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# INDIGENOUS AGENCY IN THE MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER: THE EXAMPLE OF THE KHANTY AND THE NENETS

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## ABSTRACT

In literature about missionary activities in western Siberia in the 19th – early 20th century, the natives are seen as passive recipients of the missionaries' initiative, as victims of their endeavours. This article\* intends to present another view of the encounter, showing firstly why this erroneous vision developed and secondly how the Khanty and the Nenets are actually active in the interaction. It shows how in both cases, either by accepting or by refusing, the natives follow their own interests and their own decisions without submitting to stronger constraint against their will. While those who refused to accept the missionaries' endeavours clearly expressed their independence, those who chose to convert did it sincerely, although their understanding of Christianity did not match the missionaries' expectations. They did it for conscious reasons, not just yielding to the missionaries' wishes but often being themselves the initiators. For them, Christianity is integrated in a worldview that is not based on dual oppositions. Therefore, while representatives of official Christianity do not see these natives as real Christians, they consider themselves to be so.

KEYWORDS: conversion • agency • missionaries • Arctic peoples • encounter

Traditional research on the missionary encounter in Russia tends to focus upon some limited approaches: either, in Orthodox sources, it glorifies the missionaries' activities, whose aim was to bring salvation to the natives, or, in Soviet sources, it emphasises the political impact of Christianisation (Toulouze 2008), seeing the missionaries as representatives of the State. Thus, it always focuses on the missionaries as the initiators of the encounter, as the active part, while their counterpart, the indigenous population, is presented as the passive object of their enterprise and even as victims. Thus, native agency in the encounter is usually neglected and even its possibility has not been very much discussed. In this study, I strive to insist on the active dimension of the native's role in the encounter.

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## WHY HAS THE NATIVES' AGENCY BEEN OVERLOOKED?

This neglect is not entirely fortuitous. There are several reasons for it: the nature of our sources, what is mainly known of Russia's Christianisation policy and the dominant trends in Soviet research. Still, while these factors explain fairly well why native agency has been overlooked, they do not make its research impossible.

### *The Sources*

There is not a lack of sources on the missionary encounter and overall on Christianity in the North. There are sources that we can see as 'neutral', such as reports by explorers or travellers who comment in different periods on what they see of the natives' understanding of Christianity (Vereshchagin 1849; Bartenev 1896; Maksimov 1909; Zuyev 1947). Usually they emphasise the false character of conversion and show how the natives are not actually Christian (Leete 2000a: 91–108; 2000b). Other sources are directly connected with the Orthodox Church: they consist of either reports by the missionaries themselves or by closer observers (such as Novitskiy<sup>1</sup> 1973), or hagiographic works, for example that of Abramov (1846; 1854a; 1854b). In both cases, the authors are more or less involved on the side of Christianity, and the point of view is a 'Western'<sup>2</sup> one. The natives' point of view is absent, as well as their own calculations and wishes. For these, we have only indirect sources, i.e. what others say about them.

However, if we are interested in the natives' own discourse, we have to read the existing sources more attentively, in order to find there echoes and descriptions. The texts written by the missionaries themselves, describing in detail their encounters and reproducing dialogues, give many hints of how the Khanty and the Nenets behaved in these meetings, of what they said. Until the last decade, some sources were already available: for instance Veniamin's journals were published twenty years after the end of the mission (Veniamin 1850; 1851) and curiously enough were not widely used by researchers in former times. The last prominent head of the Obdorsk mission, Irinarkh (Ivan Shemanovskiy) was also a passionate writer: in the journals of the Orthodox Church there are dozens of articles by him. Some of them were collected in the last decade (Shemanovskiy 2005, and a new collection is expected). However, more have been recently made available for researchers: the field journals of missionaries have been published in Tyumen in several collections, as well as reports and documents about their activities (Templing 2002; 2003; 2004). These are precious materials in order to understand both the missionaries and the natives. So it is possible to draw a picture that is richer and more complex.

