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RURAL POPULATION OF KALMYKIA: THEIR ATTITUDE TO MIXED ETHNIC FAMILY

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Abstract

A mixed ethnic family is a subject of research of this article. It is considered from different positions that contradict each other. On the one hand, there is an understanding that this type of union promotes positive interaction of peoples, penetration and mutual enrichment of ethnic cultures. On the other hand, there is an opinion that mixed marriage leads to the erasure of ethnic boundaries and further dissolution of the ethnic group. Therefore, this kind of interaction of peoples at the micro level requires close attention and comprehensive interdisciplinary study. The article analyses the results of sociological studies conducted in 2015 and 2017, and statistical data on the population of Kalmykia. A modern village in Kalmykia is characterized by such problems as unemployment, low income of the majority of villagers, weak social infrastructure, and dramatic migration of the rural population. Villagers have a tendency to marry representatives of different ethnic groups in polyethnic rural settlements. Young people create mixed families when they leave their native land. The research investigates attitude of the rural population of the republic to mixed ethnic marriages. Positive attitude dominates in public consciousness. It increases the role of the intercultural component. Supporters of a mixed family think that a spouse should learn the ethnic language, traditions and customs of his\her spouse. However, there is another opinion that a mixed marriage is an assimilation factor leading to the destruction of the ethnic culture, the disappearance of ethnicity. Rural people having this opinion are against mixed marriages.

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1. Introduction

The relevance of the study of mixed ethnic marriage in multi-ethnic societies of the southern Russian regions can be explained by some reasons: this union strengthens friendly relations between nations; promotes familiarization with a foreign culture; the removal of inter-ethnic tensions and the erosion of ethno-stereotypes, which form a negative image of representatives of a different ethnic identity. But there is an opinion that “mixed ethnic marriage can lead to the destruction of ethnic identity. The weaker the ethnic boundaries, the more intense this process is” (Ryan, 2018, p. 146).

2. Problem Statement

Researchers of the Centre for Studying National Conflicts recognize that the threat of conflicts between different nationalities and ethnic groups in Kalmykia is relatively low. But, minor clashes between different ethnic groups attract public opinion and spark mass non-violent protests. Besides, the Internet is quick for spreading information about the tension between nationalities. As a result, some experts believe that this region has so called permanent ‘frozen national conflicts’. Unfortunately, data of All-Russian census in 2002 and 2010 reflected ethnicity of citizens but there was no information about the number of mixed families and their characteristics (the number of people born in mixed families). It is an obstacle for analyzing and forecasting marriage relations in the aspect of inter-ethnic interactions (Namrueva, 2013). Sociological research allows to receive the necessary material for analyzing problems in this sphere.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the research is the attitude of rural population to international marriages. Rural population is of mixed ethnicity, tolerant to different cultures and open to intercultural relations. Ethnic diversity of rural population is common for many villages and settlements. Positive interactions between ethnicities provide social security for all people.

4. Purpose of the Study

The proposed research has one main objective. It focused on the attitude of rural population in the Kalmyk Republic to interethnic marriages in the context of its impact on the level of tension between nationalities and on social security.

5. Research Methods

The researchers used quantitative (questionnaire) and quality (interviewing, observation) methods of investigation. Selected results of questionnaire conducted in 2015 and 2017 were investigated by researchers. Researchers selected 302 people living in rural areas of the republic in 2015. 44 % of them were male and 56 % were female. 51 % of observed population lives in regional centers and 49 % live in villages. Respondents of the questionnaires were representatives of two main ethnic groups: Kalmyk people – 52.3 %, Russians – 36.4 %.

700 citizens of rural regions and the capital of the republic were questioned in 2017. 50.7 % of them were male and 49.3 % were female. 30.1 % of respondents live in villages, 26.5 % live in regional centers, 43.4 % live in Elista. Kalmyk people comprised 73 % of all respondents, Russians comprised 18.4 %, the rest 8.6 % were representatives of other ethnic groups. The answers given by people from rural areas are analyzed in this article.

