

Traditional (Folk) Culture in Modern Russian Comprehensive School

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Abstract—The given paper discusses ways in which modern educational system could include traditional (folk) culture of ethnic groups, sharing the same territory, into curricular and extra-curricular activities at primary school. The authors describe stages of research and experimental work that have been conducted since 2011 within the frames of the federal experimental platform made up of four Russian educational institutions. Initiated by the Federal Institute for Education Development (Moscow, Russia), the described project aims at designing alternative educational programs that will take into account the rich cultural heritage of ethnic groups living on the territory of Mari El Republic (a provincial region of Russia). The paper provides an introduction to the history of Russian research in the field of ethnic interactions. The stages of the research and experimental work done by the authors are described in detail. An overview of ethnographic material is presented as well as of mechanisms underlying certain calendar and family rites and traditions. The general philosophical principle of unity in diversity is referred to as the methodological ground of the research and practical work at school. Civic and patriotic education enriched in folk culture of different ethnic groups, in the authors' opinion, can provide new solutions and means that would ensure fruitful and peaceful interethnic communication of multinational population of the Russian Federation in future. Thus, the article focuses on the issue of establishing an identity of a citizen that would combine and harmonize a variety of identities of ethnic groups, inhabiting Russia, into one single whole.

Keywords—*ethnic interactions, Russian traditional culture, unity in diversity, primary school, patriotic education*

I. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 21-st century the issue of interethnic and intercultural communication and conflicts became extremely urgent. Moreover, it is still challenging even for the most developed and prosperous countries. What concerns Russia with its multinational culture, one can hardly deny that the country is in a desperate need of a national policy that would “provide every citizen with a certain amount of humanitarian knowledge underlying the

foundation of a nation's identity” [1]. Consequently, the educational space of the country needs projects that would teach the population to value highly the role and place of any ethnic group in the life of Russia.

The system of education plays the main part in solving problems of intercultural interactions. Whether the Russian society will be able to face the challenges of the time successfully, depends on a degree of ethnocultural literacy its citizens possess. It is up to the system of education to provide a required level of ethnocultural literacy. Defining universal codes in traditional cultures of nations, which share the Russian territory and history, and filling them up with ethnic contexts on the basis of the general philosophical principle known as *unity in diversity* would allow to highly appreciate a role and place of every nation in the life of Russia, to choose the country's way of development taking into consideration strengths and weaknesses of previous epochs and considering the Russian culture's special mission in creating one common culture and civic identity.

Thus, working out a new aspect in regarding the issue of ethnic interactions under modern conditions and designing new educational programs are considered by us one of the vital goals of the Humanities, ethnography and folklore studies among them. The latter possesses a considerable and underestimated experience in the field that would be referred in the next passage.

The problems of cultural /ethnic interactions and the use of rich folklore heritage of the peoples of the country in pedagogical purposes were raised in Russian science in the second half of the XIX century. Scientists focused their attention on the issue of cultural interactions because they wanted to reveal the problem of national specificity of Russian culture (K.D. Kavelin, F.I. Buslaev, A.N. Veselovsky, etc.) [2]. It was the time when A.N. Veselovsky formulated his famous idea of borrowings as “<...> a dialogue of cultures <...>, but not the suppression of a lower civilization by a higher one” [3]. The national policy of the Soviet state in the 20th century transferred this problem from the sphere of national self-determination of Russian culture to the sphere of interethnic contacts and interactions. Despite the well-known “narrowing” of the research position in folkloristics of that period, some important approaches to the study of this problem were formulated. For example, E.V. Pomerantseva and K.V.