### *Russia's Overall Policy*

In Russian Evangelisation policy, the periods that are most remembered are those in which it was implemented forcibly. I emphasise mainly two periods in two different regions: From 1700 Peter the Great issued a series of edicts enforcing Christianity in the so called 'pagan' areas of the Russian north (Okladnikov 1968: 324; Kappeler 1982:

272; Forsyth 1992: 154). These edicts were not followed by immediate results, but they were in their formulation quite energetic, even prescribing the death penalty for those who refused to convert to Christianity. The implementation of Peter's policy achieved some formal results in the years 1712–1725, when metropolite Filofei, who was sent to Siberia in order to implement the edicts, benefited from Governor Gagarin's help in the form of money, equipment and soldiers (Abramov 1846: 2; Slezkine 1994: 49; Vanuyto 1994; Shashkov 1996: 28). The latter were of a certain importance, both physically and symbolically, since there happened to be military collusions with angry natives and, even in peaceful encounters, they showed that the missionary had full authority from the state.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Filofei did not only convert many Khanty and Mansi,<sup>4</sup> but also destroyed their representations of divinities: this was actually a normal means of demonstrating the strength of the Christian God over the animists' deities and spirits. So the image of the first wave of Evangelisation in the Russian north is connected with violence. Even more violent was the evangelisation of the European animists. As several previous attempts had failed, in 1740 an institution was created, the New Christians' Office (Новокрещенская контора), which was invested of the authority for evangelising central Russia's non-Christians, both animists and Muslims. Over more than two decades, this office partially achieved its goal (Luppov 1999 [1899]: 141–145; Kappeler 2009: 60, 63): they baptised the majority of the animists, using sometimes rather brutal methods.

This first stage was followed by a less spectacular period. Catherine II launched a tolerance policy in religious matters. After the end of the 18th century, forcible baptism became illegal. Moreover, the Church itself was more and more interested in having in its ranks believers and in avoiding self-interested conversion. Therefore in the 19th century, any person desiring to be baptised had to follow a short training, making sure that he or she was aware of the basic dogmas of Orthodoxy. It is true that violence was still used against those who, being institutionally Christians, did not follow rules. But all conversions made after 1767 could not be achieved without the active participation of the convert's own will.

Thus, Evangelisation policy in Russia is not as homogeneous as we might think if we take into account only its first historical stages. I will focus on later periods.

### *Soviet Historiography*

For Soviet historiography, missionary work was but one aspect of Russian colonial expansion. Marxist theory denies the religious dimension any autonomy and reduces it to a mere superstructure. For Soviet practice, the fight against the Church was a priority after the Revolution. Therefore, while factual compilation was possible (Ogryzko 1941; Kononenko 1971), any particular reflection on Christianity or on the religious sphere as such was excluded. Moreover, because of the understanding that religion was merely serving the goals of oppression, Soviet historians emphasised the most tension-filled aspects of religious proselytism and of the institutions connected to the Church (for example, Efirov 1933; 1934; 1948). The natives, as the people in general, were seen as the victims of this detestable enterprise.

Despite this, these views are simplistic and do not allow us to cover the whole pic-

ture. Of course we should not be drawn to the opposite extreme and suppose that all the elements emphasised by Soviet propaganda were invented or exaggerated. One should not understand as well that the religious tolerance promoted by Catherine had abolished all traces of intolerance – it is in the nature of Christianity to be exclusive and this did not change with the new policy. I do not wish to replace a dark picture with a bright one. I am more interested in showing how complex the picture is. What is to be taken into account is that the dominant and previously almost absolute feature of the first wave of Christianisation was replaced by new devices: the natives' decision to be baptised became a crucial element of conversion, and between coercion and persuasion there were space for something different and new. Therefore speech acquired a new importance in missionary work, which is very clear for example in Veniamin's experience in the northern tundras (Toulouze 2008). The missionaries did not lose their prestige as state representatives, the police officer accompanying for example Veniamin was there as a reminder of this, and violence against so-called idols persisted. In addition to these aspects, it is to be remembered that while Filofei, in the 18th century, succeeded in baptising entire villages with the support of the governor, later missionaries did not have strength enough to impose anything: the three missionaries of the Obdorsk mission had to cover a huge territory with merely their own means, and they lived themselves in very scarce conditions, with very low wages and irregular earnings from individual services like baptisms and funerals. Therefore coercion was not in their power.

