

## **THE STORY OF LIFE IN MUSIC: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SONGS OF THE NGANASANS**

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In the traditional music of North Siberian peoples one can find songs that belong to a concrete person. The content of these songs is autobiographical. This musical genre may have its roots in very early history. Analogous songs make up an important part of the musical heritage of those Northern American indigenous peoples who lost contact with Eurasia thousands of years ago. Supposedly the final wave of large-scale migration from Siberia to the New World took place no later than in 8000 BC (Driver 1970: 15).

The first written records marking the existence of autobiographical songs among Siberian peoples date back to the 19th century. The earliest researchers of Siberian culture refer to these songs. For instance, Vladimir Bogoraz, a linguist and ethnographer who stayed in Tshukotka during the 1890s, reports that every Chukchi family or even every member of the family used to have their own song. Some of these were very old, since they had been passed on through inheritance, while others had been created by contemporaries (Bogoraz 1934 [1904–1909]: 23). The earliest observations on Samoyed songs appear in the notes of Matias Aleksanteri Castrén, whose travels to Siberia took place even earlier (1838–1849). Although his focus was mainly on linguistics, his manuscripts also contain notations of Nenets songs; these are actually likely to be similar to the songs described by Bogoraz.

The first half of the 20th century already provides somewhat more accurate information on autobiographical songs. This was the time when the first song texts and genre descriptions appeared in print, and also genre names were given. In 1901–1906 Finnish linguist and folklorist Juha Artturi Kannisto, organised expeditions to visit the Mansis. He denoted autobiographical songs as fate songs. J. A. Kannisto characterizes these as lyric songs, where the moods, experiences and fate of the author (a man or a woman) are described. He adds that these songs are also called vodka-drinking songs, since

<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol21/songs.pdf>

they are often performed when “the vodka has opened the mouth and the heart” (Kannisto 1930: 203). However, according to J. A. Kannisto, Mansis themselves call these simply Mansi songs.

The term *Rauschlied* began to spread primarily through Toivo Lehtisalo, who used this to refer to the autobiographical songs of the Tundra Nenets, e.g. *jabe'ma Katarina Marennisnya* ‘Rauschlied der Katerina Marennisnya’ (Lehtisalo 1947: 570). This is a translation of a vernacular Tundra Nenets term. Péter Hajdú also uses the term *Rauschlied*, explaining that the corresponding term in Nenets is *jabe'ma* and in Nganasan *bala* (Hajdu 1963: 38).<sup>1</sup>

Since World War II, the small peoples of Siberia have mainly been studied by Russian scholars. In 1962 linguists who worked in the Institute of Slavic Languages of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, organised an expedition to commemorate M. A. Castrén as a distinguished researcher of Siberian languages. The improvised songs of the Siberian and Far Eastern peoples were called personal songs (in Russian *litshnaya pesnya*) by the members of the expedition, because of their autobiographical content.

At about the same time (in the 1960s) the term *personal song* (also *private song*) became widely used in American ethnomusicology. The term mainly appeared in the writings of Allan P. Merriam in relation with Indian music (e.g. Merriam 1967). Ramón Pelinski, a Canadian researcher, adopted the term ‘chant personnel’ to refer to the *ajaje*-songs of the Inuits (Pelinski 1981). With respect to content and creation principles, both Indian and Inuit songs show a general resemblance with the songs of the Siberian peoples.

In the 1970s the term *litshnaya pesnya* began to spread among Russian ethnomusicologists and ethnographers and through them it also became familiar to the culture carriers themselves. Other terms followed, such as *song-autobiography* (Brodski 1976: 244) and *memory song* (Lytkin 1982: 150). All of these converge on the fact that the song retells the life events of a concrete person. In the 1990s *personal song* has been the preferred term among folklorists and ethnomusicologists (e.g. Pushkariova 1990; Niemi 1998, he also uses other terms).

Leaving aside this terminological tangle, which could serve as the subject for another study, we have found all scholars to confirm unanimously that these songs, no matter how one names them, reflect more or less the life events of the creator or the owner of the song. Thus personal songs could be viewed as a source of family tradition.

The following article discusses Nganasan personal songs or *hankudya baly* as they call these themselves. The article is based on the field-work materials collected from the Taimyr Peninsula in 1983–1990. The article aims to demonstrate the kinds of biographical data personal songs contain and to analyse how accurate or truthful the picture created by the owner of the song actually is.

