

# Yuri Vella (1948-2013) and the Forest Nenets



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## Preface

This book is dedicated to the 10th anniversary of Yuri Vella's death. At the conference gathered in Tartu in March 2014, attended by people for whom Yuri Vella was important and who were important for him, the participants agreed that it was important to keep Yuri's legacy alive. And thus, many of us, in the following years, continued to write about him and to endeavour to keep his heritage alive. This book is another way of keeping our promise. I have chosen to collect the articles I have written, sometimes alone, sometimes with other colleagues with whom we shared principles and reflections.

As Yuri Vella's life and activities were very thoroughly connected with his people. What meant, for Vella, his people? His understanding was broad. He didn't distinguish between his ethnic group, the Forest Nenets, and his neighbours, the Khanty, more precisely the Eastern Khanty. His wife was Khanty, and he drew the line more between the natives and the Russian, or those who shares with the Russians the language and the urban way of life.

But for the scope of this collection, I concentrate on the Forest Nenets. The main reason is that while there is an abundance of scientific literature, even in English, about the Khanty, general information about the Forest Nenets is but scarce. This is a good occasion to gather articles published in different reviews at different times, and which give about the Forest Nenets a sum of information.

With Liivo Niglas, we published a book in 2021, which summed up our observations about Yuri Vella. This collection includes some of the articles that inspired the book, but time has passed, and others have been written and published. They form the bulk of this edition.



# THE FOREST NENETS





# The Forest Nenets as a double language minority<sup>1</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

The Forest Nenets are a small community living in Western Siberia, which has not been as thoroughly studied as the other native people in the same region. In spite of living in the first Siberian region to be colonised by the Russians as early as the 16th century, the Forest Nenets have been identified as a specific group only in the middle of the 19th century. It is true that, according to G. Verbov (1936: 57), a group mentioned as “kunnaya samoyad” in a source dated 1602 may refer to Forest Nenets. Nevertheless, this group is but one between several other groups of “samoyads” (old Russian name for the Nenets) and is not directly opposed to the Tundra Nenets. The first scholar to have recognised the Forest Nenets as a specific group in dual opposition to the Tundra Nenets is the Finnish linguist M.A. Castrén, who collected language and ethnographic data by the Forest Nenets in the 1840-ies. At the end of the 19th century the Forest Nenets are newly discovered in Russia as a people called “nyah-samar-yah” which was considered to be unconnected to any other people of the region (Bartenev<sup>2</sup> 1998: 145-146). The confusion is cleared at the beginning of the first decade of the 20th century, with the works of Patkanov (1911) and Zhitkov (1913: 249-251); more reliable data about Nenets are due to the Finnish scholar Toivo Lehtisalo, who visited the Forest Nenets in 1914. The first comprehensive article about Forest Nenets culture as a whole is the abovementioned study published by Verbov in

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1 Article published in *Studies in Folk Culture, Vol 1. Sacred and Profane in the Dialogue of Cultures*, Tartu 2013, 95-108.

2 Viktor Bartenev (1864-1921) was a democratic Russian activist, who spent 4 years in exile in the North of the Tobol'sk region. His book was written in 1896.

1936. Afterwards there has been some systematic research about Forest Nenets language (grammatical sketches by Verbov 1957, Sammallahti 1974 and Puszta 1984); there has also been occasional research by Russian ethnographers, who have been dealing with problems of ethnical history and some questions of material and spiritual culture. Because of the scarceness of data about Forest Nenets, I shall start my paper with a general presentation of this people, and only afterwards concentrate on the linguistic issue.

Two main reasons may explain the Forest Nenets marginality.

First of all, they occupy the remotest areas in Central Western Siberia, the rivers' high streams, between lakes and bogs, the most difficult to reach, so the Forest Nenets have succeeded to remain isolated until the last decades (Gemuyev: 32, Golovnyov: 56). Toivo Lehtisalo, who visited the Lyamin region in 1914, reports suggestively how complicated it was to reach their centres (Lehtisalo 1959: 139-141). Even nowadays some Forest Nenets groups, for example those living in the vicinity of lake Num-To, are connected to the rest of the world only by a helicopter flight once a week. For centuries the only contact of Russians with the Forest Nenets was the latter yearly visit to the local fairs (in Obdorsk or Surgut), where they brought reindeer skins for exchange in order to get the "Russian" products they needed. But even these contacts have not led for a long time to their identification as a distinct group. The fact is the Forest Nenets are very closely connected to another Nenets group, the Tundra Nenets, that occupy huge territories from the Kola to the Taymyr Peninsulas both European zones and in Siberia. They were the first people of the North the Russians met in their earlier expansion eastwards. So confusion with the Tundra Nenets has been the second reason explaining the Forest Nenets late discovery: all the Nenets were treated indifferently and called Samoyeds.

Still, besides some common points, there are some peculiar Forest Nenets features in language as well as culture overall. Although linguistic analysis shows clearly the closeness of Tundra and Forest Nenets languages – that have been treated as two dialects of the same language by Lehtisalo in his extensive dictionary (Lehtisalo 1956) – this closeness is not evident for the speakers themselves, for divergent phonetic evolution has led to a situation where there can be no real mutual understanding

between the two groups. Therefore, linguists as Johanna Laakso (<http://www.helsinki.fi/hum/sugl/oppimat/sgrjohd/sip.htm>) and Tapani Salminen (<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/ling.html>) use to present Forest and Tundra Nenets as two separate languages. Moreover, the difference in ecological context – taiga versus tundra – explains that the husbandry model of both groups is significantly different. Thus, we are justified in treating Forest Nenets as a distinct community. But this is still not a generalised approach. Presently the Forest Nenets live in two administrative units, the Yamalo-Nenets and the Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous regions. If in the 1920-ies administrative authorities referred to the Forest Nenets in statistics – there were in 1926 1129 Forest Nenets (Homich 1995 : 23) – nowadays they do not distinguish them anymore from the Tundra Nenets. This means that nobody knows assertively the size of the Forest Nenets population: some groups live in contact areas with Tundra Nenets, and both populations are treated as a single people. There can be therefore only approximate data about the number of Forest Nenets nowadays: scholars mention figures between 1000<sup>3</sup> and 2000<sup>4</sup>. The only reliable statistic data we have are the figures for Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region, for practically all the Nenets living in this region are Forest Nenets:

1970	1979	1989
940	1003	1144

(Khomich 1995: 22-23, data from the last official census in USSR).

The Forest Nenets occupy nowadays three main regions in Western Siberia: the higher flow of the Kazym River, the area of the Num-to sacred lake<sup>5</sup>, the higher flow of the Agan River (a northern tributary of the Ob) with its tributaries Amputa and Vatyogan and the higher stream of the Pur,

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3 1300, according to [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=YRK](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=YRK), about 1000 for Golovnyov (1995: 71).

4 This last figure is given by <http://www.suri.ee/uralic.html> as well as by the UNESCO (<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~bergmann/russia/languages/nenets.htm#number>).

5 We know that at the beginning of the 20th century Forest Nenets occupied also the high stream of the Lyamin and its tributaries. According to oral information, after the village of Darko Gorshkovski was closed in the 1960-ies, many Forest Nenets from the Lyamin migrated to the Num-To area. In 1972, there were on the Lyamin river 16 Nenets families (45 persons) (Vasilyev 1985: 81-82). There are certainly still some isolated Forest Nenets in the forest tundra of this basin.

which is divided into two branches whose names refer to Forest Nenets clans: the Pyakopur and the Ayvasedapur. My observations are based on my fieldwork in the Agan area, where I spent five months between 1999 and 2000. From the linguistic point of view, the Agan Nenets are in a specific position, very different from what Kaur Mägi has experienced in Num-To<sup>6</sup> (2001) and Tapani Salminen in the Pur region (1998<sup>7</sup>), as I will show further on. In order to understand the linguistic situation in that region, I must present first the ethnical situation in the Agan region and the Nenets' ethnical contacts.

## **The Agan Nenets' ethnical contacts**

The actual Nenets population of the Agan Nenets is mixed: one branch, the Ayvaseda and the Yusi clans<sup>8</sup>, may be considered as early inhabitants of the Agan basin. The other clans represented in this group nowadays, the Tyott and the Vella clans, are known to have migrated to the high streams of the Vatyogan and Amputa Rivers in the 1930 from the northern areas around the village of Khalesovaya and perhaps from the region of Num-To<sup>9</sup>. This late migration is still present in the Nenets' consciousness for all the newcomers were registered by soviet authorities under the surname of Ayvaseda<sup>10</sup>, although the people themselves perfectly know that they actually belong to the Tyott or to the Vella clans.

As I have mentioned, during the tsarist period the Nenets had but occasional contacts with the Russian administration and the town's

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6 Cf. [www.forestnenets.info](http://www.forestnenets.info).

7 Oral information.

8 The main social institution of the Forest Nenets until the soviet era, and even in its first decades (Obshchestvennyi 1970: 203) was the exogamic clan, which has been losing pertinence as main organiser of social life but is still very much present in the conscience of the people: surnames are still clan names, and if not in discourse, in practice exogamy is still very much practiced.

9 Oral information by Yuri Vella.

10 The reason of this error are not entirely elucidated: according to Ogryzko, the rich Ayvaseda presented the poorer newcomers as their kins in order to dissimulate the fact they used their labour force (Ogryzko 1998: 171). According to Yuri Vella's oral information, the Vellas migrated from Num-To in order to avoid the repression following the Kazym uprising (Leete 2002).

population. Because of their living far from the centres, most of the administrative relations of the Forest Nenets were dealt through mediators. The main mediators belonged usually to another Siberian people living in the same areas, the Khanty<sup>11</sup>. The eastern branch of the Agan Khantys used to live on the river's medium and lower stream; they had thus more contacts with the Russian administration, more people among them spoke Russian. We can thus argue that until the first decades of the Soviet period, the Forest Nenets had but very rare, occasional contacts with the Russians. In 1936 G. Verbov, who visited among others also the Agan Nenets, asserts that he has met no Forest Nenets speaking Russian (Verbov 1936: 66). But the contacts with the Surgut Khantys were already most developed, both southwards, with the Agan Khantys (the families of Sardakov, Aypin, Kazamkin) and westwards, with the Khantys living in the basin of the Tromyogan, and occupying the higher flows of this river and its tributaries. These early contacts are proved both by linguistic influence and by the fact that tradition has fixed marriage rules between the Nenets and the Khanty clans, establishing a kind of interethnic exogamy, which was still active at the end of the 1930 (Verbov 1936: 68-69).

The Soviet period changed radically the context of the Forest Nenets' life. If during the first decades the ruler's concerns were to strengthen their own positions, from the 1930-ies on their ambition was to rule effectively the whole territory and to have a general system implemented everywhere (Toulouze 1998: 154). This is the period where the first schools were opened, and the collectivisation launched. Surely in these remote regions this process could not be so rapidly achieved as in Central Russia, and it took some decades to ensure a total control of the population in different types of collective farms. But the creation of these unities and the general trends in Soviet policy led to the concentration of all the natives into villages: in the Agan region, the new centre was Varyogan, where since 1937 there was a boarding school for the natives. If men were usually working for the collective farm in the taiga (as hunters or reindeer herders), women and children lived most of their lives in the village. As a

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11 This function of mediators is well illustrated – although this example concerns another river, the Lyamin – by Toivo Lehtisalo's experience in 1914: as he was looking for the Nenets, he had to rely on the help of Khanty guides, who led him up to the Nenets camps (Lehtisalo 1959: 138- 140).



matter of fact, Varyogan was a mixed village, where most of the population was either Nenets or Khanty. Surely the new way of life has encouraged mixed marriages, bringing Khantys and Nenets ever more together.

Last but not least, the main difference between the Agan Nenets and the others groups of Forest Nenets is due to the peculiar economic developments in this area in the last few decades. The Agan Nenets occupy territories where since the mid-1960-ies huge oilfields have been discovered, whose exploitation has given Russia its main oil production and therefore currency resources. Oil industry has done what neither the tsarist colonisation neither the Soviet power had been able to do: to really occupy the Siberian taiga and hold it under thorough control. Oil industry has induced also an extensive migration of oil workers coming from all over the former Soviet Union. The demographic balance has thus been altered, and the native peoples have been reduced to a very small percentage of the overall population. New cities have been founded on former reindeer pastures to accommodate the newcomers. This group is far from being ethnically homogenous, but I shall overlook here its inner ethnical subdivision: the immigrants' attitude in regard to the native people does not differ in essentials, they have all left their home region for a precise goal – the improving of their material life – and they all have Russian as a common tongue interfacing with the rest of the world. This new element is a key factor in the native's life as well as in language issues.

## **The Agan Nenets between the Khantys and the Russians**

I come now to the linguistic issues, which are most directly connected with the demographic factor. The fact is that the Forest Nenets – although we have no precise data about how much they actually are, are clearly a minority both in regard to the newcomers as in regard to the Khantys. This numerical dimension was certainly of secondary importance when people lived scattered in the taiga. But it is very clearly felt when they form a community gathered in the village, and even more since the development of oil industry, for the foundation of new towns, as Raduzhnyy in 1984 on the middle stream, right on the pastures of the Kazamkin clan's reindeers,

has chased Khanty families from their lands and led them to settle in Varyogan, increasing thus the number of Khantys.

This minority position has led to a clear domination of Khanty among the native tongues. It is interesting to notice that this seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon: in 1985, Vasilyev, according to whom the Agan Nenets were 45 families (150 persons) and the Khantys represented 51 families (250 persons), maintains that “the local Khanty know Nenets in a minor degree”, and that “both ethnic groups have preserved the main features of their traditional culture, the consciousness of their identity and their mother tongue” (Vasilyev 1985: 82). Nowadays, anyhow, the situation has radically changed. Two factors prove this subordinate position of Forest Nenets compared to Khanty: on one hand the fact that there is no Khanty speaking or understanding well Nenets (the last, an old man called Mikhail Sardakov<sup>12</sup>, died during our last expedition in September 2000); on the other hand, if a native language is preserved in mixed marriages, it is as a rule Khanty. All the Nenets who still know their mother tongue are also skilled in Khanty<sup>13</sup>.

This stronger position of Khanty compared to Nenets appears clearly in the resistance to russification. The domination of Russian is a corollary to the domination of the Russians. It has been a direct consequence of the people’s gathering into villages, with school and other institutions functioning in Russian. Certainly, at the beginning, native languages were also supposed to be used, but Russian soon became dominant: although for the heads of education policy in the first decade of soviet rule school had to be based on native languages, the lack of teachers did not allow its actual application (Toulouze 1999: 64). All the dimensions of modern life, both with its material and mental aspects, have been conceptualised through Russian. Other languages spoken by Russia’s more numerous nationalities have tried to develop their means to express modernity, but

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12 Mikhail Sardakov, according to our experience, had a good understanding of Nenets – as we could notice by his way of following and commenting a Nenets tale told by an old Nenets – but did not use to speak it: in intercourse with his Nenets friends, he too used Khanty.

13 This fact was already noticed half a century ago by N. Tereshchenko (Tereshchenko 1959: 100).

these attempts have been cruelly repressed since the early 1930-ies<sup>14</sup>; the languages of the peoples of the North were very far from being adapted, and no attempt at all was made to achieve this adaptation: actually written languages started to spread only since 1934, when the political climate was more and more tense, more and more totalitarian. Thus, all the contacts with the outer world were and are made through Russian. The knowledge of Russian is a compulsory element to get along with the world.

As in all the Soviet Union, there has been external pressure by the State's policy to make the nationalities adopt Russian as everyday language in substitution to the vernacular starting from the late 1950-ies, when native languages ceased to be taught at school. There has also been an objective pressure in favour of Russian due to the inaptitude of the actual idioms to express modernity, as new notions were much easier to be mentioned in Russian. And, in addition, there has been a subjective acceptance of these trends in the private sphere: the families have given up speaking their own language to their children. In the case of mixed marriages, the choice of Russian was even more evident, because of the above-mentioned situation: both parents did not know both languages, and usually they preferred to guarantee their children an easier future by adopting Russian since the beginning. There has thus been a generation gap in the transmission of the language, for the Nenets between 40 and 60 years of age have omitted to transmit it to their children, who have nothing to transmit to theirs.

Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, no child in the Agan region has Nenets as family tongue; no child begins school speaking Nenets – so that the lessons in “mother tongue”, reincluded since the 1980-ies in the programs as one of the subjects, are led as a matter of fact as lessons in a “foreign tongue”. But if English, as a foreign language, benefits of high prestige, Nenets is felt by the younger pupils to be of no use at all, which complicates considerably the teacher's task from the psychological point of view. The youngest Nenets native speaker in the Agan region is a reindeer herder aged 27, who lives mostly in the tundra. The Khanty

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14 As by the Finno-Ugric peoples of Central Russia, whose attempt to develop their own languages according to their own internal rules and using their own lexical bases were considered since 1932 as the expression of anti-Soviet and nationalist positions and severely repressed.

have resisted better: most of Khanty children starting school speak both Khanty and Russian. There has been no generation gap in Khanty language transmission.

As we see, there is in the Agan region a three-degree hierarchy in spoken languages: on the higher step, Russian, spoken by everybody; on the middle step, Khanty, not spoken by Russians and by younger Nenets generations, but spoken par the Khantys and by the elder Nenets; and on the lower step Nenets, known only by the elder Nenets generation<sup>15</sup>.

## **The language issue in the life and self-image of the Agan's Nenets**

How do the people themselves refer to their language and the position of their language? I would characterise the Nenets' attitude towards the linguistic double minority issue as conscious and indifferent.

The Nenets are conscious of the linguistic trends they have been submitted to. They are perfectly aware of what has been lost and they are able to explain how and why. During our fieldwork with the Estonian linguist Kaur Mägi, we recorded Nenets speech from ten persons among whom the younger was 45 years old. Some of our informants were very assured about the preciseness of the information they provided: these were people whose life was mainly connected with the taiga and with traditional skills. I may mention a couple that lives at the moment in the taiga. The man (49) is half Nenets half Khanty, but clearly his Nenets father's influence predominated, as his mother, a Khanty, suffered of a mental disease and died when her son was still a kid. Our informant's father has always lived with reindeer in the taiga; he has a good knowledge of Nenets oral tradition that he has transmitted to his son; after having lived for some years mainly in Varyogan, our informant went back in the last decade to live at some kilometre's distance from his father's camp. His wife is a pure Nenets, whose father quitted in the early 1950-ies the

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15 It is true that 1989 figures for the whole Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region indicate that 647 Nenets (out of 1144) consider Nenets as their mother tongue (Homich 1995: 311). But this statistic includes the Num-To region, where Nenets is actually the main communication language, and does not take into account the younger generations.

collective farm and has not been seen in Varyogan afterwards. His friends have built him a hut, but he still prefers to live in a conic tent. Often her husband refers to her as an authority in Nenets. Nevertheless, although these persons speak Nenets among them, they have not transmitted the knowledge of the language to their daughter, who is at the moment 21 years old.

Still, most of our informants were dubitative about their own language skills and proposed us to turn to the one person “knowing well Nenets” – considered as an authority on these questions, the only educated Nenets from the village, the reindeer herder and poet Yuri Vella, our main informant. They consider that except Yuri Vella, all the Nenets in Varyogan have forgotten their language. This is clearly an exaggeration, for most of them still remember songs or tales and are able to talk to one another in Nenets. Nevertheless, they considered the language they used as poor and limited, perhaps even erroneous, probably compared to what their remembrances may have been.

On this topic I had a significant conversation with Yuri Vella. When I asked him how a Nenets proverb quoted by him in Russian would sound in Nenets, he answered me after a small pause: “I can’t find it now. Since Auli’s death I haven’t spoken Nenets”. Auli was his elder neighbour and friend, a good singer and storyteller. I observed to Yuri that he had just spoken by phone in Nenets with his mother. But Yuri rejected this assertion: “This was not real Nenets. It was a commonplace language, which has nothing to do with our rich and expressive poetical tongue”<sup>16</sup>. This reaction illustrates the attitude nowadays Nenets have towards their language: what they possess is not a value, for they have lost the essentials, the core of what the language should be. What they know seems to be but a shadow of what Nenets has been.

Still the Nenets are in some way proud of their language. Both Khantys and Nenets in Varyogan are positive in asserting that Nenets is much more difficult than Khanty. One Nenets informant even doubted of our capacity –

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16 He has expressed this same idea in the preface to one of his collections of poems: “We, the Forest Nenets, we used to sing many stories, tales, laments and songs, we performed them with a popular melody or as intonational recited poetry (as for instance conversations with gods). The colloquial language is used in everyday life, it is poor, it has no colour, no taste, no smell, you don’t feel either colder either warmer. You cannot tell a tale or sing a song in the colloquial language, and a common conversation about wood, food or money pollutes the artistic language” (Vella 1996: 5).

of anybody's capacity - of learning Nenets. The assurance of having an exclusive language is comforting, for it gives psychological value to what they still have and to their culture as a whole and is a practical means to explain the fact that practically no Khanty knows this language. Still there are also other reasons to this phenomenon. The most important is that Nenets has no practical function in social life. When I asked Yuri Vella's wife, a Khanty, whether she didn't find necessary to know her husband's mother tongue, she answered, "Wherefore?" True enough, her husband speaks good Khanty, so when they want to share private information, they may use her language. This practical attitude is clearly inspired from the pattern dominating the whole society, for in the Soviet Union Russians did usually not make any effort to learn the languages of the regions they lived in, considering that Russian was enough to ensure communication. So, the Russian attitude towards local languages is reproduced by Khantys, who expect Nenets to know their language<sup>17</sup>, but do not make any effort for reciprocity.

This kind of attitude has led to a sort of all-over indifference towards the language, which is shared by the Nenets themselves. They have not tried to react to the general trend. In some way, the Agan Nenets have clearly sacrificed their spiritual culture as far as it is connected with language. Storytelling, which is an interactive activity, requiring comments, questions, exclamations, has lost ground, for it seldom happens in that region that only Nenets would gather without the presence of Khantys. The latter automatically will induce the use of Khanty or Russian as a language of communication. Riddles remain very much alive, and they are popular among the children, but they are nowadays mostly told in Russian. The loss of the language affects even more radically the musical culture, for Nenets do not know instrumental music and their singing is most thoroughly connected to the language (Ojamaa 2002). The gap between Nenets traditional music and European music is so deep, that it is difficult to imagine traditional songs sung in Russian. Moreover, the spiritual side of Nenets worldview is deeply affected: prayers during sacrifices are performed in Nenets by the elder generation, but the younger shall not be able to continue this tradition.

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17 When 19 years old Yuri addressed his wife's mother to ask her daughter's hand, the old Khanty woman obliged him to do this in Khanty, pretending not to understand any other language.

We could have the impression that indifference towards the language means indifference towards the survival of Nenets' identity in the Agan region. Nevertheless, it is not so. The fact is that language does not, in the Nenets' understanding, play a key role in the community's survival. The fact is that the Russians' presence in the heart of the taiga affects the possibilities for the group to survive even physically.

When we examine the place of language in the demands of the Associations defending the peoples of the North, we are surprised to observe that it is practically absent. The priorities are elsewhere: they are in the preservation of land, in the possibility of living in the traditional way.

The main concern of the Varyogan Nenets is a material one: how to live in villages where there are no jobs (or no jobs for them), and where alcoholism is rapidly degrading the health of younger and elder people? But how to live in the taiga – where pollution has spoiled the rivers and the fish, the presence of human beings has chased away the game and the pastures have been occupied by oil industry? This is the concern of most Nenets. In the last decade, some of them have chosen, as legislation has given them the opportunity<sup>18</sup>, to live most of their time in their traditional kinship territories, and to try to save reindeer herding. Others have sold their rights to oil industry in order to get compensations allowing them to live in Varyogan without having to look for work. The most conscious of the Nenets are terrified by this encouragement to idleness and parasitism and feel that this is the real murder of their people. Some Nenets are tragically divided between the desire of preserving nature and the need for money. There is no place for the language concern, when the main issue is physical survival: thinking of it is a luxury the Agan Nenets have given up long ago.

Yuri Vella shares this deep feeling. He tried in the early 1990-ies, to use language as an instrument for revitalising his people and he published a periodical paper in Nenets. The initiative, as a matter of fact, was not his, but his uncle's, Leonid (Lyakhu) Ayvaseda, but Yuri continued it after his uncle's death and produced eight issues of *Tilhivsama* (Our life). He

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18 In 1992, the local parliament of the autonomous region inhabited by the Agan Forest Nenets (Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous region) has given the natives the use of their traditional lands, providing that the subsoil resources remain property of the State.

was the unique author writing in the paper, making the page sample and drawing manually the special Nenets letters. Thus, he invented an orthograph for Forest Nenets and even introduced a “reform” in this orthograph by introducing some new letters. He tried to diversify the texts presented: news from the Nenets community, poems, riddles, translations and linguistic explanations. But this experience did not last long: Yuri discovered that only very few persons read his paper and gave up any attempt connected to the language. Nevertheless, at the end of the 1990, probably under the influence of his foreign contacts<sup>19</sup>, and discovering that foreigners had not the same contempt for the Nenets language that he was used to at home, he took over again the language issue. In his last collection of poems<sup>20</sup> there are three poems presented in Nenets and the titles of the illustrations are also given in Nenets (Vella 2001). I have participated myself at a writers’ meeting, where Yuri Vella chose to read his Nenets poems to an audience where there was no other Forest Nenets. But his new concern for the language is thoroughly integrated to his other, more political tasks. Yuri Vella’s present project is to write a toponymic dictionary of the Agan basin. He intends to show how places considered to be inhabited and empty have always been integrated to the native’s life, have names and have been used as pastures or hunting areas by specific clans. He hopes to give thus factual information that may be used in future by natives in order to prove their rights to land property. This attempt to reconstruct a kind of geography of the native’s life is meant in three languages: Russian, Khanty and Nenets. Yuri wants to introduce the three possible names of rivers, lakes, bogs and places in general, commenting each one in the original language, without translation into the other idioms. This dictionary is at the moment but a project, only some pages have been written. But I consider the linguistic approach very interesting. The information Yuri wants to deliver is not for curiosity and language is not put there for the sake of mere symbolical proclamation, but as a means of communication inside the ethnic group, to be used by it and by all those who are ready to make the effort to learn it. Yuri Vella thinks that

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19 Yuri Vella is well known as a poet and a fighter for the right of his people in Russia as well as abroad: he has personal contacts with German, Estonian, French and Finnish researchers, has been invited to Budapest, Helsinki, San Francisco and Tartu.

20 This is a bilingual collection with Russian texts and their French translation by myself. The three Nenets poems are presented without any translation.



by presenting his language (as well as Khanty) as self-sufficient, he may give an impulse to reality and help evolutions on this way.

Still, he is quite alone on this mental position. The most active of the Nenets seem to think that if they succeed in maintaining alive some kind of life in the taiga, if they succeed in saving reindeer herding as a main form of traditional husbandry in their region, the main goal is achieved. The Agan Nenets have lost their language and do not see any means of getting it back. In half a century, nobody will speak it anymore. But this does not mean that they have abandoned their values and their identity: they are only preparing to express them in a different way.



# Forest Nenets folklore and identity<sup>21</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

The Forest Nenets may be considered as an ethnic group whose identity is still very much in shaping and is characterised by some instability. On the one hand, they remained long hidden from the scientific community as a distinct group; politically they were never recognised as such; while from an emic point of view they have no doubt of their own existence, in the present live conditions, that are powerfully threatening even of their physical existence, they are attempting to find identity instruments to face the challenges as unscarred as possible. Is their oral tradition helping them into achieving this goal? The aim of this article is to unravel this complex question mainly from an emic point of view<sup>22</sup>.

## **Introduction (an etic approach): Forest Nenets seen by Others**

Literature about the Forest Nenets is certainly not as rich as it is on the Tundra Nenets, their Northern counterpart (Toulouze 2002, p.89). For centuries, in tsarist Russia, the way aborigenous groups were included in the overall state administration was through taxation. In tax systems ethnicity was nor a relevant category, the tax unit was person – adult males were submitted to the capital tax, the iasak. Thus, undoubtedly, the people we now call Forest Nenets were known as smaller units, albeit they were not recognised as a community.

Thinking in ethnic terms is inserted in history. It emerges during the

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21 Article published in *Studia Fenno-Ugrica Groningana* 7; 2011, 227-240.

22 Those reflections rely mainly on my own fieldwork, a total amount of six months among the Forest Nenets, in 1999, 2000, and 2009.

19th century: while in the first decades, as the Speransky statute shows (Slezkine 1994: 83-88, Marchenko 1984: 175, Vakhtin 1993: 16), the relevant distinctions among indigenous peoples were seen in connection with their lifestyle and not through ethnicity (although groups were listed in each of the three categories identified – sedentary, nomadic and wandering peoples), the latter emerges powerfully during the same century. In Western Siberia, the impact of science was of peculiar weight. While in other parts of Russia, indigenous groups were investigated in order to master – both in terms of knowledge and political power – the territory of the empire, in Western Siberia the influence of Fenno-Ugric research was particularly felt. Indeed, search for roots based on language kinship developed simultaneously in Finland and Hungary. It led scientists to enlarge their research field towards Russia and to explore huge territories inhabited by people speaking related languages. This approach was even more enhanced by the Hungarians, whose closest language kins were two Western Siberian communities, speaking Vogul (now called Mansi) and Ostyak (Khanty) languages<sup>23</sup>. Therefore their interest focused very much on these two communities, clearly identified by the languages they spoke. Clearly, the Hungarians were not so much interested by Samoyeds, who were much distant in terms of kinship. The Finns were not so limited in their search: they had their closest language kin, the Baltic Finns, in a contiguous area, and they were looking for more distant “relatives”. Thus M.-A. Castrén<sup>24</sup> explored mainly the so-called Samoyed areas, investigating different groups of Samoyeds and leaving precious testimonies, data and analysis. At the core of all these searches, was language, not in itself but as a milestone for the history and the roots of others.

Those whom we call Forest Nenets were identified by their language as being part of the wide ensemble of the Samoyeds. Thus, their language

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23 Actually Hungarians still call these communities, in scientific research, by these older ethnonyms, while Soviet rules led to generalise and officialise the ethnonyms recognised by the people themselves.

24 Castrén, M. A. 1870. *Nordiska resor och forskningar. Första bandet: Reseminnen från åren 1838–1844*. Helsingfors: Finska Litteratur-Sällskapet ; Castrén, M. A., Toivo Lehtisalo 1940. *Samojedische Volksdichtung*. Gesamm. von M. A. Castrén. Herausgegeben von T. Lehtisalo. Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne LXXXIII. Helsinki: Société Finno-Ougrienne ; Castrén, M.A., *Grammatik der samojedischen Sprachen*, Indiana University Publications, Uralic and Altaic Series, Vol 53, 1966.

was researched by Toivo Lehtisalo, who is the first to have dedicated them part of his work: in his fieldwork, he spent more than a year in a Forest Nenets community, and that allowed him to collect their lore, data about their religion as well as linguistic data (Lehtisalo 1924, 1947, 1959). Lehtisalo did not separate the Forest Nenets from their tundra kin: although he was well aware of the differences in lifestyle, his sensitivity to language led him to focus on linguistic structures and he chose to consider Forest Nenets as a dialect of Nenets and thus, to treat Forest Nenets as part of a wider Nenets ethnic group. This is directly revealed by the way he presents linguistic data, as his huge dictionary (Lehtisalo 1956): Forest Nenets lexical data are present as part of the Nenets language.

Russian explorers before the Revolution were not as much interested in language as the Finno-Ugrists. But they started being interested in ethnicity as a way to categorise human communities. In defining these categories, language played a huge role. At the end of the 19th century, explorers were surprised to meet people speaking a strange language, which was different from Khanty, although there were some phonetic similarities, while sounding very alien to Tundra Nenets. Thus, it was assumed that a new, unknown people was being discovered, called “nyah-smar-yah” (Bartenev 1998: 145-146). Still, the error was soon corrected and the “new” people was identified as kin to the tundra Nenets (Patkanov 1911, Zhitkov 1913: 249-251).

Soviet scholars, within the wider process of establishing Soviet knowledge and power on the indigenous areas, concentrated in the pre-war period on studying different languages and groups. Ethnic categorisation was a central issue: while solidly established nationalities, in Western Russia, were achieving some kind of autonomy, the same pattern was chosen for Siberia. In the modernisation process imposed by the Soviets, they built up their administrative construction on notions as clan and “nation”, which led them to create administrative units based on ethnic groups (Andreyev 1970: 114-115, Zibarev 1968: 43, Gurvich 1964: 102; Zibarev 1972: 83-84). The beginning of this process, encompassing the second half of the 1920s and going up to the war in 1940, is characterised by serious scholarship. Some fine specialists of Nenets were trained in Leningrad, and one of them, Grigori Verbov, concentrated on Forest Nenets. He is the author of the first monographic study, an article in *Sovetskaya*

*Etnografiya*, about the Forest Nenets, which treats them independently from Tundra Nenets (Verbov 1936). After Lehtisalo, Verbov was the first scholar to contribute to knowledge about this group, both linguistically and ethnographically (see also Verbov 1973).

The status of Forest Nenets language has actually been for scholars the core of the recognition. While recognising the undoubtable language closeness, late 20th century scholars have in general preferred to distinguish more sharply Forest Nenets from Tundra Nenets<sup>25</sup>. There are two reasons to this choice, as I would analyse it: the first is a decline of language-centred approaches. The 19th century Finno-Ugric problematics of root-searching has become obsolete; reconstruction of Uralic proto-language is no more the main focus of scholarship, even in linguistics, where synchronic analysis has supplanted historical approaches. More and more importance has been given to eco-system and way of life. Moreover, in linguistic categorisation, mutual understanding of speech has become a serious criterium of language borders.

From both of these points of view, Forest Nenets material has strong peculiarities compared to Tundra Nenets. The eco-system in which they live is different indeed: from tundra to taiga, all aspects of life are touched. Nomadism has not the same meaning and does not cover the same reality. Reindeer herding has another function, and the bases of husbandry are also quite different.

On the other hand, intercomprehension between speakers of the two languages is far from guaranteed. Quite on the contrary. While from the point of view of linguists there is no doubt on the closeness of the two language forms, the language user does not see them: they are not transparent, mainly for phonetic reasons. Actually, some experiences have convinced me of the reality of mutual non-comprehension, albeit efforts have been made. When in the 1990s, Yuri Vella, the most famous of the Forest Nenets, an intellectual who, besides being a writer, is also a reindeer herder and an activist<sup>26</sup>, organised in cooperation with the administration the import of 1000 reindeer from the Yamal-Nenets district into the Khanty-Mansi district in order to help indigenous people to restart reindeer husbandry on individual, independent bases. The

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25 It is the case with Tapani Salminen (<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/fn.html>, last consulted 4/12/2011).

26 See for more details [www.jurivella.ru](http://www.jurivella.ru).

reindeer were brought from the Yar-Sale sovkhoe, and the herd was headed south and led by Tundra Nenets. They met the Khanty-Mansi district representatives at the border between the two districts and gave them the herd. As among the people attending this meeting was Yuri Vella, he filmed it and the Nenets, on both sides, attempted to communicate. They had to resort to Russian. I had the same experience ten years later in my home, while Yuri was visiting Tartu with his wife and the Numto singer Tatva (from the Logany clan). At that moment, there was a Tundra Nenets teacher studying in Tartu and she visited us. They tried to speak their language and could not communicate; then they turned to Russian, and they explored their non-comprehension. When taking time and with the help of Russian, they recognised many elements in one another's speech and were able to identify the common root. But it was of no practical help in simple communication. So it is not a legend that intercomprehension is not possible between the two languages. This is considered, nowadays, as hindering the hypothesis of it being merely two dialects of a single language. Finnish linguist Tapani Salminen, who has been working on both and has concentrated on Forest Nenets, considers them as being two different languages, and so do I. While identity is often linked with language, this a step taken by researchers to see the Forest Nenets as a separate people.

But we still have no precise data on how many people consider nowadays to be Forest Nenets and how many do consider Forest Nenets to be their mother tongue. Soviet census are usually good sources for this kind of data, as the people chose themselves which nationality to relate to: they give us subjective data about a peculiar period. But Forest Nenets have been recognised in a census only in 1926, and then the number of respondents was 1129 (Khomich 1995: 23). After that, no census distinguished the Tundra from the Forest Nenets, and therefore there is no actual means of knowing how many persons consider themselves to be Forest Nenets. In the last statistics we have (2002), the Nenets population is of 41302 persons, defining themselves with terms that cover both Tundra and Forest Nenets. In the Khanty-Mansi district, the number of Nenets was 1290. We may be pretty sure they are Forest Nenets, because in this region there are no other Nenets. But we cannot interpret properly the data about the Yamal-Nenets district: 26435 persons are both Tundra

and Forest Nenets. So we may present only hypothesis that take into account that two of the three regions in which Forest Nenets dwell (the Num-to and the Agan basin) are in the Khanty-Mansi district; in the Yamal-Nenets district, the Forest Nenets inhabit the basin of the Pur and of its branches the Pyaku-Pur and the Ayvaseda-Pur. Taking into account that the Pur group is supposed to be the biggest of the three, we can estimate the overall number of Forest Nenets to around 2000 or a little more. We are expecting every day the results of the 2010 census about the ethnic composition of Russia, which may be a bit more precise, but we still do not have them.

## **The context – past and present**

What characterises the Forest Nenets communities is that they all live in quite remote areas. They were not on the paths followed by Russians, while they were penetrating Siberia: they followed rivers, but the Forest Nenets live as rule close to the headwaters, both of Ob tributaries and of rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean. Actually, there are three main centres nowadays forming three Forest Nenets communities: the Westernmost inhabit the high course of the Kazym and the Nadym, and the territories surrounding lake Num-to. Eastwards, toward the North, dwell the Pur Forest Nenets: the two branches of the River Pur are called Pyaku-Pur and Ayvaseda-Pur, using the names of two Forest Nenets clans. Southwards, in the Agan basin dwell also the smallest and the most endangered group of Forest Nenets. None of these territories is easily accessible: it is the beginning of forest tundra, with lakes, rivers, bogs and forests, where survival requires strong adaptation (Gemuyev 1987: 32, Golovnyov 1995:56). While accessibility has drastically improved over the last century, it still requires at least two days to reach the areas traditionnally inhabited by Forest Nenets (while villages, where they are now sendentarised, may be reached much more easily). This explains why Verbov, in the mid-thirties, when he dwelt among the Forest Nenets, did not find anyone speaking Russian (1936:66). They had undoubtedly trade contacts with Russians during the fairs (Obdorsk and Surgut), but they hardly appeared there as a separate population.

While contact with Russians developed late, it would still be wrong to consider them as a closed society. Their contacts with their indigenous neighbours were most thorough – the term *kapi* is meant for an indigenous person who is not a Nenets, and it is widely present in folklore. These neighbours could be from different ethnic groups depending on the regions. Folklore has fixed the memory of wars with *kapi*, who are sometimes understood to be Selkups and Khantys (oral information by Yuri Vella and Yeremey Aypin). More recently contacts have been more peaceful, mostly with those who live close to their dwellings. For the Num-to Nenets, it is the Northern Khanty; for the Pur Nenets, it is the Tundra Nenets, who use to spend winters in more protected areas than the Northern tundra; the Agan Nenets are closely connected with Eastern Khanty (Surgut Khanty) clans. So in spite of their habitat conditions, the Forest Nenets have been quite opened to dialogue and influence from others.

The consequences are that Forest Nenets society was far from being monocultural, even before the interference of Russians. Verbov mentions Nenets-Khanty exogamy rules. They are a clear sign, that mixed marriages were already a rule eighty years ago, as they are nowadays. There were older routes that lasted for decades even in the Soviet period: Agan Khanty and Nenets men looked for Forest Nenets wives in the Pur region around the villages of Khalesovaya and Kharampur<sup>27</sup>. Verbov presents an exogamy system ruling intermarriages between Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets clans in the 1930s (Verbov 1936). More recent developments only increased the Forest Nenets' openness to mixed marriages. While Yuri Vella married (following the clan exogamy's rules presented by Verbov) a Khanty woman from the Taylakov's clans, his four daughters present in their marriage more varied, but not exceptional patterns: the eldest married a half Nenets-half Tatar man from the same village; the second's first husband was a Nenets from the same region, but the second is a Russian of distant Khanty origins; the third married a Tatar oil industry worker and the fourth's first husband was a Northern Khanty. Mobility and social intermingling in the education system, in working structures and public places widen the choice of spouses, while the future spouses are more active in the choice and often now decide

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27 There are still nowadays families in Varyogan, in which the wives are from Khalesovaya (my fieldwork).



from themselves.

This is a consequence of two major shifts in the life of the Forest Nenets during the 20th century. The first is connected with Sovietisation. This process was not achieved quickly: it took decades. It was at some moments quite brutal: the goals were to “civilise” backward peoples – in order to form a homogeneous Soviet nation, which would overcome ethnic differences. Among the main changes that were imposed to the Forest Nenets, sedentarisation is the one that had the main structural impact in a historical perspective<sup>28</sup>. The natural habitat of the Forest Nenets was in the wilds, where they dwelt by small family units in season camps, that were not very distant from one another. With sedentarisation, they were gathered in stationary villages, given loghouses and attached to the village collective unit. Total sedentarisation was still in process in the 1980, when some individuals still lived mainly in the wild, while having a dwelling in the village. Life in the wild and life in villages answer to different rules: clothing, language are different or used to be different (Lyarskaya 2003: 272<sup>29</sup>). I suppose that for decades the Forest Nenets used to move between the two worlds quite flexibly. But by the time I made my first expeditions to the Agan area, in 1999, this was just a remembrance of the past: for the most of the younger generations sedentarisation was fully achieved, they were unable (and unwilling) to live in the wild. They had mostly lost their heritage of skills. A movement had been starting since the beginning of the 1990s with elder people going back to life in the wild and reindeer herding. These are realities that have a powerful impact on identity.

Finally, in the second half of the 20th century, Forest Nenets experienced a second disruption in their lives: the discovery in the 1960s of huge oil fields exactly on the locations where indigenous peoples were living. This region became in a few decades strategically central for Russia as whole. Oil was drilled everywhere. Even places that had remained

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28 It was of course thoroughly connected with collectivisation. Still, nothing remains from collectivisation, with the collapse of the Soviet Union collective units disappeared. While sedentarisation is a process whose consequences are nowadays still to be coped with.

29 Lyarskaya has been working on tundra Nenets. All of her assumptions may not be valid for the Forest Nenets. Still this sharp difference between the two ways of life seems to me to be a thoroughly appropriate way of interpreting the situation both Tundra and Forest Nenets have been submitted to.

relatively unscarred by Soviet presence were taken into the ruling system<sup>30</sup> and no free space remained for men, game or reindeer. This situation has several dramatic consequences for indigenous cultures: with the arrival of hundreds of thousands oil workers, they became a tiny minority on their homeland (in Khanty-Mansi district, 1,5% of the population); reindeer pastures have been drastically reduced, while aborigenes try to revitalise reindeer husbandry; game has fled; soil, air and water pollution endanger live for men, animals and plants; the massive presence of oil workers ignoring all of the local delicate ecosystem leads to different kinds of violations: fires, poaching, robbing. Life in the wild is more and more difficult.

## An unstable identity

Forest Nenets have a name for themselves, *neshcha*, and they are well aware of their existence<sup>31</sup>. Still, communitary awareness remains limited. First of all, while formerly concrete feelings of belonging were connected to family and forest, now belonging is embodied by village and is not connected to one group's culture. The stage of ethnos has not been ideologically achieved. Secondly, mixed marriages produce mixed ethnic feelings in younger generations, who most probably will choose a spouse without reference to ethnicity (other than negative). Thirdly, all indigenous identities are stigmatised in the environment: indigenous peoples are considered by newcomers as primitive and backward, event savages (Rus. *dikie*). They have no way of fleeng these judgements, because of their physical features. Language is most endangered: more in some areas than others (the Agan basin), but overall in quite weak a position. Interest for language is very tepid: pragmatic approaches lead people to consider their language as useless, hence further endangering one main identity marker.

How are folklore practices interfering with the identity creation

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30 I may refer to my own experience of flying hours over Wester Siberia by helicopter and not finding a single moment in which an oil tower would not be visible.

31 Its use is being developed, particularly in the Pur region, where the term «neshchanskiy yazyk» has been rooted. Prikhod'ko 2002.

processes? Are they strengthening Forest Nenets identity or are they offering another way out of the deadlock?

## **Folklore practice in Nenets life**

Folklore collection has been limited. Castrén and Lehtisalo collected some samples, but they are quite limited. Verbov certainly collected language, but we have no folklore recordings by him. Pekka Sammallahti recorded also language and biographic texts. Jarkko Niemi has been interested in the song repertoire, and I have collected with linguist Kaur Mägi different kinds of oral productions, presented in a CD in 2001. There have also been since publications of songs in the Pur region, also with a CD. I shall focus here on the vitality of the different genres and see how they can convey – or not – Forest Nenets identity.

Genres may be more or less connected to language and to the living use of it. It is the characteristic of songs (*kynavs*): either they are centred on narration either they are based on improvisation. Narrative songs are, at least nowadays, felt and presented as fragments of an forgotten whole. Unfortunately, nobody has collected Forest Nenets songs for eighty years, so we have no record of complete narrative songs. The language of the fragments is quite archaic and is connected with the metaphoric “artistic language” that, according to Vella, has been lost before his generation (he is born in 1948). Even more important for the cohesion of the community are the personal songs. The nature of the personal song is to remember somebody through his or her singing: personal songs are usually sang while intoxicated. The melody is always the same, but the text fits to the concrete situation in which the person sings it. It is transmitted by others, who have heard it, and reproduce it by heart. Language is central: these songs are not based on melody, who is more of a kind of rhythm, with esthetics that are very far from the western type of melody.

These songs are disappearing with the fading of the generations that know the language. They are impossible to dissociate from Nenets language. Young people, who are permanently submitted to Russian style, ignore this tradition and feel totally disconnected with it. Some songs already present some melodic features, that prove how the younger

generations of language speakers already are changing their taste and their understanding of music.

These songs, as I mentioned, were particularly important for maintaining the cohesion of the community by reminding its members, absent or deceased: they were sung in gatherings, during visits and they were a way to talk about common acquaintances or ancestors, and keep alive mental and emotional links that could well be weakened by distance or lack of meeting. The extinction of this kind of instrument has certainly consequences on the internal connexion between the community members.

Children songs, even in Nenets, are liable to remain longer than others: they are more melodic and grand-parents may sing them longer to their children, who may well remember texts they do not understand in a language they do not know. Children songs may contribute to strengthen the future adult's Nenets identity but do not influence communication within the community.

There are other genres whose dependence on language is not so thorough: folk tales were told in Nenets, but this depended on a Nenets-speaking audience that was supposed to follow the narration reacting by exclamations. The possible audiences are more and more limited, the people able to react are less and less. But tales may be told in Russian: it is a common entertainment, when there are guests in the camp, that after everybody has gone to bed, the grandfather in the dark tells a tale in Russian so that everybody understands.

Another genre that stands quite well translation is the riddle. Riddles go on functioning in sociability. Children are asked to guess answers and they soon learn to ask riddles to visitors or other children. Even when riddles are connected to cultural realities, these may be described in Russian. Moreover, riddles are still an entertainment among Russians, they are present at school, so it is a genre in which Nenets tradition fits into the model that children are given with school programmes. It is not sure that children will feel a difference between the two different repertoires.

So some aspects of folklore that functioned in traditional Nenets society are fading but others are being transmitted though not in the original form.

## Emergence of new identities

I argue that folklore as well as other circumstances in the Nenets' life are promoting a new kind of identity for Forest Nenets and probably also for other indigenous peoples in Siberia who are losing their languages. Ethnic peculiarities are supplanted by a general "native" identity, which can fit best to present needs.

In real life the main gap, which is felt by both sides, is the one dividing newcomers, Russians<sup>32</sup> from indigenous peoples. As ethnicity is less and less relevant for "Russians", it is being set to the side by the indigenous peoples.

The gap is first of all connected to the massive and disproportional presence of newcomers that feel superior to the aborigenes in every matter; they also feel authorised not to respect the natives and express their contempt in different forms, even in desecrating places that are emotionally important for indigenous communities as cemeteries. In front of this everyday aggression, differences between the various ethnic groups are set to the side and this enhances an overall native identity.

This indistinct native identity is supported by several features.

Firstly, the Siberian aborigenes have no hope of merging into the Russian society for racial reasons: their appearance, while quite similar between different native groups, cannot be mistaken with the Russian's. Children from mixed families are more easily drawn towards this model, while the belonging to the father's clan may also be more and more blurred. Natives share also the practice or the near remembrance of a peculiar way of life connected with nature, among game, reindeer and spirits. Other circumstances favour the emergence of this new identity, supported by the evolution in the last decades: the endangered position of the vernacular in community life has led, at least in most regions where Forest Nenets dwell<sup>33</sup>, to a predominance of Russian in communication among the aborigenes themselves. Different languages were certainly a

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32 Of course the term Russian is not in this context an ethnic, but a « superethnic » one. Called *lutsa* throughout Siberia, they are the « white people », the non natives, who may be themselves bearers of different ethnicities. Still, in Siberian experience, they are people whose ethnicity is not relevant compared to the common features they represent versus the natives.

