

Minority and Mission: Christianisation of the European Nenets

Laur Vallikivi

Christianisation and the role of Christianity among the Nenets (formerly called Samoyeds) and other Northern peoples of Russia have been analysed quite superficially and onesidedly. This may be explained by several reasons. At first, for a long time, researchers mostly endeavoured to find out phenomena of religion seen as “authentic” and “traditional”, without paying attention to influences of Christianity on beliefs and rituals. Secondly, during the Soviet period, Marxist ethnography proceeded from a prescribed scheme and treated the impact of Christianity as *a priori* negative; it automatically presumed that the relationship between the missionaries and the Nenets could be exclusively conflictual (e.g. Bazanov, Kazansky 1936; Khomich 1979; see also Droogers, Greenfield 2001: 30). I suggest that, although conflicts existed indeed, the interaction between them was much more complex, and determined also by other considerations – both parties’ worldviews, political and religious strategies, misunderstandings, shared interests etc.

In the current article, I shall analyse the Christianisation process by the European and, to a smaller extent, the Asian Nenets in its political and social context, paying special attention to the dialogue between the aborigenes and the Orthodox missionaries, to the reactions of both parties and to the evolution of the Nenets’ belief system during the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century. My main sources are contemporary Russian Orthodox journals, which have been very little used by other researchers, and different reports by scholars and travellers. The more relevant texts I relied on are notes by Veniamin, Sitnikov, Mikhailov and other missionaries and priests involved in Evangelisation campaigns, which have been published in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century.

Political and historical dimensions of Christianisation

The first really serious encounter of the European Nenets with Chris-

tianity took place during the years 1825 to 1830. Missionary work was assigned to the “Arkhangelsk Spiritual Mission”, headed by Archimandrite Veniamin from the Antonievo-Siysky monastery. The mission also included 5 priests and one Nenets interpreter. Within five years, 3303 persons were baptised out of the approximately 4000 Nenets living in the Arkhangelsk Guberniya (Veniamin 1855: 114; Khomich 1995: 248). This was the only large-scale mission in that region: after Veniamin’s campaign, missionary work was entrusted to the local clergy, but they didn’t actually convert but a few persons. Besides this current work in local churches, there has been only one initiative aimed at the Nenets’ conversion, the merchant Sitnikov’s trip in 1861–1863 (Sitnikov 1864).

What were the missionaries’ goals and strategies? During the first, i.e. the Veniamin’s campaign, baptism was the main aim of the Orthodox Church, which was thus enabled to consider the Nenets as “Orthodox”, i.e. full and equal subjects of the Russian Tsar. Therefore, the main goal was to baptise as many Nenets as possible. Indeed, the mission’s work was geographically limited inside the boundaries of the Guberniya and did not therefore include the Nenets in Siberia. East of the Ural Mountains, there was another Orthodox mission based in Obdorsk, but its impact on the local Nenets reindeer herders was quite limited (Lebedev 1915, No. 12: 160; Minenko 1975: 267).

The Synod’s requirements stipulated that the missionaries had to be gentle towards the aborigenes. They should try to baptise the most influent Nenets first – the wealthier and the elders. They had to find out how the Nenets reacted to them and then, at a suitable moment, disclose the falseness of their pagan beliefs and reveal the truth of Christianity (O pravilakh... 1830: 471). Baptism was a goal in itself: other issues as, for example, proper explanation of Christian doctrines were of minor importance. This appears clearly in both the instructions and the missionaries’ diaries. “Having briefly presented the Holy Story to the Samoyeds and explained to them the main dogma of our Sacred Faith, I easily managed to have the majority of them adopt the Orthodox faith” (Sitnikov 1864: 191). In the writings of the time, in order to be considered Orthodox it was enough to be baptised.

Being at the service of the local Russians and Komis¹, the Nenets had

¹ The Komis are a people living mostly south of the Nenets areas. One group, called Izhma Komis, occupied the Northern tundras, took over reindeer herding from the Nenets and became in the 19th century the richest of the European reindeer breeders.

been in touch for a long time with folk Orthodoxy and Old Belief. According to a traveller's report, the Pustozersk Church had the visit of Nenets prior to Veniamin's mission (Lepekhn 1805: 292). Consequently, the encounter with the latter was, in a certain sense, the continuation of a contact situation that existed already. A large group of the European Nenets, particularly the westernmost ones, worked as herders for Orthodox Russians or Komi, or were indebted to them. In the middle of the 19th century, Vereshchagin writes that if in the Western tundras the majority of the Nenets had been contented with accepting Christianity, in the Eastern Bolshzemelskaya tundra they opposed a resolute resistance. He explains this difference arguing that in the Western tundras, the Nenets were "made poor and miserable" by their Russian and Komi masters (Vereshchagin 1849: 294).

Many Nenets avoided baptism either by escaping from the missionaries or by postponing baptism, without ever keeping their promise (Veniamin 1851: 66; Sitnikov 1864: 195). Others accepted it as an inevitable obligation, similar to the capitation² due to the State (Lebedev 1916: 170, 183). Thus there was much more than conflict in the contact situation of the two parties. Those who let the missionaries baptise them had different motivations. For example, according to the Nenets' themselves, baptism put them in an equal situation while trading with the Russians and released them from their debts towards the Russians, who used to cheat them (Bartenev 1896: 94).

