

IMPACT OF NATIVE CULTURE AND RELIGION ON THE MARI LANGUAGE

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Abstract. Mari is one of the endangered Finno-Ugric languages located in the territory of the Russian Federation. The danger of extinction of Mari is influenced by both objective and subjective factors. In the current paper, the issue under investigation is the impact of the Mari traditional religion and folk culture on language maintenance. Because of continuously reduced institutional support, the status of the Mari language has decreased significantly in the last 10 years. The favourable development of traditional culture has brought with it an increase in the number of native speaking people within the Mari El region (Russia). It is slightly observed in some spheres (social and cultural) and almost unnoticeable in others (political, economic). The mechanism of impact of Mari traditional religion and culture is characterized as psychological. It gives reason to believe that the chances for the preservation of the Mari language are reasonably good.

Keywords: language maintenance, culture, Mari traditional religion

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1. Introduction

In the time of globalization, the issue of the existence of most minority languages is essential. Since research indicates that a language disappears every two weeks, it is predicted that between 50–90% of the current distinct languages (about 7,000) will have become extinct by the year 2100 (Maugh II 2007). So, according to the UNESCO report in 2009 the world has lost 200 languages over the last several decades (UNESCO 2009). However, even in such a context, language revitalization policy expands in order to prevent the loss of languages and ethnic groups and retain the linguistic diversity of the world.

This issue is one of the most important problems in Russia. Being a place where numerous minority groups exist (more than 180), it risks losing a large part of them due to the increased assimilation of small-numbered indigenous peoples. In 2009, UNESCO recognized 136

languages located on the territory of Russia as endangered and nine as extinct. So the situation of Finno-Ugric peoples living on the territory of the Russian Federation is hard to describe as optimistic because their numbers decrease from year to year. According to the census of 2002, there were 2,762,000 Finno-Ugric people in Russia (1.9% of the population). In 1989, their number was higher: 3,200,000 people (2.2%) (Finno-ugorskije narody Rossii 2005: 14). The census of 2010 documented a further decrease of the Finno-Ugric population: 2,457,452 (Rjabčikov 2010). Some of their languages, like Kamasin and Koybal, are considered extinct, while others, like Nganasan, Vepsian, Karelian, Khant and Mansi, are endangered. Mari people also belong to the second category.

This paper reviews the current effect of traditional religion and culture on the Mari language maintenance. It argues that the ethnic cultural and religious activities in the Mari El region caused there to be a raise of interest and popularization of the language among the native population, to some extent. In turn, it increases the chances for the preservation of Mari in the modern world. This analysis is based on information retrieved from open web- and paper-resources and on the data received from interviews and e-mail surveys (2013–2014). Altogether 14 persons participated in interviews and 13 responded to the e-mail surveys. There were 10 males and 17 females from the capital city, townships, and villages. The age of the respondents ranges from 17 to 65 years old. Out of the 27 subjects 15 are higher educated and the remaining 12 indicated having a post-secondary education or an incomplete higher education (students).

The first part of this paper provides a short overview of the history of Mari since the very ancient times and determines a set of factors that has led Mari to its current endangered position. It affords grounds to expose the reasons for the positive impact of the Mari traditional religion (MTR) and culture on the native language. The following part gives a brief description of the current linguistic situation in the Mari El region. It views the state of the language development in the context of mass media, and also determines the position of the native population on this issue. In the remaining two parts both MTR and culture are considered separately to distinguish their effects on the language development. It is argued that the positive attitude of native population and high religious and cultural activism caused the emergence of this impact, which is characterized as psychological, i.e. affection via people's finer feelings.

2. Background of the history of Mari people

Mari (old name *Cheremiss*), one of the Finno-Ugric peoples, have traditionally been living in the central part of Russia. The official territory is Mari El (Figure 1) but significant parts of the population are also located in other regions (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Udmurtiya republics, Kirov and Sverdlovsk regions). In the past, Mari has been known as *Cheremis* in Russian. According to the 2010 Russian census, the number of Mari was 547, 605.

Currently, Mari is divided into three basic subgroups. These are Hill, Meadow, and Eastern Mari. The native language is Mari and is based on the Cyrillic alphabet.



Figure 1. The Mari El region on the Russian map.

