

## The current state of traditional socio-cultural practices of indigenous peoples of the North (on the example of cultures of Selkups, Nenets and Essey Yakuts)

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**Abstract:** The article examines traditional socio-cultural practices for reproduction of cultures of indigenous peoples and specifies the criteria for their analysis. The study of the current state of traditional cultures of Selkups, Nenets, and Essey Yakuts with the emphasis on funeral rites of these ethnic groups is conducted. The authors try to discover the factors, contributing to preservation of traditional culture. It is suggested that the most appropriate step to preserve the uniqueness of indigenous cultures might be fixation of their current state, which should be started as soon as possible, before the irreversible changes, caused by globalization, have completely adsorbed traditional cultures.

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### 1. Introduction

The problem of traditional socio-cultural practices, that ensure the reproduction of cultures of indigenous peoples, is inevitably linked with the problem of interaction of traditional society and modern society, as well as the problem of the very possibility of preservation of traditional practices in the era of global transformations (Koptseva et al, 2012; Koptseva, 2013; Kirko and Zakharova, 2013; Kirko et al, 2011).

It is important to note that originally characteristic features of traditional society were determined only as opposed to modern industrial society and were assessed as having negative features that prevented progressive transformation of society: conservative static nature, the lack of valuing the individual, not striving for industrial progress type of economy, etc. (Table 1). However, in recent decades scientists reject this simplistic understanding and consider the characteristics of traditional society to a greater extent as the basis for progressive change. (Kozhemjakin, 2009; Florenskaya, 2010). Nevertheless, the problem of opposition between the traditional way of life and progress of modern industrial society continues to be relevant to the cultures of indigenous peoples, therefore, it is necessary to analyze traditional socio-cultural practices of preservation of these ethnic groups.

In the present situation of active integration, assimilation and globalization processes, it is rather difficult to carry out the analysis of traditional socio-cultural practices, by which indigenous peoples have

for a long time reproduced and preserved their culture in different historical conditions.

Table1. The principal characteristics of traditional society

№	Characteristic
1.	Subordination of individual interests to public interest (of family, clan, community)
2.	Strictly regulated social relationships based on kinship, endogamous marriages and caste division of society, existing in the form of a closed community
3.	Attributed and rarely changeable social status, as a consequence -- low social mobility
4.	Predominance of natural economy, in which there are practically no commodity-money relations
5.	Dominance of collectively approved modes of thinking, based on strict observance of traditional norms of behavior
6.	Concentration of political power in the hands of a small social group (caste, clan, family), which is predominantly authoritarian
7.	Complete lack of writing or its privileged status as an elite occupation of the higher castes of society, resulting in socialization occurring mainly through oral folk culture within the family and community
8.	Linguistic and cultural variation within the same ethnic group as the result of oral transmission of knowledge and linguistic traditions (dialects, idioms etc.)

The main problem is associated with impossibility to study traditional practices in their genuine form, basing on the data of modern field

research, since it is necessary to admit that the indigenous peoples of the XXI century differ from what they were in the XVIII, XIX and even XX centuries. Global changes, affecting major ethnic groups and the climatic conditions of the planet, could not but affect the indigenous peoples, especially those living in the polar and subpolar areas (Krivonogov, 2013; Belolyubskaya, 2013; Luzan, 2011; Koptseva and Kirko, 2014 (A); Koptseva and Kirko, 2014 (B); Koptseva and Kirko, 2014 (C); Sharina, 2013).

In this connection, in order to analyze traditional practices for conservation and reproduction of culture of indigenous peoples, it is necessary to refer to ethnographic descriptions and reports of the first field researchers, who were able to fixate the lifestyle of ethnic groups, their distinctive cultural and anthropological features in the state, which was practically unaffected by major ethnic groups and globalization processes. Besides that, it is necessary to take into consideration the main criteria for the analysis of traditional socio-cultural practices that ensure reproduction of socio-anthropological systems of indigenous peoples (Table. 2) (Razumovskaya and Sokolovsky, 2012; Kovtun, 2012; Sitnikova, 2014; Ilbeykina, 2013).

