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ON THE LIMNONYMS *Khövsgöl* AND *Kosogol* AND THEIR ETHNIC IMPLICATIONS

Abstract. Lake Khövsgöl in northern Mongolia is known by two names: *Khövsgöl* and *Kosogol*. This paper reviews the origins of these names and their extralinguistic context. Although both names are of Turkic origin, they illustrate the evolution of the local ethnic and linguistic situation.

Keywords: etymology, ethnic history, Mongolic, Turkic, hydronyms, limnonyms

The huge freshwater basin today internationally known by the name *Khövsgöl* is one of the major lakes of the world. Located in northern Mongolia, it extends over a distance of some 136 kms from north to south and up to 40 kms from west to east. With a maximum depth of 267 m it contains 0.4 per cent of the world's fresh water and is, moreover, preserved in a virtually pristine condition. The lake is of an ancient tectonic origin and forms a smaller counterpart – the “Little Sister” – of Lake Baikal in the context of the Baikal Rift Zone. The two lakes are separated by the Eastern Sayan mountains, but they are linked by the ca. 200 kms long Tunka depression, which traverses the mountains and forms the basin for the Irkut river flowing into the Angara. In terms of surface elevation, Khövsgöl, at 1645 m, lies much higher than Baikal, whose surface is only 456 m above the sea level.

The basin of Lake Khövsgöl is surrounded by mountains from all sides. In the north there lies the range of Mönkh Saridag (Munku Sardyk) of the Eastern Sayan system, which reaches the height of 3491 m, while the western side of the lake is bordered by the range of Bayan Zürkhiin Nuruu, which likewise has elevations above 3000 m. The mountains on the eastern side are somewhat lower, with elevations ranging from 2000 to 2500 m. The elevations correlate with vegetational differences, in that the northern and western sides of the lake are dominated by alpine and boreal landscapes with the Siberian larch (*Larix sibirica*) and cedar (*Pinus sibirica*) as the principal trees, while the eastern side has also some open steppes and river basins. Due to the vicinity of the mountains, all rivers flowing

into the lake are generally steep and short, ranging from just a few kms in the west to a maximum of 20–30 kms in the east (for more details, cf. the maps and tables in AOX).

Beyond the mountains to the west of the lake there lies the Darkhat basin, containing the Tsagaan Nuur complex of shallow lakes and the river Shishkhid, the Mongolian source of the Yenisei (Janhunen 2012: 68–69). Because of the watershed created by the Bayan Dzürkhiin Nuruu there is no direct connection between the Khövsgöl and Darkhat basins. Lake Khövsgöl, however, ultimately also belongs to the Yenisei drainage area, for its single outlet, the river Egiin Gol, which starts at the southern tip of the lake, flows first southwards and then eastwards over a total distance of 475 kms, after which it joins the Selenga (*Selenge*), which, in turn, flows northwards into Baikal, which finally drains into the Yenisei via the Angara.

Historically, the region around Khövsgöl used to be governed under the name of *Khövsgöliin Khiadzgaar* ‘the Khövsgöl Frontierland’, which was a personal possession of the ruling Bogdo Gegen in Urga. This region also comprised the Darkhat basin under the name *Darkhat Shabi* ‘the Darkhat Vassalland’, to which the territory of modern-day Tuva adjoined on the west under the name *Uriangkhain Khiadzgaar* ‘the Uryangkhai Frontierland’. After the founding of the independent people’s republics of Tuva (1921) and Mongolia (1924), the Darkhat basin initially belonged to Tuva, but was ceded to Mongolia in 1925. The present-day Khövsgöl Province (*aimak*) was established in 1931 with the settlement of Khatgal at the southern tip of Lake Khövsgöl as its first capital. The province also comprises extensive steppe and forest areas south of the lake, which may have been the reason why the capital was moved in 1933 to the more centrally located town of Mörön (for more information on the local history and geography, cf. Janhunen 1982).

