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**GRAMOPHONE AND CHUKCHI: ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF  
CULTURAL MARKERS**

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*Abstract*

Formation and entrenchment of an identity marker of Chukchi culture is considered, as exemplified with gramophone that reached the native inhabitants of Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea coasts in the early 20th century. The subject of this article is the object in its social, material, historical and cultural expression. A life history of gramophone among Chukotka natives has been recovered. The gramophone appeared in the culture of Chukchi and Asian Eskimos as a prestige goods, obtained as a result of exchange with American traders. It was included in the culture, having acquired the attributes of the traditional culture's world of objects, that is, it has acquired a soul. After losing its materiality, gramophone was preserved in discourses and people's memory exclusively as an emotional image. The next stage in gramophone's biography is its rebirth. After screening of the Soviet movie Head of Chukotka, the mass culture perceived the image of gramophone in connection to the image of Chukchi people. Increasingly more sensitive ethnic consciousness attempts at regaining identity with the help of vivid memorable images led to gramophone taking a status of a cultural marker. The paper discusses a question that a thing may lose its materiality and continue its existence as a symbol, becoming a characteristic sign of identity in discourses. Empiric foundation of the research had been formed by historical and ethnographic sources that the author obtained in archives and expeditions to settlements of Chukchi and Asian Eskimo peoples

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## 1. Introduction

The modern culture of native peoples of Arctics, despite its close relations to the Nature, had organically embedded a multitude of various artifacts, products and technologies. At the same time, opposing universalization, peoples of the North are trying to preserve their identity by constructing boundaries, including emblematic ones, and by emphasizing specificity and unique nature of their culture. Emphasizing of originality often leads to highlighting cultural markers that are not necessarily connected to the traditional culture. An example of such a collision is gramophone that ended up being closely related to Chukchi culture.

## 2. Problem Statement

Studies of material objects with respect to their place in culture and interpersonal relations is still a hot topic for social sciences and humanities. The closest relation between the modern human being and the material world actualized discussion of new approaches to studies of materiality (Sokolovskii, 2016). The process of including new things and technical means into life of societies that keep traditional way of life is also among the relevant issues within studies of materiality (Pelto, 1987; Stammler, 2009; Stammler, 2013). The focus is usually on the things that influence the culture, changing some previously stable processes. For example, snow mobile invoked changes in reindeer farming in a number of native peoples of Russia (Istomin, 2015). However, there are objects that having being included into the culture stays as symbols. This is not about objects that having lost their utilitarian functions obtained symbolic ones or combined both kinds of functions (Baiburin, 1989; Vinogradova, 1994; Toporkov, 1989). For example, objects that had become fetishes, souvenirs or components of rituals. This work defines a problem of keeping symbolism of the object when its materiality has been lost. We propose a hypothesis that an object may lose itself as a thing, lose its materiality and continue its existence as a symbol, becoming a characteristic sign of identity in discourses.

## 3. Research Questions

The subject of this article is the thing in its social, material, historical and cultural expression. Foundation for identifying such object domain has been found in two works dedicated to the sociality of material. Following the Igor Kopytoff biographic method of research of “life journey” and “career trajectory” of an object (Kopytoff, 1986), the author attempts tracing the “life history” of gramophone in the Chukchi culture. However, unlike *Cultural Biography of Things*, we are not analyzing a biography of a specific object, but its generalized variant, taking the object's arrival into the culture as its “birthday”. The next important theoretical foundation is a statement of Harré (2002) about priority of symbolic, especially discursive action over material order in the genesis of social things. Material objects may be prone to multiple various uses and obtain multiple identities in accordance with different narrative structures (Harré, 2002).

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

Formation and entrenchment of an identity marker of Chukchi culture is considered as exemplified by gramophone that reached the native inhabitants of Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea coasts in the early 20th century. The author traces arrival of the object into the culture, its use and subsequent transformation into a literary image, resulting in its status of a cultural marker in discourses.

#### 5. Research Methods

This work employs ethnographic and historical-anthropological methods. The empiric foundation of the research is formed by field ethnographic materials collected by the author in interviews, informal group interviews and personal observations in the Russian north-east. In total, 39 inhabitants of Chukotka were surveyed, aged from 28 to 83; of them, 29 persons identified as Chukchi. Historical sources used included archive materials: records, reports, notes of a journey of officials and exiles, as well as published memoirs of travelers and traders who visited or lived in the high north of the Russian North-East in the first third of the 20th century and we able to directly observe live of people and contact them.

