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## EXPEDITION ON THE REINDEER BREEDERS IN TODJA IN 2012: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

### Introduction

The investigation of Central Asia and Siberia is one of the priority areas of the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku). As a specialist on these regions, I was given the opportunity in 2009–2010 to be a visiting professor at the Museum. I worked in collaboration with Professor Yuki Konagaya, who is one of the leading experts on the nomadic peoples of Asia. We were working on the project “Tuvans of Russia, Mongolia, and China: a comparative study.” One result of our cooperation was the monograph *One People: Three Fates* (in Russian) about Tuvans living in these three countries [Монгуш 2010a].

As the next stage of our cooperation, we arranged for an international research expedition to Russia, Mongolia, and China to see with our own eyes how Tuvans there live and make an ethnographic film about them. Minpaku was the initiator, organizer, and sponsor of this unique international project.

The expedition took place during July and August of 2012. We were 7 persons: the Deputy Director of Minpaku, Professor Shiro Sasaki; the former director of the Department of Social Studies, Professor Yuki Konagaya; the cameraman Kiyokazu Inomoto; sound manager Hazuki Ando; Professor of the Normal University of Nationalities (Beijing), Sarangerel; Professor of the Mongolian National University of Science and Technology (Ulaanbaatar), Ichinkhorloo Lkhagvasuren, and myself.

In this paper, we will introduce material that was gathered about the reindeer breeders in Todja district of the Republic Tuva. Our studies are based on the results of our fieldwork and the research of Russian [Сар 1987; Итс 1991; Рассадин 2000; Монгуш 2010b] and American [Donahoe 2001, 2008; Wheeler 2000, 2001] scholars.

### The Todja reindeer breeders

Todja is a unique area where the geographical and climatic conditions are most adapted



Typical todzhan landscape

for practicing reindeer breeding. This also is the biggest of the 17 *kozhuuns* of the Tuva Republic. Its territory is 44,8 thousand sq. km, that is 26.2 % of the total area of the republic. The population density is 1 person per 10 sq. km. Additionally the Todja people are one of the most interesting and actively studied ethnographic groups of the Tuvan population.

It was the most extreme part of the trip for us. We traveled 200 km on horseback to reach the reindeer-raising pasture grounds. Our guides were local – a reindeer breeder, Sergey Kyrganay, and his two sons, Andrey and Danil. Implementation of our trip would

have been impossible without their help and knowledge.

We visited their summer pasture grounds which are situated high in the mountains in a place called Aaldyg Azhyk. We were impressed by literally everything: the majestic and boundless taiga, picturesque landscapes, emerald meadows, the simple life of the reindeer breeders, their stoical character and ability to overcome any difficulties that they have to face in their everyday life.

An old man named Kyrganay explained to us why his household consisted only of men: “A few years ago I became a widower.

After the death of my wife, my two daughters died also, so only the three of us remained. All the female duties were heaped onto our shoulders”.

There are fifty head of reindeer in their herd; two dogs help to herd them. Deer were grazed along a valley of the Oyna River, one of the tributary streams of the Ak Hem River, which flows into the Yenisei. Kyrganay’s family has no horses, the role of transport animals belongs to the reindeer. They use saddles like those used for horses. There were also no cows. Instead of cow’s milk, reindeer breeders consume deer milk which differs in its high fat content. When milked the female deer yields no more than 500 ml of milk at a time. To prove this one of Kyrganay’s sons showed us this process. We brewed tea using this milk and tasted it. There is difference between cow’s milk tea and that made with the milk of cervines, the latter being thicker and more nutritious.

When Kyrganay’s spouse was still alive, she made oil and cheese of the milk. The oil was generally consumed by the family, and the surplus cheese was sold. It brought in a small income to the family treasury.

According to the elder Kyrganay, in the Soviet period the Todja people had over 12000 head of reindeer. They had collective farms and farms where these animals were raised. The republican government supported channelized farms in every possible way, paid a monthly salary to reindeer breeders, organized points of sale for the products of reindeer breeding (hides, meat, cheese, oil), and the local population was provided with vehicles for transportation of products, etc. Today reindeer breeders do not get paid salaries, nor are they provided with transport or medical care. There is only one thing that the government provides, which is a small subsidy for reindeer breeding development. That started in 2001. In the beginning it was 350 rubles for one deer, but it was raised to 500 rubles in 2004. Today Kyrganay receives 2000 rubles per deer annually. This money hardly suffices for a living wage. In order to survive, people also have to be involved in hunting, fishing, and gathering.

While staying with Kyrganay’s family, we were filming their everyday life and conducting interviews with each family member. Though we spent a short time among them, it was enough to get an idea of the modern life of reindeer breeders and the problems which they face, about their special status, and many other things.

