

N.Glukhova, V.Glukhov: Mari Men and Women as Bearers of the Mari Language and Identity

This topic has not been adequately explored by Mari scholars though several attempts have been made at studying it. Research on this problem which presents a real challenge to investigators is very important for the development of the Mari nation.

According to the latest population census in 1989 there were 670,868 Maris. 542,160 of them, or 80.8%, considered Mari their mother tongue. Practically 52% of the nation live outside the Republic, 18.8% of them did not speak Mari. In the Republic of Mari El in 1989 there were 11.6% who did not consider Mari their native language. In 1979 this figure was 6.3%.

The Mari represent one of the rural nations of the Russian Federation. Only 26.1% of the Mari population lives in the cities, and in Yoshkar-Ola this figure is even smaller - 23.4 % (1999) (Sepeyev, 2000:75).

The Republic and its people have attracted much attention from scholars of different branches of knowledge as the area with the best preserved language and unique traditional culture.

Historians and archaeologists previously wrote that the Mari were formed as a single nation a thousand years ago, at present some scholars (K. Sanukov, L. Vasikova) prefer to speak of several distinct sub-ethnoses, differing in certain characteristics in their identity. In this paper only typical features shared by all subgroups and distinguishing them from other nations will be discussed.

Psychologists say that on the personal level the concept of identification takes center stage in the formation of the self. Identification is the social process whereby the individual chooses adults as models and attempts to imitate their behavior (Erikson, 1963). The concept of identification with the role model shows that this type occurs throughout life because personality continually changes, even though basic aspects are formed in infancy. The result of this process is the individual's identity (Kornblum, 1994:153).

Ethnic identity is considered a basis of ethnic consciousness, a definite set of behavioral or personal typical distinctive traits (characteristics) by which an individual is recognized as a member of a group. Identity proceeds from the process of identification: a person's association with certain qualities, characteristics and views of another person or a whole group. Conclusive identity is made if investigated characteristics in their totality and relationship among themselves are relatively unique.

The findings of the sociological investigation carried out in the 1970's, 1980's and late 1990's by Mari scholars showed several basic features of Mari ethnic consciousness. The questionnaires were different but the majority of questions in them were nearly the same (Solovyov, 1977; Solovyov, 1987; Solovyov, Shabykov, Popov, 1999; Shabykov 2000:171-206).

One of the parameters of national identification was considered to be the age of a person's own association with a particular nation. These age periods were defined at 7, 10 and 15 years (going to kindergartens and schools with children of other nationalities, then continuing their education in secondary schools or colleges).

The next question and answers to it confirm the idea of heterogeneity of the Mari as a nation. Out of 4,000 people interviewed only 7% called themselves "Mari", 71% considered themselves Midland, or Meadow, Mari, 21.2% - Lowland, or Hill Mari and

0.08% referred to themselves as belonging to the Eastern group. These figures show the people's own estimation of their association with a particular subethnic group (Sharov 1993:32-34).

The other significant characteristics necessary for the topic of this paper and taken from several surveys carried out by the workers of the Mari Research Institute, their articles, and their authors' observations, vary according to the degree of their importance.

The Mari think that the most crucial parameters uniting them into a nation are:

- the language (75%-77.2% of people questioned);
- traditional culture (61.6%), explained by the way of life, and clearly shown in people's behavior both in everyday life but especially vividly during the celebration of numerous holidays and festivities;
- common historical past (21.6%);
- religion (15.7%);
- character features, mental characteristics (15.4%);
- appearance (10.8%) (Soloviov 2000:20-23; Shabykov 2000:172).

The most important part in the structure of the national identity, in scholars' and common people's opinion, constitutes the national language.

The language situation in the Republic gives a controversial picture. On the one hand, the nation is "reaping the fruits" of the Communist Party's debatable national policy in the course of 70 years. Thus, according to the All-Union census of population in 1926, 99.3% of the Mari considered Mari their mother tongue. 63 years later, according to the last census of population in 1989 80.8% called Mari their mother tongue.

