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Ethnocultural, Social and Mental Features of Suicide in the Society of the Indigenous Peoples of the North

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Abstract. The problems of suicide have been worrying humanity for several millennia. Specialists of various disciplines (ethnographers, historians, philosophers, cultural scientists, psychologists, psychiatrists, demographers) are trying to solve several fundamental problems of this complex cultural institution. Many scientists start with the traditional question of the similarity and difference between humans and animals, judging, among other things, by the presence or absence of examples of suicide in the fauna. The next stage of research is based on identifying the main causes of suicide (the influence of nature, climate, the surrounding social environment, historical events, physiological indicators of a particular person), on understanding statistical data, and ways to prevent such cases as much as possible. An equally relevant approach is the study revealing the ethno-cultural features of the manifestation of the institution of suicide, in particular, in the culture of the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (Samoyeds, Ugrians, Paleoasians, Tungus-Manchus). European settlers have been trying for several centuries to settle the Arctic and northern territories, where indigenous peoples originally live. As a result of close inter-cultural and inter-ethnic contacts, cultural diffusions, mutual borrowing of certain aspects of material culture, economy, transport, and trade rituals have occurred and continue to occur. However, the indigenous peoples retain the peculiarities of the mentality in the field of suicide, which were discovered by European pioneers in the 17th century and recorded in more detail in the materials of the 18th-19th centuries. The problem of the correlation between Arctic hysteria, shamanism and suicide requires additional research. The main methods for identifying the answers to these questions are practical methods of field ethnography, critical analysis of various sources (archival, museum, folklore), published documents, works of domestic and foreign scientists.

Keywords: North, Siberia, Far East, indigenous peoples, features of history, culture, mentality, institution of suicide.

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the Tungus-Manchus and Paleoasiates of Eastern Siberia and the south of the Far East as a worldview basis and an indicator of the features of the life system».

Research area: Ethnography; History.

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Этнокультурные, социальные и ментальные особенности суицида в обществе коренных народов Севера

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Аннотация. Проблема суицида всегда была и остается актуальной. По данным Всемирной организации здравоохранения, современная Россия лидирует по количеству самоубийств и занимает второе место в мире после Литвы. Этому вопросу посвящено огромное количество научных трудов. Ученых волнуют статистика и причины самоубийств, их социальные последствия, реакция общественности и властей. Не менее важным направлением представляется исследование сущности, этнокультурных, ментальных особенностей института суицида в обществе коренных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока. Для решения поставленной цели использованы практические и теоретические методы этнографической науки: опрос информантов; историко-типологический анализ, позволяющий исследовать стадиальные явления, тип культуры в рамках относительно замкнутых областей (бассейн Амура, Сахалин, Камчатка, Чукотка); историко-диффузионный для решения проблем этнокультурных контактов коренных народов Севера с соседними и переселенческими этносами; историко-генетический для выявления проблем трансляции этнокультурных ценностей. Данные методы, а также анализ архивных источников позволили сделать вывод о кардинальном отличии менталитета европейских этносов и коренных народов северных регионов в сфере осмысления суицида, его мотивов, причин, связи этого сложного явления с этносоциальным окружением, с верованиями, ритуалами жизненного цикла.

Ключевые слова: Север, Сибирь, Дальний Восток, коренные народы, особенности истории, культуры, менталитета, института суицида.

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Introduction

The world historiography of suicide has been created for several centuries. Almost none of the famous philosophers, culturologists, historians and writers ignored this topic. There are attempts to contribute to the study of the essence of suicide, the reaction of the community to it, and the role of religious canons in most of the works. Thus, back in the 16th century, M. Monten' wrote that suicide is a fault before God and people, since this act is a person's refusal to perform the duties given to him from above. Mass suicide is not less terrible, and here is an example of a collective mental impulse. A serious illness that brings pain and suffering can be considered an excuse for a person's suicide (Monten', 1979: 309, 311, 317, 319).

D. Yum, on the contrary, was convinced that suicide is not a sin before God; it is not considered a crime before society and the person of the suicide himself, because all thoughts and actions of a person are created and subordinated to divine providence. Tired of life, suffering from misfortunes, a person overcomes his natural fear of death and leaves this world, which continues to exist without him. Humans, like animals, are subject to natural laws and have the full right to choose whether to live or die, which does not affect the process of further development of the Universe (Yum, 1965: 698–702). Perhaps Hume's reasoning was influenced by his knowledge of ancient Indian philosophy, Hinduism, and the epic «Mahabharata», in which the hero Arjuna receives instructions from Krishna before the battle against his brothers. Arjuna, as a kshatriya, should do his duty and not think about the consequences, since Krishna has already done everything for him (Mahabharata, 2009: 81–91, etc.).

