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Ethnolinguistic Data on Human Origin in Selkup

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Abstract

This paper focuses on interdisciplinary research of an important cultural phenomenon – human origin – based on Selkup language, folklore and culture. Selkups are indigenous peoples of Western Siberia belonging to the Uralic language family and sharing cultural features with their neighbors; for example, Kets, Khanty, Evenks, and Siberian Turks. This research could reveal a significant body of human culture, observe how a language reflects people's cognition, and provide ethnolinguistic data for further comparative studies.

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1. Introduction

Ethnolinguistics is a subfield of linguistic anthropology that studies the relationship between language and culture, and how they mutually influence and inform each other (Haviland, 2010). In many ways it is “an interpretive discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understandings” (Foley, 1997). Human origin is one of the core studies of anthropology and namely in its four fields: archaeology, cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, and linguistic anthropology. An interdisciplinary approach applied in this paper helps interpret data from different fields as a system. Versions of human origin are found in Selkup folklore and ethnographic materials. These data are supplemented by the study of linguistic terms, their structural analysis, etymological findings, and semantic explanations.

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2. Methodology

Our methodology includes research of cultural behavior and social structure reflected in folklore and ethnographic descriptions, nomination process of ethnic groups, structure of ethnonyms, and comparison of relevant Selkup terms with related languages. Based on interdisciplinary study we suggest that human origin in Selkup culture may be observed as a system that includes different ethno-linguistic data.

3. Findings and analysis

3.1. Human origin from the earth

One of the hypotheses there set forth represents human origin as being from the earth – Selkups' own land. They “got out” of the earthen moss and grass into the light, and became “like lice on the head, running around on the ground.” Thus, it is believed that the earth-mother gave birth to Selkups (Pelikh, 1972). This version is confirmed by linguistic material – self-names (or ethnonyms) of Selkup local groups, which, according to linguistic analysis, are compound attribute phrases, the second component of which is the word *qum* ~ *qup* ‘man, human’, and the first – the name meaning ‘earth, clay’ (Hajdu, 1985). They can be considered as a semantic whole. However, only two ethnonyms can be translated literally as ‘earthy man’ or ‘clay man’: *t'ūje-qum* ~ *t'ūj-qum*, where *t'ū* ‘earth, clay’, *-j(e)* – adjective marker, and *čūmil'-qup*; before the adjective marker *-l'*, there is another marker of collective plurality – *mi*.

According to Finnish scholar M.A. Castrén, T'ujkums resided mostly in the area of Low Chulym. Rare examples of this ethnic name were collected in the Upper Ket; however, evidently their barriers moved to the Ket region from Chulym in the middle of the 20th century. Text examples demonstrate phonetic distribution of those ethnic names and some cultural information about these peoples: Losiniborskoje – *t'ūjqullaqanaksepal'd'uwatqannā* ‘T'uikums are traveling on dogs in Winter’; *t'ūjqullamat'tonmekwadatt'ojmadila* ‘T'uikums are building birch shelters (chums) in the taiga’.

Chumyl'kups occupied the Middle Ob and its tributaries – Pabel, Ket, Tym and Vassjugan (to the mouth of Chizhapka), and also along all Chizhapka, the right tributary of Vassjugan. Text examples demonstrate phonetic distribution of this ethnonym: Napas – *mat čuməlqup* ‘I am Chumyl'kup’; Chizhapka – *čuməlquttūmnadīradīt* ‘Chumyl'kups love fire’; Laskino – *čuməlqutqibil'žigənejadət* ‘Chumyl'kups are not tall’.

The ethnonym of the Northern group – *söl'-qup* or *šöl'-qup* could be interpreted based on contamination of two bases: *sō-* ‘soil, clay’ or *šōt-* ‘forest, taiga’ connected with the word *qum* ~ *qup* ‘person, man’ with the adjective suffix *-l'*. The meaning of this combination as ‘taiga person’ is not possible because this group of people occupies not forest but tundra region (Hajdu, 1985). The comparison of the ethnic name of this group with the southern ones has difficulties because the southern word building model doesn't agree with the derivation from the bases *šōt-* ‘forest’ or from *suə-* ‘soil, clee’ (Helimski, 2005).

The Selkups have considered the earth as the progenitor of all living things. This is evidenced by the content of Selkup text materials collected by M.A. Castrén: *čuečmundengima, mundengapsetembad* ‘the Earth is the Mother of everybody, the Earth feeds all’ (die Erde ist die Mutter von allen, die Erde ernährt alle); *mundengapsetebelčuečmundengima* ‘everybody feeding Mother is the Mother of everybody’ (die alle ernährende Erde ist die Mutter von allen) (Castrén, 1960). Relics of these beliefs are preserved not only among the Selkups but also among others related to them. In particular, the world picture of Nganasans reflected the idea that the Earth-mother gave birth to all people by herself without any masculine involvement (Gracheva, 1983).

