

## Module 3

# Changes in Expressions of Cultural Identity in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Far East

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## Course objectives

Whereas the changes in expressions of cultural identity in the North American Arctic was the main topic of the previous module, this module discusses the changes in expressions of cultural self-determination of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic; often described as Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East.<sup>1</sup> Complex issues in relation to culture, identity and self-determination were discussed in detail in the first module of this course, which could be seen as an introduction to explain the theoretical background which

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian Far Eastern Federal District includes all the areas from Vladivostok and Primorskiy Krai right up through Khabarovsk, Amur, Sakha, Magadan, Kamchatka before reaching Chukotka in the north (Sakhalin and Kamchatka further east are included as well).

subsequently will be applied in this, the previous and the next module where the case studies of the different regions will be discussed.

In this module, we discuss how culture, identity and self-determination apply to indigenous and non-indigenous people in the Russian North. We will examine various ways in which people and governments are trying to revitalize indigenous languages and to what extent these approaches have been successful. We also discuss the relation between cultural self-determination and art, media and written literature and finally the role of family, recreation and education – such as the use of mother tongue in formal school systems – for indigenous peoples in the Russian Arctic.

Upon completion of this module, you should be able to:

1. understand how the indigenous minority cultures in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East have changed over time compared to traditional livelihood, and give examples of successful efforts to maintain the traditional culture;
2. identify threats to the indigenous languages in the Russian North and give examples of successful efforts to revitalize these languages among the indigenous people of this region;
3. Explain the indigenous religion in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East;
4. Give examples of art, media and literature in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East, their importance in defining and redefining the cultures and how these have changed over time;
5. Explain the impact of (new) media on the indigenous people of the Russian Arctic;
6. Explain the effects of major socio-economic changes on family life, recreation and education in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East;
7. Explain the importance of family, education, and recreation as social institutions for indigenous families in the Russian North.

## **Introduction**

In Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East, indigenous communities traditionally inhabit scarcely populated areas, where harsh climate and lack of transportation and

communication, present challenges in relation to the indigenous peoples' social, political and economic participation in the non-indigenous society. Since ancient times, people have been living in the vast Far North of the Russian Federation, from the Kola Peninsula and Karelia in the northwest to the Chukotka, the Chukchi islands and Sakhalin in the Russian Far East. The indigenous peoples living in this region – a minority group within the larger Russian population – continue to maintain strong attachments to their cultural identities. In the Soviet Union prior to the perestroika reforms of the mid 1980s, the term “small-numbered peoples of the North” was often used to describe these indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup> Many non-indigenous Russians viewed the native peoples as backward and thought they lived in a remote and hostile region with few prospects. According to the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2010), the term “small-numbered indigenous peoples of Russia” is used in contemporary Russia to identify the indigenous populations living in the territories traditionally inhabited by their ancestors, maintaining a traditional lifestyle – who now number fewer than 50,000 individuals, and, identify themselves as separate ethnic communities. This module discusses the ways in which the identities of these peoples are shaped and expressed because in spite of 200 years of European and Russian influence, the indigenous peoples of this region have retained their identities and cultures.

Earlier, we concluded that languages, social institutions such as families and education, and media, arts and literary works are important to maintain and reinforce cultural identity and allow expression of self-determination. Their importance in defining and redefining self-determination in addition to culture and identity were discussed in the previous modules.

The media such as television and radio, but also new forms of media such as the internet, have an impact on the cultural self-determination of the indigenous people. Sometimes negatively as when native peoples are misrepresented by media, sometimes positively when media are successfully used by indigenous groups in campaigns to influence the decision-making process of governments. This module also provides a historical analysis of the mass media and how national policies in the former USSR and now the Russian Federation, aided by the mass media, have influenced the cultural awareness of indigenous peoples in northern Russia. Besides media, indigenous peoples successfully present and represent themselves in many

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<sup>2</sup> Perestroika refers to a reform agenda initiated by the Communist Party (CPSU) government of the Soviet Union in the second part of the 1980s.

other creative forms, such as literary works, paintings and ceremonies (for example at the beginning of the hunting season). The main characteristics of education, family, and recreation and how they developed over time are also discussed in this module.

This module starts, however, with a more general description of the development of indigenous and non-indigenous identity in Northwest Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East, by giving examples of the linguistic situation – according to Freeman (2000:xiii) the foundation of any culture – of the peoples of this region. This discussion of languages will then explore the reasons why there has been a shift in language usage and how the language policy of the former Soviet Union affected the language use and the identity of indigenous societies of the Russian Arctic.

## **Indigenous and non-indigenous northern identities**

Identity, culture and ethnicity have been inextricably linked. Whereas culture in the first module of this course has been regarded as how people believe, act and feel, the term “ethnicity” has often been used to describe the social organization of a particular group of people based on common factors. These factors are related to the history, ideology, language and many other characteristics of a particular people. From these factors, shared cultural characteristics emerged that have produced deep societal bonds and a sense of ethnicity; “a feeling of collective selfhood amongst a group of people that has stemmed from common blood, religion, language, and attachment to place, or customs” (Nanda 1994:303). Like identity, ethnicity transforms, sometimes even disappears, but always responding to changing conditions in the economic and social environment. Ethnicity, moreover, has been a fundamental determinant of the self-identity of members of an ethnic group.

