

## Metamorphoses “At the Ends of the Earth”: Telengit Transitive Society at Solitary Village

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The article focuses on the interdisciplinary analysis of the transformation processes in social situation of development of local people in the territorially detached community (a case study of the Yazula village of Ulagan region of the Altai Republic) through comparison of expeditionary materials of 2003 and 2019 years. The research is conducted within the framework of cultural-historical psychology and based on the methodological principle of metaposition. The analysis demonstrates that increasing of cultural diversity dictates the need for self-determination of locals and their families on behavioral level and complicates the structure of their social identity, including a problem of ethnocultural and religious self-identification. These processes provide the experiencing of insecurity of locals in front of the “outside world” and strengthen preservation of life-important rituals and sacred elements of ethnic culture.

**Keywords:** transitive society, solitary village, Telengit, Telengit traditional culture, transformation of way of life, social identity transformation.

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## Метаморфозы «на краю света»: транзитивное общество теленгитов обособленного селения

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В статье представлен междисциплинарный анализ процессов трансформации социальной ситуации развития жителей территориально обособленного сообщества (на примере селения Язула Улаганского района Республики Алтай) через сопоставление экспедиционных материалов 2003 и 2019 годов. Исследование проведено в русле культурно-исторической психологии с опорой на методологический принцип метапозиции. Показано, как увеличение культурного разнообразия в селекции обуславливает необходимость самоопределения отдельного человека и семей на поведенческом уровне и усложняет структуру социальной идентичности, в том числе создавая проблему этнокультурного и религиозного самоопределения. Это актуализирует переживание незащищенности своей жизни и жизни локального сообщества в целом от внешнего мира и усиливает сохранность жизненно значимых обрядов и сакральных элементов этнической культуры.

**Ключевые слова:** транзитивное общество, обособленное селение, теленгиты, культура теленгитов, трансформация жизненного уклада, трансформация социальной идентичности.

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## Introduction

The world is transforming rapidly. As Toffler wrote, the “death of permanence” has occurred; transience, novelty and diversity have become the norm of life [24]. Meanwhile, a number of communities continue to retain elements of traditional culture, where stability and intergenerational continuity constitute important values. There are virtually no remaining local cultures in the world that are completely autonomous from the global processes. Therefore, the question arises as to how social communities – both entire states and local villages – are transformed. How does the traditional way of life change with the emergence of new technologies (roads, electricity, television, cellular communications, the Internet, etc. [9])? What is the extent of changes in the openness/closedness of isolated communities to the outside world and their involvement in the development of cultural diversity? The focus of the study includes transformation of local community borders, external and internal cultural barriers, and complication of the system of relations in the “us vs. them” model of contacts with the “outside world.” The quality of the border, its openness or closedness to external changes, is dependent on many factors. Communities vary in their attitude toward external influences: the elements of another culture that are introduced can be accepted, alienated, or transformed into something new. However, said [the use of the word *said* is unclear. Please, clarify or remove accordingly] influences can have a non-linear impact on the metamorphosis of the local way of life, cultural traditions, and social identity.

There are many studies that reveal the phenomenon of societal transitivity [19; 26], the specifics of transformation of local communities in the context of globalization [8], which change the socio-cultural context of personal development and identity [6]. Most studies are focused either on global trends or on specific aspects of changes, such as demography [28], way of life [1], rituals

[20], material culture [4], folklore [18], etc. Since different aspects of the life of ethnic groups are studied by different sciences, there are not many works that systematically show how changes in living conditions, an increase in the openness of the village to the “outside world,” transform the system of relations and the way of thought characteristic for its inhabitants.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown [21] noted: if a researcher can demonstrate variants of structural and functional constructions of social evolution, it represents a great success for science. Transitivity of a local community modified the “social situation of development” for the younger generation, about which L.S. Vygotsky wrote: “... for man the environment is a social environment, because even where it appears to be a natural environment, nevertheless, in relation to man, there are always definite social elements present. In his interaction with the environment, man always makes use of his social experience.” [2, c. 88]. Greater openness to the external information field has changed the content and semantic accents of sign mediation of mental development, transforming not only the way of life, but the consciousness and self-consciousness of the new generations. What is the interconnection? What is modifiable, and what is “encapsulated” and has enhanced “protection” from alteration, thus becoming the “nuclei” of stabilization in the metamorphosis of life?

