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Contents

N.Erdenebayar **B.Jargalsaikhan**	Skiing Tradition of Altai Uriankhai	**4**
E.A.Avazov **Zh.A.Duisheev**	The Andijan Uprising of 1898: Main Issues of Discussion in the Historiography of the Colonial and Soviet Era	**7**
Sh.Kh.Sattarov	Service Diversification And Economic Efficiency	**13**
S.Dj.Saidova	Leadership Competence and Creativity in Managing Challenging Personnel in Higher Education Institutions	**16**
Kh.I.Mamadaliyev	Urban History of the Fergana Valley (1876–1924): A Case Study of Osh	**21**
A.B.Zuftarov	Development of The Service Sector in The Context of the Digital Transformation of Azerbaijan's Economy	**24**
I.K.Usarov **Sh.T.Karimova** **M.Y.Badalbayeva** **A.A.Beknazarov** **Sh.T.Uljayeva**	Enhancing Students' Lexical Competence Through Systematic Use of Authentic Texts: a Task-based and Corpus-supported Methodology	**29**
B.R.Karimov	Challenges in the Development of Turkic Civilization Languages: Perspectives on the Formation of a Common Turkic Language and a Unified Turkic Script System	**32**
N.Juraev	The Philosophy of the Soul and the Heart in Ibn Sina's Thought	**35**
N.Nazarov	Interethnic Relations and Societal Development in Central Asia	**42**
Kh.J.Barotova	The Representation of Nature in the Epic Farhod and Shirin	**46**
Sh.Kh.Buriev	Conservation of Museum Objects and the Preservation of Historical Memory: A Key Factor in Societal Development (The Case of Uzbekistan, 1991–2025)	**50**
K.M.Gulomova	Scientific and Pedagogical Foundations of Fostering Independent Thinking in Higher Education Students	**53**
D.S.Saparboeva	Organizing Didactic Games in Primary Education	**56**
İ.H.Cəbrayılov	Contemporary Approaches to History Education: Challenges of Learning and Teaching	**58**
O.Musaev	Peculiarities of National Policy Implementation in Multinational Countries	**62**
E.Sultanova **R.Hasanov**	The Organization of Turkic States: A Significant Political Actor on the Global Stage	**66**
O.Musaev **Z.Murodova**	The Historical Development of International Relations and the Processes of Their Transformation	**70**
R.Yarkulov	Mechanisms for Improving Students' Creative Engagement through Digital Technologies: A Case Study of the Logistics Education Program	**74**
R.Hasanov	The Person of Amir Temur and His Martyr Art and State Administration	**79**
R.Khalikova	Amir Temur's Personality and Political Activities as Reflected in Historical Sources	**81**

Skiing Tradition of Altai Uriankhai

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Abstract.
This article analyzes the ancient skiing tradition of Mongolia based on archeological and documentary data. Also, it is intended to be analyzed based on the original materials of the field research conducted among the Uriankhai people who were separated by the rights of the two regions.
The tradition of skiing in Uriankhai of Altai had an important role in adapting to the natural and climatic conditions. This tradition has been inherited among the Uriankhai Tuwa people who live in Mongolia and China today.
Keywords: Altai Uriankhai; indigenous skiing tradition; cultural heritage preservation; hunting culture; ethnographic studies; Mongolian Altai; archaeological evidence

Introduction. In Mongolian history, one of the noble clans frequently noted for their renown is the **Uriankhai**. Due to historical developments, they dispersed into smaller groups and settled in various regions, eventually adopting the names of the territories where they established themselves. Among these groups are the **Altai Uriankhai**, descendants of the ancient Uriankhai.

The Altai Uriankhai possess a rich cultural heritage, a prominent aspect of which is the **tradition of skiing**. Skiing played a significant role in their economy, social relations, and cultural life. The Altai Mountains, home to the Altai Uriankhai, are abundant in game and wild birds but characterized by a harsh continental climate. In winter, thick snow often blocks roads and mountain passes, making daily subsistence activities challenging. In this context, skis were the primary tool for overcoming these difficulties. Reflecting this importance, the Altai Uriankhai preserved the saying: "*A skier does not suffer in the snow, just as a migrant does not suffer under his banner.*"

Evidence of ancient skiing traditions among Mongolians can be found in **Rashid al-Din's** *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh*, where he notes that forest-dwelling peoples skillfully used skis for hunting in snowy terrain (Rashid al-Din, 2000: 87–88). Furthermore, the late Mongolian archaeologist **D. Tseveendorj** discovered rock paintings in the **Baga Oigor area of Ulaankhus soum, Bayan-Ölgii aimag**, depicting hunters on skis. This provides invaluable evidence that Mongolia's ancestors already used skis during the **Bronze Age**, with the possibility of use even in the **Stone Age** (Tseveendorj, 2013: 251).

