The Deafness of Ethnic Minorities in Russia

The idea of close connection between languages and people was formulated at the beginning of the 20th Century by the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who wrote that the nation's rich and varied culture and its social customs are reflected in its language, and from other side, language to big extent forms a nation (Yakubinsky 1986, 71). The world history shows that the destruction of civilization and culture, the disappearance of nations and states always begin with the loss of language, with the failure of the lingual independence, with the capitulation before the linguistic expansion. With the loss of language the people ceases to realize its originality, its culture, its identity. “The nations are the wealth of the mankind, its universal individuals; even the smallest of them has its own colors and own place in the Divine picture. The disappearance of nations will impoverish the world not less than “unification” of the people with the same face and the same character” - Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winner used to say (Solzhenitsyn 2002, 56).

It is stated in the introductory part of the law “About the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation” (1991) that languages are national property, cultural heritage and that they are under protection of the state (Zakon 1991). The regulations about the equality of rights of all languages always existed and were observed during the Soviet era. In a short time alphabets on the Latin basis were created almost for all Turkish, Finno-Ugric, Caucasian, Iranian, Tungus- Manchurian and some other languages. From 1920 until 1940 written languages were created for 50 nationalities of the Soviet Union including ethnic minorities (Russia has more than 63 ethnic communities with the population of each less than 50 thousand) (Berezin 1979, 32)).

But not everything went smoothly in the field of language building, especially for minorities in Siberia. Carelessness to the languages of minorities led to the situation when they ceased using their native languages. Although there are laws about the languages in all Autonomous Republics of the Russian Federation, their realization runs into serious financial and technical difficulties, into lack of human recourses. For example, the Buryat Language in the Buryat Republic as a special subject was not introduced for teaching at schools at all (Berezin 1979, 34). But the population of Buryat is more than 400 000. In that sense we can speak about the deafness of ethnic minorities in Russia: they are as if deaf to their own languages, don’t hear, don’t speak and don’t understand it anymore.

So the languages of some minorities in Russia are under the threat of disappearance and this problem cannot be solved without the participation of authorities. We’ll have a focus in this paper on the destiny of one of the smallest minority nations in Russia, i.e. the Nganasans.

The research of the Nganasans was for a long time a part of Samoyedic studies in general. While linguistic materials were scant and difficult to obtain, the study of the geographical distribution and dialects of Samoyedic languages advanced consistently. The first word lists and commentaries appeared as early as 1786-1789 in a comparative dictionary by P. S. Pallas (Pallas 1786). The first treatise on grammar was published in 1854 by the Finnish scholar M. A. Castrén (Castrén 1854). A separate book on the Nganasan language
was written in 1937 by G. Prokofiev (Prokofiev 1937) and later by P. Khaidu (Khaidu 1985). A recent academic review was written by N. Tereshchenko (Tereshchenko 1979). Up till recent times there was no separate dictionary of the language though some lexical material can be found in Castrén's dictionary of the Samoyedic languages (Castrén 1855). But there is a multimedia dictionary in Internet now (3500 words) (http://www.speech.nw.ru/Nganasan/introrus.html). The origin and history of the Nganasans were researched by A. Popov (Popov 1949, Popov 1984), B. Dolgikh (Dolgikh 1960) and others.

The Nganasans are the northernmost of the Samoyedic peoples, living on the Taymyr Peninsula in the Arctic Ocean. Administratively, their Arctic territory is part of the Taymyr Autonomous Region of the Krasnoyarsk district (formerly the Dolgan-Nenets National District). Their "capital" is the village of Ust-Avamsk. The Avam Nganasans live in the Avam District in the western part of the Taymyr Peninsula, in the valleys of the rivers Pyassina, Dudypta and Boganida. The speakers of the Vadeyev Dialect live in the tundra and in the eastern parts of Taymyr, in the Khatanga District by the river Heta, Lake Taymyr and Khatanga Bay. The Nganasans share their territory with the Dolgans. Their southern and southeastern neighbors are the Yakuts, in the southwest they border upon the Enets. The northern and central parts of the Taymyr Peninsula are mainly frost desert and to the south there is the permafrost tundra. During summer the maximum temperature is +13 °C while in winter the average is below –30 °C.