Language is one of many tools available for ethnic groups to express their cultural identity. The use of a native language is a key indicator of national identity: their languages form a common system of communication that helps them to exchange information and make sense of their world. Before 1917, there were no written languages among the indigenous peoples of the Russian North. Later on, Soviet Literacy programs helped many northerners to gain for the first time a written understanding of their languages. As a result, although the number of native speakers was small and many of them spoke a variety of dialects, most of the northern

indigenous languages were considered stable. The identity of individual members of an ethnic group is strongly related to their language, especially the use of their mother tongue, and when the Soviet government founded national schools and provided linguistic specialists to help preserve indigenous languages, this created a pride amongst northerners who for the first time thought that their cultures were considered valuable. Roman Rugin, a Khanty writer whose work unfortunately is not available in the English language, states that “The older generation recalled this period with some reverence.” He goes on writing, “It was really hard, but at the same time there was something that brought strength and a thirst for life. We, the northern peoples were trusted...We felt equal to other peoples in our ability to solve our own problems.” When, however, the policy of toleration of the independence of indigenous societies was replaced with forced integration and teaching of Russian language became compulsory from the 1930s onwards (The World Bank 2014:6), many natives found other ways to express their ethnic identity, such as using their mother tongue in their homes, or continuing to practice their religious activities. Consequently, many of the languages of the small-numbered peoples of Russia are currently under threat of irreversibly disappearing, such as the Yukaghir languages and the tundra Nenets language and, as in the North American Arctic, many indigenous people are struggling to preserve their traditional livelihood.

The identities of the indigenous peoples of the Russian North, moreover, were greatly affected by political events in Russia. The Tsarist government followed a policy of benign neglect and hardly interfered in the traditional way of life of the native peoples of the North as long as they paid their taxes. In 1822 Mikhail Speransky developed “the statutes of the Administrations of Aliens “ according to which the indigenous peoples of Siberia gained the right to self-government and the state policy of the policy of non-interference was formally confirmed by the law (Mastyugina and Perepelkin 1996:21-22). But once the Soviet Union was established after 1917, relations between these peoples and the Russian state changed. After the post-revolutionary civil war that lasted from 1917 to 1924 (locally in the Russian Far East), the Tsarist imperial governmental system was replaced with a Soviet (Communist Party) government. At first, relations between the government of the Soviet Union and northern peoples were marked by mutual respect. The administration of the newly formed Soviet Union, however, soon expressed a desire for northern societies to become “civilized.” This thought was broadly established among the highest levels of the Soviet leadership. Lenin, for instance, wrote; “Look at the map...There is room for dozens of large civilized

states in those vast areas which lie to the north of Vologda....and the north of Tomsk. They are a realm of patriarchalism, and semi- and downright barbarism.” (Lenin 1921). The indigenous peoples of the Russian North were seen by the Soviet administration as ‘backward’ and in need of state assistance because of their traditional lifestyle. The Soviet government attempted to promote its northern development in many ways, for instance, by providing northerners the opportunity to switch from a nomadic way of life to a new modern way of life (Uvachan 1971), developing a law requiring that native people, including women, would be included in courts and the establishment of ‘cultural centers’ and libraries (The World Bank 2014:5). The ultimate goal of the reorganization of traditional economy and social life was the integration of all national groups into a common Soviet society. The Soviet language policy of mutual respect was gradually replaced by a policy of nationality and assimilation that had much in common with the promotion of a united ‘Russian identity’ in the 1830s, named “Russification,”<sup>3</sup> The formal school system was heavily used for the new Soviet policy by the end of the 1930s: boarding schools were established and the use of Russian became compulsory. The urbanization policy initiated in the 1960s further disrupted the traditional livelihoods and led to a socio-economic crisis, and a diminution of the indigenous population until the conditions somewhat improved under Mikhail Gorbachev’s period as General Secretary in the 1980s. However, the socio-economic crisis of Russia in the 1990s after the demise of the Soviet Union, along with the transition to a market economy, led to a cut in governmental revenues, poverty and a breakdown of most of the supply and transportation system in remote areas of the North that indigenous communities had relied on. This affected the well-being of those living in these remote areas. The result was that the identity of indigenous peoples was threatened, sometimes resulting in unemployment, poverty, domestic abuse and alcoholism. Moreover, the effects of the decrease in the numbers of people using or understanding their native languages as a result of the assimilation processes discussed above, have been enormous. Today, members of the older generation who learned their native languages and were encouraged to use them under the early Soviet system, are often the only ones that now carry on their native language. In an attempt to stop such developments, many indigenous communities go back to their traditional social clan structure and try to revive the old ways of life. Already by the mid-1980s, several regional governments in the North had begun to re-evaluate and develop new language policies out of concern about the future of indigenous language teaching, however with varying degrees of

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<sup>3</sup> Russification (rusifikatsiya) has been defined as the attempts by the Soviets to impose Russian cultural values, traditions, and language on the indigenous peoples living within the Soviet Union (Tamošiunas 1980).

success. In 1991, the government of the Sakha Republic, for instance, adopted a development program for their republic's schools: the main objective of this program was to encourage schoolchildren to study (in) their native Yakut language.

