

Shibboleth: Kyrgyz or Uzbek?

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By Ingrid Piller | June 15, 2010 | Language, migration & social justice, Recent Posts

In his recent post “Accent and History,” Khan asked whether it’s possible to escape the prison of our accent and our language. Looking at [the civil war and humanitarian disaster](#) that is currently raging in and around the city of Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan, it’s hard to imagine a positive answer. By all accounts, it’s Kyrgyz against Uzbek. Osh, which is only 5km from the border with Uzbekistan, has a majority Uzbek population and Uzbeks there have been campaigning for autonomy and/or annexation by Uzbekistan since before the fall of the Soviet Union.

[The Encyclopedia of the Muslim World](#) has a good overview if you want to brush up your knowledge about Kyrgyzstan. However, even after reading this monograph, I haven’t been able to figure out what exactly distinguishes a Kyrgyz from an Uzbek. They certainly look alike to the degree that saying a given person is Kyrgyz or Uzbek makes them so, as this chilling account from [a blogger on Global Voices](#) shows:

... he called me and asked: “...so, no one is going to help us?” I wouldn’t wish this to anyone. I felt myself like a dog....I met them near the tuberculosis clinic. I took the driving wheel and shouted to everyone that he’s a Kyrgyz. With difficulties we managed to get him out of the district. On the street there were about 20 soldiers and behind them a crowd of young and not so young people of the Kyrgyz ethnicity. I don’t know what to do.

[Amnesty International](#) also report ethnicity as a matter of “claiming”:

*Eyewitnesses have reported that groups of armed civilians, mostly young men **claiming** to be Kyrgyz, were roaming the streets of Osh, targeting districts of the city inhabited mainly by Uzbeks shooting at civilians, setting shops and houses on fire and looting private property. (my emphasis)*

So, they hate each other with a vengeance but it’s not easily possible to say who is who?! Maybe that’s where accent comes in handy, just as it did in biblical times:

The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan River opposite Ephraim. Whenever an Ephraimite fugitive said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he said, “No,” then they said to him, “Say ‘Shibboleth!’” If he said, “Sibboleth” (and could not pronounce the word correctly), they grabbed him and executed

him right there at the fords of the Jordan. On that day forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell dead. (Book of Judges, 12: 5-6)

The varieties of the Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages spoken in the Ferghana Valley seem to be mutually intelligible, which would leave ample scope for “shibboleths.”

Just as with the Bihari speakers of Urdu, the invention of ethnicity and language in the Ferghana Valley has largely been a product of colonial intervention: in Tsarist times, both groups (and some others) were lumped together as “Turks.” Soviet policy then made a distinction between “settled Turks” and “nomadic Turks” – the former were to be collectively known as “Uzbeks” and the latter went by a range of tribal names, including “Kipchak-Uzbeks” for those who are today “Kyrgyz.”

It’s all very confusing and to determine the “precise” meaning of “Kyrgyz” and “Uzbek” seems to be a bottomless-pit problem. However, the upshot is that the colonial re-definition of a social distinction (nomad vs. settled) as an ethnic distinction (which intersected in some way with the social distinction) in conjunction with the colonial creation of arbitrary boundaries (just as the British carved up India, Stalin carved up the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) has created a recipe for mayhem and bloodshed.

This recipe is now readily available to [corrupt politicians](#) and [criminals of all sorts](#) if and when they choose to mobilize for their own purposes. Right now, the best hope for the people in Southern Kyrgyzstan seems to be more colonial intervention in the form of Russian peace-keepers. In the long term, all humanity will all have to look for ways to put the evil genies of ethnic and linguistic division back into the bottle.

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