

**ON THE ISSUE OF THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF NATIONAL MINORITIES****<sup>1,\*</sup> Sh. Oyundelgerekh, <sup>2</sup>Tungalag L., <sup>3</sup>Ya. Orlomsuren and <sup>4</sup>Gerelmaa, M.**<sup>1,2,4</sup>Mongolian National University of Arts and Culture (MNUAC)<sup>3</sup>Expert in National Language and Literature Affairs**Received** 09<sup>th</sup> March 2026; **Accepted** 12<sup>th</sup> April 2026; **Published online** 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2026

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**Abstract**

Mongolia is a multi-ethnic country that has preserved and developed the languages, cultures, and customs of various ethnic groups, including the Khalkha, Buryat, Darkhad, Tuvan, Kazakh, Bayad, and Durvud. However, due to modern social changes, the impact of globalization, the educational system, and the penetration of technology, the usage of their mother tongues and oral traditions is declining drastically in the region (Atifnigar *et al.*, 2025). To study the current state of mother tongue usage, preserve and protect the language and culture of national minorities, and pass them on to future generations, this study examined the current state of Tuvan language usage and oral culture among the Tsaatan (reindeer herding) Tuvans living in Tsagaannuur soum, Khuvsgul Province, located in northern Mongolia. The Tuvans communicate in a language belonging to the Turkic language family and speak the local Dukha dialect. They are distinguished by their traditional reindeer herding and the preservation of their taiga lifestyle. As of today, more than 740 Tuvans live in the Tsagaannuur Söm of Khuvsgul Province. This study, which involved 186 participants, identifies the current usage of the language and culture of the Tsaatan Tuvans, the challenges they face, and proposes a few feasible solutions to address these challenges.

**Keywords:** Tsaatan (reindeer herder), Tuvan language, minority language, oral tradition, Tuvan language use.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Among the many nationalities and ethnic groups that have coexisted in the territory of Mongolia for centuries, the Tuvans "have been part of the 7 banners of the Altai Uriankhai since ancient times and acquired the epithet of Altai..."(Mongush, 2003). They primarily reside in the Tsengel soum of the Bayan-Ulgii Province, Zuunburen soum of the Selenge Province, Zaamar soum of the Tuv Province, and Tsagaannuur soum of the Khuvsgul Province. The Tuvans have preserved their traditional economy of reindeer herding and taiga lifestyle, making them vital representatives of Mongolia's intangible cultural heritage. However, under the influence of modern social changes and globalization, their mother tongue, oral traditions, and cultural heritage are at risk of being forgotten, and their usage is declining. This constitutes the primary issue addressed in this study. The Tsagaannuur soum of the Khuvsgul Province was established in 1985 based on hunting and reindeer husbandry. Tsagaannuur soum is located 272 km northwest of the provincial center Murun and 1,048 km from the capital city Ulaanbaatar, covering an area of 5,410 km<sup>2</sup>. It is a northern border soum of Mongolia, sharing a 100 km border with the Tyva Republic of the Russian Federation and a 110 km border with the Republic of Buryatia of the Russian Federation to the west and northeast.

(Source: State Registration Department in Khuvsgul Province <https://khuvsgul.burtgel.gov.mn/map>)

Approximately 90% of Tsagaannuur soum's territory consists of taiga mountains and rugged peaks. It is rich in unique natural formations, the national minority Tsaatan people, reindeer herds, and rare cultural phenomena such as shamanism, inherited from generation to generation since the era of Genghis Khan.

As of 2025, 2,014 citizens from 545 households reside in the soum (<https://www.1212.mn>), of which 218, or more than 10%, are Tuvan citizens.

(Source: *Tsaatan Culture-I, 2023.*) Project Report. Ministry of Culture of Mongolia)

Of the 519 students at the General Education School of Tsagaannuur Soum, 26% are Tsaatan Tuvan children (Ministry of Culture of Mongolia, 2023). These students began studying the Tuvan language as an elective subject in the 2022-2023 academic year.

