



## Conference Paper

# Ethnic Representation of the Komi-Yazva People in the Late XXth–Early XXIst Centuries

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## Abstract

The article describes the ethnic situation of the Komi-Yazva people as an example of secondary ethnicity in the social contexts of modern Russia. This analysis shows the challenges of surviving faced by the minority ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** Perm Krai, Komi-Yazva people, ethnicity, language, culture, rituals

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## 1. Introduction – A Short History of the Komi-Yazva People

Komi-Yazva ethnic group lives in Krasnovishersky District located in the north-eastern part of Perm Krai. According to the recent research, this population is based on the Komi ethnic group historically settled in lower Kolva river, along Vishera river and along the banks of Kama river (in contemporary urban areas of Cherdyn and Solikamsk). However, this group has disappeared after being assimilated by the Russian population that migrated to the Great Perm from the basin of Northern Dvina River in late XVIth–XVIIth centuries. The native origins of this population are supported by the few Rodanov culture complexes dated Xth–XVth centuries, as well as by toponymy. [8, pp. 6–10].

At the beginning of the XVIIth century, Komi-Yazvans were the remnants of a larger ethnic group that had still existed in its original state along the upper Yazva river [8, pp. 9–10]. Throughout the rest of their traditional territory, extended Russian influence led to the Komi-Yazvan switching to Russian and borrowing the elements of Russian culture and way of life. Komi-Yazvans developed a dialect of Russian language which combined Russian phonetic and morphological characteristics with some features of their native language. This tradition persists today.

The residents of all villages and settlements located along the Yazva river above Verkh-Yazva village converted to Orthodox Christianity in its Old Believers version. The rest of the territory was dominated by the official Orthodox church. This denominational separation between populations continues to exist [8, pp. 10–11].

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Demographically, Komi-Yazva population entered a period of consistent growth in the first half of the XXth century. As of 1949, it reached the figure of 4.7 thousand [8, pp. 14–15]. During the latter part of the XXth century, quite a few Komi-Yazvans settled in the villages of Severny Kolchim, Krasny Bereg and Tsepel, which were established on their ethnic territory. At the same time, substantial share of the population became the residents of the city of Krasnovishersk founded in early 1930s.

According to the data provided by the Administration of Verkh-Yazva rural settlement, in 2015 Komi-Yazva ethnic territory had 24 communities with 1178 households and 3240 residents. Among them, the share of Komi-Yazvans was almost 80%. There are 11 villages, where an entire population speaks their native language. At the same time, it is almost impossible to determine the general number of Komi-Yazva population in the city of Krasnovishersk. But the residents themselves believe that there are at least 2 000 Komi-Yazvans in the city [8, 16, 17].

## 2. Komi-Yazva Identity in the Late XXth–Early XXIst Centuries

There is no doubt that the upper Yazva population is mostly comprised of the descendants of the ancient indigenous population of northern Kama region. ‘Pure’ ethnicity is preserved in the most remote part of this ethnic territory. Decades of studying Komi-Yazvans show that they consider themselves a separate community, and their self-identification is based on language, self-awareness, self-designation and, importantly, on the recognition of a common territory [4].

Today Komi-Yazvans have three identities: language identity, ethnic identity and regional identity. They are aware of their old ethnic territory, from the village of Verkh-Yazva to the Konovalova village.

In general, modern group value system of Komi-Yazvans is centered around their native language, which remains an important symbol of their ethnic culture. On the one hand, the number of people speaking the language is decreasing; on the other hand, the language is experiencing a new momentum, since it is now being taught in three educational institutions. Moreover, the teaching of native language to children directly contributes to the use of language by the adults: children complete the tasks set by their teachers in communication with their parents. All of this creates a powerful stimulus and provides a foundation for the future of one of the oldest ethnic groups in Perm Krai.

Komi-Yazvan identity is defined differently in 'internal' and 'external' communication. "In our villages we are *permyaks*, we talk our way, it's easier for us to talk *permyak* language at home," explain many local residents of Upper Yazva villages, "but when we go to Krasnovishersk or even further, we speak only Russian, our *permyak* talk is of no use there. Sometimes people ask us: you are *permyaks*, you are different, but we answer: no, we are not just *permyaks*, we are also Russians" (L.Sobyanina, 1956 y.of b., Verkh-Yazva village).

Researchers introduced three hypotheses concerning the identity of Upper Yazva river population: they are an ethnolinguistic variant of the Komi-Permyak ethnic group; they form an independent Komi ethnic group; they belong to the Russian ethnic group. As has been mentioned already, the population has a double identity: both as Komi-Yazva and Russians. They are of Komi descent, but have never called themselves this name: their preferred ethnonyms have always been the old names *permyaki*, *permyak* [6, pp. 130–131].

Komi-Yazvan double identity will persist. The residents of Upper Yazva villages boil down all talks about identity to the following thesis: "We cannot stop being *permyaks*, and there is no need to do this: our parents lived as *permyaks*, they brought us up with the *permyak* language; we are also Russians and will remain Russians; this is the custom and let it remain as it is" (N.Parshakov, 1956 y.of b., Parshakova village).

