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*Eva Toulouze*

## **Forest Nenets Folklore and Identity**

The Forest Nenets can be considered an ethnic group whose identity is still very much in the shaping and characterized by some instability. As a distinct group, they have long remained hidden from the scientific community and have never been politically recognized as such. From an emic point of view, they have no doubt of their own existence, but present circumstances pose a powerful threat to their physical existence. Consequently, they are attempting to find instruments to protect their identity and overcome current challenges with as few scars as possible. Is their oral tradition helping them to achieve this goal? The aim of this article is to unravel this complex question, mainly from an emic point of view.<sup>1</sup>

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

Literature about the Forest Nenets is certainly not as rich as that on the Tundra Nenets, their northern counterparts (Toulouze 2002, 89). For centuries in tsarist Russia, the method of including indigenous groups in the overall state administration was through taxation, in which ethnicity was not a relevant category. The tax unit was a person, with adult males subject to the capital tax, the *iasak*. Thus, undoubtedly, the people we now call Forest Nenets were recognized individually but not as a community.

Thinking in ethnic terms emerged during the nineteenth century. In the first decades, as the Speransky statute shows (Slezkine 1994, 83–88; Martšenko 1984, 175; Vakhtin 1993, 16), indigenous peoples were only distinguished in relation to their lifestyle and not through ethnicity (with groups being classified under three categories – sedentary, nomadic and wandering), but classification on the basis of ethnicity emerged powerfully during the same century. While in other parts of Russia, indigenous groups were investigated in order to control the territory of the empire, both in terms of knowledge and political power, in Western Siberia the impact of Finno-Ugric research was particularly strong. The

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<sup>1</sup> The reflections rely mainly on my own fieldwork, a total of six months among the Forest Nenets in 1999, 2000 and 2009.

search for roots based on language kinship developed simultaneously in Finland and Hungary, leading scientists to expand their research field towards Russia and to explore huge territories inhabited by people speaking related languages. This approach was most pronounced among the Hungarians, whose closest language kin were two Western Siberian communities speaking the Vogul (now called Mansi) and Ostyak (Khanty) languages.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, they focused very much on these two clearly defined linguistic communities and were not as interested in the Samoyeds, who were quite distant in terms of kinship. The Finns were not as focused in their research, having their closest linguistic kin – the Baltic Finns – in a contiguous area, and were looking for more distant ‘relatives’. It was M. A. Castrén,<sup>3</sup> who mainly explored the so-called Samoyed areas, investigating different groups of Samoyeds and gathering valuable testimonies, data and analysis. Language was at the core of all this research, not in itself but as a feature of the history and the roots of others.

Those we call the Forest Nenets were identified by their language as being part of the broad ensemble of Samoyeds. Their language was studied by Toivo Lehtisalo, who is the first to have dedicated part of his work to them. He spent more than a year in a Forest Nenets community undertaking fieldwork, which allowed him to study their lore and collect data about their religion and language (Lehtisalo 1924, 1947, 1959). Lehtisalo did not distinguish the Forest Nenets from their tundra kin, for although he was well aware of the differences in lifestyle, his sensitivity to language led him to focus on linguistic structures and on this basis he considered the language of the Forest Nenets to be just one Nenets dialect. Consequently, he treated Forest Nenets as part of a wider Nenets ethnic group. This is clear by the way he presents his linguistic data, such as his huge dictionary (Lehtisalo 1956), in which the Forest Nenets lexical data are presented as part of the Nenets language.

