



## On Forest Nenets narrative genres<sup>34</sup>

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### Research on Forest Nenets

The Forest Nenets are a small people of maximum 2000 persons living in the North-Eastern Ob basin, in taiga and forest tundra areas. This ethnic group has long been neglected by ethnographic as well as linguistic research: they live mostly in remote zones on the high stream of different rivers (Ob tributaries flowing both North-South<sup>35</sup> and East-West<sup>36</sup> as well as rivers flowing into the Ob bay (flowing South-North<sup>37</sup>). The access to their territory is thus complicated, and much determination is needed to get near to them. On the other hand, researchers have been concentrating their efforts since the 19th century on the Tundra Nenets, a close ethnic group, or more precisely the main branch of the same people. The Tundra Nenets occupy a huge territory in Northern Russia, from the Kola Peninsula up to the Taimyr Peninsula in Central Siberia, covering thus thousands of kilometres of European and Siberian tundra. They have maintained a strong identity consciousness, based on reindeer herding, and they still live in some regions fairly as they did at the beginning of the 20th century<sup>38</sup>. The Forest Nenets' culture and way of life is very different and depends on different ecological environment: reindeer herding

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34 Article published in *Studies in Folk Culture Vol.II Peoples' Lives: Songs and Stories, Magic and Law*, Tartu 2004, 36-62.

35 The Nazym and the Lyamin (nowadays this last community seems to be very small), the Agan and its tributaries the Vatyogan and the Amputa.

36 The Kazym.

37 The Nadym and the Pur, with their tributaries.

38 Such are for instance the Nenets groups living in the Yamal Peninsula: in this area, soviet collectivisation was not achieved before the 1950-ies (Niglas 1998, 1999).

is practised on a lesser scale, the Nenets – instead of being nomads all year round – are but semi-nomads, and the function of other activities as hunting and fishing is much more extensive than in the tundra. Linguistic analysis shows that the language spoken by both groups is structurally the same, and linguists they have considered Forest Nenets as a mere dialect. Nevertheless, phonetic dissimilarity between these forms is such, that mutual understanding between Forest and Tundra Nenets is just excluded. Moreover, as Forest Nenets is under the influence of its neighbouring languages, Khanty and Selkup, the lexical divergence is also very significant. Therefore, the present trend among linguists dealing with Samoyed languages is to identify not one, but two independent Nenets languages, subdivided into dialects.

There are three main territories inhabited by Forest Nenets: the larger group occupies high and central flows of the Pur, whose two main tributaries are called Pyako-Pur and AyvasedaPur, the first element of these names being the names of two Forest Nenets clans. The centre of this region is the village of Tarko-Sale, which, according to visitors, is still a genuine Forest Nenets village, where even children speak Nenets among themselves<sup>39</sup>. During the Soviet period, here as well as everywhere in the Northern areas, indigenous peoples formerly living in the forest have been gathered in villages: in this area, the main Forest Nenets villages are Kharampur and Khalesovaya, where, according to Tapani Salminen, who has visited this region in 1998, Forest Nenets traditional culture is still alive. The second group lives westwards, on the high flows of the Nadym and the Kazym rivers. They are concentrated around the village of Num-to, on the shore of a lake considered both by the local Khantys and the Nenets as a sacred place. This region has still been spared by industrialisation: traditional rules are still dominant, children speak Nenets, motor sledges are still a luxury<sup>40</sup>. The third group lives on the high flow of the Agan and its tributaries, Vatyogan and Amputa; during the first third of the 20th century, families from Khalesovaya migrated down to this zone, where fish and pastures were abundant. But since the mid 1960, oil industry has massively taken root in this region. This fact has most directly influenced

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39     Personal communication by Tapani Salminen (may 2001).

40     My conversations with Vadim and Taysya Pyak (February 2000), as well as Kaur Mägi's fieldwork (September-October 2001).

the Forest Nenets' way of life as well as the ethnic contacts in this area. Some of the indigenous families are ready to give up their lands for oil extraction in exchange of different kind of compensations. Others are trying to resist this penetration and fight in order to protect nature from pollution, to save the seriously threatened reindeer pastures and the forest, which provides them with food and, overall, with life. Moreover, the Agan Forest Nenets were even before this invasion in a weaker position, for they have always been fewer than the Khanties. Now the arrival of oil workers coming from all the regions of the former USSR has led to a clear demographic unbalance to the prejudice of the indigenous peoples. In this area, Forest Nenets has lost ground: in 1999, the younger Nenets speaking Nenets as a mother tongue was aged 23. As far as I know, no child speaks either understands it: it is practised actively only by the elder generation<sup>41</sup>.

The information available about the Forest Nenets is quite limited, as this ethnic group has been identified as such only at the end of the 19th century. The older data are to be found in M.-A. Castrén's travels reports. The Finnish explorer and linguist had also collected Forest Nenets language samples (Castrén 1940, Castrén 1960). His work has been continued and systematised by Toivo Lehtisalo, who spent at the beginning of the 20th century much time making fieldwork among both the Tundra and the Forest Nenets.

