

УДК 39

## **Ethnocultural Portrait of Russia: The Yessey Yakuts. The Life by the Lake (History and Culture of an Ethnic Group)**

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*Nowadays, a daily world of the isolated ethnocultural group of the Yessey Yakuts living in the North of the Krasnoyarsk Territory beyond the Arctic Circle near the Lake Yessey far from the majority of the Sakha-Yakuts is of great interest. It is noted that, due to historical and political circumstances, at the initial stage of national-territorial zoning with the indigenous peoples of the North in the late 1920's of the 20th century, the Soviet state bodies classified the historical territories of the Yessey Yakuts to the newly created Evenk national district dividing the Yessey Yakuts from the majority of the Yakut ethnos.*

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“You can say that this people, in general, is hard-working, this is why they live comfortably... In addition, they are hospitable and communicative. In a word, judging from the life of the Yakuts, you can see that they have surpassed other foreigners of the Turukhansk region in many ways.”

*Vladimir Zavadskii*

In connection with the reforms of the early 1990's, the Soviet Union stepped into a completely new stage in the history of our vast homeland. This was primarily due to economic modernization and the transition to the market economy, which undoubtedly caused negative consequences and fundamental changes in the existing system of the way of life of the

multinational people of the Soviet Union in the continuity of Russia.

Stormy socio-economic and cultural processes led to the destruction of the cultural gene pool and traditional forms of the economy of the indigenous peoples of the North.

In this context, the daily world of the isolated ethnocultural group of the Yessey Yakuts living in

the North of the Krasnoyarsk Territory beyond the Arctic Circle near the Lake Yessey far away from the majority of the Sakha-Yakuts is of great interest. This lake is located beyond the Arctic Circle in the Khatanga river basin between its two tributaries of the Kotui River, 1,070 km from the city of Viliuisk. The administrative border with the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is two hundred kilometres to the east.

The Yessey Yakuts lived and still live in the territory of the Krasnoyarsk Territory in the Evenki Municipal District, a former independent subject of the Russian Federation in the early 1990's, and then starting from 2007 of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has been granted special rights and status as part of the Krasnoyarsk Territory. Obviously, the region underwent market changes with all the ethnosocial consequences that came with them; a modern model of life activity and a new system of values of the indigenous small-numbered peoples, including the ethnocultural group of the Yessey Yakuts has formed against the background of these transformations.

In this regard, the aim of this article is to characterize the current situation of the Yessey Yakuts and identify the main negative and positive trends.

Let us note that due to historical and political circumstances at the initial stage of national-territorial zoning carried out with the indigenous peoples of the North in the late 1920's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet state bodies classified the historical territories of the Yessey Yakuts to the newly created Evenk national district, dividing the Yessey Yakuts from the majority of the Yakut ethnos. Of course, this situation could not contribute to the development of subethnoses in isolation from the majority of the Yakuts and created some difficulties for consolidation with the main ethnos, the situation remains unchanged for 80 years. This situation gives grounds to talk about negative trends in the contemporary ethno-

cultural state of the Yessey Yakuts, disunity with the main ethnos impedes the ethnic unity of the people and contributes to the strengthening of assimilative processes that are expressed in reduction in the rate of growth in the proportion of people who speak their native language.

It should be emphasized that, despite the fact that the Yessey Yakuts were almost completely isolated from the main Yakut ethnos, it did not lead to the erosion of their ethnic identity and complete assimilation or any signs of depopulation. Most likely, this is due to the factors conditioned by the processes of ethnic consolidation.

Under the conditions of the Soviet project, when the levelling of the "national" was happening and a new community called "the Soviet people" was forming, the adaptive strategy of the Yessey Yakuts was aimed at the processes of their ethnic unity.

Living in another national-regional subject did not lead to the loss of identity of the Yessey Yakuts, but on the contrary united the subethnos; such unity at the territorial level (life by the lake) that was manifested in both ethno-cultural and socio-economic space consolidated the Yessey Yakuts into a single organism. The Yessey Yakuts' perception of their ethnic self-identification as a part of the Yakut ethnos is expressed by the following markers: 1) awareness of their national unity at the sub-ethnic level; 2) commonality with the main ethnic group of the Yakuts living in the adjacent region; 3) unity and similarity of ethnocultural interests, the commonality of one historical destiny.

At the same time, as an ethnodialectic group, the Yessey Yakuts have their own characteristics in the development of culture distinguishing them from the neighbouring peoples.