#### NGANASAN PERSONAL SONGS

The life of the Nganasans is most directly connected to music from earliest childhood. In addition to lullabies that are sung to infants – as is customary in every culture – a personal song is created and granted to a child by one of the parents or grandparents. This is done after a child is named. The text of the song is short: it contains the name of the child and tells something characteristic about him/her. Usually these two are identical, because the name of the child can convey the special characteristics of the child, e.g. Marsymyaku (Little Shoulder; diminutive of the word *marsy* ‘shoulder’) is a name that was given to a boy who had a habit of looking over his shoulder. Marsymyaku died when he was a young man, and his relatives explain that when looking over his shoulder he must have always seen his spirit, thus being aware ahead of time of his early departure to the world of the spirits.<sup>2</sup> The expression of the child’s personal characteristics is one of the important aspects often emphasised in relation with these songs in ethnomusicological literature. In fact, the so-called personal characteristics described in these songs are often rather impersonal, as is demonstrated by the following song text:<sup>3</sup>

Tells:  
*Taibulaku-woman,*  
*a cradle woman,*

*the woman whines  
for every thing, every thing.*

Apart from the name, this song could perhaps serve to describe any child. Thus, from the perspective of family tradition, nursery songs are not particularly informative: short life, short song.

As an adult, an Nganasan becomes the owner of yet another song. Every Nganasan, a man or a woman, creates this song by him/herself. It accompanies an Nganasan throughout his life. The text of the song stores in memory its owners' thoughts and feelings, more important life events and sometimes family members. If not all, then certainly some of the songs adhere to the principle – the longer the person's life, the longer the song. In any case, compared to nursery songs, these songs are much more characteristic and – what is most essential from the perspective of family tradition – also richer in facts.

Nganasans call these songs *hankupsyama balyma* ('my when-I-drink song'), *hankutuo baly* ('getting-drunk song') or *hankudya baly* ('being-drunk song'). These are the different forms of the same term that I have noted down from my informants during my fieldworks. In addition, these songs can simply be called *baly* together with the name of the song owner or a personal pronoun (e.g. *mana balyma* 'my song') (Ojamaa 1990: 3–4). Behind all of these terms there is, however, one concrete song. The text of the song can vary considerably according to the situation. Below I will use the term *hankudya baly*, as this is the term most widely used among Nganasans.

*Hankudya baly* serves a twofold function in the life of Nganasans. On the one hand, it identifies the person. The text of the song usually mentions the author of the song or the owner. The song can start with a traditional introductory formula, e.g. *Dulsymyaku muntu* 'Dulsymyaku tells'. However, such direct expressions are hardly ever used in reality – in most cases only when someone is singing the song of a person who belongs to another family. One's own song begins with the words *I tell* (*start to tell*), and when singing songs of other family members family, related words are used; therefore, in order to identify a song's owner, one needs to know the actual family relations. As the occurrence of the name in the

text is not obligatory, melody plays a more important role in identifying the owner.

The connection between a melody and a certain person is known to everyone close to the owner of the song. It can be hummed or sung with asemantic syllables – this is sometimes done when somebody is thinking of that person. Thus, *hankudya baly* is like a sign or a symbol of the owner. The song's melody can also refer to the ancestry of the owner. For example, Numumu Turdagin (born 1915) has said about the melody of his father's song that this was in the Nenets manner, because more than two generations back there had been Nenets in his family. The formal sources of Numumu's pedigree indicate that the name of his father (born 1883) was Bargan, her mother descended from the Porbin family (both Nganasans). Earlier data is lacking (Afanaseva 1990). Perhaps the melody of his father's song has indeed stored some references to the earlier branches of the family, but this is reflected neither in the text of the song nor in other sources.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, every *hankudya baly*, where the author in general terms speaks about his or her life events, is most directly a piece of family history, and here the text of the song obviously plays a more important role than the melody. This kind of "family chronicle" ends largely with those who are presently middle-aged, since among younger people the tradition of song writing is no longer popular. Thus in today's context the claim that every Nganasan has this kind of song would clearly be an overstatement. The genre as such, however, is far from perishing. Whereas hero epics (*sitabi*) are sung/told only when specifically asked for by researchers (even this happens less and less as only a few Nganasans are able to perform hero songs today), the *hankudya baly*, which does not make any great demands on a singer's vocal abilities, is still commonly sung in some situations. This is done when somebody has relatives and friends gathered in his home, who then spend the evening together, usually in the course of drinking alcohol. I have also by chance witnessed several cases of Nganasans singing their songs while alone.

