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Security strategies of indigenous women in Nenets Autonomous Region, Russia

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses different strategies used by indigenous women seeking social security in Nenets Autonomous Region, Russia. Social security is understood as state provision as well as cultural institutions and efforts of individuals to overcome insecurity. One case describes the history of a woman who after the loss of her husband resorted to a traditional solution: she moved in to join the household of the deceased husband’s brothers in the tundra. In the second case, a woman leaves her baby in an orphanage for a few months. This latter strategy shows how women are able to preserve a high birth-rate while sustaining a tundra-based life. Even though these choices are seen within the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, which is central to existing ethnographies, this paper attempts to take the analysis further. I apply anthropological insights about care as a process that reveals social bonds, group belonging and identity in different settings, from the more intimate ties within kin groups to large-scale social systems such as state institutions. My goal is to contribute to the study of the interconnectedness among bonds, relations and affective landscapes on different levels – from mother–children bonds, to the nuclear family to community and state institutions.

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Introduction

Field researcher: ‘How did you get married, grandma?’ Agafia: ‘Following an old custom, my parents gave me away …. My sister married me to her oldest son.’

This paper is about some of the strategic choices that indigenous women in Nenets Autonomous Region (NAO), Russia, make in their life as mothers and wives. Such choices have profound influence on many different aspects of their lives, as I will show below. Nevertheless, this paper will hardly deal with a full standing analysis of all consequences of such choice or aim at explaining in any details how the women reason around it. For one reason, they would hardly recognize such decisions as social security, hence I use the notion for the purposes of analysis here and not as an emic local idea. The two cases described represent women’s participation in two institutions that have been often...
conceived of as substantially different and even contrary to each other. One belongs to traditional culture and regulates the fate of widows and the care for their children, and the second – to state public institutions of child care (orphanage). The first had been condemned by Soviet modernization policy as primitive and incompatible with contemporary values equality, collectivism, health and morality, and deemed ‘eradicated’ by the mid-twentieth century. The latter is seen nowadays as state imposed and undesired governmentality, and is presented as a contradiction to the popular expectations of what traditional indigenous culture and life should look like.

The purpose of this paper is to problematize existing ideas and expectations of how indigenous people relate to traditional kinship-based institutions and state institutions. The category ‘traditional’ has been applied increasingly in post-Soviet Russia to a catalog of practices found among the ‘Numerically-Small People of the North, Siberia, and the Far East’ (Donahoe, Habeck, Halemba, & Sántha, 2008). Although the categories are defined by the state, there has also been a strong imprint from the international movement for indigenous rights. As a result of the penetration of notions and procedures for defining indigeneity, the global search for and reference to authenticity and tradition has been imported and reified both by indigenous communities and the majority of Russians. Proliferating anthropological research in the North and Siberia has contributed to the reification of indigenous tradition, often defined in binary opposition to Soviet state indigenous policy.

Nenets, one of the few groups who after the demise of the Soviet Union, successfully revived private reindeer herding and have actively preserved other elements of their culture, like language and tundra nomadism, have become emblematic (Golovnev & Osherenko, 1999). The reference to tradition, however, has older roots and began in the Soviet period, those days with condemnation of customary ways which were seen in opposition to modernization and ‘civilization’. Indigenous people were expected, according to Soviet ideology, to make a leap from the lowest stages of social development, to socialism and communism. Soviet definition, references and politics of indigenous tradition have been extremely complex, and unstable. In addition, at present, imaginaries of indigenous tradition also incorporate practices and ideas that occurred and developed in Soviet days. Despite this complex landscape of tradition, the two narratives that I present here have been located within it.

The complex Soviet and post-Soviet landscape of tradition shapes the contours and provides context for the understanding of the women’s choices that are at the center of this paper. These two instances occurred at moments quite distant in time, and at slightly different stages in the lives of the two women. In the first case, I describe Agafia, who after the death of her husband in the 1970s decided to follow a usual Nenets practice: she let her husband’s younger brothers take responsibility for her and the family’s five young children. She moved to live in the tundra where the brothers were employed as reindeer herders and where her five children grew up at the collective state enterprise Friendship of People.

In contrast to Agafia, at the time of this field study, Elena was a young and happily married woman with three children who lead a fully nomadic life in the tundra. She belongs to a special Nenets minority group, who managed to avoid the collectivization in the 1930s and lived relatively independently as small-scale private reindeer herders during Soviet time. In this sense, one may say that Elena represents a non-interrupted
ancestry and tradition of nomadic reindeer herding Nenets culture. My interest, in this case, was attracted by Elena’s decision to leave her youngest child (at the age of few months at the time of the field study) in an orphanage in the main city of NAO, Narian-Mar, for the first months of his life. This innovative strategy that some young nomadic women practice today, as I learned, permits them to reduce the weight of female chores while at the same time increase the comfort of their babies.