In 1914, Lehtisalo worked among the Western Forest Nenets on the river Kiselyovskaya and collected precious samples of oral traditions (Lehtisalo 1947, Lehtisalo 1960). The ethnographic information he received from very impressive informants, as the blind shaman Kalyat Ngahany, has been used by Lehtisalo in his general studies on Nenets culture (Lehtisalo 1924) and language (Lehtisalo 1956). Most of the data available at the moment are due to the Finnish researcher. Later, after the October Revolution, Russian researchers took over Nenets studies. One of the most competent specialists on Samoyed peoples and languages was G. Verbov, young scholar who did not survive World War II: he has been the first to publish a substantial article (Verbov 1936) about the Forest Nenets. Mainly a linguist, he collected data about the language and left to posterity a monograph on this subject, published thirty years after

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41     My own fieldwork 2-4/1999, 9-10/1999, 8-10/2000.

his death (Verbov 1973). This work includes two short tales. Russian ethnographers later on have made occasionally field work by the Forest Nenets, but although L. Khomich (1972) on one hand and more recently A. Golovnyov (1995) have inserted data among them in more general issues, very few specific research has been dedicated to this topic. Among the linguists, the Finn Pekka Sammallahti (1974) has done a major work with his grammar of Forest Nenets, based on cooperation with a Leningrad student, born half Nenets half Selkup, who provided him with two texts (42 sentences). Sammallahti presents them with extensive and useful comments. Finally, two Hungarian scholars, P. Hajdú (1959a, 1959b) and J. Pusztay (1984), have abundantly used Lehtisalo's material for linguistic analysis.

This survey shows that the last extensive collection of Forest Nenets language and folklore dates from the very beginning of the 20th century. Therefore in 2000, a working group from Tartu University<sup>42</sup> (Estonia) has undertaken to fill this gap and started systematic fieldwork research, whose final aim is to provide a collection of Forest Nenets texts with morphological analysis and translation. The first expedition took place in autumn 2000 and lasted two months. We worked in the Agan region, but we had also the opportunity of working very thoroughly with a remarkable informant<sup>43</sup> from Num-to. This first expedition was directly followed by the visit of two Forest Nenets<sup>44</sup> to Tartu, where they recorded several hours of folklore<sup>45</sup> - songs, tales and other forms of oral tradition. A second expedition (Kaur Mägi) took place in autumn 2001 in Num-to region. These materials have been partly published, i.e. in the booklet accompanying a CD of Forest Nenets songs (Mägi, Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002). The present article is based on these materials.

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42 Formed by an Estonian linguist, Kaur Mägi and myself.

43 Tatva Logany.

44 Tatva Logany and Yuri Vella.

45 This expedition was supported by the Estonian Cultural Endowment (Eesti Kultuurkapital) and the Endangered Languages Fund, and the invitation for the Nenets informants was delivered by the Estonian National Museum (Eesti Rahva Muuseum). Juri Vella and Tatva Logany spent two weeks in Tartu. All their recordings as well as those made in Siberia are available at the Estonian Folklore Archives (Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv) in Tartu.

## The Forest Nenets' folklore: a general survey

As we see, we have still a limited amount of Forest Nenets folklore materials. Differently from other Siberian peoples, most of the available texts have been recorded recently. This complicates undoubtedly diachronic research, and the reconstruction of what Forest Nenets folklore could have been one century ago, but it gives an interesting picture of the situation at the beginning of the 21st century. This absence of older data, on the other hand, makes comparative analyses quite difficult, for most of the Tundra Nenets folklore collections reflect the situation some decades ago. We shall have to take this fact permanently into account, when referring to comparative data. For the same reason, if we may find some occasional studies in linguistics and ethnography, absolutely no mention of Forest Nenets folklore is to be found in Russian research. Russian specialists on the Nenets' folklore have devoted themselves to the study of Tundra Nenets oral tradition and especially on Tundra Nenets epics. I am therefore compelled to base my analysis on my own data and on prudent comparison with Tundra Nenets oral tradition.

We have recorded the following folklore genres as part of the living tradition of nowadays Forest Nenets: songs, two distinct types of narratives and riddles.

### Songs (*kynaws*<sup>46</sup>)

This genre seems to have had traditionally a major function in social communication, similarly as by the Tundra Nenets (Ojamaa 2002: 2). Although some kinds of songs have clearly lost their former function, the present practice of Forest Nenets singing shows the structural importance of this activity, which gives the individuals a materialised identity inside the community. For the Nenets, singing is a merely individual activity: choral singing is just unknown. True, in the last decades, under the influence of Russian and Western music, the Nenets have started to adapt their songs to collective performance, in order – consciously or not –

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46 The Tundra Nenets form of the same word is *hynabts*; *hynts* (Pushkaryova 1990: 82).



to bring it closer to the audience musical habits, and also as a means of supporting collectively endangered ethnic identity<sup>47</sup>. Nenets singing includes extended improvisation: people used to sing about their life and its main events. Songs may be divided into different types. According to the collected corpus as well as to our informants' data, the main subgenres are shaman songs, individual songs and narrative songs.

Shaman songs, called in Nenets *tachepyang-kynaws*, were ritual songs, performed during the shamanic séance. As this aspect of Nenets culture has practically disappeared, after the cruel repressions by the Soviet power in the 1930 and the subsequent weakening of religious practice in indigenous societies, shaman songs are no more an active communication form. But although I have not heard it mentioned, we can't absolutely exclude that some kind of ritual survival exist marginally even nowadays. Shaman songs are mostly nowadays remembered by the elder people who have witnessed shaman séances in their youth or by descendants of shamans. Some songs refer explicitly to the mushroom used by shamans to get into trance – called in Nenets “vipi” – and performed after consumption. Researchers connect these songs to the shaman song type (Ojamaa 2002: 16-18). Our informant Tatva Logany nevertheless asserts that these songs were performed by any person having eaten these mushrooms, which were used not only by shamans, but also by ordinary people as narcotics. Anyhow it is interesting to notice that some of these songs have been transmitted as parodies of the performer: Yuri Vella performs a vipi-song that was sung by an old shaman, who used to fall asleep for some seconds or minutes during the performance (Mägi, Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002).