In the 19th century, there is thus a kind of dialogue. The use of speech is a starting point. The form of dialogue is more and more present: missionaries go to the native camps and talk with the people; the natives visit the missionaries and talk with them. But this exchange of sentences is not a real dialogue, it is still not equal: as later the Soviet 'missionaries', the Orthodox are convinced that they are bearers of the truth and the natives' speech is not to be taken seriously, it is to be contradicted. However, there was room for negotiation and this is what we are concerned about.

#### THE EXPRESSION OF NATIVE AGENCY

The study of native agency implies that we have to examine what we know of the Khanty and the Nenets reactions to missionary initiative. Though words or behaviour we may reconstruct their attitude and something of their understanding. There are usually two stages in the encounter: the encounter and the initial communication, and, somewhat later, the moment at which the missionary proposes baptism. Then, both refusal and acceptance are a form of expression of native agency.

##### *First Contacts*

When a missionary arrives for the very first time in a Khanty or a Nenets camp, he is always welcomed in quite a friendly manner. In the missionaries' journals we have few examples of the contrary. They may be avoided or they may be denied further help, usually on the basis of indirect reputation in the period of the very first visits, but usually they are offered tea and ordinary conversation. Actually this is not surprising, if we

take into account taiga and tundra ethics: hospitality is the rule. Anyhow a visitor is always an entertainment, and a missionary is undoubtedly so. For on the one hand the missionaries talk of the most important events – births, deaths, marriages, and on the other hand tell stories. Storytelling is part of their ‘job’: the creation of the world and other stories from the Old Testament and stories of Jesus are comparable to traditional legends or tales, and they are listened to willingly. Among the stories more frequently told we find the origin of the world, of the devil, of idolatry as well as stories about resurrection and the end of the world (Templing 2003: 152–153).

The only cases of initial refusal are the situations in which the missionary wants to participate in celebrations within the community where they are not welcome – for example when Irinarkh insists on assisting with a traditional burial (Shemanovskiy 2005: 44).

However, the crucial point comes when the missionary proposes baptism. Then, the Khanty or the Nenets may accept or refuse. Whatever their answer is, a thorough analysis of the material shows that it is usually not a direct consequence of the missionary’s words or deeds, rather it is a choice depending always on the individual’s or the group’s own decision, stemming from their own motivations. Whatever the decision is, the natives attempt not to provoke conflict situations and even when the visit has been tense, the farewell is usually friendly, even from shamans (Templing 2003: 163–164).

#### REFUSAL OF BAPTISM

The first way for the natives to express agency is to refuse to do what the missionaries want them to do. This happens often, and is done in different ways and in different stages.

1. By delaying baptism. This is quite a frequent answer: not a refusal, a promise to accept baptism, only later. It may be a dilatory strategy to get rid of the missionary, and this is what the missionaries are sometimes afraid of – as with Ioann Egorov, who insisted on baptising a child immediately, because “delay means refusal” (Templing 2004: 248). However, in certain cases it may be a serious answer – the person considers the opportunity of accepting baptism but has not made his or her final decision, or considers that the time is not ripe. Both are possible, and we haven’t always clues as to which is precisely the case in each reported situation. We have several examples in which the natives who asked for a delay eventually choose to be baptised. For example, in 1832 the missionary Makarii discovered that prince Taishin’s<sup>5</sup> sister-in-law was not baptised. Both the Prince and the lady were not against it but they required a delay, and she was baptised one week after the first conversation (Templing 2003: 43–44). In the 1860s there are several cases of Nenets who promised to be baptised in Obdorsk for the fair and who did indeed do so (Templing 2002: 17–18; 2003: 213–214). Sometimes the delay is conditional: in November 1832, two Nenets declare that they “will be baptised when the rest of the group will” (Templing 2003: 55), and this is more of a delay of the dilatory type.