They also wished to obtain highly valued objects, such as crosses, icons or shirts, the missionaries used to give to the neophytes (Sitnikov 1864: 192; Lebedev 1915, No. 12: 157). The cross for example was highly honoured not only by the baptised Nenets but also among the pagans, particularly the one given in a church. Therefore, many Nenets from the Obdorsk area went to the nearest church and asked the priest a cross. If the priest refused because of they were not baptised, they would come the next time and called themselves by the name of some baptised Nenets, and thus get the cross (Otchet... 1897: 45). Sitnikov also mentions that the cross was supposed to have supernatural power: "... there are so many idolaters who hang crosses on the lead reindeer of their herds and around the necks of their favourite idols" (Sitnikov 1864: 199). He infers that it is sufficient for a missionary to be himself eager to convert, and all pagans will soon be Christians (ibid.).

The conversion process reveals the importance of power relations

² Called in this region *yasak*.

between the converts and the converters at different levels – from the use of direct force to the exercise of symbolic power. During the 1930s, the Soviet historians Bazanov and Kazansky claim that Veniamin's mission relied on the use of constraint (Bazanov, Kazansky 1936: 27). Understandably, we do not find in Veniamin's diary any report about the use of violence: his descriptions of conversion are inspired, as it seems to be the norm in the 19th century, by the New Testament; nonetheless we find in the same texts high praise of the activities of the police officers, accompanying the mission who were supposed to protect the missionaries and the Nenets against the local Russians. According to Veniamin, local Russians tried to prevent the conversion of the Nenets, in order to retain cheap labour force that could be fed with dead animals³ (Veniamin 1850: 368). The mere presence of police officers might be for the Nenets a sign that the missionaries had the support of the civil authority: baptising turned out to be quite violent (Epizod... 1896: 680; Bazanov, Kazansky 1936: 25–28). In the 1830s, there were stories spreading among the Siberian Nenets that the Nenets in the Arkhangelsk Guberniya had been baptised by force. The Siberian Nenets were frightened and refused to comply to the missionaries, so that the newly opened Obdorsk mission had to interrupt its activities (Minenko 1975: 267–268). For the same reason, the priest of the Obdorsk mission had to seek the assistance of the police, in order to contain the Nenets who wanted to hinder one of their friend's baptism and tried to drive him away (Lebedev 1915, No. 12: 145).

As long as the activities of the missionaries were clearly connected with State authority, the Nenets avoided direct hostile acts against them. However, if the Nenets perceived that missionary work was not directly supported by the State, they might treat the missionaries in a hostile manner. For instance, at the beginning of the 1860s, as merchant Sitnikov proclaimed the Gospel, the Nenets, on the basis of rumours, thought he was doing it independently from the authorities and his Nenets guides left him alone in the tundra (Sitnikov 1864: 191).

One of the most spectacular examples of how missionaries exercised symbolic power was the destruction of the idols in the Nenets' sacred sites and their replacement by crosses. The members of Veniamin's mission destroyed dozens of sacred places, among them two of the most important Nenets holy sites, on the Vaigach Island and in the Kanin

³ Christians did not eat meat of animals that died of natural death. By feeding their servants in this way, the Russian and Komi reindeer herders were able to limit their expenses.

tundra. As Veniamin emphasised, this destruction took place with the assistance of newly baptised Nenets themselves (Veniamin 1850; 1851). Veniamin describes the changes of the Nenets' attitudes towards their idols after the destruction of their *sjadeis* (wooden or stone images of gods), as they witnessed their powerlessness and nothingness (Veniamin 1850: 439).

Eighty years later, reports by a priest called Nevsky provide a different picture. He had proposed to the Nenets who accompanied him in the tundra to destroy the wooden statue of an idol. Although the Nenets laughed at the idol, they refused to give the clergyman an axe and said: "you are a priest, so the idol will not touch you, but we shall suffer evil" (Nevsky 1906: 271). It is possible to draw conclusions also from the reports of travellers who visited the tundra after the sack of sacred places, and noticed recent traces of sacrifices on the same site or elsewhere (Kozmin 1903: 69–70; Martynov 1905: 23–24; Evsyugin 1979: 93).

Incorporation of Orthodox rituals into the religious practice of the Nenets

Spiritual care following Veniamin's campaign was more than modest. Although three churches were built in the territory of the European Nenets (Nes, Pesha, Kolva) immediately after the completion of Veniamin's mission, there were very few clergymen who were ready to work in such tough natural conditions and were motivated to learn the Nenets' language. Russian Orthodox priests were as a rule ordinary clergymen with families: according to the traveller and writer Konstantin Nosilov, this did not allow them to migrate with the Nenets in the tundra, as their children could not be educated and medical care was inaccessible (Nosilov 1895: 275). The priests went rarely to the tundra, thus the Nenets' contacts with the Orthodox clergymen took primarily place when the latter came to the settlement to get supplies. If they wished to, the Nenets had the opportunity to avoid any meeting with the missionaries.