Nganasan is their self-designation, meaning 'man'. The primal meaning of the root ngana is 'real', 'true', 'genuine' and frequently both are used together in ngano nganasan -- 'genuine (our) man'. The above self-designation has only been in use since the 1930s and identification with it is not unanimous. The Avam or Western Nganasan call themselves generally nyaa ~ n’aa -- 'brother', 'fellow'. To the east, the Vadeyev dialect uses the name as’a, meaning 'brother' but also 'Evenk' or 'Dolgan'. The prototype for this, osha, is found in the Evenki language. The earlier and more widespread name is Tavgi-Samoyed, or simply Tavgi. The term comes from the Nenets whose tavy ~ taawi denotes the Avam Nganasan. Through Russian Tavgi has become established in other languages and outside the former Soviet Union it is universally used up to the present day. The name Samoyed may have derived from the Selkup word, somatu ~ samatu, denoting the Enets. It may, however, also originate from a yet unknown non-Russian word. The first written record of the Samoyeds was made by Monk Nestor. In his chronicle A Tale of the Times Past they appear as samoyad (Khomich 2000, 67).

Anthropologically, the Nganasans are representatives of the Uralic race in which Mongoloid and Arctic traits dominate. Due to their relative isolation they have scarcely mixed with other peoples. Nganasans are short (men up to 160 cm), stocky people. They have a broad face with high cheekbones, a flat nose and the epicanthic fold. Hair and eyes are dark but the skin is relatively fair.

Origin: The Proto-Uralic people probably broke into two groups in the 4th millenium BC: the Finno-Ugric to the west, and partly also east, of the Ural mountain range, and the Samoyedic between the Urals and the River Yenisey. It has been wider believed that the ancestors of the Samoyeds first moved east from their original home, and then northeast. According to a different theory, the original home of the Samoyeds was in Siberia, particularly in the regions north of the Altai and Sayan Mountains. About the beginning of Christian era the Proto-Samoyedic tribes were stirred to movement by a notable onset of a warmer and drier climate in the central Urals. Another cause for the retreat was the migration in the south of the Huns and the Taghars. In the second half of the 1st millennium separate
peoples began to emerge from the Northern Samoyedic unity, the Nganasans being one of these (Krivonogov 1998, 81). The Nganasans are considered, and they consider themselves, native inhabitants of the Taymyr Peninsula. Some genetic traits have been inherited from the assimilated former Arctic inhabitants of the peninsula. In the course of time the differentiation process among the Northern Samoyedic languages continued, induced directly by geographical dispersion and the economically and culturally isolated position of Taymyr.

**Population:** Information about the population of the Nganasans is mainly to be found from census data (Etnografiya 2003):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Native Speakers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>93.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>1,262</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The census results, however, should probably be approached with some reserve. It is known that in 1959 a large number of Enets were registered as Nganasans, and erroneous registration in favor of one or another ethnic group may have occurred in instances after that as well. Taymyr is a sparsely populated area. In 1989 the region's total population was 55,000 (on 862 sq. kilometres), among whom the Nganasans are a small but conspicuous entity. Only fairly recently have the towns and villages, where most of the recent settlers reside, begun to attract the people of the tundra.

**Language:** The language belongs to the Samoyedic branch of the Uralic languages, and with the Nenets and Enets languages it makes up the Northern Group. There are two distinguishable dialects: the Avam or Western Dialect, and the Vadeyev, Khatanga, or the Eastern Dialect. A separate group, the Oko tribe, exists, formed of the Nganasans of Dolgan origin, assimilated in the 19th century. The dialectal differences are minor and phonetic only. A speaker of one dialect can quite easily understand the other.

The Nganasan vocabulary is mainly of Proto-Samoyedic origin. Contacts occurred with all the neighbors and compared to its cognate languages, Nganasan has been under a strong influence from the Evenki and Dolgan languages. In some fields, like reindeer-breeding and animal husbandry, Nenets loan-words are in evidence.

