

PRO ETHNOLOGIA 5

Publications of Estonian National Museum

ARCTIC STUDIES 1



Tartu 1997

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Printed by:

OÜ VALI PRESS

Silla 2, EE2353 Põltsamaa

ISBN 9985-9000-7-3

ISSN 1406-9962

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Editorial

As with the earlier numbers of "Publications of Estonian National Museum", so is the *Pro Ethnologia* 5 dedicated to one area of problems. This time the collection has been compiled, thinking firstly of some arctic cultures. The main attention is centered on the worldview of the Nenets (Samoyeds/Yuraks) and Khanty (Ostyaks) and on their sacrificial rites.

The present publication is to a large extent an intermediate scientific summary of a grant project "Examining Cultural Changes in Western Siberia", aided by the Estonian Science Foundation. The project was carried out at the Estonian National Museum in 1996–1997. Within the project great attention was paid to fieldwork. The putting together of the collected material within a scientific treatment is mainly a future task. The work that has happened within the framework of the project has been described in more detail in the last synopsis-article of the present publication, named after the project. I would like to make a short comment on the articles of this publication.

Liivo Niglas, a master student of Tartu University deals in his article "Reindeer in the Nenets worldview" with the daily attitude of the reindeer herders and their beliefs associated with these animals. The author regards the reindeer as a basic factor, the key symbol of the Nenets worldview. The article is, first of all, based on the material of fieldwork by L. Niglas. It is a really interesting paper that encourages us to expect similarly interesting treatment of the Nenets culture from this author in the future.

Art Leete's article is dedicated to a definite sacrifice of reindeer. A survey is given of a sacrifice that took place in April 1996 at lake Num-To. In the first place, the descriptions of the traditional, sacred details of the sacrificial ritual have been given. At the same time, it has been indicated that the observable sacrifice had a certain additional political aspect. Above all, this sacrifice could have been

basically taken as a way of spending one's time. Consequently, it is also observing the cultural changes expressed in the ritual.

Anzori Barkalaja, a researcher in the Estonian National Museum examines in his article the collective sacrifice of the river Pim Khanty in the Surgut region of West Siberia in December 1995. The author touches on both the religious and social aspects of the sacrifice.

In addition to the three longer articles the present issue includes also three short informational pieces. These are certain selected ethnological research chronicles reflecting the work of the ethnologists of Estonia and neighbouring areas.

Olga Fishman, head of the department of the Russian Ethnographical Museum in Sankt-Petersburg, gives a short and compact survey of the collective research programme "Study of the local Baltic-Finn population groups in the north-eastern part of Russia" in the Russian Ethnographical Museum. A. Leete writes about the 2nd International Congress of Russian Anthropologists and Ethnographers in Ufa in the beginning of June 1997. At the end, L. Niglas and A. Leete introduce briefly the essential side of the grant project "Examining Cultural Changes in Western Siberia" of the Estonian Science Foundation, as mentioned above.

The editorial board thanks the Estonian Science Foundation whose help has been used in carrying out fieldwork that acted as a base for the two articles of this issue. The Estonian National Museum hopes to continue publishing collections associated with traditional and current aspects of the culture of the Siberian peoples.

December 1997

A. Leete

Reindeer in the Nenets Worldview

Liivo Niglas

The Nenets, formerly called Samoyeds or Yuraks, are an ethnic group living in the north-east of Europe and West-Siberia. They speak a Samoyed language, belonging to the Uralic group of languages.

From the ancient times reindeer-herding has been the main livelihood of the Nenets. Nowadays it is practised in different types of co-operatives.

Although the Nenets have organised several capitalist co-operatives, most of the herdsmen still work in socialist co-operatives – collective and state farms formed during the Soviet times. The aim of this paper is to analyse the cultural aspect of Nenets reindeer-herding: the connection between reindeer-herding and the general perception of the world of the Nenets. It is mainly based on ethnographic fieldwork material. All the material comes from one single group – the seventh brigade of Yar-Sale state reindeer farm, located in the Yamal peninsula.

Introduction

I came upon the seventh brigade for the first time in the winter of 1991.

I was a second-year student at the time and was wandering through North-Siberia together with a friend, hoping to find something really "ethnographic". We wanted to know more about the traditional lifestyle of the Nenets and that is why we wanted to stay for a while in one of the reindeer-herders' camps.

I had visited different ethnic groups in Siberia before and I knew what it would be like – people realising the inevitable decay of their

culture. Due to the experiences acquired when boarded out at schools far from home and in the Russian army¹ they themselves already believed that the lifestyle of their ancestors was shockingly primitive and that it was wiser to assimilate with the Russians. This was the impression I got every time I reached a village with slanting log houses, where, regardless of the large proportion of natives, the Russian language dominated, the working clothes were mostly grey and the only entertainment were the Indian action films in the cinemas.

I was expecting to find the same kind of stuffy and sombre mood in the brigade of the reindeer-herders in the forest tundra where the plane had taken us with a load of salt, following the orders of the state farm director. To my great surprise, getting off the plane I found myself among smiling people, wrapped in colourful fur coats, coming to meet us from the nearby camp and observing us with discreet curiosity. We spent almost two weeks with these people. During all that time I saw a certain cheerfulness and vitality both on their faces and in their behaviour – something the village Nenets had lacked. They certainly liked humour – all their communal activities were accompanied by animated talking and discreet laughter.

Four years later, after having graduated, when my professor asked me whether I would like to write my Master's thesis and about what. I was confident enough to say that it should be "something" about the Nenets living in the tundra. Actually, at that time my knowledge about the Nenets was quite poor – the only reason for choosing this subject was the experience I had four years before that the people were extremely nice and cheerful.

In the summer of 1996 when flying by helicopter above the Yamal peninsula, looking for the seventh brigade, I was quite excited – how would they receive me, did they remember me at all?

¹ The schoolchildren (forms 8 to 11) of the natives working in the tundra and in the taiga live in Russian boarding schools in big settlements. Therefore, they spend most of their childhood and puberty in a strange cultural and language environment. Children can be with their parents only during the summer holidays, i.e. for only some months a year. After finishing school, young men have to serve their compulsory 2 or 3 years in the Russian army.

Five years is a long time, especially when taking into consideration that meanwhile, fundamental changes had taken place in both the political and economic systems of Russia. Most of all I was afraid that the Nenets themselves changed – their cheerfulness disappeared. But these disturbing thoughts vanished immediately after the helicopter had landed. The faces of the people who hurried up towards us expressed familiar cheerfulness and the joy of recognition.

From this very moment the seventh brigade became my "home" for several months. All this time I have been wondering over the reasons for the vitality of the Nenets. Where do they find the energy that helps them endure this difficult and monotonous lifestyle? The more I think about it, the more it seems to me that the reason is the reindeer.

This comes out most clearly in the answer of my good friend and informant, a twenty-five-year-old herdsman, to the question why should a young and strong man of twenty-five prefer to live in the tundra and not in a village where all the advantages of civilisation – TV, discotheques and bars – are available? He answered: "But in the village I don't have reindeer!" At this point it should be mentioned that in addition to compulsory secondary education this man had studied for two years in Tyumen, a city of a million inhabitants, although he did not graduate. Another herdsman, the eighteen-year-old son of a brigade-leader, answered as follows: "What would I do there (in the village)? I would just idle around in the bars and get into trouble. But it is not boring in the tundra, we have the reindeer." The same kind of attitude can be found among other Nenets.

Hence, the Nenets do not live in the tundra because they are isolated from the rest of the world and therefore cannot wish anything better. It is more likely that the continuation of the nomadic lifestyle is the result of people's free will. It seems that traditional life based on reindeer-herding can offer more to some Nenets than the Russian "culture" dominating in the villages. I believe that it is not the reindeer as such that keep these people in the tundra but the concept of the world, handed down from ancestors, relying on these animals. For the Nenets people, this

worldview, different from village civilization, is in every respect logical and easily understandable.

By the term worldview I mean a way, common to a certain human group, to perceive, interpret and explain the surrounding world. Everything that concerns human life is seen and put into a logical system according to the cultural categories and concepts acquired through socialization. With the help of these categories and concepts, one can make clear to oneself what kind of world one is living in, how should one behave in one or another situation, who are one's friends and enemies. Consequently, the worldview includes common convictions of the members of a certain group that influence essentially the day-to-day life of these people, their social relationship and religion.

The concepts and cultural categories connected with the reindeer seem to predominate in the Nenets people's view of the world. During the fieldwork I discovered that the Nenets divide their reindeer into many different categories. Some categories are formed on the basis of objective parameters like sex, age, colour of the animal itself and the colour of horns. Besides these so-called natural categories, the worldview of the Nenets is characterized by a large amount of other "reindeer-categories" that cannot be understood directly by simple observation.

The inhabitants of the tundra live together with their herd from earliest childhood and, step by step, through the activities and with the help of adults' instructions, they learn to distinguish between the necessary categories.

The following paper is mostly based on the material collected by myself. As only some months have passed from the last fieldwork, the present work presents a preliminary analysis of the material. Some of the facts and opinions given here are probably to a certain extent raw and subjective.

That is why the main accent of the work is on the fieldwork experience itself and, in the interests of objectivity, I try to give, if possible, the "story of discovery" of one or another ethnographic fact. An especially sceptical stand should be taken towards the scriptural accuracy of the terms written in Nenets as the Nenets themselves have great difficulties in writing their mother tongue.

This is quite understandable because apart from a few Nenets language classes, secondary education is given in Russian. Nevertheless, I regard it necessary to use the original terms because many notions about reindeer are simply untranslatable without changing their meaning.

In the present paper I try to bring out the essential reindeer-connected concepts and categories that would help to analyse the characteristic features of the Nenets worldview.

In order to get a clear and complete picture of the Nenets world, I will first describe for the reader their lifestyle – the nomadic lifestyle – in greater detail.

Nomadic cattle-herding

As a result of 400 years of colonization by the Russian Empire in the Yamal Peninsula, the 7701 Nenets form only 49.4% of the local population (Pika, Bogoyavlensky 1995: 62) and, although many Nenets have moved to the coastal villages, following the example of the Russians, the majority of them (4500 people) still have maintained their traditional lifestyle until today and are herding reindeer in the tundra (Pika, Bogoyavlensky 1995: 62).

The Yamal Nenets are genuine nomads who wander around in the tundra with their herd throughout the year. The landscape, covered with stunted vegetation (different mosses, lichens and dwarf bushes) on the permafrost enables only temporary grazing and forces people and animals to move on continuously in search of fresh pastureland. Traditionally the main autonomous economic units were patrilinear extended families consisting of close relatives that were united into bigger groups (*НИЭСЫ*)² in order to acquire better grazing conditions (Homich 1995: 157). The establishment of Soviet power in Russia brought along the compulsory collectivisation into socialist collective enterprises – collective and state farms (see Golovnev, Zaytzev 1992: 70–72; Kopytoff 1955: 19–20), and from that time on the nomads work in brigades.

² Here and henceforth, the Nenets words are given in the Slavonic alphabet.

Officially the brigade is a group administering the property of the state – the cattle of the state farm. The task of the brigade is to graze the reindeer belonging to the state farm throughout the year in order to reproduce the meat reindeer – once a year, in autumn (October–November) a certain amount of animals, corresponding to the yearly increase is taken to the slaughterhouse in the state farm centre. Actually, the brigade is a lot more than just a sub-unit of the state farm. The brigade is the result of the development of adaptation of working practices.

Working in the brigade allowed the Nenets to follow their traditional lifestyle in a situation where the political environment made the private ownership of the means of production – the pastureland and the reindeer – impossible. The compulsory collectivization only changed the form of the nomadic animal herding but the content remained principally the same: although the herd was no longer the people's private property, groups of herders still wandered around in the tundra with their reindeer in search of fresh pastureland. As a matter of fact, the Nenets people have almost always had their own private reindeer.³ There were certain limits on their number during the Soviet times but, still, every family could have their own animals. In the changing political and economic situation the restricted numbers given by the authorities have lost their validity, and today private animals make up a considerable part of the brigade's cattle. For instance, more than one third of the 4000 reindeer of the seventh brigade belong to families.

Basically, even the structure of a state farm brigade does not differ much from the former nomadic group consisting of close relatives. If earlier it was the head of the patrilineal group of relatives who had the authority and right to make decisions, nowadays the brigade leader, appointed by the managerial personnel of the state farm, plays the leading role.⁴ Still, kinship has an important function.

³ The collective farmers were allowed to have private reindeer from the late 1930s (Kopytoff 1955: 80).

⁴ One of the duties of the brigade-leader may even be arranging marriages of fellow brigade members (Kopytoff 1955: 80).

As the nomadic lifestyle demands readiness for co-operation, and an ability to live permanently together with other people, the core of the brigade very often consists of close relatives. The unity resulting from kinship helps to avoid conflict inside the group and enables more effective co-operation. The core of the seventh brigade consists of six to eight herders, depending on the season and the number of people on vacation, most of them related to the brigade leader either by blood or through marriage – in addition to the two sons of the team leader, his wife's three brothers and his brother-in-law also work as herdsman.

The task of the herder (*ты пертя*) is to take care of the herd, to drive the animals to new pasturelands at the right time and to watch that the herd would not scatter because of the mosquitoes and gadflies in summer and because of snowstorms in winter. Looking after the herd and taking it to new places proceeds in shifts, two men (*малкода*) in every shift and the length of the shift 20 to 30 hours. One of the most difficult times for the herders is in May when the reindeer are giving birth to their young ones (*ты ниць*): calves are born during an approximately month-long period and the herdsman have to make sure that the reindeer cows with their new-born calves do not remain behind the rest of the herd.

Although it is the herders who directly take care of the reindeer, the fulfilment of this task would be impossible without the help of their families. The Nenets family is a so-called extended family by nature, as three generations of close relatives live together. In addition to the parents and their children, the grandparents and spinster sisters and brothers (and sometimes married relations) of the husband also belong to the family. For most young couples it takes several years to obtain their own house and that is why they live together with the husband's family at least during the first years of their marriage – i.e. it is a father-dependent family. That is why the number of people belonging to one family is relatively large. For example, in the seventh brigade, four families include altogether between 25 to 30 members.

Observing the Nenets in different everyday situations, it became clear to me that the large number of family members is necessary to cope with the tasks of the reindeer-herders.

Taking care of the reindeer and constant migration is possible only if people cooperate with each other. Women have to perform household duties – supplying firewood and water, cooking, taking care of children, sowing – and help men in their work. The pre-school children and retired parents of the herders do not have specific tasks, but it is presumed that they help other members of the family according to their abilities. In summer, the boarding-school children who are on holiday also take part in pasture and household works, everybody according to their age and gender.

The main character of the lifestyle of the Nenets living in brigades is constant migration – moving from one grazing ground to another. The Yar-Sale state farm is divided into 22 reindeer-herding brigades, every one of them have their fixed pastures and exact moving schedules. In summer the animals are kept in the bare tundra of the North Yamal and, as winter comes, they leave the peninsula for the forest tundra lying south of the polar circle which has nourishing moss and shelter from the winds.