Russian Orthodox Church mainly focused on ritual observance by converts. In the Obdorsk Church, the clergymen carefully followed whether the Nenets and the Khanty⁴ who had come to the church behaved correctly, crossed themselves and prayed in the proper man-

⁴ The Khanty are an ethnic group living in the Northern areas of Western Siberia: in the Obdorsk region, there are Khanty as well as Nenets.

ner; if errors in the rituals were noticed, they were explained to the culprits after the service (Lebedev 1915, No. 12: 156). Baptism was the main sacrament required and for many Nenets, it was also the sole contact with official Orthodoxy. It was very difficult for the clerics to compel the Nenets to submit to the other sacraments – receive Communion, marry and confess their sins according to the prescriptions of the Church. A clergyman often baptised children aged 5–7 (Shashkov 1894: 72; Lebedev 1916: 179) and performed memorial masses several years after the actual decease and after the traditional funeral with sacrifices and offerings was held (Lebedev 1915, No. 9: 166–167; 1916: 183). Only few Nenets accepted Church wedding, although the clerics tried to convince them of the necessity of Christian matrimony. Usually the Nenets accepted it and even required it when children were ill (Shashkov 1896: 185). However, young couples happened to choose Church wedding when, for example, the bride’s parents objected to the marriage because the bridegroom could not pay the bride price (Lebedev 1916: 182; Otchet... 1897: 45). At the same time, the missionaries complained that young Nenets maids would not accept baptism for this would raise obstacles to their marriage (Lebedev 1915, No. 12: 160). These are typical examples of how Orthodox rituals were used by the Nenets to solve problems within the community.

Sometimes however the Orthodox ecclesiastics themselves refused to administer sacraments, e.g. they refused to wed Nenets couples who went to church during fasting, when matrimony was forbidden (Shashkov 1896: 185). Because of their nomadic way of life, the Nenets reindeer herders could not follow most of the required Orthodox obligations. One Nenets told for instance the young botanist Alexander Schrenk that Christianity was generally not too bad, but fasting was indeed superfluous (Schrenk 1848: 413). The Orthodox Church prescribes up to 200 fasting days a year, which is in full contradiction with the Nenets’ way of life (Finsch 1879: 515). Moreover, this requirement was difficult even to understand as for the Nenets meat, which is the bases of their diet, was symbolically very highly valued. Missionaries and clergymen adapted their activities to the actual circumstances and overlooked the prescription of fasting (Mikhailov 1898: 128).

One of the main problem in the Nenets’ conversion, according to Bishop Makariy, was their nomadic way of life, wherefore “Samoyeds were not ready to receive the higher Evangelic truths” (Makariy 1878: 73). Nomadic way of life hindered most generally missionary work. Andrei Znamenski, in his comparative study on the Christianisation of

Alaskan Dena'ina Indians, Chukchis and Altai, points out that the nomadic groups within these people maintained, in contact situation with Orthodox missions, their traditional religious practice to a much larger extent than the settled groups (Znamenski 1999: 261). This applies also to the Nenets: the settled Nenets living in the Kolva village and Novaya Zemlya were significantly more closely connected with the Orthodox Church than the nomadic reindeer herders living in the tundra (Nosilov 1895: 161, Lebedev 1915, No. 10: 160). Settled Nenets went regularly to church, observed rituals and demonstrated a more thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine.

Because of the Orthodox pressure the European Nenets developed a complex religious practice. On the one hand, pre-Christian rituals were jealously concealed from the missionaries: e.g. the Nenets asked Nosilov, whether he knew anything about the missionaries' plans to travel in the tundra (Nosilov 1896: 66). At the same time, there are many reports showing that churchgoing and pagan rites were considered as natural phenomena that did not exclude one another. Some Nenets wondered why they could not both worship their gods and bring offerings to the church (Nosilov 1895: 160). The more contacts the Nenets had with Orthodox clergymen, the quicker they perceived the exclusive nature of Orthodoxy, i.e. they understood that for the clergymen animistic and shamanistic rites were unacceptable. When Schrenk saw a baptised shaman performing, the latter explained, "as I am baptised, I beat my drum and call the *tadebtsos* [shaman's helping spirits] quietly, so that the Russian God would not hear my voice" (Schrenk 1848: 399).

The power of healing

As mentioned above, many Orthodox elements found a positive response among the Nenets. Their attitude towards the missionaries depended more on actions than on sermons, i.e. was influenced more by events than by words. One of the events that, according to Veniamin, made the Nenets understand the superiority of Christianity was the miraculous recovery of one Nenets while being baptised. Veniamin reports how Vylkin, an elder of the Nenets, who had one hand shriveled and the other dislocated, managed after baptism to cross himself. Missionaries took Vylkin on their missionary trips and the news of the miraculous healing of his hands spread rapidly among the Nenets and encouraged many people to accept baptism (Veniamin 1850: 426). This story has a parallel in the New Testament, the healing of a man with a

shriveled hand by Jesus Christ (Mt. 12: 9–14; Mk. 3: 1–6). Veniamin presents himself as a genuine apostle, who mediates divine healing. Beyond this concrete example, the Nenets highly valued the healing power of Christianity. The healing activities of the missionaries were a clearly understandable alternative to shamanistic rites. The missionaries knew it: Sitnikov purposefully participated in nursing courses in order to use healing as a means for converting the Nenets (Lebedev 1915, No. 9: 161). In Obdorsk, one sick Nenets accepted to be baptised if the local missionary Averki succeeded in healing him. And so it happened. The brother of the same Nenets, however, stated that he would agree to be baptised only if Averki would make him ill and then heal him (Irinarkh 1905: 155; see also Nosilov 1896: 202; Znamenski 1999: 222). Similarly, Schrenk describes how a Nenets woman of the Kharyuchi clan from the Yamal Peninsula fell seriously ill and her husband made a journey to the most sacred place in the European tundra on the Vaigach Island, in order to bring sacrifices to their gods. Afterwards, he headed to Pustozersk and gave 10 reindeer as a sacrifice to Saint Nicholas (Schrenk 1848: 409).

