

Transformation of Traditional Culture (Case Study: Municipal Areas of Ulyanovsk Region, Russia)

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Abstract

The present paper aimed to analyze the latest trends in a modern ethno-cultural life in two districts of Ulyanovsk region. Empirical basis of research included interviews and statistical data as well as publications in this field. All respondents mentioned a general increase of interest in the national culture among the population especially after the USSR collapse. However, it was mostly appeared in the responses of the Mordovians, the Chuvash and partly the Tatars. There was a significant aspiration to learn and thoroughly understand cultures of areas among the Russians. Nevertheless, this tendency is often neglected with obliteration of ethnic particularity in ethnos as a concern of some experts. The author believes that national villages, schools and in some cases the administration of national districts are centers of preservation and popularization of traditional culture. Traditional sport is a way of national cultures' revival. In general, rural municipalities represent a role model for the tolerance even comparing with the multinational Middle Volga region that is especially noticeable among the youth. The interest in religion is also growing throughout the region. Christians are the greatest number of believers. The author assumed that the interest in "national" and "religious" aspects often had a distinctive characteristic indicating the process of irregularities of ethno-cultural and religious revival in the region.

Keywords: Traditional culture; Rural population; Spiritual culture; Material culture; Religiosity.



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1. Introduction

At the present stage of the historical science development, it is important to conduct a comprehensive research on transformation processes in individual ethno-social and territorial groups of Russian society. This is a very promising direction of the disquisition considering that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are traditionally associated with the transformation of culture and the mass consciousness in Russian society on the whole. The transformation of rural population's traditional culture in the multicultural and polyethnic Ulyanovsk region is complicated by a number of circumstances. Firstly, the region has a few historical and cultural areas where the transformation process of traditional cultures does not simultaneously occur and it undergoes the influence of various internal and external factors. The rapprochement and integration of mass, modern and innovative cultures with the traditional substratum of most people in Ulyanovsk region (the Russians, the Tatars, the Chuvash, and the Mordovians) caused the emergence of specific features of its functioning and the creation of regional forms of existence. Secondly, at the end of the 20th century, the rural population of Ulyanovsk Volga region experienced an unprecedented impact of transnational culture including a very ambiguous ideological and value content leading to the conflict and lack of understanding between different generations regarding spirituality and religiosity in some cases. Finally, there are some objective factors such as the globalization of public consciousness; strengthening roles of media and the Internet in the creation of the ethnic, religious and social identity in the youth; the influence of neighboring nationally-oriented republics in the Middle Volga region; and the economic crisis of the 90s (Aksenova and Miftyakova, 2013).

This creates a need for the perception and awareness of modern trends in the transformation of the traditional culture in numerous people in Ulyanovsk region. Therefore, the scientific problem is the process and result of interpenetration and interaction of various elements of the traditional and innovative culture among numerous people in Ulyanovsk Volga region (González and Antúnez, 2016).

Husnutdinov *et al.* (2017) in his book *Cultural Studies and The Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*, discuss *The Consumption of Everyday Life*. The development of consumer society is starting from the 60's where people denied identity in production and forced to seek identity in consumption. The process is encouraged by the so called ideology of consumerism which suggests that the meaning of lives is to be found in what being consumed, rather than in what being produced. He indicates this as in line with the argument of Herbert Marcuse, which describes that the ideology of consumerism generates false needs whereas the needs work as a form of social control. People recognize themselves in commodities, and they find their soul in housing furniture, kitchen set equipment, etc. The social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced. According to Marcuse, advertisement generates false needs such as, to be "an extravagant person", to wear "a stylish clothes", to eat "up-market food", to drink "energy drinks", and to use "trendy items". This paper refers also to the theoretical hypothesis

