

CHILD REARING IN THE NORTH: THE TRADITIONAL SAKHA FAMILY AND MODERN TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

Yakut people or Sakha (self-designation) are a Siberian indigenous ethnic group in North-East Asia, inhabiting the Sakha Republic in Russia. Their language belongs to the Turkic family, and it is generally believed that they originated from Central Asia and migrated to the north about a thousand years ago. The article attempts to examine the traditional Yakut family, its child-rearing practices and modern tendencies of parenting in the context of the complex ethnogenetic phenomenon. Research suggests that the Sakha people were formed through a long period of adaptation to extreme climatic conditions in the region of permafrost. The Yakut family was inherently multi-generational: the need of several generations to live together in one household was caused by the harsh climate. The elderly lived with their grown children - that cohabitation facilitated housekeeping, saved resources and played an integral part in parenting practices. Additional factors included socio-economic hardships and the communal nature of the traditional Yakut society. All these elements promoted early development of positive qualities in children, such as self-reliance, tolerance and acceptance, hospitality and respect for elders. The child was treated as an equal as soon as he or she started participating in the family activities, first entrusted with small tasks, then with permanent duties.

To examine the contemporary changes, modern rural families were interviewed. The study reveals a change in parental attitudes with signs of encouraging childish qualities in adolescent children and the desire to promote a prolonged childhood. The traditional parenting model “to live with and be a part of my child’s adult life” is replaced with “let my child have less hardships than I had”, lifting the requirement of taking care of the elders in the family. Despite the differences, the core values of the traditional family remain relatively unchanged, mainly its child-centric characteristic and the instilled values.

Keywords: Yakut, family, child-rearing, traditional values

INTRODUCTION

Yakut people or Sakha (self-designation) is one of the largest among various indigenous groups of Siberia within the borders of the Russian Federation; they mainly populate the northeast part of the country. Researchers looking into different phenomena of the Yakut ethnicity, often touch on issues of ethnogenesis of the Yakuts. Some aspects of this issue also reveal certain characteristics of the educational behaviour of the ethnos. Kon wrote, “to understand the character of a nation, we need to learn first its history, social structure and culture; individual

psychological methods are insufficient” [6]. According to researchers, the problem of ethnogenesis of the Yakuts is extremely complex. The theory of their southern origin is the most developed and generally accepted. Many scholars and travelers from the 18th and 19th centuries come to that conclusion; it is in the works of Miller, Lindenau, Maak, Middendorf, Seroshevsky [9], [12]. Southern Yakut origin was represented in the research of Okladnikov [10] (the assumption of Baikal origin); Aristov [1] (Yenisey origin); Jochelson [5] (Turkish-Mongolian origin), and others.

A great contribution to the development of this issue was introduced by a Yakut researcher and historian Gavriil Ksenofontov, who considered himself a descendant of the “Uranhay” (a subgroup of the Yakut ethnicity), and was seeking the revival of his people. In his work “Uranghay sahalat” (essays on the ancient history of the Yakuts), he identifies three resettlement periods of the Yakuts [7]. A concept put forward by Gogolev has greatly enriched the theory of ethnogenesis of the Yakuts [2]. According to him, the Yakuts are among the nations with a complex ethnic development, shaped by the interaction of two processes that took place “in an uninterrupted unity of differentiation of various ethnic cultures and their integration” [2]. The author identifies two main trends in the formation of the ethnic group: South Siberian and Central Asian, and comes to the conclusion that “sedentary animal husbandry, combined with fishing and hunting, dwellings and houses, clothes, shoes, ornamental art and religious mythological beliefs of the Yakuts do originate in South Siberia, and have a Turkic element at their core. The oral tradition, folklore and customary law all have a Turkic-Mongolian foundation and were finally formed in the basin of the Middle Lena River” [2]. The development of ethnic consciousness manifested in the self-designation: Sakha.

The nation of Sakha developed through a long way of adaption to extreme climatic conditions in the region of permafrost. In the process of development of the ethnic group, cultural norms and values had to be developed, including behavioural stereotypes, which had a decisive importance in the socialization and education of children. In the process of ethnogenesis, every nation has formed its own system of socialization and education of children, the effectiveness of which is determined by how well the younger generation accepts the cultural values of the nation.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

To study an ethnic group in the context of education, it is very important to examine the problem of national identity, national psychology, coupled with the traditional values of the people. Throughout its history, the question of the existence of the national identity of Sakha did not have a clear answer [3], [4]. Erofeev favours the opinion that each nation has its own national identity [4]. In turn, Drobizheva points out the absence of the qualities that are unique to only one group of people, but their unique combination and level of

influence are what composes the psychological features of ethnic communities [3].