A Gothic historian Jordan (Močaeв 2007) was the first write about Mari in the sixth century A.D. The ancestors of contemporary Mari had contact with Goths, Khazars, and Volga Bulgaria between the fifth and eighth centuries. From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries Mari was a part of the Golden Horde and Kazan khanate. In the sixteenth century, Mari was annexed to the territory of the Russian state. Despite the annexation until the second half of the nineteenth century, Mari lived relatively separately from Russians as they had rather weak economic trade ties with them. Basically, their contacts were limited to the payment of tributes and taxes. After the October revolution in 1917, a national rise took place aiming to unite separate Mari dialect

groups with the purpose of building one strong ethnic society. The initial aim of this movement was the creation of one common literary language and it involved all Mari social groups in the process. The movement resulted in the creation of two literary standards¹: Meadow and Hill. Further political repressions of the 30s, World War II and the post-war period gave less priority to this idea. However, the segregated way of living and weak cultural ties with Russians enabled Mari people to retain their ethnical identity, language, and culture almost unaffected.

Notable changes appeared in the 60s when an intensive Russification of the indigenous peoples started in the context of the creation of a single Soviet people. One of the characteristics of that policy was the transition to teaching in Russian from the very first grade and the elimination of the native language as separate subjects (Sanukov 1996: 49) at schools. Another peculiarity was the resettlement of the indigenous peoples by sending them to work in different regions of the USSR (Sanukov 1992). In case of Mari, it resulted in narrowing the language usage from the intellectual to the domestic sphere (Sanukov 1996: 49).

Further policy of the elimination of “unpromising villages” through the enlargement of the communities in the 70–80s (Toščenko 2011) and the intensification of urbanization strengthened the assimilation process of Mari with Russians.

A new national movement of Mari in the 90s that fell into the period right after the dissolution of the USSR allowed to slow this process. However the status of the Mari language and that of the ethnic population did not increase significantly. The main reason being: alterations in the internal policy and a severe economic crisis in the 90s in post-Soviet Russia that, in combination with unclear ideological position of Mari activists, resulted in an unsteady policy, initially aimed to involve Mari actively into various spheres of life. It was expressed in the absence of clear action sequence or insufficient activism of the local authorities. The lack of optimism of the native population towards sudden changes in their lives and, thus, the rejection of this policy became a rather distinct obstacle in the national movement of Mari.

A shift in the local power in 2000 also had a negative effect on this movement as new people and different policy directions lowered the priority of the issue of Mari people in Mari El. The current endangered

¹ The terms are still argued by some Mari linguists who insist on considering Meadow and Highland Mari as separate literary languages.

position of Mari is caused by several factors. One of the most important is the reduction or absence of its institutional support in some essential spheres (e.g. educational, economical) resulting in the emergence of unfavourable conditions for the development of the Mari language. This has complicated language activism in Mari El for the last ten years and fostered further assimilation of Mari that began in the second half of the last century.

Another important factor is the low self-perception of Mari as an ethnic group with its own unique language and culture making it difficult to mobilize people to improve its status. It is expressed in the desire of native speakers to differ from their group, their reluctance to study or speak their mother tongue, teach children etc. All the aforementioned allows to suppose that the perspectives for the development of the Mari language are rather pessimistic. However, despite this hardly positive picture, one can say that currently there is a process of cultural development in Mari El that has a favourable effect on the linguistic situation as well. Having begun because of the activity of ethnic enthusiasts, for the last few years it has progressed significantly.

3. Reasons for the positive effect of culture and religion on the Mari language

As mentioned, the positive influence of Mari traditional religion and culture on the native language is in making people re-evaluate their language attitude. The emergence of this impact itself is caused by the following factors.

First, the increase of popularity of Mari culture (forms of its art) in the Russian and world society due to the activity of ethnic folk professional groups and separate artists outside of Mari El and Russia. News about the success of Mari in other places, in turn, causes the emergence of pride in compatriots. In this context, the case of Mari traditional religion (MTR) is also obvious. For instance, for the last few years the public eye has been fixed on the “last pagans of Europe” as MTR is called because of its customs having remained almost unchanged. Popularization of MTR started attracting the attention of other ethnic groups and confessions (Christian, Islam) whose believers visited the ceremonies inquisitively. The same reason made native speakers first come to the holy groves. And those “newcomers” are likely to have found something new, important, and necessary for

themselves² in worshipping to natural forces, so it also influenced their minds. That, in turn, aided to reverse the attitude of the native population to Mari culture and the entire ethnic group.

Second, culture and religion have been the only spheres more or less free in their sustainable development for the last twenty years. They were parts of the agenda of the Mari movement in the 90s, the aim of which was to strengthen the position of Mari in the Russian society. Although, overall, this program did not prosper for several reasons, some of its issues retained their viability.

The third factor is a spiritual crisis in the Russian society after the dissolution of the USSR, that resulted in the depreciation of some moral values. Due to political and social realities, during the period of the beginning and end of the 90s, the state's advancements (particularly, in political and cultural spheres) were rejected as they were seen to be associated with the "former regime". However, after some time their significance was re-evaluated and recognized again as allowing to satisfy the spiritual requirements of the majority of the society.

The beginning of the third millennium is characterized by a transition to new social and economic relations, followed by the destruction of the traditional value system while the new created ones are still contradictive and individualistic (Bondarenko 2006: 3). As a rule, under these conditions society starts turning to the basis of existence, to permanent intellectual values as its basis for world perception. So, "in order to overcome the political, social, and economic crisis in the country and find the counteraction to approaching catastrophe in Russia at the end of the 20th century, the society was forced to have a recourse to traditional folk culture" (Popov 2007: 11). In the case of Mari, focusing on folklore is not new as the whole ethnic culture is closely connected with it. However, in the context of the large-scale folklore movement a new spin was put on its development as well.

In order to distinguish the effect of religion and culture on the Mari language maintenance, both factors are considered separately. For a better understanding of its peculiarity, the linguistic situation in the Mari El region is described below.

² The subject is an officer of the Ministry of Culture of Mari El; May, 2013.

4. The current linguistic situation in Mari El

A good opportunity for the development of the Mari language appeared after the recognition of Mari El as a national republic in 1992 with its own language (law *About the language in Mari El*, 1995). It was the time of an active campaign in the 90s initiated by the *Mariy Ushem* organization for strengthening the position of Mari in the Russian society. The linguistic issue was one of the most important concerns for that movement, so at that time the situation of the language improved to some degree in the region. However, due to some external reasons (political and economic instability in post-Soviet Russia) and internal ones (disunity and lack of co-operation among its participants, a deficiency of professionals, a weak or negative response from the ethnic population, etc.), this movement did not prevail (Šamiev 2010: 120, Martjanov 2006, Ivanov 2000: 14). Changes in local government in the very beginning of the third millennium also gave low priority to the issue of Mari and, particularly, to that of the ethnic language. It was evidenced by the fact that most of the decisions concerning language development (like increasing the number of television programs in Mari etc.) were either reconsidered or disregarded.

Currently, the situation of the language is a matter of concern for ethnic intelligentsia and those who are eager about the issue. First of all, it is caused by a gradual reduction of institutional support for language development in the region. So, a continued policy of removing Mari as a subject from schools by downgrading it from “native” to a “state language” (thus making ethnic children start studying it as a foreign language) and then by giving heads of schools and parents the opportunity to decide whether to teach it at all, causes worry for the future of Mari. As most parents have pragmatic approaches concerning this issue, it leads to the cessation of the native language studying and, thus, to a reduction in the number of schools with an ethnic program. For instance, in 2013 Mari, as a “native language”, was studied in 104 schools (8,705 pupils) and, as a “state language” in 184 schools (33,004 pupils) (Kuklina 2013). In 2004–2005 the figures were more optimistic: Mari as a “native language” subject was taught in 196 schools (18,692 people), and as a “state language” in 154 schools (19,879). Despite the increasing number of schools practicing “state language” teaching, the ethnic program has been eliminated in 78 institutions of secondary education (Sbornik 2005: 37) in the last 8 years.

Another evident example of decreasing the function of the ethnic language in the Mari El region is the mass media. Currently, there are 160 periodic printed publications which include republic-wide, city, and district newspapers in Mari (16 publications) and Russian. Out of 10 publications financed from the state budget, 6 are published in the native language. From year to year the circulation of Mari as well as broadcasting it on the state television channel (in 2012 it was 6.2 hours per week) and radio are reduced despite their high popularity in the region (Alekseeva 2012).

Undoubtedly, the native population plays a prominent role in the outcome of any linguistic situation. In the case of Mari, it is partly the approach of a considerable part of the ethnic population that influences the disappearance of the native language's function in local society. This attitude is better labelled as pragmatic since people make their language choices on the basis of its "relevance/irrelevance" for being successful in life (Ivanov 2000: 10). That is what makes most ethnic parents speak Russian with their children and reject teaching Mari at schools. Here, the words of a Mari teacher of a township school best confirm the above mentioned:

Unfortunately at present our school becomes Russianized very rapidly. Most of Mari children neither speak nor know their native language. Main reason for that is the attitude of parents who do not care whether their children speak it or not. To their minds the Mari language is absolutely unnecessary and it prevents them from studying other subjects more carefully. They think it is better to study the Russian language as it will be useful in future life. That is why they neither speak in Mari even at home nor encourage knowing their native language.³ (Nadežda, 45 y.o.)

However, in rural and urban areas the situation is different. In villages, where the ethnic population is mostly concentrated, attachment to the native culture and language is rather strong. So linguistic transmission across generations is still retained, although this tendency is also gradually weakening. In the city, due to the strong influence of the dominant society (survey, 2013), the second generation does not speak their mother tongue. This accelerates the process of Russification of the native population that has been observed since the 1960s.

³ A subject, Mari language teacher at Pomar school (Volzhsk district, Mari El).

5. Mari traditional religion

Religion plays a prominent part in the formation of a world outlook of any people, being an important component of their existence. However, its function and impact vary in different contexts. In some places, for instance, the domain of religious influence is wide, like Islam determining the life perception of Muslims. In other cases, at first sight, the effect of religion is almost unnoticeable. For instance, Christian Orthodox religion is more related to the second category as it does not govern the whole way of life of people in Russia. It can partly be explained by a residual effect of Soviet atheistic propaganda, where atheism was supported at a state level. Indeed, the function of religion in Russia is limited as it governs only some spheres of social life. According to a survey, there are 79% of Russians who consider themselves Orthodox Christians. Only 4% out of the 79% are committed to Christianity, following religious canons, the rest 75% “just believe but do not burden themselves with too much” (Dobrynina 2013). In this context, the Mari traditional religion has something in common with Christianity as its effect on the ethnic people is very special, and it is hard to observe any connections between religion and language maintenance. Currently, there are neither religious books published in Mari⁴ nor MTR taught as a subject at schools⁵. Additionally, it is not explicitly propagated. Over centuries, religious knowledge was passed on from generation to generation orally without being recorded. Even though due to the activity of some individuals some texts have been recorded in more recent times, the number of them is too small to have any impact on language development. Indeed, the influence of MTR on the language maintenance is of a different kind. In order to observe the mechanism of its influence, it is necessary to understand the essence of MTR and its significance to the native population.

At present Mari traditional religion is known as pagan because of its empathy for and deification of nature (Jazyčestvo 2013). However, native speakers call it *Mari jūla* (translated as ‘Mari tradition’) implying the entwining of traditions with daily life. Essentially, to some extent, MTR is a vital philosophy of Mari, the basis for their world perception that specifies the local image of the ethnic group. “God for

⁴ There have been some attempts to publish religious texts by individuals but they are not wide-spread.

⁵ There are some attempts to include MTR as an open-class by members of non-governmental organizations.

Mari is Universe, its spiritual force. With the word Jumo (translated as 'God') Mari describe the animate outside world, the sky shining before sunrise and after sunset, thundering etc." (Popov 2012: 13) Thus, people structured their lives by animating nature and that determined their place in the world.

The philosophy of Mari is reflected in MTR, the main idea of which is that

... how I relate to nature today will determine my life, my family's existence and also my people's further destiny ... The basic principle of MTR is to harmonize with nature (God) and one's surroundings. Most important for Mari was always family, hearth and home, not striving for domination and oppression ... A man living in the forest area succeeded in accustoming himself to and fitting into the tempo and tonality of the Universe ... (Škalina 2012: 29)

Such a philosophy has been in the sub-consciousness of the Mari through the centuries and it lies at the root of their national character and lifestyle: closeness to nature, quietness, moderation, striving to avoid conflicts, and living in peace. Furthermore, it is thought that "it was the world view, harmony with the universe, their belief and ability to connect internally with Him (God) that allowed the Mari to stand on their own and persevere ..." (Popov 2012: 9, Zenkin 2012) through millennia while other militant peoples passed into oblivion.

Coming back to the issue of the current influence MTR on the language maintenance, it can be said that its effect is revealed at a social and psychological level by influencing language frequency. At present Mari pagan rituals involve more and more ethnic participants because of an increased rate of interest in it. The given effect manifests itself via the following activities.

First, preparation for prayer ceremonies and conducting them. Indeed, it has a strong psychological impact on native participants. People who gather for a ceremony are different in their characters, worldviews and the degree of their attachments to the realities of Mari life (culture, language and altogether ethnicity). Only one thing is common here and that is their attitude to MTR that can be assessed as highly positive. Most people, being from a multinational environment, become unconsciously relaxed in these circumstances as there are no rules to follow that are dictated by an alien society. ("People go already being ready to communicate either with other people or high spirits, right? People are more relaxed, ready to communicate – for dialogue –

they are ready to reveal their thoughts – yes, more free, natural, sincere.” (Dmitrij, 30 y.o.)

Such getting together allows the Mari to stay what they are, to demonstrate their ethnic character in behaviour and communication (addressing one another, personal interaction, recognizable habits understandable only by compatriots, etc.). The above mentioned is best confirmed by the words of a participant of praying ceremonies:

Well, it seems to me that it was always this way, that it must be this way, so good. I do not feel the same anywhere. Everybody – everybody is Mari here. And all in all I feel very much, when people come to the worshipping when people are of one mind. – All in all, it is so easy to be among people of the same type, when the contact is not direct but so slight, because everyone thinks the same way. [...] And the rest, mainly – it is felt, that those who came from villages – especially men and women become glad for seeing each other and communicating. (Vladimir, 49 y.o.)

So, coming back to religion and traditions reminds them of their essence and to some degree can influence the re-evaluation of their attitude to Mari as an ethnic group with its unique culture.

Second, communication only in the native language. Simply speaking only in Mari inspires people to continue doing that outside ceremonial activities. Communicating in the native language and, thus, demonstrating their ethnic identity promotes strengthening the sense of similarity that is important for locals:

It is like a spiritual solidarity with your people. People already feel rather confident among their mates. You know, it is such solidarity. People come here not like ordinary visitors. – But the purpose is spiritual unity, i.e. interrelation of people, already so sincere and native – you may come to any people and speak in your mother tongue and it is natural and normal. So polite and respectful attitude to each other, so friendly – you may come to any person and just simply communicate with him, right? Openness ... (Dmitrij, 30 y.o.)

It inspires people to talk more in Mari: “When everybody speaks Mari around – first, it raises a spirit – it inspires you more. And second, you see, you feel that – some strength via language, because we were born and brought up Mari – And that influences on us ...” (Vladimir, 49 y.o.); even those who, for some reasons, usually do not speak their native language in daily life despite knowing it: “Even a person who

usually speaks in Mari a little starts speaking – switches to Mari completely. Because everybody speaks Mari around. If you know Mari you also start speaking it.” (Lidija, 55 y.o.) “They speak in Mari all day long. Some of them stumble but they try to speak in Mari.” (Oleg, 65 y.o.)

Respect for the traditions and customs of ancestors and to elders who usually speak only pure Mari also play a prominent part in it. That influences the increase in the number of Mari-speaking people as well.

Research indicates that at present the native population mostly understands the role and necessity of MRT in the life of Mari. For instance, 80.9% of respondents (out of 115)⁶ agreed with the statement *It is necessary to promote the traditional religion of Mari* that demonstrates the positive attitude of the native people on the issue. So, being together, participating in common activities and speaking only the mother tongue with a vast number of people of different social groups can have a positive effect on people’s minds in terms of their attitude to performing different ethnic practices. From a linguistic aspect, texts of prayers can be an excellent source for the enrichment of Mari vocabulary as they contain a lot of authentic Mari words categorized as archaisms. If one takes into account the current problem of *varysh*, a weird mixture of Russian and Mari that most Mari speak nowadays (Krymmarij 2010), it might be a rather effective way for vocabulary refining.

6. The state of Mari culture

The main feature of Mari culture is its closeness to folklore due to being maintained by common people as it has been supposed on basis of the concept of Žulanova (2000) over centuries. It is a subject of interest for local studies (Popov 2007; Kutasova 2007; Petrova 2007 etc.) considering that local culture possesses a huge potential for the future of Mari art. However, there was a time (in the 60s of the previous century) when folklore was neglected by the people in art although the population had a positive attitude towards it (Popov 2007: 14). Furthermore, it was the latter fact that played a prominent role in raising the whole Mari culture to a professional level. “Habitually connected with a rather limited sphere of culture, everyday

⁶ The data was received during fieldwork in Mari El (Russia) in 2013.

life and history, it (i.e. Mari culture) started claiming to acquire the status of commonality” (Popov 2007: 18).

Currently, the popularity of the ethnic culture in Mari El can surely be characterized as high. Having started gaining popularity in the 1990s as a part of the national movement it succeeded in its sustainable dynamics of development while other activities either failed or diminished. Basically, it survived due to the fact that the cultural movement happened to be the one area stirring up the least disputes because the participants were mostly of one mind on such issues. Moreover, the active response of the native population also favoured it.

Among the reasons for increasing the popularity of the Mari culture, it is necessary to point out the most important ones:

Cultural activity in and outside of Mari El. A variety of regional cultural contests (*Ilyš pamaš* ‘Spring of life’, *Kugeze vozž* ‘Ancestral roots’ etc.) aimed to involve the local population in folk art, concerts and festivals, quickened interest in ethnic culture within the region. According to the records of the local Ministry of Culture, there were 21 regional events held outside of Mari El from January to September 2013 (Svedenija 2013). Tours of folk groups and participation at all-Russian and international events on the territory of the Russian Federation undoubtedly led to more recognition and an increasing popularity of Mari as well. Additionally, it is necessary to mention the activity of migrated Mari (about 11,000 Mari live in Tyumen region) who often organize cultural ethnic events (like concerts for Mari living with separate groups, ethnic discos, etc.) and develop good cultural connections.

The interest of Russian and, to some extent, world society in Mari that resulted in making feature and documentary films (*Spring* (2010), *Celestial Wives of Meadow Mari* (2013), *Swarm* (2012), etc.) and programs (*Mari Traditional Wedding*, *Early Povetluzhie. Mari*, etc.) by creating the first film studio *Marikino* in the region that makes movies in Mari (*A Pair of Swans above the Village* (2013), *Salika* (2010), etc.)

Training professional artists. Its roots are in 1947 when the College of Culture and Art named after Kliuchnikov-Palantai (the first cultural and educational school) was opened. The opportunity to master skills in ethnic art increased with the creation of the faculty of culture and art at the local university. That also promoted raising the level of cultural development from folk art to modern professional art. Currently, the graduates from related institutions have the opportunity of developing various national musical directions, some of which are rather successful

(like modern Mari pop music) or at the stage of further progress (for example, ethnic rock).

The support of the Ministry of Culture of Mari El. At present, numerous cultural projects (like *Family Archive*, *Alive Springs of Mari El*, etc.) originating in the initiatives of some enthusiastic native people, are now actively supported by the Ministry and other non-governmental organizations.

All these factors in combination with other favourable conditions have gradually had a positive influence on Mari as well as living in the Mari El region, and resulted in the emergence of a feeling of pride of themselves. Undoubtedly, it inspired them to pay more attention to the development of the native culture and continue working in this direction.

6.1. The mechanism of cultural effect on the Mari language maintenance

In essence, the mechanism of the cultural effect on language maintenance is somehow similar to the religious one and can be characterized as psychological. It is possible to observe its impact from some facts. For instance, all organized events where it is possible to perceive speaking, singing and dancing in Mari and where the frequency of speaking the native language is high, have a strong emotional effect on the native population:

I feel delightedness that having opportunity to participate on such cultural events I feel myself as a part of Mari. And I can get more knowledge about traditions, customs, and culture of my native people. (Snežana, 21 y.o.) I was, for example, in Mari Kas (translated as ‘Mari Evening’) and saw that many Mari were ethnically inspired and such getting together was necessary for them. It was natural to be together among people speaking the same language ... I was just happy inside. I liked it. It just raises a spirit. (Inga, 44 y.o.)

That, in its turn, also has a positive impact on people’s attitude to their language. So all that has aided in raising the language prestige among Mari to some extent and, thus, increasing the number of people speaking the mother tongue in different situations: “Such events catalyze the interest to native culture. Besides, they give opportunities to communicate among Mari themselves as non-Mari population not

familiar with Mari language and culture dominates in Yoshkar Ola.” (Aleksandr, 27 y.o.)

However, it is notable that at such festivals the rate of speaking in Mari is not as high as, for example, in pagan religious ceremonies. It can be explained by the fact that such events are attended by people from various ethnic groups who are also interested in Mari culture, so Russian and other languages can also be heard there: “People speak in both languages. Everything depends on the venue.” (Alevtina, 33 y.o.) “People speak in Mari and in Russian” (Inga, 44 y.o.). The second fact is that in the presence of other non-Mari speaking people most native speakers usually switch to Russian so as not to intimidate them by speaking in an incomprehensible language.

As has been stressed already, all cultural activities have an impact on language maintenance. The mechanism of its influence (in common with religion) has the following scheme: cultural event → psychological effect on people → improvement of language attitudes → increasing the number of Mari speakers that is noticeable in cities and townships, especially among Mari. It should also be stressed that the number of Mari speakers increases only in limited spheres of the ethnic society, that is, in cultural and domestic ones. In all other spheres its speaking frequency either decreases (educational, political) or increases slightly (business). Mostly it is caused by the absence of suitable conditions at a formal level for the development of the native language and extension of its domain usage.

7. Conclusion

The current paper outlined the effect of Mari traditional religion and culture on the Mari language development. It has been hypothesized that within continued reduced institutional support, and a pragmatic approach of native speakers to language studying, the processes of cultural and religious development are able to slow down the assimilation of Mari with Russians.

It has been concluded that the effect MTR has is revealed at a social and psychological level via preparation and conducting prayer ceremonies, where communication is always in the native language. Situations with a high rate of speaking in Mari inspire people to continue communication outside of the worshipping in the same language. That, undoubtedly, positively influences the rise of Mari-speaking frequency. Due to the high popularity of Mari culture in Mari

El, the emotional attachment of native speakers to their language becomes stronger as a sensation of pride of the people raises their self-awareness and also makes them speak more frequent in Mari.

Summing up, both the above mentioned factors have similar mechanism of psychological impact on the language development that can be drawn in the following scheme: religious or cultural event → psychological effect on people → improvement of language attitudes → increasing the number of Mari speaking people, particularly noticeable in cities and townships. Such a process is observed only in cultural and domestic spheres of the ethnic society.

In conclusion, one can surely state that spiritual development of Mari society influences positively not only the attitude of Mari to their native language, but the whole ethnic group as well. Though it is early to evaluate the extent to which MTR and culture raised the subjective vitality of Mari, but under further favourable development of this process some definite conclusions can be made.

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Kokkuvõte. Elena Vedernikova: Rahvakultuuri ja -usundi mõju mari keelele. Mari keel on Vene Föderatsiooni ohustatud keeli. Mari keele väljasuremise ohtu mõjutavad nii objektiivsed kui ka subjektiivsed asjaolud. Käesolevas artiklis uuritakse mari rahvausundi ja rahvakultuuri mõju keele säilimisele. Institutsionaalse toetuse pideva vähenemise tõttu on mari keele staatus viimase kümne aasta jooksul tähelepanuväärselt langenud. Rahvakultuuri soodus areng on kaasa toonud emakeelekõnelejate arvu suurenemise Mari Eli piirkonnas (Venemaal). Soodus areng on vähesel määral märgata mõnes valdkonnas (sotsiaalia ja kultuur) ning peaaegu märkamatu teistes (poliitiline ja majanduslik). Mari rahvausundi ja rahvakultuuri toime- mehhanism on psühholoogiline. See annab põhjust uskuda, et mari keele säilitamise võimalused on üpris head.

Märksõnad: keele säilitamine, kultuur, mari rahvausund