

Desired Identity and Mistaken Orthography Among the Khakas of Siberia

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The Khakas belong to one of the less known Turkic speaking groups. They live in the Khakas Autonomous Republic, situated within the Russian Federation, by the middle flow of the Yenisey River. Their capital is Abakan. Their language belongs to the South Siberian areal group of Turkic languages. Together with Shor it forms the Modern Yenisey Turkic branch of South Siberian Turkic; South Siberian Turkic also includes Altay Turkic, Chulym Turkic, and Sayan Turkic. Khakas comprises six groups the dialects of which partially show marked differences. The standard language is based on the Kacha dialect spoken in the districts of Ust'-Abakan, Altay, and Shira. The second most important dialect is the Sagay dialect (spoken in the Askis district and in the northern part of the Tashtyp district), which has also made its influence felt on the literary language. The Beltir (in the Tashtyp district) and the Koybal (on the right bank of the Abakan river, along the banks of the Kandyrla river, and in the district of Beya), who in the early 19th century still spoke a Southern Samoyed language, have become assimilated to the Sagay and the Kacha. The origins of the Kyzyl may be traced back to the Chulym Turks and the Eastern Siberian Tatars. Driven by famine, some groups of the Shor (see above) left their homeland in the neighbouring region of Mountain Shoria (Gornaya Shoriya) in the 18th century and assimilated to the Khakas tribes (Schönig 1999 and 2001).

Unlike the Turkic speaking populations of Central Asia, the Near East and Eastern Europe, the Khakas do not profess Islam. Similarly to other South Siberian Turkic groups, they were also targeted by the missionary zeal of the Russian Orthodox Church, and were converted, albeit superficially, to Christianity in the course of the 19th century. In spite of their conversion, they have preserved many notions and practices from their pre-Christian past, which have been influenced by traditions often subsumed (even by some scholars) under the label 'Shamanism' (although Shamanism is not a religion but a set of techniques).

According to Chinese sources, already in the early Middle Ages the territory of modern Khakasia was controlled by the so-called Ancient Kirghiz or Yenisey Kirghiz. The relationship of these groups to the modern (Tien-shan) Kirghiz still awaits clarification, and it is quite possible that continuities were limited to the adoption of an earlier ethnonym. Originally, the Yenisey Kirghiz were not Turkic speakers either; According to Róna-Tas (1974) they probably spoke a kind of Palaeosiberian language. Like some other groups in history, they assimilated to some Turkic speaking groups (perhaps the precursors of the modern Kipchak

Turks) in the course of time, undergoing language change in the process. Their decentralised aristocratic socio-political system was united under a Kaghan in the late 7th century A.D., only to be subjugated by the Kōk-Türks of the so-called Orkhon Turkic Kaghanate in the early 8th century. Following the decline of Kōk-Türk power, and the emergence of another Turkic tribal confederation, that of the Old Uighurs, the Kirghiz continued a subordinate existence until the 840s, when they overthrew the Old Uighur steppe empire and assumed power. However, they did not follow in the footsteps of their predecessors in the steppe, instead, they retreated behind the mountains of their tribal territories, where they ruled over non-Turkic groups, possibly including speakers of Obi-Ugrian, Samoyed and Yeniseyic languages, the so called Kyshtym. They were famous for their metal production (as were, e.g., the Yeniseyic Kets in later centuries), and held trading relations not only with China but also with the Islamic world.

The numerous epitaphs found all over south Siberia most likely date from this period of Kirghiz history. They were written in the so-called Turkic Runic script, a syllabary, which by and large follows the orthography of the Uighur Runic inscriptions rather than that of the Orkhon Turkic inscriptions, which comprise the first texts written in a Turkic language. I shall return to this topic later below.

In the 13th century the Kirghiz, together with some other tribes of the so-called “forest peoples” (Mongolian *boy-in irgen*) submitted to the conquering Mongols of Chinggis Khan, but towards the end of the same century they were already rebelling against their new overlords (ca. 1254–70). In the course of a devastating war many were deported and the Yenisey Kirghiz experienced a dramatic decline, as a result of which they eventually disappeared from historiography. They are mentioned again in the 17th century, at the time of the Russian encroachment into the Yenisey region. At this point the Yenisey Kirghiz were organised in four principalities: Altı, Altı(n)sary, Yzyr, and Tuba. Initially they paid tribute to the Oirat-Mongols’ later they were conquered by Russia (Pritsak 1959).