The description of national features of the Yakuts in the 18-19th century consists of descriptions of researchers, including travelers, writers, political exiles, who had lived in Yakutia. Human activity in the North was defined by climatic conditions and took place in a brutal struggle for survival, which contributed to the development of strong personal qualities, fortitude, and relationships based on empathy and constant readiness to help. The system of relationships and communication generated by the people ensured the survival and determined their way of educating children. It found its reflection in the customs and rituals of the nation. Ksenofontov described one of the customs of the northern Yakuts: "Every hunter who has acquired an edible animal is obliged to pay the lion's share of their game to one of the neighbors or even a casual visitor". The "Nymaat" custom doesn't require any gifts or favours in return, moreover, the subjects of this law are usually "decrepit old men, crippled widows, orphans, or random visitors" [7].

Education of the younger generation of Sakha in the past occurred in the family, which was the only institution of socialization of children, which reflected the experience and characteristics of the ethnic group as the subject of education. Relationships within the family were in the basis of socialization and education of children. Yakut family, being the main subject of education, was based on the traditional values of the nation. Throughout the history of the national development, family and children were at the core of the Yakut person's life.

These values were well reflected in the system of relationships within the family: a child held an exceptional position and was the subject of special attention and care, which ensured his/her overall protection, emotional well-being, close personal relationships with parents and other relatives. Among other values were respect for adults, deference for the elderly, protection of children with disabilities, humane treatment of orphans. However, according to our surveys conducted from 1996 to 2002 among respondents whose age ranged from 80 to 90, the attitude of parents towards the child was a subject of gradual change as the child grew older[24]. A child up to the age of five – was the object of adoration for the whole family. At an older age, beginning at seven, parental feelings were visibly less intense, the child would acquire responsibilities and became an assistant to the parents. Later on, the family would heavily rely on the teenage child for support and household duties.

The child is not only very important to its parents but for all its relatives as well. At the core of this attitude was one of the traditional values of Sakha - the value of the growing human not only for the family, but also for the nation as a whole. Questions that relatives and guests ask when they visit the family are primarily regarding the child's development and current achievements. However, this attitude of parents is not identical to the concept of 'spoiling'. A child would encounter restrictions expressed not in the form of shouting or slapping (or any corporal punishment), but as a change of the parental attitude from affectionate to

reserved. Attention and respect for the child was combined with demands regarding its safety and discipline. Communication with the child was determined by the acknowledgement of the child's activity. Much of the socialization of the child depended on him or herself; even a small child was not taken care of by the parents all the time. Since Yakut families had many children and due to the general busyness of the parents, younger children were cared for by their brothers and sisters who themselves were only a year or two older. That way they had an early opportunity to take the initiative and be self-dependent. In this case, the child is perceived as a friend and his or her first self-service skills are considered as assistance. That favourable position of the child in the family was at the core of the formation of his or her self-esteem. However, the attitude towards a young child contained the requirements for the development of socially significant qualities that determined the development of the child's personality [15].

The notion of encouraging the child to be independent was an integral part of the parental attitude. A saying popular among Yakut parents – “Kytaat!” (“Do your best!”) - used to accompany a person throughout his or her entire childhood and adolescence. A soulful connection between parents and children was characteristic of traditional relationships in the Yakut families, which meant mutual love and affection, mutual trust, empathy, tact, commitment to each other, mutual support and the drive to make each other happy. A parental attitude based on reason was reflected not only in the requirements imposed on the child's personality and behaviour, but also in the development of the sense of duty to their parents. From early childhood, the child formed a sense of duty to his or her parents: a son would be the future support for the parents; a daughter would help around the parents' house up until her marriage.

The parental relationship with the child was reformed as the child developed, taking into account the child's maturity, that aspect was always present in the parental attitude. Changing the type of relationship with the child in accordance with his or her age and psychological characteristics was gradual based on continuous monitoring of the child in work and everyday life. Any new accomplishment that the child had was immediately noted and encouraged by the adults. Children engaged in most household activities of the family very early on: generally, at age five or six. From that age on, a child was entrusted not just with assignments, but permanent duties as well, which occupied a lot of time every day. With manual labour being a necessity for the family living in a harsh environment, children were not just assigned with it as form of punishment, but as a natural part of their life. Seroshevsky wrote: “Yakut children are gradually taught to work, from early childhood. ... At age ten, a Yakut child begins to be regarded as a semi-adult. Most of his time absorbed in labour ...” [12].