6. Findings

The republic consists of 13 districts, 3 cities, including 1 Republican subordination, 111 rural municipalities, 262 rural settlements according to the data on 01.01.2018 (Table 01).

Table 01. Population dynamics of the Republic of Kalmykia (thousands of people)

Year	Population at the beginning of the year	Including:	
		Urban	Rural
2002	292.4	129.5	162.9
2010	289.4	127.6	161.8
2011	288.9	127.3	161.6
2012	286.7	127.4	159.3
2013	284.1	127.0	157.1
2014	282.0	126.5	155.5
2015	280.5	126.5	154.0
2016	278.7	125.9	152.8
2017	277.8	125.8	152.0
2018	275.4	125.0	150.4

The number of people in the region has decreased by 17 000 people or 5.8 % in the period of 2011 to 2018. The decrease of population is big in rural areas. According to the census of 2010 there lived 161 800 people and according to the data on the 1st of January 2018 the number of people became 150 400. The number of rural population reached the level of 1960s, but at that time rural population comprised 70 % of the whole population and nowadays it is 54.6 %.

The main drawbacks of modern villages in steppe region are connected with lack of jobs and low level of wages. These factors led to dramatic migration of rural population independent of their ethnicity. It is becoming dangerous that the territory of the republic is losing its attractiveness for living here for Russians, representatives of other ethnic groups, and for titular ethnic group either. But despite these negative phenomena villagers in some areas are building cultural constructions, Buddhist temples and Orthodox churches, playgrounds for children, create mixed families. The population despite the decreasing number in rural areas is doing their best to improve their lifestyle and the environment.

Ethnic composition of rural population of the Republic of Kalmykia is inhomogeneous and is characterized by a significant share of multiethnic settlements. The distribution of big ethnic groups of rural population (Kalmyks, Russians) was analyzed on the basis of All-Russia census in 2010. The share of Kalmyks reach 51.9 % and the share of Russians is 30.0 %.

Four groups according to the share of titular population in administrative regions of the Republic of Kalmykia were distinguished (figure 01).

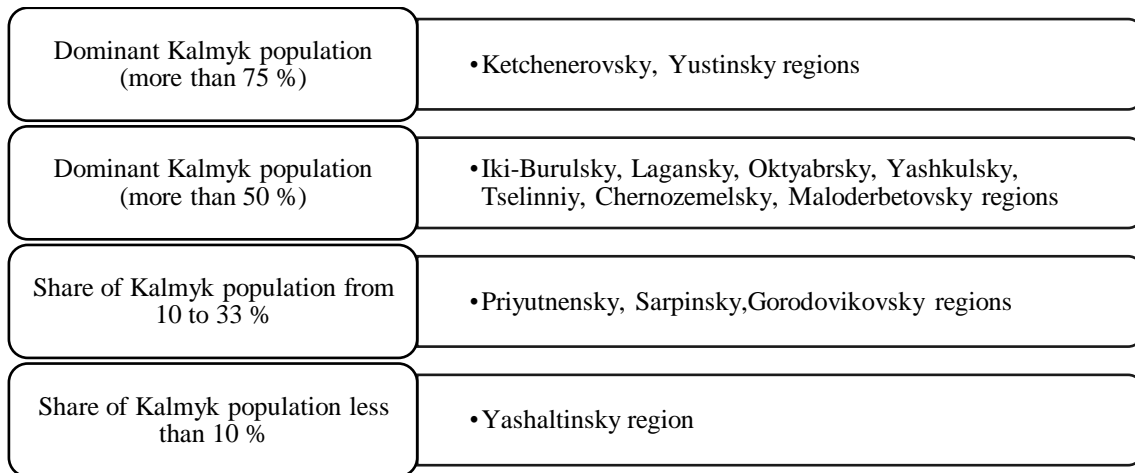


Figure 01. Distribution of titular Kalmyk population in administrative regions of the Republic of Kalmykia

Besides let's investigate the distribution of the second largest ethnic group – the Russians. According to the share of Russian population there four groups of regions in the Republic of Kalmykia (figure 02).