Traditionally, healing is one of the most important functions of the shaman: thus curing missionaries became somehow rivals for them. Competition between Christian holy men and shamans gave the people more alternatives. The functional similarity of Orthodox priests and shamans appears clearly in many reports; one of the most illustrative is the following: when a Nenets woman asked a Soviet official in Peschanka, whether she could leave her baby unbaptised, she was given a positive answer. After this approval, the woman said: “That’s good. I won’t go to the priest as he asks a lot of money. I go to the *tadibei* (shaman), he takes less” (Skachkov 1934: 25).

This kind of pragmatic attitude by the indigenous people confronted to innovations is common in situations of cultural contacts. Healing in particular became one of such links in the communication between the missionaries and the Nenets, and opened the way for a dialogue between the two.

Dialogue: reciprocal understanding and misunderstanding

The acceptance or the rejection of Orthodox elements by the Nenets determined a peculiar dialogue between the two parties. The main feature of this dialogue was translation, in its widest sense. Firstly, there were a number of problems related to translation from one language to another, at the so-called **interlinguistic** level; secondly the

dialogue between the missionaries and the Nenets was moulded by **intercultural** or reciprocal cultural translation.

As far as interlinguistic translation is concerned, only few missionaries were sufficiently fluent in Nenets to proselytise in this language. In the majority of cases, preaching took place either in Russian, if the Nenets knew at least a little Russian, or with the help of interpreters. As a rule, women did not know any Russian at all, while the men living in the westernmost tundra could mostly speak colloquial Russian, but usually ignored all of religious terminology and Church Slavonic that was used in religious services. Easternmost European Nenets could only speak very little Russian even at the beginning (or at the end...) of the 20th century (Poezdka... 1913: 347; see also Vallikivi 2001).

Archimandrite Veniamin began to learn Nenets: this was also recommended by the Synod's decree on the Christianisation of the Samoyeds, issued in 1824 (O pravilakh... 1830: 471). With the help of a Nenets translator, he compiled a grammar and a dictionary, and translated most of the New Testament into Nenets; he also began to use this language while preaching. According to Veniamin, his mission work in Nenets was very successful; he wrote: "The Nenets were extremely impressed by the deep truth of the Gospel, when they heard them spoken in an understandable voice, in their own mother tongue" (Veniamin 1855: 114). However, the best specialist of Nenets in the 19th century, the linguist and ethnographer Matias Aleksanteri Castrén, who had personally met Veniamin, evaluated his knowledge of the Nenets language as superficial (Castrén 1967: 120). Bazanov and Kazansky confirm this impression: they present some of the prayers translated by Veniamin, which were illogical and full of mistakes, so that the Nenets could understand nothing of the original message (Bazanov, Kazansky 1936: 48).

Usually the Nenets did not understand the sermons even when they were translated or when the missionaries preached in Nenets: the translators had trouble in finding Nenets terms for Russian notions. The clergymen of the Obdorsk mission's translation committee considered Nenets to be an "extremely poor" language and therefore, they recommended either to use Russian words or to have "ideas conveyed in a very free wording" (Otchet... 1905: 142).

Nosilov writes about the harmfulness of mission work done with the help of interpreters at the end of the 19th century: he considered such translations to be heretic. The interpreter is "an ignorant, who distorts every word; or a cheater who takes advantage of the missionaries'

confidence, deliberately translating in favour of the indigenous people..." (Nosilov 1895: 274). In addition, Nosilov blames the translators for taking side with the indigenous people in other ways: "... once I witnessed myself how such a translator, accompanying the missionary, took side with the savages: he suggested them to hurry in hiding the idols and expose the icons, hang the crosses around their necks..." (ibid.). Mission work in Nenets probably induced some Nenets to be baptised and its existence provoked reactions and new forms of intracultural communication; but the result was not in essentials what the missionaries expected, a better understanding of the principles of Orthodoxy. That is what the Obdorsk clergyman Popov expresses: "... the inexactness and lifelessness of the ideas conveyed by the interpreters did not really help the indigenous people to understand and adopt the godly truths expressed by the preachers" (*Sudby...* 1994: 30).

Concerning **intercultural** translation, Tzvetan Todorov, in his book "The Conquest of America", shows how the dialogue between the missionaries and the Mexican indigenous people was based on analogy, seen as the cornerstone of interpretation mechanism (Todorov 2001). To use analogy is proper to human perception, which domesticates the unfamiliar according to its goals and to its context (Guthrie 1993: 46). The use of perceived analogies is a main feature in most mission situations, like in the dialogue between the Orthodox missionaries and the Nenets.

