The Soviet Union never recognized central Siberia's Chulym as a distinct ethnic
group, ignored the uniqueness of their language and refused to allow them to
device their own writing system. During decades of assimilation, they almost
disappeared as a people.

Today's Russia has granted them status as an indigenous community, and
last summer Swarthmore College linguist K. David Harrison recorded the
Middle Chulym language for the first time.

"The language is essentially new to science," Harrison said in an interview
from his Philadelphia home. "When we first went there, we didn't know whether
there were any speakers left at all." The Chulym people are congregated in six
isolated villages near central Siberia's Chulym river, Harrison said. The closest
large city is Tomsk.

Harrison said the Chulym tribal council had registered 426 members, but of
that number, only 46 were fluent Chulym speakers, and the youngest of these
was 52. Chulym is thus a "moribund" language with no child speakers,
probably destined to disappear.

"Some of the younger people have some passable knowledge of Chulym,"
Harrison said. "But Russian is the first language."

Harrison said the Chulym are an Asian people who traditionally lived as
hunters, gatherers and fishermen. Middle Chulym, a Turkic language, has a
rich vocabulary describing local medicinal plants, animal behavior and
weather: "One of the things we're interested in is how specialized knowledge is
embedded in a language," Harrison said. "All of that will be gone."

-- Guy Gugliotta
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