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THE YAKUT PEOPLE SHIFTING FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY: STAGES OF CULTURAL INNOVATIONS

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Abstract: This paper deals with transformations having occurred in Yakut culture from the second half of the 18th century to the 1920s-1930s and concerning both material and spiritual culture. According to the authors, Yakut culture came a long way from traditions to modernity over this extensive period. In the first place, these transformations are associated with reforms carried out in the political order and economy, namely, the provincial reform of 1775 (constitution of the Yakutia Region), the First Yasak (fur tribute) Reform of 1766-1769, agrarian reforms of the 1770s and M. M. Speransky's Siberian Reform of 1822, among others. This research study used the retrospective and comparative methods. Special attention was given to the modernization of culture, the transformation and disappearance of traditional forms of culture. What is meant by modernization is a shift away from tradition to the formation of mass culture and the establishment of civil society institutions. The authors made for the first time in research history an attempt to identify the critical periods, which were of multi-stage nature, of this process. The first stage relates to the second half of the 18th century when innovations in material and spiritual culture started to penetrate Yakut culture not yet influenced by the Russian expansion. The second stage connected with the reforms implemented in the 1820s introduced into Yakut culture certain elements borrowed from Russian culture and assimilated by the Yakuts. At the turn of the 20th century, the third stage is marked by the widespread modernization of many facets of Yakut culture. Finally, the fourth stage dating back to the first decades of Soviet rule is characterized by intensive modernization which led to the disappearance of a great

number of traditions and the emergence of various forms of mass culture. The above-mentioned stages highlight the historic milestones in the development of Yakut culture influenced by modernization. The present paper examines for the first-time transformations having taken place in specific areas of Yakut culture such as mundanity and art. The authors conclude that these transformations were evolutionary and unmarked by any regrettable incidents.

Keywords: Yakut culture, reforms, tradition, modernization, innovations, assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

As a system of stable spiritual and material values, norms and behavioral patterns, traditions ensure the functioning of culture, and innovations foster interaction with other cultures. The stated topic is one of the fundamental areas of contemporary research [1-3]. A balance between traditions and innovations is of utter importance for a society to develop normally. Conflict, symbiosis and synthesis are possible scenarios in the evolution of such interactions. There is an opinion that "the entire history of Russian modernization is an ongoing and conflictual coexistence of traditions and innovations, of inner development trends and those borrowed from European culture" [4]. Is it so? Russia is a big multinational country boasting a wide variety of cultures, and regional specificities play a notable role there. In this regard, research into the regional and local aspect of this topic is highly relevant [5]. Yakutia is the largest region of the Russia Federation. The Yakut people, after which the region was named, are unique in terms of the historical evolution of a symbiosis between traditions and innovations. The present paper, based on the retrospective and comparative research methods, aims to examine the main stages representing the introduction of cultural innovations into Yakut culture and the nature of this process. The research study involved the use of documentary sources from both local and central archives.

Chronologically, the study covers the period from the second half of the 18th century, when profound changes took place in Yakut lifestyle and household habits, to the 1930s, i.e., the time of the Soviet cultural revolution. This time framework marks out some steady trends in the traditions/innovation's dialectic. The Yakuts, numbered some 100,000 during this period, were the representatives of a typical traditional culture. In the context of the dispersed nature of the population, semi-nomadic and semi-sedentary cattle and horse ranches operated as grazing and livestock keeping in summer boxes (*sayylyks*) and winter ones (*kystyks*). Entirely dependent on natural and climatic conditions, this kind of households was economically fragile and unsteady. Droughts or cold winters recurring every 10 to 20 years used to devastate both small and previously self-sufficient households counting dozens of head of cattle. The entire population lived in the countryside under the *ulus* system obeying their major (*ulus*) and minor (kin) heads.

Before the first period under investigation, Yakut manors and virtually their entire material world rested on ancestral foundations. These include the wood-framed pillar structures of winter dwellings (*balagans)*; birch bark summer tents (*uras*); household décor comprising ceramic ware; men's and women's traditional clothing

made of tanned fur, cloven-hoofed (deer, elk), predatory (wolf, lynx, bear) and domestic animal skins and decorated with copper and silver; wooden and birch bark receptacles and metal labor and household tools handmade by local artisans or family members. In social terms, the small-sized form of family counting 5 to 8 members prevailed; these families would then group together into paternal kins known as *ulus*. The ulus nobility relied on socially important genealogical reasons (family ties to the primal forefathers Ellay, Omogoy and others) and on their economic power represented by dozens of dependent ulus people and hundreds of head of cattle) to expand their authority lost in the past century during Yakutia's incorporation into the Russian Empire.