Russian explorers before the Revolution were not as interested in language as the Finno-Ugrists. However, they started to become interested in ethnicity as a way to categorize human communities. Language played a huge role in defining these categories. At the end of the nineteenth century, explorers<sup>4</sup> were surprised to meet people speaking a strange language which

<sup>2</sup> In scientific research, Hungarians still use these older ethnonyms, while Soviet rules led to the general and official use of the ethnonyms recognized by the people themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Castrén, M. A. 1870. *Nordiska resor och forskningar. Första bandet: Reseminnen från åren 1838–1844*. Helsingfors: Finska Litt eratur-Sällskapet; Castrén, M. A., Toivo Lehtisalo 1940. *Samojedische Volksdichtung*. Gesamm. von M. A. Castrén. Herausgegeben von T. Lehtisalo. Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne LXXXIII. Helsinki: Société Finno-Ougrienne; Castrén, M.A., *Grammatik der samojedischen Sprachen*, Indiana University Publications, Uralic and Altaic Series, Vol. 53, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> The ‘discovery’ was made by Prof. Yakoby and was relayed both by Bartenev in 1898 and by Dunin-Gorkavich in 1907. In his expeditions, Yakoby had met people whom his interpreter, who had a good

was different from Khanty (although there were some phonetic similarities) and sounded very unlike Tundra Nenets. Thus, it was assumed that a new, unknown people had been discovered, called ‘nyah-samar-yah’<sup>5</sup> (Bartenev 1998, 145–146). The error was soon corrected and the ‘new’ people was identified as kin to the Tundra Nenets (Shemanovski 1907, 325–328; Patkanov 1911; Zhitkov 1913, 249–251).

Within the wider process of establishing Soviet knowledge of and power over the indigenous areas, in the pre-war period Soviet scholars concentrated on studying different languages and groups. Ethnic categorization became a central issue – with solidly established nationalities in Western Russia achieving some kind of autonomy, the same pattern was chosen for Siberia. In the modernization process imposed by the Soviets, administrative construction was based on notions such as ‘clan’ and ‘nation’, which led them to create administrative units based on ethnic groups (Andrejev 1970, 114–115; Zibarev 1966, 43; Gurvitš 1964, 102; Zibarev 1972, 83–84). The beginning of this process, encompassing the second half of the 1920s and continuing until the war in 1940, is characterized by serious scholarship. Some fine specialists of Nenets were trained in Leningrad, and one of them, Grigori Verbov, concentrated on Forest Nenets. Verbov is the author of the first study, an article in *Sovetskaya Etnografiya*, on the Forest Nenets, which treats them independently from Tundra Nenets (Verbov 1936). After Lehtisalo, Verbov was the first scholar to contribute both linguistic and ethnographic knowledge of this group (see also Verbov 1973).

The status of Forest Nenets language has actually been at the core of the distinction for scholars. While recognizing the undoubted linguistic closeness, late twentieth-century scholars have in general preferred to distinguish more sharply between Forest Nenets and Tundra Nenets.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that there are two reasons for this: firstly, a decline in language-centred approaches. The nineteenth-century Finno-Ugric concern with linguistic roots is now obsolete, with the reconstruction of the Uralic proto-language no longer being the main focus of scholarship, even in linguistics, where the focus on historical approaches has been supplanted by increased interest in synchronic analysis. Secondly, increasing importance has been given to the ecosystem of the region and the Forest Nenets way of life. Moreover, in linguistic categorization, the

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knowledge of Khanty and superficial recognition of Tundra Nenets, did not understand (Shemanovski 1907: 325-328).

<sup>5</sup> Papay interpreted this word to mean the ‘sable hunting Samoyeds’, a self-denomination for one group that Shemanovski connects to the ‘pian-hasovo’, the ‘tree-men’ he had personally met (Shemanovski 1907, 325–328).

<sup>6</sup> See Tapani Salminen (<http://www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/fn.html>, last consulted 4/12/2011).

mutual understanding of speech has become a serious criterion of language borders.

From both of these points of view, the Forest Nenets are clearly distinct from the Tundra Nenets. The ecosystem in which the former live is very different: between tundra and taiga, all aspects of life are touched. Nomadism does not have the same meaning and does not cover the same reality. Reindeer herding involves different functions in each group and the bases of husbandry are also quite different.