Table 2. Criteria for analysis of traditional socio-cultural practices

№	Criterion
1	Territory
2	Language
3	Family
4	Social structure
5	Medicine and Healthcare
6	Home life (housing, clothing and food)
7	Traditional economies
8	Religion
9	Art

## 2. Material and Methods

In this paper, we will study the current state of traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples of the North of Krasnoyarsk Krai, the way they combine tradition and conservatism with modernity and variability. The material for analysis was collected during the expeditions in 2010-2013 to such settlements of Krasnoyarsk Krai, as Turukhansk, Farkovo, Nosok, Karaul, Tura and Essey. During the expeditions the state of traditional cultures of Selkups, Evenki, Nenets and Essey Yakuts was studied. Further presentation of the material is divided into several blocks. In *the first block* we will study the degree of preservation of traditional culture among the above-listed ethnic groups. In *the second*

*block* we will try and identify the reasons why the folk culture of some ethnic groups is better preserved than that of the others'. And in *the third block* we will try to understand what actions should be taken in order to preserve the unique cultures of indigenous peoples of the North.

The conducted study of degrees of preservation of culture of indigenous peoples showed that different components of the traditional way of life of indigenous peoples of the North are preserved in varying degrees: some of them have completely disappeared; others, on the contrary, are widespread and practically not prone to change. To start with, we distributed the components of traditional culture of indigenous peoples into four groups, according to their degree of resistance to transformation. The components of cultures that are best preserved both in their quality and in number can be attributed to *the first group*. These are traditional occupations (reindeer herding, hunting, fishing), traditional cuisine and medicine. Reindeer herding is best preserved among Nenets, for most of whom it is the main occupation, for which reason the majority of the population, related to the posyolok (village) of Nosok, does not have a stationary housing in the village, but travels nomadically throughout the year in the tundra around Nosok with the deer herd.

Reindeer herding is less common among Essey Yakuts. Despite the fact that there are several reindeer brigades in the posyolok (village), they are more closely connected to the village, their nomadic roaming is not so long, and the percentage of reindeer herders in the total population of Essey Yakuts is small. Essey Yakuts are much more actively involved in hunting wild reindeer, whose migration paths are not far from the village. The locals have fun saying that in some years the migration paths passed directly through the village, so that they could hunt deer without leaving their houses, through the window. The residents of Essey also fish a lot. As for Selkups, according to their own words, reindeer herding completely disappeared in the 60-70s of the XX century. The traditional occupation of modern Selkups is hunting, they mainly hunt sables.

Speaking of preservation of traditional cuisine it must be noted that traditional ethnic food is still cooked by both the representatives of indigenous peoples, engaged in traditional occupations, and those who are no longer engaged in reindeer herding, hunting or fishing. We cannot say that nowadays indigenous peoples eat only traditional food, but traditional dishes make up a significant part of their diet. Besides that, every one of the listed ethnic groups continues to actively use traditional medicine when needed, first of all, medicinal (healing) herbs.

*The second group* includes those components of culture that are preserved to a significant degree, but not among all of these peoples. Among them are the ethnic language, customs and rituals, including funeral rites. The ethnic language continues to be an everyday means of communication for Nenets and Essey Yakuts, while among Selkups it is still used only by those engaged in traditional occupations and by the older generation, even despite the fact that the Selkup language is taught at school. Customs and rituals are rather widespread among Nenets and Essey Yakuts both in household (purification rites, division of things into male and female, etc), and in traditional occupations (cajoling natural forces, animals). Funeral rites in their traditional form are preserved to a greater extent among Essey Yakuts and Nenets than among Selkups. The latter only talk about how people were buried in the old days and confirm preservation of some traditional burials sites.

Further we will describe in more detail the attitude of indigenous people to the phenomenon of death, as well as characteristics of burial customs in different traditional cultures. The interviews and questionnaires, conducted among Selkups, Kets, Evenki, Essey Yakuts in Farkovo, Turukhansk, Nosok and Essey, and visits to cemeteries in these settlements allowed to identify a number of features that distinguish the attitude to death of these indigenous peoples from the one in the urban culture of our country.