More recently, the plight of many of Russia's northern indigenous peoples has gained increasing attention within the international community whereas in the past, the value of native cultures was not recognized nor was their value as contributions to human civilization. As of 2012, the rights of indigenous peoples are stated in Article 69 of the Russian Constitution, and specific federal and local laws, each addressing the cultural, territorial, and political rights of indigenous peoples and their communities, exist. Although challenges remain, for instance in relation to self-determination in fields of education and media – as the following sections will illustrate – the principles set out in these federal laws are examples of how in Post-Soviet Russia the rights of indigenous peoples have been enhanced. The law “On Territories”, for example, specifically provides that where designated traditional territories are established, oil and other industrial development may occur only after consultation and agreement with the indigenous communities living there (UN 2010). Others argue that even though the formal framework – including federal laws – has been established, many of its provisions remain theoretical and land rights continue to be denied due to shortcomings of the legal system (Murashko and Sulyandziga 2008). A third, more general, perspective is offered by the World Bank, arguing that the contradiction between the desire for state control versus autonomy or independence leads to a conflict between the Russian state and its minorities (World Bank 2014:7).

## **The impact of media on indigenous people**

The search for alternative means of expressing identity has been necessary when an ethnic group's language has been suppressed by another group's linguistic or cultural dominance. In the former Soviet Union and Russia, the formation of national consciousness and cultural identity amongst the peoples of the North was greatly affected by state policy and the mass media throughout the twentieth century. The print media, which consisted of newspapers, periodicals, and literary publications, were the first sources of mass information present in the North. In many cases, it was the printed media with news content, which gave the peoples of the North their first contact with the rest of Russian society. However, a northern press did not

develop until the 1930s. In pre-Soviet Russia there was no organized effort on behalf of the state to promote the creation of a northern press. On the contrary, the Tsarist regime actively discouraged development of an independent press in all parts of Russia, including the North. Neither did the Tsar attempt to promote the development of written northern languages out of a fear for the establishment of an intellectual class among northerners. Bringing literacy to the people of Russia – including northerners – was not a priority for the regime and education was not viewed as an inherent right of each citizen. The motto was rather that the Tsar and his government knew what was best for Russia and a less-educated citizenry meant less criticism of the government.

Later on, after the Tsar was replaced by a Soviet administration, the mass media became a tool for framing positive endorsements of state policy such as portraying the advantages of a modern way of life combined with socialism rather than the traditional livelihood of indigenous northerners. This occurred because the storyline of the Soviet media was controlled by the state. With regard to northern issues, it was considered ‘normal’ by the non-indigenous population that the content of scientific literature, novels, television, radio, and cinema would support the state’s positions. As a result, Soviet policy and the non-indigenous mass media portrayed the peoples of the North as having passed through an historic point of evaluation initiated by the socialist development model. This model was characterized as a great step forward to avoid the harmful impact of capitalism on the indigenous peoples of the North. The Soviet government believed in the power of the mass media to express philosophical and ideological ideas, both to indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Cultural expression was a fundamental tool used by the state to spread communism propaganda and to gain political support – including from indigenous inhabitants – for Soviet policy. So, besides serving as a unifying force, culture would, in this case also be a tool to govern people.

Thus, literacy and press were closely regulated by the Soviet government and promoted as part of the Soviet Union’s grand socialist experiment. The mass media was developed in every region of the state – including the North – to spread communism. Yet, indigenous inhabitants were able to develop their traditional livelihood such as their own culture and languages while at the same time acting as the mouthpieces for the government. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the culture of the indigenous peoples was influenced not only by the Russian media, but also by the more internationally oriented media of the West in terms of film, music, magazines (women- and health magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*), and

the internet, bombarding indigenous peoples with the idea that they, too, can lead the affluent lifestyle of ‘modern citizens of the free world.’ This has affected families and children in the Russian North who have been exposed to a whole new series of needs by the mass consumer society.

## **Expression of identity and self-determination through media**

The right to a own identity is a complex and multi-faceted issue that involves both autonomy and access to forms of media so that the indigenous peoples of the Russian North can express their cultural heritage to themselves and to the world. This is considered crucial for the survival of northern cultures and the expression of identity through different kind of media has assumed tremendous importance in the North, not only in Russia but also in the United States and Canada as discussed earlier. The media are not only used as a medium to express identity, but they are also an effective tool for minorities to gain worldwide attention for their issues, such as for the Evenk peoples who used the mass media in an attempt to protest against RAO UES’s (a former energy company) plan to construct a hydroelectric dam on their traditional land (Murashko and Sulyandziga 2008).

One of the first newspapers that appeared in a native language in Russia was ‘Manchary,’ which was in the Yakut language and first published in 1921. Although some newspapers are available in native languages, such as the online news site [kym.ru](http://kym.ru) (in Yakut) and the newspaper *Krayny Sever* (partly in Chukchi), the presence of indigenous languages in the media in the Russian North is limited, although several northern peoples, such as the Nanai, Nivkh, Evenk, and Even had their own short-lived presses that existed until the 1930s. Some of them were briefly revived during the Second World War and then closed again soon after. Besides the strong position of the national media – as discussed in the previous section - the major reasons for the underdevelopment of a northern press are geography, colonialism, a small population, and the limited use of written languages among indigenous peoples.