First, I would bring some examples of how the missionaries regarded the Nenets and interpreted their beliefs. For the missionaries, imbued with Enlightenment ideology, the Nenets were savages, with no higher mental development than children, wherefore they had to be instructed in the Christian faith with gentle and careful ways. "Therefore, the missionaries adapted their words to the level of infants' thinking, who could receive and retain merely the shortest teachings about God, His deeds, about man and his salvation through Jesus Christ, and on how to live in order to earn eternal salvation" (Makariy 1878: 72). It is usual for missionaries to simplify religious dogmas and to bring them "down" to the presumable "level of thinking" of the people they endeavour to convert. According to Fienup-Riordan, this is one part in the process of creating negotiated meanings between the missionaries and their partners (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 69).

The aim of the missionaries was not to understand deeply the Nenets' worldview, as most of them were convinced that they knew everything about "paganism". In this dialogue, the clergymen acted

according to their convictions and interests, and described the Nenets beliefs mostly through Biblical vocabulary and images. Archimandrite Veniamin, in his description of the Nenets beliefs, presents the so-called pagan moral code in the form of 25 commandments, whose clauses mostly coincide with the Christian doctrine. The first commandment states as follows: “Believe in the Almighty God and honour Him”. Similarity with the first commandment of the Christian Decalogue is evident, both regarding the essence and the form. The following commandments call to honour St. Nicholas the Miracle Worker and the Devil (Veniamin 1855: 127). For the Orthodox ecclesiastics, the latter corresponded to Nga, the Nenets god of the Lower World. Once Nga has been identified as the Devil, the missionaries’ descriptions confer him the features of the Christian Devil (ibid: 116). For the clergymen, the Nenets beliefs were assimilated to worship of the Devil, and this was also the official standpoint of the Orthodox Church. During baptism, the Nenets had to declare explicitly they renounced the Devil and joined in Jesus Christ (Otchet... 1897: 45). To demonise the “other’s” gods is a common rule in religious contact situations, and Christianity is no exception.

Konstantin Nosilov admits that the missionaries knew very little about the Nenets’ beliefs, explaining thus the lack of success of the mission work (Nosilov 1895: 40). Bishop Makariy’s view is also characteristic of the time: he says that the Nenets beliefs are shamanistic “without any difference from other Siberian non-Christians” (Makariy 1878: 57).

The missionaries’ texts and rhetoric reveal much about their way of thinking. In the missionaries’ writings, the Nenets’ conversion is abrupt: Veniamin describes in his diary how the Nenets, after some hours and sometimes after several days of missionary work, awakened and agreed to be baptised. This sudden change is due to the action of Christian supernatural power. From all points of view, this is in complete compliance with the descriptions of conversions in the New Testament, imitating primarily the conversion of Saul on his journey to Damascus (Acts 9: 26–28). At the same time, one of the characteristic features in Veniamin’s texts is the absence of details in the conversion reports, which are merely based on rhetoric formulas, as well as numerous conversion narratives throughout history, present conversion through oppositional metaphors (see Fienup-Riordan 1997: 107). For example, the bad smell on the clothes and body of the Nenets, due to the dead animals they allegedly used to eat, miraculously disap-

peared thereafter. “As soon as the Samoyeds were baptised, at the very moment the neophytes were put into the water, all the smell vanished and after this the converts could hardly tolerate the smell coming from the non-baptised, even from their relatives” (Veniamin 1850: 420). The new baptised feel joy in their heart, whereas “the heathen do not get rid of their stink and remain deep in mendacity and in darkness” (ibid.).

Likewise, the Nenets’ perception of the Orthodoxy was shaped by perceived similarities. Castrén reports a most enlightening example: a missionary told the Nenets how the prophet Elijah (Elias) went to Heaven and the Nenets did not express any surprise. One of them finally observed: “My brother also went to Heaven a couple of months ago” (Castrén 1967: 164). According to Castrén, the Nenets believed that if a respected person disappeared in the tundra, this meant that he has gone to Heaven, whereas when a bad person disappeared, he was supposed to have been eaten by a bear (ibid.). Probably the Nenets’ vision of good persons going to heaven reflects former contacts with the Russian world and Orthodox folk beliefs.

Saint Nicholas as the own “stranger”

The Nenets selectively introduced supernatural characters and symbols connected with the Orthodox religion in their worldview and used them according to their own religious logic. The best example is the role of Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker (*Mikola*) in the Nenets’ belief system. Influenced by the local Russians and the Komi, the European Nenets worshipped Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker even before the Evangelisation campaign of the 1820s. As early as in the 16th century, the Nenets called the Pustozersk church the House of Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker (Bazanov, Kazansky 1936: 6; Okladnikov 1999: 17). In the 19th century, while Orthodoxy was penetrating amongst the Nenets, Saint Nicholas’ cult expanded and became an important link between the Nenets beliefs and the Orthodox religion. The Nenets sacrificed to Saint Nicholas as they did to their own idols by smearing the saint’s mouth on the icon with blood, grease or vodka. At the beginning of the 20th century Andrey Zhuravsky mentioned specific icons called *Sjadei-Mikolas* that were made for Saint Nicholas. “In the case of a successful hunt or escape from an ocean storm, a wax candle is lit in front of *Mikola sjadei* and larch resin is burnt as incense on a hot pan /—/ and at the same time, Mikola’s face is smeared with blood, blubber, whitefish grease and snuff” (Zhuravsky 1911: 26–27). Kostikov describes a reindeer with a specific sign dedicated to Saint Nicholas by

the Nenets of the Gyda Peninsula. “The *Hasovos* [the Nenets] considered him [St. Nicholas] one of their gods, and now he is not in any respect different from the ordinary gods (*hehes*)” (Kostikov 1930: 122).

