YURI VELLA POET AND REINDEER HERDER

Reconfigurations of indigenous personhood in Western Siberia[119]

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The topic of this article is indigenous personhood as seen from a Western Siberian point of view. Often research about indigenous personhood focuses on what appears, from a Western point of view, to be the most distinctive aspect of indigenous personhood: ”Data on personhood in animistic societies (...) invariably demonstrate that non-human entities may be regarded as social persons” (Brightman, Grotti, Ulturgasheva 2012: 2). Although this has been the main interest in previous scholarship, I shall not focus here on human-non human relations. The point of view chosen here is historical: it focuses on how colonisation has put pressure on configurations of human personhood in Western Siberia. The result of this pressure is a shift in the way human beings see themselves in their relations with the rest of their environment and has led to a simultaneous duality of perception with which indigenous people have had to cope. This has come about in different ways. I shall introduce an example of one of them, in analysing the conscious endeavours by a Nenets intellectual to work on his personhood in order to achieve indigenous ‘wholeness’.

An attempt to a theoretical framework

The notion of personhood, which underlies of this article, is neither a neutral nor a simple one. It is not within the scope of this article to

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explore all its philosophical implications; this would be a research it its own right. While the understanding of "personhood" as a common feature of humans, being rational and having moral status (Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007: 8-9), is too wide for my scope, I am interested in more particular features of personhood: how persons in concrete communities situated in a concrete historical position see their place in relation to oneself, to the environment, to other existing "awarenesses". I am interested in analysing how for the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia this understanding has changed in the course of history, more precisely how it has been subject to ruptures.

Two main questions cannot be ignored while exploring this kind of issue. One is the appropriateness of talking about personhood, which implies the existence of a subject: as Humphrey emphasises, because it is not possible to dissert the "subject" as a philosophical entity ignoring the fact it has been thoroughly deconstructed at the end of the 20th century (2008: 235). The second question concerns the contents of the notion "personhood" and its allegedly Western focus, as my aim is to reflect on non-Western understandings of personhood whilst taking into account the "Western pressure" it has experienced and its influence.

In this introduction, I shall attempt to delineate some of the borders of my subject and to define what I shall and what I shall not develop.

In the article referenced above, which treats a similar topic, Caroline Humphrey develops at length different authors' views about how to cope with the "death of the subject". She pinpoints the contradiction between what philosophers have been arguing and both the ethnographic experience and the needs of anthropology, which cannot be satisfied with general issues, and need to delve into details that may not fit with universal categories and the "peculiarities" not covered or explained by them (see Humphrey, *ibidem*). One of the ways to overcome the difficulties is to explore, as Humphrey does, different philosophers' responses to the deconstructive pattern, what can be called "subject two", which presents, depending on the philosopher, different features of the "subject" (Humphrey 2008, p.259-60). Among the different new versions of the subject, the one she insists on as the most productive for her material, is Alain Badiou's understanding of personhood emerging with the occurrence of an Event (Humphrey 2008: 260-280). Badiou, in Humphreys' words,

"acknowledges the social and historical conditions of the formation of a subject" (2008, 360)[120]. Moreover, Badiou, for whom the search for truth is the core of philosophy, insists that "there could be no truths without the subject" (Vihalem 2011: 74), thus justifying the necessity of the subject. For Badiou, "there is an indiscernible and incalculable event, completed by a finite subject aiming at understanding the infinite truth of the event and determined to be faithful to its implications" (Vihalem 2011 : 78). As this impressive resume of this central tangle in Badiou's thought shows, in Badiou's vocabulary, these three notions – truth, subject and event – are impossible to separate from one another. Another conclusion one may draw is that all these notions are quite dissociated with the common use of the words used by Badiou and depict abstract phenomena. One has, therefore, to try to understand what meaning Badiou gives each one of them. The "event" may be seen as "a turning point from which truths can be affirmed" (Vihalem 2011:70). As far as the subject is concerned, it "is far from being a substantial entity" (Vihalem 2011: 75). What is interesting for us is a series of processes: "There is something that can be thought as an event, so one considers the event having taken place. One thus accepts the implications (at least some of them) of this event and re-composes oneself (one's thoughts, one's actions, one's being) as the subject related or event allied to the event concerned, entering, as Badiou puts it, into the composition of the subject" (Vihalem 2011:76). The understanding of "event", something "that maddens our ordinary knowledge" (Meillassoux, 2008), is for Badiou a subjective turning point that changes a person and thus, "enables the emergence of subject two" and, through change, reveals his or her new personhood. I find this sequence quite inspiring, even if we take the words in their ordinary meaning. Neither Badiou nor Vihalem use the word personhood in connection with subject. But the way Vihalem explains how Badiou understands the recomposition of self allows the connection between the two notions.

This question has also being discussed within the framework of anthropology of Christianity. Here, while the focus is directly connected with the individual/dividual opposition according to Strathern (see below), it is also linked to Badiou's understanding through Joel Robbins'

120 Not being a philosopher, I use here secondary literature in order to comment on the basis of a reliable interpretation.

argument on rupture, which comes forth in his debate with Mosko[121] in which (Mosko 2010; Robbins 2010; see also, on this debate, Bialecki & Daswani 2015: 272). As far as my material is concerned, Robbins' case is most convincing, though he applies it to religion, while I deal mostly with history. But it is not to be doubted that the "event" which is at the basis of the changes I emphasise in personhood is a rupture, thus confirming the usefulness of Badiou's model for my reflections here.

The second question has been seriously discussed by Strathern, who argues that the individual is a Western understanding and may not be a proper conceptual tool to analyse non-European ethnic groups; in "The Gender of the gift" (1988) she proposes the concept of the Melanesian "dividual", who may "ignore ideas about unitary individuals" (Humphrey 2008, 369): dividuals are "frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm" (Strathern 1988: 13), or, as described elsewhere, the Melanesian dividual person may "be in a state of division with respect to others" (Strathern 1992: 125). As Spiro sums up (relying on Markus and Kitayama's thoughts): "Thus, as a Westerner, I use the word "I" exclusively, to denote only my own person (or my own self), alternatively to denote some psychic structure (an ego, a soul, whatever) within my person or self, but if I were a non-Westerner I would use the word "I" inclusively, to include other persons as well" (Spiro 1993: 108). While many authors have discussed this question, often presenting it as an "in/dividualism binary" (Bialecki & Daswani 2015: 274), but also discussing this opposition, I am still unsure, on the basis of my fieldwork, how to appreciate the Siberian case. One of the reasons is probably that Western Siberian indigenous peoples have been exposed to Russian contacts and later domination and influence for a very long time, from first contacts allegedly between the 9th to the 11th century (true, as far as the European Nenets are concerned), then with the conquest of the areas beyond the Urals since the middle of the 16th century. Thus, they are the first of Russia's peoples of the North to be integrated into the Russian world, and