The Khövsgöl region is among the ethnically most diversified parts of Mongolia. The dominant elements today are several groups of Mongolic speakers, most of which are known to have arrived in the region relatively recently: the Buryat from the northeast mainly after 1917, the Khalkha from the south mainly after 1911, and the originally Western Mongolic Khotgoit (Khotogoid) from the west in the 17th century or later. The only group of Mongolic speakers that could possibly count as “indigenous” to the region is formed by the Darkhat, but even their history seems to have involved recent migrations, as well as mixture with both Western Mongolic and Turkic elements (Gáspár 2006: 3–7). There are also two tiny groups of Turkic speakers still extant today in the region: the reindeer-breeding Tsaatan or “Dukha” to the west of Lake Khövsgöl and the cattle-breeding Uighur Uryankhai or “Tuha” to the east of the lake (for information on the Turkic groups in the region, cf. also Ragagnin 2006, 2009, Eriksson 2013). All these groups, but also others, will have to be considered when local toponyms are discussed.

Khövsgöl < *kök+sub+köl

The international name *Khövsgöl* is based on the modern Khalkha orthographical shape ⟨Xövsgöl⟩ (Хөвсгөл), phonemically /xöbʂgəl/ and phonetically [xəʃsgəl]. Depending on the principles of Romanization, the name also appears in the shapes *Khöwsgöl*, *Chöwsgöl*, *Hövsgöl*, *Hovsgol*, *Huvsgul*, and others. In older Mongolian the name was pronounced (*)*köbsügül* > (*)*xöbsügül* [xəbsugul], as reflected by Written Mongol **Guibʂugul** or **Guibʂugal**, and Buryat still has synchronically *Xübʂegəl* [xubsəgəl], which is the source of Russian *Kubsugul* (Кубсугул) or *Xubsugul* (Хубсугул). The Mongols normally add either ⟨nuur⟩ ‘lake’ or ⟨dalai⟩ ‘sea’, yielding *Khövsgöl Nuur* ‘Lake Khövsgöl’ or *Khövsgöl Dalai* ‘the Khövsgöl Sea’. Both appellatives are also used with the name *Baikal*, Mongolian ⟨*Baigal*⟩ (Байгал).

The name *Khövsgöl* is etymologically transparent and can be derived from the Turkic compound **kök+sub+köl* ‘blue water lake’ (as noted already by Rinchen 1962: 251 note 9). Both the Turks and the Mongols use colour terms as frequent parts of hydronyms, including the names of rivers, lakes, and natural springs. The colour term ‘blue’ is particularly common in limnonyms, and there are many Mongolian lakes bearing the name *Xöx Nuur* ‘blue lake’, the most famous of which is Lake Kuku Nor (Tibetan *mTsho sngon po*, Chinese *Qinghai Hu* 青海湖) in northern Tibet. The name *Khövsgöl* also has an exact formal parallel in the Dorno Gobi Province of Mongolia, though it is unclear whether it there can be understood as a primary hydronym (Tatár 2009: 333–334). In any case, as the name of the major lake in northern Mongolia, *Khövsgöl* is unquestionably of Turkic origin.

The fact that there are Turkic place names all over Mongolia is, of course, not surprising, since it is well known that Turkic was the dominant language of Mongolia during most of the first millennium, and especially during the Kök Türk and Uighur kaghanates (552–840 AD), but probably also long before them. In places with no present-day Turkic-speaking population, the Turkic place names reflect the pre-Mongolian period. The situation is different in northern Mongolia, where Turkic languages have been spoken until modern times: here, Turkic place names can also be based on contemporary usage in the local languages. Even so, since *Khövsgöl*, being an exceptionally large lake, must have been well known to the historical Mongols, it is likely that its Mongolian name also dates back to mediaeval times.