## WHAT IS TOLD BY THE SONGS OF ONE FAMILY

From the perspective of family tradition, the most fascinating songs are those of the members of shaman families. These people are good singers, they have close ties with traditional culture and very strong kinship bonds or feelings of solidarity. This means that in addition to their personal song, they can also sing the songs of relatives, either living or long deceased. When regarding these as a unitary set of songs, a colourful picture of the positions of related people within the family, the turning points and tangles of their lives and interweaving interests spread open before us, that, taken together, is what makes up the story of a family.

The examples of songs in the present article belong to the song repertoire of the Kosterkins. Fieldwork has enabled me to record the songs of Dyukhade Kosterkin, his sons, Demnime and Tubyaku, their wives, children and grandchildren. Both Dyukhade and his sons practised as shamans.<sup>5</sup>



*Photo 1. Demnime Kosterkin (in the middle) with his wife Hyarku, daughters Nina and Jevdokia, son Volodia and grandson Igor. The photographer is unknown.<sup>6</sup>*

Unfortunately this picture does not show Dulsymyaku (born 1940), the son of Demnime, who after the death of his father kept alive his songs and was also knowledgeable of Demnime's incantational tech-

niques. Also Faina Turdagina (born 1952) is not here – she was the wife of Dulsymyaku whom he began to live with only in 1984. From all songs that I have been able to record, namely Faina's *hankudya baly* is the one that most clearly expresses the nature of this genre and at the same time shows what kind of biographical data can be found in the texts of the song.

I recorded Faina's *hankudya baly* in a tea-table atmosphere. Dulsymyaku was also present. During the singing, he was an active partner to his wife, which is the reason why the performance resembled a dialogue (Dulsymyaku's responses are presented in brackets both in the notation and in text translations). This custom comes from the tradition of singing/telling hero tales: here the listeners do not play a passive role – they can ask questions requesting details, express surprise, approval, etc.

Hankudya baly of *Faina Turdagina*

*I begin to tell you of my life.*

*(You tell.)*

*Retell my life?*

*When I was in Volotshanka, I was growing up, I lived there.*

*There were conic tents, there were.*

*The father left his children [behind] – in Volotshanka.*

*But now*

*To Ust-Avam<sup>7</sup> I moved.*

*(You came...)*

*Here I came, settled down.*

*(Here in bad or good...)*

*... with one child I began to live.*

*Here I live.*

*Now I get drunk.<sup>8</sup>*

*(Bad or good, living badly or well.)*

*Living badly or well*

*(How will my life be henceforth?)*

*How will my life be henceforth?*

*(No matter how I am going to live, well we are going to live.)*

*No matter how I am going to live, well we are going to live.*

*Then say, I say*

*(Ancient...)*

*Ancient is my grandmother's song, ancient.*

1. n' i - i - e - i - e a - au - am ma - na - a - ga ni - i - e - e - e - pu - s - am - ma - a - a a

2. i - e - e - e bi - s - am - ma - a wo - o kun - da - a dap - tu - u - o - ra - a - a -

3. mu - u o man - na - ar - ga dap - tu - u - o ra - a - a - mu - u - ra  
 ma - nu tas - e - e - e - nen - na - e wo - o - o - on - gar - la - ça - a - an - ka ti - i - e i - e - e - e

4. ta - ni - ei ra ba - da - a - a - du - u - q - a - a - a - d' a - a - a - om - ma ta - ni - i - ir - ga  
 n' i - i - e - i - e - ka tan - n' i - i - e  
 n' i - i - e - i - e - d' i - i - e - d' a - a

Example 1. Hankudya baly of Faina Turdagina. Continued on facing page.

5. tañ-n'í-jei - n'í-be ie-ç - çu-u - o-o-o mã-ðu-o - n'ei-ç ie - s'tu-o - o-o-ouh

6. n'ú-kü - na - a-a-m-d'a d'é-e-e - jem - ma-xi d'é - e-ma ko-i-ç -

7. ma - ah-a vâ-lâ - o - o - ç-a-a - a - ân - kâh-a-n'í e-e

8. â-ma t'ç-m-ç-i-e - ne-e-a a-â-om  
us't-a-vam o ho ñai ko-o-o - rut-t'ie ie-çj ko-ru-u - üt-tu-u-o-o - tu-o-â-âm-mah

9. tu-s'í - o - â - a - o - om am-ma-a n'í-ç-e - i - li - ja - a - o - o - om-ma  
man-na - a n'í-ç-e - ie - li - ja - am

Example 1. Hankudya baly of Faina Turdagina. Continued from facing page.