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Chistov concretized the thesis of borrowing as “an integral part of the process of interaction and interchange of contacting ethnic traditions” [4]. V.M. Gatsak’s opinions are also interesting in this regard. He developed the idea of merging (with the “transplantation” of the narrative into a foreign ethnic environment) the influence of genre factors with the “transforming power of oral-poetic (including stylistic) and historical-domestic traditions” [5]. B.N. Putilov also made attempts to identify the mechanism of assimilation of “foreign texts”. He even introduced a special term – “a code set” – to denote “the capabilities of a foreign text embodied in this ethnically defined system of artistic ideas, poetic semantics, folklore consciousness” [6]. E.A. Kostyukhin also wrote about the adaptation of borrowed plots to a certain cultural tradition and their perception in its context [7]. V.P. Anikin, in his turn, showed his interest in the opposite process. The scientist associated it with the concept of “Russian folklore stability” [8]. In connection with the borrowing mechanism, scientists focused their attention on such a feature of spiritual culture as permeability / impermeability of its various sides and fragments. Thus, N.I. Tolstoy wrote about the heterogeneity of the genres of Slavic folklore regarding their stability, national identity and openness / closeness. In his opinion, an anecdote, a fairy tale, a legend, a spiritual verse and a proverb can be considered “susceptible” to foreign folklore and non-folklore stocks. As for the ritual calendar and family poetry, epic poetry (epics, dumas, youth’s songs), they are characterized by the scientist as “impervious, closed, externally and internally stable” [9]. E.V. Pomerantseva, V.P. Anikin, K.V. Chistov and others wrote about a greater degree of permeability of oral prose in comparison with song genres. In the process of ethnogenetic and comparative historical research in the field of traditional spiritual culture, especially of the Slavs, N.I. Tolstoy’s idea is of a great importance. He wrote about the necessity to use the methods of internal (diachronic research within one language family) and external (synchronistic research within one language family) reconstruction, and added that “reference to the material of unrelated and heterogeneous languages and cultures is only possible at the final stage” [9]. The research “programme” of cultural interactions and their forms was set at the end of XIX century and mostly realized in Soviet folkloristics. 1) Thus, along with contamination [3], such forms of interaction as apperception, interference, unilateral influences, co-creation, synthesis, symbiosis, repulsion, etc. were introduced and, in some cases, even confirmed [see, for example, 4; 7]. 2) The differentiation of the forms of interaction was made depending on the proximity of ethnoses coming into contact. It is interesting that re-examination of the achievements of Russian science of the XIX-XX centuries, the expansion of the subject field of folklore, the introduction of new research methods at the turn of the XX-XXI centuries showed no changes in the approaches to solving the problem of intercultural interactions. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the new formulation of the question on the relationship between universal Russian and regional

components, suggested by B.N. Putilov. It is known that during the existence of Soviet folkloristics, scientists admitted the phenomenon of a “single Russian root” which was not confirmed by research practice. B.N. Putilov suggested comparing local / regional traditions with each other in order to identify universal topics, motives, plots, forms and methods of Russian folklore [10].

The studies of the scientists of Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, especially of T.G. Vladykina [11] and A.V. Chernyh [12,13], represent the greatest interest in the sphere of regional research. The project “Ancient Voices of the Ural World: audio recordings in the archives of Russia (particularly of Udmurtia), Estonia, Finland and Hungary” (coordinated by Dr. Thjerd de Graf, a member of the Frisian Academy (Netherlands), V.N. Denisov, a staff member of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The project was funded by the British Library through the University of Groningen (Netherlands) [14,15]. The Estonian Folklore Council also carries out certain work in this direction. Its tasks also include the support, revival and development of national and regional cultural traditions; the transfer of cultural heritage to children and young people; evaluation of the role of folklore in modern culture; ensuring understanding and tolerance among various peoples of the world.

Among the specific objectives of the research, described in the article, issues of designing the curriculum of primary school with the usage of basic components of traditional culture and its regional peculiarities come first. Another goal is to develop educational accompaniment for the process of conscious sociocultural identification and formation of the system of civic and patriotic orientations of a personality on the primary level of education as well as approbation of models of educators’ professional growth on the basis of acquiring knowledge in the field of traditional culture of peoples living in Mari El and use of IT.

To face the challenging issues, in June 2011 the Federal Institute for Education Development (Moscow) organized a network experimental platform in Mari El Republic (Russia). The platform comprised four educational institutions: Mari State University, Republican gymnasium of Humanities “Blue Bird”, School 6 (the town of Yoshkar-Ola), School after S.A. Losev (the settlement of Yurino). The theme of the research was formulated as “Design of educational system of primary school students of Mari El Republic based on values of traditional (folk) culture”. The experimental work was needed to make use of cultural values of Russian and Mari people and of other nations inhabiting Mari El Republic in learning, development and civic and patriotic education.

