

# On Thin Ice Nenets Reindeer Herders' Changing Perception of their Environment After Conversion to Evangelical Christianity

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**Abstract** In this paper, I will focus on Nenets reindeer herders' changing perception of their environment after conversion to evangelical Christianity. Until recently they regarded the landscape to be populated by numerous sentient beings with their own differing agendas. I suggest that conversion of Nenets families has led them to reinterpret much of the earlier intricate forms of agency into largely one kind of demonic agency in which more or less respectful reciprocity with spirits is discontinued. This shift informs directly how people navigate on the land and water, perceive their environment and talk about their relationship with it. I discuss these issues using a pair of notions, i.e. the practical mastery of one's surroundings and the mental map-reading. My central argument is that conversion creates a certain shift in these perceptions and practices related to the environment and the spirit world.

**Keywords** Animism. Evangelical Christianity. Conversion. Ethics. Ontology. Navigation. Nenets.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Navigators or Wayfinders? – 3 Embracing God's View. – 4 Thin Ice and God's Rage. – 5 The Master of Water. – 6 Demons or Angels? – 7 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few hundred Nenets reindeer herders in the Great Land tundra<sup>1</sup> rejected their animist ways and have been trying to adapt to the new Christian life since then. Russian-speaking Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries had come to teach their faith to formally unschooled and illiterate nomads. This meant learning new words, values and ritualistic gestures which all were said to be necessary for achieving the eternal life guaranteed by the only true God there is. This mission encounter has made a considerable impact on one's relation to oneself as well as on the pattern of sociality in the Nenets communities as the new religious regime involves privileging relations with other Christians and discouraging everyday engagement with the 'pagans'.<sup>2</sup> The latter are told to be involved in sacrificial rituals, drinking vodka or singing epic songs about 'demonic' beings. In short, almost everything that was previously considered as necessary regarding the spirit world had to be abandoned or outright destroyed. Most conspicuously, all the spirit figures (*khekhe*) that were ritually fed from time to time had to be burned in converted families (see Vallikivi 2011, for more detail).

This cultural shift has been significant. The Nenets converts have become part of the globally widespread process in which a highly organised and institutionalised religion (conservative Baptism and Pentecostalism) with an explicit moral code transforms the experiential world of intricate, often tacit relationalities with (most of the times) invisible agents of the tundra. Reindeer nomads who have sacrificed to spirits throughout their life made a decision and converted to evangelical Christianity, proceeding with daily praying and the Bible reading, hosting pastors in their tents and occasionally visiting church services in Russian settlements. Obviously, this shift has had a noteworthy impact on their relations with numerous agents in the landscape such as the dead ancestors, the sky god Num, water and mountain spirits and others who not that long ago were given gifts, petitioned to and asked various favours on regular or particular occasions.

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**1** This is the area that lies between the Pechora River and Ural Mountains. In Nenets it is known as *Ngarka Ya* and in Russian as *Bol'shezemel'skaya tundra*.

**2** 'Pagans' (R. *yazychniki*) is originally Christians' term about non-Christians. Nowadays there are also those who identify themselves positively as 'pagans', thus distancing themselves from the Christians.

In this paper, I will focus on one particular phenomenon which is the reading<sup>3</sup> of one's environment after conversion to evangelical Christianity. Until recently, the landscape was seen to be populated by numerous sentient beings with their own differing agendas, at the same time, showing continuity and co-substantiality across the human and nonhuman species. I suggest that conversion of Nenets families has led them to reinterpret much of the earlier intricate forms of agency into largely *one* kind of demonic agency in which more or less respectful reciprocity with spirits is discontinued. There is a recognisable tendency from situated forms of relation-making with these invisible agents, who have specific characters and particular moods, towards the reading of one's environment through biblical guidelines which call human beings to reform one's self in order to please the only God and achieve thus salvation. However, there are those converts who show inventive ways when dealing with the past heritage, partly because their reading of the scriptures offers various continuities with animism.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Navigators or Wayfinders?

The missionaries and converts often talk about following the narrow path after Jesus. The ultimate aim of this moral navigation is to earn the eternal life in thereafter. For discussing these ontological and ethical shifts in conversion, I focus on two notions from the anthropological debate in human spatial orientation, which are practical mastery and the mental map approach. Although this debate concerns physical movement on the land, I regard these notions useful for delineating the spiritual and moral changes in conversion. I propose that, with the arrival of evangelical Christianity, there is a tendency to look at one's environment in a 'cartographic' manner in which one has to recognise what one can or cannot do following the fixed legend (e.g. the biblical rules) that is the same for everyone. This quality of fixity is a completely new experience for the nomads.