As is well known, in the study of adolescence researchers paid a lot of attention to the concept of crisis occurring in this age. Margaret Mead, after examining ways of socialization of children in a traditional society, concluded

a crisis-free socialization of adolescents in the community[8]. After studying the life and traits of teenage girls in Samoa, and finding no crisis in their development, Mead concluded that adolescence is a phenomenon of modern civilization; it depends primarily on the cultural traditions of the society. Yakuts in the past, as well as other peoples of the North, experienced a crisis-free socialization. Strakach wrote about an ethnic Even, Savva Kaplin (over ninety years old at the time), who was taught to drive a boat, shoot a gun, set the net, when he was just ten years old. At age thirteen, armed with a gun, he went on to his first real hunting trip. Two years later, he learnt to make skis, boats, has become a real hunter and an independent, self-reliant person [13]. This fully applies to all young people of indigenous nations of Siberia, including the Sakha.

Yakut family was inherently multi-generational. The need for several generations to live together was caused by severe climatic conditions, as well as the willingness to take care of elderly parents. Cohabitation facilitated housekeeping, which helped saving family's resources. Grandparents living with their adult children did not occupy an inferior position. In fact, the husband's parents mostly held the leading position, but their son's word, the main worker and man of the house, was authoritative for all. The role of grandparents in raising grandchildren was significant. Due to the role of grandparents in the family, a long absence of the father did not interrupt the established way of life. Childhood memories of adults were often associated with their grandparents. Aside from the actual grandparents, close and distant relatives of all ages also could be a part of the family.

Popov investigated a Yakut family phenomenon – “dyukkachestvo” [11]. It is described as several families opting to live together due to economic considerations in the difficult conditions of life. This occurrence was caused by the poverty of the majority of the Yakut families of the pre-Soviet period. In such circumstances, mutual support helped the poorest families to survive. Researchers mainly paid attention to the economic aspects of this phenomenon. However, this matter had great influence in the education of children as well. The joint family life contributed to the development of tolerance of each other, which has a beneficial effect on the socialization of children in society. In the family, children had an opportunity to observe patterns of behaviour not only of their parents but also other adults. The absence of certain qualities or personal traits in their own parents was compensated by the presence of these qualities in other adults.

Excessive authoritarianism of one of the parents towards the child was balanced by the kindness and affection of other people living together with them. The social experience of the child was nurtured by living together with people who had different life experiences and different personalities. A child could develop skills that his parents did not possess. Through the psychology of dyukkachestvo, a higher tolerance of others and any following inconveniences was developed. This feature of the Yakut family contributed to the accumulation of experience of children in dealing with people of different ages, and proper development of communication skills.

The hospitality of Yakut family played an important role in education of children. Mastering the rules of hospitality in general influenced the formation of the personality of children. Hospitable Yakut family develops kindness in children, as well as tolerance, respect for older people.

The tradition of self-restraint had its place in the Yakut culture. Here you can find similarities with the traditional family education of other indigenous peoples of Siberia, such as Buryats. However, the Buddhist model mostly determines the Buryat people's personal development (mainly, the denial of active influence on the environment and focus on the inner world).

Traditionally, as in most cultures, the father was the head of a Yakut family. Father, being an economic leader, was also the psychological leader of the family. Little children had little opportunity to communicate with their father due to his employment in household chores, hunting and fishing, but growing up, participated in these activities, and on this basis the attitude to their father was formed as a courageous, hard-working, strong person. The father's arrivals after periods of absence due to long hunting trips in the taiga, or other reasons, were an event in the life of the family, with the family reporting to the father about the events occurred during his absence. Disobedience, unworthy behaviour of children were not hidden from the father. In the conditions of a large family with many children, the relationship between adults and children was so closely intertwined that it was very difficult to hide any facts or events. Promoting certain responsibility is based on the parents' understanding that love for the child must be demanding, that the child is not only a joy, but also a future adult, master of the house and breadwinner in their old age. If the mother was more of a provider of emotional support, the father was the guarantor of children's compliance with the norms and rules. Disobedience of children, lack of restraint, reckless acts were severely condemned, the condemnation was more manifested in changing the attitude of the father, mother, and other family members towards the child than in any form of physical punishment. Stern silence of the father and mother's distress were often more effective punishment than any abuse and beatings. Physical punishment was also used in relation to small children, and often these were light strokes with a small twig. Many episodes are preserved in the memories of old people in connection with this type of punishment. As a rule, mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers utilized a symbolic form of punishment.

