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'BLOOD' KINSHIP AND KINSHIP IN CHRIST'S BLOOD: NOMADIC EVANGELISM IN THE NENETS TUNDRA

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses a conflicting encounter of two ideologies of kinship, 'natural' and 'religious', among the newly established Evangelical communities of Nenets in the Polar Ural and Yamal tundra. An ideology of Christian kinship, as an outcome of 'spiritual re-birth', was introduced through Nenets religious conversion. The article argues that although the born-again experience often turned against ancestral traditions and Nenets traditional kinship ties, the Nenets kinship system became a platform upon which the conversion mechanism was furthered and determined in the Nenets tundra.

The article examines missionary initiatives and Nenets religiosity as kin-based activities, the outcome of which was twofold. On one side, it was the realignment of Nenets traditional kinship networks. On other side, it was the indigenisation of the Christian concept of kinship according to native internal cultural logic. Evangelical communities in the tundra were plunged into the traditional practices of Nenets kinship networks, economic exchanges, and marriage alliances. Through negotiation of traditional Nenets kinship and Christian kinship, converted Nenets developed new imaginaries, new forms of exchanges, and even new forms of mobility.

KEYWORDS: kinship • blood • Nenets indigenous people • Evangelical Christianity • missionary movement • Russian Arctic

INTRODUCTION

In spring 2011, during my fieldwork in the Polar Ural tundra (Russian Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area), one family conflict happened. A married Nenets woman, who lived a nomadic life in the tundra, had run away from her husband. The woman was hiding at her relative's home in a local village called Beloyarsk. The story was not extraordinary for Nenets society. But suddenly, the family fight erupted into a big *religious*

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conflict involving several Evangelical churches, the local administration, and even the police. The husband's relatives revealed that the woman had recently converted to Baptism. She stayed with her converted relatives, in the house that hosted prayer meetings for the local Baptist community. It appeared as if the converted woman had severed her family ties, breaking up with her non-converted husband. People rumoured that it was the Baptist church and its leaders that incited this divorce. "These sectarians destroy Nenets traditional culture", argued one of the local officials in Beloyarsk. "They arrive at Nenets campsites in the tundra and force indigenous people to burn their sacred sites. They break traditional clan ties and ruin Nenets families!"

From the late 1990s, the Polar Urals and the Yamal tundra – the lands of nomadic reindeer herdsmen and fishermen – attracted Protestant missionaries from all over the world. Many Nenets and Khanty indigenous people, both nomadic and settled in villages, turned out to be open to religious changes, embracing various types of Evangelical Christianity. With that, numerous tensions and conflicts arrived, as religious conversion triggered the question of how to adapt new faith to the traditional nomadic life.

There is a popular joke in the Yamal: in the tundra, all Nenets are relatives. The issue of kinship was particularly discussed within newly established Protestant communities, as the impulse of rupture that carried the notion of Christian second birth was often turned against the family ties, tundra clan networks, and what would be called the "ancestral curses" (cf. Meyer 1998: 329).

As a range of scholars stress, kinship ties are essential for the social organisation of Siberian native people, and kin networks play an important role in social regulations, the subsistence economy, and resource allocation (Dolgikh and Levin 1951; Ziker 1998; Ventsel 2004). In the Nenets case, too, bonds of kinship keep Nenets society integrated, and the kinship system has essential cultural and economic significance in the tundra. Mutual assistance, reciprocity and exchanges within groups of kinsmen are considered the foundation for the economic system in the tundra. The interconnectedness in Nenets tundra society is popularly described as "Nenets radio". The tundra is covered by kin webs where every nomadic campsite – seemingly separated, isolated, and geographically distanced – is bound to others dispersed across the immense expanse of the tundra.

In this essay, I argue that although Protestant missionaries were largely accused of destroying 'traditional culture', severing kin ties and causing family conflicts in the tundra, it was the Nenets kinship system that became a platform upon which the conversion mechanism was furthered and determined in the Polar Ural tundra. Nenets kinship practices, as well as Nenets 'kin thinking' (when kinship becomes Foucault's grid of knowledge) significantly influenced the way the Nenets appropriated Evangelical Christianity. Nenets kinship also affected missionary work in the tundra. The missionary trajectories were often determined by existing Nenets extended kinship networks, by internal regulations within Nenets kin groups, and exogamy.

I examine below missionary initiatives and Nenets religiosity as kin-based activities, the outcome of which was twofold. On one side, the outcome was the revaluation and realignment of Nenets traditional kinship networks. On other side, it was the indigenisation of the Christian concept of kinship according to native internal cultural logic. I analyse how converted Nenets 'played' with kinship as a strategy to adjust social relations, and interpreted the conflicting encounter of two ideologies of kinship. First, Nen-

ets kinship, based on the idea of blood, land, time, and extended to the supernatural world. Secondly, kinship as a Christian category, as an outcome of the 'second birth', according to which all believers become related as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Through negotiation of traditional Nenets kinship and Christian kinship, converted Nenets developed new imaginaries, new forms of exchange, and even new forms of mobility. To put it in Janet Carsten's (2004: 9) words, "kinship constitutes one of the most important arenas […] for creative energy".