For some time, there has been a lively discussion about the ways how indigenous people find their way on the land, how they perceive their environment and how they acquire specific skills in it. Perhaps most prominently in this conversation, Ingold (2000) has argued that northern nomads and hunters do not engage in map-like navigation

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<sup>3</sup> This is a metaphorical use of the word 'reading' here. I am not following the Geertzian or any other similar tradition in anthropology which sees culture as a text.

<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted the '-ism' in 'animism' is somewhat a misnomer here, as it lacks a similar codified structure as Protestantism or other institutionalised versions of (world) religion (see Vitebsky 2017, 6).

but in more intuitive wayfinding what he calls a dwelling perspective. He argues that indigenous people move around by being fully immersed, having embodied memories from their earlier experiences and relying on others' accounts. They have an ongoing practical engagement with nonhuman agents in the surroundings while being on the move. In other words, they do not look at their landscape from elsewhere, from above, nor do they try to correlate their whereabouts with a cartographic map but they are perceptually and directly involved with the world around them. Ingold writes:

To know one's whereabouts is thus to be able to connect one's latest movements to narratives of journeys previously made, by oneself and others. In wayfinding, people do not traverse the surface of a world whose layout is fixed in advance – as represented on the cartographic map. Rather, they 'feel their way' through a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being through the combined action of human and non-human agencies. (2000, 155)

One of the key notions Ingold uses in this (e.g. 2000, 167-8) and later works is *affordances*, which he borrows from ecological psychologist Gibson who argues that in the world of physical things an affordance of the environment is "what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (Gibson 2015, 119; italics in the original). A stone which invites to sit on it as it has a convenient shape and height for a tired traveller can be regarded an affordance. In a sense it has agency as that affordance emerges from the object itself.

I find this notion to be useful for my discussion here about changing perception of the environment in a religious conversion. However, I would use it more loosely than Ingold by stretching its use to more reflective and social dimensions. In my view, affordances are most of the times rather ambivalent requiring not only earlier experience but frequently also a conscious choice. Furthermore, in an animist setting, these are often connected to spirits or other nonhumans that humans share their environment with. Take the lake ice. If thick enough, it permits making a shortcut over it or fishing on it. Yet, if it is too thin, moving on it should be avoided. Perhaps it affords support to a child but not a reindeer harness that weighs ten times more than the child. As judging the situation well may be an issue of death or life, this requires conscious deliberation. And furthermore, part of it may be related to knowing whether the particular place has an active presence of a spirit who might want to harm an incautious person.

Ingold's focus is mainly on unmediated direct perception of humans in their environment. He has been criticised for downplaying the importance of conscious reflection in spatial orientation as his primary attention does not explain more cognitive aspects of navigation (Istomin, Dwyer 2009). However, anthropologists with a cogni-

tivist approach tend to go to the other extreme. For instance, Istomin and Dwyer portray Nenets reindeer herders to be primarily calculating navigators who pretty much look upon themselves from above executing their moves on the terrain according to a map-like plan for making shortcuts and so on (Istomin and Dwyer 2009; 2021; see also Ingold 2013).<sup>5</sup> They also largely ignore the local perception of the landscape being inhabited by various spirits that influence actual navigation practices, such as avoidances of certain places because these are deemed to be dangerous.

In his analysis of the Siberian Yukaghir, Willerslev (2007) has proposed a more balanced account in which he tries to overcome the dichotomy between the Ingoldian dwelling perspective and the approach that stresses the role of conscious reflection. He argues that learning to navigate needs both practical engagement with the environment which relies both on being taught by more experienced hunters who point out significant features *and* discovering the environment by oneself via careful observation (2007, 168). The engagement with the spirit realm requires both first-hand perception and concepts and stories about them that circulate in public, allowing reflection on unusual events and shaping thus future decisions. Taking this into account, it may be useful to see affordances as not only physical but also discursive and ethical, as Keane (2016) has shown them to be (more below).