In the past it was common that a Nganasan would be familiar with the language of the Dolgans, the Evenks or the Nenets (and vice versa) but since the 1950s Russian has developed as the lingua franca. Large-scale loans have been made from Russian, particularly in the fields of politics, social life, economics and culture. Direct contact with Russian occurs from school, the press, cinema, governmental organizations, public services, and numerous other areas. Nowadays, Russian words and phrases are inserted into Nganasan speech and a sudden switch in conversation to Russian, depending on the subject or partner, is a common phenomenon. The younger Nganasans have lost command of their native language (Khaidu 1985).
Writing. The Nganasans never had a written language. While Nenets performed the functions of a regional second or common language, a *lingua franca*, Russian alone has served as the literary medium at school and in social life. A 1980 decree by the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers, concerning the promotion of economic and social welfare among the northern peoples yielded in 1988 a Nganasan literary language. N. Tereshchenko compiled in 1997 the 41-letter alphabet based on Russian characters but very little literature was published in it.

МоскваБольшедрУгоРоЛов (Russian) (Moscow is bigger than other cities)

Spiritual Life. The Nganasans connect their origin with a deer. In one of the legends it is mentioned, that they appeared from wool of a wild deer, in other it is told that they origin from the person shaped from a bone of a wild deer. In myths about the creation of the world always appears a bird or a deer. For example, it is told that the bird got the earth from under the water (Gracheva 1983).

According to their views there exist three worlds: top (sky), middle (earth) and bottom (underground). Some legends say that the top world is subdivided into three circles, others say – into nine. The Nganasans think that although the sun shines in the top world, cold winds blow there. From there, the sun as well as stars looks like holes. There are a lot of rocks in the top world, and the rocks covered by rough vegetation. There are also a lot of huge fishes and wild deers there. The top world is occupied by both good and malicious deities and spirits. In the bottom world circles are low. Our sun turns to the moon, and the moon – into the sun there. The spiteful spirits of vegetation and spirits of richness live there. The spirits of the dead people go there. The death is considered by the Nganasans as annoying misunderstanding, result of action of malicious spirits. The dead people were dressed in good clothes, women buried in their wedding dresses. All personal things of the late were buried together with the body (they will be useful to them in afterlife).

The Supreme deity is the founder of the Universe «alive Nguo ». There are two Spirits – the masters of the Earth: the benevolent old man Baykuo Nguo and the malicious Fannida that is "sepulchral". But the most popular and esteemed were the spirits – Masters of fire. Everything connected with fire was considered to be pure. Any defilement and dirtiness was cleared by fire. With its help the Nganasans tried to know their future (Doglike 1960).

Kou (sun) is the executor of the will of the Supreme deity. The sun was worshiped by the Nganasans greatly. They addressed to it with entreaties during various disasters and illnesses. The moon represents a hanging circle on which the spirit Tisyaro ("helping") lives. This spirit helps women during the labor. It is interesting how the Nganasans explain the spots on the moon. They consider them to be shamans who were sent to the moon with some mission and remained there. In general the Nganasans gave their explanation to each heavenly body or natural phenomenon. So, North Star is «a heavenly nail» on which the heavenly arch representing the overturned bowl hangs; the thunder storms because a small iron bird or the devil himself made of iron flies in the sky; the polar lights in the sky are reflection of the sea waves happening during the fish season and so forth. All natural phenomena appear as a result of activity of spirits or deities. The existence of a person depends on the will of these spirits (masters). If spirits are favorable to him and it he brings gifts to them then the spirits will help him (Vekhi 2002).
Malicious deities and spirits (barus) are not able to make any good things. Only disasters, illnesses and death come from them. However sometimes it is possible to influence barus through a shaman – using grafts, threats, various magic actions. There is a great variety of barus. They like to lodge on old houses, in the abandoned huts and generally in any remote places. In general, the basic form of the religious life of the Nganasans is shamanism. It is considered, that a shaman is selected by spirits. With their help he can travel to the top and bottom worlds, treat illnesses, predict the future. He is also the keeper of national traditions (Popov 1984).