The distance the brigade has to cover within a year is quite awesome. I have been both in the northernmost camp of my brigade which is located in the centre of the Yamal peninsula, almost on the same latitude as the Yaptik-Sale village (69°3') as well as in the southernmost pastureland which is on the same line as the town of Nadym (65°7'). The distance is more than 400 kilometres as a crow flies. By land, looking for suitable river-crossings and avoiding numerous lakes, going from North to South, the brigade covers a distance which is at least by one third longer. And this has to be done twice a year.

So, in the tundra, man and the reindeer are always together. It is in many ways natural because the life of the Nenets depends on the reindeer in the very sense of the word. Unlike many other groups dealing with reindeer herding, for instance, their close neighbours – the forest Nenets (see Verbov 1936) and Selkups (see Gemuyev, Pelikh 1974), who are hunters – the most important or even the only source of livelihood for the Nenets living in the Yamal tundras is the

reindeer.⁵ Although, if there is an opportunity, the Nenets also fish and hunt, it is the existence of reindeer that guarantees everyday food. During all the time I spent in my brigade there was not one day when I did not eat meat or some other product of the reindeer – blood, liver, brain, tongue, bone marrow. Other necessary food – bread, tea, sugar, salt and mustard – is obtained from the state-farm centre where once a year the brigades are provided with things necessary for a half-year migration cycle.

The dwelling of the Nenets is as simple as their food.

As the people have to be in constant movement because of the reindeer, the only possible dwelling has to be a portable and easily-pitched tent. Although during the Soviet times the tundra Nenets were encouraged to dis-acustom themselves from their "non-hygienic" lifestyle (see Vinogradov 1932), they still live in their conical tents or *chums*⁶ (мя). The *chum* has a simple construction (more details see Chernetsov 1936) and it is easy to set up: reaching a new campsite the conical framework of long poles is put up quickly and on top of it goes the tarpaulin (in summer) or reindeer skin (in winter) cover. Usually it does not take more than 40 minutes, and at the most an hour after reaching the new campsite it is possible to drink tea peacefully in the *chum*. The number of the *chums* in the camp depends on several circumstances: the number of the families, the season, the size of the herd. Very often many families live together in one *chum* because the smaller the number of the *chums*, the easier it is to move the camp to a new place. It is especially important in summer when the travelling conditions are difficult. The time spent in one camp depends on the specific requirements of the time. If there is enough fresh pastureland and there is no need to rush – bigger rivers have been crossed before the ice drift – the unit can stay in one place for up to two weeks. In winter there are a couple of longer stays: the more nourishing moss of the forest tundra gives the camp a possibility to stay in one place

⁵ In the Yar-Sale state farm there are also the so-called hunters' brigades whose task is to hunt fur animals (mainly polar foxes). At the same time, the basic source of food and transportation of these "nomadic hunters" is their small herds of reindeer.

⁶ Here and henceforth, the names of everyday items or events common among the peoples of Siberia and understood by the local Russians, are given in italics.

for almost a month. Still, the camps are mostly set up only for two or three days, especially in summer. The statistics based on my diary shows that during one summer month we had changed the campsite 12 times.

To transport the camp, specially trained draught-reindeer (*ена хабт, хабтырка*) are harnessed to wooden sledges or *nartas* (*хан*). These little wooden nartas have to hold all the lodging: *chum*, dishes, tools, clothes, food and religious items. To move into a new campsite, long caravans – *мюд*'s, are formed, consisting of 5 to 10 nartas, in which every narta is usually pulled by two reindeer. In front of all is the leading narta with 4–5 reindeer, where the person driving the *мюд*' is sitting. The brigade going towards new pastures consists of 10 to 12 *мюд*'s depending on the number of the *chums* and families. The *мюд*'s going one after another can make up a caravan (*мюд*') covering several kilometres.

The team consisting of reindeer and narta is the most important instrument of the herdsman. It is used when looking after the herd and when visiting friends and relatives.

The reindeer have remained the only means of transportation for the Nenets both in summer and in winter. Even the herdsman who have been able to obtain a snowmobile, do not use very much in their everyday work. They keep their vehicles with their relatives living in Yar-Sale. Twice a year when the brigade stays for longer near the state farm centre, the snowmobile makes it possible to establish quicker and more frequent connection between the camp and the village. Obviously, the snowmobile revolution (see Pelto, Müller-Wille 1983) has not taken place in the Yamal tundra, partly because of their high price. But the bigger obstacle is the nomadic life itself: constant migration and isolation from the infrastructures make the usage of snowmobiles quite senseless. Under most given circumstances, the best vehicle is the reindeer.

For the inhabitants of the tundra, reindeer skins are of vital necessity. They are used to make clothes suitable for severe weather conditions. The long hooded anoraks for men (*мальця*), fastening fur coats for women (*пань*) and high boots for both men and women (*пива*) seem to be the only possible clothing as for both their manufacture and warmth-keeping in the cold and windy tundra. The

skin is also used to make covers for the *chum* in winter, for the *arkans*⁷ and harnesses of the draught animals. The tendon fibres of the reindeer are used for sowing.

Although the reindeer-herding brigades are officially subunits of the state farm, subject to central direction, they have been quite independent. Whether and how they can manage, depends totally on themselves. During the Soviet times the communication between the brigades and the centre was much more regular thanks to portable radio stations, and, if necessary, a helicopter or a plane was sent to rescue the brigade in trouble. Although the Soviet-type co-operative economies still exist, there is nothing left of the former glory: the radio stations have not been working for years and every expensive helicopter trip could give a deadly blow to the state farm's budget. In these conditions, the Nenets can only rely on his reindeer who provide him with food and clothing and means of transportation when going for the doctor. In this sense they live now as they did two hundred years ago.

The Nenets themselves understand their vital dependence on the reindeer. That is why they want to ensure the welfare of the reindeer by all means. But at the same time they believe that in many ways it goes beyond their power and they have to hope for good luck.

The herd's good fortune

During the fieldwork it happened many times that the logic of the Nenets just amazed me. I could not understand their contradictory behaviour in certain situations. My host family had an understanding attitude towards my fieldwork: although I was presumed to work in the household (supplying firewood, carrying the water), I could choose to work with my pen or camera at any time. Once in summer, when there was no wind at all and the air was thick with mosquitoes, I was eagerly taking shots of harnessing the reindeer for the next moving. If the Nenets had usually been quite indifferent to

⁷ *Arkan* (Аркан) is a 10 to 15 metre-long reindeer-skin lasso for catching the reindeer.

my this kind of activities, then at that time the father of the family sullenly asked me to come and help him. I tried to find out why all of a sudden we were in such a hurry. The only comment I got was that: "The reindeer are suffering from the mosquitoes." I also experienced several times later that behind decisions not understandable from the human point of view was the well-being of the reindeer. This is also noticeable in the contradictory behaviour of the Nenets connected with eating mushrooms. If a Nenets is offered some mushroom sauce in the village, he would eat it with good appetite but in the tundra he does not pick any mushrooms at all. He justifies his behaviour by saying that mushrooms are the favourite food of the reindeer and man should not deprive his animals.

This respectful attitude is not due to economic considerations only. For the Nenets the reindeer is more than just the source of living. This animal is the main indicator of prestige. The bigger the number of the reindeer and the more beautiful they are, the deeper the respect towards the person who owns them, which in its turn, gives the person more authority. It is understandable because the reindeer is the only status symbol of the Nenets. The rational lifestyle resulting from the nomadic cattle-herding excludes big differences in private property: all the inhabitants of the tundra live in the same type of *chums*, wear clothes made of the same material, and eat the same food. The only indicator of wealth that differentiates one man from another is the size of his reindeer herd. The fact whether a person owns a herd of thousand (*ёнарм тэте*) or only of forty animals (*магпада*) in many ways determines the attitude towards him. A successful herdsman has lots of friends and fellow workers and many visitors find their way into his *chum*. That is why the Nenets herders similarly to the Lapps (see Paine 1994: 109) are more interested in owning the animals than in the profit they make out of them. Sometimes the passion for having as many "heads" as possible takes the form of stinginess. I have had tea in a *chum* the owner of which had a herd of several hundred animals but all he offered with tea were crackers.

It seems that the prestige coming along with a big herd does not so much proceed from economic wealth gained through diligence

and hard work than from the existence of so-called luck. When I asked the Nenets why did one man have over a thousand reindeers and another one less than forty, then almost always the answer was that it was a question of luck. For the Nenets luck means the favour of the gods. Emphasizing random luck is quite reasonable as the number of the animals can change radically during a short period of time. On the one hand the increase of the reindeer is quite rapid and, under favourable circumstances, the herd can grow remarkably even within one year. On the other hand, the reindeer are exposed to different diseases and attacks by wolves: epidemics, a certain hoof-and-mouth disease and Siberian plague can kill whole herds (Yevladov 1930: 45–46) and some ten wolves can kill hundreds of animals during one night (*Priroda...* 1995: 241, Yevladov 1930: 46–47). Although man can do something himself to enlarge and protect the herd, he sets his hopes on good luck above all.

At the same time, excessive success in herd-herding can painfully pay back in other fields of life. I was told about a brigade-leader who had had *НЯВАЦАС* in his herd for several years ahead. These are reindeer cows who are under a year old themselves and give birth to a calf. Thanks to these animals the herd grows considerably every year. But at the same time there is something wrong in his family: his daughter died of anaemia and the health of the brigade leader is also very poor.

At this point I should mention another phenomenon related to the luck of the herd. Namely, the Nenets believe that the birth of a calf with an unusual appearance is a good omen of forthcoming luck for the herd. The very clear omen is *СЮН ТЫ*, an animal whose horns do not grow at all. Allegedly there is only one reindeer like that in the whole Yamal peninsula. An animal with one horn only – *ВЯЯ СЮН ТЫ* – will also definitely bring luck. Often a reindeer with an unusual colour combination is also an omen for good luck for the herd. If a black-and-white skin animal, called *самаротка*, is not rare in a bigger herd, then *нгэвапри*, whose body is totally white and only the head is black is a firm mark of heavenly favour for every herdsman. Actually, it seems to me that then every Nenets, if he tries hard, can find an animal from his herd who acts as an omen of good luck. To my question what colour of reindeers did they like most, many

herders said that in general terms the animals of unique colour were better because they bring luck. Every herdsman has at least one individual that stands out from the rest of the herd. Even the relatively frequent white reindeer *сэп* is regarded as a good omen to some extent. The difference between *сЮН ТЫ* and *сэп* seems to be in strength only: if in the case of the first animal there is now doubt about the help of heavenly powers, the existence of the other shows the quiet approval of the gods. This kind of attitude seems very reasonable, especially when taking into account the fixed idea of the herders to have as many animals as possible.

Consequently, the reindeer seems to have an important part in the vision of the world of the Nenets. Regarding the economic importance of the reindeer and its function as a symbol of status, it goes without saying that the evaluating system of the people and the models of behaviour based on it rely on this animal to a great extent. It is confirmed by the many specific rules of behaviour in the Nenets society that are meant to ensure the safety of this precious animal.

Taboos

The reindeer is exposed to different dangers in this world. The mosquitoes, gadflies, diseases and wolves can do harm to the herd. One of the sources of danger is man himself. The Nenets believes that certain human activities can be harmful for the reindeer and that is why he has set all sorts of limits or taboos for himself. For instance, I was scolded once when I was lying in the *chum* and watching through the doorway the reindeers strolling outside. I was told simply that "... this is *хэбЫ!*". The Nenets themselves interpret this as "sin" because it is derived from the word *хэхэ* which means god or divine – consequently an activity like that is forbidden by god(s). They explained scolding me with the fact that the reindeer I was watching could just die. There are many taboos like this in their life. It is also *хэбЫ* if somebody, after removing a pot of soup from the fire, lets the hook (*па*) swing. As a result the reindeer of this person can scatter because of the mosquitoes. That is why it is not a

very rare scene that in the middle of eating many herders rush to stop the hook in order to avoid the worst.

The Nenets seem to have taboos necessary to guarantee the safety of the reindeer for all kinds of different situations. Often it depends on the sex, age or some other factor determining the status of the person involved. On the last day of my fieldwork, just before leaving the camp, two herders asked me to help them skin newly killed reindeer whose carcass had to go to the centre of the state farm together with me. When the animal was cut up it turned out that it had a roughly one month-old embryo in its stomach. The herdsman stopped cutting, scratched the back of his head and asked me to pull out the dead embryo. They explained that for them it was *хэбы* and that usually it was done by the oldest man in the brigade; as all the others were just drinking tea in their *chums*, then, as a foreigner, I was the right person to carry out the task. It was not considered to be a sin for old men and foreigners – as they do not have animals of their own, they cannot be punished directly.

Nenets women are in an especially difficult situation because of the numerous taboos⁸. I came to this conclusion after a discovery I made during another fieldwork. My principal method of fieldwork was exact and repeated observation of different so-called social situations (see Spradley 1980). One of these social situations is making a *kraal* or enclosure (*ёркала*). Men drive the draught animals by shouting and gesticulating into a semi-circular enclosure (*ва*) made of carriage sledges and old fishing-nets and, after this, the women close it with cord. They make a *ёркала* every time they need draught reindeer – whether to drive the camp to a new place or to go for a visit or to carry out some work. Instead of catching the animals with the *arkan* (*яркала*) this enables them to get the necessary reindeer quickly. Consequently, *ёркала* is a very suitable situation for systematic observation because practically every day – and sometimes even many times a day – somebody needs draught reindeer. Besides, one of my obligatory duties was to help women

⁸ L. V. Kostikov has written more thoroughly about the position of women in the Nenets society (see Kostikov 1930a).

holding the cord. On the basis of the observation in my "workplace" I found out that men and women behave differently during *ёркола*.

It is mainly the men who choose the reindeer in the *kraal*. Women have to let the cord down so that the men together with their selected animals can get out of the *kraal*. After that men come over the cord with the reindeer. When most of the men have finished, there are usually some women who go into the *kraal* as they want to choose draught animals for their sledge (*нехан*) themselves. But coming out of it they do not step over the cord but lift it over their heads. The reindeer coming after them walk over the cord. When I asked, why would they behave like that, the women answered shortly "... in past times our ancestors did so – people who have reindeer and gods act like that." Only several days later when I was "accidentally" alone with my best male informant in the middle of the reindeer herd I was lucky to get a more detailed explanation. As I had already realized, this behaviour was based on another taboo connected with the reindeer. My informant told me that because of menstrual blood, women are unclean and should not step over things that have been in contact with the reindeer. Otherwise misfortune would befall the reindeer of her family: they could fall ill, break their legs or be attacked by wolves. When observing the Nenets women moving on the campsite, it is amazing how skilfully they avoid stepping over all the things used or presumably used in reindeer herding. Every piece of cord or wood can fall on the narta and thereby be in touch with the reindeer, not to mention the *arkans* and drivingsticks⁹ lying all over the place.