Although initially they are meant to discuss spatial wayfinding, I suggest that practical mastery and the mental map approach are good heuristic notions for analysing changes in ethical self-formation and multispecies relations in conversion from animism to Christianity. In a highly dynamic mission encounter such as the one in the Nenets tundra, dwelling-like wayfinding and map-based navigation exist side by side. On the one hand, reindeer herders continue to rely on their practical mastery for successful movements in the tundra. On the other hand, people are required to know their way through a world that is governed by new moral rules instituted by one supreme

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**5** Istomin's and Dwyer's view regarding the Nenets is anecdotally supported by Golovnev who presents a Nenets herder's words arguing that Nenets nomads look at themselves from above when moving around: "[A] Nenets keeping way watches himself like from the sky as a moving dot on the map" (Golovnev in Istomin, Dwyer 2009, 43). My understanding is that Nenets herders do not look at their movement in an absolute map-like frame but use principally relational approach (e.g. depending on the overall direction in their seasonal nomadic cycle). Furthermore, the unschooled Nenets reindeer herders I stayed with did not use paper maps and they were reluctant to consult cartographic maps that I had with me. This seems to be different from formally schooled and state employed herders who have been exposed to such map reading introduced by the Soviets collective farm system. However, things have been changing recently as, with the coming of GPS navigation, pretty much every adult man in the younger generation has started using these when travelling on their snow mobiles.

deity. This can also offer new kind of emotions, including overly courageous movement on the land or being inhibited by certain divine signs which may make one cautious.

### 3 Embracing God's View

My argument is that with the introduction of evangelical Christianity there has been a move from shifting between perspectives of rather different nonhuman agents to that of privileging one, that of the transcendent judge depicted in the Bible and missionaries' sermons. This is the centre of gravity in this newly acquired value system. Even the acts of demons can only be understood from the viewpoint of 'the only true God' (often mediated by other characters such as Jesus, apostles, etc). One could describe this as a shift from a relational one to an absolute frame in spiritual terms, as there has been a pull towards adopting a mental map that looks at oneself from above and is supposed to constantly judges one's moves. In practice, this viewpoint is actualised only from time to time.

Obviously, this shift does not mean that Nenets converts would stop being attuned to the environment 'in the old way' and use their skills of practical mastery in spatial navigation. But instead of reading intricate signs of spirit masters in particular places (e.g. sacred sites) or dead ancestors (e.g. cemeteries), occasionally adopting their putative viewpoints, converts are more and more engaged in Christian moral navigation, relying on biblical maxims, stories and exemplars. For instance, when one has forgotten to pray before or after the road and his<sup>6</sup> sledge or snow mobile breaks down, then there is a talk about sins committed which require asking for forgiveness. In the old days, such accidents had to be rectified with offering or sacrifices. These events are all significant for how people have come to read their environment and navigate in it after conversion.

In the new evangelical logic, everything that happens in one's life reflects the quality of one's relationship to God. It thus imposes the ethical focus on one's self and its relation to the transcendent deity which demands piety, constant self-monitoring as well as assessing others' through the prism of absolute good and evil, right and wrong. Keane has described the way movements such as evangelical Christianity work via the active embodiment of the external viewpoint on oneself. He writes that in Christian and some other piety movements there is a

demand for consistency [which] is partly explained by the inculcation of a God's-eye view, a version of the third-person perspec-

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<sup>6</sup> My ethnographic examples here come from Nenets men.

tive from which the faithful is expected to see the totality of his or her life and impose order on it. (2016, 200-1)

The new Christian focus is seeing oneself from another's point view and imagining God's perspective on oneself in moral terms which "posits a single organizing vision" (Keane 2016, 213). In other words, a person becomes an object of thought for him or herself from elsewhere. Keane stresses that God's gaze (or this can be also the state's, party leader's gaze, depending on the movement) is mediated by other people, things and signs around which are all, in Keane's vocabulary, "ethical affordances". He uses the same term from Gibson, as Ingold does, but goes a step further from the corporeal world to that of the social, cognitive and conceptual one and argues that not only physical things but signs, stories, memories can also function as affordances. He writes:

By ethical affordance I mean any aspects of people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not. (Keane 2016, 27)

As a stone can offer itself up as a chair, if circumstances are right, so do names, concepts, symbols, habits, narratives that allow people to be evaluative towards oneself and others.<sup>7</sup> Whether one or another idea, sign or thing is picked up and used depends on various circumstances, as noted above.

The following ethnographic example demonstrate how in the Nenets tundra earlier experiences with the environment that is taken to be alive, entailing elements, spirits/demons and the heavenly God function as affordances which reflect both aspects of a dwelling perspective (practical mastery) as well as following a mental map (adopting the view of a divine judge).