121 Joel Robbins insists on the importance of taking into account that conversion to Christianity has been lived by Melanesians as a fundamental rupture with the past, fact that has been either neglected or underestimated by others anthropologists, among whom Mark Mosko. While anthropologists tend to insist on continuity, Robbins emphasises turning points, and this idea is relevant to my argument.

they have been exposed to the intrusive burden of Evangelisation from as early as the 18th century. Moreover, the first "event" I shall comment upon, the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath, more than 90 years ago, has set Russia' indigenous ethnic groups in even closer interaction with "Western" culture, in this case in its Russian form. It has been not only shaping their environment, but has also been forced upon them through powerful collective structures such as schools, the army or collective farms. One may argue that Russians carried with them one of the Western varieties of individuality. During the last 80 years, the Russian natives have absorbed part of it, achieving thus yet another variety of hybrid culture, with definitely Western features, but with a strong different substrate. So, not without previous reflection or scruples, I shall analyse "indigenous personhood" among Siberian ethic groups according to a Western understanding. This is particularly justified in my last example, when the starting point of the awareness of self, in the case I shall develop, is a typically Western understanding (see also Dumont 1986).

My reflection is based on my fieldwork with the Forest Nenets poet, activist and reindeer herder Yuri Vella from 1998 until his death in September 2013. But in order to understand the "decision-event" (as Humphrey calls it) that changed his life between 1986 and 1990, we have to go back in history and to analyse the consequences of the previous event that changed the native peoples of the North's awareness in Russia. It would be proper to start the analysis from the very beginning, the state of this awareness before the Revolution, but alas materials are scarce: indigenous discourse has not come to us directly, for native societies were not literate and did not record themselves. The only records we have are reports from outsiders (for more details on this point, see Leete 2014), who seldom communicated directly with the natives and whose data, while precious on many other subjects, cannot be relied upon as far as native worldview and perception of the self is concerned.

I shall therefore start by commenting on the deeper changes undergone by the peoples of the North with the advent of Soviet rule, and only afterwards try to develop what peculiarities I can find in their worldview after this event. The changes occurred in two phases, which troubled the indigenous peoples as a whole and every person involved deeply and traumatically. This may be seen as an event in Badiou's

meaning of the word, which compelled the people to adapt just in order to survive. Collectively and openly, they submitted. Privately, "informally"[122] they tried to retain as many of the features that made sense to them as they could. Individually, they had to cope with different competing images of self, and each individual did it in his or her own way. I will then switch to one example of conscious work on personhood accomplished by a Nenets intellectual. He is not the only person that has undergone a critical change in the post-soviet period, but as I have been working with him for fifteen years, I had the opportunity of following his endeavours and the inner pressure he was subjected to.

His example is not representative of how northern people adapted, on the contrary his model is quite a rare case - if not unique (for a more detailed analysis on the different adaptation models of intellectuals, see Toulouze 2000). But it is undoubtedly interesting because of the rare awareness of its subject and the explicit reflexion on these issues from his point of view. Other models might and should be studied in order to draw a typology of adaptation patterns that will show incredible resilience and readiness to shape the self in different ways in order to allow them to survive.

The soviet reconstruction of the indigenous world

The peculiarities of the native world were totally unfamiliar to the Bolsheviks, who had most support in Russian populated areas (Fitzpatrick 1985:61). There was no pre-defined Marxist theory about it, no predefined goals or strategies. They were not amongst the priorities in the first years of Soviet rule, when power was far from consolidated and urgent problems – military amongst others – were impending. In civil war, during which many events took place in the North, the indigenous world withdrew from contacts with the Russians: deliveries were interrupted and they turned towards autarchy (Onishchuk 1986: 108; Gorodkov 1926:59-60). Soviet policy toward the North was thus a mix of answering urgent questions and postponing a more encompassing approach of the problem. Answering urgent questions: if the Bolsheviks wanted to keep hold of power, they had

122 With the meaning given by Lyarskaya & Dudeck 2012, 62-64.

to rule over all the territory of the Russian Empire. While they struggled to cope with the consequences of the civil war and to reconstruct the country, they had to consolidate their power in the Northern borders – with international waters haunted by the British (as their landing in Arkhangelsk showed) and the Norwegians, and unfamiliar ethnic groups wandering in the tundra. But there were people among the Bolsheviks themselves or among the opposition to the tsarist regime who had some knowledge of Northern peoples: these were the exiles, Bolsheviks or populists, some of them scientists of international fame (Budarin 1952: 127, Slezkine 1994: 151). The new authorities turned to them for immediate policies, for urgent answers.

The first stage was thus a provisional policy conceived by competent well-wishers, gathered in a committee, the Committee of the North (Slezkine 1994: 150–152). In the first years of the Committee of the North they suffered from no interference. They were even able to elaborate a theory that allowed the native ethnic groups to find a position within the Soviet strategy: they were assimilated to the proletariat; class struggle was supposed to be unknown among them, for they were collectively victims of tsarist exploitation (Slezkine 1994: 152–156). The backbone of this first policy was to enhance the importance of education and to free them from external interference, which could be fatal to very frail communities. Such, at least, was the understanding of the policy-makers.

But their means were limited, their financial support shallow (Forsyth 1992: 244–246; Slezkine 1994: 136–141). Their policy's main tool was the so-called "red missionaries", a group of young people, mostly students, who volunteered to bring the Soviet "gospel" to those populations along with education. They also attempted to establish their position within Soviet power by relying on indigenous pre-existing structures, thus creating a syncretic system in the Provisional Statute of 1926, respectful of indigenous agency (Onishchuk 1986: 118–119). On the other hand, local power was not always, indeed not usually, in compliance with this spirit. Often local powers were either not aware of the indigenous peoples or had been officials or merchants formerly and were thus not directly interested in their welfare. Why spend energy and money for miserable backward populations, far from the Soviet power's main goals such as industrialisation? (Slezkine 1994: 167, 170–171; a good example of

resistance is given in the specialist press, Marin 1931) There was thus a double policy, engaged on the behalf of those peoples on the one hand, indifferent to them or even hindering them on the other.

How did the populations react to these changes? Yuri Vella writes, still in the Soviet period, with a slight sense of humour, that his grandfather, "through lack of political awareness and training", fled both from the Whites and from the Reds (Vella 1991: 53). Very probably this was a most widespread position: why would they support the one over the others? They fought over issues they were not concerned with. The expressions "White tsar", "Red tsar" just illustrate their indifference with what was at stake. They were not likely to be concerned by the outcome of the war.