The so-called “individual song” is probably the main form of singing in Nenets society as in other cultures of the Arctic peoples. The term “individual song” is used by scholars and its Russian form “lichnaya

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47 I have an example from the Agan region: some elder women (the younger is merely 50, the elder about 70) from the village of Varyogan, where Khanty dominate, have been singing together for some years, performing in local cultural events, until the death, in 1999, of one of them. One of these elder women is my main informant, Yuri Vella's mother. His son does not approve on her not respecting the traditional performance style and criticizes the Russian influences he perceives in her mother's singing. I am sure anyhow, that one of the main motivations of the women has been the wish of being together, speaking their language that the younger do not know any more, and feel stronger to be themselves in a non-Nenets environment.

pesnya” has reached the Nenets, so that many of them use it or its Nenets form *nyeshang-kynaws*. Nevertheless, the Nenets themselves used to call this kind of song “drunken song” or “drunkard’s song”<sup>48</sup>. Every song is produced by a concrete person<sup>49</sup>, who usually performs it while drinking. It is to be noticed that drinking is not a male peculiarity, and these songs are performed both by men and by women. Although gender work division is part of the Nenets’ way of life, the Nenets traditional couple forms a very coherent unit that rarely splits. Men’s work is usually outdoors and women’s mostly indoors. But relaxing activities are usually performed together, and women drink and get drunk like men. It seldom happens that one performs one’s song in ordinary situations, but it may happen, for instance when the presence of a stranger creates a special, stimulating context. When Yuri Vella was asked to perform his own song, he just laughed and answered: “Nobody is so stupid as to sing his own song himself!”, showing that usually individual songs are performed by others, not by the person to whom they are ascribed. One special form of individual song is represented by the songs invented by the parents for their children: growing up, the latter may use this song but may also change and have a new song of their own. These songs have no other name than the “owner’s” one. The tune is always the same, and characterises the song, but the words may change, being submitted to improvisation. Thus, this is a communication form characteristic of small groups. This kind of performance is undoubtedly still alive and represents a way of spending leisure moments gathering together.

Another kind of song is what is called by the general name of narrative song (*shotpyawskynaws*, “tale-song”). This word can hardly be considered as a definite term. It is more an empirical way of describing by external marks a phenomenon about which the Nenets themselves identify varied origins. There are short tales entirely performed with melody. The samples we have of this kind of song are animal stories, whose recipient

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48 According to Lehtisalo, the Tundra Nenets call them *yabe’ma syo* or *yabe’ma hync* (drunkenness song), or just *yabe’mai* (drunkenness) (Lehtisalo 1947: 551-591). Although Yuri Vella (from the Agan region) asserts that no such kind of word is known by the Nenets themselves, Kaur Mägi’s fieldwork in Num-to proves that this is the very way the Nenets there use for this kind of song.

49 This is the criterion adopted by Pushkaryova in order to identify this kind of song (Pushkaryova 1990: 82). The explicit existence of an author leads the Nenets folklorist to consider this type as a literary genre and to exclude it from folklore (Idem: 85).

is supposedly children. The other form thus called is considered by all the informants to be a kind of reminiscence: fragments of a narrative are sung as the rest of the narrative is just performed as a prose text. The unanimous opinion is that formerly those tales were entirely sung, but the performed fragments are the only original part remembered by the performer. As a matter of fact, tune is not the only way to identify these more ancient elements. There is what Yuri Vella called “recitative”, rhythmic performing style. We have recorded no specific Nenets term for this style, which is also known by the Tundra Nenets<sup>50</sup>. Yuri Vella, in an introduction to his poems, pretends that “We, the Nenets, used to sing many poems – tales, lamentations, songs – which were performed in an artistic language with a popular melody or in form of incantation poetry. The everyday language is used in everyday life, it is poor, without colour, taste or smell, it transmits no warm and no cold. It is impossible in this language to tell a tale or to sing a song – but talking about wood, food or money would insult the artistic tongue”. But because of different reasons, the “artistic” language has been lost. According to Yuri’s experience, “My grandmother found a new way / of telling tales /. At the beginning, she sang the tales according to tradition, but in order to make clear what happened, she repeated the contents in everyday language. Then she went on singing, and again translated the meaning into an understandable language” (Vella 1991: 3, 5). It would be interesting to analyse both parts of these narratives from the linguistic point of view, and to identify whether the difference is really as significant as Yuri Vella says. This reminiscence of archaic sung tales is not to be confounded with the introduction of songs as such into tales. We may find inside a tale some character’s personal song, which plays a role in the narrative pattern<sup>51</sup>.

Nowadays, singing is suffering from the loss of language skills in younger generations. Moreover, not only the text dimension is becoming totally stranger, but also the melodic pattern is less and less familiar to people getting used to the “Western” aesthetics transmitted by the media (Ojamaa 2002: 5).

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50 According to Lyudmila Taleyeva, a Tundra Nenets from the Small Tundra (in Northern European Russia), who recognised in the Forest Nenets “recitative” a well-known pattern.

51 More developed analysis and samples of Nenets songs may be found in a CD published by the Estonian Museum of Literature in 2001.



## Riddles

Certainly, the riddle (in Nenets *kowsu*) has resisted better to the fading of traditional culture: although not all the cultural patterns may easily be translated into Russian, it is easier to translate a riddle in a different language and many Nenets riddles are still known in Russian by the younger generation, are part of the children's games, are performed by adults in family or friend's evenings. Nenets riddles are deeply connected with the Nenets material culture and its environment: nature and reindeer in the most concrete details are inexhaustible items. A distinctive feature of Nenets riddles is probably the abundant scatological elements: this kind of riddles is not easy to transfer in other languages, where language taboos may respond to different rules<sup>52</sup>.

