

# Sharing Cultural Concepts and Practices in Siberia Through Advanced Digitisation: Towards Multifunctional Archives and Interfaces for Multiple Audiences

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## 進歩したデジタル化技術を通じたシベリアの文化的概念と実践の共有： 多様な利用者のための多機能アーカイブとインターフェースに向けて

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近年、シベリア財団（FSC）では、「北方デジタル人文科学」（DHN）の構想を開始した。この構想は、幅広い収集データに対し、目標を絞り、制御されたアクセスを提供するためのデジタル技術による解決策と新たな記録形式を発展させることを目的としたものである。この構想のために、個々の研究者や文化遺産関係機関の所蔵資料が DHN データベースの形式に合わせてまとめられ、収集されることになっている。多様な利用者の個別のニーズを扱うために専門にデザインされたインターフェースを通じ、こうしたデータベースは科学者や一般の人びと、そして危機に瀕した言語や文化的知識を維持する地域集団のニーズや興味に対応することができる。2018 年、シベリア財団は、DHN 共同事業体の協力者とともに、多くのワークショップを開催している。まずはデータを相互に利用可能な形にするための共通基準と技術的な解決策を議論し、定義するためである。さらに、博物館資料と多様な所蔵資料に含まれる先住民知識に関する音声・視覚資料をつなぐ新たなデジタル形式を創出するための複数のプロジェクトが計画されている。そのひとつは「シベリアの世界観と儀礼」、もうひとつは「衣類と装飾美術」に関するものである。後者はおもにカムチャツカの文化に関するもので、本稿でより詳しく提示する。

Keywords: Digital Archives, Virtual Exhibitions, Clothing and Decorative Arts, Kamchatka, Evens  
キーワード：デジタルアーカイブ、視覚的展示、衣類と装飾美術、カムチャツカ、エベン

### Introduction

This chapter is on a recent initiative by the Foundation for Siberian Cultures that aims to integrate museum exhibits and corresponding audio-visual recordings on local cultural knowledge and practices in new digital formats in the Internet. This initiative will enhance the meaning and understanding of the objects and increase the interest of museum audiences. Also, and possibly even more importantly, it will respond to the pressing need to make these presentations more easily accessible to multiple and diverse audiences from other parts of the world, and especially for those local communities from where the given objects once found their way into the museum collections. To this end, new digital formats will be created by social and cultural anthropologists in collaboration with their Siberian community partners, and with professional IT service providers.

A particular focus will be on shaping particular web portals or Interfaces according to specific user interests and behaviours, in this case for museum visitors as well as

for local community audiences in Siberia. As the cultural heritage and social identities of many indigenous communities are at risk, new ways of digitally sharing objects and related knowledge will provide them with new methods of digitally based learning as well as significant support and stimulation to further enhance their cultural and artistic practices. Through the participation of indigenous communities in these co-productions, local cultural preferences and attitudes will be explored to make this variant of the foreseen Interfaces – which addresses the local communities – most user-friendly and attractive for them to visit. To this end, especially the local community Interfaces must be well-integrated into existing social media networks. On the other hand, the Interface or virtual exhibition that is directed towards general museum audiences will be designed differently in consulting their specific needs and interests. All these envisaged new formats will draw upon and will be integrated into the forthcoming archival *Digital Humanities of the North* structure of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures, where the long-term storage of this unique and

invaluable data will be secured. For safety reasons, this database should be mirrored also at other participating institutions.

While the overriding emphasis will be on producing applications of new digital technologies to access cultural heritage through the Internet, one also has to bear in mind diverse museum user-behaviours or preferences. Therefore, the primarily targeted virtual (Internet) exhibitions on particular themes will relate to corresponding book editions and DVDs for extant conventional uses as has already been the case for the past few years in the hybrid publication strategy of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures with regard to simultaneous print and electronic editions of the same titles. The concurrent electronic editions of these books will then later have hyperlinks to relevant thematic modules of the foreseen virtual exhibition. Thus, users can also navigate from the online catalogue to the virtual exhibition in the Internet and access in this way its additional and most informative audio-visual contents. The integration of these various print and digital formats will appeal to multiple user groups and stimulate interest in those advanced digital formats that will be first pursued here.

