



## MONGOLIAN TUVANS: THEIR ETHNO-LINGUISTIC SITUATION<sup>1</sup>

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Received 13<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2016; Revised 24<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2016; Accepted 5<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2016; Available online 1<sup>st</sup> Dec. 2016

### ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to investigate Tuvan ethnic groups living in Mongolia, where they are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. Object of research are four large ethno-local groups of Tuvans, who inhabit different *aimags*, set at some distance from each other. These groups are located in *Tsengelsum* ('district') and *Buyantsum* of Bayan Olgii. *Buyamsum* of Khovd, *Tsagaannuursum* in Khovsgol and *Tsagaan-Uursum*, which is also in Khovsgol *aimag* though they are set apart from the *TsagaannurTuvans* in terms of distance and ethnohistorical context.

The authors focus on their settlement, number and modern ethno-linguistic processes. This article is based on materials gathered during field-work, which was conducted by the authors in Mongolia in the 2000–2014s.

**Keywords:** Mongolia, Tuvans, Turkic-speaking people, ethno-linguistic processes, ethnic minority, ethnic identity, nomads of Central Asia

<sup>1</sup> This article was written with the financial support of the grant RGNF №15-21-03002 «Dialogue of civilizations of the peoples of Central and Inner Asia: history, culture and paradigm of existence". RGNF grant №16-21-03002 «Socio-cultural, ethno-genetic research and kinship groups of Central Asian nations (Case of Tuva Republic, Altai Republic, Kalmyk Republic, Mongolia and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China)."

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## INTRODUCTION

Tuvan ethnic groups are settled not only on the territory of the Russian Federation, but also in Mongolia. In the territory of Mongolia, Tuvans are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. Because of their settlement in various territories in the past, Tuvans have had to live in mixed communities with other ethnic groups: this had led to processes of assimilation, and as a result they became parts of the host population.

At the present moment, there are at least four large ethno-local groups of Tuvans in Mongolia, who inhabit different *aimags*, set at some distance from each other. These groups are located in *Tsengelsum* ('district') and *Buyantsum* of Bayan Olgii. *Buyamsum* of Khovd, *Tsagaannuursumin* Khovsgol and *Tsagaan-Uursum*, which is also in Khovsgol *aimag* though they are set apart from the *Tsagaannuur* Tuvans in terms of distance and ethnohistorical context.

Tuvans are also to be found in *Selenge* and *Tov aimags* (in *Altanbulag* and *Zaamarsums*, respectively), but because of their small numbers and wide dispersal, these two groups do not represent compact ethnic formations.

This article focuses on distribution and numbers of the Tuvan population in Mongolia, their modern ethno-linguistic situation.

## Distribution and Numbers

As research, carried out by Y.L. Aranchyn and M.Kh. Mannai-ool demonstrates, Tuvans have lived in Mongolia for a long time. According to their research, in 1757 the Tuvan tribes that travelled as nomads along the southern ridge of Tannu-Oi (or Tagna-Uul in Mongolian) to the upper reaches of the Khovd River were separated from the general mass of Tuvans, who inhabited the Upper Yenisei basin. This separation created the conditions for the foundation of four distinct ethno-local groups of Tuvans in this area [1:214; 3:57].

The *sums* of *Tsengel* in *Bayan-Olgii* and *Tsagaannuur* in *Khovsgol* are the closest to the border of the Republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation, where the majority of the Tuvan people is to be found. The first of these *sums* abuts the *Mongun-Taigakozhuun* (district in Tuva), and the second is adjacent to the *Todjakozhuun*. Many of the Tuvans who live in these *sums* assert that their land was a part of the territory of Tuva at the time when the state borders, which now divide Russia and Mongolia, did not exist. The establishment of borders between the two states in the first half of the twentieth century, however, led to the separation of a certain number of Tuvans from their native ethnos and their consequent settlement in neighbouring Mongolia.

Khovdaimag, which is also inhabited by Tuvans, is comparatively far from Tuva. It is understood from Chinese sources that the Tuvan tribes under the dominion of the Altan Khans (from the sixteenth to the first half of the eighteenth centuries) travelled not only within the territory of present-day Tuva, but also further south along the Khovd, and further east as far as Lake Khovsgol [2:200]. In 1974, on his first visit to the Khovd Tuvans, Y.L. Aranchyn, the well-known Tuvan historian, identified remnant characteristics of the Tuvan ethnos [1:234].

