Post-Soviet practice of preserving ethnocultural identity of indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia in Krasnoyarsk Region of the Russian Federation

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Abstract: The article presents the results of many years’ field research of small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia, resident in the territory of Krasnoyarsk Region (the Russian Federation). At the present time small-numbered indigenous peoples of Krasnoyarsk Region (the Evenks, Enets, Chulym, Nganasans, Nenets, Selkups, Kets, Dolgans) are exposed to serious influence of modernization and global transformations. Ethnogeny and culture genesis processes are not the same for these ethnocultural groups. Some post-Soviet cultural practices support formation of a positive ethnocultural identity of indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia. Museumization of the Nganasan culture (an indigenous Siberian people resident only in Krasnoyarsk region) confirms the conclusion that Taymyr Neo-Shamanism is significantly different from the Shamanism of archaic and traditional cultures. Museumization of the Nganasan cultural heritage points out that the culture experiences a strong impact of modern market mechanisms. True Shamanism is no longer typical of the ethnocultural identity of the Nganasans.

Keywords: indigenous peoples, North Asia, Siberia, Nganasans, ethnic identity and cultural identification

1. Introduction

There are two main opinions expressed in modern ethnical and cultural researches. The first of them is based on claiming self-sustainability, invariability (stability) of a certain culture. Supporters of this opinion suggest, that every culture is spread in a strictly outlined geographical area. From the point of view of these researchers, globalization does not influence the existence and development of local cultures. Soviet Age researchers of indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia used to stick to this opinion. It was clearly manifested in their primordialism and articulated by the most authoritative Soviet ethnologist, Yuri Bromley (2009). This point of view of Soviet ethnographers and ethnologists was typical of their researches of indigenous cultures of the North and Siberia (Khomich, 2003; Volodin, 2003). If Soviet ethnologists found any dynamics of the cultures, they would arrive at the conclusion that all changes of the indigenous cultures is the result of communication between individuals within the framework of one given cultural group, not a result of intercultural communications and/or global influence (Northern Encyclopaedia, 2004).

Representatives of such researchers insist, that terms “small group”, “ethnic minority”, “national minorities” should be replaced with “ethnocultural group” (Berry et al. 2002). This opinion leads us to a very important conclusion. At the present moment it is wrong to see reasons of people’s actions as influences of certain cultures. Behaviour of a people is not determined by a single cultural group. Ethnogeny and culture genesis are permanent processes. Processes of emergence of new ethnocultural groups, forming under constant cultural influence, is never ending in the world. For this reason the efforts of ethnocultural group researchers should be focused on the behaviour of people who belong to the ethnocultural groups. It is necessary to study, which cultural practices are used by people for preserving their ethncial and cultural identity (Branch, 2001; Greene et al., 2006; Kiang et al., 2010; Kiang et al., 2006; Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Researches of modern ethnocultural identity processes of indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia during the post-Soviet period are impossible to be carried out without considering the global transformations making impact on the groups. Indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia are vulnerable to a series of economic, political, cultural influences. The major role in ethnogeny of small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia in post-Soviet time is played by the influence of industrial and urbanized Russian society (Kirko &
According to the Census of 2010, in Krasnoyarsk Region of the Russian Federation there are representatives of over thirty ethnicultural groups of Northern and Siberian indigenous peoples. In Shushenskoe, Novoselovskoe, Uzhurskoe and some other settlements, there live the Khakass. The Khakass, who come from the Republic of Khakassia (borders with the South of Krasnoyarsk Region), are usually students or labour migrants in Krasnoyarsk city, towns of Minusinsk, Achinsk, Kansk. But the number of Khakass population in Krasnoyarsk Region is continuously decreasing. In 1989 there were 6466 people, in 2002, there were 4489 people, and in 2010, there were only 4102 people (0.15% of the whole population of Krasnoyarsk Region). Their number decreased by 387 people, which can be connected to the processes of ethnical and cultural self-identification. It is clear that the indigenous peoples resident in industrial and urban areas tend to identify themselves as “Russians”, while people resident in their “mother land” still claim that they belong to indigenous groups.

In Table 1 “Population number of the indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia based on All-Union Census of the years 1959, 1979, All-Russian Census of the years 2002, 2010” you can observe that the ethnicultural self-identification processes are different for the indigenous peoples. Despite a certain stabilization of the process of ethnical identity, the share of Krasnoyarsk Region population identifying themselves as indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia is constantly decreasing. Though, at first sight, the decrease seems insignificant.

