

## Article

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# The Turkic Dukha of northern Mongolia

**Elisabetta Ragagnin**

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The report informs about a new project on the Turkic language of the Dukha, a variety of Tuvan spoken in northern Mongolia.

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A new project to provide an analysis of the Turkic language of the Dukha of northern Mongolia has started at the University of Mainz. The ethnonym Dukha is a phonetic variant of Tuva / Tuba, and the language spoken by the Dukha is a variety of Tuvan. Our goal is to present as complete a description of this language as possible. I myself began collecting oral material on the language in the fall of 1999 and continued my linguistic investigations *in loco* in the summer of 2000. Additional field research is planned for 2001.

The Dukha are a nomadic group inhabiting the northernmost part of Mongolia's Khövsgöl region. They nomadize in the forested area, or taiga, northwest of the Khövsgöl Lake, within the Cagaan Nuur district. This area borders the Republic of Tuva in the west and the Republic of Buryatia in the northeast. The Dukha are divided into two groups: the fourteen households of the eastern taiga in the north and the sixteen households of the western taiga in the south. Both groups live in the neighborhood of the Darkhats, who are said to be of Turkic, probably Tuvan origin, though they have been linguistically assimilated to Mongolian.

The western group of Dukha originated from the Tozhu region of Tuva. During the Manchu period, when Tuva was part of Outer Mongolia, this group nomadized across a large area. After the establishment of the border, they had to limit their routes to the Mongolian territory. The eastern group immigrated in the 1940s from Kungurtug of the Tere-Khöl area of the Republic Tuva to avoid the Russian army draft and collectivization. Some Dukha families are found in the urban center of Cagaan Nuur. Especially in the 1960s, when life in the taiga was very hard due to the collectivization of the cattle, they abandoned their nomadic lifestyle and settled here. Many Dukha from the eastern taiga came to work in the fishery, which was established at that time. When the fishery closed down in 1990, they returned to the taiga.

Although their self-designation is Dukha, the groups in question have been given various names such as Tagna Uriyangkhay, Taigin Irged and Soyod-Uriyangkhay to

distinguish them from the Tuvans of the Bayan Ölgii and Khovd provinces of Mongolia. Presently they are better known under the rather derogative Mongolian nickname *Caatan* 'reindeer people'.

Most of the scholarly material on the Dukha deals with ethnographical and anthropological questions. The Dukha are the only reindeer breeders of Mongolia, and are also partly involved in fishing. They have maintained old features, e.g. shamanist practices. Today they are under strong pressure from economic and ecological forces. Recent years have seen some initiatives to help this unique and endangered group to survive.

My own research focuses on the language, about which practically nothing has been published before. Due to their isolation from the main Tuvan population, the leveling effect of standard Tuvan and influence from Russian has been avoided. On the other hand, in addition to the older Mongolian impact on Tuvan, the language of the Dukha has been subject to new and strong Mongolian influence. The lexicon has preserved many unique words of material culture, reindeer breeding, hunting, botany, etc.

Today the Dukha are all bilingual. Tuvan is only used as the in-group language, while Mongolian serves as the language for all spheres of communication outside the Dukha community. Younger people below the age of 20 tend to use Mongolian for the everyday taiga life as well, even if they master their mother tongue perfectly. The language of the Dukha is no doubt an endangered variety, which should be documented and described as soon as possible.

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