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Les vêtements traditionnels tchouktches comme source historique de transformation culturelle

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Article abstract

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Chukchi traditional clothing as historical source of cultural transformation

Nadezhda I. Vukvukai*

Résumé: Les vêtements traditionnels tchouktsches comme source historique de transformation culturelle

Cette note de recherche se base sur l'étude des vêtements traditionnels tchouktsches en tant qu'aspect majeur du patrimoine ethnique et culturel de la Tchoukotka. Ce sujet fut choisi par la nécessité de démontrer les avantages des vêtements traditionnels dans la zone arctique. Notre objectif scientifique était de recueillir des données concernant les vêtements tchouktsches et des descriptions sur leur fabrication afin de développer une méthode pour la formation professionnelle dans leur réalisation et de perpétuer ce savoir traditionnel.

Abstract: Chukchi traditional clothing as historical source of cultural transformation

This research note is based on the study of the Chukchi traditional clothing as a leading aspect of the national and cultural heritage of Chukotka. The topic was chosen by the need to show the advantages of Chukchi traditional clothing in the Arctic zone. Our scientific task was to collect data about Chukchi clothing and descriptions about its crafting in order to develop a method for professional training in their making and to promote this traditional knowledge.

Introduction

Until the Soviet period, the 738 000 km² expanse of Chukotka had been populated by Chukchi, Eskimos (Yupiget), Koryaks, Kereks, Yukagirs, and Evens. Historically they each developed their own culture, but the Chukchi dress appeared as the most distinctive silhouette on the northern background. The aim of our project is to understand the role of traditional clothing in the Chukchi culture and its presence in the wardrobe of some neighbouring communities in Chukotka.

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Methodology

The existing written sources about Chukchi clothes were the starting point of our research, then we did both field and archival work. We were particularly interested in identifying particular types of clothes. Archival photo collections constituted an additional source for our study. Photo documents from the Bogoraz collection in the American Museum of Natural History in New York and works by the Magadan photographer R. Mesiagutov were used for the first time in the historical study of Arctic clothes. This involved collaboration from experts on the photo collection *Enmelen-Nunligran* and *Uelen* from the coastal villages of Enmelen, Nunligran, Novoe Chaplino and Uelen. It contains 63 photo documents representing local landscapes, portraits of local people, and everyday life (Vukvukai et al. 2005).

Fieldwork was completed in six of the eight districts of Chukotka: Chukchi, Anadyr, Bilibino, Schmidt, Chaun, and Iultin. Provideniya and Beringovskii were not covered but data was collected through archival photos and interviews with informants who were born in those two regions.

Although the main purpose of the clothes is to protect the human body, the variety in the raw-material processing technologies and the embedded religious attributes required a wider look at the role of the traditional clothing. Sea mammal hunting and reindeer herding being the main traditional occupations, our study also took them into account.

Discussion of results

An in-depth analysis revealed that similar clothes were named differently depending on the type of raw material used. Our field data showed that coastal and tundra Chukchi designs were identical. We tried to get feedback on this result through the mass media (Vukvukai 2006a, 2007b).

Processing technologies

As we gathered information on different processing technologies, we realised that Chukchi sewing depends on the seasonal reindeer herding calendar. Summer appears as the most intense period: good summer pastures are likely to provide more favourable wintering and thus the preservation of the herd till the next summer. During this period, women try to prepare as many fur products as possible.

During our study of the processing technologies, we paid special attention to the question of the labour education for sewing skills in Chukchi society were transmitted from older to younger women (Vukvukai 2004c). For the purpose of our study, we drew up a list of traditional Chukchi clothes. Such a list enhanced the analysis of the

most common types of clothes, their transmission to the modern generations, and the reasons behind the changes in people's relationship to some traditional items.

Raw material processing technologies depend on environmental components, and there are some geographic differences in the making of some clothes. Our research gives some idea about how the clothes from reindeer have led to the formation of basic ethnic groups in Chukotka. The 17th century brought some demographic changes in the Russian Northeast. This most likely provoked some changes in the migration routes of the wild reindeer whose fur had become the basic raw material for aboriginal clothes in Chukotka. Military events of that period boosted the development of large scale reindeer herding, which began to concentrate in the hands of Chukchi reindeer herders. Data from all areas of Chukotka show a stable condition for the fur clothes that have been dominant in Chukotka for the last three centuries. No significant name changes were noticed with regard to the basic types of clothes. Neither the silhouette nor the zone of distribution have changed.