CHRISTIAN KINSHIP AS SUBSTANCE AND CODE

It was Nadia with whom the story of Beloyarsk Evangelical community began.[1] Nadia, a widowed Nenets mother of nine, had been living in the tundra all her life, fishing and herding reindeer. She was one of the first in the tundra who had converted to Baptism. The Beloyarsk Evangelical community I observed consisted mainly of the members of her extended family. In one of my visits to Nadia's chum, we were sitting near the fireplace, having tea and she was telling me the news about their congregational life in the tundra. They had new 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the community, while some other members had broken away from the church and therefore were no longer 'sisters' or 'brothers'. Finally, she said to me, "Tanya, if you would repent, you would become our sister, and no one would be closer to us than you".[2]

Relationships in her religious life were cast in an idiom of kinship, but what meanings and social practices underlie her notion of 'sister' and 'brother', and how did the Christian ideology of kinship correlate with Nadia's understanding of traditional Nenets kinship and her native tundra kin network? In other words, what did it mean to be a 'sister' or a 'brother' among converted Nenets and how did this new category fit the native ideology of kinship?

In his study of American kinship, David Schneider (1977; 1980: 28) examines the distinction between a relationship as substance (conventionally called "blood" or "natural" kinship) and a relationship as code of conduct (socially constructed and culturally specific aspects of kinship), a dual aspect upon which kinship is built. Likewise, the Nenets often describe their kin relations through the notion of shared blood and flesh, though what they call blood kinship is also structured upon various social aspects and implies a code of conduct element. Religious conversion furthermore re-assembled the relations between substance and code of conduct.

It is the relationship between substance and code that I analyse below. My argument is that the case of Nenets conversion shows that both substance and code are heterogenous and flexible idioms: that 'blood' crosses its domain of corporeality, while code is 'naturalised'. In short, "'substance' is as constructed as 'code'", to use Marshal Sahlins' (2011: 3) reply to Schneider's dichotomy.

Nenets conversion experience led to the denaturalisation of kinship: those aspects of kinship believed to be natural or inherent are now taken out into the field of social construction. At the same time, the creation of Evangelical communities in the Nenets tundra implied 'naturalisation power'. When religious community relationships that seemingly had no basis in substance, were interpreted and built according to the 'natural' understanding of kinship. Silvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney (1995) define it as a process of naturalisation at work, when relationships are cast in an idiom of kinship.

The notion of kinship is a grounded concept in Christianity. The use of kinship terms, 'kin thinking', is distinctly functional in the life of Evangelical Christian communities. As Schneider (1977: 69) argues, Christianity made a shift from substance to code, "so that commitment to the code for conduct becomes paramount as the defining feature and the substantive element is redefined from a material to a spiritual form in Christianity".

Yet, Christian kinship, spiritual brotherhood in Christ, is also based on the idea of embodiment. It implies the importance of blood as a substance of spiritual kinship (Englund 2004: 304–305; Cannell 2013). United by the blood of Jesus or being born again in His blood, Christians organise a spiritual unity that is, therefore, experienced as corporeal unity (Englund 2004: 305). Harri Englund (ibid.) provides an example of Pentecostal Christians in Chinsapo (Malawi), who believe that the blood that Jesus shed on the Cross runs in the veins of every believer. Similarly, Caroline Bynum (2007) has demonstrated how Christ's saving blood was "alive" in blood relics in late medieval religious life.

This corporeal unity, however, is not a matter of inheritance but a relatedness that is gradually constituted. It is a matter of on-going verification through religious practice, something that is not substantively given, but a matter of perfection, which can be temporarily or forever lost if one stumbles morally. In Beloyarsk Evangelical community, there was a practice of temporary or permanent exclusion of a member from the community that saw a person disallowed from participating in the religious life of the church. This was perceived as detachment from Christ's body, and of course from His blood too, as this person was not allowed to participate in the Eucharist. Usually community members were cautious about calling a violator 'brother' or 'sister'.

Thus, spiritual re-birth establishes relatedness that is built on both elements: substance and code. And this fluctuation of 'corporeal', 'substantive', constructed and socially regulated becomes an arena where two kinship ideologies meet and negotiate.

NENETS KINSHIP AS SUBSTANCE AND CODE

The Nenets have historically had a distinctive clan (Nenets *yerkar*) and phratrial (Nenets *tenz*, 'a group of clans') system (Verbov 1939; Khomich 1966: 141–155; Dolgikh 1970; Vasil'ev 1979; Golovnëv 2004: 37–70). Members of each group call one another *niami* (Nenets *nia* 'brother'), or *ŋamzanipelia* ('a piece of my flesh') (Verbov 1939). It is believed that clan members are united as brothers with a unity in blood and flesh. The heterogenous meaning of blood transcends the domain of materiality and bodily substance and refers to both Nenets kinship and ethnicity. "Doctors came here the other day and they did blood tests among the Nenets. And it was revealed that the Nenets don't have pure blood anymore – everything is mixed: Nenets, Khanty, Russian", a Nenets woman once said to me.

The idiom of blood however is not paramount for understanding Nenets kinship. The wide practice of adopting and 'sharing' children (within a polygamous family or between different families) in Nenets society is, perhaps, the most striking example of how the importance of 'blood' and procreation can easily be 'forgotten'. There are furthermore aspects that constitute both the structure and the social life of Nenets kinship.