To some extent, the relatively old dating of Mongolic (*)*xöbsügül* < **köb-sügül* is confirmed by its shape. Most probably, the element **sub* ‘water’ of the Turkic original still retained its final **b* at the time of borrowing, since otherwise the presence of (*)*b* in the Mongolian data is difficult to explain. On the Mongolic side, where the structure of the compound was no longer obvious, three developments took place: (1) the extension of the palatal vocalism of the first

syllable over the whole word; (2) the phonotactic adjustment of the consonant and vowel qualities to the Mongolic system; and (3) the metathetical exchange of the syllable-final consonants **b* and **g*. Finally, the geminate at the boundary of the second and third syllables was simplified, yielding **kög.süb.gül* > **küb.süg.gül* > **küb.sü.gül*. Of course, the phonetic development may also have taken some other route, but it appears less likely.

Assuming that *Khövsgöl*, at least in reference to the actual Lake Khövsgöl, is a relatively old Turkic loanword in Mongolic, it may date from the same period as the name of Baikal, the original Mongolic shape of which was (**)baigul*, as still preserved in Khamnigan Mongol (Janhunen 1996), reflecting Turkic **bai+köl* ‘rich lake’. The Turkic-speaking populations from which these names were borrowed were linguistically ancestral to the later Siberian Turkic groups of the Sayan and Baikal regions, including the Tuva and Yakut. To the Mongols these Turks were known by the generic ethnonym Uryangkhai, a term still used by the Mongols about several Tuva-related groups in northern and western Mongolia, including the Uighur Uryangkhai.

It should be mentioned that the compound **kök+sub+köl* ‘blue water lake’ is still used, as it seems, by some of the modern Turkic-speaking populations of the region, notably the Uighur Uryangkhai (field notes of Tom Eriksson). The modern shape of the word in the local Turkic idioms may be abstracted as (**)kök+sug+köl*, which still retains its compound structure with no harmonic levelling between the vowels. Importantly, however, the final **b* in **sub* ‘water’ is represented as (**)g* [ɣ] in all the Turkic languages of the region, which is why it is unlikely that the Mongolian shape of the limnonym could derive from these languages. On the other hand, it is also unlikely that the modern Turkic name could be secondarily based on the Mongolian name of the lake; rather, the concept of ‘blue water lake’ would seem to have survived among the local Turkic speakers.¹

In this connection, it has to be noted that the “indigenous” status of the two Turkic speaking groups still extant in the Khövsgöl region may also be contested on the basis that both groups seem to have migrated to their present-day territories rather recently. Thus, the Tsaatan arrived from the Todja region in eastern Tuva mainly only after the settling of the modern state border, while the

¹ Rinchen (1962 l.c.) quotes a spelling “Köksükül”, probably implying Written Mongol **Guigsugul**, from Qianlong period Mongolian documents. This could mean that modern **küb.sü.gül* could also represent the result of secondary dissimilation from **kög.sü.gül*. However, in the lack of more information this remains unconfirmed, and it could also be a question of a graphic confusion between the very similar medial letters **b** and **g**. Of course, if the development **kög.sü.gül* > **küb.sü.gül* could be verified, this would make it more difficult to date the borrowing from Turkic to Mongolic: it could still be an early loan from the period of the historical Mongols, but it could also be a much later loan from the local Turkic languages of the region.

oral traditions of the Uighur Uryangkhai suggest that they may have northern connections on the Russian side of the border. These migrations are, however, insignificant in the general geographical context of the Eastern Sayans. Apart from the Tsaatan and the Uighur Uryangkhai, there are three other Turkic populations in the region: the Karagas or Tofa (Tofalar), the Soyot, and the Todja Tuvinians. Most of these groups, whose languages are collectively embraced by the term “Taiga Sayan Turkic”, are traditionally engaged in nomadic reindeer herding, and all of them have for centuries lived close enough to Khövsgöl to be aware of this major lake.