of Pierre Bourdieu that explains mutually constituting nature of individual practice and cultural context. Bourdieu proposed that culture is an arbitrarily constructed notion, and a social group constructs its own particular temporarily contingent notions of culture. He was influenced by Max Weber's thinking, on the power of symbolic constructions, and Marxist theory, in which he introduced his notion that a society is fuelled by struggles in accumulating capital. Bourdieu further elaborated his theoretical ideas by raising the issue of a society which used culture as a mechanism to maintain social hierarchies (Hobsbawm, 1966). In his later studies, he concentrated more to issues of internal dynamics of cultural practice and its interrelationship. The studies conducted have contributed to a new research methodology, the so-called reflexive sociology, which encourages research on the nature of individual and collective practice, and the relationship between the specificity of social contexts and individual practice. Bourdieu's studies demonstrated that the arbitrary or constructed symbolic dimensions of tribal culture, as manifest in objects and practices, support and reproduce shared beliefs, meanings and values and thereby, maintain social cohesion within individuals in tribal groups. He puts symbolic practices on the same level as economic practices, as strategies in the competition for prestige or standing in the social hierarchy. All actions of people are to be conceived economically as actions aimed at the maximization of material or symbolic gain. The studies of Bourdieu on the characteristics of ideal home demonstrated that different class of society has different taste, and the lower class attempt to imitate the taste of the upper class through the purchase of reproduction furniture. According to Bourdieu architecture is not depended on an external market for its existence, it sets its own beliefs and values, although these are subject to internal struggles. Architecture as cultural goods does not have intrinsic properties that made them valuable, yet value is ascribed to them by the authority. The authority is, in a constant struggle, to maintain the legitimacy from others, who sought to take his place. Any act of cultural production implies an affirmation of its claim to cultural legitimacy. Those who claim cultural legitimacy also claimed distinction. Bourdieu insisted that cultural values are arbitrarily constructed and, therefore, those who claimed distinction are destined to continuous challenge by newcomers (Idiatullov, 2015).

2. Methods

A systematic approach was utilized in the present research. All questions were asked from interviewees in order to identify contemporary and traditional elements of the culture. Components including folk festivals, rituals, songs, features and patterns of national clothing, and cuisine were taken into account. The selection of respondents was carried out by the snowball method. Two trips were arranged for the interview¹, during which documentary materials (local history museums, schools) were thoroughly studied, conversations were carried out with residents about the history of village, natives' lifestyles, and peculiarities of traditional culture, household and economy. In addition, the paper analyzes data of state statistics, publications of periodicals.

3. Results and Discussion

Rural areas of Ulyanovsk region have experienced the transformation in the post-Soviet period characterizing by a number of obvious contradictions in the development of cultural process within specific ethnic groups in specific territories (Husnutdinov *et al.*, 2017). Certainly, there is the localization of individual ethnic and religious cultures (Hobsbawm, 1966). For instance, the Russians, as the numerous ethnic group of region, are settled across the territory rather unevenly, mainly in the western and north-western regions. In five districts of the region, the Russian population reaches over 80%, and it is a maximum of 88.6% in Bazamosyzgan district. In the southern Starokulatkinsky district, the Tatars constitute the predominant part of population (93.5%), and the Chuvash population constitutes 55.9% of population in Tsilinsky. The Mordovians are seen everywhere throughout the region, and thus their number is not constant. The greatest number of the Mordovians (26.7%) is concentrated in the Nikolaevsky district. Many ethnic groups of this region have undergone a few significant changes in their numbers and percentages (Idiatullov, 2015). Therefore, researchers have become more interested in investigating the preservation and functions of traditional cultures and religions of autochthonous ethnic groups in individual municipalities (Malygina, 2011). The research on local cultures and identities has been widely mentioned in the national and foreign literature. Mostly, this kind of phenomenon is analyzed from according to the geographical science (Marks, 1999) ethnography (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982) and the sociology (Sadykova, 2013) (Trofimov *et al.*, 2008). This research was conducted in a greater extent by an ethnographic approach (Villalobos, 2018).

In recent years, the number of people from the Caucasus and Central Asia has significantly increased in Ulyanovsk region districts; and it is evident not only by regular statistical data, but also by the observation of local people. It is interesting how these changes in the national structure are traced not as much in the whole district as their own settlements. According to an interview: "Until 1990, Kanadey was mainly populated by the Russians. There were several intermarriages. The Armenians then began to move here. We always had the Gypsies as well, and then the Tatars, Mordovians, and Chuvash emerged" (Weiss, 1988).

All respondents mentioned a general increase in the interest among the population in the national culture principally after the USSR collapse. However, it was largely seen in answers by the Mordovian respondents in Nikolaevsky district and the Chuvash respondents in Tsilinsky district. A particular remarkable fact is that there has been a decrease in the absolute population and in the proportion of Volga natives for several decades in the revival of the traditional culture among the Mordovians of Nikolaevsky district like the territory of Ulyanovsk region. For