## Prose narrative genres (*shotpyaws* and *wanlh*)

Further on, I will concentrate on this topic. As a general presentation, and before analysing details, I must observe that storytelling remains a main entertainment form among the Forest Nenets nowadays. It is true that media have broadly developed their influence over the last decades: in the villages, all the families have televisions and many of them may also watch videos. The radio has been for decades a general tool. In the taiga camps the presence of electricity varies from region to region: where oil industry has expanded, as in the Agan region, the use of electric generators has been generalising over the last decade. This means that even if television programs are not caught for lack of sufficient antennas, most families in this region have video players and may spend evenings watching to film cassettes. This entertainment is not sufficient to fill all the free time and therefore more traditional ways are still alive. So, unlike the well-known situation in other parts of the world (Thomas 1976: 197), new technologies have not led to the total disappearance of storytelling as a family entertainment. In other regions of the Forest Nenets area, techniques have not penetrated so deeply and therefore influence still less everyday lifestyle.

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52 According to my personal observations. This is particularly true for translation into Russian, where the social use of some terms is strictly limited to male society.

Before I present the details of narrative genres in Forest Nenets context, it may be interesting to precise how our material has been recorded. When a Forest Nenets tells a story<sup>53</sup>, his or her audience is far from passive: the storyteller expects reactions to the delivered messages, expressing approval or surprise (*ta-ta, kay-to*), interruptions, questions and comments. Without this kind of interaction, storytelling has no meaning at all. When we recorded most of the stories of our informants' repertoires, our knowledge of Nenets wasn't sufficient to react properly and satisfactorily. That's why there was no occurrence of storytelling meant only for recording. All our recordings were therefore made in real communication occurrences, where the recipient was represented by other Nenets<sup>54</sup>. We did not only record the pure text of the narrative, but only the preparation and the final comments of the narrator as well as the audience's reactions. As a matter of fact, our interest for their language and culture was a very effective stimulus for our partners, who lived in an environment where they know the dominant languages (Khanty, Russian), without anybody knowing theirs<sup>55</sup>, being most of them

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53 This is of course no original feature: "This activity of participation involves both understanding and enjoyment. The audience receptive competence in no ways refers to passivity" (Abrahams 1976: 16) .

54 Strange enough, what must only be considered as a weakness on our side, the ignorance of the language, played here undoubtedly a positive role. Our experience seems to contradict Honko's objection to later trends in folklore research: "We seem to wish to come as close as possible to the informant and the performance, the social interaction, the empirically observable human main and at the same time we want to affect the authentic folklore communication process as minimally as possible by our own presence. This attempt is proved to be rather illusionary – not even the long cherished technique of participant observation (...) will solve the problem" (Honko 1976 : 23). Our presence undoubtedly influenced the process: we gave the Nenets a rare opportunity. But the ignorance of the idiom very soon rejected us out of the frame, and the Nenets found themselves not being disturbed in behaving in a familiar way, internal to their group, which is not often actualised because of other disturbing factors our presence removed. Our presence was marked verbally usually at the end of the narrative, either with jokes about our not understanding the point or with comments wondering what we would do of these unintelligible materials.

55 This is true for Russian as well as for Eastern Khanty. Languages are set in a clear hierarchy, Russians don't know any of the local idioms and Khanty knowing their and Russian. If the younger Nenets speak only Russian, the elder ones are able to communicate either in Russians or in Khanty. In the Agan region, the only Khanty who spoke Nenets was an old man called Mihail Sardakov, who died in October 2000, some days after an evening in which he participated in a Nenets story recording event.

integrated in ethnically mixed (Khanty-Nenets) families<sup>56</sup>, Forest Nenets have not frequent opportunities of gathering and spending time speaking their languages and telling their tales in Nenets : there is always somebody around who does not know Nenets, and the whole company adapts to this single person by switching to Russian. We incited them to communicate among themselves in their own language, and as we were the guests, the non-Nenets members of the family were more tolerant and did not impose the use of a common language.

## **Historical and comparative remarks on narrative genres**

Serious discussions have taken place about the focus on indigenous names for oral traditional genres. To Ben Amos' conviction that "The names of folklore forms reflect their cultural conception and significance" (Ben Amos 1982a: 134) – Honko answers by scepticism "I doubt that the indigenous names for genre categories will be of much help in our empirical research" (Honko 1976: 24). Still, if our goal is not to find categories fit for universal folklore classification but to concentrate on one culture trying to get deeper and deeper in its inner coherence, these names may open interesting perspectives. Therefore, sharing Ben-Amos' cautiousness about the danger of etymology's fetishism (Ben-Amos 1982: 49), I still consider as useful the analysis of indigenous names for genres. This approach may deliver key information for genre evolution history among the Nenets taken as a whole. The fact is that despite slightly different cultural and linguistic evolutions Northern Samoyeds<sup>57</sup> are still a pretty homogenous group, as shows the presence of common clans (Ayvaseda/Ayvasedo/Ayvashata, Vylla/Vyllo, Vylko/Vylka/Valey) existing both by the Forest and by the Tundra Nenets, some of them, as the latter, covering an impressive territory.

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56 Many Nenets are married to Khanty women, and the reverse model also exists. Anyway mixed marriages have very long been a reality: in 1936 G. Verbov remarked clear exogamic relations between Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets clans (Verbov 1936: 69).

57 This group includes, besides Forest and Tundra Nenets, also the Enets and the Nganassans.

Ethnomusicologists have pointed out a remarkable closeness between Tundra and Forest Nenets singing cultures: both have the same kind of songs, the same melodic features, the same way of adapting text to tune with special syllables etc. Singing is performed in identical circumstances and its function in social life is similar (Ojamaa 2002). The difference in the system of narrative genres is therefore most intriguing.