Foundational ethnographic studies on Mongolian ethnic groups have briefly mentioned skiing traditions, particularly among the **Tsaatan Tuvans of Khuvsgul Province** and the **Altai Uriankhai** (Badamkhatan et al., 2012: 251). In his study *Historical Traditions of Skiing, Tsuuri, and Khoomei Culture among the Uriankhai*, young researcher **I. Altansukh** examines skiing traditions using Chinese historical sources and other materials (Altansukh, 2018).

Chinese scholars have also contributed to understanding these traditions. **T. Namjil**, in his work on Oirat Mongol customs, describes the origin and construction of leather-covered skis used by the Uriankhai and Tuvan peoples in China's Xinjiang region (Namjil, 2010). Similarly, researcher **S. Nayantai** studied the historical context of leather-covered skis among the Uriankhai in **Handgait Mongol Township, Altai Prefecture**, drawing on local tools and rock paintings depicting hunters on skis (Nayantai, 2015).

Other scholars, including **B. Puntsagdorj** (1992), **Ch. Damchaa** (2015), and **N. Gerelkhuu** (2019), have briefly mentioned skiing traditions in their research.

Building on these previous studies, this paper draws on **field materials collected during the Ethnographic Baseline Research Project on the Altai Uriankhai (2011–2013)**, as well as subsequent fieldwork conducted among the Uriankhai in **Handgait Mongol Township, Altai Prefecture, Xinjiang, China (2015, 2017, 2019, 2024)**. The aim is to document and analyze the skiing traditions of the Altai Uriankhai, combining historical, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence.

Origin of Skis



A key source of evidence for the origin and development of skis lies in archaeological monuments, particularly **rock art**. The late prominent archaeologist **D. Tseveendorj** described ancient Mongolian skis in his study, noting a rock painting located approximately 10 km downstream (eastward) from the confluence of the **Baga Oigor** and **Tsagaan Salaa** rivers in **Ulaankhus soum, Bayan-Ölgii aimag**. On a flat rock surface facing southeast from a winter camp on a northern mountain slope of the Baga Oigor River, the painting depicts a majestic large-horned stag fleeing from a hunter on skis. The hunter, carrying a large quiver on his back, is shown skillfully drawing his bow while slightly bending his knees. Below them, a large-eared hunting dog with outstretched legs pursues the stag. The dynamic motion of the hunter, stag, and dog is vividly captured. This serves as invaluable evidence that Mongolia's ancestors used skis as early as the **Bronze Age**, with the possibility that skiing may have been practiced even in the **Stone Age** (Tseveendorj, 2013: 251).

In the *Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh*, **Rashid al-Din** also provides detailed accounts of skiing among forest-dwelling peoples: their territory

was mountainous and heavily forested, with abundant snowfall, allowing them to hunt various birds during winter. They made special boards called “skis,” stood on them, used a pole to steer, and propelled themselves over snow much like a boat over water. Using skis, they could descend slopes, pursue wild cattle and other animals, and transport two to three thousand loads of goods with minimal effort. Inexperienced individuals, however, risked accidents, particularly on descents. Skilled users, by contrast, moved with great ease and speed (Rashid al-Din, 2000: 87–88).

Together, the archaeological and written sources indicate that Mongolian ancestors incorporated skis into their subsistence activities from very early times. Ethnographic studies further note that **Altai Uriankhai hunters** in the 12th century used skis made from horse and roe deer hide, which remained essential hunting tools for foot hunters into the early 20th century. These skis were long, wide, and made of dark wood. While traveling on skis, hunters often carried loads tied around their waists or on square wooden sleds (sometimes covered with horse hides) to transport food, clothing, and game. This represents a distinctive hunting method of the Altai Uriankhai (Badamkhatan et al., 2012: 251).

