

ON THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL SELF-AWARENESS OF THE EVENK ONE OF THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE NORTH.

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The Problem: Perspectives for revival or demise?

The present problems of native peoples are granted a great deal of attention, both on the part of the states which include these distinct national groups as a special type of minorities, and also on the part of different non-governmental agencies and organizations. The cause of such attentiveness is greater awareness of the harm done to indigenous cultures by rapidly modernizing, expanding and exploiting the land of native peoples' societies.

The disintegration of community, the degradation of family and kinship relations and, correspondingly, social organization; the decline of the cultural, material and spiritual spheres of the lives of the natives; the numerous social and psychological problems (depression, suicide, criminality, unemployment, social dependency, poverty), - all these indicate a critical problem in term of not only the spiritual, but even the physical survival of indigenous peoples.

A situation faced by a native Evenk community, situated in Iengra in the Sakha Republic, may be considered one of those illustrative cases which are a reflection of the universal problems of the loss and degradation of national culture under the impact of a major civilization of the Western¹ type. This native community is historically one of the most significant settlements of the Evenk, who are scattered all over the vast spaces of Siberia and the Russian Far East and are differentiated by peculiarities of local life-styles, language dialects and culture. The period of the most intensive industrial exploration of the territory of Southern Yakutia, where Iengra is situated, occurred in the 1970s; bringing closer the "blessing and curse" of technocratic civilization, it strongly affected the social organization of this native community. One of the major industrial centers of the Republic of Sakha, Neryungri, is situated close to Iengra and is a center exercising administrative control over the territory of traditional Evenk lands.

The range of problems of this community is huge. First, there is the impact which exploration of the land resources has on reindeer breeding, which is traditional for Evenk. The coal mining, but especially gold-mining companies, which were allocated plots of land close to Iengra, have made a strong impact upon nature. The flora and fauna of the forest were damaged, and lands, previously used for reindeer breeding became a source for industrial exploitation. The community was pushed away from its native land.

The economic problems accompanying transition to a market economy have affected reindeer breeding and hunting, and fur-breeding as well. Collective farms and separate households do not have sufficient resources to maintain independent and self-financing economic activities and need subsidies. Unemployment is one of the most acute problems in Iengra. Correspondingly, there are high crime and suicide rates, and few opportunities for cultural and social development.

However, the psychological and social problems are even more acute among those who live in Iengra. These include depression, social dependency, a high level of

anxiety, drug and alcohol addiction and abuse, consequent predisposition to suicide and crime (among other villages of the Neryungri region their highest rates are in Iengra).

The sources of moral and psychological degradation, which condition the variety of social and economic problems among the Evenk, are the absence of well-formed reference points, values and life perspectives, and the whole phenomena of anomie, which, according to Emile Durkheim, contaminates a community undergoing a structural transformation. In the case of the Evenk it seems that the main problem affecting the social and psychological health of natives is the absence of the sense of community and, correspondingly, the national sentiment, which plays the role of a bounding element. It creates a sense of solidarity between the members of the community and protects them from deviant behavior.

On the individual level it is expressed in the absence of well-formed worldview, beliefs and solid moral, social, and cultural convictions. While losing sense of national self-awareness, one loses the correspondent notions of what is normal and abnormal, standard and prohibited, encouraged and condemned (since a sense of national belonging implies one's attribution to community and its values). The factors contributing to the loss of national identity were assimilation, erosion of language and culture, inflow of migrants and the whole functional inactivity which has struck the Evenk community. However, it seems that on the level of social organization the causes of that are the destruction of traditional social institutions, which secured the perpetuation of the Evenk before modernization.

The Evenk who are as other native peoples of the North presently called "peoples of the circumpolar North" or "circumpolar civilization,"² possess unique national self-awareness due to the special character of values and worldview, in the core of which is persistence, care about nature, tolerance and respect for everything. This worldview was formed in unusual, extremely harsh environmental conditions, during a constant process of adaptation to this environment and accumulation of knowledge about it, elaboration of a special ethic in the treatment of nature, animals and human beings. The national self-awareness of the Evenk emerged out of their awareness of belonging to a unique culture and community.

The changes brought with modernization introduced splitting and confusion into the holistic worldview of native peoples. The Evenk, who possessed a unique world-view and values, encountered values and norms of behaviour which are absolutely opposite to those to which they always adhered. The conflict of values and destruction of the "symbolic universe"³ or the meaningful image of the world, which was based on particular cultural knowledge which organized and regulated life, has resulted in anomie and the loss of a sense of social significance.