#### **4 Thin Ice and God's Rage**

The Nenets reindeer herders I have stayed with over the years live in the Great Land open tundra with abundant lakes and rivers (only a few reach thinly forested patches in the southern areas and some live in the Ural Mountains on the border of Europe and Asia). I have travelled with nomads between their southern winter pasturelands

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<sup>7</sup> See Lukin (2020) who offers an interesting discussion on Keane's semiotic affordances in the Nenets oral tradition.

and northern summer areas throughout all seasons.<sup>8</sup> An anthropologist moves around usually with a host family in this part of the world. But in rare cases of individual travel with a reindeer harness in the flat treeless tundra, I have experienced how difficult it is to find the way from one location to another. Not finding one's way is not the only problem. There are various dangers when moving around which can be fatal such as climbing mountains, crossing water bodies, losing one's harness in the snowstorm, suffering hypothermia and so on.

Let me give a brief ethnographic example of what I mean by the changing perception of the environment which involves adopting God's-eye view in this newly converted community. Middle-aged Yegor<sup>9</sup> had recently converted to Christianity with his entire family. Earlier he had participated in sacrificial slaughtering of reindeer and made offerings to the spirits dwelling in rivers, lakes and mountains - not too often and "not with an aim to become rich as many did", as he insisted. But by the time when I first met him, he was a devout Baptist who talked abundantly *about* God and talked abundantly *to* God.

One morning, after reading a passage on God's rage, Yegor said: "If we do not remember God, the rage of God would come close to us". He added: "We need to ask for forgiveness where we did not do the right thing". The same day the two of us drove our sledges over the autumn ice of a lake. Water emerged from the trails, showing how risky it was to make a shortcut over a layer of thin ice. After stopping on the other side, Yegor said: "You see, this water is like God's rage. We should keep to the edge of the lake". It was his routine practice to recall the Bible passage read on the same day and ask "what is God trying to tell to me".

In a way, Yegor was reading the landscape in a 'practical' manner, as he had always done, only his cosmological and moral interpretation had shifted. At that moment, instead of just passing on his ice knowledge, which he still kept doing from time to time (e.g. clear autumn ice is safer than old cloudy spring ice, etc.), or instead of telling about the signs in the old way which would have linked the precarious situation on the ice to the activities of local spirits, he chose to explain the ice breaking behind our sledges as the sign of God's action. Yegor was measuring events through the Bible, reading it slowly but patiently himself or relying on interpretations given by visiting Russian missionaries (see also Vallikivi 2009; 2014). His everyday duty, as he sensed it, was to take the divine gaze from above on himself, others and the world, listen to God, be open to unexpected mo-

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<sup>8</sup> I have done fieldwork among Nenets for 19 months between 1999 and 2017, including one year of migrating with a few nomadic families (2006-07).

<sup>9</sup> Personal names here are pseudonyms to protect my interlocutors' anonymity.



ments of divine intervention and also to tell about it to others, including me, 'an unsaved person'.

Each trip, however practical in its ends, was cast as a moral journey. Converts prayed before leaving the camp in order to have God's blessing for the journey to be safe. After reaching the destination, they thanked God for having arrived unharmed. Everything was spoken in either terms of blessings or in cases when serious obstacles or problems emerged these were seen as God testing His children. Lakes and rivers were regarded as one of the most dangerous areas where one had to be extra cautious, both to the physical and spiritual qualities of the surroundings.

## 5 The Master of Water

If I had arrived a few years earlier Yegor would have probably explained this situation to me in an 'animist language'. I had heard non-Christians saying that treacherous moments on the ice may be due to the activity of the water spirit called Yid Yerv, 'the master of water'. This male spirit who in myths lives in an underwater tent with his family and herds fish and sea animals is known to be a dangerous spirit that drowns people and boats. However, as with cosmological and moral dualism being not that stark in animism as in Christianity, it is regarded to be possible to influence Yid Yerv's plans and make him even into a cooperative being, especially when fish or sea mammals are needed.

Drowning is one of the main causes of early death, especially for men. This is related to the dangers of ice-cold waters in the region where people are not able to swim, and quite so often, this happens in a drunken state. Old timers say that when a person falls through the ice into the water, this is seen as the water spirit taking the person to his realm. Although I have not heard it myself, there are comments in the literature that say that no help is offered to a drowning person as he or she is caught by the water spirit and cannot be taken back from the spirit (Khomich 1976, 21-2). The drowned person could become an evil water spirit who would not end up in the land of the dead and continue to be potentially harmful to the living - to avoid this, a shaman had to be called who led the soul safely to the land of the dead (Lar 1998, 35; 2003, 98; Lar, Oshchepkov, Povod 2003, 108).

