New Forms and Methods of Library Service to Ethnic Groups and Minorities in the Far North of the USSR

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On the example of library activities in the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the author describes the diverse forms and methods of library service to such an unusual category of readers as hunters, reindeer-breeders and fishermen.

Before the Great October Socialist Revolution this region had no State libraries. According to data of the All-Russian census of 1897, there were 7 literates per each 1000 Yakuts and 3 literates per each 1000 persons of other ethnic groups and minorities of the Far North.

In 1922 when the Yakut ASSR was established there existed only 22 libraries with a total bookstock of 3000 volumes in a territory of 3.2 million km². At present the local population (794,000) has at its service 949 State public and departmental libraries with holdings amounting to 8.8 million units of storage. As of January 1, 1977, the reading frequency amounted to 19, attendance to 7.6, circulation to 1.2; this means that the Yakut libraries have almost reached the level characteristic of the Russian Federation. Seventy-three percent of the librarians have received higher and secondary library education. During 1976 the libraries of the republic increased their readership by 16 percent and exceeded their previous book circulation.

Library development in the republic is carried out according to the main trends of its overall economic and cultural development and in conformity with the national, climatic, territorial, and geographic features of individual zones.

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Yakut ASSR constitutes one-sixth of the whole territory of the Russian Federation; one library provides service to residents of a territory nineteen times bigger than in the RSFSR. One library in the northern regions of the republic serves readers populating a territory of approximately 12,000 km², where the native population, comprising such indigenous nationalities as Evens, Evenks, Chukchi and Yukagirs, is occupied with reindeer-breeding, hunting and fishing and lives in small settlements numbering 100-150 residents.

Development of library services in the north of the Yakut ASSR calls for its organization in conformity with the area’s division into industrial and economic districts. The territory includes the tundra zone, chiefly populated by reindeer-breeders, hunters and fishermen, and the zones of forest and mountain tundra, the residents of which are engaged in fur farming, cattle-breeding and horse-breeding.

Libraries of the plain tundra districts serve a professionally narrower circle of rural residents (mostly reindeer-breeders, hunters and fishermen) living out of their settlements near herds, hunting grounds and fishing areas, while libraries of the forest and mountain tundra districts additionally serve cattle- and horse-breeders.

Over 180 public libraries and cultural teams (agitculturbrigades²) extend library service to the peoples of the Far North. The region also boasts of school and technical libraries, as well as libraries attached to political education offices.

District and village libraries located in cities and urban settlements provide service only to workers. Everyday work of stationary village libraries is organized with due regard for traditional domestic and professional requirements of the local population. Thus, in small settlements and reindeer-breeders’ camps with a considerable number of residents, mobile libraries are organized, while at fishing areas delivery posts have proved to be a success. The specific labor conditions of hunters, who live in isolation during the hunting season and seldom assemble at their bases, call for a different approach. Here book peddling proved to be the most rational form of library service. As a rule the fur/skin collectors and the hunters themselves are entrusted by the librarians to act as book peddlers. During the summertime when hunters return to their settlements, they are served by the lending departments of local libraries.

All district and village libraries, irrespective of their location or departmental subordination, conduct mobile library services. In 1976 there were 2077 mobile libraries and 50,000 readers, i.e., about one-sixth of the total number of readers in the republic.
Great assistance to stationary libraries in delivering books to readers is rendered by cultural teams, which provide most effective library service to reindeer-breeders' teams, hunters' teams and remote fishing teams. These cultural teams have replaced the former "red ġums" and carry out educational, cultural and political activities among the peoples of the Far North. If in the past the "red ġums" drawn by reindeer or dogs managed to visit each location usually not more than once or twice a year, now the cultural teams have the opportunity to reach them by helicopter when the need arises, irrespective of seasons. All transport expenditures of cultural teams (700,000-800,000 rubles annually) are covered by the State.

At present these teams operate in 19 districts of the republic. The staff of these teams includes lecturers, projectionists, actors, librarians, and postmen. The teams have no bookstocks of their own, but have free use of the district libraries' holdings.

The task of the librarian in these teams is usually entrusted to the instructor, who prior to his takeoff to the tundra or taiga is provided with twenty to thirty books on different subjects by the district library, where he is given individual consultations on problems related to book propaganda, as well as specific assignments on rendering service to readers.

