ANIMATING THE UNSEEN
LANDSCAPE DISCOURSES AS MNEMONICS AMONG KOLGUYEV NENETS

• KARINA LUKIN •

ABSTRACT

Changes, such as the social, cultural and economic transformations of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, evoke a need to remember and remind. Recollecting can be expressed in multiple ways, among which discourses connected with physical artefacts are a universal form, though contents and meanings vary considerably. This article examines Kolguyev Nenets memories of, and discourses about, a hill named Seĭkorkha: a sacred place whose idols were destroyed in the Soviet years. Providing a backdrop to this Nenets discourse is an artistic project which aimed to protect the Kolguyev Nenets and their island. The recollections are seen both as valued speech and as a part of everyday resistance to imposed transformations. This case study, based on field work and archival materials, shows how a community that has lived through vast changes has built continuity and stability through constantly changing discourse about a place that has been undergoing modifications for centuries.

Keywords: Nenets, post-Soviet, memorial, sacred places, resistance, discourse

Introduction

An employee of Nenets District Museum once declared to me that there are no sacred places on Kolguyev[1] Island anymore. She complained that tangible historical monuments like the old church and the Nenets idols were either destroyed or fell into ruin during the Soviet years. Fortunately, the woman continued, a monument stands in the graveyard among the wooden and metal crosses which makes at least one point on the island worth mentioning in the catalogue of historical monuments of the district. Regrettably, the museum employee was right about the absence of physical historical monuments and had a clear sense of the changes that the Soviet years had brought. Still, both at the time of our discussion and in the years since, it has been difficult to endorse her statement about the disappearance of holy places in their entirety. This is because contemporary Kolguyev Nenets narratives credit the island with sacred places and objects that once were there.

Situated in the eastern Barents Sea, northwestern Russia, Kolguyev Island is one of the most western points of residence of the Nenets, who live between the Kola Peninsula to the west and the Yenisei River to the east. The island is administratively part of the Nenets Autonomous District (*okrug*) situated on the western side of the Urals, where about 7,800 Nenets live, about 400 of them on Kolguyev Island[2] (Statisticheskie dannye…; Davydov 2006: 54). They have traditionally been tundra-dwelling nomadic reindeer herders, fishers

and hunters, but today, all the Kolguyev Nenets live in the village of Bugrino situated at the southern end of the island. Moving, freely or involuntarily, from a nomadic way of life in the tundra into villages and permanent settlements, was one of the most influential of vicissitudes affecting many aspects of life in the Russian North during the Soviet years. The settlement was accompanied by economic, social and cultural reforms which obliterated many practices and landscapes, but also created Soviet village communities such as Bugrino. (Slezkine 1994: 131–385 offers a comprehensive overview of Soviet transformation in the Russian North.) The collapse of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, brought new kinds of transitions, further shaking the foundations of the newly emergent village community.

Bugrino: *vtoroĭ ryad*—the second line of houses and the path beside it.

The material transition from nomadic to settled life, and profound social and political changes have given rise to a need to remember. Remembering, forgetting and being reminded have their own historical and cultural logics, no matter how universal they are as phenomena (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 176–177; Tonkin 1992: 2–11; Vansina 1985: 190–191). Memories attached to places and remembering a place or being reminded about it may take various forms. In Kolguyev, moving away from the tundra has produced a discourse about places formerly visited by most of the islanders. This discourse—though concerned specifically with the tundra—also circulates in Bugrino, constantly referring to former ways of living and ways of talking about them, powerfully defining this landscape as still meaningful for the islanders. It is a discourse that has been passed along to those who have only occasionally visited the island and its tundra and

yet who now also have an image and sense of its places and a will to remember them. At the beginning of the twenty-first century Ada Rybachuk and Vladimir Mel'nichenko, two Ukrainian artists who have spent considerable time in Kolguyev, offered their bronze sculptures for exhibition on the island, specifically mentioning the hill named Seĭkorkha as a possible site for their so-called Bronze Head. Their undoubtedly good intentions encountered strong opposition on the part of the indigenous islanders whose poignant comments never found their way into the local media.

Although Rybachuk and Mel'nichenko lived in the tundra with reindeer herders and, according to Rybachuk's texts, seem to appreciate many features of this way of living, the artists were unable to predict the reaction of indigenous islanders to their initiative. Opposition to it arose from different kinds of understandings of the meaning of a statue or monuments in the tundra, especially on high hills. For whether these bronze heads represent a tribute to the Nenets or are simply works of art, it is not the opinion of the Nenets islanders that these kinds of statues should be placed in the high hills of the tundra. My aim in this article is to explain why Nenets opposition was so strong by discussing the meaning of this particular hill in Nenets folklore and conceptions of tundra. This leads us to consider how certain forms and contents of knowing resist reforms and transitions.

Bronze heads in local media discourse

Ada Rybachuk and Vladimir Mel'nichenko visited and lived on Kolguyev Island in the 1950s. Instead of carrying out the practical part of their art studies somewhere in the socialist republic of Ukraine, they traveled to the fascinating northern regions of the Soviet Union, eventually ending up on Kolguyev. Their stay on the island, both in the village of Bugrino and in the tundra with reindeer herders, yielded many beautiful pieces of art and brought fame both to the artists and the island itself. Their artworks and especially the texts written by Ada Rybachuk (1967) reflect deep respect and a will to comprehend the life of the Kolguyev Nenets who at that time—although already under the *kolkhoz*—still mostly lived in the tundra, herding reindeer, hunting and fishing.

