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## **Recategorising an Arctic Hero Entitlement and (Un)Tellability in a Soviet Drama**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the claims of entitlement and processes of rendering a story tellable in early twentieth-century Soviet Union through a case study of the play *Vavlyo Nyenyangg*. The play was co-authored by Ivan Nogo and linguist Grigori Verbov in the context of the creation of a cultural and political intelligentsia, as well as a literature and other modern institutions, for Nenets, an indigenous community living in northern Russia and Western Siberia. In analysing the manuscripts of the play, the alterations made to it and its final, published version, the article argues that Nenets writers collaborated with their Russian assistants by combining two different fields, the vernacular Nenets and the institutionalised socialist models, to create original textual products that both followed the socialist requirements and alluded to the Nenets oral narration. Shared knowledge, called either ‘folklore’ or ‘oral history’, was used as an entitlement for the indigenous writers to tell stories that were rendered tellable in the socialist context through choices in vocabulary and plot structure. These choices produced stories that erased some local contents, structures and interpretations but simultaneously produced new ones.

Keywords: entitlement, tellability, Nenets, Soviet Union, indigenous literature

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In times of social, economic and cultural upheaval, storytelling can serve as a comfort and a way to preserve a people's past, shared knowledge and community. Indeed, the past, shared knowledge and community have been identified as important functions of folklore and the practice of narration (Bauman 1971). This view of the social base of folklore, however, has been recently contested and modified by perspectives that highlight the fluidity and mobility of cultural forms and people and the spectral nature of folklore's social base (see Noyes 2012). Moreover, it is important to note that folklore and narration not only create, acknowledge and strengthen communities but may also be used for the purposes of sense-making, financial gains, establishing power, creating new kinds of communities and conquering others. Nonetheless, folklore and oral history, as a communally shared body of knowledge, have been and are still frequently used as a means of claiming or denying entitlement to tell a story. As claims over the ownership and authorship of stories are often part of tense and emotionally loaded discussions, less attention tends to be given to the claims of for whom the stories are told and how they have been rendered tellable in their new contexts (e.g. Welch 2009; Coombe 1998; Shuman 1986; 2005). These are also vital in determining their social base.

This article discusses the use of culturally and locally shared knowledge in Soviet literature, aiming to show how this type of knowledge, often called folklore or oral history, is used as a resource in claiming entitlement but, at the same time, is also recontextualised in order to become tellable. In the Soviet Union, this play between entitlement, arising from the interplay of the writer and his or her community, and tellability, managed throughout the literary regime, made anti-imperialist claims while also radically reworking the voices of the people whom the texts claimed to represent. Indeed, despite the anti-imperialist claims, such processes have been discussed in the context of imperialism (Frank 2016; Boliachevets & Sablin 2016) as a form of cultural appropriation. In the following, I will focus on one case to show how the relationship between shared knowledge and tellability was negotiated in the context of early Nenets literature. The Nenets represent one of the northern indigenous peoples of Russia for whom literary languages and literatures were created in the early twentieth century to enhance the peoples' cultural development in accordance with Soviet ideals. Living in the tundra and boreal tundra of northern Russia and Western Siberia, they were mainly large-scale reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen when the Soviet regime took power (Khomich 1966; Golovnev & Osherenko 1999). The Nenets language comprises two different variants, namely Tundra and Forest Nenets, and a literary standard was developed only for Tundra Nenets, for which a surprisingly large body of literature was established during the 1930s. All in all, the rapid and exten-

sive publication processes resulted in a body of literature for fourteen different Siberian linguistic communities, and this would not have been possible without the passionate cooperation between indigenous students and mainly Russian ethnographers and linguists working in Leningrad. (See Poshataeva 1988; Ogryzko (ed.) 2003; Grenoble 2003; Frank 2016.)

I will investigate a play written in collaboration between Ivan Fedorovich Nogo (1891–1947), a Nenets politician and writer, and Grigorii Davidovich Verbov (1909–1942), a Russian linguist and ethnographer. The play is *Vavlyo Nyenyangg*<sup>1</sup> (1937), a story which brings together history, oral narration and revolutionary themes. Vyacheslav Ogryzko (2003) has suggested that Nogo wrote the play in order to deprive the Nenets of their memory, not taking into account the negative images of Vavlyo Nyenyangg in the community. Ogryzko also argues that Nogo wrote the play in order to contrast the traditional worldview and wealthy reindeer owners with the forward-looking revolution. Ogryzko wonders why Verbov encouraged Nogo to write in such a way despite knowing about the negative images concerning Vavlyo among the Nenets living in the tundra (Ogryzko 2003, 11). In the following, my point is less about the possible misappropriation of tundra dwellers' knowledge or the deprivation of their memory and more about understanding how and why the negotiation between the Nenets shared knowledge and the published play turned out the way it did. I argue that Nogo and Verbov worked together and that they both understood that the play would recategorise Vavlyo Nyenyangg's figure. I ask how Nogo claimed to be entitled to tell the story the way he did and what kinds of recategorisations he made in order to render the story tellable. Consequently, I will look at how the claims of entitlement were brought out in the play and what this reveals about the possibilities of voicing indigenous experience in the early Soviet context. I argue that the claim that the story was based on local experience and oral, vernacular knowledge – which was essentially considered a shared, local knowledge – was vital for the indigenous writers of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, I also claim that local knowledge acted mainly as an entitlement claim because tellability demanded rather profound sacrifices of the local and cultural ways of telling the story. I will first discuss tellability and storyability in more detail, after which I will sketch the cultural and historical background of the creation of the Nenets literature and *Vavlyo Nyenyangg*. The focus will then turn to the recategorisations made by Nogo and Verbov and the ways in which these aimed to render Vavlyo Nyenyangg storyable (Shuman 2005, 153) in 1930s Soviet Union.

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1 Tundra Nenets is transliterated according to the system introduced in Niemi and Lapsui (2004, 10), except for the schwa, which is not indicated. Russian is romanised according to the British standard, omitting the diacritics.

