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Cultural Borderland of the Yessey Yakut Reindeer Herders of the Krasnoyarsk Krai

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This article is a brief summary of the history of the formation, assimilation and cultural boundary of the separate ethnolocal group of the Yessey Yakuts, historically separated both territorially and socio-culturally, with the basic ethnic group of Sakha-Yakuts that have not lost their identity, culture and language. The article gives an assessment of the current state of culture, development and problems of this ethnolocal group living in the north of the Krasnoyarsk Krai in the Evenk Municipal District in the settlement of Yessey.

In this context, the northeastern border of the present-day Krasnoyarsk Krai and the northwestern regions of Yakutia, namely the place of formation of the sub-culture of the Yessey Yakuts – the area of Lake Yessey, can be classified as a borderline ethnocultural landscape.

The ethnolocal components that structure the basic skeleton of the culture of the Yessey Yakuts represent a complex multicomponent formation that was formed even before it came to this territory.

Keywords: assimilation, cultural borderline, Yessey Yakuts, ethnolocal group, Yakut reindeer herders, transformation, marginalization.

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Research area: ethnography, ethnology and anthropology.

Currently, in the territory of the Krasnoyarsk Krai, in the north of the Evenk Municipal District near Lake Yessey, located beyond the Arctic Circle in the north of the Central Siberian Plateau in the Khatanga River basin, between the two

tributaries of the Kotui River, the ethnolocal group of the Sakha people – the Yessey Yakuts, live in quite remotely.

For the first time the name of the lake is found on the map published by the Academy of

Sciences in 1745, where it is named Lake Ezel. The lake is surrounded by forest-covered mountains, its length is about 49-50 km, 29-30 km wide. The area of Lake Yessey has long been famous for its abundance of fish, animals, wild deer (in times of seasonal migration). The northern Yakuts began the development of neighbouring lands, rich in natural resources, in the 18th century, thus, from the basin of the Anabar and Olenek rivers, the movement of Yakut reindeer herders to Khatanga began. In the process of migration, the ethnocultural interaction of the Yakut reindeer herders with indigenous inhabitants of these territories—the Tungus tribes, began.

One of the local groups of the northern Yakut reindeer herders found themselves at Lake Yessey of the Turukhansk region, in which they eventually settled firmly. It is known that in the 17th century these places were inhabited by the Tungus tribes of the Vaniads¹, who for unknown reason disappeared from the mentioned territory in the 18th century. The first information about the appearance of the Yakuts on Lake Yessey also refers to this period.

The problem of the cultural borderland is one of the important themes of Russian ethnography. The emergence of subethnic formations updates the study of the phenomenon of “dual” identity in the modern period, emerging problems associated with assimilation processes, the displacement of large groups of people, new forms of social and cultural contacts. The place of intersection of cultures is the borderline of the multicultural society neighbouring with other territories and that has experienced migration influence in the recent past that is most susceptible to assimilation.

In this context, the northeastern border of the present-day Krasnoyarsk Krai and the northwestern regions of Yakutia, namely the place of formation of the sub-culture of the Yessey Yakuts – the area of Lake Yessey, can be classified as a borderline ethnocultural landscape.

According to the Turukhansk archives, at the end of the century the inhabitants of the lake areas are already the Yakuts². Thus, the ethnographer V.N. Vasilyev writes: “We managed to see the old documents dating back to the end of the 18th century, in the archive of the Turukhansk district executive committee. In these documents the inhabitants of Lake Yessey are called the Yakuts”³. A.S. Parnikova also notes that the documents of the late 18th century contain references to the Yessey Yakuts.⁴

According to a number of authors, the main reason for the resettlement of the Yakuts to Lake Yessey was a change in the socio-economic conditions of life on their ancestral lands in the Lena River basin, which were joined to the Russian Empire. V.N. Vasilyev, who took part in the Khatanga expedition in 1905, writes: “The Yessey Yakuts say that they came to Lake Yessey after the Russians first appeared on the Lena River, from which they fled”.⁵