The written forms of indigenous languages were initially combined with one medium, the newspaper, rather than in literary works. Newspapers were a popular and inexpensive form of

mass media because they were relatively cheap to produce and because they reached a large audience and therefore in many cases served as the first reading material ever consumed by indigenous northerners. They had, moreover, an important social function: newspapers offered northerners the chance to read about themselves and their own societies for the first time in their own language, and in easily accessible formats that in turn further solidified northern cultural identities. It was by being employed by newspapers that the first northern writers had the opportunity to practice their craft. Northerners had a chance to read about the outside world, and this in turn made it quite apparent to northerners how different their way of life was compared to other societies, especially life in the contemporary Soviet Union. Thus, newspapers facilitated the increased speed of communication in northern societies, which was significant for the North. Paradoxically, the ability to communicate in the written form made the peoples of the North more aware of their common cultural identity, but they also became more aware of how this identity was being manipulated by the Soviet state. The 1917 *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia* stated that a national press was intended to promote “the free development of national minorities living in the territory of Russia.” (Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia). However, many indigenous people would soon realize that the “free development” of their societies would not occur simply because of the existence of a national press, and after only one decade of supporting the northern press, the Soviet state began to claw back its funding. In 1930, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, one of the most influential governmental bodies of the Soviet Union, passed a resolution with the objective to weaken the position of regional newspapers. As a result of this policy directive, most of the indigenous language newspapers in the North lost their funding on which they had been dependent and had to close down their offices. The Soviet state justified these closures by arguing that the northern papers had fulfilled their mandate to spread socialist and the Bolshevik doctrines of communism among the indigenous populations of the Russian North. The papers had, moreover, increased both literacy and the use of the Russian language in the region (newspapers were frequently published bilingually, both in Russian and indigenous languages).

Thus, the press served as a teaching tool in the government’s plan to make the North more culturally Russian. Soviet language policy served the higher goals of the Russian state and promoted indigenous languages almost exclusively for the utilitarian purpose of teaching northerners how to speak Russian. Having obtained the ability to communicate in Russian, the peoples of the North could fully participate in Soviet society – so the Soviet policy-makers

claimed. Accordingly, the government did not see a need for minorities to hold onto their own languages or cultures; therefore for minority cultural institutions an example being a northern indigenous press, support was drastically reduced.

Although in some cases the minority press in indigenous languages continued to operate into the 1950s, it became evident that national presses were eventually supposed to be published in Russian only. Officially, the bilingual press policy was now explained in terms of it being a transitory process, the intent of which was to make indigenous peoples and other minorities able to adopt the Russian language as their first language. In the North there were two kinds of papers: newspapers produced by Komsomols – the Communist Youth League – in every governing district composed of ethnic minorities; and nationally circulated Russian-language newspapers. There were only two northern Komsomol-published newspapers: one published in Yakutia, and the other in Buryatia. These were the only papers in the North that were published by northerners, and the contents of which were primarily devoted to northern issues. These two newspapers were bilingual publications that were only allowed to exist under Soviet policy because they offered indigenous readers a chance to enhance their Russian language skills. Despite the fact these newspapers were written in a – for indigenous people – non-native language these two northern papers did represent a northern voice to the peoples, albeit a voice that was muted by censors.

Yet, this limited northern voice would soon be affected again by decisions of the Soviet state. In 1959, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a resolution calling for the abolition of national newspapers and journals that had small circulation audiences. This led the committee to reconsider the issuing of independent newspaper licenses in districts with a relatively small population. For the North, this meant that its only two bilingual papers were both forced to co-publish with a Russian national paper. Naturally, this cut in half the content was devoted to local issues in the two northern indigenous language papers. As a result, northern views and voice were further diminished, especially when their editorial control was handed over to the Russian side of their operations. In addition, the northern staff sizes were reduced and the content that appeared in the indigenous language sections of the papers was increasingly written by non-indigenous writers who did not even live in the region. The so-called “dubbed” editions of the two northern papers produced poor-quality indigenous language translations because fewer and fewer indigenous writers contributed to the content of the papers. As the primary source for production and distribution of indigenous language

material in the North, the two bilingual northern newspapers were important cultural institutions for the peoples of the North. By reducing the quality and independence of these two papers, the Soviet state failed to adequately protect the right of the peoples of the North to communicate in their native languages.

In effect, the Soviet state denied northerners the chance to express their own national identity through a well-functioning indigenous language press. It was not until the 1990s that the northern press again began to show any signs of revival. By this time, the former Soviet Union had given way to the Russian Federation; and with this change came a new government policy of recognizing the inherent rights of national minorities and, not unimportant, the openness and freedom of speech (*glasnost*). This recognition was also a response to a growing appreciation by minorities – and non-indigenous citizens of former Soviet states for that matter - of their distinct cultural identities. Indigenous and non-indigenous populations started to demand the opportunity to be able to express their own identities. Recently, under Vladimir Putin's third period as President of the Russian Federation the freedom of the press in Russia has again come under criticism (World Press Freedom Index 2013).

## **Expression of identity and self-determination through literary and visual arts**

Expression of identity through literary works – the writing of stories and ideas – got underway in the Russian North after the indigenous languages of the region were formalized into written forms. This did not occur until the 1930s, but the northerners who took up the challenge of being the first writers of the peoples of the North practiced their new craft with a sense of mission. On them was bestowed the honor of transcribing the ancient stories of their ancestors into writing. Most of the first writers used northern folklore, the traditions and customs that were orally preserved amongst northerners, as the source for their stories. The retelling of old myths was the primary vehicle used by the first northern writers to transmit the accumulated wisdom of their ancestors. These myths were reinterpreted in light of modern circumstances, so both northerners and non-northerners could enjoy their meaning. It was quite natural that the first northern writers decided to continue their traditions in their new art medium, because their stories had been a fundamental link in passing knowledge from one generation to the