### **Literacy Regimes and Ideals**

When reading Ivan Nogo's play *Vavlyo Nyenyangg*, it is vital to situate it in the context of Soviet literature. Soviet literature, as a national literature, was to raise the standard of literature to its highest level through the form that came to be called socialist realism. However, the Soviet model did not emphasise the role of the originality of literary texts as much as their value as expressions of ideologies, people's thinking and the working-class experience. If literature had previously been the voice of the people, it now had to be the genuine voice of working-class people. This collectivity became an institutional part of the regime, regulating the themes and structures of published works, and it served the authorities by becoming a central part of the literacy regime (Dobrenko 2001, esp. 226, 242–246).

Apart from its emphasis on working-class writers, its Party-minded voice and its prescribed ways of writing, the Soviet literacy regime made an effort to include indigenous texts. Accordingly, the regime of the early Soviet decades did not only or mostly present difficulties for the incipient indigenous literatures, as described by research on other indigenous literatures (Blommaert 2008; Besnier 1995). Rather, Soviet literature was an arena in which new writers were actively sought, educated and assisted. Still, in order to make their voices heard, writers processed their stories according to the models of the regime in ways that clearly differed from the local cultural models. The revolutionary, utopian discourse that characterises socialist realism differs from the Nenets historical discourses in multiple ways. The most salient difference is the one between the utopian modernisation and atheism, and Nenets ontology. Modernity and atheism not only conceptualised the Nenets way of living and oral tradition as dying traditions but also as ones that should be downplayed and replaced with a modern, socialist way of life and expression.

When represented in the general frame of socialist realism, which emphasises general Soviet qualities and values at the expense of specific local and cultural ones, the missing parts may only be filled by the representatives of local cultures. Combined with the negative value given to the hidden features, typically local and traditional, the Soviet images are not only salient but also paradoxical and ambiguous, difficult to relate to. Eva Toulouze's (2004) characterisation of Nogo and his contemporaries as a generation of misunderstanding reflects this: in order to build Soviet society, they created literature that contrasted with Nenets' worldview and participated in processes that changed Nenets' values and view of themselves. Arno Survo (2001, 183–186) has described this tension as a field of languages with contaminated meanings, where the symbols are withdrawn from their conventional contexts into the utopian worlds of a radiant future. The mechanism concerning images is definitely as described by Survo: the symbols are recontextualised, and their

meanings are radically changed. This mechanism is typical for culture and the circulation of symbols, images and discourses in time and space. In such processes, the meanings often change as the context of the representation varies (Siikala & Siikala 2005, 58–131; Urban 2001). Additional discourses strengthen or weaken the new contexts, meanings and interpretations. As discussed by Carlo Severi (2015), who has analysed similar kinds of combinations as chimeras, the images could also form positively challenging combinations, which I believe was Nogo's intention.

In order to understand what the aims of indigenous writers were, I ask how they entitled themselves to tell the stories and how they negotiated the relationship between the shared knowledge and the obviously new kinds of interpretations that had to be made of it. By asking questions about entitlement and tellability, I aim to avoid discussions about ownership and authorship and go beyond the essentialist assumptions they often rely on. Essentialism nurtures the idea of cultures and traditions as easily definable wholes. The circulation of contents and forms, their movement in place and time, and the new frames the contents and forms take on in these movements – all of which have been theorised to be vital for culture (Urban 2001; Siikala & Siikala 2005) – tend to be left out of the picture. Amy Shuman (2005, 51) explains how entitlement is not about matching or not matching the story to a context, but rather 'entitlement concerns ownership of experience and the right to represent those experiences' beyond their personal contexts and meaning. Entitlement to tell a story is only one part of the circulation of stories in the world. If entitlement is about who is able to tell about an experience, tellability is about the possibilities of the teller to tell someone. Who can tell to whom is closely linked to storyability – that is, to what gets told. As noted by Shuman (2005, 24), tellability depends on the interpretation and categorisation of an experience, and thus a previously untellable story might become tellable through recategorisations, and *vice versa*.

By focusing on how entitlement claims are made and allegory used in the creation of an ethnic, socialist hero for the Nenets in literature, I aim to bring out the process by which an ethno-linguistic resource is utilised in the creation of a socialist play. Hence, my analysis is about the appropriation and even creation of a social story, a narrative that is claimed to tell about a community's meaning, which serves the purpose of a still larger community: the proletariat, or socialist peoples. In addition, I focus on claims about storytelling and institutional processes of evaluation rather than on cultural appropriation, ownership, creativity and authorship *per se*.

### **Literatures for the Soviet North**

In the 1920s and 30s, the Institute of the Peoples of the North gathered enthusiastic researchers and a community of northern peoples who had been selected to become students and future organisers of Soviet life in their home regions. At the Institute, northern languages, cultures, societies, economies and geography were studied, while at the same time, indigenous peoples were learning to become teachers, cultural workers, journalists and administrators. Consequently, while fictive literature was not the primary aim of the literacy campaign, literature in general soon became a natural part of the cooperation between northern students and researchers (Grenoble 2003; Hirsch 2005; Lyarskaya 2016; Vakhtin 2016).

Such was the collaboration between Ivan Nogo and Grigorii Verbov. Although Nogo is the first Siberian Nenets writer and the first Nenets dramaturg, he cannot be considered a naïve newcomer. Nogo's biography suggests that he found in the October Revolution and its visions a path for realising his social, political and literary agendas, as Ogryzko (2003, 10–11) suggests. Nogo was literate before the October Revolution since, as an orphaned boy, he had been taken in to study at the so-called missionary school led by Ivan Semenovich Shemanovskii, or Father Irinarkh, around 1900. Shemanovskii led the Obdorsk missionary station and school situated near the mouth of the River Ob in the Yamal Peninsula, Western Siberia (Ogryzko 1998, 522–523; Lipatova 2005). After leaving the school and before the October Revolution in 1917, Nogo worked as an assistant for several Obdorsk tradesmen. He studied in the Institute of the Peoples of the North and became a central politician and organiser of collectivisation among the indigenous peoples as well as a cultural persona in the Yamal-Nenets Okrug in the 1930s and 40s. Apparently, he also took part in the suppression of the so-called first *mandalada*, a Nenets uprising against Soviet policies in 1934–35 (Ogryzko 1998, 522–523; Golovnev & Osherenko 1999, 81–88). As Nogo's biography suggests, he was not only living in times when large-scale social, economic and cultural changes were taking place all over the Soviet Union but also chose to actively implement policies that often aroused confusion, anger and even violence among the indigenous peoples. *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was undoubtedly part of that implementation.

