

Chapter 14

The False Term “Baga Yastan”: Human Rights and Cultural Discrimination in Mongolia

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Editor’s introduction: The language and linguistic stigma of those considered to be minority people are a key and important issue in many nations today, including in contemporary Mongolia. Addressing this issue, Bat-Amgalan Baatarjav describes how the term “baga yastan,” which means “little” or “junior” people, carries a strong connotation of ignorance and incompetence as attributed to western ethnic Mongols. This is especially ironic, he suggests, because the language forms of western Mongols are in significant ways more indicative and ancestral of the Mongolian language, and its original script, than is the case of ostensibly non-dialectical Mongolian.

Describing the linguistic and cultural stigma that he and others have endured as western Mongols, Bat-Amgalan Baatarjav emphasizes that the issue of ethnic stigma within Mongolia, and of ethnic Mongols living outside of it, is serious and has particularly negative and unfortunate impact on young people, including through the perpetration and reinforcement of misleading attributions on the internet. In conclusion, he calls on scholars and scientists to dispel such false characterizations and to reveal the unity of western and other ethnic Mongols with Mongolian linguistic and national traditions rather than viewing them as ignorant and at odds with them. In a postscript, the author thanks scholars and civic, political, and religious leaders for taking his plea seriously.

In two decades following the silent democratic revolution of 1990, Mongolia has faced many significant challenges. Surprisingly, the nation has, for the most part, achieved positive results despite major mental and cultural as well as political and economic changes. Of course, the most challenging of these has been the economic transition from a centrally planned to a market economy. Everyone discusses and calculates what we lost and what we gained during the transition period, especially our economists. But those of us in the social research community need to understand what attitudinal changes we have undergone so far, the results of these changes, and how they will affect our ability to overcome the challenges that our nation has yet to address.

Since 1990, a non-official and misleading term has been used with greater frequency in Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia. It is that the western part of Mongolia is a minority or “baga yastan.” This term has been generally used, including by people from the western provinces themselves, even in the Socialist times. The term is now used with increasing frequency as an official designation as well as in colloquial speech or slang. The Mongolian word “baga” means “small”, “junior” or “little.” I see our understanding of “baga yastan” as a direct translation of the Russian slang, “maly narod” – малый народ, which literally means “minority people.” But an incorrect understanding of this slang has saddled the term with a wholly different and derogatory connotation, that of ignorant and incompetent people. The terms hence brings a feeling of doubt and shame to those who are counted as “baga yastan”, mainly from Uvs, Khovd and Bayan-Olge provinces.

The western regional provinces of Mongolia, including Gobi-Altai, Zavkhan and Khovsgol, have played an enormous role in preserving traditional Mongolian life styles and hospitality. When we encourage researchers to compare them with other regions in Mongolia, they find unique inheritances

of culture, religion and language. Most importantly, we observe the direct influence of modern parlance on the ancient Mongolian dialect, which is better preserved in these western Mongolian provinces, along with poems, songs, fairy-tales and legends that have been both told and sung. And yet, Western Mongolian is still called “baga yastan” language, though it is actually an important and ancient Mongolian dialect, inherited by the western Mongolian Oirad people: torguud, dorbod, myangad, oold, zakhchin, khoshuud, uriankhai and tuva.

It is hardly correct in a free independent Mongolia to name an ancient Mongolian dialect as a minority or “baga yastan” language, especially when most researchers know that this dialect is the direct language expressed in or by the old Mongolian Scripts. It is widely known that old Mongolian Script was designated as the original script of the nation, the vertical script, the script of the great Empire established by Chinggis Khan. Therefore, we must not forget that Mongolia is one nation, not only on its land, but including those Mongols who live abroad as a result of historical facts and reasons.

Unfortunately, most western province people do not know the more neutral original meaning of this misunderstood and presently stigmatizing term, and some have even accepted it as an official name and definition. Young people in particular have become embarrassed by their western Mongolian dialect, their native mother tongue. They have been influenced by a “hidden but intentional purpose” that is similar to the highly devious message of the Manchu Empire, an attempt to keep 19th century Mongolia from gaining the will to unite again under one flag.

