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Тел.: +7(7172) 744685 Факс: +7(7172)744785

www.turkacadem.kz, e-mail: iat.journal@gmail.com

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THE ORIGIN OF THE ETHNONYM UYGHUR, AND THE LANGUAGE OF ANCIENT AND MODERN UYGHURSS

Oraz Sapashev*

Abstract

This article discusses the ethnic processes in Central Asia. The medieval history and language of Turkic tribes are examined in the article. Diachronic analysis method compares the origins of ethnonyms. Ethnic consolidation processes are considered. Ethnonyms often discover that they belong to certain language groups. The issue examined in this material is viewed as the main problem of modern Turkic Studies.

Key Words: *ethnicity, ethnonym, Uighurs, migration, Christians, Turfan.*

Introduction

The majority of the names of different ethnic groups originate in ancient times. The territorial principle that defined a certain local feature as well as lifestyle and cultural peculiarity dominated the first stages in the development of certain ethnicities.

The concepts of “us” and “them”, “familiar” and “foreign” have been expressed in the mentality of a certain ethnic group reflecting household and cultural types. Thus, for instance, the Chinese called the Huns or the Saks, who engaged in nomadic animal husbandry and were not urbanized, “barbarians” or “savages,” and the Mongols as “people who eat raw meat.” The ethnonym Kangly comes from the Turkic word for a “cart”. In this case, the linguistic law of paradigm finds its expression through the juxtaposition of household and cultural types.

Ethnonyms (Greek *ἔθνος* – tribe, ethnic group, and *ὄνομα* – name, denomination) are the names of ethnic groups, people, tribes, tribal unions, kinship groups and other ethnic communities.

The study of the history of ethnonyms, their use, prevalence, and contemporary situation is important for addressing the questions of ethnic history, ethnogenesis, linguogenesis, and onomastics.

The study of ethnonyms provides an opportunity for tracing the evolution of the tribal or ethnic name, explaining its origin, tracking the patterns of ethnic migration, and the cultural and linguistic contacts. Ethnonyms as ancient terms carry a valuable historical and linguistic information.

It seemed that the question about the issue of the origin of Uyghurs had been resolved on all levels and in all aspects and that a clear distinction between ancient

* The Research Center for Turkic Studies of al-Farabi Kazakh National University / Kazakhstan, orazss@mail.ru

and modern Uyghurs would be firmly retained in the future. However, a number of researchers still keep using these ethnonyms interchangeably. Thus, the works on the history of modern Uyghurs written by the scholars in the Uyghur studies are especially marked by such a tendency. However, the works of turkologists, that is, experts on ethnography, culture and history of Turkic peoples, are an exception to this "rule".

The origin of the ethnonym *Uyghur* has been the focus of numerous research studies for many years. There are several interpretations of this ethnonym, and several different opinion about the etymology of the word Uyghur exist in scholarly literature. For instance, *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia* presents the following definition of this ethnonym:

The Uyghurs are an indigenous people in the Xinjiang-Uyghur autonomous region in the People's Republic of China. They also reside in several regions of the USSR, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. They speak the Uyghur language. They are believers who practice Islam that replaced shamanism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Buddhism in the 14th-17th centuries. The Uyghurs are one of the most ancient Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. Their ancestors are nomadic tribes of Eastern Turkestan who played a significant role in the Hunnic tribal union (3rd c. BCE – 3rd-4th cc CE). The Uyghurs are mentioned in written sources of the 3rd century CE (including the Orkhon inscriptions of the 8th c. CE). In the 5th-8th cc CE, the Uyghurs were part of the Zhuzhan kaganate, and later of the Turkic kaganate. The process of the ethnic consolidation of Uyghurs ended in the 8th c. after the disintegration of the Turkic kaganate and the formation of the Uyghur early feudal state on the Orkhon river. In 840 CE the Uyghur state was destroyed by the Yenisei Kyrgyz. Part of the Uyghurs relocated to Eastern Turkestan and the western part of Gansu, where two independent polities were created – with centers in Gansu and the Turfan oasis. The former was destroyed by the Tanguts, and the latter became a vassal of the Kara-Kitais (Chinese?) in the 12th c. and a part of Moghulistan in the 14th c. The prolonged domination of the conquerors, the fragmented character of their policy, and other reasons accounted for the fact that the ethnonym Uyghur practically fell out of use. The Uyghurs were then named after the place of residence – Kashgarlyk (the resident of Kashgar), Turfanlyk (the resident of Turfan), etc. or the type of main activity – Taranchi (farmer) (БСЭ 1963: 265-308).