While in the tundra, I heard several stories about someone's experience of almost drowning. For instance, when a grandfather drove with his granddaughter across the river and the child fell into the water. The grandfather was able to pull the little girl out. He then threw some bread into the water as an offering. However, soon his wife died, which shows that, despite the offering, something went wrong (but as his granddaughter, who told me this story, said, the grandfa-

ther said that “at least the child survived”). People experience such events with ambiguous, ever-changing and never fully knowable spirits, as the animist world (especially once there are no more shamans around) lacks the certainty of evangelical Christianity.

In order to avoid death by drowning, one needs to give something else to the spirit, either as blood sacrifice (*khan*) or bloodless offering (*khangor*). Non-Christian Nenets poured vodka or blood from a ritually killed reindeer to Yid Yerv so that he would give fish and marine mammals and would not drown people and sink boats. In spring before the fishing season began and in autumn before the ice cover was formed, gifts were given to him. This was not done everywhere but only in particular places where the spirit was known to dwell. A good catch and good health were asked from Yid Yerv who was addressed as grandfather with diminutive suffixes (*yiryiko*, *vesakotsya*).<sup>10</sup> In summertime, when crossing certain rivers where there was known to have the water spirit present vodka was poured into them, asking “Yid Yerv, don’t spare the fish, give us fish” (*Yid Yerv, khalyam nyon sayyi, khalyam ta*).<sup>11</sup>

Yegor’s uncle told me of his practice of pouring vodka whenever crossing the river called Khekhemboyi: as he explained, this was not only for getting more fish but also making his reindeer stronger in the harness while on a journey. He said that he could sense the stronger pull of reindeer straight away after an offering. This staunch ‘pagan’ explained to me that he had also seen the water spirit with his own eyes when he saw him lifting the edge of the net in the river and they were left without fish. Apparently, no sacrifices were made in right time. Again, one could not be entirely sure what was the reason for the behaviour of the spirit.

The water spirit Yid Yerv was said to have many outer appearances. Most often he was described as a pike fish with antlers, as Tyikinye, a young Pentecostal Nenets woman from the Urals did. She explained to me that the spirit swam around a spruce tree under the water. Tyikinye had not herself seen the spirit but this is what a shaman had told in the old times to her kin when shamans were still active (until the mid-twentieth century). When she was twelve, her family migrated for a summer to the Pike Lake (*Pyrya-to*) in the Urals, where they caught fish. She recalled that they were warned not to

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**10** See also Khomich 1977, 8; Lar 2003, 121-2; Lehtisalo 1924, 44-6; 1956, 123; Khar-yuchi 2001, 107-8; Yevladov 1992, 98.

Other names or related beings of Yid Yerv are the river spirit (*Yakha Yerv*), sea spirit (*Yav Yerv*) and lake spirit (*To Yerv*).

**11** In the older literature there are reports that in autumn at the Ob River tied reindeer were thrown into an ice hole as a sacrifice. Also skulls, bones or testicles of a ritually strangled reindeer were thrown to the water spirit (Lehtisalo 1924, 45-6; Lehtisalo 1956, XLIX).

throw stones into the water in order not to enrage Yid Yerv.<sup>12</sup> Tyikinye also said that near the Pike River (Pyrya yakha) that flows out from the Pike Lake there is a sacred grove with trees (*khebyidya pya*) and where one can see reindeer antlers hanging from the trees. If someone cut a tree there, the person would go mad or die. She added that some people had seen there the dead people (*khalmer*) and their tent. But not everyone could see them though.

Making sacrifices is not limited only to humans. For instance Yid Yerv also receives gifts from the loon (*nyunya*) – the bird one often hears in the summer tundra is told to make sacrifices to the water spirit by pushing one egg from the nest into the water. According to Tyikinye the loon lays four eggs: it lets one through the nest under the ground and rolls the other one it towards the water and only two are left in the nest. She was not able to say why the bird did this. However, the Nenets scholar Lar notes that in this way the loon brings sacrifice to Yid Yerv and also its loss explains the bird's melancholy call one can hear in the summer tundra (2001, 285-6; 2003, 85). Also, in creation myths the loon is the one who is sent by the sky and creator god Num to fetch the earth up from the bottom of the primordial waters after which the land began to grow. Furthermore, Tyikinye said that the loon was once a human being before Num turned it in to a bird (see also Golovnev 2004, 39; Lar 2001, 285-6). Apparently, in animist thinking humanity was not as bounded and stable as the new Christians argued it to be.