For example, in the North it seemed that death is not considered global grief. Death can be ranked as a commonplace routine event: today is one's birthday, also today one's brother drowned, tomorrow is the fisherman's day and one ought to do some work in the garden, etc. From the point of view of urban culture such attitude may seem profane, because long mourning, grieving is customary in urban culture. The appearance of the cemetery, located within the boundaries of Turukhansk, is unusual: it looks semi-abandoned, arrangement of graves is rather chaotic, in the cemetery there is abundant unkempt vegetation. This is explained by the fact that, unlike urban traditions, it is not customary among the indigenous peoples, and the respondents in Turukhansk and Farkovo, to take care of graves. People come to cemeteries only during funerals. They do not come after that to clean and fix graves. The question why they do not do that even puzzles people a bit: why? They are already dead. Some of the Selkups explained that the world of the dead and the world of living people are two different words--there is no need to connect them too often.

There can be distinguished at least two reasons for such differences between burial traditions

and attitudes toward death among indigenous peoples of Farkovo, Turukhansk and representatives of urban culture. Firstly, urban culture is more individualizing, more anonymous, consequently close relationships in the city (friendship, kinship) are valued more as they are quite rare. That is why the loss of one person seems considerable grief. In rural areas, where almost everyone knows each other, relationships are generally characterized by greater closeness and trust, there is no significant gap between "friends/insiders" and "strangers/outsideers" because there are practically no "strangers/outsideers", almost all are "friends/insiders". Consequently, the loss of one of many "friends/insiders" is easier to endure than the loss of one of few friends/insiders". Secondly, the cause of different attitudes to death and funerary rites may be differences in the views about the other world, the differences in the religious component. While it is customary in Orthodoxy to mourn the dead, bury them in the ground, take care of graves, which can be explained by the belief that during the Second Coming the dead will rise from their graves, therefore, it is necessary to take care of burial places. With regard to burial places, which are common in the North among indigenous peoples, not Orthodox, but rather pagan features are evident, because the local people, though identifying themselves as Orthodox, never mention rising from graves. But it is common to believe that the souls of the dead dwell on earth for a while then leave. Or a cemetery is regarded as a place with the closest connection between the world of the living and the dead. In this regard, people should not go to the cemetery too often, not to violate the border, or, on the contrary, when it is necessary to communicate with the spirit of the deceased, one should visit the cemetery and call it (ringing, for example, a bell on the grave).

In the old times, graves, according to Selkups, were arranged in a different way. Most respondents know how babies and shamans were buried: a big tree was found, a hollow space was made in it, where they sat a baby or a shaman and then covered them with bark. As the time went the tree grew and became taller, and the bones went higher. It is said that you can still find trees in the forest with bones at the top of them. Talking about graves of adult people, Selkups told about two types. Firstly, graves were made in the ground: some bark was torn off, the ground was dug (but not very deep), the bark was soaked in the substance from boiling fish or animals: the grave was covered with the bark and the dead person was covered with this bark too. It was some kind of a capsule. The dead people were buried with their things, including overcoats ("Why?"—"Because it is cold there".) On the grave narty were put, on which people put things. Secondly, adult

people were buried in vetkas (traditional boats), which were bound to tops of trees. As time went, vetkas decayed, the dead bodies were most probably eaten by birds and other animals. Both of these types of burying, as well as burying in the trunks of trees were made in special uninhabited places. For example, people named the Devil's lake, where according to some information, dead people are still buried. Another place is Dead peoples' cape, where dead people from nomad camps were brought. The fact that burial places were situated far from nomad camps also guaranteed that dead people were seldom disturbed. But besides graves outside the settlements, nowadays burial places are found inside the settlement of Farkovo, notably, in the cellars of houses. Most often they are remnants of babies, but skulls and bones of grown up people were found too. It is considered that they should not be disturbed, shown, touched. It is said that one of the Selkups, while putting potatoes into the cellar, removed the skull and bones, and the following day he drowned.