Thus, the Yessey Yakuts were able not only to preserve ethno-demographic reproduction, but also the conditions for preserving their national priority – a traditional way and type of economic

management, an original way of life, the Yakut language and cultural traditions. Preservation of such a basis for the existence of any ethnos of cultural heritage, despite many negative consequences of modern life, allows the Yessey Yakuts to realize and feel their ethnic integrity and creates the basis for national self-assertion and self-awareness. The Yessey Yakuts are proud of their status and their culture, their ethnic identity has a very high degree of manifestations, and there is no sign of humiliation or inferiority of consciousness in their worldview. Although young people almost cannot speak the archaic language, and, of course, some young families are almost not engaged in traditional economic activities, ethnic identity still remains important for the Yessey Yakuts. To reconstruct an integral picture of the world of the Yessey Yakuts, let us turn to the historical experience of the Soviet past.

### **Soviet period of development**

It should be noted that the most powerful cultural and economic leap in the development of the subethnos occurred precisely within these years. In 1990, in the six state farms of the Evenki Autonomous Okrug, there were about 12,000 domestic deer at that time, 2,000 thousand of which belonged to the Kotui farm in the Yakut settlement Yessey; at the present time, domestic reindeer breeding has practically lost its previous value.

In the planned economy, hunting has always played a significant role in the activity of Evenk collective farms, bringing them, along with the reindeer breeding, the largest part of the income. In the late 1980's, just before the market reforms, the share of the handicraft industry in the commodity output of the state farms of the district was 37 %. At the same time, over three quarters of the total value of hunting products was furs, where sable accounted for almost 90

%. On average, throughout the whole Evenkia, including amateur hunters who constituted about 70 % of all field-men in 1990, 25,000 to 32,000 sables were annually hunted in total. Hunting for hoofed animals, mainly wild reindeer, was estimated at an average of 10-13 thousand<sup>1</sup>.

To date, although hunting has not lost its relevance, but have lost the support of state bodies as such, and is of a wild, non-systematic nature of a collectively-appropriating way of life.

In 1947, in the Soviet period, the first air line Tura-Yessey was established, and since then it has been operating regularly. In the Soviet period until the mid-1990's air transport maintained a direct connection with the Krasnoyarsk regional centre. From the middle of January to the middle of May cargoes for the population were transported by air on cargo planes AN-12, AN-24. Large aircrafts landed on the Lake Yessey. Thus, the external connections of the population were established with Krasnoyarsk supplying the settlement with the necessary industrial and food products.

In the 80's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most profitable branch of the farm's economy was fur trade and animal breeding<sup>2</sup>. In Yessey, a new branch of the economy is emerging – caged-animal farming that was an important additional source of fur production, this valuable “soft gold”. The development of animal breeding did not require constant movement, but on the contrary it contributed to settlement of the population. Despite the novelty of the branch economy – animal breeding in the settlement of Yessey developed at a fast pace and in a short time and became one of the main branches of the economy.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a completely new branch of the economy is being developed in Yessey – cattle and horse breeding. Although, the number of livestock was insignificant. Due to the lack of hay, animals were fed with mixed feed-stuff and grain. The shores of the lake were

mowed out completely, and there were unsuitable lands further away from the shore. Therefore, an obstacle to the rapid development of cattle was the extremely inconvenient placement of hayfields scattered in shallow areas along the shore of the lake. Despite the harsh conditions, farm workers from the local population acquired skills in caring for livestock and horses that were kept in special premises away from the settlement. Livestock was intended to provide milk mainly for educational and medical institutions.

Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sewing production was functioning – a fur workshop for finishing reindeer skins using traditional technology, as well as for sewing fur winter clothes: fur boots, bakari (eterbes), gaiters (soturuo), parkas (makhse), hats (bergehe), soles for short fur boots sewn from several deer feathers (ala) for high strength. It should be noted that the Yessey Yakuts retain all kinds of national clothes. This is due to the harsh climate of Yessey. Currently, the Yessey youth usually dresses in modern European clothes that do not have a national colour. Life in the settlement required new forms of clothing, footwear, that is, the purchased clothing was widely used. Traditional fur garments are used during hunting, on the way, sometimes partly in winter in the settlement.

*Education.* Many facts testify to the growth of the cultural level of the population in the Soviet period.

In order to solve the problem of eliminating illiteracy and introducing to the culture of the changed time, it was decided to open a preparatory school. The first founders of the school and the first teachers in Yessey were the spouses Ilya Nikolaevich Donskoi and Evgenia Fedorovna Donskaia sent from Irkutsk to Evenkia. In June 1933, the first Yakut school in Yessey was opened. In the beginning, 9 children studied there. Together with the school, a “red chum” was opened in the settlement, the purpose

of which was cultural and educational work with the local population. The main task of the “red chum” was agitation and propaganda of the new Soviet way of life, the elimination of illiteracy was one of the main tasks.

