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Eva Toulouze

## The beginning of literacy and literature by the Tundra Nenets

I have chosen to sum up my reflexions about the first stage of the development of Nenets literature, seen in the perspective of Nenets national identity as a whole.

I will start by putting this problematic into the wider historical perspective of the introduction of literacy.

### **Literacy in the North: an effect of the Soviets' nationality policy**

When Soviet propaganda used to assert that Russia's nationalities, before the Revolution, had no literacy neither literature (for example Gusev 1973 :154, Škljaev 1976), and that both were one of the results of Lenin's national policies, in most cases it was but a soviet fairy tale with little bases in reality. As far as the peoples of the North are concerned, however, this assertion is very close to reality.

In other regions of Russia, the spreading of literacy had been prepared and even started by the missionaries, who had been working among non-Russian people for a very long period (Toulouze 2001 : 453-454). In the Volga area, there had been several attempts to create schools for the indigenous peoples since the 18th century, whose results had been close to nil : many children died and those who resisted the poor material conditions usually left school without any solid knowledge, for they were taught in Russian, a language they did not understand (about the Udmurt example: Suvorova 1990 : 11, Frolova 1996 : 7). Since, these experiences had provided a close contact zone between the missionaries and the different ethnic groups. They had prepared the waves of intensification of missionary work based on local languages that took place in the first decades of the 19th century an especially throughout the second half of the same century: during the last 50 years before the

revolution, the number of translations was multiplied, the number of schools and thus of children and adults in touch with the Russian world was intensely increased<sup>1</sup>. In the Finno-Ugric regions around the Volga these processes led to the emergence of a relatively small but convinced group of educated aborigenes, who were prepared to be clergymen as well as school teachers. They represented the active nucleus who permitted the appearance of national consciousness and subsequently of a national movement.

When the Revolution provided the different ethnic groups with new conditions for their self-affirmation, the “intellectuals” educated by the missionaries had a tool they used for new, independent purposes: the development of a literature accompanied naturally the assertion of self-identity.

In the Northern areas the situation was very different. The people of the North lived in areas far beyond the reaching of State or Church authorities. Most of them were nomads or semi-nomads, and nature founded not only their material welfare, but also their spiritual life. It was difficult to penetrate these territories. The missionaries were not able to put permanent pressure on them, as they could easily do in areas with sedentary population. Still their presence could be felt mostly in two areas: the European tundras and the Yamal peninsula. : in the European tundras, Veniamin succeeded to baptise, according to Veniamin himself, 3303 Nenets in five years (1825-1830) (Veniamin 1855 : 114). Three churches were built in order to ensure some spiritual care relying on the missionary’s work (Nosilov 1895 : 275), and some schools appeared, three of them had only native pupils (Bazanov, Kazanskiy 1939 : 45). Christianity had penetrated into the Nenets’ world, touching it without becoming dominant: the Nenets preserved their independence by going on living according to their rules their own nomadic life (Vallikivi 2003). In the Yamal peninsula – more precisely in its southernmost part in connection to the Russian center of Obdorsk, a mission was founded in 1832, but its activity did not last, until it was renewed in 1854 (Kratkiy ocherk 1892 : 31, Kratkiy ocherk 1893 : 12). The richest period in the Obdorsk mission’s activity is when it was led by Irinarh Shimanovski, who arrived in Obdorsk directly after the end of his studies in Novgorod (Golovnev 1992 : 26): at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he founded an organisation called

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<sup>1</sup> In this process the main actor was a Russian Orientalist scholar and missionary, Nikolay Ilminski, who promoted penetration of Christianity through the use of the peoples’ mother tongues. About Ilminski: Znamenskij 1892, Lallukka 1987, Toulouze 2001a.