2. Often the refusal is first of all verbal: the natives answer the missionaries with arguments. One argument is, “we do as our ancestors did” (Templing 2004: 244). Another is, “yours is the Russian faith, we have ours” (Templing 2002: 29; 2003: 165).

As an old man explains: “there is the god in heaven, and also the Russian God and the Khanty God, there is no difference to whom one prays” (Templing 2004: 244). These assertions are first of all a profession of tolerance, which is a basic feature of the animists as opposed to Christian exclusivity. Others refuse, asserting that they live very well as they do (ibid.: 248). There are also practical arguments: Veniamin is answered once that the persons addressed refuse baptism because they do not want to change their habits of food consumption (Veniamin 1851: 79). This is a very serious reason: the Nenets used to eat raw reindeer meat as well as reindeer blood. This is not accepted by Christianity, which forbids the consumption of blood. Conversion implies changes in the everyday diet that may be disturbing and even dangerous for people’s health, because raw meat and blood are a source of vitamins and a protection against scurvy. Some other reasons are perhaps less serious, such as with those who pretended that it was a sin to be baptised without reason, without a vow (Templing 2004: 259). However, this argument illustrates the search for an argument that would be final for the missionaries, as it was taken from their own repertoire.

3. Notwithstanding, the first answer is usually insufficient. The fact is that for the missionaries, the natives’ word is unequal; it is not to be accepted seriously. The missionaries have a task to accomplish and they must insist until they have achieved their goals. Even if the person they are conversing with strives to find an argument that would put an end to the discussion, the missionaries always insist, trying to push conversation further. From their point of view, what is at stake is the person’s salvation... So the Khanty and the Nenets, after the first exchange, will try to give answers only for the sake of closing the conversation. We have two very convincing examples of this kind of dialogues in which words are not meant to convey meanings. In the first, the Khanty answer that they live as their ancestors did. The missionary replies: “You never do anything new? Your ancestors had nobody to tell them about God.” They answer: “If we ever feel the need, we will convert”. The missionary then talks about hell and the devil. They answer: “Then let it be so.” (Ibid.: 240) The second example is a dialogue with a Khanty who answers to all questions “I don’t know”. The missionary asks “Do you want to live like a dog?” – “Yes.” – “Don’t you want anything better?” – “No.” (Ibid.: 255) It is clear that when the natives see that the missionary does not respect their serious answers, they use speech not for dialogue, but to end contact.

4. However, the missionary’s task is to insist until there is no other possibility. Words are of no use. At last, the natives are compelled to act, although their acts are mainly passive.

The main way of putting an end to the missionaries’ endeavours is to disappear physically. Veniamin had several times the experience of meeting Nenets he had already met – seeing him, they just fled with their camp (Veniamin 1851: 67). Other missionaries also had similar experiences, like the Yugan’s priest Ioann Tveritin, who gathered the inhabitants of three conic tents into one tent and preached about sin. At the beginning, the Nenets answered him and presented objections, but then they just left until the missionary remained alone with the interpreter (Templing 2004: 203).

Very seldom the natives react aggressively and put the missionaries in a tight position. During Makarii’s first expedition in Khanty villages not far from Obdorsk, he was received, according to his report “savagely” (*зверски*). However, he was accompanied by a tax collector, so we do not actually know who was unwelcome (Templing 2003: 53). In

addition, in the first reports in the 1830s, baptisms were hindered by groups of Nenets (ibid.: 57–58). In Veniamin's reports, we have no cases of aggression from the natives against the missionary. Despite this, a parallel source from the same time mentions an incident that Veniamin had left unmentioned in his journal, which was actually a report for his ecclesiastic authorities. After a tempestuous meeting with Nenets he had already met and who had refused baptism, his guides had abandoned him and left him in the tundra (*Epizod* 1896: 681). Later these cases do not happen anymore and the missionaries are usually not threatened by the natives.

A curious remark by a missionary, but very much to the point, may be a conclusion for this section: "They behave as if they knew deeply that they were right" (Templing 2004: 258).

