

School on the “move”

A case study: Nomadic Schooling of the Indigenous Evenk children
in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia (Russian Far East)



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Abstract

The present state of the traditional culture of indigenous people in Russia can be characterised as critical. This situation is a result of an assimilation process and the policy of russification. It is well known that education was used as a main tool for acculturation and assimilation of non-Russian ethnic indigenous groups during this policy. In recent time the revitalisation of the indigenous minority culture stimulates a process of bringing back the nomadic schools. The nomadic school is defined as a special type of elementary school which was adapted to the extreme northern conditions of Siberia: this model started under the Soviet in the 1920's and 1930s. This type of school moves with reindeer herders and it makes the school accessible for the children of nomadic people. It seems strange that in a modern time the indigenous people decided to return not only to their traditional culture but also to the type of schooling which was used by their parents. The first nomadic school in Russia was created in the 1930s and now this kind of school starts to work again in nomadic communities. I have decided to write about the nomadic school because education is an important aspect of life of the indigenous people: it opens doors for indigenous people. Today the nomadic school is a new educational institution for the indigenous nomadic children.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose, definitions and background

“Children are like tiny flowers; they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers”

-Friedrich Froebel¹

The focus of this thesis is on the education of the Evenk children in contemporary Sakha society and the challenges they face. This study investigates whether it is reasonable to apply the “old” system of nomadic schooling from the 1920’s to the current situation and whether this approach would give positive outcomes. It is also of importance to examine the applicability of other school models. *The crucial research question of this thesis is whether the nomadic school constitutes a step towards the future, or that it is just a backward move to a primitive lifestyle which could make the indigenous people unable to survive in a modern world.*

Frank Darnell and Anton Hoem (1996) understand education as:

A cultural process [...] and in every cultural setting, is an instrument for survival. It is also an instrument for adaptation and change. To understand education we must study it as it is – embedded in the culture of which it is an integral part and which it serves².

I would like to continue this definition: It has different levels and by comprehending each level, people acquire knowledge which serves them for the rest of their lives. Therefore, they become a visual tool for preserving their identity. Each type of education has its own value which is useful in a certain sphere. Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy says:

Education does not mean knowledge of the alphabet. This type of knowledge is only a means to education. Education implies a child’s learning how to put his mind and all his senses to good use³.

Therefore, in his view, education is not only based on knowing facts but teaches us how to use the mind. It is about something more than just basic knowledge. The Director of the Institute

¹ Friedrich Froebel quoted in Dantinne 2001.

² Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 257.

³ Gandhi quoted in “Education of the Whole Child” 2006.

of Small - Numbered Peoples of the North in the Republic of Sakha, Vasiliy Robbek (2004), points out; “the system of education of reindeer–breeders, hunters and fishermen cannot be outside of a nomadic way of life”⁴.

The aim of this study is to analyse an indigenous school in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia (Russian Far East)⁵. I concentrate on the nomadic school of the Evenks⁶ who are indigenous people in the North of Russia. The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of hunters and gatherers describes the Evenks as:

One of the most widely dispersed nationalities in eastern Eurasia. Evenki individuals most commonly refer to themselves in their own language as Evenki, but in the specific regions may call themselves *bae*, *ile*, *orochon* or *khamnigian*. They are best known for their skills as hunters, and as herders of domesticated reindeer. Today elders remember their homelands in territories bordering the Sakha Republic, or as far away as Lake Baikal⁷.

I write about a nomadic school which is in the small Evenk community in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia. Egorov and Neustroev (2003) define the nomadic school as:

A special type of elementary school which was adapted to the extreme northern conditions of Siberia: this model started under the Soviets in the 1920’s and 1930s. This type of school moves with reindeer herders and it makes the school accessible for the children of nomadic people. Today, with the revitalisation of the culture of the indigenous people, a process has started to bring back of the nomadic schools in a new form⁸.

I have decided to write about the nomadic school because education is an important aspect of life for the indigenous people. It is a main idea of my paper that education opens doors for indigenous people. Scholars from different countries are deeply concerned about this question. A leading Sami politician, Ole-Henrik Magga (2005) mentions:

⁴ Robbek 2004.

⁵ Yakutia is now officially called Republic Sakha.

⁶ In different sources the Evenks are called Evenki or Tungus (from Russian translation).

⁷ Lee and Daly 1999, p. 142.

⁸ Egorov and Neustroev 2003, pp. 3-4 (in my translation).

Statistic concerning indigenous education, where available on a country-by-country basis, shows that indigenous children are a most vulnerable group in terms of poor participation and attainment in formal education⁹.

My fieldwork supports this experience because at this moment there are only a few indigenous schools of good quality for indigenous children in the Republic of Sakha. It is important and will be useful to apply a new approach to education by taking into consideration the background of different ethnic groups. There are numerous cases which have demonstrated the negative effects of the old school system of assimilation. It was based on boarding schools where children were taken away from their traditional way of life and the result was a severe identity crisis among these children. The Committee for Children’s Rights has identified child groups who have been affected by discrimination and children of indigenous communities, nomadic and minority children were included in this list¹⁰. In the Republic of Sakha, among indigenous groups, there are 5,657 indigenous children (Evens-2,158, Evenks-3,235, Ukagirs-165, and Chukchi-123). Of this total number, 1809 are children of reindeer herders¹¹. All of these children have different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles.

In recent times in Yakutia, there have been many debates about re-introducing nomadic schools. Traditionally, nomadic schools moved with the reindeer herders; this helped children by making them feel comfortable by growing up in their habitual environment as they could stay the whole time with their parents in their herder units. The development of indigenous schools today is still an issue that concerns many researchers around the world. A researcher on indigenous schooling issues, Asle Høgmo at the University of Tromsø, observes:

Designing a modern Sami education from kindergarten to college and university level is a crucial instrument in the building of a modern Sami nation. The problems and challenges facing educational developments are the same as those experienced in the development of other modern Sami institutions. The Sami people are an indigenous people, and I believe the problems experienced in Sami society have parallels among most other indigenous peoples in the world¹².

⁹ Magga 2005.

¹⁰ UNICEF 2002, p.28.

¹¹ Nikulin 2004, pp. 41-42 (in my translation).

¹² Høgmo 1994, p. 21.

Thus, indigenous people in different countries have similar issues such as the development of traditional culture, the revival of their mother tongue, the financial support of education and so on. Such conceptions as tradition, language, culture and spirituality are necessary and very important for all nations. Indigenous schools, as an institutional expression of the minority identity, function by providing insights into the traditional culture of the young generation. I believe that well-educated and responsible individuals will love and preserve their land, culture and traditional way of life.

Map 1.



Source: Scott Polar Research Institute 1997.

Map shows the research areas:

- No. 26 - the location of the Scientific Research Institute of the National School in Republic Sakha;
- No. 31 - Aldan district where the Evenks reindeer herder from “Amma” community live.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1. I carried out my fieldwork in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia from June to August 2005. Its main aim was to visit the reindeer-herder community to conduct surveys among three groups of people: parents, teachers and pupils. For the purpose of interviewing staff and gathering academic information from sources such as libraries and archives, I also visited various institutes which develop indigenous people’s issues.

In the first month of my fieldwork, I visited the Scientific Research Institute of the National Schools of the Republic of Sakha (SRINSRS)¹³ in Yakutsk, the capital of the Republic of Sakha. At SRINSRS I gained access to the institute’s well-resourced library and focused my attention on publications about the nomadic schools and the indigenous people’s situation in the Republic of Sakha. However, most books about the indigenous peoples’ situation in the region provided only general information. The lack of reliable statistics and updated information created problems for my research. I also visited the Institute of Indigenous Peoples Issues of the North in Yakutsk to learn more about the ideas of preservation, revival and development of the small populations in Northern Russia. This institute is the main institute focusing on the problems specifically related to indigenous people in the Republic of Sakha.

The experience was doubly useful for me as I also met researchers who developed theoretical models based on existing nomadic school projects and who were drafting suggestions for further improvements. Another positive point of my visit was that I interviewed the staff of

¹³ Scientific Research Institute of National Schools of the Republic Sakha was established by a Decree of the President of Republic Sakha in April 4, 1992, on the basis of the Yakutian Branch National Schools Institute of Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation.

SRINSRS and deepened my understanding of the different views concerning the purpose and structure of nomadic schools. The staff expressed different views concerning the aim and organisation of the nomadic schools.

The older generation of researchers believed that the idea belongs to the past that it is not necessary to try to go back to it because modern times require openness, not obsession with an idealised past. I observed that the people who opposed this new wave of nomadic school had themselves studied in this kind of school.

On the other hand, younger scholars supported the existence of nomadic schools as they believed that these schools would contribute to the recovery of the traditional culture and language of the indigenous minority people. They argue that nomadic schools are not a matter of blind primitivisation; they give opportunities to and preserve traditional culture.

1.2.2. Afterwards, I stayed in the “Amma” nomadic school in Aldan ulus¹⁴ (“ulus” is an administrative and territorial district in Sakha) where the Evenks live. I chose this region because it is representative of the Evenk community and it has a nomadic school. At the same time, it is in a critical situation and faces challenges related to the disappearance of culture and language. The community has also established links with SRINSRS. The school is a sub-branch of a basic, rural school.

The aim of my visit was to meet and interview people working at the nomadic school or in other ways related to these schools. I should say that it was the most important part of my fieldwork because during that time I got first-hand information from community members, an experience which helped me to understand clearly their attitudes and ideas concerning the nomadic school.

It was not surprising for me that their opinions about the necessity of this kind of school differed from the SRINSRS’ views in Yakutsk. Consequently, I decided to pay more scientific attention to these differences in my master thesis. I hope this will make its content more interesting and increase its scientific quality.