¹ The trips were organized within the framework of the state task "Loci of socio-cultural landscapes in territorial socio-economic systems (e.g. polyethnic Middle Volga region)" / № 31.8018.2017 / BC

instance, if the percentage of the Mordovian people in the population of region was up to 5.7% in 1970, it turned to be only 3.3% in 2010. The last two censuses recorded this trend within Nikolaevsky district: the percentage of the Mordovians decreased from 28.56% down to 26.66% and in generally by 1,426 people (which is 16.46% of 2002 population). Due to such an obvious reduction in the Mordovian population, the «second» prevalent ethnic group of region is particularly indicative amid with generally favorable conditions for the revival and preservation of the Mordovian culture that was created in the region in the last decades. Principally, Baevka village, and particularly, the Baev secondary school can be considered as a real center for the preservation and popularization of the Mordovian culture. According to an interview: «One of the essential directions of this school is the investigation of the history, culture and life of the Mordovian people. The folklore band «Kilene», which is translated to Russian as «Beryozinka» (“*Little birch*”), is here as well. It holds different celebrations and events for locals. For instance, they dance and demonstrate rituals on Mother Tongue Day. Furthermore, their bright, colorful and very ethnic costumes are as a present from the [authorities of] Republic of Mordovia, and we have a very close relationship with this republic» (55 year-old woman, Baevka, a Mordovian teacher). The activity of a local branch of the national cultural and educational Mordovian organization «Lismapry» directed by Yashkin Grigory Sergeyeovich, who is originally from Baevka, makes an equally significant contribution to the actualization of Mordovian traditions. It is quite possible that the percentage of the Mordovians is declining in the region not because of assimilation processes, but for conditions which make discouragement. However, there are mono-ethnic Mordovian villages where number of interethnic marriages is relatively low as well as the activity level of Mordovian national associations. In our opinion, the decline of the Mordovians in the region is primarily due to the immigration (especially the young people) to the Republic of Mordovia due to being quite close to the region. This point of view also appeared in respondents' answers: «There are excellent Mordovia campaigns for Mordovia's universities. Ulyanovsk universities are extremely expensive. Our students prefer Mordovia State University » (61-year-old woman, Baevka, a Mordovian teacher).

The majority of respondents believed that the genuine raise of interest in national cultures in Nikolaevsky district was observed in the last 5-10 years and was absolutely related to activities of the current administration. According to an interview: «We've recently had this tradition in our district to hold the festival «Ethnic patterns». It takes place on June 12th and it is the Day of Russia. The founder is the head of our district. He pointed out and established roots of respect and honor for cultural traditions. The meaning of this festival refers to the creation of national courtyards including The Mordovians, Russians, Chuvash, Tatars, Gypsies and Armenians. Each village is responsible for its own courtyard. National cuisine is also exhibited. They put up a stand with a history of villages; and all of them are represented in national costumes. It is all played out, and we dress up» (41-year-old woman, Kanadey, a Russian teacher).

It is difficult to judge how deep roots let this festival print out into the mass consciousness of local residents. As one of the respondents accurately mentioned the national culture is only «played out» and «being performed», there is the utterly obvious tendency of popularity growth to this event.

The increase of interest in the national culture is also evident in the Tsilninsky district. However, it is not in fact connected with activities of the administration itself, but mostly with the local national activist party. According to an interview: «We study the Tatar and Chuvash languages, folklore and culture. Perhaps the most ethnical elements are seen in our national villages. When people move to regional centers and cities, the national culture unfortunately disappears. National culture does not accumulate» (50 y.o man, Bolshoy Nagatkino, a Chuvash school principle).

Mostly the «living» antiquity functions in the region exist as national and religious customs and traditions and within the spiritual culture, while material culture elements are often preserved only at district schools and museums. In the administrative center of Tsilninsky district, the transmission of national culture in the youth environment is primarily carried out at the school level as a part of the school curriculum; children often «try on» ethnic cultures of neighboring or unfamiliar people: «According to the Federal Educational Standard, there is a subject called «Regional studies»; and there is a topic dedicated to different people in Volga region. Every year, we organize a multicultural festival where all nations are represented. Participants should introduce customs, cuisine and national traditions» (70 y.o woman, Bolshaya Nagatkino, a Russian teacher).

There is another way to revive national cultures in regional centers and it is connected with traditional kinds of sports and national dance: «During our Physical Education classes, folk sports are played. For the jubilee of school, we seek to show Russian national sports to children. For example, gorodosny sport (*from an Old Russian folk game “Gorodki”*), «kuresh» (national Tatar wrestling), and «kureshu» (national Chuvash wrestling). In our art school, you can see dance performances from different nations. For example, the Russian, Mordovian, Chuvash, Tatar, Ukrainian dances» (50 y.o man, Bolshoy Nagatkino, a Chuvash school principle).

Interestingly, the same tendency of «playing out» neighboring cultures can be seen in a nationally mixed Elkhovoe Lake village, and it was repeatedly mentioned by a number of experts: «Last summer, we went to Yulovo village where we participated in an ethnographic festival. The Tatars were dressed up in Chuvash suits and the Chuvash were dressed in Tatar costumes. The Chuvash can fluently speak Tatar, there is no language barrier and Tatars can sing in the Chuvash language» (60 y.o woman, Elkhovoe Lake, a Tatar teacher).