From such new concepts of knowledge exchange that will be explored and realized with this initiative, cultural heritage institutions such as museums and local communities at risk will benefit in both ways. Museums often have limited and sometimes incorrect information on exhibits of their collections, and usually they have not been in the position to reflect corresponding current political discourses within the communities or to follow ethical considerations from a local point of view. Therefore, incorporating local perspectives becomes essential as soon as the history of museum collections comes into focus. Here, the current debate – especially in Europe and in Berlin with regard to the new Humboldt Forum (Savoy 2018) – centres on provenance and possible restitution of objects and other recorded knowledge, which might have been acquired illegally or under dubious circumstances. Therefore, another aim of this initiative is to contribute to this discussion in exploring possible alternative approaches by means of collaboratively integrating tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the foreseen digital formats, and sharing its outcome this way, electronically, between the given stakeholders instead of moving precious objects physically back and forth between distant locations – which might involve the risk of damage or loss.

Once the objects are enriched by their cultural context – through participation of the local communities in question – the collections in museums will become even more appealing to them as well as to the general public. If

produced collaboratively, local communities can better identify themselves with the outcome and will be more inclined to use this for their own educational resources in order to sustain their cultural heritage. This responds and extends to earlier experiences from extensive periods of fieldwork and numerous co-productions with local partners (Kasten 2019), as also on other topics such as ecological knowledge (Lavrilier and Gabyshev 2017). From the local community perspective the objects and their physical restitution is often of less importance than maintaining the cultural knowledge and practices connected to them – to which this initiative will significantly contribute. Consequently, this approach will clearly add another useful perspective as well as grassroots community voices to this vibrant discussion that has been led so far mostly between politicians, cultural heritage institutions and other elites from the respective countries.

Moreover, relevant discussions on the ethics of treating other people's cultural heritage often fall short, as many previous cultural heritage institution's presentations and digital formats even contain sets of audio-visual data of people, i.e. their views, images, and practices that could touch on cultural property and personal rights. As indigenous concepts of these rights often differ from ours and from the recently adopted European General Data Protection Regulations<sup>1</sup>, they deserve our particular attention and have to be brought in line with each other (cf. Alleman and Dudeck 2017).

The aims of this initiative will be first tested and then realized by the example of incipient Interfaces or web portals on particular themes. First outcomes will serve as blueprints for creating similar subsequent presentations on other themes that will draw on earlier experiences, software solutions and templates. With certain modifications and adaptations the subsequent completion of this mosaic-like presentation of indigenous cultural concepts and practices in Siberia and in the North will later, after first pilot projects, proceed at a faster pace and will eventually lead to an aggregated complex and more complete whole.

### **The Digital Humanities of the North (DHN) database**

As a first step, consideration has to be given to how to create an appropriate infrastructure by which the enormous amount of data for the planned virtual exhibitions or web portals can be organised in a useful way and secured for long-term storage. To this end, the *Digital Humanities of the North* (DHN) database initiative has been launched by the Foundation for Siberian Cultures in 2018. It will build the database from where the afore-mentioned foreseen Interfaces will draw their data. The DHN database is just

another logical step that adds to and continues former electronic publication activities of the Foundation for Siberian Cultures<sup>2</sup>.

There are a number of well-operating extensive databases already in place, especially on indigenous languages. The Language Archive (TLA) at the Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (Netherlands), The Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS University of London, and more recently the Language Archive Cologne (LAC) have already been or are in the process of establishing such databases that are connected on the CLARIN (European Research Infrastructure for Language Resources and Technology) network. Another international umbrella body for such initiatives is DELAMAN (Digital Endangered Languages and Musics Archives Network). LanguEDOC (Moscow) is another important archive as it includes Kamchatkan material (Aliutor), the same as the Alaska Native Language Archive in Fairbanks.