Verbov was a student of ethnography at the Institute in the 1920s. He graduated in 1931, after which he worked as a teacher of Nenets in the north, as an editor of northern literatures at the Institute and as a creator of a Cyrillic northern alphabet for Tundra Nenets. In 1937–1938, Verbov lived in Salekhard, preparing the new alphabet for Tundra Nenets. In addition to the new orthography, the two plays resulting from his obviously intense cooperation

with Nogo must be considered the principal results of this expedition (Burkova 2010).

The play *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was not the first text written by Ivan Nogo, or the last. Nogo's first play, the 1937 *Tadebya (The Shaman)*, is a straightforward agitation play that points at shamans as spiritual and economic exploiters of the Nenets. In the play, the shaman's tricks are unmasked, and he is ridiculed, after which the Nenets in the play decide to join the Soviet way of life. If *The Shaman* attacked an internal threat in Nenets culture, *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* points to an external menace, represented by rulers and tradesmen in towns, and to the internal hierarchies between the wealthy reindeer owners and the poor ones in the tundra. Nogo juxtaposes the rulers, including Khanty Prince Taishin and Russian tradesmen, with the ruled, the poor Nenets reindeer herders who are made drunk and cheated by the townspeople. *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was also clearly written for agitation purposes; in other words, to sharpen the need for collectivisation and to justify dekulakisation, namely the confiscation of reindeer herds and possible arrests of those against collectivisation or of shamans, in the minds of the tundra dwellers.

Both plays were written in Nenets by Nogo and edited and translated into Russian by Verbov. Covering the collaboration in its entirety would require a study of its own and cannot be done in one article. Nonetheless, a preliminary observation of the collaboration is one of the points of departure of this article. The manuscripts and correspondence preserved in the Kunstkamera (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Saint Petersburg) and Tobol'sk State Archive show that Verbov made corrections, such as suggestions for parentheses, so that the play would follow the conventions of a play text. In addition, Verbov omitted quite long passages, which Nogo accepted. Verbov's support, especially in promoting the play's publication in Leningrad and writing the preface, was also a significant part of their cooperation. (MAERAN 2.1.145; MAERAN 2.1.146; GATO 1727.1.19, 21, 25.) The title page of the published version of *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* states the name of the writer, I. F. Nogo; the title, *Vavlyo Nyenyangg: A Play in Five Scenes*; the publisher, the Yamal Okrug Committee for the New Alphabet; and the year, 1937 (MVK: Nogo). It is a modest, typewritten document with a black-and-white photograph of a Nenets tent on the cover, and probably not many copies were printed. *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* premiered at the ten-year celebration of the Yamal-Nenets district (*okrug*). The play has also been staged in 1941, 1969 and 2001. (GAYANAO 3.1.14; Komanovskii 1977, 72; Kharyuchi 2018, 88–93). Consequently, it seems clear that the play is officially celebrated, but we do not know anything about the reception among the tundra dwellers. Nogo

continued to write other plays, as well as short stories and other texts, none of which were published (Ogryzko 1998; MAERAN 2.1.146; GATO 1727.1).

*Vavlyo Nyenyangg* is based on actual events, which have been studied, re-imagined in fictive literature and told in local people's oral history and folklore. According to the available historical sources, Vavlyo Nyenyangg (or Vavlyo Piettomin) was a Nenets rebel (*vozmutil'*) in early nineteenth-century Western Siberia. He grew up poor and for several years stole reindeer and defied the local administration and civic order. He was first arrested in 1839 and after escaping from prison planned an even larger attack against the authorities in Obdorsk. News about the planned attack caused panic among the town dwellers and administrators, and it seems that a bluff planned by several administrators prevented the attack. Vavlyo was arrested in 1841 and sentenced to forced labour in 1843 (Abramov 1857; Barsh 1881; Kvashnin 2015; Kharyuchi 2018). These kinds of unrest among the indigenous peoples in the Arctic have been explained by, for example, changes in administrative structures and poverty caused by massive losses of reindeer herds due to infections (Lezova 2000; Kharyuchi 2018, 16–24).

The Russian texts describing Vavlyo Nyenyangg are roughly of two kinds. According to Kvashnin's excellent analysis (2015, 130), the pre-Soviet texts call Vavlyo a bandit and robber, whereas the Soviet texts describe him as a national hero and liberator. Therefore, the seemingly alarming figure of a native raising the standard of pre-Soviet writers provided Soviet imagination with a promising character: Vavlyo Nyenyangg became a figure who defended the populace from imperial supremacy, and several novels and short stories were written based on this theme. N. A. Abramov's *Description of the Berezov District* (*Opisanie Berezovskogo kraya*, 1857) is the first text that mentions the events and is based on eyewitness accounts. Zakhar Aleksandrovich Barsh's (1881) short article about Vavlyo Nyenyangg plays a special role in the chain of the texts. Barsh wrote his text based on oral testimonies and narratives that he collected, as no official documents were available at the time. Although Barsh's description includes several mistakes and shows a strong ignorance of the Nenets way of life, it had a considerable impact on consequent texts (Kvashnin 2015). In contrast, Eva Felinska's text (1852; English 1854) has not been cited as frequently, despite being more detailed. This lack of citation is obviously because the text was written in Polish and published in Poland.