33 I have not been in the Pur region, where the language situation may not be so dramatic.

distinctive feature among natives (the Ob-Ugrien languages and Nenets are not mutually understandable), but this distinction is less and less relevant. I have mentioned community lore fall into oblivion. Moreover: the emergence of a common “enemy” has drawn to oblivion the memory of ancient thrifths between communities, and thus, increasing solidarity sets the conditions for identity merging.

Is something remaining from Forest Nenets peculiarities?

What is undoubtedly remaining are clan names. At the moment clan consciousness is pretty well preserved, at least as the sensitivity to which people a clan belongs. But how long will the younger generation keep it? At the moment the Forest Nenets share already many features with the Khanty in life style: some of them are directly borrowed, as the log houses (called in Nenets *kapi mja'*, Khanty house). Some differences are still existing in lifestyle between the communities. Actually (in the Agan basin at least) the distinguishing features are all coming from the Khanty side: they are more traditionalist than the Nenets (who have more pragmatically adapted, for example to Soviet rules), and, besides being more keen on the use of traditional dress and maintaining severe secret in spiritual manners, they practice still peculiar tabus that Forest Nenets ignore: not singing in the morning, but especially *izbeganie*, a female practice of covering one's face with the scarf in the presence of male inlaws. These tabus are not only practiced by the middle aged generation but also by younger women in several families. We may assume that Khanty identity is liable to resist longer than Forest Nenets.

How is this new identity expressed?

Blurring borders means not to distinguish any more the origin of some item that is borrowed, and not feeling the alienness inside the borrowed element. For example, I have heard tales told without mentioning whether it is a Khanty or a Nenets tale. The younger will have a mixed repertoire, about which they shall not know anything: while the grandfather knows wherefrom the tales are, for the younger, they are only connected with “us”. Probably a deep scholarly knowledge of the worldview expressed in the tale could allow to identity the actual origin. But this is an expertise not many of the younger generation will acquire.

Not only the origin of borrowed practices is no longer felt while they are incorporated into the new being, but they may be an active quest for

external influences. For example, women who sew and compose pearl decorations look for patterns used by other communities, to incorporate them into their own traditions. Thus, the new practices will be inspired from several Northern traditions, but nevertheless they will be culturally rooted.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I present the assumption that a new identity is growing by the Siberian natives, that is not interested in keeping the peculiarities of each group but looks for common features. I suppose that it is a possible development within an eco-system – I imagine a wide Western Siberian taiga identity, composed as a patchwork of Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Komi and Russian features and whose bearers will forget the composition to internalise merely the merged result. Probably, facing this forest ensemble, in which Khanty elements will predominate for some time at the very least, the tundra nomads will present a homogeneous front – but they are all Nenets in this region.



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

*Eva Toulouze*

### 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 *wanh*)

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 Nganasans.

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 *syudbabts* 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,

etiological 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).



## On Forest Nenets view about the world beyond<sup>76</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

By reading the ethnographers' reports about the Nenets' beliefs, and having done myself fieldwork among the Nenets, I have often felt some kind of suspicion in front of the reconstructions of perfectly coherent systems they have tried to achieve, which often seem to be artificially constructed. By analysing two recently recorded Forest Nenets tales about the world beyond, I shall not try to build up a closed image of this important element of the Nenets' worldview, but to emphasise some basic characteristic elements.

I shall here concentrate on three Forest Nenets narratives relating a human being's contact with the world beyond. Of the first we have three versions<sup>77</sup> by the same storyteller, a 40-45 years old blind man from the Western area inhabited by the Forest Nenets<sup>78</sup>. The second has been recorded from a 55 years old Nenets, a reindeer herder and a poet with

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<sup>76</sup> Article published in *Studies in Folk Culture, Vol.I, Sacred and Profane in the Dialogue of Cultures*, Tartu 2003, 46-76.

<sup>77</sup> One of them has been recorded by Kaur Mägi and myself in autumn 2000; another has been recorded in a studio, in Tartu's Literature Museum, in November of the same year. Of the last we have only a written text and its translation into Russian: it is the transcription of the tale as the storyteller told it and recorded it for the Research Institute of Khanty-Mansiysk in the second half of the nineties (we haven't any precise information about the year) made by his wife. I have used here the two latter.

<sup>78</sup> His official name, according to his Russian passport, is Aleksandr Chipakhevich Logany and he is born in 1960. His Nenets name, by which he is generally known and called, is Tatva. Logany is the Russian version of his clan's name, in Nenets Ngakhany. Tatva lives in a camp on the shore of the Porsavar Lake, at 15 km from the village of Numto.

higher education, who is also a fighter for his people's rights<sup>79</sup>. According to his report, this narrative was part of the active repertoire of one of his neighbours, who died in 1995 as an old man<sup>80</sup>. It is only a fragment of a longer story, but the rest has been forgotten. The peculiar feature of this narrative is that the core of it, describing the world beyond, is performed in rhythmical prose, in opposition to the introduction, which is formulated in ordinary prose<sup>81</sup>. The third is another story by the younger storyteller, which has been recorded by himself and literated by his wife; I base my comments on her translation. The texts are presented as appendixes<sup>82</sup>.

I start by summing up their structure: in the first one, the hero, a girl named Atpälha, is the victim of her two stepmothers' jealousy. The women try to kill her by throwing a burning hot thimble in her throat. The girl falls inanimate. Her father, back from hunting, puts her body on a sledge with one single reindeer and sends them where they have to go. Meanwhile the girl sees and hears everything, but she is unable to react. She sees people in the forest, whose strange behaviour makes clear, as well as the narrator's comment, that she is in the world beyond<sup>83</sup>. She starts to live there, gets married and during a quarrel her husband hits her in the back. She falls inanimate. When she wakes up, the thimble is on the grass in front of her, she is in a cemetery in the forest with her sledge and her reindeer, and she goes back home. In the second story a man (who is not

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79 His official name, according to his passport, is Yuri Kylevich Ayvaseda, born on March, 12. 1948. As a matter of fact, his connection to the Ayvaseda clan is but an error of the Soviet administration: his father and his mother were both registered as Ayvaseda, although they belonged respectively to the Vella and Tyott clans. As a poet and public personality Yuri is known as Yuri Vella. At the beginning of the 1990-ies, Yuri moved to the taiga, where he lives presently as a reindeer herder. He belongs to the Eastern group of Nenets and is based at the village of Varyogan.

80 Auli Yusi. Auli's camp was at some 30 km from Yuri's own camp in the taiga.

81 A more extended analysis of this narrative feature may be found in Mägi, Toulouze 2003.

82 The records are available in the CD « Discovering Siberia: the Songs of the Forest Nenets » (with booklet by Kaur Mägi, Triinu Ojamaa, Eva Toulouze), Published by the Estonian Literature Museum.

83 Version 1: "She wondered: - How strange! Why is it so? That's what they did when they were alive. They stole wood near the tents of other people. And after their death they are tormented in that way."; version 2: "These people are co occupied eternally. These are the people who during their life... and when they are dead in the other life they go on doing the same".



a Nenets<sup>84</sup>) tries to discover who steals his fish, sets a trap, and follows one morning the traces of blood on the grass. He arrives at a hole and stares into it. He discovers then that it is the upper orifice of a Nenets tent, and what he sees convinces him that he is glancing at the world beyond, and he goes quickly back home.

The structure of the two narratives is slightly different: the first one is a closed round form, in which the trip into the other world constitutes the central part; it is framed by the circumstances of the trip and the return, which form themselves a story. In other words, in this narrative there are two plans, and two stories corresponding to the two worlds. The second narrative is formed by a longer introduction presenting the circumstances of the contact, and a conclusive sentence. In the first story the trip, although central, is but one of the episodes, while in this story, the contact with the world beyond is the core of the whole narrative.

The third narrative is a very long tale, whose story embraces two generations: the plot starts with a young girl's trespassing the prohibition of entering the territory of an evil giant. The giant wants her to marry him, and threatens to kill all her kins if she refuses. Instructed by a young man she met in the forest, she refuses and marries another man. But the giant keeps to his word and kills the husband and his relatives. The young woman goes back to her brothers and gives birth to a son, who soon remains orphan. The child – called Foxhat's Son – is adopted by a Russian merchant, who has a son of his own. Once the Russian's son, Foxhat's Son's companion, plots to kill him, but he is killed instead and the young Nenets must fly away. During his journey, he meets the giant's son and defeats him. After that, he descends to the lower world, where he travels further and when his journey is over, he returns to the living's world and convinces the Russian merchant that he is innocent of his son's death. In this narrative, the journey to the other world is a marginal element of a much longer and much complicated plot.

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84 Often the heroes of tales are not Nenets. They are presented by the word *kapi*, which nowadays means usually "Khanty", but is known to have been used for other indigenous peoples. Russians are not included under the word *kapi*.

## The passage point

In Atpälha's story the passage point is more developed than in the other tale, where the hero is just an eyewitness and does not enter himself the world beyond. He stays at the border, which is represented by a hole in the ground. Although he does not pass through it, the border is very clearly represented: it is a physically perceptible border, situated in a vertical perspective. Thus is the border in the story of Foxhat's Son: there is a door in the earth, leading downwards and protected by two giants: the hero has to defeat them in order to pursue his journey. In Atpälha's story, the passage is twice achieved by the hero and is not represented by a physically located border, but the by a change in the status of the hero herself.

This change of state and even of status is achieved by external interference and represented by an object, the thimble, whose presence into Atpälha's body is concomitant with her status as non-alive. The two step-mothers, by throwing the thimble into the girl's throat, are cause of the first passage, as well as the husband is the initiator of the second one, by hitting her wife on the back, and provoking the expulsion of the thimble from her body<sup>85</sup>. Both times, the girl falls inanimate: her temporary neutralisation is the narrative sign of the passage.

Since the passage, her position in both worlds is ambiguous: the storyteller tells us that she is dead, but not completely: she sees and hears all as in a dream<sup>86</sup>, but is unable to react, as long as she is still in the camp. As she sets herself in the world beyond, she is still different from the others, as we shall soon see. So after her passage in the other dimension, Atpälha is herself an in-between: she is not alive (she can't move for some time, she sees life in the world beyond), but she is not dead (she sees all what happens around her, she is different from the other inhabitants of the other world). She is in a medium position.

As a hero, Atpälha is a most passive character: she merely obeys

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85 No comment in Version 1. Version 2: "the thimble was blocked in the throat. That's what prevented her living".

86 Version 1: "Atpälha fell on the ground. She was dead. She fell. (...) She hears all, but she is not strong enough to speak (...). During her journey, she opened her eyes"; version 2: "And she died, but it was as if she were not completely dead. (...) Although her eyes were closed, at the same time she sees all as in a dream".

her stepmothers, who call her into the tent<sup>87</sup> and order her to shut her eyes and open her mouth. Her only initiative in this world is to order the reindeer to go home.

## **The world beyond as it appears in these tales**

Before commenting the vision of the world beyond as induced by these tales, I must present the facts as told by the storytellers.

So Atpälha is sent to the place where she is supposed to go. During her journey in the forest, she sees all what happens around her. She sees first people walking towards a camp and carrying wood. But at the camp they are unable to discharge the wood, which remains glued to their arms. The storyteller here observes that these persons were those who, while living, used to steal wood from their neighbours. Then she sees people walking towards a camp carrying on their shoulders fish-traps full of fish. But neither they were able to put the traps on the ground. The storyteller explains that these were the people who, while living, used to steal fish from their neighbour's traps. Then she sees a couple lying under a reindeer skin. Each one pulls the skin to his or her side, so that the skin is permanently moving from one side to another. These were the couples that were unable to live in good harmony<sup>88</sup>. Then the storyteller says that she saw many other people<sup>89</sup>, but he has forgotten their stories. Finally, she arrives to a big "town", a camp with many tents. The reindeer stops in front of one tent. A woman comes out and rejoices seeing the girl: she helps her stepping from the sledge and welcomes her home, announcing that she has been given a bride for her son. Atpälha is given a place in the tent. Her mother-in-law is very attentive to the girl's comfort: she knows Atpälha must be hungry, and gives her soup. But the soup is full of worms and fly grubs, and the girl refuses to eat, saying she is not hungry. After some days, her stepmother starts to be concerned for her not eating at all

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87 In version 2, she just steps in the tent with the wood she has just been chopping.

88 In version 2, the order is slightly different: she sees first of all the couple, then the people carrying wood and fish.

89 Version 1 : "She saw all kind of things on her way, until she arrived to the other world"; version 2: "And she saw any kind of people, how they stole things from one another, all those who did not live in a normal way, until all this finished".

and says to her son: “She is not used to our food. Go and slaughter your best reindeer, let her have good fresh meat”. Her son obeys, slaughters their best reindeer and gives Atpälha a whole leg. But when she starts to skin the leg, she sees under the skin the same worms and fly grubs, and throws the leg away from her. Then her husband gets angry against his capricious wife and hits her on the back, Atpälha falls and so on.

In the second tale, the hero looks through the hole and understands that it is but the upper orifice of a tent. He sees a woman bending over a cradle. In the cradle lies a very old man, wounded; on the other side of the tent, two naked children, a boy and a girl, play. The woman says to the man in the cradle: “Look what you have done! I have always told you that the humans’ food is not good for us. Heaven and earth have set that our food is worms. If you go on like that, you will never grow as old as your grandfather and your grandmother, who are playing so quietly on the ground”. Hearing these words, the man understood that he was glancing at the world beyond, where time runs the other way round.

In Foxhat’s Son tale, the young Nenets arrives at the door after having defeated numerous enemies. He has to defeat the two giants at the door and while he pursues his journey in the dead’s world, he fights many other supernatural beings – “He fought many evil spirits and gods of diseases”. Then he arrives near a tree supporting two eagles’ eyrie: the eagles assist the evil spirits and bring them victims among the living, from the earth. Foxhat’s Son accepts not to kill them, if they bring him further. They fly over six sulphur rivers, then they see the Russian merchant’s son, who walked against the sun, but he refuses to answer Foxhat’s Son’s call. After the seventh river he arrives near a huge house made of iron: it is the dwelling of the emperor of all diseases and evil spirits. The emperor receives him as his son and asks for support, but Foxhat’s Son’s fights with him until the emperor promises to give him back his mother and the other dead. Then the young man returns to the earth, where indeed he finds his mother and his other relatives alive.

Let us see what features of the world beyond these tales reveal.

a) First of all, in these stories, the world beyond is not presented as a whole system: in both cases, the heroes see only a fragment of the life that

is led there. In one story, it is the interior of a single household. In the other, the vision is more complex, for during her journey in the forest, Atpälha sees different persons in different situations, representing each a type of misbehaviour and its punishment in the world beyond. The story-teller informs us that the list was much longer, but he doesn't remember the other cases. Anyhow, the result is a traditional structure in three episodes. So we can identify in this tale a starting point for a global vision of the world beyond, which is not systematically developed. The place she arrives to is a city<sup>90</sup>: but this broader frame is just mentioned, and the main episode of Atpälha's story, where she is an actor and no longer a spectator, is in a single tent, where the characters apparently live as in real life. In Foxhat's Son's tale there is a much more developed topography: after seven sulphur rivers, there is an iron house where the god of diseases dwells.

b) This is the second structural feature about the world beyond: it is mostly represented like ordinary life. In Atpälha's story, the forest is an ordinary forest and the people's activities are like all other forest people's ones: they carry fish traps or wood, like anybody else in real life. The tent is an ordinary tent, where people live and eat ordinary food: soup, reindeer marrow, raw meat. So the organisation of life is a reproduction of the real world's way of living. People have reindeers and act like ordinary people. There is apparently nothing strange, nothing supernatural in the world beyond. The third representation differs substantially from these two: there are supernatural beings presented as such, eagles who carry the hero and sulphur rivers and a house of iron – all of these elements are far from realistic. We may even wonder, whether this "other" world is the same as the one appearing in the first two narratives: the aspect emphasised by the narrator is not life in the "other" world, after death, but the place where evil spirits dwell. Still, the two are very thoroughly connected, as revealed by the presence of the young Russian killed by Foxhat's son in self-defence.

But even in the cases where this world is similar to the ordinary world, this is only the surface. For some elements are most essentially different, and the kind of difference is in all cases of the same nature: the reverse. The

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90 Version 1: "They arrive at a big camp. There were many many tents, tents everywhere"; version 2: "And she arrived at a long, long town, where she saw many houses".

character that is mentioned as a little child has the appearance of an elder man and the grandparents are small naked children. Only the woman, a middle aged person, is as she is supposed to be, for in both calculations of time she is in the midst. So the appearance of the characters is inverted comparing to what we use to have in the human's world.

In Atpälha's case, the difference is still more subtle, and appears only in connection with food: first of all, people eat things that for humans are disgusting; only after a while we have the full revelation of the situation: even the reindeer, which look alive, are as a matter of fact but rot meat. People eat what for humans is the symbol of death, for, in spite of appearances, they are dead themselves. The fact Atpälha does not accept worms as normal food is the proof that she does not belong to the world of the dead.

Even in Foxhats' Son story there is a very small indication of this principle: the Russian's son is walking in the opposite direction comparing to the Sun's, and this element is just connected with the minor aspect of this "other" world, the one connected to the dead.

## **Some deductions from these two tales**

If we try to get some general features of the understanding of the world beyond on the basis of these two tales, we may distinguish the following features:

- The world beyond is no extraordinary place. We have no fantastic constructions, but the simple surface reproduction of ordinary life, as far as there is no confusion with the location where gods live.
- The passage moments in the tales show contradictory locations: in Atpälha's story there is a spatial continuum between the home forest and the forest inhabited by dead people. There is no sign of verticality. In the two other tales however verticality is patent and the world beyond is represented as being under the real world of the living humans. In Foxhat's Son, the doors lead down, but this lower world is itself flat.

- The main feature distinguishing the two worlds is the fact that some elements in the world beyond are the reverse of those of the living's world: as to which elements are inverted, the two stories differ in some way. In one tale, it is space, a movement in the "wrong" direction; in another tale, it is time. In Atpälha's story, there are no space-time discrepancies between the two worlds: Atpälha's husband and stepmother are in this regard as they would be in the human's world. But there is a distinctive element common to two of the narratives: food. On one case, the woman nursing the old man in the cradle says that human food is no good for them and that they eat worms. In the other story, the girl is given unacceptable food, and even the slaughtering of a reindeer, supposed to provide fresh meat, does not change the nature of the meat.
- In one of the tales the dimension of the world beyond as a place of punishment for misbehaviours committed in lifetime is present, while in the other this aspect is completely unknown. In Foxhat's son, the world beyond for the dead corresponds spatially to the place where evil spirits live.

How can we explain the differences between the three tales? Do they express complementary views, all acceptable to the Nenets? Is it possible to establish a chronology between them, and explain the divergent elements by a chronological evolution of the Nenets' worldview?

Some elements seem to prove that both Tatva's stories – Atpälha, as it has been told us in 2000, and Foxhat's Son – are of more recent origin and express a more syncretistic way of understanding the world beyond.

The first clue is connected with genre. The tale where time measuring is inverted belongs to a genre called *wanlh*, and characterised, according to Nenets genre taxonomy, by its connection with truth. It has been transmitted by an old man at the end of his life, so we may suppose that it

has circulated for decades<sup>91</sup>. It is true that we know nothing about Atpälha's story and its origin. It has been told by a younger storyteller, who says that it is *šotpjaws*, alias a fiction tale<sup>92</sup>. Foxhat's Son is also presented as a tale and does not pretend to have any connection with real life. As a matter of fact, it may even be classified among the "belief tales" (*kahäj šotpjaws*): we are informed at the end that Foxhat's Son became himself a god.

A second clue suggesting the possibility of Atpälha being a more recent item is its symmetrical construction, with at least one ternary episode, the three visions in the forest. True enough, the storyteller observes that he has forgotten the others, suggesting thus that the tale has been longer. But such as it is told nowadays by Tatva, the structure is closed: Incident – passage to the world beyond – a ternary vision sequence and a sequence about life in that world – return to the world of humans – punishment of the culprits. As far as we know from historical sources, this kind of structure is not traditional in Nenets narrative. We have no extensive comparative material from Forest Nenets folklore: the larger collection of Forest Nenets texts is the one due to Toivo Lehtisalo (Lehtisalo 1947), who collected language samples and folklore among the Forest Nenets in 1914. We find there some short tales and one somewhat longer. But this is not enough to have a comprehensive view of oral traditions at the beginning of the 20th century.

On the other hand, we are allowed to compare Forest Nenets folklore with Tundra Nenets oral tradition: the two peoples are very closely connected to one another, although nowadays phonetic evolutions prevent mutual understanding and the way of life present divergent features. Tundra Nenets folklore has been thoroughly analysed, especially the so-called "epic" genres, some samples have been also published by N.

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91 According to Tatva, this story is not a *wanlh*, but a *shotpyaws*, a fiction tale. The difference between the name originally given to it and Tatva's understanding is directly connected with the evolution of beliefs: what for Auli, born at the beginning of the 20th century, would be object of belief, is clearly no more so for Tatva, born in the second half of the same century.

92 I must mention that during the recording of the second version, a discussion aroused between our two informants, Yuri and Tatva. They stressed, Yuri actively and Tatva passively, that depending on the interpretation of what happened to Atpälha, this story could be also understood as a *wanL*: this could be the case if we consider that all what Atpälha saw and experienced in the other world is but a dream. Anyhow there is in this story an interesting mixture of both emic genres' elements.



Tereshchenko (Tereshchenko 1990). These materials are not of recent origin, for they have all been collected in the first half of the 20th century. There is in Tereshchenko's texts no trace of circular structure. We may therefore suppose that this arrangement of the material is of relatively recent origin. The narrative about Foxhat's son is not constructed according the same pattern: it is a linear development of the story, in which the journey to the other world is only the culmination.

The third clue is a very intriguing aspect of Atpälha's story, the crime and punishment aspect. It is completely absent from Yuri Vella's story. In Atpälha's it is concentrated in one series of episodes and does not affect the rest of the story. Most of the specialised literature omit this aspect in the conception of the world beyond in the Nenets' traditional world view, while this element is on the other hand essential in the Western understanding in Christianity as well as in the elder mythologies. We may suppose that this is a complementary element of later origin. Some original aspects are also present in Foxhat's Son: some details as the sulphur rivers cannot but remind of the traditional connection in Christian folklore between the devil and sulphur. On the other hand, the world of the dead coincides with the world of the evil spirits. The moral element is present in this superposition.

If we assume that this chronological distribution is justified, we may identify an evolution in the Nenets way of understanding the world beyond, where the basic elements remain unchanged – an apparent reproduction of the human's life context with reverse elements – and some features may fade in more recent treatment, as the thorough verticality and the time aspect. More developed contacts with the Russian world may have introduced a moral element, which was absent in the traditional view. It is interesting to notice that Tatva, who is blind, has not been to school and is illiterate. But he is a very open-minded Nenets, interested by all phenomena in the world and not at all reticent about progress; he has introduced in his own life many changes comparing to tradition. He may well have given to this tale some of its peculiar features, especially the ternary aspect, which is clearly present in many of his other tales.

I could materialise the chronological evolution I suggest in the following way: on an axis, I would place Auli's legend as the older text, followed by Foxhat's Son and later by Atpälha. The reason I put Foxhat's

Son in-between is because some elements as verticality, and the world understood as formed of different layers seem to be connected with the way ethnographers have presented the classical Nenets understanding of the world beyond. Still, some details, as the sulphur rivers and the merging of two understandings of the other world (both as the dead's and the evil spirits' dwelling) indicate that new elements are becoming essential. As far as we know, the vertical construction of the world (the earthbeing in the middle, between heavens and underworld), gives the evil spirits and the diseases' master the underworld as main place; the dead are also supposed to be inserted at the same place, but with a different status and seemingly different local disposition – these two elements are melted in Tatva's tale.

If these items are the only Forest Nenets ones that we have recorded presenting a view of the world beyond, there are Tundra Nenets folklore texts on this subject (Khomich 1995 : 264). They are all much older than our recordings, and present a slightly different image from the one we have just summed up. In these texts, the inhabitants of the world beyond live like the humans, only during the night – at daylight, they are invisible, and their camp is a traditional cemetery (Idem). As we have seen, there is in Atpälha's story an allusion to the cemetery, where she wakes up after coming back to life. But there is no distinction between day and night – Atpälha is sent away by her father during the day – and in Tundra Nenets' texts the deceased do not see the living humans coming among them. As in our texts, the world beyond is either located on the same level as the humans' world, either placed under the ground.

But other Tundra Nenets materials seem to confirm the chronological evolution I proposed: Leonid Lar's material comes clearly<sup>93</sup> from his fieldwork at the end of the 20th century. The conception he presents, based on "myths and tales" about living people's journeys to the other world, differs very deeply from those based on earlier texts: if verticality is absolute and not discussed, it is also accompanied by a very thorough dual principle of good versus evil. According to Lar, the dead's soul has to accomplish a long and difficult journey in the other world, passing through different villages where evil spirits attack him. He is protected

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93 Unfortunately Lar systematically omits to refer to his sources. But he happens to mention "I have heard a similar story reported by ..." (Lar 1998 : 24).

by a shaman and by two spirits, who accompany him until he arrives to the place where he will be judged: there, his companions report his good and his bad deeds. If the good prevales, the fate of his soul is decided by Num, who may send it in a kind of paradise, in the village of his ancestors or back on the earth as an animal (Lar 1998 : 23-24). In another chapter, commenting the funeral rituals performed by Nenets shamans, he just observes that “the life of good people in the other world is absolutely similar to their life on the earth. Their souls find their friends, their kins and their acquaintances” (Lar 1998 : 35). If we put in perspective this assertion with Tatva’s tale, it is to be noticed that there is no opposition between the world of the people punished and another virtual space for “good” people. Nothing suggests that the people who receive Atpälha were “good” people in life: the moral element is not structural, it appears only in one episode. Further on, life in the forest (as the one led by the “sinners”) – except for punishment – is as similar if not more similar Atpälha’s way of life than life in a large group of people.

Further on, according to Lar, If evil prevales, the soul is sent to the lowest circle of the underworld and has to serve its god Nga until he decides of its fate and its punishment. So in this understanding, the moral element is structural and reward for deeds in life is fundamental. Lar presents a legendary journey, which reminds very much of some elements in Dante’s elaborate construction: the visitor has guides, he sees the people punished and his own acquaintances and he arrives to the lowest circle, and then comes back to the middle-world. As Lar himself observes, the influence of Christianity is here evident. We may regret that Lar does not put his information into a wider context, presenting sources, or informing about its recurrence in similar material: he just affirms that such is the Nenets’ understanding.

If in conclusion we compare the results of this analysis with the materials collected by ethnographers, we may observe that some elements are clearly confirmed by fieldwork data.

All ethnographical data concerning the world beyond show that the representation of a world that is the opposite than the human’s world is generalised. According to the narrator of Atpälha’s story, everything is the reverse: first of all time, but also the moon and the sun – the moon

is the deceased's sun<sup>94</sup>. The habit of burying dead Nenets is a coffin on which a broken sledge is disposed is generally explained by the same fact: broken things, useless here, are useful there. This usage is still fully practised at the North of Western Siberia, in the Yamal Peninsula, by the Yamal Nenets, and we have photos from the late nineties proving the maintenance of this custom. According to a traveller in the Agan region in the 1930-ies, "according to the beliefs of the Ostyaks<sup>95</sup> and the Samoyeds<sup>96</sup> all the objects offered to the gods broken are given in the "gods" world their original appearance" (Khomich 1972 : 209). The Forest Nenets bury their deceased in the ground, but the belief in reverse features of the world beyond seems indeed to be very solid and lasting. As the two tales show, the reverse elements may be of different kind, but they exist. It is interesting to notice that the world described in the two stories is not totally ruled by opposition. This may even be only marginally mentioned, as in Foxhat's Son. We have the impression that in the narratives, the presence of at least one of these inversed features is a sufficient sign to assert the nature of the whole world. It does not alter in essentials the similarity with the human's world. This last element is also confirmed by recent interviews with Forest Nenets, who assert that the life beyond is no better neither worse than life in this world: the +/- dimension is, according to them, entirely absent<sup>97</sup>. This confirms Khomich's statement about the Nenets' view of the world beyond: "In the Nenets' representation, the world beyond was very similar to the world around them and to everyday life. After his death, the Nenets hunted, used reindeer sledges, carried and prepared fur clothes, ate, drank, etc." (Khomich 1995 : 226). Foxhat's Son, where the world beyond is very different from everyday life, seems to be an exception. But in his journey, he is but very little interested by the dead: his and the narrator's main focus is on the other aspect of the world beyond, the dwelling of evil spirits, which is totally absent from the other tales.

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94 According to Kaur Mägi's (Tartu University) fieldwork in Num-to, in autumn 2001.

95 Old name for the Khantys.

96 Old name for the Nenets. In the scientific terminology, the Samoyeds are a group of peoples speaking genetically connected languages; the Nenets, along with the Enets, and the Nganasans, form the Northern branch of this group.

97 According to Kaur Mägi's (Tartu University) fieldwork in Num-to, in autumn 2001.

A very interesting question is the topological disposition of the worlds, for ethnographers have presented different schemes. According to Khomich and to Lar the Nenets' understanding of the world is strictly vertical, with the seven heavens and the seven levels below the ground, which were inhabited by hostile spirits, by diseases (Khomich 1972 : 181, Lar 1998 : 24) and although by the most powerful of these spirits, Nga, the divinity opposite to the heaven's god Num, as confirmed by Chernetsov's fieldwork in the 1920-ies (Istochniki 1987 : 88). Golovnyov, on the bases of his fieldwork, emphasises this vertical organisation, and remarks that both divinities are in contact with the intermediate world and observe it through different holes. These holes are materialised in the structure of the tent, forming an axis in its centre, from the hole on which the stove is disposed up to the upper orifice (Golovnyov 1995 : 398-399). This reminds us of the disposition appearing Auli's story, suggesting that the world beyond is the world below, the humans' world the intermediate one and the gods' world the upper one. The hero glances at the world beyond, the world of the dead, through the upper orifice of the tent, thus reproducing, at human scale, the way Num is supposed to look at the human's world. The sacred number seven is present also in Foxhat's son, but we have the impression that its seven rivers are disposed on one single layer and not plunging deeper and deeper into the abyss.

Yet there are two different localisations of the deceased's world: in the other version, it is on the same level that this one. Ethnographical data mention also this occurrence. Golovnyov, presenting the Tundra Nenets' funeral rituals, observes that as the dead are buried on the surface, the ground cannot be a symbolical border between the two worlds, but is represented on the horizontal level by distance in space (Golovnyov 1995: 205). As a matter of fact, in Atpälha's story, the forest is an ambiguous space: on one hand it is a space of the human world, surrounding the camp. On the other hand, it is already part of the other world, where the "sinners" bear their punishment, before the town inhabited by the people who have no punishment to bear. The contact point, as we happen to know at the end of Atpälha's journey, is the cemetery, the necropolis where she founds herself when she returns to life.

According to ethnographic data, this empire of the dead is located northwards. Here we have no indications of direction: we only know

that Atpälha's father, when her daughter is seen coming back home, is incredulous and exclaims: "Those who are gone in this direction never come back!" There is also another detail that shows concordance between this story and Golovnyov's data, according to which the journeys of the living humans and the dead in the tundra cross twice a year, at the moment they change the direction of their migrations. This happens in spring and in autumn, which are the transition seasons from winter to summer and vice-versa (Golovnyov 1995: 206). Our first version indicates clearly that Atpälha's journey starts at the beginning of spring and she comes back when spring is already confirmed. True, Golovnyov does not present any sources for his assertions, but they are clearly based on Tundra Nenets' evidence, hence only for them the change of direction in migrations is of real significance: the Forest Nenets' migrations are much more limited and their direction depends concretely on the disposition of reindeer pastures. Tatva lives in a border zone with Tundra Nenets migrations, and contacts have left their trace on Num-to oral culture (Mägi, Toulouze 2003). This chronological coincidence in Atpälha's story may be one of them. On the other hand, the second version does not confirm this point. There are a few indications about seasons: at the beginning of the story, Atpälha's father works outdoors, it is summertime. He comes back from fishing, but no detail is given on the season. But when Atpälha wakes up, the thimble shines on the snow and the narrator adds, when the girl arrives at the camp, that her father was working outdoors and it was late autumn, perhaps winter. So the data are completely different. The only point we may observe in this version is that Atpälha has been absent during the change of seasons. Anyhow, the variation on this point shows that this element is not a basic one for the narrator, and the choice of the season may be, from his point of view, indifferent.

Anyhow, we notice that ethnographic literature as well as our narratives confirm the idea that there is a double location of the deceased's world. It is difficult to assess in which way these two dimensions are linked. We must consider that both understandings are accepted by the Nenets, not only as complementary but even as concomitant, without trying to build on any artificial system. I am not sure that this duality is felt as being contradictory. To conclude on that point, I may add two remarks: first of all, the vertical disposition of the Nenets' universe has

been confirmed by many travellers and scholars since the 19th century, in connection with very precise information about location of different spirits and gods and the respective shamanistic hierarchy. But during the whole of the 20th century the religious representations and even the knowledge connected to it have deeply suffered from Soviet repression of shamans as well as from the people's atheistic surroundings and has not been regularly transmitted. This is well illustrated by Juri Vella's asserting that he learnt from the ethnographers that Num was not only the heaven and the weather, but also the Nenets' main god (Golovnyov 1995: 380). We must not be surprised to find, at the beginning of the 21st century, vague and contradictory reports. On the other hand, Atpälha's story may reflect Tundra Nenets influences. For the Tundra Nenets, who occupy only permafrost territories, the representation of a vertical world could be imaginary, but much more difficult to find concrete illustration as required by the narratives. When needing to create visual representation, the deepness is just transposed into horizontal space. In other words: the beliefs in the location of Num and Nga and their assistants are part of a most sophisticated system, which is certainly quite remote for nowadays Nenets. On the other hands, contact with death is a permanent concern and must be dealt with in everyday life: the border has to be materialised, and it is easier to define it according to their concrete perception of the surrounding world.

Finally, the dimension of crime and punishment is practically absent from the sources, excepted from missionaries' and travellers' accounts in the European zone of Russia, where syncretistic legends were told and reported. In Europe, we may well explain them by early contacts with Christianity, but this explanation is not very convincing when Forest Nenets are concerned, for their contacts with missionaries are very unlikely. The Forest Nenets were scarcely known at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and during the 20th century Christian religion disappeared from the public life of the peoples of the North. It is more verisimilar to explain the presence of such elements by indirect sources, by later contacts with Russians who, not being themselves missionaries or even active Orthodox, had preserved a traditional worldview of the Christian world beyond, based on punishment for the sins. The sins presented here were certainly the most common among the Forest Nenets: while reindeer

theft was one of the main “sins” of the Tundra Nenets, wood and fish for the Forest Nenets represent the basic elements in everyday life. So the elements appearing in Atpälha may show an evolution of the Forest Nenets’ understanding of the world beyond during the 20th century. It may be due to increased contacts with the Russian population, but we cannot exclude a cumulated pressure both directly from Russian culture and indirectly through Tundra Nenets contacts, if we presume, following Lar, that the latter understanding of the world beyond in the 20th century has been very much influenced by Christian moral duality.

As a conclusion, the present analysis allows to present formulate the following hypotheses:

- Auli’s story – or the fragment we know – is probably on its present shape the older of the two, and is much more homogeneous than Tatva’s narrative. It reflects a view on the world beyond that is mostly coherent with what we know of the Nenets’ traditional beliefs.
- Atpälha’s story is probably more recent and presents traces of different influences: one of them is the Western worldview, with the idea of punishment in the other world, and a very neat circular structure. On the other hand, some elements may reflect Tundra Nenets influences.
- We observe that some elements in the Nenets’ view of the other world are stable, as the principle of ordinary life with reverse elements. The idea that the human’s food is not acceptable for the dead and vice-versa seems to be a general feature. The idea of inverted time measuring, generally emphasised in interviews, does not appear in both narratives, showing that one inverted element is enough to show the audience that the border has been passed.





## On Forest Nenets Shaman Songs<sup>98</sup>

*Kaur Mägi and Eva Toulouze*

Very little has been written about Forest Nenets shamanism and beliefs in general. Few data have been collected at the beginning of the 20th century. More extensive research has unfortunately been started only in the post-Soviet period: systematic persecution against shamans<sup>99</sup> since the early 1930-ies and the subsequent penetration of materialistic beliefs, transmitted by all the institutional levels of society (school, army, collective and state farms system) have led indeed to very deep changes in the Forest Nenets' worldview and beliefs<sup>100</sup>. Shamanic practice has been particularly affected by these events: we have no reports about the present existence of performing shamans, either in our own extensive fieldwork in two Forest Nenets areas – the Agan river and the lake Num-to –, or in any literature about this people. While questioned, informants use to mention concrete people who were shamans, and are now deceased, but add that nowadays there are no real shamans. In the Agan river basin,

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98 Article published in *Ethnographica et folkloristica carpathica*, 2002, *Mental Spaces and Ritual Traditions. An International Festschrift to commemorate the 60th birthday of Mihály Hoppál*, pp.413-431.

99 There are many references about the ideological war against shamanism (Suslov 1931 is one of the most complete articles on the subject) and knowledge about repressions in Western Siberia. Nevertheless few authors give more concrete information about the latter than Sokolova (Sokolova 1992 : 147).

100 This article deals in particular with Forest Nenets culture. These phenomena are of course not specific to the Forest Nenets: all the so-called small peoples of Siberia have more or less gone through the same historical evolution and deep changes have been noticed anywhere. Many studies have been dedicated to these items, but this is the first attempt to sum up what we know about Forest Nenets shamanic tradition.

we have been told about living or lately deceased Khanty shamans<sup>101</sup>, but remembrances of Nenets shamans are much older and faded<sup>102</sup>. This is certainly not enough to pretend that shamans do not exist at all in the Forest Nenets areas<sup>103</sup>, but it allows us undoubtedly to suggest that even if shaman practice may still be found, it is but marginal.

The goal of this article is to sum up our present knowledge about Forest Nenets shamanism and to organise these data around concrete texts of shamanic ritual songs collected in 2000. The 20. century published material does not present any text connected with shamanic practice, although published texts certainly do not cover the whole of collected data. An interesting article presenting Forest Nenets dream songs, which are actually connected with shamanic practice, has been published in 2001 by Jarkko Niemi (Niemi 2001). Our texts are certainly not spectacular, neither have they been recorded during real shamanic practice. But we have nothing better to start from.

It must nonetheless be mentioned that if Forest Nenets data are very poor, this is not the case for Tundra Nenets material. Tundra Nenets shamanism has been thoroughly studied<sup>104</sup> and there is no lack of illustrative texts and historical background (Hoppál 2000). The Forest Nenets are undoubtedly thoroughly connected with the Tundra Nenets, like two branches of the same people<sup>105</sup>. Is this enough to consider that Tundra Nenets data about shamanism are valid also for Forest Nenets? Toivo Lehtisalo comments both Tundra and Forest Nenets information

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101 As, in the Trom-yugan region, Ivan Stepanovich Sopochin (deceased in the early 1990-ies), and his kinsman Leonid Mikhailovich Sopochin, born in 1954 (Kerezsi 1995 : 40).

102 We have been told about a shaman who was called Yancha: he was the father of Pavel Yanchevich Ayvaseda, who died in the mid 1990-ies. There is thus a generation gap between Khanty and Nenets shamans in the Agan region.

103 We have no concrete experience at the moment about the third great Forest Nenets area, the upper course of the Pur river.

104 Also from the point of view of textual analysis: the metric of Tundra Nenets shaman songs has been thoroughly analysed by Hajdú (Hajdú 1978).

105 Forest Nenets distinguish the other peoples by specific terms. The term used for Russians is *lhusa*, which is also used for other “western” people, except the Komis, who are called *Lutsa*; it may be supposed that the term *kapi*, used nowadays for the Khantys, referred formerly also to other non-Nenets peoples: Selkups are called for example *tasam kapi*. But Tundra Nenets are not *kapi*: they are called *n’iLčeeL*, “people of the other country”.

about beliefs in the same study without structural distinction (Lehtisalo 1924). L. Khomich, in her basic monograph about the Nenets, dedicates more than 15 pages to Nenets shamanism, but without mentioning the Forest Nenets at all (Khomich 1995: 230-246). In a former study, she noticed that the few data available about Forest Nenets correspond to what is known about the Tundra Nenets (Khomich 1972: 208).

We would like to be more prudent. The first reason is that despite the closeness of Tundra and Forest Nenets cultures, there are many fields in which analogy may not be applied. The differences between the languages are of such importance that contemporary scholars chose to treat them as separate languages and not as dialects, although their common origin is easy to identify. The Forest Nenets way of life differs considerably from the Tundra Nenets' because of the different character of their ecosystem. As far as we know, the folklore of the Forest Nenets presents some particular features and some peculiar developments (Mägi, Toulouze 2002); the Forest Nenets are aware of having borrowed the Tundra Nenets folklore items (narratives and songs), they mention the fact, and true enough it happens that the name of some characters are very clearly of Tundra Nenets origin. Direct analogies do not work automatically in other cultural areas. Therefore, we shall not consider as an understatement that both forms have been thoroughly identical.

We shall start from the existent Forest Nenets materials, comparing them to the very few indications from the past and only in a second stage with what we know about other peoples.

## **About Forest Nenets shamanism in the first decades of the 20th century**

The main researcher on Forest Nenets in the 20th century is undoubtedly Toivo Lehtisalo. The Finnish scholar spent some time in 1914 in the Forest Nenets area, where he recorded not only the comparatively few folklore texts we find in his collection (Lehtisalo 1947 : 70-72, 79-86, 101-104, 132-147, 343-344, 406-420, 546- 548, 604-607) but also a huge amount of linguistic data which are to be found in his extensive Nenets dictionary, which includes Forest Nenets as well as Tundra Nenets lexical

forms (Lehtisalo 1956). One of his main informants was a man from the Ngahany clan called Kallyat, whom he met in summer 1914 (Lehtisalo 1947 : X). As far as we know, Kallyat was already an old man when he got acquainted the Finnish linguist and agreed to answer his questions and practically to teach him his tongue. Lehtisalo learned very much from Kallyat: many examples from his dictionary have been heard from him and many of the data included in his *Nenets Mythology* (Lehtisalo 1924) have the same source. Kallyat was a shaman and he considered Lehtisalo as a shaman as well, i.e. as a colleague; we know that Lehtisalo could have been initiated to his shamanic knowledge. But Kallyat required 50 roubles, asserting that it is not allowed to teach shamanic knowledge for free; Lehtisalo considered that he was not allowed to spend in this way the money given him as a scholarship, but he managed to gather nonetheless some information, by convincing Kallyat that if he would just speak Russian, the Nenets gods would not understand (Lehtisalo 1959: 154).

This data are extensively referred to in Lehtisalo's *Nenets mythology*. In this study, a whole chapter is dedicated to what the Finnish researcher calls "the 4 enchanters" (*Die Zauberer*, Lehtisalo 1924: 145 and following), where he mentions Forest as well as Tundra Nenets shamans. According to the Forest Nenets, the shaman is the one who knows the origin of things (Lehtisalo 1924: 165).

There is another fairly unknown researcher who had the opportunity of participate to a shamanic seance: Raisa Mitusova, after a previous pilot expedition (Mitusova 1927), spent one year among the Agan Forest Nenets and she dedicated an article to her experience (Mitusova 1929). Unfortunately, as Khomich notices, her article is nowadays a "bibliographic rarity". We have nevertheless some excerpts in Khomich's article dedicated to the Forest Nenets (Khomich 1972): the Russian ethnographer quotes entirely the parts describing the shamanic seance (Khomich 1972: 209-210). As Mitusova reports, her arrival was followed by a seance whose aim was to ask the spirits whether she was to be accepted or rejected. The shaman was an elder man, rather shabby, whom she had by chance given presents at her first meeting with the elder. During the seance, the spirits informed the shaman that Mitusova was a great healer, and this approval simplified considerably her work during her sojourn in Siberia. We shall present later more in detail some elements of this seance.

Anyhow, this is all we have to insert present data into an historical perspective.

## About Kallyat and his songs

At the beginning of the 20th century, Kallyat was probably quite well known as a shaman. Nowadays Nenets tell legends about him. We asked one of his descendants, who is also a member of the Ngahany clan, to tell us who Kallyat was. Our informant, called Tatva, is a 43-years old Forest Nenets from the Num-to area, who is blind (as Kallyat was at the end of his life), and therefore has lived all his life in a Nenets environment, without school either army, and has a very deep knowledge of his people's traditions.

He told us some legends about Kallyat. One of them is about how he became a shaman:

*When Kallyat was a young man, he hunted wild reindeer. Once in the spring, he walked for a long time, he didn't see any animal. On one lake, he got a grebe. He thought: "since I have nothing else to eat, I shall boil this grebe for dinner". 5 He made a fire in his camp, which was set on the shore of a subterranean river. Suddenly, he heard someone coming from the other side of the river. He looked at the person who came towards him, and he thought: "Hereabout, I have never seen this kind of man, he looks strange to me". The stranger said: "Haha, Kallyat, you went hunting..." So, he knew Kallyat's name. He carried a bottle of vodka. They sat down and started to drink. They drank for some time, and Kallyat got drunk. Then the stranger said: "Kallyat, when you grow up, you shall be a great shaman and you will live a long life". They drank, sung and embraced each other. Suddenly, the stranger said: "Look at me!" Kallyat looked at him. The stranger's face was weird, distended. The stranger said: "You will experience thrice misfortune in your life". Kallyat got scared and thought: "This is no common man, I must hold distance with him". And he moved over. He fell asleep. When he woke up, it was about noon. No man was in sight. The pot was still on hanging over the fireplace, but the fire was extinguished. He looked to the other side of the fireplace: there was a cedar looking like a man who holds a bottle in his hand. Kallyat went back home and told the others what had happened to him. Later on, his kinsmen looked after the place where he had camped and they saw that the grass was trampled as if two men had*

*been there. And there was also the cedar looking like a man. Kallyat lived further on. Before this event, he hadn't felt any shaman powers. After this, he became a shaman. During his life, he had three wives, and all of them died. These were the three misfortunes forecasted by the stranger. The man who had visited Kallyat was probably some kind of forest spirit, but nobody knows whether he was good or bad*"<sup>106</sup>.

The way Kallyat became a shaman reminds closely the experience of the two Khanty shamans mentioned by Ágnes Kerecsi: "Both of them were chosen as shamans in most ordinary conditions, while they were hunting or during a longer trip, while there were no other persons around, when they were alone in the nature. When they talk about this event, they describe the nature around them and the weather and the hunting circumstances most realistically. Both confirmed that they did not expect the appearance of the supernatural being and there were no sign announcing it" (Kerecsi 1995: 40). It is interesting to notice the stronger similarity of this story with the Khanty shaman's ones, while Tundra Nenets data seem to emphasize hereditary transmission of shamanic power and earlier appearance of signs from childhood (Khomich 1981: 8-9).

After Kallyat became a shaman, he had the opportunity of competing with other shamans:

*Once Kallyat was in a town. He drank and met a Khanty shaman. It was probably a Khanty from the Kazym River. The Khanty said: "Let us compete to see which of us is the stronger shaman. Kallyat answered: "I have no great power, just a little bit". The Khanty took seven knives; he heated them on the fire and plunged six of them into his throat. But he didn't manage to plunge the last one. Kallyat heated also seven knives on the fire and plunged them all into his throat. So Kallyat was the winner.*

The shaman plunging knives in his flesh is a recurrent theme in literature about the Nenets, starting from Richard Johnson's report in the 16th century (Hoppál 2000: 116). The following report is from our fieldwork in the Agan region in 2000<sup>107</sup>. The Nenets Awakhylu (50) (whose father Vahalyuma was saved as a child by a shaman) remembers having

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106 This and the following legends have been referred by Tatva in Yuri Vella's winter camp on the river Tyutyakha (in the Agan region), on October 10., 2000.

107 Referred during his visit to Yuri Vella's winter camp on the Tyutyakha River, on October, 16. 2000.

seen in his childhood a man plunging a knife into his flesh and pulling it out without any visible wound. He commented further on that this was a common way for weaker shamans to show their abilities. Khomich's comment is somehow different, as she asserts that this kind of practice was characteristic not of weak, but of the strongest of shamans (Khomich 1981: 13).

There are still some interesting episodes from Kallyat's life, and some of them are connected with songs.