### CONVERSION ACCEPTED

It may happen that the natives accept conversion, and even seek it. Usually it is not a choice that follows the missionary's own actions or words, but a decision taken individually or collectively on the basis of an external stimulus. The exception would be, in our materials, the case of Veniamin, who often presents a situation in which Nenets nomads accept baptism after his preaching. He does not explain it otherwise than by the grace of the Holy Spirit, although in listing the possible motivations for conversion, I think it is possible to account for them in other ways – which certainly a believer would not accept easily, but it may be the task of the researcher to present other possible interpretations. Why do the natives accept baptism when proposed or even demand to be baptised?

First I shall comment on one of the reasons often presented by candidates for baptism, and hereafter propose some possible additional interpretations of the materials we have.

#### *Fulfilling a Vow*

The explanation often given is that they must fulfil a vow, a promise. In a difficult situation, they have promised the Russian God to accept baptism if they escape. The Russian God is seen as powerful and thus may help, but he requires faithfulness. Usually, this explanation is presented when the missionary visits a camp. This reason for not being immediately baptised appears in the last decades of the 20th century; it is absent from Veniamin or Makarii's reports. This shows that the Russian God has become a familiar character in the natives' worldview as he is integrated in their lives at least as a possibility.

Which are the situations in which natives make a vow? There are two kinds of situations in which this may happen: disease and danger. The typical situation is the following: somebody is ill and promises to be baptised if he survives (Templing 2004: 253). There may be variations: the ill person is a child. There is a complicated example of a shaman whose children always died as infants. After the birth of a daughter, he let her and only her be baptised. But when he and his wife fell ill, he decided to baptise the whole family and they were healed (ibid.: 218–219). Actually, there are several exam-



ples in our sources of shamans accepting baptism. Another example of motivation is escaping danger: a rich Nenets and his wife were in a storm on the winter sea and they decided to convert if they survived. Immediately after this decision, the iceberg that threatened them drifts further. But the Nenets decided not to demand baptism, but to make an offering. Then he and his wife fall ill and he understands that the Russian God is angry with them and demands baptism (Templing 2003: 218–219).

Not all the Khanty and Nenets who convert do it as a consequence of a vow. Some just decided without giving any peculiar reason for it, which has happened since Veniamin's expedition (1825–1830). In order to attempt an understanding of why, since the 1830s, some individuals have been interested in becoming Christian we should first of all look at who they are.

### *Close to the Russians*

The first Nenets and Khanty who expressed the wish to convert were those who were closer than others to the Russian world. Some of them worked as herders for rich Russian or Komi reindeer owners. Veniamin is very clear: they came to ask for baptism against the will of their masters, who tried to convince them that if they became Christians, their herds would be taken, they would be compelled to go to the Army and their children would be taken to school. Veniamin's interpretation is that the Russian and Komi masters used to feed their herders and servants with the meat of dead animals, and that they would not do that anymore if the herders were to become Christians (Veniamin 1850: 367–369). I find Veniamin's interpretation a bit too restrictive: I think the Orthodox masters felt comfortable to treat their herders without regard – of which their feeding them with the meat of dead animal is but one example – because they were 'pagans', i.e. less than human. Their becoming brethren in religion would make it more embarrassing to go on in the same way.

Other candidates for baptism are Nenets or Khanty living in towns or in villages and working for Russian or Komi masters. They go willingly to meet the missionaries at the mission as soon as they hear about their coming (Templing 2003: 41, 44, 45, 48, etc.).

What is common among these early converts is that they have been living in the Russian world, or very close to it. I think we can understand their decision to join Christianity as an adaptation strategy. I have argued elsewhere that today ecosystem and language are very closely connected in the northern areas, in other words that vernacular languages are better preserved in the tundra and in the taiga than in contexts that are external to the natural environment of the speakers: village and town language is Russian, versus the Nenets or Khanty or Mansi used in the traditional context (Toulouze 2002). The same thing concerns religion. While animism is proper in the 'wild', the Russian environment also requires adaptation from the religious point of view, and adopting Christianity seems appropriate.<sup>6</sup> While observers with a Christian background could be tempted to see this attitude as treason towards their original spirituality, or as 'going over', it must be emphasised that there is no contradiction in the Khanty or Nenets worldview between Christianity and animism, whose coexistence is perfectly acceptable.