In 1921, at the Congress of the erstwhile Uyghur representatives in Tashkent, the ancient original name of Uyghur was restored to the status of the all-ethnic denomination for the Uyghurs to honor the founders of the state on the Central

Asian territory in the first millennium, thanks to the proposal by the academician V. Bartold and S.E. Malov. Yet, many of the participants of that congress stated the heterogeneity of their ethnic origin.

Meanwhile, it is important to conduct both comparative-historical and typological analysis in order to establish the continuity between a certain ethnic group and its ancient predecessors. In the cases described above, such an important criterion was omitted or completely ignored. Superficial solutions of a serious problem often lead to prolonged disputes and debates; an example would be the origin of the ethnonym *Tatar* and the relationship between modern and ancient Tatars.

In regard to the ethnonym *Uyghur*, N. Ia. Bichurin suggests that the Mongolian word “hoihu” is pronounced in a southern Mongol dialect as “hoihor”, and in the northern Mongol dialect as “oikhor”: “Turkestani people correctly spell this word, but given that their “waw” letter is pronounced as both “o” and “u”, the word “oihor”, due to the quality of their language, has changed into “uyghur”.

Tanshu (History of the Tan dynasty), chapter 217, mentions the following in respect to the name and origin of “hoihu”: “The ancestors of the House of Oihor [hoihu] were Huns. They would typically ride carts with tall wheels; therefore, during the Yuan-wai dynasty [since 386], they were also called Gao-gui or Chile, by mistake transformed into T’iele. Yuan-ge, i.e. hoihu, was also called Uhu, Uge; during the Sui dynasty, it was also called Vaige.”

Vaishu, chapter 103, tells the following about hoihu: “The Ga-gui are the descendants of the ancient generation of Chi-di. At first they were called Dili; in the north they were called Gao-gui Dinlins. Their language is similar to Hunnish, but there is a slight difference. Some say that the ancestors of the House of Gao-gui originate from the grandson via a daughter from the House of Hunnu.” (Бичурин 1950)

G.E. Grumm-Grzhimailo opined in his “Fair-haired race of Central Asia” about the Uyghurs that by the 5th c. the Dinlins (Di, Dili) were driven out of the Yellow river valley to the north, to Manchuria, Baikal, and the Altai-Saian mountainous region by the Chinese newcomers. In the latter region they blended with the Turkic-speaking tribes and formed the Uyghur ethnicity.

Having analyzed the etymology of the word Uyghur by such authors as Rashid-ad-din, Abulghazi, Ia. I. Schmidt, von Klaproth, Vambery, V. Shot, Kazembek, V.V. Radlov suggests the following version on the origin of the ethnonym *Uyghur*:

From the standpoint of the laws of phonetics and the formation of the Turkic language, the majority of the interpretations of the word *Uyghur* do not either find full justification, nor encounter any particular objections – of course, this word could have been formed the way the researchers explain it; however, a different question would be if it really was formed that way. Regarding the verb root of the

word in question, the eastern Turkic tribes who were named Uyghurs would have it as “ut”, not “uy”, therefore, the name, if it were of eastern Turkic origin, should have been pronounced as Utkur, and not Uyghur, and only later the former would transform into the latter. In the meantime, the Uyghurs in Hami retain the verb “ut” in its original form until the 16th c., as it becomes clear from the Uyghur-Chinese dictionary at the Asian museum of the Imperial Academy of Sciences; here, on page 100, b the Uyghur word “udup kel” is rendered in Chinese transcription; on page 46, *Uyghur* is rendered in the characters of *uy-gu-r*, which fully corresponds to the word mentioned by Rashid-ad-Din in the 8th century (Радлов 1890: 1-28).

It is important to note here that the ethnonym *Uyghur* also describes an ethnic group in Tibet. In scholarly literature, they are typically called Saryg Iugurs. This ethnic group’s self-denomination is Iokhyr, and their language is close to Old Kyrgyz. This once again indicates the heterogeneity of the tribes constituting the Uyghur kaganate.

Based on the language of the written record *Tes* discovered in 1976 in Mongolia, K. Sartkozhauly points out the word “ujurmys” (*Tes* II.2) that was used to denote the concept of “unified,” “united,” “collaborating.” This scholar further asserts that, based on linguistic data, the Uyghur kaganate was not represented separately from the Ancient Turkic kaganate (Каржайбай 2002: 4).

