

The Role of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Exhibitions in the Regional Museums of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug

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Some elements of the culture of the Achaivayamski¹ reindeer herders, such as ancient beliefs and cult objects, are now retained only by members of the older generation. A significant change in the lifestyle, customs and culture of the people has led to a situation in which the young are no longer able to describe many ceremonial activities or to name the cult objects.

In almost every national region of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug (KAO) there is a regional museum. The museums are usually affiliated with a school, so that concrete examples of traditional cultural objects and artwork of the native peoples of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug can be shown. There is a relatively wide range of exhibits for the schools and the community. Collections include harpoon tips, which are thousands of years old, as well as much more recent objects, such as a tobacco box, made at the end of the last century. Almost every museum collection contains a set of the tools required by every reindeer herder, fisherman, and hunter. It goes without saying that these are essential for teaching purposes. Few children, and for that matter very few adults, are able to state accurately the purpose of this or that object. Wooden hand drills have been replaced by electric drills. Only in places with irregular electricity can you find a solitary old man planing runners for a sled. With the arrival of the new economy, some reindeer herders have lost their reindeer, or simply slaughtered them, because they were unable to afford the labor time, and herding brigades have collapsed because they have never had commercial instincts. The delivery of food and equipment has been discontinued because of the rising cost of helicopter rentals. To live through the winter without sufficient food or ammunition is practically impossible. Some brigades of herders are settled hundreds of kilometers from the nearest town, and for them to travel to town, even riding on reindeer, can take more than a month.

Every generation of northern peoples has been presented with serious challenges, but following the path of our ancestors has always been twice as hard.

In the pre-Revolutionary period, despite all the difficulties of life, our grandfathers and fathers preserved the traditional way of life as well as the spiritual culture of their ancestors. In the Soviet period the nomadic way of life was declared uncivilized, and all northerners were required to adopt the settled lifestyle, which brought many ills. Today, numerous traditions and customs, such as the skills required for reindeer herding, as well as for the construction of hunting and herding equipment and even traditional dwellings are all on the verge of extinction. Worst of all, though, is the fact that the young have totally forgotten the language and culture of their people. Therefore, today it is extraordinarily important to preserve that which is still not irretrievably lost, while our elders have still not left to join their exalted ancestors and taken their knowledge with them.

Preserving languages and traditional occupations under contemporary conditions is an unusual and difficult problem. Left to himself, the northerner is a person of few words, and he will simply never engage in pointless conversation. Such is the custom; that silence is a character trait of the northern person. Sometimes the reason for silence is the desire not to show emotions, that is, an eloquent silence. He never forces his children or anyone else to do something that they do not want to do. But the children have always known quite well what is required for survival on the tundra, what can be done and what is forbidden. They simply imitated their parents: girls followed their mothers, boys their fathers. But this only applies to children who lived on the tundra, as opposed to in boarding schools. This applies to those who woke in the morning to the sound of crackling wood and the rattling song of the teakettle; and those who walked with their fathers following the herd at night; to those who helped their mothers sew boots from reindeer hides by the light of the fire and learned to dress the meat. They all learned to depend only on themselves and on their knowledge. These children will never forget the laws of the tundra.

But what is it like to be one of those who grew up far from the dawn's rising sun, who don't know how to make a *trivet* (*taganok*—tripod of sticks which supports a kettle or teapot over a fire) on the tundra, who call a *malakhai* a "hat". All of these links should be joined in some way. The Okrug center produces radio programs and articles in Koryak language, but the young people do not listen or read them. For help, one can come to the Koryak Regional Museum, where the store-rooms and exhibits hold the answer to any question. Museum workers offer lectures and slide shows, and lead

excursions that teach about the spiritual and material culture of the native peoples living in the Okrug and on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Masters of applied arts and tent builders have been invited to the museum, where they taught visitors how to sew *chizhi*. It is already difficult to accommodate the ongoing exhibits and collections in the museum's building. But, unfortunately, plans for a teaching workshop on the skills and practices of reindeer herding, hunting, fishing and tent-building, have been dropped. But the museum already has everything that is necessary for such instruction: tools of the reindeer herder, harnesses, sleds, herd nets, harpoons, cutting-out boards, cut-out patterns, etc. The library is rich in materials in Koryak, Itelmen, Even and Chukchi languages. Foreign researchers and filmmakers working with the museum materials have been pleased and surprised by the richness of the ethnographic collections and available objects, many of which ceased to be used long ago, and whose names have been forgotten.