The Nganasans have very rich folklore traditions. Epic legends (sittab) are about the giant heroes of the past. Sittab is a long rhythmic legend which is performed in long winter evenings by singers-storytellers. The listeners endowed them with magic force. The heroes of this folk epic are rich and possess supernatural abilities. All other narrative genres of folklore are prosaic and called dyurume ("messages", "news"). The most popular dyurume are the stories about the trickster Dyaiku or Oeloko (Odeloko), giants-cannibals (Sige), ridiculous Ibul. Among small genres of folklore are allegoric chastooshkas (keineirsya), riddles (tumta), sayings (bodu). Mythological legends are esteemed as authentic stories. In them we can find myths about the creation of the world which has arisen at will of the "Mother of everything having eyes " and " the God of the Earth Siruta-ngu whose son, a man-deer, becomes the first inhabitant of the Earth and the patron of the people. In the legends, the real relations among the Nganasans and Nenets, Russians, Dolgans, Evenks interwined with mythical stories about unknown " headless and hairy people" (Skazki 1976)

Music is represented by singing, epic, shaman’s, dancing and instrumental traditions. The singing tradition is based on a principle of personal writing of tunes, quite often improvised. Practically each singer has some personal songs and melodies (bal). Children's songs (n’uona bal) are created by parents for their children who in process of growing up study them and sing as their own nominal songs. Lullabies (l`andirsipsa bal) are in family traditions and are transferred on the female line.

Among the adults, lyrical allegoric songs (keineirsya kainerue) are popular. The tradition of poetic-singing competition-dialogue is represented by the legends (sita bi) which are sung on personal melodies of protagonists and are some kind of the historical encyclopedia of Nganasan’s tunes. Circular dances are accompanied by hoarse singing (narka kunti). As a whole imitation to voices of animals and birds takes important place and are included into the musical corpus of epic and lyrical tunes, as well as shaman rituals.

The melodies of the shaman songs (nada bal) according to Nganasans beliefs, belong to various spirits (d’amada) and alternate during lasting many hours shaman rituals: a shaman begins to sing, and one or several his assistants repeat it. Each shaman has ritual songs corresponding to various stages of a ceremony: nabatachio bal – calling of the spirits; khotisapsa bal – fortune telling; nantami bal – appeal to the spirits. Shaman rituals are performed to the accompaniment of tambourine (khendir) or staff with a handbell (chire). Sometimes singing of a shaman is accompanied by the beats of a stick with vertebratas (kheta) on tambourine but sometimes also as an independent rattle. The majority of suspension brackets-rattles on a suit and other attributes of the shaman represent spirits (koika) and have different forms: n’uon (diver), koker (crane), denkuika (swan), chedo (moon), etc.
**History.** The Samoyeds emerged in history in connection with the trade and military expeditions of the Russians. Monk Nestor of Kiev has mentioned them as neighbors and allies of the Ugrians (of Jugra). Russian interest was not confined to trade; the main incentive was to levy taxes on other peoples and to take possession of their territories. At first the Nganasans were spared because of their remote position. It was not until the early 17th century that tradesmen and officers of the Tsar Mikhail reached the land of the Nganasans (first contacts with the Russians were established around 1610). The governor of Tobolsk, Prince Trubetskoy, was ordered to hand out 15 tubs of strong spirits every year to aid in the collection of taxes. The main aim of both the taxation system and trade was always to secure the highest possible amount of furs -- a copper kettle, for example, cost an Nganasan a kettleful of sable furs. The Russians also introduced the Nganasans to tools, firearms and various trade goods, including alcohol, which has plagued these people ever since. They also brought with them diseases that these peoples had never been exposed to before. These factors caused a rapid population decline among the Nganasans.

Russian Orthodox missionaries reached the Nganasans in the late 17th c. They made many converts, but it turned out that the conversions were rather superficial - Shamanism remained strong also among converts.

As late as the 1930s the Nganasans led a tradition-bound nomadic life. Their main occupations were fishing and hunting, with reindeer the main game. Frequently the Nganasans cooperated with the Enets in stalking and chasing game. Reindeer meat and fish were the basic food of the Nganasans, providing them with all necessary vitamins and minerals. A few domesticated reindeer were used as beasts of draught, however, the main draught animal was the dog. Conical tents (named *chums*), made by covering a frame of poles with skins, served for shelter and an open fire provided light and warmth. No European clothing or footwear was yet used.

Political missionary work in the land of the Nganasan was set under way in the 1930s. In 1931 the idea of “red chums” (traditional houses of the Nganasans) was proposed, that is, special tents for ideological instruction. For all nomadic peoples such as the Nenets, these tents and their fittings were to be transportable. In 1934, in the all-Union paper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, there appeared an appeal for Young Communists to go and help the northern peoples build a communist society.

