VOICES FROM THE TUNDRA

THE LAST OF THE YUKAGIRS

A film by Edwin Trommelen & Paul Enkelaar

Info: c.ode@uva.nl
In the Russian Republic Sakha (Yakutia), above the Arctic Circle, live the Tundra Yukagirs, nomadic reindeer herders. Sixty-three of them still speak Yukagir, a uniquely musical language that turns melodic as storytellers relate traditional tales of Yukagir history. Only two elderly masters of this skill remain. Amsterdam linguist dr. Cecilia Odé has made repeated trips to the remote corner of eastern Siberia that the Yukagirs call home to capture their language and preserve it for posterity. A diagnosis of metastatic cancer threatened to end these trips, but a period of remission enabled her to return to the land of the Yukagirs once again.

Cecilia’s journey features all the ingredients of a fascinating and inspiring documentary: a dedicated scholar whose life work is to preserve a vanishing language; a people torn between age-old traditions and the challenges of subsistence in the brutal cold of Siberia and, on the other hand, the seductions of a more comfortable life in the region’s towns and cities; the primeval power of the songs retained by aged Yukagirs raised by parents who could recall pre-Soviet times and hopeful scenes of schoolchildren learning their ancestral language using materials developed with Cecilia’s help; the romance of lassos, reindeer herds, and deerskin tents pitched on the ice.

But the film’s strongest asset is the heart-warming friendship that has developed between Cecilia and the Yukagirs. This friendship allows the filmmakers to enter the Yukagir community in an unforced manner and gain access to the people’s innermost thoughts. The trust and confidence developed through Cecilia’s longstanding relationships with members of the Yukagir community enable the filmmakers to produce a compellingly genuine portrait of extraordinary people living their lives in distant Siberia and capture frank discussions about their disappearing language, their traditional way of life, and their efforts to keep their culture alive.