The use of the Mari language as the means of obtaining education was markedly narrowed in the years of stagnation (1970's-1980's), when teaching in the mother tongue in (incomplete) secondary village schools was stopped. By the beginning of the 1990's Mari was the language of instruction only in some primary schools. From the 1960's till 1990 the rural population in the Republic was drastically reduced (by 180.000 people). 60% of the Mari village population left were (and are) women of a retirement age. At present they might be considered the preservers of the Mari languages and Mari traditional culture.

Before 1995 the Mari language was not taught in town schools at all. It is not used in government institutions, though formally the Mari languages have always been the state languages of the Mari Republic.

The Mari are the least urbanized people in comparison with other Finno-Ugrians in the European part of the Russian Federation. Only one fourth of the Mari live in towns (Sepeyev, 2000:74-75). The use of the Mari language in the Republic has been restricted by the domination of the Russian-speaking population. Political developments in the former Soviet Union during the periods of "Perestroika" and "Glasnost" and the first steps of the democratic process gave rise to a national awakening of the Mari people. It was reflected in many aspects in the life of the Mari-speaking community. Fundamental changes in the constitution of the former Soviet Union in 1991 made it possible to take first steps on the road towards the rebirth of the Mari culture and language. Since that time some important Republican government decisions on Mari language functions have been adopted, one of them being the Constitution of the Republic of Mari El, where the Mari languages were proclaimed the state languages of the Republic of Mari El together with Russian. An "Education Law" was adopted which provides for the restoration of schools with the Mari language as the language of instruction. Decisions from the "Conception of

Education in Mari El", the program "National Schools", and the "Language Law" are either under development or have been implemented.

At present the Mari languages and literature are being taught in 226 schools (the Mari languages are studied as their mother tongue by 21.6% of schoolchildren), the history of Mari culture in 406 schools (93% of all schoolchildren). As the state languages of the Republic of Mari El, they are taught in 184 Russian language schools (to 35,126 schoolchildren, 37.1%), in 284 kindergartens, in 10 secondary specialized educational establishments. It is also an optional subject in secondary schools, in teachers' training colleges, at the college of arts and culture (Danilova 2000:151-154; Shvetsova, 2002:16-17).

Higher education in the mother tongue can be obtained only at the History and Philology Department of the Mari State University and the Philology Faculty of the Krupskaya Teachers' Training Institute. There, more than half of the disciplines of the curriculum are taught in Mari.

Despite certain positive changes, the Mari languages have a relatively restricted use in the mass media of the Republic. There are 4 national, 13 regional newspapers and 4 magazines in Mari. Due to economic circumstances there is a considerable shortage in the circulation of printed mass media. For example, before the congress of "Mari Ushem" (Mari Union) at the beginning of the 1990's its activists organized the publication of the newspaper "Mari Chang" (Mari Bell) (2,000 issues). The newspaper has been irregularly published since that time in 1 to 2 issues every year and at certain periods has not appeared at all. The newspaper "Kugarnya" (Friday) was initiated in 1991 and since that time has come to its readers regularly once a week, but the number of its issues has been reduced from 5,000 to 3,500 in January 2000, 3,217 in 2001 and 1,617 at present). The newspaper "Eryk" (Freedom) whose founder is "Kugezhe Mlande" (Forefathers' Land) appeared in 1993. The circulation of the first two issues was 1,000 copies. Only a few editions have been published with a limited number of copies (Efimova 2000:146-147). The leading national newspaper is "Mari El". This newspaper has continued the traditions of "Mari Kommuna". At present it has 8,736 subscribers. Regional newspapers such as "Shernur vel" have 1,464 issues, "Morko mlande" - 1,159. Mari readers in Bashkiria subscribe to the newspaper "Cholman" (4,932 subscribers in 2002). There is "Gornomariiskaya gazeta" in Russian (2,138) and "Zhera" in Hill Mari (1908 subscribers in 2002).

The same situation can be observed in book publication. As of 2000 only fiction has been published in Mari. Not more than five books in Mari per hundred persons are published today. In 2000 with the financial help of the Finnish government several textbooks for schools and higher educational establishments were published. Nevertheless it is practically impossible to find technical, scientific, or philosophical books written in Mari. Their lack testifies to the absence of a scientific-technical style in the system of functional styles of the Mari languages.

The oral transmission of information in Mari takes places through radio broadcasts and TV programs. At present the radio programs in the Mari languages last only 20 hours and 10 minutes and the television programs in Mari 12 hours and 10 minutes per week (Ivanov 2000:158).