An Orthodox missionary, Irinarkh Shemanovski (see Toulouze 2005), who was the head of the Obdorsk mission[123] between 1898 and 1911, was impressed by the native's mistrust of the Russians and he reflected on the reason for the mistrust and the Russians' behaviour that brought it about. Things had hardly changed in so short a time. Still, all through the 1920s, the signals they received from the new power were mostly friendly: in the forest or the tundra, people were mainly in touch with the "red missionaries" who were devoted to their interests and had started to gain some trust from the local populations. The other representatives of the Soviet power hardly went so deep into their everyday life.

Certainly native populations were not as homogeneous as one could think. Local differences were relevant: in regions where Nenets reindeer herders were massively pauperised and subjected to richer masters – Russians, Komi, of even other Nenets –, as in the North-Eastern part of Europe, the Soviet message was often welcomed and could be understood.[124] The Yamal peninsula remained quite remote from the presence of Soviet power and Yevladov, in his survey expedition in 1928, discovered that people knew very little of the new "Red tsar" (Yevladov 1992). In general, the native population, with few exceptions, remained cautious, in an observatory position, but expecting more than before a

123 Nowadays Salekhard, on the lower Ob.

124 We have an interesting testimony in an autobiographic novel by one of the first Nenets intellectuals, scholar and writer Anton Pyrerka (written in 1940 but published later), who was a poor Nenets and was happy of the freedom the Reds brought him from his master, who did not pay him and with whom he had no perspective of ever having a life of his own (Pyrerka 1949).

friendly behaviour from the representatives of the new power.

For the native population, the event that triggered a restructuring of their whole life, including personhood, is actually connected with the implementation of the second stage of Soviet policy. By the end of the twenties, the situation in the country had stabilised and the Bolsheviks started to implement their overall programme of collectivisation and standardisation. Exceptions were no longer welcome: everyone was supposed to become a Soviet citizen with equal rights and duties. That's why, as early as 1927, the doctrine that had been elaborated within the Committee of the North and according to which the Northern people, *in corpora,* were not concerned with class struggle became suspect (Slezkine 1994: 188-190). The well-wishing policy of the Committee of the North was rejected at the central level (Sergeyev 1955: 103). In spite of desperate attempts by its members and leaders to protect the communities (Slezkine 1994: 193), the Soviet machine ran over their protests and applied to them the same harsh treatment as to all other Soviet citizens. Sovietisation was forced at a very quick pace. Who did not or could not follow, was squeezed.

The so-called Kazym war, in the heart of Western Siberia, is a very good example of the implementation of these harsh policies, which were in stark contrast to the previous sympathetic approach, thus confounding the indigenous communities. In this tragic episode, the final confrontation between the indigenous groups and the Soviet authorities was the outcome of a long process that can be seen from the natives' point of view as a series of provocations: first the children were forcibly brought to school, in a centre called Kultbasa (Cultural base, cf. Toulouze, Leete, Vallikivi 2015), while *kul,* for the natives, is a dangerous divinity. Then four shamans were arrested. Then the same shamans were prohibited from voting. Later a fishing brigade was sent to work on the shores of a sacred lake, where fishing is prohibited. Finally, a group of party and state representatives with a woman communist violated a sacred island, where women are not supposed to step. The natives, Khanty and Nenets, with their own agency responded: they took their children back from school, they fled into the wild, and finally they detained an official delegation and executed its members in a ritual way. The discovery of this fact lead to brutal repression that deprived the families of the Kazym river of their men, who were arrested and brought to court and then to prison, and the

women of all means of subsistence (Leete 2002).[125]

In some ways this represents the last burst of native resistance to sovietisation. After this explosion, native resilience moves to underground tactics. Actually this expression suggests something more organised than it was in fact. We are speaking now of resilience, not of resistance. Resistance was broken. The communities attempted to keep what makes sense to them far from the gaze of the authorities and of the Russians. Their intimate, personal sphere became the stronghold where Khanty values and behaviours persisted (Lyarskaya & Dudeck 2012)

The constitutive elements of indigenous personhood after the event

Indigenous groups had to find out which were the elements of their culture that were so crucial to them that they had to be preserved in the new forceful conditions.[126] I do not argue that this process was undergone with full awareness: probably it was driven by necessity in tragic conditions. But those elements that were deliberately protected were certainly those that were considered the most important.

The question of one's position in the world is central to animistic worldviews: the human is not the only subject and the only awareness, all their surroundings have an awareness of their own, all are entitled to subjectivity. As Graham Harvey puts it: "Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human" (Harvey 2006). It is in relation to them that the self has been defined. Relations with others are fundamentally part of the ontology of animistic groups: relations with ancestors, with animals, with plants, with spirits. Man must negotiate his/her position in regard to them and the understanding

125 This episode has been differently treated. Khanty writer Yeremey Aypin presents it as an episode of the Khanty fight for freedom from the Russians (2002). Tatiana Moldanova (1994), another Khanty writer, focuses on the suffering of the women after the repression. Cinema has also taken over: on the basis of Aypin's book a love story has been shot with Hollywood kitsch techniques (2009, Red Ice. A saga about the Khanty, by Oleg Fesenko) while Aleksej Fedorchenko's recent treatment, using a laconic cinematographic language, is much more sensitive (2014, The Angels of the Revolution).

126 In this part I rely mostly on my fieldwork made in Siberia since 1991.

of self depends on it. This dimension of the animistic worldview, with all its consequences for an understanding of personhood, probably did not suffer much because of the abovementioned events. They were not directly contested. Relations with animals were not so much of concern to the state authorities. If on the one hand the materialistic worldview certainly does not accept the idea that animals or other natural elements have personhood and agency, this idea did not directly interfere, in ordinary life situations, with what was essential for the state.

I shall hereafter attempt to identify, on the basis of fieldwork carried out in Western Siberia between 1992 and 2013, some peculiar features of this modern Siberian animistic worldview, in order to try to understand the deep contradiction that indigenous groups and individuals have been confronted with for at least sixty years, the pressure of which has not entirely disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I will not attempt to reconstruct, as often Soviet and Russian ethnography attempts to do, the state of the natives' culture "before the arrival of modernity", i.e. before the 1917 revolution. Neither am I interested in picking out animistic features and constructing upon them an ideal model. What I am interested in are the original characteristics of indigenous thinking we may identify nowadays, in all their hybridity and their contradictions. Those which reveal the tension this part of the population has gone through and may give a hint of what, in the traditional ontological system, makes sense for them at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st.