Furthermore, we should also point out the fact that Elkhovoe Lake is an important center for the preservation and popularization of Tatar culture in the region. However, the interest in the culture of the Tatar people is not so widespread even within this village. Only a few isolated cases of interest in the growth of the national culture have been recorded. The Tatar traditional culture is currently experiencing the crisis and is only preserved by rare enthusiasts such as local school teachers. «Nowadays, they speak their native languages quite badly. Students are never initiative. They do not remember anything. I've planned a small event «Indian Summer» with traditional jokes,

songs, and old games. Last year, I held the contest «Young Homemakers». We also organize «Mother Tongue Day» (60 y.o woman, Elkhovoye Lake, a Tatar teacher).

In fact, Tsilninsky district is a good example of the tolerance even for the entire multinational Ulyanovsk region where is especially noticeable among the youth. According to an interview: «Children do not have ethnic divisions. After school, the separation takes place. There are some ethnic divisions in the city. But here, no. In Ulyanovsk, the Chuvash tend to hide their nationality» (45 y.o woman, Elkhovoe Lake, a Russian teacher). However, preconditions for tolerant relations between children are established by their parents who set a role model based on principles of mutual respect and the tolerance prevail: «Rituals, traditions, we are celebrating everything. There is a union. We understand languages of our neighbors. It's our custom» (60 y.o woman, Elkhovoe Lake, a Tatar teacher).

The desire for the knowledge and understanding different cultures of the region is especially noticeable among the Russian population. It often borders with obliteration of the ethnic particularity of given ethnos which has been expressed as a concern by some experts. In this regard, it is a fascinating fact that Tsilninsky district has no such celebrations as «Ethnic Patterns» of Nikolaevsky district, where, as we have already mentioned, and various national cultures are demonstrated and «played out». In fact, there are representatives of different ethnic groups at this kind of celebrations and they are actively involved in relevant actions in Tsilninsky district. Nevertheless, the need to demonstrate their differences does not arise. First of all, this refers to the «Bega» (“*Running*”) festival which has been held for more than 80 years in Bolshoi Nagatkino. It still attracts residents from all over the region and has been emphatically multinational and, in a certain sense, non-national.

The interest in the religion also increases in Nikolaevsky district. The greatest number of believers consists of followers of Christianity and Islam. However, we should remember that the Renaissance of Orthodoxy, which is now manifested in church constructions, and a high increase in the number of parishes do not necessarily have a direct expression in ritual practice and religious experience. In fact, interview materials documented almost the controversial nature of the religious renaissance across the region. Respondents often stated that the interest of local population in Orthodoxy is completely genuine, sincere, and lively especially among the youth. According to an interview: «The church has a very great influence; and young people revere traditions. They believe that they must go to church before any holiday» (61 y.o woman, Baevka, a Mordovian teacher). Though some responses, it seem slightly more restrained regarding religious feelings of Orthodox believers: «I agree, hypothetically, the religion is reborn, but in reality, it is not like that. Even in some small villages, and even less populated ones, there are churches and we only have a prayer house in the former apartment» (41 y.o woman, Kanadey, a Russian teacher). Therefore, according to interviews, the revival of Orthodoxy is a complex and inconsistent process in the region.

Religion is also reviving in Tsilninsky district which is primarily seen in the construction of churches and mosques. We can observe the interest in the religion among the youth especially Orthodoxy followers: «There is a Sunday [*Orthodox*] school in Bolshoi Nagatkino, and children attend this Sunday school. There are a lot of children in our church. I, myself, go to church» (70 y.o woman, Bolshoi Nagatkino, a Russian teacher).

It should be also highlighted that despite signs of ethno-cultural and religious revival, people live generally peacefully in this region; and there is no clearly expressed conflict over religious or international basis.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, the number of indigenous people, for example the Mordovians, is declining in the municipal districts of Ulyanovsk region not only because of assimilation processes, but primarily due to the immigration. The interest in national cultures occurs in municipalities for various reasons. Therefore, the process is stimulated by the local administration in Nikolayev district, while it is mostly connected with the national activist parties across villages in Tsilninsky district. In the youth environment, national cultures are mainly preserved by the help of education institutes. Elements of traditions and customs are presented in every school curriculum.

Current religious and ethno-cultural situations in Nikolayev and Tsilninsky districts generally remain quite stable characterizing by a certain increase in the interest in mother tongue, national culture, traditions and religion. This is obvious in the school curriculum; ethnic celebrations and festivals; the number of national associations, and the growth of churches and mosques. However, the interest in «national» and «religious» aspects often has a «played out» or «performing» nature allowing us to draw a conclusion about the unevenness and irregularity of the ethno-cultural process and religious revival across the region.

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