Diversity in Dukhan Reindeer Terminology

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The Dukhan People and Language

The Dukhan people are a Turkic-speaking nomadic group inhabiting the northernmost regions of Mongolia’s Khövsgöl region. This area borders on the northeast with Buryatia and on the west with the Tuvan republic. Nowadays ethnic Dukhans number approximately 500 people and are divided into two main groups: those of the “West Taiga” (bariin dayga) originate from Tere Khöl, whereas those of the “East Taiga” (jüün dayga) came from Toju; both regions are in Tuva.

Presently, around 32 Dukhan families are reindeer herders in the surrounding taiga areas, on the south slopes of the Sayan mountains, whereas the remaining families have settled down in the village of Tsagaan Nuur and in neighbouring river areas, abandoning reindeer breeding. Some families, however, regularly rejoin the taiga in the summer months and tend to reindeer.

Although the Dukhan people identify themselves as tuhiba, in Mongolia they are generally called Tsaatan, a rather derogatory term meaning ‘those who have reindeer’, stressing in this way the fact that they are not like Mongolian herders. Recently the more neutral Mongolian term tsaačin ‘reindeer herders’ has been introduced. In the available published materials, Dukhans have been designated by several other names such as “Urianxay”, “Taiga Urianxay”, “Taigïn Ir ged” ‘peoples of the taiga’, “Oin Ir ged” ‘peoples of the forest’ and “Soiot”

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1 I wish to thank the Dukhan community for their constant cooperation in documenting their language and culture.

2 Dukhans follow the so-called Sayan-type of reindeer breeding, characterized by small-size herds of reindeer used as pack and riding animal and as a source of milk products. On the Sayan-type of reindeer herding, see Vainshtein (1980). For more recent views of Sayan economies, see Donahoe & Plumley (2003). Hunting used to be an important part of the Dukhan economy. However, hunting and fishing proscriptions were recently issued by the Mongolian government. In order to balance the impact of these proscriptions, the Mongolian government has granted Dukhan families dwelling in the taiga and tending to reindeer a state pension calculated on the base of family numbers.

3 The Mongolian style of pastoral nomadism is based on the so-called five snouted animals: sheep, goats, cattle (cows and yaks), horses and camels.
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(Badamxatan 1962: 3). Dukhans do not call themselves Uyghur, as claimed in some publications; see Ragagnin (2011: 20-21).

Linguistically, Dukhan belongs to the Taiga subgroup of Sayan Turkic together with Tofan, the Toju variety of Tuvan and some varieties of the Tere-Khöl area as well as Soyot of Buryatia.4 Reindeer-breeding and hunting characterizes or characterized the lifestyle of these groups until not too long ago.

On the other hand, Standard Tuvan and the rest of its dialects belong to Steppe Sayan Turkic together with Altay-Sayan varieties spoken in China and western Mongolia, and Uyghur-Urianxhay (Tuhan) of East Khövsgöl.5

Nowadays, Dukhan is actively spoken by the older generation, that is by speakers older than 40. Younger Dukhans communicate in Darkhat-Mongolian, although they possess passive knowledge of Dukhan. Furthermore, language loss is more acute in Tsagaan Nuur and river areas, where most of the households have already completely switched to Darkhat-Mongolian.6

As the result of a Mongolian-Tuvan educational project, Standard Tuvan, which differs from Dukhan, was taught on a non-compulsory basis as a foreign language for three hours per week in the local boarding school for just a few years (1990-1993 and 2002-2005). In more recent years, Oyunbadam, the director of the local boarding school, has been organizing Dukhan language summer schools in the taiga camps. She is also trying to reintroduce Tuvan language teaching in the school curriculum. Mass-media in Tuvan language are not available. Television, which exists and works in the taiga as well, broadcasts programmes in Khalkha-Mongolian.

The fact that Dukhan people are quite famous in Mongolia (and beyond) as being the only reindeer herders of the country – and thus representing a highly rated tourist destination advertised by national and international tourist agencies – has positively affected the Dukhan community with regard to the consciousness of the uniqueness of their culture and native language. However, the future status and use of Dukhan will be dependent on the

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4 On the taiga vs. steppe division, though with slight differences from the view presented here, see Žukovskaja et al. (2002). Furthermore, on Soyot, see Rassadin (2010), on Tofan, Rassadin (a.o. 1971, 1978, 2014) and Harrison (2003), on Toju, Čadamba (1974), on Tere-Khöl Tuvan, Seren (2006), and on Dukhan, Ragagnin (2011).

5 On standard Tuvan, see, a.o. Isxakov & Palm'bax (1961) and Anderson & Harrison (1998); on Tuvan dialects, see Sat (1987) and on Uyghur-Urianxay, see Bold (1975) and Ragagnin (2009).

6 The general view among scholars is that the Darkhat people are of Turkic origin and that their language and customs have become Mongol in the past few centuries. For a short survey of Darkhat grammatical features, see Sanžeev (1931) and Gáspár (2006).