

The Yukaghir People

Yukaghirs are considered to be indigenous peoples of the Northeastern Siberia. Their original territorial spread is from river Lena to the west to river Anadyr to the east, and from the northern coast down to Verkhnoyansk mountains.

However, they were defeated by Tungus people, immigrating here in the 12th and 13th century. Their numbers were even greatly reduced in the times of tsarist colonisation and tribal warfare in 17th to 19th century. Today, their numbers are slightly increasing.

Yukaghir have no self-designation name. Two surviving tribes are named Vadul and Odul. Both names mean „Mighty“ in respective languages of Tundra and Taiga Yukaghirs. There are some indications, that another tribe, called Dotka or Duguč may have survived in numbers around 40.

Because of intense russification, only around 40% of Yukaghir people actually speak their native languages; most of them speak either Russian or Tungus as their primary language.

Though Yukaghir languages have common ancestry, they were deeply changed in the time of conflicts with Tungus tribes (namely Evens and Evenks).

Yukaghirs were not a stagnating society, they were able to create pre-alphabetical means of communication called Tos. Today, they use improved cyrilics introduced by Gavril Kurilov.

Yukaghirs were technologically on the level of epipalaeolithic or mesolithic hunter-gatherers until 1920s, when the use of gunpowder became economically advantageous over producing silex arrowheads.

In the Soviet era, they were very successful in adjusting to the new society rule of „earning for living“. They work usually as cattle breeders, farmers or skin/flesh hunters. Hunting Yukaghirs were and presumably still are masters of efficient hunting.

The most known part of their culture is perhaps their shamans, called almu, who was a healer and a spiritual leader. Almu are used as an ethnoarchaeological parallel to the body of a shaman from the Brno II grave.

Yukaghir spiritual beliefs are animistic, meaning they believe that everything around them has a soul, and thus they worship, or perhaps communicate with elements, trees, sun etc. They keep deceased shaman body, because they believe that the dead shaman will become their spiritual guardian. They also believe in multiple worlds: The Upper world, The Middle World (the Earth) and the Bottom World, which was the world of the dead.

In their folklore culture, they tend to be very firmly bound to their natural surroundings and try not to harm it. Their society is matrilinear and matrilocal, but perhaps there is evidence for exceptions. The music is important, but not as much as singing and oral tradition, which is very rich. Their basic dance is a kind of a ringdance, called Longdol.

Yukaghirs do not need much of dress up: they usually have two dresses, a winter and a summer dress. The summer dress is deprived of animal hair. Also their boots and caps are made of fur. They usually decorate clothes only on rims.

Yukaghir favourite food is meat. They either dry, smoke or ferment it to conserve it. Two specialties are called Kulibaha and Anil kerile.

By Martin Malata