

Transition of the Nenets Traditional Lifestyle in Western Siberia: Transformation of Religious Beliefs

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Abstract: Growing globalization processes have significant impact on the assimilation and transformation of lifestyle, and shifts of social roles in the family and religious beliefs in the contemporary Nenets society. Nomadic population still has traditional religious ideas about the world creation, God, struggle between Good and Evil, posthumous fate, sacrifices and rituals. But they are currently transforming under the influence of civil society and European culture patterns. The processes of this transition are passing slower in the Arctic region, especially among nomadic population, still involved in traditional occupations (reindeer herding, fisheries). But those who moved to the national settlements and got married to non-indigenous person are almost losing these traditional beliefs. These trends are stronger among educated young who are influenced by television culture. Intra-generic and intra-family communication impacts significantly on religious views. The Nenets modern religion has far more monotheistic characteristics than shamanism, and maintains a very strong connection with the reindeer herder's traditional lifestyle. At present, it is still developing, exploring new religious ideas as well as transforming religious practice.

1. Introduction

The intensification of globalization processes has a significant impact on the transformation of lifestyle, shifts of social roles in the family and religious beliefs as a part of the “picture of the world” in the traditional indigenous society. The processes of this transition pass slower in the Arctic region, especially among nomadic population still involved in traditional occupations (reindeer herding, fisheries). Nenets are the main reindeer herders in the tundra areas of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Arctic zone of Western Siberia. However, they also inhabit the vast territory stretching along the Arctic Ocean coastline from the Kola Peninsula in the West to the Taimyr Peninsula in the East [1].

Tundra is still perceived by nomads as a “men’s space”, and a woman is used to be a wife, sister or daughter of a reindeer breeder. The traditional division of gender roles in household and ritual duties in a nomadic family remains invariable. A woman runs a “house”, cooks food, looks after children, takes care of fire, cloths etc. A man is a “breadwinner” who herds reindeers, catches fish, hunts and makes a sledge.

Contemporary transformation of the traditional lifestyle had significant impact in modification of Nenets religious beliefs. Old shamanic practices are almost out of use nowadays, and Nenets spiritual vector has changed since pre-literate era. It makes the main task of our study especially interesting: to compare old religious system and modern religious ideas, and evaluate the impact on the social processes in the contemporary Nenets society.

2. Methods

Our study was conducted among the Nenets population of the village of Gyda, Yaway-Shalinsk and Tanam tundra, Krasnoselkupskiy district of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. 108 Nenets (60 women and 48 men) were interviewed in 2014-19 during the expeditions in the Arctic zone of Western Siberia. The average age was 38 ± 24 years old. An interviewer asked questions, guided by a pre-formed plan of the survey. The obtained answers in the free form were formalized and recorded by the interviewer. Religious affiliation and religious practice were estimated, respondents' attitudes to the most important religious ideas and the objects of worship were examined.

We consider the use of a complex multidisciplinary approach to investigate contemporary Nenets religious beliefs to be especially important. Specialists in ethnography have collected extensive material about the Nenets religious beliefs since the 19th century. However, the Nenets religious life is presented in their works as a static exhibit of the ethnographic collection, rather than alive and changing religious system. On the contrary, sociologists focus on quantitative and external characteristics of religious life, often missing the meaning of religious action. Theologians try to define leading religious ideas and to make comparisons with other religious systems. It gives a deep understanding of the religious beliefs nature. However, a very rare use of quantitative criteria and statistical methods of information processing prevents from getting information about the religious life nature in different social groups and to examine the intensity of religious processes. It is obvious that the study of modern religious processes in the traditional society requires a combination of ethnological, sociological, and theological approaches. The use of both qualitative and quantitative criteria is proposed. The development of algorithms for data formalization with following statistical analysis is required. It seems possible to solve this problem only within the framework of the three-dimensional model, analyzing the religious life in three areas: the range of religious ideas, religious tasks and the object of worship.

3. Results

The main religious ideas which became the subject of the interview were: the ideas of the world creation, God, struggle between Good and Evil, posthumous fate, repentance, sacrifice and rituals. Answering the question "Who created the world?" 65% respondents believed that the world was created by Num. 3% of them got this knowledge from elderly people. 62% respondents referred to a personal opinion that the world was created by Num or one God. However, 20% respondents believed that the world was self-formed. 5% of respondents thought that the earth existed forever. The remaining 15% of respondents were indecisive.

