



Research Article

Etimology of the Etnonim “Teyit”

Toichiev Mairambek Tokonovich* 

Department of Russian Language and Literature, Nazarshoev Khorog State University, Khorog, Tajikistan

Abstract

The present article offers a comprehensive etymological investigation into the ethnonym Teyit, a self-designation used by one of the most prominent groups within the Ichkilik Kyrgyz tribal confederation. The author performs a critical re-evaluation of the long-standing hypothesis that attempts to link this name to the Arab tribe of Tayyi', which purportedly settled in Transoxiana during the Islamic conquests of the 8th century. In contrast to this traditional view, the study proposes a novel interpretation that connects the ethnonym to the phytonym tiit (larch tree), a term found in various Turkic languages with phonetic variants such as *tit* or *tyt*. This hypothesis is substantiated by the sacred significance of the larch tree within the archaic spiritual traditions of Siberian peoples. By synthesizing data from comparative linguistics, ethnography, and population genetics, the author demonstrates the invalidity of the "Arabian" theory and proves the autochthonous Turkic origins of the ethnonym, rooted in ancient cults of nature. Furthermore, the research explores the historical involvement of the Enisei Kyrgyz in the ethnogenesis of the Yakut (Sakha) people. By analyzing previously overlooked Yakut historical folklore and oral traditions, the author argues that the Kyrgyz component played a far more substantial role in Yakut history than is currently acknowledged in mainstream historiography. A point of significant scholarly novelty is the author's hypothesis regarding the origin of the ethnonym Kurykan—the ancestors of the Yakut people. The study suggests a direct linguistic correlation between this name and an alternative reading of the ancient Chinese characters traditionally used to denote the ethnonym Kyrgyz. This multidisciplinary approach provides a fresh perspective on the migration patterns and cultural synthesis of Turkic-speaking nomadic societies in Central and North-East Asia.

Keywords

Ethnonym, Yakuts, Kyrgyz, Teyit Clan, Phytonym, Larch (tiit), Population Genetics

1. Introduction

Since antiquity, the debate regarding the essence of names has been reduced to two positions: *physei* (the nature of a thing is reflected in its name) and *thesei* (a name is an arbitrary entity established by social convention) [16]. Although modern science recognizes the validity of the latter, there are frequent and characteristic situations where the *physei* position takes precedence. This is most vividly manifested in attempts to etymologize ethnonyms, particularly regarding the endonyms of

Turkic peoples.

In particular, questions concerning the etymology and ethnogenesis of the Kyrgyz people are traditionally viewed through the prism of the *physei* concept. Such an approach is logical: according to Academician V. V. Barthold, among the modern peoples of Central Asia, "there is not a single one whose name appears in history so early" [5]. Given the traditional dominance of verbal forms for transmitting historical

*Correspondence: Toichiev Mairambek Tokonovich (toichievbakir@gmail.com)

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experience, as seen in Kyrgyz culture, the reconstruction of the complex process of ethnic formation is possible only through a deep etymological analysis of endonyms. Only such an approach allows for the identification of archaic semantic constructs rooted in profound antiquity.

The earliest mention of the ethnonym "Kyrgyz" is found in Chinese sources in the form of "Gegu" (or *Gegun*) and dates back to 201 BCE [5]. Currently, there are several hypotheses regarding the origin of the ethnonym itself, ranging from folk etymologies to rigorous linguistic reconstructions. Based on their semantic nature, these hypotheses can be broadly classified into three categories:

- 1) Numerical (related to the number forty);
- 2) Landscape-based;
- 3) Descriptive (referring to appearance and character).

The first group includes the most widespread variants: "kyrk+az," "kyrk+yuz," and "kyrk+oz/oguz" (supported by scholars such as V. V. Radlov, S. G. Klyashtorny, S. M. Abramzon, etc.). In these versions, the word *kyrk* (forty) is combined with an ancient Turkic root corresponding to the names of various tribes or clans.

Another version is "kyrk + kyz" (forty girls): a well-known folk etymology reflected in legends about forty ancestral maidens who survived the annihilation of their tribe. Despite its popularity in folklore, professional linguists view it with skepticism. N. A. Aristov notes that similar legends of ancestral maidens also exist among other peoples, such as the Kotonians (Khotans), Tanguts, and the Ainu—a Japanese sub-ethnic group [3].

The second group consists of interpretations such as "kyr + gyz," "kyr + gez," or "kyr + gut," where the root "kyr" is used to mean steppe, open space, or highland. In this context, *Kyrgyz* translates to "steppe dwellers" or "steppe Oghuz" [M. N. Speransky, N. A. Aristov, B. Munk ácsi, et al.].