In most cases, Saint Nicholas cult required church with an icon of the saint where he could be worshipped and sacrifices could be brought to him and where the communication with him was the most effective. The Nenets found various ways to keep in touch with the saint. There was for example a tradition to bring to the church a reindeer consecrated to Saint Nicholas: a cross had been cut into the reindeer’s flank hair and it was tied up to a picket near the church (Nosilov 1895: 407). In this example, the church and its icon of Saint Nicholas have been organically melted in the Nenets’ own beliefs. Both baptised and non-baptised Nenets used to bring reindeer carcasses and furs to the church entrance, in front of the icon of Saint Nicholas. They smeared his mouth with blood but also lit candles in front of the icon according to the Orthodox custom and asked for good hunt, well-being for their reindeer as well as their own recovery or somebody else’s (ibid.). The Nenets also used to walk around the church and throw silver coins on the roof of the church – this custom imitates the sacrifice at holy places in the tundra (Nosilov 1898: 358). Lebedev mentions a prayer said in Russian by a Nenets: “Saint Mikola, have mercy on me. My reindeer are sick, severely sick; they have a hoof disease; I will sacrifice a reindeer cow to you, I will sacrifice an alive one to you, I will bring it to this house, I will not deceive you...” (Lebedev 1916: 178). In that case the Nenets thought that it was necessary to say his prayers in Russian, which refers to the continuance of Nicholas’ “external” or “other” identity.

Saint Nicholas is totally integrated in the Nenets’ worldview, but at the same time, his identity remains thoroughly connected to the Orthodox Church. Thus, the almost almighty Saint Nicholas cannot help the Nenets against the Komi and the Russians who, according to the Nenets’ words, erect for him more powerful shrines (Nemirovich-Danchenko 1881: 100). In legends from the Yamal Nenets, Saint Nicholas, alias Mikola, figures as a miracle-working deity who has come from the far South and entered the service of the Nenets supreme being Num (Lar 1998: 42).

According to Leonid Lar⁵, on the basis of the material he collected during fieldwork in the 1990s, Mikola Mutratna, the Nenets equivalent

⁵ Nenets artist and researcher in folk religion.

to Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker, is even today one of the main supernatural beings in the Yamal Nenets' cosmology. He is the assistant to Num, the Nenets God of Heaven and lives on the fifth level of the Upper World. According to Lar, the icon of Saint Nicholas was one of the shamans' main means of communication with the Upper World, as the saint was the highest deity whom a shaman had personally access to (Lar 1998: 37). During my own fieldwork in the Yamb-To community of the European Nenets, in summer 2002, I was told that, even nowadays, all the men depicted on icons were considered Mikolas.

Besides Saint Nicholas, the Nenets worshipped Saint Elijah (Elias) and the Virgin Mary (Lebedev 1916: 171). Saint Elijah (Elias) was considered the patron saint of reindeer, and therefore, on the 20th of July, the Samoyeds of Yugorsky Shar gathered in great numbers in the local church to pray (Shashkov 1896: 180–12; Kercelli 1911: 98; see also Lambert 1999–2000). A report from the same region mentions that the Nenets considered also Saint George to be the patron of reindeer; therefore April the 23rd was a recognised feast (Mikhailov 1898: 126). The fact that Saint Nicholas, Saint Elijah (Elias) and Saint George are considered as Patron saints of reindeer demonstrates that the saints' functions were not thoroughly specialised.

Mikhailov reports that the Nenets call the Christian God, or “The Real God”, by the name of the Russian God while their own idols are seen as the Samoyed gods (Mikhailov 1898: 294). According to Lebedev, “most of the baptised Nenets think there is a distinct “Russian” God and a “special” Samoyed god; but above those two, there is a higher god, Tjavui-Num⁶, who is the creator of everything and who controls everything” (Veniamin 1855: 115; Otchet... 1897: 46; Lebedev 1916: 171). We are not sure of how the Nenets themselves saw these relationships, because the missionaries' descriptions have been greatly influenced by Christian signification practice. In Nenets oral tradition, Num appears as a Demiurge, who created the World and the Nenets⁷ with his brother Nga (Lar 1998: 18).⁸ His connection with the Heaven and “Num” being the Nenets name for Jehovah, “have apparently

⁶Apparently this form derives from Тю'уй Нум, “The Higher Num”.

⁷In Nenets, their own ethnonym – ненэця” – means “human beings”.