Kosogol < *ka(a)sa+köl

Rather surprisingly, the name *Khövsgöl* appears on international maps very late, only in the 20th century. Before that it used to bear another name, normally rendered in Roman spelling as *Kosogol*. During the 19th and early 20th centuries Russian explorers carried out several expeditions to the lake, including that of G. I. Permikin in 1856 (Sel’skii 1858) and the so-called “Kosogol excursion” of a larger team in 1904 (Berg & al. 1906). The resulting Russian publications, which long remained the principal sources of information on the lake, used invariably the name *Kosogol* (Косогол), in Western languages rendered also as *Kossogol* or *Cossogol*. Even on contemporary Chinese maps the lake was recorded by the name *Kusuguer* 庫蘇古尔 (DQDGQT map 24).

The earliest mention of *Kosogol* seems to be contained in the handwritten “Khorograficheskaja kniga” (1697–1711) of the Tomsk-based Cossack S. U. Remezov, the first cartographer of Siberia, who mapped the lake under the name *Kosogul* (Косогоул[ъ]) (XK 146). Like all of his atlases, this is a work based on primary materials (Goldenberg 2007: 1884–1902), though it is not clear whether he (or his assistants) actually visited the lake. At about the same time, the lake is mentioned as *La[c]us Ko[ʃ]ogol* by the Danish traveller and Russian ambassador Evert Ysbrants Ides (1704: 121). Soon afterwards, it appears on Ph. J. von Strahlenberg’s map “Nova descriptio geographica Tattariae Magnae” from 1730 (NDGTM) under the name *Ologoinor al. Kofogul*.² Finally, it is depicted under the name *Kosogol* on the revised edition from 1788 of the map of Asia by Guillaume Delisle and

² The name *Ologoinor* mentioned by Strahlenberg will not be discussed in any detail in the present paper. However, it seems to have been an alternative name for Lake Khövsgöl, perhaps used by the Western Mongols in the 17th to 18th centuries. It clearly contains the Mongolic topographic term *-nor* = (**nuur* ‘lake’, preceded by an element that could be either (**ologoi* (**vuluqhai**) ‘colon, large intestines’ or (**ölögiüi* (**vuilugai**) ‘cradle’. The semantic motivation of the name remains obscure, and a further discussion would require additional information.

Philippe Buache of the French Royal Academy of Sciences (ESK 342–343), after which it regularly appears on all sufficiently detailed maps of the region.

In view of the rough overall similarity of the names *Khövsgöl* and *Kosogol* one might be misled to thinking that they are variants of a single name. This is not so, however, for there is no way to explain *Kosogol* from **kök+sub+köl*. Although *Kosogol* also contains the Turkic appellative **köl* ‘lake’ (on which cf. Tatár 2009), the initial part suggests an element like **koso* or **kasa* in the donor language. Indeed, there is information that the modern Turkic-speaking Karagas (Tofa) used to call Lake Khövsgöl, which lies in their sphere of geographical knowledge, by the name *kasaa* (V. I. Rassadin, personal communication). This suggests that the lake was known to the local Turkic-speaking populations not only as **kök+sub+köl*, but also as **kasa(a)+köl*. The Russian written form ⟨Kosogol⟩, pronounced [kasaˈgol] in dialects with *akanye*, must simply be due to orthographical confusion.

The next question is where the element **kasa(a)* in **kasa(a)+köl* comes from. In earlier research (Dolgikh 1960: 262–263), the suggestion has already been made that it might be identical with the widespread South Siberian Turkic ethnonym used by the Russians in the shape *kácha* : *káchincy* to denote a tribal group of the “Minusinsk Tatars” or Khakas. The native Turkic shape may be reconstructed as **kaac*, reflected as Khakas *xaash* > *xaas* : plural *xaas-tar*. The name is also attested among the Turkic Karagas (Tofa) in the tribal names (**)kaash*, (**)kara+kaash* (= *Karagas*) ‘Black Kaash’ and (**)sarig+kaash* ‘Yellow Kaash’, which may imply an ethnic mixture with the Khakas (cf. also I. V. Rassadin 2011). Moreover, it is contained in the ethnonym *kangmazhī* [kʰɑŋmɑːʒə], the native name of the Samoyedic-speaking Kamas, which may be derived from Turkic **kam+kaash-ī* ‘Shamanic Kaash’ (Katz 1980). The shape *káshincy* was used by the Russians for another section of the historical Kamas speakers (Dolgikh 1960: 239–240).