Besides the relationship in blood and flesh, Nenets kinship also implies an aspect of territoriality, when a clan or a group of families is marked by its own land, pastures, fishing and hunting territories, cemeteries and sacred sites (Zhitkov 1913: 205–208; Verbov 1939: 65; Brodnev 1959; Dolgikh 1970: 92–95; Yevladov 1992: 153–156; see also Stammler 2005: 207–238). Property relations and land tenure, which endured through time, constituted the concept of descent and of affinity, as Edmund Leach (1961: 11) argued. Despite Soviet attempts to destroy the clan system among the Siberian natives and to replace it with territorial organisation and territorial administration (Dolgikh and Levin 1951), the principle of clan lands and the territorial integrity of Nenets clans has retained its vital importance in Nenets social and economic interrelations to the present (Stammler 2005: 129, 131, 218–219).[3]

The principle of social interaction in the tundra is also kin based. A Nenets nuclear family household[4] is not an economically independent or integral unity, but rather, of crucial life importance is *ŋesy*, a nomad campsite comprising integrations of several nomadic households usually related to each other and migrating on a particular territory. The multiplicity of social ties integrates dispersed Nenets tundra *ŋesy* into a clan. And the responsibility of mutual assistance between kinsmen is a basic rule (cf. Brodnev 1959; Stammler 2005: 172).

Kinship is not a stable idiom for the Nenets, but implies an aspect of changeability and fluctuation. As scholars point out, although the integrity and solidity of Nenets clans are of great social importance, they never functioned as stable units. Kin-based economic associations were relatively unstable, depending on the season, migration routes, availability of resources, as well as animal epizootics, which could at times realign the power structure within a kin network. This network can either be organised into a well-structured body or can disintegrate. (Slezkine 1994: 5–6; Golovnëv 1995: 51; Stammler 2005: 172, 225–226; Volzhanina 2013) When reindeer herders, for instance, who used to live in kin-based nomadic campsites, lose their herds because of epizootics or other reasons, they can settle down on river banks and become fishermen, living as relatively isolated families, or they can move to a village until they are economically ready to return to the tundra. In this case, the kin-based economic association disintegrates, although it is never fully broken, and temporarily or permanently settled Nenets can maintain ties and reciprocal exchanges with their tundra relatives (Khomich 1966: 153; Brodnev 1959: 73; Volzhanina 2013). In different seasons, times and places, different patterns of this potential network can be realized.[5]

Whereas a previous kin network can be deactivated in practice, in contrast long-term social ties within a neighbourhood can generate kinship. Endurance through time is one basis for the construction of an alternative kinship ideology (Carsten 2004: 144–145) in which permanence is the source and simultaneously the proof of the authenticity of kin ties. The Nenets heterogenous clan system is a proof of that point. Since the 19th century, the territories of the Polar Ural tundra were a place of intensive and prolonged contact between the Nenets, Enets, and Khanty groups. Some Khanty and Enets groups were eventually integrated into the Nenets clan system and marriages alliances, and today several Nenets clans are considered of Khanty and Enets origins (Castrén 1860: 192; Verbov 1939; Dolgikh 1970: 74–77).

Nenets kin networks also extend into the spiritual sphere. Among a variety of Nenets ritual objects (*khe-khe*) are doll-like wooden images dressed in traditional Nenets

clothes – the images of some deceased relatives. The Nenets call them *ngytarma* (usually an image of a deceased shaman) or *sidriang* (an image of any deceased adult relative). Both can be interpreted as an extension of a person's life, as it is believed that the spirit of the deceased continues to live in the *ngytarma* and *sidriang* (Golovnëv 1985). Nenets treat these spirits as living people, talk to them and include them into their everyday lives. *Ngytarma* and *sidriang* live in the chum, sleep on the same bed as other living relatives, eat with them sitting at the same table, get their portion of tobacco and participate in rituals (Khomich 1966: 208–209). Eventually, after several years of extended life, *sidriangs* are buried according to traditional Nenets funeral customs.

To sum up, territorial integrity, lifestyle, extended temporality, economic collaboration, and even spiritual beliefs create an alternative foundation for Nenets social life. The fluidity in Nenets kinship relations corresponds to what Leach (1961: 146, 305–306) and Beattie (1964: 101–111) wrote on kinship: it is not a thing in itself, but a way of thinking about social relations. Similarly, Schneider (1984: 50) described kinship "as idiom or code in terms of which social relations are expressed, formulated, talked, and thought about".

Nenets kinship is rather a potential repertoire of kin interactions, potential ties between kinsmen and neighbours, and a way of thinking and talking about land use and about social and economic relations. As I will demonstrate below, this logic was extended for newly established Nenets Evangelical communities, which were built according to Nenets tundra kin-based networking. Kinship became an idiom in terms of which religious community relations were codified. And it was the fluidity and flexibility of Nenets kinship that allowed the Nenets not only to embrace the Christian ideology of kinship, but also to use it for the reproduction of the nomadic system, although the reconciliation between the two ideologies of kinship was not so easy and came at the expense of broken families and kinship ties in the Nenets tundra.

ANCESTRAL CURSES

Christianity is targeted against "ancestral blood" and struggles against the "the dark side of kinship" (Geschiere 2003). The discontinuity impulse in Christian conversion leads to a significant revision of traditional kinship and to a cutting of 'blood ties'. Being suspicious of extended family networks, Protestant Christianity aims rather to separate people from kin ties, reconstituting the person within new social relationships and creating new forms of community. It therefore acts as a "surrogate family" or "family-like community" (Englund and Leach 2000: 235; Meyer 2004: 461). Ruth Marshall-Fratani (2001: 86) writes:

> True conversion means cutting the links with one's personal past, not simply the ungodly habits and sinful pastimes, but also friends and family members who are not born-again. Such individuals provide the greatest threats to a 'new life in Christ', precisely because of the power in ties of blood and amity […]. The social grounds for creating bonds – blood, common pasts, neighbourhood ties, language – are foresworn for the new bond of the brother and sister in Christ.