The impurity of woman (*сямей*) is one of the most important concepts in the Nenets vision of the world. Very many models of nomadic behaviour are explained by the impurity characteristic of sexually mature women. Because of *сямей* there is a strict classification of jobs in the brigade: men deal with cattle-herding, women do household jobs. Hereby it should be born in mind that household jobs include carrying water, supplying and splitting firewood and also making up the conical framework of the *chums* and fixing the

⁹ Drivingstick (*тюр*) is a 3 to 4 metre pole used by the driver of the narta to drive the reindeer.

heavy floor boards. The participation of women in religious activities is also restricted by *сямей*. In the interests of accuracy it should be mentioned that it does not seem to influence the social position of the women. Although the basic decisions concerning herd-herding are made by the circle of men, women have a relatively significant right to speak in domestic affairs and their opinions are taken into account when discussing more general questions. I have also seen very authoritarian men but mostly I have got the impression that the spouses are equal partners – very often it is the wife who has the final say and makes the final decision.

Stressing the impurity of women and connecting it namely with the reindeer brings forward another important conception in the Nenets vision of the world: the woman's impurity is contrasted to the purity of the reindeer.

The pure reindeer

The Nenets regard the reindeer as a very pure animal both the direct and the indirect sense of the word. This attitude was confirmed very vividly through another fieldwork experience. At the time I was living in the brigade, one of my duties was to hold the reindeer while a herder cut pus out of the wounded hoof of the animal. As the procedure usually took place on the pasture, it happened quite often that, when forcing the animal close to the ground, my hand happened to touch a pile of reindeer droppings. The first time my instinctive reaction was loud ranting and facial grimaces expressing disgust. But the faces of the nearby Nenets became serious and, feeling offended, they let me know that the reindeer is an extremely pure animal and even its excrement needs respectful treatment.

The Nenets explain the many characteristic features of the nomadic lifestyle with the purity of the reindeer, beginning with the fact that the raw meat and blood used for everyday nourishment does not contain harmful parasites and ending by saying that thanks to the reindeer skin the Nenets wearing it can do without washing for months. It should be commented here that my experience rather confirms than contradicts these statements of popular wisdom:

hundreds of kilos of raw reindeer meat and tens of litres of blood consumed by my body during the time spent in the tundra did not cause any severe health disorder; and I was also amazed that my feet looked surprisingly clean after a twelve-hour workday in the reindeer-skin boots in the course of a whole month.

The Nenets' understanding of the purity of the reindeer becomes clearly evident when comparing their attitude towards another vitally important animal – the dog. The dog is an irreplaceable aid of the herdsman but its position is unusually low in the people's eyes. Naturally, the dogs are looked after to a certain extent – at night, they are allowed to come into the *chum* to shelter from the mosquitoes or cold but it happens only because of their utilitarian value. For the Nenets the dog is not a pet but just a tool. I was the only person in the whole brigade who played with them, as I came from the world of expensive decorative dogs and even more expensive "Pedigree Pal". The dogs naturally took advantage of my kindness and every time I entered the *chum* they crept inside after me hoping to find some piece of food. This may have been one of the reasons why the usually indifferent Nenets began to disapprove of my friendship with dogs. They did not understand how I could play with such dirty animals who stink of all sorts of repulsive things. This opinion is well justified because the dogs are fed with food that is not suitable for humans – rotten meat, intestines etc. An important reason why the dogs are regarded as dirty in the tundra is, because of an inexplicable reason, many dogs want to eat human excrement – the Nenets do not believe that this results from hunger. Thus the very clear distinction between the purity of the dog and the reindeer for the Nenets becomes evident: the first animal is a smelly swallower of anything, while the second is an animal subsisting mainly on clean moss.¹⁰

¹⁰ At the same time, there are some reindeer in every herd who like human urine. In winter there were always about ten animals or *МЯНИГДАС* near our camp who licked the snow permeated with urine. They were especially numerous early in the morning and late at night when people had just got up or were preparing to go to bed. Most of the *МЯНИГДАС* are not afraid of people and so urinating can be quite dangerous because of their scuffling and swinging horns.

This concept of purity is of decisive importance for the worldview of the Nenets. It also helps us understand why the reindeer plays such an important role in their religion.

The sacred reindeer

According to the understanding of the Nenets there is an innumerable amount of all kinds of supernatural creatures in the world. The animistic concept of the world looks at every bigger stone, strange-shaped tree or hill emerging from the level ground of the tundra as a living-place of a spirit. It also makes the people consider even with the tiniest forest-, water- or bramble-fairy. In addition to this, the life of the Nenets is influenced by different authoritative gods of Heaven and the Underworld and the spirits of the dead. It is in the interests of man himself to get on well with these supernatural powers. A good relationship with the gods can be guaranteed by proper behaviour – for instance obeying the taboos – and with the help of sacrifice.

The sacrificial animal of the Nenets is the reindeer. When taking into account the above-mentioned concept of purity, using some other animal would seem like sacrilege. I have taken part in several dedication rites, and always the sacrificial animal is the reindeer. Actually, the routine slaughter of a meat animal is also a kind of sacrifice: a noose is put around the animal's neck and, pulling it from both ends, two men can strangle the reindeer within some minutes. During this time, the head of the reindeer should always look towards the sun and before the last breath of the animal, it is often turned round three times in the direction of the movement of the Sun. The Nenets themselves explain that this is how they remember their most important god, *Нүм Нүм*, which means "heaven", does not interfere directly in the everyday life of the people – he neither helps nor punishes them – and that is why he is

The Nenets do not see here any contradiction to the conception of purity of the reindeer as the salt in urine is said to be useful to the animals. I could often see the owner of the herd "watering" his favourite animals and talking gently to them at the same time.

usually not offered special sacrifices. But, as himself in Heaven, *Hyṃ* sees everything with his eye – the Sun. It seems to me that he is for the Nenets something like fate, and the existence or non-existence of the luck of the cattle depends on him. Anyway, it is quite reasonable to remember him before spilling or drinking warm blood.

In addition to blood sacrifice the Nenets are connected with supernatural forces through their living "sacrificial animals". Every family has at least some animals of this kind and they are all castrated reindeer bulls or *хабт*s. It is characteristic of these animals that they are either dedicated to some deity or in some other way connected closely with the supernatural powers.¹¹ The task of these animals is in the first place to protect themselves. The general term used for them is *хэхэнты хабт* – god's reindeer bull. *Хэхэнты хабт* is easily recognisable from the rest of the herd because unlike ordinary bulls the horns of the sacred animal are not cut. Most of them are very "beautiful", as the Nenets themselves say: big, strong and with nice fur. The simple explanation for this is that they are used either very seldom or not at all as draught animals. Naturally, driving the *хэхэнты хабт* is a taboo for women.

One of the *хэхэнты хабт*s is *ҺӀӀ тӀӀ* – a black-coloured animal (*лӀрӀсе, нӀрӀяӀнаӀ*) who is dedicated to the powerful underworld god *ҺӀӀӀ*. As *ҺӀӀӀ* is the god who sends diseases and death to the Earth, if his reindeer is among the herd, it should prevent the herd from falling ill. However, often this does not help and, to prevent the animals from falling ill, a real blood sacrifice has to be made. Once when we were returning from the northernmost pastureland of the brigade I discovered by a pole with a calf's head on top that had been put up in our recent campsite. The head on the top of the pole was coal black and dripping with fresh blood. I found out that with this sacrifice one of the herders had decided to ask *ҺӀӀӀ* not to let his evil aids – spirits of diseases – follow the brigade. To protect the herd, some reindeer are also dedicated to *ҺӀӀӀ*. In contrast to the reindeer of the God of Death *ҺӀӀӀ*'s reindeer has to be of light colour

¹¹ Kostikov has written in more detail about the role of the sacred reindeer in the Nenets religion (Kostikov 1930b).

– white (*сэр*) or with white spots (*павди*). *Нга* and *Нум* are powerful gods and only the shaman can decide which gods do the men need. When the right god has been chosen and the respective image has been made, a reindeer has to be sacrificed to him. Consequently, the existence of a divine reindeer presumes that the family also has the image of the correspondent god who lies on the sacred *narta* (*хэхэхан*) together with the other idols of the clan and family. A man usually inherits the sacred *narta* and its contents from his father and that is why the divine reindeer also comes from the previous generation. When the reindeer grows old, a new one is initiated: the old reindeer is killed in front of the sacred *narta* and with its blood the figures of the Sun and arrows are drawn on the sides of a young reindeer of the same colour.

A vital animal from the herd's point of view is *пивня ядэрта* or the wolf reindeer. The animal is usually of greyish colour (*тымуй*) like the wolf itself and it has a picture of a wolf on its side drawn with the blood of the previous wolf reindeer. It is believed that this animal dedicated to the master spirit of the wolves protects the cattle from the wolves: the wolf is thought to believe that in the presence of this reindeer it is not allowed to attack the herd. Every family has to have special sacred reindeer to pull the sacred *narta хэхэхан си'* (*си'* means the reindeer in front of the *narta*). As the spirits of the ancestors have an important place in the religion of the Nenets, they have a special reindeer – *нгытарма ты* – dedicated to them. The owners of these animals are the little dolls of the ancestors kept in the *chum* – grandfather (*ири*) and grandmother (*хада*). It seems as if the *хэхэнты хабтс* somehow duplicate the functions of the gods of people. While the idols of *Нум* and *Нга* kept in the sacred *narta* and dolls of the ancestors in the *chums* look after the welfare of the people then *нга ты*, *нум ты* and *нгытарма ты* have to ensure the safety of the reindeer. At the same time both the icons and the reindeer of the gods are two different forms expressing the same power. Every time the herder looks at his animals he is reminded of the world he is living in.

Although the fate of a Nenets and his herd in many ways depends on a good relationship with supernatural powers, the most important is his everyday "tool" – the draught reindeer. The relationship bet-

ween the herdsman and his draught reindeer might even be called friendship.

Reindeer – the friend

Every time the herdsman stands in the middle of the reindeer driven into the *kraal* or is choosing draught animals for the *мюд'* or the *narta* he has to consider many different criteria. His choice will depend on the character of the work to be done, the distance of the journey and the condition of the landscape and weather. He also has to consider when he last used one or another reindeer to avoid exhausting the animals. Knowing the abilities of all his draught reindeer, the herdsman makes his choice according to this information. If some useful animal has been left out, it will be caught with *arkans*.

In reality the selection is not always as rational as mentioned above. Personal sympathies and specific preferences resulting from actual necessity play their role, especially when choosing animals for the driving *narta*. To cover longer distances, sturdy draught animals – *недалёрцы* are used. But which animal will be harnessed to the *narta* does not always depend on its strength but on the fact whether one has to work or goes to pay a visit. The opinion of the master of the animals is very often made on the basis of his reindeer and that is why the appearance of the draught animals is even more important than their endurance. When going to visit somebody, animals of the same colour, height and shape of horns – *хан чыс* – are chosen to pull the *narta*. This kind of selection is not always justified. Once in winter I was in real trouble with two big-horned *саморогкэс* which the Nenets had chosen for my *narta*. We had to visit a neighbouring brigade about 20 kilometres away and my friends wanted to "present" their foreign guest with the greatest effect. The way up there was quite easy but on the way back my leading reindeer grew tired regardless of its big horns and beautiful fur. I reached my home camp about an hour later than the others.

The personal sympathy of the Nenets towards certain reindeer shows in the frequency of harnessing: the fewer times the herdsman

harnesses one or another animal, the greater his respect for the reindeer – the less the animal is exhausted, the stronger and more beautiful it is. In summer, for instance, the *нэдалёрц* are not often used because it is impossible to travel far as conditions are difficult and it is not sensible to torture good draught animals. The main task of the herdsman in summer is to look after the cattle and watch that they would not scatter because of the mosquitos. Then the most important work animal is the *малкось* – a slow and lazy animal who is good at trotting after the herd. Naturally, it is impossible to use one and the same reindeer all the time. But if a man has enough reindeer he is able to get along mainly with the *малкось*. The faster and stronger draught animals pull narta much more seldom and if they are harnessed it is mostly just to remind them how to pull a narta. The Nenets explain their attitude by saying that some reindeer just have to be in better condition than the others. The strong and rested animals are often the only ones who can be relied upon in critical situations – one does not go for a doctor with an ordinary work reindeer.

Their preference for fast reindeer is especially clear when using the race reindeer – *сянако мэтэс*. Narta racing is probably the most highly regarded field of sport for the Nenets. One of the reasons for its popularity is the valuable prizes given on the sporting days arranged by the state farm. Although the official competitions take place once or twice a year, the racing reindeer are trained quite often – at least once a month if possible. The Nenets try to avoid using the racing reindeer in everyday work because this would spoil the animals.

Another specific and seldom used category of reindeer is *навка*. *Навка* is an animal, which, due to some special reason, has grown up in the people's camp and that it why it is not afraid of being close to people like all other animals. If the mother of the calf happens to die accidentally or is not able to take care of its offspring, people often take the orphaned animal into their *chum*. We had two such calves in our camp in summer. They were fed with moss gathered by children and with bread and fish soup. Over the years, every family has brought up dozens of animals of the kind. My hostess used to call to them by pet names holding bread in her hand – as a result a

large number of reindeer of different ages gathered around her, waiting for tasty bits, stretching out their noses. *Навка* is not simply a useless pet, its duty is to help people in many critical situations. On urgent occasions when there is no time to make *ёркола*, some *навкэс* wandering near the camp are caught with the help of a piece of bread and harnessed to the narta. It is especially important when the herd has run far away, frightened by dogs. I have seen many times that during a trip the herdsman skilfully replaces the draught animal who has freed itself of the harness of the *мюд'* with a nearby *навка*. Consequently, the *навка* is a very important animal. The special place of this animal in the worldview of the Nenets is illustrated by the custom that one's own *навка* is never killed or eaten. The old pet is given to a relative or friend to be eaten and a young untrained bull is got instead – this animal is called *ей* or exchange. The comment of one herder on this subject was: "How could I kill my *навка*? We have almost eaten from the same plate." The herder can be tied emotionally to a specific reindeer when it comes as a present from a good friend or relative. It is common in the Nenets society that many important human relationships are cemented through the medium of the reindeer. For instance, some of the tundra Nenets still have the custom of paying a bridal dowry (*не мир*) consisting of reindeer to the father of the bride before getting married. The animals given to the father of the bride are discreetly named "the present" – *мядосэй*. An average bridal dowry consists of approximately thirty animals of different sex and age.

Мядосэй is also an animal one gets as a present from a relative or friend. In most cases it is a trained draught animal. According to good manners the receiver of the present is expected to return a gift in two or three years. If the person who got the present wants to tighten the friendship with the giver, he would give back two reindeer, if possible. In winter, when there is more time and snow enables faster movement, people visit each other regularly. Reading my diary, I found out that there was not one day in March when our unit did not entertain guests or go to visit somebody. As, according to Nenets customs, the present is always given by the receiver of guests, almost every time there are some more reindeer in front of the guests' nartas. The importance of giving presents in the Nenets

society is illustrated by the fact that within the private herd almost half of the reindeer can be *мядосэйт*.