In addition, intercomprehension between speakers of the two languages is far from guaranteed. On the contrary, while from the point of view of linguists there is no doubt about the closeness of the two language forms, the language users do not see this as it is not transparent, mainly for phonetic reasons. In fact certain experiences have convinced me of the reality of mutual non-comprehension, despite the efforts that have been made. In the 1990s, Yuri Vella, the most famous of the Forest Nenets, who in addition to being a writer and intellectual is also a reindeer herder and an activist,<sup>7</sup> organized, in cooperation with the administration, the importation of 1,000 reindeer from the Yamal-Nenets district into the Khanty-Mansi district in order to help indigenous people restart reindeer husbandry on an individual and independent basis. The reindeer were brought from the Yar-Sale *sovkhoze* and the herd headed south, led by Tundra Nenets. They met the Khanty-Mansi district representatives at the border between the two districts and handed over the herd. Being among the people attending this meeting, Yuri Vella filmed it, including attempts by the Nenets on both sides to communicate. They had to resort to Russian.

I had the same experience ten years later in my home while Yuri was visiting Tartu with his wife and the Num-to singer Tatva (from the Logany clan). At the time, there was a Tundra Nenets teacher studying in Tartu who visited us, but when they attempted to communicate in their own languages they could not understand one another and turned to Russian. Exploring their mutual non-comprehension they eventually recognized many elements in one another's speech and could identify common roots. However, this was of no practical help in simple communication. Thus, it is not a myth that intercomprehension is not possible between the two languages. Today this fact is considered to challenge the hypothesis that these are merely two dialects of a single language. Finnish linguist Tapani Salminen, who has been working on both and has concentrated on Forest Nenets, considers them to be two different languages and I agree with this analysis. With identity often linked to

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<sup>7</sup> For more details see <[www.jurivella.ru](http://www.jurivella.ru)>.

language, this distinction marks a step towards classifying the Forest Nenets as a separate people.

At present we have no precise data on how many people consider themselves to be Forest Nenets and how many consider Forest Nenets to be their mother tongue. Soviet censuses are usually good sources for this sort of data, as the people themselves list their nationality, giving us subjective data about a specific period. However, Forest Nenets were only recognized in the census of 1926, when the number of respondents was 1,129 (Khomich 1995, 23). Since then, no census has distinguished the Tundra Nenets from the Forest Nenets, and therefore there are no actual means of knowing how many people consider themselves to be Forest Nenets. In the most recent statistics (2010), the Nenets population was 44,640, with members defining themselves using terms that cover both Tundra and Forest Nenets. In the Khanty-Mansi district the number of Nenets was 1,438. We can be fairly sure they are Forest Nenets because there are no other Nenets in this region. However, data about the Yamal-Nenets district cannot be accurately interpreted. The 29,772 people there are either Tundra or Forest Nenets. Thus, we can only hypothesize. Based on the fact that two of the three regions in which Forest Nenets live (the Num-to and the Agan basin) are in the Khanty-Mansi district and the number in the Yamal-Nenets district, where the Pur group of Forest Nenets is supposed to be the biggest of the three groups (inhabiting the basin of the Pur and its branches, the Pyaku-Pur and the Ayvaseda-Pur), the overall number of Forest Nenets can be estimated to be around 2,000 or more.

### **The context – past and present**

What characterized the Forest Nenets communities is that they all lived in quite remote areas which were not on the paths followed by Russians as they were penetrating into Siberia. The Russians followed rivers, but as a rule the Forest Nenets lived close to the headwaters of the Ob tributaries and of rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean. Today, there are three main centres forming the three Forest Nenets communities: the western-most inhabit the high course of the Kazym and the Nadym and the territories surrounding Lake Num-to; towards the northeast, the Pur Forest Nenets live along the two branches of the River Pur, Pyaku-Pur and Ayvaseda-Pur, based on the names of two Forest Nenets clans; and to the south the smallest and the most endangered group of Forest Nenets live in the Agan basin. None of these territories are easily accessible as they are on the edge of the forest tundra, with its lakes, rivers, bogs and woodland, where survival requires a high degree of adaptation (Gemuyev 1987, 32; Golovnev 1995, 56). While accessibility has dramatically improved over the last century, it still takes at least two days to reach the areas traditionally

inhabited by Forest Nenets (the villages where the people are now settled can be reached much more easily). This explains why Verbov did not find anyone speaking Russian when he dwelt among the Forest Nenets in the mid-1930s (1936, 66). They undoubtedly had some trade contacts with Russians during the fairs at Obdorsk and Surgut but they were hardly formally acknowledged there as a distinct population.

