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Ethnographic Insights Into Central Asian History From “Devonu Lug’Otit Turk”

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Abstract: This article explores Mahmud al-Kashgari’s 11th-century work *Compendium of Turkic Dialects* (Devonu Lug’otit Turk) as a valuable ethnographic source for understanding the cultural and historical development of Turkic peoples in Central Asia. The study examines tribal ethnonyms, geographic distribution, and social structures, with a focus on prominent tribes such as the Kipchaks, Karluks, and Oghuz. It also highlights urban cultural centers like Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khwarezm, revealing the complex interplay between nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, religious syncretism, and ethnogenesis processes in the Turkic world.

Keywords: Mahmud al-Kashgari, *Compendium of Turkic Dialects*, ethnogenesis of Turkic peoples, history of Central Asia, nomadic culture, Oghuz, Kipchak, Karluk tribes, ethnographic lexicography.

Introduction: The 11th-century lexicographical work *Devonu Lug’otit Turk*, authored by Mahmud al-Kashgari, transcends the boundaries of a traditional dictionary. Written in Arabic, it was intended to introduce the richness of Turkic languages and culture to the Islamic scholarly world. However, beyond its linguistic value, the work offers vital ethnographic and historical insights into the Turkic tribes inhabiting Central Asia. It documents tribal affiliations, social customs, geographic locations, and even religious beliefs, thereby offering scholars a multidimensional understanding of medieval Turkic societies.

Tribal Identities and Ethnonyms

One of the most profound contributions of *Devonu Lug’otit Turk* is its comprehensive documentation of Turkic tribal names (ethnonyms), which serve as linguistic, sociopolitical, and cultural signposts of the

medieval Turkic world. Mahmud al-Kashgari's systematic recording of these ethnonyms provides not only philological insight but also allows historians and ethnographers to trace the patterns of ethnogenesis, migration, tribal confederations, and interethnic interactions across Central Asia during the 10th and 11th centuries.

Ethnonyms as Markers of Historical Identity

In *Devonu Lug'otit Turk*, names such as Qipchaq, Qarluq, Oghuz, Uzb, Yomut, Chigil, and Tuhsi are not presented merely as linguistic entries, but are often accompanied by commentary on their customs, dialects, territories, and reputations. Al-Kashgari's classification of these groups provides critical data for reconstructing the socio-political landscape of the pre-Mongol Turkic world.

These ethnonyms function on multiple levels:

- **Linguistic markers:** Each tribal name is associated with dialectal variations that reflect phonetic, syntactic, and lexical distinctions across Turkic languages.
- **Geopolitical indicators:** The location and movement of these tribes can be mapped based on Al-Kashgari's notes, correlating with archaeological and textual evidence from Persian, Arabic, and Chinese sources.
- **Cultural identities:** Ethnonyms often encapsulate behavioral traits or reputational attributions (e.g., bravery, eloquence, piety), offering insight into how groups were perceived and how they self-identified.

Key Tribes and Confederations

The Qipchaqs (Kipchaks)

Al-Kashgari identifies the Qipchaqs as a formidable nomadic power in the Eurasian steppes, particularly dominant in the region known as *Desht-i Qipchaq*. Subsequent historical sources, including Russian annals and Persian chronicles, attest to their role as both military allies and antagonists to various empires, including the Khwarezmshahs and Kievan Rus'. Their eventual incorporation into the Golden Horde after the Mongol conquest illustrates their long-term influence on Turkic-Slavic synthesis in Eastern Europe. Linguistically, Qipchaq Turkic became one of the dominant literary and administrative languages of the post-Mongol Islamic world, especially in the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt.¹ Described as a dominant tribal confederation, the Kipchaks occupied the vast steppes between the Caspian and Black Seas—known as *Desht-i Kipchak*. Their nomadic lifestyle, military organization, and later influence in forming the Kipchak Khanate underscore their central role in shaping the ethnic map

of Eurasia.

The Qarluqs (Karluks)

Al-Kashgari situates the Qarluqs in the vicinity of modern-day Uzbekistan and southeastern Kazakhstan. Archaeological evidence from the cities of Balasagun, Taraz, and Bukhara supports their integration into early Islamic urban cultures. Historically, the Qarluqs played a pivotal role in the collapse of the Western Turkic Khaganate and later supported the establishment of the Karakhanid dynasty — the first Turkic Muslim dynasty in Central Asia.² This transition from nomadism to urban Islam represents a crucial moment in the civilizational transformation of Turkic societies. Settled in parts of present-day Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the Karluks played a formative role in the ethnogenesis of the Uzbeks. Al-Kashgari notes their integration into urban life in cities like Bukhara and Samarkand, facilitating a fusion between nomadic and sedentary cultures