Regarding previous research on the customs and language of Mongolian Tuvans, an article published as a result of a 1987 study conducted among Mongolian Tuvans by Yu. L. Aranchyn and D.A. Mongush, Sh.Ch. Sat noted that the dialect of the Mongolian Tuvans is an independent and distinct dialect of the Tuvan language. Since the 1990s, research on the history, folklore, ethnography, customs, and language of Mongolian Tuvans has progressed significantly. In the early 1990s, historian M.Kh. Manai-Ool continued his research among Mongolian Tuvans, briefly mentioning their history from the XVII to the XX centuries, and noted that due to living in close proximity to Mongolians for centuries, their culture, rituals, and language have become Mongolized (Bayarsaikhan and Baatarkhuu 2016, 9). Summarizing the studies on the customs and language of the Tsaatan Tuvans in Tsagaannuur soum, Khuvsgul province: In July-August 1991, a joint expedition of Mongolian and Russian scientists led by L. Bold conducted research among the Tuvans in Tsagaannuur soum, collecting relevant materials with the goal of comparatively studying their phonetics, language, and dialect characteristics. Furthermore, in August-September 2006, under a Russian Foundation for Humanities (RFH) project, D. S. Seren worked among the Dukha/Tsaatan people in the soum, meeting with more than 20 people to study their vocabulary, economy,

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culture, and ethnography. In July and August 2011, professors from Tuvan State University conducted comparative linguistic research on the soum's Tuvans. In September 2011, researchers such as Yusha Zhanna Mongeevna from the Institute of Philology of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences conducted research on Tsaatans living in the eastern taiga. (Albayrak & Badam, 2023) That same autumn, scientists from the Tuvan Institute conducted a 14-day historical and ethnographic study among the Tsaatan people in the eastern taiga under the RFH project "Reindeer Herding Peoples of the Sayan Mountains (Tozha Tuvans, Tsaatans, and Tofalars)." As a result of the expedition, several articles on the history and ethnography of the Tuvan people were published.

In 2014, an expedition led by Professor M.V. Bavuu-Syuryun from Tuvan State University conducted a sociological survey on native language communication among Mongolian Tuvans, collected primary sources on folklore and ethnography, and conducted extensive research on the current state of the gradually disappearing Dukha language in Southeastern Sayans. That same year, a joint expedition under the RFH and the Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture and Science project "Ethnocultural Contacts of the Peoples of the Sayan-Altai and Western Mongolia" worked in Tsagaannuur soum to study the livelihoods, culture, language, ethnography, and folklore of the Tsaatan Tuvans (Dongak & Sukhbaatar, 2025). Within the framework of creating textbooks for Mongolian Tuvans, several expeditions were organized in 2011 and 2012 according to a specially developed methodology. From 2013 to 2018, primary school Tuvan language textbooks (Grades 1-5) were published with funding from UNICEF, including teacher and student books. Starting in 2013, textbooks for Mathematics, Humans and Environment, and Civic Education for Grades 1-5 were translated into Tuvan and published (Gansukh 2018). Furthermore, in 2023, Ch. Oyunbadam, the principal of the General Education School in Tsagaannuur soum, Khuvsgul province, developed and published a primary manual titled "Tyva Dyl," which is currently being commendably used in Tuvan language training.

The inclusion of the Tuvan oral dialect in the "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mongolia" (National Center for Cultural Heritage 2019) under the mother tongue, oral tradition, and expression category was an important policy step in the official recognition and protection of the ethnic language and cultural heritage of the Tuvan people. (Fiorio, 2006) Similarly, the registration of Tuvan wedding rituals and traditional knowledge and methods of reindeer herding in the "National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding of Mongolia" (Representative National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mongolia 2019) serves as a tangible expression of state policy to protect and pass down these heritages to future generations to come. Additionally, within the policy framework of preserving the language and cultural heritage of national minorities, the Ministry of Culture of Mongolia initiated and implemented the "Tsaatan-I" and "Tsaatan-II" research projects in 2023–2024. These efforts are significant for studying and documenting the current state of mother tongue usage among ethnic Tuvan citizens residing in Tsagaannuur Süm. This is considered an important initiative that has brought the issue of minority language and culture which had been relatively neglected in recent years back into the research cycle and the center of policy attention. Although state policies and measures have brought about certain progress, challenges such as the

declining use of the Tuvan language and oral traditions, as well as the trend of traditions breaking down among the younger generation, continue to exist in the region. This indicates the need for more comprehensive and sustainable protection policies (Mongush *et al.*, 2024)

## Research Section

The knowledge, wisdom, and history accumulated by nations and ethnic groups over centuries are passed down to future generations through language and oral culture. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vessel for cultural memory and values. The Tuvan language belongs to the Turkic language family, and the Khuvsgul Tsaatan Tuvans speak the Dukha dialect. Oral traditions, including folktales, myths, songs, riddles, and idioms, are the main forms of cultural heritage preservation. However, in today's era of rapid technological advancement and globalization, the traditions of minority languages and oral cultures face significant challenges (Aston & Matthews, 2013). Since one of the manifestations of any language's existence is found in the form of folklore, we investigated the participants' use of folktales, riddles, songs, and idioms in their native language, what they need to learn and master their mother tongue, and their access to the social communication and information environment conducted in Tuvan. (Oorzhak, 2025)