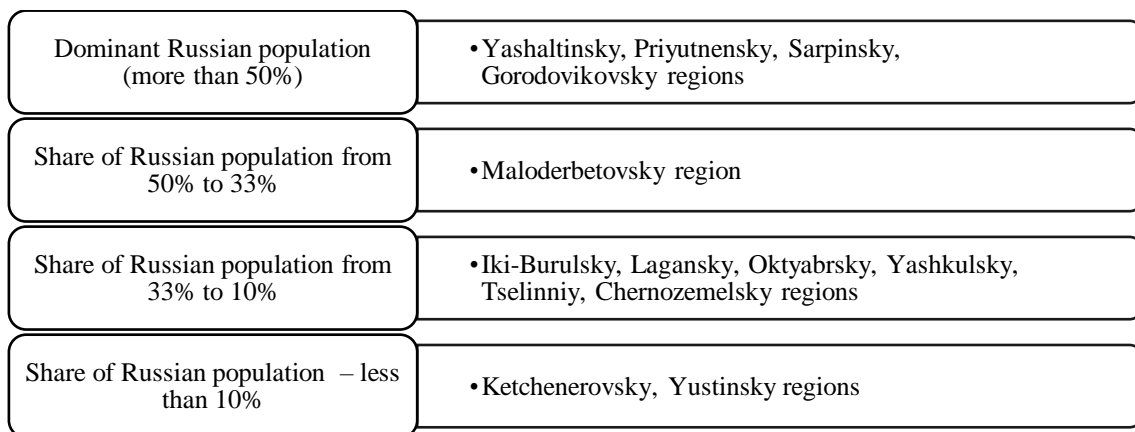


Figure 02. Distribution of Russian population in administrative regions of the Republic of Kalmykia*
 * Counted by the author according to (Ethnic composition, 2013).

It is a well-known fact that there a high proportion of mixed marriages in multi ethnic rural areas in comparison to mono ethnic villages (O'Connor, 2008). The authors agree with Nizamova (2013) that “new social conditions due to growing mobility of the population, multicultural late modern communities, different directions of localization and globalization, as well as scientific context of the XXI century give push to the problem of mixed marriages” (p. 172).

The majority of people think that rural population is more conservative to mixed marriages in comparison with urban population because their settlements are more multiethnic and multicultural (Fernihougha, Grádab, & Walshb, 2015). The example of a Kalmyk village shows that the opinion of older generation on mixed marriages plays a significant role in a small rural community. Older generation do not agree on marriages with representatives of non-titular nations. But, they agree if it is a marriage

with representatives of ethnicity who live for a long time in Kalmykia because they are familiar with culture and life style of Kalmyks (Namrueva, 2017).

Our observations show that Kalmyk women who move to work in different parts of Russia actively create families with representatives of other culture and religion. A woman who is married to an Uzbek man said to the authors that “her relatives did not approve her marriage at first. But then they saw that her husband is a hard-working and caring man, he doesn’t drink alcohol, respects her relatives, and they changed their opinion. Her family moved to her native village, and now her husband is an individual entrepreneur”. The researchers have met several mixed families in this village who married in big Russian cities while they were working there. Young pairs have close family relations; celebrate Kalmyk and Uzbek folk festivals; parents tell their children about their own cultural heritage.

The results of answers to a question of the questionnaire “What would be your opinion if any of your close relatives (son, daughter, brother, sister) marry a man/woman of other nation?” showed that more people are likely to approve this marriage. More than 40 % of interviewed indicated that “nationality is not important in a marriage; personal qualities of a person play a significant role”. But recently the percentage of this answer has decreased. During the first questionnaire this respond was chosen by 45.9 % of rural population but during the second questionnaire only 42.9 % approved this marriage.