Nowadays, this illusion has had many tragic social effects, especially among young people from western regional Mongolia who are discriminated against because of their dialect. They do not realize that it is actually an ancient Mongolian dialect, as most scientific researchers know. They

have become confused about their Mongol origins, being named as “baga yastan,” a minority people, in their home country - Mongolia. This issue can be observed on the virtual world of the Internet when the issue discussed is “Halha Mongol” and “Oirad Mongol.”

This brings me to discuss how four other young people and I were encouraged to set up Tod Nomin Gerel Center in 2006. I met Nadmid Sukhbaatar in 1992, at the inter University Scientific Conference held at the current National University of Mongolia – and we came to know each other because of our “unusual” Mongolian dialect. Except for listening to his speech, I would never have thought that he was a first year history student from the western part of Mongolia.

In our student years, our fellow students everywhere recognized us. They always asked us to speak Uvs language, and laughed at us. We tried to show them that we spoke Mongolian and that we had no problem understanding their spoken Mongolian. “Are you from Khovd or Uvs (western Mongolia)?” “Can you please demonstrate your бага ястан language?” “How do you say this in your language, please speak out in dorbet”.

These were frequently asked questions. As young students, we felt a deep sense of neglect and discrimination in our hearts. We became shy about pronouncing our own original Mongolian language. After sixteen years, while visiting the Russian Republic of Kalmykia for the first time, I experienced that same feeling again, and similarly when in Volgograd and Moscow. People looked at me, wearing a national Mongolian jacket, as a real a minority. The police tried to stop me everywhere, creating problems. I understand deep in my heart how difficult it is to be a minority within the bigger nation which considers itself to have a different origin.

Unfortunately, this situation persists in Mongolia. This misleading term is still used, even more often these days, as

our young nation increases its use of internet communications. But this shows a lack of historical understanding. Politicians, police officers, schoolchildren, lamas, newspapers and even some young “scientists” are bravely using this false term, speaking “against the baga yastan”. This is a significantly harmful yet largely unrecognized violation of the human rights and cultural development of western Mongolian people.

In my student years I saw many students and young men use their fists to prove that they were not minorities, but my approach was to read more Mongolian history and find out what the reasons were behind this discrimination. I believe that we are all of the same Mongolian nation. I now see that the lack of education is the main reason for failures of various kinds in practically every corner of the world.

Recently, during the Mongolian President’s visit to Russia and Kalmykia, a well-known Torguud doctor from Mongolia asked a question of a dorbet Kalmyk man who was a well-known TV personality: “Do you speak the Torguud language? If not, you are not a real Kalmyk”. My friend knew what he really meant, and asked me later if there is such discrimination against Mongolian Kalmyks (baga yastan) in Mongolia. This slang “baga yastan” now seems a source of serious discrimination against Oirads and western Mongolian people. Recently some people decided to describe Amarsanaa Baatar as a robber who has acted against his own people some hundreds of years ago. This is the same orientation as the Manchu-Chinese leaders whose goal was not to let the Mongols unite under one flag.

What can we say to our Mongolian brothers living abroad? Are we going to tell our brother Kalmyks in the Russian Federation, Olets in Kolon-buir, Ordos and Alasha, and Khoshuud in Kok Nuur, Dorbets in Xinjiang province, Torguuds in China, and New Jersey Kalmyks who are now living in the USA, that they are accepted only as minority

people in Mongolia? There is a Kalmyk man Bembya Chujaev, who is currently living and working in Ulaanbaatar, who knows seven generations that preceded him. Most Mongolian people know only three or less generations of their Mongolian heritage, yet they still think that they are important Mongolian people, different than the “minority – бага ястан” people, who live in the northwestern, northern and western regions of Mongolia.