Saint Guri Confraternity, whose aim was to spread Christianity, to follow up and to provide wider echos to the work done by the mission (Irinarh 1905b : 127). A school was founded by the mission and Irinarh ruled it enthusiastically trying by all means to recruit young people from the surrounding tundras, emphasising the importance of paying attention to the education of native girls, future mothers able to communicate Christian values to their children (Bazanov 1936 : 43)

The specialists of the People of the North, especially in the Soviet period, emphasised the failure of the missionaries' endeavours. And certainly, there were but very modest apparent results: not more than some educated individuals who, in most cases, did not go back to their people. According to some reports there was nobody able to read or write among the aborigenes of Western Siberia at the beginning of the 1920-s (Skatchko 1935 : 32). Although this information is probably partial, it still illustrates the lack of a social group cemented by literacy.

In the Northern areas, there was no social group prepared to interfere in public affairs. After the consolidation of their power, the Bolshevik had a problem for it to solve: how to manage the Northern areas, unfriendly, unexplored, but immensely rich and most important as ways of communication. These areas were inhabited by strange people, speaking unknown languages, whom it was very difficult even to explain the political changes occurred in the Center<sup>2</sup>. The political power turned then towards those who had a good knowledge of this area: the ethnographers, who were called at the beginning of the 1920-s to elaborate soviet policies for these regions. In 1924 was founded the so-called Committee of the North<sup>3</sup>, the main organ of Soviet policy towards the Northern areas (Zibarev 1976: 210-213, Slezkine 1994 : 150-152).

The main Russian ethnographers had a real first-hand knowledge of the people they studied and they were devoted to. They tried on the one hand to take measures in favour of the people's welfare, and directed by the wish of helping them to escape the exploitation of the merchants, of the aparachiki and other Russians who took advantage of their cultural differences to cheat them and often to ruin them (Gurvich 1971: 19). The first policy towards the people of the North is thus friendly enough, although the ethnographers could not quite decide thereselves all. Vladimir Bogoraz

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<sup>2</sup> A good example is provided by the Forest Nenets intellectual Yuri Vella, while remembering his grandfather: "My grandfather, in his youth, because of his ignorance and lack of political training, ran away both from Whites and from Reds" (Vella 1991: 53).

<sup>3</sup> Full name in Russian : Комитет содействия народностям северных окраин (Solidarity Committee with the Populations of the Northern Margins), shortly called Комитет Севера (Committee of the North)

Tan proposed even a system of reserves (Bogoraz 1922, Bogoraz-Tan 1923a:172), inspired from the American system, but his suggestion categorically rejected, „first of all by Lenin himself“ (Uvachan 1965 : 34): the Soviet State intended to integrate the whole of its territory.

Therefore the ethnographers turned to the “missionary’s” strategy: They tried to train very quickly a sector of educated persons able to be mediators between the Soviet authorities and the mass of their people (Slezkine 1994 - 180-181). Children had to be taught in their own language. This meant to have these languages studied, normalised, fixed, to prepare text books. It took a short decade: although the principle of teaching the Northern children in their mother tongue has been confirmed in the early 1920-s (Vdovin 1959 : 287), the preliminaries required much time. Work started in Leningrad in 1926 (Vasilievitch 1958 : 228). The literary languages for 14 languages were officially “ready” in 1932: in January, a „Conference on the development o languages and literacy of the peoples of the North“ was held with the participation of all the institutions concerned and of delegates from the regions (Isayev 1979 : 222), and approved the creation of fourteen literary languages, that could be therefore taught only after this deadline.

The missionaries did not take time into account, but Soviet managers could not wait until children grow into university students, they had to hurry up the whole process. A huge effort was deployed since 1925 in order to educate in Leningrad adults from the different peoples (Bogoraz-Tan 1927 : 52,62) : the first group, at the Workers’ University, consisted of 30 students . There were adults and children, some were not literate and several of them did not speak Russian at all. In 1932, a specific unit, the Institute of the Peoples of the North, was created in order to prepare specialists in humanities, economics and political management (Toulouze 1999 : 66). They were to be the necessary mediators in both the so-called political and cultural construction, the first link between the indigenous peoples of the North and the Soviet power. They are also the first writers and poets.