F. M. Dostoevsky condemned the suicides that occurred in Russia in the 1870s due to various minor problems; the writer described the suicide epidemic as « ... thoughtlessness in Russian nature...» (Dostoevsky, 1981: 4, 6, 282, 285, 314–315).

Z. Freud singled out melancholy as one of the main causes of suicide, and defined suicide as the denial of life because of a passionate de-

sire for death; it should not be justified, but can be prevented (Freud, 1999: 166).

An important pattern about the rapid increase in the number of suicides in accordance with the growth of culture and civilization was noticed by P. A. Sorokin. In the 20th century, suicide became a real epidemic, threatening society also because people very quickly got used to suicides and stopped paying attention to them (Sorokin, 2003:104). Sorokin also has controversial beliefs that there was no suicide among animals in prehistoric times. He did not consider suicides, but only victims, ritual suicides of wives after the death of their husbands, the customs of hara-kiri in Japanese culture, the voluntary retirement of old people in the traditional society of the Danes, Goths, ancient Hindus, Greeks, Romans, and Germans (Sorokin, 2003: 105).

I. P. Krasnenkova, based on the analysis of the works of well-known suicidologists, came to the conclusion that ethnicity and state affiliation in no way affect the number of suicides, in contrast to gender: men resort to this method of ending life much more often (Krasnenkova, 1999: 151–174).

In general, it should be noted that, despite the abundance of works on this problem, its solution is constantly complicated by new materials, facts that appear on the basis of rapidly emerging new ways of communication, intergenerational transmission of information, including negative information that affects the adoption of a tragic decision. Despite the active processes of globalization, there is a parallel revival of ethnic identity, bright flashes of mental features, including on the basis of the evolution of the canons of world religions, beliefs and rituals.

Statement of the problem and theoretical framework

According to V. S. Efremov, the term «suicide» has been known in the Western world since the 12th century, the concept of «suicide» in the Russian language appeared in the «Three-language Lexicon» in 1704; suicidology as a multidisciplinary scientific direction appeared in the 19th century. Only at the end of the 20th century the concept that suicide is a

conscious action of a person who understands that it will end in death developed (Efremov, 2004: 17).

The conceptual substantiation of the stated aspect of the ethno-cultural features of the institute of suicide is associated with the analysis of the theoretical developments of domestic and foreign specialists in the field of suicidology in the context of cause-and-effect relationships of suicide facts, the possible influence of natural and social factors, as well as individual psychological and ethno-psychological attitudes of specific individuals who committed suicide.

E. Durkheim's concept of the essence of suicide emphasized the extreme complexity of this social phenomenon, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to its research, to find answers to questions about whether suicide is a crime against life or a vital human right, whether its numerous causes lie in a disease or a normal state (Gordon, 1912: XV–XVI). The main causes of human suicide are the separation of the individual from the society that coordinates his life actions and aspirations with the help of religious or secular institutions, or the complete suppression of human freedom by society. Moreover, a person comes to suicide consciously, this act is not affected by racial characteristics, diseases, narcotic substances, only an individual who is fully aware of his actions and their consequences can be considered a suicide (Durkheim, 1912: 11–12, 14, 27, 31–32, 37, 43, 87–90, 102). Durkheim was absolutely convinced that suicide is only characteristic of people. Any cases of animals taking their own lives are not associated with the awareness of subsequent death, for example, a dog that yearns after the death of its owner, refuses food and dies of starvation (Durkheim, 1912: 15). In the sphere of the stated topic about the ethno-cultural features of the institution of suicide, Durkheim's thoughts that each society in a certain historical period has its own specific tendency to suicide are relevant. The elderly are the most likely to resort to suicide (Durkheim, 1912: 20, 101–102). As for natural factors, the frequency of suicides is not affected by climate and seasonal temperature fluctuations. The main influence is the nature of civili-

zation in different countries, social reasons, for example, the conquest of Rome in 1870 during the War of independence of Italy (Durkheim, 1912: 104–105). On the basis of statistical data, Durkheim criticized the conclusion of the French philosopher Charles Montesquieu that cold and damp countries have the highest number of suicides (Montesquieu, 1955: 358–359). Similarly, hot climate is not a cause of suicide (Durkheim, 1912: 107, 111).

