

The life of Lyuli (Tajik Gypsies, a closed community at all times) and especially questions of their religious affiliation always interested wider public.

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Most Tajiks think that Lyuli are not of the same faith, but in fact, it is not true. Representatives of this national minority are Sunni Muslims, as well as Tajiks, who are the largest ethnic group in Tajikistan.

There are no official documents revealing the time when Lyuli appeared on Tajikistan's territory. According to the 2010 population census, then their number was only 2 234 people.

Representatives of this ethnic group have always preferred to settle separately and live closely. Now, according to local authorities, just only in two districts of the Khatlon region, Vose and Jaloliddini Balkhi, there are more than 4 500 Lyuli. Their exact number will be determined by the next population census, which is scheduled for 2020 in Tajikistan.

**Panji Ilhomov** is 67-year-old head of the gypsy mahalla in Maxim Gorky-2 village in Khaliward jamoat of Jaloliddini Balkhi district, Khatlon region. His ancestors moved to Tajikistan in 1949. Nowadays, the majority of his group do not know where their ancestors come from.

According to him, the Tajiks believe that his people come from India.

"We are not from India, my father said that we are from the city of Termez, Uzbekistan. My

grandfather and father lived in Tajikistan. We are Muslims and adhere to Imam Azam's madhhab", said Ilhomov (*in Tajikistan, Imam Azam is the nickname of Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi school of Islam, that is the most common and traditional for the peoples of Central Asia. - Ed.*).



Panji Ilhomov. Photo: CABAR.asia



*Sonia Khojivalieva. Photo: CABAR.asia*

However, there are those who hold a different opinion. **Sonia Khojivalieva** is a 50-year-old gypsy from the Vakhsh district of Khatlon region. She believes that Lyuli come from India, but she does not know the exact time of her ancestors' resettlement to Tajikistan:

All Lyuli who originate from Samarkand and Tashkent say that their ancestors are from India. We worship Islam, read namaz (prayer) and fast during Ramadan. We do not know the Indian language because we were born in Tajikistan and speak Tajik. Nevertheless, our ancestors spoke it.

## **Mugat from the Banks of Ganges**

**Yasrib Karim**, a social expert from the Khatlon region, suggests that Lyuli appeared in Central Asian countries about 300 years ago, when India became colonially dependent on England, which had seized the country's national wealth. In conditions of mass impoverishment, most Indians were forced to flee to other countries.

Sometimes various drawn moles can be seen on the faces of Lyuli, it means that these women are Indian. Just 20 years ago, most Tajiks believed in fiction stories that Lyuli eat their dead. However, all these stories are false, since Lyuli have a cemetery and Tajik clergymen participate at their funerals.

“Lyuli” is the name of this nation in Russian. In Tajik, they are called “Jugi”, in Iran - “Kuli”. They call themselves “Mugat”. This name originates from India. A few years ago, Iranian and Tajik filmmakers shot a research movie about Lyuli lives and found out that they come from the banks of the Indian river Ganges, where they are called “Mugat”.

In Maxim Gorky-2 village, where Panji Ilhomov lives, the village cemetery is divided into three parts - one for Gypsies, other parts for Tajiks and Uzbeks. Due to the lack of a mosque, local residents conduct funeral rites (janoza) in the cotton warehouse.

**We used to be despised. Now we pray together with everyone.**

In 2014, local Lyuli built a mosque at their own expense. Not only Gypsies came to pray there, but also Uzbeks and Tajiks living next door. However, as the villagers told, in 2017, the authorities closed the mosque because it was not registered properly.

“Now Lyuli pray namaz at home, because the doors of our mosque are closed. It is only on Fridays that we go to the central mosque. Now there is no such prejudice towards us as earlier. We used to be despised. Now we pray together with everyone and the attitude towards us is no different from the attitude towards other worshippers,” says Ilhomov.



*Usmonali Nurov. Photo: CABAR.asia*

**Usmonali Nurov**, the chief imam-khatib of the Khatlon region’s central mosque, says that he saw some Lyuli who come to pray at this mosque.

“When we were young, old people said that Lyuli were not Muslims. If someone marries Lyuli, it will be a sin. Now there are no such conversations,” said Nurov.

Meanwhile, the Lyuli themselves refuse to marry people of other nationalities. It was for many years before and remains the same now.

## **Tired of Begging**

Traditionally, the Lyuli were beggars, but now most of them are changing their profession. They are trying to master agriculture and labor migration, aspiring to become citizens of Tajikistan with full rights. Some Gypsies began to engage in small-scale trading and say that this occupation brings them more income than begging, which their ancestors traditionally

did.



*Bibianvar Idolmosova. Photo: CABAR.asia*

The family of **Bibianvar Idolmosova** has been begging until recently, when she refused to do this and started making her living by trading and labor migration.

Idolmosova says that she is tired of begging and now lives a new life. Only the elderly sometimes beg, but gradually this tradition disappears.

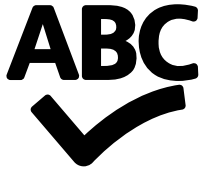
“The Lyuli are not as poor as they were before. They, just like the Tajiks, work in agriculture. Another source of their income is related to labor migration, mainly to Russia, to which many people from Tajikistan go. All this caused Gypsies to refuse begging,” Idolmosova said.

Representatives of the Committee on Religious Affairs and Regulation of Traditions and Rituals of Jaloliddini Balkhi district hukumat say that the Lyuli exemplarily follow the current legislation of the country. According to the officials, the Gypsies have Tajik passports, and every year someone of the members of the community leaves for the Hajj.

“Like other citizens, Lyuli receive permission to conduct ceremonies and holidays and contribute to solving the problems of society,” reports the Committee on Religious Affairs and Rituals.

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