"People who have reindeer and gods"

Once, in 1996, a Tundra Nenets woman in a reindeer herding brigade, formulated to my colleague, the Estonian anthropologist Liivo Niglas, what the Nenets are: "people who have reindeer and gods."[127] With this beautiful sentence, she summarises the core of what is important in the self for a simple Nenets reindeer herder: reindeer and gods. On the basis of this assertion as well as of his extensive fieldwork, Niglas concluded about the fundamental place that reindeer occupy not only in

127 Oral information (1996).

guaranteeing the Nenets reindeer herders' material well-being, but also their spiritual wholeness (Niglas 1997, 1997a, 1998, 1999, 2000; 2001).

Special relations with animals are central to animistic worldviews. In this we can identify the difference between different kinds of reindeer herding systems: the Nenets' system, deeply integrated in their worldview, in which reindeer are the core of the spiritual life and are herded not for economic profit but as an asset in itself, and for example the economically successful Izhma komi (*Iz'vatas*)[128], for whom "rational" reindeer-herding means relating to the reindeer as to capital (Kuratov 1925). For the latter, the herd is a commodity, for the Nenets, it is identity. That's probably why they have been able to retain, throughout the Soviet period, a strong particular identity, which distinguishes them from other herders in Soviet Russia. While the taiga "became a giant open-air meat factory", to quote Piers Vitebsky's words (Vitebsky 2005: 43), in Western Siberia Nenets reindeer herders were able to retain the core of their relations to the reindeer, in succeeding gradually to reproduce within the Soviet brigade, the main features of the traditional migrating kin group (Vitebsky 2005: 48). This means that the efforts of the Yamal Nenets were oriented towards preserving this essential dimension in their lives.

Even more interesting is the understanding of reindeer of the Forest Nenets, who live in a very different environment and whose herds are notably smaller than the Tundra Nenets', and do not provide the core of their life resources. Again: I am not attempting any reconstruction. As far as my knowledge of Forest Nenets culture goes, and according to the first extensive information about it (Verbov 1936), their herds were already then relatively small. Still, at least nowadays, reindeer are felt as the most pervasive identity factor. In 1999, I recorded a Forest Nenets elder woman's (Atiny Sobol'eva Kazamkina, Varyogan, probably born in 1934[129]) remembrance of a longer migration from the Pur region to the Agan basin that seems to recall images of a Tundra Nenets migration, with long caravans and huge herds. Either my information about history is inaccurate (which is possible, for data are not abundant from so early

128 About the Izhma Komi see Shabaev, Sharapov 2011; about Izhma Komi reindeer herders see Istomin 2004, Dwyer & Istomin 2009, 2010.

129 She does not know it herself. But she thinks she was about 14 years old when she gave birth to her first son (and the only one from her first husband), who was to become the Forest Nenets writer and reindeer herder Yuri Vella (see below).

a period), or Atiny Kazamkina remembers, with a young girl's sense of proportion, things bigger than they were. But it is also possible that reindeer occupy nowadays such a place in the Forest Nenets' awareness, that is throws a particular light on all that concern this animal that influences even memory.

In the last part of this article I shall focus on this woman's son, one particular individual, an intellectual who was at the same time a reindeer herder, Yuri Vella. On the qualitative level, I am impressed by the link Yuri Vella always stressed between reindeer and children. It was not the link emphasised by Willerslev and Ulturgasheva (2012: 53-58), of the child as a substitute in hunt or the child as having a guardian-reindeer. For Vella, the link between children and reindeer was very much rooted in the actual relationships between the children and the herd. Every grand-child has his or her reindeer and Yuri emphasised that not the parents but the reindeer raised the children. This understanding was well rooted in the animistic perception of the reindeer as having agency and personhood, the reindeer as wise and having a deeper understanding of the world than the limited human.[130] Contact with the reindeer teaches, educates the child, I would even say civilises him or her and makes a person of him or her.

The Tundra Nenets woman who summed up the core of the Nenets identity did not focus only on reindeer; the gods were also part of it. This woman has undergone the entire Soviet school atheist brainwashing, and still gods were a central part of the way she saw herself and her community. My interpretation of this sentence is that the Nenets are characterised by their environment, both visible and invisible. Their identity is merged with it and with its agents. I do not interpret the verb "have" as a sign for possession, but as a connector: they have reindeer and gods in the sense that they belong to a world in which there are reindeer and gods. I shall come back later on the Soviet fight against god (and gods).

The awareness of self, as it has been developed in Western culture, seems to be replaced here by a wider understanding. Its borders are

130 This very short text from Yuri Vella illustrates this understanding: "A reindeer herder hides in the bush, he looks at his reindeer and thinks "How well did I fool the reindeer. He doesn't see me!" Indifferent, the reindeer sucks lichen and thinks: "Let him believe it if he wants to" (Vella 2005: 6).

blurred at different levels. Is it a particular form of what Strathern calls the dividual, characterised by multiplicity and fractionality?

An extended understanding of the self: person, family, clan, ethnic group and beyond

The self tends to be inclusive and encompasses the different levels of kinship: in the case of Yuri Vella we see how family coherence becomes part of the identity of the patriarch (for more details, see Toulouze, Niglas 2006). In the last years of his life, dealing with the authorities, he presented himself as the head of a family of twenty-four members: a mother, a wife, a brother, four daughters, fours sons-in-law, and her daughters' children as well as one grand-daughter's husband and children. Often outsiders would ask why he should take under his responsibility his sons-in law, who are adult healthy men and might have themselves have borne the burden of supporting their wives and children. But this question comes from another worldview. In Yuri's, it did not exist: mentally, morally, he was the one to support the burden of his whole clan.

The importance of clan in the Forest Nenets' everyday life in remote times is only to be imagined. We know that in the first period of the Soviet era, as it was traditional already in tsarist Russia, the clan was generally taken over by the authorities as the basic institution regulating the Siberian native's life. There was even a word for that: "clan system" (rodovoy story). The reality beyond this generalising institution is difficult to grasp: the kinship system worked differently in each region, and generalisations did not take into account very particular realities: while in the Yamal peninsula the clan was still at the end of the 20th century an institution with real impact on everyday life (exogamy rules, mutual assistance, moiety exogamy, see Niglas 2001: 59), on the European side of the Urals we know that as early as the end of the 19th century its relevance for the life of the Nenets was not comparable.

Albeit that in the case of the Forest Nenets at the end of the 20th century, the "clan system" seems to have become quite inoperative in everyday life, it is retained in the people's awareness by becoming a

surname[131] and, oddly enough, by a general respect for exogamy rules (Verbov 1936).[132] Yuri Vella on the other hand, claims responsibility for the whole of his clan. Once, in the winter of 1999, as I was living in Yuri's and his wife's log hut, we had some visitors. A Russian filmmaker who had made a film about him brought him the film and she was accompanied by several friends. They brought as a present a bottle of vodka. Yuri, who did not drink at all, invited the whole company into the hut, and rather formally, made a "native chief" speech in which he recalled rather poignantly how he was the head of his clan, despite of being too young, because spirits had killed all his male kin (except him and a small three-years old child).