next for centuries. Many of these works, however, are unknown outside Russia and unfortunately not available in the English language. Many of these northern writers were regarded as intellectuals and imprisoned by the Soviet state in the 1930s and 1940s, or lost their lives during the Second World War. The loss of these northern writers was a tremendous setback for the northern literary tradition and their loss adversely affected the early stages of northern literary development. Talented writers, however, would continue to emerge out of the North. During the 1950s the Chukchi poet Victor Keulkut as well as the Nanay writer Grigory Khodjer garnered national praise for their works. Carrying forward into the 1970s and 1980s, names such as Roman Rugin and Vladimir Sangi were identified as talented northern writers. These writers were renowned for folklore-based narratives that explored the modern conditions of Russia's northern societies while other northern writers began to produce academic works that focused more on the subjects of history and concepts of happiness and survival. The last two elemental features of the human condition had always been prevalent in the ancient folktales of the North. On the surface, happiness and survival appear to be simple matters for reflection, but after a more thorough exploration of these concepts, it becomes evident that these two words carry with them a complex set of meanings. One can only guess as to why issues related to survival and happiness have dominated Russian northern literature. Perhaps the extreme conditions associated with living in a harsh climate have led northern peoples to confront the most immediate issues related to human existence (Forbes and Stammler 2009:35).

Another important tool for communicating the character of northern culture to the world has been the artistic recognition of northern cultural artifacts. In a general sense, the artistic expressions of a society, regardless of the form, reveal how that society has investigated the spiritual meaning of the world around it. The art produced by the peoples of the Russian North has currently been acknowledged worldwide for its craftsmanship and beauty. The work of the Nenets painters Tyko Vylka (Arctic landscapes) and Konstantin Pankov (folk and landscapes) are even known in the West, in contrast to most cultural artifacts produced by indigenous people of the Russian North. The plants and animals used to meet the basic needs of northern societies including material and spiritual needs have often been used in the creation of northern cultural artifacts.

Northern cultural artifacts have illustrated the distinctive ethnic characteristics of the cultures that produced them. This being said, the ability to find utility in all objects appears to have

been one of the most important characteristics of cultural production in the North. Northerners were compelled to express their arctic sense of the world through the material that was readily available to them; and for most northern peoples that meant using the resources that kept them alive, deer and sea animals being two prime examples. By being inspired by the beauty of the materials required for their survival, and by making art out of those same materials, the peoples of the North have demonstrated incredible ingenuity, resourcefulness, and a holistic appreciation for the resources nature has provided them.

The two climate regions in the North, the Taiga and the Tundra, produced distinct cultural traditions. The natural process of migration and contact between the neighbors of both areas resulted in art that reflected a common material and spiritual culture amongst northerners. The nomadic way of life was common to all peoples of the North, but it was an absolute necessity for peoples living in the Taiga. They produced goods that were designed in a simple way so they could be transported easily; this affected the style of art that was made by peoples living there. Generally, they tended to produce less decorative art. Furthermore, the intricate and time-consuming nature of working with wood, bone, and metal discouraged the peoples living in the Taiga from creating these arts. However, more settled peoples of the North lived in the Tundra, which allowed them to more readily explore their art through natural materials. Seaside hunters like the Chukchis, and Koryaks developed artistic techniques related to bone-carving and blacksmithing. In addition, the Sakha people created jewelry made of wood and bone carvings. Thus, the different ways of life in the North and available materials influenced the kinds of cultural artifacts produced by northerners.

Reindeer herding served as another example that illustrates the link between resources and the production of cultural artifacts. In northern Russia, deer were the lifeblood of societies. These animals provided food, clothing, shelter, and a means of transportation; furthermore, their strong hides were used to construct convenient and portable shelters used by hunting parties. It is not surprising then, that many northern societies created cultural artifacts out of a principal animal they relied on to survive. For example, deer fur was a highly valued object and an ornamental piece used to decorate garments worn by the Evenkis, illustrating how northern cultural artifacts were inspired by utility as well as by beauty.

The connection between beauty and utility is also apparent in the cultural practice of northern garment sewing and decorating, one of the most distinguished northern art forms. Garments

were made out of common materials, in particular reindeer skins with their bright nappy texture; sea animal skins; and rovduga, the suede from deer hides. Location played a role in the design and function of clothing made in the North; clothing materials and the design of clothing itself had to conform to the surroundings in which indigenous designers were located. The three historic types of Arctic upper garments demonstrate a caftan-like, wrapped, ankle-length garment with long sleeves; a wrapped, coat-style garment; and a pullover-style garment. Traditionally, the designs of the upper-body clothing used by people living in the Tundra and Taiga areas of the North, respectively, are borrowed from these three garment styles. Decorations were commonly featured on all northern garments and included fur trimmings, leather applications, beads, deer and moose hair, and interwoven straps. Some of these decorations such as beadwork are introduced by non-indigenous Russians who had gone to the North in the seventeenth century whereas other decorative techniques are of indigenous origin. The embroidery technique of using moose hair is an example of how unique garment-decorating practices developed in the North. Unlike the Russian embroidery technique, which uses thread, and the North American Inuit techniques, which often use porcupine quills, peoples of the Russian North used deer and moose hair dyed from alder and birch tree potions. Russians did influence the Yakuts with new materials, tools, and vegetable dyes, but northerners as a whole maintained their traditional methods of garment design and decoration. Even when the Russians brought cloth to the North, garments made out of it were cut and sewn in the same way as garments made of reindeer skin. Caftans made of cloth were adorned with festive black and red trim, thus remaining true to the principles of fur and leather decoration notable in the artistry of northern garments. Staying true to tradition was important to northerners when they reproduced their cultural artifacts, for these reproductions were not created only out of physical necessity; they were imbued with ritual significance and symbolism for the culture that made them. Cultural production also involved a division of labour between men and women: men worked with metal, leather, and wooden materials; and women sewed garments and made birch dishes. Each of the sexes was allowed a particular realm, and each found sacred meaning in the cultural artifacts produced in it.