Despite the great efforts of these already existing databases, one can nevertheless notice some shortcomings. Therefore, we see it as a challenge to respond to and probably to overcome some of them by means of our forthcoming activities. This refers, in the first place, to the accessibility of these databases to various user groups. Definitely, there is an urgent need to further develop Interfaces that will address in particular indigenous communities, our main target groups, whose goals and needs will have to be explored and met – whereas the existing Interfaces of the already mentioned archives are still designed and structured mostly or exclusively for the scientific community. Here, even recent examples of small community-driven archives should be taken into account as they are for the use of speakers and their local educational and cultural institutions as these have been set up in the USA, Canada and Australia for similar goals.

To create such well-suited Interfaces or web portals for multiple user groups or audiences will be one of the main tasks for the new DHN initiative in the years to come. For this it will be important that particular Internet portals for indigenous communities will also be based on their feedback and be generated to the greatest possible extent in co-production with them. This refers also to certain content that they might not like to see be made public. To develop user-friendly Interfaces with regard to discoverability and accessibility to local communities is imperative for important reasons – as the local use of indigenous knowledge in learning and teaching, in cultural institutions and especially by the younger generation via social media is one of the keys to supporting the maintenance of the languages and certain cultural traditions.

Therefore, the Foundation for Siberian Cultures has to transition its collections and publications into the next stages by means of digital distribution to make them discoverable and attractive especially to the young generation in local communities.

Drawing on the DHN database, more targeted specific Interfaces on the same selected theme will also be created for other user groups, such as the general public. With a special focus on linking audio-visual data and recorded texts to particular museum objects, the performance of real and virtual exhibitions will be enhanced. Through such presentation, the visitor can easily navigate between different levels from general to more specific themes. For coordinating selected museum's data collections, a similar consortium to the one for the Languages and Cultures of the North is in preparation. Another Interface can be created at a later point from the DHN data files for university educational online uses in the humanities and social sciences. Most likely, those specifically targeted Interfaces will further optimise the accessibility and dissemination of the cultural data collections by making these attractive to even more diverse user groups.

### **Implementing the aims of the Digital Humanities of the North initiative by means of first concrete projects**

The wide concept and the extensive tasks of the DHN initiative can only be realized gradually in subsequent steps that will in the long run add together to form complex and composite outcomes. The starting point is the creation of Interfaces or web portals for multiple user groups on specific overseeable themes. On these themes relevant data will be compiled from the repositories of the participating partners to a thematic working database, hosted at the Foundation for Siberian Cultures and mirrored at the institutions of the partners. On such selected themes, the respective constitution of the team will vary with regard to those partners from the network who are interested and in a position to contribute their material on a certain topic of this joint venture.

A first pilot project is in preparation on "Worldviews and Ritual Practices" that will draw on case studies from Western and Central Siberia and from Kamchatka. In this chapter, however, I will give an outline of another web portal in planning for multiple user groups on a different theme – "Clothing and decorative arts of the Evens in Kamchatka". The focus of this theme is on material culture and therefore particularly interesting from a museum's perspective.

Regarding the Evens on Kamchatka, exhibits in museum collections as well as historical documentation on



them is relatively confined as this Tungus group immigrated only later, in the beginning of the 19th century, to Kamchatka, where they eventually formed a compact population in the central part of the peninsula, in the Bystrinski rayon and in its main villages Esso and Anavgai (Fig. 1). Based on and in direct reference to its own small collection of objects and video recordings, the Foundation for Siberian Cultures has recently published its approximately 4-hour-long annotated video documentation on Even clothing and decorative arts (Kasten and Avak 2018).

The recorded texts that are transcribed in Even language and also given in English and Russian translations inform first-hand about all different stages in the work process and about the meanings of the ornaments. More on the background of the craftswomen will be found in another forthcoming publication on Even life histories in which they recall their remembered past. Here, I will briefly summarize the content of the recent publication on “Clothing and decorative arts of the Evens in the Bystrinski Rayon”:

The book contains transcribed Even texts with Russian and English translations, together with a DVD with optional subtitles. As all texts in the book are given with time codes to the films on the DVD, sections or sentences of

the printed texts can be directly identified in the given films and simultaneously viewed and listened to. As mentioned above, the existing time and XML codes also make it easier to later convert these files into the foreseen DHN structure.