The third group includes the "descriptive" variant: "kyryg + uz," where "kyryg" means red or fair/ruddy, and "uz/oghuz" refers to the people. Early Chinese chronicles described the Yenisei Kyrgyz as people with "red hair and blue eyes" (N. A. Baskakov, A. N. Kononov, K. I. Petrov, et al.).

A separate mention should be made of a hypothesis gaining popularity based on internal verbal semantics. Despite growing interest, the academic community of etymologists does not consider it scientific: "kyr" in the sense of the action "to exterminate" + "gyzs" — an affix that semantically excludes the potential possibility of the action. Thus, it translates as "the inextinguishable people" or "the indestructible nation."

The connection with historical realities and ancient daily life is clearly manifested in the ethnonyms of many Kyrgyz clans. For instance, the self-name Bugue reflects the ancient cult of deer worship [11], while a group of ethnonyms such as Bagysh, Chon Bagysh, Kara Bagysh, and Sary Bagysh traces back to the name of the elk, whose skin was traditionally used for making shamanic drums [11]. The list of such ethnonyms could be continued at length; however, it should be noted that

not all interpretations are definitive, sometimes sparking academic debate. In this regard, the large tribal group *Ichkilik* stands apart.

The origin of the ethnonym *Ichkilik* itself remains a subject of debate. Nevertheless, the position of K. I. Petrov is considered the most well-founded. Here is his viewpoint in full: "As for the core composition of the *Ichkilik* group, whose tribes undoubtedly consolidated with the Left and Right wings as early as the first millennium (as evidenced by a uniform anthropological type, language, etc.), these are the tribes of the main conglomerate of the Yenisei Kyrgyz. In relation to the peripheral Ob-Irtysh Kymak-Kyrgyz tribes, they represented migrants — inhabitants of the internal region of *Ichki*. Hence their name, *Ichkilik* — 'internal'." [15].

The names of many clans within the *Ichkilik* group reflect their historical past. For instance, the ethnonym *Nayman* is traced back to the numeral 'eight' in Mongolic languages, while the name *Kesek* has direct parallels in the ethnonymy of neighboring peoples: the *Kara-Kesek* among the Kazakhs, *Kedeget* among the Khakas-Sagay, and *Kezek* among the Tuvans, and so on. However, the etymology of the ethnonym *Teyit* still requires clarification; therefore, we shall examine it in detail.

2. Etymologization of the Ethnonym *Teyit*

It is well-known that "the *Teyit* are one of the major clans within the *Ichkilik* tribal group" [11]. Indeed, the sheer number of constituent ethnic components is a distinctive feature of the *Teyit* clan; few other tribes can compare in the quantity of names of their included sub-clans. This naturally sparked interest in the origin of the lexeme *Teyit* itself, as it remains a semantically opaque ethnonym. It appears that the lack of a transparent internal form of the ethnonym served as the primary incentive for seeking external etymological links. This is reflected in the hypothesis suggesting that the *Teyit* clan is considered a "fragment of the large Arab tribe *Tayyit* (*Tayy*), which settled in Turkestan" [8].

It is important to note that the pronunciation of the ethnonym as *Tait* (or more accurately, in the 'Arabic manner' as *Tāit*), as suggested within this hypothesis, has never been prevalent among either the Tian Shan Kyrgyz or the members of the *Ichkilik* Kyrgyz tribe. At the same time, the sound [ə] is present in the characteristic speech of the *Ichkiliks*, who typically use it not only when pronouncing similar Arabic loanwords—such as *Səyit* (a male name), *məyit* (the deceased), etc.—but also in native Kyrgyz words like *zhəyit* (pasture), as opposed to the Tian Shan form *zhayyt*."

Even considering the obvious probability of the /ə → ə/ transformation under the influence of the Tian Shan pronunciation—where the sound "ə" is atypical—it seems unnatural that people would intentionally 'distort' their own community's endonym by pronouncing it as *Teyit* instead of the more

comfortable *Tait*. This state of affairs gives us reason to believe that in the pronunciation of the ethnonym *Teyit*, the alternation of mid and high vowels originally functioned as a marking factor.

In this regard, the phonetic similarity between the words *teyit* and *tiit* appears noteworthy. It is known that the name for the larch (a genus of coniferous trees in the family Pinaceae) in the Yakut language is *tiit* [18], with phonetic variants such as *tit* [14] and *tyt* in the Altai, Shor, Chulym, and Khakass languages [2, 6, 10, 12, 19]. Notably, in the modern Kyrgyz language, the word *tyt* does not refer to the larch, but is used to designate another woody plant—the mulberry tree (*Morus*) [24]; as is well known, the larch is not found in the wild within the territory of Kyrgyzstan, as it is not an indigenous species.