In her study of Ghanaian Pentecostals, Birgit Meyer (1998) observes that the newly converted seek to liberate themselves socially and economically from extended families, thus delivering themselves from the ancestral past and repudiating sins committed by any of one's preceding generations. All family ties are represented as potentially dangerous. The newly converted inform their families of the fact that they are breaking the covenant which linked them with Satan through their family. "Indeed, in practice the 'complete break with the past' boils down to a break with one's family" (ibid.: 329). Kin ties are regarded as a matter of the past.

Evangelical conversion was understood by both Arctic missionaries and Nenets converts as directed specifically against 'ancestral blood' and the genealogical grid. Below is how a Baptist missionary in Beloyarsk once explained it to me:

> In general, genetics is of great importance here, because the curse is transmitted by inheritance, through generations. And I am grateful to my service in the North, because it showed me how strong this coherence of generations [*stseplennost' rodov*] can be. [...] I believe in genetics. Here the curse is inherited in genes [...] and our task is to break this coherence, this curse of sin transmitted in a clan.

'Blood' and 'genes' were believed to transmit the Devil's curse, and sin. "The Devil played one cunning trick – he split them [the Nenets] into clans and descent groups", argued a Baptist evangeliser, who continued that the curse and sins are transmitted to all by generation. Therefore, to cut blood ties meant to cut off the vicious chain of sins and curses. The very foundation of Nenets kinship meant to be converted – now it was Jesus and his blood that were the foundation of the new kinship.

Many missionaries working in the Polar Urals believed that evil spirits operated within the frame of families and groups of descendants. Therefore, spirits got access to a person through blood ties. Yevgeniy, an Evangelical missionary who worked in the Nenets tundra, expressed this in the following way:

> [A family] is held by a team of spirits, evil spirits! And there is real worship! And when you stop worshiping spirits, the latter begin to demand that you worship them, if not – people die, drown, commit suicide... There was one chum keeper [Russian *khozyayka chuma,* Nenets *miad' pukhutsia* – a female chum spirit in the form of a wooden doll]. She was 500 years old! Can you imagine? [...] So, all these years she has been keeping the whole family in dependence […]. And the Holy Spirit eventually liberated them from this dependence.

'Ancestor worship' or 'ancestor religion' reveals here the blurred boundaries between kinship and religion, as these domains are structured by the same terms (cf. Schneider 1977: 70; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 11). What is defined as Nenets 'ancestor worship' is perceived as something inherent, similar to people born into a family or nation. Therefore, religious conversion and the renunciation of Nenets traditional faith were interpreted by the non-converted Nenets as breaking Nenets kin ties, as betraying Nenets ancestors and the whole idea of 'Nenetsness'.

In the Nenets tundra, some stories were tragic, including stories about families who punished unfaithful members by converting to an alien faith, fully excluding them from the kin network. Parents disinherited their 'sectarian' children, taking back all the reindeer. Others were cast off from the crucial tundra economic system and were forced to

settle in villages. Rumours have been told about a young woman killed by a relative for ritual betrayal. Her dead body was found in a cemetery, tied to one of the graves. "She was ritually killed – little by little, by seven knots, strangled by that shaman [her relative] because she gave up her ancestral faith and accepted Christ in her heart", people said.

Not only was faith itself regarded as a breach of kin and neighbourly networks in the tundra, but the social and economic lives of the newly established religious communities were also regarded as damaging. The wealth of a tundra dweller and even his/her survival – which greatly depends on the functionality of well-arranged kin and neighbour interactions – was now under threat. One of the frequently discussed issues was the practice of tithe in the tundra (which in the tundra is normally paid in reindeer and fish). A Nenets woman in Beloyarsk said:

> They [converted Nenets] give money to some strange community, they slaughter reindeer. Because they say, if you enter our community and follow our way, you have no right to look in a different direction and to go a different way. So, looking for money, they [converted Nenets] slaughter reindeer every year! At the end of the day they lose their sense of living in the tundra. Being left without reindeer, what can they do?

By the same logic, a leadings Nenets politician in Salekhard argued:

> They [missionaries] want to take away from us the most valuable thing – our land, our territory. And now they [tundra Nenets] pay with reindeer. Thus, little by little, all reindeer will go over to those who made them believe in this religion.

In other words, unlike the Ghanaian Pentecostals in Meyer's (1998) case, it is difficult in the Arctic tundra to get rid of relatives and networking reciprocity, because outside the family and kinship system a nomadic Nenets simply cannot survive in the tundra. Finding themselves in a conflict between two different kinship ideologies, many born-again Nenets were not ready to make that complete break with their families and kin networks. Shifting between the two systems, they neither straightforwardly rejected nor simply reproduced the dominant mode of kinship. In rupture, they tried to find continuity, bridging the two idioms of kinship.

As I will show below, there were two ways to bridge these idioms. First, born-again Nenets denaturalised traditional kinship, they realigned and legitimised what they called 'blood' kinship in terms of religious kinship. Essentialisation of religious kinship was another strategy, when new forms of relationship were couched in an idiom of 'natural ties'. The Nenets used their new religious networks according to their traditional understanding of kinship and according to the traditional practices of a kin-based community. That meant that brothers and sisters in Christ became engaged in traditional Nenets economic and social reciprocity. While establishing an alternative kinship network – based not on 'blood' kinship but on Christ's blood – native born-agains sought to plunge it into the traditional practices of the tundra kin web.