Once in summer Kallyat was again looking for something to do. Once he saw a stork and its young woming towards him. He asked them: "How long will youn live in this world?" The stork answered: "We shall live as long as the sons of this place's gods, as long as the sons of this place's heavens will". The stork started singing:

Kaľat kaLuŋ kinaws Kallyat's stork song (Tatva)

kaľat manti	Kallyat says:
šāja"t jiLiwsuta	"How much longer will you live."
kaLu jātmaĵ	The stork walked,
ńumta wātāš	taking his child by the hand.
kaLu taĽam ma	The stork said:
čúki numu" ńu	"The child of these heavenly beings,
čúki kāhu" ńu	the child of these gods,
pĵituŋ kačituŋ	their noses, their nails
husaš kān	when they end,
maj kānĵaj	we will die,
tajna kānĵaj	then we will die."
číki kaľat kaLuŋ kinaws	That is Kallyat's stork song.

*Kallyat said: "Yes, it seems that you will live long indeed, I think I should come with you." People do not say that Kallyat went with the stork, we just don't know whether he went or not. "The once again, I don't know whether it happened before or after the meeting with the stork, in the autumn Kallyat met six grebes. The grebes asked him: "Will you come with us? You could very well come, but you have bad clothes. They are not waterproof. We have good clothes, given by the heavenly*

*father". Kallyat threw his malitsa<sup>108</sup> into the water and it remained there, floating on the surface. Kallyat flew away with the grebes to warmer countries where he spent the winter. He came back in the spring. His relatives had found nothing but his malitsa, they didn't know whether he was dead or alive. In the spring Kallyat showed up.*

kałat kālĭkāt kinaws Kallyat's grebe song (Tatva)

matĽi matĽi pajaĽ	Only six, only six grebes,
pajaĽ pajaĽ	grebes, grebes,
wa"ptuŋ mānštu" mānštu"	Say, beginning to speak:
kałat tūjin	"Kallyat, come and
ši"wimtiŋā	be the seventh!
ńānana" ńānana" tūjin	Come, come with us!"
matĽi pajaĽ	Only six grebes
wa"ptuŋ mānštu"	start to speak, saying:
tohoma" tōmān ŋijiši"	"If only you would come with us,
ŋaiĽa panijut hāŋuĽinŋa"	your clothes are rotting.
mańa" num ńēšana"	Our clothes,
tāmi panijuna"	given by heaven, by our father
wi"kat wi"kat maniĽa	repel water
hiŋuĽta ní" ŋa"	they are not rotted."
kałat čĭki wāta namtaš	Kallyat, hearing this talk
kōpaj malta malta	threw his leather malitsa
wi"t mōŋata	into the water,
ĽaphaĽata	cast it in.
ka"taš ka"maj	[Into the water it] fell, and floated.
ši"wimtiŋā kałat paĽa"aj	Kallyat flapped his wings as the seventh.
jupa" jaha"na	In warm lands
kałat jātiĽa	Kallyat goes,

108 Malitsa: a typical men's cloth like a long anorak worn with a belt.



kalat manti	Kallyat says...
či	That's all.

*This is his song, he sang it while he flew away with the grebes.*

Songs accompany thus two of the main episodes of Kallyat's life. The interpretation of these songs is ambiguous: as a matter of fact they may be interpreted in two different ways. Tatva considers them as shaman songs: the stork and the grebe are at this point the spirits helping the shaman. In the grebe song's texts, the birds call Kallyat to come with them, to become one of them, to identify him to them by acquiring of some of their attributes. We may notice that the original number of the grebes is six, "only six" as emphasised in the text, which means, as seven is a positive and often sacred number, that one more is needed. And the one who completes the set is the shaman.

Nevertheless, other interpretations are possible. Most of shaman songs may be characterised as personal songs<sup>109</sup> as well: they are not spread on a regional basis, they are not used by other people practising the same craft, they are thoroughly individual. Each shaman has his or her own songs. The specific characteristic of the shaman's personal song is its function during the shamanic performance. "Each spirit lives in a specific place and the ways leading to them are also different. Therefore, according to Kallyat, the enchanters have different songs depending on the spirit they want to summon. Also the god of the heaven has his song. Forest Nenets shamans do not address more than one spirit at a time, because they may be mixed up and that would not do any good" (Lehtisalo 1924 : 161).

Kallyat's songs may also be interpreted as more trivial personal songs. According to Tatva, his intercourse with Lehtisalo was not one-sided: if the latter learned a lot about Forest Nenets culture and language by listening to Kallyat, the latter was also curious of the Finn's country, of its culture and way of life. According to an oral report, he used to tell the other Nenets what he had heard from Lehtisalo about Finland and the

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109 Personal songs are one of the main "genres" in Nenets musical tradition (as well as by other small peoples of Siberia): each person has a personal tune which usually while consuing alcohol he or she performs with words adapted to the circumstance. The words may vary, the tune is directly connected with its « owner » (Mägi, Ojamaa 2002: 178, Toulouze 2002: 94).

West in the form of a mental travel as a migrating bird. These songs could also be the introduction to this kind of tales. It is also to be noticed that flying as a bird is a recurrent theme in Forest Nenets worldview: we have collected in the Agan region the remembrance about an elder man, who disappeared for two months. When he came back, he explained that he had gone to the Pur River region under the guise of a grebe<sup>110</sup>.

Still these songs do not have all the features of personal songs. Their text presents the action from an external point of view: the person used is the third, not the first. They do not have either some features characterising the shaman song, which, according to Khelimski, is allocutive and not narrative (Khelimski 1989 : 247), And their contents are not very ordinary, either as a shaman song<sup>111</sup> either as a personal song: the birds are not presented explicitly as helping spirits, there is no reference at all to the “other world”, the scope of the trip in the grebe’s song is totally absent.

Finally, Tatva reports a legend about the last years of Kallyat’s life:

Kallyat got old. At that time, there was another shaman, from the Nichu clan. He was a shaman with an evil power. Kallyat was a shaman with a positive power. Once the Nichu shaman said: “Let us compete to see who is a stronger shaman!” They competed in dream. The Nichu shaman threw dust into Kallyat’s eyes and therefore Kallyat went blind. Once this same Nichu and his wife visited Kallyat. Kallyat understood that it was the same man who had caused his infirmity and said in low voice: “If he, who made me blind, should come here, I would not show any mercy to him”. Nichu said to his wife: “Let us go away, Kallyat’s words are somehow bad”. They went away. During their journey, they arrived upon a cedar grove. When they went by, Kallyat had already been there with the help of his powers and had put there a magical self-shooting trap. An invisible arrow was shot; Nichu felt pain in his heart and collapsed dead. He was buried in that cedar grove. The place exists still nowadays, somewhere on the shore of the River Lyamin. After that Kallyat still lived some time, then he died too”.

The same kind of fight between shamans, with the use of invisible self-shooting arrows, is mentioned by Kerezsi as common by the Eastern Khantys (Kerezsi 1995 : 48).

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110 Tatina, village of Varyogan (Agan region), September 2. 2000.

111 If comparing to Tundra Nenets material.

## About the fly agaric songs and their functions

Fly agaric use is often mentioned in connection with Siberian shamanism. The consumption of fly agaric is supposed to help the shaman getting into the necessary trance, during which he communicates with the spirits and gets answers to his questions. This is how Munkácsi presents Vogul data about fly agaric: “To achieve the ecstatic state necessary for the shaman to begin his shamanic activity, Vogul shamans generally use *Amanita muscaria* ‘fly agaric’. (...) The mushroom produces shamanic ecstasy and enhances the performances of the shaman (...) There are male and female varieties, which are used by men and women, respectively.” (Munkácsi<sup>112</sup> 1995 : 181). Fly agaric has certainly been used also by the Forest Nenets. We have collected the texts of three fly agaric songs, and shall present hereafter two of these *vipi*-songs. The name of this mushroom in Nenets is *vipi*, and this word is abundantly repeated throughout the songs.

But how did the Forest Nenets use fly agaric and who did it? Was it indeed an attribute of the shaman practice?

According to one tradition the shaman used to sing these songs during the performance, standing on one leg and imitating thus the external aspect of the mushroom<sup>113</sup>. Maret Saar asserts – but without mentioning any source – that by the Forest Nenets only “sacral persons” used fly agaric (Saar 1990 : 503). As the other shaman’s songs, *vipi*-songs as well are personal songs: each of them is connected to the concrete name of a concrete person.

Still, we have contradictory information about the use of fly agaric: on the one hand, we may assume that fly agaric was a common accessory of Forest Nenets shamanic practice as in their neighbour’s. Tatva connects it expressly to Khanty shamanism. In specialised literature, we find confirmation of his assertion. Barkalaja comments the use of fly agaric by the Khantys, observing that if wrongly used, it may bring no results or be dangerous, even mortal, to its user (Barkalaja 1996 : 100). He mentions a shamanic seance in 1994 during which one shaman used fly agaric, but without any results. He commented that “the mushroom’s spirit might

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112 Munkácsi’s data about the Voguls have been collected during his fieldwork in Siberia in 1888-1889.

113 Oral information by Triinu Ojamaa.

possess someone else” (Barkalaja 1998 : 62). On the eastern Khanty river of Vasyugan, there is a special category of shamans using fly agaric in order to have visions about the future (Lukina 1978 : 118). Anyhow shamans not using fly agaric were considered as more powerful than those who did (Barkalaja 1996 : 101).

The main arguments in favour of this hypotheses are both Lehtisalo’s and Mitusova’s reports.

Lehtisalo’s comments about fly agaric use concern the Forest Nenets as he got information from Kallyat. According to him, Forest Nenets shamans knew the use of fly agaric. They used it dried and washed. Only those were allowed to eat them who knew the origin of the plant. Those who did not see correctly the spirits of the mushroom may die or go mad. Usually, shamans ate two and a half agarics. The shaman saw a number of human-shaped spirits corresponding to the number of mushrooms. Half a mushroom represents half a spirit. They start to run, following the sun on its way from sunset to sunrise and the shaman runs after them. He could not keep pace but the half spirit ran more slowly and looked constantly behind as if waiting for his other half<sup>114</sup>. All is dark and the shaman does not see anything. The spirits disclosed what the shaman wanted to know during this journey (Lehtisalo 1924 : 165).

Mitusova describes the seance she attended in 1928: “On his clothes, Payata [the shaman] put on a long white calico shirt that reached his knees. He sat down and started to chew tobacco with bits of fly agaric. At the same time other Nenets brought the drum and started to warm it. It seemed to be an ordinary Nenets drum - rather big, and the strut used by the shaman to hold it supported chains to which small bells were suspended. The shaman’s face reddened, his eyes became vague. He sipped some water, probably in order to strengthen the effect of the fly agaric, but perhaps only to quench his thirst. Because of the fire, it was very warm in the tchum<sup>115</sup>. He started by beating softly the drum. The blows got stronger and stronger. And Payata started to sing. He called his spirit-protector, in order to get assistance from him in his fight against

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114 In this report there is a theme reminding us of the above-mentioned grebe song: it is the shaman seen as completing the spirit’s group – six grebes + 1, half a spirit waiting for his other half running after him.

115 Russian word for the conic tent in Western and Central Siberia.

the illness sent by the evil spirits. His way “to the other worlds” was apparently hard, the shaman sweated profusely. He stood up and started walking around the fire, beating the drum with all his strength. His eyes were closed; dribble appeared at the corner of his mouth; all his body was shaken. All the men started to shout “Ou ! Ou ! Ou !”. This shout, the strikes on the drum, the jungling of the bells mixed in a deafening noise. For a long time Payata jumped around the fire. The people sitting in the tchum chased the evil spirits away by shouting “Ou! Ou! Ou!”, in order to protect the soul of the shaman. Finally, the shaman collapsed with a groan beating himself in a nerve crisis. The other Nenets lifted him seven times on the fire while one of the men went on beating the drum. When they put him back at his place, Payata regained consciousness and continued the séance” (Khomich 1972 : 209).

On the other hand, Tatva has expressed two contradictory opinions: according to one of them<sup>116</sup>, *vipi* was connected with shamanic practice by the Khantys, but not by the Nenets. Everybody could eat fly agaric and get “drugged”, but the visions given by the mushroom did not allow the consumer to help anybody else: he could get messages for him, see events of his own future, but did not get revelations about somebody else’s illness or the way to solve it. This was the peculiar function of the proficient shaman, who did not need this means to get into trance and to communicate with the spirits. This opinion is interesting: as Tatva is a younger man, who most probably did not have personal experience of shamanic practice, it may reflect a certain development in Forest Nenets shamanism. This possibility is mentioned also by Saar: the Estonian mycologist mentions the individual or collective use of fly agaric in order to obtain “a pleasant psychic state” (Saar 1990 : 513). True enough, she does not explicitly mention to what ethnic group this information refers, but we may assume it concerns the Khantys, for her field work was achieved by the Yugan Khantys.

Somehow his assertion is confirmed by another informant, the Nenets poet Yuri Vella, who comments thus the use of fly agaric: “The fly agaric song is sung when fly agaric is eaten. That is done when a person feels the need to attain the condition occasioned by the use of fly agaric. This need is felt when someone falls ill and the shaman is not nearby,

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116 Oral information to Kaur Mägi, Num-to, October 2001

yet it is necessary to perform supernatural procedures. Anyone can do this to a certain extent, by the way, even without fly agaric, if he is able to concentrate. Fly agaric helps a person to concentrate more quickly and effectively on his/her inner self” (Mägi, Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002). According to this assertion, fly agaric is used when “the shaman is not nearby”, therefore we can assume that it is not an attribute of the shamans, but of lower categories, who have not the necessary spiritual strength to concentrate by their own means<sup>117</sup>. As a matter of fact, Mitusova does not give any indication of the category Payata belonged to either of his strength. We cannot exclude that the Nenets she visited had no stronger shaman. But they had to face an unknown problem, the coming of a Russian ethnographer who intended to sojourn with them; and they had to find a proper answer. This is of course merely a hypothesis allowing conciliating Mitusova’s account of fly agaric use with other data concerning the Nenets as a whole and the Forest Nenets in particular.

As a matter of fact Khomich does not mention at all fly agarics in her global presentation of Nenets shamanism (Khomich 1995 : 230-246). It is interesting to mention that also other scholars presenting Nenets shamanism omit to mention the use of this mushroom (Basilov 1997). This is to be emphasised, because during the Soviet period all kind of materialistic explanations about shamanism were most welcome (as Bogoraz-Tan’s pathological explanations, Bogoraz 1910). Nevertheless, Homich assumes that fly agaric could play a certain role, although it was not common among the Nenets: “There are interesting data showing that Forest Nenets shamans used stimulating means, the fly agaric (...) As far as the Nenets, and especially the Tundra Nenets, are concerned, the use of fly agaric was not typical. They did not use either alcoholic beverages before the seances” (Khomich 1981 : 29- 30). Probably the Forest Nenets data she quotes (without precise indications) are no more than the above-mentioned report by Mitusova. Anyhow, in the same article, Khomich explains the shaman’s trance not by the use of hallucinogen mushrooms,

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117 This deduction corresponds to Mircea Eliade assertion about the use of fly agaric by the Uralic peoples of Central Russia and of Siberia as a “vulgar substitute for ‘pure’ trance” (Eliade 1974 : 401). Maret Saar also mentions this principle and emphasises that shamans using fly agaric were less respected than those who did not need the help of the mushroom: this information comes from oral information given by the Russian scholar Simchenko (Saar 1990 : 504).

but by other reasons: “The shaman’s ecstasy was due to a complex set of factors: special training and teaching, a system of representations acquired from childhood, the development of fantasy, the conditions of the seance etc.” (Khomich 1981 : 38). Thus, we must consider the use of fly agaric by the Nenets shamans as marginal. Mitusova’s example comes from the Agan river, where Forest Nenets are clearly a minority population and certainly were particularly such when Mitusova visited them, as most of the Forest Nenets migrations either from the Pur region or from Num-to took place in the 1930-ies. Many authors have presented descriptions of Tundra Nenets shamanic seances, most of them from the 1920-1930 (for example Yevladov 1992 : 122-126) and in none fly agarics are mentioned. We may explain the presence of fly agaric by the Forest Nenets by Khanty influence, as Khanty are dominant in the Agan area. Probably geographical factors are also essential, as the availability of the fly agaric, which is mostly a forest mushroom.

Anyhow, as soon as 1981, Khomich explains the shaman’s trance not by the use of hallucinogen mushroom, but by other reasons: “The shaman’s ecstasy was due to a complex set of factors: special training and teaching, a system of representations acquired from childhood, the development of fantasy, the conditions of the seance etc.” (Khomich 1981 : 38). Lar, who does not either mention the use of fly agaric, emphasises the importance of the drum as a means of communication with the spirits (Lar 1994: 99).

Khomich, following Mitusova, observes that Forest Nenets shamanism differs considerably from Khanty’s shamanism on one basic point: as by the Tundra Nenets, “not everybody was able to be a shaman” (Khomich 1972: 210). Although we have no data about how shamans learned their skills (Khomich 1972: 209), “[Forest Nenets] shamans were distinguished by different steps of skills (Mitusova met also “small” shamans, who had very low authority)” (Khomich 1972: 210): besides the categories of “good” and “evil” shamans, many authors mention the existence of “strong” and “weak” shamans (Khomich 1981 : 13). This gradation of shamans according to their power may explain Tatva’s assertion: only “smaller” shamans used fly agaric, strong shamans able to cure and to predict did not need this means to fulfil their tasks.

But in October 2000, in a conversation with Yuri Vella recorded in

Tartu's Literary Museum, Tatva commented his performance of fly agaric songs expressing a contradictory position. When answering to Yuri Vella's question about the number of mushrooms to be eaten, he asserted that occasionally people ate three agarics, but seven (as in the songs he performed) was the maximum they could eat. Only the strongest shamans were able to ingest up to ten. The matter is that to each mushroom corresponds one spirit. If you call many spirits, it is much more difficult to control them, they may mislead you and even cause your death. This assertion seems to indicate that Forest Nenets shamans, and even the strongest ones, did really use fly agarics. But this does not mean that this use was regular or compulsory. Further on, we do not know the real reason of fly agaric use, as nothing is said about that nor in the songs neither in the comments.

In our collection we have recorded three fly agaric songs: two of them come from the Num-to region and one from the Agan basin. One of them – presented below – belongs to Allyu Vylla (Num-to), but we do not know for sure whether he was considered as a shaman or not. Another song's owner is Myty Pyak (Num-to) who was a shaman, as well as Yancha (Agan). But they had not the reputation of being strong shamans.

we"la alu wípi kinaws Allyu Vylla's fly agaric song (Tatva)

še" w wípi né	Seven fly agaric girls,
še" w wípi né	seven fly agaric girls,
ŋiLi čahaŋ pajiLaLa"	go farther in that direction!
čoLaj taja	I have a belt,
ših'iLči jātmi	forged by the šihilhča,
ňahaL ŋisugo"ta	It has three joins.
čoLaj tajaŋa	I have a belt.
še" w wípi né	Seven fly agaric girls,
jāLa" kuna	where is your land.
ših'iLči jātmi	Made by the šihilhča
ŋiLi čahaŋ pajiLaLa"	Go farther in that direction.
kukīŋamāhana manti	Another time he says:



jiwsu"ta pūjan	"The infants that remained after us,
ŋa"ški" tuLa" pa"taŋāta	children, add wood to your fire."
še"w wīpi né	Seven fly agaric girls
tun pakaLjat	climbed into the fire.
alōL ha"maj	Al'u was able,
þemaši tun nūLjat	he stood in the fire without his boots
tuhuna taLaŋa	dances in the fire.
tu"ta tuŋ níña	Above a burning fire
še"w wīpi né	seven fly agaric girls
johoLku"ni"iw	bewilder him.
tajna manti me	Then he says, well:
ŋami jāLahana	"Some day
taLam mantŋata	you will say:
ŋupuna ŋa"ški"	Infants,
niLima" taLšaš	our grandfather was like that."

The first interesting feature is that the owner of this song, as well as Myty in another one, call for seven fly agaric "girls". Lehtisalo mentioned already the fly agaric spirit as being human-shaped<sup>118</sup> but he did not mention the gender of the spirits. According to Tatva, the mushroom spirits are usually young females. In our third *vipi*-song, the spirit is the "mother of fly-agarics". The second interesting element is the number of the mushrooms – seven in both songs coming from Numto, while in the third song the number is not explicit.

Allyu's song reminds of some particulars in Lehtisalo's report, as the running of the spirits in a precise direction, or the question about the origin of the mushrooms. We may also mention the importance of fire in this song, while standing in the fire is, according to Tatva, a recurrent theme in *vipi*-songs. Anyhow the contents of this song show that most probably Allyu was a shaman, whose song is directly connected with shamanic practice.

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118 So did Barkalaja about the Khanty fly agaric spirits, who were somehow similar to little men with sharp heads (Barkalaja 1996 : 100).

Anyhow, the active practice of shamanism, as mentioned previously, seems to be by the Forest Nenets deprived of present reality. This appears well in the evolution of some songs connected to the fly agaric. We have a good example in our repertoire with a *vipi*-song being performed nowadays as humorous song: the performer imitates an old shaman, who used to fell asleep some times during the performance of his song. Yuri Vella has repeatedly performed this imitation in front of us, adding though that he did not see the old shaman himself, but had seen him imitated by another Nenets. This shows already some distance between the performer in 1999 and 2000 and its model.

Mother of fly agaric.../sigh, snoring/

Mother of fly agaric, I here present my mother's song.

Mother of fly agaric, I here present my mother's song. Carrying my children, carrying them (holding hands) here I climb under the tent's cloth... /snoring/

So that my children may see one day, day, I will take them out, out (=save them).

On one foot, foot, I begin to sing. /Speech/ Tomorrow, tomorrow I can see /speech, snoring /

Well, then he apparently fell asleep again.

We tried to sum up what we know about Forest Nenets shamanism in connection with songs and we must recognise that the existent material is quite thin. Anyway, from the quantitative point of view, we have at our disposal three « *vipi* » - songs and two quite questionable shaman songs. As we have come to the conclusion that probably the use of fly agaric, though well-known and existent, was not a norm in proper shamanic practice, we may assume that more persons that real powerful shamans were addicted to fly-agaric consumption and performed these songs, explaining thus that these have been transmitted more easily than true shaman songs.

The two possible shaman songs we presented seem, compared with the examples we have from Tundra Nenets shaman songs (Khomich 1981: 39-41; Lehtisalo 1924 : 167), much more simple and fragmentary: if they were really performed by Kallyat during a shamanic seance, they were probably much longer and detailed. Anyhow they have been preserved upon a form that allows a functional shift and permits them to be received nowadays as personal songs.



# **YURI VELLA POET AND REINDEER HERDER**





# Reconfigurations of indigenous personhood in Western Siberia<sup>119</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

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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119 Article published in *Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews. Comparative studies on Contemporary Eurasia, India and South America*. Ed by. Lidia Guzy and James Kapáló, 2017, 89-116.

explore all its philosophical implications; this would be a research in 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 dissent 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)<sup>120</sup>. 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 been 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’

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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<sup>121</sup> 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

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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 ethnic 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”<sup>122</sup> 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

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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<sup>123</sup> 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.<sup>124</sup> 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

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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 led 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).<sup>125</sup>

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.<sup>126</sup> 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

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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 Aleksey 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."<sup>127</sup> 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

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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*)<sup>128</sup>, 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<sup>129</sup>) 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

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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 it 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.<sup>130</sup> 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

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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, four 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<sup>131</sup> and, oddly enough, by a general respect for exogamy rules (Verbov 1936).<sup>132</sup> 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

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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<sup>133</sup> (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

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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<sup>134</sup>. 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,”<sup>135</sup> 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

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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 may 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).<sup>136</sup> 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.<sup>137</sup>

School and especially boarding schools were the means for rooting hygiene<sup>138</sup> (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

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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 sovkhos 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, on 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)<sup>139</sup>. 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,<sup>140</sup> but what I want to emphasize in this article is the work on himself he made in the last 15

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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](http://jurivella.ru).

years of his life<sup>141</sup> 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<sup>142</sup>”, as well as the equivalent to “civilisation”, “tsivilizatsia”, are used as an absolute, but are in fact synonymous with the dominant, i.e.

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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. It 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.<sup>143</sup> 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.

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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.



## Yuri Vella – looking at Himself<sup>144</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

Yuri Vella (1948-2013), a famous Forest Nenets poet, reindeer herder and fighter, left behind him several texts about himself that we can understand as autobiographies. It is interesting to note that two of them were induced by proximity with death. Indeed, one of them is the *Monologue* Olga Kornienko recorded two months before his demise. We may suppose that the approach of death, the contact with terminal illness, are ordeals that led him to reflect on fundamental questions which, after all, are not so different in a Western city, in the Sahara or in the Siberian taiga, although the answers will probably differ.

Two months before his demise, Yuri Vella went back to his camp after a long absence, during which he had undergone chemotherapy in the city of Nizhnevartovsk. As with everyone suffering cancer he had meditated on the approach of death. He unbosoms himself to Russian filmmaker Olga Kornienko's camera.<sup>145</sup> There, he reflects on the meaning of life. A similar thing happened ten years earlier when he had spent a year wandering from hospital to hospital, and he had reflected on the same question. He

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144 Article published in Finnish, "Juri Vellan peilit", *Idäntutkimus*, suomentanut Karina Lukin, 1/2021, 66-73.

145 Olga Kornienko (Bystryakova) is a Russian filmmaker living in Surgut. She worked for Surgut television and started by making reports on the region's indigenous population. Yuri befriended her, feeling she had potential, and asked her to follow him and his companions in an expedition along the Agan River, looking for the people who still lived on the shores and for remains of former campsites. She made a film about the trip (Kornienko 1996). Afterwards she made other successful films about indigenous peoples and remained until the end a good friend of Yuri's. She published a book of essays and remembrances in which Yuri features as an important character (Kornienko 2016: 152-158, 172-206) and, in 2024, a three volumes collection of Yuri's works.

had answered it through a short text he called “Autobiography”, which he wrote in his hospital bed, in which he presented his thoughts, again in a concentrated form. The third text I choose to see as an autobiography is a reflection on the notion of *Autoportrait*.

His thoughts were a Western Siberian native’s thoughts, reflections of a taiga inhabitant who chose, when he was 40, to go back to Forest Nenets tradition and to put his life in compliance with the worldview he had meanwhile developed. Between 1990 and his death in 2013, Vella lived a full life in the forest, a modern life in Siberia’s bogs and forests, the life he dreamt of as a child, a life with reindeer – a life he built against the oil industry that nourishes Russia but destroys Siberia’s nature and the peoples whom it feeds.

The first of these texts, called *Autobiography*, was written in 2003; the second, written years later, is called *Self-portrait*, the last is a monologue Olga Kornienko filmed two months before Yuri’s death in 2013. All three texts are short and therefore it is reasonable to present them here in full. Each will be translated into English and is followed by my comments (see also Toulouze, Niglas 2019).

## Autobiography

Between Varyogan and Novoagansk, there is a road bridge. From this bridge, if you walk four hundred metres north-west, you will find old stumps, high enough, covered with moss: that was the Nenets Kyli Ayvaseda’s (Vella’s) camp. There, in March 1948, I was born.

After her husband Kaly Vella’s death, my grandmother Nengi abandoned her choom and her reindeer, and went back with her children to her parents’ camp near Varyogan, close to lake Settey along the Khypitosta. At the time of the international Red movements, of the quest for Kolkhoz Happiness, they went partly on foot with the Ayvaseda clan up to the village of Varyogan and there, in 1951, they ate their last reindeer.

As with many children of the North I went to the kindergarden at boarding school (I remember Stalin's death, the flight of Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin). When I was young, my best conversation partners were my elders: the brothers Yeparkin, Vasili and Anton, as well as Yefim Aypin. Even as an adult I always relied on men of the older generation: Kuli, Auli and Oysya Yusi, Andrey Kazamkin. But I think that my character was mainly shaped by two people, my father's mother, grandmother Nengi, and my mother's father, grandfather Khopli.

As a state hunter I followed the distance curriculum of the Gorky Literary Institute and in 1988 defended my thesis (the book *News from the Camp*) with distinction.

Still today I do two things simultaneously: I pasture my reindeer and I write down my people's oral tradition, the mirror of its present cultural level, so that each person may look into it him- or herself.

In 1999, I was admitted into Russia's Writers Union. I live with my reindeer in the Agan basin. I am registered in Varyogan. In 1978-1979 our land passed from Surgut to Nizhnevartovsk district.

All kinds of things happened in my life: I published five books, created two museums, two schools, one rural council; for some years, I was the best hunter in the promkhoze; then, I asked to leave as a volunteer to Vietnam, but because of my flat feet, I spent my military service as a builder; I am categorically opposed to military action in Chechnya and I dedicated the book *The Swan Hunt* to this question; I was investigated four times because of LUKoil workers' false denunciations, I won three cases and my complaint about the fourth is at the European Court of Justice; in 1992, I was the victim of a fire and I haven't managed yet to get over poverty: my wardrobe contains 90% friends' presents and half of my apartment furniture came from my previous boarding school; but today I am finishing the recovery of the manuscript

for *Breeze from the Lake*, which had burnt; I have prepared a small book for Nenets students entitled *The Land of Love* and I am looking for sponsors to support its publication; I am working on a toponymic dictionary, the provisional title of which is *The River Agan and Its Tributaries*.

Today, Fate has inflicted on me ordeals: since October, I have gone from hospital to hospital, I have undergone three operations and even if the situation is improving, there are still complications. Friends' support... Surrounded by my friends, I am the happiest man on Earth!

*March 12, 2003*  
*Surgery department, Nizhnevartovsk*  
*(Vella 2008b: 154-155)*

This text is a real autobiography. Yuri was 55. Between two operations, he reflected and wrote. As with all his texts, his autobiography had to have a goal. His aim was here to send a message. Yuri knew that he was ill, and he thought he would perhaps survive. But he was not sure. His most original message was in the conclusion: "Surrounded by my friends, I am the happiest man on earth".

His friends seldom appear in his writings. He happened to mention some people, usually elders, or people who were useful to him in everyday life, but he did not express particular attachment to one or the other. Often a mediator was needed for a person to discover that he or she was important to Yuri.<sup>146</sup> So, in this text there is an exceptional recognition: he says to his friends that they are important for him.

Everything is significant in this short text. He selects, among the experiences of a whole life, the most meaningful ones; he selects the events that transmit a message. We think that one of the messages Yuri wants to get across is that his person cannot be separated from the space that, in

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146 I heard a lot in Yuri's camp about anthropologist Stephan Dudeck, whom he had known since Stephan was "a student of Berlin University", as Yuri said. For Yuri, he was a real authority. Yuri constantly repeated: "Stephan said, Stephan thinks, Stephan knows... What would Stephan do, think...?" But according to Stephan himself, Yuri never directly expressed this kind of regard for him and was constantly criticising him.

any case, rules his life: his birth, his family's migrations are concretely encompassed into a space, with distances, and rivers (which in Siberia are among the most important spatial markers). When he talks about his life and its insertion in space, he does not omit the administrative changes that transferred 'his' territory from one district to another, separating it from its natural environment. The Agan River basin is inhabited by Forest Nenets and Khanty who speak the Surgut dialect. But they have been merged into the Nizhnevartovsk district, whose core is the Vakh, an eastern tributary of the Ob, where the native inhabitants speak a completely different dialect of Khanty. He says this in a laconic sentence: "I live with my reindeer in the Agan basin. I am officially registered in Varyogan. Our land, in 1978-1979, passed from Surgut district to Nizhnevartovsk". This sentence is very simple; however, it covers several emotional injuries, which will be understood only by those who are aware of the situation in the region. This fact was important enough to deserve the indication of the precise year (cf. *infra*). Actually we could comment in this way on the whole text, which is exceptionally dense in concepts.

In this I am reminded of what a good friend of Yuri's, Agrafena Pesikova, a Khanty intellectual, used to say about Khanty culture, which is constructed on secret. She qualifies it as "openly closed". Indeed all the important clues are visible, but you must know the culture in depth to interpret them as clues (Oral information, 2015). Yuri was very close to Khanty culture: he had been living all his life surrounded by Khantys, his wife was Khanty herself and he was fluent in the language.

Before turning to Yuri's life, let us comment on the temporal framework. Of course, in the history of a life, chronology is central and we would expect some dates. Naturally, the year of the birth is the first. The second is more intriguing: it is the year in which his parents ate their last reindeer before moving to the village. Here also, the message is exceptionally concentrated: "It is there [in Varyogan] that in 1951 they ate their last reindeer".

Of course, he is not talking about food. His message is that until 1951 they managed, in spite of collectivisation, to keep a family herd; this describes laconically how hard were the constraints at the end of the Stalin period. The main form of coercion was hunger, because during the



war, and also in the first years after the war, everything that hunters and fishermen caught went to the state. Often Yuri said that he loved ruffe, because he grew up eating this tiny fish, which was the only one the fishermen could withhold from the state. This means that the hunger was such that his family gave up any hope of rebuilding a herd, which means it gave up the main marker of native identity. This relatively trivial sentence deserves a date, because in Yuri's life it is a turning point. He was three at the time, meaning that he was to grow up without reindeer. The other dates are all connected with his person, but at the same time directly in connection with the wider context.

As well as using dates to position Yuri's life in time, we can also mention explicit historic context. He gives these periods interesting names: the International Reddening, the quest for Kolkhoz Happiness, Stalin's death, and the first Sputnik, in other words 1917-1918, 1930, 1953, and 1961. The first name is intriguing. There is no difficulty in understanding 'reddening', but why international? Does Yuri refer to the year 1918 with the Hungarian and German Council Republics? But we must develop our reflection in another direction, i.e. the capital letters, which give a metaphorical character through the personalisation of general notions. This is a very common method used by Northern native writers, not only Yuri Vella but also Yeremei Aypin in prose texts, giving abstract notions not only personality but also agency, or the potential for agency.

Finally, we must emphasise the human frame: the people who have been important for Yuri. He roots himself in a series that is not genealogical. What is common among those people is age: they are all older people, and not all of them Forest Nenets, for Yeparkin, Aypin, and Kazamkin are Khanty clan names. So Yuri does not connect himself with ethnic belonging, but with a kind of native "overdynasty" (See also Liivo Niglas' film *Yuri Vella's World* 2001).

After having commented on the contextual aspect, let us come to the elements of his life that he focuses on when the moment comes to sum up. First of all, education: kindergarten, boarding school. An ordinary native life. Then, the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute, presented as perfectly ordinary. He does not, by the way, mention the great discoveries that characterise this period. But he does give a date for the end of his studies

and for his graduation, which suggests that this is an important moment in his life.

As far as his activities are concerned, he emphasises two dimensions of his life that might be surprising: “I pasture my reindeer and collect my people’s oral traditions”. Of course, the first is basic, if we think of historical truth because when Yuri wrote these words he is a reindeer herder and his main activity is to deal with his herd each day.

The second assertion is more surprising. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s Vella spent some time recording his neighbours, among whom were the old men he mentioned previously. But by 2003, they were all dead. Their descendants, who are still his neighbours, have little to transmit. When Eva and the Estonian linguist Kaur Mägi collected Forest Nenets folklore in 2000, Yuri did not participate other than as an excellent informant. But if we look at the text, he does not say “I collect”, although in some context the expression ‘write down’ and ‘collect’ can be read as synonymous. But here, Yuri is very precise. What he does, is writing, which is completed by “down”, suggesting that the content of the writing is not internal to him, but external.

However, we must go further. He adds: “the mirror of the present cultural level of my people, for anyone to look at himself”. This last observation is important. Firstly, it confirms our analysis – he is talking about his writings; secondly, through them, he makes Nenets and Khanty culture available to any audience.

So, Yuri achieves a turnaround that reveals what status he wants to give to his personal production. Not the original writings of a native personality, but the collective mirror of the community he comes from. We feel here the wish to see his own writing work as oral production, the wish to merge into a plural personality that he intends to represent and to which he wants to give the floor as *vox populi*. Certainly some generations must pass to assess the prophetic dimension of the vision Yuri Vella has of his writings. Will it contribute to the creation of an ideal community that will recognise itself in Yuri’s writings, while today this community does definitely not exist? Regardless of this, we know that Yuri sees in the future how he speaks with the voice of a present that ignores itself.

Let us examine how he assesses the different aspects of his personal historic experience, of his achievements. He just selected the most

meaningful events.

In this paragraph, we have several listings.

The first enumeration is about his creations: five books, two museums, two schools, one rural council. Yuri wants to present himself as a builder in different spheres. Some remarks about this: what books is he talking about? He is probably preparing the sixth, in which he was going to publish this Autobiography. Actually, his five books are two + two + one. The first is his graduation poetry collection at the Gorky Institute called *News from the Camp*. For the first edition, which was published in Sverdlovsk in 1991, Yuri had to accept the diktat of the editor, who obliged him to make some small changes. Some were connected to the use of Russian, which he slightly distorted, in his awareness that he was not, and did not want to be, a Russian poet. For this reason, the same year he published another collection under the same title at his own expense in the small Siberian town of Raduzhny, in a modest edition, almost a booklet, in which the texts were presented as he originally wrote them, without interference. The third book was published in Surgut in 1996 and republished four years later, also in Surgut, but by another publisher. This book was called *The White Screams: A Book About Eternity*. Yuri was not a wordy author. In these books, some of the poems were the same as those previously published. But Yuri inserts them in a different context, and connects them differently with one another, which gives them a new meaning. He did the same thing for the fifth book, published in 2001, in Khanty-Mansiysk. It is the first time – but not the last – that a book of his would be multilingual, with translations of his texts into French. This edition was not so much aimed at being widespread in France, but at showing his partners from his native Siberia that he is listened to in the wider world. He already had five books, he would write several more in the following years.

As was already explained above, the two museums Yuri mentions in the text are two essentially different realities: one is the open-air museum he indeed created in Varyogan; the second existed only in his discourse, i.e. his life in the forest, which he called an “ecomuseum”.

We do not precisely know what he means by mentioning two schools. One of his most innovative initiatives was indeed the creation of a camp school. This school functioned in different premises, a small log hut in his winter camp in 1997-1998 and another, slightly bigger in the same camp

in 1999-2000; he then built in the same camp a house particularly meant for the school, with a classroom and a room for the teachers. For many years at the summer camp there was no building particularly meant as a school and so lessons were held either outdoors or in the main building where everybody lived; but in the last years of the school, 2006-2008, Yuri added a building, a sort of trailer that oil workers use when working in the forest.

There was also another school building. In 2007, Yuri moved his winter camp to a new location and along with houses, storage rooms, etc., he built a schoolhouse there. So we suppose the two schools listed in the autobiography are the two school buildings he built in two different winter camps.

It is certainly difficult to pretend that he created the rural council in his wife's village, Agan, although he was certainly the first native mayor.

After this listing, he adds three episodes from his life, which show his relationship with the institutions. He was the best hunter in the *promkhoze*, he wanted to leave for Vietnam and he was opposed to war in Chechnya. We think that he wanted here to underline several important features of his personality. What he came most to value, is his critical mind. While he was recognised for his qualities, he made his choices not according to state propaganda, be it Soviet or Russian, but according to his own convictions. For example, he was against the war in Chechnya in the first decade of the 21st century, and he said as much openly; he was also very critical when Russia attacked Georgia in 2008. Thus he was not a systematic opponent, he was primarily a person with critical reflection, able to analyse and decide by himself accordingly.

He opposed not only the State: in the last 15 years, his life was characterised by permanent confrontations with the oil company LUKoil (See Liivo Niglas' film *The Land of Love*). He sums up these events through the court cases in which he faced LUKoil. These sentences suggest that while his lands are unduly occupied by LUKoil, the company also continually assaults him and thus doubly victimises him. But he did not let himself be pushed around. He answers, and even turns to the international courts.

If we were tempted to see in the writer a pure spirit, he efficiently brings us back to reality. Indeed, the fire that destroyed his house in 1992 was a serious blow, all the more so because it happened when the village

economy crumbled: the kolkhoz collapsed, as well as the small souvenir factory that employed the native population, among them Yuri's wife. Poverty is explained by a personal event, but the fire allows Yuri to turn towards the present: how to recover a lost manuscript... And writing, writing, writing... This text finishes with the toponymic dictionary, work that lasted 10 years, but when Vella died, he had at least achieved it.

## Self-portrait

Not a long time ago in the newspaper *Tiymen Oblast Today* (No 13, 26-01-2007) I read a maxim by Samuel Butler: "Any human creation, be it literature, music or painting, is always a self-portrait of the author". And I looked around me with Butler's eyes, at those I know closely; for I know, it seems, their creative selves as much as I do their everyday selves.

Readers sometimes ask me about the works of Y. Shestalov and Y. Aypin. Usually I say: "If you want to know the creative self of a writer, do not ask for personal meetings, but rather read his works, read criticism about these works and compare this with your personal perception, personal emotions. Because meeting in person can mar the creative image of the writer, his self-portrait. For the writer, as any other man, is subject to change. He depends on his personal moods, on the attitudes of the people around him, even on the political tendencies and natural upheavals. If you meet him when he is in a blue mood, then for the rest of your life you'd have a perverted image of the creative mind of this gifted person.

Before I met personally with the artist G. Rayshev, his work "Yegor the Big" served for me as his self-portrait. Later I saw his piece called "Self-portrait", made my acquaintance with the author, talked to him, read his philosophical treatments of creative mastery; comparing my idea of an artist with his personal deliberations about himself, I was even more assured that the

creative self-portrait of G. Rayshev is still “Yegor the Big” – in my soul, there is, of course, physical resemblance to the author in his “self-portrait”, but the inner, spiritual essence of the artist is still “Yegor the Big”.

Is this a mistake, or is the personal opinion of the author about himself false? Or perhaps both are true, only the two works must be unified into a diptych.

And for myself, I have even composed the non-existent piece by G. Rayshev, “Yegor the Small”. I can see it now: a young boy, going in a boat on the Salym, Agan or Yugan river, and the world around him is a fairy tale; but this fairy-tale world, it seems, is more true than the real one, as invented by G. Rayshev (or me?).

Thus, after having finished mentally discussing my friends, I must have a look at myself with the same eyes. In my books *News from the Camp*, *White Screams*, the *Reindeer Herder's ABC*, *Talk to Me*, I am the author, a young Nenets, I am almost a boy, and thus – sincere, even to the point of naïveté, full of the young boy's maximalism.

In my books *The Triptychs*, *By the Track of the Mistress of Agan* and in a longer poem for two voices, written with T. Yurgenson, called “The Swan Hunt”, I am unseen and more mature as an author, although no older than of middle-aged status.

This is how I see myself: the author as my self-portrait. But in truth – who knows? Perhaps, everything is just the other way around.

Let us look into the last page of the *Reindeer Herder's ABC*. From the photo the leader of the clan looks at you, almost an old man, in a sun-bleached and rain and wind beaten cheap malitsa, with cunning eyes like a cat's. He has lived long and probably got a thorough picture of the human, and especially the mind of children.

Among us, the Nenets, there are the age definitions, and among them “He who has lived to the time when he returns to childhood”. That is to say, an old man who has begun to play with children. He plays with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The old man does not say to the children, “Let’s play this or that”, but the children themselves choose games and he becomes their partner and follows their fancies.

Any teacher will say that the nucleus of a person’s character is formed in childhood. Therefore, the wizened sage, having understood that he didn’t bring his children up exactly the right way, would now like to try to make amends for these deficiencies in his great-grandchildren and grandchildren, and try to teach them the basics in their early childhood.

And this is why, perhaps, this photo is the real self-portrait of the author of the *Reindeer Herder’s ABC*, *The White Screams*, and *Talk to Me*. And then you begin to understand that he is not a young boy, he just seems to be like one at first glance. In truth, then, he is a wise sage who has managed to hide behind our rascal cat Kotofey.

For, isn’t the image of myself that I have created (as the author) already present in my works? And what was left for the photographer was just to click the shutter?

But after the rain the gray clouds dissolve, the sun comes out, from the end of the camp the mosquitoes will rise and the flies from the marsh. And along the edge of the lake up to the far grove, towards the smokescreen the deer will stretch out; and at that moment I begin to see that I am an unkempt young boy from the deerherder’s family, and the many stories that made up this book, had happened not to me. I have heard them told, in the evenings by the camp fire, in a tshum (see footnote 115) or a village hut, by my grandma Nengi. (Vella 2008a: 170-172)<sup>147</sup>

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147 Translated by Alexander Vashchenko.

Is a self-portrait the static equivalent of an autobiography? It's certainly something close, in a concentrated form although still in a different genre. In this text, which Yuri wrote after the Reindeer Herder's ABC (2005), written without the stress of being in hospital and without the inner need to sum up his life, Yuri reflects on the notion of self-portrait and on the traps it presents. We won't comment on this text as thoroughly as the previous one, which required a deeper analysis. Hereafter, we present merely some reflections about this text, which is itself a reflection on the notion of the self-portrait of a creator.

Initially Yuri suggests that an author's production says more about him or her the person, and so in order to know an author it is better to read him or her than to meet him or her. He then develops his thoughts based on the painter Gennady Rayshev's production and of his self-portrait, emphasising the difference in understanding: for Yuri, Rayshev's Self-portrait resembles him physically, although the 'true' self-portrait of the painter is another painting. Thus, he suggests that if we read his text as a mirror, we must be cautious about what he will say about himself and that we must forge our own representation by reading his texts critically, an approach which, as we have said above, is crucial for him.

He tries to see himself through our eyes by suggesting two representations of himself. In some works, the author is a young enthusiastic man, a maximalist, while in other works he is a mature man. But then he mixes the cards and suggests that the author of his writings is a mature man who has seen much, learned much and is trying to transmit what he has learnt. Again, he surprises us, especially through one particularly painful sentence: "Therefore the wise old man, understanding that in his time he did not bring up his children correctly, tries now to correct these shortcomings in his grandchildren and in their children, and attempts to set the foundations while they are still young".





In Khanty-Mansiysk: Yuri, Eva Toulouze and Gennady Rayshev.  
(Syomya Ayvaseda 1999)



Yuri with the cat Kotofey. (Photo from the *Reindeer Herder's ABC*)

To correct a mistake is an element Yuri had omitted in his autobiography, where he did not talk at all of his family, the family he is responsible for. He has not brought up his children correctly. This wound will remain to the end. What does he regret? What has he failed to do? He has often mentioned this orally, but without developing it, focusing more on what he tries to do in order to correct his mistake. Let us try some hypotheses, without any possibility to verify them.

His first mistake was to entrust his four daughters, Tayna, Lada, Aelita and Syomya, to the official education system. Could he have managed otherwise? Probably not. Actually at the time he was not aware of the system's weaknesses. And certainly no alternative education would have been accepted. And in that case what could he reproach himself for? That he did not pass on his daughters' pride in their nativeness by depriving them of both their father's and their mother's native tongue, Forest Nenets and Khanty? Meanwhile, he discovered that the village school, far from bringing children anywhere close to Russian culture, left them without any culture at all: they were deprived of their heritage but did not receive anything to replace it, not even the real values of the coloniser's culture. Perhaps he regretted that he did not compensate for the system's shortcomings at home. Regardless of the reason, he persisted with the painful impression that he missed the boat with his daughters until the end of his life.

Indeed he tried to correct this with his grandchildren when he created the camp school, although the attempt was but partially successful: if the grandparents managed to bring up two of their grandchildren as they wanted, the other daughters rejected their father's proposal and chose to have their children educated as they were. So the 'mistake' was also reproduced on most of his grandchildren.

## The last monologue

This is the first question: what does it mean to be a human being, what does one live for?

It is a trivial question, a school question: we wrote essays at school about it. I don't know whether they write now or not, we did. You know yourself that answering, if one wants to answer frankly, is very complicated.

I looked at the teacher. On the one hand I understood that it was a Soviet question, and we knew how to answer: well, the point is to plant a tree, to write a book, to leave a trace behind you, a good one, of course.

But anyhow, in a person's soul, the question remains. And the more you live, the older you get, the more you ask yourself this question and you look for an answer, not for an examination, not for an essay, but for your grandchildren, for your great-grandchildren, who perhaps shall not write such an essay, but would need one.

What is life? What is it, to be a human being? For what has life been given to a person? Why are we born into this world?

Auli died. Two days before his death, I went to see him, to his bed; he knew he was dying. Just in order to support him, his spirit, I told him: "You know, one does not disappear just so. Even if your body dies, the spirit remains, it goes on living." He answered me: "You are right, but if, after me, not even one tent remains on this earth, what did I live for? Why did I raise my children if after me no tent remains on this land?"

I thought that I came to support his spirit, but finally he was the one who, while dying, attempted to support mine.

At this moment my camp exists. Before, my grandmother's camp was here. Well, not exactly here, a little bit further, more to the south – she was my father's mother. Here, on the river Varyogan, my mother's mother was born. This means that I am living on my two grandmothers' land. And before my grandmothers, here, three kilometres from here, was the camp of Vella Van'kuta... and when you start to think, but who lived further? There, where there is the fifth workshop... there is Yvy Tyata'ay... If a place is named, it means that it is named with a person's name, it means that a person called Yvy lived there.