For clarity, the theme of this book and DVD is relatively narrowly defined and refers only to a relatively small group of about 750 Even speakers. Of them, only a small percentage who are about 60 years old and above can be considered to speak Even as their mother tongue, and in the same way much of the traditional knowledge in crafts and sewing skills has been rapidly declining or even vanishing among younger generations. Therefore the approximately 4 hours of video recordings display a unique comprehensive documentation and provide thorough information by some of the last bearers of traditional knowledge in this complete form on almost all aspects of the fabrication and use of traditional Even clothing in this area.

In the first chapter, “remembrances,” social contexts are addressed, for example in which ways children earlier learnt these skills from parents or grandparents (Fig. 2). In the following chapters, on a second DVD, the consecutive steps in preparing fur clothes are shown. First,



Figure 1: Map of Kamchatka peninsula.



Figure 2: Recalling the remembered past while the daughter is sewing, Esso 2003.



Figure 3: Drying of reindeer furs, Anavgai 2003.

the reindeer furs are prepared by means of drying, scraping and softening (Fig. 3-5). In the next chapter the tedious process of dyeing with alder bark sap is demonstrated (Fig. 6). Then, the twisting of threads from reindeer neck sinew is shown in great detail, as these threads have the particular quality of swelling up



Figure 4: Scraping of reindeer furs, Kabana river 1998.



Figure 5: Softening the reindeer hide, Esso 2000.



Figure 6: Dyeing the hide with alder bark sap, Esso 2000.

once they get wet, thus making the seams watertight. Thereafter, we see how sewing patterns are measured by hand and with fingers in the traditional way (Fig. 7), and how the pieces are eventually cut. In another chapter particular women's clothing, the festive Even parka, is presented and commented upon. After this, the expressive ornaments from reindeer materials and, in particular, from beads are explained in great detail and with regard to their motifs – that sometimes reflect episodes from family histories (Fig. 8). And, finally the fabrication of caps and footwear is shown.

The films are based on recordings of the most knowledgeable seamstresses from the villages Esso and Anavgai, taken mostly in the years around 2000, and many of the women are no longer alive. A few films also illustrate situations in which the knowledge and the skills are transferred to children and younger women (Fig. 9). It is revealed that today's ways of learning often differ from those of the past.



Figure 7: Measuring the size of reindeer fur boots, Esso 2014.



Figure 8: Bead ornaments on the apron of an Even parka, Esso 2014.



Figure 9: Learning sewing techniques from an instructor with participation of the grandmother, Esso 2000.

By this comprehensive audio-visual documentation exhibits are not only vividly and authentically explained by their manufacturers and users for museum audiences, but at the same time they provide a valuable repository for the local communities which they can draw upon to maintain and in some cases revitalize certain techniques. In combination with historical sources and museum items from earlier times, they learn more about their history, in particular continuities and changes of cultural practices. Especially, when eventually transferred and converted into virtual exhibitions on web portals, and by making use of modern social media dissemination, these well-integrated materials will be made even more appealing to younger generations and so will help them to remember their unique cultural heritage, to sustain it and keep it alive.

To my knowledge there is no noteworthy literature in English on clothing and decorative arts of the Evens in Central Kamchatka. There might be a few more recent books and articles in Russian, mostly by local authors, that have to be reviewed and, if possible, integrated into this web portal.

### Sample project on Even clothing and decorative arts: Working steps

The existing data that is hosted at the Foundation for Siberian Cultures could already be sufficient to mount a virtual exhibition on this theme. But, it should be investigated how these materials could be further aggregated and enhanced by integrating additional data from more collections at other heritage institutions. Here, first logical partners could be museums in the Russian Far East, whereas European museums have no noteworthy collections on Evens in Kamchatka.

#### 1. Compiling the data by the partners

After possible partners have been identified, all existing data on the given theme have to be first compiled by them. Most attention will be directed to the audio-visual documents. One set of these data refers to photographs of



museums exhibits. Especially those that will be selected for the most prominent presentation should be photographed again according to best practice. This could be for example turntable photography, all-around vision and/or 3-D photography. More information on a museum's latest state-of-the-art photography can be found in the outcomes of a recent European Union project<sup>3</sup>. At the centre of the documentation will certainly be video films that explain the fabrication, use, and meaning of the objects in authentic speech – in Even language – by the craftswomen and seamstresses.