The main feature I would like to emphasise about all this highly voluntaristic process is hurry: the Soviets felt they were running out of time. Enourmous labour was invested in this enterprise. Undoubtedly there were results: by the end of the thirties, a small group of representatives of the main indigenous peoples of the North had been trained. From the soviet point of view, they were allies within the

communities in order to bring them more and more close to the soviet society and close the gap with the rest of the social body.

Who were these persons? Usually, they were young and eager. They wanted to do something constructive for their kin and to guarantee them better life thanks to modernity. As younger members of the community, they were usually deprived of real power from within: the soviet projects gave them an opportunity to invest their potential energy and achieve influence much sooner than the traditional framework. They believed the soviet's promises: they saw the in the development of literary languages a token of respect as they had neer had before.

By the second half of the thirties, these policies seem to have achieved a considerable success: the literary languages indeed exist. The first text-books, the first literary texts show that literacy started to work: the first Nenets textbook, G.N. Prokofyef's „New Word<sup>4</sup>“, was published in 1932, and the same author, in 1936, published a „teach yourself“ textbook for adults. The newly created languages are also used in the press: the first pages in Nenets appear in 1930 in *Naryan Vynder*, the newspaper of the Western Nenets areas and in Naryana Ngerm in the Yamal peninsula (Komanovsky 1977 : 26). Literacy works: this enthusiastic evaluation became a leit-motiv repeatedly emphasised by the official positions, as this report quoted by Stebnicky: „Literacy is spreading like epidemics, children educate their parents, husbands their spouses. The students at the school of the Party receive letters only in their languages. The collective farms' presidents and secretaries have the reports and requests made by their brigadiers written only in Koriak...“ (Tebnicky 1934 : 48). Nevertheless, eighty years later observation in perspective compels us to moderate our assessment.

Indeed, literary languages existed. But how much were they used? There were only very little teachers among the natives. Most of the teachers were Russians, who mostly ignored their pupils' languages (Toulouze 1999 : 79). The discussion about the alphabet in 1936-1937 shows that the contingent of teachers able and disposed to use the latin letters in which the native languages were first written was very reduced (Toulouze 1997 : 74-76).

Secondly, it is too early to pretend that the literary languages worked. The first persons to use them are those who participated to their creation. They still have no

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<sup>4</sup> In Nenets : *Jadej wada*, Moscow 1932.

readers, and even by Soviet accounts, they had to wait at least ten years to have the first readers educated . Their works gave hope, but did not represent anything else than the pursuit of the centralised effort to spread literacy (Toulouze 2002 : 236).

Finally, two contextual aspects biased the efforts invested in this work.

Firstly. All the above-mentioned processes are mature after 1935. The first literary texts are published in 1936-1937, in the dark years of stalinist repressions. While the first intellectual circles dwelling in Leningrad dreamed for their people of a future where they could live in welfare without losing their values, the very social basis of healthy welfare was being systematically destroyed on the spot. In this tragic period the people of the North lost not the new-born Soviet minded intelligentsia, but their spiritual leaders, the shamans, and those who had the more skills, who were the more deeply rooted into their culture, who mastered their people's lore. The final aim was clearly to substitute to the old traditionalist elite a new generation, who owed all to the Soviet power. But the brutality of the repression, its absurdity for the people, who did not understand what was going on, the weakness of the replacers did not allow this plan to be successful – when we assess it eighty years later.

Another reason for failure is the lack of general bases for the spreading of literacy. In other regions, this had been prepared by centuries of slow penetration, of very close cultural contact situations with its promoters, the representatives of the Church. In the North, these contact situations were but occasional and did not deeply affect the whole of the population. Moreover, the impact of school was also very different in nomadic areas: the few schools functioning in the Northern areas were very deeply isolated from the population, as school was sedentary and the people were nomads. So its impact could hardly be felt outside, as most of the pupils were unable to transmit their new “culture”. The soviet “builders” could well, and much better than the missionaries, select goals and achieve them with a small number of actors in little time, but the real impact of their endeavours on the communities could not be forced. It remained superficial: literacy remained an “imported” item and, until nowadays, it does not really work (Toulouze 2002 : 239-240). But this is a different subject.