From the memoirs of Evgenia Fedorovna: “Having left Irkutsk at the end of January 1933, we arrived in Tura at the end of March, where we received our appointment and again got under way on deer to their permanent place of work. My husband and I were sent to Yessey. We arrived in Yessey in mid-April, tired and wet from the mud season. We were met by the chairman of the nomadic council Fedor Solomonov and his deputy Khristofor Chordu. We were settled in the former church, where we had been living until the winter. There were only 10 houses in the settlement... There were no textbooks and notebooks, there was only plain thick paper, pencils and slate boards. My husband and I wrote letters and numbers on paper. I hung out the alphabet on the wall and taught children to pronounce sounds and names of the letters. Each evening we laced notebooks out of paper, lined them and wrote samples of the elements of the letters. Children learned how to write, draw, sing, learned interesting games. In early September, we were instructed to organize vacation. In October, we resumed classes. We got ABC books and problem books...<sup>37</sup>” A school building and a two-storey boarding school for reindeer herders’ children were built in the settlement.

However, it is now accepted to negatively speak about the Soviet past and the methods of the socialist development path, but in comparison with the realities of the present time, there are more pluses than minuses in this historical period of development.

### **Post-Soviet period**

Later, crisis phenomena began to accumulate since the early 1990’s. They were the result of a

general economic crisis that hit the whole country. However, in Evenkia, where the Yessey Yakuts live, these processes were much more complicated and painful than in the whole country, because of the special economic, social and natural climatic conditions of the Krasnoyarsk North. Ignoring the regional specifics in the course of radical reforms sharply exacerbated the situation, so by the mid-1990's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, negative trends were manifested so much that it was already characterized as a state of a deepening social and economic crisis. Residents of the North of the Krasnoyarsk Territory were the most unprotected in the transition to market relations, this phenomenon, of course, is not an exception for all northern regions of Russia, which is due to a lack of preparedness of the peoples of the North for adaptation processes to market realities. Subethnos of the Yessey Yakuts was no exception, in the mid-90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of the population of the settlement of Yessey lived without money, hunting for wild reindeer and fishing helped them to survive, the most able-bodied and educated Yessey Yakuts did not have a permanent place of work.

Yet the proof of the adaptive strategy of the ethnic group – the isolate was the actualization of the cultural heritage of the Sakha people in post-perestroika times. Thus, since 2013 the Yakut national holiday “Ysyakh” has been held annually at the end of June in the centre of the Evenki district, in the town of Tura. In the settlement of Yessey, the same holiday is held. The manifestation of the Yakut ethnicity reflected itself in the creation of the Yakut vocal ensemble “Sandal” (“Radiant”) in 2014. In the formation of a set of official and normative documents aimed at preserving and maintaining the ethno-cultural development of the region. Thus, the Government of the Krasnoyarsk Territory issued the Resolution No. 14-P dated January 18, 2011 “On Approving the Orders and Norms of Providing

measures of social support to persons from among the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North and persons belonging to... in the Evenki Municipal District of the Krasnoyarsk Territory (with amendments as of July 25, 2014) “On the approval of the Orders and standards for the provision of measures of social support to persons from among the indigenous minorities of the North and persons belonging to the ethnic community of the Yessey Yakuts in the Evenki Municipal District of the Krasnoyarsk Territory.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the Yessey Yakuts were included in the list of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North of the Krasnoyarsk Territory.

Let us consider one of the important projects in the implementation of the ethno-cultural component of a daily life of the Yessey Yakuts.

For the Yessey Yakuts, a wild reindeer is a commercial species, as for a number of peoples of the North, thanks to which they exist in a harsh climate, have a source of earnings and, as a consequence, improve their well-being. The innovative project “Evenki deer” initiated with the support of oil companies from a subsidiary of Rosneft – the East Siberian Oil and Gas Company, is of practical importance for the territories of the Northern Evenkia. Until recently, hunters travelled hundreds of kilometres in search for wild reindeer wasting a lot of time, money, health and strength. At present, the population level is being tracked, biology scientists came to the Yessey settlement for this purpose. Within the framework of social activities, the company pays much attention to supporting the way of life, culture and traditions of the indigenous small peoples.<sup>57</sup>

#### **Local studies as an educational resource of patriotism and respect for the history and culture of its small homeland**

An important condition for the development and study of the native land, in the first place, is the historical past, the folk customs and traditions, the

problems of regional development and the revival of its identity. An academician D.S. Likhachev rightly noted speaking of local history: “This is the most massive area of science: great scientists and schoolchildren can take part in the collection of materials.” Today, when the Internet becomes the main source of information for students, live communication with the history and culture of their people becomes a real necessity. It is necessary to apply all methods of local history research, for example, field observations, visual (direct observations (survey) of the phenomena and objects studied), personal interviews (local population and personal conversations with local historians and old residents that help establish historical and everyday facts, clarify already known information).

Speaking about the study of local lore in Evenkia schools, for the first time it has been introduced as an academic subject since 2006 as a means for patriotic education and study of historical and cultural monuments. In the development of the content of curricula and the practical application of local history teaching, the contribution of teachers – historians, geographers of the Evenk district of the settlement of Tura who provided significant assistance, was significant.