It is interesting to note that the ideas of a person's birth “from the Earth” are common for some ancient Oriental (especially Mesopotamian) traditions – the Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian and later under their influence Hittite tradition. The authors of the book “The Indo-European Language and the Indo-Europeans”, T.V. Gamkrelidze and V.V. Ivanov observed etymological sameness of ‘man’ and ‘earth’ in the Indo-European protolanguage (Gamkrelidze, 1984).

Selkup mythological incarnation of the earth as the progenitor of life is the character *pajaor pajaga* ‘old woman Earth’ that is present in a number of folklore texts of both groupings of Selkups. According to southern Selkup motives, people got out into the light of the marsh tussocks *n'aril' ol*, lit. ‘marsh head’ – the head of Old Women of

the Earth (Tuchkova, 2010). Here *n'aril' ol* – is a metaphor involved in the secondary nomination – the meaning shift from one phenomenon to another one using internal resources of language. Human cognition is designed in such a way that any new phenomenon is learned through the old, familiar one. First of all, there is the comparison of the external world to itself, where a person viewing new pictures compares them with something similar relevant to his or her own experience. This is a productive means of metaphoric creation, as Russian *ушкоуиэлы* ‘ear of the needle’ or English *eye of the needle* (Stepanov, 1975). According to E. Sapir, no one language would be able to express every new idea with a new word or a new root. Individual experience is limitless, while resources of the richest language are strictly limited. Language is forced to classify countless meanings into a restricted number of conceptual registers (Sapir, 1993).

According to Selkup mythology, ‘Old Woman of the Earth’ lives in the lower reaches of the river and folklore heroes in order to get to her place traveled down the river, for example, *ulyo* ‘Ice’ (evil personage) takes down the river *old man's daughter*. This representation should be related to one of the possible etymological interpretations of self-names proposed by E. Helimski. He believes that the base **s'ōšə* is comparable to Nganasan *kin's'i*, *kin's'ini* ‘downriver’ *kin's'iə* ‘the area of the lower reaches of the river’ The proto-Samoyedic form is reconstructed as **künsi* or **künsə* (Helimski, 2005).

3.2. Solar human origin.

In the mythology of the Northern Selkups, the function of the demiurge of life was attributed to *ilintil' kotaimil'a* ‘living old grandmother’, ‘life granny’. She created life by sending sun beams to women and they gave birth to babies. Similar ideas about the origin of life from the solar beam were recorded among Wakh Khanty, who believed that *Pugos lung* ‘mother-spirit’ was rocking babies in the cradle on the roof of her house. These children were so small that one could barely see them; at sunrise *Pugos lung* sent them with the first beam to the ground. Where the beam hits the ground, there a baby will be borne, no matter, whether an Ostyak (an alternative name of Khanty) one, or a Russian one (Shatilov, 1931).

3.3. Human creation by a celestial demiurge.

In more modern cultural tradition, celestial Selkup demiurge is observed by Russian ethnographers: this is a supernatural force, the spirit or god *num* (*nome*, *nop*). Through his messenger *nopkullusull* ‘spirit with wings’ *nop* inserts souls into newborns. Through a hole in the sky, *nop* sends to the ground fur peaces and seeds from which animals and berries originated to feed people (Gemuev, 1984). The Selkup word *num* is found already in the earliest historical and lexicographical sources. In the area of Narym it has the phonetic variant *nop*, and in the area of Chulym it is *num* ‘god’ or ‘weather’. In other Samoyedic languages this word is presented in similar meanings in the dictionaries of 17-18th centuries, for example, Nenets *num*, Kamassnum, Koibalnum, Matornum (Donner, 1932). This word belongs to the Protouralic lexical layer.

The etymological row of Protouralic reconstruction, according to Collinder (1955), includes **nu-*, **no-*, **numə-* and consists of Ob-Ugric and Samoyedic data:

Mansi – *num*, *numi* ‘top, summit, upper top, the highest one’, *numi-taarem* ‘god of heaven’, *numen* ‘on, above, on top’; Khanty – *num* ‘upper top, top, heaven’; Nenets *num* ‘sky, heaven, air, god’ Selkup – *nom*, *nop*, *num* ‘sky god’; Kamas – *num* ‘sky, heaven, thunder’; Koibal, Motor, Taigi – *num* ‘sky, heaven, god’.

For Protosamoyedic state J. Janhunen (1977) reconstructed the form **num* ‘sky, weather, god’. This reconstruction is based on data of the Nenets, Selkup, Kamassin, Mator and Koibal languages. We have every reason to believe that the idea of *num* as a deity and the demiurge doesn't belong to the traditional world picture of the Selkups. This fact was pointed out by E.D. Prokof'eva (1949): “*num* – deity didn't interfere in the life of mortal people. The Selkups didn't address this god often”. Apparently, this notion has developed under the influence of Russian Christian culture around the 17th century. Semantic analysis of the Selkup word *num* identifies the following process: the horizontal space > outer, upper space, the upper world, the sky > supernatural active force, weather creator > spirit, god. Characteristically, all previous settings are not removed at the end. These steps of semantic development correspond to three cultural periods of Selkups (pre-animistic, animistic, Christian) (Kim, 1997).