It must be mentioned that folklorists (Kupriyanova<sup>58</sup>, Shcherbakova, Pushkaryova) and linguists (N. Tereshchenko<sup>59</sup>) have mostly dealt with Tundra Nenets folklore. But all the aspects have not been equally studied and some important aspects are still in the dark. Soviet research tended to emphasise the use of folklore for historical and ethnographic research. Soviet folklorists did not focus on oral traditions as elements of a people's spiritual culture; they expected concrete information on precise elements. This explains why certain genres were considered as less interesting than others, as the following quotation, from Lyudmila Khomich, clearly shows: "among the Nenets folklore genres, stories occupy a remarkable place. Because of their goal being to entertain and their being based on fictive elements, tales (*wadako*) actually transmit less than other genres data about the real phenomena of the past" (Khomich 1995: 260). The most popular genres among the folklorists are the so-called epic genres<sup>60</sup>. For slightly different reasons, they are important also for the present research.

Folklorists distinguish two epic genres in Nenets oral traditions: the most archaic, called *syudbabts*, focus on supernaturally strong heroes, as the more recent *yarabts* is more similar to a lamentation of unjustly suffering poor Nenets. Probably the rich ethnographic data about the Nenets' material culture and eventually their history to be found in these kinds of texts explain their popularity with researchers. Anyhow the fact is that entire books have been dedicated to their analysis. I am mostly concerned with the etymological coincidence of the Forest Nenets word *shotpyaws*, which we could translate by "tale", and the Tundra Nenets term *syudbabts*. The latter's origin is connected to the verb *syudbars'*, "to sing a heroic song" (Poshatayeva 1988: 61); another scholar mentions

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58 cf. Kupriyanova 1965.

59 cf. Tereshchenko 1990.

60 According to the terminology used in Russia.

in this connection the word *syudbya*, “giant-hero” (Kuprijanova 1965: 28). According to our Forest Nenets informants Yuri Vella and Tatva Logany, the word comes from *shotpya*<sup>61</sup>, “strong, great, powerful” and *wata* “word, language, speech”<sup>62</sup>. The whole term is supposed to mean “powerful speech, heroic discourse”. Clearly the two words are connected as far as their origin is concerned. The Forest Nenets word’s etymology corresponds also to the Tundra Nenets’ meaning, but the contents of the Forest Nenets notion is far from parallel.

The main themes of the Tundra Nenets heroic *syudbabts* – the quest of a wife, the orphan’s bloody revenge, the fight for reindeers and pastures – are practically absent in the Forest Nenets tradition. At least, in our collection, there is no correspondent item. I cannot assert that such themes are absolutely unknown, but we have an extended number of samples and there are absent. I may deduce that if they exist<sup>63</sup>, they are nowadays most marginal. But we must resist to the temptation of treating these notions similarly. The fact is that we have no diachronic insight of Forest Nenets folklore, while most of Tundra Nenets data have been collected decades ago. So there is a chronological shift between the materials on which folklorists are working on and our material.

The absence of such forms in Forest Nenets folklore may be explained by two contradictory hypotheses: 1) These forms have never existed; 2) These forms have existed but have disappeared. There are circumstances in favour of both hypotheses. The fact that, as long as we know, the *syudbabc* form for Tundra Nenets, considered as the older style, has been losing ground during all the 20th century: synchronically, the picture is not so unbalanced. But we are not obliged to reconstruct a special epic form parallel to what the Tundra Nenets had. Their social conditions have been thoroughly dissimilar – the Forest Nenets had no huge reindeer herds, a much less developed social stratification, and probably this kind of society did not provide a sufficient basis for the development of the same kind of epics. At the moment, we have no elements allowing the

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61 In Nenets there is no particular category for the adjective.

62 Personal communication, in Tartu 29/10/2000.

63 We have no records from the Pur region. The collection of new data from that area may possibly modify the present picture, as the Nenets from the Pur are in very close contacts with Tundra Nenets groups.



choice of one or the other of these two hypotheses. As a matter of fact, they are presented here in order to open the way to further and deeper fieldwork research.

As far as *wanlh* are concerned, the situation is reversed. If the Tundra Nenets heroic tale has its share of attention and is considered, without chronological considerations, as a very important element in oral tradition, the stories pretending to historical truth are considered by the Tundra Nenets specialists as a fading genre: “The tales about the past (*lakhanako*, *wa'al*) are little known nowadays, even by elder people” (Khomič 1995: 260). I would assert the opposite: among the Forest Nenets, these tales are as popular as the other genre: our main *wanlh*-tellers are men aged 40-50<sup>64</sup>. This genre seems to me to be alive, at least as much as any genre based on language may be among the Forest Nenets.

We know that genre history may hardly be reconstructed (Honko 1989: 22). In this case, nevertheless, I think that the closeness of Forest and Tundra Nenets ethnic groups and the dissimilarity of folklore collection in the first case may reveal some elements about the Forest Nenets worldview and its evolution in the last century. We are allowed, with proper verifications, to use the better known Tundra Nenets genres history at least to question eventual developments in Forest Nenets storytelling practice.

## **Emic approach in a taxonomy of narrative genres**

My approach is clearly focused on the Forest Nenets understanding of their own folklore. Far from wishing to use categories grown out from other soils to the systematisation of fieldwork research or to construct a universal model comprehending them, my approach has been to follow the way the oral tradition actualisation in practice and its perception by the Nenets themselves is connected and articulated with their own worldview. I would here follow Ben-Amos approach: “Folklore texts and their performance have a different kind of subjectivity, their own cultural subjectivity. They constitute a reality that is culturally regulated. Like language, their repeated patterns, their regularities are cultural, not

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64 Tatva Logany (Num-to, 44) and Semyon Ayvaseda (Varyogan, 49).

scholarly, constructs. We have the opportunity, duty, and privilege to find the meaning of these cultural creations, categories, and orders“ (Ben-Amos 1992: 21). At least this is the approach I wish to implement in a first stage. Probably further comparison shall require a provisional framework of common elements between the elements of the comparison. But I consider this as a future task.