For the question "Who controls the world?" 82% of respondents said that it was controlled by one God or Num. The majority of respondents were confident that Num and "Christian God" were the same, and Num as well as the "Christian God" controlled the world. 7% believed that the world was self-controlled according to its laws. 11% were indecisive. None of the respondents expressed the idea that the world was controlled by spirits. However, it was admitted that spirits played an important role in people's lives, but Num could control any spirits. Respondents answered the question about the world's control much faster and more confident than the question about the world's origin.

Num was characterized by the respondents primarily as the God "helping people to live, giving food to animals and people, health, welfare growth, and family prosperity". The qualities such as love to people

and the supreme justice were not emphasized; although, in a more detailed survey, respondents mentioned that these properties were probably inherent in Num. Tundra inhabitants paid attention to the Num's role in the reindeer herd's growth, family prosperity increase, and favorable weather conditions. Nenets living in the settlements told about Num's justice and identified him with the God of all people or the "Christian God". The majority of respondents perceived Num as a person. Direct communication with him was possible and he could interfere actively in the people's affairs.

The idea of the struggle between Good and Evil forces seems to be highly anthropocentric by the majority of respondents. They consider evil spirits to fight primarily against people but not Num. On the contrary, good spirits help people. Neutral spirits (usually spirits of the house and water) assist people if they sacrifice to the spirits in time. Num is the leader of the Good forces (12%). 82% perceived him as a governor of the spirit and human worlds. 6% respondents were indecisive about the interaction between Num and spirit.

Educational level and escaping from nomadic lifestyle had strong impact on Nenets' religious beliefs. Those who had secondary professional education and lived in the settlements, were closer to the Christian culture, believing that Num was the only God.

Almost all respondents focused on the punishment for bad things during this life. The majority of respondents (62) told about the dependence of the posthumous fate from the life before death. Good people live happily after death and the bad ones suffer or become evil spirits and ghosts. Three respondents reported that they knew how to decipher dreams about the dead people's posthumous fate or knew in person the dreams interpreters. However, only one of them recognized that he came to Num in a dream and asked him about the posthumous fate of the deceased, and Num showed him the guilty deceased and the punishment as well as the one rewarded for good deeds. He saw bad people in the darkness or in a hole and the good ones sitting in the sky, air or on the water.

The majority of respondents highlighted that the punishment for bad things did not come immediately, but a few years later in some cases. The guilty has no luck in any case. The relatives cease to communicate with him. He loses relatives, a herd; gets quickly impoverished, sick or dies suddenly. Despite the assertion that the punishment is usually deferred, an explanation for this phenomenon is not given. The idea of time for repentance is virtually nonexistent. The idea of repentance plays a role in everyday life, but religious practice does not consider it important. It should be highlighted that the repentance idea of the Nenets has an evident anthropocentric character. Respondents readily cited examples of pecuniary damage, explaining that it was vital to help the person whom you had offended. On the contrary, the idea of the divine law violation and repentance before God resonated among the respondents only after suggestive questions. Apparently, theocentric idea of repentance is not a key component of a religious system, or at least the question that is not enough actualized. The idea of the impossibility to repent and correct misdeeds of the deceased was resonated with several respondents. They told about the appearance of the dead relative's souls in dreams with requests to correct their misdeeds, or sacrifice. Suicide is condemned by the overwhelming majority of the Nenets. However, purely practical, unreligious arguments are often used: "she left children as orphans", "who will help the elderly", "was not married yet". Only 10% of respondents explained the suicide unacceptability with the threat of imminent curse on the whole suicide's kin. Nenets perceive the suicide as the person who is guilty in front of his family (remaining without a helper) or damned descendants, not as a person sinned before God. None of the respondents focused on the impossibility of repentance for suicides.