And there is a sacred place on the Varyogan, called Kapityan Soho, after Kappi. This means that at some time Kappi lived on this land. I do not know whose kin, direct kin he was, but his name remained in the toponymy of this place. And it goes on living.

When describing the toponymy of this area, I tried to keep his name. I do not know his other names, I do not know his clan name. For the Nenets, he was just Kappi. Alien, literally translated. He was probably Khanty. And Yvy was his daughter. And this Yvy became my grandmother's aunt. In other words, one of my grandmother's kin married her.

And not far from here, 15 kilometres from here, there is my grandmother's grave, Ayvaseda Kheshi. And there, where this hill starts, the hill they intend to cut, there is Yusi Kol'chu's grave, whose name I have attempted to maintain in my grandson. Because my grandson is not only my descendant, he is also his descendent, Yusi Kol'chu's. And on September 11<sup>th</sup> 1924, this same Yusi Kol'chu was chosen as head of the Forest Nenets in a meeting of the citizens.

This is clear from Raisa Mitusova's notes, the sister of the white general Kutepov.

So this land is connected with many names.

Among them, mine will probably remain. My wife's, my daughters' names... how long – perhaps one year, perhaps two... If longer, that's also all right. It is something like a monument.

But if not a single tent remains here, who will think of it, who will remember? Who will tell their grandchildren who lived here? What these people's occupations were. Who will attend a meeting with the administration tomorrow in order to obtain a pasture, in spite of the employees' arbitrary decisions...? Of the employees' thirst for money? Trying to prove the ecological rationality of not touching this land... Although on paper they are responsible for the forest, they are responsible for the ecology, they should come to me and say: "Do not touch this land! Do not harm it!" They receive a salary for this. They receive it, but I am the one who acts...

Granny! Shall we have tea?

Of course, it is neither a real testament nor a will. It is a monologue in front of filmmaker Olga Kornienko's camera, two months before his death, just after another session of chemotherapy. He participated in a conference (where Eva last spent time with him), but a fever rose and finally he spent some days in hospital. Just afterwards, back in his camp, he shared his thoughts with the filmmaker, who edited them after his death into a film called *The Last Monologue* (Kornienko 2013).

Emotionally, it is a hard film to follow. Yuri feels that death is coming. It is no longer possible to omit the main question, the meaning of his life. He looks for an answer and, as he mentions in his autobiography, he finds it by listening to the elder, for the answer comes from his dying neighbour Auli Yusi: "If, when we go, we do not leave a single tent on earth, what have we lived for?" To leave a tent behind means to leave people on one's land, to leave the land inhabited, to ensure continuity of life. Not only biological life of course, but life as native people understand it. Symbolically, the conical choom tent is life. If all life disappears, did his own life have any meaning? Of course, the conical tent here is a symbolic item. Neither Yuri, nor even Auli lived in conical tents any more. Only old Oysya never




agreed to quit his. But behind the conical tent, there is native life, lived in communion with nature, a life of dignity and responsibility. If, after us, it disappears, have we done things correctly?

During this monologue, Yuri almost always has tears in his eyes. He asks himself: will something remain after me? We find in his reflection the spatial understanding of personhood that we mentioned in connection with the autobiography, but now reflected in the names of the people who lived in the different places, who have been buried there. Will his name remain? He thinks it will, for some time – but how long?

Of course, Yuri wanted to be buried in the taiga, so that his name would be written down in the landscape, as with his ancestors. But after his demise, his family did not follow his wish and buried him in the village graveyard. Will this have any consequence on the inscription of his name in local toponymy? How long will toponymy register the history of the local population, when the native languages are gradually disappearing?

This anguish is felt in the last sentences. Will there be responsible natives after him? Will his grandchildren be able to be the type of people who look after their land and carry out the protection work the authorities are supposed to but neglect? He is deeply concerned and we share his doubts.

So he did not depart in peace, sure of his inheritance. He had already expressed some concern in 2009, when he complained to Eva and Liivo about the grandchildren he had brought up, who behaved like all teenagers in the world. Eva tried then to give him his optimism back, reminding him how he was when he was a teenager. It is the answer we would like to give him now, understanding his doubts. Yuri always built his utopia over time. Only in some generations will it be possible to assess the real impact he had.



# **A Man of Words and Silence: A Siberian Intellectual's Mixed Patterns of Communication<sup>148</sup>**

*Eva Toulouze*

Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a well-known personality in Western Siberia's indigenous world.

Unlike most of Western Siberia indigenous inhabitants, Yuri Vella was exceptionally skilled with words. He used words in everyday life in order to achieve his goals, among whom the main one was to protect his kin and neighbours in the forest from the destructions induced by the oil industry. He was able to hold his own in discussion with the oil industry representatives and to have with them the last word.

But how did Yuri Vella use words in private life? That is what months of fieldwork sharing the hut he lived in with his wife allowed to ascertain. I shall concentrate on patterns of speaking –how? with whom? – and silence in everyday life, outside the attention of an audience. Or was my presence in the hut enough audience to change his patterns? These reflexions are what this article is about.<sup>149</sup>

**Key words:** Siberia; Forest Nenets; silence; speech; gender; intercultural communication; dialogue; monologue

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The intellectual who will be at the centre of this research is a well-known personality, about whom much has been written and published in the last decades. Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a prominent Forest Nenets writer, who started his life path as an ordinary Western Siberian native but acquired all along exceptional skills and thinking potency, while he chose to spend the last decades of his life in the forest as a reindeer herder. I have been acquainted with him since 1998 and had diverse opportunities to observe his behaviour and interact with him. I first got acquainted with him at a public event in 1998. Then I endeavoured to discover his poetry and translated some of his poems into French. He was interested and invited me to work on more translations at his camp in the forest. I spent all in all six months there (both sharing a log hut with him and his wife and living in other houses of the camp with other members of his household). Moreover, we met several times at public events in Russia, Estonia and France, and on two occasions he stayed at my place in Tartu and in Paris. I will add that we have been interacting for more than one decade with my fellow researcher and filmmaker Liivo Niglas. Niglas met Yuri in Tartu in 2000 and showed him his film about the Tundra Nenets, *The Brigade* (1999). Yuri asked him whether he would not like to make a film about them, and my colleague accepted. It was the beginning of a cooperation and friendship that lasted until Vella's demise. Niglas' method of filming is as little intrusive as possible, and Vella is interested himself in the process of filming. Thus, I had many opportunities of following his way of interacting with his direct environment, both on the basis of my fieldwork and of Niglas' filmed material and have been impressed by the diversity of the tools he mobilised in order to get his messages through or simply to live his life in harmony. In this study, I will concentrate on these patterns as they are revealed by my observation. But first of all I shall introduce my reflexions by summing up some significant features of his character.

## **Yuri Vella, a Presentation**

Certainly, the most fascinating aspect in Yuri Vella was the multiple dimensions of his identity. As I mentioned, he started as an ordinary native young man: dropping from high school, marrying at 19 a local

native girl, working in different jobs – postal service, fish collecting, “Red Tshum”<sup>150</sup> worker etc. As a father of four girls, he would certainly have identified himself as a hunter of the local cooperative. But his peculiarities started to emerge: he wrote poetry (in Russian); he quit drinking a couple of years after the army; later, he founded in his village a museum with the forest log huts that sedentarised inhabitants of the village had left in the wild. He had a native discourse around that endeavour. At the same time, he decided to finish high school and to attend the literary institute in Moscow. University education definitely opened his world: he understood that Russian civilisation was but one form of civilisation among others and that the native world had also its own civilisation; finally he learned not to accept blindly authoritative discourse, and to rely mostly on his own thinking (see Toulouze and Niglas 2012).

In the last decades of his life, after this discovery that changed his whole attitude towards the world, his personality presented three aspects.

## **A Reindeer Herder**

Yuri had always dreamt of reindeer. His father was a reindeer herder, but he died when Yuri was but a small child. At the end of the 1980s he left the village, bought ten reindeer and went to the places where his grandmother came from and started building there a life for himself and for his wife. He built it metaphorically and literally: they built two camps – a winter camp and a summer camp, with several log houses for their daughters and visitors, and learned to become reindeer herders. Ten reindeer constituted a very small herd, and Yuri suffered the first years to keep them together. He benefitted from the advice of his Nenets neighbours, who were experienced herders and gradually the herd grew, until, at the time of his demise, it had around 100 animals. He was very active with the herd and had close personal contact with the animals: he fed them manually dried bread and salted fish soup; he knew all the reindeer one by one and fetched the herd every morning in winter. They became the centre of his life, the motivator of his most important decisions. Yuri felt

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150 The Red tshum or Red tent was a mobile structure of the Party’s propaganda service by the peoples of the North.

comfortable in the forest, although compared with more experienced forest-dwellers, he kept some aspects that revealed his village origins – for example he did not eat things like reindeer brains raw, as other natives do. But he learned a lot of new skills in the 27 years he lived in his camp.

## **A Poet**

While Yuri wrote poetry since his younger age, he became a recognised poet after his University studies. There, he attended in the poetry section of the literary institute and concluded his graduation with a collection of poems. After that he went on writing, although relatively rarely at first. He used some of the same poems in different collections, and the meaning changed according to the context in which they were presented. Still, in the last decade of his life, Yuri became more and more active in the literary field. He fought his ‘battles’ with words. He wrote several books and both his prose and his poetry became impressively documental: he abandoned fiction and even the creation of synthetic characters, to concentrate on the description of real episodes of his real life. He abandoned so called poetic descriptions to impress in his readers’ awareness the messages he considered as fundamental.

He started also writing in Nenets and even Khanty: he had firstly used Russian, explaining that the Nenets artistic and metaphoric language had disappeared, and that it was not proper to write poetry in everyday language, in the language used for ordinary conversation with his mother or his neighbours. But then he understood that writing in Nenets was also a political tool, and he started to publish some short texts in this language.

## **An Activist**

To become an activist was not an ideological choice *a priori*. It was not even a choice: it was life itself that did not leave the natives any alternative. They had been dispossessed of the lands of their ancestors: they had been relocated in villages, leaving thus the taiga uninhabited (at least legally) and the lands were entrusted to the oil companies, who knew that they

could do whatever they wished with them.

But in 1992 the legal system changed and gave the natives new opportunities: on the initiative of the local intelligentsia, a regional law created the concept of 'kinship territory': they were portions of land, which could be entrusted to the natives who would like to live in the taiga in order to follow the traditional subsistence crafts of their culture – hunting, fishing, gathering and reindeer herding. The natives willing to move back from the village to the forest had to prove that the land they would like to take responsibility for had been used by their kin during the 20th century. The land was certainly not given to the natives in legal property: the resources of the subsoil remained State property, but the native were supposed to give the oil companies permission to exploit them. This was a huge change. The oil companies had been extracting oil without needing any special permission in an uninhabited land, and that had already provoked tensions and conflicts with the natives. Now, the land had keepers who could deny them access to the natural resources they needed. It created obvious tensions. The oil drillers attempted to obtain by any possible means the natives' permissions. Some were satisfied to receive 'compensation' in money and goods – some families were already using their camps in the forest, even before the law gave them new rights; many actually never had the intention to move seriously to the 'bush'; others attempted to resist. Yuri was among the latter. He helped some of his kin and friends resist and he himself was one of the most resilient of LUKoil's<sup>151</sup> partners. He denounced continuously in his poetry the nuisance of oil industry towards nature, towards the reindeer and towards the natives themselves. He opposed several plans of both the local government and the company, and was able to achieve some victories. The tensions between them culminated on 2000, when the company attempted (and ultimately succeeded) to destroy a bridge that was vital for the movement of the natives in general and Yuri's family in particular. He happened upon LUKoil's employees while they were working and he stopped brutally their attempts by breaking the main bulldozer's tyres

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151 LUKoil is one of the most important oil companies in Russia. It was founded in 1993, though the merging of three oil-producing enterprises – Langepasneftegaz, Uraineftegaz and Kogalymneftegaz (hence the name LUKoil), and three processing enterprises – Permorgsintez, the Volgograd and Novoufimsk Refineries.

with his axe. He lost the court case against LUKoil and had to deliver the oil company several reindeer as a fine. The company obstinately refused to pay him the compensations they were due on the basis of the “economic agreements” established with all the natives living on the territory where LUKoil was working. He fought against the oil giant with all the means at his disposal, even with incredible fantasy, always emphasising his native identity.

This was but one level of action in Yuri’s manifold activities: his ultimate goal was to ensure sustainable vitality to the local aborigine cultures and way of life. The conflict with LUKoil was the negative part of it, the fight against. There were also positive forms of activity, as the ‘import’ of 1,000 reindeer from the Yar-Sale reindeer-herding sovkhoe in 1996, the organisation of an expedition along the river Agan, the creation of a camp school, the writing of a toponymical dictionary of the Agan basin... All his endeavours were long-winded: the toponymical dictionary was meant to be used in several generations to prove land occupation.

As I said, I met firstly Yuri Vella in June 1998, for the 50th birthday of his fellow writer from the same village, the Khanty Yeremey Aypin.<sup>152</sup> Yuri joined the international group following Aypin and was very open and communicative with all the members of that small party. He was a marvellous storyteller and we were fascinated listening to him.<sup>153</sup> We conversed for hours and I was particularly impressed, because I was not accustomed, with Northern aborigines, to meet such skill with oral expression. Still, Yuri Vella told me from the very beginning that in ordinary life, he was very different. I had many opportunities, at his place, to witness his silent behaviour. This article is built up on my reflexions in connection to these two facets of his public and private behaviour.

## Northern Aborigines, Speech and Silence

Before continuing on our reflexions about Yuri Vella, let us concentrate on more general reflexions about the cultural peculiarities of Northern Russia indigenous peoples in regard to speech and silence.

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152 About the relations of these two writers see Toulouze 2002.

153 His charm would deserve deeper study and analyse.

Already 19th century travellers have pointed out as a characteristic of the Northern aborigines their restraint in the use of words; they observe that they are “silent, reserved, even close; stingy with words; there is no ‘small talk’ neither ‘verbal ceremonies’, nor greeting, good-bye or thanking formulas” (Khristoforova 2006: 1). According to the same author, small genres in folklore teach both the value of silence and the weight of words (Khristoforova 1998: 224). Indeed, cautiousness concerning words does not mean neglect or underestimation, on the contrary: words are powerful tools, not to be used lightly. Several researchers comment upon the power of words in native understanding, for example Yelena Lyarskaya and Stephan Dudeck (2012: 68) insisting on their transformative power (see also Pushkareva 2004). Ol’ga Khristoforova, commenting in her two articles (1998; 2006) the relationship to words seen as “sacral object or even subject”, observes that this attitude towards verbal code is “characteristic of non-written societies”. This assertion may be challenged, at least as a categorical statement, by arguing that this dimension is not unknown in Russian society. Caroline Humphrey (2010: 317–318, 320, 323, 335) emphasises on the contrary that verbal functioning in the Soviet Union was very much based on assumption of magical power of words: how words could bring people to GULAG, how people became afraid of taboo words (both political notions or swearing). So this magic of words is a much wider phenomenon, but it is clearly manifested in Northern aboriginal culture. The magic peril hidden in words has another consequence, which is well known in different cultures: the taboo on particularly mighty words leads to the use of euphemisms – as with the names of the bear in Estonian<sup>154</sup> (Rätsep 2006: 17–18) or the sacred number 7 in the Ugric languages<sup>155</sup> (Bereczki 1998: 69).

It was important not to use direct expressions, and that would lead to the value of the aptitude of using metaphoric language: “there exists a complicated taboo language to avoid direct speech. Khanty and Nenets folklore knows; especially when it comes to sacred themes, a plethora of parallelisms and metaphors” (Lyarskaya and Dudeck 2012: 68). A

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154 The oldest known name of the bear, seen as totemic animal, in Estonian is ‘ott’, which is supposed to be a euphemism of Fennic or Baltic origin.

155 Unlike the other simple numerals, which are part of the common Finno-Ugric vocabulary, the sacred number is in the Ugric languages a loan from Indo-Arian languages.

“beautiful language” is a metaphoric one (Khristoforova 1998: 225), such as the one used in the Nganasan *keyngersya*, a genre which is not alive any more (Dobzhanskaya 2015: §12–27), and we shall find this understanding very much alive in Yuri Vella’s thought and practice (see below). This is confirmed by Piers Vitebsky and Sally Wolfe (2001: 91), who comment upon Even culture: “The indigenous languages are extremely expressive – for old-fashioned kinds of communication, in which a veiled, allusive style of expression was fundamental”. But they also emphasise a dimension of silence, which I have not found mentioned in the reflexions by Russian colleagues and which I find enlightening in regard to Yuri’s practice. They bring out how silence enhances sensitivity.

Relations with other persons require a similar kind of non-verbal sensitivity. People develop sensitivity to each other’s moods, which could go unnoticed in a more fully verbalized environment. It is clear that people always know exactly what is going on, everywhere in the camp, even when nothing is said. (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001: 89–90)

We may relate this dimension of silence with the Western Apache custom of being silent in situations in which the status or the state of mind of the interlocutors is ambiguous or unpredictable (Basso 1970: 227).

Silence in the aboriginal world has often in recent research been connected with political issues: silence drawn upon atrocities, silence as a form of testimony – “Silence that cannot speak” or “silence that will not speak”, to quote Japanese-Canadian poet Jay Kogawa (Tagore 2009: 3). It is often seen as a weapon, as Jerome Meyer Levi (2003: 263) emphasises reflecting on Mexico’s Rarámuri: “Silence is a particularly noteworthy aspect of the Rarámuri’s response to the encroaching ‘outside world’. It is not just the meaningless absence of sound, but a transmissive modality of resistance guided by cultural insiders.” This is also how Natal’ya Novikova (2015: §2) chooses to broach this subject: “I deal with anthropology of silence, in the context of State politics, in relation to court practice”. She argues that “native worldview (and in particular verbal taboos) has been an obstacle to achieving a just decision” (ibid.: §4). She observes that when she started asking about silence, her informants said to her “You

are starting to understand something...” and she concludes: “Silence is a code” (ibid.: §21). But she also sees silence to be a form of protest (ibid.: §26–27). This is one of the forms silence is used that did not appear in Yuri Vella’s practice, in contrast to other uses of silence and this is an interesting remark we shall have to dwell upon later.

Northern cultures are characterised by balance: it is not surprising to see that what is appreciated as intelligence is the capacity of having always the proper behaviour, i.e. to be able to speak metaphorically, “beautifully”, when speaking is needed, and to be able to keep quiet when words are not needed (Khristoforova 2006: 9). Did Yuri correspond to this ideal?

I argue that he did, but only partially, which is easily explained. He used certainly more words than usually Nenets use. How did he use them? Did he use metaphoric speech?

## **A Way with Words**

Yuri would have agreed with Khristoforova, that metaphoric speech is the ideal way of expressing oneself. He recalled how his grand-mother Nengi told him stories when he was a child: she told some part of the story in ordinary language, for the child to understand it, and then repeated it the “artistic language” (FM 2011). So, he is in some ways familiar with it. However, he must recognise that he has no proficient command of this indirect speech, although he sometimes attempts to introduce it in his texts written in Russian, and he is aware, probably more than younger generations, who live, as in all Siberian regions, in an environment where village television and videos are largely in Russian, a European language laden with modern expressions and forms of expression. This is also the language of colonialism, of passionate novels, high drama, popular magazines, cinema, and pornography. Even the discussion of Nature in Russian magazines is cast largely in the alienated global idiom of the ‘environment’. (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001: 91)

Still, in Yuri’s monologues and storytelling we may identify some traces of this practice. I would take as an example an excerpt of Liivo Niglas’ film *Yuri Vella’s world* (2003), when, walking in the forest, he says that everybody has his own measure of how much he may hunt: his father



and another friend had exceptional success at hunting sable, and they did not pay attention to the signal telling them that they have filled the measure allocated to them, and they died prematurely. He concludes: “I have hunted around 200 sables and I stopped”. Was he talking about family history and explaining his choice of quitting the profession of a hunter, or was he actually talking about oil drilling, in the taiga? Probably both. But we may assume that it would not have been prudent to say directly that the oil drillers or oil drilling are doomed by greed...

Probably his ability to come at the right moment with indirect, illustrative speech explains that his speeches were always thought-provoking and kept the audience listening. His exceptional verbal skills appeared when he discussed with oil drillers, when he spoke at the television or to an audience – in congresses or conferences. I would like to focus here on verbal communication and of the ways he organised his discourse according to his goals.

I distinguish three patterns of oral communication: dialogic, didactic and solo.

## Dialogue

When we think of communication with words, the first category to come to mind is certainly dialogue. Dialogue is a concept which is very much present in Yuri's literary work. For him, dialogue is first of all a literary fiction. He has written several works he has called “Dialogues”. The first is certainly “Swan hunt”, which is presented as a dialogue between himself and another Siberian poet, Tatiana Yurgenson, in visit to his camp. She discovers the life of the natives and she expresses her deeper feelings and asks questions to which Yuri answers, as the older indigenous sage, explaining the natives' worldview. At the same time, it is a political pamphlet against war and more precisely against the wars the Russian government had launched in the previous years in Chechnya. In “This perfect world” Yuri presents an improbable, but real poetic dialogue between the reindeer-herder-poet and an Orthodox nun, who lived in a monastery on the Volga. Despite their physical and mental distance they meet on a human field, sharing their concerns and their joys. Still Yuri

does not give up on his role as a teacher, as the older, wise grandfather. The third dialogue is different from the two previous because of its basic position: it is a correspondence-dialogue between two companions, both wise old men, each one a moral authority for his people. In 1998, at Yereley Aypin's birthday where we first met, Yuri met also Kiowa poet Scott Momaday, who was impressed by the meeting. They met again some years later at a Congress of Finno-Ugric writers held in Yuri's regional capital, Khanty-Mansiysk. After this second meeting, Scott Momaday sent a poetic letter to Yuri was not really in hurry to answer, he did it after ten years. This does not mean that there were no contacts between the poets meanwhile, they happened to meet several times. The two poets had no common language, so they communicated through the mediation of Russian scholar Aleksandr Vashchenko. Their correspondence lasted almost until Yuri's death: each of the poets wrote the other four letters. Yuri published them some months before his demise. Here, it is a real dialogue, from a position of difference, but moral equality.

Still, in real life, dialogue was not a genre Yuri used abundantly. At least not in his everyday life in his camp. Outside his universe, he was indeed able to dialogue. But in his ordinary life his conversations were limited to very circumscribed circumstances. When it happened sometimes that he had to discuss something with his wife, these were usually practical conversations. We have some samples in Liivo Niglas' films where he says: "Now we'll have tea" and his wife replies: "But before, we must spread the beds". – "Right, and after that we'll have tea". Most of his "conversations" with his wife were "non-verbal", at least according to what Yuri himself said. Of course, when guests arrived at his place, he was the one who would enter into dialogue with them. Some of these conversations were important for him: with neighbours, he would discuss the reindeer and their movements. We have also some samples in Liivo Niglas' films, when Yuri speaks with his neighbour Dmitri Ruskin. Sometimes, he asked advice on some technical point and was interested in hearing the response: as when he asked his grandchildren about some computer difficulty. I could also mention as dialogue his communication with gods and spirits. He addressed them and in his understanding, they were having a conversation. But of course nobody else was aware of the dialogic dimension of this peculiar communication.

Often, in situation of dialogue, we have the impression that he did not listen to his partner, in order to follow his own thoughts. For example, in Liivo Niglas' film *The Land of Love* (2016), he sits in Paris with Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg and he tells the French researcher about Russia and colonialism. The latter attempted to comment about Russian history, but Yuri just ignores his words and pursues his thoughts, interrupting him. I shall discuss monologue later on. But here I want to observe that, although in a situation when he is confident and knows his partner, he may seem to be inattentive, in less informal contexts, he always kept in mind with whom he was speaking and he implemented *ad hoc* tactics in order to keep his discourse acceptable to the other. Let me give an example. As I had spent there only a couple of weeks in his camp in 1999, he asked a Nenets visitor to "make him a god". When the visitor has complied and carved an anthropomorphic piece of wood, Yuri made a small ceremony in his log cabin. At the end, he said to me: "That's how we entertain ourselves". The aim of this sentence was to provide an acceptable interpretation of what had happened, in case I would have been sceptical or disapproving of this kind of "superstition", as probably some local non-native would. It was probably also a test, to watch my reaction and assess what it was possible to do in my presence.

I suppose I should include into the category 'dialogue' the polemical debates he had for example with oil companies. He was a formidable speech opponent. Unlike what the native culture suggests (see Novikova 2015), which are answers to aggression through silence, Yuri was able to answer with words and he did not hesitate to do it. The rhetorical skills of the Russians, opposed to the stubborn silence of the aborigines, often doomed the latter to pull back. Yuri was able to nullify the other side's arguments and to obtain through rhetoric the results he was looking for. Not long before his demise, he was called by his fellow villagers, the Khanty Aypins, who asked him for help in negotiating with the administration and the oil company. He was himself quite proud of this performance, for he obtained victory only on arguing on the basis of the main legal document, the constitution. He fought the Russians, wielding the latter's weapons better than they did. From this point of view, Yuri was an exceptional native.

## Teaching

The didactic aspect is a very central one in Yuri's understanding of his own function. In *The Land of Love*, Yuri explains to Dominique Samson in Paris that the Russian language is his main weapon: "I endeavour to explain them so that they would live here harming us as little as possible". His poetry is his main means of expression – and it is often didactic.

From the artistic point of view, this may even be the weakest aspect of his poetry. Often I have had the impression that the poem would have been stronger without the last explaining verses, without the explication of what has been the point during the whole text. I even said that once to Yuri, when he asked my reaction about a poem written in connection to the war in Georgia. Yuri just laughed and commented: "Well, that means that the French are like the Nenets, they understand. You may not translate these parts, but I have to keep them: I write for Russians, and they won't understand unless we explain everything in detail".

So teaching is the main aim of all his work. He feels he is in the position of the one who knows. It is this position that dominates his conversations with his kin and close acquaintance, with his grand-children, with visiting ethnographers. He was not really interested in answering their questions, but in promoting his own ideas, his own teaching.

This was also the aim of the different speeches he was asked to deliver. Then, he would tune his speech to the concrete audience and try to achieve concrete goals in convincing the audience, relying on its peculiarities – private reindeer herders, administration employees, writers etc.

## Monologue

In all these different sorts of communication, what is the most characteristic is the monologue. It seems to be the genre in which Yuri was the most comfortable. It is even probably difficult to distinguish the monologue from the teaching... Teaching is also a monologue, in which the listener is particularly important, because he or she is the aim of the verbal act. In pure monologue, actually, the presence or the absence of a listener may be of lesser importance.

Yuri was very good at delivering monologues in front of the camera. The camera was a comfortable partner, and Yuri knew Liivo enough to trust him not to interrupt the flow of his thoughts with idle questions.

Did Yuri need a listener, a stimulus, for starting a monologue? The camera was undoubtedly stimulus enough. He knew his ideas would meet an anonymous audience, far away in space and time. But probably our presence was also a necessary stimulus. His wife and his daughters were not interested in his monologues. We were. He would not attempt to convince us or to teach us, for he knew we shared his goals and many of his understandings. But I think the main goal of these monologues, even when the camera was not recording, was to order his own ideas and to test them with a well-disposed audience. Yuri did not need anybody who would answer. But I suppose he would have listened if any of us would have been violently opposed to his point. It was probably more of a dialogue with himself. This was what happened in the scene mentioned above with Dominique Samson. Yuri felt that he must pursue his topic: he was not ready to integrate into his thoughts a new complication. He must be in a very particular mental disposition to be ready to listen to his partners and to include their thoughts into his own. It happens usually when he expects something from them – and then we fall into the previous model.

While Yuri did not use silence as a weapon, still in private he did not waste many words. I do not think we can be mistaken if we argue that words were for the outside world. In private, in his camp, in the world he had created, he was a man of silence, in contrast to the verbal active practice his grandchildren were educated into, because of their Russian teachers.

## **A Gendered Silence**

Often silence, even if it is a tactic, is viewed as the constrained absence of something necessary, for example of transmitting memories, and able to produce deep fright and trauma (Humphrey 2010: 332–336). But this silence, as well as the silence viewed as self-defence tactic, has nothing in common with the creative silence of the Northern aborigines. Some

researchers link this silence with the Northern peoples' life conditions (Burkova et al. 2015). But this seems a light explanation.

In his ordinary life, Yuri preferred silence. That does not mean that he wanted to be surrounded by silence – the radio, the TV set were regularly filling the soundscape of the cabin. I refer to the silence that is the absence of speech by the humans living in that space. In the morning, at breakfast, Yuri told about his dreams, and went out. When he came back, he slept or ate. There could be comments about the food or about the reindeer, but they were not aimed at anybody in particular. When he held one of his monologues, for instance when Liivo and/or I were there, the women of his household almost automatically disconnected their attention from the abstract issues in which their husband and father was interested, and followed among them a path of communication of their own, about everyday topics. Usually, Yuri addressed his monologues to Liivo, calling him by his name, apparently excluding me from the conversation. By the way, he never had any conversation, except of menial themes, with his daughters, neither he ever directly talked to them. I must consider it as a sign of acceptance to be treated like them, when I was in the camp. Yuri never addressed me directly when I lived in his camp, and even in his log house.

Thus, I could identify a gendered pattern of communication which excluded women from direct exchange at least when Yuri was on his territory. In any other context, Yuri would speak to me without hesitation. We discussed all kind of issues when we met in Moscow – two or three times I travelled in order to meet him there – or at some writers' meeting. We would work on his texts, or discuss his homepage. Nevertheless, in his household, even in absence of his wife, the pattern of communication changed totally. I did not exist anymore, except that I was present.

The main reason that the women in his household were not included in Yuri's conversations was probably that the women of his household did not show any interest in the topics he spoke about. Also, as Stephen Dudeck pointed out, it was a structural aborigine behaviour, not to discuss questions related to the male sphere with females (and probably the other way round), especially with females of fertile age. This separation of the spheres and lack of interest are probably very intimately connected. While I was undoubtedly, unlike them, interested, I must suppose that he

just applied the gender ethics he followed in the forest and did not choose to make an exception. So he adopted a different strategy, the strategy of indirect communication. Yuri could mention me indirectly, as when we had offered him white fabric for offerings. We decided together that he would bring it to a sacred place and make an offering without blood, for we had no time to slaughter a reindeer and go to the sacred place afterwards. But when Yuri decided to make the offering, he called along only Liivo. When Liivo understood that they were to go by car without much physical exertion, he told Yuri that I would certainly be interested in going with them, and got no answer. But when Yuri's three years old grand-child Ramiz started crying because he wanted to go to, Yuri told him: All right, get dressed and tell Aunt Eva to come along. This is a convincing example of the kind of indirect communication pattern Yuri used to include me in the verbal field. Other examples were daily routine: Yuri would address explicitly Liivo, and then tell him some story, which made sense to me, but not to him – as I had spent more time with them, I knew kin and neighbours, etc.

In this first set of examples, silence was a form of avoidance – could we call it almost ritual avoidance between genders, akin to what Lyarskaya and Dudeck (2012: 67) mention – avoidance between generation groups etc.?

Anyhow Vella was clearly concerned in respecting scrupulously these points in behaviour ethics, not wishing to angry the spirits and to put himself, his family and his reindeer at risk.

## **Silence as Telepathy**

But in a more general way, the absence of chatting in his territory, far from creating a void, left the space open for a different kind of communication. Let's give the floor to Yuri, who, in a short poetic text, recalls the memory of his grand-mother Nengi:

In general my grandmother was chatty. But sometimes, while walking along the riverbank, she lowers her hand, wrinkled and light and dried by time, on my head, and we stand and we are

silent in front of the quiet waters of the Agan. But our hearts are not silent. They continue to chat. Invisibly and inaudibly, she transmits me her sensations, her perception of the world. No, not her thoughts. And I start to see through her eyes our fresh river flooded with sun, I start to hear through her ears the voice of the cranes on the marsh, I start to perceive through her heart our camp and every sound, every rustling, every breath in it. (Vella 2001: 28)

This text is meaningful, because it explicates the sensorial aspect included in silence. Silence is not absence of communication – it is just a different form of co-being.

This interesting form of telepathy is one of the points Yuri always emphasised himself. So here I rely on his discourse. Since the very first time we met in 1998, he always emphasised that communication did not imply words and that he used to use telepathy on a daily basis. He mentioned two fields where he used telepathy, and they were the closest relations he had in his life – his wife and his reindeer. According to his discourse, he was in permanent communication with this wife, wherever he was. He pretended that his wife always knew exactly what he was doing. Usually, when he told these stories, she was silent and did not react either way.<sup>156</sup>

He also mentioned another telepathy issue, concerned with reindeer. According to his discourse, a good reindeer herder always knew where his reindeer were and he could, even from far away, remotely pasture his herd. He argued that a good reindeer herder was always with his reindeer.

So the ability to communicate through non-verbal means was for Yuri an important aspect of how he wanted outsiders to view the natives.

How must we treat these assertions? Certainly seriously, for Yuri did not speak randomly, he always had an aim. Were they to be taken literally? Probably not, but I argue that Yuri wanted to impress upon his conversation partners the importance of silence as means of communication. I quoted above a sentence by Vitebsky and Wolfe (2001: 89), who said that in silence,

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156 I am not arguing that native cultural behaviour corresponds to Yuri's. All behaviours are idiosyncratic, but they are encompassed within a range of possibilities and that is the interesting feature.



people develop a sensitivity to each other's moods. This sensitivity, this empathy, can be translated into information and, through a different path, people may come to know concrete things "even when nothing is said".

Another example Yuri liked to convey concerns the practice the natives have not to greet: actually, as Khristoforova (2006) remarks, there are in their languages no formulas for greeting or saying good-bye, except those that have been loaned from Russian (*An' torovo* in Nenets, coming from Russian *zdorovo*). Still, the Khanty have developed some forms of greeting which are not loans from Russian, as *pecha-pecha*. The absence of formulas for saying good-bye may have to do with the wish not to close communication too finally. Anyhow, instead of greeting one another, the Nenets just continue a conversation as if no interruption had ever happened at all. So, absence, as well as silence, is just the prolonging of on-going communication.

## **The Shock of the Absence of Silence**

The correctness and the importance of silence are particularly well felt in the absence of it. I recall a situation in my very first stint of fieldwork at Yuri's camp in winter 1999, and I will report it as I felt it on the spot. A Russian ethnographer arrived to bring Yuri a short film she had shot at his place. I was living in the family's log house so I was there, as a silent insider. I was impressed by the negative impact of what was meant as politeness. There were five newcomers in the room, while only the ethnographer, who was previously acquainted with Vella, spoke. But she talked permanently, filling the space in the small log cabin and leaving no breathing room. She asked questions. I then felt how improper this attitude was. I was not surprised that, when Yuri got the possibility to answer, what followed was not dialogue, but monologue. Yuri chose to deliver the messages he was interested in, not giving a thought to the concrete questions that were asked in the midst of the word flow that had preceded. I felt, probably under the impact of the sensitivity that Vitebsky and Wolfe (2001) mention that the proper behaviour would have been to keep silent, drink tea with the head of the household and leave the initiative to him. It would have created from the very beginning a shared space, instead of monopolising

it on one side. Silence would have been not only the respectful behaviour, but also the most efficient for the ethnographer to achieve her goals. It was the shock of two etiquettes, as Khristoforova (2006:7) says it, when “the Russian’s communicative behaviour is characterised by developed phatic functions of speech, weakly expressed role of action code, categorical statements...”.

I was later surprised and interested, when I discovered that other researchers had the same experience. In 1837, Alexander Schrenk was shocked to receive no sign of welcome in a Nenets tent; in a Komi tent, the first contact was friendlier, but the Komi kept a silence that was “boring” to him. Other travellers discovered that one could enter a tent without any particular words, but would always be offered tea. (Khristoforova 2006)

I consciously used silence abundantly during my long stay with his family. I had always the feeling that the right moment for asking my questions and getting answers to them had not come. But usually, I got the answers without even asking the question. At some moment Yuri started talking, and his discourse explicated the points about which I had been wondering. I am sure the answers I got were more precise and appropriate than those I could have elicited by insisting. Was this an issue of the ‘telepathy’ mentioned above?

At the same time, my silence was puzzling for Yuri’s wife, as she sometimes expressed it. I do not refer on silence in discussions concerning male problems, which was natural, but even silence when she abused me. Lena was sort of nervous and often expressed her irritation in words. I did not answer. I was there as a guest and could not allow myself to thoughtless spontaneous protest. Thus, my behaviour did not fit in with my status as an alien, i.e. seen as a Russian, who would have certainly responded to abuse. While the visitors in her camp are far from being all Russians, still the closer model she had of non-native was Russians. From her point of view, I did not behave understandably, because I did not correspond to her stereotypes.

But silence is not always a correct option. In some situations, according to Yuri’s practice, talking would have been the only right behaviour. In discussing the issues related to this article, Dudeck remembered that once his silence has been considered impolite, while the hosts were expecting stories from the Germans. I recall another case,

more complicated: it was an evening, when we came back from a day in Kogalym, the local oil company's 'capital'. On the way back, we stopped in an oil workers' canteen, where we bought baked chicken and biscuits, to bring home as a treat. But when we stepped in the log house, all was silent and dark. The private tent was set up. Yuri's son-in-law was sleeping. Nobody prepared tea for the head of the family, as was expected. Yuri stood in the centre of the house, waiting, and then exploded, throwing on the floor the food we had bought. His wife answered from within the private tent that he could have asked how she was. She did not feel well and went to sleep. He answered that she should have told him immediately what the matter was. His wife then, as I understand it, violated an actional code, which is to welcome her husband by preparing immediately tea. In the absence of this deed, Yuri was expecting words, to have at least a verbal explanation. Vella's expectation, from a western point of view, would be considered as improper sexist behaviour (Briggs 1970), but he is a Forest Nenets, and I am not interested here in judging his expectations, which are ordinary in the Siberian native's understanding. I am interested in assessing his relation to words, which is ambiguous. This situation is not easy to decipher: I do not know what explained the absence of immediate explanation – perhaps Lena was sleeping. Yuri Vella had been in a good mood during the day, and expected the meal, with all the household, to be a pleasant one. Perhaps there was a background of irritation – something we did not know about between the husband and the wife? Perhaps Yuri felt authorised by external presence not to refrain from usually tabooed expression of anger? I have been some other times witness to violent exchanges between husband and wife, but in this case I am interested in the fact that at least seemingly, it was triggered by absence of speech in a situation when it was expected.

## Conclusion

Yuri Vella's ambiguity with words is very well understandable if we take into account the duality of the world in which he was living. Yuri Vella was a man between two worlds – the Russian dominant mainstream world and the indigenous world of a forest camp – and feeling comfortable in

the ways of both. It was also a way to warrant efficiency in both contexts. I suggest that he was most naturally acculturated into the Russian world: it had been the environment into which he had been raised. As all the natives had, he had attended school, fulfilled military service, and been exposed to all the pressure of what is widely called in Russia 'civilisation'. He took advantage of it at the highest level, discovering, unlike his kin, thanks to the University, all the richness of the Russian mental world. He was able to write and to speak as proficiently as any Russian and he used widely all his skills in his confrontation with the oil company and the administration. I did not notice any particular effort when he had to battle with words and arguments, for he had developed a skilled rhetoric. The native aspect of his personality, while undoubtedly he was born with and developed it with his grandmother and in the native environment, was not fully empowered until he understood the significance of it and decided to adopt it as his life's main line. Therefore, some dimensions in it may have been particularly emphasised and even exaggerated, as the gender pattern I identified above, but it was clearly meaningful for Yuri's identity as a male, and as traditional head of his family and of his household.

In attempting to analyse Yuri's communication patterns, I do not endeavour to generalise my conclusions to native behaviours or to draw any general pattern. Yuri's behaviour was very much his own, integrating the different layers of his personal culture. It is one example of the duality colonisation has brought into the indigenous world. This duality exists for all the indigenous persons, who are torn between the worldview imposed to them by society and their own ethnic worldview, which is particularly relevant when dwelling in the forest. All have to cope with it in their own way. This example is particularly interesting, because in its native features, it was driven by awareness and intention.

I said above that in some ways I was caught in this particular gendered communication, or, as I uncomfortably felt, absence of communication. But what did it actually mean? Perhaps Yuri's silence towards me in his camp was but one natural form of communication I was unable, for cultural reasons, to cope with?

On the bank of the lake  
With unhurried steps  
We go...  
Beyond the lake, also unhurriedly  
The reindeer their small calves  
Lead forth...  
Beyond the far away forest  
The swan with an inviting scream her baby  
Will call...  
We shall remain silent.



# Native spirituality in (re)constructed personhood: observing and filming Yuri Vella<sup>157</sup>

*Eva Toulouze, Liivo Niglas*

**Abstract:** This article<sup>158</sup> is an attempt to understand what role spiritual matters play in the ideas and everyday life of a public figure quite famous in Western Siberia, the Forest Nenets writer, reindeer herder and activist Yuri Vella, and how the so-called religious practice is articulated in his life. In our reflection, we do not rely on any ad-hoc discourse, on issue-centred interviews, but on our fieldwork observation of speech and practice, a big part of which has been recorded on video with the aim of using it in the making of ethnographic films.

**Keywords:** personhood, identity, spirituality, religion, participant observation, ethnographic film.

## Introduction

The 20th century brought radical changes in the material and spiritual life of the Siberian indigenous communities: Soviet rule attempted to transform deeply not only social lives but also individual worldviews in order to achieve the project of inventing the so-called “Homo Sovieticus”. This project has certainly not been achieved according to its initial aims. However, Soviet systematic endeavours have certainly had consequences

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on the natives' lives (see, for example, Leete & Vallikivi 2011a; 2011b). They had to adapt to understandings very different from their own, while starting from a point radically different from the dominant, Russian, commonly accepted truth. Almost a century later, what is the result? What has been left of the northern natives' pre-Soviet worldview? How have concepts and practices changed?

There are different ways of approaching these questions. We (Eva and Liivo – we will refer to ourselves by first names) have chosen to concentrate on one individual, in order to understand in depth the kind of processes at work in personhood construction. It is clear that we understand personhood from a Western point of view. However, we are convinced that northern natives have had to find ways of adapting and surviving, and these ways have deeply affected their individualities. They have been individual as each person had to find answers to questions that were not community issues: children in boarding schools, young men in the army had to express individual agency in coping with new and barely understandable phenomena. We have concentrated on one individual, Yuri Vella, with whom both authors of this paper have interacted for almost fifteen years, living in his camp and keeping constantly in touch with him. Yuri is a peculiar person, particularly interesting to follow: coming from an ordinary native life experience, very much in compliance with the 'script' the Soviet regime had imagined for natives (Gray 2003: 48), he has developed a keen reflexive native consciousness, which leads him to constantly follow his own behaviour and his own actions, incomparably more than the majority of his kin and people in general do. His experience is certainly not to be generalised: it would be erroneous to pretend that Forest Nenets in general follow his pattern, he is more an exception than a rule, but he shows one of the possible intellectual ways open for a person of his generation. Other possible ways are double patterns – one in the forest, the other in the village –, conversion to Christianity, predominance of materialistic and positivistic understandings, for example. But Yuri's approach, while being unique because of his consciousness, is deeply embedded in a world that is shared by his native companions.

The materials we rely upon are of different kinds. They are mainly based on fieldwork: Eva has been to Yuri's place three times – in 1999 and 2000, for a cumulated time of five months, two of them in the company

of the Estonian linguist Kaur Mägi. Moreover, she has met Yuri in other public events in Russia and abroad (1998, 1999, 2005, 2008). Liivo met Yuri for the first time in Tartu in 2000 and was thereafter invited by him to shoot a film about the Forest Nenets. He twice spent a month (in 2000 and 2001) at Yuri's place and made the film *Yuri Vella's World* (Niglas 2003). In 2009, Eva and Liivo dwelt at Yuri's camp for three weeks while shooting video footage for research and for a new documentary about him. Liivo returned to Yuri's camp some weeks later in the autumn to record additional material for the film during the coupling of reindeer. These fieldwork trips provided us with film material and several conversations, as well as practical experience of rituals. The film footage, more than 50 hours in total, is an additional fixed material and we may add to this the interviews in the numerous films made about him, and the content of the available part of the video archives he himself shot regularly between 1995 and 2001.

## **Methodology: observing and filming**

While staying in Yuri's home, our fieldwork method was mainly just living (Kerttula 2000: 3). We were engaged in our own work – Eva translating Yuri's poetry, Liivo shooting for documentaries – but as anthropologists we simply observed and participated in Yuri's everyday life. We carried water for sauna, played with Yuri's grandchildren and spent hours drinking tea and listening to Yuri's stories. There was no specific research plan, no thematic interviews. Therefore, the spiritual issues as commented hereafter result from how they came forth spontaneously in a given observed situation. There are specific reasons why we focused on participant observation in our fieldwork at Yuri's place.

Yuri is a very active and outspoken person. He is constantly on the move, always doing something, be it taking care of the reindeer, checking fish traps, building a sledge or driving a car to a nearby village or town. It was very difficult to pre-plan a longer interview session with him because we would simply never know when and for how long we could do it. On the other hand, he is usually very talkative and likes to express his views on all kinds of matters. He likes to talk about himself, or, more precisely,



whatever topic he is concentrating on, which he usually approaches through his own personality. In other words, although it is complicated to conduct a proper interview with Yuri, it is relatively easy to gather information from him. As fieldworkers we just had to participate in his activities and tried to keep pace with him while making our observations and collecting data.

This fieldwork methodology works well with the kind of filmmaking Liivo has carried out at Yuri's places since 2000. As a filmmaker, Liivo is reluctant to make interview-based films. Many documentaries use the interview – an informant or an expert, usually seated in a room, answering a set of questions posed by a researcher or filmmaker – as the main narrative device. In his film work, Liivo tries to harness the potential that is inherent in the real life behaviour of the film characters, including their spontaneous reactions to the presence of a camera. He employs observation as the main strategy in his filmmaking, but his camera is not limited to being merely 'a fly on the wall'. His approach emphasises 'being with' rather than simply 'looking at' the film subject. Filming Yuri means participating in his everyday activities with a video camera, which is not only a recording device but also a partner, whose presence enables Yuri to comment on his action, to discuss various topics and to construct his identity. The object of the video observation is not just Yuri's behaviour and insights, but also the role of the filmmaker in that observed reality. Therefore, although Liivo's filmmaking is observational in form, it is participatory in essence: filmmaker represents his subject's socio-cultural reality by showing a series of contiguous events, thus encouraging the audience to learn by observing rather than just by listening; and in order to "enhance the value of his material as evidence", he reveals his role as a filmmaker in the recorded events (MacDougall 1998: 134)<sup>159</sup>.

Our research project as a whole thus included both fieldwork and filming. The important part of the information and insights employed in the present analysis were achieved when Eva and Liivo stayed together at Yuri's forest camp in the summer of 2009. Our aim was to film video footage on Yuri's life history, focusing on his different biographical episodes. We planned to use these episodes both for the research and

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159 For discussion on observational and participatory cinema, see also Nichols 1991; Young 1975.

for the documentary film. Eva's role was to engage Yuri in informal conversations while Liivo recorded it with a video camera. Our plan was to ask Yuri to take us to the places that had some sort of significance in his life history or had influenced him as a person. We hoped that visiting these places would trigger the flow of information from Yuri and reveal his emotions in the way it could not have been achieved in a normal interview situation. Thus, while previously Eva and Liivo had worked independently, one doing fieldwork, the other making a film, this time we decided to join forces and use a video camera as a proper fieldwork tool.

Using a video camera in ethnographic fieldwork is quite common these days. Some researchers see it merely as a 'note-taking device', others use it more systematically in the data collection, analysis and representation phases of the research in order to focus, for example, on aesthetic, corporeal or other sensory aspects of reality under study (Pink 2007; 2009). In the case of Yuri, the video camera had an important methodological value for us. It provided us with the mechanism for studying his self-representation. The role of the camera in the construction and representation of personal identity is one of the methodological devices that film can offer to anthropology. For example, Jean Rouch put the idea of performance and role-playing at the centre of his filmmaking. He has stated that "when people are being recorded, the reactions that they have are always infinitely more sincere than those they have when they are not being recorded. The fact of being recorded gives these people a public" (Blue 2006: 268–269). Yuri has repeatedly stated that his life is a museum (Toulouze 2004): it is on display for others to see and to learn from. He is always ready to demonstrate his way of life and to explain his understandings of reality to the audience, be it by hosting people (researchers, politicians, filmmakers, etc.) in his camps, delivering public lectures, giving interviews to the mass media, or participating in TV programmes and documentaries. As the main aim of Liivo's filming was to make a feature-length documentary about Yuri, we offered him a potential film audience that he could relate to and perform for. He is well experienced in manipulating visual media (Niglas 2005), and he knows how to make an impression on the audience.