The Mari literary languages are better known by the representatives of town Mari intelligentsia (born and brought up in villages), both men and women, working in educational establishments or in governmental bodies. In the countryside women are the preservers and disseminators of the languages. The average age of men in the Russian Federation is 59 years, women live longer - they survive their male partners by 13 years (72). At present, without the possibility of sustaining family life at a

decent level young Mari men go to the building sites of Moscow, Kazan, Nizhnii Novgorod, to the Northern regions of Russia where they are recruited as workers in the gas and oil industries. Thus, men's role in the development of the Mari languages consists - partly - in their changing the lexical layer with borrowed words from Russian as at a certain age they represent the most mobile part of the village population and mix more with the Russian-speaking population. Educators in kindergartens, the Mari language school teachers, are mainly women. They know the Mari languages best of all.

As is well known, language is represented in two forms - oral and written. The countryside population still prefers to use an oral channel for getting or exchanging information - radio, television, and direct interpersonal communication.

Language, no doubt, helps identify oneself closely with a person or group. But the term "ethnic consciousness" implies a vast circle of other notions including not only identification but also certain ideas of typical national features (ethnic stereotypes), historic past, culture, traditions, behavioral norms, living in a certain territory under certain geographic and climatic conditions.

Language, material and spiritual culture has been better preserved in Mari El than in any other Finno-Ugric Republic in the Russian Federation due to another factor determining the identity of the nation - the way of life, which influences psychological features of the national character, people's tradition and traditional culture (61.6%).

The ancestors of the Mari were people of a forest culture. Local forest dwellers (5.000-3.000 B.C.) in the Neolithic era, especially when metal came into general use, changed their way of life and along with hunting and gathering started farming and animal husbandry. The Mari were good hunters, runners and warriors. In the 15th and 16th centuries partly because of a swampy territory, in a forest zone, partly due to lack of roads, different sub-ethnic groups already lived in different natural-geographical zones and therefore had their own specialization in economy (Sanukov, 2002:5-8). Where the lands were barren people went hunting, fishing and gathering, later they traveled to find different kinds of seasonal work. The traditional types of occupation in other places were farming and animal husbandry (Molotova, 2000:181-191).

As has already been mentioned the Mari still live mainly in the countryside. This fact has historical roots. After the 16th century (following hundreds of years of war with Rus') the Mari were not allowed to settle in towns nor to use metal in their work.

By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th the Mari were a people with an incomplete, or underdeveloped social structure, remaining mainly a peasant nation (Chuzayev, 2000:110), characterized by rustic, or rural mentality. This type of mentality is aimed at supporting its steady structure, its stability. Life is ordered by natural rhythms and agrarian labor, ancient customs, which seem to always exist. A man here does not expect a rapid change of events; the hunt for variety in life and sensations, typical of life in towns, is alien to him (Shkuratov, 1994:110-116).

The majority of psycho-cultural peculiarities of the agrarian Mari civilization of the period were based on two important factors. It was an ecological community, sunk into nature, reproducing its rhythm. It was a social environment of direct, personal communication where people knew each other face to face and spent their lives in familiar surroundings. With these features the Mari entered the 20th century.

Social and political processes among the Mari, as well as among other Finno-Ugric nations in Russia during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, developed very slowly. The starting point of the destruction of a patriarchal mode of life, the introduction of commodity-money relations, leading to the emergence of a bourgeois social structure refer only to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Basically it had no serious impact on the Mari community. At the same

time a new social group appeared: it was a small group of national intelligentsia, who proposed a task of self-determination and autonomy (Sanukov, 2000:13).

During the 20th century the nation's way of life did not change very much. Collectivization, personality cult, post-war policy did not give the Mari a chance to improve their social and economic position. Even in 1989 at the industrial enterprises of the Republic only one fourth of the workers were Mari, the majority of whom were occupied in timber, woodworking, light and food industries and working there did not demand a high qualification (Popov, 2000b:42). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the factories and plants existing went bankrupt. Their workers were left unemployed.

Any ethnos as a historical subject differs from others not only by character features, specific mentality, way of life and system of values, but also by a selective attitude towards economic and social changes in the society. Mari historians and sociologists stress the fact that the historically developed mentality of the Mari interferes with their active participation in on-going reforms and changes in the economy. There are practically no businessmen of the Mari nationality worth speaking of (Popov, 2000b:41).