The artists have generously donated their artworks to the Nenets District Museum situated on the mainland, in the capital of the Nenets Autonomous District, Nar'yan-Mar. Their willingness to place their head-shaped bronze sculptures on permanent exhibition on Kolguyev Island was reported in the local newspaper, Nyar'yana Vynder (Korepanova 2002) in the context of the UN's International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995–2004). The sculptures were linked with the protection of indigenous peoples and with plans to create an ethno-ecological preservation area on Kolguyev Island. Next to the newspaper article a fragment of a letter from the artists was published:

> 'The Bronze Figures' are devoted to the indigenous peoples who from time immemorial have inhabited our land, whose guidelines in life proclaim: this land has to be protected, as you would protect your own home that gives you shelter, as you would protect the world that provides the chance to live—to everyone. Because we do not have another home, another earth to live on. We want to bring these 'Heads'—cast in bronze with especial respect for indigenous peoples and their worldview—to some high hill, high place on Kolguyev Island, in the Barents Sea, in the Arctic Ocean, where people, despite conditions apparently not suitable for human existence, not only survive and live but also

> respect and simply LOVE this country. We have a strong compulsion to raise these bronze figures on the island where we lived and which we KNOW; and we know that on the island there is a high hill, from the top of which one can in clear weather without the cloak of mist and rain, see around—all the island and the sea—as if it were the whole world, a cosmos. And this hill is called Arka Seyak Sede[3]—the Big Heart. (Author's translation.)

Thus, the artists wanted to place their sculptures on Seĭkorkha which is one of the highest points of the island, but their letter suggests that there might be many such statues and they could all find homes on other parts of Kolguyev. The project appeared to be a positive one. The artists wanted to highlight the beauty of Nenets culture and way of living, which is not very usual in contemporary northern Russia where local indigenous peoples are usually described within the discourses of social problems and cultural extinction. Moreover, the Ukrainians connected the islanders with the international discourse on indigenous affairs thereby raising the possibility of bringing land-dispute issues, and their occasionally heated discussion, into a wider context. The newspaper article condemns the local administration for not financially supporting the artists' project. Meanwhile, the media outcry and the artists' indisputably good intentions eclipsed the islanders' discourse about the possible sculptures and their potential exhibition placement. This is a highly noteworthy omission because during my own field work in Bugrino it became clear that the opinion of the Nenets islanders is unanimously negative.[4]

When they suggested locating their statues in the Kolguyev tundra, the Ukrainian artists were certainly unaware of the nature and extent of changes in the Nenets' way of life. They visited the island in the 1950s when most of the islanders still lived in the tundra and visited Bugrino only occasionally, mainly in the summer. The crucial material changes happened mainly during 1960s and 70s. They did not know that the tundra—inhabited in the middle of the twentieth century by Nenets reindeer herders and their families—is now a landscape where only a few herdsmen work without their families. Placed in such a location, the Bronze Heads would merely be curiosities, out of sight of the islanders who nowadays only rarely visit Kolguyev's tundra from the village of Bugrino.

Changing ways of life on Kolguyev Island

As the nomadic lifestyle was considered backward by the Soviet state, the nomads were encouraged and later also forced to move into villages (see e.g. Golovnev and Osherenko 1999: 95–99; Fondahl 1998: 64–72; Sokolova 1990: 25–27). This did not happen overnight on Kolguyev, but took place mainly in the postwar decades, when Bugrino evolved into a village. The state did not only want to relocate the so-called unproductive labor force (women and children) to the villages and houses, but new dwellings, such as portable houses, were also designed for the herders in the tundra. (GANAO op.7, d.77: 26; Tuisku 2001: 45–46.) It was clearly considered important that the Nenets dispense with their conical tents (*myaq*), live in the tundra in a 'civilized' way, and finally settle into furnished flats with no tangible connections to the tundra. The resettlements demonstrate the minute attention that was paid to space in the Soviet Union (Crowley and Reid 2002). Stephen Lovell (2002: 105) has noted that:

> The post-revolutionary order was designed to create a new man by remaking his environment in the broadest sense: not only by eliminating political and social opposition, building factories and creating institutions, but also by ripping apart the fabric of everyday life and then weaving it anew. Soviet people were required not just to acknowledge discursively, but also to feel and see, the 'sovietness' in which they were enveloped.

At the end of 1970s the shift-herding system was introduced on Kolguyev Island. This meant that herdsmen were also settled in the village: half worked in the tundra living in cabins as the other half waited for their shift in the village. (GANAO op.7, d. 5: 40; GANAO op.7, d. 22; see Tuisku 1999 for a more detailed picture of changes and adaptations in reindeer herding in the Nenets Autonomous District and Stammler 2005 for Yamal examples.) As a herding system, the arrangement might have worked well; certainly the reindeer economy has been very successful on Kolguyev. However, its social and cultural consequences have been significant. Regarding reindeer herding as an occupation rather than a way of living has been the main notion and the problem behind the transformation. Men were separated from children and women who, meanwhile, were separated from their home tundra (Tuisku 1999: 93–98; Vitebsky 2002; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). Shift herding also caused demographic changes such as a decrease in birth rates, in new marriages and in marriages between ethnic groups. The Nenets who moved to live in the villages, especially the men, did not find their place in the social life of the village which caused a sense of displacement (Golovnev and Osherenko 1999: 98–99; Pika and Prokhorov 1989; Simchenko 1998; Khomich mentioned this as early as 1966 [2006] in her secret report to the authorities).

