

The Loss of Oral Traditions in the Far East Russia: Future of the Community

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Abstract: This paper investigates the issues threatening the existence of oral traditions and expressions, a strong element of Intangible Cultural Heritage of indigenous nations in Russian Federation and discusses the consequences for the associated communities of such threats. Two of the major threats, rapid globalisation and modernisation of human life-style, have led to the distancing between generations, a phenomenon clearly evident in native settlements where younger generations are moving to urban areas and abandoning their native culture. This paper specifically focuses on the case of Evenks people of Russia, who represent one of the largest native minorities of the country. The Evenks were chosen to be a representation of the phenomenon due to the fact that the native community shows high concern for the issue of oral traditions endangerment and works on safeguarding it. The research used content analysis and netnography research to collect data from social media associated with Evenks and research articles on the issue to study the factors that affect the loss of oral traditions and the consequences for Evenks people of the loss of their oral heritage. It was found that topic of the endangerment of oral traditions among Evenks lacks the diversity of research, and does not receive enough support of legal protection of oral traditions and expressions. Nonetheless Evenks people show a great case of community empowerment through the process of creating programs for safeguarding their language and culture in the modern setting.

Key words: oral traditions, cultural heritage, loss of values.

La pérdida de tradiciones y expresiones orales entre las naciones indígenas de Extremo Oriente: consecuencias para la comunidad

Resumen: Este artículo investiga los problemas que amenazan la existencia de tradiciones y expresiones orales, un elemento fuerte del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial de las naciones indígenas en la Federación de Rusia y discute las consecuencias para las comunidades asociadas de tales amenazas. Dos de las principales amenazas, la rápida globalización y la modernización del estilo de vida humano, han llevado al distanciamiento entre generaciones, fenómeno que se manifiesta claramente en los asentamientos nativos donde las generaciones más jóvenes se desplazan a las zonas urbanas y abandonan su cultura nativa. Este artículo se centra específicamente en el caso de la gente de Rusia de los Evenks, quienes representan una de las minorías nativas más grandes del país. Los Evenks fueron elegidos como representación del fenómeno debido a que la comunidad nativa muestra gran preocupación por el tema de las tradiciones orales en peligro y trabaja en su salvaguardia. La investigación utilizó el análisis de contenido y la investigación de la netnografía para recopilar datos de medios sociales asociados con los Evenks y artículos de investigación sobre el tema para estudiar los factores que afectan a la pérdida de las tradiciones orales y las consecuencias para los pueblos de los Evenks de la pérdida de su patrimonio oral. Se encontró que el tema del peligro de las tradiciones orales entre los Evenks carece de la diversidad de la investigación y no recibe suficiente apoyo de la protección legal de las tradiciones y expresiones orales. Sin embargo los Evenks muestran un gran caso de empoderamiento de la comunidad a través del proceso de creación de programas para salvaguardar su idioma y cultura en el entorno moderno.

Palabras clave: tradiciones orales, patrimonio cultural, pérdida de valores.

Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), as a part of Cultural Heritage, is a very sensitive subject as it is "important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization" (UNESCOb, 2011, p. 4). Oral tradition, have an important role in every culture, as it includes not only language, but also "spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems... and more" (UNESCOa, 2011, p. 4).

Oral traditions for indigenous people represent more than just spoken language; yet it is the factor that brings all oral traditions together and allows its transmission. Language builds the knowledge, defines the community structure and builds personality different from other native communities (Boroditsky, 2009). Unfortunately, established tradition and modern society often clash as a result of rapid development and changes. Leading to the shift in values, urbanization causes the movement of people and intermarriage among different native people

results in reduction of cultural populations; this leads to clash with national languages resulting in decay and a risk of extinction (Lewis, 2009). This phenomenon is very evident in the case of Evenks ethnic population, and therefore they were selected as the subject of this research.

The Evenks indigenous people represent the largest native population in Russia geographically (Syliandziga et al 2003) (see Figure 1). Yet in the current decade sociologists and ethnologists define only around ten to thirteen thousand native speakers world-wide while the overall population is over double (Janhunen & Salminen, 1993; Lewis, 2009) and it keeps decreasing.