## Family, education and recreation as social institutions for self-determination

Families and education, in the underlying module seen as social institutions, are important in terms of cultural and political self-determination and form an essential framework by which cultural and spiritual values are transmitted and shared among indigenous peoples in the Russian North. Prior to the expansion of the Russian society in the North, the family was the primary socializing influence for indigenous cultures. Family was important in these often remote societies, not only because it lay the foundation for one's ethnic and individual characteristics as well as intellectual and personal traits, but also because the social organization of the northern indigenous peoples was based on kinship, which defined the rights, duties, and responsibilities of all group members. Furthermore, social and economic relationships and belief systems were integrated into a religion in which relationships between the land, natural resources, and human groups were inseparable.

The religion of the indigenous people of the Russian Arctic has many similarities with the world views of other natives living in the circumpolar region discussed in the previous module. Both animals and other natural resources such as trees and water were thought to have souls – or “owners or masters” in case of the Chukchi people (Schweltzer and Gray 2000:21), which one had to treat with respect rather than using for one's own benefit. Similar to the practices of the indigenous peoples of the North American Arctic, Shamanism, was practiced to interact with the spiritual world, allowing shamans to heal sick people or to secure a good hunt. Note that there are different types of shamans with different functions and/or rituals among the inhabitants of the Russian North. The ritual specialists of the Evenkis, for instance – called *samanil* – communicate with the spirits by flying great distances or engage in battles with distant enemies (Anderson 2000:63). The skin drum is often associated with shamanism. According to Evenki tradition, the drumbeat accompanies the shaman when he or she is searching for contact with the spiritual world, a ritual described by Anderson (2000:63) as *Kamalan*. During the kamalan the shaman uses a mixture of languages and images in order to request good hunting conditions or to retrieve the lost souls of sick people. The assistants of the shaman are associated with other parts of the spiritual world and can take the form of species such as the Siberian taimen, black bear, or loon.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russian Orthodox missionaries established contact with the indigenous populations with the objective of spreading orthodox Christianity but often with respect for the spiritual views of the natives. After the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union when religious practices were banned for ideological reasons, respect for indigenous beliefs was replaced by oppression. In the 1930s, dozens of people identified as shamans were arrested and executed (Anderson 2000:63). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union when Russia was experiencing difficult economic conditions in the 1990s, missionaries from abroad outperformed the investment of the Orthodox church in terms of personnel and other resources in the region (Schweltzer and Gray 2000:22). More recently, the Russian Orthodox Church is again seeking to strengthen its position in the Russian North.

Education was based on traditional knowledge that was transmitted from generation to generation. However, during the Soviet period, education systems – like other spheres of social life in northern indigenous societies – were shaped in order to spread the non-indigenous Russian culture, thereby changing the way of life of the indigenous peoples and how they identified themselves with others. The boarding school system initiated by the end of the 1930s is a good example of the education policy of the Soviet Union regarding indigenous peoples: just as in North America this system had a destructive influence on their traditional livelihood, especially when it was extended to the primary school level. These boarding schools separated children from their parents and their community, which further separated them from the values and ethnic traditions taught in their tightly knit communities and families. Children growing up far from their parents returned at the age of 16-17 as almost complete strangers, often with weakened ties to their ethnic origin and language or dialect, and bereft of practical skills for traditional occupations. The education system favored assimilation into the Russian society and the effects of this on indigenous populations, particularly regarding the number of people using or understanding their native languages, has been enormous. Thus, the children of the North grew up within an alien culture and way of understanding creating a situation where children were steeped in a non-indigenous cultural environment that was very different from their ethnic roots which were based on a traditional lifestyle.

As a result, indigenous family relations were deformed, and several generations of indigenous peoples grew up having only identification documents as a sole indicator of their ethnic identity, which in turn, made it harder for indigenous children to view the world as their parents and grandparents had done. To this day, this policy of assimilation has severely affected the family structures and mode of education in northern indigenous societies.

## **Indigenous families: the impact of assimilation processes**

Besides boarding schools, the structure of families and the identity of northern inhabitants have also been affected by poverty and in some cases by deportation.<sup>4</sup> The peoples of the Russian north are confronted with substantially the same sets of difficulties and social problems as all peoples in Russia were confronted with, especially during the 1990s when the economic situation was difficult. However, the destruction of the subsistence economy and traditional culture on the one hand and a breakdown of most of the supply and transportation systems in the remote areas of the North on the other, had a more significant impact on those who had become dependent on modern infrastructure for the basic elements of survival: food, clothing, shelter and medical care. Although the economy has improved remarkably since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century due to the exploitation of natural resources such as oil and gas – Russia has been counted as one of the five big emerging economies, or BRIC countries – many indigenous populations in the North still experience a lack of housing and financial resources and in some cases shortage of provisions and necessary goods.<sup>5</sup> The destruction of indigenous patterns and values in combination with the social and environmental issues resulted in a loss of ethnic identity, which in some cases led to unemployment, alcoholism, diseases, and other afflictions.