*My mother's song.  
My mother said:  
one of my babies,  
one of my lasses<sup>9</sup> after the days [of my life],  
my baby begins to cry.<sup>10</sup>  
One of my babies does not know Russian words,  
does not know them*

*(A name, name, well.)  
A name called grandmother, that's what she's called.<sup>11</sup>  
A woman lovelier from the cradle the baby, higher from the cradle<sup>12</sup>  
A woman, Darsymyaku by name.*

In contrast to Faina's *hankudya baly*, that of the usually very talkative Dulsymyaku proved to be much less informative. Dulsymyaku created his own song at the age of 28. The contents of the song (or the contents of the version he sang to me during the recording) were not at all of a personal nature. The song describes the changes in tundra life (e.g. instead of reindeers, people now ride snowmobiles, and there is even a tractor in the village) and expresses the hope that his children's fate would be happier and in the future the life of all people would become even better.

Dulsymyaku borrowed the melody of his song from the repertoire of Demnime's shamanic melodies. The melody of his sister Nina's song (she was born in 1943) also comes from the same source, and Nina's song as a whole is very directly connected to Demnime. Four recordings have been made of Nina's song during the period 1983–1989. With respect to both the melody and the text, these serve as very good examples of an Nganasan *hankudya baly*; however, the owner's refusal to give consent because of the intimate contents unfortunately prevents me from printing it. Nina made her song after a serious illness. It was the spring of 1962 and the time when the ice breaks up on rivers. The family was on its way from the winter camp in the tundra (photo 1) to the village of Ust-Avam. Nina suffered from severe headaches, and she was lying on the *narta* (reindeer sledge) nearly unconscious. She needed medical aid. The breaking of the ice made it impossible to cross the river with *narta*, but the village was located on the other side of the river. Demnime, Nina's father, decided to heal Nina by incantation, since

he did not want to be less of a man than Soviet doctors. He incanted for several days. Nina heard him repeatedly singing the Sungirl song (*Kou Kopta baly*).<sup>13</sup> Recovered from her illness, Nina made a song for herself, in which she told about her illness, and she sang this with the Sungirl melody. Nina always starts her song with this life episode. Over the years other events and facts have been added to the song, e.g. about Nina's son Igor, the latter's father, about learning the saleswoman's vocation, about marrying a Russian, about life in Saratov and return to the home village.

Demnime's older daughter, Jevdokia (born 1938) also remembers in detail the time and particulars of the creation of her own song – she made it after she got married, and she also composed the melody of her song by herself. In terms of content, the text of Jevdokia's song is quite similar to Faina's. It gives a short overview of the main events of her life, also of those that happened before she got married, that is, before the creation of her song. The content, in sum, is as follows: her father [Demnime] was not poor. He hunted arctic foxes. I began to attend school, travelled to Dudinka.<sup>14</sup> Then mother fell ill. I had younger sisters and brothers – Nina, Dulsymyaku and Marsymyaku. I lived in the tundra again. I wedded a projectionist named Kunduli, who was an Nganasan like me. We moved to a village. We had four children. Two children are studying in Leningrad and two are at home. Then I lived alone for seven years and remarried to a Russian construction worker.

#### **ABOUT THE VERACITY OF *HANKUDYA BALY***

The songs of Kosterkins, who died before 1983 when I began my fieldwork on Taimyr, have been recorded as performed by a relative of the author or owner of the song. I designate the situation where someone is singing a *hankudya baly* that belongs to another person as a secondary performance and the song as a secondary variant. The situation of the performance of Faina's song (Example 1) clearly shows us that close people are familiar with the author's text: with his swift reasoning, Dulsymyaku virtually prompts words to his slower wife. Thus the author's text is retained in the memory of family members and biographical data available there is known or well remembered by them. However, there is reason to suspect that in secondary variants Nganasans actually modify the author's

text quite considerably, including their own thoughts and memories of the song owner. Thus, songs are born where the melody belongs to one and the text, at least in part, to another author. It should be mentioned here that despite modification of the text, for Nganasans a secondary variant does not become a new song, but remains the *hankudya baly* of the person who created the song's melody.

