The ethnic groups comprising the Tungus ethnocultural complex that are officially recognized in Russia are the Ewenki, formerly known as the Tungus proper, and Ewen, formerly Lamut; however, this division often appears to be artificial and unrelated to cultural and linguistic differences. The Tungus themselves, until their absorption into the Russian or Soviet administrative institutions, did not differentiate between the two, generally basing their identities on local areas and lineage memberships. The Orochon of southeastern Siberia, though of the same general cultural and linguistic stock as the Ewenki and Ewen, generally consider themselves, and are often in the Russian-language ethnographic literature treated, as a separate ethnic group. Officially, they are treated as an Ewenki subgroup in Russia, while in China the Oroqen and Ewenki are classified as separate ethnic minorities. From the linguistic and ethnogenetic viewpoints, the Negidal who live along the Amgun river, an Amur left tributary, are also basically a Tungus subgroup, but from the cultural standpoint they are close to the Amur-Sakhalin culture area, especially those of the lower course of the Amgun that borders Ulcha and Nivkh territories. In the Amur valley, the Managir, Solon/Horse Tungus, Samar/Samagir and Kile/Kilen were often classified as separate ethnic groups linked with the Tungus, but since the early 20th century the Managir and Solon have become regarded as clusters of Tungus/Ewenki-descended clans while the Samar and Kile now consider themselves to be Nanay lineages of Tungus/Ewenki descent.

The Tungus phenomenal expansion over vast territories of North and Northeast Asia is comparable to the Polynesian dispersal over equally long distances in the South Pacific. In the same way as the outrigger canoe was indispensable for the Polynesian navigators colonizing the islands of the South Pacific, the Tungus would be unable to accomplish their feat without the use of the reindeer as a means of transport. But unlike the Polynesians who colonized empty islands, the Tungus everywhere encountered indigenous Paleoasiatic communities who they gradually assimilated and whose cultural characteristics they absorbed and in varying degrees adapted into their own cultural system. Therefore, the Tungus people cannot be considered direct heirs of an ancestral proto-Tungusic speaking population in spite of the fact that their language belongs to the Tungusic family. Like the peoples of the Amur complex, whose basic
culture goes back to the lower Amur valley Neolithic in spite of the Tungusic languages they speak, whose original homeland was in Manchuria, the Tungus cultural roots should likewise be searched locally and independently from the language they use. Thus while their language has its roots together with other Tungusic languages in Manchuria, the Tungus as an ethnic group with its typical hunting culture were formed in the Trans-Baikal Yablonovyy and Stanovoy mountain ranges. These forested mountains had been occupied since the Paleolithic period by various hunting groups whose linguistic affiliation is impossible to ascertain. A cultural (though not yet linguistic) continuity with the ethnographic Tungus is increasingly visible since the late Neolithic era, initially as pedestrian forest hunters focusing on the wild reindeer. Their ethnic identity as Tungus-speaking highly mobile hunters mounted on the domesticated reindeer begins to emerge only since the middle of the 1st millennium AD. Although the contemporary Tungus are linguistically fairly homogeneous, their culture displays a large amount of regional variations that are based not only on local ecological adaptations, but also on various cultural strata attributable to assimilated autochthonous groups as well as later migrants of Mongol and Turkic backgrounds whom the Tungus also absorbed. In spite of the local cultural and dialectal differences and often separate ethnic identities and autonyms, the Tungus complex should be seen as an integral whole that has culturally consolidated itself during the great migrations and territorial expansion lasting almost one millennium, when individual Tungus groups continuously separated from and merged with each other to form new lineages, clans and clan clusters.

The Tungus culture which is based on hunting is ancient as it shows continuity with Neolithic cultures of east Siberian taiga hunters and similarity to surviving local Paleoasiatic cultures such as that of the Yukagir. On the other hand, the Tungus, along with the west Siberian Uralic-speaking peoples, developed pastoral nomadism based on reindeer breeding during the late 1st millennium AD, which enabled them to colonize vast territories and assimilate local hunting and fishing peoples, and induce a culture and language change along the way. From this point of view, the Tungus are often considered a young ethnic group in comparison to the generally non-pastoralist and sedentary pre-Tungus aboriginal ethnic groups. To distinguish them from these so-called Paleoasiatic (or Paleosiberian) peoples, some anthropologists (e.g. Czaplicka 1914) employed the term “Neosiberian” to classify the Tungus, the Turkic-speaking Sakha (formerly called Yakut), who became the dominant force in the valleys of major rivers of eastern Siberia in the period between the 13th and 15th centuries, and the Uralic-speaking peoples of western Siberia, most of whom are likewise nomadic pastoralists. This dichotomy, however, cannot be