The boarding school systems, which for instance separated Evenki families who earlier lived a nomadic existence, downplayed the importance of families and substituted formal education systems whereas the indigenous peoples of the Russian North regard the family as an essential

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<sup>4</sup> The forced relocation of peoples living for instance in the North Caucasus and the Volga Germans resulted understandably enough in the destruction of ethnic, social and cultural structures (The World Bank 2014:6).

<sup>5</sup> The 'BRICS countries' are Brazil, Russia, India, China and, since 2012, South Africa, all seen as having reached the stage of rapid economic development.

actor for transmitting of indigenous culture to future generations. In some cases, however, schools that teach indigenous children have used families as a partner for ethnic revitalization projects. For example, formal schools for indigenous children in the Republic of Sakha, particularly for the Evenk, have introduced native elements into the education system, promoting the native languages and traditional culture. Another example is the teaching of traditional rites of manhood (Yrng Uolan) associated with Evenk culture in formal state-run education institutions. This form of ethnic pedagogy incorporates physical, spiritual, and mental challenges that must be overcome by young male indigenous group members in order to become full members of their society. Fathers have administered this rite of passage and cycle in the education curriculum for their sons. The benefit of incorporating this particular ethnic practice has been that it has given pride to a practice that is intended to challenge young men, helping them to acquire physical strength, and teach them a purity of character that gives them a sense of emotional and psychological stability. Incorporating this practice into the education system has also helped a generation of fathers devastated by social ills to regain social status and prestige by making them integral once more in the upbringing of the next generation of men in their societies.

## **Education systems: indigenous concerns vs. educational practices**

The previous section concluded that during the Soviet period, educational systems were mainly seen as a tool for processes of assimilation. Later on, in the post-Soviet period in the 1990s, however, attempts have been made to make sure that education systems also represent trends that promote cultural revitalization among both indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of the North. One of the examples of this trend has been upbringing programs that have contained elements of ethnic pedagogy – sources of knowledge that are unique to many indigenous cultures – and ancestor practices in educating children. Accordingly, some of the principles associated with indigenous pedagogy include a strong sense of interconnectedness with not only nature but also the events that transpire in the world; and a strong sense of spirituality that promotes a holistic approach whereby human beings are connected with the world through religious practices. In essence, the indigenous pedagogy as taught in public schools in the North aims to realign the way indigenous children learn and understand the

social and natural environment that they are to gain from their culture. Tolerance for majority and minority cultures, especially neighboring ones, was another principle of this new post-Soviet education policy.

The implementation of such trends in the indigenous cultural curriculum was planned for both general mainstream schools and indigenous-exclusive schools. In the early stages of this program, northern indigenous languages, including those that had not been taught before (Yukagir, Dolagn, Ket) were introduced into senior-level classes in mainstream schools. In addition, indigenous language classes expanded in regions where indigenous peoples constituted a significant proportion, for example, Sakha (Yakutia). The following programs that were introduced in Russia in the 1990s are a concrete example of this trend: “The Concept Restructuring of Pre-School, Primary, Secondary, and Northern Professional Training Education” and “Indigenous Knowledge Curriculum Concepts for Indigenous Nations of the Russian North.” These education reforms acknowledged that the cultural and psychological concerns of ethnic minorities (indigenous peoples) had to be recognized in all Russian education institutions. These programs, furthermore, acknowledged that the proper rearing of children, especially those that had been historically marginalized, required teaching practices that emphasized the positive aspects of indigenous cultures. Other examples can be found in the Khanty-Mansiysky Autonomous District where new indigenous subjects, such as the “ABC of Native Culture,” “Lessons of Ancestors,” “Traditions and Cultures of Our Land’s Peoples,” and “The Spiritual Basis of Our People” were introduced into the curricula of schools, or the formation of nomadic schools for the Evenk people of the Sakha Republic in the mid-1990s. The focus here has been on combining the acquisition of practical knowledge of everyday life, such as traditional hunting and handicrafts with instruction in their own native language. These nomadic schools operate from December to May. In the spring and autumn, when roads are bad, or reindeer are driven into fields for pasture, children return to their parents’ camps followed by a school teacher or the so-called “red-tent” brigades that travelled along with the Evenki families (Anderson 2000:62).

These examples illustrate how new forms of school education are beginning to come into effect in the North. Such programs trends have not always been able to repair the damage from the past. As Anthony Pika (1996:16) argues:

Stereotyped and undifferentiated educational programs in schools, and the boarding school system that separates children from parents and families for many months every year, have made northern youth indifferent toward their national culture, mother tongue, folklore, and art. It is evident that the loss of their native language is leading to the collapse of their spiritual culture and ethnic self-comprehension. For them, this is the road to non-existence.