¹⁴ Located in the southern part of Yakutia, the center of gold mining and mica; metal industry, manufacture of building materials.

1.2.3. I divided the questions of interviews in three groups: questions to the researchers, to teachers and community members and to the pupils. Questions to each group took into account the different backgrounds and positions of these people.

1.2.3.1. Questions to the first group - *researchers (people who work in various institutes which developed theoretical models based on the existing nomadic school projects)*:

1. In your opinion, is it necessary to revitalise the old system of nomadic schools in Russia (Republic of Sakha) in modern times? (Why?)

I decided to include this question, as the main investigation question of my thesis because by analysing different opinions, I could understand the importance of revitalisation of the nomadic school system.

2. What are the most serious problems which the nomadic schools in Russia (Republic Sakha) face today?

I used this question for two groups (researchers, members of community and teachers) because it was necessary to establish the most significant challenges for the nomadic schools in order to find solutions.

3. In your opinion, do the nomadic schools enjoy enough legal protection, rights and financial help from the government? What are the issues hindering their functioning?

This is a main question which is interesting to me and very important for indigenous people. I also used it for two groups (researchers, community members and teachers).

4. Why does your organisation (project) support a nomadic school? What are the perspectives for further development of the nomadic schools in Russia (Republic Sakha)?

This question was asked directly to those who develop the concept of revitalisation of the nomadic schools in modern times.

I concentrated on the SRINSRS and interviewed researchers of this institute. One of the most important persons who gave me full information and interesting comments was Tero Mustonen from the International Project of “Snowchange” Cooperative¹⁵.

¹⁵ Winner of the prestigious Worldwide Fund for Nature 2002 'Panda Prize' for best national ecological project, SnowChange was started in late 2000 to document and work with local and Indigenous communities of the Northern regions. In 2001, a partnership was established with the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) to provide case studies from Finland and Russia to the Chapter 3 of ACIA: Indigenous perspectives. The aim of this project was to document and work with local communities and Indigenous peoples to present

1.2.3.2. Questions to the second group – *teachers and members (parents)* of the reindeer herder community:

- 1. What kind of value does the nomadic school have for your community? What is the function of the nomadic school in your community?)**
- 2. Does the nomadic school provide any perspective for future development of your children? (What kind of perspectives?)**
- 3. Can you describe the differences between your nomadic school and an ordinary school? (Specific differences?)**

These questions include more specific details because teachers and members of the community have their own views concerning nomadic schools, they can specify details of the nomadic schools from the perspective of those who are directly related to these schools.

1.2.3.3. Questions for third group – *children (pupils of nomadic school)*:

- 1. Do you like to study in the nomadic school? Why?**
- 2. What are you going to do after graduating from this school?**
- 3. Are there differences between the nomadic and the ordinary school for you?**
- 4. What kind of changes you want to see in the nomadic school?**

When I interviewed the children I tried to ask simple questions they could answer without being confused. The opinions of pupils had the same important value as the opinions of researchers and teachers in my thesis. The feelings of children reflect the inward conditions of this school. If cultural prosperity of all nations depends on children (they are the future carriers of culture), then children should also play a main role in its development. In addition, their answers reflect their feelings. These are a special category of answers which can realistically represent the conditions inside the nomadic school. If educational systems are created as a system of care for children, then the nomadic school should not be an exception.

1.2.4. In addition, I use descriptions because it is difficult to write about problems without describing the background and history of the case. Approaching the problem of education of the indigenous people also requires an overview of the different aspects of their life. As Frank Darnell and Anton Hoem (1996) reflect:

their findings of climate and ecological change in a way that would offer a viewpoint that empowers the local people of the changing Arctic (in: About Snowchange 2005).

To better understand the problems of providing education among the indigenous peoples of the Far North, it is helpful to examine the environment in which these people live and the circumstances that have influenced their lives. Natural surroundings, political histories, and social relationships all have contributed to the present cultures of northern indigenous societies¹⁶.

I present the Evenks’ history (their origin, territory, occupations, ways of life, culture, neighbours and relations with them) for understanding the problems they face and to explain their organisation of the nomadic schools.

Such difficulties concerning the existence and organisation of indigenous schools have occurred not only in the Republic of Sakha. That is why it is helpful to use a comparative method to define the roots of the problem or give visible examples. I use experiences of different indigenous peoples, in particular, the Sami experience in Norway. The Sami history and experience are marked with the struggles for survival as a nation. The Sami have also gained recognition as indigenous people from the dominant society of Norway. There are a great number of publications about Sami history which include the history of the Sami education system.

1.2.5. I also refer to the Gandhian philosophy. In Gandhi’s struggle for freedom, an important element was to change the educational system for equality and against discrimination. “Gandhi’s critique of western, particularly English, education was part of his critique of western civilization as a whole”¹⁷. I believe that Gandhi’s ideas are applicable for finding solutions to the indigenous people’s problems. For example, he develops reconstruction ideas for Indian education. Some of them are relevant in analysing the indigenous education system in Russia as well. Gandhi opposes, for example, the “modern” civilization and advocates the ancient Indian civilization in the form of village communities that are self sufficient and self – governing. This idea has a parallel with the desires of the indigenous peoples because today they prefer their traditional culture instead of the “modern” civilization.

¹⁶ Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 31.

¹⁷ Burke 2006.

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis consists of five chapters, a conclusion and illustrative materials of nomadic communities and maps. These are important for introducing the living area of the studied indigenous groups.

Chapter one: *“Introduction”*. I describe the purpose of the paper, definitions and the background of the nomadic school. I give a common description of origin of the Evenk. I reflect on: the process of my fieldwork in Yakutsk and in the Amma community and my methodology which consists of interviews, comparisons, and the gathering of information. In addition, I write about the debates surrounding this nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha. I include a map showing the research areas.

Chapter two: *The “Indigenous Minority People” or “Small Numbered People of the North”*. I discuss the general situation of indigenous people in Russia and in the Republic of Sakha. I also concentrate on the definitions of the term “indigenous people” and analyse its content according to explanations in both academic and legal settings. I use articles discussed in seminars of the Master of Indigenous Studies programme at the University of Tromsø Norway, in dealing with the histories of the Sami and other indigenous peoples

Chapter three: *“Our home is just under the North Star”*. In this chapter I present the Evenk and their life, history, culture, religion and so on. I also explain the policy of *“Russification”* which has caused significant changes in indigenous people’s lives. It is important to have a more thorough knowledge of Evenk history in order to understand the role of the nomadic school in an Evenks community.

Chapter four: *“School on the move.”* In this chapter I present the nomadic school “Amma”: its definitions, functions and differences from the first nomadic school, along with its dilemma today. I also describe the community where this school situated and discuss the different kinds of roles this school has in the nomadic community of “Amma”.

Chapter five: *“Possible solutions”*. This chapter gives some ideas concerning the improvement of the education for the children, especially children of reindeer herders, in the

Republic of Sakha. I analyse other models and projects of the nomadic school being developed by researchers of various scientific institutes in Yakutsk and assess other alternatives for improving indigenous schooling. I also present the Nutendli¹⁸ nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha as it is a success story of the concept of the nomadic school.

¹⁸ The Nutendli nomadic school was created in 2003 in the Nizhnekolimskii region which in the nomadic community situated in the Earth of Republic Sakha and supported by “Snowchange project”.

Chapter 2: The “Indigenous Minority People” or “Small - Numbered People of the North”

There are, however, “the other Siberians”: people who are not covered by the Russian word *Sibiriak* and who are defined exclusively through difference; people who are savages, aliens, or natives because they are not Russians¹⁹.

There are many different indigenous groups in the world; some of them are known and well studied, but the “smaller” ones are not studied as much. Each indigenous group presents a unique culture. They have their own tradition, language, and way of life which have been created over many years. However, Doeker-Mach (1993) notes the Siberian people remain unknown and there is little information about them.

In the territory belonging to Russia, “Siberia”, which has always been part of Russia and did not have to be incorporated into the Soviet empire under either Lenin or Stalin, there are many ethnically autochthonous groups (native people) who have never come to the attention of the world public, unlike the native peoples of Canada, Australia, and America (Eskimos, Inuit, and Indians for example) who have largely won for themselves a status that allows them to participate in the political decision-making process without claiming nationhood. In the part of Russia simply referred to geographically as Siberia, this indigenous population seems to be dwindling to extinction as a result of colonization and Russianization²⁰.

Doeker-Mach concludes that in Russia, the indigenous people are the “forgotten” people, they just live in their homeland and only very few researchers outside Russia know about them. Unfortunately, usually Russians have stereotypes concerning indigenous people in northern Russia. They believe that the indigenous people are primitive and savage and cannot study and become well educated. This image has probably arisen from the big differences between their own vast culture and that of the indigenous people and their ways of the life. The indigenous people in the north are minority groups and their traditions are not familiar among many Russians, therefore, they are stereotyped as a primitive people by the majority.

¹⁹ Slezkine 1993, p. 15.

²⁰ Doeker-Mach 1993, p. 7.

Indigenous people in Russia are officially defined as “native small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation”²¹. The term “native” means that they live in the traditional territory as the first inhabitants. And “small-numbered” could be understood as “minority” because each group totals less than 50,000 people. “People of the North, Siberia and the Far East” describes the territories in which they live. One thing I found very interesting is the manner in which non-Russian scientists explain the recognition of indigenous people in Russia. According to Delmann and Goldmann (2006):

There has until now not been a need to determine who is an indigenous person in Russia, because there are no special benefits given to indigenous people on an individual basis²².

The term “indigenous people” implies a relationship between a government and its ethnic groups in which the ethnic groups are officially recognised by the government as indigenous people. If the indigenous people are officially recognised then the government is obliged to provide support for them in form of juridical laws and legitimate their rights according to international criteria.