A MISSIONARY GUIDE

Once, two tundra dwellers visited Irina, who was my hospitable hostess during my fieldwork in Beloyarsk village. Irina was a Nenets woman in her fifties, recently settled in a village, after more than forty years of nomadic tundra life. Pasha and Sasha were her nephews from the tundra, visiting Beloyarsk briefly to buy provisions (*snabzhat'sya*) and to get some petrol. I noticed that despite the Nenets hospitality tradition, Irina did not invite them to tea. They were talking for a while staying on the porch of her house, and she was grumbling at them in an unfriendly tone. Then she pointed at the darkness of her narrow entrance corridor and said more loudly, "Behind this door there is a believing brother, a missionary. Go in there and listen to God's Word, let him talk a little about God. Go, go there! For you think only about vodka!"

I was surprised that these two robust men obeyed the small woman and knocked on the door to Sergey's room, a Russian Baptist missionary who also stayed in Irina's house at that time. Irina grumbled, "Pasha! Take off your hat! Take off your coat! How are you entering a house? You can leave your shoes on." Pasha was nervously bustling, not knowing where to leave his clothes. Obviously, they were feeling ashamed. Finally, they entered the missionary's room. They stayed there for about half an hour. And when they came out, they were holding some Christian magazines. This time Irina said, "Once they have become our brothers, once they have listened to God's Word, then we can invite them for tea. Lena, make some food for them!" Lena (Irina's niece) began to cook macaroni and fry sausages for the guests. Irina said to the men, "Once you've listened to God's Word, you can have tea then".

Irina's life in the village was always like that. During almost the whole year missionaries from different parts of the world lived in her guest room. At the same time, her house was always full of tundra relatives who frequently visited the settlement to buy provisions or get social welfare payments. Sedentary relatives were not separated from the tundra kin-based system of social and economic reciprocity; they were fully integrated into all social practices of their extended families. Irina was a communicative node of her extended family; she was its informational, social, and economic junction. In every family fight or conflict (both in the tundra and in the village) she played the role of controller or arbiter. Since mobile phones are available even in the tundra, she could control her family online.

Irina was also an inner missionary guide within her extended family network. Missionary trajectories in Beloyarsk and the surrounding tundra were determined by native missionary guides like Irina, who were usually female members of an extended Nenets or Khanty family. A guide coordinated missionary movement in the tundra and villages. She was supposed to assist visiting missionaries, opening the geographical and social landscape of the tundra with its nomadic trajectories, the location and the composition of campsites, inter-clan and inter-family relations. A missionary agent also helped with translation. Yet she did not merely work as a language interpreter, she socially translated the missionary message, preparing a potential recipient for conversion and providing a welcoming and cooperative background for evangelising. A guide eventually opened her kin network for the missionaries. At the same time, she carefully made sure that missionaries did not breach the conventional regulations of social relations within a kin-based society and observed the boundaries of a provided kin network.

This was Irina's role – to be a node in the missionary web. Being a *knower* and a junction point in her extended family, she was responsible for preparing a member of her kin network for conversion. She decided which relatives, families, or campsites were now ready to hear the Christian message and which ones were not worthy of it. She directed missionaries according to her inner understanding of the tundra and the power relations within her extended family. As an outcome, this practice caused power redistribution within a kinship group, and the inclusion/exclusion of kinsmen from the religious community indeed became a means to regulate kin-based interrelations and reciprocity.

When expecting missionary visits, Irina would accumulate the necessary information about the life of her extended family: conflicts, family fights, marriages or divorces, births or deaths, economic relations, and nomadic directions. She would negotiate with a relative, gradually preparing him/her to meet the missionaries. At the same time, she would use her authority as a missionary guide as a tool in regulating family conflict and power redistribution. When Irina said, "I might send a brother [missionary] to Kolia this year, let [the missionary] speak to him, let him repent [*pust' on pokayetsya*]", behind these words there were some internal family realignments, conflicts and power redistributions. In fact, it meant that Irina intended to include this relative in a new kin-religious community. By including him in her church she legitimised traditional kinship and kin-based economic reciprocity with this person, making this relationship both 'religious' and 'blood'. And vice versa, the exclusion of a kinsman from the religious community could be a matter of his/her exclusion from networking kin reciprocity. In both cases internal cultural logic underlay the practice of inclusion in and exclusion from the newly organised religious-kinship network.

PARTICIPANT CONVERSION AND 'CLAN CHURCHES'

Native kinship became the platform upon which the mechanism of religious conversion was performed, meaning that missionary trajectories depended on its internal logic. This is what I call participant conversion – the techniques for creating alternative (converted) kin-based networks in the tundra, when missionaries were actually plunged into the reproduction of Nenets culture patterns. Missionary trajectories depended significantly on which clan and which families they collaborated with and which families and kin webs would be opened to them by their guides.

In the Polar Urals, the determination of missionary trajectories according to existing clan networking resulted in the creation of 'clan churches'. As during the Soviet period, when Nenets *kolkhozy* consisted of members of the same clan (despite the resistance of the authorities), newly established religious communities were also built according to Nenets kinship principles, even though missionaries consistently struggled against traditional Nenets kin bonds.