The Kirghiz principalities were torn between the Russians and the Oirat, until in the early 18th century a great majority of the Yenisey Kirghiz were deported by the Oirat with the aim of hindering Russian encroachment through the politics of creating an empty space. It is still a matter of discussion, whether Kirghiz immigration to the Tien-shan Mountains was directly connected with these deportations (Pritsak 1959: 600). The remaining Yenisey Kirghiz mixed with their former subject population, the Kyshtym. It was from this mixing that most of the modern south Siberian Turkic speaking groups emerged.

Under Russian rule the Turkic speaking groups were able to preserve their traditional organisational structures. The peoples of special interest to us were at that time labelled ‘Abakan Tatars’, ‘Minussinsk Tatars’ or ‘Tatars of the Yüs-Steppe’. They themselves seem to have called their own lands Qoŋ(g)oray even before this time, which toponym later became Xooray. During Russian rule this

name was largely forgotten, and it is only now, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, under new conditions of relative autonomy, that some circles have attempted to revive it. I shall return to this topic below. During the Tsarist period of Russian rule the designation 'Khakas' was not yet in use for this people. This was first applied by indigenous intellectuals in the early Soviet period, and it was based on a misreading of the Chinese rendition of the ethnonym applied to the (Yenisey) Kirghiz during the Tang dynasty (7th-10th centuries), a view which goes back arguably to Klaproth (1823) and Radloff (1907). Incidentally, the name itself contradicts the sound law of the Khakas written language, which only knows *x* but not *q* (velar *k*) in back vocalic words. After several stages of organisational modifications in the political structure (such as the Autonomous Region of the Krasnoyarsk Country founded in 1930) the Khakas Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was established. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union it was transformed into the Khakas Autonomous Republic within the Russian Federation. The capital of these political formations was and has remained Abakan.

One of the earliest efforts to write down the Khakas language was connected to the activities of the Altaic Spiritual Mission in the period between 1893 and 1899 and took the form of the Cyrillic script. This 'missionary alphabet' formed the basis of the so-called 'national alphabet' in the Latin script, which was developed in the early Soviet period and remained officially in use until 1939, when the Cyrillic script was re-introduced. This alphabet has remained in use up to the present day.

Similarly to many other groups within the Russian Federation, since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Khakas have also made efforts to assert their sovereignty through mobilising their recently acquired political rights in many areas of life. Among these efforts an important role is played by the re-construction and construction of a history, which is both heroic and respectable. One of the most important exponents of this new historiography is the Khakas scholar Viktor Yakovlevich Butanaev. His remarkable work points to a direction, which had its antecedents in the Soviet period. Thus in articles like Ungvitskaya (1971) connections between the Old Turkic Yenisey inscriptions and modern Khakas folklore are described. Of course such connections may exist, and Ungvitskaya may be right with her analysis. But if we take into consideration the colourful history of Southern Siberia, it is very unlikely that such connections are limited to the Khakas. This is one of the principles carried over by the new nationalists all over the former Soviet Union from the preceding Soviet "nation building programmes": the inhabitants of single Soviet administrative regions became the direct heirs of preceding cultures in the area concerned, especially, but not only, if no original "cultural heroes" of the nations in question were readily available. Thus the poet Nizami-yi Ganjavi, writing in Persian, became one of the most prominent "Old Azerbaijanian" writers – despite the fact that he never wrote

one single line in Azeri, only because he lived in what is today Azerbaijanian territory. The famous poet Navai has thus become the “father” of Uzbek literature, even though he wrote in Chaghatay Turkic and lived at the Timurid court during the last days of Timurid rule in Central Asia, which was eventually defeated and destroyed by the invading Uzbeks. In the case of the Khakas another “proof” of direct relatedness with the Yenisey Kirghiz is the fact that beneath names of Khakas *söök* (‘bones’ = families) a name like *Qirgīs* can be found. But the Khakas nationalists forget to mention that such family names also appear among other Turkic peoples (and not only in Southern Siberia).

One important activity of the new Khakas nationalists is to treat Khakas as an old ethnic and linguistic unit; scholars like, e.g., W. Radloff, L.P. Potapov, and S.A. Tokarev considered them only as an administrative unit created by the Oirat-Mongols and later on by the Russian administration. Furthermore the view of the new Khakas nationalists considers the Khakas the descendants and cultural heirs of the Yenisey Kirghiz, who are credited with the authorship of the so-called Yenisey inscriptions written in the Runic alphabet.¹ As a result Butanaev and other Khakas nationalists have started decorating various printed matter with these Runes, and in doing so they often violate the Runic orthography and use individual Runes in the wrong way. Another area, which exemplifies the modern use of these Runes is souvenirs of all kind.

