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Tofa

Capsule Summary

Location: South central Siberia, on the territory of Irkutsk Administrative Region, Russian Federation

Total Population: approximately 600-700

Language: Tofa (Tofalar)

Religion: animist

The Tofa (also known as *tofalar*, formerly *karagas*), were formerly hunters and reindeer-herders of the south Siberian *taiga* (forested mountains). Once practitioners of animistic religion and dwellers in bark-covered teepees, they now live in log cabins in three mountain villages. Still, the Tofa may be the least documented among native Siberian peoples. Early travelers who visited the Tofa reported a few limited details of their physical appearance, pastoralist lifestyle, and material culture. Some evidence for the practice of shamanism was collected, including ribbon-bedecked shamans' costumes and deer-hide drums now on display in Russian museums. The Tofa were forcibly settled in the 1930s. Since that time, language shift, cultural decline, and Russification have proceeded apace. Though the Tofa still maintain a distinct culture and ethnic identity, they find themselves under increasing pressure to abandon their language, land, and traditions. The Tofa language is now seriously endangered and spoken fluently only by elderly persons.

The Tofa share a close cultural and linguistic affinity with two other small, isolated, and endangered groups of nomadic and seminomadic reindeer herders. The nearest of these are the Todzhu, reindeer herders of

northern Tuva. The Todzhu speak a language quite closely related to Tofa. Another closely related group is the Tuha (also known as Dukha or Tsaatan), nomadic reindeer herders of northwestern Mongolia, who number fewer than 200 persons. The Tofa, Todzhu, and the Tuha form a common culture area, strikingly similar to each other in terms of language, folklore, nomadism, animism, and reindeer ecology. These three peoples represent the southernmost extreme of reindeer pastoralism in the world.

South-Siberian reindeer herders differ from the large-scale reindeer (caribou) ranchers of Scandinavia, Alaska, Canada, and northern Siberia, who live in tundra areas and raise large herds of reindeer for meat. The Tofa, by contrast, use reindeer primarily for their milk products, and as pack and riding animals, while wild game is the principal source of food. This unusual combination of hunting and herding shaped the Tofa religion, customs, language, and worldview.

Tofalaria, as the ancestral Tofa territory is called in Russian, is located in the foothills of the Sayan Mountains in western Irkutsk administrative region along the border with the Republic of Tuva. It contains three remote villages: *Alygdzher*, *Nerkha*, and *Gutara*. The 1989 Soviet census recorded 731 Tofa persons, but intermarriage with Russians and others is common and many Tofa are of mixed ancestry. The Tofa were recognized in 1926 as a "small-numbering people," a special ethnic status in the Soviet Union. However, they failed to meet the minimum population standard needed to receive an officially sanctioned orthography. Efforts at writing or publishing were

prohibited until 1989, when Russian scholars developed an alphabet based on Cyrillic letters and published a primer to teach schoolchildren. The writing system has not been widely accepted and few adult Tofa-speakers read it. The language is currently spoken fluently by only about 30 persons. No children in the community are learning or using Tofa as their first language; on a scale of language endangerment it is thus considered moribund and likely to disappear in the coming decades. Contact among native speakers from different villages is sporadic, as travel between the three villages is increasingly difficult. All speakers now use Russian for daily communication, even at home.

Tofa belongs to the northern (or northeastern) branch of the Turkic family, making it a distant cousin of Turkish. It also shows considerable Mongolian influence and borrowing of words from an earlier, now extinct language, probably of the Yeniseyan family. Tofa boasts a rich legacy of legends, stories, and songs. As of 2001, a few elderly people were still able to sing songs or recite traditional stories like the following one, a Tofa creation myth:

How the earth was created

In the very beginning there were no people,
there was nothing at all.

There was only the first duck,
she was flying along.

Having settled down for the night,
the duck laid an egg.

Her egg broke.

The liquid of her egg poured out.

From it, a lake was formed,
and the egg's shell became earth.

That is how the earth was created.

For indigenous people such as the Tofa, whose entire culture developed around the productive activities of hunting, fishing, gathering, and reindeer breeding, the native language reflects an intimate knowledge of the land and natural resources. The Tofa way of life depends on complex knowledge of the land and its resources, which in turn depends on rights of access to that land and its resources. A variety of political, social, economic, and institutional pressures, particularly during the Soviet period, eroded this connection

to the land. Soviet collectivization was followed by the introduction of the *sovkhos* (state farm), forced settlement of mobile reindeer herders, the introduction of boarding schools for children, and the establishment of village-based fur-processing and sewing enterprises to employ the wives of herders. The emphasis on so-called production nomadism was a major blow to the south-Siberian reindeer herders' way of life. These changes also undermined family structures by which language and culture should be transmitted from one generation to the next. By the late 1940s, the state had banned shamans (traditional healers and religious practitioners), forbid the use of the language, sent many children off to boarding schools, and conscripted young men to fight Nazi Germany on the western front of World War II. Following decades brought an influx of Russian settlers, leaving the Tofa outnumbered in their own titular territory.

In the face of all this, the Tofa struggled to continue to hunt, herd, practice animism, maintain a separate ethnic identity, retain their language, and pass on cultural knowledge to their children. They can claim modest success in some of these areas. Many Tofa still engage in traditional activities of hunting, fishing, and gathering of berries, pine nuts, and medicinal plants. A smaller number engage in animistic religious practices that include making offerings of tea, food, and vodka to the local spirits that are believed to reside in mountains, rivers, and campfires. Fewer than half a dozen Tofa men still practice reindeer herding, and the number of deer had declined to well under 1,000 head in the year 2001. As the last speakers of Tofa grow old, the death of the language in the next two decades becomes a great likelihood. With it, much of the cultural legacy may also come to an end. Left behind is a community that has forgotten its own creation story.

K. DAVID HARRISON

See also *Mongolia; Siberian Indigenous Peoples; Tuvans*

Further Reading

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