The toponym *Tiit-Ary* (Larch Island) is mentioned in folk legends regarding the settlement of the Middle Lena by the ancestors of the Yakuts, who arrived there from the shores of the Yenisei while fleeing from turmoil and inter-clan wars [23]. There is also information "about... cattle breeders (Kyrgys) who lived on the Middle Lena before the Yakuts..." [23]. The phytonym *Tiit* (*tit*, *tyt*) can be considered within the context of the ancient beliefs of Siberian inhabitants, where trees such as larch, juniper, willow, birch, and others were spiritualized and endowed with supernatural properties [1].

Scientists are still developing hypotheses regarding the ancestors of the Yakut people, linking them to various Turkic-speaking ethnic groups of Siberia. The most well-founded is the hypothesis of Academician A. P. Okladnikov, which connects the origin of the Yakuts with the Turkic-speaking Kurykan people. Citing historians, E. I. Ubryatova writes that "the core of the Yakut people is believed to have been formed by migrants from a certain Turkic tribe that was part of the Kurykan tribal union" [21]. There are several interesting versions of the etymology of the ethnonym *Kurykan*; we, in turn, draw attention to the data of the linguist A. V. Dybo¹, [9] which, upon closer examination, allow for a correlation with the ethnonym *Kyrgyz*. The fact is that one of the readings of the hieroglyphs representing the meaning *Kyrgyz* sounds like *krĕk-kwĕn*, which possesses a certain consonance with the ethnonym *Kurykan*.

N. Ya. Bichurin believed that the Yakuts were descendants of a people who referred to themselves as the Boma [7], which is a Chinese transcription of the ethnonym *Alat*, i.e., *ala at* ("piebald horse"). Regarding this, there is "evidence... that in the 1640s, the Dzungar Erdeni Batur Khung Tayiji waged war against the Alat-Kyrgyz or Buruts {...}" [22]. This may serve as a basis for identification with the *Kyrgyz*, as "... Burut served as a derogatory nickname for the Tian Shan and Yenisei *Kyrgyz*, given to them by the Dzungars {...}" [22].

Information published in 1902 by V. F. Troshchansky is

quite noteworthy, referencing evidence he drew from the works of other Russian researchers: "The Yakuts have a legend that they came from a country located three thousand versts south of where Irkutsk stands today. The Kyrgyz Sarabay Toyon and his wife Sai-sar, a Tatar by birth, set out from their homeland to the north with their children; Sarabay Toyon died where Irkutsk now stands, while his wife and children traveled further and arrived at the site where Yakutsk is now located, near the Sai-sary branch of the Lena...' And further on (in the footnotes) he notes: '...in a note by the native Nikol. Pryadeznikov (in the margins of Chapter II of Priklonsky's ethnographic essays [17]), "Kyrgyz origin from the tribe of Khan Kharabay" is attributed to one of the ancestors of the Yakuts named Äp Älläi [cf. Er Elley: 23, p. 304 authors' note—T. M.]. Should the last word not be read as Sarabay here, considering that poorly educated Yakuts often denote the sound represented, according to Böhtlingk, via s=h, with the symbol kh (x)?' [20]. We should note that this hypothesis appears quite robust in light of linguistic data, not only from the period of Academician O. N. Böhtlingk's (1815–1904) life and work but also from the modern period: '...at the beginning of a word, with certain exceptions... h is an optional variant of the phoneme s.' [21]."

In modern genealogical tables (*sanjyra*) of the Kyrgyz *Teyit* tribe, specifically within the *Teyit-Chalteyit* lineage, the name Khan *Sarybay* invariably appears. It is important to note that the word order used in this name follows a pattern characteristic of the Russian language and is consistently maintained across all genealogical records. This is notable because Kyrgyz tradition typically places the title after the name: *Rakhmankul Khan*, *Alymkul Atalyk*, *Kurmanjan Datka*, *Atake Biy*, and so forth.

Given the phenomenon of vowel reduction in Turkic languages and the likelihood of name distortion during transcription (*Sarybay* — *Sarabay*), it can be assumed that these refer to the same individual. Although the context in which Nikolai Pryadeznikov created this note remains unclear, its factual value as evidence of data obtained from a real informant is undeniable.

Furthermore, the work "*Historical Legends and Tales of the Yakuts*" (published in 1960) contains significant topo-ethnonymic parallels. The name of the Yakut administrative unit (*nasleg*), *Chakyr*, is identical to the self-designation of a sub-clan within the Kyrgyz *Teyit* tribe. Additionally, the name of another sub-clan — *Kara Tuuma* — shows a clear resemblance to the ethnonym "Black *Tumats*," which is widely known in the context of early Yakut history. The abundance of phrases containing the word *Kyrgyz* in the Yakut texts of this bilingual work may indicate a substantial *Kyrgyz* influence on the history of the region.