This study summarizes a survey on the current state of mother tongue usage among 186 Tuvan citizens (2023) representing the national minority in Tsagaannuur Süm, Khuvsgul Province, Mongolia. Of the survey participants, 51.1% lived in the taiga, 2.2% in the provincial center, 38.7% in the soum center, and 8.1% in the bag (sub-district) centers. Regarding education, 48.3% had incomplete secondary education, 37.8% had complete secondary education, and 14.0% had a higher education. Children up to 16 years old made up the largest proportion (29.0%), and 65.1% of the participants were female. The survey was organized using a questionnaire consisting of 19 questions in two sections. The data were processed using quantitative analysis methods and analyzed in relation to variables such as age, location, and education. The research results are presented below:

Within the scope of oral tradition, songs and melodies can be considered a stable form of culture that remains unforgettably "immunized" in human consciousness, transmitting not only artistic expression but also the historical memory, values, and mindset of an ethnic group (Váradí, 2020). Therefore, forgetting or neglecting music carries the risk of losing cultural immunity. A question was developed to determine the current state of Tuvan song usage and to aim for its future restoration and dissemination. For instance, comparing the answers to the question "How many songs do you know in the Tuvan language?" by age group shows that 64.8% of those up to 16 years old, 80.0% of those aged 17-25, 73.9% of those aged 26-35, 50.0% of those aged 36-45, 63.3% of those aged 46-55, and 66.7% of those aged 56 and above stated they know 1-3 songs. This indicates that knowledge of oral culture is limited across all ages, and in particular, the repertoire of songs is preserved at a low level. Riddles are a traditional genre of Mongolian folklore. Through poetic forms based on metaphor, symbolism, and hidden meanings, they are considered to play an important role in human cognition especially in developing children's intellectual and cognitive skills and in passing down cultural knowledge from generation to generation (Kortabaeva,

2023). Therefore, when participants were asked, "How many riddles do you know in the Tuvan language?", 53.7% of the citizens living in the taiga, 50% of those in the provincial center, 73.6% of those in the soum center, and 85.7% of those in the bag center answered that they do not know any. The fact that the majority of the participants do not know riddles in the Tuvan language indicates that the transmission of oral tradition, particularly language and culture, is weakening and trending toward disruption.

**Table 1. How many songs do you know in Tuvan (By Age)**

No	Age Group	1-3	4-6	7 and above	Don't know
1	Up to 16	64.8%	18.5%	1.9%	14.8%
2	17-25	80.0%	5.0%	15.0%	0.0%
3	26-35	73.9%	13.0%	0.0%	13.0%
4	36-45	50.0%	17.9%	14.3%	17.9%
5	46-55	63.3%	23.3%	6.7%	6.7%
6	56 and above	66.7%	16.7%	6.7%	10.0%

**Table 2. How many riddles do you know in Tuvan (By Location)**

No	Location	1-3	4-6	Don't know
1	Taiga	36.8%	9.5%	53.7%
2	Soum center	20.8%	5.6%	73.6%
3	Bag center	14.3%	0.0%	85.7%

When asked, "How many folktales do you know in the Tuvan language?" The vast majority of respondents (over 60%) answered that they did not know any folktales in Tuvan. This indicates a weakening trend in the knowledge and transmission of oral traditions, particularly folktales and myths, in the Philippines(Peritos, 2026).

**Table 3. How many Tuvan folktales do you know? (By Age)**

No	Age Group	1-3	4-6	7 and above	Don't know
1	Up to 16	26.4%	1.9%	7.5%	64.2%
2	17-25	25.0%	0.0%	5.0%	70.0%
3	26-35	21.7%	0.0%	0.0%	78.3%
4	36-45	14.3%	3.6%	0.0%	82.1%
5	46-55	6.5%	22.6%	0.0%	71.0%
6	56 and above	22.2%	3.7%	7.4%	66.7%

To the question "Do you watch or listen to Tuvan language programs on national television or radio?" Of those aged 46-55, 41.8% answered that they occasionally watch Tuvan-language programs, whereas 56.5% of those aged 26-35, 40.7% of those aged 36-45, and 46.7% of those aged 56 and above answered that they do not watch such programs. On average, 9.8% watch regularly, 33.7% watch occasionally, 21.3% do not know that such programs exist, and 34.3% do not watch at all. The fact that 55.6% of all participants either do not watch Tuvan-language programs at all or do not know about them shows that the media/information environment is weak.