This paper will analyze the life choices sketched above in the light of the contemporary debate about Nenets culture and tradition. My goal is to show that the institutions of care that are located in family and kinship relations and thought of as traditional, such as levirate or state-provided social security, should not be seen in simple opposition. Processes of cultural and social transformation influenced by the Soviet and post-Soviet state, including its institutions of care, unfold in complex and unpredictable ways. Thus, the offered parallel discussion of two diachronic instances of strategic choices related to care reveals that no simple evolution can be traced from pre-Revolutionary to state-organized practices and ideologies of care, kinship and citizenship. Instead, the state-initiated struggle against some kinship institutions, such as bridewealth and levirate, and the many innovations introduced by the state, including kindergartens, boarding schools, orphanages, and other provisions have created a complex landscape of opportunities and limitations, generally perceived as ‘old’ and ‘new’. Indigenous people orient themselves within this landscape through their strategic choices. They improvise, experiment, and creatively combine in order to procure security and provide or receive care. They negotiate with state bureaucracies, in the wider society and within their own communities and families.

I take inspiration for my analysis and borrow concepts and ideas from the latest anthropological discussions of social security and care in the study of postsocialist societies. Social security, in such research, is understood both as formal institutional provisions at state level, as well as other cultural institutions and even efforts of individuals, groups, and organizations to overcome insecurities. As Thelen et al. define it, social security constitutes ‘a variety of arrangements, through which people acquire food, shelter, education, and care’ (Thelen, Cartwright, & Sikor, 2008, p. 3). Social security in this understanding emerges through diverse practices, relationships, ideologies, policies, and institutions.

Within this broader understanding of social security, I particularly emphasize the aspect of care, in the way it has been recently theorized by Thelen. Even though she focuses on practices, understandings and analysis of care mostly in state institutionalized settings, the insights provided are of much broader significance. In her latest publications, Thelen and her colleagues offer a perspective that aims at incorporating broader studies of social belonging, for example, through kinship. ‘Since kinship, like other forms of social belonging, has to be actively chosen, made, or maintained, care practices are needed to contribute to the making and maintaining of kinship’ (Erdmute & Heike, 2015, p. 2). Care, thus, can be thought of as ‘a social practice that connects not only kinsmen and friends, neighbors and communities, but also other collectivities such as states and nations’ (Erdmute & Heike, 2015, p. 2). In this new understanding, research on care need not be concentrated only on the organization of social work and workers, as previously, but also pay attention on the act of care as human and emotional, as part of our human ‘capacity to make, shape, and be made by social bonds’ (Erdmute & Heike, 2015, p. 2). This approach reflects a duality of human perception and experience of care, both as a duty or a burden, but also as a pleasure, affection, satisfaction, trust,
dependency. Care in this framework can be affected by individual and group identities, culture, and finally life courses and stages.

The field of care when drawn in this way can bring together the study of social order on different scales, for example, those of state institutions and kinship relations. Thus, kinship and state policies can be seen as entangled fields to a bigger extent that can mutually influence each other. In a recent review of anthropological analyses of care, Erdmute and Heike highlight the meaning of care as constituting or complementing kinship: ‘care is a particular type of social action performed among people who understand themselves as belonging to each other by kinship and who are performing belonging through care’ (2015, p. 7). The authors underline that care and kinship can be simultaneously transnational and universal phenomena, and local, strongly influenced by culture and can take different expressions. ‘The modes of belonging produced, transferred, or confirmed through care refer both to the sphere of kinship as well as to other kinds of social belonging… to other types of collectivities, such as communities, nations, or states’ (Erdmute & Heike, 2015, p. 8).

The empirical data for this paper has been collected during a one-month field study in NAO in April 2013 by the three authors. Interviews and participant observation took place in the village of Karataika and tundra reindeer herding camps belonging to the Cooperative Friendship of Peoples (Druzhba Narodov). Even though not a native speaker of Russian, I am fluent in the language so it has been the main source of communication. The narratives of the two women that are main figures for the paper have central importance. Nevertheless, I also make use of the discussions and evidence provided by other members of the community in the analysis. Even though people collaborating in this project have not required anonymity or confidentiality, I have taken decisions based on my professional judgement and in observance of the leading ethical requirements in the field of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Thus the anonymity of some people has been preserved through invented names and slight changes in details to an extent that does not affect the quality of the analysis.