The term “indigenous people” used by the World Council of Indigenous People states:

*Indigenous people shall be people living in countries which have populations composed of different ethnic or racial groups who are descendants of the earliest populations which survive in the area, and who do not, as a group, control the national government of the countries within which they live*²³.

The native small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation in Russia can be defined as indigenous people. They live in a country (Russia) which has populations composed of different ethnic groups who are descendants of the earliest populations which have survived in the area; as we know from history, the Russians first met them in the seventeenth century in the territory of Siberia. They do not control the national government of the country where they live. However, it is interesting to note that the Russian government has not ratified the International Convention N 169 for the indigenous people in Russia.

²¹ Delmann and Goldmann 2006.

²² Delmann and Goldmann 2006.

²³ Bodley 1990, p. 153.

*Currently, only one international instrument protects the rights of indigenous peoples: the Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, No 169 (ILO Convention 169), adopted by the international Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1989. Also the Russian federation showed interest in this convention, unfortunately it has not signed the instrument, despite pressure by international bodies, even though in 1998 Russia initiated the ratification procedure for the convention*²⁴.

In general, the Russian policy does not demonstrate a desire to recognize its indigenous people. Therefore, the indigenous people of Russia do not have state protection for their own rights. This is why we see the current situation of these people in Russia:

*Nevertheless, discrimination is still the major problem for indigenous peoples of the Russian North, Siberia, and Far East. The difference in living standards between the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is vast. Currently, over 30 percent of the indigenous population lives in substandard housing or traditional tents, often because housing in rural areas and along migration routes is not available*²⁵.

During the interviews, I asked about the protection and rights of indigenous people from the government in Russia and the Republic of Sakha. I received only short negative answers. The Russian state has only mentioned some future plans concerning indigenous people:

The state of Russia has an obligation to preserve and support the cultural diversity of its peoples, especially the small – numbered Indigenous peoples – this is what President Putin has emphasized for example on the visit to Yamal [Autonomous Okrug in Russia] in 2004 and in many other speeches as well²⁶.

In the Republic of Sakha, as in many other regions of Russia, the troubles for the small-numbered indigenous peoples began with the industrial development of their traditional territory. Unfortunately, these areas became mining centres of rich mineral resources such as diamonds and gold (“the Republic of Sakha produces 90% of the diamonds and 40% of the gold of the Russian Federation”²⁷). The development of the industry has led to a large stream of labour migration. Unreasoned industrial development has resulted in ecological destruction of these territories and the disappearance of the traditional way of life such as

²⁴ Xanthaki 2004, p. 76.

²⁵ Xanthaki 2004, p. 80.

²⁶ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

²⁷ De Cordier.

reindeer breeding, fishing and hunting. Today, the ecological environment is polluted and this has created a variety of difficulties for the indigenous people. However, the central government has not allocated compensations or help for people who live in these territories.

Therefore, indigenous peoples in Russia have two alternatives: either to wait for support from the government or to start doing something independently. One of the researchers from SRINSRS pointed out: “The idea of bringing back the nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha is an initiative of the nomadic and indigenous people only.” This means that the indigenous people are tired of waiting for support and protection in the form of indigenous rights. They have themselves started to bring back the nomadic schools which combines an educational institution with the preservation the traditional way of life. I would like to summarize this chapter with a quote from Alexandra Xanthaki:

Nevertheless, numerically small peoples are still in a critical situation and do not enjoy the rights guaranteed by the federal state. Implementation of the federal laws protecting indigenous rights is very weak²⁸.

Nobody knows when this critical situation will change and when the “savages, aliens and native people” (defined in this way because they are not Russian) will be respected by the Russians as people who are equal to them.

²⁸ Xanthaki 2004, p. 104.

Chapter 3: “Our home is just under the North Star”²⁹

3.1 Introduction

I write about the Evenk, who also live in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia among five other indigenous groups and other different nationalities.

The Evenks “inhabit a huge territory of the Siberian taiga from the River Ob in the west to the Okhotsk Sea in the east, and from the Arctic Ocean in the north, to Manchuria and Sakhalin in the south. A large Evenk community lives in the northeast of China, close to the Soviet border, while others inhabit areas of Inner Mongolia and Manchuria³⁰.”

According to the 1989 census, in the Republic of Sakha there are 14,428 Evenks. This means that 48.2% of the people calling themselves Evenk live in Yakutia³¹.

The indigenous peoples in Russia have been studied by several ethnographers such as: Mainov, Johelson, Bogoras-Tan, Pekarskii, Shirokogoroff, Vasilevich, and so on. The huge work in the study of the history of the Siberian people was done by *politssilnie* (persons who were sent to Siberia for political reasons in the 16th century). Most of them were well educated and they compiled the first descriptions of the history of the indigenous people and their life. Their studies were rich in content and introduced the culture of the Siberian people to a new audience. They lived among the Siberian people for many years and observed them over time. In that time, Siberia was known as a “wild land” and was a place for “politically dangerous people” or in other words, “a prison without walls”.

Despite these descriptions, the origin and early history of Evenks is still not clear and has not been studied well. The small indigenous groups of the north had not a written language until 1930s. Earlier they had only an oral culture of narrations. According to Vasilevich and Smolyak:

²⁹ This is the way the Evenks talk about themselves. Quoted in http://www.krasu.ru/evenkia_e/eth/index.html.

³⁰ Viires 1993.

³¹ Argounova, 2006.

The Evenks received their written language after the Revolution and in 1928-1929, the first publications in the language were reproduced by mimeograph. In 1931, the first Evenk book appeared³².

The Russian ethnographer Shirokogoroff, also notes the limited knowledge of the history of the Evenks: “The history of the Northern Tungus [another name for Evenks] is also very little known, which is quite easy to understand, as the Northern Tungus have no written language³³. Therefore there are many unclear moments in their history.

Evenks in recent time are known also as Tungus. The ethnographers are not sure about the origin of this name. There are some hypotheses used to explain this term: For example, it has been suggested that it originated from the Yakut word “toŋus” i.e. “pig”³⁴. Chinese records also indicate that there were tribes living in present Manchuria (Tung-hu), i.e. the “Eastern Barbarians”³⁵ and “Tung-hu” could have become “Tungus”. Another theory according to Vasilevich and Smoliak is that the name is neither Russian nor Evenk in origin, but an ancient Middle Asian one.

From these three hypotheses, the second one of the Chinese origin seems more likely to be true. The first one, perhaps, emerged later with the arrival of the Evenks tribe from Manchuria where, according to Shirokogoroff, they were swine breeders. Therefore, the Yakut called them “toŋus”, which means a “pig” in the Turkic language. The third possible explanation is not convincing either because the Russians encountered the Evenks between the 15th and 17th centuries. By this time, the Evenks were already known by the name Tungus.

However, according to the Evenk language it belongs to the Tungus – Manchurian branch of the Altaic language family³⁶. The ethnographers and linguists suggest that the ancestors of the Evenks came from China. “At present, the Northern Tungus are met within the basin of the three great rivers; namely, the Enissy, the Lena, and the Amur river³⁷. Now in Russia they are known as a widely dispersed ethnic group. The Evenks did not give the exact definition

³² Vasilevich and Smolyak 1964, p. 654.

³³ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 4.

³⁴ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 50.

³⁵ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 50.

³⁶ Sirina 1999, p. 62.

³⁷ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 2.

of their homeland they just recognise themselves as the nomadic people and say: “Our home is just under the North Star”.

At present, some of the Evenks groups live “in northern China on the Khingan spurs (Northern Manchuria) and to some extent in the Mongolian People’s Republic, on the upper reaches of the Iro River and near Lake Buir-Nur”³⁸. They are engaged in different types of economic activity as they depend on the local environment and the natural conditions of their territory. Usually, the northern Evenks are reindeer herders and hunters. The southern Evenks are cattle breeders and in some cases cultivate land.

Their different types of activity are due to different reasons. The first one is territory: “The reindeer lives principally on lichens, called lavukta. These lichens usually cover the mountains, especially on the northern slopes, so that sections of taiga, sometimes without interruption, are covered like a carpet by lichens”³⁹. Therefore, the reindeer herders cannot live just anywhere they would like:

Their whole traditional culture supported this mobile way of living: they had light conical tents, excellent skis, and light clothing. It was the domestication of reindeer that enabled the Evenks to become extremely mobile⁴⁰.

Another major factor is the strong influences their neighbours had upon them.

3.2 External influences

According to monographs about the Evenks, we can suggest that as an ethnic group, they can be characterised as being very flexible. Over many years they have had communications with other ethnic groups. According to the Russian ethnographers Vasilevich and Smolyak, the Evenks were influenced by the Yakuts, Buriats (ethnic group in southern Siberia, Russia) and Russians.

³⁸ Vasilevich and Smolyak 1964, p. 620.

³⁹ Shirokogoroff 1979, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁰ Viires 1993.

Shirokogoroff notes that there have also been Chinese influences, but these were not so strong. Today, the reliability of this version is not clear like many other issues in the Evenks' history:

Chinese influence over the Northern Tungus has been of different kinds. First, this influence was long ago introduced among them second hand, i.e., by the Manchus and the Mongols; second, direct Chinese influence has met with opposition from the Tungus at a time when they were deprived of the political and social system organized by the Manchus, who themselves were considered by the Tungus as a people akin to them; third, to be counted as such, Chinese influence is much younger than any other; fourth, Chinese influence over the Tungus living in Transbaikalia and generally in the territories formerly belonging to Russia was outweighed by Russian influence⁴¹.