Researchers and those working within local cultures and history (*kraevedy*) began to pay attention to the events of the 1830s and 1840s again in the 1920s and 1930s. These early Soviet texts began the new tradition of Vavlyo as a liberator and were full of rhetorical eloquence about the struggle of the masses (Kvashnin 2015). In addition, researchers paid attention to Vavlyo

Nyenyangg, and besides Kornienko's (1932) very political article, workers at the Omsk historical archive also published official documents related to the events in 1929 and 1940. These non-fiction texts were soon combined with fictive ones, of which Nogo's play is the first. The later texts could not have had an impact on Nogo. Budarin's *Syn' plemeni Nyenyanggov* (1964; *The Son of the Nyenyanggs*) is the first larger Russian fictive novel of Vavlyo. The most recent version was written in the 1980s and published in 1984 (Anisimkova 1984). The figure has also inspired other indigenous Soviet writers: Vavlyo's name is mentioned in a short story written by Ivan Istomin – a contemporary of Nogo, who brought Nyenyangg together with the mythic figure of Pinegusse and the motif of stealing the Sun – and in Leonid Laptui's poems (Istomin 1955; Laptui 1967).

Nenets folklore about Vavlyo Nyenyangg has not been studied or published very extensively, although its existence and popularity are often mentioned when Vavlyo Nyenyangg is discussed (see Khomich 1966; Pushkareva 2000; Pushkareva & Khomich 2001). As noted by Golovnev (1995, 156) and Kharyuchi (2018, 106), Vavlyo Nyenyangg is an ambiguous figure in Nenets narration. He is often depicted as an aggressive leader of a hunting camp, who persuades those close to wealthy reindeer herders to lead him and his team to steal their herds and to share the booty. The theme of reindeer theft might be followed by another one, in which Vavlyo is invited to town, where he is served liquor and arrested. The themes have been told in songs, epic narratives, called *xinabts*, and prose narratives (Bobrikova 1967; Pushkareva 2000; Golovnev 1995; Lar 2001). They are clearly related to but also differ from the multifarious epic texts that tell about Nenets visits to towns, which usually involve drinking liquor or describe court cases (see, e.g., Lehtisalo 1947, numbers 69 & 75; Castrén 1940, 270–280). In these narratives, the drinking and going to court typically end in favour of the Nenets protagonists, whereas in texts related to Vavlyo, the drinking clearly results in his defeat. In addition to these epic song texts and prose narratives, Pushkareva and Khomich (2001) have published two individual songs related to Vavlyo Nyenyangg. Individual songs, *syo*, are short poems that use figurative language and often focus on a central event in the life of the ego of the poem. Ideally, they are composed by the ego, but they can be performed by others when the ego of the song is absent. (See Niemi and Lapsui 2004.) One of these songs is a tragic wail by Vavlyo's sister, who finds her son on a frozen lake, apparently killed by Vavlyo himself. In her recent study, Kharyuchi (2018, 46–62) has also published people's reminiscences about Vavlyo Nyenyangg, recorded in the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding the fairly small amount of folklore published about Vavlyo, one can notice that, apart from the later reminiscences, the character is pictured quite negatively in Nenets folklore. The reminiscences are most-

ly told by people who, in one way or another, attach themselves to the same bloodline, and Kharyuchi hints that the descendants of families who have suffered from Vavlyo Nyenyangg's actions might have other kinds of reminiscences. Lastly, it should be mentioned that narratives about Vavlyo have been popular among other native peoples in the area; the Khanty, Mansi and Komi have also told narratives about Vavlyo Nyenyangg (see Rochev 1979).

### **Building a Historical Play**

*Vavlyo Nyenyangg* begins in Nyenyangg's conical tent and camp, where he, together with his right-hand man, Toxo, gathers Nenets to join the uprising. In long monologues, Nyenyangg explains to the men why it is important to struggle against Prince Taishin and the officials in Obdorsk (they are treating the Nenets unfairly in court, cheating them in trade and collecting an unfair amount of *yasak*, i.e. the tax paid in furs) and how the uprising will proceed. The second act turns the audience's attention to the town of Obdorsk, where the rulers are described as idle and greedy for furs, power and liquor. Hearing about Nyenyangg's intentions, they devise a plan to lure Nyenyangg to Obdorsk alone and then capture him. At the beginning of the third scene, Toxo arrives at the camp, reporting that they have collected more troops and stolen reindeer from wealthy herders. At the end of the scene, Nyenyangg and Toxo leave for Obdorsk, believing the word of a Russian tradesman, Nechaevskii, who confirms that the town, with its citizens, is ready to accept Nyenyangg as their leader but says that they ask him to arrive without weapons. In Obdorsk, Nyenyangg and Toxo are arrested, and the prince and the chief administrator also come to make final decisions. They will release Toxo, send Khanty soldiers to disperse Nyenyangg's troops and arrest Vavlyo Nyenyangg. In the fifth scene, Khanty soldiers return to Obdorsk and report how the troops were dispersed. They also bring expensive presents from wealthy reindeer herders, who thus prove their loyalty to the prince. Toxo is released and ridiculed. At the end of the play, the prince and the chief administrator also intend to ridicule Nyenyangg who, in defiance, promises that their actions, the blood-sucking of the people, will soon come to an end. Thus, the play ends in a promise of liberation, alluding to the October Revolution in 1917.