¹ "Kyrgyz (ethnonym): [characters] authors' note, T. M. (Pulleyblank 1962, 230; Starostin 1989, 453).

Characters: > 1. [character] authors' note, T. M., Mod. *gé*, Old Chin., Class. Chin., LH *krĕk*, EH *kriĕk*, PST *kiĕk*, Mid. Chin. *kaiik* 'to separate; to be divided' (Karlgren 0855 f).

2. [character] authors' note, T. M., Mod. *kūn*, Old Chin. *kūn*, Class. Chin., LH, EH, PST *kwĕn*, Mid. Chin. *kon* 'elder brother' (Karlgren 0417 a–b).

Featured in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*).

Reconstructed reading: LH *krĕk-kwĕn*, which is traditionally interpreted as **kirkir* or **kirkir*."

3. Connection to Genetics

The question regarding the origin of the ethnonym Teyit is also being clarified by the results of current genetic population studies. This refers specifically to the dissertation of O. A. Balaganskaya, in which "...contrasting groups of Naryn and Murghab Kirghiz were studied" [4]. It should be noted that within the Murghab Kyrgyz population (the Kyrgyz population residing in the Murghab District of the GBAO, Tajikistan), the Teyit tribe is represented as one of the largest (alongside three others: Kesek, Nayman, and Kipchak) [13].

As the author of the dissertation states:

"...The research material consisted of 1,101 venous blood samples from representatives of 13 small Turkic nationalities and sub-ethnic groups living across four states: Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan... The samples were collected during long-term expeditions (2004–2010) by the Laboratory of Human Population Genetics of the Research Centre for Medical Genetics (RCMG) of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, conducted under the leadership of E. V. Balanovska in collaboration with Kemerovo University and scientific institutions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan within the framework of the international 'Genographic' project, as well as grants from the RFBR and the RHSF. The formation of the sample groups was carried out taking into account the pedigree of each individual. The analyzed sample included 1,101 unrelated males. To minimize the influence of modern intermixing processes, the sample included only those representatives of the indigenous population whose ancestors all belonged to the given population for at least three generations. The work was conducted with the written informed consent of the subjects under the supervision of the Ethics Committee of the RCMG." [4].

Following the results of the conducted research, O. A. Balaganskaya notes: "It is remarkable that such geographically distant Kyrgyz populations (from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) turned out to be so genetically similar; $F_{ST}=5.1\%$. The differences between them are related only to the ratio of Central Asian and Siberian haplogroups. In the Tien Shan mountains, the steppe influence on the gene pool prevails (Central Asian variants of haplogroup C account for 44%), whereas on the high-altitude (4,000 m above sea level) Pamir plateau, the steppe influences are weaker. Consequently, evidence of the Siberian origin of the Kyrgyz is better preserved in the Pamirs, manifesting in a high frequency of the 'Siberian' haplogroup N1b (24%)" [4].

4. Conclusion

The aforementioned points allow for the following conclusions:

- 1) The Kyrgyz ethnonym Teyit originates from the phytonym *tiit*, which held sacred significance in the ancient Turkic languages of Siberia. The form *tiit* is likely the original (Ancient Kyrgyz) version. Phonetic variants in

related Turkic languages (*tit*, *tyt*) emerged as a result of contraction, indicating their secondary nature relative to the initial long-vowel form.

- 2) A portion of the Yenisei Kyrgyz—who as early as the 1st millennium, "in relation to the peripheral Ob-region Kymak-Kyrgyz tribes... represented emigrants and inhabitants of the internal region of Ichki" [15]—migrated to the Middle Lena, settled there, and subsequently participated in the ethnogenesis of the Yakut people. Meanwhile, another segment fractured and continued its migration across the territories of Mongolia, China, and Central Asia, partially mixing with local ethnic groups. One such group may have maintained a mental connection to the image of the "sacred tree" or a specific toponym—for example, identifying themselves as a community originating from the locality of Tiit-Ary. A group leader bearing a corresponding name could have founded a clan with an identical self-designation, which later rose to prominence and expanded by incorporating new ethnic elements.
- 3) Over time, the ethnonym *Teyit* retained only its eponymous essence, while its phytonymic and sacred components were gradually erased from folk memory. This may have been due to the fact that the descendants of the first Kyrgyz to embrace Islam sought to distance themselves from their Siberian past, which was associated with ancient belief systems such as Tengrism, shamanism, and totemism. Initially, this was dictated by security concerns during the religious conflicts of the early period of the Caliphate's conquest of Central Asia, and later by psychological adaptation to a firmly rooted Islamic civilization.

Abbreviations

GBAO Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region

Author Contributions

Toichiev Mairambek Tokonovich: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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