The Russian influence was stronger than other influences because the Evenks, like many other ethnic groups, were exposed to a policy of “*Russification*” during the 1960's-1970's. A significant change in Evenk lifestyle was triggered by this policy. “The arable lands in Siberia were occupied by Russian settlers, migrating there in the 17th century, and those Evenks, living in the vicinity on the upper reaches of the Lena and near Baikal, were *russified*”⁴². It could be said that the Russian government implemented a colossal change of life of the indigenous people.

During the 1960's and 1970's, the Soviet state pursued an open policy of Russification. School instruction was conducted only in Russian. In some regions, school children were not even allowed to speak their mother tongue. This led to the loss of indigenous languages and the disappearance of national cultures. From 1970 to 1979, the percentage of people in the North who could claim their indigenous language as their mother tongue decreased considerably⁴³.

The “*Russification*” policy has a parallel to that of “*Norwegianization*” in Norway towards the Sami and the re-organisation of schools. As Professor Henry Minde mentions:

The policy of norwegianization was introduced in the field of culture “with school as the battlefield and teachers as frontline soldiers.” The subject which was focused on was, therefore, language⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 90.

⁴² Ants 1993.

⁴³ Batyanova, Loukjantchenko, Kalabanov 1999, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Minde 2003, p. 122.

Schools as social institutions became one of the main tools in the assimilation process. Governments used the school and majority language to challenge minority culture, language and self-identity of ethnic minority groups. These policies had negative results both in Russia and in Norway.

This policy of “*Russification*” resulted in a “stigmatisation” of the ethnicity of the indigenous people in Russia. Even today people remember how it felt being indigenous and being perceived as “primitive”. The “*Russification*” policy was perceived as “civilizing” and “developing” the “primitive” lives of the indigenous people in Russia. An expert on the problems of the nomadic schools, Tero Mustonen, described the result in an interview: “civilization” has brought diseases, suicide, alcoholism, western (Russian) education, Russian language, resources extraction and so on.

Gunther Doeker-Mach observes that some of the indigenous people, who have preserved their own language, culture and traditional way of life today, live a long distance from “civilization”:

The people in this part of Siberia remained at the economic level of hunting, fishing, and gathering until recent times. They did not become familiar with modern civilization until 15th centuries. Nevertheless, in this part of Siberia there were nearly thirty-three peoples or nation-like tribes, the so-called “indigenous peoples”, to use the term employed in international law. They used to be called the “little peoples of the North”, who lived under difficult conditions at huge distances from the cities and major settlements of the Russians and had preserved their archaic forms of communal life⁴⁵.

In addition, I noticed that the Yakut influence on the Evenks who live in Yakutia was very strong as well. Some ethnographers who investigated the history of the Evenks, suggest that the Evenks had especially bad relations with the Yakuts, “who had settled in the river basin of the Lena in the 13th century”⁴⁶. The bad relations between Yakuts and Evenks can be explained as a result of an assimilation process, that being: the minority group (Evenks) exposed to assimilation of the majority group (Yakut). However, at that time in Siberia, the relations were bad not only between the Yakut and Evenk groups; it was a typical state between various different ethnic groups. According to linguistic expert David Crystal: “The

⁴⁵ Doeker-Mach 1993, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Viires 1993.

term most often encountered in this connection is cultural assimilation: one culture is influenced by a more dominant culture, and begins to lose its character as a result of its members adopting new behaviour and mores”⁴⁷ .

The influences of Yakuts to Evenks were on a large scale:

The Yakut influence affects the language, the ethnographical complex, and even the anthropological characters of the Tungus. As to the methods of gaining control over territory, the Yakuts remind one of the Mongols, and considering the persistence of their methods they may be compared with those of the Russians and the Chinese, so that they seem to be better adapted than any other group for successful trade with the Tungus⁴⁸ .

One can also suggest that the Evenks adopted a culture of nomadism from other ethnic groups whom they met in Russia during their migration. Concerning this question, Shirokogoroff reflects:

When, and for how long the reindeer – oron [oron means reindeer in the Evenk language]-has been domesticated, the Tungus do not know. They believe the reindeer to have been known to them since the very beginning of the existence of the Tungus, i.e., the existence of man⁴⁹ .

It could be said that the indigenous groups living in the Republic of Sakha, have a separate history because they were twice objects of assimilation: by the Yakuts and Russians. When the Yakuts came into the Sakha, they met five indigenous groups (Evenks, Evens, Dolgans, Ukagirs and Chukchis) who already lived in the territory of the republic. The Yakuts, a large ethnic group compared to the other indigenous minority groups, influenced them in all aspects of their life. So, as Vasilevich and Smolyak (1964) reflect:

The Yakuts were a great influence on the Evenks. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Vilyuy, Olenek, Anabar, and Lower Aldan [see the map on p. 6] Evenks became so Yakutized that they even forgot their native language⁵⁰ .

Today in the Republic of Sakha, most indigenous people speak the Russian and Yakut languages, yet they cannot speak their own language. At the moment, the language of the

⁴⁷ Crystal 2000, p. 77.

⁴⁸ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 95.

⁴⁹ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Vasilevich and Smolyak 1964, p.625.

indigenous minority groups is a main problem in the process of the preservation and revitalisation of their traditional culture.

However, at the same time, the Evenks have managed to preserve their culture and ethnic independence. Many ethnographers note their unique ability to adopt practices from their neighbours and at the same time to keep their ethnical identity. Shirokogoroff says:

They realize that without their language and their own customs they are unable to maintain their ethnical existence any longer; but at the same time, under interethnic pressure, they adopt all kinds of innovations, and change their original ethnographical complex, preserving, as far as possible, its equilibrium⁵¹.

3.3 Religion

The Evenks, like most Siberian ethnic groups, believe in spirits and the sacral power of shamans. James Forsyth gives the following description of the Evenk religion:

They believed that there were three worlds-middle earth where people normally live, the upper world of the supreme god and other divinities, and the underworld inhabited by the spirits of the dead. These three worlds were linked by a river. The whole of nature was animate with occult force which took the form of “master” of the forest, of mountains, rivers, animals, fish, etc⁵².

Usually, they communicate with different spirits through shamans because they are perceived as being the mediators between the sacral and human worlds. The shaman plays an important role in the indigenous society, especially among the northern and Siberian people.

One of the functions of the shaman (which is in origin a Tungus word) was to perform religious rites involving the sacrifice of white or dappled reindeer reared specially for this purpose, on such occasions as weddings, funerals, the start of the hunting season or divisions of the clan. The shaman’s great power lay in his or her supposed ability to establish contact with spirits and control

⁵¹ Shirokogoroff 1979, p. 95.

⁵² Forsyth 1992, p. 52.

them by projecting his own soul and flying into the spirit world. By this means it was believed that people could be cured of disease⁵³.

Shamans still have very strong power and influence on the Evenks today, even if most of them belong to the Christian Orthodox religion.

3.4 Education

According to statistics, in recent times the level of education among indigenous people is rather low.

48 per cent of the indigenous population of the North over the age of 15 have elementary or incomplete secondary education. 16.9 per cent of this population does not have any form of elementary education and half of these can be classified as totally illiterate. The overall low educational levels of the indigenous inhabitants of the North makes it very difficult (if not almost impossible) for them to begin successful studies towards mastering the modern prestigious professions or to study at technical schools, institutes and universities⁵⁴.

The critical situation of the level of education among indigenous people in Russia can be explained as a result of such factors as: poor organisation of the indigenous educational system, lack of indigenous schools and an inadequate approach to the indigenous children from educational institutions. Vasilevich and Smolyak point to:

The first educational institution in the okrug was opened in 1927; this was a boarding school attached to the Tura cultural base on the Lower Tunguska [Russian *Nizhnyaya Tunguska* is a river in Siberia]. By 1950, there were in the okrug 25 elementary schools, 3 seven-year schools and 3 complete secondary boarding schools in which about 800 children are taught at full state expense⁵⁵.

It has also been argued by some that it was very difficult for the Evenk children to study because of language differences. Viires (1993) reflects that, “there have long been problems concerning the Evenk language. The Evenks, living dispersed over a vast area, had close

⁵³ Forsyth 1992, p. 52.

⁵⁴ Batyanova, Loukjantchenko, Kalabanov 1999, p.12.

⁵⁵ Vasilevich and Smolyak 1964, p. 654.

contact with Russians, the Buriats and other ethnic groups, and so the transition to another language was often inevitable”⁵⁶.

We can see a different situation in the Republic of Sakha. “In 1917 there were 4,660 children at school, but by 1948 the number was 62,942”⁵⁷.

Table No.1: School type in 1917 and 1948 in Yakutia (Republic Sakha). Source: Tokarev and Gurvich (1956).

School type	Year	1917	1948
Primary		164	424
7-year		5	149
Secondary		4	30
Total number		173	603

The table shows that from 1917 to 1948 the number of primary schools increased from 173 to 603. The number of pupils in schools went up from 4,660 in 1917 to 62,942 by 1948. According to this table, we can surmise children of Evenk ethnicity who were born and lived in the territory of Sakha Yakutia, started going to school earlier than their relatives in other places (in Russia).

3.5 Language

When you lose your language, you exclude yourself from your past⁵⁸.

The Evenk language is the largest of the northern group of the Manchu-Tungus languages, a group which also includes the Even and Negedal language. The basic vocabulary has much in common with the Mongolian and the Turkic languages, indicating a close relation. In certain areas the influences of the Yakut and the Buryat languages are strong. The influence of Russian is general and overwhelming (in 1979, 75.2% of the Evenk were fluent in Russian)⁵⁹.

Today in Russia, the language situation among the indigenous people can be characterised as extremely critical. Many ethnic groups have lost their traditional language. For example, in

⁵⁶ Viires 1993.