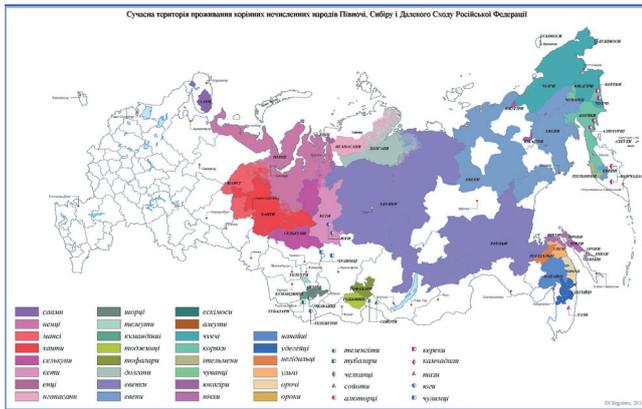


Figure 1.-The Territory of Modern Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation.

— The Importance of the Research

This research is essential, as culture and traditions are the foundation of human creativity and intelligence. Language enables ethnic groups to communicate information among each other and pass it on to future generations, without which people will lose their heritage. Therefore it must be safeguarded in order to ensure that future generations have opportunity to cherish the same experiences that past and present generations have now.

This research aims to 1) identify the factors that cause the native language to vanish; 2) determine what the effects are of the disappearance of language on the traditional way of life; 3) suggest possible solutions for how oral heritage can be safeguarded.

Literature review

— ICH

Cultural Heritage (CH) is defined as something of value, which communities want to pass to future generations and what brings a “sense of continuity” (Deacon et al 2004, p. 7). It demonstrates the diversity of nations and individuals; both tangible and intangible in form, it unifies a community. Unfortunately, ICH, unlike CH, is

neither universal nor bounded by time, as it is a direct representation of the living traditions and practices of a community that change and evolve (UNESCO, 2011). ICH conveys identity and uniqueness of the community, impacting the way individuals view their world.

— Concept of the Oral Traditions and Expressions

Oral traditions are defined as any spoken outlook passed from generation to generation from parents to their children. Language plays a critical part in keeping culture alive, as without oral expressions it would be impossible to transmit all the knowledge and wisdom that has been collected by previous generations. This also can lead to the distancing between generations and loss of connection to the past among younger people, as they are more oriented toward western cultures (Hieber, 2012).

At the moment, there are around 6,900 known languages in the world (Lewis, 2009). Over 3000 of these are endangered (see Figure 2). Russia alone accounts for 111 of the total endangered languages in the world (The Endangered Languages Project, 2016). With some forecasting, professionals predict that by the end of 21st century 50% (Nettle & Romaine, 2000) to 90% (Krauss, 1992) of all languages used today will be either endangered or extinct (see Appendix A).



Sources: Alliance for Linguistic Diversity, UNESCO

Figure 2.- Map of Endangered Languages in the World.

— Loss of Oral Traditions and Expressions

The endangerment of oral traditions are due to a variety of factors; among which, globalisation and urbanisation, environmental problems as well as the change in the setting of the place (UNESCO, 2011; Hieber, 2012). Those factors force people to move to urban areas (Emirova, 2013; ICHCAP, 2016) and amalgamate in a new environment (Tygolykov, 1982), which results in decrease of native speakers. With separation and distancing of the native working population, the community is further reduced (Tygolykov, 1982). All these factors negatively impact the condition of the language itself.

— *Impact of the Loss of the Language*

In cases where language extinction is threatened, it results in eventual disappearance of the bond between the culture and the language of its speakers. Though, ICH does not include the grammatical structure of the language, with the loss of the language it is inevitable that the loss of oral expressions would soon follow (UNESCOa, 2011). Even though it is natural for languages and oral traditions to adapt to the community's ongoing changes, the disappearance of a language can have harmful effects on the community (Sallabank, 2010).

From the linguistic point of view, the shift that speakers have toward the wider used languages, leads to the generations that would not be aware of all the diversity of oral expressions that society has to offer.

• *Relationship between Endangered Language and Native People*

Languages mirror the society (Lupyan & Dale, 2010) and its relationship with nature. The oral expressions or terms used in everyday lives have cultural and environmental context specific to that language. When a community loses its language, its cultural identity could also be lost. Most of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a society is transmitted through language, and it is connected to the other ICH domains. Performing arts, festive events or even daily routines cannot fully function without language.

Methodology

The paper used an exploratory qualitative research method (Nargundkar, 2003). Document analysis and netnography were utilized in the collection of data, mostly with use of ethnographical approach for better understanding of Evenks' people lives and more in-depth insight knowledge on the case. It also produced richer data that otherwise would not be found through quantitative methods, due to limitations.