The shift-herding system clinched the final settlement of the islanders in Bugrino, which was a big step both symbolically and in practice. Moreover, the settlement and shift-herding system were not the only changes taking place in the postwar decades; there were multiple, similarly large-scale reforms or innovations in education, health care, and possibilities for political representation, which aimed at modernizing—or sovietizing—life in the North (Sokolova 1990 gives an extensive picture of the reforms; see also Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). Furthermore, Russian and Ukrainian pioneers were settled in the villages to take care of the most important administrative and political duties, creating a sense of inferiority amongst the natives (Khomich 2004 [1957]: 246). At the same time, northern natural resources were explored and opened to exploitation thereby altering the tundra and conditions for indigenous livelihood. This, as Alexia Bloch (2004: xvi) has noted, produced a type of welfare-state colonialism in which natural resources were extracted in northern areas in exchange for services and raised standards of living. On Kolguyev, test drillings were made from the 1970s and since 1982 oil and gas have been exploited in the eastern parts of the island with the drill sites shifting further and further towards the center of the island, reducing the area of reindeer pastures (Tolkachëv 2000: 166–173; 437–438).

Village settlement and the changeover to the shift-herding system have emptied the tundra. If in the past people moved around the area, with their families and reindeer herds constituting several separate dwelling groups, nowadays only two brigades of male herders—occasionally accompanied by some women—cross the tundra from cabin to cabin according to plans made in advance. Villagers work in occupations not connected to the tundra at all: the public sector is the biggest employer with few other alternatives

despite the two food shops in the village. People earn additional income by selling berries, mushrooms, handicrafts, furs and meat. Nowadays, the majority of the islanders visit the tundra only in summer for fishing, goose hunting and collecting berries and mushrooms. Besides walking, which is the most common way of getting about, people also use dog teams and snowmobiles though the latter, and the fuel to run them, are both expensive and scarce so they are used with consideration. Nor are reindeer as easily available to villagers as they once were and dog teams are an inventive solution to the scarcity. Few families spend long periods—weeks or even months—in the tundra in summer; most visit only for a day or two or for a week. Consequently, the tundra is experienced mostly from the perspective of single places, not through movements across broader areas as before. Most of the islanders thus never see what happens in the reindeer pastures or oilfields, but hear about it through the herders.

A hunting cabin in the southern part of the island.

There are considerable differences in knowledge about the tundra between the generations and families. Most of the adult population—people born in the 1960s or before—have lived their childhood in the tundra, but spent school years in Bugrino or Nar'yan-Mar boarding schools. The majority of them still spent their school holidays in the tundra roaming with the brigade or family, and thus they have experienced nomadic life and have some knowledge of the tundra's landscapes. Among younger Nenets knowledge of tundra life and local traditions depends, however, on their parents, and most do not talk about the tundra very much with their children. The herders, on the other hand, of whom there are about thirty on Kolguev Island, are usually descendants of tundra-oriented parents

and tend to know the traditions very well. Thus, reindeer herding connects the islanders to the tundra, although the herding and the reindeer are almost invisible in Bugrino and the villagers are mostly isolated from tundra herding practices. Herding is still important not only because of its symbolic meaning and the news it provides of the tundra; it is also understood as a material basis for life on the island. Even if the village seems to be cut off from herding practices, reindeer herding is of utmost importance to Nenets society and changes in herding practices and pastures affect the whole community.

The tundra is not part of the village community only through reindeer herding. The Nenets residents of the village moved to Bugrino from the tundra with their culture, their world view, social structures and ways of being. This is reflected in the ways the Nenets dwell in Bugrino. Although the village design is a typical result of modern statecraft's visual codification (Scott 1998: 238–254), consisting of four straight rows of so-called standard houses, many modes of living in the houses reflect life in the tundra: old herdsmen do not warm their houses, most of the activities are concentrated in the small kitchen and living and bed rooms are used for storage, to mention a few examples. The difficulties facing the creation of 'Soviet' Nenets were noticed as early as the 1930s, when the first settled Nenets brought their own pieces of furniture from their conical tents to their new apartments (Khomich 1966: 288). Often described and set against the tundra, the village is also part of the network of Kolguyev's places the islanders know. The village is not just the opposite of the tundra, but also part of it. Thus, the village itself cannot be understood through the village environment and practices only, but becomes comprehensible in relation to other places on the island (See also Rethmann 2002: 130; Liarskaya 2009).

Tenacity of memory, power of place

Although the practice of reindeer herding changed during the twentieth century in a very radical way, many aspects of Kolguyev Nenets culture become meaningful only through the nomadic lifestyle and the practices related to it. The symbolic importance of reindeer herding is also constructed through these cultural traits, and not only—or even mainly—through contemporary reindeer herding practices. Still, the continuity of present with former herding practices is emphasized as one of the main foundations of identity. The past way of life with its structures still dominates the ways people think and talk about the tundra, about their island, about their home. In this way, their memories bring their tundra history into the present and are an example of culture being a palimpsest, an uneven whole of different kinds of practices and their representations (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 20–27; Glassie 1982: 664).