To see the changes in the modern family, contemporary rural families were examined[14]. Study of the current parental relationship happened considering the following parameters: communication with a child, encouragement to independence, rebuilding the relationship with the child due to age-related changes, closeness of parents and children, demands on children, responsibilities towards parents. Comparative analysis revealed groups of families with different parent-child relationships.

RESULTS

In the Yakut family, the foundation of the upbringing of children was the traditional family relations, which reflected the existing culture, traditions, spiritual and moral values of the ethnos, its views, ideas, ideals. The existing provision that the village is the keeper of ethnic culture does not mean the immutability of all phenomena of the ethnic environment. It is believed that the traditional family relations of the ethnos are preserved in the rural family, but the data of our study indicate a change in the parental relationship. These changes did not happen immediately. The change in the mental make-up of the ethnos, its customs, behavioural patterns, occurs quite slowly, during several generations, imperceptibly for the old and new generations as a result of replacing traditions with innovations, transforming stereotypes of behaviour. At the same time, examples are given of the change in the image of the world among ethnoses that occurred in less than one century. The parents interviewed by us say that their parents' attitude toward them was “more demanding, strict”, but they also had “constant joint experiences” and “spiritual closeness”.

The role of grandparents in the family is now relatively reduced, their influence on the upbringing of grandchildren is insignificant. More prevalent separate residence, the reduction of communication with grown-up grandchildren caused by lack of sufficient care by parents to further develop the relationship of grandparents with grandchildren lead to the alienation of grandchildren from grandparents. In the list of important people for whom they listen, the students celebrate their parents mostly, without mentioning grandparents [15]. Thus, one of the most important factors of ethnic socialization is that the influence of grandparents loses its important role, thereby weakening the ethnopedagogical system.

At the same time, in modern rural families there are relationships that are close to the traditional model. Parents spoil children in early childhood (“spoiled and at the same time were restrained”, “mostly indulged”), but as they grow older, parents become more reserved. At the same time, the child's independence is encouraged, and the child him or herself bears responsibility for his or her own destiny. The child should always please the parents, achieve a lot in life. Parents from this group of families are sure that children will take care of them in old age. Between the parents and the children there were relations of “spiritual intimacy”, characteristic of the traditional relationship of parents and children, regardless of the age of the children. Thus, the content of this type reveals the features inherent in the traditional attitude of the Yakuts to children, but they cannot be fully attributed to the traditional relationship. There is insufficient insistence of parents for children to work, as well as instilling in children attention, warmth and care for others.

The study showed that the special attitude and care of the family members towards the child, the recognition of its importance in the life of the parents, is characteristic of the relationships in all the families surveyed. The identity of the parents and other parameters do not become central to the family. In describing

the attitude toward the child, mothers emphasize the child's exceptional role in their lives.

CONCLUSION

There are a couple of distinguished types of relationships characteristic of modern rural families. In all of these types of parental attitudes, the exclusive position of a little child in the family is retained, inherent in traditional family relationships. It should be noted that there is another trend that is the same for all parental relationships: lack of confidence in the child, in his social readiness, a desire to protect the child from hardship. In general, an overall decrease in demands for children is observed. However, the main trend in the change of family relationships is that under the influence of changes in environmental conditions, emerges a new type of parental relationship, that is not characteristic of the ethnic group. In contrast to the traditional type of relationship, when the expectations of parents lay in the fact that the children, as adults, will take care not only of themselves and their family, but also of their parents, there is a new attitude that parents express: "My son (or daughter) just has to study and graduate from the university, remain in the city and take care of himself (herself)". Traditional parental model "to live and be a part of the adult life of their son or daughter" is replaced with the following: "Let the child experience fewer hardships than we had to endure". This parental attitude is not conducive to the development of internal personality, and rather, promotes externality, and develops social infantilism. Certain types of parental attitudes, containing the trends of preferring childish qualities and the desire to promote prolonged childhood and reduce the demands in the traditional structure of parental attitudes revealed to be more prevalent in modern Yakut families.

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