— *Document Analysis*

Content analysis is one of the most suitable research methods when it comes to study of ethnography and human communications: "Communication content is transformed through objective and systematic application of categorization rules into data" (Holsti, 1969). The paper included information from peer reviewed studies from Russian authors as well as public records (Appendix B). It served as a background and support for netnography, in order to build the base of trustworthiness among readers (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

— *Netnography*

Netnography, also known as "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000, p. 257) can be defined as "a participant-observational research based on online fieldwork" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 66). Netnography was used to provide more primary data to support the topic and answer the research questions. With netnography, by using the wide range of online resources that were provided for researcher (Bowler, 2010), several main types of resources were selected in order to have the best observational material. (Appendix B).

— *Analysis of Data*

The original language of the content used for analyse was Russian, as Evenks are native people of Russian Federation. Therefore, to present unbiased information to the reader, the double-blind translation method (Heath, 2005) was used to insure the accuracy of translation and trustworthiness of data.

The use of the "pattern based coding" allowed the author to cover more research ground in shorter time, as well as get larger amount of feedbacks from native people (See Table 2). Researcher was able to work through the patterns met in the content of the web-sites and from that developed structure that could satisfy the research discussion. As research had only focused on Evenks ethnic group, it is important to understand the limitations that affected the methodological design.

Findings and discussion

— *Evenks*

Territory of Russian Federation is a home to over 200 ethnic groups and almost 100 of them are representing local indigenous population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016; Case 2). Each community has their own language and culture to represent and safeguard (see Table 1). For the present time the language of Evenks people is marked as "endangered" (Case 3.1, 3.4), and local dialects are already "possibly extinct" (Janhunen & Salminen, 1993, p. 1).

— *Findings*

It was possible to find some of the factors that affect the process of endangerment of languages and the oral traditions world-wide, in result the cause-effect relationship diagram was created (see Figure 3).

The research suggests that there are some affects that are mentioned more often than the others and that are correlated with other reasons for vanishing of the language.

Table 1.- Ethnolinguistic classification of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East.

| Family of Languages | Language Group | The name of the people - their language (dialects) |
|---------------------|----------------|--|
| Altai | Turkic | Dolgans - Sakha (Dolgan dialect) Tozhu tuvans - Tuvan (Todzha dialect) Tofalars - Tofalar Kumandy - Altai (Kumandin dialect) Teleuts - Altai (Teleut dialect) Shor - Shor (two dialects) |
| | | Evenki - Evenki (three dialects) Evens - the Even (three dialects) Nanai - Nanai (several dialects and dialects) Ulchis - Ulchi Udege - Udeghe (three dialects) Orok - Orok Orochi - Orochi (three dialects) Negidal - Negidal (three dialects) |
| Ural-Yukagir | Ugrian | Khanty - Khanty (three dialects) Mansi - Mansi (several dialects) |
| | Samoyeds | Nenets - Nenets (several dialects and sub-dialects) Sami - Saami (four dialects) Selkup - Selkup (six dialects) Nganasans - Nganasan (several dialects) Enets - Enets (two dialects) |
| | Yukaghir | Yukaghir - Yukagir (two dialects) |
| Chukchi Kamchatka | | Chukchi - Chuukese (two dialects) Chuvans - originally Yukagir Now Chukchi and Russian (Markov dialect) Koryak - Koryak (nine dialects) Itelmen - Itelmen |
| Eskimo | | Eskimo - Eskimo (three dialects) |

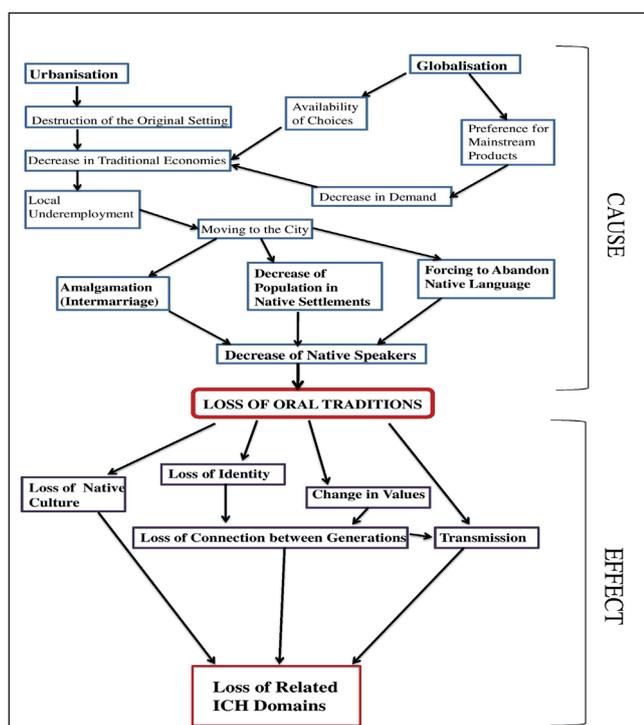


Figure 3.- Cause and Effect Relationship Diagram of Oral Traditions Endangerment

Table 2.- Categorisation of Common Terms Found Through Content Analyse and Netnography.