Sweeping Soviet changes also produced local reactions to administrative acts that were meant to modernize life in the North: the nomadic Nenets were to be made legible and thus open to more efficient administration (Scott 1998: 78–82), but the reforms had to be adjusted to local conditions and they were adopted differently all over the Soviet Union. Another aim of the reforms was to replace the so-called backward elements with modern Soviet ones though this was not fully successful either (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 206; Stammler 2005:146). Still, the Soviet years created a huge space with common, Soviet cultural traits that are not merely superficial (e.g. Humphrey 1983: 17). The

collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in more changes, however slow to arrive, that have affected everyday life in multiple ways. The transformations are most apparent to the elders with experience of life both before and after the reforms and their implementation, and who have become a source of knowledge about the past. During my field work, I recorded interviews with elderly men who were recommended to me as the "ones who know the island": retired reindeer herders and recognized tradition bearers whose knowledge is valued in the community. I moved between formal and informal interviews and collected speech connected both to places and landscapes and to the history of the island. The material contains place names, structurally coherent narratives and memories, recollections and comments about the transformations that have taken place during the twentieth century. Typically, people also refer to the narratives and recollections in their daily speech so that I have been able to grasp both the familiarity of the tradition and its life in daily discourses.

The material collected is speech-oriented and demonstrates that knowledge about places exists not only in practices of dwelling in the tundra, but is also readable in both everyday speech and more fixed forms of speech concerning places and landscape. This kind of speech comprises a body of material for studying the place conceptions of Kolguyev Nenets in the twenty-first century. The material consists of circulating discourse, which is meaningful and thus repeated though not always fixed in form (Urban 1996: xii–xiv), in this case not only reproducing but also transforming conceptions of place. It is important to keep in mind that this kind of circulating discourse cannot be understood as meaningful only for a certain time in certain settings, then to be forgotten or replaced overnight with another discourse. Accordingly, Kolguyev Nenets discourse not only brings history into the present, but also selects and re-narrates it. Discourse is in constant transformation during its transmission which, on the one hand, maintains it as meaningful and interesting but, on the other, changes its meanings over time. What thus is fundamental in speech about place is that it circulates, reproduces and transforms the way a society experiences, perceives and thinks about places (Basso 1996: 56–57). Speech is a constitutive part of collective memory and sense of place.

Recollection is a culturally patterned representation of past actions (Tonkin 1992: 2–4, 10–12). Physical objects or remembered places can also serve as vehicles for memory and recollection, but are most often attached to some discourse (Basso 1984; Raivo 1997: 207; Siikala 1998). As a speech act, recollection represents a recognizable speech genre in itself, but the speaker may also relate his/her speech to folklore with a variety of textual devices. This usually adds to the historical depth or authority of a stretch of talk (Bauman 1977: 17–22; Tonkin 1992: 38–41). Connecting speech to folklore highlights the collective significance of the speech: it points to the preserved and polished contents of cultural consciousness of a community (Siikala 1990: 175–177). Folklore consists of performances, texts separated from the performances, and the interrelationships between the two. It forms a culturally valued system of discourse that can be understood as an "instantiation of culture", as a virtual system of differentiation (Bogatyrëv and Jakobson 1982 [1929]; Siikala and Siikala 2005: 17–19, 48–49; Tarkka 2005: 63–64). Recollections can be part of this culturally valued system, they can be reckoned as folklore due to their specific characteristics, or those recollecting might simply make references to folklore or take advantage of its means of narrating.

Highly relevant when discussing the notion of place and, indisputably, memories of places, is Halbwachs' emphasis on the relative stability of places and surroundings and the power of these stable frames for creating a sense of continuity, a sense of society (Halbwachs 1950: 130–139). For Halbwachs (1950:133), places receive the imprint of a group reciprocally: "every action of a group can be interpreted in terms of space, and the place for the group is but a combination of these terms". Changing or transforming the structures related to a meaningful place produces opposition in the society or group living there. Furthermore, though not necessarily in any striking way, the old balance will be sought even in new surroundings "with all the power of tradition the group has", which Halbwachs (1950: 138–139) explains by virtue of the stability and tenacity of thought. While he is referring mainly to European cities, their houses and walls, his notions are readily applicable to the resistance Nenets place speech expresses against Soviet dislocations—with all the power of tradition.

The Heart-like Hill recollected

To illustrate the tenacity of Nenets conceptions of place with regard to the tundra I present a fragment from a recorded interview with an older Nenets man. The purpose of the interview was simply to elicit place names but as had happened many times earlier, the man also began to tell narratives about the places on the island. He created topic sequences and chains of narratives (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996: 56–61) moving through the Kolguyev landscape and associating between remote and more recent events on the island. In this way we reached Seĭkorkha from the western parts of the island, after the man had told me about his encounters with *sirtya*, creatures believed to live under the earth. We had a map before us and the man was pointing with his finger at the places—the hills and canyons—to which he was referring in his narrative:

> And then, on this side of the Gubistaya [River] in the lowlands is Seĭkorkha, The Big Heart.[5] They said, in the past it was told, that the guardian of the earth, that his conical tent [is in the hill]. In the flat lowland there is such a high-high hill. Not quite the altitude of this hill, from the sea level, probably a little lower. And once in the summer time people who lived around this neighborhood heard that someone was calling his dog. In the evening, the mist, usually there is a mist in the lowlands because of the humidity arising from the lakes so that only the peaks of the hills can be seen. And in that kind of [circumstance] a loud voice, someone shouted in a loud voice: that is very loud, audible. The echo was heard even in these canyons. Called his dog. And the dog's name was probably Logy. "Logy-Logy-la-la"[singing], called his dog. And lower, lower in this area the dog begun to bark and again the echo was heard in these canyons. And all the time, people already were of the opinion that the guardian of the island's earth lives there with his dog. And those who lived in this neighborhood, everyone heard, you see, everything they heard, you see. And true or false, I don't even know it. And in that way they used to see all kinds of people, according to old speech, of the old people. In the old days it was like this: if in some hill or anywhere at all, someone previously not seen, let's say a man, was seen. In this place where it was seen, an idol was placed, as if an icon that is, they walked around it a little like that. These days these idols do not exist anymore, nowhere can you even see them, idols, *syadeĭ*, they do not exist anymore. (H13/ 28.02.2004.)