National self-awareness and mechanisms of its formation

That is why the national self-awareness of native people may be seen as one of the main meaningful aspects of self-awareness, which regulate one's life and provide it with reference points, moral guidelines and, finally, psychological comfort. The problem is in the destruction of self-awareness and the mechanisms of its formation or transmission. These embody that common sentiment which unites a community and helps to mobilize it.

National self-awareness is awareness on the part of an individual or a group of a fact of belonging to a community of people, united by common national sentiment. This

notion assumes the presence of the collective, which is aware of its distinct culture, common present and past, and which distinguishes itself from other human collectives. The mechanism of the formation of national self-awareness is connected with its constituting elements such as national self-identity and values, national memory and national stereotypes.⁴ These are formed as a result of knowledge about the world obtained in socialization.

Being a main source for the formation of national self-awareness, knowledge is a very important condition for accumulation, checking and formulation of the content of national self-awareness. The character of knowledge of the Evenk about the environment and ways of dealing with it were the source of their beliefs and ideas constituting a culturally determined model of objective reality, or a meaningful and conceptual framework of the world, in the terminology of Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger “the symbolic universe.”

The specificity of the knowledge passed on in the society of an indigenous people is conditioned by environment and cultural peculiarities. For Evenk, as for other indigenous peoples, the practical knowledge of the environment, and the best ways of orienting and adapting to it were essential, as were their conceptions of the organization of the universe and the place of human beings in it. This knowledge was the source of the Evenk notion of the origin of their own people and its code of behavior and culture. Since it was primarily a knowledge of the environment, the attitude to it was one of respect and the Evenk view of place was elaborated in terms of relations with the environment and its supremacy over the human; humans were viewed as a part of nature rather than its competitor. There followed an ethic concerning the proper treatment of the environment, tolerance and respect for nature and people.

The language was one of the mechanisms for the familiarization of native people with an image of the world constructed over generations. Knowledge of social regulations and the symbolic universe, which was transferred to children informally, legitimated the existing social order, although it was also subject to changes, additions and amendments. This did determine fluidity of the people’s everyday knowledge and the flexibility of the meaning of key notions.

In this respect, the role and content of community memory was determined by collective practices, with regard to immediate or meaningful events and conditions; as Goody and Watt define it, collective memory was reflected in language and, correspondingly, a stock of knowledge, where the appropriate and inappropriate experiences were sorted out:

Language is developed in intimate association with the experience of the community, and it is learned by the individual in face-to-face-contact with the other members. What continues to be social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually forgotten: and language - primarily vocabulary - is the effective medium of this crucial process of social digestion and elimination which may be regarded as analogous to the homeostatic organization of the human body by means of which it attempts to maintain its present condition of life (Goody and Watt 1990: 315).

Therefore, a native language is a very flexible mechanism for the transmission and formulation of knowledge. The practical character of knowledge and the oral mode of its transmission in non-literate societies conditioned the selective choice of the material, which constituted the stock of knowledge. Language, which creates a “system

of relevances”⁵ in the words of Luckmann and Berger, helps to organize the cultural stock of knowledge and socially distribute it according to this system.

Conceptualizing socialization as maintaining a culturally distinct “symbolic universe.”

Socialization is the basis of human adaptation to the environment and the elaboration of norms guiding behavior. Essential to any culture as the necessary precondition for the perpetuating of a culture, socialization varies in its form and content from culture to culture, civilization to civilization. The agencies preoccupied with tasks of socialization are social institutions such as family, school, community, work, etc.

The conceptual scheme of Berger and Luckmann presupposes that social institutions are the main repository of knowledge and all assumptions specific to a given culture, and are the main agencies preoccupied with promotion and transmission of the knowledge of everyday reality. A culturally conditioned system of relevance determines psychological comfort, as was emphasized by Bernstein, when he emphasized that socialization processes limit the range of variants of possible social ordering and thereby protect individuals:

...socialization is a process for making people safe. The process acts selectively on the possibilities of man by creating through time a sense of the inevitability of a given social arrangement, and through limiting the areas of permitted change (Bernstein 1990:162).