The cemeteries in Nosok are near the village, close to the local dump (absence of recycling is mentioned by the local people as one of the most important problems in the village), but residents take it easy — how could it be otherwise? In the cemetery all are buried together, though earlier dead people were buried separately: Russians, Nenets, - now all the traditions are mixed up. Modern cemetery is small in size. Most often the grave has the following structure: shallow digging is made (about half a meter deep), above which a wooden box about two feet in height is put up. The dead person and the things he would need in the afterlife: clothes, utensils are laid there. Partially the belongings (that did not fit inside) are placed next to the burial place: furniture, a sledge (narty), a khorey (a sharp pole to drive deer) is placed vertically. Over the grave on the bar a bell is attached. Bells are moved by the wind, so there is a quite ringing over the cemetery. Boxes at the cemetery are large and small, for children. Wood is blanched from wind and water. Near the graves of adults there are belongings which were used by the deceased during lifetime: dishes, furniture (stools, small tables, leaning against the coffin, even a sofa), next to some there are sledges and khoreys, because when a reindeer herder dies, it is customary to kill a deer for the deceased to have a one to ride on. Meat is carefully removed from the bones and is shared between the people who help with funerals. A deer skeleton with horns is left in the cemetery.

After the funeral a fire is made in the cemetery not far from the grave, people walk around the grave sunwise, it is strictly prohibited to move anti-sunwise (in the direction, opposite to the direction of moving of the sun). Upon returning from

the cemetery it is necessary to make a cleansing ritual. When going to the cemetery for commemoration, people take with them a matchbox and a stick, in the cemetery people ring a bell with the stick, calling the spirit of the deceased, for it to hear that they came. When leaving people also ring the bell and ask the spirit not to watch them going and not to wait for the next. Locals say that this method of burying (in wooden boxes) has several disadvantages, among which - unsanitary conditions: corpses decompose almost on the surface of the ground, spreading putrid smell and possibly pathogenic microorganisms. Graves are damaged by natural disasters, such as storms, as well as animals – arctic foxes, dogs, - digging up graves and pulling bones apart.

Essey Yakuts are buried at the depth of about 1.5-2 meters, while the soil in these latitudes thaws for only 50-70 centimeters. The dead do not rot in these conditions, which were found out when doctors came to exhume the corpse of a man, who had been shot in the previous year, in order to perform an expert examination. It turned out he was very well preserved. On trees or on three poles installed like poles of a chum (a reindeer skin tent), people arrange a storage shed (labaz), where they put one set of clothing, which was constantly worn by the deceased during lifetime, some utensils, which was used by the deceased, a head of a deer. Near the storage shed (labaz) people leave the sledge (narty) of the deceased, laid on its side, sometimes with broken runners, i.e. in a non-working condition. A wooden headstone, manufactured by the family of the deceased, is set over the grave. On top of the headstone a cross is placed. Markings indicating who is buried, are often absent, the locals say that sometimes families have no money to order even enamel plaques. Graves are visited for only 3 years, because it is believed that the soul stays on earth for 3 years and it knows who comes to it, hears the visitors. Three years later, the soul flies away. It is not customary for Essey Yakuts to cry over the dead, as it is believed that in that case the dead person will have to go to the other world being wet.

When a person dies, no one is called to the funeral - all the people come to help, even those who have been at quarrel with the deceased. The deceased is made a good coffin, a headstone; each family deals with this by itself. The deceased is kept for three days in the house, during which time the dead person is fumigated with the composition of wild rosemary and internal fat, which prevents the spread of putrid smell. If the deceased was with open eyes, coins were put on them, if the mouth was open—a thick pancake was put into it, saying that apparently the deceased did not eat enough during lifetime. It is often

prohibited to go to the cemetery – not to invite disaster. If a grave is dug but the corpse is not buried for some reasons, another person will die and take an empty place. When the deceased is buried, an ax is put on the place in the house where the deceased was lying, in the old days a big boulder was put in that place to ensure that the spirit of the deceased did not stay at that place. A person who was engaged in fumigating the deceased was himself fumigated three times so that this person did not get sick. Wild rosemary and internal fat and wooden shavings were used for that.

