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Ethnocultural Identity of the Mari People in the Virtual World

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Abstract. Recent experience has demonstrated that the development prospects of ethnocultures have been decreasing without a proper transformative leap forward in the digitalization of ethnocultural space; ethnocultural identity tends to get lost against the backdrop of mainstream culture that has taken place in the virtual environment. This work attempts to define the degree of integration of the Mari culture into the Internet and the influence of its integration on Mari identity. A systems analysis was used to examine the ethnocultural space of Mari on the Internet. This method promoted defining identity as a system and included some interrelated components: axiological, linguistic, communicative, regional, mental, and the component of everyday life. The works of both foreign and Russian scholars on the theme of ethnocultural identity and the peculiarities of its transformation served as a useful methodological tool. Turning to the peculiarities of the Mari ethnocultural identity that have taken place in the virtual environment, the author considered methods and techniques of representation of Mari culture in virtual reality. It was concluded that the globalization of the information and communicative area not only helps harmonization and standardization of cultures but also encourages the integration of ethnocultural space, manifestation, the realization of basic needs of identification, and the decision-making process on ethnocultural everyday life in a virtual ethnocultural space. On the Internet, ethnoculture is saved and maintained; it acquires a new quality of life due to symbolic forms referring to its historic background.

Keywords: virtualization, Internet space, ethnocultural, Mari, language, ethnocultural identity

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1. Introduction

Today, when analyzing the virtualization of the ethnocultural space, the perspective of research questions has shifted towards the quality of ethnoculture's "everyday" life on the Internet. By the end of 2020, the need to subject the influence of the Internet space to philosophical and cultural analysis, as well as virtualization on value aspects inherent in ethnic cultures, was prioritized. The point is that the socio-cultural issues that were long overdue and most acutely emerged during the 2020 pandemic only now became apparent and got worse. Seemingly, from the very concept of ethnic culture, it follows that it will face not only a destructive transformation in the virtual space but

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also complete destruction [1, pp. 5, 177], — the culture that relates to the daily life of its members incorporating traditional, historical conventions, morals, religion, and folk art.

Nevertheless, virtual space has become a part of the daily lives of people. Because of the acceptance of this fact as an inevitability, the urgency of the theme "ethnoculture — Internet" has shifted from the position of statements about the blurring value lines of ethnocultures in the virtual space to the problem areas of the degree and quality of the virtual space's influence on ethnocultural transformation; to the possibilities of productive use of virtual space as one of the ways of forming sustainable development of ethnocultural identity; to the everyday life of the ethnic group realized in the virtual space.

Therefore, the studies devoted to the analysis of the possibilities and prospects of preserving ethnocultural identity in virtual reality cannot but be irrelevant. The culture of the Mari people is the most interesting for the author of this work; they have preserved traditional beliefs and customs. Modern Mari people, without losing their ethnocultural identity, live as a compact group not only and not quite in the Republic of Mari El but in rural areas and towns in other regions of the Russian Federation as well.

Taking the foregoing, the purpose of this work is to analyze the representation and possibilities of further formation of the ethnocultural identity of the Mari in virtual reality.

2. Methodology and methods

Studying the ethnocultural identity in a cultural perspective, the author resorts to the methodology of systems analysis considering cultural identity as an integral system, which includes the following components:

1. axiological;

2. linguistic;

3. communicative;

4. regional;

5. mental;

6. the component of everyday life.

The developments of Russian and foreign scientists have provided invaluable assistance in identifying and analyzing the relationship of the above components of ethnocultural identity. The issue of identity was developed in the writings of Erickson. Stuart

Hall emphasized that identity "always remains incomplete, always in process, always being formed" [2]. In modern science, the approach to the problem of ethnocultural identity is on the part of the influence of globalization changes. This is how Trine Kvidal, an American researcher, compares globalization with cultural imperialism. Such assessments of globalization are inherent in the works of Hall [2], Hegde [3], Lie [4]. Lie writes that television especially has an impact on ethnocultures in an intercultural local/global context representing the broadcast of local values on a global scale. Exploring the influence of consumer culture on the identification of minority peoples, the author examines the impact of advertising texts on changing values. Yadov [5] and Platonov [6] note that it is very important to preserve the values scale for the development of ethnoculture. Religion plays its part in the choice of the values scale. Weber [7] and Trevor-Roper [8] were among the first to express this point of view. Special perceptions of the spiritual world are shaped through religion, certain contours of spiritual manifestation of ethnocultural identity are set, and cultural values that are especially significant for the ethnic group are singled out.

National images and cultural values are transmitted to the next generation and manifested through language. Bakhtin wrote about any language as a worldview [9]. Through language and with the help of language, the spiritual life of an ethnic group is realized, its historical problems are solved relating both to ethical issues and socio-political ones. Levi-Strauss notes that language is not only an important component of culture created in the process of its development but a condition for the development of culture itself as well, one of the ways of its existence [10].

Sociological research methods helped to collect the empirical material presented below.

3. Results and discussion

Based on the works of predecessors, let us assume that the primary assessment of the degree of sustainable development of ethnocultural identity in the virtual space depends on the measure and appeal of the presentation of all its above-mentioned components.

Moreover, the Mari national culture has successfully been presented on the Internet from the second half of the 20th century. One can easily find any information on the Internet about the Mari living not only in the Russian Federation but also abroad. The staff of the Mari Scientific and Research Institute of Language, Literature and History named after V. M. Vasiliev (I Marneuli) deserves significant credit for that. Strengthening

the values of the Mari, the appeal of their special spiritual attitude for members of other cultures served to spread information on the Internet about the Mari as the last pagans of Europe living in tune with nature and having a nature-oriented worldview [11], which cannot be irrelevant nowadays. Therefore, the news of the opening of an interactive center of Mari culture in Bashkortostan has been welcomed as good news to social networks being an example to follow [12] and the presentation of the values of the Mari.

The problem of linguistic identity is acute for the Mari people. The ethnocultural group's communication by means of social media such as Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook is in a mixed Russian-Mari language. At the same time, one can see a focus on preserving the Mari language foundations in their everyday chats.

Chemyshev is a computer linguist now heading the project called "Information Technologies and the Mari Language". As a result of his work, the following were created on the basis of virtual platforms: Mari keyboard layout, electronic dictionaries, machine translators, an electronic library of publications in the Mari language including audio-books, online courses in the Mari language [13]. An animated course on studying the Mari language for children of primary school age was created on the website of the Republican Center of Mari Culture, the State Budgetary Institution of Culture of The Mari El Republic.

Moreover, when analyzing dialogues in social networks, one can single out a certain type of behavior, the Mari mentality. This is self-control, unhurried response to the opponent, non-possession (non-acquisitiveness), and the ability to strive for unity. The example of disputes about paid education of karts (Mari priests) illustrates this point [14]. The Mari priest must both receive and give away his knowledge for free. Kart is an honorary title.

When considering the regional status of subscribers of Mari ethnocultural groups in such social networks as Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, their region of residence (Mari from Kazan, Mari from Moscow, Mari from Bashkortostan, etc.) is recorded. Although, one would think that the regional factor should disappear with the immense expansion of the Internet leaving the way open rather ideological preferences. Furthermore, these same Mari people are in each other's groups. In the authors' opinion, such separation is caused by the fact that despite the persistence of common spiritual values, there are regional differences caused by various ethnocultural contacts, economic and geographical characteristics of the territory along with the existence of regional tasks of an ethnocultural nature.

Ethnoculture is a living organism. Often a website with static information is not able to provide flexibility and mobility of everyday processes taking place in the daily life of

an ethnic group. The opposite is true for social networks; they have enough mobility and flexibility for solving everyday problems. In private conversations on Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki (Facebook less often), some everyday, creative, traditional religious issues began to be solved, virtual meetings and training seminars were scheduled. The quest for self-fulfillment, given the circumstances of forced social distancing, has provided the impetus for the study of the possibilities of working in the information area for the older generation. For example, the Ural Mari, Z. I. Yametova (73 years old, the village of Kurki, Artinsky municipality of the Sverdlovsk Region), choosing new techniques for needlework, has watched more than one video on YouTube; S. S. Petrova (60 years old) from the same village has mastered capabilities of YouTube as an author of videos about the cultural life of fellow villagers, created her own ethnic page on Odnoklassniki. The digitalization of the museum of the culture of the Ural Mari now begins in the village of Sarsy, Krasnoufimsky municipality. The young generation of the Ural Mari, communicating on social networks, is gradually returning to the desire to learn the basics and features of their culture. Vkontakte has more than five groups of the Ural Mari, one of them is the page (Mari DISCO Ekb) of I. A. Yashkina from Verkhny Potam, Achitsky municipality of the Sverdlovsk Region, Sarsinsky village community center. Therefore, due to the Internet, the Ural Mari began to find each other at long distances, communicate, and discuss the problems of everyday life in their native language. The administrators of all these pages, on which the daily life of the Ural Mari is published, discussed, and analyzed, rely on the websites in their activities that present the national culture of the Mari of Russia. Finno-Ugric site administrators obtain information from groups in social networks.