Yuri is a highly media-conscious person to work with. He has familiarised himself with the film medium by watching thousands of

fiction and documentary films: he has a huge collection of VHS tapes that he likes to play on a TV set in his forest camp, and whenever there is a chance to watch TV (when the TV signal in his forest house is powerful enough due to the weather conditions, or when he is visiting friends and family in nearby villages and towns) he often spends hours watching several films in a row, sometimes until early morning. For more than five years, when working officially for the Research Institute for the Revival of the Ob-Ugrian Peoples, he also systematically used a VHS camera to document his own life in order to demonstrate how the natives live in the region.

Yuri is personally interested in film as a process. He consciously cooperates with the filmmaker, both by thinking technically (answering questions so that they could be easily edited), visually (“What a beautiful sequence you could have had!”) and in terms of the message. Thus, the mere presence of the camera is a catalyser, which provokes information. We are conscious of the peculiar quality of this information: it is simultaneously explicit, biased and controlled. As for Yuri, film is a way of forwarding the messages he has been thinking about. He is, on the one hand, careful and aware of what he says, while on the other he says certainly more than he would without a camera pointing at him. The camera makes him talk, which is certainly partly a need for him to find clarity in his own thoughts (the ‘sofa of the psychoanalyst’). The camera as a recording and representation device encourages him to put on a good performance, to show his storytelling and reasoning skills. In many cases, the camera just records the same things he has stated elsewhere, in conversations or in his stories and poems, but sometimes it makes him approach his life experience from a new angle. By talking to the camera, he constructs both his narrative and himself, giving us a kind of personal ‘official’ discourse about his biography. ‘Official’ does not mean it is false or invented. It just attempts to give a coherent narrative of life’s naturally heterogeneous layers and incoherent course. In this ‘official’ autobiography there are iconic stories, emotions, turning points, philosophical developments. It reveals more clearly than anything else who Yuri attempts to be, not only for us, but mainly for him. Thus, it participates actively in his production of sense and the construction of his identity.

This article is about one individual. It is one possible way to approach

worldview questions, and certainly not the least interesting, for it allows one to go deeper into reality's complexity without having to cope with differences between individuals and the need to generalise and to modelise a large amount of diversity (as in Pentikäinen 1971). Still, we cannot avoid the necessity of simplifying and modelising, which reflects the attempt to organise the thinking of one single individual. His personal effort to produce order is certainly of great help, although we are aware of the possible manipulation this control on the information flows allows. But the manipulation itself is also of significance.

### **About native spirituality: an attempt to define what we look for**

The kind of evidence we are looking for is intuitively clear while it is tricky to formulate and to define, for in Nenets culture the boundaries are not as clearly drawn as they are in Western scientific understanding. If we were missionaries or officials, we would certainly speak about Yuri's 'religiosity', about his 'beliefs'<sup>160</sup>, about his 'religious thinking', even about his religion. We would have no scruples in using a word which refers to our own default worldview and covers an unambiguous sphere. But we are anthropologists and we know that the way a Siberian native understands the world and the connections within it is not to be summarised with the words 'religion' or 'belief'. These are exogenous, they have been imposed upon the natives by alien mental structures, by people who, being professionals in that sphere, could only interpret the unfamiliar by using familiar categories: their thinking habits and their languages did not and still do not provide them with appropriate tools, they do not correspond to the realities they are supposed to cover. At the same time, those categories have been accepted, interiorised by the natives themselves (Asad 1993): in contact circumstances, speaking a language that is not theirs, they took over the conceptual tools introduced by the Other and used them while confronting the attempts to penetrate their consciousness. These tools

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160 Several authors have emphasised "that 'belief' in the interiorised sense that Christians usually use the term may not be applicable to other religious traditions" (Hann 2007: 385; see also Ruel 1982: 22–23, 27).

became a kind of weapon: even if they were not well suited for their case in a theoretical way, pragmatically, they could still be advantageously used, when nothing else was available.

We are thus facing a challenge: to express what is not to be reduced to the concepts we have in our kit box. The closest is perhaps 'ontology', which is certainly fit (as worldview is) for the holistic approach it induces, but seems not to be sharp enough to be of much help in defining boundaries. We have chosen here the word spirituality, giving it very much the sense used by Hann (2007: 387). Nevertheless, even this term remains critical: for, in concept as well as practice, there is no clear boundary between spiritual and profane in the world of indigenous people in Western Siberia. The spiritual aspect is in all deeds, even the most trivial: the choice of a place to urinate in the forest is an act directly embedded in the notion of sacred; in the permanent dialogue and negotiation one is involved with all the forces that surround the human being. Eva's fieldwork shows this eloquently: in 2004, during an offering in a Khanty forest camp, prayer was thoroughly intermingled with jokes and laughter; slaughtering reindeer in order to eat meat is no less a sacrifice (we will come to this later on). The clearly defined realms of sacred and profane, of earthly and spiritual, are part of our worldview. From this point of view, the choice of this issue is clearly connected to the understandings we have grown up with. However, the holistic approach does not annihilate the sense of sacredness; it just refuses to isolate it and inserts it into a continuum. We will concentrate on one end of this axis. To put it in other words, we will try to follow Yuri's ways of negotiating his own place in the world with the other forces – human, natural or spiritual – that must be domesticated. The three aforementioned spheres are not thoroughly distinct from one another, forming three layers of one whole, they are also disposed in a continuum without clear boundaries. By limiting our subject (for scientific approach, Western-centred, requires limiting), we impose our worldview; but still, we consider we may do it, for this understanding has been dominant in the region for some time now, and these concepts are used by the natives themselves. Moreover, we suspect that Yuri himself is very much influenced by this way of reflecting on the world. In any case, communication with the spirits exists and is undoubtedly of great importance for Yuri and his family.

## **(RE)CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONHOOD**

In order to appreciate how the perception of the sacred sphere interacts with other aspects of Yuri's worldview, we must start by giving an overview of his biography (see also: Toulouze 2003). This explains how from a typical Soviet start in life, the course of his personal history has led him to occupy a unique position among the intellectuals of the Russian North.

### **Yuri Vella's short biography**

Yuri had quite an ordinary Soviet childhood. After the death of his father, who was a kolkhoz reindeer herder, he moved with his mother to Varyogan, a village founded on the upper Agan River in the 1930s by relocating nomadic Forest Nenets and Khanty from the region into one settlement. There he went to school and visited as often as possible his grandmother Nengi, who shared with her grandchild her stories told in Nenets. In Varyogan Yuri could attend only elementary school and had to move to Agan – a bigger, predominantly Khanty settlement down the river – in order to continue his studies in a boarding school. Afterwards he started high school in the regional centre Surgut, but soon got into conflict with his Russian language and literature teacher, who did not appreciate him writing poems, and he left Surgut without finishing school.

Yuri's further years did not differ from most native boys' course of life. He served in the army, was employed in different jobs, and married a native girl, Yelena Taylakova, from a Khanty family living in Agan. One year after completing his compulsory service in the army, he decided to stop drinking and started therapy with a well-known Sverdlovsk-based physician – this was one original decision that he made quite early. Another step, which was not so commonplace<sup>161</sup>, was to move to his wife's place: as Elena was the youngest in her family, she was supposed to live with her mother until the latter's death. Later they moved back to Varyogan, where Yuri earned his living as a hunter in a state enterprise and spent long periods in the forest, sometimes with his family. Meanwhile, on the

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161 Forest Nenets as well as Khanty traditionally practice patrilocal residence.

advice of a Russian ethnologist, Izmail Gemuyev, he applied for distance education at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow: in order to do that, he first had to finish high school and then to attend university courses in poetry while working full time; for two years he worked as the president of the rural soviet of Agan, but after realising that his attempt to turn the local policy towards the indigenous people had failed due to the significant number of Russian newcomers living in the area, he went back to his profession as a hunter.

In 1990, when the Soviet economic and political system was crumbling, Yuri completed his first poem collection, which was published the next year<sup>162</sup>, and decided to leave the village in order to live with his family in the taiga. He bought ten reindeer and moved to the area where his paternal ancestors used to live as reindeer herders and hunters. However, like many other areas in Western Siberia, where oil was discovered in the 1960s, his ancestral territory had suffered from the ruthless exploitation of the Soviet oil industry.

Yuri has lived there ever since. Today he has twenty-four people under his responsibility – daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren – and he manages a much larger reindeer herd. Meanwhile he has published several new books<sup>163</sup>. As the territory where he retired with his reindeer is on the land used by Lukoil, the giant multinational company exploiting oil resources in the region, Yuri found himself in a conflict with the oil industry and also with local authorities. He had to become politically active and start a fight for indigenous rights in order to survive as a reindeer herder in one of the most important oil-producing regions of Russia. Since then, he has been known as an activist who often uses very clever and exceptional ways to fight for the rights of natives to their traditional way of life. This makes him a very uncomfortable ‘trouble maker’ for Lukoil and regional authorities.

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162 There were actually two books both titled *Vesti iz stoibishcha*, (News from the Camp). The first book (1991a) was published by a Sverdlovsk publishing house in a traditional way, with an editor who made slight changes (not political). Yuri was not satisfied with the changes and some months later published a new shorter volume at his own expense (1991b).

163 For a complete list of Yuri Vella's books, see <http://www.jurivella.ru/index.php/-raamatud--books>.

## The revelation

Yuri, as we have pointed out, has experienced an upbringing very similar to that of other young men from the taiga. Although his connection with his grandmother was quite close, he did not live in her home but in a boarding school, where the ruling values were those of the communist regime, i.e., materialism and anti-religiosity. These values were given to him by default. He did not discuss them at the time. One of his jobs<sup>164</sup> was working as a propagandist in the 'Red tshum' (the propaganda corner in the village). Actually, Yuri told us that he had applied to be accepted into the Communist Party three times but had been rejected each time. This shows that he had then no doubt about the righteousness of the Party's politics and of the general political discourse, part of which was atheist education. As a whole, in the remote parts of Russia, it was actually a convincing story for ordinary citizens who had no basis for comparison, as they had never gone abroad nor seen anything else.

To the ethnographer Andrey Golovnyov, who, in 1992, enquired about his understanding of the Nenets gods, Yuri answered that for him, the word *num* had long meant only sky, and it became the name of a god only when later he read in books that this ordinary word was also the name of the Nenets' main god (Golovnyov 1995: 380). This provocative answer indicates that in his youth Yuri was not explicitly instructed in the Nenets' worldview. He discovered this aspect of his culture only later on. In any case, this is the way he presents his biography: there is a clear turning point, as in a kind of Pauline religious conversion.

There is a long and interesting episode in the video footage shot in the summer of 2009 at Yuri's summer camp. It shows how the mere presence of a recording camera can catalyse a long and uninterrupted flow of information with almost no questions from the filmmaker. It was our first day at Yuri's forest camp and one could sense that Yuri was excited about being filmed again. It almost felt as if the camera was an old visiting friend, with whom he was eager to share his personal news and insights after so many years of separation<sup>165</sup>.

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164 He worked at the fish centre, as a post worker, etc.

165 The last time Liivo had filmed Yuri was in May 2001. But since then, Yuri has been filmed by others many times, both for documentary and for television (see, for example, Gerchikov 2005).



Yuri was digging soil in a small garden next to a reindeer enclosure. When Liivo approached him with his camera, Yuri started a long monologue that lasted all in all for almost an hour. Whenever Yuri ran out of thoughts, he returned to digging. But in a short while, seeing that Liivo continued shooting, he took up a new topic, even if the camera was filming at the other end of the garden. Liivo took it almost as a test – to see how long and on what issues Yuri would keep talking without any interference from the filmmaker. The topics he brought up were obviously very relevant for him at that moment. He talked about the garden and the difficulties of maintaining it; about his new passion for sledge building; about his concern over autumn pastures where reindeer go for the rut and the oil people to hunt and drink. Surprisingly, one of the topics was the revelation that changed his life many years ago.

This happened while Yuri was studying at the Literature Institute. During his first years at the institute, Yuri underwent a fascinating process: he discovered the notion of culture<sup>166</sup>. During the first year at the institute, the students had to study ancient Greek and Roman philosophies and Yuri discovered that they were very much universally understandable by people from other cultures (much more so than Oriental philosophies). He started realising that the Nenets also had a culture of their own: while the teacher talked about classical cultures, Yuri reflected in comparison about his way of thinking as a native. He thus discovered his own culture not through the elders or his kin, but by going far and facing other, different ‘cultures’. Actually, he considers now that school had not transmitted any hint of high culture either to him or to his daughters, and that it just destroyed what they knew without bringing them anything in return. In Yuri Vella’s *World* he states: “Children live in a boarding school. Returning to camp, they don’t know anymore how to live there, how to heat a stove, from which side to approach reindeer. They have to learn all this over again. But there’s no work in the village. Our children graduate high school or technical school, but they don’t find work. And so they lounge around. For them, what is there to do? Nothing.” (Niglas 2003)

Studying at university allowed Yuri to discover that there were real intellectual and ethical values in the Russian and ‘Western’ culture overall. He discovered world literature as well as art and classical music,

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166 About the meaning of this word in Russian (kul’tura), see Grant 1995: 15–16.

all of which was kept far from the natives' reach. He also discovered the contradictions between the discourse he was accustomed to and historical reality. Once a lecturer commented on the existence of intellectuals and poets among anti-Bolshevik groups, known as the Whites, during the Russian Civil War in 1918–1921, and Yuri discovered that there were values on the 'other' side too – loyalty and honesty, for example, which had been denied by their teachers at school, who had always presented the Whites as 'bandits'. It was one of the first contradictions that led Yuri to start doubting the whole system and trying to judge always by himself, without relying on any authorities' discourse. He has learnt to doubt: he started applying this new knowledge to all domains in life, subjecting all information to critical examination dictated by his own reason. For him, authoritative speech has entirely lost its weight, and forever.

However, Yuri discovered something else as well. He realised that what his people had been deprived of by Russian colonisation was also culture. Until entering university, he thought as they had been told that they were a primitive people, and that Russians had brought them civilisation<sup>167</sup>.

## **(Re)constructing an indigenous identity**

Now, by discovering the Others' culture, Yuri also discovered his own, and from that day on he started defending the Siberian natives' values in any situation with which he was confronted. One must admit that not only culture was at stake in Western Siberia's oil industry development, which started in the 1960s and achieved a peak in the 1970s: the natives' physical life started to be endangered, as the environment around them, which they relied upon, was gradually being destroyed by air, water and soil pollution. While the political conditions in Russia changed, confirming the suspicions that had already arisen, the natives' position in their own land became more and more ambiguous: on the one hand, they

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167 As one Nenets inhabitant of Varyogan observed to Eva in 2000: "Vy znaete, my zhe pervobytnyi narod!" (You know, we are a primitive people). Moreover, the Russian word *tsivilizatsiia* (civilisation) is commonly used to characterise the Russian culture as opposed to the primitiveness of the natives.

were provided with the so-called kinship territories whenever they chose the traditional way of life<sup>168</sup>, on the other, as those territories were often already being used for oil production, conflicts between oil workers and reindeer herders were multiplied. For oil companies as well as for many newcomers in general, the landscape is a place where there is nothing, which is empty, because there are no signs of buildings or other marks of civilisation. Therefore, they occupy it irrespective of the signification it may have for the indigenous people<sup>169</sup>.

Yuri wants to show the depth of the cultural layer inherent in the Agan natives: he likes to exhibit their skills in deduction, in reconstruction. 'Playing detective' is one of his favourite attitudes<sup>170</sup>, which we have witnessed many times. A good example of Yuri's performance as a detective is captured in a sequence Liivo shot in May 2001.

Yuri is walking in the forest looking for the herd. He reaches a spot without big trees not far from a small lake and informs the camera that there was once a campsite there. The only visible evidence of the campsite that the camera can see is a wooden detail of a traditional conic tent (chum), half-hidden in the moss. Yuri shows where the entrance was, detecting it from the location of a tiny pile of rotten tree branches that used to be firewood that was used to heat the tshum. As there is no sign of a fireplace, Yuri claims that people used an iron stove and therefore they lived there either during or after the war. He points out that the people lived there in winter because the trees were chopped down when there was snow – he shows a tree stump with traces of an axe blade, which is half a meter high. He adds that the campsite was used temporarily, probably in order to hunt

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168 In Russian - *rodovye ugod'ya*. In 1992, the Duma of the Autonomous Khanty-Mansi district passed a new law giving the natives this possibility. See also Jordan 2004: 30–31.

169 Eva remembers from her fieldwork in 1999 an observation made by a Russian driver (from Ukraine), who had been living in Siberia for thirty years. While driving in the suburbs of Raduzhnyi, a town built in about 1985, the driver said: "Look at this: there was nothing here, and now there is an airport. And here there is a dacha quarter." Actually, the place where the airport now is was the summer pasture of Yegor Stepanovich Kasamkin; the dacha quarter was built on the same clan's cemetery. See also Yeremey Aypin's short story *Pervoprokhodets* (Aypin 1995: 172–173)

170 Actually Yuri Vella is not the only intellectual from the indigenous peoples of the North who uses this way of explaining one layer of his culture, as Eva witnessed in 2004, when Eastern Khanty intellectual Agrafena Pesikova-Sopochina explained to her the landscape around her camp in the same way.

for squirrels or wild reindeer. And then he gives a personal twist to his interpretation, speculating that the occupants of this site could have been his father and mother, because, according to his mother, that is the area where they lived after the war.

The aim of this performance for the camera is clear: to show that the natives are able to see and interpret, while the white man who sees the same things does not understand what messages objects, landscape and animals convey. As Yuri explains in the same sequence, the white man is blind and does not wish to see, where there would be so much to see. That is why Siberia is presented like a white stain. But the landscape, the trees, the soil, the objects speak: they are not only the remains of the native culture; they may be part of a culture still alive. And the way people know and see it is a direct expression of its peculiarities and of what this culture may contribute to universal knowledge.

Yuri's contemporary insertion in traditional culture is the result of a conscious construction that started after he graduated from the institute. He built himself up in several ways. In 1990, he changed his way of life totally by becoming a reindeer herder: he had never lived permanently in the wild; he left the village and started a new life from scratch. It was actually very hard on his wife, who did not want to leave the life she was accustomed to and which she liked. Becoming a reindeer herder was his own personal project, corresponding to his personal dreams and to his peculiar vision. With his wife's help he built dozens of kilometres of fences, several log huts in different camps, roads to them, even bridges. He learned to be a reindeer herder, albeit he had never lived with reindeer. At forty, he attempted to learn skills that one should acquire while a child. Part of this reality is the fact that he is still rather clumsy as a reindeer herder. He is not good at catching the reindeer with the lasso. This explains why Yuri, who is usually very happy to be filmed, gets easily irritated when filmed during reindeer catching. He often mentions that he is "a young reindeer herder". Sometimes he turns to that story in order to show the proficiency of Russian reindeer herders. For example, in his personal video archive there is material recorded at the Congress of Private Reindeer Herders in 1999, which shows him in his introductory speech sharing with the audience how he asked a reindeer herder in Lapland how many ways he knew for castrating a male deer. As he received the answer "one", he

added proudly: “You all know that our elders know six ways for castrating a deer, depending on the result you want. I myself know three of them, and I may use only two, because I do not have my own teeth anymore.” But more often this story is meant to convey that Yuri has not achieved the proficiency of most herders. Compared to his neighbours, the difference in knowledge and ability is clear: as we observed during our fieldwork in 2009, his Khanty neighbours were very proficient in preparing the reindeer, and they ate more parts than Yuri and his wife did.

Yuri’s construction is heroic and desperate. What he did for his material life, he also did with his mind. He bent it in order to create a new awareness and to build up a whole indigenous identity, while he had been condemned to duality by the circumstances of his upbringing. He attempted to reunite his own world. Of course, there are no witnesses to how he struggled, except perhaps his wife, who nevertheless was in enough trouble herself, trying to adapt to a life she had not chosen (and that by now she has learnt to love). However, we may assume his struggles were hard.

Thus, what he is attempting to do is not to invent a new identity from scratch, but to reunite his divided identity, to find anew what has been lost and annihilated, to reconstruct himself. In the same way, he learnt to live within native spirituality, which is now fully part of his identity. We do not know whether he has the same apprenticeship feeling in so-called spiritual matters, but we are going to explore this issue in the following part of the article.

## **A SERIOUS ‘ENTERTAINMENT’: SACRIFICIAL PRACTICE TODAY**

Once, in 1999, when Eva was living at Yuri’s place, they were visited by a couple from Num-To, to whom Yuri had promised to give an old snowmobile. They spent about two weeks at Yuri’s place. Once Yuri asked the man, a Forest Nenets:

– Do you know how to make a god?

– No, I have never made any.

– That’s good! The result is better when one makes a god for the first time. Mine is too old. I must have another.

Some days later, as we were all together indoors, Yuri gave his guest a piece of wood and a knife and asked him to start carving. He gave him instructions in order to have the piece of wood carved into a rough anthropomorphic shape. When it was ready, Yuri wrapped it in tissues and performed a short ceremony. At the end of it, he addressed Eva and said: “Well, this is how we entertain ourselves.” The tone was ambiguous. Yuri watched Eva’s reaction attentively, with a hint of a smile, which was clearly open to various interpretations.

For us, this last remark shows Yuri’s attempt to integrate Eva’s potential reaction into his discourse. He had not known her for long by the time and he supposed that, like almost all the lutsa<sup>171</sup> he had formerly met, she could consider his beliefs as ridiculous, and tried to protect himself by being the first to laugh at them. There was something pathetic in Yuri’s defensive position. It illustrated how injured the native people were in their relations with outsiders and how frequently they had been ridiculed by them<sup>172</sup>. Or may we infer that Yuri still remembered how he would have reacted himself not so long ago? Was there a part in him that still distanced itself from what he attempted to be, in spite of long-term habits? Actually this cautious behaviour is not accidental. We can identify it in an episode in Yuri Vella’s *World*, where Yuri talks about the President’s reindeer.

Yuri is feeding dried bread to reindeer and explains that there is a custom to present a friend or a relative with a reindeer that stays in the herd of the giver, and that it is possible to conclude how lucky its owner is by observing the behaviour and the fate of the reindeer. He goes on saying that some years ago he and his wife had dedicated a female reindeer to the president of Russia, and that when her first calf was born, they learned that Boris Yeltsin, who was the president at the time, had become ill. Yuri continues: “We performed a rite of sacrifice, offered the calf to the gods

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171 This is what ‘white people’ are called in Western Siberia. Actually this name is used in the whole of Siberia (Anderson 2000, etc.).

172 This aspect is emphasised by Irinarh Shemanovski, one of the last missionaries who worked with the Western Siberian Nenets (the Tundra Nenets) at the beginning of the 20th century (Shemanovski 2005: 14–21).

so that the President would recover. Soon the mass media announced that the President was well again.” Yuri does not explicitly connect the two events; he leaves the conclusions to be drawn by the audience. We have already commented on this in a former article: “He does not assert that the sacrifice was the reason for the president’s recovery, but the fact is that he was healed. This is an interesting point in Yuri’s behaviour. Clearly, he believes in the connection between the reindeer and their owners, between the deeds and their consequences. At the same time, he is perfectly acquainted with the Western scepticism about all this kind of ‘superstitions’, and he presents them in a way unobjectionable to the outside world.” (Niglas & Toulouze 2004: 106) The influence of modern values proceeding from the Soviet materialist understanding upon traditional way of thinking is very clear here.

## **Offerings and sacrifices**

Sacrifice is the main form of communication with the spirits practised by the Siberian natives. It punctuates the year and the main periods as well as the main moments in people’s lives, and helps people to express veneration towards the divinities who rule their lives – the local ones, the ones represented in natural elements as well as the protectors of the clan. An offering, a sacrifice is a way to draw their attention to the people who perform the sacrifice and who ask for well-being. They also accompany any kind of communication moving from below towards the highest spheres.

We have had the opportunity, separately and together, to participate in several ceremonies we shall here recall. In 2009, we had brought Yuri as a gift a long piece (3 metres) of white fabric. It is one of the accessories for sacrifices and offerings. It was supposed to be a welcome gift, as Yuri had declared to Eva once in 1999. While during previous visits when Eva had brought one, it had been put aside and certainly used by Yuri when needed, this time we were thoroughly involved in its use, most probably because of the interest Yuri had in our filming. As our visit took place in the second half of July and beginning of August, we were not expecting to participate in blood sacrifices, for the reindeers change their fur at that

time of the year and herders avoid slaughtering them before their skin is fit for use. However, the family was longing for meat, so they started at the end of July to follow the reindeers to see whether at least one of them would have a proper skin. As we had only some days left before returning to Europe, Yuri addressed the two of us asking: "Which of you bought the fabric? Is it a gift from one of you personally or from both?" We answered that it was our common gift. What would have happened if only Liivo or only Eva had been the donor, we do not know – would Eva being a female have had an impact? Certainly, the presence of the camera was a key factor. He knew we wished to film and he was ready to adapt his deeds to the needs of filming. Anyhow, Yuri then told us to choose the use for the fabric ourselves, the situation being the following, as he explained to us: the proper way to do things would be to proceed to a reindeer sacrifice with the fabric being loosely knotted around the neck of the reindeer during the sacrifice, dipped in blood afterwards and brought to a sacred place we had expressed the wish to see not far from the Vatyogan River. But there was no time: the reindeer would not be sacrificed until our very last day because of the skin. So we were given a choice: either to put the fabric aside for the last day and perform the first part of the full ritual or go to the sacred place before the sacrifice and make a simple offering with the fabric. We chose the second alternative for both general and self-interested reasons. The latter was the needs of the film Liivo was shooting, as the topic of the film was directly connected with the Vatyogan area. The general reason was also related to the same piece of land. The area by the Vatyogan River was a critical place for Yuri's herd and he was deeply concerned about it. It was the rutting place for his reindeer, but the governor of Khanty-Mansi region had given the same land to the Lukoil hunting club. Yuri had been unofficially given a copy of that document some months earlier and thus discovered why his reindeer were often harassed during the rut by hunters. He had decided to chase hunters from the Vatyogan shores and planned to build a provisional log cabin there for this purpose. To have an offering and a prayer in a sacred place situated in the middle of a disputed area seemed to be appropriate to Yuri's needs at that very moment as this had been his main concern during the whole summer. Moreover, the summer had been mosquito-free, and the reindeer, who are usually attracted home by the smoke produced by burning fresh moss in the so-



called reindeer house (*olennyi dom*), were not bothered by insects and roamed freely on the Vatyogan River, causing deep concerns to the herder. So, to have an offering in the area seemed to be an appropriate decision. Yuri had previously suggested that Liivo's film could be about the Land of Love (i.e., the Vatyogan area where the rut was taking place), hinting that it would probably also include him fighting with the oil people there. By carrying out a ritual in the place, he was offering the filmmaker a powerful episode that would intensify the film narrative.

Thus, we went with Yuri and his three-year-old grandson by car to the sacred place, which was a hill of elongated form, in the centre of which there was a natural treeless sandy corridor. The heart of the sacred place was the top of it, where besides a metal pole hammered into the ground proving the oil workers' presence, there were recent reindeer skins hanging on trees and pieces of reindeer hair still dragging across the ground. Before the sacrifice Yuri tore three pieces from the fabric: he gave one to his grandson and one to each of us. He explained that Grandmother (his wife) would sew the piece on the child's *malitsa*, the anorak-type clothing for men. There are two types of *malitsa*, the winter one and the summer one, but both have a hood, and the piece of sacrificial fabric is sewn on the back of the hood as a protective mark. While Liivo was filming, Yuri addressed the gods, in Nenets as he always does, his prayer being interrupted by repetitive bows and turns clockwise. He held his grandson by the hand and the three-year-old child imitated all his grandfather's gestures and movements, except at the end of the prayer, when he clearly got bored and started playing on the ground. After the prayer, Yuri asked Liivo to climb up a tree and knot the fabric around a tree branch in the proper way. Before climbing the tree, Liivo gave the running camera to Eva and asked her to continue to record the ritual. While he was climbing, Yuri kept shouting "Wow, wow!" and asked the child to do likewise<sup>173</sup>. After Liivo had come down, Yuri asked him to walk around the tree with him and his grandson, while Eva filmed. Yuri set the order by age: first he, then Liivo, then the child. Yuri interfered when the child wanted to walk between him and Liivo. Eva was not involved, not so much because of the camera, but because females do not participate actively in offerings.

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173 Art Leete has written (1997: 46) that the Khanty, who share many cultural traits with the Forest Nenets, shout during a sacrifice in order to draw the attention of the gods.

This is one example of an offering without a blood sacrifice. In the following sections, we shall present other examples of sacrifices of reindeer in connection with both sacred places and prayers that are pronounced during their performance.

## Sacred places

People make sacrifices and address the gods in special places. These are places felt to be connected with the spirits and anyone having a ‘spiritual’ experience at a specific site may start a tradition of a sacred place there – in the beginning for himself, later on it may spread and become more widely used, as with the one on the Vatyogan, at which Yuri sacrifices. While driving there in his four-wheel-drive minibus<sup>174</sup>, Yuri explained into the camera the probable origin of this sacred place:

*A kapi<sup>175</sup> lived in that area and once, while hunting, he got to the hill and saw it was a nice place. He started to walk back and suddenly heard a bell ringing. He returned and looked for the bell, but couldn't find one; he moved and heard the sound again. So he decided it was a sacred place.*

The main sacred place close to his camps has been destroyed: it was on the spot currently occupied by the oil workers' village Povkh, and more precisely by the offices of Central Technical Engineering Service. Actually, according to Yuri, several “bosses” died at their working table in this office, and so he added: “That shows that the sacred place is still functioning.”

However, some sacred places are only for him and his family. One, for example, is not far from his former winter camp<sup>176</sup>. It was chosen because a swan nested on it, and Yuri felt it to be a sign. It was here that the first sacrifice Eva attended took place. Its circumstances show that it was all but an entertainment.

In 1999, Eva had just arrived with Yuri and his wife from Helsinki and they found that there was no meat in the camp any more. In the evening,

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174 For more information about the importance of a car in Yuri's life see Niglas 2011.

175 In Nenets, a *kapi* is a non-Nenets, but native. Usually, in this area, it is the word used for the Khanty, but it may also refer to other ethnic groups (Selkups, for example).

176 In 2009 Yuri Vella and his family moved to a new winter camp: the pastures surrounding the former one could no longer provide enough food for his reindeer.

Yuri and his wife discussed which reindeer to eat. On the following day they all went to the place where the herd stayed, in a corral further in the forest. Yuri spent much time inside the fence with his grandchildren but by the evening there was no reindeer chosen. Yuri behaved according to what he had said in a previous congress of private reindeer herders: one was too slim, the other too nice, the third too old, it was impossible to decide which would be slaughtered. But during the night Yuri had a dream. He saw that Death was hanging around, looking for his wife. He decided instantly after having awoken that a sacrifice had to be made, in order to expel Death from the camp. He went back to the herd with his wife and took three reindeer, which they brought to the camp. After lunch he made a short speech: "We are going to make a sacrifice, no cameras or recorders can be used, and leave your bad thoughts behind in the camp." The first part of the speech was clearly addressed to Eva, who had a camera and a minidisk recorder, but the second could well have been addressed to his wife, who had been very irritated the whole day. The sacrifice was held in the private sacred place, in the presence of the whole household: his wife, his second daughter and her two sons as well as Eva. The ritual was very similar to the others we had witnessed: having tied the reindeer with a lasso, and put some whitish fabric around their necks, Yuri addressed the gods. Then he slaughtered the reindeer by knocking them down with the back of an axe and then pushing in a knife under their front legs in order to stab the heart, and behind the neck to hit the brain. All the time until the legs of the reindeer became still, Yuri talked to the gods and whipped their bodies with the lasso, as if encouraging the animals to run faster, for the movements of the reindeer's legs represent its galloping towards the other world and when the reindeer remains still, it means it has arrived. When the sacrifice was over, he poured vodka for "those who can drink it"<sup>177</sup> and everybody took some food from the small table of food and drink offerings. Then the longest part of all started – the skinning and the cutting of the meat, as there were three reindeer. The male animal genitalia were thrown up into a tree, and the heads were also hung on the same tree. Then we went back home on sledges pulled by a snowmobile.

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<sup>177</sup> Yuri never consumes alcohol himself and he is usually very angry with people who do. But for sacrifices he accepts it, although he never joins in the drinking himself, and nor does his wife.

This story shows how serious Yuri is about sacrificing. As long as only his comfort was at stake, he could linger and give his reindeer time. But as soon as the situation became critical (the dream), quick action was required. The fact that he forbade any kind of recording<sup>178</sup> was clearly another sign of the seriousness of the situation: it was not meant to be an exotic display, but a real ceremony with a real purpose, not fit to be mixed up with a public show of local identity. It was designed for a higher purpose, to protect the inhabitants of the camp from impending death. Actually we learned later that in those days a Nenets woman in the village of Varyogan died. Yuri presented this information as proof that the sacrifice had been successful and that Death had to turn to another place to catch his prey<sup>179</sup>.

## Prayers<sup>180</sup>

The performer of the sacrifice – which is always the oldest of the men – is the one who prays in a loud voice. And Yuri does it in Nenets, although it is not a language he uses every day. Actually, in the last years, many of his Nenets partners in conversation, elderly men, have died. As he is married to a Khanty woman who does not know Nenets actively, he

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178 Kaur Mägi has also had the experience of Yuri forbidding any recording or photographing during a sacrifice (oral information, June 2010). Actually we do not know how Yuri would have reacted if someone was making a documentary about him at that time. Would he have allowed recording the ritual because the would-be film could serve as a concrete benefit for his cause? We are inclined to believe that Yuri Vella, despite of his eagerness to use film for his political ends, would have been very careful turning this critical situation into a media event.

179 This idea of replacement in death is clearly very much present in the understanding of how the interaction between humans and forces functions: it is possible to steer the final direction of the strike. A good example is one comment Yuri Vella made to us in 2009 about the oldest inhabitant of Varyogan. Being asked whether this man was still alive, he observed with a look of disgust on his face: “Oh, yes, and he is not close to death. He feeds on his children: all of them are now dead; he avoided his own death by eating them. This man is dangerous.” (See also Vitebsky 2005: 124, for quite a similar example of replacement.)

180 Few prayers have been recorded from the Forest Nenets. We have some samples in Lehtisalo’s Nenets texts collection (1947: 547–549) in different situations. Two of them are prayers accompanying a reindeer sacrifice as in our material. Still, except for having in both cases an address to Num, the main heavenly god, we do not recognise any formulas corresponding to the texts presented below.

never speaks it at home: their daughters were brought up in Russian and so have their grandchildren. Therefore usually there is nobody around who understands Nenets. His praying in his mother tongue is thus quite annoying for his wife. Once in 1999, during a meal, she said: “You have talked too long. What could you have to say so extensively?” He answered: “And I didn’t by far say all I wanted.” Actually, for him his prayer is as a private conversation, an address to the gods, and its form seems quite free: one may recognise very short formulas in the address parts, but the core of the text is quite flexible, as proved both by this fragment of conjugal conversation and by the way the prayer is pronounced, as clearly Yuri is looking for words that match his thoughts at the moment. Still, this freedom according to which every prayer is a single event represents a choice of formulas that may be repeated, and thus, the composition of prayers reveals, like many other features in this field, a limited flexibility (see below).

During the previously reported offering in 2009, the text of the prayer was the following, according to Yuri’s own translation from the video tape into Russian:

*Eh, Old Man of the Vatyogan! Our guests, those two<sup>181</sup>, because they walk on this land, have brought you as an offering this small pieces of fabric. Receive this offering with your right hand. Protect well your land from those who threaten it. Not only your land, but our land as well<sup>182</sup>. Let our reindeer never be without food, let our reindeer always find their nourishment here<sup>183</sup>. Let the other animals in their nests never be without food. Let the animals never meet distress. Let fish always dwell in your former riverbeds<sup>184</sup>. Old Man of the Vatyogan, look well after this land; let the plants grow well and the lichen sprout well. Let the reindeer calves always find food between the legs of their mothers; let them always find*

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181 The authors of this article.

182 Yuri Vella refers to the same land on the Vatyogan, which belongs both to the god and to the people who live there.

183 Clearly a formula: see Vella 2008: 76.

184 The Siberian rivers have many meanders. Some of them have become still pools isolated by land from their former river.

*lichen and mushrooms<sup>185</sup>. Continue to add good days<sup>186</sup>. Let the men walking on this land never meet misfortune. Let people always meet each other with a smile. Eh, Mistress of the Agan, you too, look here, take you too this offering in your hand and bring these fabrics to your lips. Let your hand touch this offering. And help the Old Man of the Vatyogan to guard this land. Eh, Master of the taiga, you too, look here. You were, at some time in the depth of the centuries, also assigned the task of protecting this land<sup>187</sup>.*

Some remarks about this text. First of all, the addressees: Yuri, as he emphasised in his own commentary on the translation, addressed three gods at different levels. Two of them were local divinities, one of them ruling the closest river, and another the whole basin. The third god was a very general one, the master of the taiga, who seems to be totally unconnected with the places themselves, but is the protector of some kinds of beings – in this case, he is the protector of vegetation. In terms of structure, the introduction explains the offering, and begs for its acceptance; the second part expresses what is wished for in exchange of the offering. Actually, our presence is just a pretext: we, the visitors, seem to ask for permission or to express gratitude for the permission to walk on these lands. Yet, the demands do not come from us, but from the people belonging to the gods. There is one main demand: protection of the land against those who threaten it. But Yuri mentions them just once; he prefers to insist on the positive demands. The ‘beneficiaries’ of the demands are first of all the fauna and flora: the reindeer, the other animals, the plants; then again the reindeer and only after them the human residents. Thus the prayer is focused on nature and men are present as part of nature, with wishes most similar. We do not know if and to what extent Yuri chose the wording of his prayer thinking about the future film about the Land of Love and about his fight with the oil people there.

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185 Forest Nenets is a language that uses augmentatives and diminutives widely. Here both words “lichen” and “mushrooms” are in their diminutive form, because they are connected to reindeer calves. In addition to the reindeer’s main food – lichen – Yuri Vella mentions mushrooms because reindeer are very fond of them. As a rule, the Nenets, Forest as well as Tundra Nenets, do not eat mushrooms themselves in order to leave them to the reindeer (Susoy 1994: 19).

186 Yuri’s explanation: “There have been good days until now, let them continue.”

187 Yuri’s explanation: the Master of the taiga is responsible for the vegetable world, which is also threatened.

Actually we have another video recording of a sacrifice described below, in which there was also a verbal dimension. In December 2000, Liivo filmed a ceremony whose main aim was to provide Yuri's kin in the village with meat. Yuri brought from his camp three reindeer, one of them white. The sacrifice was held in the small pine grove behind his village house in Varyogan, and his kin attended it. Actually there were also non-natives, either husbands of his kinswomen or acquaintances (one Ukrainian). All the men were involved in the ritual slaughtering. They followed the rules of traditional sacrifice: the men stood in one line side by side while Yuri knocked the reindeer down with the back of the axe before stabbing the animals in the heart and behind the head. After having skinned the animals, he divided the meat among the different households of his family. The ceremony was concluded by another ritual act: Yuri's son-in-law (the father of his youngest daughter's baby), instructed by Yuri, dipped a small piece of reindeer hide in blood and drew two circles on the house: first on the wall facing the grove and then on the wall to its right.

Yuri prayed two times during the sacrifice: the first time shortly before stabbing each reindeer and then later again because the legs of one of the stabbed animals were still moving. We have the video recordings of the prayer before the slaughter of the first and the third reindeer. In the case of the first, a white reindeer, Yuri addressed the heavenly divinities – Father and Mother of Heaven. The other address was general, without any mention of a concrete god. The texts were simple and short, with two main themes: asking the gods to accept the offering, and protect the people called their “children”<sup>188</sup>. The second moment in the ceremony when Yuri spoke – for quite a long time – was when the three animals had been knocked down and stabbed one after another. They were actually dead, but one of them still moved its legs. The lasso was put around his neck and Yuri talked to the gods while shaking the lasso, as imitating the movement of reins. Then he addressed different gods, most of them local: he started with the one of Varyogan (Tupka Nat in Nenets), then the Mistress of the Agan, and then the Old Man of the Forest. At this point we notice that the structure is pretty much the same as in the previously reported offering:

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188 “Mother of the heaven, old man of the heaven, look at the offerings put here by these children. Let the children who walk on the earth walk without trouble. Try to give them a good time and good weather.” (Text translated by Kaur Mägi.)

firstly the divinity of the particular place, then the master or mistress of the larger river basin, and then the master of the taiga. This seems to be the main 'trinity'. His list was, however, not finished: he also addressed the God of the Tyuytyaha, the rivulet close to his camp, and a god in the form of a goose, a clan divinity<sup>189</sup>.

So usually prayers are a compulsory part of any reindeer slaughter and this, as well as feeding the spirits (see the next chapter) shows that each slaughter is a sacrifice. Most of those performed by Yuri correspond to this rule, but not all. When Eva and Liivo were at the summer camp in August 2009, the slaughtering took place on the last day of their stay. The family was moving south to Agan for a few days, to the funeral of one of Yuri's wife's elderly kin, and the camp was visited by a neighbouring Khanty couple. The slaughtering had been decided before, but the coming of these neighbours, whose relations with Yuri were not the best<sup>190</sup>, led him to take advantage of the neighbour's better skills of lassoing and they marked the calves together. Then they chose a reindeer whose fur was already long enough to make it fit to be used, and they slaughtered it. Yuri's mood was not the best: the tension with the neighbours, the fact that it was too early to slaughter a reindeer, the forthcoming trip to Agan reflected on his disposition. Even the presence of the camera seemed to annoy him this time. Thus the slaughtering proceeded quite rapidly: all the men stood side by side, the men of the family closer to the reindeer, the neighbour standing behind, but still in the sacred space. And all the usual proceedings were respected, except the verbal ones. Yuri only commented about the cat that was expecting meat at some distance, and just killed the reindeer in the usual way without a single address to the gods. Moreover he, his wife and his son-in-law left the subsequent activities (skinning, cutting, washing and cleaning parts of the meat) to the neighbours. This reflects the absence of dogmatism, the flexibility that characterises his 'religious' practice.

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189 All this information is due to the translation from Forest Nenets by Kaur Mägi.

190 The neighbour's herd grazed not far from the place in which Yuri's herd stayed in the rut period, and Yuri was afraid that the herds might get mixed. Moreover, the neighbours have made compromises with the oil workers that Yuri Vella does not approve of. Still, they keep seemingly friendly neighbourly relations.



## **FLEXIBILITY IN YURI VELLA'S SPIRITUALITY**

What we call flexibility is the absence of any absolute rules in proceedings. There are ordinary features, but exceptions are always possible. We could also call this feature 'pragmatism'. It appears in different fields.

For example, as we have shown, sometimes the ceremonies are rigidly kept from recording, but sometimes filming is allowed. It depends on the nature of the sacrifice. The ceremony where Eva was asked not to use recording devices was carried out in order to prevent the death of his wife – therefore, the ritual was too serious and too urgent for Yuri to risk the efficiency of it by allowing it to be recorded. In other instances, for example, when Yuri slaughtered three reindeer for meat, the rituals had a more general nature and Yuri did not mind someone recording them, as long as the filmmaker or the researcher followed certain basic rules of behaviour during the ceremony, like staying behind the sacrificed animal and not crossing the line where other male participants of the ceremony were standing. And then there were ceremonies where Yuri was genuinely interested in having been filmed, as in the case of sacrificing the piece of white fabric we had brought with us.

As we have shown, there is no difference in nature between the slaughtering mainly for meat or slaughtering mainly for sacrifice – we use the word 'sacrifice' mainly in order to characterise the predominant scope of the slaughtering to be inserted into a continuous axis. The ritual may be simplified and the verbal dimension reduced, but the house gods must be fed with sacrificial blood. While for an explicit sacrifice all the camp will be physically present, when the ritual aspect is not emphasised, everyone's presence is not as compulsory. Once after the first snow in the autumn of 1999 one reindeer was slaughtered for meat as Eva was working in the log cabin. She was not called to attend, and she saw Yuri coming in with a bloody bunch of fur, opening the box situated on the sacred wall and 'feeding the spirits' with it. This showed that undoubtedly it was considered as a sacrifice. In other cases – as in the slaughtering of reindeer in August 2009 – we did not notice the feeding of the spirit dolls in the cabin. It may have been due to lack of attention from our side, but we cannot exclude that it just did not take place.

We have no clues about the reasons for the non-accomplishment of one rite or another; we have not conversed on this issue with Yuri himself. But we should take into account the possibility of very human reasons, such as fatigue (our hosts are ageing and may be tempted to reduce efforts to the minimum), stress, bad mood and other forms of mental disposition.

Another sign of dominant flexibility is the fusion of Khanty and Nenets traditions in Yuri's practice. Using fabric for sacrifices seems to be a Khanty custom<sup>191</sup> practiced also by the Forest Nenets in certain areas, mostly where sacred places are visited by both communities, but not everywhere<sup>192</sup>. We do not know to what extent using fabric in sacrifices is due to the regional Forest Nenets peculiarities and to what extent it is a syncretic feature of Yuri's offerings that he has borrowed from the Khanty. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Niglas & Toulouze 2004: 110), Yuri himself does not often draw a clear line between Forest Nenets and Khanty tradition and he tends to see the indigenous people of the region as one culture.

What we would like to emphasise at this point is that rules are not to be followed blindly, and that each person, each head of family knows when and how they may be adapted. Clearly, the interest and the welfare of the reindeer and the people are always taken into account. This is no peculiarity of Yuri's approach, but a general feature known in Siberian Arctic communities. Flexibility and mobility are general characteristics of the peoples' worldview and Yuri is no exception.

Still, this flexibility may have limits, and we suppose that the concrete definition of the limits is very much connected with the single individual's understanding. While being quite flexible in most matters, there are rules that must be complied with. We can formulate the hypothesis that there are general rules followed by everybody, no one even thinking of

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191 Eva has witnessed it among the Eastern Khanty. See also the description of a collective sacrifice, where the Khanty use fabric the same way Yuri does (Balalajeva & Wiget 2004: 81).

192 There are data about using fabrics as offerings by the Forest Nenets: Zen'ko-Nemchikova reports, when mentioning an analogy with Khanty rituals, the Forest Nenets tradition of bringing to sacred places in collective sacrificing ceremonies fabrics in different colours, white being the colour for the spirits of the high world, of the skies. Unfortunately, she does not describe the ritual slaughtering of reindeer (Zen'ko-Nemchikova 2006: 238). Khomich does not exactly describe sacrifices, but gives a general overview, in which fabrics are not mentioned (Khomich 1995: 210, 219).

ignoring them, a kind of hard core on the axis, while others are submitted to individual choices and variations. There are rules that are particularly important for Yuri, according to our observation, and he is quite critical of their non-compliance by other performers. The fact that others may overlook them shows that they do not belong to the hardest core.

In his camp, when a sacrifice is performed, women do not take any active part before skinning. They are present at some distance (5–10 meters), staring, but not moving or bowing. They only join the men in the sacred area to take food from the sacrificial table. Yuri's wife does not participate in any spiritual practice (at least openly). However, there are different examples. For instance, once we watched on a VHS cassette a public ceremony performed in Khanty-Mansiisk on behalf of the indigenous Association to Save Yugra<sup>193</sup> by the Northern Khanty writer Maria Vagatova-Voldina, who is a respected elderly woman. Yuri commented on this ceremony, highly disapproving of her “putting” herself forward in that position, while there were men available. She was most probably the oldest person present, and certainly no more of fertile age<sup>194</sup>, but as there were younger men present, she broke some rules by performing or accepting to perform this sacrifice, moreover publicly. Clearly, this deed was not perceived as shocking by many Khanty, Mansi or Nenets, as it was organised by an institution whose members are natives. However, it is an institution in which women, and even younger women<sup>195</sup>, have played a central role from the very beginning, and it is probably their influence that has led to more flexibility in gender issues.

But for Yuri, an elderly man himself, a patriarch within his own family, flexibility has its limits, and the issue of gender roles is certainly one of them. He seems to be very keen on systematically separating the genders, as Eva had the opportunity to observe during all her fieldwork (Toulouze, 2014). We do not know enough about the Forest Nenets'

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193 In Russian: Assotsiatsiya Spaseniye Yugry.

194 Gender in indigenous cultures is a wider issue, not to be developed in this context. However, fertility is the basis of taboos to be followed by women: girls who are still not menstruating and women past menopause are seen as closer to men. Therefore, sacral activities led by elderly women could be acceptable from this point of view. As Vella's wife is a Khanty, we have no information about Forest Nenets female cults.