In his work on Oirat Mongol history and culture, **T. Namjil** notes that among the Oirats, the Altai Uriankhai and neighboring ethnic groups such as the Khoshmoncho and Torguud used skis for hunting in mountainous snow. Skiing traditions among these groups date back over 2,000 years, as evidenced by rock paintings located in **Handgait Mongol Township, Altai Prefecture, Xinjiang**, depicting hunters on skis (Namjil, 2010: 177).



Young researcher **I. Altansukh** observes that Chinese historical sources and Rashid al-Din’s accounts of forest-dwelling Uriankhai hunters demonstrate how ski use and construction techniques were passed down to later generations of Altai Uriankhai, highlighting the continuity of cultural heritage (Altansukh, 2018: 22). Furthermore, Chinese scholar **S. Nayantai**, based on fieldwork among the Uriankhai of Handgait Township and analysis of ancient rock art depicting hunters on leather-covered skis, notes that early Altai Uriankhai made skis from crude wooden planks and animal bones to meet daily survival needs, and that this traditional form continues in use today (Nayantai, 2012: 31).

Based on the above evidence, it appears that the ancestors of the Mongols inhabiting the Mongolian Altai created and utilized skis from a very early period. This is corroborated by the rock paintings in **Baga Oigor, Mongolia**, as well as depictions of hunters on skis at **Zhongbu Spring** in **Handgait Township, Altai Prefecture, Xinjiang, China**. From this perspective, the origin of skiing can be considered a unique cultural innovation developed by the ancestors of the Mongols living in the Mongolian Altai. Today, this tradition continues to be preserved among the **Tsaatan Tuvans of Renchinlkhümbe soum, Khövsgöl aimag, Mongolia**, as well as among the **Uriankhai and Tuvan communities of Xinjiang, China**, maintaining its ancestral forms and practices.

On the Skiing Tradition. As mentioned above, the tradition of skiing, or gliding on skis, has been preserved among the U**riankhai, Tuvan, and Tsaatan-Tuvan groups in Mongolia**, as well as among the **Uriankhai and Tuvan communities in Altai Prefecture, Xinjiang, China**. Up until the late 20th century, skiing remained a common practice among these groups in Mongolia. Ethnographic field data provide detailed observations, for example:

“Uriankhai hunters frequently used **skis** and **sledges**. The skis were equipped with poles and, although rudimentary by modern standards, were covered with horsehide. The hair of the horsehide was aligned in the proper direction to facilitate smooth gliding, and on uphill sections the hairs prevented backward sliding, making travel easier for the skier.” [Chuluun, 2011:143]

The Uriankhai of the Altai mountains would settle near one another during summer pastures, maintaining kinship ties, but disperse during winter. Because passes in the Altai range were blocked by heavy snow, during the Lunar New Year celebrations, skiing was used to deliver messengers from Altai and Handgait deep valleys to monasteries and officials at Sagsai, facilitating communication and gift exchange. [Damchaa, 2015:32]

Oral histories indicate that the Altai Uriankhai engaged in extensive winter hunting, primarily targeting large game for food and supplies. There are also accounts of hunting **snow leopards** using skis. For instance, Tsogt Boooloo, a native of Bulgan soum, Bayan-Ölgii aimag, described that hunters would pursue a snow leopard on skis, intercept it from behind, and disable the hind legs with sharp blades before finishing the hunt. Similarly, a local named Tsagaadaan Noost would attach horsehide to ski bottoms to hunt deer, using knives and bows while gliding on the snow. [Puntsagdorj, 1992:18]

Among the Tuvans inhabiting the Mongolian Altai, hunting on skis—known locally as **khaak**—was also common. Borhoo Chonai of the White Soyon clan reported: “Our Tuvan ancestors used skis for hunting in areas such as Tavan Bogd’s Yellow Nose, Takhilt Pass, Tsagaan Us, and Khaan Pass. The skis were essential for winter travel and hunting. When I was young, old skis were still found in many households. Skiing was used to travel across mountain ridges and conduct extensive hunts.” This indicates that the Tuvans relied on skis to navigate snowy terrain and sustain their livelihood. [Gerelkhuu, 2010:103]

These sources collectively show that the skiing tradition among the U**riankhai and Tuvan communities of the Mongolian Altai** persisted until the late 20th century.