Homesteads were rather secluded and self-sufficient under the prevailing *khutor* settlement system. There were no major settlements numbering more than 100 inhabitants, and the Yakuts rarely lived in towns. Possession of a dozen of head of cattle and several horses was considered normal, and poor homesteads with no cattle accounted for some 20 per cent of the population. Trade and business relationships were only emerging at that time. Not yet influenced by world religions, the spiritual world of the Yakut people, who believed to live in Middle-Earth, was based on animalistic ideas of worshipping the spirits of various localities, faith in supreme deities (*ayyi*) who would give prosperity and well-being to people. During season festivities (*ysyakhs*), especially invited shamans (*oyuuns*) would offer these deities gifts and sacrifices, mostly cattle, as part of various worship rituals, such as *kyydyy* sacrificed to the horse-breeding *ayyi*.

Consequently, the **first stage** covering the second half of the 18th century was, above all, associated (1) with transformations in administration arising from the provincial reform of 1775 which led to the constitution of the Yakutia Region. The role and extent of participation of Yakut nobles in administration, especially in the judicial branch, increased. (2) This period witnesses the mass baptism of the Yakuts which triggered the mechanism of transformation in their traditional world perception. Up to one third of the Yakut population had become Christian by the end of the century. Christianization was apparently a formality limited to the adoption of Russian names, elements of Russian clothing and one-time attendance of churches and chapels that were limited in number back then, totaling some two dozens. What interested newly converted Christians most were material gains such as *yasak* (fur tribute) exemption for several years and other benefits. Shamanism and ancient beliefs remained perfectly intact at this stage and throughout the following two stages too. Religious syncretism marked this period when, despite the formal adoption of Christianity and observance of certain Orthodox rites, the practice of inviting shamans and of worshipping sacred locations and objects (trees) was maintained.

(3) The *yasak* and agrarian reforms of 1760s-1770s speeded up the sedentarization of the Yakut population. Administrative and fiscal territorial entities known as *naslegs* (from Russian 'nochleg' or night lodging) were newly established based on old yasak *volosts*/districts and some enlarged *ulus*. The population would be registered in these *naslegs* managed by *nasleg* lords/heads. From this time on, written authorization was necessary for anyone who had to absent him- or herself from their place of residence and borders between *naslegs* and *ulus* started to be fixed. (4) The evolution of goods/money relations and highway communications brought about changes into the material world. Forced to use their horses as a mode of annual

transportation of State-owned cargoes, the Yakuts started to be involved in these relations. Converting *yasak* payments into a monetary equivalent and the absence of official prohibition of barter and trade allowed, first, the Yakut nobles and, later, common Yakuts to engage into business transactions.

From this time on, the imperial communication field expanded into Northeast Russia, with the acquisition by the local people of the Russian language, daily practices and the introduction of rudimentary public education among the Yakuts. Previously, Russian settlers and the indigenous population did not have much contact, but new communication channels emerged during the period under examination. In addition to official communication represented by *yasak* and other homage payments, this period witnessed an active development of close business relations and highway communications as well as an increase in international marriages between Russian peasants, who had been arriving in large numbers in Yakutia since the 1760s, and Yakuts living along highways, and between other categories of Russian peasants and Cossacks and Yakuts inhabiting various newly christened *ulus*. Given the growing role of land ownership, wooden winter houses became larger and *khotons* (barns) adjacent to *balagans* increased in size too. From now on, Yakut residential complexes featured log houses called *babaaryna* (from Russian *'povarnya'*).