My fieldwork also leads me to another remark about identity, in this case about ethnic identity. I have the impression (Toulouze 2012) that awareness of ethnic belonging is fading. I had this feeling during my fieldwork, by noticing that the women – Yuri's wife is a Khanty, some daughters have registered as Khanty, others as Nenets – looked for handicraft patterns in journals and took over patterns they liked, whatever their ethnic origin (for example Mansi); by listening to Yuri telling folk tales in the evening, but without mentioning their ethnic origin; or by talking to the children who, as a lesson about indigenous languages, did not know to which of the local languages a word belonged. But it became very clear in Liivo Niglas' film "Yuri Vella's world" (2001): at some moment he develops the idea that every person has a measure allocated to him or to her. He must recognise when he must stop. Then he says: "Many in my kin did not recognise it. My father, Aleksandr Aypin, both died young". Anyone who knows the region is well aware that Aypin is a Khanty clan. So Vella

131 This is a general rule, but there are exceptions and more complicated personal or group histories that explain anomalies: for example the Ayvaseda in Varyogan.

132 In his 1936 ethnography, Verbov reveals the exogamy rules of the Forest Nenets. They are more complicated than for others because they include Khanty clans. In Varyogan, I have met only one case of « improper » marriage in which the spouses were both Nenets (and it was a case of marriage between two elder people, who did not have children together), although nowadays the marriages are decided by the spouses themselves and without the initiative or interference of parents.

considers this particular Khanty man as somebody of his kin[133] (Toulouze, Niglas 2012).

A geographic projection of this extended self

The blurring of the borders defining the self is also felt on another level. The indigenous self is also deeply integrated into landscape, into surrounding nature. As people are part of the identity of nature, and nature, particularly places, are part of the identity of the people. I have spent several months at Yuri Vella's place in the Western Siberian taiga and his favourite way of speaking about the people who were relevant to his life, especially of ancestors and kin, was to tell stories about them and about places connected with them. He would drive his car and stop and tell a story that happened to one or another person. People had geography as well as history. His last monologue, filmed by Olga Kornienko some weeks before his demise, illustrates eloquently this peculiarity – Yuri reflects on heritage: when leaving this world, people leave behind something, and this something are places. They leave their memory connected with the places and his thoughts, while preparing to quit this world, were focused on the places he would leave behind.

Thus, indigenous personhood, at least in Western Siberia, seems, on the basis of my fieldwork, to be an extended personhood, in which the self is a complex concept whose borders are blurred and may encompass both kin, past and present, as well as the environment.

Soviet changes and outputs

This understanding of personhood has lived through difficult historical times. While native ontology was challenged before the 20th century, for example with the Orthodox missionaries' evangelisation

133 I thank Laur Vallikivi for his comment on this point: according to his fieldwork, the relative indifference to indigenous ethnicity seems to be characteristic of multi-ethnic regions. He noticed that for Yukaghirs (with the exception of ethnic activists) to be registered as Evens was not considered as a problem.

attempts, it had never been as fundamentally under attack as in the Soviet period. The former penetration attempts into native life were superficial. They were integrated in tax systems and legal systems (Forsyth 1992, Slezkine 1994), but these institutional enterprises were aimed at changing behaviours, but not thinking[134]. Christianisation was more ambitious, but much less than later Protestant evangelisation of some communities of reindeer herders (see Vallikivi 2005): Orthodoxy is very much a ritualised religion, in which the proposition of adherence is much less demanding of core change. This does not mean that Orthodox missionaries were not concerned by the superficial and pragmatic religiosity they identified in their neophytes, but their ambition was limited by their means: few men in charge of huge alien, unknown territories with limited resources and not backed by the State authority. But with the new Bolshevik regime, things changed thoroughly.

The Soviets were borne by a demanding ideology that encompassed every field of human action. They were moved by a project, which was totalitarian, and as such, did not take into account differences in ontologies. This project was holistic and had universal ambitions.

The Soviet project for the North

Behind the changes in society that the Bolsheviks wanted to achieve – to have a society without class exploitation, based on collective ownership – there was also an ontological project whose aim was to change both the society and the human being within it.

Society was to be built on rational rules that would structure the whole system, based on general work. As far as the human being is concerned, the aim of the soviet "construction" has been summed up as an attempt to create a "Soviet person,"[135] supposed to be free of the individualism and egoism developed by capitalism, and the bearer of several qualities – social involvement, activity, devotion to the Party, and characterised

134 This does not mean that we can dismiss as insignificant the possible Russian influence on indigenous communities: on the long term, even superficial contacts my lead to self-evidences.

135 For a critique of the result, see Zinovyev 1986.

by a deep equality, which in the Bolsheviks' understanding was equal to standardisation. In this system, all cultural differences, all particularities, seen as results of centuries' long exploitation and oppression, were to be eliminated. The Northern people, who had been granted by the former regime particular privileges, were to become similar to all other Soviet citizens.

This endeavour included the fight against what were called the relics of the past *(perezhitki proshlogo)* that were to be systematically uprooted. Religion, in all its possible forms, was one of them; social consensus was another one. Since the beginning of the thirties, the fight against shamanism was very resolute in the North (Suslov 1931, Bogoraz-Tan 1932, X plenum 1934: 154–155, Slezkine 1994: 226–227, Leete 1996: 394). Materialism was to be generally promoted, and the new person to be devoid of any irrationality in his or her way of thinking. All that was connected to older beliefs was considered to be superstition and had to be uprooted. Powerful instruments of change were supposed to act on both levels – the social and the individual (on all these questions see also Dudeck 2013:72).

The instruments of change

We may list three main instruments used to give new shape to society. These were all collective institutions that operated throughout the whole society and in which all Soviet citizens were at some moment of their life, to be integrated.

Chronologically, in the life of an individual, the first one was the school. It was also the most powerful, because it exercised authority over the children; it was also the most problematic. In spite of serious endeavours, at the beginning of the Soviet period (and until today), to find proper ways to develop education within nomadic population, no better form was found than the boarding school (Lunacharski 1927). It was also the fittest model to instil new values in a totally soviet environment. This usually meant alienation both from the family (at a very young age) and from the indigenous environment, the indigenous skills. Children reacted to school in different ways (as it is everywhere, but certainly with more

extreme consequences).[136] Some of them – mostly girls – adapted and enjoyed their stay. Usually, those who graduated later from University, who became intellectuals, writers, are among those who adapted not too painfully to school. But they were not the majority. For some children, the rupture with the familiar environment was unbearable, and they fled. Some were caught, others escaped for a while, and others were lost. The majority however, survived. But the difficulties they had to face were often misinterpreted and many children, because of their silences and their laborious expression, were considered as intellectually limited and sent to other institutions. Teachers, Russians as a rule, were not able to cope with the trauma brought about by a different environment, emotional uprooting and unfamiliar language.[137]

School and especially boarding schools were the means for rooting hygiene[138] (as understood in Western culture), physical habits (Russian versus native diet) as well as fundamental values based on materialism. The various school subjects allowed them to shape the children's understanding of the world according to materialistic and evolutionary principles. These were in explicit contradiction with the traditional worldview of the indigenous peoples. But the latter learnt to live in the Russian way and adapted to all the necessary contexts.