This idea of sacrifice is central in the contemporary religious practice of the Nenets. All respondents practice sacrifice. The link of religious practice with traditional lifestyle and residence is crucial. If there is no reindeer for a sacrifice for any reason, or it is impossible to visit ancestral sacred sites and graves for sacrifice, in this case, religious practice is postponed prior to the occurrence of this possibility. Fishermen or residents of the settlements without reindeer try to maintain a relationship with kin herders to have the opportunity to visit sacred sites and sacrifice. The majority of respondents noted the hierarchy of victims. The higher the victim, the narrower the circle of persons admitted to its making. 1. Sacrifices to ancestors

can be made by any family member or people who are not even relatives. The victim to water can be made by anyone who wants a good fishing or being in danger during a storm. 2. Victims to evil spirits were previously brought by shamans only who first of all had identified the evil spirit to be blamed for a disease. Shamans can be both men and women. 3. At the ancestral sacred places, sacrifices are usually made by the eldest man in the family. 4. Victims to Num should be brought only after the ritual purification at the sacred hills. Women are not permitted at the top of the sacred hill where the sacrifice is made.

Despite the wide distribution of the sacrifices to Num, the majority of respondents mentioned that the traditional ritual was not often observed recently. So the sacrifice to Num is not often made on the sacred hills, but where the reindeer is butchered. In addition, a purification ritual is rarely used; women are not permitted to the butchering of the sacrificial reindeer. Only one respondent reported about having the reindeer, dedicated to Num, in the herd. Despite these changes, a number of respondents confirmed that the victims to Num began to be made more often than in their parent's time. Some respondents noted that some blood of each butchered deer was devoted to Num. Perhaps, the ritual changes are associated with the nomadic routes change or shortening and the participation of the residents of the settlements who are not nomads in the sacrifice. As a result, many sacred places have ceased to be regularly attended. A burial ritual and the sacrifices to ancestors remain the most conservative. The tradition of burial in Palmerah is strictly maintained (Kholmer is a grave in the form of the above-land wooden box where a deceased is placed). 1–3 rough reindeer carcasses, butchered with stomach spearing with wooden spokes, are left at the Kholmer burial. An axe or a knife is put under Kholmer, the kettle is hung, and the table with food is laid.

The reindeer is sacrificed 6 months after the person's death. It is cut and eaten. Then the reindeer is sacrificed every 3–5 years. If the deceased appears in a dream or his soul disturbs the living, then the sacrifices are offered more often. During the year, small sacrifices are often made: cigarettes, a shot of vodka, gingerbread, and campfire in memory of the deceased. Small sacrifices are usually brought when passing by the khalmer or staying overnight in the area. This ritual is made not only for the ancestor's remembrance, but also for the souls of the dead will not disturb the living. That sacrifice is not offered necessarily by the relatives of the deceased, but also by the members of other families and kins, traveling or staying nearby.

Analyzing the number of reindeer antlers, cigarettes, and other traces of sacrifice among the recent graves, we can surely say that the traditions of sacrifices to the ancestors are observed very carefully at the present time. The majority of respondents said that 2-3 generations ago the victims to water were made before fishing or crossing the river each time; the first ice in autumn as well as water before the first summer fishing was sprinkled with the sacrificial reindeer blood. Currently, most fishermen do not perform a ritual of ice and water sprinkling with the reindeer blood, rarely sacrifice before fishing. However, in case of emergency, practice of the victims to the water is remained (a storm, a dangerous crossing of the herds on the ice, long-lasting flooding) or long absence of fishing.

Women are generally more conservative. Most interviewed women definitely sacrifice to “Mistress of cloudberry” before picking berries. None of the respondents was a direct participant in shamanic rituals of sacrifice to Evil spirits for the soul redemption of the sick or sacrificing by shaman on other occasions. However, the respondents readily talked about the fact that the strong shamans lived 2-3 generations ago and might still live somewhere now. However, stories about shamans belong to folk rather than reflect contemporary religious practice. When you sacrifice to Num, the recitation of the God's name aloud and supplicating appeal to him is practiced. You can say the request aloud and in your head, which involves Num's hearing of thoughts. In urgent cases, it is possible to apply without a preliminary sacrifice.

While sacrificing to ancestors, the name of the deceased (if known) is pronounced. When you sacrifice on your Holy place, the names of specific spirits (if known) are called. However, the survey has not obtained the data on the use of spells, special names, and other attributes of elaborated magical cults. Only 28% of respondents have idols and sacred objects or note that they are stored in sacred sleds by elderly. However, the idols' names or the origin of many sacred objects were remembered only by 5% of

respondents. We fell under a strong impression that for our interviewees, knowing the name of the sacrificial soul is much less important than the place of sacrifice. The performing of sacrifice is the main marker of religious activity of adherents to the “Nenets faith”. Our research showed that 75% of the adherents to the “Nenets Era” sacrifice to the ancestors. 32% make sacrifices to the spirits at the sacred sites, 72% take part in sacrifices to Num.

