Shor

Location: Kemerovo Administrative Region, (South Central Siberia), Russian Federation.
Total population: estimated at 12,585 in 1989.
Languages: Shor, Russian.
Religion: Orthodox Christian, formerly Animist.

The Shor are an indigenous people of Siberia who inhabit forested regions in the foothills of the northern Altai mountain range of southern Siberia. Traditionally hunters and gatherers of the vast Siberian boreal forests, many Shor now live mixed among the Russian population in an urban, industrialized setting in the Kuzbass, Russia's largest coal producing region.

The Shor belong linguistically to the large and dispersed family of Turkic peoples, and have ethnic ancestry linking them to other, non-Turkic Siberian peoples, most likely Ob-Ugrian and Yeniseyan peoples. They have mixed in recent decades with the Russian-speaking population of Siberia and are becoming increasingly Russified. The Soviet census of 1979 counted 15,000 Shor, including 9,760 mother tongue speakers (61%). By 1989, the census found a reduced number of 12,585. In 1998, the Shor themselves estimated their numbers to be only a few thousand, in the absence of any official count. There are reportedly only three small villages in Kemerovo district where the Shor are still concentrated as a majority population.

The current number of fluent speakers of Shor is probably under 1,000, and the language is severely endangered. Even in villages where the Shor form a majority, children are no longer acquiring Shor as their mother tongue. This fact is greatly regretted by the older generation, yet they also express a desire for their children to speak Russian in order to succeed. Given the current demographic situation, the language is likely to disappear within a generation or two. As the language goes, the rich oral traditions of the Shor will likely be forgotten. These include myths, songs and stories connected with the bear cult, hunting, shamanism, and an animistic world view.

The Shor were traditionally hunters, fishers and gatherers, who practiced agriculture and animal domestication to a much lesser degree. As with all Siberian peoples, hunting would have been a highly ritualized activity for the Shor, due to its connections to forest places and to animals—especially the bear—regarded as having spiritual significance. Spoils of hunting were shared among an extended kinship collective, as a way of counterbalancing the risk that an individual hunter might find no game on a particular outing. Men hunted in the winter, spending many days or weeks hiking or skiing through the forests. Hunting provided not only meat, a primary source of food, but also valuable furs. A portion of furs was paid in tribute to more powerful neighboring groups. In early times these would have included the Mongols, and after the 17th century, primarily Russians.

As Siberia was colonized by the Russians from the 17th century onwards, the Shor became scattered in small pockets amongst the larger population. As recently as the 1920's the Shor lacked any unifying ethnic identity, and identified more closely with traditional clan groupings (known as söök). Knowledge of one’s clan membership was necessary to avoid marrying within the clan, which was forbidden.

The Shor lacked any standardized language, writing system or cohesive political identity until the 20th century. In the later half of the 20th century the Shor were given a standard literary language, based on the Mras dialect, with elements of Shor dialect and Chulym dialect. For a brief period, the standard language came to be used in native-language schools and in over one hundred published books. This brief flowering of a Shor literary culture was followed by a period of severe repression of culture and language. During 1937 to 1945, Shor-language schools were shut down and in 1942 the Shor language newspaper called Kyzl Shor ('The Red Shor) ceased publication. Subsequently, the Shor stopped using their language for publishing, public functions or school instruction, and used it only as a home language.

In the modern era, not only the Shor language, but the Shor people themselves have been politically marginalized. They never truly wielded administrative control over their own lands and people. As a token gesture towards the Shor minority, the Soviet state established a Shor National Region, called Gornaya ('mountain') Shoria, in 1929. The indigenous Shor population may have comprised a majority at the time of creation of this national administrative unit. But a rapid influx of Russian and other immigrant settlers during the early years of the Soviet industrialization drive quickly reduced them to a minority in their own titular region. The Shor National Region was ultimately disbanded in 1939, and the land ceded to Kemerovo province.
It was not until the era of *perestroika* that some Shor felt free to express their linguistic and cultural identity once again. With help from Russian and other scholars, they undertook a revival of the literary language and began using it in publishing, pedagogy and other social functions. A language association was founded, and in 1988, a chair of Shor Language and Literature was created at the State Pedagogical Institute in Novokuznetsk, the provincial capital. This institute offers teacher training in the Shor language and literature. Within a year of its founding, teachers of various subjects who were themselves Shor began to teach Shor in some small village schools. Still, progress towards self-determination and ethnic autonomy has been quite modest. Attempts at reviving the Shor literary language show only minimal prospects for success, as the generation of Shor under age 30 have already become fully monolingual Russian speakers.

The Shor still have official state recognition as a 'small-numbering' minority people of Russia, which allows them certain rights of participation in cultural and political groups and activities. But these small concessions cannot in any way counter the enormous social pressures causing the Shor to become fully Russified in culture and language, and thereby to lose their language and ethnic identity. Like most indigenous Siberian peoples, the Shor now face the likely prospect of full assimilation into the dominant Russian culture in the near future.

K. David Harrison