The traditional costume includes textiles and, consequently, the color range undergoes changes too. Members of the nobility, first, introduced elements of Russian clothing into their wardrobes. For instance, Sofron Syranov (1719-early 19th c.), deputy of Catherine's *Ulozhennaya* (Code) Commission and first head of the Yakutia province, who had lived a long life, was buried with traditional rituals in a *chardat* burial. Nonetheless, his funeral costume features new elements such as items of Russian clothing (a red wool coat, a silk scarf, etc.), imported decorations and, finally, a small crystal cross [6]. Yakut homes now had new tools, household items and decorations. Gradually replaced by imported porcelain and glassware, Yakut pottery lost its decorative value and became rather plain. Woodenware underwent major transformations too: in particular, the shape and décor of *choroons* was considerably modified [7]. The handle in the bottom part of the container disappeared, transformed into the stand. A newly introduced practice was tobacco smoking. Bone chiselers mastered the art of making smoking pipes and snuffboxes after the imported samples. Tobacco had high demand and, therefore, it became a major article of commerce. The Yakuts started to use fire weapons despite an official ban on them.

The need to involve the Yakut population into administrative affairs resulted in the promotion of literacy among them through private teachers, church and Cossack schools. In the middle of the 18th century, Yakut children were schooled for some time in the Yakut Spassky Monastery as a result of a pastoral visit of Bishop Innocent II Nerunovichi of Irkutsk to the Yakutia uyezd (district). According to F. G. Safronov and V. F. Ivanov, there were about a hundred literate, Russian-speaking Yakuts by the end of the 18th century [8]. Therefore, Yakut culture assimilated, by means of Russian culture, some European cultural values through innovations due to political and economic reforms and the development of market relations. Other stages followed the first one. The **second stage** is associated with a number of transformations dating to 1820s-1830s, including the following: introduction of the *Chart on allogenes (Ustav ob inorodtsakh)* of 1822 stemming from the activity of General Governor of Siberia M. M.

Speransky; the resulting intensification of indigenous self-administration by means of emerging indigenous councils and the Yakut Steppe Duma; and the Second *Yasak* Commission which regulated Yakuts' land tenure arrangements in the form of a class system that divided the Yakut population into several classes by volume of homage payments. Newly baptized Orthodox Yakuts became proficient in agriculture and horticulture, which considerably enriched their traditional cuisine. From now on, pancakes and other flour products were part of everyday food consumption, in addition to the *salamata* porridge.

The traditional Yakut costume came into existence at that time [9]. The inflow of textiles, the diversity of imported clothing and accessories transformed the design of both men's and women's costumes. Men's and women's wearing of shirts and dresses, respectively, the appearance of costume elements such as *khaladay, kharsyat* and *seliechchik* gave the finishing touch to the traditional Yakut clothing. Blacksmithing and jewelry had evolved sufficiently to provide people with not only household tools, but also luxury goods. Women's silver jewelry surpassed the previous phases of its development in terms of variety and ornamentation. The professionalism of Yakut carpenters created demand for them even outside Yakutia: for instance, a joint Russian-American company hired hundred of them to work by contract in Alaska [10].

The boundaries of the communicative space of Yakut culture not only expanded within the Russian Empire, but also crossed the borders. First steps were made towards creating the Yakut written language, and the translations of *Catechism* in 1812 and 1819 provided the Yakut language with abstract religious terminology. Literate Yakuts became were often involved into private correspondence using the Cyrillic script, including in the Yakut language, and major Yakut administrative documents were also first written in the Yakut language. A. Y. Uvarovsky's *Memoirs*, published in 1848, became the first literary work written in the Yakut language. According to P. A. Sleptsov, the first literary lexical structures in the Yakut language date back to this period [11]. A written language, though not yet widespread, gradually evolved, becoming a milestone event in the Yakut intercultural communication field.

The Yakut intellectual class can be said to have emerged in this period[12]. In the 1820s, a graduate of the Yakut District College, Nazar Borisov, became the first teacher of Yakut background [13]. In this regard, of special importance was the school affiliated to the Yakut Spassky Monastery: active between 1801 and 1816, it graduated dozens of young Yakuts who then worked as scribes in allogenous councils, and some of them are known to have joined provincial State administrative bodies. On an auditing visit to Yakutia in 1844, Senator I. N. Tolstoy was impressed by the academic performance of Ivanov, a young Yakut from the Tyllymin *nasleg* of the Kangalas *ulus* who studied in the district college and recommended that he should continue his studies in a gymnasium in Irkutsk [14]. Although unsuccessful, this first attempt to give upper secondary education to a representative of the Yakut population illustrates the fact that allogenes (in this case, Yakuts) were given equal right to secondary education with Russians. Furthermore, the Yakuts were encouraged to receive vocational education. As an example, in the mid-19th century Yakut youths were sent to Kazan to get training in medicine [15].