As regards the relationship between Old Uyghur and modern Uyghur, it is important to note the following. The most ancient Turkic language is the language of runic inscriptions, with its literary variant dating back to the 7th-9th cc. The foundation of the language of runic inscriptions is the Oghuz-Kypchak dialect since the Kypchak tribes formed the core of the tribal consolidation in the Turkic kaganate. As it can be seen from the text of these inscriptions, the Old Turkic language was shaped far from the Orkhon texts since it is characterized by a finished, stylistically established literary character; however, judging by the other records of that period, it is reasonable to admit its functional, stylistic, and regional variability.

E.R. Tenishev indicates that the Uyghurs formed their literary language after relocating to the territory of Turfan (Eastern Turkestan) in the 9th century. Its basis was the runic koine adopted by the Uyghurs earlier, which was supplemented with the elements of the urban dialect of Turfan, close to modern Uyghur. Thus, a structurally blended language was formed, named *türk ujur tili*, or the Turkic Uyghur language, in Uyghur manuscripts. Beside the runic alphabet, the Uyghurs also utilized Sogdian and its adapted variety (called Uyghur), Manichean, and Brahmi scripts. Radlov contended that the formation of Old Uyghur was finalized between the 8th and 9th centuries, and it was later used in monasteries without any changes. According to the finds of S.E. Malov, the Old Uyghur script was used by the Guangzhou Uyghurs until the 18th century (Тенишев 1990: 143-144).

However, the script indicated by V.V. Radlov and S.E. Malov does not imply linguistic affiliation but is rather related to the idea of writing.

E.R. Tenishev also indicates the influence of Old Uyghur on the formation of several literary languages, for instance, its role in the formation of Karakhanid Uyghur on the territory of the Muslim state of the Karakhanids. This scholar, however, also emphasizes that the term “Karakhanid Uyghur” is not sufficiently precise; medieval authors used other denominations, such as Bugrakhan (*buyrā hān tili*) by Yusuf Balasaguni, Khakan (*hāqāniye*) by Mahmud Kashgari, and Kashgar (*kaşgar tili*) by Akhmad Yugnaki (Тенишев 1990: 143-144).

Modern Uyghur belongs to the Karluk-Uyghur subgroup of the Turkic languages. The Karluk-Uyghur subgroup, in turn, refers to the community of tribes and ethnic groups emerging in the 10th-11th cc., also known as the Karakhanid state, and comprises two languages. First, the literary language of the Karakhanid state, which emerged in the environment of Uyghur, Tiurgesh, Yagma, and Karluk tribes whose language prevailed as a result of the contact with the language of Iranian tribes. It had also acquired a stratum of Arabic and Iranian vocabulary as a result of this interaction and the influence of Arabic first, and literary Persian of the Samanid state later (Баскаков 1952: 121-134).

The second language of this subgroup was a literary language of the later period (12th-14th cc.), that is the period following the Mongol invasion. This language retained the basic features of the language of Karakhanids, i.e. its Uyghur foundation. However, depending on the place and the environment in which a certain written record had been created, it acquired local features similar to Old Uzbek and therefore, did not have a common norm. The following works represent the written records of this language: “*Qisas al-Anbiia*” by Nasireddin Rabghuzi (14th c.), and “*Hibat al-Hakaik*” by Adib-Akhmed Yugnaki (11th-12th cc.). Some elements of this literary language can also be found in the *yarlyks* of the khans of the Golden Horde, whose scribes were the Uyghur officials from the Khan’s chancelleries of the Golden Horde (Баскаков 1952: 121-134).

According to N.A. Baskakov’s classification, Old Uyghur belongs to the Uyghur-Tiukiu subgroup of the Uyghur group of the Eastern Hunnish branch along with the Old Oghuz language of the Orkhon inscriptions (Tiukiue). Their contemporary descendants are Tuvan (Uryankhai, Soiot, Soion) and Karagas (Tofa).

A.N. Samoilovich (1922) divides the Turkic languages into six groups: the R-group or Bulgar languages (includes Chuvash); the D-group or Uyghur languages (beside Old Uyghur, includes Tuvan, Yakut, Tofa, Khakas); the tau-group or Kypchak languages (Tatar, Bashkir, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Altai and its dialects, Karachai-Balkar, Kumyk, Nogai, Crimean Tatar); the taglyk-group or Chagatai languages (modern Uyghur, Uzbek except its Kypchak dialects); the tagly group or Kypchak-Turkmen languages (transitional dialects – Khivan-Uzbek

and Khivan-Sart); the ol-group or Oghuz languages (Turkish, Azeri, Turkmen, southern Crimean Tatar dialects) (Самойлович 1922).