All the draught reindeer have names – this describes the attitude of the Nenets towards their animals. The reindeer may not react to its name, but it is of great importance to the owner – using the name differentiates this very animal from the rest of the herd and brings out its individual qualities. One herdsman can own over a hundred draught animals and it is really amazing how he can remember all the names. Usually the reindeer is named according to its colour or shape of the horns. Very often a diminutive suffix, *-ко* is added to a name. For instance, a white reindeer is called *Сэрэко*, an animal with long and protruding horns is named *Нурчико*. A reindeer's unusual appearance also gives reason for a name – one animal was called "Georgian" because of its hooked nose. A reindeer can get its name due to its character or to some event. One herder called his favourite reindeer "Sawdust" because when training him to become a draught animal the narta fell to the dusty ground. The *мядосэйт* usually have the names of the people who have given them as presents, for example *Хасовако хабт* or simply *Хасовако*. What is characteristic here is that the reindeer are often called after the Nenets first name of the giver, not after the everyday Russian names.

The draught reindeer is more than just a tool to the herder. The Nenets knows that, if necessary, he can rely on the help of one or another animal. That is why he tries to make their life easier and this often happens on behalf of the less favoured animals. This attitude can, with some reservations, even be called friendship. My good friend and source of information once concluded the subject like this: "These special reindeers *навка, сянако мэта, пивня ядэрта ты* give meaning to your life. They are part of your life. You can always rely on them."

Conclusion

The nomadic Nenets live in a world that at first sight seems monotonous and dull – there is no entertainment – no TV, no bars, no expensive clothes or "educated company". Life in the tundra seems to offer only strenuous work and inhuman living conditions. The fact that the majority of the Yamal Nenets have remained true to the traditional lifestyle of their ancestors is more a pleasant surprise than something self-evident. This is especially remarkable in the situation where a large number of the Nenets have a long-term experience of "culture" thanks to boarding-schools and to the army: in addition to getting acquainted with the "advantages of civilization," this experience also includes the negative identity forced on the native inhabitants together with its consequences – the wish to assimilate.

As a result of my fieldwork in the seventh brigade this contradictory picture has to some extent cleared up for me. The cheerfulness and the vitality of the brigade members that was not understandable at first has become more comprehensible. In reality, I think that the mental welfare of the tundra people depends, to a great extent, on the existence of the reindeer. After several months of observation and interviewing I came to the conclusion that, for the nomadic people, harmony is guaranteed by their worldview based on the reindeer. This worldview gives them security for the future: a man who has reindeer has food, transport, gods and friends. This world-vision functions as the basis of the Nenets in their attitude towards their environment. In their worldview, the reindeer-connected conceptions and cultural categories dominate and, using them, the Nenets decides how to behave in different situations and what to expect from his companions. There is no sphere in the perception of the world which is not connected with the reindeer in one or another way – be it the belief in fate, the attitude towards women, animistic religion or relations between kins and friends.

The whole vision of the world proceeds from one fundamental argument – the reindeer is, above all, a trustful friend for the Nenets. It is a friend who makes the severe and monotonous life in the tundra worth living and satisfying.

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Translated by Mall Leman

Sacrificial Ceremony at Lake Num-To

Art Leete

Introduction

This article gives an overview of the sacrifice of reindeer by Lake Num-To¹ in the Beloyarsk region, Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Region, Tyumen oblast, Russian Federation on April 19, 1996.

The description is based on the written notes made by this author at Num-To village in the evening after the event and supplemented by comments provided by the people present there.

During the sacrifice it could be seen² that a hunter from Num-To village, Stepan Randymov (55), was more involved in watching it than the other people. He did not perform leading parts in it, but every time someone forgot about something, it was he who lead them back to the right path. This was the reason why this author chose Stepan to be the key informant. He has twice provided commentaries on the present ritual.

First, he explained the ritual immediately after the end of it at his place in Num-To village. He recalled the most important events of it from memory. When questioning Stepan, this author concentrated on the aspects of it that Stepan was able to recall.

Secondly, Stepan Randymov explained this sacrificial ritual when watching the event on video tape recorded by the Khanty-Mansiysk broadcasting company "Yugoria" on April 24, 1996. Then Stepan was questioned together with a Khant Sergei Grishkin from the broadcasting company "Yugoria". Timofei Moldanov, a Khanty

¹ *Num-To* – 'heavenly lake' or 'lake of god' (in the Nenets language). In the Khanty language *Torum Lor*.

² This author participated in the sacrifice by Lake Num-To on April 19, 1996 as a guest and performed all collective parts of it.

folklorist, at whose place in the city of Khanty-Mansiysk the meeting took place, participated in the discussion, too.

Also, some information is provided in an interview given by Timofei and Tatyana Moldanov, Khanty folklorists and ethnologists, at their place in Khanty-Mansiysk on April 26, 1996. Timofei participated in the second part of the ritual and also helped to prepare it.

Yuri Vylla, President of West-Siberian Reindeer Herders' Society, was the only Nenets who provided information about the ritual. Though he was the main organizer of the ritual, he did not perform a leading role during it.

The majority of the people participating in the ritual were Nenets, mostly reindeer herders from the tundra belt, including some Nenets from the forest areas around the Varyogan River. The lack of information provided by the Nenets is due to the short time this author could spend on the spot. The next morning after the ritual this author, together with other guests³, left Num-To. Thus, it should be considered that this is a Nenets ritual explained by a Khant (S. Randymov), though, he has had a Nenets wife.

This aspect gives a different background to the present overview. An interpretation provided by Stepan highlights the traditional elements of the ritual. At the same time, the majority of the Nenets taking part in the ritual did not pay much attention to the different parts of it, but rather regarded the ritual as a whole.

The forthcoming description of the ritual will be given without making wider connections or drawing comparisons with other related phenomena. The purpose of this article is to give a comprehensive overview of the events focused on this particular ritual of sacrifice with commentaries provided by people who participated in it.

This method has been chosen, presuming that oral interpretation of the ritual within a culture is variable. There are no unchanging

³ On April 19, 1996, there were people from the broadcasting company "Yugoria", Natalya Gogoleva, head of the association "Saving Yugra", Maria Voldina, and editor of a Khanty newspaper "Hanty Jasang". Also, a helicopter took home Yuri Vylla, President of the Reindeer Herders' Society with his family, and some native people from remote regions.

criteria for interpreting the ritual. Nowadays the Nenets have no proper rules of ritual behaviour or social control over the authenticity of understanding sacrificial ritual: possible interpretations are individual.

Yuri Lotman states that in cultures without mass literacy the available mnemonic-sacred symbols are involved in the text of the ritual. At the same time these symbols maintain some freedom regarding the ritual as a phenomenon. Symbols pertaining to the ritual are wrapped in the sphere of oral tradition and legend, whereas their connections with various contexts would be "imbalanced" (Lotman 1992: 106).

There is an infinite variation of semantic relations between single actions of sacrificial ritual and the phenomenon as a whole. So are the connections between the ritual, worldview and daily life: they cannot be fixed overall.

Provided that a wider approach to the subject would presume a more thorough study and reasoning of connections between the ritual and its backgrounds, this author chose a small-scale project of giving a thorough description of the sacrificial ritual at Lake Num-To.

The course of the sacrificial ceremony

The sacrifice of reindeer took place in a sacred place on a small island near the southern shore of Lake Num-To, 1.5 kilometres to the east of the village Num-To. On the shore of the lake, there were seven sacred cedars. On the island there grew birches. The weather was clear, windy and cold, about 15–20 degrees below zero.

Participants in the ritual, both men and women⁴, went there in snowmobiles and reindeer sledges along the frozen lake. The three reindeer that would be slaughtered were tied to a birch.

⁴ Before going there, women at Num-To were unsure whether they would be taken along or not. Had the sacrifice been carried out on a large sacred island, they should have stayed home. The main organiser, Yuri Vylla had actually planned to give offerings on that island, but he did not do it that time (see also Footnotes 8, 25).

According to Stepan Randymov, three reindeer were killed, thus having a team of them. One reindeer was white and had horns, *hor*⁵, and was a leader animal. It was the most important victim. The other reindeer were grey and without horns.

Stepan⁶: *Here, by the sacred lake, we prayed to all gods and spirits. This is why we took along our wives. When offerings are made to the whitest heavenly god⁷, only men participate in it. And when /meat of reindeer/ is taken home, /it/ is a taboo to give it to women. Neither frozen nor cooked. Only men /eat it/.*

However, some Nenets families, who, men and women together, give offerings to heavenly gods, sun, moon /---/. I know some. For them this is not a taboo. To a white god a white /reindeer/ fur with a head was hung to a birch. They came with their wives: it is not a taboo for them. At home women, as well as men could also eat meat.

There are also some sites where only men are allowed to go. These are high places. They climb to some hill, and – Oh! There is a sacred site over there above the forest. However, when riding a reindeer sledge, the sacred site may be at a distance of 40–50 kilometres. In most cases such places are near the upper courses of rivers, between rivers. There are such places near here, by the Kazym /River/ and in some other places where it is a taboo for women to go. /---/

Last year we went to the place where the sacrifice took place by reindeer sledge. There we sacrificed three reindeer, a team of reindeer. /---/

The small island was not that sacred, and it was not a taboo for women to visit it. Thus, women were taken along. The purpose of the ritual was general, and this also caused and allowed their going there. Also, that time a wider response was expected for the event. The previous sacrifice on that island, was carried out without women, as said Sergei Grishkin from the broadcasting company "Yugoria".

⁵ *Hor* – reindeer bull (in the Khanty language).

⁶ Here and hereafter, mainly Stepan Randymov's commentaries (abridged and adapted to the written text) are in italics. At the end of the article, commentaries by Timofei Moldanov and Yuri Vylla will be provided.

⁷ I.e. to Numi Torum. Numi Torum is the Khants' and Mansi chief god who lives in the Upper World. The Nenets call it Num.

There is an island in the middle of the sacred lake. It is considered to be sacred, as it is like the heart of the lake. Women have never been to it: only men go there⁸.

That time we took the sacrifice to the shore, where everybody could go with his wife and children. /---/ There everybody can take along his wife.

/---/

On that lake there is an isthmus that looks like a neck of human or animal with a head on it. On the part of the head there are two sacred sites. Not a woman has ever been /there/. It has two eyes, two islands with six birches /on them/, there are two eyes on the sacred lake. In the lake, at a distance of four kilometres from the village, there is an island that is considered to be the heart /of the lake/. When one sees it from a bird's eye view, from a plane or helicopter, it resembles an animal, with the heart, head, and eyes. /---/

Over there one can see plaits: small rivers go like plaits.

/---/

Every tribe does not have its private site. The sites, such as the one by the lake Num-To, are very old. Every river has a name which is sacred. All peoples can sacrifice on Lake Num-To. However, there are no such places on the lands of different tribes. There were no such things before. And there are no such things nowadays either.

/---/

When someone from a different region has to sacrifice a reindeer, he buys it for money or vodka. There is a custom that everybody has to sell him a reindeer then. He can go there by plane or train⁹. However, one cannot take along /a reindeer/. Thus, one

⁸ Stepan refers to the island in the middle of the lake Num-To where, according to some beliefs of the Khanty and Nenets, the white chief god Numi Torum, or Num, lives there. When in December of 1933 a Russian woman, Polina Shneider, a representative of the Ob-Irtysh oblast party committee, went there, she, together with the other people with her, were killed by the local Khanty and Nenets. This action was among the main reasons for the armed uprising undertaken by the Khanty and the Nenets people against Soviet forces in 1933–34, put down by Soviet army in 1934 (Leete 1996a: 394, see Footnotes 4, 25).

⁹ This refers to sacrifices in sacred sites generally. The village Num-To is at a distance of 100 kilometres from the nearest railway station.

must buy a reindeer on the spot from a settlement, village or conical tent. No matter whom you ask, everyone would sell it.

Then, a fire was lit on the sacred site, and they started to boil water in buckets. They had taken firewood with them.

Stepan: *The fire was lit. Because fire is stronger than any of the hundred gods¹⁰. Because in fire everything burns to ashes. Thus, first a fire was made. The fire burned as long as people sat there. They /watched/ that it did not extinguish.*

Two pieces of cloth were tied round the neck of the white reindeer, a longer and a shorter one. Both were light, nearly white.

Stepan: *The cloth must always be three metres long. No matter what color it is. This sacrifice is to heavenly spirits, gods¹¹.*

Now, everyone who had taken along a piece of cloth, tied it round the reindeer's neck. As long as it is alive, the cloth would be round its neck. Those who did not have a cloth, left coins. Those who came for the first time, men or women. Only silver, white coins /are suitable, coppers are not allowed. Banknotes were also allowed where we offered. Those who had not taken along a piece of cloth, took a clean handkerchief and tied it to a birch.

The reindeer furs were hung on birches together with heads and horns. They were from the previous sacrifices. There were also pieces of cloth and ribbons tied round the birches. Birch is a white tree related to white gods and the Upper World.

Stepan: *The furs that hang there on a sacred birch were put there a year ago, last year when we first came to this site. When giving offerings in a place for the first time, then a fur with a head and ribbons are tied there and left forever. These furs, heads and horns are not taken with you.*

First, Yuri Vylla (Aivaseda), a Nenets from the tundra belt, Maria Kuzminitchna Voldina, a Khant from Num-To, editor of the Khanty newspaper "Hanty Jasang", published in Khanty-Mansiysk, and

¹⁰ This implies that there are very many, an incalculable number of gods.

¹¹ White color relates to the gods of the Upper World.

Oleg Aivaseda, Yuri Vylla's neighbour, gave interviews to the TV crew. They talked about the importance of keeping oil industry away from the areas around lake Num-To, and about traditional culture. Also, they explained that Yuri Vylla would dedicate his white female reindeer to the President of Russia (at the moment of dedication: Boris Yeltsin), and Oleg Aivaseda would dedicate his to the Governor of Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug (at the moment of dedication: Filipenko). The idea of this was that the President and Governor thus had a property in Yuri Vylla's and Oleg Aivaseda's herds, and when the environment would be polluted this would also affect the president's and governor's properties.

Then a cloth was spread on the snow. On the cloth everybody put sacrifices he/she had taken along: barankas (hard biscuits), snickers, candies, cigarettes "Prima", bottles of vodka, tea, etc. There were seven vodkas, i.e. three 100 cl and one 50 cl ("half-full") bottles. The 11 bottles were counted as two. It was important that there were seven vodkas, although they had not agreed about it before. They just counted that there was exactly the right amount of them.

Stepan: They put the bottles right on the snow. I was watching. But I had a cloth with me. I had a leftover: I saw it hanging on a nail, thus I took it with me. I put this red cloth on the snow. Then the bottles were placed on it. They put the bottles on the snow, on the clean snow. They had nothing to put them on, and then of course it is allowed. You just put a bottle and a cup with vodka right on the snow. But I knew the customs: I took a red cloth with me. Its length was less than a metre.

/---/

We sacrificed to seven gods-spirits. We had seven bottles. Exactly. The bottles were big, this makes /the same as/ six /small bottles/. Thus, we had seven bottles.

Then, the reindeer were untied and arranged in a line with their heads to the victims and cedars, whereas they had to be with their heads to the south, thus to the sun and white gods.