This fact might be explained by the history of mentalities (Shkuratov, 1994:48-69;110-117). According to it some features of people living now refer back to a rustic civilization. Adherence to the previous experience hinders introducing new facts into life, prevents them from orientation towards the future. People are immersed in the immediate present. The past experience serves to fit the tasks of socio-cultural stability in the village community. Life in the village is so difficult that people think only of themes and problems of everyday life. The principal regulator of interpersonal relationship is direct communication. Though some people praise the collectivism of the former Soviet people (the Mari included), rustic civilization gives birth to absolute egocentrics. People lack individual self-awareness which is substituted by a set of collective notions, assumptions and in the long run collective traditions.

Some other features which can also testify to the previously expressed fact about the impossibility of the Mari to successfully adapt themselves to new economic relationships in the country might be shown here. 70% of the contemporary Mari live in a partly rustic civilization. No wonder that in people's mentality there are traces of the pre-urban culture. According to the history of mentalities, the typical features of the peasant civilization all round the world are the same. They are: an agrarian economy, manual labor, minimum consumption, simple life, dependence on natural-climatic rhythms, an all-round animism, adherence to ancient traditions, direct personal communication. It is also characterized by the absence of a written language as an important channel of information (Shkuratov, 1994:100).

Of course, the contemporary technological progress has had a definite impact on the Mari village. The Mari have two literary languages, different genres of literature. Mari villages have several modern conveniences, electric devices, gas. People use modern means of transportation - cars, buses, trains. Most of the village population wear "town" clothes and footwear, eat "town" food. Nevertheless the contemporary village Mari, even when occupied in different sectors of the national economy (working on the collective farms, in agricultural production cooperatives), have large individual plots with vegetables and special potato fields for themselves and their domestic animals. People prefer to live in their own wooden houses thus retaining some features of the peasant civilization.

The Mari village intelligentsia finds its place in the educational structure consisting of kindergartens, schools of different levels, libraries and village colleges of vocational training. Nearly all the village Mari have relatives in towns with whom they have very

close ties. With their help they sometimes can change their place of living and the social layer to which they have previously belonged becoming drivers, builders, nurses, militiamen, clerks in small offices, shop-assistants, bookkeepers etc.

Some scholars say that the contemporary level of civilization and technical progress, high level of urbanization, are harmful to the Mari community, to the nation's mentality. The most intellectual and communicative part of the population is being drawn into very intense contacts and assimilation with more powerful and stronger cultures and is lost to its own nation. Different life facts show that the Mari at present live in a sort of a transitional period not only from "developed socialism" to "wild capitalism" but also from a village life to life in towns, trying to change their traditional way of life (Solovyov, 2000:15).

Beside the features enumerated above, in our opinion, the most vivid way of representing identity is through national holidays, which are part and parcel of a traditional culture (61.6%). During the holidays the Mari prefer to wear national clothes, sing national songs, dance national dances, cook national food, speak Mari with their relatives, neighbors and friends.

As a part of their cultural heritage traditional Mari holidays and rituals have been preserved by the nation. The Mari ethnos managed to retain specific features and functions of several holidays and nowadays they serve as a connecting link between the past and present. Social changes since 1985 have eased the revival of traditional holidays and religious rituals. Formerly forgotten festivals such as Uarnya (shrovetide), Kugeche (in the Christian tradition Easter), Semyk (in the Christian tradition Whitsunday) (in some places a component part of Semyk was Agavairem – (Plow Holiday), then Kuso (a summer holiday before the Petrov day, New Moon), Uginde (Harvest Holiday), Shyzhe Kuso (Autumn Sacrifice Holiday), Shorykiol (yule-tide, Christmas time) are being actively revitalized nowadays. The most important holiday was considered Kuso. But since before it was a ritual of the banishment of evil forces and spirits (surem muzho) sometimes this holiday was called Surem. It lasted for two weeks. Usually, calendar holidays were held at regular intervals and they were dependent on the main cycle of agricultural work. Mari calendar holidays were 'attached' to the end and /or the beginning of another stage of labor activities. Among the principal calendar holidays there was, as a rule, a seven week interval. But between Semyk and Kuso the new moon broke the usual time space for celebration. Kuso had to be celebrated in the middle of summer. A seven week period of time was also interrupted between Shorykiol and Uarnya. Such holidays as Agavairem, Urlyk Lukmash were observed in spring and summer as they should be correlated with the beginning of spring work in the fields thus correcting the time interval. The first calendar holiday was Shorykiol (Etnografiya, 2001:106-117; Prazdniki, 1992).