The comparison of answers in different years shows that the selection of answer “nationality is not important if husband/wife knows the culture and keeps traditions of my nationality’ (Figure 03) is stable (there is a small increase from 20.6 % in 2015 to 21.8 % in 2017). It should be noted that if a mixed marriage is approved the importance of having some knowledge of the culture of husband/wife should increase.

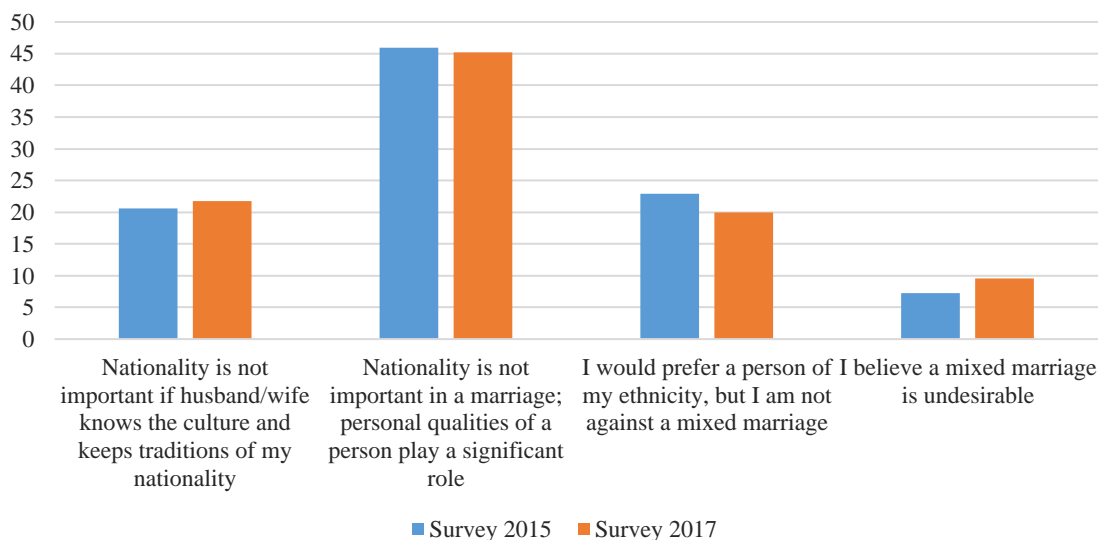


Figure 03. Distribution of answers on question “What would be your opinion if any of your close relatives (son, daughter, brother, sister) marry a man/woman of other nation?” (%)

If positive answers are summarized then it is clear that the majority of rural observed population (66.5–67 %) have a positive attitude to mixed marriages. This approval shows that rural community

develops and enriches the culture of polyethnic relations in the process of interactions between different nations at family micro level.

The authors considered results of the questionnaire conducted in 2015. The analysis of data obtained in the ethnic context showed that respondents of Kalmyk origin (70.2 %) prefer mixed marriages in comparison with respondents of Russian nationality. Opinions of male (65.9 %) and female (67.1 %) on this question do not differ. Analysis of respondents' answers by age structure showed that the third part of respondents (32.2 %) in age group from 51 to 60 years old (the highest result on this question) said that ethnicity of the spouse is not important for them. Respondents of this age group said that some knowledge of culture of the spouse and appliance with applicable customs is more important. More than half of respondents from the age of 30 years old (54.5 % is the highest result among three groups) have positive attitude to mixed marriages because they value personal characteristics (Namrueva, 2016).

Analysis of dual option showed that the fifth part of all respondents (22.9-20.0 %) prefers a person of their own ethnicity but are not against mixed marriages. Results of the questionnaire of 2015 indicate that opinion hold male (25 %), Russians (25 %), young respondents aged under 30 (27.3 %), representatives of age group from 31 to 50 years old (25.3 %) (Namrueva, 2016).