The kinship principle, of course, was not fully observed, and sometimes 'blood' relatives were excluded from the converted kinship network, while non-relatives could be included in the alternative kinship systems of the converted. In both cases, it was the discursive technique of realignment and reinvention of the kinship ties that entailed such exclusions/inclusions. Believers tended to articulate kinship relations with those who were to be included in a new religious-kinship community. When a new member

entered the Baptist community in Beloyarsk, Irina started recollecting her family memories: the man turned out to be a distant relative on her mother's side. It was important to her to stress that new brother in Christ was a legitimate person to include in the religious/kin-based community. At the same time, converted Nenets would rather forget existing relations with those who were excluded from the religious yet kinship-based community.

The clan principle of small-scale Evangelical communities in the Polar Urals led to the division of major mission churches along ethnic lines. Two Evangelical missions dominated on the religious landscape of Beloyarsk and the Polar Ural tundra: the Baptist church and the Charismatic Pentecostal. The former consisted of almost all the Nenets, while the latter was entirely a Khanty community. The Charismatic church was known as the church of *Tayshiny* (a Khanty clan), meaning that it consisted of the members of this clan and those families that had traditional marriage relations to the *Tayshiny*. Sometimes I got the impression that one could study traditional marriage contacts by studying the family compositions of the Polar Ural churches.

In the case of a breach of this principle, the community always experienced internal conflicts. A pastor from the Khanty Charismatic church once said to me: "You know, all those in this community who caused a disturbance [*korki mochil*] and later left the church, were Nenets […]. They [natives] simply do not accept that Nenets and Khanty can be together in one church."

In the same way, if a religious community consisted of members of different family groups, this inevitably increased tensions within the church. This was the case in the Nenets Baptist community in Beloyarsk, which had two parties from different unrelated Nenets families – the camp of Irina and the camp of Galina and her family. These competing family parties were always a source of on-going tension, conflict and squabbles within the community. Two families always competed for the right to provide missionaries with their resources – i.e., with their tundra relatives who were supposed to be converted. And when missionaries arrived in Beloyarsk, Irina and Galina always argued about where the missionaries were supposed to go: to Irina's campsites or to Galina's. At the same time, both parties tried to shift some of the hosting responsibilities onto each other, such as accommodating and feeding missionaries or providing them with transport, duties that were sometimes quite costly.

To summarise, the social life of religious kinship functioned according to the traditional logic of Nenets kinship. At the same time, the traditional concept of kinship was realigned and legitimised within the frame of Christian understanding of kinship as something that can be acquired, controlled or lost. Who would be considered a new kinsman and who would be excluded from new kin ties, and therefore excluded from all traditional economic and social exchange systems, was of great importance within the community of Nenets believers. The new constructions of kinship became a tool in internal power redistribution within the Nenets nomadic network, in the realignment and the re-actualisation of existing social networks in the tundra and sedentary space. Kinship became a space for social construction and power struggles.

Finding themselves 'hostages' of existing Nenets kin-based networks and traditional nomadic trajectories in the tundra, missionaries further became involved in the reproduction of traditional Nenets practices, functioning as mediators in the tundra.

In winter 2011, the Beloyarsk community was notably agitated. Believers were expecting the arrival of missionaries. They already knew that the missionary leader was going to arrange two marriages this year. Two young women from the Baidarata tundra – the church members whose destinies were going to be decided – were the subject of rumours, jokes and general excitement in the community. Who would be their bridegrooms, chosen by the missionary leader? From what part of the tundra? What are their names and how wealthy they are? What about other unmarried brothers and sisters, when will the missionary arrange their marriages? Some families 'showed' their sons and daughters who had reached marriageable age, trying to put in a good word for them.

Evangelical missionaries in the Polar Urals and the Yamal tundra often functioned as Nenets traditional marriage matchmakers (who are responsible for providing a marriage partner for a member of a church). In many cases a couple did not know each other and quite often lived in different parts of the Nenets tundra. If a Nenets man was ready to get married, a missionary would make a trip to a potential bride and negotiate the marriage with her parents. In the Nenets tradition, the bride did not participate in such negotiations and so it was in newly created Evangelical communities. Here is a story of the engagement of a young Nenets woman, a tundra dweller from the Baidarata tundra:

> Sergey [a Beloyarsk missionary] and Aleksey, a minister from that place [Bol'shezemel'skaya tundra] brought the groom with them. Sergey explained to the groom that there was a good girl here in our tundra, a believer, and her mother is a believer too. So, they arrived, two matchmakers [*dva svata*], Sergey and Aleksey. They arrived at Beloyarsk. My mother was in the village at that time. They were holding a sermon in the village and then they travelled to the tundra together with my mother, to our chum. We did not know anything. They did not even say anything to my mother. So, they arrived at our chum and held a sermon there too. They prayed. And then they said to us: "We have one more thing to talk about, on another topic." Then Sergey opened a Bible and read a passage, I think it was from Genesis, where there is a passage about a husband and a wife. And then he said to my parents that I am already grown up, that I am already a marriageable girl and that they already have a groom. I was taken aback! All this was so sudden to me!

The story looks like a traditional Nenets marriage arrangement ritual (cf. Khomich 1966: 164–165), with the exception that the matchmakers were Russian and Ukrainian missionaries. They took on the traditional Nenets social role of matchmaker within Nenets marriage arrangement institute. Traditionally, Nenets marriage alliances sought the redistribution of wealth and the restructuring of social relations between clans. In the community of the converted, marriage arrangements were no less significant. They functioned as a method to consolidate believers into a united religious community. Missionaries tried to control this sphere, since they believed that only the creation of new Christian families could consolidate born-agains into a strong church.