Stepan: *To white heavenly gods, always to the sun. To the black god Hyn-iki¹², then to the dawn. Then a reindeer must be placed in this direction. The young¹³ did not know it. They placed them opposite us. Opposite us, to the night. For they were dead¹⁴. We first prayed for life. If the old man did not tell them, I would have told them myself that the heads must be to the sun. The young first placed them to the night. When placed to the night, then a sacrifice could be made in a settlement¹⁵. When to the black god, we need not have gone there. We could have made the sacrifice at our village. They say that the black and heavenly gods are at war with each other. The black gods..., when they drink too much, get drunk. It can be that one would kill another, and is then imprisoned.*

/---/

Cedars are to the black god¹⁶. And also to Hyn-iki. Earlier, old men, our grandfathers also made sacrifices/ by the shore over there. On that spot, 50 metres from the shore, a cedar remained. And six small ones started to grow there. So, there are seven cedars growing

¹² *Hyn-iki* The most important god in the Underworld., also known as *Kul'* or *Kul'-iki*.

¹³ I.e. the young Nenets. Stepan contrasted his knowledge with theirs regarding both ethnic and age aspects.

¹⁴ Here it follows as if Stepan does not consider the reindeer sacrificed to the gods of the Upper World to be dead, whereas he considers to be dead those sacrificed to the gods of the Underworld. Yet it is not clear whether Stepan had similar considerations.

¹⁵ According to Stepan, a reindeer could be placed with the head in different directions, depending on which gods or spirits the sacrifice was made. At the same time he related some activities (drinking, killing animals) to the Underworld and *Hyn-iki* if not carried out in a sacred site.

According to Liivo Niglas, the Yamal Nenets always, when killing a reindeer, place it with its head to the sun, as killing a reindeer is also a sacrifice to the gods of the Upper World (L. Niglas, oral report to this author, see also pp. 7–33 and Barkalaja, pp. 57–68).

¹⁶ Here I am not going to analyse the Ob-Ugric semantic system of quarters of the horizon and kinds of trees. Stepan considers cedar as the most important tree of the god of the Underworld, and so it should be regarded in the context of this ritual. Yet other researchers have provided contradictory data on this question. For example, that in the Mansi, cedar is related to *Numi-Torum*, the most important god of the Upperworld (Gemuyev, Sagalayev 1986: 145), or to *Kaltash-ekva*, the people's mythological ancestress (Rombandeyeva 1993: 66).

now. There also sacrifices are made, to the black god. And also to the sacred lake. /---/ The black god, a cedar, a black tree is related to it. To cedars also cloths are tied.

/---/

To the black god only black reindeer /are sacrificed/. And to the white god only white reindeer. /---/ To the black god so that people did not have illnesses, that they did not die. They pray, as they pray to the heavenly god. They make similar sacrifices, such as reindeer, vodka, food. A table is also laid.

Vodka was poured into cups, and the cloth with food stood untouched. The reindeer stood in a line, the one to the east was the white one, *hor*.

Stepan: They made sacrifices, so that there was a team of reindeer. The first one, the one with horns was the leader. One cannot rein all the animals. Only the one to the left is the leader. The reins are /in one's right hand/, in one's left hand there is a *horei*. One governs them with the *horei* only. Thus, the leader is to the left. Where the leader, there also the other.

The men stood behind the reindeer, with their faces to the south. The guests were on their right, with their faces to the southeast. Some men (Täkvjak, an old Nenets, Yuri Vylla, Oleg Aivaseda, Stepan Randymov) took off their caps when praying. Most of them had their caps on.

Firstly, Täkvjak, the oldest of the Nenets, said a long prayer. Then Oleg Aivaseda, another Nenets, said a somewhat shorter prayer.

Stepan¹⁷: /Today sacrifices were made/ to the sacred lake /---/ Num-To, Heavenly lake¹⁸, that is why it is a sacred lake.

/---/

¹⁷ Täkvjak and Oleg Aivaseda said the prayers in the Nenets language. A strong wind considerably interrupted the work of the broadcasting company, thus they could not tape the prayers. So, Stepan Randymov retold their content. As the prayers are typical for the Khanty and Nenets, their content is quite general.

¹⁸ Num-To -'heavenly lake', 'lake of god' (in the Nenets Ing.). See also Footnote 1.

/We prayed/ that all local people, all people /had a happy life/. For children had a peaceful life, and for all people grown up around here, for they live in the same places where their mothers and fathers did. For /these places/ were not neglected.

Those who want their children to forget about it, this is their business. They do not obey, neither believe in god. They cannot then be forced to do so. Those who want, obey their parents. Here, the young also came. Mothers and fathers do not live for 100 years, you know. They will be heirs then. They should also make sacrifices there. In the same place. Where their grandfathers did. And where we have been today. /---/

But this sacrifice was made for family life, for one's children to be well and alive. For one to have good luck with one's reindeer. But the Nenets all live with reindeer.

/---/

The old Täckvjak, the one with grey hair among the Nenets from the forest areas, is the oldest of his generation. That is why he was trusted with /saying the prayer/, for he /prayed to/ all the heavenly gods, spirits of the sacred lake, so that they would take care of all the reindeer. /---/ There were other victims. All those who had come here, had taken something with them – vodka, food. They put all that on the cloth. Seven bottles of vodka and seven cups of vodka were placed there. For the heavenly gods, spirits of the sacred lake receive it, with reindeer and all, hospitably. /---/ He told about all gods, as many as there are heavenly gods. One hundred gods, all in all. He called each god separately. /---/ Kaltash-imi. There are many of them, one cannot count them.

/---/

When we went there, the weather was bad, now it is clear. We also prayed that the weather be clear when you fly back. Also, that those who had come here, that they had good luck on the road. Snowstorm, purga, that is what the weather is like here. We have such custom. That when misfortune comes to a person or family, /we pray that luck be with them/.

But when /we pray for everybody/, then that the people who had come here had clear weather when going back by helicopter or plane. This is for all spirits and gods whom we pray be happy.

Then the reindeer were killed. Two Nenets people throttled them by pulling tight a lasso about their necks. The third Nenets hit them at the nape with the eye of his axe. Before he hit, he measured two times. The third reindeer fell on its left side. They quickly turned it on its right.

Stepan: It fell on the wrong side. It certainly had to be turned on its right side. You see, when the leader was hit, it fell on its left side. They all then turned it on its right, for it lay there.

The other two reindeer were pushed after hitting them with the axe, so that they fell on their right sides. The prone reindeer were also stabbed in the heart and nape. Then they were dragged clockwise. The three reindeer were left lying with their heads to the south.

Stepan: /On the snow reindeer are turned around/ once clockwise. The white, grey grandfather, Täkvjak told the young to turn /the killed reindeer/ around once again. Like the sun goes. It is a custom that they turn so in sacrifices. He prayed to all gods and spirits and then he has to make three circles clockwise.

The dead reindeer were placed on the snow, as when pulling a sledge. The white one on the left was the leader. Their legs were placed to the east. The head of the white reindeer was turned by 90 degrees (with its snout to the heavens), horns were jabbed into the snow. Then Stepan Randymov hit them on their sides with a lasso, and made sounds proposing motion. The white reindeer convulsed at it, which indicated that the white gods had received it. It seemed that the other two were not. The third reindeer shuddered a little at the hit, but Randymov did not count it. Actually, he did not see its movements, as he turned before the victim started to move.

Stepan: To the upper gods. /---/ Reindeer are placed with their heads to the sun. Not to the night. We placed them like a team. The one with the horns was the leader. The leader was received well. Even when I hit it three times, it moved three times as dead. But the other two, they fell down and were dead already. The leader was received just after we had prayed to the spirits. /---/ All the reindeer that were touched with the lasso, they had to beat three times, for they must not fall dead. /---/ They certainly have to be hit three times with the

lasso, for they moved. After that the reindeer is dead already, but /only after/ one has hit it for three times.

Then the men stood behind the reindeer again, with their faces to the south, women and guests to the west of the reindeer, with their faces to the east. Then they all screamed aloud seven times and turned around clockwise, making bows at each quarter of the horizon. This all happened in disorder, so that they all did not make the same number of turns or bows.

Stepan: All gods and spirits were called to the spot, so that they hear it. Probably some did not. They were not called then. After that they scream seven times. And turn themselves around seven times. /---/ Among all the gods in the world the white heavenly gods are the most important. Like father and mother, and the sun, seven sons, seven brothers. That is why seven times. But in other sacrifices they do not scream seven times. Only three times. When they do not call them all. But this time all the gods on the ground and in heaven, all were called. And a team of reindeer /was sacrificed to them/.

While they are turning themselves and screaming, some Nenets pass by the sacred site over the lake on sledges.

Stepan: They did not want to participate. No one is personally asked to participate /in the sacrifice/. Those who want must come themselves. The two who passed by along the lake rode to their village, their tent. /---/. Usually they tell everybody about the sacrifice. All who want to participate, learn from it. The young do not want to come. Their parents did not take part in such sacrifices and so do they.

After the prayer the main participants in the sacrifice covered their heads with a hood or cap.

The lassos that were round the necks of the victims, were thrown into the birches. Two stayed there, whereas the third one fell down.

Stepan: The lassos that were tied around the reindeer's necks, are thrown /in the birches/. For all the gods and spirits /focused their attention/ where there people have reindeer. For people had good luck with reindeer, for reindeer grew well and had a happy life. For

people had good luck with fishing and hunting. So that when someone goes hunting, then animals would come to him. /---/ Now there were no trees, they just threw them over there into the brushwood. Lassos must be thrown into the wood. No matter which one. Should there only be a tree nearby.

Then they started to eat sacrificial food. The Nenets started eating and Täckvjak served vodka. Everybody present got a cup of vodka. The cup was passed on clockwise. Täckvjak had the bottle. He filled the cup and gave it to someone, who then drank it up and gave it back. Täckvjak again filled the cup and passed it to the person sitting, kneeling or squatting to the left of the previous one. Only the men started eating and drinking, later the women joined in.

Stepan: This time all the spirits and gods were called. And the table¹⁹ /was laid for them/ with the sacrifice of reindeer. First the cups with vodka. There are seven of them. The first one has to be given to fire, to the Fire God. /---/ Everyone must drink. Now each man gets a cup but when all men have got one of those standing on the table when gods and spirits were being called, then comes the women's turn.

Seven cups and seven bottles. So that there is not an even number of cups, four, six or two. /---/ All the spirits and gods were called. And this is why there are seven cups and seven bottles.

At the beginning of eating Stepan poured the cup of vodka, that was chosen before and stood there at the time of sacrifice, into the fire. As Stepan said, fire is "the strongest among the hundred gods". At the same time he was saying prayers in Russian. His wishes were very general: for everybody to be happy, for everybody to be well, and for everybody to get back home well (many had come there from distant regions, not only from areas around Lake Num-To and surrounding tundra areas). He said his prayers in Russian, so as everybody would understand (the TV crew filmed it). Besides, the gods would understand any language, as Stepan said afterwards. After the prayer Randymov made bows to different quarters of the

¹⁹ Actually there was no table, but a red cloth spread on snow instead, as is said already.

horizon, while turning around clockwise three times. Stepan sacrificed to the fire bareheaded.

The content of his prayer was as follows:

...to the almighty god, fire... your children, all... people be well, for guests who have come here, would get home with fine weather, for they be well.

When the men had finished eating, they started to skin and chop the reindeer. The skins with heads (without lower jaws) were placed aside, more or less with their snouts to the south.

Before skinning the victims, white cloths were removed from the neck of the leader and tied to birch branches. Later, before placing the skins and heads on the snow, they were tied again about the cut-off head of the leader.

Stepan took some blood with a cup from their cut bellies and tossed it in various directions, mostly to the south, to the cedars, covering the area from southwest to southeast. He tossed so seven times.

Stepan: I took /blood/ of the three victims, /tossed/ it to seven places. It is taboo to throw more than seven. /---/ When we took the cups of vodka, there were also /seven of them/. To the gods, spirits, this all is for them. We prayed to the spirits. It is taboo /to throw blood/ for more than seven times. /---/ Thus, we sacrificed to seven gods-spirits, as we had seven bottles. /---/ /I took/ blood of three reindeer. I saw that no one wanted to /do it/. The young probably do not know it. I /keep/ our traditions, as my parents taught me. And I did it all myself.

The chops were left there on the snow, some were cooked cook in buckets over the fire.

Also, they continued eating and drinking. Then the Khants Aleksei Moldanov, with his sons Timofei and Grigori arrived. They came from around the Kazym River (54 kilometres) by snow-mobiles. They had also a bottle of vodka with them. Aleksei talked to everybody actively and tried to perform for the TV crew. He sang a lot.

Then Tãkvlak sang even more, especially for the TV crew to film it. He himself considered it to be very important.

Stepan Randymov stood bareheaded next to him and was looking at him all the time, bowing to the south at intervals.

Stepan: The old man sang, for the young would sing alike when he is dead.

Then he told about reindeer. How we sacrificed them. How we laid the table. With this song /he turned/ to all gods again, calling to them all.

While he was singing, I looked at his eyes. I am a Khant. My wife was a Nenets. I was scared that he might put a curse upon me. /So,/ I wanted to listen to him. He is blind in his left eye. His right eye was in tears already. He sang a song. So, I was looking at his face: he was singing, but he felt that he would not have much time left to live by this lake.

The empty bottles were jabbed into the birch twigs, an activity started by Stepan Randymov and imitated by other people.

Stepan: We put the bottles there, so as not to leave rubbish there. As the lake is sacred. We drank this bottle to the heavenly gods, spirits in the forest. We drank the vodka. This vodka is also a sacrifice to the gods... They are alive, you know, they can find vodka everywhere. When you leave an empty bottle here, they would fill it. I always do so.

We have just been here, sitting. /The young Nenets asked:/ "Why do you take birch twigs and jab the bottles /into them/? Is it for beauty purposes?" I told them that I kept our traditions. You ate them up but the gods may also find some vodka. It can be that they have got a can of vodka. Thus, they must pour it somewhere. I always do like this. You can only jab them into birch twigs. You must not jab into the trees other than birch.

Then Stepan²⁰ said that he is a guest at this sacrifice, as he is a Khant. This was the Nenets sacrifice²¹. As Stepan was the guest, he

²⁰ Stepan Randymov stated that he was a guest at the sacrifice. This commentary is not provided after the sacrifice as are many other in this article.

could not coordinate the action there. Not one of the young really knew how the ritual should go. As Randymov said, everything there was performed wrongly:

Meat was cooked. They ate it already cooked, but nobody had eaten it raw. Actually, they ought to have eaten it raw first. And start cooking it then.

Stepan also explained this to the Nenets. The young Nenets listened to him and asked everybody to come and eat it raw (they had not cooked all the meat). Some people then ate it raw. First there was no salt, then they got some.

Stepan: The table was laid, but raw meat... Nobody even thought about it and nobody ate it. /---/ The ought to have eaten a piece of it each.

They enjoyed eating reindeer liver raw, which they call "the Nenets snickers".