195 The first president was Tatiana Gogoleva, a young Mansi woman, later a successful politician, who was assisted by Zoya Ryabchikova, a young Khanty teacher.

traditional gender practices to appreciate whether this limit in flexibility is a documented or Yuri's own reinvented tradition. We may just observe that, according to Yuri's own words, compared with the Khanty, the Nenets tend to be much more relaxed about rules, and it is certainly the case with gender issues<sup>196</sup>. But practice reveals that it is certainly very important for him to emphasise male predominance in the spiritual sphere.

## AMBIGUITY IN YURI VELLA'S PERCEPTIONS

Sometimes, we still have the impression that Yuri's position concerning spiritual matters is not as crystal clear as it would seem in the previous sections. We shall focus on two problematic points: his relation to shamanism and to filming. His views seem to be contradictory and ambiguous on both issues, at least to our understanding, and we shall try to unravel them.

### Yuri Vella and shamanism <sup>197</sup>

Every adult man in the Khanty and Nenets environment is able to communicate with invisible agents in some ways. This is actually what any head of family does when he makes an offering. To transmit one's wishes to the gods does not require high esoteric skills, and the 'making of a god' shows very much the same, as above. But men who have more skills get in touch more easily with unseen beings, of whom some may even assist them. This mediation role is the function of shamans, who have both skills and techniques to get superior knowledge and abilities, who can

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196 Even today the Khanty have customs that show how seriously gender rules are observed: the reluctance of elderly women to accept trousers in the younger's vestimentary practices, the women's reserved behaviour with male visitors according to Yuri Vella's own remarks, and the custom of hiding the face behind the scarf in the presence of male non-blood kin (*izbeganie*).

197 It would certainly make sense to further develop the issue of shamanism today among the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia. While some researchers have touched upon it (Siikala & Ulyashev 2010), the aim of this article is not to delve into the question in general, but to try to understand, based on Vella's practice, how he relates to it.

be helped by spirits to find answers. The most famous among the Forest Nenets shamans was *Kalliat*<sup>198</sup> from the Ngakhany clan, Toivo Lehtisalo's main informant in 1914 (Lehtisalo 1959). In this region, shamans have generally disappeared. The persecutions against them in the 1930s have been well documented (Leete 2007). Yuri himself mentions them in his literary texts, especially in one story whose main character is the old man Kapitya-ai, a Khanty whose skills were so genuinely recognised by the Nenets that they gave him a Nenets name. Kapitya-ai was denounced to the Soviet authorities as a shaman and committed suicide thereafter (Vella 2008: 34–35). Actually, Yuri never says explicitly that Kapitya-ai, or his Nenets counterpart Yavunko (he too was so popular among the other ethnic group as to have been given a Khanty name), were shamans. He says they were wise old men who knew many stories. It is not difficult to understand, especially when reading a recently published story about Yavunko (Vella 2008: 27–29) that these old men had superior knowledge and skills. But Yuri is reluctant to use the word 'shaman'.

One must of course be prudent in saying that there are no shamans any more, and one must not forget that there may be people practising shamanic skills while there is no wider knowledge of it. The Khanty are very secretive about their shamanic practice as well as their 'religious' practice in general, secrecy being a fundamental part of it (cf. Pesikova 2006). The Forest Nenets seem to be less so<sup>199</sup>. The only thing we may say for sure about the Nenets, is that the last Nenets who had the reputation of being a shaman in the Agan basin was Yancha, whose son Pavel died in the 1990s as an old man. The memory of Yancha is caricatural: Yuri himself sings a song imitating Yancha, who was a very old man who would often drowse while beating the drum and singing about fly agaric. There is no full proof he was a shaman, but if we add it to his reputation, we may assume he might have been one. Actually Yuri had never seen the old man himself, only others imitating him. So, as often happens, a personal song is performed through several intermediate interpretations. The comical aspect of Yuri's performance is interesting: is it a way of showing shamans

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198 On *Kalliat*, see Mägi & Toulouze 2002.

199 An observation made to Eva in 1999 by Yuri Vella himself, who remarked that the Forest Nenets adapted much better to the new rules after the Revolution: they were the first around Varyogan to become members of the Communist Party.

through ridicule? Is it a relic of Soviet practices, when shamanism was prohibited? Is it only a funny way for Yuri to perform a song? It is difficult to give a clear answer to these questions. We would suggest that political caution was not the only psychological reason at stake. Soviet materialist education has not left Yuri unscarred, and scepticism, while not totally acknowledged, may be expressed in that way. Anyhow, Yuri seems not to be willing to be explicit on this subject.

As far as the Khanty are concerned, the 'last' shaman in the Agan basin, Ivan Ivanovich Sopochin, whose character has been fixed in Lennart Meri's film about the bear feast, *The Sons of Torum* (1990)<sup>200</sup>, is still alive in people's memory, as he died only in the mid-1990s<sup>201</sup>. Yuri knew him well, and is even better acquainted with Sopochin's son, Iosif Ivanovich, who is a very well-known person in the Agan community. He is suspected of having inherited some of his father's abilities, but he is still not considered a full shaman and he tries to play the role of a leader in the community, though he seems to be much more intimidated by the oil industry than Yuri.

We mentioned the situation in the Agan basin because Yuri is actually deeply interested, even fascinated, by shamanism: it is clear when he watches recordings of Ivan Sopochin's drum playing in the film *Refugees from Kogalym* (Yernazarova 1991), as both Eva and Liivo have separately witnessed. Once in December 2000, when Liivo was filming some evening activities in Yuri's cabin, Yuri was again watching the film and commented that while one is playing the drum, one straightens up, becomes lighter. He is also in trouble with the definition of the word 'shaman'. In a sequence included in *Yuri Vella's World* (Niglas 2003), Yuri is watching a VHS recording of a German television programme, where he is presented as a shaman; in his smile, comments and tone one may read several concomitant attitudes: on the one hand it is clear that the suggestion of his being a shaman is seen and felt as absurd and ridiculous; on the other hand, he feels flattered by the idea. Actually this sums up the ambiguity of Yuri's attitude towards shamanism. What is shamanism, who is a shaman,

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200 Lennart Meri was an Estonian writer and filmmaker, who made several films about Finno-Ugric peoples from the 1970s onwards. He later became the first president of Estonia after the country regained independence.

201 About Ivan Sopochin, see Kerezsi 1995.

who is or may be a shaman? And could he be a shaman?

The fact that this is an issue for Yuri becomes clear if you look into the glossary presented in the last issue of his Nenets journal *Tilhivsama*<sup>202</sup>. In this glossary, he tries to explain the notion of *tadibja*, which is the Forest Nenets word usually translated as ‘shaman’. Yuri explicitly denies this connection: for him, to translate *tadibja* as shaman is a sign that the reader has understood nothing. This reveals that Yuri tries to disassociate the Nenets notion (seen as expressing something serious and important, highly symbolic of native communities’ identity) from the Russian word for this phenomenon<sup>203</sup>, which is seen by Yuri as inappropriate. This shows his personal concern about the whole notion, and actually this may also be significant for the whole generation, for they themselves lack a living experience of shamanism as they have not been brought up with it. They have been accustomed to hearing this word used by Russians with a depreciative connotation, and even worse consequences. So the word is dangerous, and does not cover a stable notion, for during the repressions, among the people accused of being shamans, there were wise old men, mere bearers of tradition. Still, shamanic knowledge is part of the symbolic tradition of Siberian indigenous people, so it was necessary for Yuri to define his position towards it, as soon as he made the choice of accepting his cultural heritage. This may explain why he likes to emphasise his organic connection to shamanistic knowledge: he often, for example also in *Yuri Vella’s World*, tells a story about his parents, who consulted a shaman one and a half years before he was born; the shaman predicted his birth (a boy), and that he would be the only child, as well as the early death of his father. As a matter of fact, we have the impression that Yuri would very much like to be a shaman, but as far as we know, he is not one. He has hinted to us that he has no special abilities, and he may assert that as a fact, because he has probably checked himself, hoping

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202 At the beginning of the 1990s, Yuri Vella started to issue a paper in Forest Nenets – the first attempt to write this language, following his uncle Leonid Aivaseda’s first number of the publication. It was a single sheet, either A4 or A3, with articles, poetry, riddles, photos and drawings, everything made by Yuri himself. He stopped publishing it after the eighth issue.

203 We are well aware that the international word ‘shaman’ is not a Russian word, but a loan from a Tungus language (Vitebsky 2005: 12). However, it is the word used by Russians and that is why we call it here functionally ‘Russian’.

to discover that actually he is one. But the facts were very clear and he definitely regretted not to be able to be in direct contact with the spirits. Nevertheless, as he writes in one of his short prose texts (Vella 2008: 34), anybody – not only a shaman – can beat the drum<sup>204</sup>. Yuri himself has one and, as he has told Liivo, sometimes, on special occasions, he beats it.

Still, he likes to entertain ambiguity; although, in a rational conversation he says that unfortunately he is not a shaman. However, he likes to recall the two stories an old man used to tell, one if he wished the next day would very cold, the other to call for warm temperatures – as in the written version of this story (Vella 2008: 28–29). Yuri always finishes his storytelling by saying that he has used them himself to get the weather he wishes. As one of the main signs of one being a shaman is the ability to master the natural elements and especially the weather, he achieves thus – if by words only – his dream of having special gifts.

Apart from the abovementioned episodes in which Yuri was reacting to film images on a TV screen and telling a story about his birth, Yuri never talked about shamanism in front of the camera. We assume that it can be explained by his deep belief in shamanism. The forces that are engaged in shamanistic beliefs and rituals are too powerful to play with, although it would certainly help to attract media attention that is so vital for Yuri in order to achieve his political goals. But Yuri cannot pretend to be a shaman when he is not one – it could be dangerous for his life and for his family's welfare.

## Filming: public versus private

Actually, as a public person, Yuri often relies on his native way of interpreting the world in order to achieve his goals. It is interesting to follow how he has used the President's reindeer story for media communication (cf. Niglas & Toulouze 2004; Niglas 2005; Novikova 2000:

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204 “The drum hangs on the wall. You would like to reach out and give it a beat, but you feel hesitant. Nowadays many raise a drum beat not in order to get power for their souls, but to fill their stomachs. It wouldn't be good if my children and my grandchildren would think that my art existed just to increase the family budget .... The drum hangs on the wall. And still, you would like to beat it so badly...” (Vella 2008: 34).



online; Khanzerova 2009: online; Butenschön 2003: online). Another example is how, in April 1999, when, as mentioned above, he erected a conic tent in front of the local administration building in Khanty-Mansiisk and in order to give more weight to his message, he took advantage of a Nenets custom connected with death. He put inside the tent a doll that represented the administration, which was ill with 'oil plague'. He then referred to the Nenets practice of leaving a dead person in the tent, and transformed the tent into a tomb only by changing the direction of the opening door and turning it towards the West (Niglas 2005: 127). However, traditions and worldview are different from spiritual issues. Eva has heard Yuri discussing the Ob-Ugrian practice of the bear feasts. He denied in a conversation that these events belong to the 'religious' sphere: he considers them as a way of being. Here, we recognise the holistic feature of native spirituality. It would be wiser and more appropriate to use the concept of 'continuum' proceeding from the direct address to the gods toward the everyday practice of native culture, in which examples like the ones quoted above or the President's reindeer are situated in between.

He counts on the attraction of exoticism and uses it for achieving his own aims, which are meant to protect the land for future generations. He uses this tactic on several levels. Once, in the winter of 1999, while Eva was a guest in his camp, two cars full of Russians visited him. He was not deeply acquainted with the visitors. They brought him a bottle of vodka as a gift. Yuri, very much as we can imagine an indigenous chief, gathered them in his cabin; he delivered a very impressive speech both about the rules to be followed in the forest and about the deadly significance of vodka as a gift. His attitude, sitting and speaking like a patriarch, added weight to his message. We thus see that he is able to manipulate curiosity about exoticism.

Yuri has very much taken advantage of the media as a way to give publicity to his endeavours for he has understood the importance of it in forging public opinion and thus giving strength to social forces. Here we may mention two early experiences. In 1990, there was a wave of reindeer killings and reindeer helicopter hunting by oil workers. Yuri organised a demonstration closing the road to the oil field, and invited not only regional, but also international media (Swedish TV was on the spot). The erection of a conic tent in the middle of the square facing the regional

administration in Khanty-Mansiisk in the spring of 1999 was also a highly mediatised event. We may wonder, seeing that he has used traditional customs – i.e., that the Nenets give reindeer to friends and relatives who are far away in order to follow their wellbeing – to send political messages to the Russian president if he has also used traditional religious practices to gain media attention, as has been done in the same region, for example by the Saving Yugra association, who organised public sacrifices<sup>48</sup> and bear feasts. What are the uses of the sacred in the public sphere?

One of the public actions connected with the sacred realm is the denunciation of shameful acts committed by officials against what should be sacred. Some public appearances of these issues may be identified both in literature and in action. Some literary texts are devoted to the expression of Yuri's reactions to desecration.

More privately, Yuri reacts extremely painfully when oil companies intrude in sacred places. In the basin of the Vatyogan, a tributary of the Agan River, there is the abovementioned sacred place on the top of a hill (see above, the offering in 2009). The Nenets (and certainly also the Khanty) used to visit this place and make sacrifices and offerings. Yuri told us on camera that when he was working as a hunter in the vicinity in the 1980s, there were reindeer antlers and skins all over the trees. When we were there, we could see only a few very recent ones hanging on the trees. The old ones had disappeared, and Yuri accused the oil workers of having removed them<sup>205</sup>. According to Yuri, the same oil company workers used to drive over the hill, until he informed them that for the natives it is a sacred place. Then Lukoil's workers came with a bulldozer and made a ditch to block the access for motorcars to the sacred place. But "they did not understand that the whole hill is sacred". And, for mysterious reasons, they planted an enormous metal pole on the top of the hill, probably as a geodesic landmark. Yuri explained to us in an angry voice that he was shocked, as he was also shocked when the newcomers did not respect cemeteries: for him, as he told us (the Western people), "it is like someone knocked a metal pole in the middle of a church". Moreover, although this does not reflect directly what sacred places represent for him, it shows

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205 Actually the oil workers are those who, according to Yuri, behave as no natives would. As a matter of fact, there are no other non-native people in the area besides the oil workers.

the requirements for general respect for the sacred that he would expect to see followed.

There are several other examples of how newcomers have desecrated places important for the indigenous peoples. Close to the city of Raduzhnyy, a suburb of dachas has been built on the sacred place of the Kazymkin's clan. The little town of Novoagansk, 8 km from Varyogan, has been built on a cemetery. In *Yuri Vella's World* (Niglas 2003), he recalls the time when it was part of nature. The sad expression on his face is more eloquent than any words. The desecration of cemeteries is a bad newcomer habit from which the locals have suffered. Close to Lukoil's 7th department automobile base, at a distance of 150–200 metres from the lake, was the grave of Yuri's grandmother's mother-in-law, Evy. And as we have already mentioned, the leaders of the oil workers' settlement of Povkh, according to Yuri's story, all died some time after destroying the sacred place. However, this story remains a private conversation and we have the impression that it is too serious a question to make fun of and to manipulate for the mass media. Still, it was told to the camera. We have the impression that filming is something between totally public expression and an intimate conversation. Yuri knows that eventually part or all of it may become public, but everything depends on the filmmaker's editing. Could it be that for Yuri ethnographic filmmaking, based on a long-term relationship between the filmmaker and the film subject, is more accurate and delicate means of representing his inner reality than TV reportage or news programmes, which often focus on the superficial and sensational? Although Yuri has never clearly expressed his content with *Yuri Vella's World*, saying half-jokingly only that it is "an Estonian view" of his life, his eagerness to be filmed again in 2009 proved that he must have been rather pleased with Liivo's film.

We have seen in the case of a very serious sacrifice and in the case of shamanic activities that Yuri is reluctant to exploit the exotic 'religious' issue for other purposes; it acts in his life as a value per se, which is not to be desecrated for profane use. But these are extreme examples. We may still wonder where the border between the indigenous worldview and religious issues runs. Does Yuri himself draw a distinct border? Aren't clear borders a characteristic of Western scientific thinking, incompatible with the way Siberian indigenous peoples reflect on their own experience?

## CONCLUSION

The study of Yuri's connection to the sacred within his ontology shows one individual's possible approach. The comments above are an attempt to draw a possible model on the basis of what we were able to observe by living with him and his family, by filming him and following his discourse. Is it possible today to study these issues otherwise than to examine each individual in depth? Thanks to Lehtisalo, we have some representation of what could have been the understanding of the sacred by the Forest Nenets back in 1914 (Lehtisalo 1924). Later on they emerged from isolation and were exposed to the very strong influence of Soviet ideology for many generations. This led to a painful duality in their consciousness, while their worldview was basically holistic. The duality in understandings – materialism against animism –, with a double belonging – village against wild – has coerced each individual to negotiate ways of positioning themselves, of inventing their own ways out of the deadlock, of dealing with their own personhood and spirituality. Yuri's experience is particularly interesting, for he is an intellectual deeply conscious of himself. It is impossible to argue that he follows the path of his forefathers. He wishes to do so, but he is compelled to adapt, to recreate his identity, his tradition, in order to find himself and to look for support in the forces that are external to him.

His practice is serious and committed. Unlike many other ethnic activists, he does not exploit this sphere of spirituality for his struggle for indigenous rights. Although he is known to have participated in massive collective sacrifices, he has never organised one, albeit his imagination has proven to be very fertile when he looks for media-friendly forms to achieve his political aims. He has undoubtedly used what can appear as peculiarities of the indigenous worldview to promote his welfare and to draw attention to the needs of the local indigenous population, but he has not mixed his personal spirituality with the public sphere of protest and political expression.

However, as has been demonstrated in this article, Yuri is rather enthusiastic about being filmed, even when it comes to recording rituals and sacrifices. Thus, his reluctance to use spiritual matters in his public appearances as the testimonies of his life experience and indigenous

identity is not absolute. His attitude towards filming religious practices is flexible, as it is also flexible towards other aspects of his socio-cultural reality. It depends on the nature of the particular ritual and perhaps also on the specific relationship he has with the person(s) behind the camera. In some cases filming can even be a sort of catalyst for a ritual, or at least have some influence on the proceedings of the ritual.

All in all, Yuri is very ambiguous and cautious when it comes to stating his religious understandings. On the one hand, due to his intellectual background, he is more than capable of rationalising along the lines of Western materialism. But on the other hand, as a person who is strongly aware of himself as a native, Yuri understands that it is absolutely vital to negotiate one's position with the spirits, to communicate with them. Yuri has learnt to play his role as spiritual leader in his own family, although he seems to be more at ease in the ordinary communication with spirits than trying to fit himself into the role of a shaman. Yuri is well aware of peculiar power coming from some people – Ivan Sopochin was undoubtedly a strong shaman –, but he tends to be critical of the notion, and more importantly, he cannot but reconcile with the reality that he does not master the necessary abilities. While indigenous spirituality plays an important role in the conscious construction of Yuri's personhood, the specific aspect of this spirituality – shamanistic experience – is too far out of his reach to be included in that construction or in the filmic representation of it.

In any case, this article is an attempt to outline a possible blueprint of a particular person's spirituality. We have found that the quest for a form of spirituality peculiar to the Western Siberian natives, without being theorised by Yuri, is very much present in his everyday life, while the influence of Soviet ideology is present in Yuri's caution both towards his visitors and towards the spiritual matter itself. This spirituality seems to be a late reconstruction, and as such it is both flexible on some aspects and rigid on others, as in gender matters. We achieved these results mainly on the basis of observation and filming. The next stage would be to conduct issue-centred interviews with Yuri, in order to discover what his own awareness is on the subject. As we have many hours of valuable video material on the topic, it would probably be fruitful to use it in interviews to elicit information from Yuri's conscious as well as unconscious mind. This will allow us to check the validity of our present deductions and give

us a clearer picture of the mechanisms behind Yuri's way of constructing, or reconstructing, his personhood as an intellectual, as a native, and as a spiritual person. Studying Yuri Vella in depth gives us a deeper insight into one particular way in which humans could adapt to invading Western globalised thinking.



# Buying a God in Paris: Cultural Hybridity in the Thinking of Yuri Vella, Forest Nenets Intellectual<sup>206</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper analyses highly creative and hybrid practices which tie up the Indigenous Siberian, European Christian and Soviet worlds in unexpected ways. Reflecting on the Forest Nenets reindeer herder, poet and intellectual Yuri Vella's understanding of the religious, the authors discuss an episode of turning an icon-like painting of Madonna with the Child into a Nenets "god". This took place in Paris half a year before Yuri's death. First, we present his short biography, emphasising the key moments that shaped his cosmological and religious sensibilities. Then we depict a ritual of "god-making" by using the ethnographic technique of thick description and then comment it from various angles and discuss what they reveal about Yuri's understanding of personhood and agency, relations with deities and other humans. Finally, we explain how animist notions and Christian elements become entangled in his religious thinking.

**Keywords:** animism; cultural hybridity; Forest Nenets; Notre-Dame de Paris; sacred objects

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## Introduction<sup>207</sup>

Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a remarkable indigenous intellectual, poet, reindeer herder and indigenous rights activist from Western Siberia. He spent the last decades of his life in the forest taking care of his reindeer and fighting against the encroaching oil industry that ignored the needs of the indigenous peoples in the region where he lived, i.e. the Forest Nenets and Khanty. Yuri belongs to those exceptional Siberian indigenous intellectuals who in the early 1990s returned to the ancestral way of life after being thoroughly immersed in the Soviet, i.e. Russian world<sup>208</sup>. Although much has been written about Yuri (e.g. Kornienko 2016; Leete 2014a; Mis'kova 1999; Niglas and Toulouze 2004; Novikova 2002; Toulouze and Niglas 2019), in this paper we endeavour to examine his intimate, inventive and hybrid religious thinking and practice. We rely on a particular event that took place in Paris a few months before his untimely death in September 2013. In order to better understand what happened there, we discuss the development of his religious thinking from his youth until his demise.

Yuri's thinking went through several important changes especially when he gradually (re)discovered the rich Forest Nenets spirit world in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. At that time, he began consciously reconstructing his own version of animist religiosity which had borrowings from the mainstream understanding of monotheisms: his ideas came from the village and the city as well as from the Forest Nenets and Khanty elders as well as from the forest environment that he observed as a hunter and herder<sup>209</sup>.

The ritual episode central to our reflections here may be summed

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207 This research has been funded by project PRG1584. We thank Kaur Mägi for his glossing and translations from Forest Nenets.

208 Another well-known example is the Tundra Nenets writer Anna Nerkagi (born in 1952) who returned to the tundra after living many years in the city of Tyumen.

209 The three authors of this article became acquainted with Yuri largely in the same period between 1998 and 2000: Eva in June 1998, Laur in January 1999 and Liivo in November 2000. Liivo and Eva have spent several months with Vella's family, alone as well as together, in his forest camps. We rely here on the materials of our fieldwork, our multiple conversations with Yuri, both in Siberia and elsewhere (Tartu, Helsinki, Paris), as well as on his writings as a poet and prose writer.



up as the “making of a god”, which, *per se*, may appear both exotic and intriguing as reflected in Yuri’s use of language and performative actions. This whole phenomenon is recognizably of an animist kind with its origins in distant Siberia but taking place in Paris, the totally unexpected surroundings of a Western European metropolis. Furthermore, this episode reverberates some deep historical links to harsh Sovietisation which made Indigenous communities with a very different perception of the world to find a way to survive in the new reality.

The episode commented in this article appeared to us as very significant and revealing of Yuri’s way of thinking, characterised by situatedness, fluidity and hybridity. We see cultural hybridity to be the act of living in borderlands, involving postcolonial ambivalence and triggering contestation of cultural difference while potentially empowering certain new cultural processes (Young 1995). Before we present a detailed description of the god-making event in the tradition of thick description<sup>210</sup>, we must go back to the broader context, both historical and autobiographical, in order to understand better its content and meaning.

## A Soviet village boy

When the Russian anthropologist Andrei Golovnyov first met Yuri Vella in 1992, the latter told him that he learnt about the Nenets supreme deity Num from books as well as when talking to some Khanty. Previously he had used the word *num* only to mark the sky and weather (Golovnyov 1995: 380)<sup>211</sup>. Also the ethnographer Viktoriya Spodina referred to Yuri’s “vague” ideas about Num by writing that Yu. K. Ayvaseda (Yuri’s passport

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210 Thick description is a concept widely used in anthropology and in other social sciences. According to Pontoretto, it „accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them” (2006: 543; see also Ryle’i [1971] 2009, Geertz 1973, Scheff 1986; Leete and Torop 2020).

211 For instance, when a Forest Nenets says *khoma num*, it does not mean a ‘good deity’ but ‘good weather’.

name was Ayvaseda) considered the word *num* to originate from the Khanty word *nomyn*, meaning the “upper” (2001: 25). As she writes, he associated *Num ve’ku* [‘Num man’] with various fishing, hunting or herding deities but not with the only, supreme sky god, as anthropologists and missionaries have been eager to depict him<sup>212</sup>.

On the one hand, Yuri’s ignorance may reflect the special status of Num in the animist religiosity of the Forest Nenets. This old-man-like deity is not spoken about or addressed often. Instead, the main communication takes place with various master spirits who live in rivers, lakes, trees and elsewhere. Historically, it seems that the importance of the sky deity has grown with the increasing contact of the indigenous population with the Russian Orthodox Church. Although Forest Nenets were relatively untouched by the direct Christian missionary campaigns, they heard about one powerful god from elsewhere, including their neighbours Khanty whose sky deity is called Numi-Torum<sup>213</sup>.

On the other hand, Yuri’s ignorance of Num as a supreme deity may reflect that he had just not happened to hear about this aspect. Apparently Num’s name was mentioned out of respect rarely (Spodina 2001: 26). As we know from the Finnish linguist Toivo Lehtisalo’s meticulous work from the early 1910s, the Forest Nenets were well aware of the existence of Num as a demiurge and supervisor of lesser spirits (1924: 8–9; see also Karapetova 1990: 65; Spodina 2001: 25–27; 2010: 203; Zen’ko-Nemchinova 2006: 201–202). One of the main sacred sites of the region is called Num-To (“Num’s lake”, which is however further away westwards from Yuri’s area in the Agan River basin, see Koshkareva 2016: 128–132). As Lehtisalo notes, Forest Nenets made sacrifices and petitioned Num who was given reindeer (sometimes also sheep bought from Russians) as a sacrifice in spring around the time of first grass, leaves and thunder and

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212 Towards the end of his life, Yuri considered Num to be just one out of many gods and not the principal deity – he calls the principal deity to be Tya-Makhang-Shcheishchi, ‘The master of the earth’s back without heart (immortal)’. He writes about Num that he lives on the lake of Num-To, calling him Num le’tpyota Num Vă’ku, “The sky guarding Sky-Man” (Vella 2012: 108). Apparently, for Yuri, sorting out a strict pantheon was not of interest.

213 For instance, Lehtisalo writes that Forest Nenets considered that Num had predestined the time of death of each person (1924: 29). This is just one possible example of the ideological impact of Christianity.

in autumn when the first snow fell and the migratory birds have left for the south, the purpose of which was staying healthy and happy throughout the season, or the Nenets year (1924: 28–29). Usually, no material figure was made for Num<sup>214</sup>.

Yuri's ignorance of one of the major religious figures comes from his upbringing. As Spodina notes referring to Yuri: "The informant himself links this inaccuracy to his rupture from the traditional way of life" (2001: 27). At the same time, Spodina refers to some other Forest Nenets men who gave particular details about Num as a sky deity who occasionally punished his children, i.e. humans, for their misdeeds (2001: 27, 74). Yuri was born in the taiga, but his parents were soon relocated to the village of Varyogan on the Agan River. His father committed suicide when Yuri was five and he was brought up primarily by his father's mother Nengi. Although his grandmother gave him a deep understanding of the Forest Nenets folklore by telling folk tales and singing songs, he might have not learned much about Num, as the sky deity is not a typical character in songs and tales.

So, apparently not much of explicit religious knowledge *per se* was conveyed to him by his grandmother. This may be well understood considering that he grew up in the village in a female environment, both at school and at home, not having around him adult men, who were the ones who performed rituals in the forest. Yuri lived in Varyogan, as did both his mother and grandmother, and after his elementary education he continued his studies in the bigger village of Agan, where there were more Khanty than Forest Nenets children. For his secondary school he moved to the Russian-speaking city of Surgut, where he dropped out as many other indigenous students. Being a village boy, he thus lacked the usual male experience of ritual practices that were very much alive in the forest.

However, the oral poetry he heard from his grandmother gave him a sensibility of an ontologically rather different world where spirit beings were abundant, active and powerful. Later on he spent much time out in the forest when working in a state enterprise as a hunter. This provided

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214 Lehtisalo argues that Nenets never make an image of Num (1924: 29). However, Mitusova reports from her expedition to Forest Nenets that during a sacrifice among the wooden images of deities (Rus. *derevyannye izobrazheniya bozhestva*) there was "Num, the deity of the sky, with lead eyes and nose, [that] holds in the lap one of his wives – Agan pushya with the head of an otter" (1929: 15).

him with an intimate perception of the environment where the spirits live (Vella 2012: 91–92).

Yuri's early fictional writings from the Soviet period also reflect some contacts with the local spirit world. His writings were rarely pure inventions: he relied on his personal experiences and sometimes merged several encounters with various personalities into a fictional character (Toulouze 2017a). For instance, when he writes about an old man who has just broken a finger and then repairs it miraculously, or when he speaks about an old shaman who crosses a lake in an inexplicable manner. While expressing his perplexity he presents these instances as facts. Another interesting case is how he reproduces a prayer in one short story, about an old man, Shay-iki, who utters a prayer at a meal with a guest who had brought a bottle of pure spirits according to the custom. The old man said petitionary words but without naming the names of particular gods (see Toulouze and Niglas 2019: Chapter 12 for more detail). Curiously, the words are very similar to some of Yuri's prayers to deities we recorded in 2009.

At the same time, Yuri was definitely influenced by his Soviet school education, in which God or gods had no place and the Christian God was the placeholder for absolute backwardness and ignorance. Much of his early education came from the boarding school where he received a typical atheist Soviet education, which ridiculed shamans and the natives' "backward superstitions". This is also a period when Yuri applied thrice for the Communist Party membership, not doubting the truths that had been given him by state school and authorities. Becoming a well-known indigenous intellectual in the 1990s required from him considerable self-transformation in the years when the wider society also began talking about various gods, world religions and the dangers of extraction industry.

## **Back to the forest via Moscow**

Yuri's moment of revelation took place after he was accepted to the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow at the age of 35 (graduated in 1988). His studies, which truly fascinated him at least in the first years, opened his eyes to the multitude of other cultures he was not aware about

before. He discovered world literature and classical music. He understood that the Russian culture was not the only great one in the world and there were the Ancient Greek, Ancient Roman and other cultures. This led him to the thought that the Nenets have also “a culture” – a significant and not a primitive one that is inferior to that of others as the Soviet education system suggested.

Furthermore, he realised that the Communist Party had been lying, for instance, presenting all the Whites in the Russian Civil War as bandits while at the university he was told that there were bright intellectuals who held their own laudable values. Reading abundantly Russian and foreign classical literature and learning new things about the world which were not in line with the doctrinal teachings of the Party revolutionised his thinking. He stopped trusting implicitly any authoritative words by developing his own highly critical and sceptical mind. In the late 1980s, aged around 40, he began consciously shaping himself and embracing his new indigenous identity. He strove to become “a real Nenets”, who is proud of his customs and worldview, which he now dared calling a “culture”. Looking for his own roots, he discovered gods, spirits, sacred sites, and sacrificial rituals of his own people<sup>215</sup>.

Soon after his almost Pauline revelation, Yuri changed radically his whole way of life and moved with his wife Yelena to the taiga camp in 1991. He quitted his work as a state hunter, bought ten reindeer and restarted his life from scratch in the forest, building log cabins and learning how to be a reindeer herder. He asserts in his autobiography that this is the period of his life in which he depended very much on his older neighbours – Pavel and Vakhalyuma Ayvaseda, Auli and Oysya Yusi. These elderly Forest Nenets reindeer herders taught him not only how to deal with reindeer, but also how to think and behave like a Nenets. Most likely he learnt from them how to make sacrifices and how to pray. They also kept his Forest Nenets language alive. After the deaths of these elders, Yuri complained that he had nobody with whom to speak proper Nenets. In the Varyogan

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215 It was not strictly an ethnic matter for Yuri. He saw the local indigenous world as his own and the neighbouring Khanty – the dominant indigenous group in the Agan region – were part of it. Moreover, his wife was a Khanty. Yuri, according to the evidence of numerous examples, used to think more in terms of the indigenous versus Russians (Nen. *lusa*) than in distinguishing the Nenets from the Khanty (see for more details Toulouze 2012).

region, Yuri was probably the last to master several aspects of the Forest Nenets language and cultural ways. When someone asked him information about how something was said in Nenets, he often explained first how the Nenets would think which he claimed to be radically different from Russians (much less comparing with the Khanty though, see Golovnyov 1995: 262; Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 55).

During that period, he also came in more direct contact with Christianity as the post-Soviet wave of evangelisation in the Russian North had not left his family untouched. In the 1990s, Baptists had arrived in Forest Nenets and Khanty villages. They came first from Moscow, then from Surgut, which is the central city of the region. They managed to convert some indigenous people, mostly women, mainly by the lure of their fierce anti-alcohol stance (Wiget and Balalaeva 2011).<sup>216</sup> Among them were Yuri's mother as well as one of his daughters who lived in Varyogan<sup>217</sup>. Yuri, although his personal stance to alcoholism, was similar to the Baptists', shared the traditional Soviet suspicion against "sects", as are called all religions far from the Russian Orthodox Church. Yuri interpreted their attraction to Baptism a mere fashion, like superficial shamanism, and he even stressed the similarity of the two phenomena in his literary texts being united by the absence of seriousness<sup>218</sup>.

When we became acquainted in the late 1990s, Yuri was comfortable with his new indigenous world. One well known incident showed particularly well his creativity in managing his heritage and the new political situation. In 1996, in a collective sacrificial ceremony of Khanty and Forest Nenets at the lake Num-To, Yuri publicly announced to the TV

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216 Alcoholism was a problem in the village, mostly for males, but not exclusively. Without employment, the locals had few occupations except watching television. So, drinking, as in many Siberian and far North villages was a plague indeed. Yuri had the experience of having been intoxicated, and he drank before his military service and abandoned drinking a couple of years afterwards. He never touched alcohol again. He did not stand to have around him drunken people, which set him apart from all the other villagers. His hostility to alcohol was absolute: he refused to serve women wine even when at a table he was the only man (as expected in Russia).

217 The denomination, Baptists or others, had clearly no relevance for them, as our fieldwork revealed.

218 Yuri had ambiguous attitude towards the word "shaman". He kept a more positive assessment for Forest Nenets *tadibya* who Russians translated as 'shaman', the word which had a pejorative connotation also for Yuri (Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 274; see also Spodina 2001: 13).

camera that he was about to give a reindeer cow to the president of Russia (then Boris Yeltsin) who, as Yuri declared, was free to take it away or leave it in Yuri's herd (Leete 1999; 2014). His initial idea was to get the president's attention by saying that he would make everything in his power to keep the reindeer alive against all the odds – the expanding oil drilling that threatened to pollute his pastures, or take them away altogether, the oil-workers who poached in his lands and let their dogs stray in the reindeer pastures. He said: "According to the beliefs of my tribe, this reindeer can live forever. How? When it becomes old, it becomes ill, and when I think it feels badly, I kill it for meat. I replace it by a young healthy reindeer from my herd. At the same time the reindeer can also pass away. It may die in an accident, or from an illegal hunter's gun near the oilfield. Only then the President's reindeer can disappear" (Leete 1999: 23).

In 2001, he showed the president's reindeer to Liivo and gave a more specific explanation by saying that the reindeer now served him to monitor the new president's (Vladimir Putin) health and whether his deeds were approved by the gods. When the president's reindeer cow was lost, Yuri stated that the gods did not approve Russia's war in Chechnya: "Probably the gods did not like that he started another war" (Niglas 2003).

This kind of gift-giving to someone – however usually to a kin or friend – has been common in the region, reminding other gift economies elsewhere in the world (Mauss 2016). In Yuri's thinking, it seems the gift reindeer are taken to be as extensions not only of the giver but also the new owner. As such these reindeer serve as indices of the health, well-being and moral actions of those involved and their relationships which can be read from a distance<sup>219</sup>. This could create occasional tensions as well, as Eva witnessed. Once Yuri gave a reindeer calf to Yeremei Aypin, a Khanty writer from the same village, as a 50th birthday present (in June 1998). But Yeremei did not come to take it from Yuri's herd, and when the two had a verbal argument, Yeremei declared he was not interested in the gift. As a result, Yuri decided to castrate the reindeer calf in order to leave it alone without an offspring. Shortly after the reindeer began behaving

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219 Among Tundra Nenets in the Polar Urals, Laur learned that when somebody received a reindeer as a gift, killed the animal for meat and boiled the heart, if the heart remained hard to chew, it was said to mirror the giver's greed and negative attitude towards the recipient. Herders said that the donor kept thinking of this gift-reindeer in terms of pity or regret.

strangely and soon died. Perhaps Yeremei did not want to be subjected to the giver as this would have created an obligation to reciprocate putting him in a relationship he did not desire. We don't know for sure what were the motifs of one or the other but obviously there was a lot at stake in this act of offering a gift and declining it.

## **Sacrificial rituals, sacred places and god-figures**

Sacrificial rituals were common in Yuri's everyday life in the forest. Whenever a reindeer needed to be slaughtered for meat, there was a ritual dimension to it. For instance, in October 2000, while Eva was working in the log cabin, Yuri came in with a piece of reindeer fur smeared in blood. He climbed to the shelf high up on the back wall, opened a sacred box and ritually fed the blood to the anthropomorphic god-figures wrapped into the reindeer fur and textile. The moment had come to slaughter the first reindeer of the new season and to sacrifice it to the home or family gods (god-figures), as the first snow had just fallen.

Another example of a regular sacrifice was captured on video by Liivo in the yard of Yuri's house in Varyogan in the winter of 2000. Yuri slaughtered three reindeer he had brought with him from the forest in order to distribute the meat among his relatives living in the village. The ritual contained long prayers, the participants turning themselves around sunwise and drawing a mark with reindeer blood on the eastern wall of the house.

There were irregular occasions of reindeer sacrificing as well, especially when Yuri sensed a danger lurking somewhere nearby. One of the triggers could be an ominous dream. In February 1999, when Eva had just arrived at his winter camp, Yuri dreamed that death was around the corner. The next day he chose three reindeer to be sacrificially slaughtered and in the afternoon the entire household – Yuri, his wife, their daughter Lada and her two sons Kolchu and Anton, also Eva – went to their family sacred place a few kilometres from the camp and carried out a sacrificial ritual. Later he received news that one older Nenets neighbour had died in the village. The underlying logic here seems to be that he had inflected death attacking his family by making the sacrifice in time. So,



this experience rather supports our impression that Yuri took addressing the gods, especially when there was immediate danger involved, very seriously. Furthermore, as this incident was a source of great anxiety for Yuri, he prohibited taking photos this time.

In normal circumstances, when there was no ongoing crisis, he was not against recording sacrificial rites. Liivo and Eva filmed one of these regular sacrifices in the summer of 2009. It was one of so-called bloodless sacrifices that Khanty and Forest Nenets do without involving reindeer slaughtering (Lehtisalo 1924; Spodina 2001: 30–33). The ritual we witnessed and participated in clearly manifests the importance of sacred places in indigenous religious practises and the vulnerable state of these sites. Yuri took us to the main sacred site of the region, which was located on the top of a small hill overlooking the Vatyogan River, where there were some reindeer skins and skulls hanging on the trees. We had brought to Yuri as a gift a piece of white fabric which is one of the most used items for bloodless offerings in the area. Yuri, knowing that we were interested in filming rituals, proposed us to be part of the rite. The ritual itself was a traditional one: Yuri prayed the local forest and river spirits to take care of reindeer and humans, accompanying it with sunwise turns around himself, and then asked Liivo to climb on the pine tree and tie the white fabric on the branch of the tree (Niglas 2016).

What was not that “traditional” about the situation was his complaining about the current state of the sacred hill. As many other sacred places of the Indigenous Russian North (Dudeck et al. 2017; Murashko 2004), the hill had been physically damaged. There were many truck tracks and a freshly dug ditch on the hill. Yuri explained that after he had informed the authorities that non-natives (Rus. *nekorennnye*) should keep away from the sacred hill, oil workers brought in heavy machinery and dug up the soil to prevent cars driving to the hilltop. Yuri was furious that the Russians were so ignorant and were not able to understand that the entire hill was sacred. At the very top of the hill, there was a metal pole being rammed into the ground, probably serving as a geodetic mark. Yuri noted to Liivo who was filming: “Just imagine that in the church you attend with your children, some people would come and stick such a pole in the very middle. How would your soul sing? How happy would you be?” (Niglas 2016).

When we were present, Yuri often drew an analogy between indigenous religious and Christian practices, probably in order to make his ideas comprehensible to his audience more knowledgeable about Christianity than about the tacit and fluid Nenets ontology. In a way, this event may also demonstrate how Yuri reinforced the value of Nenets animism with non-traditional, especially Christian conceptions and values. But clearly Yuri's analogy went deeper than that. He once commented about a researcher who had visited him in his forest camp, wanting to understand something about his religious thinking. The researcher apparently admitted that he was a non-religious person himself and Yuri gave us a harsh opinion about him: "He is an idiot. He himself is not a believer. How may he even think of understanding how we feel?" We are not sure had he ever reflected on the different mechanisms at work in different religions but evidently, he operated with the notion of religion (Rus. *religiya*) as a phenomenon, as well as with religions (Rus. *religii*) in plural when he compared different religiosities. Depending on the situation, it seems that for him there was often a hybrid area where different religions overlapped and became part of the same phenomenon.

This kind of hybridity is not so uncommon in the religious thinking and practise of indigenous people in the Russian North. Since the early 18th century when the forced baptismal campaigns began, the local indigenous population adopted several material features from the Russian Orthodoxy and integrated them in their own cosmology. We know that in early conversions to Christianity neck crosses were given and they became appreciated amulets offering protection in particular contexts. Also, in many households, icons of saints became common in homes since the late tsarist period (Mitusova 1929: 9, 16; see also Vallikivi 2003: 111)<sup>220</sup>. Today, the icons are seen as protective sacred items that supplement other animistic religious objects, providing a household with necessary protective power. These can be bought in the Orthodox church shops (see Vallikivi 2011: 83).

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220 Mitusova reports how after a shamanic seance she saw an Orthodox icon, that of the Mother of God (Rus. *Bogoroditsa*) among other god-figures being ritually fed with blood of a sacrificially slaughtered reindeer (1929: 16). Furthermore, in 1915 Mitusova took back from her expedition to Agan a "wooden idol Num-Nemya" which is now in the Tobolsk museum (Perevalova and Karacharov 2006: 30).

This hybrid use of Christian images in native religious life is well illustrated by the ethnographic event we present next. This involved Yuri, Liivo, Eva and the small icon-like painting of Madonna and the Child that was bought in the Notre-Dame de Paris. We are able to describe the event in full detail because it was recorded with the help of two video cameras. Liivo also filmed Yuri's action and reflections before and after the process of "god-making". So the presence of things, cameras and anthropologists were part of the evolving scene.

### **Finding, making, buying and selling gods**

Before we focus more closely on the ritual episode in Paris, we provide just a short overview of the first "god-making" episode we have written about elsewhere (Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 242). It happened in 1999 when Eva had just arrived at the winter camp with Yuri and his wife, and they had guests, Vadim and Raisa, a couple from Num-to, to whom Yuri had promised an old snowmobile and who were supposed to spend a couple of weeks at the camp. At one moment Yuri asked Vadim:

– Do you know how to make a god (Rus. *bog*)?

– No, I have never made any.

– That's good! The result is better when one makes a god for the first time. Mine is too old. I must have another.

This unexpected dialogue took place in an ordinary setting in front of everyone, that is Yuri's and Vadim's wives, and Eva. Eva did not interrupt the proceedings with the many questions she had at that moment, and observed further, knowing that something would become clearer later on. Indeed, a few days later, while they were all indoors, Yuri gave his guest a piece of wood and a knife and asked him to start carving it into a roughly anthropomorphic shape. Vadim did it and Yuri wrapped the figure in fabrics and performed a short ritual. At the end, he addressed Eva and said with a hint of a smile: "Well, this is how we entertain ourselves".

Yuri must have thought that Eva did not understand what was going on. This perhaps explains his ambiguous statement about "entertain ourselves". Eva had been with them less than one month and they did not know whether she might behave like a typical "Russian", who might

misjudge this dimension of the local life. Yuri was apparently protecting himself from the possible deriding by an outsider and preferred to present it as something as not entirely serious<sup>221</sup>.

The ritual under focus here took place on the afternoon of March 6th in 2013, half a year before Yuri's demise. He had travelled to Paris to read his poems at the National Institute for Eastern Languages and Cultures (INALCO), where Eva works as a professor of Finno-Ugric studies. He travelled to Paris from Estonia with Liivo, who had time to spend with Yuri, while Eva had also her university obligations.

The ritual had a prelude which began a few days before the actual event. Liivo and Yuri were sightseeing in the city and one of the sites they visited was the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. When they came out, Yuri expressed that he felt at once a sense of pure sacredness in the cathedral. A couple of days later, they returned to Notre-Dame but they did not go in as there was a long queue at the entrance. They stopped on the Pont au Double, one of the nearby river bridges. There Yuri made an improvised ritual, a discreet one, as he used to do in his home forest when crossing a river. He took some coins out of his pocket and picked a number of coins according to the number of the persons he was invoking the deities' blessings on – his wife, his four daughters and his mother with their families. He threw the coins one at a time into the Seine River while uttering prayer words in Forest Nenets<sup>222</sup>. He prayed for the wellbeing of humans and reindeer, for people not losing their hunting and fishing luck, and for guests finding their way. When there were no more coins to throw, he switched to Russian and added more universal prayers that he adapted

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221 When Laur was in the Malozemelskaya tundra among Tundra Nenets in 1999, he once took a chunk of wood and started carving it. His host jokingly commented: "Oh, you are making yourself a god" (see also Chernetsov 1987: 160; Leete 1996: 107).

222 As our experience on the sacred hill damaged by oil workers demonstrates, Yuri took the sacredness of a site of worshipping seriously and compared it to a Christian church. He stressed that the sacred ground is much larger than the actual spot where religious rituals were carried out. Yuri illustrated this conception eloquently with his small offering ceremony on the bridge by the Notre Dame. It was not only the cathedral itself but the natural environment around that was sacred too. The river – the only major natural feature around the church – shared the church's sacredness. Furthermore, a river is regarded as "the centre of the world", as Yuri put it after praying on the bridge. It is a channel of communications with the spirit world, through which the souls of dead people travel to the other realms (e.g. Balzer 1980).

to the current context:

“May the local gods be always benevolent so that a man who walks the earth would not stumble, so that there would be happiness, so that people would smile at each other when they meet. May all be well with the women who give birth to children, and may the children who are born not suffer, may their birth be easy. And may the dark man be not very greedy. We will die anyway one day but may he should not be too greedy when we die. May he take us one by one. Not many people at once.” (Niglas 2016)

Between each prayer he made a sunwise turn around himself and uttered “Ouh, ouh, ouh, ouh”, a traditional formula accompanying Forest Nenets and Khanty prayers.

After that Yuri and Liivo went to a nearby café and had some tea. When they returned to the cathedral there was no more queue and they went in. He bought a small painting of Madonna and the Child on a wood panel which reminded an Orthodox icon. Immediately after, while still inside the cathedral, he told Liivo to give him some coins and take the picture from him, explaining: “Now, you must buy it from me. For any sum. Later we’ll do the ritual (Rus. *obychai*)”.

Back at the Eva’s place, Yuri arranged the ritual which required Liivo’s active participation. Liivo was ready to film, but Yuri ordered him to sit next to him on the bed. Liivo set up one camera on a tripod and gave Eva another camera to film with. When Liivo asked what was going to happen, Yuri replied that he would not know as “he... they would show it”, referring to a god or gods and their guidance.

