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**THE TUVINIANS AND KAZAKHS IN MONGOLIA: PROBLEMS OF INTERETHNIC
RELATIONS (BY EXAMPLE TSENGELSUM OF BAYAN-OLGILAIMAG)**

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to investigate Tuvan and Kazakh ethnic groups living in Tsengel sum of Bayan-Olgiiimag of Mongolia. The majority of Tuvinians live in Russia, where they have a recognized position and territory—the Tyva Republic; the most of Kazakh population live in the Republic of Kazakhstan. In the territory of Mongolia, Tuvinians and Kazakhs are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. However Mongolian Tuvinians and Kazakhs still keep their native language, ethnic consciousness and traditional lines of the culture. As a result of long historical and cultural interaction these peoples had a great influence at each other. The authors focus on the settlement, number and problems of interethnic relations. This article is based on materials gathered during field-work which was conducted by the authors in Mongolia in the 2010–2015.

**Keywords: The Tuvinians, the Kazakhs, Turkic-speaking peoples, small ethnic groups of
Mongolia, national minority, nomads of Central Asia, inter-ethnic relations**

INTRODUCTION

Tuvan and Kazakh ethnic groups are settled not only on the territory of the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, but also in Mongolia. In the territory of Mongolia, Tuvinians and Kazakhs are national minorities and do not have national-territorial status. Because of their settlement in various territories in the past, Tuvinians and Kazakhs 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.

Living conditions of Tuvinians and Kazakhs in Mongolia are very similar. Usually they live in rural areas. Their average settlement consists of 100-150 households. Their houses are quite simple architecturally and look similar to Russian ones. Every family has its own house, some erections (including sheds and fences) for the private livestock and a small land plot, where they cultivate potatoes and vegetables. Stock-breeding is their basic occupation. They breed sheep, goats, cattle and horses. Agriculture is the secondary economy and in some places, where the climatic conditions are suitable, they normally cultivate wheat, barley and oats. Among other activities they prefer private market-gardening, hunting, fishing and gathering which are the bases of their trade business. The main goal of the Tuvinian and Kazakh economy is to provide themselves with the food and goods

necessary for everyday life.

As to their standard of living, it is not different from that of other ethnic-groups living around them. They have electricity, internet, TV set and other facilities which make life more comfortable. However, they have no special excesses and they seem to be content with their life and conditions. They live in harmony with nature and nature for them is the source of life, energy and everything they need.

This article focuses on distribution and number of the Tuvinian and Kazakh population in Mongolia, their contemporary situation and problem of interethnic relations. We will introduce gathered material about them; our field work took place in the *sums* of Tsengel in Bayan-Olgii, which is the closest to the border of the Republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation and Republic of Kazakhstan.

Distribution and Number

Tuvinians and Kazakhs have lived in Mongolia for a long time. At the present moment, there are three large local ethnic groups of Tuvinians in the country, who inhabit different *aimags* situated at some distance from each other. These groups are located in Tsengel *sum* ('district') and Buyant *sum* of Bayan Olgii, Buyam *sum* of Khovd, Tsagaannuursum in Khovsgol.

Unfortunately, reliable reports on the numbers of Tuvinians in Mongolia do not exist. What facts we do possess are

inadequate and need more precise definition. For example, in 1966, Taube determined that Tsengel *sum* was inhabited by approximately 2,400 Tuvinians (1994, p.8). When Mannai-ool was in the same area at the beginning of the 1990s, he counted 232 households (*Mannai-ool*, 1995, p. 58). The latest census of the *sum's* population, carried out in the summer of 1999, states that the entire population of Tsengel was 7,600 people, 2,000 of whom were Tuvinians belonging to 500 households.

In all, Bayan Olgiiaimag is inhabited by approximately 700 Tuvinian households. If one assumes that an average household contains between five and six people, then the Tuvan population of this *aimagis* approximately 4,000 people. Sources suggest that the Tuvan population of Khovdaimagis greater than 2,500 people, and approximately 1,000 Tuvinians live in the Khovsgol *aimag*. Yet, practically nothing is known about the population of Tuvinians in other *aimags*.

The data collected from unofficial sources state that approximately 25,000 Tuvinians live in Mongolia. However, as our informant Gaagiin Zolbayar (born in 1966, native of Tsengel) clarifies, this number includes both those Tuvinians who have retained their native language, and also those who abandoned it a long time

ago but who still call themselves Tuvinians. It is estimated that out of these 25,000 Tuvinians, about 8,000 speak Tuvan as a first language.

Previous attempts at carrying out a census to discover the number of Tuvinians have been unsuccessful, and it has become clear that, until recently, Tuvinians have been labelled as either Uriankhai, Uigur, Kazakhs, or even as Mongols in their Mongolian identification passports (Taube, 1994, p. 46). Acknowledging the low status and inequality of their ethnic group in comparison with others, some Tuvinians have chosen to identify themselves as Mongolian. These negative factors often influence Tuvinians to try and escape the visible demonstration of their ethnicity, and sometimes even to deny it entirely. But to a certain extent these are somewhat isolated occurrences. And in the 1990s, another tendency has arisen among Tuvinians, who out of their own free will, have begun to identify themselves as Tuvinians using the ethnonym 'Tyva,' which is the standard designation used by Tuvinians in Russia.