When finished, they took the three reindeer skins with the heads to a birch previously chosen by Täckvjak. When trying to find the right tree he walked to and fro in the small wood and then chose a bigger tree. This was among the few trees in this island that would endure the load.

The Nenets went to the tree in line, one by one. One of them climbed the tree. Then he was thrown one end of the lasso. The one in the tree put it over a branch and threw it down again. The skins with heads were now pulled up the tree along the lasso. The Nenets who was in the tree now fastened them there, placing the horns between twigs. The skins and heads stayed hanging there, with their heads upwards.

Stepan: /The skins and heads of reindeer were hung/ in the birch, as it is a heavenly tree. We never cut them for firewood. They hang them in the birch.

/---/

²¹ Though it was not determined which ethnic group was more important at the sacrifice. Most people were Nenets, but there were also Andrei, a local Russian, Stepan Randymov and some other Khanty, and this author, an Estonian. Stepan probably considers that the main organiser and the old man, leader of the sacrifice were the Nenets.

To the white god you can sacrifice a three-metre long white cloth or a white reindeer. You hang it all: skin, head and horns. They /hang/ them in the birch only. We think the birch is related to the white heavenly god. A sacred tree. We do not cut it for firewood. The white cloth and the reindeer-victim. They also hung them. Only the birch /is suitable for that/. But the other trees – pine or spruce – are not. And other peoples in all other regions do it similarly. In other regions²².

While they were pulling the first reindeer, the white one, they all screamed seven times. The men stood around the tree, with their faces to the tree.

After all three reindeer were in the tree, women started to scream in the back row. They hooted a couple of times and stopped then. The men did not react to it. The women stood in the back row, with their faces to the west, but this was accidental. They did not turn themselves deliberately in that direction.

After that they cleared away everything they had used while eating, e.g. meat, firewood (that had been taken there from Num-To village), the lassos used for killing the reindeer and then thrown into the birch twigs, etc. So, they put everything they had taken there with them on the snowmobiles and reindeer sledges and rode back to the Num-To village²³.

Before leaving, everybody had to make a small circle clockwise. Generally, all turns with sledges, both when arriving and when leaving, should be made clockwise. A young Nenets did not know that and turned against the sun.

Stepan: He turned the sledge left. In such a place one should turn clockwise only.

Täkvjak, leader of the sacrifice, was the last person to leave. He waited for the other people to leave. He was singing there. Yuri

²² This generalization is not valid in all aspects. In Ob-Ugric tradition cedar can also be related to the Upper World through sacrifice.

²³ Generally, it is a taboo in a sacred site to take along the things that are taken there. Probably, this site is not "that" sacred, so that you can do it there.

Vylla was also with him. They were sitting on a sledge and smiling, if not singing.

That was the end of the sacrifice. In the following evening people at Num-To went to see each other. They drank tea and sang a lot.

Subsequent Comments

There are some other important aspects related to the sacrifice on Lake Num-To described above. Although they do not pertain to this particular ritual only. These wider connections should also be examined.

Yuri Vylla, the Nenets from the tundra area, was the main organiser of this sacrificial ritual. He said that he had sacrificed two times on Num-To's sacred islands: for one and the other eye. He has to sacrifice for the third time, too: for the heart²⁴. But he does not want to do it yet: he is not prepared for that. This time he made a sacrifice on a small island by the shore. First, he sacrificed a white reindeer, next a dappled one, and third time he should sacrifice a black one²⁵.

There are similar sacrificials ceremonies on Lake Num-To quite regularly every year. There is no certain time for doing that. Everybody can go there at any time during winter, make sacrifices and go back home.

An important aspect is to what extent do the commentaries provided by the Khanty coincide with the Nenets' (as the main performers of the ritual) opinions about it. Or, what are the links between their interpretations. That the Khanty also used to go to this sacred site, is among a possible explanation to this question. It was only by accident that in this case mostly the Nenets made sacrifices. On other days the Khanty went to make sacrifices there.

²⁴ As has been said above, there are three big islands on Lake Num-To: the two eyes and the third is the heart, as the local people say.

²⁵ The island related to heart is to the night or Underworld of the Num-To village. There is also a local people's graveyard. This might explain the sacrifice of the black reindeer on this island (see Footnotes 5, 9).

Stepan: *People do not go there until next winter. As long as the other people would come. To that same place.*

/---/

In winter, people who want to sacrifice all come at the same time. No one can be taken here by force. Everybody comes at will. In winter /they come here/ by reindeer sledges. From every region. /The Khanty²⁶/ from Surgut region, Tromagan, Pim and Lyamin regions, they all come to the sacred lake by reindeer sledges. /---/ Along the same road which is marked by crosses on trees²⁷.

There is an even more important aspect, namely the relations between the content and form of the ritual. In other words, this is a question about the norms of the ritual: can sacrificial ceremonies contain other aspects beyond traditional and original symbolic actions? Concerning the ritual described above, there was the problem of presenting it to TV and guests. Now, one may ask: was it a "real" sacrifice?

Timofei Moldanov: *When going to Num-To, why was not there anything? Money or anything. Because for a long time I did not want drinking arranged at Num-To. Thus, there was no money. So, I was sitting, sitting, and did something when it was high time²⁸. This does not matter. This get-together there. It was not important that people went there. And made sacrifices there or whatever they did.*

This was not a sacrificial rite, for the local Nenets this was a pretext for heavy drinking. Every year sacrifices are organized by people who live on the spot.

²⁶ The Khanty from the areas around the Kazym River also make sacrifices at Lake Num-To.

²⁷ By trees marked by crosses Stepan considers the trees with twigs cut near the top. Such signs are used for marking winter paths over ice and snow between Num-To and the aforementioned rivers. (Leete 1996b: 53–54)

²⁸ Timofei Moldanov (b. 1957), Vice President of Reindeer Herders' Society, among the main organizers of this sacrifice. He was responsible for financial support of it.

Tatyana Moldanova²⁹: *One should follow the content, but in this case they followed the form.*

Timofei: *We went there on the 18th³⁰. My father left the site on the 17th. He left his knife there. Went there to fetch it. With reindeer. But before that – why he left – they had gone with Grisha³¹ to the sacred site. They took a 3-year old reindeer with them. Then killed and sacrificed it there. Then went back home. But he left his knife there. And thus he went there in the morning of the 17th. And back again in the evening. He went there to fetch his knife before we started for there.*

He knew that there would be a get-together on the 18th. Yet he did not stay. If there is the get-together, it is there. Let it be there.

This article has examined the traditional details of the ritual. However, for some participants this was also a form of political action. On the one hand, they were people who wanted to communicate the native peoples' fight for their traditional rights to a wide audience (Yuri Vylla and Oleg Aivaseda³²). On the other hand, the people from the association "Saving Yugora", the Khanty newspaper and the broadcasting company needed a lively media event involving native people's culture. Also, this was a kind of entertainment, a way of spending leisure time in the form of traditional ritual.

However, Stepan Randymov regarded it as a real ritual, the original symbolic actions which should be performed in accordance with arbitrary rules. The present article is largely based on this viewpoint.

All the three aspects of the ritual – traditional, political and entertaining – were mingled with one another. They had a different

²⁹ Tatyana Moldanova, Khanty ethnologist and folklorist, Timofei Moldanova's wife.

³⁰ The guests (TV crew, editor of the Khanty newspaper, head of the association "Saving Yugora", etc.) arrived there by helicopter on April 18, 1996.

³¹ Grigori Moldanov, (b. 1968), a Khant, Timofei Moldanov's brother.

³² Yuri Vylla had threatened oil companies that he would organize an anti-oil industries picket at the sacrifice. This was to make the companies pay him, i.e. arrange free transport by helicopter to the sacrificial and back to their seasonal settlements. In return, the West-Siberian Reindeer Herders' Society promised to cancel the picket. He said that he did not really want to arrange it.

role and influence on different people. The sacrifice of reindeer on April 19, 1996 was a good example of the contemporary changing traditional ritual among the Khanty and Nenets.

The ritual was carried out in accordance with its traditional actions. Yet only a few participants checked that the sacrifice be performed in a traditionally, originally correct manner. The majority of the participants just imitated the others. Should the leaders forget about any of the traditional rules, there was no one able to notice and "correct" it. In such cases opinions of individual "specialists" became crucial. There was no community understanding of the proper ritual behaviour.

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Translated by Epp Uustalu

On the Sacrificial Ritual of the Pim River Khanty in December 1995

Anzori Barkalaja

The Khanty are a Finno-Ugric people inhabiting the basin of the river Ob in Western Siberia. They subsist mainly on hunting and fishing; north of the river Kazym, they also rear reindeer. Agreements between representatives of oil industry and Khanty land owners ensure that some families derive part of their income from compensations for drilling contracts. The Khanty could roughly be divided into three groups – the Northern, the Eastern, and the Southern Khanty, differentiated from each other by their language, life style and details of world outlook. The present paper rests mostly on data obtained from the Eastern Khanty, more specifically from the inhabitants of the basins of the Pim and the Lyamin.

The Khanty attach great importance to offering sacrifices to their gods and local spirits, since good luck in hunting and fishing – and accordingly, the survival of the people – is thought to depend on the favour of gods. Despite the shaman-hunting campaign (Leete 1996), sacrificial rituals (Khanty *poryi*) have been kept up till our days. Thus, for instance, the Khanty of the Pim, Lyamin and Tromagan basins never fail to dispatch the soul of each slaughtered reindeer to some deity through sacrifice. The sacrifice can be offered by members of one family or it may be brought by several neighbouring families. In the latter case, the number of reindeer offered up is usually larger. Sometimes, all the Khanty of a given district also bring a joint offering (Karjalainen 1918: 428–430). On such occasions, the first recipient of the offering is usually the god or goddess of the corresponding river, who must then pass on to their rightful owners the souls of the reindeer meant for superior gods.

In December 1995, after a pause of several years, a joint offering was brought by the Khanty of the Pim basin. According to the local informants, the best time for bringing large-scale sacrifices (Khanty *jyyr*) is during the last waxing or full moon of the year. Karjalainen quotes examples from all over Western Siberia about the greatest sacrifices being brought either in the autumn or in spring. The Khanty of the Tromagan River, next to the Pim, offered their most important sacrifices in November or December. Here we must also keep in mind that the Khanty sacrifices do not fall on fixed calendrical dates but do have terminal deadlines (Karjalainen 1918: 433–435). The Khanty consider it inauspicious to bring sacrifices while the moon is waning; neither is it fit to give offerings while the snow is melting.¹ As to the time of day, different authors hold different opinions (Karjalainen 1918: 435); the Khanty of the Pim River bring sacrifices at daytime, preferably while the sun is still rising, that is, before noon. As the informer put it: morning favours all kinds of beginnings, “while the sun is rising, all things thrive; then it’s also good to give offerings, they have effect”.

The initiator of the sacrifice was Fedya K.² who heard spirits tell him in a dream that he was to call the people together or else he would be taken ill. The site of the offering was to be either at Yegor Kanterov’s or N. Vostokin’s place, who dwelt near by. It is interesting to note here that the Kanterov and Vostokin families are closely connected through a shamanic war waged between

¹ One of the informants told me how her husband had fallen ill and been taken to the hospital while the snow was already melting, so he was in no position to arrange for an offering. Then the informant had pledged to the god the reindeer she had brought to the marriage as her dowry, had “marked them off” for the god, as it were. After she had taken the pledge, her husband’s health improved considerably. She also said that she had been afraid her husband might get angry with her for promising to give up her beautiful reindeer, but after all she didn’t mean to live with her reindeer, it was her husband that she wanted. Some authors have also described cases where reindeer sacrifices were not brought in summer but were postponed till winter (Sokolova 1980: 139); or where it was promised to bring offerings at some future date, upon the fulfilment of certain conditions by the god (Karjalainen 1918: 432–433).

² I have not agreement with some Khantys to publish their full names. In these cases names are marked by initials.

their ancestors, which ended only as the head of the Vostokin family deprived the Kanterovs of shamanic power (Barkalaja 1996). Eventually, however, the relations between the two families have normalized and, due to their new survival strategy, the Kanterovs are even better off than the Vostokins who have lost their dominant role in that neighbourhood. Unable to compete with the other families in the traditional way, relying on shamanism, the Kanterovs became more receptive to changes. As a result of the invasion of oil industry, the environment of the Khanty underwent a considerable change to which the Kanterovs responded faster and more openly.

Fedya K. first called on Yegor Kanterov to tell him of the dream; together they went to N. Vostokin in order to discuss it. There it was settled that the elder of the sacrifice should be Yegor Kanterov. Early investigators reported that only a shaman could be in charge of sacrifices; nevertheless, already Karjalainen demonstrated that it wasn't always the case and pointed out the role of *tonx-urt* ('spirit master') who directs and performs the sacrificial ceremony (Karjalainen 1918: 440–442, 573–574). The *hlunk* (the Khanty word for genii, spirits, gods) had appointed Yegor's nephew Valeri to be the keeper of the sacred dolls of the Kanterov family, but after the death of Yegor's father who was their former keeper, Yegor temporarily acted as the head of the family since the ceremony of exchanging and handing over the dolls was not yet completed (Barkalaja 1996).

The neighbouring Khanty were informed of the sacrifice in the old traditional way, using message sticks. For that purpose, three sticks were made,³ each bearing twenty one notches. The sticks were sent out in three different directions and handed over to the neighbours together with the message; the neighbours, in their turn, carried them on to their neighbours; at the end of each day, one notch was whittled off from the sticks. Thus, the next recipient of the message could keep count of the days left till the offering. The head of the last family to receive the stick brought it along to

³ The informer said that either three or seven such sticks were to be made, depending on the god.

the site of the sacrifice. Similar sticks have been used to mark off the days of mourning after a burial and the feasts given in memory of the dead (Sokolova 1980: 140), as well as the songs sung at the bear-festival. The sticks notched at the bear-festival are stored in sacrificial storehouses. The custom of making such counting sticks seems to be spread throughout the Khanty culture area; numerous sticks of this kind, both from the Northern and the Eastern Khanty, are stored in the treasury of the Estonian National Museum.

Joint offerings, as well as the sacrificial storehouses of gods, also serve a specific purpose, namely the social redistribution of goods. In the course of the sacrifices, a wealth of material riches – meat, cloth, and money – is amassed. The valuables left over from direct sacrifice are distributed equally between all participants as a gift from the god to whom the sacrifice was offered. Also, the keeper of the effigy of the corresponding deity, acting as representative of the god or goddess, may hand out to the participants cloth and money from his sacrificial storehouse, particularly when the storehouse is beginning to get full. Sometimes the money collected in the storehouse is spent to buy sacrificial animals if there are none available in the given area. As a rule, each family brings as rich an offering as it can afford. Thus the rich bring more than they get back at the redistribution, whereas the poor get back more than they brought. The primary aim of the sacrificial rituals being communion with the god or goddess, the rich do not mind that state of affairs, especially since the redistributed goods are regarded as belonging already to the corresponding god or goddess.