The idea of ritual still plays an important role in modern Nenets life. The meaning of customs, taboos, and superstitions is usually not explained and passed down very carefully from the elder generation into the contemporary Nenets society. It is assumed that the negative consequences of the ritual non-compliance or ritual taboos infraction will come automatically. Our research showed that almost 100% of the adherents to the “Nenets faith” try to observe certain rituals and taboos.

3.1 Shamanic rituals

Conspicuous is the fact of very rare mentioning of the shamanism elements by the respondents in the modern religious practice of the Nenets. None of respondents said about the personal experience of asking a shaman to participate in a religious ritual. However, half of the respondents noted a significant shaman's role in the religious life of the Nenets 2-3 generations ago. Only 2 respondents used the guidance of the elders, endowed with the abilities to predict, for the choice of the sacrifice place and the spirit name to which a request was addressed.

3.2 Everyday magic

The majority of respondents mentioned that elderly who are able to conduct the “new mother's purification ritual” cannot be found in each camp; the rituals to cure diseases, to aid in childbirth, to stop bleeding are practically never performed. Rituals in reindeer searching and bad weather are almost obsolete. The purification ritual is supposed to be made before the sacrifice at the sacred places, but in modern practice this condition is not very strictly observed. Only 22% of adherents to the Nenets faith use the magical practice data.

Strengthening assimilation processes and transformation of the lifestyle have significant impact not only on modification of traditional religious beliefs but almost disappearing them, especially among young Nenets population who are mostly educated at boarding and technical schools. In the process of learning, they not only have close contact with other faiths representatives, but also assimilate images from European and Russian literature based on Christian culture. A wide range of television programs is available, and not only the settled population but also the tundra one forms religious outlook. At least, the respondents most frequently referred to information received through television to explain the religious points. In spite of the changes in lifestyle, contemporary religious practice remains tightly linked with traditional lifestyle, nomadic reindeer herding culture, and living in a particular area.

The most religiously active Nenets converted to Orthodoxy as well as the Protestant denominations of Evangelicals and Baptists two last decades. If the entry to the Protestant community often involves a break with relatives, practicing “paganism”, the conversion to Orthodoxy usually does not lead to the rupture of family ties.

Intra-generic and intra-family communication impacts significantly on our respondent's religious views. In addition, we met families keeping bronze icons and baptismal crosses donated to their ancestors in the Empire in the early 20th century. Maybe these are traces of Irinarkh Shymanovski's mission in Obdorsk. Undoubtedly, years of contact with Christianity left traces in the worldviews.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of religious motives is very complex and difficult to formalize. The same action may be driven by the motive of preserving the traditions and desire with the help of a magical ritual to control the

spirits, or make sense of a truly religious act of turning to God and following his will. However, there is no doubt that the religious beliefs of the Nenets are not ethnographic relic frozen in changeless ritual forms. Our research shows that the understanding of religious ideas changes, a filling of a new meaning of existing symbols is coming.

Perhaps, we are witnessing the transformation of the Nenets traditional religion under the influence of changes in lifestyle, growing population in the Nenets settlements, increasing information flow and contact with monotheistic religions. The modern Nenets religion has a tendency to the loss of traits inherent to shamanism: the disappearance of shamans and shamanic practices, the reduction of the magical ritual role, knowledge of the spirits names and techniques of their management, the almost complete disappearance of references to the evil spirits for the patient's soul redemption [2-4]. At the same time, religious ideas that are characteristic of monotheism appear: the idea of Num as the God of all people that is radically different from other spirits, active Num's interference into people's affairs and the possibility of personal address to him, the idea of different post-mortem fate depending on deeds or misdeeds in life. There are widespread sacrifices to Num [5,6]. There are no, or insufficiently manifested characteristic features of Christianity: the idea of repentance before God, salvation, redemption, the history finiteness, theocentric understanding of the struggle between good and evil forces for the human soul, messianism, the ban on sacrifices to the spirits and power, justified religious intolerance to suicide.

Thus, the Nenets modern religion has far more traits of a monotheistic religion than shamanism, maintains a very strong connection with the reindeer herder's traditional lifestyle, and currently continues to develop, exploring new religious ideas as well as transforming religious practice.

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