Since the 1990's pagan prayer ceremonies and Agavairem have been celebrated not only in the villages but also on the territory of the sacred Oak Coppice in Yoshkar-Ola. Shorykiol which had been widely commemorated in the villages became quite popular among the town youth. The urban Mari like the gatherings "Mari Kas" (Mari Evening Party) for different age-groups. Among other holidays one can name two new national festivity days: "Mari Taleshke Keche" (National Hero Day) and "Mari Tishte Keche" (Day of the Mari Written language).

Ethnographers note with regret that many festivity components constituting the complete structure of the holidays such as table manners during a festivity or religious ritual, public merry-making (without excessive drinking) with visiting friends, relatives and neighbors, youth games, sit-round gatherings known to the generation of the 1950's and 1960's have been lost. The integrity of the ritual forms has been

broken (Kalinina, 2000:104-106). Nevertheless, traditional holidays and rituals are being gradually re-introduced into a system of the holidays determining the unique character of the Mari nation.

The ideology of a rustic civilization is an all-round animism. It is vividly seen by the holidays' character. Even when the rural community adopts a monotheistic religion - Russian Orthodoxy - it appears to be polytheistic. At present there is a revival of paganism in Mari El, and 15.4% of the Mari consider it to be a uniting factor in the identity of the nation.

The village people's outlook showed all nature phenomena as a result of somebody's activities. Any person could cause an awful cataclysm either by ignorance or evil will. At present there are different types of praying on the part of pagan believers. People are still afraid of the evil eye and the evil tongue, and widely use different types of charms (Glukhova, 1997).

In the Republic of Mari El there are different confessions. Nonetheless during the last 15 years Mari Paganism has claimed to be a consolidating force for all the Mari. Mari historians note that under the circumstances of the absence of the nation's own statehood, of a single administrative unit, of a written language, in the period of heavy spiritual oppression from the Russian Orthodox Church, the social and political yoke, it did play a significant role in the nation's consolidation. This religion had for a long time been a spiritual basis of the nation (Popov, 2000a:118-131; Chemyshv, 2000:132-137). It was a bulwark against Christianization and Russification as it helped preserve the national world view. But, in our time, its integrating function and its role of expressing the national outlook has lost its former significance. Today the Mari people have achieved their own statehood, have reached another level of education and culture, are characterized by another trait of national self-consciousness that was formed under internationalism in all spheres of the life. Naturally, Mari spiritual demands and life are not determined by those values which were important in the epoch of the tribal society and patriarchal way of life (Solovyov, 2000:22).

Another constituent of the national identity is a nation's character. The Mari discussing themselves note such positive character features as perseverance and patience, industry and diligence, stoicism and fortitude. Such qualities were born during many years of work on the land. Other positive features which the Mari possess and ascribe to themselves are: simplicity, sincerity, tolerance and industry.

Negative features are: shyness, diffidence, timidity. People describing themselves indicated the absence of mutual aid (21.5%) and mutual respect, addiction to alcohol.

In a word, one may speak of a national inferiority complex (Sanukov, 2002:21) which includes an unduly low self-appraisal, characterized by a permanent lack of self-confidence, loss of initiative, indifference, feelings of shame and anxiety.

The characteristics enumerated above are unique in their totality and relationship among themselves, and we can undoubtedly speak of a specific Mari national identity.

Some well-known scholars, S. Kapitsa for example, say that history has quickened its pace, that the speed of historic events has been accelerated. This has increased the number of events happening in the same unit of time in comparison with previous centuries. Thus, the identity and mentality of a nation at present are being more strongly influenced by social and political changes in the country and the whole world. Thus, it is not enough to raise this question and consider it settled. It is more important to have a long-term identity-monitoring project than sporadic articles on the theme.

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