According to the informer, offerings were given to all gods lest anyone (i.e. any god) take offence. The number of reindeer coming short, some gods were given three meters of cloth. The cloth was tied around the necks of the sacrificial reindeer. In the lack of reindeer for an “upper” god, white cloth was tied to a tree for him; for “lower” or underworld spirits, black cloth was spread on the ground.

The informer did not describe the actual sacrifice of the reindeer on the assumption that I was already acquainted with it. Therefore, I should like to describe a sacrifice brought in the same area a year before, in March 1994, where I was fortunate enough

to participate, myself. The reindeer was brought to stand with its head pointing to the north, white cloth wrapped around its neck. Each participant who desired to placate the god to whom the reindeer was offered, tied banknotes or coins to that cloth. After that, the reindeer was felled with an axe-blow over the back of its head. If the reindeer dropped to its right side, it was considered an auspicious sign; if it fell to the left, an inauspicious omen. That may explain why the men holding the reindeer assisted at the fall, taking care that the animal drop to the right. Next, it was stabbed in the heart with a long knife and turned around once, clockwise. At the same time, the elder of the sacrifice started off with the prayer, invoking in a loud voice the god to whom the reindeer was offered. The others lined up behind the elder, swaying their bodies. From time to time, following the example of the invoker, they turned around once, clockwise, and then went on swaying. If the legs of the reindeer jerked during the prayer, this, too, was taken for a good sign denoting that the animal was already running towards the herd of the god. At the end of the prayer, the lasso (Khanty *njuur*) that had been used for tethering the animal was flung onto a tree north of the sacrificial site; if it remained hanging in the tree, participants in the sacrifice could expect good luck in hunting and fishing all through the coming year. Then the reindeer was turned onto its back and skinned. Its blood was received into a pail; after cleansing, the stomach was put there, too. Its heart, tongue and part of the meat was immediately boiled, laid out on a dish and set before the images of the gods together with a glass of vodka. Then another prayer was intoned and all the participants drank vodka together, the glass going round clockwise. Each participant was also allotted a piece of the heart and the tongue.

A more detailed survey of different reports concerning the sacrifices can be found in Karjalainen (Karjalainen 1918: 428–498).

Parts of the tongue and the heart were portioned out to the participants at the joint sacrifice of the Pim River Khanty in December 1995 too, the only difference being that women were forbidden to eat of the heart and tongue of the reindeer dedicated to the supreme god, Numi-Torum. The meat of the sacrificed

animals was also distributed between the participants. Women were forbidden to step onto the spot splattered with the blood of the sacrificed animals; violation of this rule would have tainted the offender with a heavy sin. The evening was given to feasting, merry-making and story-telling. A shamanic seance took place, too, to find out the gods' attitude towards the sacrifice. For that end, one of the renowned local shamans ate amanita while another beat the shaman's drum (Khanty *kuijyp*), but to no avail. The shaman showed no signs of intoxication. People waited all night long, the shaman who had eaten the mushrooms said the mushroom spirits might possess someone else. The informer speculated that perhaps the young shaman had warded the spirits off, heading them towards the old drummer, but obviously the latter didn't want to shamanize, either. Eventually, one of the participants began to show symptoms of intoxication, but this time the rest of the company forbade him to shamanize. Then the spirits tried to take possession of another participant, but he did not "give himself up", did not want to shamanize. The old man scolded him, telling him to stop hiding and sit at the drum, but notwithstanding he walked out into the cold night. Nobody dared to take the responsibility for shamanizing. The bickering went on for about two hours. Finally, however, the shaman who had eaten the mushrooms sat at the drum and "the spirits took to him". He beat the drum for some time, then began to pronounce on what life would be like and whether the gods (Khanty *hunk*) "turned their faces to the *porji*".⁴ He said the gods had looked at the sacrifice, which was a good sign. The shaman's words had been very garbled, the informer could understand but little of what he said, but those in the know had understood more. Thus the shaman kept alternately beating the drum and speaking, as the spirit of the mushroom (Khanty *pong*) went between him and Torum-Ati (another name for Numi-Torum). Here, *pong* is the intermediary between the shaman and the god, communicating by turns the questions and the answers. The informer did not keep count of

⁴ The expression signifies the attention and goodwill of gods. If a god "turns his face away from someone of something", it signifies his disgrace and, accordingly, ill luck.

how many times *pong* went to the heavens and came back. When it was asked who would live long and who would die, the answer came that one of the participants sitting in the ring would not see the next snow. And indeed the Khanty Timofei Golovanov had died before next snow fell.

In the basins of the Vasyugan and the Irtysh, however, unlike the rite described above, the spirit of the shaman himself goes to travel after eating *pong* (Karjalainen 1918: 586, 591). He also records cases where it was not the shaman who sang at the ritual, but the mushroom spirit, or the shaman merely repeated the songs sung to him by the spirits of the mushroom (Karjalainen 1918: 568, 586).

It was a great honour to the Kanterov family to be elected elder of the sacrificial ceremonies, particularly because most of the Pim River Khanty had responded to the invitation and more than two hundred people were present. As a rule, any Khanty has the right to perform a sacrifice. It is enough for him to dream of some god or other telling him to perform a sacrifice. Nevertheless, the number of people coming to participate greatly depends on the social status of the inviter. In days gone by, after defeat in the shamanic war and the resulting loss of shamanic power, the Kanterovs had been poor and socially inferior of other families. Successful adaptation to the invasion of oil industry and the fortunate circumstance that oil was found only on the outer fringes of their family lands, combined to make them in a few years the leading family of the area. Naturally, the shrewdness of the present head of the family, Yegor Kanterov, and his peculiar world outlook comprising elements of scientific thinking have played an important role, too.

It is also interesting to follow the aftermath of a sacrifice. Thus, for instance, one of the Khanty, I. K., “went off his head” after the shamanic ritual. Judging by the descriptions, it was a typical seizure of the shamanic disease discussed also in professional literature (Eliade 1974: 20–21, 33–35; Siikala 1977: 312; Lintrop 1995: 19–26). I. K. began to be harassed by spirits forbidding him to walk abroad at night and attacking him upon breach of this ban.

When the spirits first visited him, I. K. kept it in secret; but presently he began to feel very ill because the spirits persecuted him and demanded that he inform his neighbours of his experiences. I. K. found the situation intolerable and tried to escape. A path led to the south; he began to walk along it. He met a woman sitting by the path. They engaged in the following dialogue:

The Woman: Where are you going?

I. K.: Along the path; I've nowhere else to go.

The Woman: Don't go, I must first inspect your documents! Got a passport?

I. K. showed her his passport. The woman consulted a list but could not find his name.

Thereupon the woman told I. K. to go back: If your name is not on the list you cannot pass. The episode recalls Gondatti's account of the Northern Khanty who maintain that the sky god provides the god of underworld with a list of those doomed to die, and the latter refers to it when selecting the souls to be herded to his realm (Kulemzin 1984: 126). Again relating to the Northern Khanty, Karjalainen writes that the sky god does not keep count of the souls himself but has trusted with this job his private secretary, who compiles the list according to his instructions (Karjalainen 1918: 37). Other sources quote evidence that among the Northern Khanty, the life span of men is measured out by Numi-Torum's wife Kaltesh, who keeps a book of records for this purpose (Schmidt 1989: 223). A similar belief prevails among the Pim River Khanty. By August 1997, the informer was not yet fully convinced whether I. K. would become a shaman or go mad and die.

As another follow-up of the sacrifice, I learned that people were suffering from the scabies and running noses, the disease spreading from north to south. One of the informers, J.N., who had not been present at the sacrifice, himself, argued that it was caused by the stupidity of the performers of the sacrifice and mistakes resulting from that:

Usually, offerings must be given to all gods at a jyyr; but they gave offerings to the gods of sickness, too. Now they've been ill for

a whole year. The lower gods of sickness must be exempted, otherwise they will rejoice and want to return the gift. But what else can they give, only their diseases, mucus and scabies.

Only leftovers can be given to the spirits of sickness. When the poryi is over, everybody goes home, the "upper ones" (that is, gods of the heavens) go away and only armed guards remain to protect the people. "The lower ones", the demons, throng around like dogs and the guards drive them back. When everything is finished, then they will come to gobble up the leftovers.

Yegor Kanterov's poryi would have been very good if they hadn't given to the three spirits of sickness. But someone with only 99 per cent of wits decided to give to them, too. I asked who thought of giving to them. Yegor didn't know, the others didn't know. They were at the higher site of sacrifice. Surely somebody at the lower site wanted to be clever.

Here I should point it out that the sacrifice was performed in two groups. Everyone high enough in social esteem tried to be at the higher site (that is, higher up the river), where sacrifices were offered to the more important upper gods. At the lower site (down the river), offerings were given to lower gods; and the decision to include the spirits of sickness among recipients of the sacrifice was passed there after a discussion, by voting. The informer deemed that kind of a solution, as well as the ado over a spirit doll during the preparations of the ceremony, a sign of the decline of the shamanic tradition.

According to the informer, he dreamt that the son of "the lord of wind and weather" died before the *poryi*. For that reason, he decided not to participate in the sacrifice. Actually, it was the son of the keeper of the corresponding spirit doll that had died before the sacrifice; and according to the tradition, that doll should not have been used at the ceremony, the family being in connection with death and underworld. Yet the people assembled for the sacrifice raised the question of divesting the family of the right to keep the effigy of the god. Some among them, particularly the old men and shamans, were against it but lacked the authority to settle the matter. Tradition prescribes that the gods themselves choose

the person or family to keep their effigies and sacred storehouses, as we saw already in the case of the exchanging of the spirit dolls of the Kanterov family (Barkalaja 1996). In the present case, people decided to take this responsibility upon themselves. The various obstacles and ado encountered in the process of taking away the effigy, however, were again interpreted by the informer as a sign of the disinclination of the god of wind and weather to participate in the ceremony.

In conclusion we can say that the first great offering on the Pim River after the invasion of Russian oil industry colonists in 1960s on the area reflected adequately the social strife among the local Khanty. The Kanterov family, formerly occupying the lowest rungs on the ladder of social hierarchy, has considerably improved its position due to better adjusting to the changes in environment. Because of the loss of shamanic power, the Kanterovs were exiled to the border areas of the society (in social not geographic sense). Among numerous other functions, however, the border area fulfils one more task in the semiosphere – it is the region where semiotic processes are accelerated. Peripheral areas being less strictly organised than central ones, they allow for quicker change. The regions that are not described by the dominant world model or that no longer answer to such descriptions, undergo swifter change (Lotman 1992: 2029–2030) and act at the same time as catalysers for cultural permutation. Here I deliberately use the word “change” instead of Lotman’s “evolve”, since I cannot agree to the positivistic paradigm implied by the latter word. It’s in the above-mentioned peripheries that the so-called syncretic phenomena can take place.

At the same time, the inhabitants of such border areas are in some sense “strangers” regarded by other families with slight prejudice. On the other hand, they may all of a sudden turn out to occupy culturally central positions if the survival strategies adopted by them prove more successful than those of other families. Then, bearers of the older and “purer” tradition find themselves in the periphery and another new behaviour strategy can take shape on this ground, which may in the course of time prove central, in its

turn. Such shifts of positions do not pass without strain and open or concealed struggle for dominance. In the Pim basin, the “higher positions” were formerly occupied by the Taibin and Nimperov families. One of the informers also comes from the Nimperov family and has gained the image of a leading figure in dealings with the Russian colonists. Naturally, he is not pleased by Yegor Kanterov’s rise among the leaders of the society.

Concerning the events that accompanied the given sacrifice, it is also interesting to note that “the logic of dreams” reflected the state of affairs in material world. Fedya K. dreamt that the sacrifice was to be performed by representatives of the most successful big family of the district. The “opposing” informer, J.N., however, dreamt of an incident that was bound to cast a shadow on the oncoming sacrifice. We can surmise that the patterns and ways of thinking characteristic of man’s everyday consciousness operate as filters in the *changed state of consciousness* (Siikala 1992: 26–27; Hamayon 1995), in receiving and interpreting information derived from the “sacred world” just like they do in receiving and interpreting information derived from everyday experience. Whether we regard this as an imaginary construction of the “sacred world” or a real and existing “depth-structural world” (Uus 1994), unfortunately depends on each person’s individual belief, it being exceedingly difficult here to prove anything pro or contra. Again, we can but acknowledge that our ability to envision the “sacred world” and its impact on the world of everyday experience is limited to what we have been taught to see by habit and education and what is defined by attitude (Bachmann, Huik 1989: 99).

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Translated by Triinu Pakk

Russian Ethnographical Museum and Baltic Finns

Olga Fishman

Since 1989, the department of north-western ethnography of the Russian Ethnographical Museum (in St. Petersburg) has been conducting a collective research program, "The Study of Local Groups of Baltic Finnish Habitation in the North-West of Russia". The aim of the program is to find out the mechanisms of ethno-cultural interaction between the Baltic Finnish and Slavic (Russian) populations, as well as the peculiarities of persistence and variation within the contacting cultures. Within the general framework described above, the following individual topics are studied: A. Zadneprovskaya, "Ethno-Social and Cultural Processes Among the Finns of St. Petersburg Guberniya"; M. Zasetkaya, "Estonian Village Population in Leningrad District, XVIII-XX Centuries"; O. Fischman, "The Tihvin Carelians. A Phenomenon of Non-Russian Old-Believers"; L. Korolkova, "Interethnic connections in the North-West of Leningrad District. An Ethno-Archaeological Study of Contacts Between Russians and Vepsians in XVI-XX Centuries"; M. Kuropyatnik, "The Social Structures of the Lapps of the Kola Peninsula"; O. Kondratyeva, "The Culture of the Provincial Towns of Leningrad District".

During the six years, 16 expeditions have been organised and interesting comparative material collected on the ethnical identification and its specific forms of manifestation among different local groups of Ingrian Finns, Estonians, Carelians, and Lapps. A number of the expeditions were of a complex character, that is, there participated archaeologists, ethno-musicologists, archaeographers, specialists from provincial museums. As a result of the research, there emerged new specifying data on the contemporary

ethnic composition, demographic structure, and numbers of different groups of Finno-Ugric population, as well as the location on the map of Leningrad district of their places of habitat; the treasury and archives of the Museum were enriched by field notes, photo and video materials and exhibits of material culture.

On the initiative of the Russian Ethnographical Museum, four Finno-Ugric Symposiums have been held in St. Petersburg since 1988, which have become a means of co-ordination of the scientific research work in the field of Finno-Ugric studies in the North-West of Russia. The problems and methods adopted to approach the central issues of historiography, ethnic history and ethno-cultural contacts are clearly brought forth in the collected papers published during those years. Thus, the papers read at the 1st Finno-Ugric Symposium were published under the title "Finno-Ugric Studies Today. Experience and Problems", Leningrad, 1990, and represent the first fruits of the work of Leningradian specialists. Much attention was paid in the papers to the settling of problematic issues in the study of the Finno-Ugric population of the North-West of Russia, as well as to the innovative approaches to the interdisciplinary study of ethno-cultural processes. The next collection was titled "The Population of Leningrad District: Materials and Studies in History and Traditional Culture", St. Petersburg, 1992, and must be regarded as an organic part of the research program of the Slavo-Finnic history and culture of the region.