**Ethnographic and geographical setting**

NAO is situated in the European part of the Russian North. It is one of three administrative units where Nenets people live in Russia. Nenets, even though a titular group, constitute about 6% of the total population in NAO (Tuisku, 2002). The majority of residents are Russian immigrants who moved to the area during the Soviet industrialization. The majority of Nenets is rural population that is mainly employed in agriculture and education. The reindeer herding economy employs many Nenets even though other ethnic groups are also represented (Numbers, 1999; Tuisku, 2002).

Historically, Nenets have been predominantly reindeer herding nomads inhabiting the range between White Sea in the West to the River Yenisei in the East, and from the coast of the North Sea in the North to River Pechora in the South (Khomich, 1966, p. 16). Ninety-five percent of all Nenets in the past lived in the tundra sharing a relatively unified culture, which according to the influential ethnographer Liudmila Khomich, who has studied the group thoroughly in Soviet time, makes it possible to infer that cultural traits from one region should be similar to another (Khomich, 1966, p. 20). The most important features are common language dialect and the methods of reindeer husbandry (Khomich, 1966,
Reindeer herding is culturally specific and important ethnic symbol, even though only 14% of Nenets are actively involved in it today (Evsiugin & Vyucheiskii, 1998).

Nenets people lived in groups of few nuclear families residing in a close proximity and nomadizing together during the year. They practiced exogamy and were patrilocal (Khomich, 1950). Earlier scholars have distinguished two phratries and determined the names of all families belonging to each of them (Brodnev, 1950; Verbov, 1938). The members of each phratry are only allowed to marry spouses from the other phratry.

After the October Revolution, the Soviet state took up redefining the history and culture of all indigenous groups of the North in order to organize their modernization. Despite a number of turns in policy and ideology, the main line of reasoning was that they occupy a primitive stage of development which was in urgent need of reformation under the patronage of the more developed Russian nation (Slezkine, 1994). The economy of Nenets people was collectivized by appropriating their animals and all resources of production and organizing them into state or collectively owned agricultural enterprises. Reindeer herders were slowly converted into salaried employees, and later, in the 1950s and 1960s, nomadism was condemned as inappropriate for civilized life. Consequently, women and children were moved to villages and towns, while in the tundra one or two women were allowed to follow the reindeer herders in order to help with household work (Khomich, 1966; Liarskaya, 2013; Tuisku, 2001).

Soviet authorities also aimed a thorough transformation of Nenets customs of social life and religion – a process that has its roots long before the twentieth century. First, the Soviets banned polygamy, thus leaving previous families disbanded and many children without fathers. As people recollect, half-siblings were not told until recently about their kinship relation out of fear of the authorities and the shame before the multicultural community (author’s fieldwork data from Karataika, April 2013). Interestingly, Soviet ethnographers mention instances of polygamy even in the 1960s, which shows that traditional family models were quite persistent (Khomich, 1966, p. 303). In addition to direct regulation of family and social life, the Soviet ideology interfered with the practice of many Nenets customs by the inadvertent qualification of Nenets traditional culture as primitive and inconsistent with modernity. Thus, those who persisted in it could experience marginalization by the general community. Nevertheless, as some scholars point out, Soviet policies transformed Nenets culture but did not necessarily weaken all its practices or Nenets identity (Golovnev, 1995; Liarskaya, 2009; Liarskaya, 2013).

One of the Nenets groups that are the subject of this paper provides a unique instance. This group, known today as obshchina Yamb-To, have escaped the collectivization in the 1930s and managed to preserve fully private reindeer husbandry and nomadic way of life. Even though the Soviet authorities and local residents became aware of the group’s existence, according to evidence from villagers in Karataika, after the late 1940s no clerk was interested in either reporting the group to the higher state authorities or taking the pain of registering people. This situation was not unique to NAO since anthropologists mention, private owners during Soviet time existed also among Yamal Nenets (Stammler, 2005). Thus, these private reindeer owners (odinolichniki, in local Russian jargon), received their official status as Russian citizens together with their passports in the late 1990s.
How Soviet policy affected this group is hard to say today given the limited research (practically absent in Soviet ethnography). Even though scholars tend to think that the group is relatively unaffected (Vallikivi, 2008), a few of its members seem to have received school education. People also claim that they have been able to procure some basic supplies even in Soviet days through limited exchange and private sale of reindeer products in villages. Given also their attempts to avoid the attention of the authorities, I would expect more perceptible impact than acknowledged so far, which future research can perhaps reveal. Most of Yamb-To are nomads at the present, but slow tendency toward sedentary life can be noticed, as well as pronounced economic segregation. The majority of families in the group own herds of about two to a few hundred reindeer, which is considered enough to organize a reasonably comfortable life as a nomad. Few owners, however, have managed to increase their reindeer herds beyond the thousand or so utilizing the grazing lands of the neighboring collective reindeer enterprises, such as the Friendship of Peoples. Since the inheritors of the old Soviet reindeer enterprises experienced severe crises while trying to reform under the new political and economic situation, few of these private reindeer herders have managed to expand their herds and affluence. Their efforts are met with mixed feelings by other members of the group, since grazing lands are a limited resource and a competition for the common pastures was on its way in 2013, when I conducted this study. A couple of owners of smaller herds then explored other economic strategies. The collective enterprise Friendship of Peoples has been after 2010 working its way towards a slow recovery and increase of its reindeer. Due to the constant recruitment problems, private owners readily joined the collective against a monthly salary and other social security provisions, plus a promise to be allotted land in Karataika and state subsidy to build a house (Vladimirova, 2017).