N. A. Berdyaev criticized the sociological concept of suicide by E. Durkheim, and drew the attention of scientists to the ethnocultural feature of suicides of Russian emigrants at the beginning of the 20th century. The reasons were hopelessness, the loss of the meaning of life due to isolation from the motherland, the horror of the realization about having to live in a foreign world, the loss of the former high social status, the need to engage in heavy physical labor, diseases, the consequence of these motivations is the rapid «contagion» of the suicidal idea as a result of observations of suicides. You can sympathize with a suicide, feel sorry for him for the suffering that led to suicide, but you cannot justify the very fact of suicide, which is a sin before God and a crime before society. The suicide of an emigrant is not a personal matter of an unhappy person, but a demonstration that the Russians, as an ethnos, do not stand up to the hardships of emigration in general (Berdyaev, 1931: 28, 5–11, 15, 18 etc.).

Analyzing the work of A. N. Radishchev, Yu. M. Lotman stressed that for him the heroic suicide was a vivid manifestation of civic virtue (Lotman, 1994: 72, 133, 160, 216). The specific case of suicide that Radishchev described was related to the suicide of the Jacobin revolutionaries, prisoners who thus escaped the disgrace of public execution. Lotman identified a difference in the causes of suicide in England and Russia, in particular from longing: dueling, reckless behavior in war and playing cards took place among the Russian nobles. An epidemic of suicide took place in the second half of the 18th century in Russia, Europe and America; often suicides imitated literary heroes (Lotman, 1994: 176, 215–223).

Yu. A. Sumarokov, when studying the causes of suicide in the society of the indig-

enous peoples of the North, proposed to pay special attention to the peculiarities of their worldview, mental perception of the world and ethnopsychology (Sumarokov, 2015: 224; Naumenko, 2020: 944–945).

An equally important aspect in the process of revealing this topic is «institutional» suicide, the name of which was developed in the middle of the 20th century by the American psychologist and leading theorist of suicidology Norman Farberow. This type has been known in human history since ancient times. Its most striking manifestations: the self-immolation of widows and servants in India and China, after the death of the husband and master, the ritual suicide of *hara-kiri* in Japan, suicide among the peoples of antiquity (Celts, Germans, Zulus), which was considered the natural way of the most worthy death (Farberow, 1961; Efremov, 2004: 29–30). Such numerous cases of suicide are recorded in the traditional and modern culture of the indigenous peoples of the North. Thus, the phenomena of suicide as a worthy death proposed by Radishchev and Farberow fully correlate in their essence with the phenomenon of ethno-cultural features of suicide in the society of Arctic ethnos.

Statement of the problem

The author supposes it is relevant to study the ethno-cultural features of the essence of the institution of suicide in the traditional and modern society of the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. This problem is also highlighted in connection with the theses of well-known scientists identified above about the possible influence of natural and social factors on the mechanism of suicide. The fundamental thesis is the study of the mental differences between the phenomenon of suicide in the societies of indigenous and displaced peoples in the northern regions. This factor is complexly connected with the evolution of specific ethnos and civilizations, with the processes of ethnic contacts, ethno-cultural diffusion, divergence and acculturation.

Methods

The methods of field ethnographic science were used to achieve this goal: inter-

viewing informants, recording the collected ethnographic and folklore material in a field diary and on electronic media. Archival materials of the 18th century, published works of domestic and foreign researchers were collected and analyzed to study the features of suicide in traditional societies of the indigenous peoples of the North.

Discussion

Among the works on specific cases of suicide in society and indigenous peoples of the North in particular, we can highlight the articles by D. K. Zelenin, N. B. Semenova, etc., devoted to historiographical overview of the problem (Zelenin, 1937: 47–78; Loginov, Solodka, 2017: 101–105; Semenova, 2017: 17–38; Stopchak, 2019: 226–230). E. A. Naumenko, Tarskaya and others stressed the risk of suicide for indigenous peoples of the North – their systemic nature, globally affecting the mortality rate for aboriginal people (Naumenko, 2020: 944; Tarskaya, 2009: 62).

Modern researchers of suicides among the peoples of the North emphasized that the largest number of such sad cases was recorded in the Republic of Komi, in Udmurtia, in the Nenets and Koryak Autonomous Districts. Experts noted the impact on the dynamics of suicides of socio-economic, anthropogenic and natural factors, in particular, heliogeophysical, electromagnetic anomalies, northern lights (Kasatkina, 2014: 45).