| The Causes for Vanishing | Categories |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Development of Neighbouring Regions | Globalisation |
| Globalisation | |
| Environmental Problems | |
| Urbanisation | |
| Decrease in Economy Support | Migration |
| Drop in Demands for Native Crafts | |
| Lack of Governmental | |
| Migration | |
| Modernisation | |
| Unemployment | |
| Moving to Urban Areas | Abandoning of Native Language |
| Abandoning of Native Language | |
| Amalgamation | |
| Bi/Tri Lingual System of Education | |
| Change in Traditional Way of Life | |
| Decrease in Population | |
| Health Issues | |
| Intermarriage | |
| Lack of Use of Language | |

The most commonly used terms were categorised and included into the discussion (see Table 2). It also helped in defining important factors, as it clearly showed by the mentionings, what is considered important among native people and what people are really concerned about.

— Discussion

The most commonly mentioned causes for the endangerment of the oral traditions were globalization, migration to urban areas and abandoning of the language. [Table 2]

•Globalisation

The issue of globalisation is the most commonly mentioned factor that affects the loss of language. It is well-known outside Evenks community, as other indigenous people are also affected by this process. Three main factors were discovered that come from the globalisation, they are: development of neighbouring regions, environmental problems and urbanisation.

Globalisation is not something that can be easily stopped in the modern world. Globalisation and modernisation are the forces that despite helping the community do not pay much respect to minorities and their culture, and homogenies cultural groups. Therefore the local community sees it as a threat to their culture and the traditional way of life, as it brings change. In the discussions on forums, elders state “the longer civilization does not come to us, the better” (Case 3.4).

Local people acknowledge the globalisation and recognise its effect on their life. Community members participating in public forums like “Indigenous Russia”, “Evenki”, “RAIPON” talking about changed of their original way of life, most commonly how it affects their nomad life style. Having to settle and change their habits, leads to changing of the language, as there would be no need for the particular slang or words that they would use while moving around (Case 3.4). Among elders, the grandmothers are generally the carriers or oral traditions, which they would pass through story-telling to their grandchildren, yet now situation is changing. “They live in the city, and I am in the village” – comment one of the elders in the village (Case 4).

Urbanisation comes from development programs that were created by Russian government (Case 1.2, 1.3). This development changed the eco-system and the environmental situation of the region, resulting in environmental pollution and change in the original setting (Case 1.3). The consequence for native people was the decrease of pasture for reindeers, as well as the number of stock itself (reindeers are the main livestock for Evenks, as well as a mean of income, food and equipment supply) (Case 1.2, 1.3). Those factors resulted in decrease of economy and since it is harder to support the family, native people are

forced to move to urbanized areas or bigger cities to find more stable and profitable job.

•Migration

The migration issue that affects locals came from several causes, like: drop in demands for native crafts, unemployment, lack of governmental support, decrease in economy and modernisation. All of those factors have resulted in the increasing migration wave.

As one of the Evenki teachers informed: “Why we do not know the language? Became too settled, having comfortable lives, to preserve the language, you also need to save the nomadic way of life” (Case 4).

The changes in economic situation and drop in demand for local crafts appeared due to the local economy not being able to compete with mass production and mainstream brands. With larger number of modern choices for people, as well as lack of support from the government, it is harder for people to take care of their homes and family (Case 1.5, 1.7). This makes local community to shift from local businesses and trades to more modern incomes. Modern technologies have also replaced the original tools (Case 3.3, 3.4), and while it is making the life easier it certainly has an impact on the language usage. Less and less they use Evenks language to explain the tools and materials, changing them to Russian or even English substitutes (Case 3.4).

People highlight that they have to abandon their nomad way of life and settle down, and even though it improves their life, it cuts them off from their roots. Slang what would be used by reindeer is now getting evaporated, as smaller amounts of people are using it, and there is no one to pass this knowledge to, as modern generations are not interested. Several speakers noted that “the preservation of reindeer herding is the basis of preserving the language, as children of reindeer herders are completely native Evenki language speakers” (Case 3.4). The migration causes the alienation of Evenks people and leads to abandoning of the language which is the direct cause for disappearing of the oral traditions.