Now we can sum up the results of comparison of burial customs in traditional cultures of the peoples of the North. Firstly, the worlds of the dead and the living –are different worlds, which should not be connected too often. The boundary between these worlds is the thinnest at the cemetery, therefore one should not go there too often when it is not necessary, not to disturb the souls. Essey Yakuts visit burial places only for 3 years old, because it is believed that during this time the soul stays on earth, understands who comes to it, hears the visitors. Three years later, the soul flies away. To awaken the soul they come to visit, Nenets attach a bell on a bar over the burial place, which they ring when they come to the cemetery, calling the spirit of the deceased, so that it can hear them. When leaving, they also ring the bell and ask the spirit not to watch them going, not to wait for the next.

Secondly, the world of the dead is very similar to the world of the living, after death the dead have to deal with the same things as in life. That is why Selkups, for example, in the old days buried their dead in *vetkhas* (boats), which were used for fishing. Nenets continue to lay in the burial place belongings of the deceased, put the sledge (*narty*) beside the grave, *khorey*, kill a deer. Essey Yakuts arrange storage sheds (*labaz*) on trees or three poles, set like the poles of a *chum* (reindeer skin tent), where they put a set of clothes which was constantly worn by the deceased during lifetime, some utensils, which was used by the deceased, a head of a deer. Near the *labaz* they put the *narty* (sledge) of the deceased.

Thirdly, death is not considered global grief, it is perceived in a natural way, as another event of a lifecycle. It is not customary for Essey Yakuts to cry over the dead as it is believed that in that case the dead person will have to go to the other world being wet.

In general, we can say that funeral rites in traditional cultures is preserved best of all in comparison with other components of culture, such as language, arts and crafts, clothing, household utensils, etc. Moreover, funeral rites do not change in

their content base, only some formal components are modified. For example, the Nenets not only put dishes and small tools, but can also put a sofa of the deceased near the grave.

Such components of culture as traditional housing, clothing and arts and crafts, according to the degree of their preservation, can be related to *the third group*. Traditional housing – *chum* (a reindeer skin tent) and *balok* (a temporary shed) are largely preserved among Nenets, and most widely used by them, which is associated with the specifics of such traditional occupation as reindeer herding. *Chums* and *baloks* are mobile homes, which are most functional in constant nomadic roaming. *Chums* are also used by Essey Yakuts, but only by those engaged in reindeer herding. But it should be noted that many of the Essey Yakuts not only have a usual Russian wooden house in their farmstead, but also a traditional Yakut hexagonal structure - a *golomo*. But *golomos* are not used as living quarters, only as summer kitchens. Traditional clothes are best preserved among the Nenets, which they associate with the fact that it is very useful for extremely low temperatures. Among Essey Yakuts the traditional clothing continues to be used by hunters (but to a lesser degree than it is used by Nenets), as well as by those representatives of this ethnic group, who are not engaged in traditional occupations, especially during festivals. Selkups have completely lost such component of culture as traditional clothing, only the middle-aged or elderly representatives of this ethnic group can remember the appearance of *parkas* and *malytsas* (deerskin overcoats, worn with fur inside, put on as a pullover.) Arts and crafts are preserved both among Nenets and Essey Yakuts, while Selkups have lost them.

The components of traditional culture that have almost entirely disappeared can be referred to *the fourth group*. First of all, it is shamanism: according to the representatives of all of these ethnic groups, there are no shamans left.

Next we will briefly discuss the peculiarities of preservation of individual components of culture, because it cannot be said that even *the first- group* components, which are most resistant to changes, such as traditional occupations, traditional cuisine and medicine, remain unchanged at present as compared, for example, to the XIX century. Rather, they are a mixture of traditions and some modernization. The situation observed in the village of Nosok with using the Nenets language and traditional clothing can exemplify mixing of traditions. On the one hand, the population of Nosok, which does not belong to the indigenous ethnic group, in the processes of joint work starts to speak the Nenets language, wear traditional winter clothes,

which are best suited for extreme weather conditions. On the other hand, in summer Nenets wear European type clothing which is more functional. Mixing of traditions can be clearly seen at Nosok cemetery: in the past graves were dug for Russians, while Nenets were traditionally buried in shallow diggings, now Nenets graves are sometimes also dug to a considerable depth, however, the tradition of putting belongings, which were used by the deceased in lifetime, still takes place, but nowadays they are placed not into the wooden box and on top of the dead person, but into the grave.

