

The land and identity of the Yukaghirs

Spirits of the Land



Jarosław Derlicki, MA, winner of a scholarship from the Foundation for Polish Science, works at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, where he studies the Yukaghirs, an intriguing Siberian people

JAROSŁAW DERLICKI
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Warsaw
Polish Academy of Sciences
derlicki@iaepan.pl

The identity of every ethnos – from tiny groups to great nations – is defined not only by its common history or culture, but also by the space it inhabits

The surrounding land or space plays an enormous, if not basic role in the existence of every human group, be it a small local entity or a great nation. Most theoreticians of nationalism and ethnicity refer to the concepts of “homeland,” “locality,” or inhabited space. Human communities may be studied from various standpoints and defined in terms of their common culture, common past, or symbolic values. The surrounding space, however, remains something eternal – it witnesses the lives of many generations

and constitutes the most permanent element of what may be called the inhabited landscape. This is strikingly evident in the case of small hunter-gatherer groups whose lives are highly dependent upon nature. In what follows we will investigate the significant role played by space and its perception, looking at the example of a very small Siberian ethnos known as the Yukaghirs.

Who are the Yukaghirs?

The Yukaghirs are the oldest known inhabitants of Yakutia (the Sakha Republic), which nowadays forms part of the Russian Federation. Their tribes still inhabited large tracts of this region as recently as the 17th century, with a population of approx. 5000. Starting from the 13th–14th century the Yukaghirs were gradually pushed northward by wandering Tungus-Manchurian peoples, and then by the Yakuts and Russians. Such pressure ultimately led to the near total disappearance of the Yukaghirs, e.g. from imported diseases. Presently the number of the Yukaghirs living in Russia

The Yukaghirs of Upper Kolyma chiefly live in the settlement of Nelemnoe on the Yasachnaya River. Their traditional way of life is based on hunting, gathering, and fishing, and thus they are often described as “forest” or “river Yukaghirs”



J. Derlicki, W. Lipiński



stands at over 1500, including 1100 individuals within Yakutia, where they have survived in two areas in Upper and Lower Kolyma.

The Yukaghirs from Upper Kolyma live mostly in the settlement of Nelemnoe on the Yasachnaya River and in Zyryanka, the capital of the region. Their traditional activities include hunting, fishing, and gathering, which is why they are often described as the "forest Yukaghirs" or "river Yukaghirs." The "tundra Yukaghirs" from Lower Kolyma, in turn, live mostly in the settlement of Andryushkino on the Alazeya River and in Chersky, the center of the *ulus* (administrative district). They are hunters, fishermen, and gatherers like their Upper Kolyma kinsman, and also reindeer herders.

Yukaghir lands through the ages

Today it is difficult to reconstruct the exact size of the original Yukaghir territory, but available sources indicate that Yukaghir tribes (or even peoples) once inhabited enormous tracts of Yakutia. Individual clans would roam from place to place along the rivers they controlled, spending only the coldest months in permanent settlements with winter shelters. Subsequent epidemics and tribal wars caused the Yukaghirs to either gradually die out or become assimilated, as their territory was taken over by incoming Evens and Yakuts. Only two pockets survived into the early 20th century, inhabiting the Kolyma basin and then consisting of just several hundred individuals.

Once Soviet authorities reached these far northern regions, the Yukaghir land was collectivized. Permanent settlements were built for these "new citizens" and so-called cooperatives were established, under which cooperative employees retained their private possessions but paid part of their collectively earned income to the state. At that time, the Yukaghirs from Lower Kolyma lived in the settlement of Tustakh-Sen on the Chukocha River and worked in a cooperative called "the Oduls of Chukocha" ("Odul" being a Yukaghir word for "Yukaghirs"). Their Upper Kolyma kinsmen, in turn, lived on the Yasachnaya River in Nelemnoe and on the Korkodon River, forming the "Yukaghirs" and "Luminous Path" cooperatives. In the late 1930s these enterprises were turned into *kolkhozes* (collective farms). Individual property, including hunting and fishing grounds as well as



J. Derzhich, W. Lipnitski

reindeer pastures, was then made collective. Nevertheless, in practice organized groups of fishermen, hunters, and herdsman still worked on the land of their ancestors. More serious changes were caused by the process of centralization, when smaller settlements were eliminated and people were moved to larger ones, considered to be more progressive. Thus in the 1950s the Yukaghirs from Tsutakh-Sen went to live 100 km away in Andryushkino, where they became a minority among Evens and Yakuts. As Yukaghirs were no longer able to exploit their distant former territories, they received new land from the authorities of the *sovkhoz* (the state-owned entity which by then had replaced the *kolkhoz*). The Yukaghirs from Nelemnoe, however, had their settlement moved only several kilometers downriver. Although the established *sovkhoz* had assumed ownership of the Yukaghir territories, it did not interfere with their exploitation and native habitants could still hunt and fish the land of their ancestors. Newcomers, on the other hand, were permitted to exploit the territories of their kinsmen and relatives.

The Heja, an Even dance, is festively danced in the multiethnic settlement of Andrushkino

Difficult comeback

The collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s led to the demise of the *sovkhozes*, which had to be replaced with something different. Their replacements in Yakutia were called "clan communities," which assumed control of the collective farms. Even parceling out the former *sovkhoz* property and stock proved to be an enormously difficult challenge, as it was hard to determine who had

The land and identity of the Yukaghirs

Inhabited space and nature determine the way of life of the Yukaghirs. Many residents of Upper Kolyma, on the Yasachnaya River, engage in fishing



J. Berlicki

contributed what to the former collective, i.e. who deserved to be given how much back. The same problem pertained to land.