The primary aim of the play, as in many other Soviet texts and other historical novels or plays, is to write history within the frames of art, or to obscure the boundaries between the two (see, e.g., Kaljundi, Laanes & Pikkanen 2015). Moreover, the originality of Nogo's play was thought to be in the Nenets perspective, which he knew through folklore and oral history and which would provide readers with not only an indigenous but also a northern working-class perspective on the history of the north. Thus, the play combined several dis-

courses that seemed to reach in different directions. If history was thought to describe the past from a more or less objective perspective, art was given the opportunity to choose, frame, underline, emphasise and, in brief, interpret subjectively. Moreover, folklore was understood to reflect a 'pure working-class perspective', which could be cultivated according to the models of socialist realism. In this perspective, Nogo is obviously leaning on one of the genres of the Soviet novel in his play. The Soviet historical novel involved a structuring principle that allowed readers to make connections between what they read and the contemporary, and this principle has been designated as the secret sense of the present (*tainaya sovremennost'*):

It is typical for a historical novel to present political intention through the permanent positivity of the heroes, who represent the people and who are oriented towards social protest, and through a narrative structure that allows the reader to make straightforward analogies between the events in Soviet and in the more distant past and be convinced of the superiority of the Soviet events. (Litovskaya 2008, 20)

It should be noted that there are several processes of allegory at play. First, the personal or local experiences and narratives are to be interpreted as reflecting the shared community experience of an indigenous group, the Nenets. Secondly, the story is taken to tell about a more general working-class experience of exploitation and possible liberation. Finally, the historical is meant to be understood as an allegory for the Soviet present.

The first allegory relies on an indigenous, or local and cultural, entitlement claim, which is clearly indicated in the negotiation process concerning the play's title. The subtitle of the earliest manuscript version by Nogo (MAER-AN 2.1.146), handwritten in Tundra Nenets in exercise books, is interestingly different from the subtitle of the printed version. While the earlier version's subtitle is 'The Nenets Hero from Taz Tundra, Who Went to Obdorsk to Overthrow the Ostyak Prince and Tsarist Officials in the Year [missing]' (*Nenetskii geroi Tazovskoi tundry shedschcii na Obdorsk dlya sverzheniya Ostyatskogo Knyazy a tsarskikh chinovnikov v [] god*), the final item archived in the Yamal-Nenets Okrug Museum has a pencilled addition to the title: 'The Heroic Struggle of the Nenets People for Their Independence under the Leadership of Vavlyo Nyenyangg in the Years 1839–41' (*Geroicheskaya bor'ba nenetskogo naroda za svoyu nezavisimost' pod rukovodstvom Vavle Nyenyangg v 1839–41 gody*). Both subtitles emphasise heroism and the hero's ethnicity, but the final version has a collective actor, the Nenets people, instead of an individual one. In addition, local elements, be they geographic (Taz Tundra and Obdorsk) or ethnic (Ostyak, i.e. Khanty, and Russian), have been omitted from the final version.

This tendency to downplay local, specific elements and the possible juxtaposition between different ethnicities is typical of the whole editorial process. The shift from 'a Nenets hero' to 'the Nenets people' moves the agent of the story from a personal to a communal level and renders the story socially significant. It appropriates the story for the communal actor and highlights the possible shared story and interpretation of the event.

What the subtitle also suggests is that the play is founded on actual events, on historical sources that provide information about the hero and his actions in the early nineteenth century. Nogo had at his disposal several historical analyses, the latest of which had been written in 1932, as discussed above (Kornienko). The overall scheme of the plot implies that Nogo used these texts, rather than Nenets folklore texts, as his points of departure in writing the play. What is more, the motifs of Nenets folklore about Vavlyo seem to be very few in the play. This is notable in light of the foreword written by Verbov, in which Nogo's knowledge of the motifs of the oral tradition about Vavlyo is explicitly mentioned: it is claimed that Nogo's play is exceptional and different from previous Vavlyo Nyenyang stories specifically because the writer is Nenets:

Vavlyo's name is outstandingly popular and respected among the contemporary Nenets. Songs about his revolt are sung even today. During the years that I have worked in the tundra, I have not met any adult Nenets who would not know Vavlyo, the Nenets national hero. [...] Comrade Nogo has not only used historical materials but is also greatly attached to folklore materials about the revolt, which he knows very well. (MAERAN 2.1.145)

In the above excerpt, an emblem of national hero is attached to Vavlyo Nyenyang and Nogo's attachment to the culturally shared knowledge is foregrounded. He is, in other words, claimed to be entitled to tell the story from the Nenets' point of view or to complement it with his indigenous knowledge in order to highlight Vavlyo as a Nenets national hero. This is not a modest claim as it is related to lines of thought that emphasised the value of vernacular experience and oral narration as sources of literature as well as ones that outlined the proper ways of writing in the early Soviet decades. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists of folklore began to criticise the Romantic views of folklore 'as the creation of a socially undifferentiated mass of peasantry' and, instead, placed more emphasis on contemporary performers as individual artists and on variation at the level of the individual as well as of social class (Howell 1992, 146, 193–194). Moreover, master performers and their creativity were parallel with literary authors (Howell 1992, 173, 224–225). During the First Five Year Plan (1928–1932), which often demarcates

a more radical line of argumentation at all levels of Soviet society, studying and collecting folklore was no longer seen to be enough. Furthermore, the use of oral tradition and its forms in agitation and literature became a crucial part of the class struggle. Consequently, the active participation of performers, folklorists and writers in the process of selecting folklore and reworking it into texts that would help socialist construction was emphasised (Howell 1992, 70, 249–270). During the same years, Maksim Gorkii, who had a considerable impact on literary discourses, encouraged writers to turn to their native oral traditions (Gorkii 1934; Piksarov 1938, 171–176). Nevertheless, as writers themselves had to be moulded into Soviet writers (Dobrenko 2001, 295), elements of tradition and history were to be written in a way that supported socialist construction.

*Vavlyo Nyenyangg* represents one of these works that created publicly supported and cherished, unique images of indigenous cultures and their histories. In the play, Nogo reimagines the past and the future of the Nenets, and his authorship arises from the curious interchange of cultural and literary models reflecting the imagined past and future alike. The excerpt from the preface suggests that Nogo has turned his attention to oral tradition and makes use of it in the play in addition to the historical sources available. It is implied that Nyenyangg is depicted as a Nenets hero especially among the Nenets, which is the significant reconceptualisation that Nogo is able to make. Because of Gorkii's famous and influential words, it was thought that each ethnic writer should make use of their own folklore in order to raise the quality of Soviet literature. Hence, Nogo is claimed to be entitled to tell not only a Nenets story but also a Soviet one, so that the local story is recategorised in the Soviet framework.