As today people note, they would not know these things if shamans had not told that. The latter were able to mediate other species' perspective only because they had a far better access to these hard-to-reach realms.<sup>13</sup> For their soul journeys, shamans used parts of animals such as bird heads, or bear paws, claws and fangs. Also pike heads and teeth were used for travelling through different cosmological zones (Lar 1998, 29, 32; 2001, 287-8).<sup>14</sup> These attributes attached to the body enabled to take a perspective of particular spirit helpers in various animal disguises that lay people could not. However, ordinary people could also use animal parts as tools in their protective magic or addressees for offerings. I saw pike heads in the box-

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**12** Playing at the shore may cause headache to the water spirit, as children are warned (Lehtisalo 1956, 5, 115-16; see also Golovnev 1995, 469; 2004, 305). Some say that stones would hit Yid Yerv's eye (Kharyuchi 2001, 108).

**13** All these instances show that taking various perspectives and shifts in outward appearances have some similarities with perspectivism we know from Amazonia and elsewhere (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Brightman et al. 2012). This is a topic I have no space to go into properly here.

**14** Also shamans used the loon as spirit helpers, known as iron loons (*yesya nyunya*) who were sent to fly around and check the future fate of the shaman's clients (Lar 1998, 38, 72).

es of spiritual items on a sacred sledge (*khekhengan*) in the camp of a non-Christian Nenets. Also such dried pike heads with open jaws were hung as apotropaic traps against evil words. When visiting the tent of her relatives, Tyikinye told me that she was surprised to see a dried pike's head (*pyrya ngeva*), mouth full open, tied to the central vertical pole (*symzy*). As she learnt, the pike's head was supposed to catch all the evil words sent by other people and neutralise the curses and gossip that reached the family. The location of the pike's head was not incidental: a pike on the sacred pole which connects the lower and upper worlds has the power to protect the family, as it is a predator that can catch all kinds of malicious agents coming from the lower world.<sup>15</sup>

Old timers were used to the idea that various beings had their own unique perspectives on people. Take the *syikhyirtya*, a mythical small people living underground, who keep themselves away from human affairs (see also Lukin 2020, 11-13). They live largely as humans, only leaving their caves in the dark and fishing at night. A Nenets man told Khomich, the Soviet ethnographer specialised on the Nenets,

[w]hen Nenets [not an ethnic marker here, but denoting humans] start moving on the ice in autumn, old men *sikhirtya* say 'the upper people began driving' [their reindeer sledges]. (1970, 64)

This noise they heard was the sound of thunder, as she was explained. This draws a parallel with how Nenets describe thunder in the middle world on earth. This is when sky spirits drive their harnesses and the runners of iron sledges throw out sparks on the stones which people see as lightning (*khekhe tu*) and hear as thunder (*khe*) (Lehtisalo 1924, 19; Kharyuchi 2012, 17).<sup>16</sup>

This complex animist world related to the water and ice is comprehensible only from the perspective of various kinds of nonhumans with whom the humans share their living space. However, with the arrival of evangelical Christianity this intricate and multifaceted realm of various kinds of agency is largely homogenised. Now, talk-

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<sup>15</sup> There is also a gendered dimension to it with a cosmological underpinning. The Nenets women of fertile age are not allowed to cut a pike, as they are considered ritually impure, triggering unwanted attention by dangerous spirits. And in some areas and clans (e.g. Pyrerka 'pike-like'), pikes are not eaten at all, even if nothing else is left to eat (Tereshchenko 1965, 926). Pikes are considered practically inedible by most Tundra Nenets as they prefer white fish. When a pike was caught in the net, my Nenets friends said that it goes either to the dogs or would be sold to Russians.

<sup>16</sup> Also as Lehtisalo's informant shaman Ganka said, the water spirit can take seven different guises, including that of a human, sturgeon, a large iron pike with antlers that break the ice. He also said that Yid Yerv creates dangerous places in the river mouths as he breathes in under water and the air flows out behind causing whirlpools that sink even big boats (1924, 44).

ing about nonhumans' agendas in any other way than Satan's actions is denounced and avoided. However, there are moments when converts who have known the previous world ponder over the exact identity of one or other being as their own past experiences and the Bible readings work as such affordances.

## 6 Demons or Angels?

As a result of the recent missionary activity, there has been a clear shift from explaining actions of sentient beings out on the land in particularistic mode to the general scheme of the good and evil. With conversion to evangelical Christianity, most children would not hear about spirits and their particular characters and deeds, at least in detail, but they would learn rather general statements about their evil, demonic nature. The converts would say that it is believing in the demons that triggers these actions but then they may sometimes contradict themselves by depicting evil spirits (*ngylyeka*) as real agents who cause damage regardless of one's beliefs. This is so especially in sacred places (*khekhe ya*) which are carefully avoided because of their mere power. It is insisted that only God could protect humans from such malevolent agents.