The narrative can be seen as a text or collection of texts in two ways. First, it is an entextualized fragment extracted from a communicative event by the anthropologist. I selected and transcribed this fragment believing it represents a meaningful whole and thus, an instantiation of culture. This text is a material piece of Kolguyev Nenets culture. Second, not only researchers think that we can extract texts from the cultural process, but also "natives engage in processes of entextualization to create seemingly sharable, transmittable culture" (Silverstein and Urban 1996: 2). They too, extract portions of speech they have previously heard and situate these texts into new contents. This all is embedded in the text. As a text the narrative begins as a description of a place, results in a narrative keyed as tradition and ends with metacomments. The expressions "they said, in the past it was told" and "according to old speech, of old people" serve as the main keys for a narrative that begins slowly as the man tries to explain some contextual information for me. Referring to past narrations the man is both linking himself to a chain of speech acts and actors and at the same time claiming authority. The performative peak of this narrative is the point when the man sings "logy-logy-la-la" in a very low tone and recitative way, thereby making a reference to epic singing traditions which he knows very well. He thus again reminds the audience of the traditional grounds of the narrative and of his status as a good and authoritative tradition bearer. One of the common textual devices of these kinds of belief legends is the discussion about the truth value of the narrative ("everyone heard" "And true or false, I don't even know it"). Consequently, the narration itself reveals that it consists of a text or texts from a circulating discourse. Hence, the teller emphasizes that his talk is special, it is not just any recollection, but gains its weight from the past telling and singings. His narratives and recollections and his ability to tell of them are widely known and appreciated in Kolguyev. Although this lore about Kolguyev's places is widely known, as folklore it is performed only by few. The knowledge is of special value for the community.

The narrative ends with metacomments about the religious practices related to Seĭkorkha and other similar places. The teller describes how the idols were put in place as a sign of someone's perception of something that had not previously been seen. He also makes an interesting comparison between *syadeĭs* and Orthodox icons suggesting that the latter have represented similar idols to the Nenets as the *syadeĭs*. Some sources do indeed imply that icons have been understood as a category of *héhés* (Lehtisalo 1924; quoted and analyzed in Siikala 1987 [1978]: 203–204). Hence, the contents of the narrative refer to folk religious practices. Seĭkorkha is a sacred place previously marked with *syadeĭs* which were usually nude wooden statues mostly with pointed heads. (Lehtisalo 1956: 431.) According to Russian ethnographer Lyudmila Vasil'yevna Khomich, *syadeĭs* have been a subcategory of guardian spirits, *héhés*, which were located in places where something meaningful had happened or that were notable because of their form or size (Khomich 1966: 199–208). Thus, these wooden statues are a way of remembering or commemorating. They act as reminders as long as the memories attached to them are told and remembered. *Syadeĭs* comprise a category of their own in Nenets culture and religious thinking as markers of sacred places where one should behave in a certain way.

An English biologist Aubyn Trevor-Battye, who visited Kolguyev Island in 1894, in all likelihood also visited the Seĭkorkha. He describes in his travel account how he climbed to the

> Siecherhur,[6] one of the four sacred spots on Kolguyev. (…) This mountain, the highest in Kolguyev, is a conical hill, situate[d] some 150 feet above sea, and rising suddenly to about 100 feet. Its sides are steep and sloping, and it is formed as regularly as an ancient camp. On the top are two very old wooden bolvans,[7] too large to carry away, and many remains of reindeer. (Trevor-Battye 2004 [1895]: 327.)

As the English gentleman climbed up the hill to see the top and the scenery it gave, his Nenets companion was woefully alarmed and "flung himself flat on the ground and buried his face in the moss" (Trevor-Battye 2004: 328). The Englishman witnessed the folk religion of Nenets in everyday life. Today, the wooden *bolvan*s and reindeer remains are no longer on the hill which is why local Russians can say that there are no sacred places on Kolguyev. It is indeed hard to observe the continuation of the religious aspect of the traditional culture these days, because people tend to dismiss this topic by saying: "Religion is dead." Religious metaspeech denies the existence of religion and even the possibility of it in the village setting. In reference to folk beliefs and their possible continuity, I have heard it said many times that religion cannot live in the village, because it does not have a place there. It is also often said that shamans gave up their positions "because they were not needed anymore" as the Nenets moved to the village. Neither is Russian Orthodox Christianity, an inseparable part of Nenets folk religion, any longer visible in daily life. The only visible evidence of religious life is provided by the graveyards near the village of Bugrino.