The indigenous, Nenets, or local entitlement is brought up explicitly at the beginning of the play through the subtitle and preface text. Furthermore, Nogo's ability and Vavlyo Nyenyangg's story are also insinuated at a metalinguistic and metanarrative level. This is most clear in Nogo's creation of adversarial positions between the rulers and the ruled, the rich and the poor, which are typical of socialist realism. Although previous texts about Vavlyo Nyenyangg describe similar kinds of opposition, Nogo is the only one who depicts this opposition inside the Nenets community. Nogo could not create the parts of the play that take place in the tundra based on previous Russian descriptions of Vavlyo Nyenyangg because Russian writers always depict revolts from the point of view of the town, and these revolts do not take place in the tundra. Still, the overall structure of the play seems to follow Barsh's narrative published in 1881, which does not depict the events in the tundra. The dual quality of the plot arises from this tension: the elements of the events taking place in the town reflect or repeat the Russian narrative, and one would expect Nogo

to use narrative elements of the Nenets oral tradition in the tundra scenes. Nevertheless, Nogo has decided to build the tundra scenes as confrontations between Vavlyo's feverish character and revolutionary mind, 'a schizophrenic combination of spontaneity and consciousness' (Clark 1981, 16–24; 82), and as confrontations between the rich and the poor reindeer-herding Nenets. Thus, the events that take place in the tundra highlight the socialist revolutionary character of Vavlyo Nyenyangg and his alleged ideology. He is depicted in the same way as many other typical heroes of early socialist texts: a rude and fervent agitator, who is guided more by his passion than by his reason (Clark 1981, 72–82). At a metalinguistic level, the working-class experience is built with the help of the notions of *teta*, *ngewa mena* and *manggbada*, which are translated into Russian as 'olenshchik' (a herder), 'predvoditel' (a foreman) and 'bednyak' (a pauper). According to the story, the herders and foremen of the camps who are not willing to join Vavlyo's cause are keeping the poor ones close to them so that they would not escape to Vavlyo's troops. Their reindeer are also mercilessly stolen by the troops.

### **Tellability and How it Turned into Untellability**

To unfold the case of *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* thoroughly, I will now look at the relationship between Nenets representations of heroes in folklore and the picture of Vavlyo Nyenyangg depicted in the play. These are related to the ways Nogo built his own entitlement as a writer to tell about Vavlyo Nyenyangg in the first place, in relation to both the shared body of Nenets knowledge and the working-class experience.

In Nenets folklore, too, the figure of Vavlyo is contradictory: in some narratives, he is related to the young heroes of Nenets epic songs, who often defy their parents, relatives and possible allies and only learn to establish reciprocal relationships in the course of their lifetime. In others, he is described as a wealthy herder himself, who stole from another, or as a great shaman who frightened everyone (Golovnev 1995, 156). Oral narratives about Vavlyo are not told from his perspective but very often from the perspective of either his sister's son or an ally, who might be called Toxo, for example, and who has unwillingly joined Vavlyo's raids. The hero of these narratives is severe and violent, and he breaks the conventional rules of ownership: reindeer theft is categorically unacceptable among the Nenets. On the other hand, thefts are central themes of epic narratives, in which they trigger series of wars and circles of vengeance. In their article about the representations of Khanty and Nenets leaders in folklore, Golovnev and Perevalova (2017, 119–120) note that Nenets leaders are usually depicted as spiritually powerful, egalitarian, highly mobile and wealthy reindeer owners. More often than not, they also are capable of establishing relations – often with relatives unknown to them – and are

dependent on those relations. The narratives are usually about inter-family or inter-ethnic feuds or wars but very seldom about confrontations between the indigenous peoples and the Russians. *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* highlights the mobility and egalitarian mode of Vavlyo Nyenyangg but downplays the ambiguity of the leader figure and the inter-family or intra-ethnic nature of the story related to Vavlyo Nyenyangg. Naturally, it also downplays the stories of those whose reindeer were stolen. By this move, Nogo is able to tell a simple, black-and-white story of the rich and the poor, relating the wealthy Nenets to the town nobility and the poor to Vavlyo and the demands of equality.

As I have already mentioned, this juxtaposition is partly created through the use of the notions of *teta*, *ngewa mena* and *manggbada*, of which the first two are attached to pre-revolutionary power and the last to the poor in the Soviet sense. The correspondences are not so simple, however, and Nogo has had to erase some of the meanings in order to build a coherent juxtaposition. *Teta* is a derivative of *tecy*, ‘to own reindeer’, meaning a person who owns reindeer. In folklore, though, it also serves as a denominator of a hero or protagonist (Golovnev & Perevalova 2017, 120). Consequently, Vavlyo, too, is called *teta* in folklore. *Ngewa mena* literally means ‘the one who is in the head’, referring to a leader. *Manggbada* is derived from *manggbasy*, ‘to be poor’. This highlights the hierarchical relations inside the camp in a vocabulary that is not conventional in Nenets folklore, where one would meet notions like *ti’ per-tya*, ‘a herder’, and *xabyi*, ‘a worker, a slave; Khanty’. The differences in word choice may seem small, but they indicate a deep recategorisation of the Nenets camp structure and economic ontology. Nogo’s play creates a contrast between those leading the camp and those who are poor in the camp. Nenets folklore portrays hierarchical relations between those leading the camp and owning reindeer and those not owning reindeer, but this hierarchy operates within a broader ideology, which presupposes that those who own reindeer take care of those who do not. The frame does not deny the hierarchical relations between workers and owners, but workers are not called ‘poor’. Rather, the poor ones are those who live close to towns and villages and beg or work for Russians, not living a nomadic life. In other words, Nogo takes a category that was conventionally attached to a non-nomadic lifestyle and connects it to nomadic life. At the same time, he recategorises the Nenets community according to socialist thinking. In addition, omitting the notion of *xabyi* is also significant. While the notion can be translated simply as ‘a worker’ or ‘a slave’, its second meaning is ‘Khanty’, which could be confusing. I argue that replacing *xabyi* with *manggbada* was a strategic choice that made it possible to avoid juxtapositions between the Nenets and the Khanty in the play. These word choices make the play tellable in the Soviet context. They recontextual-

ise the local Nenets narrative on a wider, transnational, Soviet plane and re-categorise the historical events as class struggle.