While contact with Russians developed late, it would still be wrong to consider the Forest Nenets as a closed society. Their contacts with their indigenous neighbours were most thorough – the term *kapi* refers to an indigenous person who is not a Nenets and is widely used in folklore. These neighbours could be from different ethnic groups, depending on the regions. Folklore has fixed the memory of wars against the *kapi*, who are sometimes understood to have been Selkups or Khantys (oral communication from Yuri Vella and Eremai Aipin). More recently, contacts have been more peaceful, mostly with those who live in proximity. For the Num-to Nenets, these neighbours are the Northern Khanty; for the Pur Nenets, it is the Tundra Nenets, who used to spend their winters in areas that were more protected than the northern tundra; while the Agan Nenets are closely connected with the Eastern Khanty (Surgut Khanty) clans. Thus, despite their location, the Forest Nenets have been quite open to dialogue with and influences from others.

Therefore, Forest Nenets society was far from monocultural, even before interaction with the Russians. For example, Verbov mentions Nenets-Khanty exogamy rules as a clear sign that mixed marriages were already the rule 80 years ago, just as they are today. There were traditional connections that had existed for decades even in the Soviet period. For example, Agan Khanty and Nenets men looked for Forest Nenets wives in the Pur region around the villages of Khalesovaya and Kharampur.<sup>8</sup> Verbov presents an exogamy system which governed intermarriages between Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets clans in the 1930s (Verbov 1936).

More recent developments have only increased the Forest Nenets' openness to mixed marriages. Yuri Vella married a Khanty woman from the Taylakov clan (following the clan's exogamy rules as presented by Verbov), his four daughters have made more varied, although not exceptionally different choices. The eldest married a half Nenets-half Tatar man from the same village. The second daughter's first husband was a Nenets man from the same region, but the second is a Russian of distant Khanty origins. The third married a Tatar oil industry worker and the fourth daughter's first husband was a Northern Khanty. Mobility and social intermingling within the education system, in

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<sup>8</sup> There are still families in Varyogan in which the wives are from Khalesovaya (my fieldwork).

working structures and public places have widened the choice of spouses, and future spouses are now more actively involved and often decide for themselves.

The present situation is a consequence of two major shifts in the life of the Forest Nenets during the twentieth century. The first is connected with Sovietization, a process which did not occur quickly, taking decades and at times being quite brutal. Its goals were to 'civilize' backward peoples in order to form a homogeneous Soviet nation which would overcome ethnic differences. Among the main changes that were imposed on the Forest Nenets, sedentarization had the main structural impact from a historical point of view.<sup>9</sup> The natural habitat of the Forest Nenets was the wilderness, where they dwelt in small family units in seasonal camps not very distant from one another. Sedentarization meant they were settled in villages, given log houses and attached to the collective unit of the village. The process of settlement was still occurring in the 1980s, when some individuals still lived mainly in the wilderness, while also having a dwelling in the village. Life in the wilderness and life in the village were different; for example, in terms of clothing and language (Liarskaya 2003, 272),<sup>10</sup> although at one time the Forest Nenets probably moved between the two worlds quite easily. However, by the time I first went to the Agan area in 1999 this was in the past, with most of the younger generation completely sedentary and unable (and unwilling) to live in the wilderness, having lost most of their indigenous skills. At the beginning of the 1990s a movement had started amongst some of the older people to return to life in the wilderness and to reindeer herding. These are realities that have a powerful impact on identity.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Forest Nenets experienced a second disruption to their lives, with the discovery of huge oil fields in the 1960s in the regions where indigenous peoples were living. In a few decades this area became strategically central for Russia as a whole, with oil wells appearing everywhere. Even locations that had to that point remained relatively unscarred by the Soviet presence were absorbed into the new world,<sup>11</sup> with little wilderness remaining for humans, game or reindeer. This has had several dramatic consequences for indigenous cultures – with the arrival of

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<sup>9</sup> It was of course thoroughly connected with collectivization. Nothing now remains of collectivization, as the collapse of the Soviet Union led to its disappearance, but the consequences of sedentarization are still being dealt with today.