So, I have tried to understand how the Nenets themselves see and conceptualise their stories. According to Ben-Amos, there are three means of designing a formal category: “cognitively, by naming it, pragmatically, by performing it in particular contexts, and expressively by formulating it in a distinctive language which is peculiar to the genre“ (Ben Amos 1982a: 135). The first observation during the fieldwork is that when a storyteller prepared to tell a story, he usually asked the audience to choose between a *shotpyaws* and a *wanlh*. In other circumstances, the storyteller started his narrative announcing his own choice. This suggested that both types of narratives may be performed in identical conditions, by a same narrator and with the same audience. Therefore, if using Ben-Amos’ distinctions, the Nenets themselves do not distinguish these genres pragmatically. On the other hand, I have noticed that the Nenets did not introduce themselves a formal distinction in the expressive performance, and I have not noticed any such distinction myself: both genres – at least nowadays – are performed in non-metric prose. I have not noticed special distinctive starting and closing formulas. And if Tatva closes all his narratives by *Chi, malhta!* (‘Here it is, it is the end’), this formula does not introduce a formal taxonomic distinction.

If we look for formal elements of distinction, we may find that length may be taken into account. An old man living in the taiga<sup>65</sup> asked his audience to choose between a *shotpyaws* and a *wanlh*. The audience has no preferences, so he had to decide himself and he thus discovered that all the *shotpyaws* he knew were very long. He told the shorter, which lasted forty-five minutes. So, length may eventually be a distinctive characteristic of *shotpyaws*, but this should be verified on a larger scale.

Therefore, the main focus must be put on the cognitive principles on which prose genres’ taxonomy is based. During our fieldwork, we tried to identify these two genres main features not according to our own analysis

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65 Vahalyuma Ayvaseda, 29/09/2000.

(inevitably inspired by exogenous elements) but on the bases of what seemed important to our informants. Who are they? Some elements about their background may be precious to assess the data they transmitted. Our main informants were two men. Tatva Logany is a man in the early forties, blind since he was three years old, who as therefore been living the two first decades of his life practically without any contact with the non-Nenets world. He did not go to school and was not called to the army. In Num-to, where he lives, there are very few Russians; there is still no industrial exploitation of the region. In the first part of his life, he has received from his family, from the elder people, their vision of culture, learning to sing and to tell tales listening to his grand-mother. Later on, he broadened his repertoire by listening to his neighbours and collecting himself his own people's folklore. He is extremely curious, mentally active, lives now an independent life with his wife and his child, has built his own house and is an excellent hunter and fisherman. Without any theoretical knowledge (he is unable to read or to write), he has a passionate overview of the Nenets' culture and implement all his mental abilities to reflect on it. Our second informant is Yuri Vella, a very well-known personality, who is a reindeer herder with higher education. He has studied at Moscow Literary Institute, is known as a good poet and fights for the rights of his people. Yuri has never really quitted his region (when he studied in Moscow, he was most of the time a hunter in his village), his wife is Khanty. He knows well his own language, has a small repertoire of tales and songs inherited from his grand-mother, and an extensive general culture. He knows deeply both worlds and is therefore an excellent mediator between them, and without being himself a trained folklorist, he acts as a scholar of indigenous origin. But he tries also to conceptualise his culture most varied elements and therefore he often suggests explanations in which the culture bearer and the educated observer are mixed up.

Both our informants agreed on a very simple distinction: *shotpyaws* is a narrative based exclusively on fiction, while *wanlh* is a tale from the past, it is verisimilar and the facts related could have taken place in reality. The informants said that the most important is not that it has really happened, but that it could have happened. Likelihood is thus the main element. Therefore, we have been told that animal tales are undoubtedly *shotpyaws*: everybody knows that real animals do not talk. Without any doubt also,

etioloical tales, explaining the origin of place's names, of clan history or special features, are clearly *wanlh*. The Nenets situate their narratives in a bipolar system opposing – very roughly – fairy tale and legends.

This is not an exception in the folklore of the peoples of the world. Commenting the nature of legends, Dégh observes that “Attitude toward belief is the essence of the genre [the legend]” (Dégh 1996 : 33). According to Bascom the distinction between fiction and reality, more widely than in legend analysis, is an element that structures many popular taxonomies: “It is certainly significant that some groups [---] distinguish between narratives that they regard as true and false, while the Ojibwa regard all their tales as true. It is essential to the understanding and interpretation of folklore to know whether a given tale is regarded as historical fact of fiction” (Bascom 1965: 283-284). This is confirmed by Ben-Amos : “The referential distinction concerns with the truth value of narrative accounts” (Ben-Amos 1992: 24).

In the case of Forest Nenets, this observation comes from their own comments on a tale. Moreover, this question has been directly submitted to them and has led to a detailed discussion on this point. During the quarter of an hour it lasted no other criterion than the above mentioned was presented. We may well appreciate the further potential developments opened by this explanation if we treat it as one element in a system functioning according to its own logics: if the likelihood criterion, the possibility of a tale being rooted in reality, is really the line dividing one genre from the other, the distribution of tales into genres by the Nenets themselves allow to identify their own understanding of reality. What comes to the surface is belief. As Linda Dégh observes, “In the experience of folklorists, tellers state, explain, interpret or at least imply their personal attitude toward the belief content of the legend they tell” (Dégh 1996: 33). She insists on the need to work on beliefs: “any legend researcher needs to focus on the attitude towards belief expressed by individual participants in the legend process to gain insight into the dialectics by means of which believability, the purpose of any legend communication, are debated” (Dégh 1996: 38). We must deduce by Forest Nenets very simple distinction that the whole of their tale repertoire is structured by belief, forming thus a kind of “corpus” of belief. It is therefore possible to get data on about the Forest Nenets mental universe in tales, is we don't take the word

“belief” in its religious contents, but we use it in order to analyse broader mentality elements. It is therefore a guideline for further fieldwork to follow very precisely what informants and the people in the audience say about the recorded tales in order to analyse individual persons and small groups from the point of view of their “belief”. This analysis is by nature complex: for the perception of likelihood is probably one of the elements most submitted to evolution in cultural models. The researching needs also the utmost delicacy<sup>66</sup> and we must be conscious of the fragmentary nature of the recorded data.