Besides the audio-visual collections on this specific theme all available metadata on the history of the given museum exhibits will be compiled that refer among other things to earlier written documents and correspondences, for example, on the provenance of the given objects. For this, we can draw on experiences of a metadata model to be applied as Semantic Web and Linked Open Data that has been developed most recently at the University Library in Göttingen (Al-Eryani et al. 2018).

Unfortunately, general historical information on the fabrication and use of Even clothing in Kamchatka is not available in the same comprehensive and detailed way as it is in the extensive descriptions from the 18th and 19th centuries on other peoples of Kamchatka<sup>4</sup>, especially on



Figure 10: Even garments from the Dybowski collection, Ethnographic Museum Crakow 2018.



Figure 11: Investigating items of the Dybowski collection with Jacek Kukuczka (on the right), 2018.

Koryak clothing by Waldemar Jochelson (1908) – though for diachronic views and analyses regarding possible changes of materials, practices and meanings, such historical information would be particularly useful.

However, there is an important source. Benedykt Dybowski made a very informative collection on Even clothing from the Bystrinski rayon in Kamchatka in the years 1877 to 1883 that is hosted at the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow (Poland) (Fig. 10, see also Fig. 8), and on which the Foundation for Siberian Cultures already collaborates with its researcher, Andrzej Dybczak. In March 2018 the author visited and commented on this Dybowski collection relative to the background of his own experiences and recordings (see Fig. 11). This will be an excellent example how linkages between similar items and information from different time periods can allow diachronic assessments regarding possible changes in techniques, styles and meanings.

## 2. Community discussion and feedback on the compiled data

In the next step, community discussion and feedback will be prompted on the compiled data. For this, project partners will discuss the data with their local collaborators. While showing and discussing recent audio-visual recordings of the documented practices in the given communities, local opinions will be obtained about possible restricted uses of certain materials, and how they would like to see information balanced out in its presentation. During this participatory community research, present day's scope and forms of use of social media and the Internet by local communities will be investigated and discussed for later integration of these experiences and results into the foreseen community Interfaces.

## 3. Discussion of ethical, cultural and personal rights and possible restrictions of access and use of certain data in public spaces

Based on this community feedback, the partners will discuss and decide during an ensuing workshop which data will be publicly presented and in which way. Here, ethical, cultural and personal rights and possible restrictions of access and use of certain data in public spaces will become an important topic. Also from earlier case studies, most project partners might have already gained experience of earlier concepts in collecting and presenting culturally sensitive data. Through the documented community feedback, which will have been collected in stage 2, we will be in a position to apply appropriate ethical considerations of how personal and often sensitive data can be presented openly towards other non-local audiences in the future.

#### *4. Hosting and long-term storage of the compiled and community-discussed data*

After this, the team will compile all selected photo, film, audio and text data again and decide if and how it will be presented according to documented community feedback. Then it will be converted into convenient digital formats that the team has found to be compatible for this purpose and for further applications, as well as in prospective more comprehensive databases. Such compatible data can be useful also for far-reaching comparisons and diachronic views with datasets on similar themes from other peoples of the North – for example, on certain techniques such as the already mentioned twisting of threads from reindeer back sinews, from Saami or Nenets to Kamchatka. Obviously, this is a cultural continuum all over the Russian North, although we can notice that this material is being replaced more recently at some peripheries, such as with the Saami, and occasionally with Evens in Kamchatka. Furthermore, the metadata have to be structured in the same way to facilitate a later easy search by means of keywords. As part of the DHN archive the compiled data will be hosted at a well-equipped institution in long-term storage. Even for reasons of safety against possible loss or damage it will make sense to mirror the data set at other participating institutions.