The converts' focus has clearly shifted to managing one's relations with God by inspecting one's thoughts and reforming one's character. Also, the past events are reinterpreted from the new vantage point. Yegor's Baptist brother Andrei told me that when he was still a non-Christian he once almost drowned when crossing a river. He got lots of parachute material from the Soviet military in Amderma and he sold it to other nomads for making harnesses. However, the heavy sledge almost drowned him as the current took his harness into a canyon. "I was not yet a believer, but I already addressed God then", he said. Escaping this dire situation, after that he decided to give away much of his spare things including these parachutes.<sup>17</sup> At that moment, he did not discuss the predatory nature of Yid Yerv, his tendency to be active in certain places but he discussed this as a matter of his own greed that left him without God's protection (and making himself vulnerable to Satan's actions).

Baptist converts admitted that when making sacrifices to 'demons' one could indeed get plenty of fish and also their reindeer herds would grow rapidly. Yegor gave me an example of a man who often carried

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<sup>17</sup> There is a certain parallel with earlier accounts. When in danger of drowning, one could throw away something valuable such as a rifle as an offering to Yid Yerv (Golovnev 2004, 305) as well as give a promise to be baptised in the Orthodox church (Veniamin 1855, 115).

out sacrifices and his herd multiplied unusually fast. However, soon after, two of his sons died and he himself drowned and most of his reindeer were lost. “The spirit of Satan gives reindeer quickly, but they vanish also quickly”, he told me. From his new believer’s position, Yegor stressed that Satan gave only temporarily in order to corrupt the person and let him burn in the hell forever. However, reindeer given by God were seen to be a more stable resource here on earth as far as people prayed to God, read the Bible, kept communion with the congregation and demonstrated all other necessary characteristics of a believing person. This is why one’s entire focus had to be with God and not anyone else.

Interestingly, this unease with sudden prospering is an issue that is not an entirely novel Christian feature. Such unexpected abundance or exorbitant hunting was seen as a dangerous sign of a future misery. A hundred years ago, Yevladov who travelled on the Yamal noted that when game was abundant this was an ill omen and it was said that the person would die in two or three years (Yevladov 1992, 122). Twenty years earlier Zhitkov also wrote:

Among hunters there is a widespread belief that one should not hunt too much, as Num (God) does not like it when people hunt too much in reserve and to such a Samoyed he can send death. (Zhitkov 1913, 223)<sup>18</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church had been a source of many motifs and rituals since the nineteenth century. Andrei described that, although their grandfather considered himself to be Orthodox (he baptised children etc.; see Leete, Vallikivi 2011, 94-5), he still made sacrifices to the spirits including Yid Yerv. His grandfather visited a few times a church in his youth and, as Andrei explained, at the end of his life he “kind of repented”, as he admitted that he had “not behaved well” in his life. The grandfather had suffered from the bad treatment of his sons except for one son, Andrei’s father, with whom he retained a good relationship, “even when they drank vodka together”. Andrei told me “you see how they live”, referring to ongoing drinking and fighting scenes in his ‘pagan’ uncles’ tents. In Andrei’s words various

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**18** It is significant that the sky god Num was mentioned as the moral entity who could punish people. This idea apparently came from the Russian Orthodox Church as its missionaries had been preaching in the tundra since the 1820s (Vallikivi 2003). A couple of times I heard some non-Christians saying “God Nikolai is watching” (*Num Mikola manye*) when someone committed a mistake or transgressed a taboo. This had the potential to shift one’s perspective in these moments to a transcendental judge. However, this did not constitute a sustained practice of self-objectification, as this God did not have the piercing gaze of the Baptists’ God and the notion of sin had a more limited meaning among animists.

violent incidents had taken place in his uncles' families which proved that they were cursed by God and this iniquity has passed down to their children. However, Andrei was ready to see some signs of repentance in his uncles' actions, even if I knew them to be staunch opponents to evangelical Christianity.

When I asked Andrei's and Yegor's brother Ivan (who was the first Baptist convert and the main assistant for Russian missionaries) about the water spirit, he gave me a different answer, implying that there were different kinds, depending on what people believed. Ivan told me of a shaman who drowned and began haunting fishermen on the seacoast. He explained that this was not the dead shaman himself but Satan who had taken the form of a shaman in order to scare the fishermen. The idea was that, although the outer form may change, the essence remains always the same. In Ivan's explanation, the dead cannot do this "because they are dead". However, Satan can take any visible shapes. What people see depends on what they believe, was the widespread claim, even if other times demons are depicted as full-fledged agents, as explained above. This was a completely novel idea that believing had concrete consequences in one's life.