In line with the discursive approach [5], the research methodology is based on the idea of historical and cultural transformation of the social situation of development as a source of personal development (L.S. Vygotsky) [2] and the theory of a transitive society [7; 24; 26].

In our research we focus on the changes in the social situation of development in a local community by studying the interrelations of changes in the *way of life* (at the level of everyday culture, the ritual component of life and musical traditions) and the *system of social relations* of local residents with increasing “openness” to the outside world. Another focal point is the way these changes are reflected in the image of the world and the image of

self in the world (social identity). Under *way of life* we mean both external and internal factors of a lifestyle in their interrelation, following the logic of understanding the “social situation of development” [not necessary to mention] as a unique combination of objective social relations and subjective priorities in their experience [2].

By *metamorphosis* we understand the transformation of the structure of relations within a community, in the forms and ways of existence of different aspects of culture, as well as in the structure and content of the social identity of the representatives of the community studied. We consider the term “transformation” to be synonymous with metamorphosis.

By *local community* we mean “a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common — usually a common sense of identity” [29, p. 72–73]. A community has a clear location (a territorially isolated village with stable social relations between all its inhabitants).

We understand *social identity* as the result of a unified process of differentiation/identification of an individual which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) “together with the emotional significance attached to such membership” [31, p. 255]. “Social identity is the result of the process of comparing one’s group with other social communities” [22, p. 110]. The question of which group a person identifies with and compares themselves with can be solved at different levels of social stratification, depending on the communicative situation. We considered social identity from the point of view of the following components: regional-territorial, ethnic, religious, professional activities [30].

The *Telengits* are an ancient subethnic group of the Altaians living along the rivers Chulyshman and Chuya in the Ulagan and Kosh-Agach districts and speaking a dialect of the Altaic language. There are different versions as to their ethnogenesis [27]. Recent demographic studies note the stability of the Telengit population in the historical territory of their residence [18, p. 36–43]. During the 2000s a number of ethno-political processes (in Russia in general and the Altai Republic in particular) led to the mixed identity of the Telengits, which is expressed in different variations: Altaians (not distinguishing Telengits as a separate ethnicity), Telengits (as a group separate from the Altai people), Altai-Telengits (as a separate local group within the Altai ethnicity) [25, pp. 4–45].

## Research Program

**Stages of the research.** The first stage — summer 2003 expedition with an archive of audio and video recordings, a series of publications [1212] and summaries of research results [11, p. 161–168; 14]. The second stage — summer 2019 expedition, archive with registers of audio and video recordings. The analysis also used research data produced by other scientists in the region [3].

**Sample description.** The population of Yazula in both 2003 and 2019 was approximately 250 people (fluctuating between 240 and 260). The research was conducted with most of the families of the village, but in 2003 the communication took place mainly with teenagers and the middle generation (children and the elderly did not speak Russian), and in 2019 — with all generations, from children to the elderly.

**Research methods.** We employed participant observation; thematic interviews which were recorded through audio, photo and video means; compilation of registries using tagged recordings; qualitative analysis of data on selected parameters: everyday life and the system of social relations in the village, ritual and musical culture as a display of ethnic worldview and self-experience; self-awareness of Yazula inhabitants in the aspect of social identity. The research program is disclosed in the authors’ publications [10; 13; 15].

**Purpose of the research** is to identify social and psychological changes in the local community as a reaction to the processes of transitivity of the way of life in a territorially isolated village (on the example of the Yazula village in Ulagansky District of the Republic of Altai).

