

## Conference Paper

# Aspects of the Linguistic Culture of the Ural Mari People in XIXth-XXIst Centuries

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## Abstract

This article adopts a linguoculturological approach to analyze the transformation of the Ural Mari culture between the XVIIIth and the XXIst centuries as an interconnection between language, mentality, and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** culture, language, linguoculturology, Ural Mari people, Mari language

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## 1. Introduction

Every national language possesses its own deeper meaning created over the centuries as a result of unique historical, geographical, ecological, political, religious and aesthetic development. Taken as a whole, this meaning forms the 'inner linguistic consciousness of a nation' (Wilhelm von Humboldt). Therefore, we may say that language is a mental and spiritual self-expression of a people and its cultural identity. Through language, the surrounding world acquires its 'otherness' (other-being) as a specific supra-subjective spiritual reality, a concept of which has been developed through a concrete ethnic or national cultural experience based on the life of many generations.

On the other hand, language is a cultural code of a people (nation, ethnic group), its living mentality and probably the only way to preserve its cultural, moral and spiritual values, its own beauty and way of life. To deprive a people of its language means to deprive it of itself, since language is a cradle of its cultural identity.

Let us try, however briefly, to elucidate this interconnection between language, spirituality, mentality and cultural identity using as an example the linguistic transformations of the ingenious Ural Mari people throughout XVIIth-XXIst centuries. The study of the development and transformation of their culture inevitably leads to a linguoculturological analysis of their linguistic traits. For the Mari people, their familial connections have always formed the center of their value-oriented worldview. Their notions of good, evil, loyalty and betrayal are reflected through the familial, communal

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and tribal connections and are linguistically encoded. These values are reflected in Mari folk songs, in their everyday verbal communications, in their epic and modern poetry.

## 2. The Cultural Identity of Ural Mari People

Mari people living in Ural and the western piedmont of the Ural Mountains do not constitute a monolithic territorial community. The two dialects found among the Ural Mari people are known as the Kungur and the Krasnoufimsk dialects. They were described by G.Seleyev, A.Chernykh and others [2]. Kurgan, or Sylven, Mari people (*Kö-gyr mariy*, *Suliy mariy*) live in Achit, Arti and Nizhniye Ser'gi districts. Krasnoufimsk Mari people (or *Yuponsh Mari*) had settled in the southern part of Krasnoufimsk district. Mari settlement occurred in several stages. Their villages were founded at the Bashkir and Tatar territories. As a result, in some places Mari were assimilated into the local Tatar or Bashkir populations, and the memory of them is preserved only in toponyms and traditional narratives. For example, in Bolshiye Klyuchi village part of the neighborhood used to be called the Cheremis Road (*Cheremis* is the old Russian name of the Mari people). Today this place is called Dyakovka. Similarly, a Mari village existed at the site of the present Chatlyk village; the name of the Manchazh village comes from the Mari language; during the Pugachev uprising, there was a Mari settlement near the Titesh Mountains; the territory of the today's Arti and Bisert factories used to be a Mari place, etc. Traces of Mari presence are also found in Rezh and Kamensk districts. We can assume that these traces mark the easternmost part of the migration of Volga Finno-Ugric people. Kungur Mari had also stopped in the villages of Yalyan (Starobukharovo) and Kyikyr (Nakoryakovo) in Nizhniye Ser'gi district. Mari people had always readily taken part in the Sunday trade, bringing onions, flour and hemp cloths to the Bashkir and Tatar markets. Thus, they needed to know two or three languages to participate in this trade.

The differences in Ural Mari settlement have produced the distinctive characteristics of their languages and their linguistic loans. Tatar and Mari culture became intertwined quite closely linguistically. This led to the borrowing of Tatar words, including names and words for everyday objects.

Tatar linguistic influence is more pronounced in Sylven Mari than in Krasnoufimsk Mari. For example, Suksun Mari call a priest *mola* (*mulla* in Tatar – the similarity is obvious), while Krasnoufimsk Mari use the word *kart*.

The transformation of the work *kovsh* ('ladle') is interesting. In standard (literary) Mari language it sounds as *korka*, Krasnoufimsk Mari use the variant *vudkorka*, while

the Suksun Mari have borrowed the Tatar word *aldyr*. This example also shows the preservation of many archaic cultural traits.

Tatar words have acquired a new meaning, being transformed in the mentality of Ural Mari. For example, the loanword *terekemesh* ('mercury') changed its meaning to a dead wild beehive in a pine tree. As a result, an abstract word acquired a concrete figurative meaning based on the everyday experience of the Ural Mari. The volatile quality of mercury was transferred to signify flying bees, while the mortal danger of this substance became associated with an image of dead bees and a destroyed beehive.