Kazakhs in Mongolia live in 181 settlements. They are one of the largest ethnic minorities and make 3, 8% of the population of the country. Their number is about 130 thousands, and 50 thousands of them live in an administrative center of the Bayan-

Olgiiaimag, the others live in different *aimags* of the country. Bayan Olgiis considered to be a Kazakh *aimag* because most of the Kazakhs in Mongolia live there. In comparison with them, the representatives of other ethnic groups look like national minorities. This is the reason why there is some difficulty in Tuvinian-Kazakh relations. There are about 10 thousand ethnic Kazakhs live in the capital of Mongolia, in Ulan Bator.

Tuvinian-Kazakh relations

Due to forced resettlement that took place during the 1960s and 1970s, Tuvinians had to move to Selenge and Tovaimags of Mongolia. In 1963, the independent Tuvansum of Tsengel in Bayan Olgiiaimag was eliminated and was unified with Ak-Khemsum, which had a principally Kazakh population. From that point, Tsengelsum ceased to be an area with a mono-ethnic population. M. Kh. Mannai-ool writes that this action exerted a negative effect on the Tuvinians, who formed a minority in this newly-created sum. Kazakhs filled all the important posts and senior positions, and many Tuvinians were left without employment (Mannai-ool, 1995, p. 58).

The Kazakhs not only deprived the Tuvinians of work, but also of fertile pasture, without which the Tuvinians no longer had any reasons for remaining in these areas. In effect, this merging of the

two *sums* forced many Tuvinian families (more than 1100 people) to leave Tsengel seeking for work. They moved to other *aimags*, mainly Tov and Selenge *aimags* that were engaged in a special state program aimed at speeding up their socio-economic development. The leadership of these *aimags* needed extra workers, and therefore the Tuvinians found themselves welcomed.

The numerous attempts made over a long period by the Tsengel Tuvinians to draw the attention of the Mongolian government to their poor situation did not produce the desired results. Then in 1995, the famous writer Chinagiin Galsan, who is a graduate of Leipzig University in Germany and an ethnic Tuvinian and a native of Tsengel himself, organized the return of 36 families from the Zaamar and Altanbulag *sums* to Tsengel at his own expense. This was an intentional call to the Mongolian leadership to take notice of the situation of these Tuvinians. Over the course of a month, these families made the 2,000-kilometre journey back home by camel and were “shadowed” the entire time by a German film crew who made a documentary about them. When this was later shown throughout the country, it had a great effect in drawing the attention of the Mongolian public to their predicament and influenced the Kazakh authorities in Tsengel to change their policy concerning

the local Tuvan population. Thanks to this precedent, the flow of Tuvinians migrating from Bayan Olgti *aimag* has come to a virtual standstill (Mongush, 2010, p. 210-211). However, after the 2000s, migration from Bayan Olgii *aimag* started again. The main reason for this is the difficult social-economic situation in the *aimag* and the high level of unemployment among young people. That is why many of them have to go to other regions to search for a better life.

At the first sight, the relations between Tuvinians and Kazakhs seem very positive. But sometimes our informants complained about the Kazakhs. During the last 10 years they built three mosques in Tsengel that have caused a lot of trouble for the Tuvinians, who do not have their own Buddhist temple. In these circumstances, the Tuvinians fear being involved in a process of Islamicization. In order to resist this tendency, the Tuvinians are making all possible efforts to construct a Buddhist temple in Tsengel.

One noticeable fact is that during certain ceremonies, particularly at the ritual benediction of the *ovaa* (*ovoo* in Mongolian), a stone cairn dedicated to local spirits, the Tuvinians of Mongolia were happy to invite the representatives of other ethnic groups as honored guests, provided that they were of the same faith as the Tuvinians (*i.e.* Buddhists). From

this, it follows that only Mongols could participate in ceremonies of the Tuvinians as their closest neighbours, and the Kazakhs, as Muslims, were left out.

In addition, our respondents provided a very significant piece of information, which is that the difference in religious beliefs held by Kazakhs and Tuvinians acts as a serious block against marriage between the two groups. For this reason, marriages with Mongols, albeit few in number, are preferable to those with Kazakhs.

Referring to the Tsengel Tuvinians, we have noted that even though they live in close proximity to the Kazakh population, marriages between Tuvinians and Kazakhs are so surprisingly rare that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Out of all the neighboring peoples, Mongols predominate as far as non-Tuvinian spouses for the Tuvinians are concerned. However, their number in Tuvinian households is not really noticeable. The reason for this can be found in the answers given to questions on the family and marriage.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the data gathered shows reliably enough that the modern ethnic development and interethnic relations of the Tuvinians and Kazakhs in Tsengel *sum* of Mongolia are complex and multi-faceted in character. Firstly, having lived in a mixed ethnic

environment for a long time Tuvinians and Kazakhs have to mix with other peoples and accept their languages and culture. This leads to the natural process of their partial assimilation and problem of their ethnic self-conservation actually exists. However, in spite of this, they still retain such important components of ethnicity as their native language, ethnic consciousness and some features of traditional culture, which allows them to be identified as Tuvinians and Kazakhs. Secondly, the process of interethnic integration is the characteristic of most of Tuvinian and Kazakh groups: this means the interaction of different ethnic groups without their amalgamating. This process is typical for Mongolia, where cultural and economic interaction between different peoples is the main measure to solve national problems. There are certain difficulties in the relations between Tuvinians and Kazakhs in Tsengel. All these questions presented here offer promising avenues for future investigation, and could serve as an initial foundation for further analysis and broader comparison.

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