Among other signs of the second stage of cultural innovations are Yakut merchants' achievements and deepening communication links in the business and

religious sectors. The culture of money and entrepreneurship originates in this period, and the extent of Yakuts' influence in this sphere becomes clear if consideration is taken of complaints from local Russian merchants who feared strong competition from their Yakut counterparts. Leisure activities of some Yakuts who resided in cities and town included visits to rich Russian merchants, officials and Cossacks, reading books and journals and attending the Municipal Club in Yakutsk.

Starting at the turn of the 20th century, the **third stage** is related to modernization processes which began to be clearly manifest in this time. During the period under consideration, the Yakuts were still a prevailing ethnic group throughout the vast Yakut Region covering over 4 million sq. km^2. Their population according to the 1926 census was 235,926 (82.7% of the total population) whereas Russians and Tungus accounted for 30,156 (10.5%) and 13,145 (4.6%) respectively, the overall population totaling 285,471 [16]. The main occupation of the Yakuts, i.e., cattle breeding, was market-oriented. Throughout the region, the Yakuts represented 95.8% of those engaged in cattle breeding and 82.8% of those making their living from transportation services [18]. Despite their geographical dispersion, the Yakuts maintained a clear perception about their ethnic territory. According to M. Khrokh [19], the ideas about their common past and the descent of all Yakuts from their forefathers Omogoy and Ellay were widespread among the Yakuts.[1]

All the Yakuts spoke the same dialectless and mutually understandable language that took on a literary quality [20, 21] and even acted as a means of interethnic communication. Common shamanic beliefs and the Yakuts' formal commitment to Orthodox Christianity largely contributed to the maintenance of their ethnic unity. Only 2.1% of the Yakut population resided in cities and towns while representing 32.5% of the region's total urban population [16]. The third type of relationships, according to M. Khrokh, has to do with the concept of equality of all members of the group, which was also applied to the rather homogeneous Yakut society: by the mid-1920s, middle-class peasants constituted most of the population (68%) [22], with an average of 8.4 head of cattle and 3.1 horses per homestead [18]. This land was mostly inhabited by small and medium cattle owners. A transition from the economically disadvantaged class to the upper one, represented by merchants or *toyons*, could be completed within 1 to 2 generations. Besides, *toyons* had close blood, family and kin ties and business relationships with the rest of the population.

Having emerged in the early 20th century, the Yakut intellectual class claimed religious leadership [23]. According to the 1897 census, only 0.7% of the Yakuts were literate, but the Yakut's literacy rate made remarkable progress over a quarter of a century (through to the fourth stage): in 1917, their literacy rate was 5% to 10% in 1917 and 16% in 1926, with 12.8% of Yakuts being literate in rural areas [24, 25]. The Yakuts had become exceedingly sedentary, and there was no longer much difference between winter and summer dwellings. Summer birch bark *urasas* became a thing of the past [26], and Russian *izbas* were a frequent sight in Yakut homesteads. Fire weapons, Lithuanian scythes and other imported household items came into everyday use. Yakut crafts monopolized the local market: Yakut artisans produced carvings in wood and bone, women's and men's jewelry, furniture, luxury items and even rifles. Items made by

[1]See, for instance, Ksenofontov, G. V. Elleyada. M. 1977.

Yakut blacksmiths were in high demand in Siberia and even overseas among Native Americans [27].

Libraries were formed in educational institutions and by individuals. The Yakut language acquired a written form and actively explored the new space of the vibrantly developing imperial Russian culture. Newspapers and journals in the Yakut language started to be published in the early 20th century. The expanding popular education network yielded its first results: Yakut teachers, doctors, musicians, officials, priests, writers and professional artists were no longer a rare occurrence. The Society of Literature and Theatre Lovers, a regional museum and a library were established by the end of the century. The scenic art, including the activity of the Allogenous (Inorodchesky) Club and the first productions in the Yakut language (for instance, V. V. Nikiforov's *Manchary*), was becoming increasingly popular among the Yakut population.

