



Kulturstiftung Sibirien



# Sustaining Indigenous Knowledge

Comparative Views on Indigenous Learning Situations  
from Russia, Peru and Papua New Guinea



Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien  
SEC Publications

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme  
Ein Titeldatensatz für diese Publikation ist bei  
Der Deutschen Bibliothek erhältlich.  
<http://dnb.ddb.de>

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During the workshop on *Preserving Endangered Languages and Local Knowledge*, convened at the Foundation for Siberian Cultures, Fürstenberg/Havel in 2011, learning tools and community initiatives from various parts of the world were discussed. With this DVD some of the initiatives and pedagogical approaches are shared among the indigenous communities that were portrayed in the films, as well as with others who are facing similar situations and concerns. Such comparative views will be informative and stimulating for the further development of their efforts.

*See also the edited volume on this workshop:*

Sustaining Indigenous Knowledge: Learning Tools and Community Initiatives for Preserving Endangered Languages and Local Cultural Heritage, Erich Kasten and Tjeerd de Graaf (eds.) 2013, Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.  
[http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/sustainingik\\_E.html](http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/sustainingik_E.html)

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Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien gGmbH  
Fürstenberg/Havel  
[www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de](http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de)  
ISBN 978-3-942883-21-4

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Printed in Germany

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# Sustaining Indigenous Knowledge

Comparative Views on Indigenous Learning Situations  
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*Erich Kasten and Michael Dürr (eds.)*

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## Tundra Yukagir / Russia

### Voices from the Tundra – Tundra Yukagir

*Cecilia Odé*

Tundra Yukagir is spoken in the northeast of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia, Russian Federation), between the lower Indigirka and the lower Kolyma. The population is approximately 700, but at present the number of good speakers is dramatically low with some 50 people still speaking their mother tongue properly. Most Tundra Yukagir speakers are fluent in Russian and Yakut, and in at least one of the indigenous languages of the area: Chukchi, Evenki and Even. In the village of Andryushkino where most Tundra Yukagir live, the language is hardly spoken anymore, and Tundra Yukagir parents and language teachers blame themselves for not passing their language on to their children. In school children learn their native language and about the indigenous cultures of local peoples. Folkloristic festivals are frequently held in which villagers, young and old, participate.



The general attitude is positive towards language revival. Tundra Yuk-agir is an especially unique language as regards specific features in traditional storytelling techniques: in narratives, speaking conventionally gradually changes into singing. This unique strategy in the characteristic art of TY storytelling has never been registered and analysed, and needs to be documented and preserved given its exceptional character. (For more details see: <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/cecilia.ode/>)



## Itelmen, Even and Koryak / Russia

### Learning Indigenous Languages in Kamchatka

*Erich Kasten*

In the Russian North, teaching indigenous languages and traditional knowledge within the regular school curriculum has often turned out not to be very successful. However, it is remarkable how local speech variants have been able to live on until now, side by side with the formal teaching of these languages in school. The language taught in standardized textbooks often seems foreign and is thus hardly used in everyday life. At times it even creates irritation in communication with elders.



This film presents and contrasts more recent community-driven pedagogical approaches and learning tools for sustaining languages and indigenous knowledge in Kamchatka. During workshops, new methods have been explored for transmitting native languages and knowledge more in line with natural ways of learning. This encouraged us to design and adapt learning tools for use outside the common school

context. Examples demonstrate how these teaching aids in both printed and electronic form have been applied and were received in the communities.

Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the role that performing arts can play, in particular for the youth. This is not only to preserve and to further enhance important cultural traditions. It also helps to create cultural self-esteem that obviously is an essential condition for the success of the given endeavours. Examples illustrate how singing, dancing and crafts could be profitably integrated into contemporary native language curricula, and how other natural ways of learning are reflected in newly developed DVD learning tools.