⁵⁷ Tokarev and Gurvich 1956, p 298.

⁵⁸ Crystal 2000, p. 41.

⁵⁹ Viires 1993.

the Republic of Sakha, the young Evenk generation speak only Yakut or Russian and only old people use their native language in daily life. In some cases, a process of losing the native language occurs because indigenous people think that the minority language is not very useful. For example, some indigenous parents speak with their children in the majority language (Russian) to avoid future difficulties concerning adaptation into the majority society. The same situation has occurred with the Sami in Norway. Professor Harald Eidheim observes: “People in the fjord community think it is “necessary” and therefore “right” to speak Norwegian to children. They shall not have the same handicap as we have had,” they say”⁶⁰. The language situation among the indigenous people in Russia is very problematic and is considered to be a result of long historical process:

In the twentieth century the indigenous peoples of the Russian North moved from a primitive patriarchal society to modern forms of social, political and cultural life. Along with significant positive results, this process had some negative influence on the native languages, cultures and traditions that served the northern peoples well for untold ages and ensured their survival in the extremely difficult conditions of North. The adaptive and regulatory functions of native languages and traditional cultural originality assumed more and more decorative features. The language situation in the North in general can not be characterized as a simple one. But negative trends are dominant⁶¹.

Unfortunately, the minority languages in Russia have become very limited in their usage in daily life today. This means that the language knowledge does not seem useful anymore for those who use this language as mother tongue.

Modern times dictate their own demands concerning many aspects of life, but for the indigenous people in Russia, a main concern today is language survival. As the Sami writer Matti Aikio pointed out in 1899: “Modern life is getting closer and closer, and it does not speak Lappish”⁶². At that time, Aikio felt a real threat of the disappearance of the Sami language; that the indigenous people will lose their language because of assimilation processes and influences. Usually, as a result of stigmatisation, majority languages become the only tool in society for communication, education, work and life.

⁶⁰ Eidheim 1994, p. 46.

⁶¹ Hairullin 2006.

⁶² Minde 2003, p.140.

The result of such influences has led to the disappearance of language. It is connected with the cultural assimilation of different ethnic groups. David Crystal (2000) defines it as “one culture is influenced by a more dominant culture, and begins to lose its character as a result of its members adopting new behaviour and mores”⁶³. He also suggests some methods for preservation of minority languages and divides these into several points:

1 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community⁶⁴.

In my opinion, the prestige of the minority languages in the Republic of Sakha will increase within the dominant community if the indigenous people start to use it in their daily life. However, if they continue to study their language in school only as a second language, the minority languages will never increase in prestige.

2 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community⁶⁵.

The wealth of the indigenous people is considered to be their traditional territories where they can lead the traditional way of life; hunting, fishing, and reindeer-herding. Firstly, for increasing their wealth, the indigenous people in the Republic of Sakha should receive rights to the properties within their territories.

3 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community⁶⁶.

In the Republic of Sakha, indigenous minority groups which today constitute 2.1% of the population in Yakutia⁶⁷, will find it difficult to increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community as there are already two majority groups, Yakut and Russian, both of which have strong legitimate power.

4 An endangered language will progress if its speakers have a strong presence in the educational system⁶⁸.

Indigenous people should develop traditional elements within the education system, for example, in the form of curriculum content by increasing the use of their language in educational institutions, or by creating special institutions for indigenous children.

5 An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down⁶⁹.

An indigenous language will progress if its speakers are encouraged to use it not only among community members in daily life, but in media, educational settings, literature and so on.

⁶³ Crystal 2000, p.77.

⁶⁴ Crystal 2000, pp.130-141.

⁶⁵ Crystal 2000, pp.130-141.

⁶⁶ Crystal 2000, pp.130-141.

⁶⁷ De Cordier 2006.

⁶⁸ Crystal 2000, pp.130-141.

⁶⁹ Crystal 2000, pp.130-141.

However, difficulties arise when looking at implementing such methods of preservation of the Evenk language as the Evenks cannot increase their legitimate power because they are a minority group in the Republic of Sakha. The Constitution of the Russian Federation and Article 68 (State Language) says:

(1) The state language of the Russian Federation throughout its territory is the Russian language. (2) The republics have the right to institute their own state language. They are used alongside the state language of the Russian Federation in bodies of state power, bodies of local self – government and state institutions of the republics⁷⁰.

A certain minority language is official only in the territory of residence of the minority ethnic groups who speak it. It is well known that rural areas in the republic, especially the territory where indigenous people live, are in a difficult economic situation. Therefore, people try to move to urban areas for a “better life” and in doing so, they abandon their territory and the official right to use their language.

Historically, the number of Evenk language users has decreased. Ants Viires in 1993 reflects:

In 1979 the percentage was 42.8%. Over 31% of the Evenks had adopted Russian, 15.6% had adopted Buryat, almost 8% had adopted Yakut, and 216 Evenk spoke the Yukagir language. In the 1926 census, the Evenks who spoke another language were included in the count of that other people. Of the 12,000 Evenks living in Yakutia, 85% speak the Yakut language and only 12% speak their own language. As much as 57.2% of the whole cannot speak their native language⁷¹.

Today, the Evenks, like most of the indigenous people in Russia, are on the way to losing their language and therefore face the threat of losing their identity. For the indigenous people, it will be a tragedy to lose their memory of their history, their traditions and culture. A native language is important for the survival of traditional culture and the preservation of the idea of self-identity and belonging to a separate ethnic group.

⁷⁰ *Constitution of the Russian Federation.*

⁷¹ Viires 1993.

3.6 Summing up

The origins and early history of the Evenks are not clear because of a lack of publications and investigations. Today, the Evenks live in China and in Russia. In Russia they are known as a widely dispersed ethnic group because they occupy a large territory of Siberia. They have a unique culture which is influenced by different elements of the culture by other ethnic groups. Their religion is based on animism and shamanism; even today the Evenk shaman is known as one of the strongest shamans among ethnic groups in the north of Russia. Today, we can characterise the Evenks as a unique group which could preserve its own culture in spite of assimilation and colonisation processes. They have successfully adopted elements of other cultures in addition to their own culture. For example, their religion of shamanism and animism has not been forgotten by the Evenks in spite of the forced Christianisation policy from the Russian government.

Unfortunately, the Evenks like many other indigenous peoples in Russia have faced problems related to the disappearance of their language and traditional culture. Tero Mustonen explains that this is a result of a colonisation and assimilation process:

When Siberia was colonised by Russia and later the industrial colonization took place under the Soviet state, Indigenous societies of the region were assimilated and the attempt was made, effectively to wipe out the local knowledge system, beliefs and languages. The residential internat school system has caused the near destruction of these societies. Therefore the introduction of new nomadic schools in Yakutia represents a historical attempt to correct the problems of the colonisation in Russia and support the re-birth of the (neo) traditional lifestyles of the tundra and taiga⁷².

⁷² Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

Chapter 4: School on the Move

“Little is known about education among these people, and there is much more to be learned from their history and current practices”⁷³.

4.1 Introduction

As has been noted before, the history of education of the indigenous people in Russia has been poorly written and studied. Comuzzie, Duggirala, Leonard and Crawford (1995) explains that: “Because of its nearly impenetrable wilderness and its severe winter climate, Siberia was among the last regions of the world to be investigated and mapped by Western explorers”⁷⁴. It is not a surprise that the nomadic school which was created for the severe climate conditions and the nomadic way of life in Siberia was not studied either. In my opinion, the nomadic school is a unique institution which deserves to be investigated and become known. These kinds of schools play very important roles for indigenous children’s education, especially today when many indigenous peoples start the long process of preserving their traditions.

The nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha Yakutia functions as a branch of a basic rural school organised for the children of reindeer-herders. The initiators of the organisation of these schools are in most cases members of the reindeer-herder community (parents and reindeer – herders).

A main purpose of this school is to provide education for the children of the community which is far from any district centre and in some cases migrates with the reindeer herders to different places. Additionally, it helps herders by not disturbing their work routines but allowing them to follow the migration paths of the reindeer. Importantly, it ensures that children get an education in their community in natural surroundings.

⁷³ Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Comuzzie, Duggirala, Leonard and Crawford, 1995.

4.2 History

In Russia, the nomadic schools were established in the 1930's during Soviet rule. The first nomadic schools were created in places traditionally occupied by the indigenous people. The aim of the schools was to provide basic education for those who lead a nomadic way of life, it also was a tool in helping to control and influence the nomadic peoples. These kinds of schools did not include traditional elements or subjects which concentrated on the nomadic way of life. These schools were created and functioned as part of a policy which had the aim of reorganizing the nomadic community into a sedentary way of life.

With Stalin's collectivization during the 1930s the indigenous populations of Siberia were forcibly reorganized (often with no regard to ethnic background) into cooperative settlements composed of groups of workers called brigades. As a result of this forced reorganization, the original clan and tribal structure was disrupted and the economic practices were taken out of the control of individual families and placed into communal holdings to be overseen by brigades of oftentimes unrelated workers. Another result of this reorganization was the creation of permanent settlements for each of the newly created collectives. Such settlements greatly decreased the nomadic movement of many of these peoples⁷⁵.

The policy of “*Russification*” has destroyed the traditional cultures and occupations of the indigenous people in Russia. The schools were used as a tool for changing the mentality and way of life of the indigenous minority people in Russia. Today, the “new” nomadic school concentrates on traditional issues and includes not only the basics of education, but also helps in preserving and promoting their language and nomadic way of life.