Mixing of traditions can lead to formation of new cultural traits that can potentially become its markers. The similar thing happened a few centuries ago with arts and crafts of Essene Yakuts, in particular with the patterns, which they use in ornaments. Traditionally Yakuts used floral patterns in their motifs, while the indigenous peoples, who inhabited the area near Lake Essey before the arrival of Yakuts, used geometric ornaments. Mixing these two traditions led to the fact that the arts and crafts of Yakuts are characterized by combination of ornaments with both floral and geometric motifs.

Modernization, rather than just preservation of traditions, can be observed on the example of erection of chums by Essene Yakuts: chums used to be covered with long cloths, made of several dozen reindeer skins, whose tanning is a very time-consuming process, but nowadays large lengths of canvas are used instead. Modernization of process of hunting sables can be observed in the practice of Selkups: instead of erecting chums they put up tents, traditional fur clothing is replaced by tourist sleeping bags.

### 3. Results

Now we will discuss *the second of the blocks*, which were mentioned at the beginning – the reasons why traditional cultures of some ethnic groups are preserved better than that of the others'. Geographical remoteness of a place of residence of an ethnic group from other settlements, difficulty of access could be named as one of such reasons. And it will be valid in relation to Essey and Nosok, but the example of Farkovo – the place of compact settlement of Selkups in Krasnoyarsk Krai – makes us doubt the validity of this reason. It is because, although Farkovo is a settlement which is difficult of access, this factor did not contribute to preservation of culture by the local population to the same extent as it is preserved by Essey Yakuts and Nenets. It can also be assumed that better preservation of traditional culture is affected by an ethnic group living in mono-ethnic settlements. But, on the one hand, the village of Farkovo can be named a mono-ethnic settlement, with the overwhelming majority of Selkups living

there, which did not contribute to preservation of their traditional culture. On the other hand, in the globalizing world it is difficult to imagine a mono-ethnic settlement with sufficiently strong borders.

We consider ethnic pride and functionality of components of culture to be more likely factors, contributing to preservation of traditional indigenous cultures. Ethnic groups, possessing ethnic pride, are able to much better preserve their ethnic culture than ethnic groups which take no pride in their ethnicity. The latter include Selkups, who have much less ethnic pride than Nenets or Essey Yakuts. Nenets are proud of their friendly large families, their hospitality, their reindeer herds etc. But Essene Yakuts are especially proud of their ethnic language, because it is more ancient than the Yakut language itself, which is generally accepted in the Sakha Republic. While ethnic pride helps to preserve traditional culture in general, the functionality factor contributes to the preservation of individual components of culture. For example, as it has been already mentioned, in comparison to European-style clothing, traditional Nenets clothes are more suitable for extremely low temperatures (Pimenova, 2014; Sereckina, 2014; Libakova and Sertakova, 2014).

### 4. Discussions

In conclusion, we will discuss what actions should be taken for preservation of unique cultures of indigenous peoples of the North. Despite having already discussed the two factors, contributing to better preservation of culture, here we are not going to talk about the need to support ethnic pride or taking measures to increase functionality of individual components of culture on the grounds that they appear to be panacea for preserving unique cultures. In fact, supporting ethnic pride is quite a complex matter, because it is not easy to analyze the situation and to predict the consequences, in order to decide what level of support is adequate. After all, if you overdo it with supporting ethnic pride, you will have to grant sovereignty to the ethnoses, which is a potential danger to the integrity of the state. Increasing functionality of individual components of culture can occur, for example, through the use of modern materials, for example, in house-building or making clothes, but it can lead to a complete loss of features of native culture. Therefore, we consider that fixating the current state of indigenous ethnic cultures will be the most appropriate measure to preserve the uniqueness of indigenous cultures, which should start to be taken as soon as possible: before some ethnic groups have lost all the components of their culture, or before other ethnic groups have modernized their culture beyond recognition and while the older generation is still alive and keeps the memory of the traditional culture.

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