<sup>10</sup> Liarskaya has been working on Tundra Nenets. Not all of her assumptions will be valid for the Forest Nenets; however, this clear distinction between the two ways of life seems to me to be a thoroughly appropriate way of interpreting the situation which the Tundra and Forest Nenets have faced.

<sup>11</sup> Here I can refer to my own experience, flying over Western Siberia for hours in a helicopter without a single moment in which an oil tower was not visible.

hundreds of thousands of oil workers, they have become a tiny minority in their homeland (in Khanty-Mansi district they now comprise only 1.5 percent of the population); reindeer pastures have been drastically reduced at the same time that the indigenous people have been trying to revitalize reindeer husbandry; the traditional game has fled; the pollution of soil, air and water is endangering human, animal and plant life, and the massive presence of oil workers who ignore the delicate local ecosystem, leading to different kinds of violations, including fires, poaching and theft. Life in the wilderness has become more and more difficult.

### **An unstable identity**

Forest Nenets have a name for themselves, *neščā*, and they are well aware of the nature of their existence,<sup>12</sup> although their sense of community remains limited. While concrete feelings of belonging were once connected to family and forest, belonging is now embodied in the village and is not connected to one single group's culture. A sense of ethnos has not been ideologically achieved. Mixed marriages have also produced mixed ethnic feelings in younger generations, who are most likely to chose a spouse without reference (other than negative) to ethnicity. Moreover, all indigenous identities are stigmatized in the new environment, with indigenous peoples being considered by newcomers to be primitive and backward, even savages (*dikie*). They have no way of avoiding these judgements because of their obvious physical differences. Language is most endangered; more in some areas than others, for example in the Agan basin, but overall it has quite a weak position and the level of interest in the language is very low, with pragmatism leading people to consider their language to be useless, further endangering a major identity marker.

### **Folklore practices in Nenets life**

How are folklore practices emerging in identity creation processes? Are they strengthening Forest Nenets identity or are they offering another way out of the deadlock? The recording of folklore has been limited. Castrén and Lehtisalo recorded some samples, but they are quite limited (Castrén 1960; Lehtisalo 1960). Verbov certainly recorded language but we have no folklore recordings by him. Pekka Sammallahti has also recorded language and biographical texts (Sammallahti 1974), while Jarkko Niemi has an interest in the song repertoire (for example, Niemi 2001). Along with linguist Kaur Mägi, I have also collected different kinds of oral productions, which have been presented on a CD (Mägi,

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<sup>12</sup> Its use is being developed, particularly in the Pur region, where the term 'neshchanskiy yazyk' has its roots. Cf. Prihodko 2000.

Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002). Songs from the Pur region have also been recorded on a CD. Here I will focus on the vitality of the different genres and examine how they convey or support Forest Nenets identity.

Genres may be more or less connected to language and to the living use of it. Songs (*kynavs*) are characteristically language-oriented: either they are centred on narration or based on improvisation (Toulouze 2002; Mägi, Toulouze 2002a, 2002b). Narrative songs are, at least today, felt to be and presented as fragments of a forgotten whole. Unfortunately, nobody has collected Forest Nenets songs for 80 years, so we have no records of complete narrative songs. The language of the fragments is quite archaic and may be connected with the metaphorical ‘artistic language’ that, according to Vella, was lost before his generation (he was born in 1948) (Vella 1996, 5).