One remarkable omission in Nogo's play that must be mentioned is the spiritual strength related to Vavlyo Nyenyangg in Nenets narration. The leaders or protagonists in Nenets narration very often have spiritual powers that imply shamanic practices, and these kinds of powers cannot be defined as simply good or bad; instead, they create ambiguity around the protagonists. Consequently, parents warn their children about Vavlyo, as in a prose narrative about Togo Pani's (who corresponds to Toxo) life in which his father warns his son who is leaving the home camp: 'Go. But don't go too far. Vavlyo, the *ngilyeka*, from the family of Nyenyangg, has settled here. You should be afraid of those kinds of men' (*Xanyan, ngedalyo. Sac xewnyakumna nyon yadyer. Tyuku yaxanana Vavlyo ngilyeka ngamdi, yerkada Nyenyangg. Tyiki tolaxa nyenecyang tosa.*) (Lar 2001, 75). *Ngilyeka* not only means 'a severe and violent person' but is also a designation for a malevolent spirit. Vavlyo is often connected to strong spiritual power in this way: he is a character who misuses his power. Using the figure in the play, Nogo decided to hold on to the severe characteristics of Vavlyo, as in, for example, the scenes in which he agitates his troops to support him in his plans. However, Nogo downplayed Vavlyo's negative characteristics and replaced them with a clear class consciousness.

Furthermore, Nogo originally planned to highlight Vavlyo's non-shamanic appearance with the help of a figure of a Nenets shaman Wata in Obdorsk. This figure appears in the earlier version of the play, and he is associated with the ideas of greed and careless alcohol consumption. He is not only bibulous but also mean and malicious when Toxo and Vavlyo are arrested and humiliated at the end of the play. Nogo describes the shaman clearly as an antagonist of the Nenets. Moreover, Nogo emphasises his anti-shamanistic aims through the shaman's name, Wata ('unnecessary, overage'), possibly alluding to the long tradition of such characters in Russian literature, from Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin to Turgenev's unnecessary man (*lishnyi chelovek*; Mann 2001). Although a purely antireligious figure, Wata has been omitted from the final version of the play. Consequently, the play does not feature shamanic themes at all, while the earlier version contrasts Vavlyo Nyenyangg with the shaman. Both strategies downplay the shamanism attached to Vavlyo among the Nenets, and I argue that it is because a hero in a Soviet play could not be associated with tradition or religion. Instead of depicting an ambiguous shaman, Nogo has chosen to recategorise Vavlyo Nyenyangg as a leader in the struggle for equality. One recent study has argued that the overall silence around shamanism related to Vavlyo Nyenyangg in the play comes from a desire to protect his family from persecution (see Kharyuchi 2018, 11). It seems, then, that

although the reasons of Nogo and Vavlyo Nyenyangg's descendants were different, if not contradictory, they both caused an erasure of shamanic themes.

By combining knowledge of social and economic hardships with Soviet-type heroism, Nogo creates the fundamental salience of the figure, but the combination also creates an essential tension vis-à-vis previous narratives about Vavlyo, the bandit. Although the character downplays many central elements of Nenets oral tradition, Nogo's interpretation, together with Soviet historians' texts, have had a considerable impact on Nenets' historical views of Vavlyo. Ethnographers and folklorists have also repeatedly confirmed this interpretation. In today's Salekhard, for example, it is not uncommon to hear that Vavlyo Nyenyangg was the Pugachev or Robin Hood of the Nenets, which indicates that the new interpretation and character were very salient (see Yaresh 1957; Regnum.ru 2019).

So far, I have concentrated on the claims and choices made by Nogo and Verbov before the publication of *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* in Salekhard. The story has a sequel, which also sheds light on the issues of entitlement and (un)tellability. Soon after *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was published locally, Nogo and Verbov prepared for the play's publication in Leningrad and sent a publishing request to Detizdat (*Detskoe izdatel'stvo*), the largest publisher of literature on northern peoples at the time. It is for this publication that Verbov wrote the preface that emphasised Nogo's knowledge of Nenets folklore and narration about Vavlyo. According to the established principles, the play was first read by two editors, Aizenberg and Almazova, at Detizdat. Their short and polite answer, dated 15 June 1941, notes that the play could be published only after significant changes. Firstly, the figure of Vavlyo should be described more extensively in order to bring out his talent, bravery, strength and generosity instead of his roughness, vehemence, impatience and credulity. Secondly, the editors worried about the play's juxtaposition of the local indigenous peoples, namely the Nenets and Khanty, and recommended the removal of this element in order to highlight that the revolt was about class struggle. Finally, the reviewers wanted the end of the play to be rewritten so that Vavlyo's troops, learning that they have been cheated, would go to Obdorsk (MAERAN 2.1.145).

These review comments suggest that the era of Vavlyo's type of hero was gone by the time Nogo and Verbov sent the play to Detizdat. As has been noted by Katerina Clark (1981), the fervent leaders of the early Soviet novels were replaced by more contemporary, more dynamic and more convincing characters by the end of the 1930s (Clark 1981, 80–82). Because the system of editing and reviewing literature was quite efficient during high Stalinism, these kinds of demands were realised quickly throughout the whole system of literature. In other words, by the time Nogo and Verbov submitted the play

for publication, the revolutionary leaders had become untellable: Vavlyo was too revolutionary. In addition, history, as such, was no longer favoured as a theme; descriptions of contemporary processes were now in favour. What is more, tensions between different ethnic groups had become an extremely difficult theme, along with the possibility of an unsuccessful revolt, as in the play. The careful work of recategorising *xabyi* into *manggbada* was not enough as the play's events brought out a tension between the Nenets in the tundra and the Khanty prince in the town. Moreover, revolts in general were a difficult theme because of the ongoing small-scale revolts, such as *mandalada*, all over Western Siberia (Balzer 1999; Golovnev & Osherenko 1999, 81–88; Leete 2004; Vallikivi 2005; Laptander 2014).