However, when they went back to life in nature, they were helpless. While on the one hand they lacked the indispensable techniques to survive, on the other hand they couldn't make sense of their environment. This new challenge led to different answers, from total denial (total integration into town/village environment and adherence to its values) to a kind of double standards – the town/village acquired standard and the nature traditional one, each of which was actualised depending on the situational

136 See Heimo Lappalainen's documentary about the Evenk experience in the nineties (Taiga Nomads part III, 1992). See also Valentin Kuik's documentary « Flight » (Lend 1995) about Khanty children and school.

137 Nenets filmmaker Anastasia Lapsuy draws on her own experience as a child when in her « Seven songs from the tundra » (2000) she shows a Nenets girl coming to school and having her hair cut. It is also the inspiration for her film « Pudana » (The last of her clan, 2010).

138 One of the main arguments of Soviet propaganda was that the children learnt to brush their teeth. That's how Anastasia Lapsuy and Markku Lehmuskallio found the main character for the film Anna (1997), that tells what happened to a Nganassan girl filmed at the beginning of the fifties brushing her teeth.

environment.

Other institutions, while not meant to teach, were nevertheless useful tools to nurture the values learnt at school. The army was an important moment in young men's life: for two years they were immersed in a standardised environment, with other young men coming from all over the Soviet Union. The army is always a powerful standardising tool: people from different origins need a common language to communicate, while strong experiences shared with other young people rooted through the emotionality of the life they led fed into their personhood. While boys, as a rule, adapted less willingly to school, the army provided the necessary integration within the Soviet system.

In the experience of work, the kolkhoz and the sovkhoz were also institutions that carried the Soviet spirit. Still this spirit was probably less totally present than in the abovementioned frameworks. Often, the bosses were from the same nationality (unlike at school or in the army). If the activities were traditional, contact both with nature and with other natives sharing the same values were unavoidable. At the same time, the collective work units were the way to integrate into Soviet life the indigenous peoples' traditional husbandry activities. So they were the core form of implementation of the Soviet project in the North, but at the same time they were actually the weakest link. Depending on the place, the implementation could present conspicuous peculiarities: the brigade in Yamal Nenets reindeer herding could be a thoroughly Nenets framework, composed by kin, and where all the rituals necessary to keep good balance with the gods could be performed; on the other hand, in the Western tundras, shift herding kept herders and their families under control.

The deceptive force of discourse

As usual in any kind of conversion attempt, discourse is one of the ways to influence both children and adults and to change their worldview (Vallikivi 2009). Soviet discourse was permanently present

in the indigenous peoples' life, especially through the aforementioned institutions.

In regards to the Soviet ideological shaping of indigenous personhood, discourse was certainly a tool, but a blunt one. In cultures of silence such as (at least) Western Siberian ones, it was very difficult to engage with natives in dialogue. Discourse was not challenged, it was accepted, but the level of discourse interiorisation was diverse. Some were able to reproduce it, and could progress in the Party's hierarchy. Some did not even try. Some just replied through silence. Some interpreted quite freely what they heard: Yuri Vella liked to tell the story of a Nenets Party secretary in Varyogan, who was asked what communism was and answered after having thought for a little while, that it was eaten with bread. This anecdote shows one of the possible ways, probably the most extreme, in which words may function: being deprived of any meaning and having just a phatic effect. In other cases, the Soviet colonial discourse was properly interiorised: one Varyogan Nenets explained to me seriously once in 1999: "the Nenets were a primitive people, the Russian have civilised them".

So words and their repetition might have an influence on how singular persons saw themselves and the world around, but it is not safe to take it for granted that discourse would have the desired effect. Individual agency has to do with the reception of discourse.

The importance of the environment

Still, while analysing the outcome of all this indoctrination work, we cannot omit the situative dimension: behaviour and discourse, which are the signs that we have at our disposal to appreciate our informants' worldview and thoughts on themselves, may change depending on the environment: the village or the "wild". There are rules to be respected while in the forest, which are not relevant while living in the village: all makes sense with nature around, and each element of the environment is alive. So, every step, even a trivial one, made by a person, for example where to pee in the forest, required the making of choices that have to do with the understanding of space and rules.

While the village is an environment conceived by Russians, and

thus carries their world, the taiga and the tundra were originally an indigenous environment. Over centuries indigenous groups wandered in these environments according to their needs and covered the space in their own way. Hunters moved looking for game, herders followed their reindeer, and families lived either moving with their herds throughout the year or changed camps each season on smaller areas. But the 20th century has induced a two-folded change: sedentarisation, a programme of sovietisation largely achieved by the 1950s, emptied the taiga of its indigenous and human inhabitants; at the same time, oil drilling has led to the invasion of this peculiar space by hordes of oil workers for whom the environment is considered an enemy to crush and to annihilate. The clash of worldviews and values is closer, it becomes explicit. But for the indigenous peoples, most of whom at least partly remain connected to the taiga, it is still the space where their traditional understandings reflect a meaningful truth and where central aspects of their personhood are actualised, while, oh the other hand, they remain latent in the village.

The forest (or the tundra) is a place where reindeer are pastured and where the presence of gods is felt. On a more practical level, the forest is a place where you can move around with your knife, as traditionally, and not being accused of carrying a weapon; it is a place where it is natural to wear traditional clothing, which is comfortable and adapted to the needs. It is also a place where all Russian rules are not permanently implemented: it is possible to ride a car without an official driving license, for there are usually no officials to implement the rules. But the problem in recent decades is that while indigenous peoples have their own rules by which to live in this void, now the taiga is inhabited also by others, for whom the void means total impunity. In this void, they may perpetrate acts they would not dream of in a context ruled by law: most of them wouldn't think of stealing a cow or desecrating a grave-yard. But it is what they do when they chase reindeer by helicopter (in 1990, the spreading of this practice provoked a demonstration by the Varyogan villagers) or

when they dig graves (see a poetic text by Yuri Vella on this topic)[139]. Thus, the peace of the indigenous world, where natives could live according to their particular rules is disturbed by the presence of people for whom the absence of one set of laws is not replaced by another but by total absence of any behavioural rules.