**Modern Situation:** The basic break of the traditional life of the Nganasans occurred in the middle of 1970th – with the loss of reindeer breeding and transition to the settled way of life. Reindeer and pastures were the property of collective farms and the Nganasans have settled down into villages. Free hunting of reindeer was prohibited. For his own needs a man was allowed to shoot only one animal per year. However, due to the massive slaughters conducted annually from helicopters the number of reindeer has been greatly depleted; an average of 50,000 were shot every season. As a consequence the animals changed their traditional paths and were more difficult to find. The lifestyle of the Nganasans gradually approached the Soviet norm; they came to prefer ready-made clothing and food from the food store. The prestige of the few remaining shamans has been eroded and they have few true believers left.

The shamanism was one of the brightest features of this life. In nomadic groups a shaman was considered as the central figure. He not only cured people and helped with searches of people and dears lost in snowstorms, but also provided good luck during hunting,
influenced the nature, for example, could stop a snow storm lasting many days when it was threatening with famine to his people.

The last recognized shaman and at the same time the epic storyteller was Tubyaku Kosterkin who died in an accident in 1989. Tubyaku was the successor of a legendary clan of shamans belonged to the Nganasans tribe of Ngamtuso. One of ancestors of Kosterkin's clan, shaman Hottare in order to save his tribe from famine, went to stay with the Owner of Water. He dived in his shaman's attire into the water through the hole in ice in the lake. One and a half year later in spring his tribe came to the lake again. One of his sons saw his father in his dream: he told him that it was time to pull him out. So next day they made a hole in the ice and lowered the hooks, one of them was very heavy. They began to pull the hooks. Very soon they saw Hottare who was beating the drum and singing shaman songs. But he was terribly awful - covered with scales and seaweed. One of the guys was so frightened that he let out a rope. The shaman disappeared under the water, and this time for ever (Pluzhnikov 2000).

The industrialization also influenced negatively on the life of the Nganasans. The entire economy of the Taymyr region became dominated by massive non-ferrous metal plants that were built in Norilsk. The plants have also had devastating effects on the environment, which has again caused severe health problems. Many among the Nganasans cannot adapt themselves to the altered demands of life. Alcohol-abuse is a universal plight. This is a major factor in the high incidence of mixed marriages since Nganasan women prefer fertile Russian males to their heavily-drinking countrymen.

The Nganasans had never developed any real sense of political nationalism and they are extremely few, so there have not been demands for Ngansan independence in the new situation that was created by Glasnost and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. There have, however, been calls for emergency measures to preserve the original indigenous culture, and there have been protests against industrialisation. Nganasan leaders have joined the recently formed Association of Peoples of the North.

The processes of assimilation, in particular language assimilation, promptly develop in last years. Owing to relative isolation from other peoples, Nganasan until recently were "champions" of mastering their own language among other small people of Siberia. However, if in 1979 according to population census, 93,8 % Nganasans, living on Taimyr recognized the language of their nation as a native one then in 1989 - 88,8 %, and in 2002 their share decreased uphill 44,1%. In the group of children Nganasan language as a native was named only by 5,9 % of respondents. This situation testifies to the cardinal changes which have occurred for the last 20 years. The Russian ethnographer V.P.Krivonogov considers that the main reason of Nganasan language assimilation is disappearance of nomadic reindeer breeding and the process of Nganasan settling in the mixed settlements (Krivonogov 1998). These processes are interconnected and coincide on time.

Conclusion

But not everything is so pessimistic as it seems at the first sight. In any case we should not take the position of non-interference, just observing how unique languages and unique spiritual cultures connected with them are dying. We should not consider the process of language assimilation to be irreversible, and that there are no effective means which could stop this process. The experience of many people shows that the teaching of a national language at school, development of its writing, the publication of folklore materials, the edition of educational and methodical literature, dictionaries, creation of experimental
classes, organizing of children's language camps and other measures in this direction are capable to brake sharply the process of language assimilation and to influence the growth of ethnic consciousness. Realization of similar programs needs both active efforts of the Center, and the good will of the local authorities, and to convince them of necessity of realization of such steps should the fact that 79,5 % of the Nganasans support introduction of the program of the teaching their native language at school. The using of Internet also gives some hope for better. If in this situation there would be no measures taken then in a pair of decades we would witness how the gloomiest forecasts come true.

Bibliography


Dr. Victor Pogadaev, Profesor Madya, FBL University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia