The Izhora people of Russia: the strength of a people is not in its number

A century ago, the Izhora people of Russia numbered about 30,000 individuals, but the repression experienced under Stalinism and multiple wars filled this Indigenous community's history with tragedy. Today, they number less than 1000 and mostly live in some 30 villages in an area close to Russia's border with Estonia, just a couple of hours drive from Russia's second largest city, Saint Petersburg. Intensive industrial development on their ancestral territory is posing a serious threat to their survival, but the Izhora remain strong thanks to their determination to preserve their traditions and defend their land.

By Dmitrii Harakka-Zaitsev - June 1st 2022

I was 3 years old when, for the first time in my life, I heard the name of the people Izhora (Ingrians in English, Ingeroist in Izhora language). Walking down our village street toward the sea from our family house, my grandmother said: “Do you know that we have names and words other than in Russian?” She started to tell me the local family names and words in our Ingrian language: Hirvi (elk), Säkki (bag), Harakka (magpie.)

She named our villages explaining that these were Russian names, but in our language we have different ones. “Do you know why?”, she asked rhetorically. “Because we are not Russians, we are Izhora”. That was the starting point for me in the process of self-indentification as an Izhora; discovering my roots, Izhora values and way of life and understanding what our ancestral environment and land are.

A unique culture

Izhora are the original peoples of Ingria, the territory that spans from Lake Ladoga on the east to the Narva River and the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland on the west. Russia’s second largest city, the famous St. Petersburg, was fouded some 300 years ago on lands inhabited by Indigenous Izhora. Nowadays the only surviving Izhora villages – around 30 in total – where Izhora live intermixed with ethnic Russians, Votians and Ingrian Finns, are located close to the border between Russia and Estonia, just a couple of hours by car west of St. Petersburg. The heart of Izhora land today lies in the Soikinsky peninsula and its adjacent areas.
Since ancient times, Izhora have been living at the cultural, trade and political crossroads where this Finno-Ugric people have been interacting not only with their Finno-Ugric kindred, such as Votians, Finns, Estonians and Ingrian Finns, but also with Slavs, Swedes and Balts. Famed seafarers and fishermen, coastal Izhora participated in international commodity exchange and intercultural knowledge-sharing. Just how far in the world Izhora reached is evidenced by the centuries-old use of cowrie shells – originating far away in the Indian Ocean regions – which have been an integral part of Izhora women's traditional costume decoration.

Izhora are often called the “most singing people of the world”. More than 125,000 folk runic poems and songs of different genres were recorded from Izhora traditional singers. And this from a group that numbers only a few hundred individuals! The unique singing tradition survives up until now. Despite Izhora having participated in such intercultural communications and being in relative vicinity to large cities, including St. Petersburg, they have managed to preserve their unique culture over centuries, a unique quality that did not escape the attention of ethnographers.

Some of the first reasearch was carried out in the 18th century by Fyodor Tumansky and Peter Simon Pállas at a time when Izhorian land was part of the vast Russian empire. But even in the 21st century, Izhora and their heritage attracts the interest of folklorists, ethnographers, linguists and anthropologists. Estonian, Russian and Finnish researchers have been attracted to the unique features of our national costume, handicrafts, rural architecture, agricultural techniques, traditional economy, spiritual beliefs, ceremonies, values and worldview.

**From Stalinist regime repression to assimilation**

It is necessary to note that the Izhora population was never umerous. According to modern estimates, by the beginning of the 1930s their numbers were around 27,000 - 30,000 persons. Today they are less than 1,000. The 1930s signified a tragic milestone for the Izhora. In the beginning of 1932 many were dispossessed of their lands and property and forcibly displaced as part of the Soviet policy of collectivization.

In 1937, as the Soviet Union prepared for war with Finland and the country was engulfed with anti-foreign paranoia, many Izhora fell victim to infamous Stalinist regime repression. Izhora were arrested en masse, subjected to forced displacement and many were executed, and all this due to their cultural closeness to Finns. Official documents explicitly refer to the need to “clean
border areas of Finn-kindred population”. Those people were declared “public enemies” and surviving members of their families were subjected to various restrictions, including a ban on higher education.