Mongolia's northernmost border region of Tsagaannuursumin Khovsgolaimag, is home to a distinct ethno-local group of Tuvans made up of approximately 500 people who generally call themselves Dukha. Because most of these Tuvans have historically engaged in reindeer-herding, hunting and fishing in the taiga regions to the west of Lake Khovsgol and Darkhad valley, they are commonly known in Mongolia as the 'tsaatan' (Mongolian for 'reindeer herder').

Currently, a little over thirty households lead a fully nomadic lifestyle of herding reindeer and hunting in the taiga, while the remainder of the population either live in the centre of Tsagaannuursum or herd steppe-based livestock in the valleys that stretch

throughout the area [6:6-7].

Due to forced resettlement that took place during the 1960s and 1970s, Tuvans also came to inhabit Selenge and Tov aimags of Mongolia. In 1963, the independent Tuvansum of Tsengel in Bayan Olgii aimag was liquidated and was unified with Ak-Khemsum, which had a principally Kazakh population. From that point on, Tsengelsum ceased to be an area with a mono-ethnic population. This action exerted a negative effect on the Tuvans, who formed a minority in this newly-created sum. Kazakhs filled all the important posts and senior positions, and many Tuvans were left without employment.

Unfortunately, reliable reports on the numbers of Tuvans in Mongolia do not exist. Data collected from unofficial sources state that approximately 25,000 Tuvans live in Mongolia. However, as our informants clarify, this number includes both those Tuvans who have retained their native language, and also those who abandoned it a long time ago but who still call themselves Tuvans. It is estimated that out of these 25,000 Tuvans, about 8,000 speak Tuvan as a first language.

### ***The ethno-linguistic situation***

Before asking concrete questions about the ethno-linguistic processes which take place among these various ethno-local

groups, it is important to note that in their linguistic relations the Tuvans of Mongolia are a single unit: they all speak in various dialects of Tuvan. Their language is wholly similar to modern Tuvan, apart from a few peculiarities in its phonetics, lexis and melodies. Alongside this it must be pointed out that each group has, as a result of its localisation, a characteristic ethno-linguistic situation.

For example, following linguistic criteria, the Tsagaannuur Tuvans roughly fall into two groups: those from Todja and those from Kungurtug *khozhuuns* of Tuva. This division arises from the fact that in the 1940s and 1950s, when the period of collectivization began in Tuva, many Tuvan families from the above-mentioned regions migrated into Khovsgol *aimag* on the Mongolian side of the border. In this new place, they became united with the small group of Tuvans that had already been living in the area.

It is a fact, acknowledged not only by researchers but by the Tuvans of Tsagaannuur themselves, that there are subtle differences between the languages of the two groups, even though they both speak Tuvan. Their language contains word-borrowings from Mongolian, and certain words have become Mongolised in sound. These facts notwithstanding, their

language may on the whole be considered a dialect very close to the Tere-Khol dialect of Tuvan. The departures made from this dialect may in truth be identified as individual peculiarities of speech. Alongside their native language, the Tsagaannuur Tuvans also freely speak the Darkhad dialect of Mongolian. In general, Tuvans used only within the narrow family circle. But because their children study in the local Mongolian boarding school for most of the year, now Tuvan is mainly spoken fluently by those in their twenties or older. While children may have listening comprehension of Tuvan, in practice they communicate with their parents and siblings in the Darkhad dialect of Mongolian.

The Khovd Tuvans exist within a similar ethno-linguistic situation in that they live surrounded by Mongolian groups, such as Dorvots, Zakhchins and others, as well as by Kazakhs. In their linguistic relations they are bilingual speaking both Tuvan and Mongolian. Their children study in Mongolian schools, where classes are held in Mongolian, and they study either Russian or English as a foreign language.