There is one more explanation of the Yakuts getting into the area of Lake Yessey, which I.S. Gurvich wrote about: “After the introduction of the fee (in the 70s of the 18th century) ... the Yakut fur traders rushed to Lake Yessey without encountering any obstacles from the part of the Russian administration”.⁶

Finally, according to G.V. Ksenofontov (“Uraankhai-Sakhalar”): “... the Yakut reindeer herders, hibernating near Lake Yessey, originally paid yasak and tribute in Turukhansk, and meanwhile every summer they appeared at the mouth of the Olenek River, i.e. within the former Verkhoyansk district. Some groups of the same Yakuts in the summer wandered along the Taimyr Peninsula ...”⁷

The well-known scientist B.O. Dolgikh, who worked in 1935-1939 during the expedition to Evenkia, noted that the Yessey population are the Yakut nomadic reindeer herders who came from the Olenek River basin: “We should

seriously emphasize that the population of the Middle and Upper Olenek and the upper reaches of the Anabar, living in the Krasnoyarsk Krai in the area of Lake Yessey on the Kotui river, not only belonged in the past to one of the naslegs (agricultural communities) and clans, but was quite the same ethnographically – the same language, way of life, clothing, customs”.⁸

During the 17th-18th centuries the Yessey Yakuts, in addition to the connection to their “historical” homeland, actively contacted the neighbouring Tungus tribes, the processes of mutual rapprochement between the culture and life of the Yessey Yakuts and the surrounding diverse Tungusic tribes developed. It is interesting that the Yakut language has survived and is still dominant among the Yessey Yakuts. During the period of the appearance of the Yakuts on Lake Yessey, mutual marriages have been and are being concluded, but the cultural and linguistic traditions of the Yakuts are preserved. Of course, Evenkian elements of culture are more evident in material culture, in particular in clothing, as well as in management, while the Yessey Yakuts retain their identity.

Analyzing the family affiliation of the Yessey families, let us turn to the field materials of the ethnographer I.S. Gurvich, who worked in the Olenek district of the Yakut ASSR in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and where he scrupulously studied the material and spiritual culture of the Yakut reindeer herders. In his monograph he presents the recorded Olenek genealogical traditions, in which the connections of the northern Yakut reindeer herders with the main part of the Yakut people are traced. The scholar studied the genealogy of three families – Osogostok, Espek and Beti.

According to his informants who were part of the Khatygin nasleg, the Osogostok family came from a Yakut woman who came to Olenek pregnant three generations ago and settled with

her brother Bakhynaya (pashenny). From the son that she gave birth to, this family started.

The founder of one of the branches of the Chordu family is Yakut Kykhylov, the great-grandson of Kykhylov, Nikolai (Sekenei uola), died in the 1930s. I.S. Gurvich believes that the migration of Chordu family took place in the first half of the 19th century.

According to one of the members of the Espek family, the founder of the family is the Yakut named Өspök, followed by Chogurkan (not baptized), Ignatii (blind), Vasiliï (Kookooki). I.S. Gurvich considers these family ties concluding that Espek family migrated in the 18th century.

“Only Beti family,” the scientist writes, “is recognized by the local tradition as Evenki-Yakut.

Its founder is Shaman Mykal. Some consider him to be Yakut, others refer him to the Tungus family Chapogir. All our informants pointed out that their ancestors had married the Tungus (Evenk)”.⁹

The formation of the local ethnic group of the Yessey Yakuts proceeded following active interpenetration of the Yakut and Evenk cultures.

The process of assimilation takes place over a large period of time and requires certain social and cultural conditions. It can be assumed that if there were borrowings between the Yakuts and the Tungus, then not in the basin of the Olenek and Anabar rivers, where the Yessey Yakuts originated from, but in the other territory of Yakutia, and the Yessey Yakuts came to their present homeland as a fully formed ethnic group with their material and spiritual culture. Then, on the spot, they adopted skills, elements of everyday life, individual words used by reindeer herders from local Evenk tribes, which they needed for living in new conditions. Even the Turukhansk Evenks, although they were in close contact with the Yessey Yakuts, retained their identity – culture and language, which cannot be said about

the Tungus tribes who roamed in the territory of Yakutia and who are completely Yakut at the present time. Any nation, interacting throughout its history with its neighbours, has a cultural influence on them to some extent and absorbs elements of another culture itself. And only in conditions of isolated, compact residence, these processes slow down, therefore the traditional ethnic culture that has been formed for centuries is preserved, as it was preserved by the Yessey Yakuts.