Pika's argument is most evident considering the current language situation of northern indigenous peoples. Today, there is a clear tendency towards a decreasing use of indigenous languages in practically all indigenous northern groups in Russia. Furthermore, the indigenous languages are in many cases taught only as one subject of the overall education program and schools often fail to combine school education sufficiently with the traditional system regarding the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. Thus, students do not learn their own languages, cultures, traditions, and customs. This happens out of fear that knowledge of a mother tongue would hamper indigenous children from obtaining a good command of Russian, to enter universities or make people feel uncomfortable in future jobs. Moreover, Schweltzer and Gray (2000:25) argue that one of the problems in terms of addressing indigenous rights and interests is the relationship between social (umbrella) organizations and the local and/or federal government. Organizations representing indigenous peoples often depend on governmental support, making it in some cases difficult to criticize one's own sponsor. Moreover, the fact that many organizations are (partly) financed by foreign NGO's is not necessarily considered to be an advantage in Russia's contemporary political climate. The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), founded in 1990 at the First USSR Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North, is an example of such an umbrella organization. RAIPON represents the interests of many regional indigenous organizations in economic, environmental and cultural issues, often by proclaiming the right of self-determination. Despite RAIPON's status as Permanent Participant at the Arctic Council, the organization was temporarily shut down by the Russian authorities in November 2012, due to alleged violations of formal regulations, but has re-opened again in March 2013.

Traditional methods of transferring knowledge are not necessarily an alternative to contemporary education, but are also a means of supplementing and compensating for the defects of the existing education system. It is more important to give equal status to both state and indigenous education programs. A more recent example of such an education program is offered by the Nenets social activist Yuri Vella, who – instead of a boarding school - has

implemented a different kind of educational practice based on the experience of early nomadic schools in the Soviet North, which taught children and adults in their usual living environments (in their camps).<sup>6</sup> Vella has brought a private tutor to live in his camp and to teach the children to become acquainted with the traditional lifestyle of their parents instead of growing up in large settlements or towns. The children follow a Russian curriculum, in order to meet comprehensive secondary school standards, but also learn their native language and traditional knowledge such as hunting techniques and reindeer herding.

## Recreation

Along with education, health and cultural improvement programs, various types of recreation activities have been developed as a way to express indigenous cultural identity such as celebrations related to the “Family of the Year” or “Children of the Arctic.” Moreover, various types of recreation activities, summer employment programs, and cultural and sporting activities are organized for children in the North each year. Once again, families have played a central role in preparing participants and individual family members in how to take part in cultural celebrations and sporting events. In this regard, sport and recreation have strengthened the bonds between indigenous families and communities, including members who have moved away from their respective traditional practices. When indigenous youth take part in summer and winter festivals, reindeer games, sing in choirs, act in dramatic presentations or other ancient folklore, they connect with traditional beliefs and simultaneously honor their ancestors. In this way, the ceremonial part of their culture is reconstructed and celebrated in the present. The aesthetic effect of such practices on the identity of young people is extremely significant because it is through such kinds of activities that pride in their identity and culture is fostered.

Similar recreational activities were conducted during the Soviet period, but with different goals. Rather than focusing on the identity of indigenous peoples, the main focus then was on the creation of a communist Soviet identity. On the other hand, many of the traditional games and contests of these festivals were later transformed into national sports which today are associated with Arctic peoples, such as reindeer, horseback riding and sleigh riding, lasso

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<sup>6</sup> A short video about the way of life in these schools can be found on: <http://portall.zp.ua/video/yuri-vellas-world-preview/id-dOai3Xf7bif.html> (accessed April 1<sup>st</sup> 2014).

throwing, sash wrestling and national dance performances. In general, these national indigenous sports are rooted in the natural, physical, and cultural realities of the North. By taking part in these activities, participants and spectators are appreciating how recreation activity can translate ethical and cultural meaning. Some of these sports became over time so popular with the wider population of the North that they currently serve as a means to unify indigenous and non-indigenous peoples alike, such as the Arctic Winter Games. Again, by incorporating indigenous practices – that is, sports and customs – into mainstream schools and society, children from both communities are taught the value of tolerance and respect for other cultures.

In sum, addressing the subject of ethnic indigenous education, art and literature has given rise to a national consciousness among the indigenous peoples of the Russian North. The native peoples have kept alive and refined art forms that in many cases remained unknown to the West. Moreover, the previous sections stated that several minority indigenous education programs have been introduced where children learn their traditional lifestyle and cultural heritage surrounded by their own environment (taiga, tundra). For the indigenous peoples of the Russian North, the role of the families has always been essential and strengthened due to a contemporary policy with a lesser emphasis on boarding schools. The ways to express cultural identity which are discussed in this module all have contributed to the ethnic revival of indigenous culture in the Russian North, although challenges remain, such as the relation between umbrella organizations and the environment and the use of native languages in the public sphere.

## Glossary of terms

<b>ethnic identity</b>	a feeling of affinity shared by a group of people who have the same ancestral heritage.
<b>language policy</b>	a deliberate and legally enforceable government pronouncement about how a language will be regulated.
<b>mass media</b>	the means of communication that reach large segments of the general population. Examples of these means are newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.
<b>new literature</b>	literature provided by an ethnic group or nationality that has only

	recently transcribed their language from an oral form to a written form.
<b>peoples of the North</b>	the traditional indigenous ethnic groups who lived in northern Russia. The Soviet state divided them by decree in 1925 into 26 peoples that included the Aleut, Dolgan, Saami, Eskimo, and other peoples.
<b>russification</b>	the attempts by the Soviets to impose Russian cultural values, traditions, and language on the indigenous peoples living within the Soviet Union.
<b>Soviet National Policy</b>	an ideological position of the Soviet government that sought to regulate the relationship between it and ethnic minorities living in the Soviet Union. Ethnic minorities were closely monitored and their freedoms undermined because the Soviet government wanted to ensure that they submitted to its Communist system of government.

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