•Abandoning of Native Language

The most direct and at the same time most challenging reasons for the endangerment of the language among Evenks have been referenced by both researchers and local people. Change in traditional way of life, amalgamation, bi/tri lingual system of education, lack of use of language, intermarriage; all result in decrease in population and therefore abandoning of native language.

When people amalgamate, they change their habits, their way of life; learn the language that people speak around them. The first shifts to another language took place during the Soviet Union, as native people had to learn Russian

language, in order to be able to work on factories and understand the majority of population. The director of the school says: "We speak both Russian and Buryat and Yakuts and Evenks [languages]" (Case 4).

Amalgamation process is happening as people move to more urbanised areas in order to be able to fit in a new way of life. One of the main consequences of amalgamation is intermarriage. Evenks often comment on a fact, that now most of them already have mixed ancestral roots. The teacher of Evenki language speaks "[My parents] automatically speak only in Russian, even among themselves. The language is preserved only among the old-timers" (Case 4).

The bi/tri lingual system of education that is common among native settlements might not be as useful, as it seems at first. While Russian based schools teach two languages: Russian and English, when it comes to native regions, students have to study two to four languages, depending on how many different native ethnics are living in this region. This of course gives a basic knowledge of a language, but sometimes it is not enough to be able fully express everything. "Teachers of the Evenki language are not prepared, we have textbooks...[but] they are very old. We ... [use] different words, if you read something to old people, they do not always understand" (Case 4). The teacher later continues: "Evenki [language] none of our students know; teach them from scratch. In total teach four languages at school: Evenks, Russian, English and Yakut. All employees of our school speak Yakut. Evenki only know 1 and 2-3 employees" (Case 4).

In some cases even in families the language preservation is at risk: "In families Evenki language dies, even my own children say I did not teach them from childhood, and now they complain that they want to know their own language" (Case 4). The other problem faced by schools is the lack of findings from the government to support enough educational institutes, which results in decline of educational level (Case 4). The example can be the Yukaghir language that even though taught in several schools has only 20 native speakers (Case 3.2). This shows how the system that intended to help in safeguarding of the language has flaws; even though it is taught, it lacks the depth and meaning behind it.

•Impacts

The loss of native language has a great impact on not only native people but also the outsiders. It has been already mentioned above, that the loss of language and oral traditions leads to loss of other intangible heritage, like rituals, performing arts, social practices and even craftsmanship. By using old legends and spelling rituals, Evenks used this knowledge to conduct annual rituals, create the ornaments on products or clothes that would tell about their and their ancestors' lives (Case 3.4). Many other examples can be shown on how the language interconnect with the cultural heritage of Evenks, and with loss of only one element, all others would

be affected. This in the end would cause the changes in the mind-set of people, change their values, and as a result the disappearance of the culture will take place.

The loss of culture would affect not only Evenks that would not be able to represent their culture anymore. This would also affect the country as a whole, as Evenks represent a great ethnical layer of Russian culture and history, and without it, Russian culture would suffer a loss of its wholeness.

—Implications

Even though the Evenks language is considered endangered, there is still hope for its safeguarding and passing to next generations, not only as a linguistic treasure, but also as a mean to bring the community together, a cultural core that passes values from generation to generation.

Local and regional non-profit organizations (NPO) as well as local community's head officers are taking measures to safeguard national cultures and with it the oral traditions (Case 1.1). The local community leaders together with regional governments are creating different programs and platforms, helping to safeguard oral traditions. The law "On nomadic schools" (Case 3.4) is one of these projects that can be used as an example. The other case that can be used is the Eskimos' ICH that was offered by local community to be included into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List (Case 3.3), which gives hope for the Evenks people as well.

The rising interest in "the development of the social media in local language, textbooks and courses in local languages" (Case 3.4) also take place, which shows the support of local people towards their language, and their willingness to promote and distribute it among the population.

It can be seen that even though there are difficulties, the community members and the associations try their best in preserving the language, by implementing new courses as well as trying to push new legislations to the national level.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to discover the reasons behind the disappearance of native language among native people of Russia on the example of Evenks people. The investigation tried not only to identify the reasons for disappearing, but also the consequences for community in case language is lost. It was found that there are changes that affect the language in Evenks settlements. These changes are taking place mainly because of the increasing influence of globalisation and modernisation. Although development cannot be stopped, smart development considering safeguarding of ICH can be implemented.