One of the discoverers of Kamchatka, S. P. Krasheninnikov, emphasized that Itelmen resorted to suicide in traditional culture as a specific defense against boredom, anxiety, and the inability to live in the usual comfort «... it is better to die than not to live as they please...». Cases of suicide were so frequent that the Russian authorities were forced to send decrees ordering the Kamchatka administration to prevent the suicide of Kamchadals (Krasheninnikov, 1949: 368).

There were special rooms for the detention of captives-hostages (*amanats*) from among the indigenous peoples in the Russian fortresses, built by the pioneers in the process of developing the North and Siberia in the 17th-18th centuries (Zuev, 2002: 277–279).

G. L. Maydel wrote that one of the commanders of the Anadyr prison in the 1760s Plenisher was to identify the feasibility of further functioning of this Russian outpost in the northeast. Plenisher came to the conclusion that the prison could not be paid for, that it was impossible to influence the Chukchis in the interests of the Russian authorities with the help of hostages. Even in ordinary life, the Chukchis killed their infirm relatives at their urgent requests. The hostages were immediately classified as dead. The hostages themselves tried to commit suicide (Maydell, 1896: XXI, 606–608), so as not to expose their soul and body to bullying by the Cossacks, Koryaks, Yukagirs, and other aborigines who accepted Russian citizenship and paid *yasak*, with whom the Chukchi had military clashes, stole their deer, and took their wives and children (RGADA, 1761: 12; Bereznitsky, 2020: 136, 139, 144–145).

Over time, Plenisher revealed interesting ethnographic facts, features of the culture, mentality, and ethnopsychology of the Chukchis, which made it impossible to bring them into Russian citizenship in the 18th century (Zuev, 2006: 99). The Chukchis were extremely militant, mobile, quickly rallied when an external threat arose, and were not afraid of death. Analyzing various materials about the activities of the Anadyr fortress, the stories of the Cossacks about the campaign in Chukotka in the 1730s–1740s, Plenisher identified the ethno-cultural features of other indigenous peoples of the region. In particular, it was possible to influence the Yukaghirs with the help of hostages taken. The Yukaghirs themselves sent their children to fortress to prove their loyalty to the Russian authorities (RGADA, 1764: 14 ob, 63, 315–317; Bereznitsky, 2020: 153–154, 237–238). In the reports of the 18th century, all expenses related to the maintenance of *amanats* were recorded in detail (RGADA, 1764: 184, 193).

Researchers of the 18th–19th centuries collected numerous cases of suicides of elderly people, representatives of the indigenous peoples of north-east Asia (Chukchis, Eskimos, Koryaks, Itelmens), who were helped to commit suicide by their relatives (strangled,

stabbed with spears, cut with knives, etc.) (Billings, 1978: 56; Merck, 1978: 138; Wrangel, 1848: 182).

According to F. Boas, V. G. Bogoraz, V. I. Iokhelson, etc., in the traditional culture of the Chukchis, Koryaks, Kereks, Yukagirs, and Eskimos, the custom of voluntary death was an extremely honorable ritual in which the entire family participated (Sarychev, 1802: 109; Boas, 1888: 589, 615; Bogoraz, 1900: 52–58; 1934: 106–112; Iokhelson, 1997: 197; Kalinnikov, 1912: 86–87; Leontiev, 2008: 67; Omrytkhaut, 2008: 94).

V. G. Bogoraz penetrated deeper than others into the essence of the institution of suicide caused by climatic, genetic and social reasons, the need to sacrifice the soul of a suicide to spirits, and most importantly, what is most relevant for the stated topic – the ideological, mental, ethno-cultural and ethno-psychological characteristics of the aborigines. The tradition of suicide was so strong that it was recorded by Russian ethnographers, representatives of local authorities in the middle of the 20th century (Kuznetsova, 2004: 390; Gagarin, 2008: 224–229; Mikhailova, 2015: 89–91, 140, 148; Davydova, 2015: 130–135).

S. S. Gagarin noted that after the establishment of Soviet power in Chukotka, it faced a number of ethnocultural features of indigenous peoples, in particular, the canons of customary law. The Soviet criminal system was particularly strict about the custom of «voluntary death», which was applied to the sick, elderly people who did not want to burden their loved ones. The ritual was performed at the request of those who wanted to go to the world of their ancestors. In their worldview, a complex transformation of consciousness took place, a person mentally turned into a wild deer, which was supposed to be «hunted» by relatives, with the help of a spear, a knife, a lasso, and firearms. Relatives, shamans, who consciously help suicides to leave the human world, were well aware of their expected criminal punishment for murder, even if unintentional, but could not refuse the last wish of a relative (Gagarin, 2008: 224–229).