The interview fragment along with other material from Kolguyev manifests that the landscape is alive with spirituality. This becomes represented in old graveyard sites, burial grounds of shamans, living habitats of *sirtya*, and prayer/sacrificial places. In certain places pieces of tree or stone should be left untouched, in their place, because "believe it or not", they have some influence on humans. Significantly, Kolguyev Nenets folk religion, then, seems to live in the settings in the tundra where it is placed by discourse. Folklore on Kolguyev at least questions the Soviet atheist mission. Situating religion in the tundra is quite natural, as the material basis of Nenets folk religion is in the tundra and its places, and in the practices carried out in the tundra. On the other hand, there are no places in Bugrino where religion could be actualized. The actual space of the village is organized by very different principles than, for instance, that of a camp site or migration routes. In this sense a space can be significant whether religious practices are enduring or changing. The Soviet ideologists knew what they were doing when they settled people in the furnished houses that eventually developed into villages.

In the tundra, on the contrary, religion is connected to a network of places based on former nomadic ways of dwelling in the landscape. Formerly, reindeer herding was organised around, and by, the family unit and Kolguyev was divided into family districts where each group aimed to live and move. The movements followed relatively regular pathways so that people visited and stayed in the same places year after year although constantly on the move. Stability did not lie in houses or walls, as in European cities, but in stones, hills, lowlands and pathways visited repeatedly and regularly around the same time each year. Describing Yamal Nenets current reindeer herding practices, Florian Stammler (2005: 208) portrays a herder mapping "his" territory "as a complex set of seasonal pastures, crossings of migration routes, fishing and hunting places, nomadic camp sites for himself and his neighbors, and of cemeteries and other sacred places connected

to his clan". The tundra is not only an economic space but Nenets have "multiple ways of relating to the land", which is mirrored in their territorial behavior. The Nenets with whom Stammler has lived are nomads who spend most of their time in the tundra. Still, their sense of belonging is in many ways constructed along the same lines as evidenced in the place speech of Kolguyev Nenets.

Syadeĭs, and the hills where they stand, are relatively stable places reminding the Nenets of the continuity between past and contemporary generations, of their relatively stable pathways in the tundra. In Bugrino most of the Nenets know that the guardian of the earth or the island lives in Seĭkorkha. Moreover, this knowledge is connected to knowledge about other high places in the island: when conversation turns to Seĭkorkha, it is very probable that soon there will be discussion about Semigolovnaya, Savdi or Bol'shoĭ Nos. These form a network of high, sacred hills on the island which is linked to former nomadic practices, as sacred sites usually lie in areas that were continuously inhabited (Kharyuchi 2004: 162–163). The four hills are all common sacred sites, which means that every island family visited them when passing. Thus, they formed a collective, ritual landscape for the islanders.

As a hill that has already lost its *syadeĭ* and is now remembered only through circulating discourse, Seĭkorkha also acts as a reminder about the changes that have happened and are happening. In the narrative, the artistic character or commemorative functions of the *syadeĭ* are not the main issues; it is the religious importance of the *syadeĭ* in marking sacred or sacrificial places that is emphasized by the narrator. The narrator implies that his narration should be interpreted in the context of previously circulating discourses. Circulating discourse about Seĭkorkha functions as a commemorative vehicle reminding the islanders of their past way of living and its particulars; it preserves the image of Seĭkorkha as a sacred place—"our place" (Kharyuchi 2004)—and thus legitimizes the island as Nenets space. Furthermore, the discourse is about Nenets ethnic religion as a whole: it calls to mind that the landscape is inhabited by spirits who were respected by the people in the narrative. Their appreciation comes back to some exceptional event that made the hill sacred. The narrative is also about the nomadic way of living that made a network of places meaningful. Today, the spiritual landscape is partially out of reach for the islanders, as the way of living so tightly attached to it does not exist anymore in Kolguyev. Thus, the transformations: the narrative is told in Russian, not in Tundra Nenets and its metacomments mainly call into question the religious contents.

Resisting non-Kolgueyev practices and ideologies

Speech about places in the tundra, such as the narrative discussed above, is familiar to most of the population. As the Nenets were made administratively legible, however, the tundra became less accessible to most of the indigenous islanders, physically transforming into a space for herders and occasional visits. Meanwhile it persisted in the minds of the whole community through discourses concerning it. Drawing on the power of tradition is one way, among others, in which the Nenets community has resisted Soviet transformations with all the power of tradition. These shared recollections also separate the Nenets community from the settler community of Russians and Ukrainians who

have no part in them. For the Nenets, however, discourses of recollection preserve the tundra as a meaningful landscape in its entirety, as a network of places associated with their past way of life. The recollections reproduce the image of the tundra as a lived space (Berdoulay 1989: 130; Gow 1995: 59; see Kharyuchi 2004: 160–161 on similar tradition in Yamal).

Folklore can be "a sign of, and in some cases an argument for, the articulation of an indigenous epistemology and relationship to the land" (Bacchilega 2007: 167) as shown above. Since Luigi Lombardi-Satriani's (1974) remarks on folklore as a culture of contestation, folklorists have studied both the multiple genres of resistance and often exceptionally inventive and creative heroes in these narratives of contestation (e.g. Knuuttila 1992: 71–85; Saarinen 2003). Seppo Knuuttila has also suggested that we should extend the concept and apply it in a wider sense to cover the culture of resistance that is often unheeded as it is part of practice and narratives of the subaltern class, or the 'folk'. As a wider concept, the culture of resistance refers not just to oral practices, or 'wars of words', but multiple forms of struggle. These often

> require little coordination, let alone political organization, though they might benefit from it. They are, in short, forms of struggle that are almost entirely indigenous to the village sphere. (…) such forms of resistance are the nearly permanent, continuous, daily strategies of subordinate rural classes under difficult conditions. (Scott 1985: 236, 273)

I want to highlight that narrators do not always resist in a conscious way, nor are they always emphatic about their contestation. Some modes of recollecting and knowing the landscape are more salient than others, something which implicitly contests the significance of the others. These enduring narrations are part of a stubborn, everyday struggle expressing tenacity through memory.