II. METHODS

In the given research and article an attempt is made to organize the educational process in the system of Russian primary school according to the general philosophical

principle of unity in diversity. The principle was shaped by the outstanding Russian philosopher K. Leontiev and his disciples in the given field, such as N. Danilevskiy and L. Gumilev. The principle has already been used to advantage by specialists of the Department of Sociology of Art Life of State Institute of Art History in a project that claimed to create a new model of regulating relations between art and society in the modern epoch [16,17]. Within this model (the theory of sociocultural stratification) a new cultural policy of a country must be built according to demands and interests of all social groups including subcultural communities) in the given society. Correspondingly, the application of the given principle towards the current issue (design of new educational programs regarding dynamics of ethnical interaction on the post-soviet territory) presupposes the use of values (elements) of traditional culture of all nations which make the body of the given community / collective in the process of civic and patriotic education. As for the traditional methods applied in the research, they are observation, analysis, hermeneutic and structural semiotic methods.

III. RESULTS

During the experimental work of the Federal Institute for Education Development and Mari State University the authors of the article were able to determine a number of peculiarities of folklore, as well as its fields and genres that seem most efficient in the process of forming basic national values (patriotism, social solidarity, citizenship, nature). The participants of the project have also defined possibilities and perspectives of using the Russian traditional culture of the given region as an integrating unit of education at primary school.

The research was focused on calendar and family rites of peoples of Mari El. In order to use the rich material, which had been collected and classified by researchers of Mari State University for many years, and to make it fit the concept of unity in diversity, the researchers have processed it on different stages described below.

At the first stage some universal patterns that underlie origins of folklore traditions were determined. For instance, the cult of forefathers has played an important part in establishing calendar rites of all peoples of the Volga region. Both Slavic and Finno-Ugric peoples used to believe in living souls of the dead and their visits in certain calendar periods, they used to meet them and see them off [18]. Also, the wedding rites display a strong connection to the so-called rites de passage [19].

At the second stage ethnographic descriptions and texts that are relevant for the given patterns were found out. It was claimed that the calendar traditions of the Volga region with the essential rite of house visiting and corresponding songs and dialogues are connected to the cult of forefathers. In the wedding rite that goes back to the initiation ritual, such elements as saying good-bye to the native home, parents and relations, single youngsters, places of walking

and corresponding lyrics are vitally important.

The third stage was devoted to defining extended/non-extended ritual forms, texts and to making commentary. Thus, the Mordva peoples' rites of meeting and seeing forefathers' souls off are remarkable because of their completeness and extended texts [18]. The songs performed in the given period are closed structures and can be considered as a united ritual text. From them one gets a good idea of participants' roles - what and when masters and guests do. Accordingly, guests remind masters of the necessity to cook ritual dishes, they name the main performers of the rite, recreate the surroundings of the other world, act out punishments in case of masters' refusal to obey ritual orders, describe difficulties they face on the way to the house, perform dialogues where the idea of exchange is displayed (guests ask for ritual dishes and, in return, they promise a prosperous future to the house owner's family). If compared to the Mordva's songs, in Russian songs (those with descriptions of ritual dishes, ritual characters, ideas of guests' feasting and prosperous future) archaic details look scattered in different plots and are often used as ground for new songs and all kinds of additions and developments. As far as the Mari people's songs are regarded, the degree of their preservation and completeness occupies a middle position.

Considering national similarities and difference, the authors created some kind of unified models of rites / texts. Each of them is grounded on a universal pattern to which national variants are added. Such an approach allows researchers and educators to neglect the issue of referring a rite or a text to a certain nation or the issue of borrowing it by some nation from another. The way universal patterns work are also unfolded in applied arts, embroidery, details of interior. Outstanding Russian scientists such as N. Tolstoy, S. Tolstaya, and A. Byburin have already described the fact of cultural synonyms.