On the spot, the team not only organizes lectures, discussions and concerts, but also carries out for Evenk, Chukchi, Yukagir, and Yakut listeners oral readings of works of Yakut writers and writers representing ethnic minorities of the Far North. The reindeer-breeders and fishermen derive great pleasure from listening to and discussing such novels as Hanido and Halerha by the Yukagir writer Semen Kurilov, Sleep on the Border of Fog by the Chukchi writer Yury Ritheu, and Destiny by the Yakut writer Nikolay Yakutsy.

With the aim of propagating advanced experience of reindeer-breeders, fishermen and hunters, members of the cultural teams, besides lending books on professional topics, widely use such audiovisual aids as posters, photo albums, and recordings of interviews with advanced workers; they also acquire small collections of books specifically written for reindeer-breeders and representatives of other professions; discussions, surveys and readers' conferences are illustrated by library posters and the audience is offered lists of recommended books.

The libraries of northern districts, aspiring to coordinate their work with the life and professional activities of various production teams or areas, use widely other effective means of visual aids, such as the so-called "folder"—a portable cardboard case (90 x 60 cm) which
contains a set of sheets designed by the staff of district libraries and
cultural departments of local authorities. The contents of these folders
vary according to their purpose. For example, in 1975 one of these
folders compiled by the Nizhnekolymsk district library included the
following lists: "Half-yearly report on the results of Soviet competi-
tion"; "The best komsomol team: its everyday life, work and pursuits";
"The meeting in Space"; "The glory of these days is everlasting";
"Books about your native land"; "Yakuts—Heroes of the Soviet
Union," etc. The subject matter of these lists is extensive, but each folder
must always include the following lists: "Political and cultural news,"
"On socialist competition," "Advanced experience," as well as small
collections of books for reindeer-breeders or hunters and lists of recom-
manded literature.

Many district libraries prepare special radio programs timed to
celebrate memorable dates and anniversaries. Thus, the staff of the
Nizhnekolymsk district library is currently engaged in the preparation
of a radio program entitled "Aurora Borealis." As a rule such programs
include talks accompanied by poetry recitations and music. For exam-
ple, a radio program of 1975 entitled "The mother's role" included
stories about the mother of N. Ostrovsky 1 and women of the Yakut
ASSR. Tundra residents showed great interest in a literary and musical
composition on A.S. Pushkin titled "The Glory of Russian Poetry,"
and a talk on the works of Semyon Danilov, winner of M. Gorky award
for the best literary work, "Son of the North."

During the last few years the so-called "talking books" have
become widely used. These "books" represent collections of sound
recordings of works of fiction, popular songs, music, etc. in one of the
languages of the peoples of the Far North. The first of these collections
was composed in the Evenk language and included stories of such
Evenk writers as V.D. Lebedev, A.V. Keimetinov, and A.V. Krivoshap-
kin; poems by P.A. Stepanov-Lamutsky, A.N. Shadrin-Kolymsky, E.M.
Mikulin, V.D. Lebedev, H. Suzdalov, and E. Yedukin; items of amateur
performances; songs and legends of popular story-tellers; and short
interludes, satirical quotations and riddles. With certain amendments
this collection amounted to 175 pages and took 10 hours. Later, after a
selection, three independent "books" were compiled on the basis of
this collection; each of them was recorded in ten or fifteen copies and
given to cultural teams.

The first hearings carried out in the Yakut ASSR and in a number
of districts in the Magadan Region showed that the "talking book" was
an effective and easy-to-understand means of propagating literature
among ethnic groups and minorities of the Far North.
First, in comparison with traditional publications “talking books” have the advantage of being easy to compile and easy to understand irrespective of the age or literacy level of the audience. If the process of publishing books and making them available to readers is time-consuming, the compilation of “talking books” is rapid and requires no expense. The hearings of such books can be organized not only in big lecture halls, but in tents of solitary hunters. Second, the recorded contents can always be renovated, renewed and substituted, depending on the specific aims of each “book.” Such flexibility allows them to retain their topical interest and to be composed with due regard for the peculiarities of the manner of speech or dialect of the population for which each hearing is organized. Third, as the materials offered are given in spoken language, this simplifies their understanding by the audience. The emotional impact of “talking books” is enormous; however, they by no means compete with printed books; on the contrary, they become the latter’s helpmates.