Yuri had bought three scarfs downtown and asked Liivo to choose one of them which he put aside. Yuri wrapped the icon in another scarf, giving it a kind of anthropomorphic form with a recognizable head, explaining: “It is a mother, after all”. Then he gave the wrapped icon to Liivo and said in Forest Nenets:

jaa-mna jaatiL’a-tam-š,	nginL’i jaa-mna jaatiL’a-tam-š
land-PRS to walk-1SG-PST	I have walked along the foreign land,

I have walked along the land, I have walked along the foreign land,	I have walked along the foreign land,
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<i>man'jaa-mna-j jaatiL'a-t-am-š,</i>	<i>La"khä"-j jaa-mna jaatiL'a-t-am-š</i>
I land-PRS-PX1SG to walk-1SG- PST	kin-PX1SG land-PRS to walk-1SG- PST
I have walked along my own land,	I have walked along my kin's land,

<i>kähä-jjo"-nga-t,</i>	<i>kähä"-jjoho</i>
god-PX1SG to loose-RFS-1SG	god-PX1SG to disappear-3SG
I have lost my god,	my god has disappeared

<i>pi"t-i jaatäL-ma-nt</i> šeeL ngami <i>kähä n'i-ša-n</i>	<i>ku"-, n'i-ša-n manäs-", n'i-ša-n</i> <i>ngami-hät</i>
you-PRT      walk-GER-2SG      PP (during) what god NEG-INT-2SG find-PTCP NEG-INT-2SG	see-PTCP NEG-INT-2SG what-ABL find?? god-SIM-ACC
<i>ngami-hät (jeeL??)</i>	<i>kähä-Laha-m?</i>
what-ABL find??	god-SIM-ACC

You, when you have walked along the land, have you not seen, have you not found something similar to a god?

Yuri then translated his words into Russian and added: “How shall I live without a god (Rus. *bog*)?”. He also dictated Liivo what the answer should be, in whatever language he wanted: “I was in many lands, I have been everywhere.... I have a god, I found it. Look, isn't this god yours?”. Liivo said these words in Estonian – as Yuri was using Nenets for ritual phrases. Then Liivo explained what he said in Russian and the rest of their conversation took place mostly in Russian.

Then Yuri examined the wrapped icon, which he did not fully unwrap

and said in Russian: “Yes, it is a good god, he is somewhat similar to my god. But my god was beautiful, was good, he brought me luck”. He then switched to Nenets for a short moment:

<i>jaa-mna jaatiL'a-tam-š,</i>	I have walked along the land,
<i>nginL'i jaa-mna jaatiL'a-tam-š</i>	I have walked along the foreign land,
<i>man' jaa-mna-j jaatiL'a-tam-š,</i>	I have walked along my own land,
<i>La"khä"-j jaa-mna jaatiL'a-tam-š</i>	I have walked along my kin's land,
<i>kähä-j jo"-nga-t,</i>	I have lost my god,
<i>kähä"-j johō</i>	my god has disappeared
<i>pi"t-i jaatäL-ma-nt š e e L ngami kähä n'i-ša-n k u - " , n'i-ša-n manäs- ", n'i-ša-n ngami-hät</i>	You, when you have walked along the land, have you not seen,
<i>ngami-hät (jeeL??) kähä-La-ha-m?</i>	have you not found something similar to a god?

Yuri then translated his words into Russian, adding a few new details in Russian such as: “How shall I live without a god [Rus. *bez boga*]?” or “Have you not found some god? Have you not found my god somewhere?” He then dictated Liivo what the answer should be using whatever language he wanted: “I was in many lands, I have been everywhere [...] Yes I saw one god. Yes, I picked up a god. Or then, I bought a god. Then say, yes, I have a god, I found it. Look, isn't this god yours?”

Liivo said in Estonian that he found a god that might be Yuri's. Then Liivo explained what he said in Russian. Yuri took the god and examined it by unwrapping it a little bit, saying in Russian: “Yes, it seems to be a good god, he is somewhat similar to my god. But my god was beautiful, was good. He brought me luck.” He then switched to Nenets for a short moment:

<i>w'aap-ta homa-š ,</i>	He had good luck, my god,
<i>man'kähe-j-i ,</i>	this [one] here seems to be
<i>t'ukä'' ngaL'a jeeti-Lka ngä-Lha</i>	like a new one.

He continued in Russian: "It is not an old god, I had an old god. No, it is apparently not mine. But if he is a spare one, would you sell it to me?" Liivo spontaneously answered "Yes, I may sell it to you, if you like it" but Yuri corrected him: "No, you must not agree at once, you should have said that you also need it, that you also like it. You may agree only the third time."

The scenario was set and Liivo kept acting according to it. Yuri started then to present his arguments: he needs a god because he has reindeer to protect, children and grand-children to raise. In short, he needs an assistant. And he added: "I have good money. Not our money, foreign money." Liivo acknowledged that money would be good, but he likes this god and is not keen to give it away. Then Yuri took the scarf Liivo had chosen earlier and started praising it and added then: "In addition to money, I could give this to you, you have a daughter, wife, mother-in-law, teacher, neighbour. You can give it away as a present perhaps. For this scarf do you agree, I add the money?" Liivo started also to praise the scarf and finally agreed to the deal, as he had declined the offer twice already. Yuri took from his pocket some coins and they acted as if that it was a lot of money. When Liivo had given him the wrapped painting, Yuri explained that after returning home he would consecrate it with other family gods around by sacrificing a reindeer ("prepare fresh blood to honour this god"). Finally, he said: "Let's see, perhaps this god will serve well. Thank you. I will take this god to my home."

That was the end of the ritual part. Liivo took a camera from Eva and continued filming. Yuri offered additional comments of what had just taken place:

"Look, when we were for the first time in this Goddess's house, Num's mother's house, I had no particular thoughts. We went there, visited, and went out. And then I had a dream, and I was told to go there again. I was not sure what we would do there. But when we arrived, there was a very long queue and this drew my attention. God knows that I do not like long queues, so we seemingly went away. We had tea. Then it rained a bit. We



say that rain on the road brings luck. Under the rain we went back.”

And he continued:

“I didn’t know what I would find inside and whether there was what I was looking for. We went in. We looked on the one side and then on the other and suddenly we found what we needed. This was another hint. And later when we went out of the God’s Mother’s house, the clouds parted and the sun appeared. This was the third sign that we had done right.”

He added that once back at home in the forest, he would consecrate it and put it among the other gods he had. At Liivo’s question whether it is common to have an icon (Rus. *ikona*) as a god, he answered that it was and that he had seen these among both Khanty and Nenets (he named several persons) to have icons among their gods, such as Jesus Christ and Nicholas the Miracle-Maker: “Therefore, I find this to be fine.”

Yuri said that he himself came from the pagan family where no one was baptised: “I do not take this as a Christian item. What we just did with you was a ritual of pagans (Rus. *yazychniki*). And this has become a pagan deity now. But a pagan deity can be of any form, in the form of a human being, a frog, a bird, an animal. At this moment it is a woman with an infant. She has such a name, Num Nemya”<sup>223</sup>. He also noted that his wife came from a family where her father and mother were baptized, even if she regarded herself a pagan (Rus. *yazychnitsa*). Yuri supposed that she would be glad to see the new icon.

Yuri insisted that he could not make a god for himself but he had to get from someone: “I must necessarily buy it from someone else, another person”. As we see, the way and from whom the god is obtained determines its efficiency for Yuri. He noted:

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223 Unlike Tundra Nenets, Forest Nenets seem to have a special relation to the God Mother, *Num nemya*. The ethnographer Raisa Mitusova who travelled among Forest Nenets in 1924, records that the old man called Ilyuko, who was ill, organized a sacrifice of two reindeer: “Ilyuko himself killed the white one, saying loudly a prayer-request to Num-Nemya, god mother, a deity who is very revered among the Forest Samoyeds” (1929: 17). She adds that Ilyuko’s son-in-law acted as a shaman and killed a black reindeer for the evil spirit who took the soul of the reindeer and released the illness from Ilyuko’s body (see Iaso Vella 2012: 124). In 1989, Golovnyov recorded a Forest Nenets creation myth in Num-To about God father and God mother who made three sons, a Russian, a Khanty and a Nenets. Several hardships followed, after which all of them died and the Sky and the Earth decided to make people again, this time they made a man and woman (1995: 394; see also 487; Alekseyev 2010: 390).

“It is desirable that this person would live long. Because if the person from whom you bought the god dies – you learn the news that he is dead – then the god has to be reconsecrated. This god has to be left in the nature<sup>224</sup>, another god has to be bought instead, undergo the ritual of reconsecration and be given its name, the new god.”

As it turned out, Yuri had planned replacing two of his gods already for some time as those who made them had passed away. One god-figure he had in the forest camp was made by his late friend Yegor Stepanovich Kazamkin. He knew he had to change it soon, but in the right time (“in spring or summer”, speaking in winter). At least one “Nenets year” (i.e. summer or winter) has to pass before a new god can be made. Yuri also explained that he wanted Liivo to give him the new god, because Liivo was still young and would live long and therefore the god would serve him for a long time.

A few times Yuri corrected himself as he was rethinking some details which he had just said. In Yuri’s words, one cannot just accept a god from someone else without giving something in return, such as a coin or something else. As he said: “Anyway, I buy it”. At one moment, he thanked Liivo for “giving the god as a gift” (Rus. *podaril*) and then quickly corrected himself, adding for “selling” (Rus. *prodal*) it. Or another example. The scarf, as Yuri later recommended, was to be used preferably by Liivo himself or by one of his sons, changing his idea about it being a good gift to his wife or some other woman. It seems that in Yuri’s thinking the god would work better if the scarf is used by men, as Yuri noted: “Because the scarf was used as an exchange for the god.” Although the representation was of a female goddess, the scarf had been given as a payment in exchange of a god which mattered in Yuri’s reasoning. Yuri held a similar scarf around his neck, which he pointed at when explaining it all. Dealing with home or family gods/god-figures is the male domain.

Yuri concluded the topic by saying with a smile: “When you find a new god, it is a feast (Rus. *prazdnik*). We have to make a food sacrifice for the new god”. It was a hint that it was time to drink tea and eat something in Eva’s kitchen.

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224 The Khanty scholar Agrafena Pesikova Sopochnina said that Khanty used to take older “gods” to sacred places before finding new ones (oral information by Stephan Dudeck; see also Vallikivi 2011: 88).

## **“Even though this is all symbolic, it is all real”**

Let us now reflect on these experiences of producing material “gods”. We try to understand what we may infer from our data about the significance of this activity. However, we have not managed to find such depictions of ritual trading sacred objects in the scholarly literature on the area.

Let us start with commenting on the ideas of finding, buying and making a god. All these verbs refer to different aspects or stages of the same episode. In order to have the bought artefact function as a god, Yuri had to obtain it by ritually buying it. The verb “to find” has a taste of fortuitousness (unlike in the episode in his home forest with Vadim, when Yuri asked an unsuspecting friend to “make” a god for him). In this case, he did not know beforehand what he was going to find in Notre-Dame. The sacred object came to him in the combination of his own and spirit beings’ volition.

Yuri had received three signs, two beforehand, one after. The first was given in a dream, which is a canonical way to communicate between the worlds in this part of the world (Moldanova 2001) and beyond (e.g. Toulouze and Anisimov 2021). Yuri was induced by a dream to go back to the cathedral. Then they did not enter because of the huge queue, but they returned later. And then Yuri found what he was looking for. And the rain that fell while they were walking towards the cathedral (another favourable omen) ceased when they came out, confirming that Yuri had done what needed to be done.

Over the years, Yuri had developed a skill of sign reading in the environment and people that surrounded him (see also Vella 2012: 108–110). He knew that nothing happened by mere chance. Once Eva witnessed how Yuri went one day from his camp to the city of Nizhnevartovsk and everything went unplanned. The people he wanted to meet were not available, the car stopped functioning. Yuri, sitting at the wheel started thinking about what these punishments – as he called these – might be for. Similarly, when his health failed and he needed repeated surgeries, he expressed the wish to speak to Eva via Liivo. When Eva called him, he had nothing to tell in particular, but she understood that he wanted to check whether she was angry and held a grudge against him. He was at once

reassured when Eva was relaxed and friendly. So, he was very keen to deal with all the signs from what he considered to be linked to the spirit world that were interwoven into the human relations around him.

A fundamental feature that appears in these cases of god-making is the use of another person, of a mediator. Yuri says it explicitly: he cannot make himself a god, he cannot buy it himself. He could not carve a piece of wood for himself: it would lack the force another's hand would give it. And this hand is particularly valuable if it is unexperienced in Yuri's view. Vadim had never carved a god. Liivo, at the beginning of the ritual, had no idea what Yuri wanted. And Yuri himself declared that he was not entirely sure what was going to happen, even if he had a plan ready in some form. In short, other humans, in this case men, were indispensable in order to achieve what he needed from the gods.

In this event, money has a role of an exchange item for marking the transfer of ownership. Although Yuri is the one to bring forth money to buy the icon. But this is not what counts as it takes place before the actual ritual of buying the *khaekhae*. He could not have just put the icon in his luggage and brought it back home. Thus, he sold the icon to Liivo by asking him for a few coins already in Notre-Dame. And when he took out the icon from the bag at Eva's place and gave it to Liivo, he said explicitly: "This is yours". Liivo was thus the necessary mediator who could sell the icon to him and prove it to be useful by being young and having a long life ahead.<sup>225</sup>

We would like to stress that the Nenets word "buy" (*temtash*) has not necessarily a mercantile dimension to it as Westerners understand it, but it marks any transaction which corresponds well to the Maussian scheme according to which a gift requires a counter-gift creating an obligation to reciprocate that does not only exchange things but "one gives *oneself*" as well (Mauss 2016: 144). In Yuri's scheme, once the person dies, the link

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225 In historical sources there are notes about buying things for turning them then into idols: „Ides, a 17th century diplomat who passed through Siberia on his way to Beijing, wrote that the Ostyaks (the former name of the Khanty and Mansi populations of North Siberia) had come to him and saw a clockwork bear toy. When the Ostyaks saw the toy working, they performed the necessary rituals and begged Ides to sell them this bear figurine so that they could make an idol of it“ (Baulo 2002: 149). We cannot be sure however whether this reflects the actual practices or the exoticizing rhetoric of the author.

disappears and the god loses some of its efficiency. This is why Yuri needed to find another *khaekhae* or *bog* after the death of the maker or mediator. Part of his logic seems to parallel that of the president's reindeer as Yuri explained it in 1996 at the collective sacrifice in Num-To (see above).

This event was also linguistically loaded. As a fluent bilingual of Russian and Forest Nenets, Yuri switched from one language to another, preferring in the key moments to use his mother tongue. Yuri uses the word *bog* or *bogi* in Russian ("god" or "gods") and *khaekhae* in Nenets for both the invisible deities, spirits as well as for their material images<sup>226</sup>, both animistic wooden god-figures and Christian icons<sup>227</sup>. These are not really representations, as most Westerners are used to see these things even if Orthodox believers' relations with icons can be more complex<sup>228</sup>. This shows that material items may become the extensions of particular invisible spirit beings.

Yuri's notion of god (*bog/khaekhae*) has not the status of the omnipotent god of a monotheist religion: a god is not the one who fully decides how its owner is going to fare but is there to primarily to guard and assist. When in the forest, there are very different gods Yuri addresses in his prayers, among them the gods of the particular places such as the river Agan and its tributary Vatyogan, or the small river Tyuyt'yakha on which his winter camp is located. Yuri's god-helpers are there to support him in his daily activities as well in extraordinary and threatening moments (as with the case of having an ominous dream described above, see also Vella 2012: 132).

In everyday life, Yuri often acted or gave the impression that he performed an act. But nevertheless, this kind of acting was being very much himself as we had seen in numerous situations over the years. And

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226 The name of this object would be, for Christian missionaries (Orthodox as well as Protestant), "idol", referring to the worship of "false gods" prohibited by the Christian God (Vallikivi 2011). Although usually indigenous people themselves when speaking in Russian call these objects "idols" (Rus. *idoly*; the same goes with the word "pagans", Rus. *yazychniki*), interiorising thus alien-imposed notions, Yuri does not beat around the bush and calls them "gods".

227 Also Lehtisalo's material reflects the idea that Forest Nenets signify with the word "kaehe" both invisible spirit beings and their material forms (1924: 29–30, 92, 96).

228 Consider what Garrards have argued: "To the believer, icons (from the Greek 'image') are more than art; they are portals into the spiritual world. (...) Believers talk to them, and the icons answer" (2008: 6).

thus, all is acting indeed, and in spite of it, because of it, all is right. In this case, Yuri bought the painting himself and “sold” it hurriedly to Liivo in the cathedral. Liivo, although needing some instructions about the proper way to do it, “sold” it back to Yuri during the ritual act of buying in Eva’s apartment.

We think that what summarises well the entire event is when Yuri says: “Even though this all is symbolic, it is all real”. As we clearly see there was no contradiction in this claim as the ritual framework itself guaranteed the efficiency of the entire event, as acting was a necessary part of the rule. As Hamayon (2016) has argued, play is of the utmost importance in Siberian ontologies which in many contexts this does not discard the uttermost seriousness of it and yet lets the implicit ambiguity to be productive in human experience.

## **Conclusive remarks**

There are several aspects of cultural hybridity we would like to point out in this final section. On the one hand, this concerns the space, temporality and sociality in Yuri’s relations to the spirit and human world. On the other hand, there is a complex entanglement with the Christian or European cultural layer that surrounds the Western Siberian indigenous people in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For us, it was unusual to see the praying performed out of the Siberian context. However, it well demonstrates how Yuri’s mind worked in unfamiliar situations and environments. He found elements that fit well in his worldview (the sacredness of certain places, a river as a channel, the existence of gods connected to specific spots or areas, universal concerns of birth and death) and that answered to his needs. This, and his choice of a Christian image as a new god(-figure), shows how creatively and inclusively he acted towards his religious tradition.

At the same time, this ritual event in focus here has to be seen as part of a longer series of events which encompassed reading divine signs, finding the god, buying it from someone else, to be followed by a consecration through the sacrifice of a reindeer. Even after that the god who acts as an assistant will be still observed over time whether it brings

lucks and solves the necessary problems<sup>229</sup>.

As we have seen, it is a world in which relations with humans and deities are entangled. In Yuri's thinking, it is important to know whether the person who had made or sold the god-figure for him is alive and well. The president's reindeer, Vadim carving an anthropomorphic sacred figure, Liivo selling him the icon show how he created connections between himself and other people and spirits and their material extensions. Yuri's world was interconnected, as a huge network, in which different agencies were at work – not only his own, but also, among others, the President and the spirits'/deities and anthropologists. These people are so deeply embedded into various material forms and transactions, that their fates and powers were connected with his: the death of one of the makers puts an end to the power and assistance it produced, and the "god" (god-figure) had to be replaced (or a reindeer replaced, as with the presidents' reindeer)<sup>230</sup>.

One of the key aspects in Yuri's cultural hybridity is his situated use of Christian notions and objects. The contact of these two worlds became a complex set of meanings. Answering a question by Liivo, Yuri commented that indeed it is natural to have an icon among one's gods. He enumerated examples of two Khanty and another older Nenets who own icons among their personal or family gods. And then he explained that the ritual was a "pagan" ritual, and that by this ritual the meaning of the picture has been changed.

The object that lies at the core of the transaction in the "god-making" ritual is a polysemic representation – a kind of interface between two worlds: on the one hand it represents the Christian character (Mother of Jesus Christ), which is a powerful symbol of divinity especially in the Catholic but also in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and on the other hand it has the new meaning given by Yuri, who took this Christian symbol for

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229 Among Tundra Nenets, Lehtisalo noted that shamans made a wooden image called a *syadey* from a tree that grew in a sacred place (*khekheya*). They gave it to somebody for a certain period so the person could hunt or fish successfully, after which it should have returned to the sacred place (Lehtisalo 1924: 65; see also Vallikivi 2011: 88).

230 We see that it is a concept of shared or extended personhood, and we see it well illustrated in this example as well as in other dimensions of his experience. His personhood encompasses a spectre wider than his immediate family: he considered some non-kin including Khanty as "my people". But Yuri Vella expands his understanding of personhood to other, nonhuman entities as well.

his own, and gave it a different power, of a Nenets kind, calling it Num Nemya. He translates it into Russian God's Mother (and not Sky-Mother which could be another version). It was now a Nenets goddess with a Nenets name and her Christian identity and status as Our Lady were inactivated<sup>231</sup>. That also means that for the Nenets, his own worldview integrates, encompasses all the others and provides the means to reinterpret all symbols according to its logics.

As we saw above, Yuri's contacts with Christianity were limited. He had grown up in a Soviet environment. He grew up also in a "pagan" environment, nobody among his close kin had been baptised. So, he had not much specific knowledge of Christianity, perhaps except for seeing icons and crosses here and there. Although in later years some of his family members converted to Baptism, he himself remained devoted "pagan". In any case, as we have demonstrated, he regarded it, at least in its classical form, with a respect, as he did with all other forms of "proper" religious devotion<sup>232</sup>.

Thus, Yuri's attitude towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, was complex and included contradictory elements that merged into a creative personal worldview. What characterises Yuri's overall approach was inclusivism which is common to the local indigenous pattern. It seems he relied on his rediscovered indigenous worldview to incorporate Christian elements and to give them a place in his peculiar and individual perception of the world. Yuri's religion was very much relational and extended, much more than the usual Western (Christian) ones are, but at the same time, it was deeply individual, for the whole

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231 Yuri also lit candles in the Notre-Dame. They have for him their own meaning, which may, or may not coincide with the meaning for Christians. Consider what he writes in a published text from 2008: "It is not only us pagans who make sacrifices. A Christian goes to church, buys a candle and burns it. It is a sacrifice, too. A Christian buys an icon, sanctifies it and puts it into a venerable corner. We buy or bring up a deer, sanctify it, then send his soul to the gods, we give away the meat, and put his hide up on a sacred tree, in a sacred place" (quoted in Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 267).

232 In one of his last books, Yuri recalls how in 1989 he told to give one thousand roubles that he had earned for setting up the local museum in Varyogan to the "Foundation for the Restoration of the Church of Christ the Saviour". He thought of this a sacrifice from his family "for the museum existed, for our family to have well-being". At that night when travelling on the snow scooter with his wife he finds five hundred roubles near a small stream. After that he once a year threw a coin into it, adding that perhaps this will be known as his sacred site in the future (Vella 2012: 133-135).



achieved is composed by different personal ingredients connected with his life experience.

At the same time, his approach to the religious also reveals a very ordinary pattern used by the Siberian indigenous peoples to face the challenges of their history: instead of merely adopting new standards that both missionaries and Soviets attempted to impose on them, they integrated the new elements into their own world structure – be this St Nicholas the Miracle maker becoming a god in the indigenous cosmology, or, in another sphere, the hunters and reindeer herders integrating the state enterprise system into their own patterns of subsistence. Therefore, despite Yuri Vella's originality, inventiveness, and occasional idiosyncrasies we recognise his situated choices as a deeply embedded expression of indigenous thought and agency.



## Museum as means for survival: Yuri Vella's experience<sup>233</sup>

*Eva Toulouze*

When we couple these two words, “museum” and “survival”, I guess the first notion we get is of survival by memory: lost cultures are preserved, all over the world, in places where their material creations, their art, their achievements are put together and shown as testimonies of their former brilliancy. This concerns both antique civilisations, as we may admire it in Rome or Athens or Cairo or Mexico; or, closer to us chronologically, industrial culture presented within transformed factories in disaffected areas. This same practice is quite as frequent concerning ethnic issues. But this is a virtual survival: it often follows the vanishing of the culture concerned.

What I shall be reflecting on in this presentation is how museums may be used as tools for granting actual, physical and spiritual, survival of endangered cultures, as one of the possible means to struggle for them. In this presentation, I shall dwell on Yuri Vella's experience.

Yuri Vella is a quite well-known Siberian fighter for rights of indigenous. In Estonia, we have had the opportunity of meeting him in 2000, when he spent two weeks mostly in Tartu. Yuri Vella is a Forest Nenets: his people live in Western Siberia's remotest taiga areas and has been directly threatened, in the last decades, by massive oil drilling and all the destruction it brings around.

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233 Text of a presentation in Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2004, but not published.

## **The problem Yuri Vella seeks a solution to**

In order to understand the challenge Yuri Vella tries to face and the role he wants to give museums, I must present with more details the context he is dealing with: in his region, the basin of the River Agan, huge oil reserves have been discovered at the end of the 1960ies. As we know, oil was and is for Russia of vital importance: Western Siberian oil was thus drilled without any consideration for nature or people living in it. Moreover, it dragged to Siberia hundreds of thousands workers, who ignored all about traditional cultures and considered themselves the discoverers of an empty area, which therefore belonged exclusively to them. Towns were built on reindeer pastures, on sacred groves, on indigenous cemeteries. Natives were gathered in villages. Unused skills tended to disappear. Russian started to replace local languages in everyday communication, even between the natives themselves. Most of the Nenets, and their neighbours the Khanty, had to work for the collective farm in the village. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought here only additional harms: oil drilling was not stopped, but the village kolkhoze disappeared in bankruptcy. No more jobs were available any more. At the same time, some new political opportunities appeared: in 1992, a law by the regional government gave the natives who wished to live a traditional way of life the use of their kin's traditional territories with extended rights over the land. Oil drillers needed now permission to use the native's land and they attempted to obtain it by promising the natives financial and other compensations. Some of the natives nowadays gave their lands away and may live without having to do anything. Inactivity, on the other hand, is a good soil for alcoholism, which is destroying the people's physical and spiritual health. From this very rapid overview, it appears, I think, clearly, that survival not only as an ethnic group but also as individuals requires efforts in different directions: outward and inward.

There is work to be done towards the oil companies in order to compel them to take into account the indigenous people's interests. This may be done through negotiations and compromise but also through pressure strong enough to compel reluctant oil drillers to respect their results. The Natives must also be active towards State institutions, which set the

overall rules and might protect the weakest partner: on their native lands, these peoples represent nowadays about 1%. And they must not ignore the population of incomers, who live near them mostly ignoring all about them: many abuses are not of political but of cultural meaning. Finally, nothing may be saved, unless the people concerned are willing to be active themselves: they are uprooted people, who live schizophrenically in a world whose values are very different from their traditional ones, without having totally lost the latter. If they keep despairing, there is no hope left.

Yuri Vella has a degree in poetry from a Moscow University and is a recognised poet; since the early nineties, he is a reindeer herder who lives mainly in the taiga; he is considered as the spiritual leader of the Forest Nenets and, thus, has been fighting in multiple ways for the welfare of the two native ethnic groups living in this area. Among other activities, he has created a museum.

### **Varyogan open air museum: a living memory**

I mentioned there were in Varyogan many people who had been obliged to leave their camps in the taiga and to settle in the village. Thinking of them, Yuri Vella opened in 1988 an open air museum in his village. He started by transferring the abandoned taiga huts and other buildings up to the village, where a large space was allocated for this aim. Here, the main dimension emphasised by Vella is that each item belongs to concrete persons. This connection between the real people, who lived settled in Varyogan, and their former homes was not to be diluted, on the contrary: they were given back what was their own. Vella's intention was clearly to reconcile, through the museum, the uprooted people with their roots, materialised by their former dwellings often built by the people themselves.

Yuri's museum exhibits are thus polysemantic. The traditional meaning, the storage and preservation of items, has not lost any importance: the collections had an objective value, and could be advantageously shown to the museum's visitors. But for Yuri, the items' meaning is first of all "owner-oriented": they still belong to the persons they are connected with. These persons have free entrance in their house,

they may (and are invited to) store in it the objects that were significant in traditional life but that do not serve any purpose in village life. These houses may be used for receiving guests, for lodging visitors for the night. Fires were made the stoves, tea was prepared and food was cooked in the traditional way. The people could recover part of the life they were forced to quit, could practice traditional skills and teach them to their children and grandchildren. So for Yuri Vella, the museum is a living identity marker.

Another aspect which was important for Yuri Vella is memory. The items do not only “belong” to somebody. They are the living remembrance of their author, of his or her skills, of his or her life. Yuri Vella likes to “play Sherlock Holmes”: by observing a detail of a reindeer harness, he is able to tell you lots of information about the owner and the author: how old he was, how skilled, how many reindeer (approximately) he had in his herd. This most spectacular exercise is not only a show ruled by the wish to impress: he wants people to feel that objects are full of signs, that they are actually culture-bearers, memory bearers and this is to be transmitted to the following generations.

This is how Yuri Vella understands museums. Now how did this system work? Does it function at all?

Because it was a private imitative, at first it worked pretty well. The people in Varyogan, especially the elder ones, started indeed to use the rooms as Yuri hoped they would. It was a practical place to store objects that were just a nuisance in village homes. The problems came from the authorities. The official understanding of a “museum” required that several rules would be fulfilled. The items were to be secured. It was not acceptable to have rooms permanently opened, to have the exhibits touched by anybody. Official labelling as a museum killed the life in it. Yuri Vella, compelled to write regular reports and to ensure security, was no longer interested in a museum like all the others. He resigned his post as director and turned to other kinds of activities.

When thinking about the failure of his attempt, we may easily identify a pattern in which individuals are smashed by institutional machines and oral tradition is replaced by written culture. In spite of Yuri being a writer, he confided in practice and oral transmission: he did not envisage writing

long descriptions of the exhibits and all the data about their author and their owners. He acted according to the logics of his traditional worldview. But this mental approach was not recognised and the experiment was to be concluded.

## **Life as museum**

Perhaps even more curious is another dimension of Yuri Vella's notion of what is a museum: one that no authority can deny him. He often declares that his life is a museum. What does that mean?

In 1991, Yuri Vella resigned his job as a hunter, bought ten reindeer and went back to his ancestors' lands to resume traditional life in the taiga and learn to be a reindeer herder. At the beginning, he and his wife lived in the traditional conic tent, later they built step by step different camps, with all you need for living a comfortable life and even a school for their grandchildren. Now Yuri Vella wants this place to be a public one. Indeed, there are almost always visitors at his camp. I have spent myself five months with his family; several films have been shot there; Russian, German, Estonian, Hungarian and Finnish linguists and ethnographers have been hosted at his place. But here are also journalists, representatives of local administrations, project managers asking for advice, not to talk about neighbours, friends, or even people from the closest oil industries who happen to drive nearby. Everybody may be accommodated for the night in the same conditions as the hosts and live for a little while the same kind of life, partaking to the household tasks, respecting the special rules of the place. Everybody may have a look on Yuri dealing with his reindeer and his wife with her household.

This openness of his whole life is what Yuri calls "life as a museum". He pretends having been inspired by the French notion of "écomusée", but Yuri Vella's approach is both radical and broader than the boldest attempts. It is radical, because what he intends to show is his own actual life, which is totally exposed to other people, without any kind of privacy. In ecomuseums, you may see living handicraft, but the people you admire do their job, get their wages and go home. Yuri Vella does not get any wages, although he pretends he should get paid for his "job", and he is at

home. He accepts the constraint this approach requires, for the sake of a higher goal. But it is very hard to bear for his family. On the other hand, his understanding of ecomuseum is broader, for it encloses not only the past, but mainly the present as a way to prepare the future. Yuri Vella wants to answer the following scenario: he is persuaded his region is developing according to a provisional model. He is expecting the end of oil reserves and then, the companies will go away, the money that flows so liberally at the moment will disappear, the incomers will go to more profitable areas and the natives will remain alone. They will then need all the traditional skills to survive. This need is not massively felt nowadays, but he is witnessing its very beginning: unemployed natives that have nothing to do in the villages start looking for better life in the taiga, where, by hunting and fishing, and breeding reindeer, they may live with dignity without starving. Ensuring continuity means give the upcoming generations a chance for choice.

Yuri Vella's life seen as museum is addressed both to their own people and to aliens. He intends to convince Khantys and Nenets it is possible to live a traditional life taking advantage of many achievements of contemporary life: he has an electric generator, an electric oven, a video cassette recorder, a television, two computers. An example of his syncretic way of forging his model is the school issue: he wants his grandchildren to be brought up in contact with nature, still receiving a proper education and therefore founded a school in the taiga, where his camp's and the neighbours' children may attend lessons according to the official school programme and take exams twice a year at Varyogan school. His "museum" is not a nostalgic remake of old times, it is a way to adapt to modernity, preserving the framework, but allowing the inside elements to transform.

Towards outsiders, Yuri Vella "works" as a guide: it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between acting and being. In presence of occasional guests, Yuri Vella often exaggerates his traditional chief's attitude, in order to impress people and to transmit his message in a most efficient way. He tries to make visitors aware of the dignity connected with traditional way of life, of natural respect for the environment. He wants to gain respect and understanding.

How can we assess this second way of fighting through the museum idea? The impact of Yuri Vella within his community is certain, but

ambiguous. His personality is very much respected, but not without some scepticism or even irritation. His is often seen as too radical. The world he endeavours to create in the wild is often seen as imposed by dictatorship to his wife and daughters. Still, I am sure that, in spite of these reserves, his approach has a stimulating influence on his people. As far as the outsiders are concerned, Yuri's attitude is certainly more univocally efficient. The persons who visit him are held under his spell: as he is perfectly familiar with their worldview, and aware of their prejudices, he is able to play the most adapted role to guarantee the reception of his message. Respect for nature, sustainable development, parsimonious use of resources – all these are sensitive themes nowadays for Westerners – and in this respect, I would include Russians among the bearers of Western culture. For oil companies, he is a nuisance. They may win trials against him, but they cannot easily get rid of him: his openness grants him huge support abroad and this is a most effective protection.

So Yuri's challenge has led to some results, first of which is his own safety. As for the impact of Yuri's strategy upon his global aims, their remoteness does not allow us to assess it so far. It will probably become clear when his grandchildren are grown ups. Till then let us just appreciate that museums may be seen as much more active tools than they usually are.





# Fixity and movement in Western Siberia: When oil worker, native and reindeer paths cross<sup>234</sup>

*Eva Toulouze, Liivo Niglas*

## **Abstract.**

In the last centuries, the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia have been nomads or semi-nomads. One part of them, those who live in the forest or the tundra with reindeer, are still moving around, steering their herds toward available pastures. But in the last fifty years another economic and social actor has occupied the territory they lived in: the oil industry. How these human and animal societies interact with one another, how their movement patterns meet and divide and how their coexistence has pragmatically led, in addition to unavoidable conflicts, to a kind of symbiosis and mutual dependence, is the focus of this article, which relies on fieldwork carried out by the authors since 1999.

With the development of the oil industry in Western Siberia, two very different populations – the oil workers and the natives – started to coexist and to interact. Movement and fixity characterise both ways of life, but the background, the values and the ways of thinking, differ deeply. This occasional coexistence when their paths meet may lead to conflicts

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<sup>234</sup> Article published in *The Dynamics of Cultural Borders. Approaches to Culture Theory 6* (ed. Anu Kannike & Monika Tasa), University of Tartu Press, 46-84.

between the two groups and in order to avoid this, both must learn to handle the way they relate to their environment and to one another. The aim of this article is to map the present situation. It describes the movement and fixity patterns of both groups and shows the strategies natives implement to regulate their relations in order to avoid conflict with oil workers. These conflicts would be dangerous mainly for the natives, if we compare the political and economic power of both groups. But in certain situations, conflict behaviour is for the natives the only strategy to stand up for their rights.

The area covered by this article is situated in the basins of rivers Pim, Agan and Tromagan, which are part of the Middle Ob region in Western Siberia (the south of the green area in Figure 1). It is a taiga and forest tundra zone, inhabited by indigenous people – Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets, whose traditional subsistence activities are semi-nomadic reindeer herding, hunting and fishing – as well as by Russian<sup>235</sup> newcomers, most of whom work for the oil industry. We have been stimulated to reflect on the patterns of movement and its absence both by our experience in fieldwork over the long term and by some theoretical discussions about Western Siberian nomadism. The data rely on our fieldwork, which began in 1999. The authors of this article, both separately and together, have spent several months in the seasonal camps of Yuri Vella (1948–2013), the Forest Nenets poet, reindeer herder and activist. Moreover, Eva has moved around in the Pim and Tromagan basins in 2005. This article reflects our observations and information gathered from our host as well as from the local population. Yuri Vella was certainly an exceptional person, and his experience vis-à-vis the oil workers cannot be generalised to the local native community. But we believe that many aspects of his interaction with newcomers are similar to those of many other reindeer herders in the region. Yuri Vella was part of the community settled in the village of Varyogan and in the forest area that is historically connected to it. His forest territory, with several seasonal camps in it, is 140 km north of the village, in an area bordering the Tromagan Khanty area and he has both Nenets and Khanty neighbours.

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235 Russian' here is not a purely ethnic term: it covers a diverse community of workers, who are united by Russian as a lingua franca and a Russian or Soviet way of life, and are of different origins – from Russia and the former Soviet Union.

Since the 1960s, when oil was first discovered in massive deposits, it has and continues to be exploited. This industrialisation in areas mainly inhabited by indigenous peoples living in villages, with activities in nature (hunting, fishing, reindeer herding), induced manifold changes. We shall concentrate in this article on the unavoidable contacts between such extreme communities through the point of view of fixity and movement in the Pim, Agan and Tromagan basins, where Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets live together. Moreover, our previous experience in different regions of Western Siberia since the beginning of the 1990s has been of further assistance.

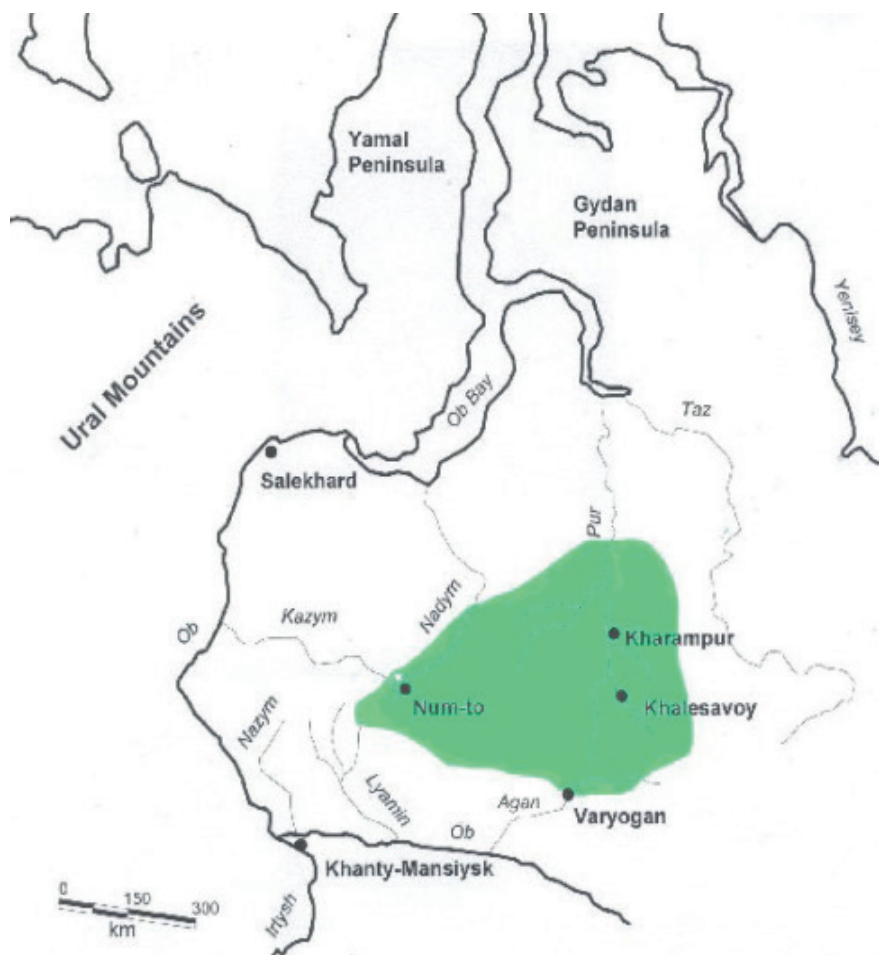
A considerable part of the information and insights presented in the paper have been acquired in the course of the ethnographic filmmaking that Liivo, alone as well as with Eva, has carried out since 2000. Therefore, many of these observations have been recorded on video and serve us as a source of fieldwork experiences that can be revisited and analysed for the needs of research. We also use these video recordings to represent the observed events and to present some of our findings for the audience.

Filming is not just a tool that helps a researcher observe the research subjects' behaviour in more detail – it is not only a device for audio-visual note taking. It is also a specific way of achieving anthropological understanding. Video recording makes it possible to capture and represent the research subject's or fieldworker's lived experiences with the aim of conveying many of the emotional and sensory subtleties that are often left unaddressed in written note taking: the subject's face, body movements and voice as well as the film maker's way of filming (the ability or disability to hold a steady shot, camera movements and movements with camera, etc.) can be an important source of understanding the psychological and physical conditions in which the filmed/filming experience takes place. The captured video material can be edited into short video clips or feather length ethnographic films in order to offer a means for the audience to share the lived experiences of the film subject and the filmmaker/researcher. This way the understanding of anthropological signification of the observed/filmed event is reached through active experience rather than through reflection on that experience (MacDougall 1998, 79).

In this paper we do not aim to focus on the filmic side of our research, neither do we want to emphasise sensory or emotional aspects of the

encounters between natives and oil workers. We mentioned filmmaking and what it can offer to anthropological research only in order to underline that while reading the text that follows one should keep in mind that the issue of coexistence of native reindeer herders and oil workers in Western Siberia is on both sides loaded with strong emotional stress caused by mutual profound mistrust as well as by genuine efforts to find ways to improve the situation. Quite often this contradictory psychological state of conflict and cooperation is discernible in people's micro-behaviour (gestures, posture, intonation) rather than in their outward action and speech. Sometimes a bold attack is the best way to hide insecurity and fear that is visible only for a microsecond in the attacker's eyes, sometimes reckless bullying is the most effective way to proceed if you desire to be left alone.

As the conflict and the co-operation we are dealing with is in essence a cross-cultural one, the peculiarities of ethnic ways of verbal and extra-verbal communication also have to be taken into consideration. The silence that seems to be agreement to one side can mean the strongest disagreement for the other; what is a friendly gesture in one culture could be taken as sign of aggression in another. Watching video recordings or ethnographic films can help us to notice and to interpret these microscopic behavioural units more easily; even if we missed them during the actual event, we can discover them in a later viewing of the recordings. But the most important aspect of ethnographic film is that it prevents us forgetting that we are dealing with real people, that what we see on screen is not a manifestation of an abstract cultural practice but a unique person for whom this 'interesting cultural phenomenon' can be the question of life and death: "ethnographic film is tied to the particularities of the person before it is to the generalities of culture. [...] its indexical attachment to its subject prevents it from playing fast and loose with the person in ways that are par for the course with expository prose" (Taylor 1998, 535). Those who are interested, apart from the more abstract treatment of the issue presented in this paper, in "more intimate structures of culture" (MacDougall 1998, 62) we invite to watch video clips that are available in the electronic version of the article.



**Figure 1.** The Forest Nenets area in Western Siberia.

## Native nomads and the oil industry

The relationship between nomads and the outside world has been a challenging topic for anthropologists all around the world (for an overview, see Khazanov 1994; Barfield 1993). No type of pastoral nomadism is self-sufficient and it cannot function in isolation. All nomadic groups have to find ways and means of adapting to wider economic and political reality. The outside world does not usually act as a passive background for the nomadic way of life. It is an active force that has a great impact on the lives of pastoral nomads. But this interaction is not a one-directional cause-effect chain; rather it can be explained as a series of feedback links between nomads and the outside world. Thus, the choice of specific ways in which nomadic society can adapt to the outside world depends on the needs of its members and the specific opportunities and limitations offered by the wider economic and political environment (Khazanov 1994, 198).

The Middle-Ob region was connected with the outside world mainly through military conflicts with neighbouring people and trade networks that reached as far as the Middle East (Golovnyov 1995). It seems that in former times, when partners did not share a language and were scared of one another, the trade relations with outsiders were executed mainly through a strategy that is described as 'silent trade': natives avoided direct contacts with outsiders by leaving their trade goods at a certain spot in the forest, and their trade partners exchanged it with their own goods a little later (Leete 1999; Dudeck 2012, 96–97; Etkind 2011, 165–166).

The arrival of Russians signalled the beginning of a new area in the region: colonialism that combined commerce with coercion and was based on ruthless extraction of natural resources, first fur animals and later oil and gas (Etkind 2011).<sup>236</sup> At first the Russians came in small numbers as they used locals to do the highly skilled job of hunting and skinning animals, and the contacts between the natives and outsiders were limited. With the huge migration of the oil workers to the forest, the natives had to find ways to continue their way of life in the context of

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236 Yamal has done surprisingly well compared with many other northern regions in post-Soviet Russia: some regions experienced almost total collapse in reindeer herding after the demise of the Soviet Union (Forbes et al 2009). Krupnik has labelled the crisis as "great reindeer crash" (Krupnik 2000).

rapid industrialisation in their immediate neighbourhood. Could the old strategy of avoiding unnecessary contacts with newcomers also work in this new situation?

When analysing the impact of the oil industry on native life in the Middle Ob region, researchers usually describe its devastating nature (Wiget & Balalaeva 2011; Dudeck 2012). But if we turn our attention to the Yamal region, which is not very far from there, and features both nomadic reindeer husbandry and the oil and gas industry, the situation seems to be far less dramatic. According to a study that analyses industrial impact and climate change in Yamal, the natives' socio-ecological system "has experienced significant social/ecological shocks and increasing pressures, yet appears to have reorganized in ways that allow the overall system to continue to function, even thrive" (Forbes et al 2009, 22042).

Why has the coexistence of industrial development and the natives' traditional way of life resulted in a much more drastic situation in the Middle Ob region than in Yamal? Although there are many important socio-economic similarities between the two areas, there are also some fundamental differences. One critical difference is the way reindeer are herded. The Yamal region is situated mainly in an open tundra zone suitable for large-scale and fully nomadic reindeer pastoralism that is characterised by regular, linear and meridional yearlong migrations (Khazanov 1994; Niglas 1997; Stammeler 2005; Krupnik 2000; see also Niglas 2000). The Middle Ob river basin' environment is dominated by forest tundra (pine groves alternating with marshland) and reindeer are herded in a circular movement between seasonal pastures in much smaller herds, while hunting and fishing plays an important role in the economy. In this, so-called, semi-nomadism the mobility is limited and pastoral migrations are shorter, both spatially and temporally, than those of pure nomadism (Khazanov 1994; Verbov 1936).

The difference in the scale of oil and gas development is also very important. In the Middle-Ob region the oil industry has been flourishing since the 1960s, resulting in a huge influx of migrant workers and the development of numerous new settlements, while on the Yamal Peninsula natural gas deposits were opened for production relatively recently, two or three decades ago, and the population increase due to the arriving newcomers has been less drastic.

These socio-economical differences mean that the open space needed for nomadic activities is much more available in the Yamal tundra than in the Middle-Ob forest area. In order to avoid ecological pressure and conflict with newcomers the Yamal reindeer herders were able to use the adaptive strategy that has worked for nomadic groups in many different parts of the world – they simply moved away (see Khazanov 1994; Barfield 1993). In fact, that is how Nenets herders have responded to the presence of the oil industry in Yamal. The researchers found that free access to open space has been critical for success in adjusting to institutional constraints and ecological changes – the ability to roam freely enables people and animals to exploit or avoid a wide range of natural and manmade habitats. The Yamal Nenets have adjusted their migration routes and timing in order to keep away from disturbed and degraded areas (Forbes et al 2009).

For natives living in the basins of the rivers Pim, Agan and Tromagan moving away from ecologically and socially challenging places is usually not an option, although many have attempted it. The land use there is much less flexible – Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets families can migrate with their herds and households only within the limits of their kinship or family territory (*rodavye ugodia*) as there is simply no free land available in the midst of neighbouring family territories, oil production sites, roads, villages and towns. Moving within their small family territories is how they have tried to adapt to the ecological destructions of oil development. Their seasonal settlements were originally concentrated along the main waterways. But with the approach of first geologists and then oil workers, they moved up the river into the swamps towards the watershed as their “settlements were destroyed, huts were removed by bulldozers, the waterways were dammed up when roads were built over the marshland, reindeer pastures on the riverbanks destroyed” (Dudeck 2012, 90).

The industrial pressure on land and other natural resources is ever increasing in the current economic situation, where the Russian State budget depends heavily on oil revenues, and the Middle-Ob region is still one of the most important oil producers in the country. The new oilfields are explored by building main roads along the rivers and then expanding in branches into the marshland between the rivers. This way the oil development has reached even the remotest parts of the taiga, putting high pressure on native territories. Many people cannot withstand



the economic, administrative and psychological pressure of state and oil authorities and sign away parts of their land for oil production. This usually results in degradation of reindeer pasture, hunting and fishing grounds and the family's reliance on different forms of material compensation from the oil company. This also means that roads to the oilfields connect them with the existing towns and with the new emerging settlements of oil workers. As a result, the frequent contacts between the natives and oil workers are becoming unavoidable and both sides use co-operation as well as conflict to achieve their economic and political aims.