#### *5. Cross-disciplinary discussion about best practice digital formats for presentations in the Internet*

During another workshop, all project partners will – together with IT service providers (programmers and web designers) – discuss and test software solutions and first templates for how the outcomes from the preceding phases would be presented in appropriate digital formats. Regarding particular Interfaces for the local communities, priority should be given to creating these platforms in such a way that they would be compatible with existing social media networks that are already used in the communities while being flexible enough to adapt to new developments that most likely will come up in the future. These platforms should be moderated or administered later in the first place by interested and skilled local people. Relevant trends and possible technical solutions have already been identified in collaboration with indigenous partners during the foregoing local community study (see working step 2).

The outcome of these discussions and preliminary templates will then be tested again in the communities and probably being further revised and fine-tuned according to specific community responses. Similar testing will also be conducted with museum audiences. Regarding the European museum version, by means of this transcultural exchange, community voices regarding those contents that local

communities would like to see, to be emphasized, or to be omitted, will naturally be incorporated.

#### *6. Realising the aims of the project: Producing Interfaces or web portals on the given theme and integrating them into sustainable archival structures*

At a closing workshop, design and software solutions for the Interfaces will be finally discussed and set by the participating IT service providers and all project partners. These web platforms will not be kept static, but will be flexible enough in providing spaces for interactivity and for adding supplements successively. The software tools and applications that will be developed for this purpose will be open for further development. Moreover, a revised and augmented electronic book edition on Even clothing and decorative arts will be linked to corresponding contents of the digital formats in the Internet. In addition to this, a co-authored article will be submitted to a pertinent journal to inform the scientific community and cultural heritage institutions about the outcomes of this project. This article will relate to current discussions on relevant themes (mentioned above), and show prospects for innovative resilient digital strategies in sharing tangible and non-tangible cultural heritage.

#### **Expected outcomes**

The main outcome will be at least three interfaces that will address different user groups – the general public or museum visitors, researchers and the scientific community, and the indigenous local community. It is clear that these audiences are very diverse with regards to the information they would expect and because of their different user behaviours. Therefore, the Interfaces have to be structured and designed accordingly in different versions though on similar contents so that they are appealing to all these targeted audiences. Most crucial would be the design of the cover page from where the user would then further navigate according to his or her specific interests. For example, the front page for the museum web portal on this theme would most likely start with images of the most prominent objects in their collections or real exhibitions. From there the viewer will be led further to more aggregated information on the fabrication or use of the given object by means of video films with subtitles in various optional languages, or to written documents on the history of its acquisition.

The Interface for the local community, however, would rather start with another cover page, most likely with a map of the area that the local community would identify with, together with images of the craftswomen or seamstresses – that community members would immediately

recognize and relate to. For scientific audiences the cover pages could be designed in a similar style as the already existing ones meant mainly for linguists at the above-mentioned Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, and others – that are comprehensible and accessible for this very specific group of users. Furthermore, the foreseen database could serve in the future as a repertoire for particular educational uses, such as for university online courses in social and cultural anthropology, especially in museology.

## Conclusions

During this project new research and software tools will be developed for the digital humanities that integrate social and museum sciences, computing and web design. The expected new digital formats will reflect creative dialogues between world cultural heritage institutions, ethnological research and local communities' views and voices. Museum objects, corresponding cultural practices and their ethnographic documentation are closely linked to each other. Therefore the expected best practice digital formats will be developed in a collaborative approach that will be applied here throughout this project. Interfaces for diverse user groups will observe particular standards of cultural and personal rights. The DHN database at the Foundation for Siberian Cultures will secure long-term storage of the project data and ongoing updates of its applications. This database can be also mirrored and hosted at other servers of the partners, and project data can be provided on USB storage to the communities. Besides the paramount web presentation, even customary formats such as related print and electronic editions and DVDs will appeal to other user groups, in order to achieve the widest dissemination and to encourage a fuller understanding of new digital ways of sharing and enhancing the unique cultural heritage of humankind. Particular attention will be paid to the dissemination of best practice digital solutions among local communities to sustain their endangered cultural knowledge that complies with already existing social media networks.

## Notes

- 1 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection_en)
- 2 [http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/bibliothek\\_E.html](http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/bibliothek_E.html)
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## Credits

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