As for the mentioned commentary, it includes reasons for the difference in the degree of preservation of this or that rite spread in the Volga region (history, migration, credibility of texts, moments when they were collected and written down).

The fourth stage presupposes adaptation of the material. One cannot plan any work with primary school children unless the material becomes suitable for their abilities and cognitive level. First of all, such adaptation includes selection of material. The latter must correspond to the programs of subjects the children learn, the academic and educational process of the given school, students' nationalities (a unified model must take into account traditions of all children present), a degree in which students are ready to work with texts of traditional culture, educators' and parents' attitudes towards the new approach and the teacher's qualifications and skills in the field of teaching traditional culture.

At the fifth stage all possible kinds of student's books and teacher's books are compiled. The authors' research

and teaching experience of using traditional (folk) culture of Mari El Republic in school education could be shared with educators from other regions.

At present the participants of the federal experimental platform have already developed and published the first programs that are aimed at forming students' idea of calendar and family rites and traditions of peoples living in Mari El Republic as an integral part of life. The programs help to gain a better understanding of differences and similarities between the rites of ethnic groups inhabiting Mari El Republic, to see the way they interact and function, their content and artistic means. In the participants' opinion, those are effective ways to provide children's respectful attitude to the culture of people living next to them and in the country, by and large, to develop tolerance.

Moreover, the programs are used to design lessons and extra-curricular events. Partially they have already been conducted by the authors of the article and other participants of the experiment and have been attached to the programs [20].

Presentation of the materials of the experimental work is held at the sixth stage. To achieve the goal, the participants of the research have created digital databases of traditional culture of peoples living in Mari El Republic. Some databases are in the process of making at the moment. The databases are designed to contain full texts (including main ethnographic descriptions and texts, audio and video recordings of rites and actions of the main ethnic groups of Mari El Republic) and a web search engine. The materials are presented in the form of a virtual museum of folklore with a virtual excursion. There is an element of gamification included (hidden object game play and a funny character-guide). One museum of this kind (the virtual museum of folklore of Yurinskiy Region of Mari El Republic) was made several years ago and is still regarded as a unique database in the field of preservation and presentation of folklore and ethnographic materials in Russia.

Public discussion constitutes the seventh, and final, stage of the work described. We have found it efficient and convenient to share our ideas and materials in Russian social media. Thus, a public page devoted to the folklore and ethnography of Yurinskiy Region has been opened on the social media site VKontakte [<http://vk.com/club45378220>]. The group enlists 200 followers; there are mostly inhabitants of Yurinskiy Region and the town of Yoshkar-Ola. However, the page is visited by guests from other regions of Russia and from abroad. Ethnographic photos are regularly viewed.

At the moment the group contains materials on history of the most popular sights – Sheremet'yevskiy Castle and Michael the Archangel Church. The page comprises a shortened amount of materials of the database described above and informs its followers on the coming holidays and traditions typical of Yurinskiy Region. It also serves as a platform for sharing creative works by students of the local

school (an institution that participates in the federal experimental network platform), displays short films about the settlement of Yurino and its sights.

IV. CONCLUSION

Summing up, the issue of ethnic interactions requires close attention; new approaches need to be developed and put into practice. In Russian ethnography and folklore studies there have been the most successful attempts to research and interpret folklore materials so that contemporary cultural challenges could be successfully faced. The social and cultural situation of the beginning of the 21-st century required new research in the field of ethnic interactions and renovation of educational and academic process on the solid research ground.

One of the possible approaches to achieve such a goal is to apply the principle of unity in diversity towards folklore heritage of a variety of peoples sharing the same territory and to teaching it to school students. The universal (unified) patterns of rites and traditions, shaped in the result of the serious research, become an integral part of student's activities in class and outside the classroom. The participants of the project are assured of the fact that such work will promote better conditions for pedagogical effect of traditional culture, will increase the level of students' tolerance both in town and in the countryside and will effectively renovate the content, forms and methods of teaching, learning and upbringing so that school in modern society could start fulfilling new functions.

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