Even more important for the cohesion of the community are the personal songs which are used to remember somebody, usually sung while intoxicated.<sup>13</sup> The melody is always the same but the text fits the concrete situation in which the person sings. The songs are then transmitted by others who have heard them and know them by heart. The language is central, as none of these songs are based on melody but use more of a rhythmic form, with an aesthetic far removed from Western melodic styles. The songs are impossible to dissociate from Nenets language and are disappearing along with the generations who know the language. Young people absorbed into Russian culture ignore the tradition and feel quite disconnected from it. However, melodic elements have been adopted in some of their songs, suggesting that the younger generations of language speakers are rediscovering a taste for and understanding of traditional music.<sup>14</sup> These songs, as mentioned above, were particularly important for maintaining the cohesion of the community through remembering those who are absent or deceased. They were sung at gatherings and during visits and were a way to talk about common acquaintances or ancestors, as well as to maintain psychological and emotional links that could well be weakened by distance or absence. The extinction of this kind of mechanism has certainly had consequences for the internal connection between the community members.

Children’s songs, even in Nenets, are likely to survive longer than others. They are more melodic and grandparents may continue to sing them to their grandchildren, who may well remember by rote texts they do not understand, in a language they do not know. Children’s songs may contribute to the

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<sup>13</sup> One of the expressions for personal songs in Forest Nenets is ‘kalhalhooma kynavs’, ‘drunken song’.

<sup>14</sup> This feature is clearly illustrated by ‘Shunya’s song’ on the CD we published in 2001.

strengthening of future adult Nenets identity but they do not influence communication within the community or the connection with it.

There are other genres which are not so dependent on language. Folk tales told in Nenets require a Nenets-speaking audience to follow the narration and respond with exclamations. However, this kind of audience is becoming increasingly smaller.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the stories can be told in Russian; for example, it is a common form of entertainment when there are guests in the camp that after everybody has gone to bed the grandfather tells a tale in the dark in Russian so that everybody understands.

Another genre that works quite well in translation is the riddle, which has continued its social function. Children are asked to guess the solution and they soon learn to pose riddles to visitors or other children. Even if the riddles are connected to aspects of Nenets culture they can still be described in Russian. Moreover, riddles are a form of entertainment among Russians, as well as being used at school, so it is a genre in which Nenets tradition fits into the broader school programme model. It is not clear whether children recognize a difference between the two repertoires. Thus, through folklore, some aspects which functioned in traditional Nenets society are fading away while others are still being transmitted, but not in the original form and in a way that may not be supportive of ethnic identity.

### **Towards a new identity**

I have argued that folklore, along with other aspects of the Nenets life, is promoting a new kind of identity for Forest Nenets and probably also for other indigenous peoples in Siberia who are losing their languages. Ethnic peculiarities are being supplanted by a general 'native' identity which best fits their present needs. In everyday life the main division felt by both sides is between the Russian newcomers<sup>16</sup> and the indigenous peoples in general. However, with ethnicity becoming less and less relevant for 'Russians', it is also becoming less important for the different indigenous groups.

The division is primarily the result of the massive and disproportional presence of newcomers, who feel superior to the indigenous people in every way. They feel that their lack of respect for these people is justified and express

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<sup>15</sup> I witnessed a storytelling day in Autumn 2000 by an old Agan Nenets, Vahalyuma Ayvaseda, who told stories to a small audience made up of Tatva Ngahany (a Num-to Nenets) and Mikhail Sardakov, the last Agan Khanty who understood Nenets. Sardakov died two weeks later. It would be impossible to have this kind of event in Varyogan now.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, in this context the term 'Russian' is not an ethnic but a 'superethnic' one. Called *lutsa* throughout Siberia, they are the 'white people', the non-natives, who may themselves be bearers of different ethnicities. Nevertheless, in Siberian indigenous experience, they are people whose ethnicity is not relevant due to the common features they represent in comparison to the indigenous people.

their contempt in different forms, even desecrating significant indigenous sites such as cemeteries or holy places. In the face of this daily aggression, the differences between the various ethnic groups are giving way to a more general 'native' identity encouraged by several different factors.