**Research implementation procedure** was based on the principle of meta-positioning [13], which we consider as a technology for organizing multiprofessional interaction between different specialists in the general research space of a particular ethno-cultural community (at the stages of planning, collecting and analyzing field data). Expedition work was aligned on the basis of general recording of significant aspects of the external parameters of the social situation in the village to the highlighting of research focal points on specific issues that represent the social and psychological transformations in the local community. In 2019, the study of key parameters was organized against the materials of 2003.

## Research Findings

For the period between 2003 and 2019 we recorded modifications of cultural transmission (*sensu* M. Mead) from post-figurative type (“where children primarily learn from their predecessors”) to a special combination of co-figurative (“where both children and adults learn from their peers”) and pre-figurative (“where adults also learn from their children” [7, p. 322]. The younger teenagers and children with whom we communicated in 2003 became active participants of the community: school director, head teacher, teachers, head of the rural community. The living conditions associated with openness to the “outside” world and involvement in new information flows have changed dramatically. As A.V. Tolstykh noted, speaking about the change of generations in the post-Soviet era, “... values, norms and behavioral patterns of different... cohorts are now formed and absorbed... in different social contexts and environments... The channels of generalized experience are different.” [233, p. 181]. The

temporal scope of the research covers a relatively stable historical and social period in the country. At the same time, the results obtained allow us to talk about the metamorphosis of generational transmissions: when different generations have different dominant sources of information, dissimilar content and a different format of intergenerational communication. We present the results of the study at the level of analysis and generalization of empirical data, some of which are disclosed in the publications on the transformation of the way of life [16] and musical culture [17] in Yazula over a period of 16 years.

***Metamorphoses of the way of life.*** Laying a road from the district center nonlinearly changes the status of openness/closedness of the isolated village: many borrowings are introduced into the everyday part of life, while a number of spheres (ritual life, sacred places) become more guarded. The increase of accessibility and variability of connections between the local community and the “outside” world amplifies the processes of transformation through openness to novelty in some aspects of life, while in others it yields an effect of “encapsulation” [8], increasing the degree of hiddenness of significant cultural elements from external individuals. Thus, the boundaries between “us” and “others,” between “us” and “them” are actualized.

The transformations that took place led to an increase in mobility and external contacts of the villagers and the complication of the system of social relations, as well as to changes in types of activities and living conditions. The appearance of the road resulted in families acquiring personal vehicles. This increases the availability of a variety of materials that are now easier to buy than to manufacture. The technology of building ails (settlements of nomadic or semi-nomadic type) and setting up household facilities also begins to change, with the appearance of products that substitute a number of traditional industries. People begin to assess what would be easier for them in terms of solving everyday issues: to spend time and effort or to solve said [the use of the word *said* is unclear. Please, clarify or remove accordingly] issues with money. If there are small funds in the form of a pension or salary, people are more likely to choose to buy what is needed. Thus, a wide range of traditional methods of subsistence are lost.

In changing the everyday part of life (housing construction, household appliances, means of transport, etc.) the focus falls on the modern, the urban, which is not always more functional. In these conditions arises a situation of choice (for example, what type of ail is to be built), which occurs not on the scale of “older vs. younger” (“tradition vs. innovation”), but depending on individual priorities (“what is more convenient for me”). What is observed is not only the replacement of old forms with new ones, but also an increase in the diversity of options for organizing living spaces and economic activities. The residents obtain the possibility of choice and the need for conscious self-determination, rather than just following traditions or fashion.