This aspiration of a human to put objective reality into subjective terms, to order and categorize it, is what Luckmann and Berger meant when they commented that the origins of institutionalization are in the habitualization of human activity. Institutions are agents of power and functions of history: they decide which patterns of everyday activities are accepted as local models, but this deciding process is defined by the past experiences of a given society.

In order to make the social ordering of reality meaningful there is a need to legitimize all the activities of social institutions. This is done through the creation of a “symbolic universe” which integrates all the activities of social institutions into a whole, explaining how they correlate with the world of meaning and the symbols dominant in a given cultural community.

The process of socialization is concerned with obtaining knowledge of the range of possible social roles and culturally determined ways of behavior and corresponding elaboration of distinct cultural identity. A child, who gains knowledge about the world, acquires self-awareness as a representative of the distinct group to which he or she belongs. As B. Bernstein put it,

...the process of socialization is a complex process of control, whereby a particular moral, cognitive and affective awareness is evoked in the child and given a specific form and content. Socialization sensitizes the child to various orderings of society as these are made substantive in the various roles he is expected to play (Bernstein 1990:162).

Traditional and modern social institutions of Evenk and Alaska Natives: a comparison.

It would be of great help to contemporary specialists, who are occupied with the provision of practical relations between the social institutions of family, community and school, to define the positive resources of the social institutions which exist within a particular native culture: their functional success in educating children, providing them with norms, values, behavioral guidelines, psychological protection for the adaptation within the whole system of social organization.

In order to evaluate this we need first to regard the roles played by traditional and modern social institutions in the maintenance of the symbolic universes of the native people, and to grasp the impact of these agencies on the transmission of knowledge and the worldview of these people. Relative to the Evenk community living in Iengra, we need to consider first of all the role of traditional institutions of family and community. Second, we must explore the dynamics of social change and the changing role of traditional institutions in the formation of national self-awareness. And finally, the activities of newly introduced modern institutions such as official educational institutions (boarding schools and kindergartens in Iengra) need to be analyzed in regard to the involvement of national culture and knowledge in the process of education and the degree of their connection with community and family, as former basic social agencies promoting national values, culture and practical knowledge. The contradictory impact of these institutions on the formation of national self-awareness is due to: 1) the different “symbolic universe,” which was often behind educational programs, policies and content of education, built according to the Western⁶ model of schooling and type of knowledge; 2) the weakening ties between school and community, and between children and the primary sources of their socialization, historically so important and indispensable in the performance of this task.

The family and community socialized or educated, and supported a child during the whole process of community life. Practically all social, economic, cultural activities of the family and community were socialization practices. This was the natural mechanism of promotion of national self-awareness and the transmission of cultural experience to younger generations.

From the very moment of birth a child participated in the whole complex of religious, economic and cultural practices as a fully valued member of the community. In play activities children developed important skills for hunting or reindeer-herding. In communication with elder members of communities they acquired behavioral codes, spiritual values, occupational skills, rites and rituals of their national community. Education was informal, based on oral tradition of narratives, told from one generation to another. In this way children were prepared for the independent lives of reindeer-herders and hunters, acquired traditional knowledge and skills, rules of treatment of nature and people. Such education was an indispensable part of adaptation to the peculiarities of the environment. Conducting nomadic mode of life with family and community, Evenk children were included in economic life and gained a certain status among peers and the older members of the community.

Industrial development, extraction of natural resources, and railroad construction affected the natural environment and marginalized the Evenk in terms of land management and economic affairs. They became more and more detached from their independent way of living and were intended to become part of the great national entity of the Soviet people.

Traditional institutions of family and community deteriorated and structural changes brought on functional degradation. For example, the family almost totally lost its function of education and preparation of children for future, and could no longer teach them social roles, integrate them into the community, or pass on the language, occupational skills, traditional knowledge.

A new type of specialized social institution, educational institutions, such as kindergarten and boarding school, which were introduced by the state, borrowed this function and monopolized it. Boarding school was the most widespread practice of socialization of native peoples in the Soviet era. Children, educated there in the spirit of the abstract knowledge and values of the Western type of civilization lost real and psychological attachment to their parents and their own national community. In this respect, a very important function of the family was not fulfilled by educational institutions: adaptation and preparation of a child to the real conditions of life.

Socialization of natives in family, community and school is not a continuous process any more, as it used to be. Traditional institutions merged with the modern ones and the provision of the holistic “symbolic universe” has been disrupted with the advent of the Western type of knowledge, values and logic of action. National self-awareness of the native people became fragmented, marginal, where the values and notions of the Western type of civilization clashed with those of the civilization of natives. Conflict of values and disorientation in everyday reality resulted.

The Evenk community Iengra itself underwent degradation and disintegration. The arrival of migrant workers from the different republics of the Soviet Union to the huge so-called “building sites of the century” (Bakal-Amur railway, Neryungri coal-mine) situated near Iengra, brought some assimilation of the Evenk as a result of mixed marriages. The pattern of single mothers became widespread. Correspondingly, the social structure of the community changed, as did its economic activities: collective farms for reindeer-breeding and fur-production, and gold-mining companies were introduced. The psychology of dependence and of seasonal work was adopted from migrant workers, whose attitude to nature was the carelessness of the consumer, characteristic of Western civilization.

In this way the gradual destruction of traditional social institutions and the content of their socialization practices meant undermining the mechanisms of the transmission of norms, values, worldview and mode of life of native peoples, e.g. of everything that contributes into the formation of national self-awareness, providing a “symbolic universe” for meaningful life.

The impact of boarding schools was quite contradictory: on the one hand, they provided children with abstract knowledge and that kind of education was directed to adaptation in the dominant society. On the other hand, the boarding school in Iengra was regarded as one of the most prominent due to the elaborated methods of teaching Evenk language, introduction of the elements of national culture in the education. Paradoxically, boarding school in many instances became the main source of information about Evenk language and culture for the descendants of hunters and reindeer-herders.

The situation with role of traditional social institutions in Alaska in contemporary life of the native peoples and their potential for the transmission of native language and culture is different from that described above: in Alaska the family, as the institution, preserved its role as the primary source of language and native culture for a child. However, there is the question of how many families have parents who still can speak their first (native language). The opinion of the famous Alaskan linguist Michael Krauss is that while both parents speak native language with their child, the language is subject to consequent transmission; otherwise, the native language is under the threat of extinction. Presently, almost all Alaskan native languages are in such a danger.

Native communities in Alaska also preserved their role in education and communication with children. This preserved role of traditional social institutions may be attributed to the different state policies applied in Alaska, where traditional knowledge was not allowed a space in the Western educational system and the boarding schools for natives were abolished, as institutions which harm native children. The model of small rural schools was proposed instead, with a perspective of a greater community involvement into the process of school education and the preservation of the natural place of a child in a family and community.

The educational institutions are especially important for socialization, since in modern societies they are designed for a planned and officially approved socialization, providing children with knowledge and behavioral norms, moral guidelines and values corresponding with official state ideology.

Unlike in modern societies, education in traditional societies was not differentiated from community life; it was informal and rather practical (as opposed to the principles of rational organization and regulation of life in society, based on transformation of natural environment). It was rather a part of the whole system of practices, directed to maintenance of traditional social organization and its relation to “symbolic universe” of native peoples, transmission of practical knowledge and skills necessary for everyday life in community.

Being placed into boarding schools natives became detached from practical everyday reality, notion of principles which organized it, awareness of their own place in the community. At the same time, education within native family and community was directed toward elaboration of the awareness of belonging to a distinct community and a corresponding range of life choices for the realization of ones capabilities, wishes and callings.

Comparing the experience of the Evenk people with that of the native peoples of Alaska, it may be commented that the traditional role of the family and community in Evenk socialization decreased because of their erosion as social institutions, while in Alaska the very institutions of family and community stayed preserved, but lost that knowledge of the language and culture they possessed.

In this respect, it is especially useful to regard what is taken as the grounds of the alternative educational institutions in Alaska (there is still a lack of alternative education for native peoples in Russia). All the models of alternative education currently proposed in Alaska (community schools - “gargi,” native language immersion schools) are assuming as their basis the whole native community as such, therefore, they are directed toward utilization of the positive resources existing on the part of the traditional institutions of native peoples. They are designed so as to place a child in conditions of communication with the members of community. “Gargi” is the traditional informal community school in Alaska, which was, nevertheless, distinguished as a separate cultural unit in a community. Its task was to familiarize children with rituals, native arts, folklore, and rules of behavior and to teach them practical labor skills. The role of teacher is played by the most respectful and knowledgeable members of the community, usually, elders. Simultaneously, this traditional school function as entertainment and includes arts and performances.