Ivan also recalled how they earlier asked Yid Yerv fish and sea mammals by sacrificing in spring time in a stream that would take the reindeer blood to the sea where the spirit lived. Curiously, he said he was not sure who Yid Yerv exactly was, saying that he was "unable to place it anywhere" in terms of a category of beings. He noted that it is possible that Yid Yerv was "the angel of water" that is known from the Bible, and he argued that, when a person drowns, Yid Yerv gives the person to God if the person is righteous. Perhaps echoing his earlier animist experience, he tried to attribute more concrete personhood to this agent. Although I do not remember him saying where exactly he found this passage, I guess he might have taken it from the Book of Revelations (the text he often read and talked about these days) in which among various wraths blood pouring into the sea is depicted (16,3-7).<sup>19</sup> The idea that different angels preside over different natural spheres is implicit in this passage which matches the Nenets pre-Christian logic. Ivan also noted that sacrificial blood contains the soul of the animal and in this way an entire being is given to the spirit. He insisted that people who made sacri-

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**19** The passage in the King James version: "3 And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. 4 And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. 7 And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments".

fices would receive more fish as Satan was capable of giving to those who believed in him. However, this would end with the eternal damnation in the hell, if not repenting in time. The focus was on one's deeds and character and not on knowing the intricacies of the particular spirits' behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, Christianity had brought to the tundra a new practice of objectification as there was a demand to publicly articulate its teachings by means of gestures, symbols and words, introducing new concepts (e.g. "I am sinful") and values ("humans are superior to animals"). These were ethical affordances which worked via particular scriptural phrases such as "God's love" or "God's rage" which one could see on the banners with biblical citations hanging in tents and could hear in everyday conversations. By frequently taking up the topic of what God wants from us, the most devout converts tried hard to make Christian morality a dimension of everything. This is what was called believing, entertaining a particular kind of loyalty towards one God that was argued to hate Satan, His enemy. As we see from these examples, the perception of the environment had become both God- and self-centred.

## 7 Conclusion

Even after conversion, moving through the tundra still requires lots of knowledge and experience which one can acquire by learning from others and trying out oneself. Wayfinding as a dwelling perspective is thus of great value for surviving in the tundra. But with conversion Nenets herders are coping with a new demand for self-formation on every step they make which makes them think and talk about God and His view on His children who err on the land, their temporary home. We could say that the converts read their environment by combining the old and new experiences and stories in a hybrid way. The particular tradition of literalist reading of the Bible and explications by missionaries offer a mental map, which enables – theologically speaking – to follow the path of Jesus. On the one hand, this was cast as a teleological project which has the end point in ultimate salvation and blissful existence in the world beyond. On the other hand, there

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<sup>20</sup> This matched with what the leading Baptist missionary once explained to me that for Satan everything was possible in order to hold people back from burning the idols, and that Satan became especially active when he realised that somebody was about to convert. He held that some Nenets would not convert because they had heard about people who had lost their reindeer after conversion. A specific example he gave was about a herder who had converted, but after that could not find any of his reindeer in the communal herd. Despite the missionaries' promise of powerful protection from the Christian God, many were not convinced.



was hoping for the immediate return in terms of growth of family and herd, health and sense of worth.

In this new stark dualist logic, all spirits (now “demons”), including those in the water and elsewhere, are regarded to be of the evil kind. Every so often I heard Nenets converts arguing that looking at things from the spirits’ or demons’ viewpoints was not appropriate, as it would be related to excessive interest in Satanic practices and thus dangerous for one’s relation with God. Some Christians outright discouraged me from asking questions about various spirits as this would be the wrong kind of investment of my time and attention as well as make my interlocutors think ‘in the old ways’ posing a threat to their salvation. In rare moments of juxtaposing the old pagan knowledge with the new Christian one, as with Ivan’s argument on demons and angels, this was to tread a precarious path to speculating on matters that most dared not to discuss.

With the arrival of evangelical Christianity, the attention was shifted onto the self that was not anymore distributed across species but was worked upon with God’s-eye view on oneself. The animist world where loons were ex-humans and made sacrifices to the water spirit had become dangerous if not unthinkable – in a sense impossible and impermissible to think about and certainly not to be conveyed to the next generation. Any trans-species transformations were just the proofs of a harmful belief in Satan that can end in the eternal damnation in hell. The new Christians did not need to share their resources with the spirits and no more respect-based reciprocity was entertained with the spirits who were being disenfranchised of their particular agendas.

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