## **Native community and movement**

While Khanty and Forest Nenets are considered two different communities, for they speak different languages, which are only remotely akin, their way of life is very similar; they also have a long tradition of interaction and intermarriage, in which interethnic exogamy was regulated (Verbov 1936); they are also developing, under pressure from newcomers, a common indigenous identity (Toulouze 2012) and will be treated in this article mainly from this point of view. As mentioned, their traditional way of life is characterised by semi-nomadic reindeer herding, hunting and fishing. How much is this way of life currently followed? It has certainly not disappeared. Even in the Soviet period, it existed marginally, and despite the fact that the indigenous population had been sedentarised, i.e. gathered into villages and employed in collective farms (*kolkhoz*) for which they hunted, fished or pastured reindeer, they did not entirely lose connection with the nomadic way of life. Some individuals managed to leave the collective farm and migrate on their own with their reindeer.

After the breakdown of Soviet economic and legal system, as soon as the system allowed it, numerous indigenous households, while keeping their house in the village, moved back into their family's territory in the forest in order to live as the previous generations did. In 1996, Yuri Vella even organised the delivery of 1000 reindeer from the Yamal region to natives wishing to re-establish reindeer herding in the area. This movement back to the forest was also encouraged by the villages'

situation in post-Soviet Russia: the *kolkhozes* collapsed, and thus most of the villagers' employment disappeared.

Living in the forest provides activity and motivation and is a more or less efficient antidote against the alcoholism that is widespread in the villages: people have much to do not in order to get money or social status, but merely in order to survive. One needs to prepare the firewood, fetch water, and hunt and fish in order to survive in the forest. Every activity has both motivation and justification. Moreover, stores are scarce; vodka is less accessible than in the villages. Often, people who are permanently drunk in the village are sober while in the forest. However, this is not an absolute rule; it happens that frequent visitors bring vodka and alcoholism cannot be totally avoided. Some families, older and younger, started modulating their lives between the villages, where they have a house, where there are shops, the administration provided services, medical care, post office and camps in the forest, which may be further than 100 km from the village. Movement between the villages and the 'wild' now doubles traditional movement in the forest.

When people wish to move between the village and the camps, they must rely on their own transportation means. Snowmobile penetration occurred in the late 1970s.<sup>237</sup> Since then, reindeer have less and less been used for transportation. Snowmobiles have also been an appreciated commodity, as well as one of the goods provided by oil companies as compensation for drilling on the natives' territory and have been quite widespread in the region, so that at the turn of the millennium, most natives owned snowmobiles. Notwithstanding this, moving between villages and camps was quite an adventure. By snowmobile, it could take several hours of driving in extreme cold and heavy wind before a traveller reached his or her destination. It was even more difficult before the mobile phone era began in Western Siberia (Stammler 2009), for it was very complicated to organise logistics. However, mobile phones came to the region in 2000; at the same time, car use, which had started earlier, developed in the region (Niglas 2011), allowing more fluidity in movement between the village and the camp, and conferring more flexibility to the movement patterns.

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237 While motorsledge penetration has been wide indeed, it has not induced a social revolution similar to that which Peltó analysed among the Sami (Peltó 1973).

The more traditional sort of movement of local indigenous people has been described as typical of semi-nomadism (Khazanov 1994, 42): this means that families have several camps in a relatively small territory (approximately 20x20 km) and move between them according to seasons and needs. They have a winter camp and a summer camp, today with several log huts;<sup>238</sup> in addition, they may also use other more mobile dwelling places. For example, in 1999 Yuri Vella had a *balyk* (a small house with wheels) close to a corral one hour from the winter camp, and a *tshum* (conical tent) in which the family lived in spring, and which was set close to the place where the reindeer calved (see Niglas 2003). Later he replaced the tent with a light structure that was designed by local art students: it had a platform that allowed observation of the herd during the calving from far away without disturbing the reindeer and it could be moved to a new place with the help of a tank-like “all-terrain vehicle” (*vezdekhod*) (see also Niglas 2011, 54). Movement between these seasonal camps is done either by foot, by ski, by dugout canoe, by snowmobile or by car.

When the natives change camp between the seasons, they move with all they need for living. When speaking in Russian, they use the same term that tundra nomads have for their everyday migration (*kaslanie*). Although the movement to a new camp is today done mainly by car and has become faster and physically much easier than in the past, when people travelled on reindeer sledges, it has still retained psychological and emotional importance for those involved. Liivo has documented this stressful but exciting process of loading the car, driving and unloading everything in another camp several times on video. According to Yuri Vella, moving the camp was always a joyful and festive activity (Niglas 2014a; see also Niglas 2003).

But even when the natives are not changing camp, movement is part of their everyday life. Many households have some reindeer: although most of the natives lost their herds during collectivisation and sedentarisation, most of those who returned to their ancestors’ territories started reindeer herding again. Forest reindeer herding techniques depend on the season. In winter the reindeer are supposed to come every day to a corral in the winter camp. In the afternoons they go freely to the pasture the herder has

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238 The log huts are called «Khanty houses», *kapi mya*’.

oriented them to and either come back in the morning or the herder goes and fetches them. In summer, when mosquitoes torment men and beasts, the pasturing is mostly free: the deer look for food during the night and then come 'home' again, because in the summer camp corral there is a permanent smoke source that protects them from the insects.<sup>239</sup> After the mosquito time, pasturing is free. The reindeer choose the place for the rut and the herder takes care that they are undisturbed. As soon as the first snows fall, the herd is gathered and winter pasturing starts again.

Therefore, looking for reindeer, following reindeer movement is one of the everyday obligations of the herder, if he wishes to keep in touch with his herd and not have it turn wild. A skilled herder is supposed to know where his animals have gone during the night and is usually able to find them in the morning. Usually, this tour is made on foot, but snowmobile or cars may be used as well if needed (see Niglas 2003; 2014d).

There are also other obligations that require movement in the forest: if today shop food is widely present in natives' nutrition, they still hunt and fish. Hunting and fishing are achieved mainly through different kinds of traps. Traps must be set on animal paths or in rivers and lakes, and they must be checked. Some families, as Yuri Vella's, do not hunt regularly. Usually, he shot a bird or a squirrel that might cross his path while looking for reindeer. But in summer his family fishes regularly. Every day or every two days it is necessary to check and empty the fish traps.

## **Fixed points and their inhabitants**

The fixed points are first of all, historically, the 'national villages', which were created during the collectivisation process in order to settle nomadic natives and use them as labour in collective farms. In the Middle Ob region, the national villages were founded in the 1930s, although the

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239 In recent years, since 2008–2009, mosquitoes have been scarce. This causes concern to the herders, who have to look, sometimes quite far, for their reindeer as they are not motivated to 'come home'. In 2013, Yuri Vella came to the conclusion that mosquitoes are being systematically exterminated by the oil workers, who want to work undisturbed in the oil sites.

sedentarisation<sup>240</sup> process lasted much longer (Forsyth 1992, 293–299). The national villages have a population that is mostly native, but the villages are often run by non-native officials.<sup>241</sup> We have mainly worked in the village of Varyogan, which was founded in the 1920s, and where a boarding school was opened in 1939<sup>242</sup> (Varyogan Secondary School). There were around 700 inhabitants in the village in 2010.

In general, the sedentary way of life is seen as the antithesis of nomadic life. Clearly there are major differences between the conditions in which the two exist that justify this kind of dichotomy. But this view also exists because of certain ideology, which is cultivated sometimes consciously or unconsciously by the nomads themselves. This ideology is usually fundamental in the negative attitude towards the sedentary world (Khazanov 1994, 199). That is also the case in the Middle Ob region: for many natives, the sedentary life seems less fulfilling and harmonious than living in the forest. However, this attitude does not prevent the Forest Nenets and Khanty from enjoying the opportunities and conveyances of village life now and then. Even those natives who live in the forest were officially included in housing projects, and many reindeer herders received houses or apartments in the villages. However, they did not move there permanently, preferring to travel between the forest and the village whenever needed. At the same time most of the native people who live and work in villages have close ties to their nomadic relatives. Probably we can agree with Yelena Lyarskaya, who has proposed an interesting insight into the Yamal region: while recognising that “life in the tundra and life in the village are clearly distinguished and opposed”, she argues that the Nenets society in Yamal is represented by a continuum and cannot be separated into only tundra people and only village people (Lyarskaya 2003, 269). This is a keen observation, the aim of which is not to draw

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240 Sedentarisation of nomads was one of the main issues of the sovietisation agenda. It began intensely at the beginning of the 1930s and was achieved by the end of the 1950s.

241 For example, the administrative autonomy of Varyogan village has been thoroughly reduced in the last years: while in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s sometimes the head of the administration was a native, in the late 1990s and the 2000s natives were supposed not to be able to administrate a village and at the end of the decade, the administration was transferred to the closest small towns.

242 See Varyogan Secondary School homepage.

absolute lines where they do not exist and to acknowledge a deeper fluidity between two opposite models as a way for Siberian natives to adapt to the alien structures that have been imposed upon them. However, while in Yamal most of the villages are still places where Nenets are dominant, in the Middle Ob region the intensive oil exploitation has resulted in the development of various kinds of settlement with an absolute majority of newcomers.

In our research area the national villages are like islands of native populations, separated from each other by long distances and numerous newcomers' settlements. For example, the nearest national village to Varyogan is Agan, situated 100 km down the river Agan; to get there by car takes more than four hours. The closest small town (*poselok gorodskogo tipa*), Novoagansk, is just 8 km away from Varyogan; it was founded in 1966, and has around 10 000 inhabitants. The closest bigger town (*gorod*) is Raduzhnyy; it was established in 1973 and has a population of 43 500. As these data show, the foundation of these towns is quite recent and accompanies oil industry development. The nearest non-native settlements that were founded before the discovery of oil are the two largest cities in the region – Surgut (est. 1594) and Nizhnevartovsk (est. 1909), both having more than a quarter of a million inhabitants. While in Varyogan, the population is two thirds native (Khanty and Forest Nenets), in towns there are only tiny percentages of indigenous population, all the others are people initially connected with oil industry and coming from elsewhere.

These 'new' people are more or less mobile. Undoubtedly, they are migrants. Their mere presence is the result of a very decisive movement, which led these people to build their lives in an ecosystem very different from the one from which they originated. They came with a strong motivation, often (but not always) two-fold: money, for salaries were higher in the North, in order to attract newcomers; and adventure, pioneering, having the feeling of achieving something. Usually, these people, mostly young men, came in connection with oil industry work. The oil industry has been expanding for about fifty years, and the massive migration and the multiplication of families has demanded the creation and development of all kinds of administrative service: industrial (construction, road building), commercial (trade and distribution) and services (banking,

insurance, school, medicine, culture). Many of the inhabitants of these towns today are no longer directly connected to the oil industry. The life they lead in this environment is not so different from the life they left: a sedentary, urban, modern life.

Not all of the newcomers are fully sedentary. First of all, those who are involved in the oil industry do not always actually live in town. In Russia, long-distance commute labour or shift workers (*vakhtoviki*) is increasingly becoming a means of meeting the needs for labour in the expanding oil and gas industry. Both intraregional shift workers who commute within their region and interregional workers who travel to the region from outside are used to exploiting the oil fields in Western Siberia (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger 2011; Spies 2009). Most of them are younger single men who live in camps not far from the oil fields. They usually spend a month in camp with quasi-military discipline and then go back to their homes “in the South” for the same amount of time (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger 2011; Spies 2009).<sup>243</sup> This means that in addition to historical cities and mono-industrial towns that were developed during the first oil boom in the 1970s–90s, there are also shift-labour villages (*vakhtovoi posyolok*) with the capacity of several thousand oil workers. Clearly these workers are less attached to the land where they work, for they keep a strong connection with their place of origin.

So, as a rule the natives and newcomers live in different environments. Even most of the natives who are settled in villages have close ties with the traditional way of life. At the same time, they have had very little involvement in the oil industry. For a long time, the ‘newcomers’ ignored the natives because they were considered ‘wild people’ who are a hindrance rather than an asset to the industrial development of the region. Apparently, this attitude is changing and many reindeer families have some family members working with the oil companies (Dudeck 2012, 97).

We already see that the forest, dwelling place for one, working place

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243 In some parts of the Russian North, a kind of long-distance commuting was also practised in reindeer pastoralism, although it was never implemented in Western Siberia. This industrial nomadism (*proizvodstvennoye kochevanie*) implied a shift system in which herders alternated between working in herding brigades and living in the village with their families. It was an attempt to sedentarise nomadic families that was modelled after the oil industry (Vitebsky 2005, 44; Vitebsky & Wolfe 2001, 81–94, Stammmler 2005, 149).

and entertainment for the others, may very well be a place for conflict relations between the two communities. Oil production sites have been built not in compliance with taiga logics, but according to industrial criteria. Production sites are built where oil is found, shift-workers' villages where it is convenient for people to go to work. The needs of reindeer and herders are ignored. Oil pumps may be just a few hundred meters from a seasonal campsite. Contact between the natives and oil workers in the forest are thus unavoidable, and in order to understand the interrelations between the two groups, we must describe some of the more typical situations where their interaction takes place.

## **Willing meetings**

The initiative for meeting may come from each of the sides concerned. It can happen when a newcomer visits a native in his camp. This may happen for different reasons. The newcomer may be lost in the forest and happen to arrive at a native's place. He will then stop, enter the hut and be given the usual welcome a visitor, albeit unexpected, is supposed to receive in a camp. He will be offered tea and whatever eatables are available. News and comments will be exchanged. Life in the tundra or in the taiga is pretty monotonous; any unexpected visit is welcome indeed.

When the places are known it may happen that somebody passing by will decide to make a stop and have a chat. They might for example ask whether they can buy reindeer meat. Individual relations exist and are often quite friendly. The usual racism of newcomers (see below) is not actualised in the presence of a real person, and every native family has a network of superficial acquaintances, with which they exchange slight services and mutual help.

At Yuri Vella's camps visits were much more frequent than the average: Yuri Vella was a well-known personality and he was consulted by very different kinds of person. As an example, in winter 1999 in the course of three weeks that Eva spent in his camp, Yuri Vella was visited by a filmmaker, the head of a natural park looking for advice on reindeer herding, and entrepreneurs who were trying to sell biological toilets to people living in the forest.



Willing meetings can also happen when a native goes to an oil production site. These sites have become places in which problems connected with what both the natives and the newcomers call 'civilisation' may be solved. Different kinds of people and professions are concentrated on these sites: drivers and mechanics, welders and metal workers, geologists and engineers, etc.

The presence of oil industry infrastructure has allowed the spread of modern technology in the reindeer herders' camps. Most families have electricity generators and can use various electronic devices as well as other modern tools in their everyday life. In Yuri Vella's camps there are electric ovens, televisions, video recorders, computers, water pumps and mobile phones, not to mention chain saws, snowmobiles and cars. Some of these devices are easy to repair in the camp but sometimes more specific skills and tools are needed, and those are often available at some bigger oil site.

These oil sites are also urban culture representatives 'in the wild' in other ways. There are refectories where everybody can buy a meal and some basic groceries. Yuri Vella visited these refectories almost every time he drove past one in order to have a Russian style lunch and to buy biscuits, cakes, chicken, sweets and other food that would introduce variety into the everyday diet.

As Yuri Vella and other natives use cars, electricity generators and other fuel consuming technology, they have to find ways to obtain petrol without driving long distances to a filling station in a town. Since the beginning of the 1990s, when the regional parliament approved the law about family territories, the oil industry has been compelled to ask for native approval to extract oil on his territory. In exchange, the companies are supposed to sign "economic agreements" (*ekonomicheskie soglashenia*) and compensate the loss of reindeer pastures and fishing and hunting grounds. Apart from money, goods and different services, this compensation usually includes petrol. In this way, many natives get the opportunity to use generators, snowmobiles and cars – but they also became more and more dependent on petrol. Compensation tends only to be paid to those natives who are docile and do not cause too much trouble. As Yuri Vella was actively trying to discipline Lukoil to change its working ethics towards the natives and towards nature, the company stopped

fulfilling the economic agreement and Yuri Vella had to find other local sources of fuel. He either had to drive to a filling station in the nearest town or buy it from oil workers, who had obtained it illegally from their company (see Niglas 2011, 47). So, the native population may visit these oil sites and oil workers' towns to get fuel or to negotiate those 'economic agreements' with representatives of the oil companies.

## **Difficulties of coexistence**

Meetings between the reindeer herders and oil workers often result in conflict. For ethnic Russians and for those who have assimilated Russian culture into their everyday life, the forest is a location of recreational activities and entertainment. Therefore, it often happens that natives meet oil workers in the forest when these people are either hunting, fishing, picking mushrooms or simply relaxing in nature, i.e. drinking. These meetings are potential sources of confrontation because the presence of strangers in the forest can be highly damaging for indigenous people and for their reindeer. For most of the newcomers the forest is a world unknown, even hostile, something of an antithesis of life in the towns. It is certainly not a civilised place that compels one to be responsible and to think about the consequences of one's actions. As they have no direct impact on the newcomers' lives, the rules of safety as well as of respectful behaviour are mostly ignored.

The main danger for the forest, and for those who depend on it, is fire. Dry summers increase the danger of forest fires, which can destroy huge parts of the woods and reindeer pasture. Lightning may cause fires but people, who do not extinguish their campfire before leaving, or throw their burning cigarette butts onto dry moss, can also cause them. According to Yuri Vella, that is what had happened repeatedly on his territory: after strangers fished, hunted or worked in certain parts of the forest, fire started there. How dreadful forest fires can be for the lives of people became clear in 2011, when lightning started a forest fire that destroyed one of Yuri Vella's camps and the family lost most of their winter clothes and many household items along with the entire VHS archive that Yuri had collected over decades.

A further danger for the forest and reindeer is also the habit of leaving trash in the forest. When walking on the forest roads of Yuri Vella's territory one can see empty beer cans and bottles almost everywhere. Campsites that oil workers use for fishing, hunting or mushroom picking are literally littered with garbage that leaves no doubt about the role of alcohol in those recreational activities. For example, in August 2005, after having spent a couple of days at a Khanty camp in the Pim River basin, Eva and her companions cleaned the forest of dozens of empty vodka bottles that had been left there during the two previous weeks. The garbage left behind in the forest is not only unpleasant for the eye but also dangerous for reindeer as they might harm their legs by stepping on broken bottles and beer cans with sharp edges. That is also the case with waste that oil companies have left in the forest in the course of their industrial activities: broken wires, pieces of iron sheeting, toxic materials and oil pollution can be seriously dangerous for the reindeer (see Niglas 2003).



**Figure 2.** Pim River taiga, Estonian poetess Kristiina Ehin and Khanty linguist Agrafena Pesikova ‘clean the forest’ near Pesikova’s camp, gathering empty bottles left in the forest.

The increasing number of people who move around in the forest either for work or for entertainment threatens the security of the reindeer. All reindeer, although they move unchecked in the wild, belong to someone. They are domesticated animals, as cows and sheep are. But while it would be unconceivable for an ordinary person to shoot a cow, reindeer are treated as game animals in the taiga. It was especially bad in the early 1990s, when oil workers were shooting reindeer from helicopters in the Varyogan area. This triggered native action: the Khanty and Forest Nenets blocked a road used by oil workers, called the press and protested against the danger their herds were exposed to. While in the last years this kind of attack has ceased, it is still dangerous for reindeer to move too close to oil sites.

Another danger for the reindeer is being disturbed by the presence of strangers in the forest. Reindeers are easily frightened. Even the noise of a passing car or a gunshot can make them scatter and run. Dogs, brought to the forest by oil workers, are also dangerous to the herd as they usually start chasing a reindeer whenever they see one, not to mention the harm the packs of stray dogs that have been left behind in the forest by their owners can do to the herd. A frightened reindeer runs away and can become isolated from the rest of the herd for a long time. A single reindeer is much easier prey for beasts and poachers, and a herder can lose several reindeer this way every year.

The herd is especially vulnerable to disturbance during the time of rut. For the reindeer, the rut is a very limited in time. Many females accept the males for only a few hours a year. It is thus important for the herder to take care that his reindeer are not disturbed during this crucial moment, if he wants his herd to reproduce. The reindeer rut usually happens in late September and early October. This autumn period is also very good for hunting. Hunting is considered one of the privileges of people who are compelled to work so far from the pleasures of the city, and the oil companies have their own hunting societies. The regional authorities provide these societies with hunting grounds that sometimes correspond to areas where native people pasture their reindeer. When oil workers go hunting they usually use heavy transportation and dogs. If they pass rutting reindeer, it is very much to be expected that the herd's reproduction will be a failure. Yuri Vella had one of his herd's rutting grounds on the land

that was simultaneously his family territory and a hunting area for the Lukoil hunting society. He expresses his anguish in a poem:

But the Land of Love  
Where all must be peaceful  
And quiet  
As in the nursery,  
Where one must hear  
Only the cries  
Of the newborn children  
And the deer calves,  
Where the peace must be guarded  
against the car exhaust pipes,  
against the barking of dogs,  
against the marksmanship over emptied bottles,  
against the forest fires from the hunters'  
And fishermen's fires –  
Now is the hunting ground  
Of the LUKOIL Company.

And with the opening of the autumn hunting season,  
When the deer  
Have their Love time,  
In that white,  
World peaceful before,

The oilmen rush  
Not for the drilling of oil and gas,  
not for the strengthening of the state,  
Not for the prospering of the people,  
But  
for a hunter's sport,

for the ranging of guns,  
for the training of dogs,  
for the testing of snowmobiles,  
for picking mushrooms and berries,  
for spending nights  
beside the fishermen's fires,  
for enlightening the children  
in "national hunting" [...]

*(Vella 2010, 34–35)*

The movement of newcomers in the forest can also be dangerous for forest dwellers for a reason that may be summed up in the word 'vandalism'. Oil workers who are hunting or working in the forest might come upon a hut, a storehouse, a fish trap or a dugout boat. All these objects are someone's property; somebody has made them and uses them, even if they are just left unprotected in the forest. According to the forest rules, the use of these items in the absence of the owner is natural. When natives leave their camp, they usually leave some firewood in the hut, to allow anybody who passes by to make tea or to stay overnight, if needed. But this taiga hospitality, where nothing is locked up, is thoroughly unknown to people accustomed to a westernised urban culture in which it is natural to protect ownership. When there is no clear hint that property is protected, a sign is given that there is no need to respect the ownership. All over the taiga, natives have had the sad experience of finding their stores and cabins vandalised, their canoes burnt, instruments and furs stolen.<sup>244</sup> For example, twenty years ago someone burned down Yuri Vella's hunting cabin.

There are even worse transgressions by the oil workers, at least from the symbolic point of view. Destroying graves is unacceptable in every culture, no less so in Russian culture than in the native culture. Nevertheless, desecration of graves is often observed in the northern areas. Many graves have been destroyed in order to make way for industrial development in the region. Often a natives' clan cemetery is turned into

<sup>244</sup> Khanty writer Yeremey Aypin even wrote a short story in 1977 about a man who refuses to put a lock on his door (Aypin 1995, 65–74).

a sand quarry or into new settlements, as it is usually located on high and dry ground between marshlands. For example, the towns of Novoagansk and Raduzhnyy are both partly built on the cemeteries of the Aypin clan. But there are also many examples of cemeteries being destroyed for no obvious reason. Is it because natives' cemeteries look different from the Christian ones, and therefore are not recognised as places deserving respect? Yuri Vella has written a strong text about his experience when visiting one of these desecrated cemeteries:

For what reason? Yesterday I was passing by the clan cemetery of the Aypin. What I saw beats any reasonable explanation. The majority of graves are dug up. These are not the traces of animal claws, they are traces of spades, used by human beings. What were they looking for here? Why? The hidden treasures they didn't find in the storage huts at the sacred grove? [...] Here lies the discarded rotten boot of the singer Shchimka. One can see a 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 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, o 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 my weather-beaten skull: What have I done to you?<sup>245</sup> (Vaella 2008, 36–37).<sup>246</sup>

Apart from cemeteries, which are also clearly distinguished as such by newcomers, there are other parts of the sacred landscape that oil workers destroy without even knowing it. Even ordinary places in the forest, which for newcomers appear empty, can be of the highest significance

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245 All the quoted English translations from Breeze from the Lake are made by Aleksandr Vashchenko, a non-native English speaker, a Russian academic who helped and supported Yuri Vella and died some months before the Forest Nenets poet. To enjoy Yuri's literary talent, please consult the original Russian text.

246 See also a film by Olga Kornienko (1998).

for natives. For example, Liivo filmed Yuri explaining at the oil company's truck depot where he goes to get his things repaired that the depot was built on the site where his grandmother's aunt was buried. It is kind of surreal to watch Yuri explaining the whereabouts of the grave, using an oil pump and a filling station as reference points, and then talking about casual issues with the oil worker who has no idea what sort of meaning his working place has for the native person (Niglas 2014c).

Another important source of conflict between reindeer herders and oil workers is the destruction of sacred places where natives worship their gods. Travelling to the sacred place and gathering there for animal sacrifices is an important aspect of the social interaction inside a community and is mirrored in the spiritual communication with the deity who protects that community (Dudeck 2012, 96). Unfortunately, these important communal sites are under great pressure from the oil industry: as with the cemeteries, sacred places are usually situated on elevated and dry locations, which makes them ideal for sand quarries and for other industrial development. The main sacred place close to Yuri's camps has been completely destroyed: now there is the oil workers' village of Povkh.

There is a still-functioning communal sacred place not far from Yuri's autumn camp, where he sometimes performed rituals. It is a sacred place on top of a hill, overlooking the marshland and the Vatyogan River. According to Yuri, there were many reindeer antlers and skins hanging on the trees in the 1980s as the local Forest Nenets and Khanty visited it often to make sacrifices and offerings. But in 2009, we could see only a few very recent ones on trees. Yuri accused the oil workers of removing them. Yuri also said that the oil workers have desecrated the place in other ways, too: they used to drive their heavy trucks over the hill, and he also showed us a metal pole that was planted on the hill top as geodesic mark. Showing us the geodesic pole, Yuri made a remark that the oil workers would never think of doing the same in a church (Toulouze & Niglas 2012, 146–151; see Niglas 2014b).

There must be some reasons for behaviour that seems extreme and does not fit with the image of the civilised people the oil workers are supposed to be. We have already mentioned the ignorance of rules of proper conduct in the ecological and cultural system that is new for people coming mostly from urban and Western settings.



Alcohol is certainly one possible reason, or at least condition for such mischief. It is important to understand that for newcomers the forest is an environment full of ambiguity. It is attractive as a place for recreation and entertainment, but at the same time it is frightening: the forest is something exceptional, it is an environment that is non-domesticated. In 2005, the Russian truck driver who gave Eva and her companions a lift to Lyantor commented: "Of course, the forest is frightening. One has to drink." So, the forest is relaxing, exciting, and also frightening, and in order to feel comfortable one has to drink.<sup>247</sup> As the forest is beyond the ordinary life environment, visitors do not feel any responsibility towards it. But alcohol consumption could also explain the actions of ordinary people, who would not carry out these actions in their own environment, being sober.

Probably the main reason lies not so much in the newcomers' love of alcohol and in their ignorance of decent behaviour in the forest, but in their lack of willingness to understand this new environment and its requirements.

While earlier newcomers, who arrived to the region individually in different periods from the Tsarist Era to the 1920s–30s, tried to merge into the local society by learning the new rules and in many cases even languages, those who came here during the oil boom arrived in completely different conditions. They migrated here in massive numbers, bringing habits and values from the world from which they originated. Instead of revising them according to the new environment, they came to impose their own preconceived worldview. The imported world they live in has very little to do with the new location of their life. Their values are confirmed by their community, which lives in a world of its own. They have no wish to change their habits and ideas. It is a comfort to rely on well-known ideas, especially when one is convinced of their superiority, rooted in instinctive racism. Racism towards native people is a general

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247 This attitude is revealed in the stereotype about Russian hunting and fishing culture. Several popular films have been dedicated to the phenomenon of Russian hunting and fishing, in which alcohol plays the central role. The titles of the films clearly hint at the national character of the behaviour: *Peculiarities of National Hunting* (1995), *Peculiarities of National Fishing* (1998), *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in Winter* (2001). Actually, in the poem about the Lukoil hunting society we cited earlier in the article, Yuri Vella indirectly refers to them.

feature of Russia (see Pika 1999; Gray 2004, 95, 150, 204; Rethmann 2001; Bloch 2003, 143; Xanthaki 2004), even though it is often not backed by acknowledged awareness. It relies on a clear evolutionist understanding of culture, whose roots plunge deep in Soviet positivism and materialism. There is a universal scale of culture, of ‘civilisation’, according to which communities are judged and positioned.

The notion of ‘culture’ (*kul’tura*) or ‘civilisation’ (*tsivilizatsiya*) is a central one in Russia’s ideological landscape, as Grant and King emphasise (Grant 1995, 15–16; King 2011). The concept of culture has two different but interlinked meanings. On one hand, culture stands for everything that is peculiar to a specific ethnic group, as in the understanding that “every people has its own culture”; on the other hand, culture is seen as a universal attribute of humanity (King 2011, 71, 115–116; Grant 1995, 16). We would like to insist upon this universalistic understanding of culture as being a crucial notion in the North. ‘Culture’ and ‘civilisation’ are absolute notions<sup>248</sup> that denote the higher step on the evolutionary ladder of different forms of cultures. They are opposed to primitiveness, backwardness, which is at the bottom of the ladder. The features that characterise civilisation are manifold: upbringing with school and written culture, urban ways of living, integration of progress and the refinement that is supposed to go with it. It may also be Christianity versus animism. Anything seen as archaic or primitive is considered as staying below in the universal scale of values. The indigenous peoples are primitive and thus at the bottom of the scale. Moreover, they have themselves interiorised this category (Toulouze & Niglas 2012, 139). What is usually outside the awareness of the people who use these categories, is that what they consider to be a universal rule is actually the pre-eminence of one form of culture, more precisely Russian.

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248 There are many comments on these terms as used in Russian, for example Piers Vitebsky and Sally Wolfe comment about Yakutia: “The current terms *kul’tura* and *tsivilizatsiya* are Russian words which carry heavy Soviet ethical baggage. This scale is mapped out across the face of the earth, along a continuum from wilderness, through the village, to various provincial towns and the city of Yakutsk” (2001, 90).

## **Natives' adaptation strategies**

The natives respond to the presence of oil workers in the forest by implementing different strategies whose aim is to protect them from conscious or unconscious aggression. They try to find ways to co-exist more or less peacefully with newcomers, as it is not realistically possible to get rid of them.

One way of doing it is to attempt to assert more control over land. The natives' concept of land ownership is much more flexible and more fluid than in the West. In Western thinking a formal land title and rigid borders define ownership of the land, which is then enforced by a legal system. But in order to control the usage of land and resources, and to provide for the transfer of land rights between generations, an indigenous society usually relied on oral records and community understanding. Thus, there was no need to delineate the borders of family territories. The arrival of oil workers close to reindeer herders' camps introduced the necessity to mark clearly the boundary between the reindeer pasture and the rest of the forest. Oil workers tend to consider the forest just as a kind of no man's land and feel free to drive wherever possible. One of the natives' strategies to prevent outsiders from entering their territories and so avoid contact with them is to delimit their territory with the help of road signs, written warnings and gates. Many reindeer owning families have also erected wooden fences to isolate their territory. Yuri Vella himself built several kilometres of fence. The main aim is not so much to keep outsiders out – it is quite easy to open the gate and to get in –, rather it is to keep the reindeer in. Thus, reindeer should not be tempted to go wandering towards the oil sites, putting in peril their own lives.



**Figure 3.** “Native camp, entrance prohibited”: Boris Ayvaseda’s, a Forest Nenets reindeer herder’s camp entrance nearby Yuri’s camp in 2011.

Actually, speaking about ‘their territory’ is somewhat misleading. In Russia, indigenous minorities do not have property rights for the territories on which they live. They are allowed to use the land for free, but they cannot own it. They have no rights on the subsoil and the raw material it contains, but they may use the surface area for traditional activities like hunting, fishing and herding. The majority of the landmass in Russia, including the territories of traditional natural resource use, is owned by the Russian Government (Yakovleva 2011, 9–10). In the Khanty-Mansi autonomous region, the natives were granted the right to use their ancestral territories in 1992. The territories, called “kinship territories” (*rodovye ugod’iya*) are officially confirmed to the families wishing to lead a traditional way of life and have clearly determined borders.

Apart from using different ways of demarking the borders of their land, some reindeer herders convince the oil companies to construct physical barriers, like metal gates and ditches that make entering to their family territories very difficult (Dudeck 2012). Sometimes oil companies use the argument of protecting reindeer herders from outsiders in order to demonstrate their capability of controlling the natives' movements in the forest. For example, Yuri Vella discovered one day that he could not drive to his autumn pasture on the Vatyogan River as someone had erected a metal barrier on the road. The barrier was locked and it had a sign attached to it with the information that the key could be found in Yuri Vella's camp. According to Yuri, it was deliberate attempt to cause mistrust inside a local community as the barrier also blocked the way to an important sacred place that native people used for rituals. The natives' movement in the forest may also be controlled by checkpoints that oil companies have established on the roads to oil fields. Officially the checkpoints are there to protect oilfields and natives from outside threat like alcoholics, poachers and vandals, but quite often the companies' security guards make it hard for natives or their visitors to enter the forest.



**Figure 4.** The fence built by Yuri and his wife around the kinship territory to protect his reindeer (2011).





**Figure 5.** Metal barrier as a border to native territory on the Vatyogan River.

There is another, more active way of protecting the family territory and the herd – chasing the trespassers out from the reindeer pastures. Not all natives have enough determination and skill to do it. One of those who was quite successful in this was Yuri Vella. Yuri insisted on catching the strangers who had entered his territory for a hunting or fishing trip and teaching them a lesson. Lesson teaching did not naturally encompass either physical retaliation or brutal action, but was achieved with words – a means that Vella was probably much more skilled at using against Russians than most of the natives in the area. Vella tried to catch the people who circulated unduly on his lands, to identify them and to threaten them with denunciation to their bosses and to other authorities. This practise sometimes involved a nerve breaking car chase, skilful verbal attacks and a great deal of bluffing (see Niglas 2014a).<sup>249</sup> However, this strategy, which is based on a kind of conflict behaviour, can be dangerous for the

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249 See Niglas 2014d.

natives. The trespassers may have guns and may be intoxicated, hence unaccountable. In fact, we do not know anyone other than Yuri Vella who uses it systematically to keep outsiders away. Thus, we can consider that this practice is not used very often among the reindeer herders in the region.

The best strategy to protect the reindeer in the region is active herding. In the forest, the herds are much smaller than in the tundra, where herds may contain thousands of domestic reindeers. Forest Nenets and Eastern Khantys have herds with as few as 20 animals, others, bigger, with a couple of hundred, but not more. The small size of herds allows the herder to better protect his reindeer through close contact with his animals. Usually herders want to check their herd every day, either by visiting them in the forest, especially during the times of rutting and calving, or attracting them home with the help of smoke in summer and treats like dry bread and salty fish soup in winter.

Yuri Vella tried to have contact with the herd as often as possible, and was therefore constantly looking for them in the forest, either on foot, by snowmobile or by car (see Niglas 2014d; 2003). Being close to his reindeer helped him to discover the disappearance of animals from the herd early on, so he could find them before they ended up in the vicinity of oil sites and were killed there by oil workers. It also prevented the reindeer from turning wild. That's what happened with Vella's younger neighbours: they did not take enough care of their reindeer, mostly due to alcohol, and their big herd became so wild that the herders had to shoot deer in order to get meat; this herd has now scattered and is no more.



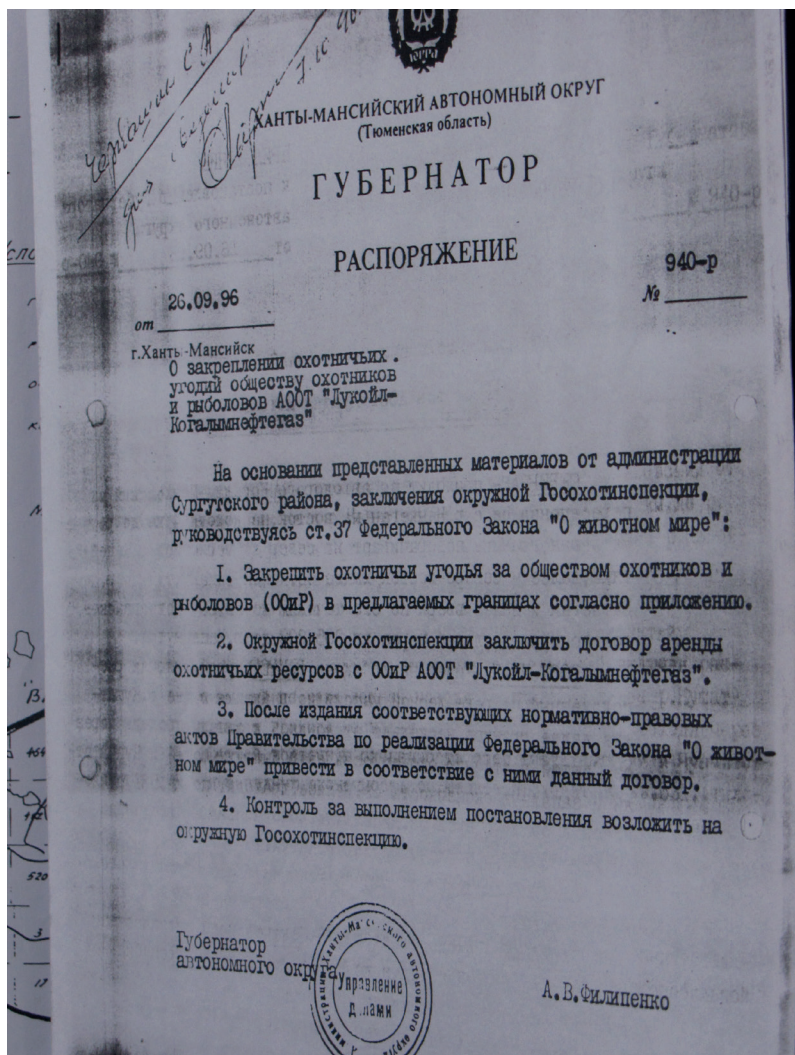
**Figure 6.** Active herding means being close to the reindeer and getting them used to human presence (Yuri Vella among his herd in February 1999).

Another method to maintain a sustainable way of life in the forest is to negotiate with oil workers, to develop contacts with them and to convince them to remove the elements in their policy that disturb the natives most. As oil companies and regional authorities have promised that the natives' territories would remain free of outsiders, herders may rely on this promise to protest when they have a proof that it has not been respected. Negotiations between the two groups have developed in the last decades as the law on family territories has compelled the oil companies to address personally the natives, in order to receive their agreement to oil drilling on their land. Further, the need to sign 'economic agreements' has led to closer discussions between the natives and oil workers.

These discussions are unequal and difficult for the natives: the company and state representatives are masters of rhetoric and they



speak moreover in their mother tongue, while the native's culture gives a secondary place to verbal communication and they speak a language in which they are not so very proficient. Often negotiation is not favourable to the natives, who sign whatever the company wants them to sign. It also happens, especially in the case of negotiations with the state, that an agreement has been reached but that the next administrative level's requirement is not fulfilled, and the agreement may never be confirmed and implemented. For example, according to Yuri, in 1996 an agreement was reached between the heads of families and the local administration about the borders of the land allotted to each family. The natives were satisfied and considered that the measure was implemented. But this agreement was never confirmed at a higher level and, in fact, some months later a letter from the governor ascribed the same land to the Lukoil's hunting society. The natives were not informed about this: Yuri Vella found out about it more than 10 years later, in 2009. So negotiations are important, but people have no illusions about them.



**Figure 7.** Letter from the Governor of the Khanty-Mansi autonomous region, Aleksandr Filipenko, entrusting the Vatyogan area to Lukoil's hunting society (2011).

## **A new kind of symbiosis**

Nonetheless, negotiation and cooperation seem to be the only way to survive. Actually, the natives are those who are most in need of negotiation because they have no real strength to oppose the newcomers. In the Khanty-Mansi autonomous region, the indigenous population represents, according to the 2010 census, around 1% of the population. It is clearly not a percentage that allows much hope in terms of power struggle. Moreover, the natives do not fight the intruders actively. First of all, they are accustomed to avoiding conflicts, and secondly, they know that if they would dare to, it would be an easy task for oil companies to squeeze them. In 2000, when Yuri Vella attempted to prevent Lukoil from destroying a bridge that was vital to his movement between his camp and the village of Varyogan by cutting bulldozer's tyres with an axe, the result was a lawsuit, which Vella lost.

It seems that the key for natives to maintain a sustainable life in the forest it is to take an active part in negotiations and to try to have access to the goods and services that can be offered by oil workers. What does that mean in practice?

An idealistic vision would perhaps dream of a forest without oil workers. But the reality is that they are there, and that they have brought a world that cannot be undone. In this way, new needs have been created for reindeer herders that only oil workers are capable of fulfilling. These needs have been partly created by oil workers, but they come also, more generally speaking, from the wish to live in the forest a life that has some aspects of modern comfort. The modern life demands energy, which is produced from the oil that the newcomers extract from the forest. Fuel is used for cars and snowmobiles, and for electricity generators. Electricity is needed in order to have light in the evening and during the long winter darkness, to charge mobile phone and computer batteries, to watch films or television, to pump water for sauna, to bake bread in an electric oven, etc. Today, all natives in the forest have a crucial need for fuel.



**Figure 8.** An electricity generator in Vella's winter camp (1999).





**Figure 9.** Liivo Niglas and Yuri Vella after the purchase of oil (2011).

The natives also have a need for technical help, as mentioned earlier. Many modern tools, such as cars, snowmobiles and electrical instruments cannot be repaired in the reindeer herders' camp, they have to be brought to a place where proper tools and technical skills are available. So, the natives have to go either to a nearby town or to an oil site. Sometimes, they even may need to use heavy transportation. For example, when they want to move a log house to another place, they need a truck to transport all the pieces it is composed of. During the Soviet period, Vella decided to bring different kinds of cabin and storage house from abandoned campsites in the forest to the village of Varyogan in order to make an open-air museum there. He was able to do that thanks to the oil companies' cooperation.



**Figure 10.** Iron stoves in Yuri Vella's car ready to be taken to Lukoil's site.

But what can the natives offer to the oil workers? Obviously, the oil companies are interested in native signatures on the contracts of land use for oil exploitation. Is there anything else that could interest the newcomers, such as they are? First of all, the natives can offer symbolic assistance. They may give shelter. After all, that is what they would do to anybody passing through the forest, and today the people more frequently lost are indeed the newcomers looking for oil sites. The natives also have skills and knowledge that can powerfully contribute to the newcomers' understanding and management of the forest environment. Unfortunately, these skills are usually not recognised. Being humans 'at the bottom of the civilisation ladder', their knowledge is too often dismissed as unscientific<sup>250</sup>. Yuri Vella said that he repeatedly proposed helping Lukoil to work out the plan of how to exploit oil in his territory in

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250 See Yuri Vella's enlightening short story, "How the KGB man taught fishermen to catch fish" (Vella 2010, 51–55).

a way that was ecologically sustainable and had little impact on reindeer. Yuri believed that his model, which was based on his intimate knowledge of the forest ecosystem and the needs of reindeer, could have served as a model for other oil companies in order to change their environmentally disastrous policies.

There are more practical and efficient fields for cooperation. What the natives have, and the newcomers are interested in, is connected with the traditional way of life. The natives are the only ones to have reindeer. While a reindeer meat market is still not organised in the region,<sup>251</sup> oil workers and other newcomers might be more interested in buying or exchanging meat with the natives, instead of obtaining it illegally by killing a lost reindeer near an oil site. The other commodity natives have is connected to recreational activities in the forest. The oil workers' hunting, fishing, berry picking and mushroom gathering could be coordinated and agreed with the natives, if a proper relation system between the two parties were to be established: instead of entering to the natives' territory without their permission and disturbing the herd, the oil workers could be welcomed to the areas where reindeer were not present at that moment. There could be basis for negotiation and cooperation that would eliminate some of the potentialities for everyday conflict between natives and oil workers.

Neither of the two sides is really interested in confrontation. Oil workers at all levels are mainly interested in working, living and relaxing without any hindrance. From the natives' perspective, the main problem of course is the oil production that competes for land with reindeer herding. But they know that this cannot be solved according to their wishes: oil is so vital for Russia's economy that to expect any compromise on this point would be extremely naïve. Yet other sources of conflict could be avoided through dialogue: at the moment, the oil workers work, live and relax without taking into account the interests of other people living in the area. Better coordination between natives and oil workers could make things easier for both sides.

What is the state of the dialogue at the moment? On the one hand, relations with the oil companies as institutions are tense in our fieldwork

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251 Unlike in the northernmost Jamal-Nenets region, where there is an open market for reindeer meat.

region. The companies' attempt to keep the local population under thorough control has led to conflict, especially in Yuri Vella's case. Yuri was a skilled and active fighter for his rights demonstrating that sometimes there is no other option to protect natives' interests than to engage in an open conflict with the oil industry. Yuri Vella had a long confrontation with Lukoil that lasted for almost 20 years – for the time the oil company decided to stop fulfilling the economic agreement in mid 1990s as a reaction to Yuri's demand for environmentally responsible oil production, to the very end of his life in 2013. He was quite successful in this fight: he proved that a native person can withstand the economic and political pressure from a giant oil company and state authorities, while maintaining a sustainable way of life in the forest. Yuri Vella's neighbours had slightly better relations with Lukoil, but at a price: some of the neighbours have yielded large parts of their family territory to oil exploitation and are experiencing a serious impact on reindeer herding and other subsistence activities. Recent developments in the region testify that there are other natives who have decided to put up a serious fight with oil companies in order to save their traditional way of life in the forest. Some have gone even as far as challenging the state authorities with the fact that they have the legal right to self-determination (Borodyansky 2014).

However, 'official' relations are not all. The big bosses of oil companies sit in city offices and are almost never seen. In the field, relations are characterised by compromise and dialogue, sometimes peppered up by occasional conflicts. People meet, and stereotyped relations become more personalised. We have a good example in the relations Yuri Vella developed with the head of a Lukoil transport unit close to his camp. Vella allowed him to hunt on his family territory and sometimes provided him with reindeer meat. In return, he helped Yuri Vella when needed. When Vella brought him his old iron stoves to be welded, there was between the two men a very interesting dialogue that illustrates eloquently the relations between the two groups of people that have to find ways to co-exist in the forest: they looked like antagonists and accomplices, they playfully embodied the 'civilised' and the 'native'. But behind the words, there were a hint of friendship, mutual understanding and a long experience in dialogue (for details, see also Niglas 2011, 46; 2014c).





**Figure 11.** September 2000: Yuri Vella attacks a bulldozer that was destroying a bridge – on the orders of Lukoil – that was vital for the natives.

## Conclusion

The natives living in the Pim, Agan and Tromagan river basins cannot use their traditional strategy of avoidance of outsiders when it comes to finding ways of co-existing with oil workers. Unlike the fully nomadic Tundra Nenets, who can avoid disturbed and degraded areas by changing their migration routes, the semi-nomadic Forest Nenets and Eastern Khanty have no option of keeping away from the areas of intensive oil production. Thus, they have to find specific ways in which they can adapt their way of life as reindeer herders and hunters to the world of oil extraction, migrant workers and energy dependence. In doing so, the native communities have to consider the needs of their members and the specific opportunities and limitations offered by the wider economic and political environment.

In the relations between oil workers and the indigenous population that live on the same land, there are always multiple levels. As far as the regional authorities are concerned, they naturally express support to both sides. The oil industry is the backbone in its relations with federal power, so it is vital for the local administration to give it as much support as required. At the same time, the regional and state authorities have the moral duty to support the indigenous people living on its territory, and in discourse they do so. But clearly, what is at stake is too huge for the interests of the natives to be really protected.

On the other hand, relations between oil companies and the population are even more complicated. It is a well-known fact that oil industry troubles the ecological balance in the forest and that this is a huge disturbance for the indigenous population, whose living environment and resources are damaged. However, the consequences of the oil industry on natives' lives reach further: there is also the human aspect. People from all over Russia and the former Soviet Union have migrated to these areas, of their own will and also to accomplish tasks useful to their countries (and to their families). They arrive with their own needs, their own habits and their own worldview. As little as the indigenous population likes their presence, they are a reality and cannot be ignored. The northern aborigines are pragmatic: they know that, in order to survive, they must

find a way to live with the nuisances that accompany the presence of outsiders in the forest and to lessen them as much as possible. They have adapted and built their lives on relations with newcomers, often using both conflict and cooperation to maintain their traditional way of life in the forest. As a result, a kind of accidental symbiosis has emerged, based on dependence relations. We have tried in this article to explicate the conditions and the outcome of this symbiosis. The main concern in the article is that the dependence is rather unilateral.

We hope that the video clips that are available in the electronic version of the article help the reader not to forget that what we have presented here is a part of the everyday existence of real people, both natives and oil workers. In Yuri Vella's case, these video recordings are also a testimony to a great man, a reindeer herder, a poet and a social activist who is no longer with us.

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