Two secondary variants of Demnime Kosterkin's *hankudya baly* were sung by his brother Tubyaku Kosterkin. The melody of both secondary variants remains the same, but the texts are entirely different. The songs discuss the relationships between family members, which were complicated by property disputes and other issues revealed by the following text fragments:

*Hankudya baly of Demnime Kosterkin (a fragment from secondary variant I)*

*The woman of Ningeingaku*<sup>15</sup>  
*I did not take from Marsymyaku.*<sup>16</sup>  
[This action] *also has to do*  
*with Ningeingaku.*<sup>17</sup>  
*Two faces white,*  
*who of those two will tell?*<sup>18</sup>  
*I am from Manka*<sup>19</sup> *family.*

*Hankudya baly of Demnime Kosterkin (a fragment from secondary variant II)*

*How much subsistence (means of living)*  
*does he keep?*<sup>20</sup>  
*Dulsymyaku, Dusya,*  
*with which reindeers*  
*will grow up, oh, how grow up?*  
 *Holding on to it.*<sup>21</sup>  
*How many means of living*  
*will I hand out?*  
*Tubyaku, do not be angry.*  
*Our reindeers remained,*  
*our reindeers the best*  
*tomorrow I will bring.*

Unfortunately it is impossible to compare Tubyaku's texts with the author's, because there are no recordings of the *hankudya baly* performed by Demnime himself. The first secondary variant supposedly follows the author's text more accurately than the second. This assumption is based on the fact that the song tells of events that do not directly concern Tubyaku, i.e. that he has unbiased attitude towards them. The second secondary variant tells of the conflict caused by the division of property between the two brothers. The background of the text fragment is the following. Tubyaku moved to the village (Ust-Avam), but Demnime stayed to live in the tundra. Their father's reindeer herd was more than Demnime could manage and take care of. Upon Dyukhade's death an argument arose as to how to divide the herd. In the second secondary variant Tubyaku sings about how the issue was resolved. Presumably in the lines that describe Demnime's turning to Tubyaku, he does not use the authentic text of Demnime's song, but has included them himself.

On the basis of the identity of the performer, therefore, we can divide *hankudya balys* into two groups: the first consists of the songs performed by the author or the owner of the song, and the second one comprises secondary variants.<sup>22</sup> The contents of the first are richer in facts and clearly author-centred. The perspective of secondary variants is somewhat different – the author-centredness is replaced by performer-centredness. This means that the describing of the owner's life events is not essential in the song, and therefore the reconstruction of the actual life course on this basis proves impossible. Instead, the text of a secondary variant reflects the relationship between the singer and the author.

Also, knowing the actual events, we can see that sometimes the song texts are not entirely veracious. Tubyaku's secondary variant of his father's song serves well to confirm this. Dyukhade's shamanic status was apparently inherited by Demnime, who was then for unclear reasons (allegedly due to incantation that was by that time prohibited by law) put into prison. After this, the position was assumed by Tubyaku, who had already begun to practise as a shaman. After his release from prison, Demnime wished to regain his position. The brothers became rivals, and the grudge between two families persisted even after the death of Demnime. Secondary vari-

ants of Dyukhade's song as sung by Tubyaku, however, show the situation in a different light.

Hankudya baly of *Dyukhade Kosterkin (secondary variant I)*

*My father tells,  
my father tells:  
Tubyaku, child,  
after me, days will come, one day certainly.  
Tomorrow know  
the ancestress of your spirits<sup>23</sup>. Your icy spirits  
your master.*

In terms of content, the second secondary variant is quite similar – the text is shorter but even more explicit.

Hankudya baly of *Dyukhade (secondary variant II)*

*Tells now my father, tells:  
black spirits, white spirits  
will prevail when the black spirits appear.*

These songs are reminiscent of a testament. They leave the impression that Tubyaku wishes to show or emphasise through his father's song that he is the real and approved inheritor of his father's status.

The article does not aim to revive old conflicts or search for the real truth of life, it aims to study what kind of information was stored in these kinds of songs. Since these conflicts are reflected in the songs, the creators of the texts have consequently regarded these as important events of their lives that also deserve to be stored in the memory of coming generations.