***The transformation of rituals and the culture of childhood.*** Wedding, funeral, and memorial rituals show high stability. A more variable and transforming part of Telengits’ everyday beliefs is associated with the ceremonial accompaniment of childhood and the processes of maturation. For example, *kindyk* (an umbilical cord sewn into a special leather pouch), once a sacred object hidden from the outsiders’ view and serving as a talisman, is transferred into the category of a secular, socially important, and presentable family asset placed on the wall. These processes are associated with the transformation of ideas about the world and the self: control over children is taken into one’s own hands in those spheres of life which were formerly regarded as being “under the supervision” of spirits and forces of nature. This shows a shift in the semantic priorities of the ethnic picture of the world, manifested in ritual practices and everyday beliefs.

Children’s view of adult culture and children’s community culture show maximum variability. For children, adult family culture is replaced by a culture borrowed from television. In the village, children spend less time outside than before, interacting with each other. The culture of childhood is reflected in the community, but its content is replenished by new media content. Traditional mythological characters and storylines are mixed (through addition, displacement, replacement) with characters and motifs from Russian and foreign cartoons. The introduction of new informational content, which is focused on children in the sensitive period of their linguistic development, transforms the linguistic situation in the village. This, in turn, modernizes the overall socio-cultural life of the community as a whole, alters intergenerational communication and the life trajectories of the younger generation.

***Changes in linguistic and musical culture.*** The introduction of external content into the monolingual environment of the Telengit village transforms it into a bilingual one, both linguistically and culturally. In this case, learning the Russian language during the preschool period makes it easier for children to understand those academic subjects that are taught in Russian. This increases the quality of formal education, expanding the social mobility of the younger generation, also creating opportunities for building an educational trajectory and a professional career in the city. In general, the shift in the language situation reshapes the range of “mental tools” that allow for the construction of new systems of social relations and the perception, understanding, and use of new information resources.

The musical folklore of Telengits of Yazula within the studied period is characterized by a “probabilistic” (polyvector, nonlinear changing) nature of development and expansion of musical and cultural diversity (the presence of Telengit, Russian, Tuvianian, Kazakh and other ethno-musical codes was documented). The channels of foreign cultural influence on the intonational field of Telengit musical tradition are: radio, Internet

and television; country club; access to transport and travel to the city, international Kurultais of storytellers. While various forms of folklore (Soviet, Russian, Altai) are widely present in the country club, the Telengits' folklore tradition continues to exist exclusively in the ritual context (hidden from outsiders). Mastery of kai, a special type of intonation characteristic for the Turks of the Altai Mountains that marks their ethno-cultural identity and is popular among tourists, regional administration and the public, drives bearers of the tradition to migrate from isolated settlements to central ones. The constant function of kai continues to be the transmission of ethnospecific spiritual values of the Altai people [17].

In terms of *social identity*, we note pronounced changes in the following components: the ethnic component – from more pronounced to more blurred; the religious component – from pagan to syncretic; the professional activities component – from hunting as a significant gender-initiating practice to the loss of its initiating function. Also revealed was the change and concretization of auto- (talking about oneself in the categories of positive and negative traits) and heterostereotypes (the appearance of more pronounced negative characteristics of Saratan residents and positive characteristics of Tuva residents). Ambivalence of experience is observed in the linguistic component: on the one hand, the understanding of the usefulness of the Russian language, on the other hand, the fear of losing the Altaic language as a significant factor of ethnic identity.

The Altai language plays an important role in constructing *the ethnic identity of Telengits*. We have recorded the dynamic process of Telengit identity transformation as a result of the emergence of television and the Internet. All the respondents associate the language with the Altai identity and note that the appropriation of the Russian language by Telengit children through the Carousel children's channel can pose a "threat to nationality" (statement of a Yazul woman born in 1989). Language is seen as the main factor that grants Telengits the experience of being connected to their people, the loss of the language can turn into the loss of ethnic self. This situation generates ambivalent attitudes among the middle and older generations. On the one hand, children appear more equipped for social adaptation when they leave for the city; on the other hand, there is a threat to the preservation of ethnic identity. It is noted that all generations of Yazul residents have improved their knowledge of the Russian language as compared to 2003, which reduces the barriers to communication with newcomers.