For more details see: [http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/bibliothek\\_E.html](http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/bibliothek_E.html)



## Sustaining Expressive Forms of Indigenous Culture in Anadyr

*Erich Kasten*

In administrative centers such as Anadyr, indigenous residents rarely use their own native language in everyday life. Although many adults and elderly people, especially those who grew up in other parts of Chukotka and moved more recently into town, still practice their traditional genres of story telling, family songs and dancing. But this particular knowledge is now seldom transmitted to the young in traditional ways within the family. Therefore, special programs and school curricula focus, with the help of committed teachers, on preserving and enhancing the precious cultural heritage of the indigenous peoples of Chukotka. With expressive forms of culture, such as through stories, singing and dancing, along with the texts connected to them, more interest is stimulated among the younger





generation in learning their indigenous languages. Whereas in urban environments they no longer serve as means of everyday communication, these genres gain another important function in providing especially the youth with additional options for building up their identities.

The film also illustrates how children start kindergarten by learning the most elementary expressions of greeting in the Chukchi and Siberian Yup'ik languages. Later, in special art school classes and during rehearsals of the professional dance ensemble “Ergyron”, expressive forms of Chukchi and Siberian Yup'ik culture are studied and performed simultaneously, although clearly separated from each other. In this way, creative discourses regarding unique expressions of different cultural traditions help to form commonalities of identity between the peoples of Chukotka.



## Forest Nenets / Russia

### The Taiga School at the Tiutiakha River

*Stephan Dudeck*

The film documents the reality of an educational experiment. The poet and reindeer herder Yuri Vella established a school at the Tiutiakha River in the heart of the Western Siberian forest in Russia. A teacher's couple left the city and moved to the reindeer herders' seasonal campsite to live and work in the remoteness of the forest for the school year so the grandchildren of Yuri Vella and the neighbours' children do not have to attend boarding schools in central settlements hundreds of kilometres away from the reindeer herders' campsites. Surprisingly, it was not so much the content of the school curriculum, which was almost the same as in the boarding school of the village, but the organisation of the educational process in the work and living situation of the small taiga settlement that differed so much from the conventional Russian system of education.

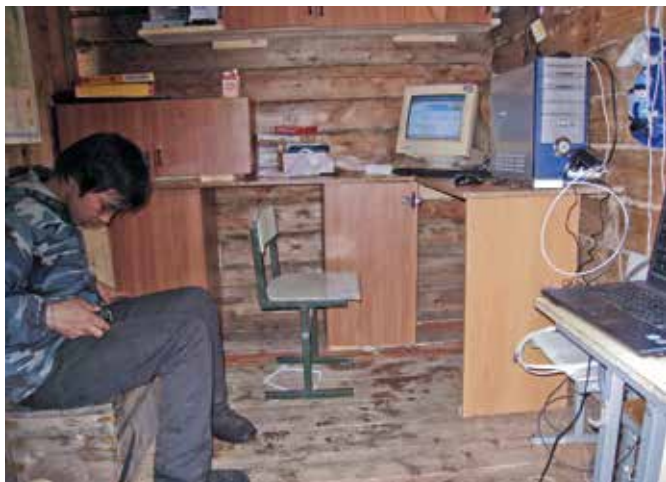


The curriculum is embedded in the traditional upbringing of the Forest Nenets reindeer herders and the teachers are required to participate in their lifestyle. Such schooling is not more expensive than the board-

ing school system, which requires the transportation to central villages and round a clock care for the children. It provides the children with schooling equal to that in the normal schools and the possibility after school to choose between higher education and the profession and



lifestyle of the forest reindeer herders. After thirteen years of existence, the school was not able to continue its work, not only because of the reluctance of the state authorities to support the experiment further, fearing the loss of control and considering the lifestyle of the reindeer herders as backward. Mainly it was difficult to find motivated teachers prepared to spend a part of their life at an isolated camp site in the forest wilderness and adapt to the rhythm of life of the reindeer herding families. The neighbours were also not convinced about the ability of the Taiga school to provide children with the needed discipline for survival in the city and in mainstream society.