#### 6. Findings

The first gramophone was imported to Chukotka peninsula by American traders in the beginning of the 20th century. From the end of the 19th century and until strengthening of the Soviet authority in the high north-east of Russia in the 1930s, Chukotka was a territory where native peoples lived with minimal presence of administrative authorities (Sablin, 2013). Chukchi involved in reindeer farming wandered through the tundra part of the peninsula; Chukchi involved in hunting sea animals as well as Asiatic Eskimos lived in coastal settlements along the Bering and Chukchi seas. External trade contacts of Chukotka natives were largely defined by American traders who transported goods, predominantly from Alaska, on their schooners. In exchange for fur peltries, walrus tusk, whalebone and other items of traditional industry, Chukotka natives obtained industrial goods (Yarzutkina, 2014).

Historical sources include several reports that in the early 20th century, gramophone was among the goods imported to the peninsula. In particular, Northeast Siberia Company imported gramophones, together with rifles, boats and sewing machines (Owen, 2008). In the early 20th century, despite the gold rush, Alaska was still a peripheral territory, where to technical novelties arrived delayed. One of the traders left a detailed description of his first acquaintance with gramophone and his decision to buy it for subsequent exchange with the Chukchi. «Several years after I entered the Siberian trade, the first «Victor» machines reached Nome. They had a horn, partly made of brass, partly of cardboard, and on the box was a trade-mark that was to become famous—a fox terrier with head cocked to one side, listening to

*His Master's Voice" I joined a crowd one day that had gathered around one of these little phonographs on display in a Nome shop... The machine was of no practical use to my customers, for they couldn't understand the words and even the rhythms of our music would be strange to their ears. I hesitated to pay \$21 for a phonograph that to the natives would be nothing but a toy. (Madsen & Douglas, 1957, pp. 35-36)*

Madsen (Madsen & Douglas 1957) had bought two gramophones and transported them to Chukotka for exchange. Both were accrued by settlement leaders in exchange for arctic fox pelts and polar bear hides.

During the subsequent years, gramophones proliferated along the coast; according to witness reports, they were very common and could be seen in almost any yaranga (Galkin, 1931; Gorovskii, 1914; Report, 1928). In the early 1930th, American trade was almost completely forced out of Chukotka by the Soviet trade. No more gramophones were imported. In addition, they were substituted by more compact record players, which also were present in some native homes (Kaltan, 2008).

Evaluating the place of gramophone as a material object in Chukchi culture, one may say that it was largely prestige (Veblen, 1934) or status goods (Ray, 1978). At the same time, in those Chukchi and Eskimo families that owned a gramophone, it was included into the general system of attitude to objects. In particular, it is supported by the fact that one of the settlement leaders left a gramophone on the grave of his son, after having broken the appliance. Traditionally, object left near a dead body were broken to separate their soul (uvirit) that the dead person takes with them to the afterlife (Bogoraz, 2011).

As a material object, gramophones existed in Chukotka for about 30 years. Their symbolism for the Chukchi culture was obtained thanks to the mass culture. In 1967, when there were no more gramophones in Chukotka, a Soviet feature film *Nachalnik Chukotki* (The Head of Chukotka) came out, directed by Vitalii Melnikov at the Lenfilm film studio. The film included a plot line where an American trader demonstrated an operating gramophone to natives and then exchanged its amplifying horn for arctic fox pelts. Without the gramophone the horn did not play anything, thus unhappy Chukcha returned to the trader. The trader then put the horn back into the gramophone and showed that the goods is operable. Director wanted to show the nature of interactions between naive natives and capitalists in an anecdotal form. Imaginative literature and later Russian jokes about Chukchi gradually confirmed this storyline about gullible, simple-minded Chukchi. According to Burykin (2002), this image was created by Soviet ethnic social politics that was characterized by excessive and unjustified patronizing attitude to native peoples.