⁸In the Nenets folk tales there are many motives analogical with the Christian cosmogony. So the heavenly origin of the Underworld Ruler Nga reminds of the Christian legends of fallen angels (see Lar 1998: 17–19). The motive of the Deluge is known in the Nenets' myths of World Creation. The origin of the similar motives is not clear: they might not be of the Christian origin (compare Khomich 1979: 24).

contributed to his identification with the Christian heavenly Father. Whilst Saint Nicholas is a “stranger” who had to be inserted into the Nenets pantheon of gods, Num is considered by the Nenets as their “own” and has only been enriched with “alien” qualities and functions. Laura Stark-Arola identifies two types of syncretisms: the first handles “pagan” deities as “Christian” and the second reinterpret Christian-based sacred beings as “wilderness creatures” (Stark-Arola 1999: 99). While Num was enriched with some features of the Christian Father in Heaven, Saint Nicholas has become equal to the other spirits and gods, although his external origin has never been forgotten.

The Dialogue of Worldviews

The process of interpretation carried out by both parties – the missionaries and the Nenets – proceeded in the dialogue from their respective worldview and systems of meaning. The first difference between them lied in purposes. While the Orthodox missionaries’ aim, at a dogmatic level, was to take care of the salvation of souls, i.e. their attention was focused on man’s fate after death, the Nenets were interested in attaining and maintaining a balance in communication with supernatural beings in order to cope as well as possible with everyday life in the Middle World or the People’s World (cf. Stark 2002: 32). The missionaries from Obdorsk used to show the Nenets pictures of the Last Judgement and “explain all its details”, emphasising the concept of the life in the world beyond (Otchet... 1897: 44). According to Lar, the contemporary Yamal Nenets do not ignore concepts as the Last Judgement or the further destination of the dead going either to the Upper or to the Lower World according to moral principles. These themes are widely represented in their folk tales (Lar 1998: 22–24): they are obviously echoes of missionary work. According to Ivar Paulson’s estimation, the Nenets’ dualistic eschatology beliefs based on ethical principles is of Christian origin (Paulson 1958: 249).

Secondly, the missionaries and the Nenets had a different perception of the role of beliefs and rituals. While for Orthodoxy, individuals had to be guided by abstract ideas and introspection – as the focus was on salvation, the Nenets required above all, in order to maintain social order and balance, the observance of rules based on reciprocity (see Townsend 1997: 437; Stark 2002: 29). The Orthodox elements in the Nenets’ belief system were also integrated into the system of reciprocity: the Nenets started to sacrifice to the saints depicted on the icons, primarily to Saint Nicholas. The icon became a new medium in the

communication with supernatural beings, and its function was identical with the traditional idols' and was based on both giving and receiving.

The idea of usefulness, the orientation towards the solution of the problems in this world is also central in the Nenets' counter-arguments to the missionaries. "After having heard the words of wisdom, some refused to accept Christianity not because they had not recognised its truth, but because they did not know or see where it led. One of them asked: "If we stay in our religion we know it, but how will we live according to your religion, as we do not know it?" The others repeated: "At the present moment, it is good for us to live in our own faith; will yours be better?" (Veniamin 1850: 413). In the dialogue with Veniamin, the Nenets also said that their religion, unlike the Russian's, made it easy to learn about future successes or failures and to find stolen things. The missionaries answered that this was only possible with the Devil's help (Veniamin 1850: 369). Neither did the Nenets take any interest in confession, in the Communion or any other sacraments, because these did not offer any solutions to their everyday problems.

One Nenets explained to Sitnikov that they could not accept Christianity because God had created the Russians, but the Nenets and the reindeer were created by the Devil. This explanation was based on the strongly modified traditional Nenets cosmogony, where the characters of Num and Nga have been reinterpreted as "God" and the "Devil". The Nenets were constantly told that they believed in the Devil and they had nothing against it, because the Devil was equated with Nga and had always been one of the main deities, although he was very different from the Christian Devil. "If we start to believe in your God, the Devil will leave us and take our reindeer away, but reindeer give us chums⁹, food and clothes and we also pay *yasak* that we get from breeding of reindeer..." (Sitnikov 1864: 195).

An important counter-argument to the acceptance of "Russian faith" was that "the Russian God" was not useful for reindeer breeders, because faith in Him went hand in hand with poverty. Ylba, a rich reindeer breeder from Timan, told Sitnikov: "We don't want to pray; our grandfathers never prayed but they had more reindeer than we do; the poor have been baptised and they will soon die" (Sitnikov 1864: 187). In the Nenets' life, possession of reindeer holds the central place both on a practical and symbolical level – for everyday needs, social

⁹ Nenets tent.

relationships as well as communication with the gods.

The missionaries' and the Nenets' understandings were linked by the true belief that both parties' supernatural beings had power. Whilst the missionaries demonised the Nenets' deities and Christianised their supreme being Num, the Nenets included in their worldview the so-called "Russian God" and some of the saints with whom they tried to live in mutual balance, assimilating them to their own gods to whom they made sacrifices and from whom they expected good deeds. At the same time, all the strange and incomprehensible as well as seemingly useless elements were rejected. A Nenets told Schrenk for instance that he believed God could simultaneously be one and the three just as little as the possibility of rising from the dead (Schrenk 1848: 413).