The Turkic ‘Runic alphabet’ comprises more than thirty-five signs, which show some variation according to inscription group (see table below);² the Khakas, as self-appointed heirs of the Yenisey Kirghiz use the variant characteristic of the Yenisey inscriptions (which also includes the inscriptions of Tannu-Tuva (today the homeland of the Sayan Turkic Tuvans and another autonomous region of the Russian Federation).

The script is written from right to left: words as well as groups of words which are semantically more closely connected are separated by the sign : In addition to four vowels with a dual phonetic value (A = a/ä, I = i/ī, U = o/u, Ü = ö/ü) and one vowel with a single phonetic value (closed e), characteristic of Yenisey Kirghiz, the script also includes four groups of consonant signs. One of these can be used in words with both palatal and velar vowel sequences, (m, ñ (palatalized n), p, z). The second group consists of signs, which can only be used either with velar/back vowels (b¹, d¹, g¹, k¹, l¹, n¹, r¹, s¹, t¹, y¹) or with palatal/front vowel sequences (b², d², g², k², l², n², r², s², t², y²). At the same time the Yenisey group also features the pairs η¹ and η² as well as š¹ and š², which in the Orkhon Inscriptions are represented by the neutral η and š respectively. A third group of

¹ More problematic was the rigour with which, at a meeting at Marmara University in Istanbul, he made every effort to purge all Russian loanwords from a planned Khakas-Turkish dictionary (personal communication of Prof. Dr. Emine Gürsoy-Naskali).

² This figure is an estimate in as much that even within one and the same inscription group some signs are represented by several variants.

signs comprises the consonant clusters *nt* (*nd*) and *nč* (*nĭ*), which are entirely independent of the vocalism of the word in question. While these signs are usually read with the vowels *a/ä* (the vowels can either precede or follow the consonant clusters) in the absence of further specifications, a fourth group of consonantal signs require other vowels. This group comprises the three *k*-signs (one of the most frequently occurring consonants of the Turkic languages) (*i*)*k*(*i*), (*o/u*)*k*(*o/u*) and (*ü/ö*)*k*(*ü/ö*). One example of the application of the Runic script is found in the journal *Xaqas Ćirĭ* or “Khakas Land”.³

№	Русск.	Енис.	Орхон.	Латин.	№	Русск.	Енис.	Орхон.	Латин.
1	а, э	ᠠ ᠡ	ᠠ ᠡ	а, ä	21	л ²	ᠯ	ᠯ	l ²
2	э	ᠡ	—	ä	22	м	ᠮ	ᠮ	m
3	ы, и	ᠢ	ᠢ	ï, i	23	н ¹	ᠨ	ᠨ	n ¹
4	о, у	ᠣ	ᠣ	o, u	24	н ²	ᠨ ᠨ	ᠨ ᠨ	n ²
5	ё, ю	ᠨ ᠨ	ᠨ ᠨ	ö, ü	25	нг ¹	ᠨᠭ	ᠨᠭ	ŋ ¹
6	б ¹	ᠪ	ᠪ	ɓ ¹	26	нг ²	ᠨᠭ	ᠨᠭ	ŋ ²
7	б ²	ᠪ	ᠪ	ɓ ²	27	нй	ᠨᠢ	ᠨᠢ	ñ
8	г ¹	ᠭ	ᠭ	ɣ	28	нт, нг	ᠨᠲ, ᠨᠭ	ᠨᠲ, ᠨᠭ	nt, nd
9	г ²	ᠭ	ᠭ	ɣ	29	нч	ᠨᠴ	ᠨᠴ	nč
10	г ¹	ᠭ	ᠭ	d ¹	30	п	ᠮ	ᠮ	p
11	г ²	ᠭ	ᠭ	d ²	31	р ¹	ᠮ ᠨ	ᠮ ᠨ	r ¹
12	з	ᠵ	ᠵ	z	32	р ²	ᠮ	ᠮ	r ²
13	й ¹	ᠶ	ᠶ	j ¹	33	с ¹	ᠰ	ᠰ	s ¹
14	й ²	ᠶ	ᠶ	j ²	34	с ²	ᠰ	ᠰ	s ²
15	к ¹	ᠬ	ᠬ	q	35	т ¹	ᠲ	ᠲ	t ¹
16	к ²	ᠬ	ᠬ	k	36	т ²	ᠲ	ᠲ	t ²
17	ык, кы	ᠬ	ᠬ	iq, qı	37	ч	ᠴ	ᠴ	č
18	ок, ко	ᠬ	ᠬ	oq, qo	38	ш ¹	ᠰ	ᠰ	š ¹
19	ёк, кө	ᠬ	ᠬ	ök, kō	39	ш ²	ᠰ	ᠰ	š ²
20	л ¹	ᠯ	ᠯ	l ¹	40	раздел	ᠰ	ᠰ	—