Table 1. Population number of the indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia based on the All-Union Census of the years 1959, 1979, All-Russian Census of the years 2002, 2010 [27]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnical Group</th>
<th>1959 People</th>
<th>1979 People</th>
<th>2002 People</th>
<th>2010 People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2204051</td>
<td>2700167</td>
<td>2966042</td>
<td>2828187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolgans</td>
<td>4630</td>
<td>5805</td>
<td>5810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenks</td>
<td>4476</td>
<td>4128</td>
<td>4632</td>
<td>4372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khakass</td>
<td>3304</td>
<td>5273</td>
<td>4489</td>
<td>4102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nenets</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>2497</td>
<td>3188</td>
<td>3633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuvans</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>1492</td>
<td>2939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yakuts</td>
<td>4343</td>
<td>1315</td>
<td>1368</td>
<td>1468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buryats</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ket</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>1189</td>
<td>1029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nogais</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>950</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nganasan</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selkup</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>213</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shors</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chulyms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>159</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of Selkups considerably decreased: in the year 2002, 412 people identified themselves as such, while in the year 2010 there were only 281. The number of people calling themselves Shors also decreased: in 2002 there were 201 person, and in 2010 there were only 161. The same is true for the Kets: in 2002, they were 1189 people, and in 2010 they were 1029. The number of people claiming themselves Chulyms decreased by 12 people. The number of citizens who identify their ethnicity as the Evenks or Enets. The number of people who claim themselves Nenets is growing (3188 people in 2002, 3633 people in 2010).

In our opinion, the so-called “stabilization” of ethnical and cultural self-identification processes can be observed in the statistical data provided by All-Russia Census of 2010, which reflects two different processes. The first one is connected to re-industrialization, urbanization, i.e. modernization of the Northern and Arctic territories. As soon as indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia get in the zone where modernization processes are in action, their ethnical self-identification begins to transform. The indigenous population of the North and Siberia, influenced by the modernization processes, tends to identify themselves as “Russians”. However, there are some special post-Soviet practices, which, being taken up by the indigenous peoples, provide their self-identification with their initial ethnonym.

The mentioned post-Soviet practices are based on specific legal relations established in a series of statutes and regulations acting in the modern Russian Federation.

3. Results

The Russian Federation possesses a sufficient amount of statutes and regulations offering legal systems for forming positive cultural identity of indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia. First of all, the right of these peoples for their original culture is established by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which also states that this right is protected on both federal and regional levels. There is a Federal Law No. 184-FZ dated October 6, 1999, “On General Principles of Organization of Legislative (Representative) and Executive Bodies of State Authorities of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation”, which claims that regions may independently pass laws and other regulations for supporting traditional lifestyle of small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. It also remarks that presence or absence of such regional regulations does not influence the federal subsidies provided to the representatives of such ethnical and cultural groups (Palchin, 2013).


During the last 18 years the Government of Russia has passed and has been actualizing three federal target programs, a great variety of regional target programs regulating payment of subsidies from the federal and regional budgets to representatives of the small-numbered indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia. All 28 regions of the Russian Federation, where such peoples live, have their own registers of the small-numbered indigenous peoples which may enjoy the state support.

Therefore, significant economic support is provided exactly to those people who admit their ethnical and cultural identity as indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia. At the same time the Russian Federation sets numerical framework for the ethnocultural groups which can enjoy the support, which is 50 thousand people. We can suppose that under the global processes the indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia resident in the Russian Federation determine their ethnocultural identity seeking for the profit they may receive under the federal and regional legislation.

At the same time the old residents of the Northern and Arctic territories of the Russian Federation, who identify themselves as “Russians”, do not receive any of such economic preferences.

The most important cultural practice of the post-Soviet period used for forming positive ethnocultural identity of the indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia in the territory of Krasnoyarsk Region is so-called “museumization” of the original culture of such ethnocultural groups.

Some information about the ethnocultural group of the Nganasans is quite representative for the processes of ethnocultural identity. The Nganasans live in Taymyr Dolgano-Nenets Municipal District of Krasnoyarsk Region. The area of their compact residence covers the settlements of Ust-Aava (Dudinsky District), Novaya (Khatangsky District), Volochanka (Dudinsky District). Besides the Nganasans, these settlements are populated with Nenets, Dolgan, Russian people.

The Nganasans call themselves “nia” and explain that this word is close in meaning to “comrade”. In the Russian Empire the Nganasans were usually called Tavgys Samoyeds. Researchers
suggest that the word “Nganasan” is related to “nenesa”, which means “human”. They speak Nganasan language which belongs to the Northern Samoyed group of Uralic languages. Linguists outline two dialects of Nganasan language: Avam and Vadeev dialects. The Vadeev Nganasans also speak Dolgan. Almost all modern Nganasans speak Russian. Nganasan language has no writing.