G.Ramsted, V.V. Radlov, and V.A. Bogoroditskii also offered their own classifications of the Turkic languages. However, N.A. Baskakov's classification essentially differs from all others. According to his principles, the classification of Turkic languages represents the periodization of the history of Turkic peoples and languages in its multiplicity of emerging and disintegrating kinship associations and larger tribal associations later who had the same origin and created communities differing in tribal, and consequently linguistic, composition (Самойлович 1922).

What makes Old Uyghur different from Modern Uyghur? As Baskakov points out, Turkic tribes both consolidated into larger units and disintegrated into smaller kinship associations. Therefore, such historical processes are also reflected in the language. As S.E. Malov writes "The remaining parts of the erstwhile large Turkic clans would settle along the rivers and in the mountains of Altai during the periods of historical change and discord; today individual peoples live in every river basin and every valley here with their own customs and languages that differ, sometimes substantially, from the language of the neighbor living just across the river or the mountain." (Малов 1952: 135-143).

As it can be inferred, the divergence between modern Uyghur and Old Uyghur can be attributed to the disintegration of the Ancient Uyghur kaganate in 840 due to the defeat by the Yenisei Kyrgyz. Part of the tribes in the Uyghur empire relocated to Eastern Turkestan and the western part of Gansu where they formed polities with centers in Gansu and the Turfan oasis. The earliest Old Uyghur records "Moiunchur" and "Kulichur" are written in the Old Uyghur runic script, similar to the language of the "Kultegin" and "Mogilian" written records in terms of style and vocabulary.

The Karluks were forced to leave their pastures along the rivers of Tola and Selenga whose names had already become their symbols ("(toquz toghla - sekiz selenge") and settled across the expanse of Asia, partially in the area of the modern Chinese province of Gansu and mainly in the Turfan oasis forming a principality with a capital in Beshbalyk, which later became known as the Kocho state.

In the Turfan, Karashar and Kocho areas ("Kocho" is known as both a city name and a name for the entire district), the Karluks blended with the indigenous population, partially Christianized by then, and the name "Uyghur" spread over the entire population of the region. The word "Uyghur" was even used to denote a "cultured, educated person" (Селезнев 2005: 72-76).

During the formation of a new state, the tribes that relocated to the new territory inherited the state system of the previous Uyghur kaganate on the Orkhon river (744-840), however, they also adapted it to the new lifestyle switching from semi-nomadic lifestyle to farming and sedentary life style. They also adopted the cultures of other peoples, developed them and created their own unique culture.

The territories inhabited by them had long been the crossroads of eastern and western cultures. The new situation created favorable conditions for the cultural contact between Indian and Greek cultures, as well as the cultures of Hwang Ho and Iranian peoples. The latter – specifically, Sogdians – intensively assimilated with the representatives of the Orkhon Turks, which has influenced their anthropological type. A new type of mentality was further created through the contact between different religions: Buddhism, Islam, Nestorianism, and Manichaeism brought by the Orkhon Turks; new written records dealing with religion emerged. The Naimans also adopted the written culture of the Uyghurs through cultural links. Some historical data indicates that during the reign of Kuchuluk, both Uyghurs and Naimans were part of the same political formation. The script and the written culture also passed down to the Mongols through a Naiman stamp keeper named Tatungut. The Mongols have been utilizing the script up until the 20th century. The ethnonym Uyghur-Naiman by no means implies any belonging to the Uyghurs, but rather, as N.N. Seleznev pointed out, it defines literacy among the settlers of this large expanse of land.

The language of the Turks who settled in the Turfan oasis and Gansu belongs to the Karluk group of the Turkic language family. In time, the Karluk dialect (the Chagatai language in the Mongol period [1220-1390]) became the basis for modern Uzbek (in Transoxiana) and modern Uyghur (in Eastern Turkestan).

The Karluks are also involved in the revival of statehood among western Turkic tribes. A large tribal union, frequently mentioned in runic inscriptions as “uch karluk” (three Karluks) appears in Chinese sources in relation to the events in the first half of the 7th century. The pasture lands of Dzungaria, eastern Kazakhstan and the Altai (including the Mongol Altai) had been the main territory of the Karluk tribes for centuries.