³ Ćir is the equivalent of modern Turkish *yer* ‘soil, land, etc.’ with regular sound correspondence between the two words.

denote Khakas *x* is acceptable, since the Runic script has no separate sign for *x*; at the same time a *K*-sound in back vocalic words regularly becomes *x* in Khakas (see above). In contrast, the absence of the first syllabic vowel in čr²I could be considered correct only if the author consciously wanted to reflect an archaic, pre-Khakas reading with *ä* (which is, however, most likely not the case here); otherwise the Khakas shape of this word (čir) would require the insertion of the Runic sign I. Most probably the shape of the word is simply taken over from a publication about Old Turkic in Runic script without taking into account the spelling rules of Runic Turkic.

Let us now take a look at the cover of Viktor Yakovlevich Butanaev's publication *Xakassko-russkij istoriko-ětnografičeskij slovar': Xooray-oris tarxin-ětnografi-ya söstig'i* (Abakan 1999).



The Russian (right) and the Khakas (left) title pages face each other, and the margins of both are decorated with Runic writing from top to bottom.

The left margin of the Khakas title page displays the following sign sequence: $k^1U\eta^1r^1Ay^1 : k^1r^1k^1z :$, while on the right margin of the Russian title page we find: $Ur^1Is^2 : s^2Üzt^1s^2g^2I :$. It is not difficult to recognize here deviations from the contents of the Khakas title page and to identify some spelling mistakes. First of all, to denote the homeland of the Khakas, the author has opted for the archaic form *Qonjoray* instead of the modern *Xooray*. This is inconsistent with the spelling of $s^2Üzt^1s^2g^2I$, which reflects the modern Khakas word *söstig* ‘dictionary’

(< *sözlik) + possessive suffix.⁴ But the sequence s²Üzt's²g²I on Butanaev's title page mistakenly uses the Rune for z instead of one denoting s². The use of t¹ instead of t² is a serious violation of Runic orthography. If we make allowances, the use of s² may have been an oversight, although it is more likely that it was caused by a general carelessness, as was the case with the preceding t¹ Rune.

Let us now look at the sequence k¹r¹k¹z. If the Khakas Runic ornament on the margins is read from top to bottom, starting with the Khakas page followed by the text on the Russian one (which seems to be the only sensible way to read this), we are left with the interpretation of this sign sequence as Qırqız, i.e. Yenisey Kirghiz: with this we would get a reading of the Runes on the margins of the Khakas title page Qoñoray Qırqız 'Konghoray-Kirghiz', which makes a lot of sense, given the context of the Khakas national awakening movement. Nevertheless, the existing spelling k¹r¹k¹z should be read as qarqaz. The name of the Kirghiz usually appears in the various inscriptions as (i)k(i)Ir¹k¹z or k¹Ir¹k¹z. This means that once again we are confronted either with carelessness or/and with ignorance concerning the use of the Runic script, which is now widely regarded as the inheritance of the nation.⁵ The word oris 'Russian' is represented by the sign sequence Ur¹Is². Here the use of s² for the back vocalic s actually corresponds to the orthographic practice commonly found in the different inscription groups. However, in view of the many misspellings mentioned above, it is very unlikely that this old orthographic practice was consciously applied by the author of this recent, neo-Turkic Runic text.

With this our brief excursion in the world of Khakas national awakening has come to an end. As is often the case in similar movements, here, too, those actively taking part in the construction of a new national identity often exaggerate and resort to the misuse and even abuse of the facts which they mobilise for political ends. Driven by nationalist sentiment, persons generally perfectly competent in their chosen fields may start meddling with materials which are far beyond their expertise. We may only hope that such currents will not hold sway among the Khakas and that intellectuals will rather use their energies to solve real rather than imagined challenges of post-socialism.

⁴ The development *söz* > *sös* is characteristic of South Siberian Turkic languages in general; the change *...sl...* > *...st...* is also characteristic of the Kipchak languages such as Kazakh or Kirghiz.

⁵ Let us imagine the unlikely situation that the text should be read in a different sequence, beginning with the first Runes on the top of the Khakas page, continuing with the first word on top of the Russian page, followed by the word at the bottom of the Khakas, finally the word at the bottom of the Russian page. In this case we could interpret k¹r¹k¹z as the wrongly spelt form of *tarxin* 'historical'. We would have a t² instead of a t¹, resembling the mirror image of a k¹, and the n¹ would be replaced with an n², which looks very much like a z; but in addition to these confusing changes the orthography of the vowels would also be highly insufficient, and one would have to reckon with an l in the second syllable. In any case, this highly unlikely interpretation would still point to a high degree of incompetence.

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