When analyzing the ethnocultural and historical features of collectivization in Chu-

kotka, which did not end in the middle of the 20th century, B.M. Andronov highlighted the fact of the suicide of the kulak, who could not bear global changes and the transfer of the levers of power to the former poor (Andronov, 2008: 106).

Based on the analysis of archival materials of V. G. Kuznetsova, E. A. Davydova published works of V. G. Bogoraz, E. A. Mikhailova, and other works of domestic and foreign scientists, her own field research in the Amguem tundra, in comparative terms, considered in detail the attitude of the Chukchis and Russians to the facts of suicide in the middle of the 20th century, made the necessary historical and ethnographic excursions, showed the strong preservation of Chukchis traditions in this area, despite the powerful foreign cultural influence (Davydova, 2015: 130–135).

M.P. Dutkin analyzed a large number of works devoted to statistics and the causes of suicide in the society of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, Alaska, and Canada. According to the researcher, the main reason is the dominance of European ethnocentrism (Dutkin, 2018: 64–75).

It should be emphasized that in addition to the unique customs of voluntary death with the help of relatives, in the traditional and modern culture of the indigenous peoples of the North, other reasons for suicide are known: difficult life situations associated with temporary lack of money, unrequited love, loss of the meaning of life due to economic or commercial problems, lack of understanding by others. The mental basis is still the belief that the soul is immortal and only periodically changes its «shell», implanting itself in women or men of its kind.

As one of the typical examples, we can cite the information collected in an ethnographic expedition in 2019 on Sakhalin. The journalists brought Japanese scientists to one of the reindeer herding teams. The reindeer herders received the delegation very cordially, but they overdid it with hot drinks and began to complain to the guests about the actions of the local authorities that hinder the development of reindeer husbandry. At night, one of the reindeer herders shot himself in a nearby

tent out of desperation. It is noteworthy that he did not participate in the general dinner and was completely sober. According to the expert of Nivkhis culture, writer and public figure V.M. Sangi, it was a demonstrative suicide. In this way, the person decided to immediately get away from all the problems (Bereznitsky, 2019: 114).

Orochis, living in the Tumnin River basin in the Khabarovsk Territory, Udeges people from the Anyu River, Evenkis from the Selemdzha River in the Amur region said that already in the 1930s their grandfathers and fathers were subject to strong acculturation by European immigrants, including in the field of suicide. Suicides were then buried not in common cemeteries, but in specially designated areas, often together with the drowned. According to the stories of the Nivkhs, the souls of suicides do not fall into the human afterlife, but into submission to the masters of various elements: drowned people – in the underwater world, hanged people hang in the air all the time. Currently, due to the highest level of social apathy, the inability to preserve even the remnants of their culture, the number of suicides is very large. But now such dead people are buried in common cemeteries.

Some Anadyr Chukchi women and cultural workers told in 2018 about suicide attempts caused by a creative crisis. Nowadays, Chukchi reindeer herders teach their children to carefully observe the surrounding nature and draw the necessary conclusions about the approaching bad weather in order to save the herd and people. Often alarming signs of glaciation of pastures are given by field mice, lemmings, stoats, resorting to mass suicides while searching for food. Some indigenous peoples, reflecting on the cases of suicide of their relatives, associate these sad facts with the process of rapid loss of their native languages, knowledge of harmonious social relations, about the history, culture, traditions of their family, clan, and ethnos.

Conclusion

In general, several fundamental conclusions should be noted. One of them is based on the concept of the relativity of suicide assess-

ment. The attitude to suicide varies significantly under the influence of interrelated factors of mentality, beliefs, religion, tribal or civil laws, and morality. What seems disgusting in one society or culture is commonplace, habitual, and even necessary in another.

The following conclusion is related to the largest volume of ethnocultural differences of suicide collected and recorded in the traditional and modern culture of the Chukchis. For the Chukchis-Amanats of the 18th century, suicide was a proof to themselves and their relatives of the highest achievement of the spirit, personal courage, and honor for the family and clan. Contemporaries noted this cardinal difference between the Chukchis mentality and the Christian ideas about the essence of suicide. The custom of voluntary death as a prevention of suffering from old age and disease, a burden for relatives, existed in the middle of the 20th century.

The analysis of the above-mentioned works showed that the influence of climate, social conditions, and the pressure of the European authorities are secondary reasons that can influence the decision to commit suicide of the indigenous peoples of the North. The global mental difference of the aborigines, the peculiarity of ethnic identity, worldview, adherence to ancient traditions, a special attitude to life and death remain the main motive.

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