The Contemporary Skiing Tradition. Today, the **ancestral characteristics of skiing** are preserved among the **Uriankhai and Tuvan communities in Altai Prefecture, Xinjiang, China**. Every year, at the beginning of winter, these communities organize a **skiing festival**, or competitions for gliding on skis. Prior to the festival, they pay respect to the **rock paintings of hunters on skis** located in **Zhong Bulag** and to a sacred tree nearby. Scholars have dated these rock paintings to **approximately 12,000 years ago**. The depictions show **seven individuals**, with four apparently chasing cattle or horses, while three are shown on skis, each equipped with a single pole and elongated skis. [Altansukh, 2018:25]

At the site of the rock painting, **all skiers gather to pay homage**, after which elders offer blessings. The blessings generally wish for **abundant game, plentiful catches, and a successful hunting journey**. This ritual reflects the **pre-hunt preparation of ancient Uriankhai hunters**, who would mount skis before going hunting. Traditionally, skis are considered one of the “Nine Jewels” and hold symbolic value. Skiers would also carry **bows, arrows, knives, and saddles** during hunts. Before setting out, hunters perform rituals at mountain shrines and perform ceremonial acts, including shooting at the moon. If the moonshot misses, they circle the shrine again. This practice is believed to ensure success in hunting, especially when game is hidden in snow.

In modern times, skiing among the Altai Uriankhai has developed as a form of **tourism**, yet retains its ancestral character and traditional craftsmanship. The structure and construction of **leather-covered skis** is described by S. Namjil as follows:

"…Wooden boards, horsehide from well-groomed horses, cowhide straps, and wooden poles are the main components. The wooden ski board is made from willow wood, approximately **2 meters long and 15–20 cm wide**, tapering at the tip to about 5 cm. The board's thickness is about **2 cm in the center, 1 cm at the edges**, with the tip curved upwards. After shaping, the ski is soaked in boiling water to soften, then the tip is pulled and shaped using iron wires. Horsehide from the saddle area of the horse is soaked and affixed to the ski underside with fine straps and iron nails. The hair direction allows smooth gliding downhill, while uphill motion is resisted, providing control." [Namjil, 2010:177].

During fieldwork with Uriankhai in **Handgait, Altai Prefecture**, they described the process in detail:

- Skis are primarily made from **willow wood** due to its durability; occasionally **mulberry bark** is used.
- Wood is cut, thinned, and dried in autumn; tips are shaped and boiled in hot water for flexibility.
- Iron wires are used to shape the tip, and **horsehide** is soaked and stretched underneath to provide friction and glide properties.
- Skis are fastened with **processed cowhide straps**, treated with animal fat to resist moisture and ensure smooth removal.
- Ski lengths vary according to the user's height; children are provided with smaller skis.

Once the skis are completed and delivered to the owner, **a ritual blessing is performed**, wishing the skis durability and abundant hunting success. [Nayantai, 2015:29].

Decline and Preservation of the Skiing Tradition



According to **oral histories**, the skiing tradition among the **Altai Uriankhai** persisted until the **late 20th century**. However, it appears that **social, economic, and national development factors** contributed to its gradual decline. Despite this, among the **Uriankhai communities divided by political borders**, the tradition was preserved due to the **deep-rooted connections between state policies and customary practices**, allowing the cultural practice to survive in its ancestral form.

There is a strong potential to **revive this tradition** in its **authentic form** and develop it into a **winter tourism brand product**, combining heritage and experiential tourism.

In conclusion, the skiing tradition of the Altai Uriankhai **originated from the ancient Mongol tribes of the Altai Mountains**. It has been **transmitted across generations** due to historical circumstances and the practical needs of daily life, preserving a **unique cultural expression** within this ethnic group.

Conclusion

1. **Skiing as a Unique Hunting Tool:** Skis were a unique hunting implement created by the ancient Mongol tribes inhabiting the **Mongolian Altai**, as evidenced by **rock carvings depicting hunters on skis**, which have been preserved over time.

2. **Skiing Tradition as a Socio-Economic Practice:** The tradition of skiing was a **central element of livelihood and social relations** among the Altai-dwelling tribes, as confirmed by historical records and oral accounts.

Today, the **ancestral characteristics of this skiing tradition** are preserved among the **Uriankhai, Tuvan, and Tsaatan-Tuvan communities** in both Mongolia and the **Altai region of China (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region)**. There is significant potential to **revive this tradition as a winter tourism brand**, combining cultural heritage with modern tourism development.

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