The integration of people elder than 50 into school system, the latter’s increasing influence and the family values decreasing presence in the younger generations’ life, have probably direct effects on the belief system and on the extent of the verisimilitude field. Undoubtedly the Soviet power’s fight against religions, superstition, and against every kind of magic way of thinking has led to treat as *shotpyaws* stories, which would have been seen by elder generations as *wanlh*. Moreover: the very formulation of this criterion shows the progress of the so-called scientific way of thinking in the Nenets’ mentality: some decades ago it would have probably been formulated as a direct distinction between truth and fiction. Now, the informants have integrated a new way of thinking that is reflected by the cautiousness of their formulation.

Therefore, this criterion is very much alive, it develops and changes and follows the present worldview of the actors in the communication process. Both Yuri Vella and Tatva Logany, each one according to his vision, present the example of Toivo Lehtisalo’s main informant, the blind shaman Kalyat, who was Tatva’s grand-grand-uncle. During about half an hour<sup>67</sup> Tatva recalled this man’s legendary history, how he had acquired his shamanic gift and has become an mediator between the world of men and the world of spirits, how he implemented them, and how he was killed in a competition with a dark and stronger shaman. Integrated in Tatva’s narrative there are two songs: their text reminds how Kalyat went to the

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66 I agree with Linda Dégh on the inopportunity of questioning directly the Nenets: “Do you believe in that ?” She comments this question as follows: “The question itself provokes distortion. In the first place, belief is fluctuating, hesitant and selective, non consistent or absolute. In the second place, the informant has many reasons not to tell what he or she believes” (Dégh 1996: 39).

67 On 2000, October 10th.



South with the storks and came back with them at the beginning of spring, and how he had joined the divers after having covered his body with a diver skin in order to protect is from the cold. For Yuri Vella, this tale is considered as a *šotpjaws*, for Lehtisalo has told to Kalyat much about his own country, about life abroad, and Kalyat has in his own way transmitted this knowledge to his countrymen. The latter have turned him into the hero of legends. Kalyat's narratives show the birth of a legend, and Yuri occasionally shows how stories told nowadays by the Nenets are in good way to become legends themselves.

## Hybrid narratives

This should not lead, nevertheless, to a polarised image of Nenets tales' classification. The fact is that between the *wanlh*'s truth and the *shotpyaws*' fantasy there is a large field for uncertainty, as many stories may prove. One example is abundantly commented by Yuri Vella. Tatva announces that he is going to tell a *shotpjaws*<sup>68</sup>. The story's main character is a young girl called Atpälha. Her stepmothers are jealous of Atpälha's father love for her and decide to kill her. Pretending to give her marrow from reindeer bones they throw a hot thimble into her throat. Atpälha falls as if she were dead. The desolate father puts Atpälha on a sledge with his best reindeer and orders the latter to bring her where she must go. Atpälha is not really dead – she sees all but she can't move either speak. As the reindeer goes, she sees people in the forest: some people carry wood on their shoulders, but they can't put it down – these are persons who, while living, stole their neighbour's wood. We understand that she is in the other world, where she sees many other scenes like and starts to live another life. But then she receives a blow on her back and the thimble falls out of her mouth: she is again in the human world, in a cemetery. When she returns home, her father hears what really happened and punished the stepmothers.

After having told his story, Tatva adds: "This may be a *shotpyaws* or may be it is a *wanlh*, nobody knows". Yuri Vella developed abundantly this item: if we consider that this trip in the other world is but a dream, it

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68 On 2000, October 29th.

may very well be a *wanlh*. It is true that nobody ever harnesses only one reindeer and reindeer do not obey directly to words (*shotpyaws* element), but the reindeer may have been taught to react to human voice, so even this element may correspond to likelihood.

I presented this example in detail for it shows to interesting aspects of this question, on which Yuri Vella himself draws our attention. Even for a Nenets culture bearer the uncertainty of the relationship between tales and reality or potential reality exists. Even Tatva, who presented the tale as a *shotpyaws*, does not exclude other interpretations. True enough, in another conversation, he clearly included Atpälha among the *shotpyaws* for children. So he has a clear interpretation preference. This shows the existence of an interpretation margin that may give to certain elements a hybrid status.

In Yuri Vella's repertoire there is a fragment, including a recitative section, that was performed by Yuri's neighbour, Auli Yusi, dead in 1995. The main character is a man who discovered that his fish is being regularly stolen. He sets a trap and discovers one morning that the culprit has been wounded. Following the footprints he gets up to a place where there is a hole in the earth. The man watches into the hole and understands that it is as a matter of fact the upper hole of a Nenets tent. There is a woman who speaks to a very old man, who is lying wounded in a cradle and weeps. What the woman says is reported in recitative rhythm. The scolds the old man in the cradle for having taken human food, which is not meant for them, and calls him to be as wise as his grand-parents, showing him to children who are playing on the other side of the tent. So the man understands that he is at the jointure point of this and the other world, where time runs the other way round: children are adults, the elder are children. And he got scared and went back home.