In many languages, loanwords are adopted to describe the new or alien cultural phenomena, because their meaning is better expressed in a foreign language. For example, Russian language borrowed the words *bardak* and *chaos*, both meaning the highest degree of disorder, with an additional emotional emphasis. Similarly, Ural Mari in their everyday speech often say *ayda nasary* ('disorder') – an expression borrowed from the Tatar, which, in the Mari mentality, adds emotional expressiveness to the idea of disorder. Therefore, Tatar and Bashkir loanwords, interpreted through the imaginative worldview of the Ural Mari, have enriched their language with the new emotional flavor, reflecting the life of the XVIIth–XIXth-century settlers. This is confirmed by the history of the settlers [2].

According to L.Shumikhina, "native words are a form of presence of an object in a 'quasiobjectness'; an expression of an object in the otherness of mental reality. The same object in different languages may exist in different versions of otherness" [4, p. 60]. For example, Ural Mari transformed the Tatar word *kaychy* ('scissors') transformed into *kache*. In literary Mari language, 'scissors' are *vashkuzo* (two blades facing each other). And the word *kache* means a man or a husband. We can only guess, striving to understand the image thinking of the Ural Mari, why the image of a husband became transformed into an image of the scissors. Ural Mari used the word *kugyzam* for husband (*kugo* meaning *big, main*). However, according to the villagers, the word *pelashem* is more prevalent, meaning *my other half*.

Oswald Spengler wrote about linguistic borrowings that "we imbue the expressions of an alien soul with our own perception of the world, from which our own words take their meaning" [3]. As if building on this Spengler's observations, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that: "Languages are worldviews, and not the abstract ones, but concrete, social, permeated with value systems, inseparable from the living practice... Therefore, each object, each concept, each point of view, each judgement, each intonation" exist "at the juncture between the linguistic worldviews" [1, p. 521].

The difficult periods in the history of the Ural Mari are reflected in their songs. We have analyzed about 10 folk songs performed in Arti and Krasnoufimsk districts. All of them are at least 150 years old.

Mari songs are slow and melancholy. All songs are narrative, describing life and norms of the traditional family. The content of these songs shows that for the Mari people, their houses, villages and nature were not just an environment – they were a part of their soul and their world. Therefore, those experiences that could not be perceived or seen, did not enter the linguistic world of the Mari, but rather were perceived as something remote and not quite real.

The literal translation of many songs is impossible without an extensive explanation, since many Mari concepts don't exist in Russian and, vice versa, Mari language lacks many words used in Russian. Take, for example, the Russian word *smyateniye* ('emotional perturbation'). Mari language describes the disarray of human emotions as a dynamic process of changing colors. A song performed at a farewell ceremony goes: "Dear guests, you are leaving me, and I'm all blue, all red, and again all blue, all red".

Mari language studies played an important part in the development of the Ural Mari identity during the XIXth century. According to the existing sources, the first missionary schools opened in Krasnoufimsk *uyezd* (the first one, for 30 students, opened in the village of Yuva in 1873; then in 1874 schools opened in the villages of Bol'shaya Tavra, Potam, Karzi and Tebenyaki). The teachers were local Mari who knew not only their native language, but also Russian and Tatar.

Taking into account the circumstances, the scripture instructions were less strict, and sometimes even delayed [2, p. 72]. Despite the missionary character of these schools, they also taught a full secular curriculum in Mari language. Simultaneously, Mari school libraries were developing. According to A.Chernykh, the number of schools in Krasnoufimsk *uyezd* was growing every year. The number of pupils was 10 to 35 per school. After two years of studying in their native language, Russian language was introduced, and subsequently all teaching was done in Russian.

Even before the 1917 revolution, the need to train teachers for ethnic Mari schools was deeply felt. In 1894, the two-year school for teachers opened near the town of Krasnoufimsk. It trained Mari teachers both for the church schools and for the grammar schools. Since 1912, this teachers' school started to take in Mari children who had graduated from church schools and wished to continue their education.

The first Soviet decades of the XXth century witnessed the successful development of a network of national schools, the raise of education in national language, and the

development of traditional agrarian pursuits, but only within the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* system. Therefore, the increased ties with Russian culture facilitated the development of Mari education system, writing and literary language – which, together with the borrowings from the Russian language, facilitated the development of Mari culture providing it with a fresh impetus.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to note that the preservation of language as a key ethnic cultural element allowed Ural Mari to avoid assimilation, despite the extensive borrowings from the material culture. Ethnocultural borrowings enriched Mari life, while preserving its axiological component. The culture was enriching itself and developing through transformations.

In the late XXth–early XXIst century, worsening situation of the Mari language and the lack of language lessons in school, led to many Mari words being substituted with Russian, or Russian words used with Mari endings.

As a result, the loss of linguistic identity of the Ural Mari and the disappearance of many Mari words are facilitating the loss of their unique mentality, worldview and perception of reality, which is so important and necessary in today's globalized world.

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