For children, the best spot in the museum is the ethnographic hall, where there is a panorama entitled "Nymylans² of the coast of Lesnaya", created by the artists Viktoriya Krupina and Aleksandr Pirozhenko. The panorama represents the life in the village of Lesnaya during the summer fishing season. Holding their breath, sitting near a real tent, they are listening to the stories of an old Koryak woman, Maria Tepenovna, about "Kuykinyaku and Mitty". And in the same tent sits a shaman with a drum, bending over a sick child. The exhibits are created by the museum workers themselves, so questions and projects suggested by the visitors are greatly appreciated. The following questions are just a few examples: what is the Koryak term for "tabakerka"? What is a shaman? Why should one never disperse hot coals? How can one make Koryak instruments oneself? How is an Even or Chukchi funeral ceremony conducted?

At the museum, in one way or another, visitors encounter objects of traditional knowledge, or in today's terminology, traditional ecological knowledge. This field of knowledge could be developed further, and a special section could be created where information about the Russian Arctic is disseminated. Here it would be possible to learn what "traditional ecological knowledge" means for the Arctic environment, and recent news on this subject could be assembled. A large role would be played by the annual cycle of each of the four peoples living in the okrug. To this could be added the family cycles of the different peoples', and the specificity of different occupations: fishing, reindeer herding, plant gathering, and sea-mammal hunting. It is

commonplace to recognize that the native people of the Arctic have their own specific relationship with nature, and that this relationship has grown and been carefully protected for many generations.

Meanwhile, a new generation of scientists has come to the conclusion that science cannot manage without traditional knowledge. And at the same time, in its relation to questions about the environment, traditional knowledge is invaluable. The 1993 *Nuuk Declaration on Environment and Development in the Arctic*, which was signed by the environment ministers from each of the eight Arctic countries, declares that “We recognize the special role of native peoples in the management of the environment, and the development of the Arctic. We recognize the significance of their knowledge and traditional economies, and we will support their effective participation in achieving stable development in the Arctic.”

The traditional knowledge of the native peoples of the North are characterized by the following:

- Traditional knowledge: this is a way of life based on the experience of individuals and communities, as well as knowledge passed on from older generations and presented in the native language. This knowledge is permanently adapted to the changing life and environment of each community, and it will continue to exist so long as the people live on their land and use their resources.
- The knowledge is preserved and passed on from one generation to the next solely by means of the spoken word and hands-on training.
- The accumulation and passing on of traditional knowledge refers only to that knowledge which is specific to a given region and its ethnic inhabitants. In this way, knowledge is not simply passed from one generation to the next, but is carefully selected, so that the next generation can in turn improve upon and refine it.
- All arctic peoples developed entire cultures around the exchange relationship between generations, including techniques of education for the passing on of knowledge, systems of kinship relations, and ways of managing families, clans and communities. Contemporary civilization has disregarded this experience, and much of it has been lost.
- The knowledge of native peoples is consolidated in the form of skills and practices, customs, notions of correct behavior, methods of hunting and

managing a herd, etc. These are specific to each northern people, and depend on their mental patterns.

For many years the native peoples of Russia had pressed upon them the idea that things had improved for them. With the “smoking north” programs large areas were allocated to towns for newcomers (*priyeczhi*), transport lines, mining operations, oil fields, etc. Their lands and rivers were polluted or ravaged by careless managers, and in some cases they are no longer useable. During the Soviet period, many parts of the native economies were handled by state and collective farms. Old people say that this was not a bad time: supplies were delivered to the tundra on time, salaries were paid every month, bonuses were paid based on socialist competitions, people travelled to sanatoriums for vacation. Today, the people are used to abiding by orders and do not know how to live on the tundra without deliveries of supplies. They do not know how to sell meat or even get it to the market. Thanks to the generalized social and economic crisis in Russia, the northern peoples have begun to revitalize the forgotten lifeways of their ancestors. They have begun to turn to traditional methods for producing the means to live. Perhaps this is good, because no one but the northern peoples are able to use the natural riches of the vast taiga and tundra expanses in such an effective and rational way as by hunting and reindeer herding. The native peoples of the north, with their centuries of life experience in the harsh living conditions of the North, are unsurpassed hunters and reindeer herders, expert in handling the local environmental conditions. It is quite possible that contemporary society, anxious about the impending ecological catastrophe, may someday turn to the organization of native peoples with requests for cooperation, and in this way, seek to integrate the knowledge of native peoples into all programs to protect the Arctic environment.

Notes

- 1) A Koryak village in the north of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug.
- 2) Name for coastal Koryaks.