What is interesting in this tale is that Yuri performs it with a title, probably borrowed to Auli, which is *wanlh petyalh* (*fragment of wanlh*). True enough, other Nenets, as Tatva, do not understand this title and consider this to be without any doubt a *shotpyaws*<sup>69</sup>, where the beyond is shown even more clearly than in Atpälha's story. But I would not dismiss so easily Yuri's title. It does not come from his fantasy. The fact that the elements of the title are scarcely understandable to Tatva show that they

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69 Kaur Mägi's personal communication.

are probably archaic remainders – I would suppose this title to have been given by Auli or by the person who told him. Therefore, it may reflect a different interpretation. Further research will probably confirm or not this hypothesis. But meanwhile I would propose two eventualities: either, for an elder generation, this contact with the world beyond was considered as real and the dread of the border between the two worlds was so material that it justifies the link with reality of this illustrative tale. This chronological difference could explain the difference between Tatva's opinion (he is a man in his 40-ies) and the name given either by Auli, who was a very old man when he died, or by even more remote authors. Another possible explanation – and these hypotheses may not exclude one another – that likelihood is perhaps not the only criterion of *wanlh*. More modestly, *wanlh* required perhaps a contact point with reality<sup>70</sup> and had a concrete function of warning or providing the audience with useful information, with convincing explanations even is the intervention of supernatural elements gave more strength to the didactic message. Another text presented as a *wanlh* confirms this direction: two friends are compelled to spend the night in the taiga. One decides to sleep in a small heightened hut<sup>71</sup> where usually food stocks, working tools and sacral objects are kept. The other sleeps outdoors. In the morning, the first has been reduced to his bones. This *wanlh* has been told by Yuri Vella's mother, who is now in her 70s<sup>72</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the *shotpyaws* of our collection seem to ignore the moralising dimension, which is a basic element in folklore<sup>73</sup>. There are many animal narratives where the fox, often for a good reason, cheats all his companions or tales where the main character obtains what he wants by lying and deceiving. Their function, at least at first sight, seems to be

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70 Linda Dégh observes moth convincingly: “‘truth’ does not necessarily mean that people believe the legends they tell, but rather that legends are about what real people experience within their own topographically delimited territory in the real world. The real world is the referent of the legend” (Dégh 1996: 41).

71 According to Nenets traditions, and because of the eventual presence of sacral objects, only the family whom the hut belongs is allowed to creep there. The prohibition is particularly severe for women.

72 Ateni Kazamkina, 2000 October 5th.

73 For Bascom this dimension is the third of folklore's functions “In many non-literate society the information embodied in folklore is highly regarded in its own right” (Bascom 1965: 293).

more entertaining than edifying. On the other hand, the didactic element seems to be much more present in tales called *wanlh* by our informants. But this hypothesis requires further research and probably a larger analysed corpus. I am just at the beginning of this work.

Anyhow, even the data available at the moment allow us to precise some basic points. It clearly appears that in our informants' consciousness the notions of true/non true are not in a contradictory relationship. When Ben Amos states that these elements exclude<sup>74</sup> one another, as well as a text cannot be at the same time prose and poetry, I can't but disagree with him. At least in Nenets culture, they occupy the extreme positions on an axis whose poles the purest forms represent. There is between them a continuum, permitting, without any sharp rupture, to pass from one to the other. There is a dynamics of difference but not of confrontation that reminds us a fundamental feature of the arctic mentality, which is clearly revealed by religious beliefs: any kind of rigid opposition of contraries is unknown, as well as such values as good and evil as absolute opposites. Evil forces exist, but in Nenets worldview they are not to be fought or eliminated, they are to be neutralised. Thus, the Nenets sacrifice to the spirits of diseases in order to protect them, and they do not traditionally fight against wolves, considering that they have also right to eat - if only they do not exaggerate... By analogy, truth and non-truth do not oppose, they complete one another.

## Conclusion

This scheme of a continuum between two opposite poles explains also why the Nenets have not felt necessary to create a third hybrid category, either *wanlh* neither *shotpyaws*, but something different. The fact is that these two words do not cover closed categories whose aim is to encompass the whole of reality. This is not a scientific classification, but

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74 «People make the distinction between true and false accounts within the framework of their own cultural knowledge and perception of their world. Within such a framework such a distinction is absolute. Like the differentiation between speech with and without metric structure, there cannot be any intermediate position between truth and falsehood» (Ben-Amos 1992: 25).

a functional distinction, pertinent in the Forest Nenets' mental logics<sup>75</sup>. This distinction gives both to the performer and to the audience a much free room. There is place left, as required, for the hybrid (Stross 1999: 260), but it is to be found on an axis and not in a special compartment. I am sure, as far as Atpälha is concerned, that Yuri's and Tatva's perception is not the same; both, nevertheless, are conscious that this tale may be submitted to different interpretations and may be accepted by different sensibilities. Nenets tales seem thus to be supplied with excellent tools allowing them to adapt to the evolutions in mentality that have taken place in the last decades by the Forest Nenets as well as by other arctic peoples. The listeners may believe or not the episodes of the narrative, the framework gives them the possibility to dialogue with the performed story without having to make compromises with their own understanding of reality. Unlike the experience reported by Leea Virtanen – according to which in Finland, as electricity reduces the fear of ghosts, the corresponding legends lost ground (Dégh 1996: 34) – I have the impression that Nenets taxonomy provides items which are no more object of belief, direct possibility of recycling. This first analysis shows clearly that Nenets narrative genres, if analysed from a cognitive point of view, supply us with very rich information, completing the scarce knowledge we have at the moment of this small Siberian ethnic group.

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75 Again Ben-Amos deserves to be quoted: "Native taxonomy has no external objective. It is a qualitative, subjective system of order. The logical principles that underlie this categorisation of oral tradition are those which are meaningful to the members of the group and can guide them in their personal relationships and ritualistic actions" (Ben-Amos 1982 : 48).