### **Status of the Todja people**

In 1993 there was an official “separation” of the inhabitants of Todja from the other part of the Tuvan population and they received the status of a small indigenous people within the Russian Federation. This was prompted by the following circumstances: according to many Russian and foreign researchers, the Todja people from historical, cultural, and ethnic points of view are closer to other ethnic groups occupying the East



The reindeer breeder with deer



Ovaa – a sacred place for shamanists

Sayan Mountains, than to the Tuvans living in central, western and the southern steppe zones of Tuva, though in household consciousness they are perceived as a part of the Tuva ethnos.

The existence of favorable conditions for reindeer breeding in Todja led to there being four closely related groups of reindeer breeders and hunters, occupying four sectors of the Sayansky intersection. These are the Todja people in the southwest sector, the Tophas in the Irkutsk region in the northwest, Dukha or Tsaatans in northwest Mongolia in the southeast sector of the intersection, and the Soyots in the Republic of

Buryatia in the northeast sector. All these people occupy a narrow transitional zone between the Siberian taiga and the steppes of Inner Asia and represent a kernel of the Southern Siberian and Mongolian reindeer-breeding complex [see: Donahoe, Plumley 2001]. All of them speak very close dialects of the Tuvan language, though it is necessary to note that the Tuva language nevertheless is the first language for all Todja people. Their local dialect, which researchers consider to be “the most isolated and interesting of all Tuvan dialects” [Car 1987, 73], gradually has been disappearing and giving way to the more standard central dialect which extends through the mass media and the education system.

Besides having the status of a small indigenous people of the Russian Federation, the Todja people are also considered to be an ethnographic group of the Tuvan population.

### Population numbers

During the Soviet period, official statistics ignored the Todja reindeer breeders and they were not considered to be a separate ethnographic group, which is why it was impossible to establish their certain number. However, according to the local statistics from 1997, there were 1,454 in the Azass administrative area, 1,379 in Iy, 228 in Systyg-Hem, and 158 in Chazylar. They made up about 5 % of all Tuvans.

At the moment there are 4,442 Todja people; their main concentration live in four settlements located in the northeast part of Tuva. These are the villages of Aдыr-Кезыгыг, with the population of 1,127 people; Iy with 1,141; Ham Syra with 156; and Systyg-Hem with 187. More than 200 reindeer breeders are registered as living in the taiga, in territories which are a part of the Iy and Azass rural administrations. The number of inhabitants of Toora-Hem, an administrative center of Todja, constitutes 2,727 people [Донахо 2008, 186].

### Crisis in reindeer breeding

The traditional reindeer breeding of the Todja people belongs to Sayan type and they use a horse saddle with stirrups and three girths for riding deer. Usually the deer are freely grazed without a hunting dog or the continuous supervision of shepherds. The results of much research has shown that the Sayan type of reindeer breeding which has developed in this region arose under the influence of horse breeding among the Turkic-Mongolian people [Итс 1991, 110; Рассадин 2000, 17].

During the Soviet period, after the end of the 1940s when three collective farms were created in Todja, reindeer breeding as a type of economic activity developed and extended much more widely than it does now. However, in the 1980s reindeer-breeding farms made an unsuccessful attempt to generate income by the annual cutting of antlers for sale in the markets of East Asia. Unfortunately, this practice appeared to be pernicious for the

health of the animals, and it led to a mass extinction of the reindeer. This reached a maximum in 1996 when 400 head died, and after that the cutting of antlers was stopped. At that time it appeared that reindeer-breeding farms were not capable of surviving independently.

Disintegration of the USSR affected them in the most adverse way. The reindeer breeders who heretofore had been provided by the state suddenly lost their most basic necessities: snowmobiles, motor boats, canvas tents, guns for the protection of herds from wolves, cross-country transport equipment for the export of products and the organization of the economic activity of communities, the equipment for processing and storage of products of the taiga trade, combustion and lubricating materials, combined forage, etc. The points of sale for taiga products were also liquidated. Veterinary help declined as well, and national methods of treatment were completely lost. A number of trade enterprises and organizations that earlier served areas of accommodation for reindeer breeders' essentials ceased their activity. Moreover, reindeer breeders did not receive a salary for a long time. Amid the circumstances of an economic crisis and runaway inflation, they had to kill deer to survive or to receive cash from the sale of venison. In aggregate, all these factors led to a catastrophic impoverishment of the Todja people and a sharp reduction in cervine herds, from 14,000 head in 1982 to 1,100 in 2001 [Донахо 2008, 197–198].