All the libraries of the region are constantly searching for new forms and methods of providing library service to the population of the tundra, forest tundra and mountain tundra zones, and especially to the minorities of the Far North. This search is conducted under the guidance of the A.S. Pushkin Yakut Republican library, which is the organization and coordinating center for guiding the activities of all public and departmental libraries of the Yakut ASSR.

The specific conditions of the dispersed settling, labor and mode of life of hunters, reindeer-breeders and fishermen, most of whom are representatives of ethnic groups and minorities, limit the possibility of using traditional forms of library service to this category of readers. Therefore, the Yakut Republican library is in constant quest of means for the optimization of library service to residents of northern districts and, at the same time, of solving the following problems:

1. studying reading needs of minorities residing in the republic;
2. defining optimal forms of service and book propaganda among the peoples of the Far North; and
3. verifying the expediency and effectiveness of “talking books” in the languages of the ethnic groups and minorities populating this area.

A certain clarity in solving these problems from the organizational point of view will be achieved after accomplishing the centralization of the library network in conditions of the Far North. If the central and southern districts of the republic boast of eight centralized networks, the work on library centralization in the northern districts has only begun. In this activity, which calls for a serious and creative approach, the
Yakut ASSR receives guidance and assistance from the Ministry of culture of the Russian Federation and the M.E. Saltykov-Schedrin State public library. In 1976 they began an experiment on centralizing the library network of the Far North on the basis of the Verkhoyansk district. Specific recommendations founded on the results of this experiment will be available later.

As for local experience, this is accumulated and studied by departments of the Republican library and its recently established sector of literature of the peoples of the Far North.

To determine the reading requirements of ethnic groups and minorities, in 1971-1973 the library conducted a study of reading interests of Yukagirs populating the village Nelemny of the Verkhne Kolymsk district. The results showed that the Yukagirs read twice as many books and visit the Nelemny library more frequently than all the other readers. This shows that during the years of Soviet power a minority that was completely illiterate before the October Revolution has been given free access to cultural life, that reading for Yukagirs as for all Soviet people has become not only a spiritual necessity, but a key to education and acquiring knowledge of the world at large. The results of the experiment have also made apparent that the Yukagirs' choice of reading material is directly dependent on the quality of book acquisition in the library, and that efficient restocking of its holdings would greatly increase their choice of books.

In the framework of the all-Russian experiment on library and bibliographical services to ethnic groups and minorities, the staff of one of the specialized sectors of the library is currently engaged in research in three Evenk villages: in Zolotynka of the Nuringrynsky district, on revealing readers needs; in Tyanya of the Olekminsky district, on defining optimal forms of library service; and in Kutan of the Aldansky district, on the use of "talking books." Summing up the results of the experiment, the sector will draw up scientifically substantiated recommendations with methodological guidelines for the optimization of library service to ethnic groups and minorities of the Far North (including recommendations on the building up of library book holdings and the methodology of book propaganda), on the use of "talking books" for propagating the multinational Soviet literature among the peoples of the Far North. These recommendations will be submitted to the Ministries of culture of the Yakut ASSR and the Russian Federation. Agencies of the USSR State Committee for printing, publishing and book trade affairs will draw their conclusions concerning the quantity and content of literature to be published in the languages of the peoples of the Far North.

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There is no doubt that all these complicated problems of improving library service in the republic will be solved properly and opportunely. This certainty is based on the knowledge that the republics' libraries are staffed by experienced and highly qualified librarians, and that they can count on the unfailing support and assistance of the appropriate party and Soviet bodies.

References

1. ASSR: An autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic which forms a part of a Socialist Republic, but solves all problems concerning local administration independently.
2. Agitcultbrigade: A special team for the propaganda of cultural, educational and political knowledge.
4. N. Ostrovsky (1904-1936): famous Soviet writer who—blind and paralyzed—wrote an autobiographical novel, How the Steel Was Tempered, of astonishing courage and self-command, which to this day rouses unremitting interest and admiration.