## **The geography of emergence of a Nenets' literature**

Let us now concentrate on the Nenets. I shall focus first on individuals, for it is clear that at this stage individuals, the very few of them who are concerned, are the core of the action.

The Nenets' territories are impressively extended: they occupy the Eurasian tundras from both in the European part of Russia and Western Siberia up to the Taimyr peninsula. It is not surprising that the first Nenets involved in this adventure were from the westernmost zones, those that had been in the closest contact with the Russian world.

The first Nenets to be involved in literary world may be divided in two main groups.

The first is formed by five young persons from the tundras around Narian Mar, the new "red" town formed to be the centre of the first administrative unit "for" the Nenets in the European North. Their names are connected with an initiative of Narian Mar's literary almanach *Zapoljarie*. In 1935, the number contained two short stories by S. Nogo and E. Talejev, and the next year three other young Nenets authors were added, I. Negosyty, E. Sobolev and among them a woman, Svetlana Ardeeva (Sergeyev 1956 : 141, Ogryzko 1998 : 76). We do not know much about them and we do not hear about them later. They do just represent the first attempts to write about themselves, with no higher literary pretentions. As the Almanach's chief editor Ivan Menshikov said, "their Russian is poor" (Popov 1936 : 28). We may suppose that these texts have not been written in Nenets: they have been written directly in Russian with the assistance of the local Russian intelligentsia.

The other group is more interesting for us: the three authors who form it are really the founders of Nenets literature. We may identify their background, follow their career, perceive something of their personality. Let me present them, moving from West towards East.

When introducing Nikolay Vylka, it's impossible not to start by his uncle, Tyko Vylka, whose life was a real exception among the Northern natives. Tyko's parents had fled from the mainland to Novaya Zemlya probably at the end of the 19th century: as servants to rich reindeer herders, without reindeer of their own, they had no hope of a better life and thus decided to look for it on the island, where wild reindeer provided abundant game for hunters. Tyko was born in Novaya Zemlya.



Novaya Zemlya was, at the end of the Czarist era, a place for political exiles: Tyko as a child saw and allegedly got acquainted with two painters, and started drawing himself (Voronova 1976 : 18). The turning point in his life was his meeting with the Russian explorer Vladimir Rusanov, who took him as a guide<sup>5</sup>. A great friendship arose between the two men. In 1910, Rusanov proposed the young Nenets to spend one year in Moscow and to learn painting with the best masters. Tyko accepted. In Moscow, he got a private education, with masters in different subjects (Russian, maths, geography, etc. and even photography) as well as in arts (Koshechkin 1980 : 39). In 1911, he went back home. He wished to go back to the capital but could not: his elder brother died and according to the traditions he married his widow and had to support his new family. But Tyko's experience was of much use later on: he founded the Soviet of the island and remained its president until the end of the 1950-s.

He also supported his nephew Nikolay (?<sup>6</sup>-1942), who was impatient to be educated. His personality is an essential element in Nikolay's background. As Tyko, Nikolay was also an artist: while Tyko was a good painter, Nikolay, allegedly, was a sculptor (Polonsky 1961 : 6). He was the first Nenets to publish a short novel and to get a literary prize for it. The end of his life is not ascertained: we just know he died during the war, probably of starvation and disease.

The second Nenets personality of that time has a very different story: as Tyko's parents, he came from Bolshezemelskaya tundra. He was an orphan, servant to rich reindeer herders. He had no reindeer, no hope of becoming once independent. The Revolution gave him the opportunity of changing his fate: it's among people like Anton Pyrerka<sup>7</sup> (1905-1941), from lower social groups deprived of any rights in the traditional society, that the newcomers found there more sincere supporters, for they had an intelligible message for them. Pyrerka's good knowledge of his language and culture allowed him to become the first ever Nenets scholar. He participated actively in the creation of literary language. Pyrerka's main literary text is a short novel published in 1940 and awarded by a literary prize. He died during the war.