Reindeer breeding is worthy occupation

### **Economic and social situation**

According to the Ministry of Health of the Tuva Republic, the birth rate in Todja in 1995 had decreased in comparison with 1994 by 42.6 %, and mortality increased by 30 %. In 1995, the natural increase was 25 people, and in 1996 – 23 persons. The incidence of disease in the local population grew sharply.

Moreover, the transition to a market economy sharply aggravated the employment situation of the population. This became especially true in small settlements where in connection with the reform of the agrarian sector there was a huge reduction in the number of workplaces. The majority of those in the list of employment seekers were young people under 30 years old. Unemployment led to the outflow of highly skilled experts and youth to the city. According to data from 2002, only 659 Todja people held permanent jobs.

Thus, the Todja people appeared to be on the verge of disaster; the question of their survival and preservation as original ethnographic group with the features of their economic livelihood and culture became ever more acute. Due to this situation, in June, 1995 the President of the Tuva Republic issued a decree, “About measures for reindeer breeding development in the republic”. This decree meant that the deer that were livestock in agricultural enterprises and communities were their collective property, and their privatization was prohibited. The communities were temporarily forbidden for three years from handing deer over to the state, killing them for economic needs or for giving out as wages in kind.

Some international organizations have been helping the Todja people. For example, the French non-governmental organization “An action against hunger” visited them in 2000–2001 and delivered food and clothes for the children of reindeer breeders. The American

non-governmental organization “Totem Peoples Preservation Project” has worked in the region since 2000. This organization tries the help to reindeer breeders to improve the health of cervine herds, it delivers to them medicines necessary for veterinary supervision, carries out other necessary deliveries, and also organizes the training of veterinarians.

### **Creation of tribal communities**

In 2004, the Parliament of the Tuva Republic passed a law, “On the tribal community of the indigenous minority Todja people” which urges solutions to the problem of establishment and support for the state protection of the primordial habitat of the Todja inhabitants, and also their traditional way of life and livelihood. This law provided to Todja people legal protection which they did not have before. According to it, the community governs through a general meeting, a council of the community, and a chairman of the board; it has the right to develop a charter and hold property; some communities can unite into unions (associations) and have the privilege of using natural resources in places of accommodation; communities also have the right to observe religious practices, and create their own cultural centers. Questions of community land use and its property are regulated by the Ground and Civil codes. An association of communities of Todja people called “Tos Chadyr” was also created; its president is a local reindeer breeder named Svetlana Demkina. The association consists of about 1100 individual members and five tribal communities: “Systyg-Hem”, “Ulug-Dag”, “Odugen”, “Kham Sara”, and “Tere-Hol”. Our informants the Kyrganays are members of the “Odugen” Community.

For the coordination of activities of reindeer-breeding farms at the federal level, the Association of Indigenous Minority Ethnic groups of the North and the Far East of the Russian Federation was created; its chairman is Sergey Haryuchi (Yamal). The main objective of the Association consists in preservation of the number of deer, in carrying out selection work, and creation of a breeding herd in regions where the local population traditionally is engaged in reindeer breeding. There is a special technical training college in Toora-Hem for future reindeer-breeders, and this occupation still is considered as honorable and desirable. Some young people can be educated at the prestigious Institute of Reindeer in Yakutsk, in the Republic of Sakha-Yakutia.

### **Poaching problems**

It is necessary to note that notable distinctions between the Todja and other ethnic groups in their relation to natural resources and especially to hunting for wild animals sometimes lead to inter-ethnic friction. For example, Todja people accuse Russians of illegal hunting and shooting indiscriminately at all the animals they come across. They make the following argument: If a Russian sees five *maral* (red deer), he will kill all of them and take the antlers and the genitals, and leave all to the rest to rot; a Todja person will kill just one animal and not touch the others. However, this problem exists not only between the Todja people and the Russians, but also between the Todja people and other Tuvans, who come to Tozhda from others districts for commercial hunting and fishing [Донахо 2008, 196].

According to B. Donahoe, the very important resources for Todja people of wild animals, which are their main source of animal protein and also provide income from the sale of furs, are now being exhausted by poachers with a view towards the illicit trade in animal carcasses in the black market. Among other threats are destruction of their dwelling environment by the mining industry connected with gold mining and timber cutting, and also the temptation of receiving easy profit from hunting tourism organized for foreign clients. From this researcher’s point of view, in order to resist these threats, it is necessary to provide reindeer breeders with guarantees that they can continue to be engaged in hunting for life support, that their lands will be protected by the law from privatization and further use for industrial purposes, and that hunting will be forbidden to

those who are not natives of Todja. Otherwise, the disappearance of reindeer breeding and the way of life related to it will lead to a reduction of non-recoverable biological diversity and loss of the unique cultural heritage.