As already mentioned above, the Yakuts came to Lake Yessey as a community that was fully formed economically. By the second half of the 19th century, the Tungus, the Yakuts and the Russians, who made up the population of the Olenek and Anabar river basins, had merged into a peculiar group of northern reindeer herders¹⁰. The well-known scientist-historian G.V. Ksenofontov noted that the Yakut ethnic group, judging by the way they manage their economy, is divided into two different branches separated from each other: “Yakuts-cattle breeders, carriers of the traditional culture of the basic ethnic group of Sakha, living in the central, southern and Vilyui regions of Yakutia, engaged in breeding of livestock and horses. Yakut-reindeer herders, which moved from the central territories of Yakutia to the north, where it is impossible to breed a large number of cattle due to other natural and climatic conditions. As a result, the Yakuts adopted the traditional culture of the aborigines of the North, in particular the Tungus, engaged in reindeer breeding, hunting and fishing”.¹¹

Thus, having come to Lake Yessey, the northern Yakut reindeer herders already had features and elements of the Tungus culture (it is a question of cultural interaction and not of ethnic assimilation), since they were in close contact with the Tungus before, and therefore could not adopt from the Tungus tribes that

roamed around Lake Yessey what they already had in their cultural background. This can be traced to a greater extent in the material culture of the Yessey and Olenek Yakuts: the use of identical dwellings, in particular a booth and a chum, common names for deer by age or some peculiarities, ways of transport use, cooking, hunting and fishing traditions, clothing, and common family names.

It should be taken into account that the Olenek and Anabar northern Yakut reindeer herders did not come into contact with the Tungus tribes that inhabited the territory of the present Krasnoyarsk Krai. So what is this sub-ethnic group – the Yessey Yakuts? Apparently, this is the northwestern group of Yakuts with a number of ethnocultural features (dialects).

Considering the way of life of the Yessey Yakuts in more detail, one cannot help noticing some changes that have occurred to the sub-ethnic group in the conditions of isolation from the majority of the Yakut people, surrounded by the Tungus-speaking population, in particular, in the neighbourhood of the Chirinda Evenk¹².

The Yessey Yakuts are mainly engaged in reindeer herding, which is the base for hunting and fishing. On Lake Yessey there were several types of farms combining these traditional occupations, which was determined by the natural conditions of the taiga, tundra or forest-tundra.

The reindeer herding for baggage transportation and riding, saddle construction, ways of seating on reindeer and ways of goods transportation used by the Yessey Yakuts are very similar to the Evenk type typical for the groups wandering along the tributaries of the Yenisei to the east (the Evenks of the village of Chirinda).

Along the Khatanga road, where some of the Yessey Yakuts moved, and also in the upper reaches of the Anabar River, in particular the Dolgan, Nenets and Nganasan, also practiced reindeer herding.

The Yakut (Vilyui district) elements of culture can be traced in the way of building sledges (narts), in the use of the right reindeer as the leading one instead of the left one. The Yessey inhabitants, like the Evenks of the village of Chirinda, and the northern Yakut reindeer herders of Olenek are able to milk deer and keep them in the forest in the winter.

In the hunting practice, the borrowings are more obvious. The Yessey Yakuts, except for the hunting methods with the help of chaps, cherkans, bows and arbalests common for all Yakuts, they also adopted some methods used by the Evenks of the Chirinda settlement. The vital borrowing of the northern Yakuts on the Yessey was the Evenk custom of *nimat* (*nimat* – literally translated from the Evenk language “a treat, gifting after hunting especially those who needed and could not hunt”) associated with the hunting and fishing economic complex of the northerners. A successful hunter shared his kill with poor, weak old people and those who did not have deer. Unfortunately, at the present time the younger generation follows this ancient custom less and less, this custom is preserved only among the older hunters.