The results of the fieldwork in 2019, compared to the data from 2003, found an increase in the level of anxiety among local residents in relation to the external view of them and the village as a whole. It is reflected in their tension when any video or photograph is taken. The fear associated with the possibility of photographs and videos "hitting" the Internet, which is not yet widespread in the village, is due to the emergence

of local mythology about it and its impact on people's anxieties. Tensions about filming are reinforced by a regional television report commenting on the "wild people" and "horrible conditions" of life in Yazul. The "ceremonial portrait" strategy, already observed in 2003, has intensified manifold. The content and essence of a "ceremonial portrait" has not yet been formed by the local residents. The knowledge of the Russian language and frequent communication experience when leaving the village have created ample opportunities for communication with the "outside" people. However, this heightened the anxiety of local residents regarding the consequences of such interaction, especially within their village. The issue of representing oneself and one's culture to the outside world has become more acute. Still, there was no increase in the value of one's "correctness" and identity. Daily comparison of oneself with others (through television or communication with newcomers) does not contribute to self-confidence, and in the minds of the residents, does not work to their advantage. Our interest as outside researchers in the authentic culture of the village commands respect and enables a degree of openness in communication. But the fear that what is recorded will be perceived as "wrong" and evaluated by the outside world creates a powerful isolating and limiting effect when it comes to recording (photographs, video and audio recordings).

### General Analysis and Interpretation of the Results

A sharp change in the social situation of development [2] in connection with an increase in the openness of the local community to the outside world and the new information space does not just transform the type of cultural transitivity from post-figurative, to co-figurative, and then to pre-figurative [7]. This change differentiates culture and types of cultural transitivity by spheres of life in a community: in the ethnoconstituent part of culture (especially in its sacred part, in significant rituals) the post-figurative type of transitivity increases; in the household part of culture, everyday way of life and in language communication the prefigurative type begins to dominate; in folklore and music culture the configurative type begins to dominate. The cultural situation in the community becomes a space of greater diversity, which causes multidirectional tendencies: in some aspects – openness to novelty, in others – strengthening of closedness to the outside world. It is supposed that in local communities of this type in the future there will be not a replacement of one type of cultural transmission by another, but an increase in the diversity of cultural transmission and types of intergenerational interaction in different layers of livelihood; the significance of ethnic identity will increase as a response to risks of uncertainty and strengthening of cultural diversity which comes from the external information field.

## Findings

Based upon the results of the study of Yazula village under the conditions of transitivity of the social situation of development in a local community, we can draw the following conclusions:

1) increased accessibility and openness of the isolated village to the “outside world” causes multidirectional processes in the life of the community: acceptance of the new and increased cultural variability in the way of life; increased closedness to the outside world of the sacred component of culture, which acts as the core of the ethnocultural worldview;

2) sustainable availability of external information channels, including those targeted at children, drastically changes the linguistic situation from monolingual to bilingual and significantly transforms the social situation of development as well as the content of children’s community culture, also increasing social mobility of young people;

3) transition from the secluded existence of an isolated local community to the relative openness to the “out-

side world” strengthens the “us vs. them” opposition, makes the boundaries between the two notions more pronounced; it actualizes the experience of representation of the image of themselves and their village to other people (especially on the Internet), strengthens the importance of creating a “ceremonial portrait” of oneself and one’s life in photographs and videos;

4) changes in the cultural and informational context transform the musical repertoire of local residents as a way of experiencing reality; the ethno-cultural revival in the region determines the demand for and relocation of bearers of ethno-representative cultural traditions from isolated villages to the central ones;

5) increase in cultural diversity, especially in everyday life, creates the situation of demand for self-determination of individuals and families at the behavioral level and complicates the structure of social identity, in particular creating the problem of ethno-cultural and religious self-determination; all this increases the experience of insecurity of self and life of the local community as a whole for the outside world.

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