The data obtained indicate that 7.3 % of respondents in 2015 and 9.6 % of respondents in 2017 think that a mixed marriage is "undesirable". The data show a slight increase of negative attitude to mixed marriages. This part of respondents believes that a mixed marriage can lead to assimilation of ethnicities and then to gradual disappearance of ethnicity. Summarizing the answers the authors came to the conclusion that Kalmyk respondents (6.3 %) have more negative attitude than Russian respondents (4.6 %). It is believed that "mono national environment promotes opportunity to preserve the national language, customs, traditions, but mixed families lead the process of ethnic marginalization" (Vereshchagina, 2015, p. 169).

Modern Russia pays great attention to the policy of assimilation in the formation of a single all-Russian civil identity, which is common in most subjects of the Russian Federation. This is counteracted by regional elites, which are primarily focused on independence and self-orientation. The authors agree with Nizamova (2013) "the growth of Russian nationalism, on the one hand, and the nationalism of the titular nationalities in the republics of the Russian federation, on the other hand, cannot be underestimated" (p. 175). Nizamova (2013) indicates also positive effects of the policy of assimilation and rejection of social exclusion of 'others'. "Political program of 'inclusion' in the community of Russian nation does not allow to assign the label of 'alien' and 'distinctive' to the bearers of mixed identities, which is typical for the society of ethnic segregation and hierarchization" (p. 178).

The problem of mixed families is discussed periodically in social network. There are supporters of mixed families who think that is a consequence of historical and modern integration of Kalmyks in Russian, European and global space. Representatives of titular ethnos despite age and gender believe that the main reason of mixed families is the nomadic origin of Kalmyks and "mixture of blood was inevitable in the past because men brought wives from military campaigns or captured women during those campaigns" (Anjukaeva, 2015, para. 4). Many Kalmyk families keep legends of their ancestors who belonged to other nationalities and were brought from military campaigns.

Children born in mixed families in Kalmykia are called ‘baldr’ and their appearance have more Asiatic genes than of other nations. Supporters of mixed families tell the names of our contemporaries who were born in mixed families: Sangadgi Tarbaev (captain of the successful team of University of Friendship in the Club of funny and intelligent people), Batu Khasikov (World champion in hand-to-hand combat, now the Acting Head of the Republic of Kalmykia), Sultanna Frantsuzova, a famous fashion designer.

Opponents of mixed families speak convincingly and sharply. One of them thinks: ”if you marry a woman of other ethnicity, it is one thing, but if women of your ethnicity marry men of other ethnicity and dissolve in these nations, it is another story! It is not a result of historical process, but a result of underdevelopment and different complexes, a separation from their national roots! Let’s look at peoples of North Caucasus, who oppose this assimilation!”

This citation is the expression of opinion of many young Kalmyk men to mixed families. But they approve this kind of marriage if husband is Kalmyk and his wife is of other ethnicity. They do not approve the decision of Kalmyk women to marry men of other ethnicity. Kalmyk men think these women are betrayers and humiliate them. When the authors asked the opinion of Kalmyk women they resented them, accused them in betrayal and indifference to the problem of preservation Kalmyk ethnicity.

These discussions are quite common, and both men and women criticize those Kalmyks who have mixed families and deny their ethnicity. But behavior of these Kalmyk people would be approved if their children lived in the republic and showed respect to Kalmyk identity: marry Kalmyk people, learn the Kalmyk language, culture, traditions and customs. Otherwise, children from mixed families will lose their Kalmyk identity. It should be noted that the attitude to mixed marriages has changed. If the period of 1960 to 1980s was characterized by discreet attitude to this kind of marriage, but nowadays young people do not have discreet attitude because they consider mixed marriages as a threat to preservation of Kalmyk ethnicity.

7. Conclusion

Taken together, the overall results of our analysis showed that the interethnic marriage attitude is positive. Although part of the population, especially the titular population focused on the preservation of the traditional culture of the ethnic group and their perception of mixed marriage is restrained, and sometimes negative. This group considers such a marriage as a factor representing the risk of ethno cultural marginalization and disappearance of the ethnic group. Despite this, the villagers, aware of the undesirability of mixed marriages, positively perceive this form of family of their close relatives. And this is evidence of positive inter-ethnic interactions that ensures the social security of the population.

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