ETYMOLOGICAL AND ETHNOHISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE YENISEI

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the background of the different terms used for the river Yenisei in the aboriginal language families of the region: Mongolic, Turkic, Yeniseic, Uralic, and Tungusic. The etymological material allows, in particular, important conclusions to be drawn of the areal interrelationships and chronologies of expansion of the Samoyedic branch of Uralic and the Ewenic branch of Tungusic. The presence of Uralic speakers on the Yenisei predates that of Tungusic speakers by a minimum of two millennia. Both Yeniseic and Turkic also reached the Yenisei earlier than Tungusic.

Keywords: etymology, diachrony, language contact, areal linguistics, linguistic history
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One of the great rivers of the world, the Yenisei (Russian Енисей) has a length of over 4,100 kms and a drainage area of over 2.5 million square kms, extending from the Sayan region and Northern Mongolia in the center of Asia to the Yenisei Gulf in the Kara Sea at the Arctic Siberian coast (SSÊ 1: 877-885, cf. also EÊS). The landscapes traversed by the river along its course vary from the alpine forests and forest steppes of the south to the boreal taiga belt in the middle and the treeless tundras and marshlands in the north. On its upper course, the Yenisei first runs in an east-to-west direction through the Tuvinian basin, from where it breaks its way northwest through the Western Sayans and enters the Minusinsk (Abakan) basin, running then mainly in a south-to-north direction. After leaving the highlands of Southern Siberia, it enters its principal section, which marks the physical boundary between the Western Siberian Lowland and the Eastern Siberian Plateau.

On the Mongolian side, some of the sources of the Yenisei are located on the southern slopes of Mt. Munku-Sardyg (Written Mongol Мунгу-Сарыдяг), the highest peak (3,491 m) of the Eastern Sayans at the Russo-Mongolian border. The drainage area of the Yenisei comprises, however, also the lakes Baikal and Khövsgöl (Written Mongol Гөвсугул), two tectonic basins in Inner Asia, which are connected with each other via the Selenga river system. Baikal, in turn, is connected with the Yenisei main river via the Angara or Tunguska (Тунгуска), which forms the southernmost of the three right-hand tributaries to the Yenisei, the others being the Stony Tunguska (Подкаменная Тунгуска) and
the Lower Tunguska (Нижняя Тунгуска). The left-hand tributaries, running from
the watershed between the Yenisei and Ob basins, are generally much smaller.
In many places, the tributaries of the two rivers almost touch each other. At the
Arctic coast, however, the area between the mouth regions of the Ob and the
Yenisei contains several separate local rivers, including the Taz, the Pur, and
the Nadym.

Due to its sheer size, the Yenisei drainage area has always served as the
homeland for a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups. No single aboriginal
population alone has apparently ever been able to cover the whole length of the
river at any single synchronic point of time, although diachronically the Yenisei
has served as an important channel for ethnic and linguistic movements in the
south-to-north direction. Historically, excluding the colonial presence of Russian,
the Yenisei basin contains languages belonging to five distinct language fami-
lies: Uralic, Tungusic, Turkic, Mongolic, and Yeniseic. Of these, Yeniseic is a
family attested only in the Yenisei basin, while the other families extend far be-
beyond the Yenisei in different directions: Uralic to the west, Tungusic to the east,
Turkic to the southwest and northeast, and Mongolic to the southeast. Of partic-
ular importance in recent ethnic history has been the role of the Yenisei main
basin as a geographical marker of the linguistic boundary between the Samo-
yedic branch of Uralic (on the west) and the Ewenic (Ewenki-Ewen) branch of
Tungusic (on the east).

Since the Yenisei has been too macroscopic a feature for any single aborigi-
inal people to comprehend, the names used for it in the different local languages
are also typically restricted to denoting certain parts of the main river, or of its
sources and tributaries. There is no doubt that an etymological analysis of these
names will yield information concerning the dates and routes of the ethnic
movements and linguistic expansions that have brought the languages of the
Yenisei region to their documented locations. The present paper is an attempt at
creating a summary of the potentially important ethnohistorical implications
that this toponymic material can offer.

Mongolic *sisig-tü

The principal source of the Yenisei in Mongolia (not considering the Se-
lenga-Baikal-Angara line) is known on Mongolian maps variously by the name
Шишхид гол or Шишигт гол (Written Mongol Sisigdu Qhuul or Sisikit Qhuul),
with gol (гол) ‘river’ (cf. e.g. MNT 2: 1146). This name is neither structurally
nor materially Mongolic, though it may contain the Mongolic denominal form-
tive for possessive adjectives in -t < *-tU, suggesting a derivational origin of the
type *sisig-tü ~ *siski-tü, in modern phonemic shape shishegt ~ shishvet (or also,
Since the current aboriginal population of this region is composed of the Turkic-speaking Tsaatan < *caa-tan ‘reindeer people’, who speak the so-called Tukha variety of the Tofa group of Sayan Turkic, it is possible that the item *sisig also derives from local Turkic. In that case, the name could be tentatively compared with Tofa shijek ‘small bird’, which may or may not be a borrowing from Mator Samoyedic ṭshinjaku ~ ṭcinjaku id. (cf. Helimski 1997: 341 no. 889).

Unfortunately, it is not known whether a name connected with *sisig-tü is actually used by the Tsaatan, or by any other of the minor Turkic-speaking groups of the Eastern Sayan region, including the Tofa (in the north), the Todzha (in the west), and the Uighur Uriangkhai (in the east). A name of the type ‘bird river’ might also be semantically too trivial to represent the true origin of this hydronym, which may well have a deeper prehistory in unknown local languages. No actual names for the Yenisei or its source rivers seem to have been recorded from Mator, though it is possible that the Mator speakers simply identified the river as ṭorgo bü[q] ‘large water’ (Helimski 1997: 329-330 no. 816). In this connection, it is possibly relevant to note the name of the river *egiin Gol (♀uG uv Qhuul), which is the outlet of Lake Khövsgöl into the Selenga basin. The element *egiin = eg-iin is formally a genitive from *eg ~ *ege, a nominal stem of unknown meaning and origin but reminiscent of Samoyedic *yǝka ‘river’, attested also in Mator as ṭjaga ~ ṭcaga id. (Helimski 1997: 226 no. 169). It is not implausible to assume that the southern limits of the Mator language area once extended to all sides of Lake Khövsgöl. This would, however, have been prior to the historically documented Turkic (Uighur, Sayan Turkic) and Mongolic (Darkhat, Khalkha, Buryat) expansions into the area.

In this connection it may also be noted that, although the name of Lake Baikal (Russian Байка́л ← Buryat baigal) has been the object of numerous popular explanations (cf. Gurulev 1982/1991), it goes back to earlier Mongolic (*baigul) and represents a borrowing from Turkic *hay-köl (< *baay+kööl) ‘rich lake’. Likewise, the name of Lake Khövsgöl (Russian Кхо́всгое → Buryat *kubsugul) is a transparent reflex of Turkic *kök-sub-köl (< *köök+sub+kööl) ‘blue-water lake’. These names obviously derive from the period of Turkic (Old Turkic and Uighur) linguistic dominance in Mongolia, that is, from a time immediately preceding the linguistic arrival of Mongolic under the historical Mongols. Altogether, it may be concluded that of all aboriginal ethnolinguistic groups in the Yenisei source region, the Mongols represent the most recent wave of expansion.