Along with peasants, the Cossacks contributed significantly to the promotion of culture. Cossacks residing in Yakutia acted as a link between Russian and Yakut cultures as they were of mixed ethnic background, including the Yakut component, and spoke fluently the Yakut language. It is from them that the Yakuts borrowed some items, folklore and elements of household economy. Besides, Cossack teams had choirs and musical instruments. The Russian Orthodox Church enhanced its cultural impact on the region in this period, with intense church construction and graduates of religious schools and seminaries becoming teachers. For example, this milieu gave first notable musicians and choirmasters F. G. Kornilov and A. V. Skryabin, who marked the beginning of professional Yakut music by setting to music and performing local folk songs. First adaptations of Yakut musical folklore occupied an important place in the repertoire of choirs and orchestras booming in this period throughout the newly established Yakut autonomy.

In addition to the Society of Literature and Theatre Lovers, the Bishop choir used to hold concerts and, thus, contributed to the emergence of professional art among the Yakuts. The first Yakut violinist V. N. Svinoboev, a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory, lived during this period. First local artists were also closely connected to the religious sphere, since the expansion of Orthodox Christianity and church construction in Yakutia gave rise to Yakut art. I. I. Sivtsev-Mytyiyky, icon painter and monumental painter of the late 19th-early 20th century, was one of the originators of Yakut painting. He developed his creative talent by copying canonical icons, covered wooden Yakut churches with fresco paintings and created works of art combining Russian and Yakut elements in in intricate way. The founder of professional Yakut art and outstanding ethnographer I.V. Popov was born into the family of a village priest, received secondary education in the Yakutia Seminary and continued professional education as an artist in St. Petersburg. His works of art mostly focus on historical and ethnographic subjects. Another originator and developer of Yakut visual art is the local historian and ethnographer M. M. Nosov. Also born into the family of a priest, he attended the Yakutia Seminary and then left for St. Petersburg. Nosov mastered on his own the art of painting and preserved in his works a large body of Yakut culture and life which has not survived to our day.

The **fourth stage** dates to the first years of Soviet rule marked by a cultural revolution. Actually, Yakut culture, including elements of professional art, had been formed shortly before the revolution, and Soviet power later used all of these achievements to produce a new, Soviet, culture for the Yakuts. The imperial Russian

government was planning to introduce, in the nearest future, not only a general secondary education network, but also a primary education one for allogenes. Another planned innovation was to create a health care system. Each district had doctors, small hospitals and pharmacies. Soviet historians used to accuse Imperial Russia of the paucity of these undertakings, yet the little that the tsarist authorities had done was a major breakthrough for the 250-thousand Yakut population, the main difficulty being the region's remoteness, long distances and scattered population.

Soviet innovations include mass literacy, health care services and the establishment of a network of cultural institutions such as clubs, village reading rooms and travelling cinemas and theaters. Systematic professional training programs aimed to provide advanced training not only to club employees and librarians, but also to people employed in the emerging sector of professional visual, musical and dramatic art. The general population was enthusiastic about these innovations involving well-organized events and entertainment activities. Meanwhile, a major offensive was launched against traditions: *khotons* (barns) were separated from *balagans*, a housing development campaign was underway, shamanism was banned and prosecuted and the staging of *ysyakhs* was equally prohibited. These sweeping changes took place so quickly that the population, stunned by the extent and immensity of these campaigns, was unable to keep pace with them. As a sign of backwardness, folklore and, especially, legends may have looked suspicious to party officials, yet researchers kept collecting and studying them, and some folklore plots provided the framework for many literary, theatrical and musical works.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we identified four stages in the evolution of Yakut culture from its exclusively traditional form until the time when tradition gave way to professional development marked by the dramatic advance of modernization on all the spheres of the Yakut cultural space. This process dates to the second half of the 18th century when major reforms occurred in economic, social and political aspects of life in Yakutia and intercultural communication intensified between the local and Russian cultures at all levels. The second and third stages are related to the enhancement of above-mentioned contacts following the transformations in the 1820s when the Yakuts adopted Christianity and started to work in agriculture.

At these stages, i.e., at the turn of the 20th century, the Yakuts absorbed, despite their non-Russian status, many aspects of Russian lifestyle, food, clothing and daily habits. Cultural syncretism bore fruit in terms of the Yakuts' rethinking and assimilation of cultural borrowings, urban culture, professional art forms and so on. The fourth stage witnesses the real incorporation of Yakut culture into the all-Russian culture when traditions became history and, in many respects, Yakut culture entered the cultural space of Russia. All innovations in Yakut culture were smooth, evolutionary and unmarked by any violent upheavals or conflicts, which resulted in the full assimilation by Yakut culture of imported innovations.

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