Finding a marriage partner was always a significant issue in the tundra, because of exogamic rules and complicated brideprice regulations (Islavin 1847: 126; Shrenk 1855: 429; Zhitkov 1913: 216–217; Verbov 1939). The existing exogamic rules forbid marriages between members of the same group of clans. As far back as the 1930s ethnographer Gennadiy Verbov (1939: 47) wrote about the issue of finding marriage partners in the Nenets tundra because a limited number of Nenets clans lives in a particular territory. The Nenets were quite consistent in following traditional exogamic rules and cases of breach were rare (ibid.: 51; Brodnev 1950: 96–97; Khomich 1966). Young Nenets men could travel hundreds of miles from the very north of the Yamal peninsula to the south (the lower reaches of the Ob' River), or to Gyda peninsula in the east in order to find potential wives (Verbov 1939: 47–48). To find a proper marriage partner in the Nenets tundra was always a big problem, and the situation has hardly changed today.[6]

Young Nenets girls often complained to me about the deficit of grooms: "It's so difficult nowadays to find a proper husband in the tundra, who is not an alcoholic and who can properly support a family!" In addition to this, increasing contact with sedentary space also breaks the ideal image of the traditional Nenets marriage. Although traditional clan exogamy rules still regulate most Nenets marriages, statistics report the increase of inter-ethnic marriages, single-parent families and the violation of exogamic rules and other marriage and family regulations in Nenets society (Volzhanina 2005). Nenets often discursively frame these changes in terms of cultural loss.

Religious conversion made the marriage issue even more complicated, because of a strict religious endogamy:[7] a church member could only marry another church member; if a believer married an unconverted person the rule breaker would be excluded from community life. And as I noted earlier, in the Nenets case exclusion from congregational life could imply exclusion from kinship and kin-based reciprocity.

In order to prevent the violation of a fundamental principle and to strengthen a recently built community, missionaries got the role of marriage mediators. Simultaneously, the Nenets shifted the traditional role of marriage matchmaker onto new religious leaders, seeking to solve quite typical social problems in the tundra.

RENEWED MARRIAGE ALLIANCES

In missionary mediation, there was another aspect, that of territory, which bridged Christian and Nenets ideologies of kinship and strengthened the tundra kin networks.

In the Nenets tundra there was a tendency to look for marriage partners in remote places. In Nenets society, this practice was developed due to exogamic norms that saw young Nenets men travelling hundreds of miles to find wives from different clans. Today, as my research participants often noticed, Nenets also tend to arrange marriage between people from different villages and parts of the tundra. However, the exogamy principle, if it existed, was not articulated. A Nenets woman from the Baidarata tundra explained it in the following way:

> Often matchmakers come from other villages. They come to us, we go there. We won't know the people yet, who they are. But here we know everybody inside out [*znayem kak obluplennykh*]. It is better to marry a stranger so that you don't know

[him/her]. Or maybe she [a bride] would not show what she is made of [*pokazyvat' sebya*] in front of strangers. She would be ashamed and quiet.

In their evangelisation work, using snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, Evangelical missionaries travel across all parts of the Nenets tundra. They cover a larger tundra space than traditional Nenets nomadic routes. Therefore, they united Nenets families in new marriage alliances, maintaining social contacts with those Nenets groups that could not meet each other on their traditional nomadic routes.

In some cases missionaries even re-established previously lost marriage alliances, for example between European and Asian Nenets. In the 19th and 20th centuries, nomadic routes across the Ural Mountains (dividing European and Asian tundra regions) were more widespread than in the present. And in the mid-19th and the early-20th centuries, some groups of European Nenets migrated across the Ural Mountains to Siberia (Khomich 1966: 151; 1970; Vasil'ev 1985). Intermarriage relations between Yamal clans and European Nenets (from the Bol'shezemel'skaya tundra) were widespread (Verbov 1939: 48). However, Soviet territorial re-administration led to a significant reduction of contact between the European and Asian tundra dwellers. Newly established *kolkhozy*, *sovkhozy* and rural districts changed traditional migration routes (cf. Volzhanina 2005). The increasingly widening religious network in the tundra restored previous contacts across the Urals. I observed some cases of Christian marriage between Siberian Polar Ural Nenets and Nenets from the Bol'shezemel'skaya tundra, which Nenets considered to be a return of old marriage partnerships.

Every year, more than two hundred converted Nenets from all over the Yamal, Polar Ural, and European tundra travel to Vorkuta city (Komi Republic) for a big religious event – the all-tundra Christian conference. They come to pray, to study the Bible at the Bible school, and to listen to God's Word. These annual gatherings became a unique frame within which Nenets from different regions – from Bol'shezemel'skaya tundra and Vaigach Island up to the northernmost parts of the Yamal peninsula – could meet each other. Of course, this was a place where most of the marriages were being arranged and most Christian weddings were celebrated.

Although the marriage arrangement principles were altered among converted Nenets (it was no longer clan exogamy, but congregational endogamy that formed the basis of marriage strategies), the mono-ethnicity of Christian Nenets' marriages in the tundra was still observed. Missionaries often encouraged converted tundra Nenets to marry believing tundra Nenets. When they searched for potential marriage partners, they were careful to maintain the tundra framework.