During World War II, Izhora from the territory occupied by German troops were mostly relocated to Finland. After Finland signed an armistice agreement with the Soviet Union in 1944, most of them returned to the Soviet Union, but instead of going home, they were forcibly relocated to the central regions of the vast country, far from their native villages and prohibited to return to them. The process of political rehabilitation of these “public enemies” and their families began in 1953. It wasn’t until the mid-1950s, after the death of Stalin, that Izhora could begin their return to their ancestral lands; though not all were able to do so.

These tragic pages of Izhorian history became one of the drivers of cultural assimilation. Fearing further repression, Izhora stopped passing on their knowledge, language and heritage to their children. However, even in the circumstances of inter-generational trauma and despite fear, prohibition and other risks, Izhora culture survived – one of the many unique strengths of the Izhora people.

The beginning of Izhora cultural revival started in the 1990s and was marked on the Soikinsky peninsula with the establishment of the Izhora Museum in 1993. Locals and all those who considered the importance to preserve the cultural heritage of the people assembled the various pieces of the museum collection. The people behind the museum believed that the creation of the museum would serve to preserve the rich history and identity of the Izhora people. And in 1995, the Izhora ensemble “Sojkulan Laulut” (Soikinsky folktunes in English) began its work collecting, preserving and spreading awareness of Izhora song folklore.

**New times, new challenges**

In 2005, in order to protect the traditional habitat, traditional economy, language and culture, the Izhora people created their own unique legal entity: the Shojkula Izhora community (in Russian: Territorialno-Obchestvennoe Samospravlenie Izhorskaya Obschina Shojkula).

In many ways, the creation of the formally recognized community was a response to the challenges of the time. Having survived political repression and destructive wars, the Izhora are now confronting the threat, yet again, of losing their ancestral land, traditional habitat and resources. Losing these will inevitably lead to the loss of identity of Izhora as a distinct people.
Izhora people refuse to be turned into a museum exhibit and treated as extinct people. The damage that has already been done over recent decades, but our survival continues to be threatened today with the intensive industrial development of our coastal and inland lands.

Sea port terminals and associated hazardous industries already occupy a significant part of the territories inhabited and used by Indigenous people, most of the forest and marshlands do not exist anymore, and access to the sea has been mostly lost – partly due to industrial and infrastructure developments along the coast, as well as access restrictions. The irreversible destruction of the surrounding nature and traditional environment, high anthropogenic pressure, the impossibility to use traditional natural sites, the destruction of the natural hydrologic system, direct harm to sacred sites, not to mention the moral harm and mental anguish to the Izhora, all threaten the very possibility of Izhora to live on their historical territory.

**Izhora resist**

But the community refuses to give up. Today, it unites Izhora families, promotes cultural values through the support of cultural events and creativity, assists in the search for relatives scattered around the world, and in every possible way supports the process of inter-generational continuity and preservation of the Izhora cultural code.

In the last decade, the Shojkula community began participating in global processes related to Indigenous Peoples’ rights and intercultural communication. It is an active part of the international Finno-Ugric and Samoyed peoples’ cultural cooperation movement, promoting international awareness about Izhora people and their struggle, spreading information and educating at various levels.

One of the priorities of the community is to support positive grassroots-level initiatives focused on the construction of a sustainable socio-cultural environment. Within the framework of the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 three local initiatives were created and implemented which are being further developed today: “Secrets of Votian Museum” ethnographic quest in Izhorian (Ingrian) and Votian languages; Map of Izhora and Votian villages with Indigenous toponimies; and the “Makkuin assija” (Tasty business) project that focuses on researching and popularizing Izhora gastronomy and food systems.
The Shojkula community organizes art exhibitions, workshops, film festivals, seminars and folk groups performances dedicated to displaying the cultural heritage and modern life of the Izhora and other Finno-Ugric peoples.

As the saying goes, numbers do not measure the greatness of a people. It is not necessary for a people to be numerous in order to keep itself strong and keep the strength of its spirit. The strength is in knowing one’s own roots, having confidence and maintaining the stamina of ancestral traditions. The growth of Izhora cultural self-identity, preserved stability of family ties, sustainable cooperation with elders, academia and cultural institutions; and experience exchanges with other Indigenous Peoples give us confidence that we Izhora people will live until the end of the world and even longer.

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