It is, however, unlikely that the Russian name *Kosogol* could be based on the variants **kaac* or **kaash* of the ethnonym. Forms with **s*, yielding compounds like **kaas+köl* or **kas+köl*, could, in principle, have served as originals to the Russian data, and dialects with the development **c* > **s* may have existed in various parts of the region.³ In the 17th century, when the Russians arrived, the population west of the lake was known by the name *Kaisot*, which apparently stands for †*ka(a)s-uu.d*, a Mongolian plural from the base **ka(a)s*, which must represent a local variant of the ethnonym **kaac*. The variation of *ka(a)s-* with

³ We may probably safely dismiss the trivial possibility that the name of the lake could be based on the Turkic appellative (**kaas* >) **kaaz* ‘goose’ > Sayan Turkic **kaas*. It is true that there is another large lake, Gusinoe (Гусиное озеро), Buryat *Galuuta Nuur*, in the Selenga river system that really bears the name ‘Goose Lake’. However, while wild geese abound on Lake Gusinoe, there would seem to be no special reason why Lake Khövsgöl would have received its name from ‘geese’.

kais- may be due to some systematic mistake or convention in the Russianization or Romanization process of ethnonyms; in any case, a similar “parasitic *i*” is also attested in other items, including *kaimash-* for †*kamash-* = *kamas-* and *kaisak* for †*kazak* (Katz 1980: 240, 244).

Another possibility to bridge the formal discrepancy between the ethnonym **kaac* and the element **kasa(a)* of the limnonym is to go back to the origins of the former. According to a well-known assumption, the Turkic ethnonym **kaac* was borrowed from Samoyedic **kaəsa* ‘man, human being’, which has also ethnonymic uses (Hajdú 1950: 32–36, 93–97). That this is a Samoyedic word is confirmed by the fact that it is a derivative from the verb **kaə-* ‘to die’ (SW 56, 61) and means originally ‘mortal’ (a concept possibly based on Indo-European models). The Proto-Samoyedic form contains a “vowel sequence” (**aə*), which might explain why the Turkic data shows a secondary (post-Proto-Turkic) long vowel (**aa*). In other respects, however, the Turkic and Samoyedic items are not fully compatible (as already noted by Joki 1952: 171–173). Thus, the substitution of Turkic **c* for Samoyedic **s* is difficult to explain, as is the absence of the final vowel in Turkic.

It may be concluded that the derivation of South Siberian Turkic **kaac* from Samoyedic **kaəsa* remains a possibility, but involves several unexplained details. The derivation of *Kosogol* from a compound based on Turkic **kaac* is likewise possible, but problematic. However, there still exists the possibility that the initial part of **kasa(a)+köl* could actually be based directly on Samoyedic **kaəsa*, which is well attested in the shape †*kasa* or possibly †*kaasa* in Mator, the Samoyedic language that was spoken across the Eastern Sayans in the 17th to 18th centuries (Helimski 1997: 13–17, 269). The speakers of Mator were also known by the ethnonyms *Karagas* and *Soyot* (plural of *Soyan* or *Sayan*, identical with the name of the mountains), as well as *Taigi* (Russian genitive from *taigá* ‘mountain forest’, originally a Turkic item). All of them certainly identified themselves as *ka(a)sa* ‘human beings’, and even if this item was not used as a true endonym by them, it could have been adopted as an exonym for them by the neighbouring Turkic speakers.