**Table 4. Do you watch or listen to Tuvan-language programs on national TV or radio? (By Location)**

No	Location	Watch regularly	Occasionally	Do not know such a program exists	No
1	Taiga	2.1%	46.8%	18.1%	33.0%
2	Provincial center	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
3	Soum center	5.6%	39.4%	15.5%	39.4%
4	Bag center	6.7%	26.7%	26.7%	40.0%

Over 80% of the survey participants stated that a Tuvan person must know their national language, and 96.9% considered training, books/textbooks, and a communicative environment important for learning and using the Tuvan language.

**Table 5. Should a Tuvan person necessarily know their national language (By Age)**

No	Age Group	Generally should know	Not necessarily	Should know to some extent	Cannot answer
1	Up to 16	51.9%	0.0%	42.6%	5.6%
2	17-25	90.0%	0.0%	5.0%	5.0%
3	26-35	82.6%	8.7%	8.7%	0.0%
4	36-45	82.1%	0.0%	10.7%	7.1%
5	46-55	83.9%	0.0%	12.9%	3.2%
6	56 and above	90.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%

When asked, "Where do you mostly use the Tuvan language?" Of the respondents, 27.1% answered within the family circle, 51.5% while living in the taiga, 18.9% in work or school environments, and 7.0% in social media. This shows that the Tuvan language is preserved in informal environments but is weakly used in formal and educational settings(Soyan, 2020).

**Table 6. Where do you mostly use the Tuvan language? (By Location)**

No	Location	Family circle	While living in the taiga	Work, school environment	Social media environment
1	Taiga	34.7%	64.2%	1.1%	0.0%
2	Soum center	26.8%	43.7%	22.5%	7.0%
3	Bag center	20.0%	46.7%	33.3%	0.0%

To improve their Tuvan language knowledge and speaking skills, 29.6% stated that they needed lessons/training, 32.7% needed books/textbooks, 34.6% needed a communicative environment, and 5.5% needed a supportive social environment to practice.

**Table 7. What do you need to improve your Tuvan language knowledge and speaking skills? (By Age)**

No	Age Group	Books / textbooks	Lessons / training	Communicative environment	Social environment
1	Up to 16	17.3%	46.2%	32.7%	3.8%
2	17-25	30.0%	40.0%	25.0%	5.0%
3	26-35	31.8%	27.3%	40.9%	0.0%
4	36-45	30.8%	30.8%	30.8%	7.7%
5	46-55	19.4%	35.5%	41.9%	3.2%
6	56 and above	26.7%	23.3%	36.7%	13.3%

To the question, "How well do you write in Tuvan?" Of the respondents, 4.3% answered very well, 8.0% well, 45% moderately, and 26.5% poorly in reading Tuvan, which shows that literacy usage is insufficient. (Note: The original text mentions "reading" here, while the table header mentions writing. The table represents overall literacy proficiency).

**Table 8. How well do you write in Tuvan? (By Age)**

No	Age Group	Very well	Well	Moderately	Poor
1	Up to 16	5.7%	13.2%	64.2%	17.0%
2	17-25	10.0%	0.0%	65.0%	25.0%
3	26-35	0.0%	0.0%	52.2%	47.8%
4	36-45	3.7%	22.2%	37.0%	37.0%
5	46-55	3.2%	12.9%	51.6%	32.3%
6	56 and above	3.3%	10.0%	56.7%	30.0%

When analyzing age comparisons in response to the question, "Do you agree that the Tuvan language plays an important role in preserving Tsaatan Tuvan culture?" Of the respondents, 97% answered yes, 3.2% were not sure, 1.1% said it was possible, and 1.9% answered no.

**Table 9. Do you agree that the Tuvan language plays an important role in preserving Tsaatan Tuvan culture? (By Age)**

No	Age Group	Yes	Not sure	It's possible	No
1	Up to 16	92.6%	1.9%	3.7%	1.9%
2	17-25	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
3	26-35	95.7%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%
4	36-45	96.4%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%
5	46-55	96.8%	0.0%	3.2%	0.0%
6	56 and above	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

The research results show a trend in which the environment for using the Tuvan language is shrinking, and the transmission of oral traditions is weakening. Although the desire to preserve their native language and culture is high among the local population, the actual use of the language and the level of traditional knowledge have decreased, as revealed by the survey results (Mongush *et al.*, 2024).