The reason that *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was never published in Leningrad, and thus remained a small-scale local, self-published rarity, does not lie in the restrictiveness of the Soviet literary regime alone. After all, the reviewers thought that the play text was very important. The review was dated 15 June 1941, and Nogo was eagerly waiting for it (MAERAN 2.1.145; GATO 1727.1.19). Nogo was either too busy or unwilling to make the requested changes to the manuscript. There are two notable reasons for the play's fate. The so-called Incident of the Institute of the Peoples of the North, referring to Stalinist purges and reorganisation, washed through the Institute in 1937–1939 and must have had a considerable impact on the practical work of those who were not arrested (Roon & Sirina 2003; Krupnik 2008; Lyarskaya 2016). The second reason is the Second World War, which interrupted publication processes and also eventually took Grigorii Verbov's life (Burkova 2010).

### **Literacy Regime, Entitlement and Tellability**

Before the revolution, the Nenets had been represented through their language and oral tradition, mainly by researchers (e.g. Castrén 1852; Lehtisalo 1947). The purpose of Ivan Nogo's play *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* was also to create literature in Nenets for the Nenets, an indigenous people who did not have written literature before the revolution. Furthermore, Nogo wrote in a whole new genre in Tundra Nenets, and his plays represented first Nenets dramas. Consequently, the play served as a means of bringing the Nenets to an equal position with the other peoples in the Soviet Union. The play created and was set as part of the Nenets literacy institution that was developing the Nenets to be modern, along with the other Soviet and world nationalities and ethnic groups. This collective, nationalistic and monolingual aim was called socialist.

In rendering the story tellable in the Soviet context, Nogo, in close cooperation with Verbov, carefully wrote *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* in a way that served the socialist society: the play was designed to resemble Soviet historical novels

to act as an allegory for contemporary revolutionaries. One cannot emphasise enough that, from the point of view of Nogo and the incipient Nenets literature, the model offered an opportunity for creativity and for the use of shared knowledge as a justification to be heard. Omitting or recategorising folklore motifs, which were quickly becoming prohibited in the new Stalinist society, was also a way of doing something that fellow Nenets had not done before. Creating a new genre, a new method of expression, in Tundra Nenets required new renditions and points of view. I believe this is one of the reasons why Nogo was so open to the editorial process, which could only be lightly touched upon in this article: he did not wish to reproduce the Nenets point of view that he was familiar with but, rather, to bring out a new kind of Nenets position. The novelty was to write in a Soviet framework that emphasised not only social equality, atheism and communism but also their juxtaposition with what was before. On the one hand, being on the border between the old and the new is the defining feature of the play's contents, but on the other, one can also read it in the way the subject is treated, which is typical for the revolutionary years (Stites 1989; Clark 1981). Nogo was willing and able to produce a text that represented literary models in comparison to other Soviet peoples' texts. The logic of representation works similarly in any nationalist-based modes of representation: one represents the special character of one's own culture or community through images that are shared with others (Siikala & Siikala 2005; Siikala & Ulyashev 2011).

The popularity of Vavlyo Nyenyangg's figure in Nenets oral tradition is based on his ambiguity as well as on moral condemnation of his deeds. Moreover, shamanic themes tend to occur especially in narratives about Vavlyo and his fellows. The play presents a different kind of protagonist, a self-conscious revolutionary who wants to free the Nenets from tsarist power and wealthy reindeer herders. In addition, Nogo recategorised Nenets notions that reflected the ideal model of pre-Soviet society based on sharing despite hierarchical structures. In short, his rendition erased the multifaceted and ambiguous characteristics of earlier Nenets stories and recategorised their complexity into black-and-white class struggle structures. Although carefully made tellable, *Vavlyo Nyenyangg* did not meet the requirements of the literacy regime's central actors. The play remained a local publication.

Nogo succeeded in recategorising the image of Vavlyo Nyenyangg together with other Soviet texts that rendered the ambiguous rebel a locally celebrated hero – one who struggled for equality among the Nenets. The contemporary ideas of the 1930s placed considerable value on folklore as working material for oral performances and literature. In the framework of contemporary discussions on authorship in folklore and literature, Nogo utilised the no-

tion of folklore performers' creativity and the discourse of the importance of using oral tradition as working material. He clearly took advantage of the discourse only but did not want to use folklore *per se*. He did not want to be imagined as just another performer of oral narratives. Instead, he used the contemporary notion that took for granted the ethno-linguistic and working-class social base of folklore. As an author, he assumed the position of an indigenous socialist realist and literary man. This means that he claimed to be entitled to tell the story of Vavlyo Nyenyangg because he was attached to the shared body of Nenets knowledge related to the events, folklore and oral history that circulated among the Nenets. The story was part of the Nenets' shared knowledge.

Throughout this article, I have argued that when studying entitlement, it is important to note how the relationship between the agent and the local or cultural body of knowledge is constructed and how these align with the entitlement claim. I have also argued that focusing on these relations and alignments is more relevant than the actual match or mismatch between stories and their contents. In the case discussed above, both the entitlement claim and the recategorisations appealed to the social base of folklore, in other words, to the idea that constructing and maintaining a community and its shared knowledge is one of the functions of folklore. At the same time, the construction of another community – i.e. the Soviet community – and the tendency to justify socialist reforms created severe tensions within the group forming the social base of the folklore, the Nenets community. This tension has remained beyond the scope of public discussions, but today, the figure of Vavlyo Nyenyangg serves the creation of Nenets belongingness. It is not the Vavlyo Nyenyangg of Nenets folklore, though, but rather a character changed and remodelled in the course of Vavlyo's movement through space and time.

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