## **HANKUDYA BALY AS A SOURCE OF FAMILY TRADITION**

Personal names are the most common *hankudya balys*. The text may also contain the names of the song owner or of his close relatives and sometimes (usually in the songs of older singers) also the name of the family. Aizenshtadt, a Russian ethnomusicologist, who

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mun-tu ta-s'i-e-ða n

i - je - je - d'a-wa-ma - a wa wa e e mun-tu-u wa e a

heŋ-ke je je d'a-mu-o - wá - e - ðe - ðit - ta - a wá - e - sê

s'í - e - ra - ru eu wo d'a-mu-ŋ wa e - ði - ta - a wá e á

bär - bi - mi - k'ou ha heŋ - ku o au á au á nã - a - te -

tou - á - m'a-ku-u wá á na ne e d'e

Example 2. Hankudya baly of Dyukhade.

has studied analogous genres of the Kett and Selkup, connects the occurrence of personal or family names in the text of a song with one of the most important customs of a clan system: every member of the family has to know exactly which branch he belonged to. The practical purpose of this knowledge was to avoid incestual marriage (Aizenshtadt 1982: 180).

With some reservations we could also speak of the information on familial background contained in the song's melody. When listening to the melody, it appears that the songs of the members of one family bear some similarities. This reveals itself primarily in the manner of singing: e.g. the songs of the Kosterkins stand out due to their varying dynamics, their performance is somewhat theatrical, different timbres are used, making an unchanging melody sound more impressive; the songs of the Turdagins are more quiet, monotonous with respect to dynamics, the method of sound production is close to that of speech, etc. Alla Gomon has described the music of the Tundra Nenets as follows:

*For many centuries Nenets families have been isolated, migrating on the tundra with their reindeer herds. The sphere of communication in everyday life was limited to one family or a group of related families. This type of environment originally generated melodic traditions in a personal, individual manner. Because of exogamy, one family followed two different melodic traditions deriving from both the husband's and wife's families (Gomon 1990: 76).*

Nganasan music has developed and functioned in the same conditions as that of the Tundra Nenets. Therefore, here also we can see the representation of two different singing manners in the vocal repertoire of one family, one of which indicates the wife's and another the husband's family. The *hankudya balys* of Faina Turdagina and Tubyaku Kosterkin presented above clearly demonstrate the difference in the singing traditions between two families. Thus we can conclude that in analysing melodies it is at least theoretically possible to detect which families have been connected through marriage. In reality, apparently, it is impossible to construct a pedigree on the basis of melodies. There are several reasons for this; I will mention one that is directly connected to music. When the family of distinguished singers gains through marriage a new member

whose family does not have remarkable music traditions, then the latter is likely to adopt the singing manner of the new family; this, for instance, happened with Dyukhade's wife Husupte, who comes from the Turdagin family, but whose song sounds like the Kosterkins'.

Song texts often contain place names. It is primarily the place where a song owner lives that is mentioned, but other locations where s/he has temporarily resided (e.g. during school years) are also named. In connection with the personal songs of other Siberian peoples, researchers often emphasise the custom in Nganasan songs of giving detailed descriptions of locations although I have not observed this phenomenon.

Marriage is mentioned in most cases, both by men and women. Women's texts always contain data of children's birth and schooling, whereas in men's songs this topic is not touched upon.

Newer *hankudya balys* speak in detail about the song owner's work – specific occupations that the person has held are also mentioned. Reindeers are naturally a frequent topic – their herding, qualities of the herd (how old animals are, what colour, etc.) and also the size of the herd is mentioned.

It is self-evident that the songs performed in a recording situation do not contain biographical data that could discredit the author. In case such things have occurred they are omitted from the song – an autobiographical song is not an official CV. However, the songs do not contain data that could directly be called false – close people who are the most regular audience of a *hankudya baly* and are usually present also during the recording know the author's life course and their mere presence keeps deviation from the truth under control.

The song can become longer over the years, i.e. the owner can add new events to the text. This, however, is a rather theoretical quality of *hankudya baly* and other analogous genres that finds practical application in only a very few songs. In most cases the song focuses on a certain event that has had a very important meaning in the life of the creator of the song or on something s/he would like to talk about at that particular moment. If the life of the song's

owner has been uneventful, there is more talk about reindeers, work or children. The variants of a song show that a song text can differ considerably from one performance to another. The (secondary) variants of some recorded songs are very short. This does not necessarily mean that the song is short in reality – often only fragments are sung, sometimes also because the text has been forgotten.