Functional and symbolic aspects

A full set of functional variety was demonstrated in the Chukchi women's wear (Vukvukai 2004a). Its kinship symbolic is particularly relevant in the process of socialisation of the individual (Vukvukai 2004b). Chukchi clothes are bearers of cultural information, and our field data show their role in the exchange of information between families. Furthermore, our observations showed some differences in the working habits of the coastal and tundra residents.

The functional properties of the fur clothes played a major role in the preservation of the fur dress as a typical Arctic dress. Fur clothes are still used by the reindeer herders in Chukotka continental zones of low temperatures, where one can learn about the nature of these clothes.

Ceremonial dress takes an important place in the national costume. Until recently, research on symbolism and semantics of Chukchi clothes (Vukvukai 2004b) has been devoted to some details that are now perceived as an ornament in the holidays' costume. However, ceremonial dress is still poorly known, and the next step of our study has to do with this subject.

Territories and groups naming

We assumed that some distinctions are related to kinship or territory. Therefore we first identified local and territorial Chukchi groups. A closer look at the history of Chukotka and at the Chukchi ethnogenesis throw some light on how local groups have been formed. In addition, we worked with some museum collections of Chukchi clothes since the end of the 19th century. These materials enabled us to present the principle behind the territorial specifics in traditional dress. Furthermore, they helped

us explain the ritual and ornamental details in the costumes of various communities in Chukotka.

Our study enlightened some territorial features in the human settlement of Chukotka. A great deal of the local group names was found in the written works of some early explorers and ethnographers. Thus Chukchi groups were assigned names in respect to their geographical region, for example: Kolyma, Anadyr, Coastal (*primorskije* in Russian), Chaun, Viliunei, Amguema, and Eastern tundra (*vostochnotundrovyje* in Russian). Yet our field data deal with a different principle in Chukchi group naming that is based on the relation between the groups themselves, for example: *emnun'yl'yt* ('tundra reindeer herders') have called themselves *chauchu* ('owning reindeer'), and the sea mammal hunters, *an'qagynnegn'ytyl'yt*. The following Chukchi names refer to geographical directions: the Southern part of Chukotka (*aivall'yt*), the North (*eigysqylyyt*), the West (*neqaiankasyl'yt*), and the East (*en'en'kas'yl'yt*, 'from inland'). Finally, calving grounds and summer camp sites have provided the most characteristic group names. Our study defined 32 names for local and territorial nomad groups.

Socialist transformations in the 20th century disturbed many groups' migration territories; for this reason it was difficult to follow the development of the traditional clothing. Therefore we decided to use some ethnographic museums' collections for this purpose. We studied some hunting clothes and fitting-out artefacts related to sea mammal hunting in the Russian Museum of Ethnography and the Kunstkamera in Saint-Petersburg as well as in the Khabarovsk regional museum. This work revealed a special kind of seal hunting wear which is not used anymore. Based on the museum collections, a typological classification of the Chukchi national dress was developed. This brought to light some latitude-related typological differences within the traditional clothes and enabled the development of a typological classification on functional criteria (Vukvukai 2006b, 2007). The analysis of the clothes' functional shift enlightens the changes in the role of Chukchi clothing throughout the 20th century and forward.

As we are also involved in a research project within the International Polar Year on the Indigenous adaptation to climate change, we started collecting coastal Chukchi's traditional ecological knowledge in both Russian and Chukchi languages. A series of Chukchi-Russian dictionaries of ecological terms was established. Such dictionaries include names of winds, sea currents and ice on the territory of Uelen as well as some terms and expressions describing the weather, how to behave at sea and the rules of sea mammal hunting. This traditional lexicon lies at the basis of the Arctic sea mammal hunting culture. This research involves not only scientists (such as engineer Victoria Golbtseva) but also local knowledge experts (such as Veket, Armayrgyn, Pechetegina) from the village of Uelen.

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