Immersion schools for the study of native languages is a relatively recent initiative, which was designed for native people of different ages: for either children and

adults, who possess little knowledge of the native language, while regarding themselves the natives.

Alternative educational institutions in Alaska are filling in the gap in transmission of the native language and culture, which is due to the negligence of these by official state educational institutions. Formal schools for native peoples in the Republic of Sakha, particularly for the Evenk, have to some extent introduced national elements into the educational system. Contemporary educational policies for native peoples in the Republic of Sakha are directed to the promotion of the languages and cultures of the native peoples of the North, to greater representation of the content of culture in the educational programs and courses. Correspondingly, these programs are more indulgent in terms of allowing independence and initiative. As one of the few examples of alternative education for native peoples there was a nomadic school project for the Evenk, which is also seen as a part of the community, combining the natural acquisition of the practical knowledge of everyday life and the necessary skills of nomads with formal education.

Towards a conclusion: trends in activities and functional significance of social institutions and potential for future of the native communities.

The purpose of the present article has been to discuss the institutional mechanisms for the maintenance of national self-awareness through the transmission of native language, culture, and knowledge of everyday life: the family and community of Evenk and Alaska Natives may be regarded as examples of these. The tragic deterioration of the role of these institutions in the Evenk case may be attributed to the increasing role of formal schooling, which usurped this function from traditional institutions.

In the case of Alaska Natives traditional institutions managed to preserve their structure and maintain their potential to be primary socializing agencies, while formal schooling failed both in attempts to make native children conform to the demands and propositions of Western life, and to provide them with practical knowledge. However, both experiences point to the insufficiency of formal, state-controlled schooling as mechanisms for maintaining national culture and worldview; in this respect, alternative educational institutions are proposed as important supplementary socializing agencies, which model their activities on those of family or community.

In the Evenk case, the main positive development is due to the official policies of the Republic, which is trying to create institutions more oriented towards local culture and local opportunities.

As to the consideration of the perspectives, the utilization of all the existing positive resources is indispensable for preservation of the native culture and language, and corresponding transmission of national self-awareness. These resources exist within the realms of the social institutions and people, who provide connections between different social institutions. For example, there are specialists who currently work on the provision of real links between family and community, school and family, etc.

The network of existing social institutions should be supported and reinforced, with close relations between traditional and modern social institutions and blending all the stages of socialization into one continuous process, as it was before modernization. However, the present task is more complicated: how to reconcile the different, almost opposite and incompatible values and orientations of the Western, “technocratic” civilization and those of the native peoples of the circumpolar North? This question may be answered in accordance with the recently emerging model of so-called “sustainable

development,” which is in accord with a holistic attitude to nature characteristic of native people and is based on the notion of homeostasis in relations between mankind and nature.

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Notes:

¹ “Western” in this context refers to the technocratic type of society, which is characterised by aspirations towards progress, an industrial model of development and corresponding features: mass education, division of labor, high level of development of science and knowledge, e.g. a society characteristically different from the traditional one. Certainly, the Soviet Union was a modernizing country of this type and the psychological and social impact of its policies may be compared with those of the United States. This particular connotation signifies completely different, if not the opposing, (the Western versus the native) moral values and norms in respect to nature, people and the whole worldview.

² The term “circumpolar civilization” was created especially for purpose of signifying the people living in similar climatic, environmental conditions of the circumpolar North and having close spiritual and material culture and worldviews. Arnold Toynbee, referring to the features of environmental conditions and the special homeostasis maintained in the relations of these peoples and the environment, spoke of the “frozen” type of civilization ; contemporary scientists prefer to call native peoples of the North ‘the people of the circumpolar civilization’ (for example, Y. Vinokurova). This name has become popular and is being used officially in international forums devoted to the problems of native peoples of the North, living in Russia, Alaska, and Canada.

³ The notion of the “symbolic universe” derives from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who assert in the book *The Social Construction of Reality* that every society legitimizes its social arrangement and controls the social order by creating a distinct conceptual framework of the world.

⁴ A more elaborated list of the elements of national self-awareness can be found in the PhD thesis of Abuladze, 1998.

⁵ Berger and Luckmann T 1991: 60.

⁶ The Western type of education corresponds to abstract knowledge, based on logic of rational action and primacy of the human reasoning over nature, and, accordingly, to the different, if not the opposite values and worldview, characteristic for technocratic civilization.