The so-called “бага ястанs” had never forgotten their tradition of hospitality and are trying to keep traditional and ancestral values of authentic honesty, hard work, and loyal hearts beating for their country. My position is that we need to be extremely strong in changing this attitude, and try to not pass it to our children. Mongolia is Mongolia, with different tribal names and yastans which have been united under one flag and which bring with them important traditions and history, especially in the wise education of children.

This unfortunate term “бага ястан” has creates serious misunderstanding among most Mongolian people and was also successfully used against western Mongolian Oirad people when the Manchu Emperor failed to defeat the Oirad warriors on the land of present Inner Mongolia – Ulaan Budan. After facing a strong defense by the kings and nobles of the Oirad, the Manchu Emperor announced that Oirads were vassals and robbers who had “tricked” him and fought against the great Manchu Empire for a hundred years. Great history tells the truth and sometimes hides it, but we can all see that the old Mongolian script speaks so-called “Uvs language.”

I asked a linguist, professor Sambuu Akh, how to pronounce “My own Mongolian language” as it is written in old Mongolian script, and the answer was “ober un Mongol helen,” which is read in modern Mongolian language as “ooriin Mongol hel.” Western Mongolian people, Oirads, would have read this as “evreen Mongol keln,” which is well understood

by Russian and American Kalmyks, Chinese Dorbets, Olets, Khoshuud and Torguud people. Oirads are an original Mongol tribe and Oirad is a dialect of the ancient Mongolian language. International and Mongolian scholars understand this, but it is not well understood among the Mongolian populace at large.

I encourage all who study western Mongolian or Oirad history and culture to speak out and comment on this topic. Their voices can have a large influence on human rights in the western region of Mongolia as well as Mongol bloodline brothers living abroad. Some people call the Mongolian language “halha dialect or language,” but I understand it as a recently developed modern Mongolian dialect, influenced by use of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Upon hearing the Inner Mongolian dialect of a man from Shiliin Gol aimag, my first thought was, “Chinese language has had a great impact on their Mongolian parlance.” But my understanding completely changed when I visited Kalmykia in 2006. A man from Shiliin Gol aimag used the words “madan, tadan” to say “our, your” or “bid nar, ta nar.” I thought that this was not an original Mongolian dialect, but Kalmyk dialect proved that it was. Including within Mongolia itself, modern Mongolian language speakers have lost some of their ancient words and dialect, whereas Mongolians outside the country may retain a more ancestral form.

We modern Mongols are proud that we live in a free and independent Mongolia. But we must admit that we need to respect each other, and even our Mongol brethren living in different countries of the world. Unfortunately, many young people are still getting involved, often innocently, in discriminatory and unproductive arguments through the Internet that revolve around the aforementioned misunderstanding of the term “baga yastan.” Most of them use “baga yastan” as a term of criticism or stigma when they refer to some political issue, argue about famous individuals

or newspaper articles, and even wrestling competitions. And so-called “halha Mongols” are always raising issues of “baga yastan,” saying that they should leave Mongolia.

What is causing them to act in this way? It is misunderstanding and the lack of the historical knowledge – people are reading less and have less understanding of older concepts, as developed by previous rulers of Mongolia. Perhaps some are at pains to see Mongolia as a large and progressive nation. Mongolians know about the term *baga yastan*, but there is little serious understanding of this term and its implications, especially in the realm of political arguments. Unfortunately the term, as presently and inappropriately used, influences many sectors and increasing numbers of people in contemporary Mongolia.

What should be done to correct this situation? Responsibility rests on the shoulders of scientists, historians, and linguists to correct this situation by convincing those who do not understand the development, changes, and progress of Mongolian language and scripts. I encourage researchers to get deeply involved in this topic. We need to let western Mongols and Oirad people living across Mongolia and in other parts of the world know that Mongols should not be discriminated against as a minority, especially in the territory of their own country, Mongolia.

I would like to thank those who have allowed me to introduce this topic to the scientific and scholarly community, civic representatives, public figures and religious leaders. I wish all freedom of ideas in the democratic nation of Mongolia.