## Quechua / Peru

### Learning Project with Quechua-Spanish-Speaking Children in the Cuzco Region, Peru

*Annett Hofmann*

This film deals with Quechua-Spanish-speaking children from seven to eleven years of age living in the mountain region of the Peruvian Andes at 3200 m.a.s.l. It provides insights into a bilingual participatory project applying interactive and visual learning methods with small groups of children in a meeting after school.

In the Cusco region of Peru, as in many other parts of Peru, the children speak Spanish with their peers and at school but also understand Quechua. However, their parents speak Quechua in daily life but Spanish just with their children. All in all, there are declining numbers of Quechua speakers but the children and young people show interest in learning the language of their parents.

Therefore, in this bilingual project we speak, read and write both in Quechua and Spanish. The children produce visual and textual material based on their own experiences, write stories and draw topics from their everyday world.



Moreover, this film shows the importance of confident relationships or friendships between the group members, which is a basis for the realisation of participatory activities, such as drawings of personal ideas, as well as for the conversation about the visual material in the two languages the protagonists speak. In this way, we also aim to increase the active involvement of girls, who are often passive, in the dialogues at school. As several film sequences show, the discussion of drawings can be a starting point in this direction.



At the beginning, the film portrays the eight-year-old Luis Raul who tells us about his perspectives on our meeting. In addition, we accompany the best Quechua speaker of the village under ten years of age. He creates impressive local maps on which he comments fluently in Quechua and Spanish.

Finally, in a bilingual story evening the children try to tell stories in Quechua and Spanish. With the support of an adult person who promotes the learning of the Quechua language and local knowledge, the children are motivated to learn in similar projects or community initiatives.

For more details see: <http://sirenayoqwasi.wordpress.com/>

## Bena / Papua New Guinea

### The Documentation of Bena Language

*Regina Knapp*

This film gives an insight into the work of language documentation among the Bena speaking people in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Bena is a Papuan language, still spoken by an estimated number of 40.000 speakers. However, Bena language is threatened with extinction. It becomes gradually replaced by Tok Pisin, Papua New Guinea's main lingua franca, and English. Today, only adult and elderly people actively use the language. Teenagers and children may sometimes understand but do not speak Bena any more. If nothing is undertaken, Bena language is likely to disappear within the next generation.



Bena has never been a written language and was never consistently documented. This interdisciplinary project was undertaken with the Bena community of Napamogona who have a vital interest in maintaining their language and culture for future generations. The Napamogona hosted the project and put great effort and enthusiasm in the language work.

The film shows how language documentation in Bena works on the indigenous cultural system of negotiating – negotiating about the meanings and precise translations of words, about their spelling and their correct pronunciation – but also on the indigenous notion of personal relationships and exchange.



Based on the body of collected data, the long-term aim is to develop educational material and on-line applications for Bena language in the future.

## The Phonogram Archive in St . Petersburg

### The Last Sounds of a Language

*Tjeerd de Graaf*

In Russia many old sound recordings still remain hidden in archives and in private possession where the quality of preservation is not guaranteed. This film fragment presents a joint Russian-Dutch research program on the safeguarding and preservation of sound materials of some endangered languages in the Russian Federation. It shows the large collection of about 6.000 Edison wax cylinders in the phonogram archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, the Pushkinsky Dom.



These cylinders are the oldest sound carriers used since the end of the 19th century and the film illustrates how they are played and reconstructed by using modern methods of information technology. The program made it possible to provide digital equipment to the Pushkinsky Dom and follow the requirements of the International Association of Sound Archives. We have made part of these sound materials available and added them to the acoustic database developed with colleagues



in Russia. These recordings represent the history of Russian ethnography and contain a wide range of materials, which shows the languages and musical cultures during the first half of the 20th century, when the recordings were made. In the project *Voices from Tundra and Taiga* we concentrated on a selection of recordings of some endangered languages spoken by the Northern Peoples of Russia, for which documentation is very important. We consider the possibilities how to use these historical recordings together with the results of present-day fieldwork for the development of learning tools and teaching methods. This is illustrated with examples of some of these endangered languages.

For more details see:

<http://www.mercator-research.eu/research-projects/endangered-languages/>



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