The meaning of the word *num* ‘god disposing human life, the supreme being’ could be illustrated in the following speech contexts: Tas – *noḡqətqolamty* ‘god is going to kill me’; *imatynikkətynyty*: “*tan irə, košnyjcēlyykykoralāš, nom nil'cikšintymənty*”. ‘The wife said the following: “You, husband don’t go hunting every day, god will punish you”’; Losinoborsk – *qunqwejnəwəzədikuḡ* ‘human soul flies to god’; Laskino – *nopennewarga, tab wes' konžirnit* ‘god resides on the top and sees everything’.

Christianity introduced new religious practices to Selkups. The morpheme *num* has spread out in the Selkup speech accompanying those practices. It occurred as a noun, verb, adjective and a component of compound words, for example: Ivankino – *nomdomtang* ‘I pray to god’ (this became an idiom, literary ‘I sit before god’); *mat ilam, nēlamnomnazanomdikwat* ‘my sons [and] daughters don’t pray to god’; Laskino – *noptišpugu* ‘to blaspheme’.

Thus, for the modern world picture of the Selkups the Christian idea of god as a supreme being disposing of human life is characteristic.

3.4. Magic physiology

The name of this version of life origin is very tentative. It is based on Selkup mythology. According to Tas Selkups, the source of life is *wēl'got* ‘spittle’. The ancestors of the people – *madurla* (Selkup heroic giants) didn’t have navels and created creatures like themselves by spitting in the evening into a cup. By morning a child was originated from this spittle (Tuchkova, 2010).

3.5. Human origin from fauna and flora

Now comes the issue of human ancestors from the world of fauna. Selkup kin names include such creatures as a bear, an eagle, a wood grouse, a raven, a swan, a hawk, a crane, and a nutcracker (Prokof'eva, 1952). The Selkup kin names could have two structures: 1) adjective (with a suffix *-l'*) formed from a noun designating a certain bird + *tamtyr* ‘kin’, for example, *lympyl' tamtyr* ‘eagle kin’, *qarräl' tamtyr* ‘crane kin’; 2) Genitive case of a noun designating a certain animal or bird + *tamtyr* ‘kin’, for example, *qulättamtyr* ‘raven kin’, *qorqyttamtyr* ‘bear kin’. Since these creatures were observed as kin ancestors it is possible to suggest a human origin from the world of birds and animals.

Last but not least, according to ancient Selkup stories (*tentyl*), humans have originated from birch bifurcation. Birch is considered a tree of life in Selkup culture; some patterns of behavior demonstrate this statement. For example, Selkups waived with birch twigs in order to drive evil spirits away during thunderstorms, because they didn’t want the lightning to get to their place (Prokof'eva, 1976) Ethnonyms of southern groups – *shōshqum* (Middle Ob group by Kolpashevo), and *sūs(s)üqum* (Ket) contain components with the floral meaning ‘forest, taiga’ (Tuchkova, 2010). Floral origin of people is known in other cultures, for example, the Nivkhs of Sakhalin have legends of human origin from pine or larch (Maslova, 2004).

3.6. Ethnonyms and gender

The question of gender of Selkup ethnonyms was never discussed. Gender is not a grammatical category of Selkup language, although gender roles are definitely assigned in a Selkup society; therefore, it is important to know how gender relation is presented on an ethnic level. Semantic and etymological analysis could reveal culturally relevant gender designation. First of all, let’s consider the main gender-related words in Selkup. The word *qum* is the usual component of compound words and phrases designating a self name or the name of one ethnic group. According to etymologic research, *qum* is a part of the Uralic layer reconstructed as **koj(e)-mz* ‘Mann, Mensch’ (man). (Rédei, 1988). Obviously, the Uralic reconstruction **koj(e)-ra* ‘Männchen’ (male, masculine sexual organ), is related to it. Thus, the word *qum* has a very definite connotation of masculinity. The female component in Selkup is **ne* (Janhunen, 1977). It is usually placed before the component *qum* in compound words: *nen'a* ‘sister’ (< **ne* ‘woman’ + **n'a* ‘friend’), *näl gum* ‘woman, wife’. However, the *ne*-component is not found in compound words designating self or ethnic names. Consequently, ethnonyms in Selkup should be considered masculine or at least neutral

4. Conclusion

This interdisciplinary study reveals that human origin in Selkup culture could be interpreted in different ways that we can classify as the following:

- Terrestrial: human origin from the earth or initiated by the Selkup female demiurge – Earth-Mother *Paja*;
- Solar: *ilintil' kotaimil'a* ‘living old grandmother’, ‘life granny’ created life by sending sun beams to women to make them pregnant;
- Celestial: human origin initiated by the Selkup male demiurge and sky god *Num*;
- Physiological: human origin from spittle of Selkup folklore heroes;
- Faunal: humans could be originated from kin ancestors - animals and birds: a bear, an eagle, a wood grouse, a crane, and a nutcracker.
- Floral: humans originated from birch bifurcation and also from a general word ‘taiga’;

The observed Selkup ethnonyms are masculine-centric – there are no texts with ethnonyms containing the female component *ne-*, although their production is technically possible.

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