Based on the surveys of the Yessey school teachers, it is clear that the students attach great importance to collecting materials reflecting the lives of our contemporaries, for example, the work of reindeer herders, fishermen, hunters, village teachers. Thus, by studying history of an individual, children learn the history of their small homeland. Therefore, in the Yessey school in the study of the subject “Local studies” there is the research activity of schoolchildren, which, as a rule, involves students from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grades. Forms of extra-curricular activities are carried out – gatherings, academic competitions, quizzes, conferences, meetings with veterans of labour and others.

S.O. Schmidt beautifully formulated this cross-movement saying: “Local studies are a school of upbringing by culture; it facilitates the development of forms of creative communication of people of different generations, different levels of education and special training (scientific or artistic, in the field of crafts).<sup>67</sup>”

Young people brought up in this school will know and develop their own culture and will be able to respect a representative of another culture and never destroy other cultural monuments. Indeed, local studies educate children, their civic position, patriotism, in which a soul of the younger generation is formed in the new realities of an ever-changing and developing society.

Almost every ethnic group has a unique history and culture. This implies that in the Yessey secondary school, local studies are one of the leading factors in the formation of the historical and patriotic consciousness of children. The study of the subject “Local studies” was introduced in schools in 2006, as in all Evenkia schools, as a means for patriotic education and study of historical and cultural monuments, as well as a civic position in which a soul of the younger generation is formed in the new realities of an ever-changing and evolving society.

Thus, the younger generation raised in such a school will know and develop their own culture and will respect the culture of other peoples.

### **Conclusion**

As noted above, the ethnic group of the Sakha-Yessey Yakuts historically developed as a sub-ethnos due to administrative-territorial and political-departmental reasons, and due to these circumstances it developed as an independent ethnic community.

The Yessey Yakuts created their own unique culture that is close to the culture of the Olenek Yakuts has many parallels with the culture of the Dolgans and the northern Evenks. This is

explained by the relatively isolated course of formation of the culture of the Yesseys under conditions of foreign influence.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the culture of the Yessey Yakuts transformed, which led to profound changes. In the post-Soviet era the Yesseys are forced to return to their primordial culture. In the adaptive strategy of the Yesseys to modern conditions, a value approach to their cultural

heritage and identification of the most important and viable elements of their culture, is very important.

At present, the sub-ethnos of the Yessey Yakuts represents an important link in the composition of the basic ethnos of the Sakha-Yakuts ensuring its integrity and stability, serves as the basis for the compositional complication of the ethnos.

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<sup>1</sup> Boiko, V.I. (1992). The Evenki basin of the Yenisei. Novosibirsk: VO "Nauka", p. 72-75.

<sup>2</sup> The data on the Yessey for 1973 are provided on the basis of the materials of the Yessey-Mirinsk-Lensk dialectological expedition in 1973, stored in the archives of the Department of Nuclear Physics of the SB RAS, according to the cipher 49, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Chronicle of the school. In *The official website of the Essei Secondary School*. Available at: <http://shkola99.narod.ru/simple.html>

<sup>4</sup> Decree of the Government of the Krasnoyarsk Territory of January 18, 2011 No.14-p "On approval of the Orders and standards for the provision in the Evenk Municipal District of the Krasnoyarsk Territory of measures of social support to persons from among the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North" from the information bank "Krasnoyarsk Territory". In *ConsultantPlus*. Available at: <http://base.consultant.ru/regbase/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=RLAW123;n=60908;dst=100189>

<sup>5</sup> Yakutsk. Site dedicated to the city of Yakutsk. Available at: <http://www.yakutskhistory.net/фрагменты-истории/есейские-якуты./stati/jakutiija/sputnikovye-oleni-yevenkii.html>

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt, S.O. (1992). *Local studies and documentary monuments*. Tver, P. 6.

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# **Этнокультурный портрет России: Ессейские якуты. Жизнь у озера (история и культура одной этнической группы)**

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*Большой интерес вызывает повседневный мир изолированной этнолокальной группы ессейских якутов, проживающей на Севере Красноярского края за полярным кругом у озера Ессей вдали от основной массы саха-якутов. Отмечается, что в силу исторических и политических обстоятельств на начальном этапе национально-территориального районирования, проводившегося у коренных народов Севера в конце 20-х гг. XX века, советские государственные органы отнесли исторические территории проживания ессейских якутов к вновь созданному Эвенкийскому национальному округу, отделив ессейских якутов от основной массы якутского этноса.*

*Ключевые слова: ассимиляция, депопуляция, ессейские якуты, культурный генофонд, краеведение, субэтнос, трансформация, этнос, этнолокальная группа, этнодиалектная группа.*

*Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурология.*

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