Evangelical missionaries travelled for months and years in the tundra of the European North, the Polar Urals, and the Yamal, Gyda, and Taimyr Peninsulas. They acquired deep knowledge of the tundra, with its landscape, migration routes and campsites. In order to build a Christian church in the tundra, they sought to establish more Christian families in the tundra – those cells within the network that were regarded as strongholds of spreading the Gospel. This was how missionaries created a foundation for new tundra marriage alliances, and thus, for an alternative kin-religious network. And the creation of this new extended network throughout the Nenets tundra realigned and strengthened the Nenets nomadic system.

CONCLUSION: TUNDRA WEB

At the northernmost point of the Yamal peninsula, near Malygin Strait, there is one of the biggest Nenets sacred sites, called *Si'iv' mia'* – Seven Chums. Seven chum-like hills are made of reindeer antlers, and each one referring to a particular Nenets clan, with a central one that is believed to be all-Nenets.

In winter 2011, at the foot of the Yamal peninsula near the Polar Urals, a big Nenets nomadic campsite was set up. It had seven chums, one of the biggest tundra gatherings organised by converted Nenets. They celebrated a Christian wedding, and many missionaries from different parts of the world arrived at this place. It was a new Nenets sacred place, the Christian Seven chums, people said.

Nenets kin-based practices and Nenets notions of kinship were being realigned and revised within the Christian paradigm. However altered and revised they were, the new religious-kinship network contributed to the reproduction of traditional Nenets economic reciprocity, marriage alliances and eventually *Neneiil'* – 'authentic Nenets life'. The consolidated community of Nenets believers created a new extended alternative network of brothers and sisters throughout the Nenets tundra, thus building a new foundation for the traditional nomadic system.

The Christian category of spiritual kinship was indigenised according to the Nenets internal logic of 'natural' kinship. And the indigenisation process developed in such a way that newly established communities of brothers and sisters in Christ coincided with the tundra kin network or created an alternative tundra network that still functioned according to traditional nomadic logic. Hence, tundra economic and social networking (traditionally based on kinship) was revised and reinforced in the framework of conversion.

Facing contemporary problems of increasingly frequent breaches of clan exogamy and other traditional marriage norms and family regulations, the Nenets saw in the cultural mediation of the missionaries the possibility to restore their cultural continuity and traditional tundra social bonds mainly because kinship relations and marriage trajectories were now carefully controlled and managed, if not by clan elders, who had lost their power, then by new religious leaders.

Once, a young Nenets man explained to me his understanding of the system of traditional Nenets sacred places. He compared them with the Internet, the world wide web. Located in different parts of Yamal and the European North, it is believed that the Nenets sacred sites are interconnected with each other in such a way that they create a hyperlink. So, when you are at one sacred site, you actually can make a sacrifice that will be referred to another site. In this way, the sacred web embraces the entire Nenets universe. The contemporary Christian web in the tundra developed with the same logic. Distanced from one another, newly created religious communities were interconnected and thus organised a new base for Nenets integrity. And many Nenets I met in the tundra saw in this new web of controlled and regulated religious/kinship communities a hope to return to the 'pristine Nenets tradition' – be it lost, imagined or desired.

NOTES

1 I conducted fieldwork in Beloyarsk village and the Baidarata tundra between 2006 and 2012. During this period, several international Protestant missions worked here, and a core group of converted Nenets and Khanty from Beloyarsk and the tundra changed their religious affiliation several times. The Beloyarsk religious community also turned out to be at the epicentre of many conflicts associated with religious conversion among the natives.

2 Whereas I acknowledge that both Nenets and Christian kinship ideologies are highly gendered, and Nenets religious conversion reconstructed gender roles and practices, in this article I focus on more general discourses and practices of kinship. Gendered aspects of kinship and Nenets conversion will be the topic of my next article.

3 Even during Soviet-era reforms on the Yamal, Nenets reindeer herding *kolkhozy* and fishermen brigades were, despite the resistance of the authorities, built according to kinship principles. So, the territories of the *kolkhozy* coincided with original clan territories and *kolkhoz* members came mainly from one clan (Brodnev 1950; see also Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 48).

4 There is no term in the Nenets language for 'family': the word is usually borrowed from Russian – *sem'ya* (Volzhanina 2009: 117). In literature, the term 'family' is used to refer to a household, a group of kinsmen living in one chum or a large extended kin group. In Nenets society, family relations can be expressed through the Nenets terms *miad'ter* (a chum dweller) or *ŋesy* – a nomad campsite.

5 Another example is Nenets nomadic temporal economic associations of different households, cooperating for seasonal work. Nenets reindeer herders (mainly in central and southern Yamal) can cooperate into *parma* – united summer camps when several herd owners consolidate their efforts in joint pasturing of their herds during summer time (Maslov 1934; Terletskiy 1934; Brodnev 1950: 95; Golovnëv 1995: 53; Stammler 2005: 132, 195–196). The temporal economic bonds are usually formed according to kinship principles, although not necessarily. In other seasons the associations disintegrate.

6 This is a particular concern of the European side of the Polar Ural tundra. During my field research in winter 2011, I met a Nenets family in the Ural Mountains. The two daughters were in their thirties and were still unmarried, while their 30-year-old brother had recently married a 39-year-old woman; this did not seem normal for Nenets society, in which people usually marry young.

7 Interestingly in the European part of the Ural Mountains tundra the principle of religious endogamy has led to the opposite social problem. Here most the Nenets were converted, and few families left unconverted. Therefore, it was the latter who experienced difficulties in finding marriage partners because converted Nenets refused to marry them.

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