Folklore and recollections offer one view of the resistance. They present Seĭkorkha as a sacred place where Nenets idols formerly stood. Taking into account the flexibility of folk religion I am not suggesting that a Ukrainian bronze head would desecrate the place, but nor would it fit into the category of statues formerly situated on the hill. A bronze head to replace the *syadeĭs*, probably destroyed during the Soviet years, would be a monument that does not belong to the category of *héhés*. Raising a statue is also a very Western form of commemoration: producing an artifact to mark a place of memory. It has been argued that in Europe monuments are raised precisely because of a sense of a loss of spontaneous memory. They remind Europeans of the memory that no longer exists and assist in the creation of a network of different ways of recollecting along with archives, anniversaries, celebrations and eulogies (Nora 1996: 1–7). Physical artifacts and remains are important when the place is to be connected with the past and meanings related to past. Kolguyev Nenets are naturally familiar with this discourse through the Soviet 'obsession' with statues, and heated debates about the destiny of many statues after the collapse of the Union (Krylova 2004; Verdery 1999: 7, 19–22). In 1999, Nar'yan-Mar's Nenets intelligentsia raised their own statue near the old fortress of Pustozersk in order to participate in the post-Soviet politics of history (Lukin 2005). Nenets intelligentsia have also in recent years been quite active in connecting Nenets sacred sites to the Russia-wide discourse about culturally significant places and their protection, but local people have been wary about these projects (see Murashko 2004; Kharyuchi 2004; Obshchestvennoe… 1999).

Familiarity with this discourse discloses the differences between Western or Russian and Nenets practices concerning statues.

Western memorial discourse concentrates on fastening memory to a physical artifact. Moreover, the monuments are placed within the sphere of official history and commemoration, and everyday remembering and narration are easily elided from memorial discourse (Küchler 2001: 53–62). However, official monuments—not to mention other meaningful places for a community—are also a regular topic of reminiscence; traditions are connected to them. Recollections and traditions both become attached to the physical features of places and animate them, and remembering can continue to animate places long after the physical artifact has disappeared (Degnen 2005: 739–741; Peltonen 2003: 236–239). In Kolguyev Nenets recollections, Seĭkorkha is a sacred place with *syadeĭs*. Even though narrators' metacomments note the disappearance of the idols, they still animate the hill. The hill is a place for *syadeĭs*, not for Western figures. Moreover, Western memorials and pieces of art are conceived as belonging to state spaces: cities, villages, public buildings. Although reindeer herding practices are centrally monitored and manipulated, the tundra has remained largely a non-state space, which is reflected in the way the Nenets refer to herders as 'free'. The Bronze Heads would jeopardize this balance. As a considerable area of good pasture land is already in the hands of the oil industry, questions concerning land use are quite sensitive.

Kolguyev opposition to the statues also comes back to practices related to sacred places which are not explicated in narration yet which are part of collective knowledge. Already Trevor-Battye's account reveals that although sacred places were known to the Nenets, they did not want to visit them 'in vain'. Trevor-Battye's Nenets guide was terrified when the Englishman climbed up the hill just to examine it. Stammler describes the Yamal Nenets attitude towards sacred places as fluid and flexible. Still, nobody is thought to come to the tundra just for fun—for tourism, for example (Stammler 2005: 89, 41). Galina Kharyuchi has noted that knowledge about sacred places is, as a rule, men's knowledge while women remain ignorant about the sites and the rituals (Kharyuchi 2004: 156–159). These attitudes and practices can also be found on Kolguyev: the tundra is visited only when herding or hunting, fishing and collecting despite the fact that nowadays people also talk about the pleasure one gets when visiting the tundra. Nonetheless, visiting the sacred places just for fun is not recommended; there should always be some reason for the visit. These places are respected and avoided. This is something important to consider with regards the proposal for raising the bronze figures and opposition to it. The figures would transform Seĭkorkha from a local sacred place which is respected and held in awe to a district or even nationwide place which would probably be visited by tourists of some kind. It is in marked contradiction with the Nenets' ways of dwelling and of sensing the hill.

The opposition of the islanders must also be understood in the light of their extreme distrust towards indigenous and environmental movements, which I shall touch on only briefly here. The Ukrainian artists wanted to raise their statue(s) based on global ideas about indigenous peoples, their world view and way of life. This discourse, well known amongst the indigenous islanders, is not in harmony with the conceptions the islanders have about themselves. It situates the islanders in a global indigenous context to which the Kolguyev Nenets do not feel they belong. From the Nenets' point of view

this discourse seems to romanticize indigenous peoples as agents of original ecology and to set somewhat strict standards of, for example, purity and authenticity for their way of life. The global indigenous discourse, despite its good intentions, is seen as another form of subjugating Nenets' practices to a new ideology by simplifying local conditions. (See Cruikshank 1998: 45–70 for discussion on the problems of conflating indigenous knowledge with the discourses of global movements.) The indigenous movement is also connected to the environmental movement and the so called ECORA project (Integrated Ecosystem Approach to Conserve Biodiversity and Minimize Habitat Fragmentation in the Russian Arctic) in which both non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations and the Russian Federation cooperate. Kolguyev Island is selected as a model area for the project where "government authorities, indigenous peoples, industry representatives, and environmental organizations work together to assess problems and find solutions" (Ecora 2009).