The third collection, "Problems of the Ethnic History of the Inter-Ethnic Contacts Between the Baltic Finnish Nations", St. Petersburg, 1994, was dedicated to the memory of the great Russian scholar, D. B. Bubrikh (1890–1949), upon his hundredth anniversary. Here, as in the previous collections, priority was given to result-giving studies or publications of the newest archive and field materials dealing with the interpretation of ethnic cultures and of the interaction between ethno-socio-cultural processes in the North-West of Russia. The 4th collection, "Of the History of the St. Petersburg Guberniya" was published in 1997.

Another outcome of the culturological adoption of the memorials and archive materials held in the various institutes of

St. Petersburg was the exhibition “Of the History of the St. Petersburg Guberniya”. Among the principles put forth at that exhibition, mention could be made of the attempt to cast light on regional culture from two different viewpoints: that of the creators and carriers of the corresponding cultural tradition, and that of contemporary bystanders: scholars, travellers, cartographers, or artists. The exhibition is made up of two parts: “Archaeological Past of the District: From Mesolithic to the XVIII Century”, and “The History and Culture of the Baltic Finnish Population, XVIII – Beginning of XX Century”. Side by side with well-known exhibits, there are displayed also new archaeological finds and unique books, maps, photos, and ethnographic objects little known even among specialists.

Translated by Triimu Pakk

Extended Forum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Bashkiria¹

Art Leete

*(2nd International Congress of Russian Anthropologists and
Ethnographers in Ufa, June 1-5, 1997).*

The forum was attended by 300 researchers working in 19 groups. There were, in addition to Russian and CIN scientists, people from the USA, Germany, France, Finland and Estonia participating in it. It would not be possible to give an overall survey of the event: only a few aspects can be highlighted here. The output of the workshops there provides us with information about the current developments in Russian ethnography.

For example, there were workshops on ethnopolitics and national politics. Ethnopolitics or national politics is among the main concerns of Russian ethnography today. This was also the most discussed topic in the plenary session of the Congress. Present were R. G. Abdulatipov, Vice-chairman of the Federation Council of Russia and V. Y. Zorin, Head of the Committee for External Relations of the Russian State Duma who also gave speeches. The question of nationality was also an important topic of discussion in the first workshop on general issues of ethnography. The topic of national politics has been extensively researched in the last few years in Russia. As S. M. Tshervonnaya, a doctorate in ethnography and art, stated at the banquet after the Congress, "Nowadays all people (*ie. all ethnographers* - A. L.) should examine ethnopolitics".

¹ This article was developed as part of the project from the Open Estonia Foundation.

In Russia, 'anthropology' traditionally denotes physical anthropology, whereas 'ethnography' signifies ethnology or cultural anthropology. Yet the links between Russian ethnography and ethnology and cultural anthropology outside Russia are not adequately clear. However, this was also among the burning issues discussed in the Congress. Nowadays in Russia 'ethnology' seems to be synonymous with 'ethnography'.

V. N. Basilov, an ethnographer from Moscow, emphasized the uniqueness of Russian ethnography in the workshop on general issues of ethnography. He considered it of paramount importance to maintain its distinctive qualities. He referred to the terms of contemporary Western ethnology as scientific slang and warned about implementing them in Russian ethnography.

However, Basilov admitted that there is a crisis in Russian ethnography: the former underlying theory based on evolutionism has become old-fashioned, whereas there are no theories to replace them with. Thus, there is a certain chaos and vacuity in the theoretical basis of Russian ethnography. Should anybody look for it in the Western experience is regarded as unacceptable.

Basilov compared Russian ethnography with the work done in Turkey and Finland, considering them to be regional studies rather than ethnography. The criterion could be the scale of it, i.e. the number of ethnographers in a country, and possibly the size of the territory in which they operate.

Basilov's plenary speech provided an important topic of conversation. Considering the possibility for a new underlying theory for Russian ethnography, M. Balzer from Washington, DC stated that this was not the right time for developing a new theory. At times chaos can be useful. "Chaos can be better than one may think," she said. She also stated that the Western and Russian approaches are becoming increasingly similar (not exactly the same).

Secondly, the national question touched in Basilov's speech also caused lively discussion. His main statement in this field was that all small ethnic groups are happy about their life in Russia, at least not too unhappy. Civilization introduced by the Russians has considerably developed many primitive nations. He provided a striking

example of peoples' friendship: during the Caucasus wars, last century, A. P. Yermolov, a Russian general, after having seen the complete destruction of a mosque in Chechnya, immediately ordered it rebuilt. And this happened to the locals' delight.

Many ethnographers-ethnologists present there argued against Basilov's statement about the minorities question. Y. V. Chesnov was most vociferous in his argument against it. He recalled that Yermolov, "friend of small nations", has provided a paraphrase of a well-known statement applying to the Indians: "Only a dead Chechen is a good Chechen." Also, "scorched earth" tactics employed by Yermolov in Chechnya were highlighted.

Also, Chesnov stated that "scientists of our "prosperous" country (*i.e. Russia* – A. L.) have also something to do about the recent events in the Caucasus". Then Chesnov talked about the ethnographers' responsibility to the researched peoples. He stated that in some cases they should not publish everything they know about the locals (unless (s)he is adequately informed about the particular culture), as it may come to be dangerous in some cases.

For example, in a book published in the beginning of the 1980s there was a statement that the Abkhaz had arrived at their present settled area later than the Georgians. Therefore, when the Georgians read the book, on "scientific grounds" they started to consider the Abkhaz to be invaders. Later in fieldworks Chesnov asked a Georgian how many Abkhaz there are – "One could place them in two troop trains," he said.

S. A. Arutyunov, an ethnologist from Moscow, had a different viewpoint about the small ethnic groups. He spoke about the need for training their own ethnologists. According to him, research projects carried out by themselves would considerably broaden the horizons of science.

D. Nesanelis, an ethnographer from Syktyvkar, argued against this, saying that it would be irresponsible to encourage the representatives of small ethnic groups to take up ethnography. Experiences show that their lives have become very tragic.

Arutyunov agreed that the lives of the intelligentsia in small ethnic groups may become very tragic. However, this cannot be an argument against training them: this is not the question about the

ethnic group. Very often there is conflict between the researcher and his/her ethnic group on the one hand, and their surroundings (neighbouring large nation(s), cities, industry, mass communications, etc.) on the other. The solution could be providing small ethnic groups with a favourable intellectual milieu.

For the first time in the history of Russian ethnography forums a workshop on urban ethnography was held in Ufa. The main issue for Russian urban ethnographers is modelling ethnic processes, rather than examining marginal urban subcultures. This rests on a supposition that in earlier times ethnic processes evolved only outside cities. The people who settled down in cities were ethnically established already. Nowadays ethnic processes also develop in cities. In urban areas people become ethnically conscious. How these processes develop is among the main concerns of urban ethnography in Russia.

The workshop on urban ethnography was quite small and only lasted half a day. However, this is a promising and developing phenomenon in Russian ethnography.

At this Congress the workshop on museum affairs was not among the most important issues and thus it can be said this is not a burning question in Russian ethnography today. However, the topic is vitally important outside Russia, as also indicated by the participation of people from the National Museum of Finland and Estonian National Museum in this workshop. People from the Novosibirsk oblast museum of regional studies were among the most eminent Russian ethnographers. They talked on the subject of museum information systems (electronic catalogues and designing a home page for a museum).

Ildikó Lehtinen, curator of the National Museum of Finland, spoke on the meaning and functions of museum pieces, as well as on the criteria for collecting them. According to Baudrillard, a French sociologist, he divided the pieces into two groups:

1) symbolic, functional pieces;

2) marginal pieces, without a specific function.

Museum pieces are marginal. They do not have authentic functions. Any piece can have this only when properly used in the right place and time. Museum pieces are mostly symbolic.

In earlier times museums collected mostly curiously interesting and aesthetic items. Museums displayed objects that were no longer used, or else were never used at all.

The National Museum of Finland started expeditions to the Finno-Ugric peoples in 1856. According to I. Lehtinen, at that time mostly textile pieces, especially those with elaborate ornamentation, were collected. When there was a Finno-Ugric exhibition at the National Museum of Finland in 1920, the beauty of the pieces was among the main criteria for putting on the exhibition.

At present, there are 16,000 pieces collected from the Finno-Ugric territories at the National Museum of Finland. Many beautiful, but "dead" museum pieces that are out of context can be "revived" by fieldworks and further documenting.

This was a brief and fragmentary overview of the topics discussed at the Congress of Russian ethnologists and anthropologists in Ufa. While participating there, the author of the present article got some idea about the exciting processes currently evolving in Russian ethnography, and hopefully, was able to highlight them in this paper.

Translated by Epp Uustalu

Examining Cultural Changes in Western Siberia

Liivo Niglas, Art Leete

The project "Examining Cultural Changes in Western Siberia" is the grant by the Estonian Science Foundation held by Liivo Niglas and Art Leete under the Estonian National Museum (ENM) in 1996–1997.

The preliminary purpose of the project was to examine social structure and communication strategies of the peoples living in Western Siberia, e.g. the Khanty, Mansi and Nenets, considering their worldview. Also, the participants planned to research the local peoples' manipulation of cultural symbols. As the research progressed, the participants of the grant decided to apply a discursive approach and also include the topics not listed in the preliminary plan, instead of limiting themselves to the preliminary issues only. The topics of social structure and changes in communication strategies were considered as a starting-point for the research or cross-cultural communication.

The grant included doing fieldworks to the aforementioned peoples and giving the collected material to the collections of the Estonian National Museum. Also, the participants planned to publish articles and give lectures on the collected material, as well as to communicate the researched cultures and their problems to a wider audience using various channels.

Doing fieldworks was among the main concerns of the project. L. Niglas did fieldworks in the Nenets on the Yamal peninsula on July 6 – August 22, 1996 and on February 26 – April 11, 1997. A. Leete did fieldworks in Northern Khanty people and the Nenets living in the Nadym tundra region, collecting also material on the Mansi people, on April 12–30, 1996. Also, A. Leete did fieldworks in the Northern Khanty people and in the Komi living in Ust-Vym region, Republic of Komi on August 7 – September 3, 1997.

Most of the lot of material collected in the fieldworks has been handed over to the collections of the Estonian National Museum (including 70 ethnographic pieces, 91 pages of ethnographic texts, 250 photographs, fieldwork diaries and videotaped materials among them). The listing of some objects has not been completed yet.

An ethnographic video for study purposes called "Sacrificial Ceremony at Num-To" (15 minutes), exhibition of photographs and slide programme of the Yamal Nenets have been provided on the collected material. The exhibition has been three times put on: December 5, 1996 – February 5, 1997 at the Exhibition Hall of ENM, March 4–16, 1997 at the Kilpkonn Gallery, the town of Viljandi, and June 11–23, 1997 at the House of the Tartu Hunters' Society (presented by Anzori Barkalaja).

Fieldwork materials have also been used by L. Niglas when giving a special course on the Nenets at Tartu University, and by A. Leete when offering a course covering general aspects of cultural anthropology at Viljandi Cultural College. In addition to that, the participants have given talks in scientific conferences and workshops held in Estonia, Russia and Sweden.

Within two years, the participants have published or submitted for publishing a total of 16 scientific articles, as well as various articles on the Nenets' and Khanty culture published in periodicals.

The indirect results of the projects that are beyond numbers can be even more significant. However, as of the present moment they cannot be measured overall. There is a lot of fieldwork material that has not been researched yet. Considering the scientific results obtained by the present stage, a shift in the matter of study can be witnessed.

Before the project started, some more specific issues were planned to be researched with the further possibility to link them to the wider cultural background. In reality, the development of the project has been contrary to this. In the Khanty and Nenets' worldviews, the two preliminary issues (social structure and culture-specific communication) turned out to be inseparably connected with each other, so that the research became worldview-centered.

Also, the side issues were somewhat broadened, in addition to a certain shift in the matter of study towards the preliminary back-

ground issue. The cultural changes synthetically cover the phenomenon of culture in the form of cyclic process or chain reaction. None of the separate topics could be researched in isolation. Thus, the new topics, such as the Siberian local peoples' struggle for freedom against Soviet forces (unpredictable findings in archives), ethnopsychology, and ethnoecology emerged on the "micro-level" of the project. However, information collected within this project calls for further research in the future.

During fieldworks, L. Niglas changed his focus on the study of the role of reindeer in the Nenets culture.

Whatever the researched topic was, I realised that any object or phenomenon was somehow related to reindeer. Be it the location of reindeer sledges on a camp site or the Nenets conceptions of their religious world. Using "my poor" Nenets, I realised that in everyday life reindeer were also among the most important topics, and not from economical aspects only. This took me to the role of reindeer in the basic patterns of the Nenets' native life generally. Some essential reindeer-connected conceptions and categories will also be brought out in the article "Reindeer in the Nenets Worldview" published in the present volume.

Examining cultural changes, it can be said that the basic patterns of the Nenets traditional life have remained the same. However, this statement is valid only in the nomadic reindeer herders living in the tundra belt. The life in the tundra is based on reindeer up till today, and several centuries of western/Russian civilisation or the ideological pressures on life have not been able to change the basic patterns of their life. It is of course that things change in every culture, but in the case of the tundra Nenets, this occurs in a slow natural manner, without shocks and upheavals to their lifestyle. The continuity of the symbiotic relationship between people and reindeer has been an essential prerequisite of that.

However, as compared to reindeer herders, way of life of the Nenets living in villages has changed considerably. I would highlight the lack of reindeer there, rather than overestimate the Russian influence. In a society where there are no reindeer on which all life should be based on, the traditional lifestyle can be more easily influenced from outside.

I consider the adequate understanding of the tundra Nenets lifestyle to be the main purpose of fieldworks. Especially in a situation where for a long time the Nenets and other northern peoples have been researched through literature: materials provided by some travellers from the beginning of this century, few fieldwork reports and archive materials. Although most of the fieldwork material comes from one group of reindeer herders, yet they are the real nomadic reindeer herders who do not belong to minorities but rather represent the average Nenets: the herder in a socialist co-operative and his family. Thus, the real people living in our time are the matter of research.

A. Leete highlights the outside influences when examining the cultural changes in the peoples living in Western Siberia. In the 1930s the Nenets' and Khanty's way of life changed considerably, mostly through outside pressures on them. The imbalanced cultural aspects also change the position of the still balanced aspects of culture. For example, when the local peoples were forced to live in large settlements instead of their seasonal dwellings, they could not follow their traditional lifestyle based on fishing, hunting and reindeer rearing, and thus the environment for maintaining traditional way of life was also lost.

In conclusion, it seems that the approaches made in this project also supplement one another. While A. Leete's approach is based on both fieldwork materials and archive materials, thus being more historical, L. Niglas has focused attention on the present situation based on fieldwork materials.

The main purposes will be to analyse the present cultural context of the Khanty and Nenets, and then bring out cultural changes there.

Translated by Epp Uustalu

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