In most cases the description of life events is summary in the song. Sometimes the song owner does not wish to tell the details of his/her life to a researcher who is usually not particularly close to the informant. But the reason for this does not always lie in the intimate content that is not for an outsider. A recitation of the contents can precede or follow the performance of the song, where the singer talks about his or her life events in much more detail and openness than in the song itself. Since my knowledge of the Nganasan language was not good enough to entirely understand the song texts with their complicated structure, the preceding or following explanation always belonged together with the song. Here I would like to mention an interesting notion. ‘In return’ for the recording of *hankudya baly* I have often had to tell my own life story. Indeed, who would like to reveal the intimate details of his/her life to a person who is practically unknown to them. In one of these situations, my partner shaped my story into a song. She borrowed the melody from her father’s song, and improvised the text by herself. This spoke of my work in the village of Ust-Avam and about my family life in the “faraway south”, where the Nganasans imagine Estonia is situated.

The summary and allusive nature of describing events makes song texts difficult to comprehend and also less informative for the researchers, who are not familiar with the song owners or do not know their life story. This is certainly one of the reasons for the scarcity of more thorough studies. Nganasans themselves read much more out of the texts. When they comment on the texts of the songs, often a whole long story unveils from an allusive line, from which it would be worth creating another song.

## COMMENTS

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here, however, that the Tundra Nenets term lacks the word that denotes a song (usually *sjo*; *jage sjo* ‘drinking song’) and the Nganasan term respectively lacks the word that refers to drinking (usually *hankudya*; *hankud’a bala / baly* ‘drinking song’).

<sup>2</sup> Many Nganasans have two first names. Immediately after birth a child is given an official (Russian) name. A few years later parents can also give a child an Nganasan name. This is given later for the reason that characteristic features cannot emerge immediately after the child’s birth. The Nganasan name is not recorded in a person’s identification documents.

<sup>3</sup> Tubyaku Kosterkin gave this song to his daughter Tatiana, whose Nganasan name was Taibulaku ‘Little Tail’.

<sup>4</sup> I have compared the personal data from the songs with details found in G. Afanaseva’s book *Nganasany. Traditsionnaia sistema vosproizvodstva nganasan. Problemy reproduksii obosoblennykh populatsi*. As source material the author has used *yassak*-books and documents from local administrative institutions. Data (especially earlier) is fragmentary.

<sup>5</sup> Dyukhade’s father Hoikupte and grandfather Nigile were also shamans.

<sup>6</sup> The photo was given as a gift by Zinaida Porbina, a granddaughter of Demnime. The photo probably dates back to the beginning of the 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> Volotshanka and Ust-Avam are settlements in North Taimyr.

<sup>8</sup> The singer was not drinking. Probably she meant that now, being an adult and living in Ust-Avam, she had started to consume alcohol.

<sup>9</sup> I.e. a girl.

<sup>10</sup> I.e. life brings difficulties, because Faina cannot speak Russian, but school education is in Russian.

<sup>11</sup> Faina was given her Nganasan name Dyarsymyaku (‘Lovely’) by her grandmother.

<sup>12</sup> I.e. born before the youngest child.

<sup>13</sup> Kou Kopta was one of Demnime’s helper spirits.

<sup>14</sup> A town in Taimyr, location of the boarding school in which the children who live in the tundra are educated.

<sup>15</sup>A woman who belonged to the family of Ningeingaku.

<sup>16</sup>Marsymyaku was a son of Demnime's who died in an accident.

<sup>17</sup>I.e. the one who took over his wife was actually someone who also comes from the Ningeinganku family.

<sup>18</sup>A reference to turning to shaman spirits.

<sup>19</sup>According to Nadezhda Kosterkina, who helped to translate the song texts, it is the name of Demnime's father's family. This name does not occur in the notes of G. M. Afanaseva (Afanaseva 1990)

<sup>20</sup>I.e. whether the reindeer herd is big.

<sup>21</sup>I.e. they want to take the reindeer herd for themselves.

<sup>22</sup>Unfortunately there are no recordings of *hankudya balys* where both the author's and a secondary performance are available; therefore their concrete differences cannot be discussed here.

<sup>23</sup> A shaman's helper spirits are referred to here and in secondary variant II of Tubyaku's father's song.

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