The project is proceeding quite slowly and Kolguyev islanders have very little information about its aims or its starting points. Information about the project is openly available on the internet in English, but Russian information has been very scarce. Moreover, in Russia the project is being realized at an administrative level and communicated in the language of administration and science which more or less obscures the mission of ECORA at the local level. The islanders connect ECORA to the ethno-ecological preservation area planned to cover the western part of the island. This zone is also understood in quite negative terms amongst the islanders, who fear that it will be just another way of taking over the reindeer pastures. The ethno-ecological zone would transform the western part of the island into state space, abolishing the freedom of the herders and restricting the sense of the tundra being a Nenets space. Connected to romanticized standards of indigenous movements it would mean, if the worst fears of the islanders are realized, that there are no suitable, traditional residents for the ethno-ecological zone on Kolguyev. As the oil industry steadily expands in the eastern parts of the island and the ethno-ecological zone is planned for the west, some worry that nothing will be left for the pastures, which would mean the islanders having to move away to the mainland. After the more or less forced settlement of the islanders in Bugrino the fear does not seem ungrounded.

Conclusion

When one arrives on Kolguyev Island, one usually lands first in the village of Bugrino which shows in multiple ways the huge transformations that have taken place during the Soviet, or to be more precise, the late Soviet years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union these kinds of villages, developed around the institutions and operations of the collective economy, were temporarily suspended in anxiety and fear, because the new economic orders seemed to pull the rug out from under the Soviet system. After the post-Soviet moments many villages and villagers found their place within a new Russia which has many common features with Soviet Russia. Although continuity between the pre- and post-Soviet state is harder to find at the level of the nation, at the local level these continuities are easy to perceive. The quite recently evolved villages are meaningful only because they are located in the same lands where the inhabitants of these villages and

their forefathers lived (see also Bychkova Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001: 109–110). Consequently, the villages are not disconnected from their surroundings, although their inhabitants have been physically resettled.

The conjunctures and the long durations of history become materialized in traces of past dwelling and what people say about them. The *syadeĭs* of Seĭkorkha represented such materializations, whereas today the entextualized narratives serve as vehicles for memory. Set against narratives about other places it becomes clear that Seĭkorkha is not a solitary hill in the empty tundra. It is part of a complex of places related to past ways of life. It is a sacred place, where ritual sacrifices have been made, where the guardian of the island is believed to live. Memory about this circulates mainly in the form of narratives told in Russian amongst the islanders. This tradition not only stores up ancient knowledge, but also represents the changes and comments on them. The interview fragment presented in the article also reminds the audience of the chain of tellers and tellings, of the similarity between Orthodox icons and Nenets idols and of the disappearance of *syadeĭs* and rituals.

The bronze figure initiative of Ada Rybachuk and Vladimir Mel'nichenko is based in Russian or Soviet ideas about art as a vehicle of devotion and tribute, and also contextualized within global indigenous discourses on ethnic rights to land. Both the Soviet discourses on statues, and global discourses on indigenous rights are well-known but considered odd on Kolguyev. They do not fit local discourses on Kolguyev places or ways of dwelling in them, now or in the past. The Ukrainians' Bronze Heads were never put in their planned locations on Kolguyev, although some virtual illustrations of the heads and their possible locations in Kolguyev landscape have been published in books presenting the Nenets district in general (Tolkachëv [ed.] 2000; Nenetskiĭ avtonomnyĭ… 2001).[8]

Orally transmitted discourse animates Seĭkorkha with idols and rituals once performed. It could be characterized in the same way as the digitally created pictures: virtual and imagined. However, the Nenets Seĭkorkha discourse is based on texts and experiences that are locally meaningful and therefore tenacious and, along with other conjunctures of circumstance, it was a discourse that effectively prevented the realization of plans to raise the bronze heads on Kolguyev.

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NOTES

[1] Russian and a few Tundra Nenets words are transliterated according to British Standard. Glottal stops, of which there are two in Tundra Nenets, are transliterated with q.

[2] There are about 50 Russian and Ukrainian settlers or their descendants in Bugrino.
[3] Probably because the artists do not speak the Tundra Nenets language and also because the letter is written decades after their experiences in Kolguyev, there are errors in the place name. The name in Tundra Nenets is *(Arka) Seĭkorkha (sede)*, literally interpreted as the (Big) Heart-like (hill).
[4] I have conducted fieldwork amongst the Kolguyev islanders in periods varying from two weeks to three months in 2000, 2003, 2004 and 2005.
[5] The original narrative is told in Russian. The teller says first 'Seĭkorkha' and then translates it into Russian with the words 'Big Heart' ("Seĭkorkha, Bol'shoe Serdtse"). There is a double naming system on Kolguyev: most of the place names have both Russian and Nenets variants. Thus, the translation is not mine, but the teller's.
[6] As the name of the hill is again somewhat transformed, I have concluded that Trevor-Battye's 'Siecherhur' is Seĭkorkha by the location of the hill in Trevor-Battye's account.
[7] 'Bolvan' is a Russian word referring to Nenets idols.
[8] This adds still another layer to the issue: digitally imagined landscapes that have become symbols of the district—a layer I have not examined in the present article.

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KARINA LUKIN, Ph.D. Cand.
FOLKLORE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, CULTURE AND ART STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
karina.lukin@helsinki.fi