### **Chinese expansion**

There is another extremely serious problem in the Todja region. In April 2006, an auction sale of licenses for development of the Kyzyl-Tashtygsky field of polymetallic ores in Todja took place. It is known that this field contains large reserves of zinc and lead which are in demand in the world market. The Chinese company JSC Lunsin paid Russia 740 million rubles for the right to develop this field over the next 25 years.

In August of the same year, a meeting of heads of the republic with representatives of this company took place in the House of Government in Tuva. Representatives of the company reported to the Tuvan authorities on the beginning of design works. The Chinese party assumed obligations to consider the strictest ecological requirements shown by the Tuvan party. However, both parties reached a consensus that the activities of JSC Lunsin in Todja will bring mutual advantage for both sides. It will help social and economic development of the district and workplaces organizations, including training for local young people [Монгуш 2010b, 124–125].

When we arrived in Todja, development of the Kyzyl-Tashtygsky field was already actively under way. We got acquainted with four Chinese working there. From their words we learned the following: Currently about 1000 Chinese experts of many varied backgrounds are participating in the project. All of them work under contracts whose length depends on the circumstances. Contracts usually last for 2 or 4 years.

Our informants came to Todja because of high salaries. However, they refused to specify its amount since their contract requires nondisclosure. They have the following living conditions: They live in a hostel with a kitchen, gardens, and hothouses where they grow all the vegetables they need. Internet, TV sets, radio and mobile communication are available to them. Once a year each worker has 50 days of vacation to visit his relatives in China.

A Chinese town with infrastructure will be built in Todja. It will help Chinese workers to come here with their families. Their children will go to the kindergarten and study at the school. In this sphere they have done much. We actually saw how they were building residential and public houses. Many of these are awaiting completion.

According to the local workers in this field, they are constructing a processing factory where they will dress ore. In order to do this they will use salts of hydrocyanic acid; all this will be dumped together into a settler and be filtered there, and the remaining waste from production will be dumped into the local Ak-Hem River, from where it will flow into the Yenisei.

Ecologists from Kyzyl, who came to Todja in 2011 to study this question, have rigorously ascertained that when the processing factory starts to operate at full power, it will not be possible to avoid an ecological disaster. Todja's fauna will start to die out, all plants will become poisonous, the incidence of disease in the local population will sharply increase, and the earth will become barren.

Besides this, the Chinese also extract large quantities of gold which they melt into ingots and send in containers to China. Local people perceive it as the plunder of natural riches by the Chinese who have received permission for this from the Tuvan and Russian governments. According to elderly informants, the strong earthquakes which were taking place at the end of 2011 have grown out of the barbarous invasion of strangers into the subsoil of Tuva. The disappearance of a large mountain, razed to the ground in connection with mining, which previously had been considered to be a sacred object, was considered by the old men to be an irreplaceable loss, and the anger of the spirit owner of this mountain and other districts seemed quite justified.

Initial promises by the Chinese to create workplaces for the local population, and through that to allegedly promote social and economic development in the district, in reality turned out to be fiction. What they actually did was to buy two cars for the local administration, and then employed some tens of Tuvans and Russians as unskilled workers. Later many of them left the project. There were some serious reasons why they did this. We listed them in the order in which they were cited by our informants. First, the Russian (including Tuvan) workers got small salaries; second, what they were fed was disgusting (the remains of the food after the Chinese had eaten); and third, they felt that they themselves were traitors participating in the predatory plunder of the natural riches of their homeland. According to recent data, no more than 30 Russians remained working with the Chinese, they have to continue working for the maintenance of their families.

From the Todja people's point of view, the activity of the Chinese company in their territory is serious threat of not only an ecological, but also of a strategic character. According to them, "disinterested" investments of the Chinese industrialists in Tuva can have repercussions in the future. Having obtained a serious advantage in the region, it will be simpler for China to undertake development of other fields, and also for geological exploration. And when the railway to Kyzyl is constructed, representatives of the People's Republic of China can lobby for stretching it to Mongolia. The distance between Mongolia and China is rather short, and it is directly in the path of the Chinese expansion in the conditions of increasing globalization.

### Conclusion

In any case, the data gathered shows conclusively enough that the modern ethnic development of the Todja people is complex and multi-faceted in character. First, having lived in a mixed ethnic environment for a long time, the Todja reindeer breeders have to mix with other peoples and accept their languages and culture. However, in spite of this, they still retain such important components of ethnicity as their ethnic consciousness, and some features of traditional culture, which allows them to be identified as Todja people.

There is also a serious problem of the Chinese expansion in the Todja district. All these questions presented here offer promising avenues for future investigation, and could serve as an initial foundation for further analysis.

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