Assuming that *Kosogol* represents a combination of Samoyedic (**)ka(a)sa* ‘human being’ = ‘Mator speaker’ and Turkic (**)köl* ‘lake’, the limnonym would be of exactly the same type as, for instance, the name of the Karelian lake Säämäjärvi (Russian Сямозеро), which etymologically means ‘Saami Lake’ and is based on (**)säämä-*, the Finnic approximation of an older native Saami form of the ethnonym *Saami*, plus Finnic *järvi* ‘lake’ (Russian озеро) (Räisänen 2003: 130–131). The fact that lakes can be named according to ethnic groups is also confirmed by the name of the western Mongolian salt lake <Xiargas nuur> (Хяргас нуур), which may be derived from **kirgis+nuur* ‘Kirghiz Lake’. It has to be noted, however, that a combination of Samoyedic (**)ka(a)sa* and Turkic (**)köl* will

produce the shape **ka(a)sa+köl*, rather than **kasa(a)+köl*. The final long vowel of modern Karagas *kasaa* is enigmatic, though it may be due to some confusion caused by the obsolete nature of the word and the deteriorating language skills of the speakers.

General conclusions

There is no doubt that both *Khövsgöl* and *Kosogol* are names originally coined by Turkic-speaking populations. Neither one of the two names is very ancient, though *Khövsgöl* < **kök+sub+köl* would seem to be older and may date back to the early Turks of Mongolia, whose name *Uighur* is still used by the Mongols to refer to the Turkic speakers of the Khövsgöl region. The name *Kosogol* < **ka(a)sa+köl* has more local roots, and it may be indirectly connected with the Samoyeds, who were the principal indigenous element in the region. Of course, there have been also other ethnolinguistic groups in the neighbourhood, including speakers of Yeniseic (Kott, to the northwest) and Tungusic (Ewenki, to the north and northeast), but there is so far no toponymic evidence suggesting their presence in the immediate vicinity of Lake Khövsgöl. The Mongols, also, are relatively recent newcomers to the region.

In the centuries preceding the Mongolic expansion, the ethnic history of the Eastern Sayans seems to have involved a process of gradual Turkicization of the Samoyedic speakers. A similar process is well known from the Minusinsk basin, where the Kamas-speaking Kamas and Koibal were Turkicized in the 18th to 20th centuries. In the Eastern Sayans, the Mator-speaking Karagas and Soyot had the same fate only a century earlier. The Soyot lived in the zone extending from the eastern side of Lake Khövsgöl to the upper Oka basin north of the mountains, and at the time of the arrival of the Russians they were divided into Turkic speakers (in the south) and Samoyedic speakers (in the north). The modern Soyot on the Russian side of the border, who spoke Turkic until the late 20th century, are known to have “come” from the Khövsgöl region and are linguistically closely related to both the Karagas (Tofa) and the Uighur Uryangkhai (V. I. Rasadin 2010: 7–9).

Unfortunately, we do not know how Lake Khövsgöl was called in the local Samoyedic idioms. Quite probably, the Mator name of the lake was still in use at the time when Western explorers started collecting vocabularies from the Samoyedic Soyot and Karagas, but toponyms were not among their priorities. However, the Khövsgöl region remains a potentially rewarding territory for toponymic studies. It is a particularly tantalizing possibility that Samoyedic place names could be identified in the region around the lake, and perhaps further east and south. A good candidate in this respect remains the river Egiin Gol, whose name (*Eg*)

appears on older maps in the form *Iga*, which might represent a non-Mongolic and pre-Turkic source, perhaps connectable with Samoyedic **yəka* ‘river’ (Janhunen 2012: 69). It appears not entirely impossible that even the *-ga* (*-ge*) of *Selenga* (*Seleng-ge*) could be connected with the same Uralic word, Proto-Uralic **yuka* ‘river’. Traditionally, *Selenga* is assumed to be based on Tungusic **sele* ‘iron’, but this assumption has no credible semantic or ethnohistorical basis.

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L i t e r a t u r e

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