What are the elements in Christianity that make it a proper adaptation tool for northern natives and what do they expect from conversion?

In the first attempts to Christianise non-Christian communities, the main argument was a comparison between the 'native' gods and the Christian one, who was almighty, and therefore stronger than his rivals.<sup>7</sup> This was the ultimate meaning of the idol destruction all Christian missionaries practised: to show that the local gods do not react when their representations are destroyed by a stronger power. Actually, the Khanty and the Nenets could appreciate the strength of the Russian God through the Russian power in their areas: they accepted its supremacy. While some chose to go on with their ancestral deities, as their ancestors had, others chose to add the protection of a stronger deity, the one protecting the aliens. By converting, the northern natives did not choose God over other gods, although this is actually the choice the missionaries expect them to make: they merely added one to their pantheon.

We may even understand that some of them, by their choice of Christianity, made symbolically the choice of becoming Russian, *lutsa*. *Lutsa*, all around Siberia, is a notion that originally meant Russian, and that actually means 'non native', 'white', belonging to the urban world. For those who happened to live in an urban milieu, becoming Russian is achieving the highest possible status and being in the best possible position to negotiate with Russians.

However, there are nomad communities that accept baptism after the endeavours of the missionaries. This situation appears quite often in Veniamin's journal. The explanation he presents is a religious one, and that may be accepted or not, depending on the researcher's personal approach to religion. I would like to suggest an explanation that may not be proved in any way, but that may be psychologically correct. The idea that the Russian God is strong and powerful is certainly widespread, and the compatibility of his worship with the traditional native cults is beyond doubt. On the other hand, we have seen that the missionaries are stubborn and insist. I suggest that several groups, seeing Veniamin's insistence and wanting to be rid of him, accepted something that was in no way dangerous or intolerable.

In none of these cases was the missionaries' will determinant. What is at stake is the natives' own interest, such as they see it: security, material advantages, faithfulness, peace. They make the decision within their own worldview, in which they integrate Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

The missionaries attempted to fight against this misunderstanding of the exclusive essence of Christianity, but they were too weak; the emphasis on non-verbal, ritual religiosity was such that the propositional aspect of Christianity remained in the shade, and was not, could not, be effectively transmitted. So the misunderstanding was perpetuated, although the missionaries kept complaining that the native converts were not real Christians. The travellers and explorers took the same viewpoint. However, the natives considered themselves to be Christians. It became part of their identity, as they understood it, and as shown by their reactions to Soviet anti-church campaigns.

## NOTES

1 Grigori Novitskiy accompanied Filofei Leshchinsky in his expeditions, until he was killed in 1717 during one of them. Leshchinsky attempted to convert Khantys and Mansis between 1707 and 1728 and achieved, according to historical tradition, 40,000 conversions.

2 In this context, one may consider without doubt that Russian sources are, from the Siberian point of view, Western.

3 Actually Filofei did not achieve a single conversion before Gagarin decided to help him (Abramov 1846: 2; *Kratkiy ocherk* 1893: 25; Ogryzko 1941: 32).

4 According to official sources, 40,000 (Abramov 1846: 13). This figure shows that there were many converts, although we may well doubt its precision. It is not even known whether there were as many Khanty and Mansi at the time.

5 The Taishins were a family of Khanty rulers who were baptised and recognised by the Russians as the representatives of the Obdorsk natives. The missionaries often complained that the ruling prince did not act like a Christian and did not encourage his family and 'court' to accept baptism and follow Christian rules.

6 A Nenets informant in Yamal commented on the conversions to Protestantism taking place today, saying that they help the Nenets live in the village, while in the tundra, the traditional beliefs are the best assistance for survival (Oral information from Tatyana Vagramenko).

7 In between, as a kind of mediator, they adopted the Russian God Mikula, from the Russian Saint Nicholas the Miracle Worker, whose cult spread in the Russian North, the natives' "own stranger" (see Vallikivi 2003: 120–123).

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