Thus, in the process of formation as an ethnocultural group, the Yessey Yakuts experienced the influence of the Olenek Yakuts, the Evenki of Ilimpia¹³. In turn, they also shared their knowledge with neighbours. As a result of historical migrations and economic development of new lands, the Yessey Yakuts created an original and distinctive culture.

At present, interethnic relations on Lake Yessey are undergoing modern transformations. Among the Yessey Yakuts, interethnic marriages have become a common phenomenon, thus ethnic traditions and cultures mix, which leads to some “marginalization”.

Analyzing the cultural traditions of the Yessey Yakuts, a kind of ethnographic group of the Yakut ethnic group, a number of

generalizations can be made concerning the history of culture, the transformation of culture and ethnic interactions in the territory of the north of the Krasnoyarsk Krai and Yakutia. The formation of a specific culture of the Yessey Yakuts throughout the history makes it possible to judge the results of the ethno-cultural interaction of different cultural and everyday traditions that have spread in Eastern Siberia, and also to trace the mechanism of adaptation to the harsh conditions of the extreme North.

Historical and ethnographic analysis allows us to conclude that the ancient autochthonous components of the Tungus culture can be traced in the culture and cultural traditions of the Yessey Yakuts. The north-west of Yakutia and the north-east of the Krasnoyarsk Krai have long been a place of intersection of ethnic and cultural links. It is noteworthy that the ethnocultural components that structure the main skeleton of the culture of the Yessey Yakuts represent a complex multicomponent formation that was formed before it came to this territory.

In this connection we should expect a clear predominance of the characteristic features of the most dominant ethnic component (in our case, the Tungus component) in the culture of the Yessey Yakuts. The analysis of the culture of the Yessey Yakuts shows that in the field of reindeer herding, hunting and fishing practices, some influence of the Tungus component can be traced, that is, methods typical for the aboriginal population of the forest-tundra zone.

Northern Yakut reindeer herders in the new conditions implemented the traditional hunting and fishing experience, and also adopted methods of hunting more rational for the native population: hunting for wild reindeer with a domestic reindeer *manshchik*, pursuit of wild reindeer on sledges, drive hunting methods. These archaic, but very reliable methods of hunting were inherent in the Evenk methods of hunting

The development of domestic reindeer herding among the Yessey Yakuts was associated with the assimilation of special skills and led to a complete change in the way of life, the transition from semi-nomadic to nomadic life (unfortunately, completely lost at the present time). Analysis of reindeer herding terminology and technology leaves no doubt that this branch of the economy was borrowed from the Tungus tribes.

The history of the composition of the dialect culture of the Yessey Yakuts makes it possible to discover the patterns of the composition of this ethnolocal group.

The ethnocultural borderland of the Yessey Yakuts with the culture of their neighbours is quite interesting. As already noted, according to the peculiarities of the economy and the individual elements of material culture, the Yessey Yakuts are close to the Ilimpian group of the Evenks of the Krasnoyarsk Krai, however, the language and elements of spiritual culture allow to judge about a great proximity to the Olenek and Vilyui Yakuts.

In general, the Yessey Yakuts occupy a border position not only territorially, but also in culture between the Olenek Yakuts, on the one hand, and on the Ilimpian Evenks on the other.

The Yakut reindeer herders were forced to perceive and implement the economic pattern of the indigenous population, adapt to new

conditions, while the traditional culture of life support was maintained in the spiritual field. As a result, a specific ethnographic group emerged here, the Yessey Yakuts – reindeer herders with a culture similar to both the Evenk and the Yakut model.

The study of the contemporary culture of the Yessey Yakuts sheds light on the problems of the formation of the Yakut socialist, post-Soviet culture under the influence of the school, literature, radio programs, television, the development of the Internet and high technologies, constant communication with the newcomers, both Russians and Yakuts from central Yakutia (peculiarities of the Yessey Old-Yakut dialect quickly disappear). Old customs, rituals peculiar to this isolated ethnolocal group recede into the past. At present, there are about a dozen of old residents still remembering and observing customs and speaking the Yessey dialect of the Yakut language.