The land of the Yukaghirs living in Andryushkino was relatively remote, so the Yukaghir community regained it relatively easily. Unfortunately, due to the high transport costs only few people can afford to exploit these areas at the moment. While there is a plan to rebuild the old settlement of Tustakh-Sen and to relocate the Yukaghirs people there, this seems unfeasible not just for financial reasons but also in view of the ethnic intermingling of the local inhabitants and their extended residence at Andryushkino.

The land of the Yukaghirs from Nelemnoe, in turn, constituted the 2/3 of the whole *ulus* (administrative district), and moreover featured a gold mine. For over 10 years the community was refused ownership of this area and was only allowed to exploit it. Since the land officially belonged to the *ulus* and everyone was therefore entitled to use it, inhabitants from other settlements and villages started to hunt and fish there without seeking the Yukaghirs' permission. Only a few years ago did this Yukaghir community regain ownership of a much smaller area of land (e.g. with the gold mine excluded), its wild game decimated.

Even in the Soviet era, the use of specific land was governed by rules laid down by customary law. If a person wanted to cross some-

one else's territory or hunt there, they had to ask the owner for permission and recompense him in some way, e.g. by sharing the spoils. In those days the state provided free transport even to the most far-flung fishing and hunting grounds. At present, however, many people cannot afford to reach these places. In practice, this means that affluent individuals are taking over more and more territories that remain unexploited by their rightful owners, without asking permission. This frequently leads to local conflicts and it violates a system that has survived through the centuries.

Living land

Like other peoples living in close communion with nature, the Yukaghirs perceive the natural world as being spiritually active. They believe that every element of the surrounding environment has its resident spirit: be it a tree, rock, animal, etc. This also applies to their inhabited space, perceived through the prism of "localities" (Russian *mestnosti*), each of which possesses a guardian spirit. Some of the localities that have made a specific mark in human memory have been known for generations, some of them even appearing in local legends. These are usually places where some special, supernatural event has occurred. They are usually identified with the apparition of a guardian spirit who may award or punish the hunters entering his territory. Such locations may also commemorate a bat-

tle between shamans, someone's suicide, an unhappy love, an act of bloody revenge, etc.

Each such locality has its own character. Consequently, while certain people can safely enter a given territory, others may literally be "rejected" - unwelcome in a place or even killed for entering. Moreover, some localities have guardian spirits that are hot-tempered and often manifest their presence, while others are passive and may be passed by with indifference. But irrespective of how "active" a given place may be, hunters should ask its guardian spirit for permission to hunt there. They make a symbolic offering by throwing some food, alcohol and a cigarette into the fire while requesting a good hunt. A hunter who spends a longer duration in given hunting grounds may enter into a special relation with the guardian spirits. With time, this familiarity grows greater and the hunter may have dreams in which the spirit shows him where to find a gift, e.g. a moose to be hunted.

However, we should bear in mind that an ethnic landscape of this sort represents an ongoing process: changing not only physically, such as with a diverted river course or drained marsh, but also becoming enriched with the experiences of subsequent generations. Some localities may simply disappear when people forget about them, places may change their name, and new localities may arise.

The Yukaghirs have an extraordinary attitude towards these localities, usually referring to them as "mothers" or "fathers." Since offending one's parents is not permitted, the Yukaghirs are bound by a code of custom here, too - requiring them to behave properly and make offerings, forbidding them from littering, shouting, and most importantly over-exploiting the places. They must use these lands according to their individual needs, so as to ensure their own survival.

Space and identity

The surrounding lands, spaces, and landscape largely define who we are. In the case of the Yukaghirs such factors act as particularly good determinants of identity, since the people can be divided into groups along various spatial lines: i.e. the "forest Yukaghirs" vs. the "tundra Yukaghirs," those living in Upper vs. Lower Kolyma, on the Yasachnaya vs. Alazeya Rivers, in Nelemnoe vs. Andryushkino. Such designations draw distinctions in terms of

the activities of the local people and the places they live (rivers, taiga, tundra, etc.). Simultaneously, the traditional activities of the Yukaghirs are determined by the landscape they inhabit, where no one can earn a living working in an office or factory and where the only possible activities are hunting, fishing, and reindeer breeding. The Yukaghirs themselves often stress that their place is in the taiga and tundra and that they cannot imagine any other life. This is also a source of pride, as they proudly call themselves the most "taiga" and "tundra" nation in the world. And it is true that despite the advances of civilization and technology, their lives do not differ significantly from those of their ancestors.

Moreover, it seems that their identity has managed to survive solely thanks to these traditional activities, which have distinguished the Yukaghirs from the neighboring groups. They did not rear horses or cattle like the Yakuts, and their reindeer husbandry was not as developed as that of the Evens or Chukchi. We can conclude, therefore, that the most elements forming the essence of being a Yukaghir are literally rooted in their land. ■

Further reading:

- Derlicki J. (2004). *Nowi ludzie. Społeczność jukagirska w procesie przemian*. [New People - Yukaghir Society in the Process of Change]. [In:] L. Mróz (red.), *Etnos przebudzony*, (pp. 153-188). Warsaw: DIG.
- Derlicki J. (2004). Ethno-pedagogy - the curse or the cure? The role of the school among youth in Nelemnoe (Yakutia). *Sibirica. Journal of Siberian Studies*, 4, 1, 63-73.



A man pours some alcohol into the water to ensure that the lake's guardian spirit will be welcoming - Lake Yevrashka, near the Yasachnaya River