Today's space of everyday virtual culture includes the sphere of education. The circumstances that have arisen with the coronavirus pandemic have created an unprecedented shock experiment of an absolute transition to forced distance education, highlighting and defining not only the positive aspects of digitalization of the ethnocultural segment of people's lives but the negative ones as well. It becomes apparent that this digitalization, without a scientifically proven socio-cultural approach, exacerbates ethnocultural problems and weakens ethnocultural identity. This is influenced by material and cultural factors (these include not only the preference for certain material assets but also material maintenance, that is, the possibility of acquiring licensed software and the necessary equipment), cultural and educational, representative, cultural and psychological factors (the problem of free choice and censorship of electronic educational content). Analyzing the problem of distance education in rural schools of the Urals Mari living as a compact group, it can be noted that digitalization has exacerbated social

stratification in education. The technical requirements for distance learning make this education inaccessible for 30% of schoolchildren in rural areas (according to the survey).

That is further compounded by the digital illiteracy of the teaching staff (76% of teachers complained about gaps in their skills). The use of social networks (Vkontakte, WhatsApp, etc.) in the critical situation for solving educational problems leads to a piecewise acquisition of knowledge due to distractions factors among students (85% of the students surveyed confirmed that). That reality was identified in the course of interviewing teachers and students in localities and villages with a dense concentration of the Mari of the Artinsky municipality (Kurki, Nizhny Bardym), Achitsky municipality (Mari Karshi), Krasnoufimsky municipality (Sarsy).

In general, the analysis of distance education at the first stage of its implementation revealed its complete absence and rejection in rural areas; in the Mari villages, as the most vulnerable in ethnocultural terms, the analysis has highlighted the primary task of solving cultural problems. Nevertheless, this situation has motivated the rural intelligentsia to get familiar with the ethnocultural Internet space, gave an impetus not only to the development of skills for filtering information on the Internet but also to the development of the skills of a full-fledged participant in virtual life. More than 100 cultural and educational videos about the Mari culture were added last year with more than 55 thousand views [15].

4. Conclusions

Previously, in order to understand the problem of representing ethnocultural identity in a digital society, descriptive characteristics of ethnocultural interaction were most often used; however, fundamental cause-effect relationships were not analyzed. In this work, using the method of systems analysis, the most important internal components of ethnocultural identity were defined. The analysis of their manifestation in the virtual space is necessary when studying the representation of ethnocultural identity. Using the Mari people's culture presented on the Internet websites and social networks as an example, it is concluded that such components of the Mari identity as ethnocultural values, language as a culture code, historical features of the development of a regional-ethnic type of culture, mental characteristics, daily online life of members of ethnic groups develop unevenly but in one way or another manifest themselves and are fixed in the virtual space. In conjunction, these components demonstrate the appeal of the Mari people's ethnocultural identity not only for members of their own ethnic group but

for other Internet users as well. In order to be convinced of that, one need only to look at the reviews of the Mari channels on YouTube.

Analyzing the above examples (a good description of the national language of Mari on the Internet is provided; it continues to have the role of preserving and transmitting the socio-cultural experience of an ethnic group) and on the basis that the language is the code of culture, it might be concluded that in the first phase of this study, the Mari people's culture is not in danger of weakening, it just moves to another stage of its development. In addition, to prove this, it is worth pointing out the presence of virtual platforms that represent the culture of the Mari along with other Finno-Ugric cultures in historical and spatial terms: these are, first of all, the websites of the Finno-Ugric cultural center of the Russian Federation and the Association of Finno-Ugric peoples of Russia.

At the same time, in the territories with a dense concentration of the Mari, the problem of digital inequality has recently been exacerbated due to the lack of Internet services and even cellular communication services in some places. The pandemic situation and the implementation of online education in educational institutions have quickened the decision-making process on Internet accessibility in all areas remote from the center, provided accelerated training of teachers in rural schools, as well as students' parents in online education technologies [16].

As a result, the analysis of the representation and the possibilities of further formation of the ethnocultural identity of the Mari in virtual reality showed a sufficiently high potential for its development and formation. Transformative processes associated with the digitalization of this ethnoculture have a positive effect on the progressive development of ethnocultural identity.

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