Firstly, the indigenous Siberians are physically distinct from the Russians, while being quite similar between different native groups. Thus, there is little chance for them to merge into Russian society due to the discrimination mentioned above. Children from mixed families are more easily accepted and may feel increasingly less connected to their indigenous clan; however, they remain distinct in sharing practices or recent memories of a particular way of life connected with nature, wild game, reindeer and spirits.

Secondly, another aspect of the evolution of the last decades favouring the emergence of a new identity is the endangered position of the vernacular in community life. This has led, at least in most regions where Forest Nenets dwell,<sup>17</sup> to the predominant use of Russian in communication among the indigenous people (Toulouze 2003). Different languages were undoubtedly a distinctive feature among the native peoples (as mentioned above, Khanty, Mansi and Nenets are not mutually understandable), but this distinction is becoming less and less relevant, with the everyday use of these languages in decline.

Thirdly, I have already mentioned the fading of community lore. For example, while memories of former conflicts linger in indigenous consciousness,<sup>18</sup> the emergence of the Russians as a common 'enemy' has meant that many associations with these ancient battles between communities have been superseded. On this basis, increasing solidarity provides the conditions for the merging of identity. Does anything remain of the Forest Nenets peculiarities and identity? What undoubtedly remains are the clan names. At present, clan consciousness is quite well preserved, at least in terms of a sensitivity to which ethnic group that each clan belongs. How long will the younger generation preserve this? Today, the Forest Nenets, at least in the Agan basin, already share many features with the Khanty as regards lifestyle, with some of these features being directly borrowed, such as the log houses (in Nenets *kapi mja*, 'Khanty house'). Nonetheless, there are still some differences in lifestyle between the communities. Actually, at least in the Agan basin, the distinguishing features all originate on the Khanty side, the latter being more traditionalist than the Nenets (who have, for example, adapted more pragmatically to Soviet rules), and in addition to being more likely to use traditional dress they also are more likely to maintain strict secrecy in spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> I have not been to the Pur region where the language situation may not be so dramatic.

<sup>18</sup> Here I am recalling Eremey Aypin's comments on Forest Nenets.

manners. They maintain particular taboos that Forest Nenets ignore, such as not singing in the morning, and especially the female practice of covering one's face with a scarf in the presence of male in-laws (*izbeganie*). These taboos are not only practised by the middle-aged generation but also by younger women in several families. On this basis, we can assume that the Khanty will be able to preserve their indigenous identity for longer than the Forest Nenets.

How is this new common native identity expressed? Blurring borders means being no longer able to distinguish the origin of a borrowed item and not realizing that it is alien. For example, I have heard stories told without mention of whether it is a Khanty or a Nenets story. The young will have a mixed repertoire, about which they will know little. While a grandfather would be aware of the origin of the story, for the young, the stories are only connected with a general native identity. A thorough scholarly awareness of the world-view expressed in a story would probably allow the actual origin to be identified, but it is unlikely that many of the younger generation will acquire such expertise.

It is not only that the origin of practices are no longer learned. At the same time, borrowed features are actively being sought and incorporated into the new identity. For example, women who sew and compose pearl decorations look for patterns used in other communities in order to incorporate them into their own traditions. Thus, the new cultural practices will be inspired by several northern traditions and will no longer be rooted in a single tradition. Thus, new 'superethnic' traditions are being built on a daily basis among the northern indigenous peoples.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I argued that a new identity is growing among the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia which looks for common features among different groups rather than retaining what is unique to each. I have suggested that this could lead to the development of a broadly based Western Siberian taiga identity composed of a patchwork of Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Komi and Russian features. Those holding this new identity will have forgotten the different roots of its elements and will merely identify with the merged result. Facing this taiga ensemble – in which Khanty elements will predominate for some time at the very least – the tundra nomads will probably present a homogeneous front, but ultimately they are all Nenets in this region.

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