impermanent [doctrine]s [...]” (Clark 1982: 186); “They recognized the transitory doctrines [...]” Clark (2013: 162)¹], although *bükün-* (against Bang, v. Gabain 1930) is at least correctly translated in the sense

¹ From Clark (1982) this interpretation has also found its way into at least one of the manichaeological works of H.-J. Klimkeit.

of ‘acknowledge/ recognize’. W. Bang and A. v. Gabain were, however, quite cautious with their interpretation and also with the translation of *bükün-* and already suspected a connection with a Buddhist term, though the plural caused them some difficulties:

Zu *pük-*, *pök-* vgl. *Neg. Verbum* 129 und KOsm. III 68 Anm. Oder heißt *ürlüksüz nomlar* etwa „die Lehre von der Unbeständigkeit alles Irdischen“?? Dagegen spricht doch wohl der Plural *nomlar*. Für *pükün-* müßte dann jedenfalls eine andre Bedeutung gefunden werden. (Bang, v. Gabain 1930: 211)

The well documented *ürlüksüz nom*, as debated in Bang, v. Gabain (1930), is indeed a specific Buddhist term: the “dharma of impermanence”, actually the “doctrine of impermanence” (Skr. *anityatā dharma*), and can be found in numerous Buddh.-Uyghur. texts (e.g. in *Altun yarok sudur*² or in *Kšanti kılğuluk nom bitig*³) – admittedly (as Bang and v. Gabain have already noted) not with *nom* in the plural! In Buddhism, *anityatā*, along with suffering (*duḥkha*) and not-self (*anātman*), is one of the three marks of existence (*trilakṣaṇa*).⁴ Clauson traced *ürlüksüz* back to an undocumented **ürlük* ‘transitory’.⁵ In Manichaean-Uyghur texts, *ürlüksüz* is not documented elsewhere, which is not particularly surprising, as many specific Buddhist terms can be found in the “Manichaean Poṭhī-book” that are not otherwise encountered in Uyghur Manichaica – which leads us to the question as to how *ürlüksüz nomlar* are to be interpreted here.

Manichaeism had two different ways of handling Non-Manichaean religious terms and concepts when incorporating them in the Manichaean edifice of teachings: (1) largely retaining the contents of the terms and concepts in question (without infringing on the basic Manichaean dogmata) and (2) reinterpreting them in a Manichaean sense. Now, although it is clear that the *Anityatā-Dharma* was adopted here, what is not clear is how this very specific Buddhist concept could have been integrated into the Manichaean system. If one considers that the term *ürlüksüz nomlar* appears in the “Manichaean Poṭhī-book” in a context that deals with the commandments for the electi, and bears in mind the range of meanings of *nom* in Manichaean texts, one has to assume this is a case of reinterpretation – especially since the commandments play a central role and are based on the fundamental ethical rules of Manichaeism. Precisely the passage in which the *ürlüksüz nomlar* are mentioned contains a total of three borrowings from Buddhism in a single sentence, which shows particularly clearly the different ways of handling Buddhist terminology in the “Manichaean Poṭhī-book”. First, we have here the *ürlüksüz nomlar*, then the “three evil ways” (*üç yavlak yol*) and finally the “(re)birth in the supreme place” (*ü[s]tünki yeg oronta tug-*). In the case of the “three evil ways”, a Buddhist concept (three bad karma rebirths: 1. as daemon, 2. as preta and 3. as animal) was

² In Suv. *akıglıg ürlüksüz beş yapığıg* ‘the five unstable, transitory attachments’ (Suv 704, 14–15).

³ There correctly translated “*dharma* (der) Unbeständigkeit”.

⁴ For this cf. Buswell, Lopez (2014: 47–48).

⁵ Clauson (1972: col. 231 a).

adopted, since Manichaeism was already familiar with two evil ways (the so-called “poisonous ways”⁶) and this could therefore appear to be formally compatible with their own system.⁷ In the case of the “(re)birth in the supreme place”, a cosmological notion was reinterpreted with a Manichaeen sense. Although it is not possible to fully clarify what is meant by this “supreme place” in the “Manichaeen Poṭhī-book”, it corresponds to Nirvāṇa in Buddhism [or at least an “equivalent concept” (“temporary Nirvāṇa”, “Parinirvāṇa”), which will be addressed by the author in more detail elsewhere]]. Of course, according to Buddhist teaching one enters Nirvāṇa rather than being (re)born in it – here, again, there is a Manichaeen reinterpretation of a Buddhist concept. It is probably a very similar case with the *ürlüksüz nomlar*.

Is it conceivable that here the “transitory doctrines” are referred to? And which doctrines were supposed to be meant? Since our text deals with the recognition/acknowledgement of the *nomlar* and not with their transience, it can hardly be assumed that it refers to the teachings of Buddhism. It is also very unlikely that the transience of the teachings of the Apostle of Light is meant. Precisely the Manichaeans placed utmost importance on their teaching being set out in writing, safeguarded and kept pure, which elevated the teaching above that of Mani’s precursors – as seen for example in the *Kephalaia*.⁸ The recognition/acknowledgement of the impermanence of Manichaeen teachings would be diametrically opposed to the understanding of Manichaeism. Clark seems either to have not taken this fact into consideration or to have related the passage to the teachings of Buddha – which admittedly also makes no sense. For in that case, the recognition/acknowledgement of the transitory doctrines would be a prerequisite for a favourable reincarnation or even redemption.

The whole thing makes sense, of course, if one takes into consideration the above-mentioned ways of handling Buddhist terminology in our text. Either the “doctrines of impermanence” are meant here and the aim is to emphasize by analogy with Buddhism that even the teachings of the Manichaeans (recorded in the writings of the Apostle of Light) posit impermanence or, however, the term *dharma* was adopted here not as “doctrine” but rather in one of its other possible meanings: as “momentary elements of consciousness”. The *Anityatā-Dharma* was certainly familiar to the Manichaeans but probably not known in its entirety and it can be supposed that its incorporation into the Manichaeen system confronted the electi with some difficulties. The concept of the impermanence of the momentary elements of consciousness, on the other hand, was well understandable and also compatible with the dogmata of their own teachings. Furthermore, this interpretation does not contradict the views of the “religion of light”, as it always was the case in previous attempts of interpretation and suggested translations. Therefore, the passage should be translated as follows:

⁶ For this, cf. for example the texts of Ch’āstvānīfts.

⁷ Furthermore, the “three evil ways” correspond here to the three seals as fundamental ethical principles of the Manichaeans. A. van Tongerloo recently commented in detail on this in his lecture “Die drei Siegel als Tore der Religion” on 12 March 2015 at the workshop of the commission “Manichäische Studien” of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences.

⁸ Ibscher (1940: 7, Z. 18; 8, Z. 35).

Recognizing the momentary elements of consciousness and for fear of the three evil ways • they completed, to be (re)born in the supreme place (the realm of the gods) • the three seals.

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