At a certain period in history, both Uyghurs and Karluks were part of a single consortium. Thus, in 742, the political hegemony in the steppes of Mongolia shifted into the hands of the tribal consolidation of Karluks, Uyghurs, and Basmyls who had crushed the power of the eastern Turks. But in 744, the Basmyls were defeated by the united forces of Uyghurs and Karluks. A new political formation emerged in Central Asia – the Uyghur kaganate (744-840). The head of the Uyghur tribes became the chief kagan, whereas the leader of the Karluks gained the title of the right (western) yabgu. Eventually, however, the Karluks strife for independence led to their break-away from the Uyghur kaganate.

In 766-775, one branch of the Karluks captured Kashgaria and at the end of the 8th century another group of the Karluks spread its influence over the Fergana valley. According to the Arabic and Persian sources, the Karluk confederation in the 9th-10th cc. comprised numerous kinship and tribal groups. Thus, an Arab geographer al-Mawrazi (12th c.) mentions nine tribes among the Karluks. The Karluk confederation also included several nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic-

speaking tribes of Zhetysu and southern Kazakhstan: Tukhs, Chigil, Azkish, Tiurkesh, Khalaj, Charuk, and Barskhan.

It is important to note, that the same tribes and kinship groups could potentially participate in the formation of various Turkic peoples. The fact that there are common features in the Turkic languages originating from the abovementioned kinship groups should not be considered as a result of the interrelation of these languages at a later time.

The languages of the Uyghur written record from Turfan are significantly different from Old Uyghur; new Karluk-Uyghur grammatical formations are prevalent in them. Unlike Old Uyghur, the phonetic system of modern Uyghur is characterized by numerous deviations from the rule of vowel harmony. While agglutination is present, elements of fusion – phonetic alternations at the morphemic borders – and regressive assimilation of vowels and consonants uncommon for Turkic languages (bash "head" – beshi "his/her head"; tag "mountain" – takka "to the mountain"), as well as vowel reduction (mæktɹəb "school" – mæktivim - "my school") are also frequent.

It can be argued that E.R. Tenishev is correct in stating that the Uyghurs worked out their own literary language after relocating to the territory of Turfan in the 9th century. However, it was not the runic koine, as this scholar contended but rather the Karluk dialect adapted by local tribal dialects close to modern Uyghur that had formed the foundation of this language. Based on the linguistic factors and the ethnic composition it can be suggested that, genetically, modern Uyghur is not a continuation of literary Old Uyghur.

The earliest written records interpreted as Old Uyghur records, date back to the 5th-8th cc; they are recorded using various script systems: Manichean, runic, Sogdian, created on the basis of Old Aramaic and becoming, in turn, a basis for the Uyghur script, as well as the ancient Indian script of Brahmi. Regardless of the geographical differences, they feature the style of the Oghuz-Kypchak dialect, similar to the language of the written records of Kultegin, Mogilian and Ongin.

Since the 9th century, the Turfan and Gansu Turks had been utilizing the Arabic script, whereas the Old Uyghur script had gradually fallen out of use only being preserved in the Buddhist monasteries until the 17th c. and the Timurid chancelleries until the 15th c., as well as becoming the basis for the Mongol script. The existence of Uyghur literature is typically tracked back to the 11th c. and is predominantly a common legacy for many Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Xinjiang, whereas modern Uyghur emerged in the 17th c.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important for linguists and historians to take into account the language factors in order not to cause confusion in the ethnonyms, their origin and linguistic affiliation. An example of such confusion would be the appropriation

of their rivals' ethnonym – Uyghur – by the descendants of the Karluks which has led to several contentious issues. Ironically, the ancient written records mention numerous battles between the Karluks and the ancient Uyghurs.

Regardless of their different linguistic affiliation, some scholars in the Uyghur studies have attempted to draw a direct line from the ancient Uyghurs to the modern Uyghurs which has resulted in lacunae in the study of the Karluk origins of the modern Uyghurs. The modern Uyghur people certainly have roots in ancient times; however, in terms of their culture, mentality, language and anthropological type, they are closer to Uzbeks, descendants of the same part of the Karluks who headed for the Fergana valley in the 8th c. to become the core of the Karakhanid state, rather than the inheritors of Old Uyghur (Urankhai, Soiot, Sakha, and Karagas [Tofa]).

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