Since Komi-Yazvans have been for centuries interacting with the neighboring Russian population and have assimilated its culture, the sphere of their own national culture is significantly reduced. Ethnic culture does not function as a coherent system. However, modern experience shows that its elements serve as indispensable bonds uniting the population of Upper Yava river into a coherent whole [8, pp. 24–35].

First, the cultural landscape itself carries a certain number of ethnic characteristics. By cultural landscape we mean a natural environment that has been considerably changed due to deep anthropogenic and technogenic influence. Cultural landscape is exemplified by: agrarian cultivation; a traditional set of agrarian crops and tools' historically developed types of dwellings; typical architectural features (including traditional Komi-Yazvan number of stories in the buildings and their height, shape of roofs, etc.).

Second, the development potential of Komi-Yazvan culture is found in traditional daily (non-industrial) culture: from housekeeping to the folk lore and beliefs. Of course, in modern society it is largely transformed and narrowed down; however, it still exhibits ethnic characteristics. Ethnographic objects can be found in traditional costumes, interiors, household utensils, cuisine, visual arts, games, medical remedies, etc.

Finally, oral culture serves as an important source of preservation of local culture. Of particular importance is the fact that oral culture largely preserves the ethnic features. This is undoubtedly an old tradition, since professional culture and education used to be inaccessible to the common people.

### 3. Ethnic Representations in Komi-Yazva

Oral tradition exhibits variability as one of the important characteristics of the Komi-Yazvan culture. Characteristically, Komi-Yazvans continue to change and transform works of Russian folklore, and transmit them in this 'adapted' form to a larger population: this is a constantly developing creative trend. An excellent example was set by A.Parhakova, a teacher in Parshakov school and an author of a primer language book [6, 7]. Her translations of Russian songs and fables entered the modern Komi-Yazva culture [7, 8].

Alongside linguists and ethnographers, Komi-Yazvan folklore was studied by the students of Parshakov school, who, under the guidance of their teachers M.Antipina, K.Kichigina, A.Parshakova and T.Parshakova, collected fairy-tales, songs, folk rhymes (*chastushkas*), folktales (*bylichki*), a lot of fixed phrases, proverbs and sayings, which were used in presentations and written accounts [1-3]. Their results were presented in a series of talks at various conferences, as well as in publications. Komi-Yazva history and culture are expressed in the works of Parshakov school graduates: the poems of Mikhail Parshakov and the stories of Pavel Parshakov [5, 8, pp. 78-84].

A ritual festival 'Sarchik Brings the Spring' (*Sarchik prinosit vesnu*) has for over 25 years served as an important form of ethnic representation. Born out of the historical tradition, this festival uses traditional elements to integrate ethnic identity.

'Sarchik' is a Komi-Yazvan name for a wagtail bird. Its spring arrival was always used to observe the bird's behavior – in particular, the place where it has first been seen. A high-flying bird heralded warm spring and summer – and, therefore, a good harvest; a low-flying bird was a sign of a cold summer and bad harvest. Either way, a wagtail was offered food and a special respect, so that it would bring prosperity to the people [6, p. 132].

'Sarchik' has acquired a wide public attention since the celebrations now include people from multiple villages. Children actively participate in this holiday; the use of native tongue is ubiquitous.

'Sarchik' has defined and brought together an ethnic group system of values, the most important of which is the native language. In talking about 'our own' culture,

language occupies the first place; the second is occupied by 'Sarchik' – that is, by a ritual tradition. In recent years, 'Sarchik' have strengthened the crucial emotional and sensory aspect of an ethnic self-awareness.

An estimation of contemporary outreach of 'Sarchik' showed that this festival contributes to a wider recognition of Komi-Yazva people and to its emotionally charged and morally uplifting representation.

"People have become used to the big 'Sarchik'. We are preparing, we are waiting for guests, we even measure our life from one 'Sarchik' to another. Thanks to it, people have grown to respect their ethnicity, they have begun to appreciate their native tongue much more. And it is good for the kids too. So many students have performed on this stage... where else the kids could demonstrate their talents? We need to search for the talented kids. This will become a movement, particularly because the language is taught in school – and this means an official acceptance of our native tongue. We have to develop 'Sarchik' in our native language" (A. Antipina, history teacher at Parshakovsk school).

Their short and naturally artless expressions are based, first and foremost, on the universal subjective evaluation of their self-awareness, awareness of their people, as the only true way of developing its cultural image. This is one of the phenomenological characteristics of Komi-Yazvan festive and ritual culture.

The museum of local history at the village of Antipina serves as an institute that strengthens and recreates the ethnic culture. Its current display represents academic theory of the origins of native population, its occupations and intercultural communications. Of particular importance is a museum complex containing materials on the history of Komi-Yazva research and a development of literacy.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us note that the present ethno-cultural situation of Komi-Yazva people is a marker of deep challenges in preserving and reviving ethnic identity in local ethnic groups. The role played by ethnicity in people's consciousness is clearly demonstrated by the following example: during the All-Russian population census of 2010, 436 residents of Upper Yazva villages have for the first time identified themselves as Komi-Yazvan [8, p. 16].

International acknowledgement took the form of Komi-Yazva participants in World Congresses of Finno-Ugric Peoples in Hungary, Estonia and Khanty-Mansiysk.

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