This paper had discovered that in this case when the language is endangered, people start to understand

the importance of the safeguarding the traditions, and understand the impact it will have if no actions taken. That is why there are more and more programs being established, and the local community government is trying to put legislations of guidelines for protection their language. Moreover this brings the hope that possibly people do understand, respect and love their culture and factors that makes them unique. There are programs and cultural exchanges; new school openings as well as new legislations being implemented that are committed to the protection of the language and also safeguarding of oral traditions.

The importance of this research lays in the understanding of substantial value of the culture on the world, its fragility and invisibility to an eye in everyday life, but without which people would lose their individuality and history. The famous proverb says “finders-keepers, losers-weepers”. It perfectly describes the current situation where little by little people lose their traditions and individuality in the run for westernise mainstream trends that are pushed by modernisation and globalisation to masses. It is vital for people to understand the significance of their culture and try their best in its safeguarding to ensure that future progeny would be able to enjoy the fullness of experience that it can deliver. In other words, it is only up to the communities themselves to make sure that their cultures will live on and grow with every new generation. With this in mind, the raise of awareness is substantial for safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and particularly oral traditions and local languages.

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Appendix A.- "WAR OF WORDS" Table.

WAR OF WORDS

- ♦ 6% of the world's languages are spoken by 94% of the world's population
- ♦ The remaining 94% of languages are spoken by only 6% of the population
- ♦ The largest single language by population is Mandarin (845 million speakers) followed by Spanish (329 million speakers) and English (328 million speakers).
- ♦ 133 languages are spoken by fewer than 10 people

SOURCE: Ethnologue

Appendix B.- Findings Data Collection List.

List of Resources from Content Analyse:

- Case 1.1: Golovin, A. (2003). O koncepcii Modeli Etnicheskoi (Nacionalnoi) Shkoli dlia Korennih Malochislennih Narodov Severa Rossii [The Concept Model of Ethnic (National) School for Indigenous People of Russia North].
- Case 1.2: Kolesnikova, L. K. (2003). Socialno-ecologicheskii problemi Amurskikh Evenkov [Socio-Ecological problems of Amur Evenks].
- Case 1.3: Kozak, V. G. (2003). Ekologo-geograficheskaya harakteristika sredy prozhivaniya Evenkov amurskoy oblasti [Ecological and geographical characteristics of the living environment of Evenks in Amur Region].
- Case 1.4: Pilaeva, O. (2003). Ob ischezaiyushem lazike Amurskikh Evenkov [About vanishing languages of Amur Evenks].
- Case 1.5: Safronova, T. (2003). Socio-demographic and legal situation in the village Ivanovskoe of Seleindzinski District (1999-2000.).
- Case 1.6: Serebrennikov, V., & Syhomirov, G. (2003). Problems of preservation of traditional forms of nature use of indigenous peoples of the Amur in new socio-economic conditions.
- Case 1.7: Tygolykov, V. (1982). Evenki [Evenks]. In Ethnical History of the Peoples of North (pp. 129—154). Moscow: Nayka.
- Case 2: Government, R. (2010). Vsenorodnaia Perepis Naselenia [All-Russian population census]

List of Resources from Netnography:

- Case 3.1: Evenki (VKontanke Community Group)
- Case 3.2: Indigenous Russia (Facebook Community Group)
- Case 3.3: Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East (RAIPON) (Official Website)
- Case 3.4: The indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East (Official Page)
- Case 4: Ria-Novosti (Ria-News)



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Anastasiia Chuguevskaia, born 4th of January 1994 in Khabarovsk City, Russia. Has been studying English language since 1998. In years 2006 – 2008 participated in communication with Japanese and American delegations as well as hosting of exchange students from Japan. In 2009 participated in Environmental research of Khabarovsk Region. In May 2010 graduated from Secondary Comprehensive General Education School. After graduation, practiced in Japanese, German and English languages. In February 2011 moved to New Zealand for overseas experience. In July 2012 have made a decision to study Heritage Management in Institute for Tourism Studies and moved to Macau SAR. In 2015 participated in creation and performing the Heritage Interpretation Event as well as provided Heritage Guiding Tours in Macau SAR. In March 2016 worked on Cultural Mapping of Inner Harbour territories of Macau SAR project, with assistance of DOCOMOMO Macau under supervision of Johannes Widodo and Richard Adams Engelhardt. In May 2016 graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Heritage Management. Have participated in IFT TED-Summit as outstanding senior student representative, under the supervision of Sharif Shams Imon.