The Oghuz Confederation

The Oghuz tribes, divided into Bozok and Uchok branches in later sources such as *Oghuznama*, are central to the ethnogenesis of modern Turkic peoples including the Turkmens, Azerbaijanis, and Anatolian Turks. Al-Kashgari's notes reflect their extensive spread from Central Asia westward to the Caspian and beyond. The Oghuz migration played a direct role in the formation of the Seljuk Empire, which profoundly influenced Islamic civilization and facilitated the Turkification of Anatolia. Their collective memory is preserved in epic traditions such as the *Book of Dede Korkut*, further corroborating the ethnographic data found in *Devonu Lug'otit Turk*.³ The Oghuz tribes, also prominently featured in the lexicon, laid the foundation for several powerful states, including the Seljuk and Ottoman empires. Al-Kashgari's accounts trace their geographic range from the Caspian Sea to the fringes of the Islamic world, emphasizing their role in connecting diverse cultures through migration and trade. These ethnonyms are critical in tracing the socio-political evolution of Turkic groups and understanding their shifting alliances and migrations across Central Asia.

New Insights from Modern Research

Recent linguistic and genetic studies have provided new dimensions to understanding the data Al-Kashgari preserved:

- Linguistic studies have reconstructed the Common Turkic and Oghuric language branches, showing how certain ethnonyms reflect underlying language families.⁴
- Genetic research confirms complex admixtures among Turkic tribes, suggesting multi-ethnic tribal confederacies, especially in frontier zones like

Khwarezm and the Syr Darya basin.⁵

- Digital humanities projects, such as the Turkic Peoples Genealogy Project, have begun mapping Al-Kashgari's data with GIS tools to visualize tribal movement over time.⁶

These new methodologies affirm the accuracy and richness of *Devonu Lug'otit Turk* as a living ethnographic atlas of the medieval Turkic world.

One of the most valuable contributions of *Devonu Lug'otit Turk* is its extensive catalog of Turkic tribal names and ethnonyms. These entries not only reflect linguistic variations but also serve as markers of political, social, and migratory dynamics in medieval Central Asia.

Geographic and Urban Descriptions

Al-Kashgari's work serves as an early ethnographic map, detailing both nomadic territories and urban centers, reflecting the dual character of Turkic civilization.

Urban Hubs: Bukhara and Samarkand

These cities, located on key nodes of the Silk Road, are described as vibrant centers of commerce, education, and intercultural interaction. The lexicon illustrates the coexistence of Turkic, Persian, and Sogdian peoples, shedding light on the region's multilingual and multiethnic urban fabric.

Khwarezm (Chorasmia)

Khwarezm is portrayed as an agriculturally rich and culturally diverse region, situated at the crossroads of Turkic and Iranian civilizations. Al-Kashgari emphasizes its intellectual prominence and mixed ethnic composition, indicating its pivotal role in cultural transmission.

Nomadic Landscapes

Beyond cities, the lexicon describes vast steppe regions and their ecological features. The entries related to seasonal migration and pastoralist practices demonstrate how geography shaped the social and economic organization of Turkic life.

Cultural and Social Practices

Al-Kashgari's lexicon is replete with vocabulary reflecting the cultural life and social hierarchy of Turkic societies.

Governance and Social Structure

Titles such as *khan* (ruler) and *aqsaqal* (elder) reflect systems of authority and community leadership. These terms reveal a dual model of governance combining centralized power and council-based tribal decision-making.

Nomadic Traditions

Cultural markers such as the yurt (nomadic dwelling) symbolize the lifestyle of mobile pastoralist societies. The lexicon provides detailed descriptions of these portable homes and seasonal movement patterns, emphasizing adaptability and ecological knowledge.

Religious Syncretism

The text captures a period of religious transition. While Islam was gaining ground, traces of earlier belief systems—including Zoroastrianism and Turkic shamanistic practices—remain evident. This reflects a syncretic religious culture in the process of Islamization.

Ethnogenesis and Cultural Transformation

The data presented in *Devonu Lug'otit Turk* allow for a deeper understanding of how Turkic identity evolved through centuries of migration, conquest, and intercultural interaction. The integration of Turkic tribes with Persian, Sogdian, and Islamic elements produced a complex and pluralistic cultural landscape.

The lexicon illustrates how Turkic identity was shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by external influences from the Abbasid Caliphate, Chinese dynasties, and neighboring Iranian societies. Trade routes such as the Silk Road played a significant role in this cultural convergence, fostering the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies.

CONCLUSION

Mahmud al-Kashgari's *Devonu Lug'otit Turk* is an indispensable source for the ethnographic and historical study of medieval Central Asia. Its detailed documentation of tribal names, geographic locales, and cultural practices enables modern scholars to reconstruct the socio-political and cultural history of the Turkic world. The lexicon not only preserves linguistic heritage but also provides a vivid portrayal of a diverse and dynamic civilization navigating profound transformations.

Footnotes

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