Cultural differences of the Yessey Yakuts have mainly disappeared, only features related to fishing and hunting are preserved, but these features are no longer perceived as ethnocultural. Therefore, at the present time the Yessey Yakuts are not so much an ethnic separate group, but a local group of the Yakut ethnos on the territory of the Krasnoyarsk Krai, but this is already a separate topic of research.

¹ Dolgikh, B.O. (1960). *Rodovoi i plemennoi sostav narodov Sibiri v 17 v* [Family and Tribe Composition of Siberian Peoples in the 17th Century], Moscow, p. 122.

² Ibid., p. 151.

³ Ksenofontov, G.V. (1992). *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar*. Book 1, Volume 1, Yakutsk, p. 218.

⁴ Parnikova, A.S. (1971). *Rasselenie iakutov v 17 – nachale 20 v.v.* [Settling of the Yakuts in the 17th = beginning of the 20th centuries], p. 77.

⁵ Vasilyev, V.N. (1908). *Kratkii ocherk inorodtsev Severa Turukhanskogo kraia* [Brief overview of aliens of the North of the Turukhansk District]. In *Ezhegodnaia russkaia antropologiya* [Annual Russian Anthropology], 2, p. 59.

⁶ Gurvich, I.S. (1950). *K voprosu ob etnicheskoi prinadlezhnosti naseleniia Severo-Zapada IaASSR* [To the issue of ethnic belonging of the population of the north-west of the Yakutsk Autonomous Soviet Socialistic Republic]. In *Sovetskaia etnografiia* [Soviet Ethnography].

⁷ Ksenofontov, G.V. (1992). *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar*. Book 1, Volume 1, Yakutsk, p. 218.

⁸ Dolgikh, B.O. (1963). *O proiskhozhdenii dolgan* [On the origin of the Dolgans]. In *Sibirskii etnograficheskii sbornik* [Siberian ethnographic collection], Moscow, p. 122.

⁹ Gurvich, I.S. (1977). *Kul'tura severnykh iakutov-olenevodov* [The culture of northern Yakut reindeer herders], Moscow, p. 23.

¹⁰ Gurvich, I.S. (1950). *Sovetskaia etnografiia* [Soviet Ethnography], Moscow, 4, p. 161.

- ¹¹ Ksenofontov, G.V. (1992). *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: ocherki drevnei istroii iakutov* [*Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: notes on the Yakut ancient history*]. 1 (1).
- ¹² Chirinda is an Evenk village in the south-east of the Evenk Municipal District of the Krasnoyarsk Krai.
- ¹³ Ilimpia is an administrative territorial name of the Evenk Autonomous District of the Krasnoyarsk Krai in the past.

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RAN Sbornik museiia antropologii i etnografii. Ukrasheniia narodov Sibiri [*RAS Collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. Adornment of Siberian Peoples*] (2005). Saint Petersburg.

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Культурное пограничье есейских якутов-оленеводов Красноярского края

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Статья является кратким изложением истории формирования, ассимиляции и культурного пограничья обособленной этнолокальной группы есейских якутов, исторически разделенной как территориально, так и в социально-культурном аспекте, с основным этносом саха-якутов, но не утратившим при этом своего самосознания, культуры и языка. Также дана оценка современного состояния культуры, развития и проблем данной этнолокальной группы, проживающей на севере Красноярского края в Эвенкийском муниципальном районе в посёлке Есей. В данном контексте к числу пограничных этнокультурных ландшафтов можно отнести северо-восточную границу современного Красноярского края и северо-западные районы Якутии, а именно место формирования субкультуры есейских якутов – район озера Есей. Этнолокальные компоненты, структурирующие основной каркас культуры есейских якутов, представляют сложное многокомпонентное образование, сформировавшееся еще до проникновения на эту территорию.

Ключевые слова: ассимиляция, культурное пограничье, есейские якуты, этнолокальная группа, якуты-оленеводы, трансформация, маргинализация.

Научная специальность: 07.00.07 – этнография, этнология и антропология.