According to information provided by Krasnoyarsk scientist V.P. Krivonogov (Krivonogov, 2007), the main “ethno-preserving” activity of the Nganasans, reindeer breeding, is almost extinct: if in the year 1994 3,6% of men were engaged in it and 15,5% claimed that reindeer breeding was the beginning of their working life, in the years 2003-2004 only 1,1% of men were engaged in reindeer breeding, and 12,5% began their work with it. In the year 1994, 3,1% of women were engaged in reindeer breeding (and 6,9% mentioned it as their start-up), and in the years 2003-2004 there was not a single one, while 3,6% said that it was their first job. The second traditional sphere of activity, fishing and hunting, enjoys better prospective: in 1994, it was a profession for 27,3% of men and 1,8% of women, and in the year 2004 it was a job of 22,5% of men and 4,3% of women. 33,0% of women in 1994 were engaged in making traditional costumes, but in 2004 there were only 4,7%; many workshops were closed. In total, in 1994 30,9% of men and 37,9% of women were engaged in traditional crafts, while in 2004 there were 23,6% of men and 9% of women. Unemployment rate in 2004 was 33,7% for men and 26,3% for women. 52% of the Nganasans speak their native language, and 47% of children aged under 18 also know and understand it. Therefore, Nganasan language is anticipating the extinction process. Almost all Nganasans can speak perfect Russian, for 79% of them Russian is the “main” and “native” language.

Consequently, it can be stated that one of the basic ethnogeneric process, cultivation of the native language as the main one, is the symptom of assimilation processes for the Nganasans.

At the same time positive ethnocultural identity of the Nganasans is supported by a series of cultural practices, such as preparation and consumption of traditional Nganasan food, performance of traditional rituals made on birth of a baby, on wedding day, farewell ceremonies for the dead etc.

A very efficient practice of forming positive ethnocultural identity of the Nganasans is “museumization”, which was carried out in the 1980-1990s by Oleg Krashkevsky. Since 1987 he has been engaging himself in studies on Bioenergetics, gradually acquiring a “title” of a “white-skinned Russian shaman” among the Nganasans (Krashkevsky, 2010). He creates his private collection of cult belongings the Nganasans used in their traditional religious ceremonies, collects folklore tales of the cult places were Nganasans used to do their rituals. Near Lama Lake, 150 km away from Norilsk, Oleg Krashkevsky created a private natural park called “Putoransky” acting as a farm-unit “Bunisyak”. In the territory of the farm-unit he placed over 1000 exhibits connected to the history of culture and religion of the Ngasan ethnocultural group. He created a virtual version of his museum on www.putoran.ru. In the catalogue contents, Oleg Krashkevsky introduces his own reconstruction of religious outlook of the ancient Nganasans. Describing it, he operates the term “Arctic civilization” and claims that the Nganasans have been living in the territory of Taymyr for over 4000 years.

It seems relevant to subsume the activity of Oleg Krashkevsky under post-Soviet Neo-Shamanism (Campbell 1976; Mille 1980; Eliade 2004; Harvey 2003; Jenkins 2004; Winkelman 2000; Znamenski 2004, 2007; Noel 1997), where cultural heritage of the indigenous Nganasans is used under modern conditions not only for restoration of their archaic religion, but for visualization of this exotic culture and creation of a certain fundament for modern non-traditional medicine practices Oleg Krashkevsky engages himself in. Within culture of Modernism, the archaic cultural heritage acquires new traits: it is desacralized, put on display. Its main purpose is to legalize professional activity of Oleg Krashkevsky as a non-traditional medicine practitioner. From the point of view of archaic culture, where the shaman figure is the centre of social life, the shaman belongs to its family by birth right, not by the right of operating these or those things, performing any medical activity. For this reason the title of a “white-skinned Russian shaman” is clearly ironical. The activity of Oleg Krashkevsky is a distinctive example of Neo-Shamanism, typical of modern culture, which has no relation to the archaic or traditional culture of the Nganasans.

Modern indigenous peoples of the North and Siberia, resident in Krasnoyarsk Region of Russia, are discreet communities which have their own collective interests. The existence of such ethnocultural groups of indigenous peoples in the Region generally reflects the universal world tendencies. On one hand, these ethnocultural groups do not fit in the logic of creating and running a nation-state; in respect with them, the value of “justice” requires a special interpretation. They have a positive collective identity, clearly distinctive collective interests supported by post-Soviet cultural practices. On the other hand, modern nation-states turn to internationally recognized rights of the indigenous peoples to expand their own borders with the idea of “reunion” of scattered tribal
communities and clans resident in the territories belonging to different nation-states.

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