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<sup>5</sup> There are different opinions about when Tyko and Rusanov started working together: 1907 (Kazakov 1972 : 220), 1908 (Voronova 1977 : 29).

<sup>6</sup> There are no sure informations about his birth. Elena Susoy mentions 1904; for two literary encyclopaedias, he was born in 1911 (Ogryzko 1998 : 161).

<sup>7</sup> His Nenets name was Sjarati (Lebedeva 1958 : 236).

The third Nenets intellectual of that period is Ivan Noho<sup>8</sup> (1891-1947). Ivan Noho was also an orphan, from the Yamal peninsula. He was educated by the Obdorsk mission and learned literacy (Obdorskoye 1907 : 150) before he was sent to work for a merchant: he knew very well indeed what ethnic discrimination meant at the beginning of the 20th century in Obdorsk. When the Red came, Noho was one of the first to bade them welcome. He entered the Party and became, at the end of the 1930-s, one of its local leaders. As such, he was one of the initiators of the brutal campaign against the kulaks and the shamans (Ogryzko 1998 : 522-523). Noho wrote two plays: *Vauli Nenjang*, on a historical subject and the *Shaman*, whose aim was to reveal the “real” nature of the shaman’s deeds.

On this basis, let me sum up the main features of these individuals:

- in different ways, the three of them are marginals. Pyrerka and Noho, because of their being orphans, started life in a very unfavourable position; Nikolay Vylka’s marginality is of a completely different nature and lies on transmission of a unique personal experience. Anyhow, none of them is representative of the average traditional nenets society;
- they all come from cultural contact zones with the Russians. Novaya Zemlya was an open region whose inhabitants – Komis, Russians, Nenets – came all from the mainland. Moreover, it was widely open even to foreign contacts, for instance to Norwegian fishermen and merchants and to explorers. Tyko’s peculiar adventure is the direct consequence of his early contacts with Russian exiles and with Rusanov. All his former knowledge of Russian, of the Russians, his ability to dialogue with them led to Rusanov’s proposal. Tyko’s model was clearly transmitted to Nikolay. Pyrerka came from the Bolshezemelskaya tundra, which is one of the regions where in the 1820-s Veniamin succeeded to baptise more than the two thirds of the Nenets. It’s the infrastructure created by the missionaries that

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<sup>8</sup> In Russian sources, he is usually called Nogo.

permitted his discovery of literacy. The most direct impact of former contacts touched Ivan Noho, for he was educated by the Obdorsk mission, led by a most active missionary, father Irinarh.

The main actors among the Nenets “intellectuals” of the 1930-s were thus prepared, through their background, to be attracted by literacy and written expression. Before I finish on some interesting aspects of their texts, I would like to sum up some provisional conclusions.

It has often been repeated that the missionaries did not succeed at all in the Northern areas. Still, in the places where they acted, they have had some impact: beside the fact they influenced Nenets worldview, the little that was achieved later in the field of literacy depended much on the prerequisites they had locally succeeded to create. What is usually considered as a total failure may be reviewed as a relative failure. On the other hand, the “cultural construction” considered for decades as a total success may well also be assessed as a relative failure: the soviet power’s aim was to replace a lore-based culture rooted in traditional world-view by a modern culture based on literacy and on the ideology of progress. the Northern natives have indeed been cut out of their roots. But the introduction, without due preparation and maturing, of literary culture may be assessed as a total failure.

### **The encounter of two worldviews: traditional culture and soviet values**

I shall now focus on the contents of this infant literature and mainly on the adaptation processes it reveals on the ideological level. The authors were caught in a new net of cultural contacts: with the Russian world, but also with the soviet ideological framework, whose origins were so far from their own world-view. I shall focus now on this new encounter and the way it is expressed through the first literary works in Nenets literature. For these works are very much inspired by the “building of a new life” that was on the agenda for the people of the North at that moment. The

guideline was, under different forms, the opposition between the past and the present.

