

Tofa

Location: South central Siberia, on the territory of Irkutsk Administrative Region, Russia
Total population: approximately 600
Language: Tofa
Religion: Animist

The Tofa (also known as *tofalar*; formerly *karagas*), were formerly hunters and reindeer-herding pastoralists of the south Siberian *taiga* (forested mountains). Traditional hunter-herders practicing an animistic religion, they 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 reported, including ribbon-bedecked shaman's costumes and deer-hide drums now on display in Russian museums.

In the 1930s, the Tofa were forcibly settled into villages. 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 by fewer than 30 elderly persons.

The Tofa share a close cultural and linguistic affinity with two other small, isolated and endangered groups of (semi-) nomadic reindeer herders. The nearest of these are the Todzhu, reindeer herders of northern Tuva. The Todzhu, numbering perhaps 300 persons, 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, numbering fewer than 200 persons. They speak a distinct and endangered language that is largely mutually comprehensible with Tofa and Todzhu.

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 used 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 formed the basis of Tofa religion, customs, and language, in short, of their unique culture and society.

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 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; it is thus 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 communication, even at home

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 and primer to teach schoolchildren. The writing system has not been widely accepted; few adult Tofa speakers can read it.

Tofa belongs to the northern (or northeastern) branch of the Turkic family, making it a distant relative 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 2000, 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 sedentarization 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.

By the late 1940s, the state had banned shamanic practice, sent many children off to boarding schools and conscripted young men to fight Germany on the Western front.

Following decades brought an influx of Russian settlers, leaving the Tofa outnumbered in their own titular territory. The emphasis on “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.

In the face of all this, the Tofa struggled to continue practicing animism, maintain a separate ethnic identity, retain their language, and pass on cultural knowledge to their children. Many Tofa still engage in traditional activities of hunting, fishing, and gathering of berries, pine nuts, and other varieties of plants. A smaller number engage in animistic religious practices that include making offerings of tea, food, and vodka to the 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 has declined to well under 1,000 head. As the last speakers of Tofa die off, 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

Forsyth, J. 1992. *A History of the Peoples of Siberia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Vainstein, S. I. 1980. (translated by M. Colenso) *Nomads of South Siberia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.