4.3 The community Amma

As I have mentioned earlier, in the Republic of Sakha, as in many regions of Russia, indigenous peoples have faced serious problems with the industrial development of their traditional territory. The Evenks, who live in Aldan district, experience the same difficult ecological situation today. The community of “Amma”, situated on the shores of the river Amma, is about 10 km from the local administrative unit “Khatistir”. In the community,

⁷⁵ Comuzzie, Duggirala, Leonard and Crawford, 1995.

there are about nine reindeer-herder families. Their basic occupation is herding, hunting and fishing. In summer they use motorboats as the main form of transport to and from their community, in winter time, a car or motorbike. The Aldan district is well known as a place rich in gold. There is in addition, the construction of a large railway system which adds to the damage of the indigenous people’s natural territory.

People in this community identify themselves as Evenks, but all of them speak the Yakut language with the exception of some old people. One thing I really enjoyed while visiting this community was their food. Their food is natural and fresh, therefore, it is full of vitamins and very healthy. The women make the bread themselves as there is no supermarket nearby since the community is very isolated. They live in natural surroundings near the beautiful and very clean Amma River, famous as being one of the most beautiful rivers in Yakutia. From early morning until evening, all members of the community busy themselves with their routine work. They have their own rhythm according to the seasons and in each season different tasks are carried out.

Usually the men in this community take care of the reindeer herding and hunting. Some of them catch fish to sell to a nearby village or on the main road to people who drive from Aldan or Mirniy, a city in Yakutia which is situated near the Aldan district. The summer is short in Yakutia and the people of this area are used to waiting out a long winter for its arrival. Summer is a very special and important time as it is spent in preparing for the next winter. Each family, regardless of occupation, works hard in order to ensure their survival



during the severe winter climate.

Evenk woman sewing dress

The women of Amma community busy themselves with the picking of berries, mushrooms and plants as well as taking care of the children and the home. Some of them, especially the elders sew winter clothes and boots from reindeer skins which they also sell. Although it is very hard and time consuming work to create such reindeer skin products, they earn very little in the way of extra income for the family.

Children spend their time playing and sometimes helping their parents with the daily chores of the community. From childhood they start to go hunting and fishing with their parents and it makes them love and respect their nomadic way of life. The nomadic school gives them an



opportunity to live in the community with their parents rather than having to study at a boarding school. The school also gives the parents an opportunity to raise their children with traditional knowledge and values which are important for the future survival of the nomadic life.

Evenk girl helps to community members

The nomadic school does not force the children to accept a life which varies greatly from that of home such as the boarding schools would. Since the children remain in the community, they can continue with their diet of healthy foods such as fresh fish and meat rather than face the radical changes a boarding school would offer in this regard. This is an important element in the development of the children who are born into these conditions and are used to eating this kind of food. Therefore, they avoid problems related to the adaptation of life in a boarding school and thanks to that, the children are healthy both physically (because of the healthy food and physical activity) and mentally (because of the known surroundings).

4.4 The nomadic school Amma

Recently in the Republic of Sakha, there are nine re-organised nomadic schools functioning as branches of basic rural schools. These schools started to function as a result of the process of traditional revitalisation of the indigenous minority people’s culture in the Republic of Sakha. It includes the revival of the traditional way of life, traditional occupations and all aspects of culture of the indigenous people.

The nomadic school “Amma” was opened in 1994 by enthusiastic members of the community. This school also functions as a branch of a basic school situated in a nearby district (Khatistir in Aldan ulus. See the map on p. 6). I met and interviewed the headmaster, pupils of this school and parents, all of whom are members of this community. The number of pupils varies between 8 and 15 each school year. For each pupil, teachers use an individual approach which compensates for some shortages such as a lack of books and certain school facilities of the nomadic school. Each semester, pupils of the nomadic school have to pass exam which is organised by the nearest ordinary school and controls their study progress in the nomadic school. The teacher mentions that usually, pupils from their school pass these exams and do not suffer difficulties with the learning of different subjects.

The members of the community argue that the idea of re-introducing the nomadic school is very useful for their community as it has many positive sides. For instance, this school has its own lesson timetable in accordance with the cycles in the nomad’s life. This program is more suitable for the nomadic children because they can move around the territory with their parents. In this school the study program includes the Evenk language and such subjects as the principles of reindeer-herding, hunting, fishing, fettering, stock-breeding, crafts and so on. All these subjects differentiate the nomadic school from ordinary schools as these subjects are necessary for leading the traditional way of life. The children study all these subjects in natural surroundings and have the chance to practice what they have learned. As Mahatma Gandhi reflects, “Schools which were based around productive work where that work was for the benefit of all were, therefore, carrying out education of the whole person – mind, body and spirit”⁷⁶. I suggest that today the nomadic school constitutes the best educational institution for children of indigenous nomadic people with good and healthy conditions.

The children of the community talked about their school as follows:

We have lived here since we were born. We like our school more than the ordinary school because here we can be with our parents and friends. We can spend many hours playing and sometimes we can help our parents. We can go with the others hunting, fishing, taking care of the reindeer, etc. But sometimes it is boring because the community is too small. That is why we do not have many friends here. In the future we would like to be hunters and fishermen and live here. We are Evenks

⁷⁶ Burke 2006.

but can speak only the Russian and Yakut languages. In the community only old people can speak Evenk language⁷⁷.

This reflects the children’s comfort at remaining in their own community, but they recognise that the community is small and it isolates them from a broader society. The program or timetable of the nomadic school could be altered to be more flexible and include visits to ordinary schools. This would encourage the children to develop their communication skills and be socially active outside their own communities.

The older researchers consider that the isolation and lack of social interactive communication is a problem of nomadic schools and thus makes school boring for the children. They say that children should grow up with other children and be able to communicate with them outside the small community they live in, because communication skills are also important for children and their future life. Therefore, the dilemma of the future of this type of school is; whether it is better to create a nomadic school and isolate the children from the greater society, or it is better for the children to live and study far from their native community?

The children of the nomadic community meet with various problems concerning boarding school education. In many cases, adapting to the boarding schools creates enough difficulty that such children drop out and return to their home communities without any education. Taking this into consideration, the members of Amma community are very satisfied with the existence of a nomadic school.

The teachers of this school think that the main function of the nomadic school is to keep alive the minority culture and nomadic way of life. Within their own community children learn to identify themselves as Evenks among Yakut and Russian children. This was the first and main aim in reorganising the nomadic school: to teach the children to regard and love their culture from their childhood, and grow up with a strong sense of identity and belonging to the Evenks ethnic group.

Another function of this school is to generate additional income for this community. The economic situation is miserable, especially in rural areas like Amma. Many people are on the verge of extreme poverty. That is why the indigenous people like other minority groups, move

⁷⁷ From my interview with children of the community “Amma”, June, 2005.

to big cities in search of the “good life”. This poses a real threat to the existence of the traditional activities of the indigenous people such as reindeer herding, hunting and fishing. Unfortunately, the Amma community is not an exception and suffers economic difficulties. Tero Mustonen describes of this situation in the Republic of Sakha:

Now very few people wish to go to a remote camp along Kolyma or to Aldan [the area where my fieldwork was done], when a similar and well paid job might be available in Yakutsk, Cherski or Neriungri⁷⁸.

4.5 Problems

“Opinions cannot survive if one has no chance to fight for them”.
–Thomas Mann⁷⁹.

It is true that a culture needs tools for survival when its existence is threatened. In the case of the indigenous nomadic people in the Republic of Sakha, they have to create such tools themselves for keeping their culture. Today they prefer a nomadic school as means for preserving their culture. But at the same time, they do not have “tools” for fighting. One of the main tools can be financial resources as the first and foremost problem is the lack of financial support. As it has been noted before, the nomadic school functions as a branch of a basic elementary school. Because of the difficult economic situation in rural districts, the nomadic school cannot be provided with sufficient funding from the budget of these ordinary schools. Tero Mustonen notes:

In principle the idea of nomadic school is considered to be good and worth support in Yakutsk among the government representatives, NGOs, UNESCO, and educational bodies. Even in the regional centres the same rhetoric is practised. Unfortunately so, 99% of the time no support flows down to where it is needed the most – actual school and tribal community⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

⁷⁹ Thomas Mann quoted in Kavale and Mostert 2004, p. 213.

⁸⁰ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

There is a noted lack of teachers in the nomadic school. As it is known, the Russian nomads live in a severe climate and move with the reindeer. The teachers at the nomadic school have to live with other members of the reindeer-herder community far from district centres. However, the budget of the nomadic school cannot provide extra compensation to the teachers for the migratory life they are expected to lead. So, by working in the nomadic school teachers can get only an “exotic experience” and the same payment as other teachers who work in an ordinary school. Unfortunately, the practice shows that this kind of “exotic experience” does not attract many teachers. This problem can be solved if the government or local administration provides some extra financial support.

Tero Mustonen suggests: “For example a priority would be to provide higher-than-normal salaries for the teachers of the Indigenous language and other nomadic school teachers, people to the remote localities”⁸¹.

Another problem is that of the quality of education provided by the nomadic school. The opponents of that system claim that compared with an ordinary school the quality of education in a nomadic school is not good enough as they lack teachers and basic school facilities. However, we have to take into account that the nomadic school performs functions different to those of an ordinary school. For example, the main goal of a nomadic school is to preserve the traditional culture, minority language and traditional way of life. Today the number of the nomadic schools in the Republic of Sakha is increasing, and therefore it could be suggested that the nomadic school will continue to function as an educational institution for nomadic children. It is also with thanks to the “Own School Program” which includes traditional elements that the number of nomadic schools will increase every year.

⁸¹ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

4.6 Dilemma: Evenks between traditions and modernity

“The real difficulty is that people have no idea of what education truly is. We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock exchange market”
– Mahatma Gandhi⁸².