One could recount several examples of different ways that have been chosen by Western Siberian natives to cope with the abovementioned contradictions. One example I will not develop, but which is undoubtedly relevant is Anna Nerkagi's, a tundra Nenets writer. In one of her first novels, *Aniko of the Noho's clan,* she presents the autobiographical example of a young girl who in boarding school dreams about the taiga, but returning back there she discovers that she is not able to stand the life of her people and that she has no place in either of her two worlds (Nerkagi 1977). Anna Nerkagi's quest is still on: first, like Vella, she went back to the tundra, she tried to be useful to her people by managing a trading post in the tundra, she renounced writing, then she converted to Orthodoxy... But this is the topic for a more detailed study (see for the first period of her life and work Samson Normand de Chambourg 1998).

Yuri Vella's experience: the "event"

Much has been written about Yuri Vella,[140] but what I want to emphasize in this article is the work on himself he made in the last 15

139 "For what reason? Yesterday I was passing by the clan cemetery the Aypins.. What I saw beats any reasonable explanation. The majority of graves have been dug up. These are not the traces of animal claws, they are traces of spades, used by the human beings. What were they looking for here? Why? The hidden treasures they didn't find in the labases at the sacred grove? (...) Here lies the thrown aside rotten boot of the singer Shchimka. One can see the piece of bone – perhaps, the former foot? Is it the one he mangled once when in his youth, he was bringing the fish train to Surgut, after the war?

And at the neighbouring grave of Ayzer, plundered as well? Here are the traces of the fireplace, somebody had arranged. Two sticks and a kettle with a hole, put on a horizontal stick, swinging like a pendulum. And inside, a white skull. What on earth does this mean, oh you people?!

By instinct, I close my eyes imagining. Here I lie, at the end of the cemetery, dug out by some hooligan. And a curious and gnarled unfinished thought scratches into the weather-beaten skull: What have I done to you? (Vella 2008: 36-37).

140 About Yuri Vella and his work, as well as for scans of his works, see jurivella.ru.

years of his life[141] in order to recover a whole personhood after an event that had for him consequences comparable to a Pauline revelation (see Badiou 2003).

In the first four decades of his life, Yuri did not explicitly question the truths he had grown up with. He had a settled life in the village, with proper contact with nature (he was a hunter), with a native wife and four daughters who attended the village boarding school, with a hobby – he wrote poetry in Russian – and a repressed regret not to have reindeer to live with.

The event he experienced was not shared by his closest relatives, nor by his wife or by his daughters. He decided to attend the Moscow Literary Institute and, while continuing to work as a hunter, he spent one week per month in Moscow attending lectures and reading. This was his turning point. This "event" has two faces: on the one hand it changed deeply his relationship to authority, on the other his relation to the concept of culture. And it led to his personal struggle to reshape his own personhood.

The relationship to authority: as I said, Yuri did not question the truths taught by the Party and he even applied twice for membership. Curiously, he was not accepted, which shows certain clear-sightedness from the Party local organisation. His application to the Party shows that he was totally sincere in his adhesion to what he had been taught to consider as the truth. So when he discovered at the Institute that things were not as they were presented in the official version of Soviet history – he had been told that in the civil war the Whites were bandits, and he discovered that there were eminent intellectuals and poets among them –, this triggered a trust crisis in regard to all that he had been told only on the strength of authority and he started to sieve all kind of information critically. Nevermore was he to accept any assertion on mere authority.

The second point is the concept of culture. The Russian word "kultura[142]", as well as the equivalent to "civilisation", "tsivilizatsia", are used as an absolute, but are in fact synonymous with the dominant, i.e.

141 I have been a witness myself of these 15 years. I have spent as a whole 6 months in his camp and have met him often outside Siberia. So this part relies on my fieldwork and on material that Estonian anthropologist and filmmaker Liivo Niglas has shot about him in the same period.

142 About the meaning in Russian use of this word see Grant 1995: 15-16.

Russian culture or civilisation, versus the indigenous peoples' absence of culture and civilisation. These notions have been so generally repeated that they have widely been interiorised by the natives; living in nature is "not civilised"; going to the village is "to go back to civilisation". Yuri certainly accepted these categories before becoming a student in Moscow. But then he discovered that Russian culture was not the only one existing in the world. That the ancient Roman model, the ancient Greek model, were all different kind of cultures, and he understood that the Nenets have also their culture, which is a culture in its own right, different from the Russian one, but not fundamentally inferior.

He came back from Moscow with a new boldness. This "event" triggered a general awareness. He understood what they had been submitted to and he tried to cleanse himself of the former indoctrination and to find a new personhood made of authentic Nenets materials. Moreover, times were complicated: it was 1990, it was clear that the Soviet world could not go on in the same way.

He allowed himself his old dream of living with reindeer and made a very courageous and original choice: he bought reindeer and went with his wife to life in the forest. It was a big jump into the unknown, but it was an unknown he wished to domesticate, to make his own. He had no skills with reindeer, so he had to learn all from scratch. He had to build a living in the forest, log huts in different places depending on the season, several dozens of kilometres of fences, to keep his reindeer within. So he did, with the help of his wife, who was not happy at all, but who followed her husband's lead (although she recognised later it threatened their relationship). It was an entirely new life.

A new personhood

It is easy to follow the innovations in the couple's life but not so comfortable to attempt to follow the inner changes Yuri worked on himself. It was not a proclaimed goal. I was a permanent work, to put his personhood in compliance with his new life. It was not a work he talked about: he had no interlocutor. His wife was struggling to adapt to a life that

was not of her choice. He tried to reconquer the wisdom of a native chief, to rediscover peculiarities of native life, to start thinking as a Nenets.

For this he could draw on different sources: his native identity had strongly relied on his grand-mother Nengi's teachings, and she remained perhaps the only undiscussed authority, on whom he wrote and whom he mentioned until his last days. Then he had his neighbours. These were older Forest Nenets men, from whom he learned to be a reindeer herder – Oysya Yusi, who had left the kolkhoz in 1953 and had never more gone to the village, Auli Yussi, Pavel Ayvaseda, Vakhalyuma Ayvaseda, all closer friends, whom he recognised as his teachers, whom he listened to. They were also the ones with whom he could speak Nenets and who could tell him Nenets tales or songs. They became his network.

As a private person, he had a real sorrow he could not solve: he had no son to carry on the name and his clan. He tried to solve this problem in a very traditional indigenous way. He envisaged taking a second wife, a "younger wife", of course in agreement with his wife. She even looked for possible candidates. But finally she was emotionally unprepared and the plan was abandoned. But I think it is a good example of this period in which Yuri Vella tries to fit himself in the mould of a traditional head of family.