There are no direct reports of the situation presented in the *Nachalnik Chukotki* in available sources. It is hard to economically estimate the trade between the natives and American traders, as the system of values in different cultures was vastly different (Iarzutkina, 2017). The history preserved stories about swindler traders who had exploited this difference (Iakovlev, 1926). There were also miscommunications, as many technical novelties were new to the traders themselves (Madsen & Douglas, 1957).

The author believes that another important aspect for formation of the gramophone storyline was its vivid emotional perception. In the early 20th century gramophones were a novelty among the industrial goods and naturally caused amusement and even concerns among people, whose worldview was intimately related to the world of nature and spirits.

One of the author's informants related a story from her Chukchi grandmother who had been born in the vicinity of the modern village of Enurmino on the Chukchi coast. In her childhood, she happened to hear a gramophone operating and for a long time was sure that inside the wooden box there are tiny humans who play the music. It is similar to the following description: "... the natives were bewildered by the action of the gramophone. Eskimos believed that inside the box there are a multitude of spirits making all these sounds..." (Galkin, 1931, p 43).

In the Joseph F. Bernard Collection in the Cordova Historical Museum, Alaska, there are photographs showing Chukchi's neighbors, Inuits, listening to a gramophone. The picture shows the gramophone installed on a sledge and Inuits in ethnic clothes standing in a semi-circle around it at a distance of about 3 meters. Only a couple of the tallest men are standing at a distance of about 1 meter.

This is how the above-mentioned trader Madsen described the first reaction of Chukchis to the gramophone:

*But at last, with misgivings, I bought two machines, twenty-four records, and a package of needles for each phonograph. The first natives to hear it were the Chukchis who came aboard at Cape Serge. When I started playing a record, they backed away, stumbling over one another in fright. I laughed, patted the box, and told them to examine the machine. Curiosity quickly overcame their uneasiness. They looked at my crew, and when they saw no one singing, they peered at all sides of the box and then down into the horn to discover where the voice was coming from. Then they began beaming and laughing and talking excitedly about the magic box. (Madsen & Douglas, 1957, p. 57)*

For people of traditional culture living in a relative isolation and receiving only fragmentary information about technical progress, even in the form that it took place in the nearby Alaska, the gramophone caused a wide array of emotions. Intense directly-sensual feelings from getting acquainted with a gramophone allowed keeping the image of this technical novelty in the memory of several generations. Our informants repeatedly shared their childhood impressions from stories of their grandmothers and grandfathers about a wonderful gramophone. At the same time, when talking about trade, some informants emphasized its unfairness to Chukchi and provided the story from the *Nachalnik Chukotki* film presenting it as recollections and stories told by their elder relatives. As a whole, the image of gramophone (like images of other objects, e.g., Winchester rifle) has entrenched in the culture and now is perceived as its organic part.

## 7. Conclusion

The example of gramophone taken within the framework of a certain temporality, spatiality and emotionality helps in seeing evolution of an object. Gramophone appeared in the culture of Chukotka natives as goods, an alien object. It was subsequently included in the culture, having acquired the attributes of the traditional culture's world of objects, that is, it has acquired a soul (uvirit). Later, it lost its materiality, having disappeared/died as an object and continuing its existence exclusively as an emotional image.

The next stage in gramophone's biography is its rebirth – mass culture apprehended the image of the gramophone in relation to the image of Chukchi. In the modern printed media, on the Internet, as well as in a number of analytic publications, we may find references to the story about selling gramophone horn to Chukchis (Dizhur, 2018). Such a link, being amplified by a number of factors, made gramophone a cultural marker of the Chukchi culture.

In our opinion, the most important of the noted factors are ethnic consciousness, attempts at recovering the identity with the help of vivid and memorable images, as well as “ethnic rage”. The latter

expressed in the fact that the image of gramophone was given by the informants as a proof of oppression and harassment of Chukchi national culture by migrants from other locations (including Russians).

Using the term of Vakhshain (2006), the gramophone has become a “more-than-a-thing”. Its biography of more than one hundred years paradoxically led to the status of one of the identity markers of the Chukchi culture. From a material object it has become an object of discourse. At that, this most recent form may not be the last and continue its evolution further and turning back into a thing, acquiring new materiality, for instance, as a museum exhibit at an exhibition of Chukchi culture.

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