Concurrently, Tuvan youth from the Tyva Republic initiated and established the "Three-Letter Monument" (Ganbold 2024, 143-144) to protect their mother tongue and written culture, serving as an interesting example of the revival and promotion of national language and cultural values in a modern format. The monument, located in the city of Kyzyl, stands as a symbol of the Tuvan people's written language, unique ethnic identity, and historical memory, aiming to spread respect for the mother tongue and ethnic culture among the younger generations. Furthermore, researcher M. Ganbold's study mentions that since the 1990s, the use of the Tuvan language and its social necessity have increased to a certain extent, and the language's immunity has relatively improved. (Hill, 2024)

Therefore, the issue of preserving and protecting the language and cultural heritage of national minorities should not be limited to the research level but needs to be supported by comprehensive policies linked to education, culture, public participation and digital usage. For instance, developing native-language educational programs, preparing learning materials, increasing access to information, expanding usage in the digital environment, and regularly implementing cultural activities based on youth participation are crucial. Based on the survey of the current state of mother tongue usage, we implemented the following activities in collaboration with the soum's Cultural Center and local heritage bearers, which are considered to have made a definite contribution to activating the attitude of Tuvan citizens, especially children and youth, toward their mother tongue and cultural heritage. These include:

- Collecting traditional songs which were at risk of being forgotten among the Tsaatan Tuvan citizens from local elders and tradition bearers, compiling and publishing the "Anthology of Tuvan Songs," a significant task for documenting oral heritage and passing it on to future generations
- Organizing the "Who Can Sing Tuvan Songs Best?" singing competitions across three age categories, which increased the interest and participation of children and youth in singing in their native language and supported the

continuity of cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture of Mongolia 2024 : 9);

- Publishing and distributing practical manuals such as the "Mongolian–Tuvan Conversation Pocketbook" and "Tyva–Mool chugaa depter," which had a real impact on increasing native language usage in daily communication and encouraging language learning (Ministry of Culture of Mongolia 2024);
- Translating and installing labels/descriptions for over 400 exhibits at the soum museum (adjacent to the Tsagaannuur Soum Cultural Center) into Mongolian and English, and over 20 exhibits into Mongolian, English, and Tuvan. This has enhanced the visibility of the Tuvan language while helping restore pride in language and culture among children and youth.
- Re-displaying and incorporating tangible cultural heritage items, such as hunting gear and household artifacts, into the museum's exhibition content indicates that the Uriankhais of Lake Khuvsgul kept few livestock and mainly relied on hunting (Robbins, 1973), as well as conical tents (urtz) and furniture. This has expanded opportunities to promote local cultural heritage and use it as an educational material.

These activities are significant not only for restoring and preserving language and cultural heritage at the local level but also for identifying linguistic and cultural situations, pressing issues, and protection opportunities for national minorities. In other words, this research and the concrete activities based on it make a definite contribution to disseminating knowledge and understanding of the protection of minority languages and cultural heritage to the public and promoting the value of cultural diversity.

## Conclusion

The results show that the use of the mother tongue among Tuvan citizens, particularly the transmission of oral culture, is decreasing, and the level of knowledge regarding Tuvan folktales, proverbs, and idioms has declined. Additionally, the proportion of citizens who regularly watch or listen to radio and television programs broadcast in the Tuvan language is limited, and the existence of citizens unaware of such programs indicates that access to native language information and its promotion are insufficient in this area. Although there are signs of weak enthusiasm for learning the native language and a poor usage environment among Tuvan citizens, there is a common attitude of realizing the importance of preserving their native language and cultural heritage and passing them on to future generations. This provides positive foundational conditions for future protection and revitalization. The survey participants commonly acknowledged that to master their mother tongue, cultural policy and its implementation, the educational system, age-appropriate textbooks and materials, daily communication environments, and information accessibility are exceptionally important. Therefore, within the framework of preserving and protecting the Tuvan language and oral cultural heritage and increasing its usage, it is necessary to consider this at the policy level, as discussed below: Educational content and curricula must be improved to meet modern needs and age-specific characteristics, integrated with digital learning environments, and practical methodologies supporting real language usage must be developed. Correspondingly, it is vital to pass down and promote the lifestyle, mindset, and cultural characteristics embedded in folklore genres to children and youth, increase

the availability of Tuvan-language books, manuals, and materials, and use digital platforms to document and disseminate intangible cultural heritage that is at risk of being forgotten. Furthermore, establishing a system to evaluate Tuvan language proficiency levels, expanding cooperation, scientific research, and cultural exchange among Tuvan speakers, and regularly organizing cultural and artistic activities based on Tuvan language usage targeting children and youth are deemed essential for creating the practical conditions required to maintain the continuity of the linguistic and cultural heritage.

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