I do not know whether he prayed before, or whether he was the one to lead a sacrifice of reindeer. Usually it is the elder of the clan who does it, but he had none other around him. He certainly learnt from the older men, who were "real", lifelong reindeer-herders. They transmitted to him their spirituality. The rituals he knew from childhood, but without practical experience (he was five years old when he lost his father) he had now to perform them as the older male in his family and in his clan.

Actually all these points – fathering a son or praying have much to do with male identity. This part of his personhood was very relevant for Yuri Vella and he attempted to develop it in an indigenous way, i.e. in a patriarchal way. He was also very impatient with public women, even elder women, when they took a too important role in religious ceremonies. I suppose that the character and the choices of the females surrounding him could have influenced the form this particular aspect took with Vella. Here, the distinction was very clear between the Vella at

his camp, and the Vella in alien territory. At his camp Yuri did not dialogue with his wife or his daughters. He could monologue (at least when we were present), but he did not expect any answer or comment. And the women of his household did not pay attention to his words. Actually when I was at his camp, I was treated as one of them (which was flattering but also very frustrating). And the difference was noticeable in other contexts, for outside "his" world, Yuri dialogued very much with me. But this form of communication was impossible in his territory, because it did not fit with Yuri's camp personhood.

As a public person Yuri developed and liked to demonstrate some skills that are directly connected with indigenous knowledge: he always liked to do what I call "play Sherlock Holmes": he showed his ability to read nature or reindeer, and to deduce from a very small clue lots of information about the people living in the forest. He liked also to fight oil drillers with tools taken from the indigenous way of seeing the world: that's how he used a tepee in the regional capital or he pursued until the end of his life the story of the president's reindeer.[143] He intended to be seen as a native and thus he fought as a native.

As a public person, was Yuri Vella, as he sometimes said, the leader of the Forest Nenets? He was a socially very active character, but his actions were deeply individual; although they were supposed to be to the advantage of all the Khanty and the Nenets living in the forest, they were decided and carried on by Yuri completely alone. So one could say he was a self-appointed spokesman, for he had the ability to speak to the people of the other culture. But I dare argue that he was not recognised by the other Forest Nenets as their leader. He was too uncomfortable a character to be widely popular. Firstly, he did not drink, which set him apart from the other men. Then his choice to live in the forest was seen by many village dwellers as too extreme and his opposition to oil drillers too bold. People were in awe and respected him, recognised his superiority in many domains. But they also criticised him mercilessly, refusing his quest for indigeneity.

143 Much has been written on this topic : Novikova 2000, Butenschön 2003, Khanzerova 2009, Leete 2013.

The question of authenticity

One question we cannot avoid is the authenticity of Yuri's behaviour and discourse. While looking at the films made about him, we often have the impression that Yuri acts. But I know through experience that, while he was indeed stimulated by the camera, actually his behaviour did not differ substantially from what it was when the camera was not around.

On the other hand I can safely say that yes, Yuri acted, but he acted his own character. This impression is given by the rationalised dimension of his behaviour. His behaviour is rational, he does exactly what he wants to do, not because of a deep impulse of doing so (we cannot exclude that the impulse existed), but because such behaviour is in compliance with the image of himself he wanted to give, not only to others, but also, and mainly himself. What distinguishes his comportment from that of the other Khanty or Nenets is the utmost awareness. He is as he is because of an intellectual need of being so, not because he has no choice. Actually he has a choice: he knows how to behave in different ways in other contexts. His awareness has destroyed spontaneity.

But Yuri's awareness did not allow him to ignore how much was not achieved in his endeavour. He was aware the he had started too late to fulfil his dream and he was particularly aware that he was alone. He did not speak of it. But he alluded to it when he spoke of his goal. He did not put the mark too high. He did not pretend to have built a life in the forest. He considered his enterprise as a "museum" (see below, p.240 and following): what he wanted to do, was to show how it is possible to live a decent and dignified life in the forest in the 21st century. He wanted to show it both to the "newcomers", Russian and foreigners alike, and to his kin, the local Khanty and Nenets, who were afraid of regaining what had been theirs and who had adopted the Russian way of thinking.

Yuri was always thinking of planting seeds for the future: what was important for him was to build foundations for an unforeseeable future, when oil resources would be extinguished and the indigenous peoples would remain with an injured land and landscape and perhaps unable to live on it. It was important for him to prepare conditions for people to go back to long forgotten nature if they desire it.

Conclusion

As with all other natives, two worldviews and subsequently two understandings of self were competing in Yuri Vella: the traditional one, transmitted by the elder generation and inspired by the natural environment and the new, inspired by Soviet values, and transmitted by different Soviet institutions. As is the case with most natives, at the beginning of his life, while being familiar with the indigenous world, Yuri grew up as a village dweller and a "modern" Soviet person, embracing all the dominating principles of his society. In this dichotomy, he faced the problem all acculturated indigenous people are confronted with. His way of solving the inner pressure before the "event" was very ordinary: he ignored the contradictions and tried to live fully both lives and to shape his personhood into adaptability. Still he had a tool in that period, which certainly allowed him to relieve the pressure: he wrote.

The event, the awakening of an awareness of the colonial pressure put on him and on his kin, led to a conscious work on himself in order to retrieve original features that had been buried under the "modern" village self. Very few Northern intellectuals have lived something similar: most have remained in the mould and tried to represent publicly a world which has become alien to them. Vella has attempted to delve into this world and to make it his own. From this point of view he has produced a sample of original thinking and lived a very rich experience.

This experience confirms the relevance of the notion of Event in the changes concerning indigenous personhood. Unlike many accounts of indigenous personhood, I have decided to focus mostly on hybridity, on how the intruding Western thinking patterns have profoundly influenced the way Western Siberian indigenous peoples have been used to see themselves in their different environments. I have tried to retrace this hybridity in a general way and to analyse one example of the response to the contradictions induced. This quest for authenticity within one's personhood is also, in itself, a consequence of this hybridity: it presupposes the awareness of the existence of one whole personhood to reshape according to some fundamental principles. It presupposes the awareness of something that has been lost and that is perceived as a whole, and the attempt to isolate different parts in it and to put them in compliance with

what they were supposed to be originally, before the brain-washing of the last 70 years.

I consider this article a first attempt to disentangle a complex issue: as Spiro emphasises, “it is not inaccurate to say that the person or self has been studied in only a small fraction of human societies” (1993: 107). This topic would need further studies and, particularly, further ethnography with other, different examples of possible responses in order to be able to draw a typology of the deeper effects of colonisation on the minds of indigenous peoples.