### **Nikolay Vylka : the syncretical approach**

Of the three, Vylka is the less involved in active politics. He came from a background favorable to the communists. Still, the situation in Novaya Zemlya was very different from the one on the mainland. The island had been populated since merely two or three generations, its resources did not allow the accumulation of huge fortunes: there were no reindeer herders, the Nenets and the Komi were mainly hunters. The few Russians had no direct power on the other groups. Socially, the situation in Novaya Zemlya was less conflictual or potentially conflictual than on the mainland. The only tensions Tyko had experienced were connected with the local pope and with the czarist police the latter had called to arrest him (Tyko 1965 : 13). He had thus not to deal with class struggle and the people in Novaya Zemlya could put this essential item aside.

These special conditions are reflected in Nikolay's work. I base my analysis on four texts: one poem, "Lenin's sun on the tundra"<sup>9</sup>, and his three prose short "novels" – "On the island"<sup>10</sup>, its adapted version published by Sovetskaya Arktika "How we lived under the Czar"<sup>11</sup>, and "Maria". The two main texts are both situated in the Czar's period and reflect thus Nikolay Vylka's present understanding of the Nenets' past. The poem is a new version of a traditional Nenets legend, where the "bad" guys (here the kulaks and the merchants) stole the sun so that the (poor) people in the tundra lived in darkness. But a hero, a *sjudbja* (here Lenin) came and rescued the sun and the people came out of the darkness and lived in welfare and happiness. Thus the legend is presented by Vylka on a rejuvenated form according to the fairy tale he thought the Nenets were about to experience. His Lenin is deeply inserted in the Nenets world: he is not the Lenin of the bolshevik Revolution, he is a Nenets traditional hero himself, travelling on a reindeer sledge and addressing the people in Nenets. The borders between the "Other" and the "Own" are removed, but not by the

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<sup>9</sup> In Russian: "Солнце Ленина светит в тундре (поэма)" – *Сказание о счастье* – Москва 1970 – стр. 15-27.

<sup>10</sup> In Russian: "На острове" – *Наша страна* – 1936/5-6 – стр. 41-68.

<sup>11</sup> In Russian: "Как мы жили при царя (Из дореволюционного прошлого ненецкого языка)" – *Советская Арктика* – 1937/11 – стр. 41-68.

Nenets becoming similar to the “Other”, but by the Nenets swallowing up and integrating the “Other”.

In his prose, Vylka uses clearly autobiographical elements – most of them inspired by the experiences of his uncle: *Maria*’s parents travel to the island reminds of how Tyko’s father Hanec fled from the mainland, the character of *On the island*, like Tyko, has been in Moscow. Vylka does not talk about the present – therefore the opposition is not directly formulated. Neither does he indulge in vain praise : true, the text presented as a translation in *Sovetskaya Arktika* ends with some strokes of very dull glorification of the Soviet power. The discrepancy in style is such that I dare suggest they are an addition by the editors to guarantee political correctness...

The central element of the plot in both cases is similar: the cheating of the Nenets by people coming from outside – merchants, both Russian and, in *Maria*, Norwegian. But Vylka did not dwell on the “Other’s” cunning. He painfully insists on how the Nenets are responsible themselves for what happens to them: alcoholism is certainly one of his main themes. His people cannot resist alcohol, they look for it, drink without measure and are thus unable to fulfil their duties: winter comes, there are no furs to protect them and their families from the cold. It is clear that on this very point, much emphasised by contemporary soviet discourse, there was no contradiction at all with the traditional values of the Nenets. The new element is that Vylka emphasises also the consequences for the women: the denunciation of the position of women in traditional society was one of the main items in the soviet discourse of the first decades. Still he does not choose to break with the traditions of his people: the preparation of Tabilo’s marriage includes the *kalym*, the bride price so condemned later by soviet authorities. Vylka’s approach’s main feature is thus the quest for harmony and for unity – showing how deeply rooted he was in his traditional culture.

### **Anton Pyrerka : the explicitation of the conflict**

Anton Pyrerka’s world is different. There is no harmony, simply because the author has no experience of it. His main literary work<sup>12</sup> is a largely autobiographical

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<sup>12</sup> In Russian: *Младший сын Вэдо* – Архангельск 1960.