Modern life brings changes and people adapt to the innovations which come in the form of new technologies and different conditions. Darnell and Hoem (1996) mention:

Technological innovations create tension between those favouring adaptation and those adhering to traditional ways of doing things. Moreover, this condition is more convoluted in indigenous societies in the Far North than it might be elsewhere because of the indirect social and cultural consequences of such innovations⁸³.

Sometimes, innovations and changes which are dictated by modern trends can be destructive to traditions causing many to become obsolete. In general, such innovations have also touched education, thus forcing indigenous people to cope with two worlds. They are losing contact with the traditional culture and can not accept totally the European culture and style of life.

Today the reindeer-herders in the Republic of Sakha face the dilemma of having to choose the type of school (nomadic: which move with reindeer-herders community or, ordinary: which is situated in the administrative unit) they wish their children to attend. The type of school is not just the essence of this dilemma. The essence is to make a choice between tradition and modernity. The problem is not only in choosing and using one of the ways, but it is a problem of combining and uniting one with another and creating the best way. Here I add some researchers' ideas about a model of the nomadic school:

- 1) Tero Mustonen convincingly argues that:
- 2)

In short, the new nomadic schools, which would allow the Indigenous children to receive their education close at their traditional homes on the land may represent the last and best attempt to preserve the unique cultures, livelihoods and languages of the peoples involved. This may sound theoretical and romantic at first, but at the core of the debate this issue really emerges – survival of

⁸² Bruke 2006.

⁸³ Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 23.

the traditional mind and peoples on the land. Once the nomadic way of life is over, the process can never be reserved⁸⁴.

It is very important that the idea of the preservation of the nomadic school is heard, understood and supported not only by Russian researchers, but statements by foreign researchers outside of the Russian Federation show the depth of this idea and emphasize the importance of the preservation of traditional cultures.

2) Svetlana Semenova (director of the SRINSRS) says:

Nomadic schools will be institutions which can support the indigenous children to preserve their traditional culture at the same time it will be new schools with modern technology which can provide high quality of education⁸⁵.

Today it is quite a romantic idea to have a nomadic school with modern technology because the nomadic schools have just started to function and are facing many difficulties in their organisation which will take time to solve.

There are many debates around this dilemma for the indigenous minority groups in the Republic of Sakha to face. The Evenks and other indigenous minority groups are looking for suitable ways to preserve their culture in the modern era.

Darnell and Hoem (1996) observe:

The problem today, then, is not necessarily how to sustain or revitalize the structure of education in the traditional native mode, nor is it to cling to the factory model in the hope that it will eventually prove to be right. The problem is how to utilize the best features of all possible structures in innovative ways that fit a large variety of independent situations in accordance with local needs which are culture-specific⁸⁶.

For the indigenous society,, uniting two types of knowledge is not easy. Therefore, the education system has to be organised according to the special features of the specific ethnic groups. These kinds of difficulties are faced by indigenous people not only in Russia, but all

⁸⁴ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

⁸⁵ Svetlana Semenova answering a question from my interview, June, 2005 (in my translation).

⁸⁶ Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 143.

over the world. A similar idea concerning the indigenous people in the far north is suggested by Darnell and Hoem (1996):

The basic principle of education of any people is that education has to be planned and organized in and through the language and the culture of the group. This principle may be demonstrated by analyzing the connections between education and society. Each society, separately, has its own practical and theoretical knowledge, just as its members have specific norms or behaviour and value⁸⁷.

One aspect to this problem is the language situation. The Evenks in Amma community speak Russian or Yakut and not their mother tongue, Evenk. They have many reasons for speaking these other languages: one of them is a result of the “*Russification*” policy. Under this policy, the indigenous people were provided education in Russian and Yakut and consequently, most of them lost their language. Another reason is related to geography; they live in the territories of the Republic of Sakha where the main population group is either Russian or Yakut. There is the additional serious problem of the feeling of the “uselessness” of their language and the lack of schools which provide the learning of their language or even subjects taught in the Evenks language. The aim of the nomadic school is to keep the language as part of traditional culture even if the language is not officially used. The idea of language preservation has the same value as the preservation of traditional culture. The Evenks cannot go back in time and start to live exactly as their ancestors did before, but each ethnic group has to preserve its cultural traditional values. It is especially important for indigenous minority groups to avoid further cultural assimilation and acculturation which can result in the disappearance of the ethnic group in the cultural sense.

It is a good idea to use the traditional way of life in modern times and try to make this process a natural way of cultural preservation. I believe that the nomadic school can combine both traditional and modern culture in its own form. Tero Mustonen describes:

Further development of the nomadic schools in Russia is a historical attempt to renew life, relationships, languages and traditional knowledge in culturally appropriate terms. They are the most advanced form of Indigenous education today in the Arctic. They may, given positive

⁸⁷ Darnell and Hoem 1996, p. 146

developments, enable the re-birth of the traditional mind in current generation and future children and ensure that the ancient way of life continues⁸⁸.

By choosing a nomadic school, parents not only specify the prospective jobs of their children, but they also permit them to remain in the natural surroundings of their culture, thus allowing them to enjoy their own culture. The program of a nomadic school includes many traditional elements and it creates special conditions for continuing the nomadic way of life.

The nomadic school is an important institution for indigenous people who lead a nomadic way of life. This school presents not only an institution of education, but also an institution of adaptation of traditional culture in modern times. It is impossible to revive and keep the traditional culture in its original form, but the indigenous minority groups in the Republic of Sakha believe that it is possible to retain the traditional culture in a new form through nomadic schools.

4.7 Summing up

The nomadic school is more than just a school for the nomadic people who move with the herder community, it is also an institution which revives and continues the nomadic culture in a new form. The choice of type of school is a choice between tradition and modernity. As Gandhi pointed out “Real education consists of teaching the pupil the art of learning. In other words, a desire for knowledge should grow in him. Knowledge, however, is of many kinds”⁸⁹. This kind of school gives not only basic education according to educational standards, but also provides indigenous knowledge and preserves the traditions in a modern environment. Therefore, it is the main reason behind creating a new system of indigenous schools which will provide basic education and help to revive their culture and language, especially among indigenous people who have lost some of this knowledge.

⁸⁸ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

⁸⁹ Gandhi quoted in Burke 2006.

Chapter 5: Ideas for possible improvements to indigenous education in Yakutia

By taking into consideration problems faced by the indigenous nomadic schools, we should try to find solutions which can change the current situation in the Republic of Sakha. Solutions should relate to the idea and model of nomadic schools: what kind of institution should the nomadic school ideally constitute, and which functions should this type of school execute? As we know, during the policy of “*Russification*” the schools were effectively used as a means of assimilating the Evenks. Now it is time to use the nomadic school as a tool for revitalising and preserving the traditional culture.

5.1 Curriculum improvements

The main aim of the nomadic school is to revitalise and preserve the traditional way of life of the nomadic culture. Thus, the curriculum should be different from that of mainstream education and it should include traditional knowledge necessary for the continuation of nomadic life. It would be useful to create a special curriculum combining the general education system and the traditional knowledge, or at least to make a curriculum catering to indigenous education. The main goal should provide better training to the children while allowing them to maintain their culture and at the same time, to be able to make use of other opportunities. Then, after graduating from the nomadic school they would have the chance to continue their education if they wished. I think that a flexible curriculum for nomadic schools would be useful in the indigenous nomadic education system. If the curriculum is flexible and caters for indigenous interests, then they would be able to add innovations concerning traditional knowledge and avoid many of the difficulties they faced before with the basic educational system. It is worth mentioning that the Sami school sub-system in Norway has adopted its own separate curriculum which has had a great impact on Sami education: practice shows that for indigenous schools, it is better to have a unique program and curriculum according to the background and different features of the indigenous group concerned. Hirvonen (2006) suggests:

So far, the adoption of the Sami curriculum for the ten-year comprehensive school (097S) has been the biggest step ever taken in Sami educational matters. It was the first time in the educational history of Norway and the Nordic countries that the Sami got a separate curriculum⁹⁰.

This curriculum has important value and plays a main role in the Sami educational system because it clearly defines the rights of the Sami children. Hirvonen says further:

The Sami School contains the skills, traditions, and values which weave together the Sami community and upon which general education is built. As part of common education, the Sami School must provide children and young people with a basis for being active and responsible members in society. In general, education is to promote the Sami identity. The content of education also consists of the local Sami culture which is familiar to the pupils. Education must be based on and expand the skills and experiences of the pupils (097S:60)⁹¹.

I think it is necessary to create a particular system which will be suitable for all nomadic schools in the Republic of Sakha in order to guarantee good quality education. The enthusiasm alone of the indigenous people who lead a nomadic way of life is not enough. Protection from the educational legal framework is necessary for the functioning of the nomadic school. This will also ensure the undisturbed work of the schools in the future.

One of the main purposes of the nomadic school is also to preserve the native minority language. In addition, they should also develop knowledge of Russian and also foreign languages because it is important to be prepared for other opportunities outside the nomadic community.

A positive part of the nomadic school is that it can provide studies in native languages. Nomadic communities still use their language in daily life because the communities are isolated and communication is only inside the group. The language issue should be included as being relevant to the issues surrounding the survival of traditional culture and nomadism in the new system of nomadic school.

Lack of financial support should also be observed as a serious problem today. At the same time, I note that this is an issue that not only concerns the indigenous education system in the Republic of Sakha, but also concerns other indigenous groups around the world. Lack of

⁹⁰ 097S quoted in Hirvonen 2006, p. 37.

⁹¹ 097S quoted in Hirvonen 2006, p. 42.

economic resources is a serious problem in many Russian regions. I am hopeful greater financial support will be forthcoming when the number of the investigations and publications about the issues surrounding nomadic schools increase. It is also hoped that the popularity of the idea of the nomadic school system will also increase and it will have significant value as a different program of education.