In the autumn of 1974 the Tuvan researchers Iu. L. Aranchyn and D. A. Mongush made their first visit to the Khovd Tuvans. The result of their research

was a number of essays that were published in several different academic works. Aranchyn, for example, notes that it is surprising that even in such a small ethnographic group as the inhabitants of the Buyantsum certain facts are preserved which testify to the presence in their language, folklore and customs of definite similarities between them and modern Tuvans [1:215]. Later, the author strengthens his conclusion with folkloric and linguistic materials. His colleague D. A. Mongush notes that the language of the Khovd Tuvans is very close to that of the Tuvans in the Republic of Tyva, and may be regarded as a dialect of Tuvan which demonstrates a variety of phonetic, lexical and grammatical peculiarities. These peculiarities are a result of the isolation of this group of Tuvans in an environment where their language was influenced by, Mongolian, Kazakh, and perhaps even Altai [4:144].

In distinction from the aforementioned groups, the Tuvans of Bayan Olgii find themselves in a more favourable situation in that they can converse freely in three languages: Tuvan, Mongolian and Kazakh. Thanks to the proximity of Tuva and good roads, contact between the inhabitants of the Tsengel sum and the Tuvans in Russia has continued in full force - a factor that

undoubtedly contributes to the retention of the Tuvan language's usage among the Tsengel Tuvans. They use their native language noticeably better, and the problem of its survival has not been a serious one for them. Overwhelming proof of this is provided by the 120 songs, 17 shamanic incantations, 50 benedictions, around 800 proverbs and riddles, and 90 stories and myths, which were recorded by E. Taube during her period of field research among the Tsengel Tuvans [5:7].

Until recently there was only one school in Tsengel, with Mongolian and Kazakh classes, and teaching was carried out in the two respective languages. Tuvan children normally studied in the Mongolian classes. Russian was taught as a foreign language. In 1991 the local authorities, noting the renewed interest among Tuvans towards their native language, turned this one school into two; a Mongolian school with Kazakh classes and a Tuvan school. The Tuvan school taught Tuvan language and literature classes in Tuvan (having specially ordered textbooks for this from Tuva), while all other subjects were taught in Mongolian. English was taught as a second foreign language.

The analysis of the ethno-linguistic situation would be incomplete if the linguistic characteristics of the

language of the Tuvans in Mongolia were not touched on. Although this paper, because of its author's lack of competence as a linguist, does not offer a structural analysis of this language, an attempt will be made, without going into the details of how structural elements of the language such as lexis, morphology or grammar have changed, to outline the peculiarities of its development. These peculiarities seem to have come from the lengthy inhabitation of an area separated from the main mass of the Tuvan ethnos. This has led to a distinct reduction of the lexical and morphological structures in daily use among the representatives of these various dispersed ethnic groups and their localised dialects. In its turn, this has led to various forms of linguistic interference: the departure from existing linguistic structures as a result of external influence, which shows itself in phonetics, morphology, lexis and semantics, and leads to the abandonment of certain syntactic and stylistic norms. In the groups under study, this phenomenon was widespread and serves at the moment as one of the chief reasons for the acknowledgement of their difference from the Tuvans who still live in the Russian Federation.

The question of linguistic competence also shows certain

idiosyncratic features: of the ethno-local groups the Tuvans discussed in this paper, of the Bayan Olgiiaimaguse (i.e., speak, read and write) Tuvan freely, while the members of the other groups only know the language on a spoken level. Among the elder members of the groups, linguistic competence is noticeably higher than with the younger and middle-aged members.

### **CONCLUSION**

These facts are directly linked to the possibility of studying Tuvan within the school system — a possibility that, as our research shows, is not the same among the different groups of the Tuvan population. One attempt at resolving this problem was made in the following way. At the beginning of 1990, thanks to the combined efforts of the governments of Mongolia and the Republic of Tyva, a bilateral agreement was reached on the preparation of young people from the respective countries in various specialities. According to this agreement, in the autumn of that year four students from Tuva went to study at the National University of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar, and an equal number of Mongolian students were initially received by the Kyzyl State Pedagogical Institute and then later at the Tuvan State University. These students were all ethnic Tuvans and

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studied in the Tuvan department of the Philological Faculty. At the time of writing, the number of young Mongolian Tuvans in these exchanges has become much larger, which allows one to hope that the Tuvan language does have a future in Mongolia.

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