“Bildungsroman”. This is important also because Pyrerka’s conflict between the old and the new life is not ideological neither propagandistic, it is deeply felt through painful personal experience. “In my soul I was already a Red, because our boss hated them”. This is a very convincing psychological explanation. Pyrerka recounts with many details his sorrowful orphan childhood, hungry and ill-treatments, his way out going robbing with Russian boys, his discovery of school and the hopelessness of his life as a servant to a rich reindeer herder. The Nenets traditional world gave him no possibility of building a life on his own, no possibility of using his individual abilities – he was just condemned to his fate.

The way out comes from the outside: the arrival of the Reds shook the entireness of the former social organisation and offered people like Pyrerka an actual opportunity. His personal position determines his choice : Pyrerka had positive reasons to join the Bolsheviks on the bases of his own experience of conflict, i.e. class struggle.

### **Ivan Noho: class struggle on the stage**

Ivan Noho is a communist leader. His literary work is mainly a didactic illustration of one of the party’s main orientations in the late 1930-ies: the fight against shamans. His aim is to show how shamans 1) deceive people making them believe in their supernatural powers 2) exploit the poor Nenets by demanding huge fees for their healing activities 3) do not live in compliance with the laws as they have more than one wife, and 4) are enemies to the soviet power. All these items may be explicitly found in the play called *The Shaman*<sup>13</sup>, at the end of which the Nenets understand that Stalin was right... For Noho, the theme of class struggle was essential as one of the Party’s main ideas, more formally and with less internal pain than for Pyrerka, although he had also some experience of it.

This plot and in general this kind of plays are characteristic of the first times of the soviet era: by the peoples of the Volga we find at the beginning of the 1920-s several plays called « The Sorcerer » or « The Witch<sup>14</sup> », whose aim was exactly the

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<sup>13</sup> In Nenets and Russian: *Тадэба / Шаман* – Салехард 1937.

<sup>14</sup> For example in Udmurt literature: there are two plays written in the early 1920-ies by Kuzebay Gerd and P. Batuev called in Udmurt “Tuno” (which is the word for the local “shaman”). A short story with the same title

same. But using the stage for didactical purposes has also a long tradition, not the least in Christian practice.

Still there is a very interesting feature in this text, which has been written in Nenets. I have been amazed to discover how little Russian words may be identified even in a political conversation in which one of the parties is a party leader. Noho was still not a Russified Nenets: he was sufficiently skilled in his mother tongue to express central elements of Russian propaganda without copying them directly from Russian.

## Conclusion

We may draw from this short analysis some conclusions:

- The Soviet authorities allowed to people who did not find any place in the former order to achieve social positions. Both Pyrerka and Noho were weak links – orphans, deprived of full social rights, organically cut out from any perspective. They belonged to a category that, in other times, was the most permeable to Christianity (we know that it was easier to the poorer Nenets to accept baptism, for Christianity proclaims the superiority of poverty). Soviet ideology provided them with a more effective way out, for the communists promised welfare immediately. These are the people the Soviet power mostly relied upon, they are grateful and some of them express it through literature.
- The need for seeking an harmony between traditional culture and Soviet ideology was more felt by the only Nenets writer who had no personal experience of class struggle, Nikolay Vylka. He took over from the latter those aspects who fitted into his own mental framework, leaving into shadow the very important issue of class struggle.

- Still there are features common to all three of these writers: all of them were sincerely convinced that the Soviet power was opening a new era for the Nenets. They did not feel any threat on their identity as Nenets and they did not see any fundamental contradiction between preserving their identity and accept modernity. They did not feel that the radical changes about to happen were not meant to increase the welfare of the Nenets, but to reduce the distance between them and the rest of the Soviet population and to deprive them of very essential elements of their identity.

Eighty years later, these authors – who have been nearly forgotten – strike both by their utmost sincerity and by the tragic connected with their fate: this is the generation of the misunderstanding.

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