Another solution required of nomadic schools is that of intensifying the communication between other indigenous peoples from different regions and countries as their problems could be solved by common efforts. By sharing information or experiences and discussing common problems they can support each other. It would be useful to develop connections and networks with international organisations such as UNESCO, NGOs and so on, all of which concentrate on indigenous issues. It is very important and necessary for the future development of nomadic schooling in Russia because such organisations can provide not only financial support, ideas, and suggestions concerning this issue, but also urge governments and societies to improve the conditions of the indigenous people.

5.2 A model of the nomadic school

As mentioned earlier, in the Republic of Sakha there are several organisations such as the Scientific Research Institute of National Schools in Republic Sakha, the Institute of Problems of the Indigenous People of the North, the Department of Education of the Republic of Sakha Yakutia which develop theoretical models for the organisation of nomadic schools. They do not only concentrate on the nomadic school issue, but also work with various problems of indigenous people. In addition, they make projects and models of nomadic schools. Here I will describe a model of a nomadic school. Thanks to this model, nomadic schools have become known not only in Russia, but also in the international arena. Let me include a short version of the Nomadic School Project of 2004, Yakutsk, which was developed in the Republic of Sakha by the following institutes: Scientific Research Institute of National Schools in Republic Sakha, the Institute of Problems of the Indigenous People of the North, the Department of Education of Republic Sakha Yakutia.

The purpose of creating a system of nomadic educational institutions:

Object (Target group): Even, Evenk, Chukchi and Dolgan nomadic small [малокомплектные школы] schools and nomadic kindergartens, experimental places in the settlements of hunters, fishers and reindeer breeders.

Subject: Founding and experimenting with new forms and methods of studying

-concentrations on the native language issue

-providing basic education,

-providing indigenous knowledge to the indigenous minority children.

Purposes: Create a model of nomadic education for indigenous minority people of the north in native language which will help to preserve culture, traditions, languages, etc.

Tasks: Improvement and progress of different types of nomadic educational institutions of indigenous minority people of the north.

The basic direction of the work of nomadic schools:

1. Changing the contents of the education:

a) Structure, form and contents of school books.

b) Adding new subjects (traditional knowledge, lessons of ancestors, reindeer herding, hunting, fishery, national sewing).

2. Changing the organisation of the educational process (the structure, the form and the contents of textbooks). Adding a particular timetable in accordance to nomadic regime.

Basis of the renewal of the system of nomadic school:

1. Social base – revival of indigenous way of life.

2. Provision of equipment and security of funds - includes all material and technical needs.

3. Scientific base – the development of nomadic school must be included the researchers of scientific institutions.

4. Training of specialists – includes training teachers (especially the teachers of native language) etc.

5. Legal (juridical) base of nomadic school includes the existing legal framework and developing of a new legal documents concerning to nomadic school⁹².

Unfortunately, this model is not used today due to many difficulties. However, the researchers who developed this model of the nomadic school hope that it will be useful for indigenous education and start to function in the near future. This model, in my opinion, should be more specified and it should concentrate on specific questions related to the realistic conditions of the reindeer-herder's community life.

⁹² In my translation. The translation is from Russian language; can be some differences in meaning.

5.3 A success story

Following is an example of a nomadic school success story: The Nutendli Nomadic School in the Nizhnekolimskii region [see the map on p.6] which is in the Republic of Sakha and supported by the Snowchange project⁹³. Tero Mustonen explains the aim of this school briefly:

This school represents in many ways the best example of trying to regain control of the culture, language, tradition livelihood and survival in the Arctic⁹⁴.

The Nutendli school strengthens the rich, traditional Chukchis⁹⁵ culture with folklore, history, crafts and language. This school is one of the well-organised nomadic schools in the Republic of Sakha. It has a specific program to encourage the preservation of traditional culture and it has a very strong influence on the young generation. Members of the Nutendli community are deeply interested in preserving their nomadic culture in original form.

Like other nomadic schools, The Nutendli Nomadic School faced many difficulties, especially problems with financial support as it was not given support from the government. Luckily, the financial problem was not an insurmountable obstacle for this school, the members of community found solutions and now they continue to develop their ideas.

This nomadic school has started to work with the support of the Snowchange project. Now this project works with the second nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha. The Nutendli Nomadic School became a model for other schools and a means of hope that nomadic

⁹³ The scientific priority of Snowchange is currently in the following areas of the North:

- The Saami territories of Finland, Russia, Sweden and Norway
- Republic of Sakha-Yakutia, Russian Federation
- Savo, North Karelia and Kainuu, Finland
- Iceland,
- Faroe Islands
- British Columbia, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, Canada
- Alaska, USA

In addition to the operations in all Arctic countries (United States / Alaska, Canada, Iceland, Greenland and Faroe Islands (Denmark), Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russian Federation) Snowchange has partners in Bolivia, Nepal, Ghana and New Zealand.

⁹⁴ Tero Mustonen answering a question from my interview, May, 2006.

⁹⁵ Indigenous minority group in Russia.

schools have a perspective for developing in the future. This case has important value to the indigenous people as it shows that their activity, directed towards bringing back the nomadic schools, was listened to and accepted as an important issue by an international organisation and will probably continue to successfully function in the future.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

“Education not only moulds the new generation, but reflects a society’s fundamental assumptions about itself and the individuals which compose it”.

– Mahatma Gandhi⁹⁶.

The crucial research question of this thesis has been whether the nomadic school constitutes a step towards the future, or it is just a backward move to a primitive lifestyle in which the indigenous people are unable to sustain themselves in a modern world. I used this question as a main research question; I have concentrated on the issue of the nomadic school in modern times and developed the question concerning this subject.

I should mention that an education system is still an institution which provides the assimilation process in areas where there is a concentration of several ethnic groups. This question was discussed in the 1980’s by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. According to Donovan, Fordbam and Hancock:

Indigenous populations in modern industrialized nations are experiencing profound dislocation in their traditional lifestyles. Education increases this tension; while providing a means to cope with change, it also usually forms a basis for assimilation of the minority population into the dominant culture rather than being a support for the language and culture of the minority groups and help for them to cope better with change. The necessary criterion for success of educational programmes among indigenous minorities is the provision of an education which relates to their interests, norms and values. This “legitimizes the schooling offered”⁹⁷.

Practice shows that education accelerates the disappearance of traditional culture among indigenous people. It occurs because the young generation loses its link with traditional life and culture by studying in educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities. One of the most serious outcomes of this is that of indigenous people losing their language. It is a result of the lack of specific schools for indigenous children. In order to avoid this situation the indigenous people have to create a new system of indigenous schools to preserve the traditional culture.

⁹⁶ Burke 2006.

⁹⁷ *The Education of Minority Groups* 1983, p.38.

Today the nomadic school is a “new” educational institution for indigenous nomadic children. The first nomadic schools were created during the Soviet period in Russia. The main difference between the first and modern nomadic schools is their purpose. The first nomadic school was created by the government to control the indigenous people and it was the first step in regulating them, especially those who lived far away and lead a nomadic way of life. The “new” nomadic school has as its main goals: the preservation of the traditional culture of minority nomadic indigenous people to help to keep their language and way of life. It was not created by the government but by the nomadic people themselves. Today, researchers of different institutions develop suitable models of the nomadic school according to the requirements of a modern era.

Around this type of school there are many debates. The older generation of researchers consider that the idea of the nomadic school belongs to the past and now it is not necessary to try to go back to it because modern life requires openness, not an obsession with an idealised past. They oppose the nomadic school, especially in recent times, because in their opinion nomadic children need an opportunity to get a better education in an ordinary school and to be well prepared for the future not only in their community, but in a larger, more modern community.

Younger researchers suggest that the nomadic school is necessary, especially in modern times, for the preservation of the nomadic way of life and traditional culture. They argue that the nomadic school is more suitable for nomadic children than a basic school. They believe that the nomadic schools of today will develop and these schools will have perspectives that will be useful to the nomadic indigenous people in future. That is why they work hard to create good educational institutions in the Republic of Sakha and develop the models of this type of school.

The reindeer-herders and parents are very thankful and proud of their nomadic school. In principle, the re-organisation of the nomadic school was the idea of the nomadic people, thanks to them this idea is beginning to function today. By taking into account their opinions concerning the re-organization of the nomadic school, I suggest that the nomadic school constitutes a step towards the future and plays not only a mainstream educational role, but also really helps to preserve the traditional culture. This school will not be a move backward

to a primitive lifestyle if the organisation of this school develops according to the requirements of modern times. Hopefully, it will be a strong organisation with its own regulations. It will also become well known not only in the Republic of Sakha, but also outside of Russia as a good example of preserving ethnic traditions through education.

Non-Russian researchers also believe in the future of nomadic schools. Tero Mustonen gives an optimistic opinion concerning the perspective for further development of the nomadic schools in Russia:

The new nomadic schools are a historical attempt to try to break the sad circle of colonisation which has led to the near extermination of the local languages, cultures, beliefs and ways of life inherent to the Russian North. But like with everything, all depends on the people in the communities – as well as the capacity of the state agents to understand and fully support this development in all levels, not just financially, but by choosing new renewable energy sources, keeping away from industrial development of these areas, returning to the 1990-s policies of sustainability, fighting climate change in policy and practise and addressing the colonisation that has taken place in Russia.

Today, the nomadic school in the Republic of Sakha has gotten off to a good start thanks to the nomadic people and their enthusiasm. Hopefully in the future, it will show exceptional results as a means of preserving the nomadic way of life, culture and language. Indigenous peoples, like all peoples in the world, have a right to live the way they want to. The revival of the nomadic school in this context is their aspiration to try to preserve their traditional culture.

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