The way of communication with the Russian God did not require any major reorientation from the Nenets who had been converted to Christianity. Shamanism's main features were sacrifices and communication with spirits through the medium of a shaman: in the Nenets' perception of communication with the Russian God, these forms were replaced by prayers, offerings and the role of the priest. On Novaya Zemlya, the Nenets used to let the priest say prayers for certain purposes, e.g. to ensure the success of a hunt (Lebedev 1915, No. 10: 160). In both the animistic and the Christian rite the Nenets' goal was identical, although the mediums were different.

The dialogue between the Orthodox missionaries and the Nenets led to the syncretisation of the Nenets beliefs. This is a natural phenomenon in shamanistic-animistic religions, which are much more exposed to external impulses than the so-called world religions, included official Orthodoxy. Over the centuries, the Nenets beliefs were thus submitted to syncretisation processes also with the Khanty and the other neighbouring cultures. At the same time, the religions of the Northern People had an impact on the local Orthodox Russians as well. The Russian fishermen and hunters who lived on the banks of the Ob River adopted quite a lot of local beliefs and rituals. A Samoyed told Nosilov that earlier the Russians used to laugh at the sacrificing Nenets, but "now they bring sacrifices together with us to get a better fish haul and they even ask us to sacrifice to another Shaitan", bringing a cow to the holy place on river bank for that purpose (Nosilov 1898: 230). The clergyman Mikhailov, who was appointed to work in Yugorsky Shar for the summer, was told how Pustozersk Russians' reindeer refused to swim from the Nenets' holy island Vaigach back to the mainland and how they sacrificed a reindeer to the "idol", on the proposal of a well-

known Russian from Pustozerk. According to the same clergyman, “the Pustozersk people also go to the *tadibeis* [shamans] and believe their idle stories” (Mikhailov 1898: 295). This is not the only place in the Arctic areas where local Russians took over beliefs and rites from the indigenous people’s shamanistic religious practice and conceptions (see e.g. Znamenski 1999: 175).

Conclusions

These differences in worldview reflect to two distinct discourses in the dialogue between the missionaries and the Nenets. For the Orthodox ecclesiastics, mission work has led to the Nenets’ slow and linear evolution towards Christianity. The Nenets, on the other hand, felt they must try to adapt to a new situation, where unfamiliar notions and rituals had been imposed to them and had led to their selective acceptance of Orthodox elements. In essence, the Nenets had gained more alternative possibilities to communicate with supernatural powers. Thus, many imported elements became “traditional” (cf. Znamenski 1999: 6).

Texts from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century present contradictory evaluations regarding the Christianity of the Nenets. Most of the authors see them as “simply baptised”, but not as “authentic” Orthodox (Vereshchagin 1849: 294–295; Makariy 1878: 73), and only a few are enthusiastic about the eagerness of the Nenets in fulfilling Orthodox rituals and their openness to Christianity (Blagogoveynoe... 1894: 333; Nosilov 1898: 176; see also Leete 2000: 106). Bishop Makariy regrets a situation where “Samoyeds ask the witch-shaman to play the drum, then pray, then buy a wax candle and go to pray in Orthodox churches, but then again ask the shaman to their place and bring sacrifices to the idols” (Makariy 1878: 73). What was reprehensible to Orthodox ecclesiastics was a self-understandable religious practice for the Nenets.

The relationship of various European Nenets groups with Orthodoxy depended on the intensity of the contacts with the Church and on the missionaries’ strategies. We may assert that the closer a Nenets group was to the Church and the clergymen, the more solutions these contacts provided them with, through the introduction of Orthodox elements into their own religious practice. Likewise, the attitude of the Nenets towards Orthodoxy altered during the period under observation. By the beginning of the 20th century, syncretic beliefs and rituals with Orthodox influences had become a relevant part of the religious worldview

and practice among the European Nenets, and, to a smaller extent, by the Siberian Nenets. Even pilgrimages to monasteries were undertaken: “Malei, a Bolshezemelskaya Samoyed, wealthy and fairly intellectually developed, made a trip to Solovetsk monastery to fulfill a vow. /—/ but on his way back, in order not to offend his idols, he sacrificed two reindeer and tied some pieces of coloured ribbon to the sacred tree. And the number of such instances is massive.” (Kozmin 1903: 72).

The Nenets integrated elements of Russian Orthodoxy in their worldview and these became “natural” parts of it. For instance, even during the second half of the 20th century the Yamb-To Nenets, who live in the Bolshezemelskaya tundra, baptised themselves their children, although the sacrifice of the reindeer to the gods had not ceased (author’s fieldwork 2002). This happened regardless of the fact that institutional pressure from the Orthodox Church had disappeared since the 1920s. Consequently, to consider the influence of Christianity merely “superficial” or non-essential (e.g. Khomich 1979: 28) is to a relevant extent to simplify the actual picture. The Christianisation of the Nenets cannot be observed as a process that resulted in total conversion or immunity from all influences. Likewise, it was not a situation where one party was active and the other, on the contrary, was passive, neither where one was the giver and the other the receiver. Here, like in any cultural contact situation, there is a dialogue where the parties create new cultural symbols, values and practices, proceeding from their own interests and pre-existing set of cultural codes, in a concrete economic and political context.

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