What is distinctive about this group of Nenets besides the private ownership and predominantnomadism is that by the early 1990s about half of its members have been converted to evangelical Baptist Christianity (Vallikivi, 2008). This phenomenon, which is unusual in other Nenets communities, seems to result from the agency of a few members, the relative isolation of the group in the past, and the quest for alternative paths to modernity (Vallikivi, 2008, 79). The group’s openness to change is important and will be taken up further in the paper. In the following section, however, I will first discuss the story of Agafia which I relate to customary Nenets ideas of kinship and care.

**Family care in custom**

Agafia was 69 years old when two members of the project team visited her in the home of her second oldest son in Karataika, where she lives nowadays, in one late afternoon of April 2013. Her daughter-in-law served as an interpreter from Nenets and field assistant for the researchers in this case. Agafia seemed to understand our questions in Russian, but she predominantly answered in Nenets. Agafia is a shy and reticent woman, and she looks to me older than her official age. Nevertheless, she was friendly to us and proud to introduce her youngest grandchildren, two boys at the age of four years and eleven months respectively, who played in the same room. It is her daughter-in-law who encouraged Agafia to speak and partially told us the story.

Agafia was already twenty-five and still refusing to marry the candidates asking her hand, mostly because they came from distant villages and she did not want to move
away from her family. At this point, her mother was a widow, so perhaps this affected the
decision too. Finally, her older sister took responsibility and appointed as Agafia’s groom
her own oldest son, who had just turned seventeen. Another Nenets field assistant shared
with us the community rumor later, according to which the boy’s father was too severe
when he stopped him from moving to town to continue his education as a vet. So, one
can suggest that the decision to marry was of mutual convenience for both families.
According to old Nenets traditions, lineage transmitted along males: since the groom’s
family affiliation is determined after his father, he is not considered a relative to the
bride and hence such marriage is acceptable.

Agafia and her husband had five children. Unfortunately, the marriage was not a happy
one, according to rumors. Agafia’s husband died young of a disease caused by alcoholism.
The same village rumor attributes his short marriage and life to the big age difference
between the spouses. The close biological relation, on the other hand, was pointed out
as the reason for their children’s health problems and low education. This said, I have
to point out that Agafia’s second son, who hosted us for the interview, is a reindeer
herder, and his home was a newly built big house, so I have difficulty to judge the truth
behind such opinions. What they point to, is rather the syncretic character of contempor-
ary Nenets ideas of kinship and marriage. Agafia, a member of the older generation,
obviously felt somewhat uncomfortable to unveil to us, the foreigners, the history of her
customary marriage. Belonging to a generation of indigenous Nenets born in the 1940s,
she has perhaps become aware of the Soviet-imposed modern ideas of Nenets customs
as primitive and uncivilized. At the same time, she seemed to have no doubt about
them or question them, since she has followed them in her marriage and later life. Unfor-
tunately, I did not feel comfortable enough to enquire how, if at all, this marriage and
Agafia’s children were registered officially with the Soviet authorities.

In contrast to Agafia, the younger generation of educated Nenets women obviously
believed that customary marriage rules are of interest and value to scholars like us, who
want to document Nenets culture. Our field assistants, who belong to the latter group,
picked Agafia’s life story and arranged for us to meet her by their own initiative,
without hinting to us what her story would be. In this way, I can infer that they attribute
high value to old Nenets culture and feel a certain pride in it, or at least wish to call atten-
tion to it, while at the same time, they question the biological rational of some of its pro-
visions. They also attributed the problems with Agafia’s marriage and with her children to
her close biological relation to her husband and their age difference. In this way, they prac-
tically questioned the wisdom of old Nenets kinship, based in patrilineal family and cross-
generational marriage.

After her husband died in the late 1970s, Agafia moved to the reindeer herding camp in
the tundra, where her late husband’s two younger brothers worked as herders. They helped
her receive a salaried job as a camp worker (chumrabotnica). There she also received help
from her relatives to raise her five children. While further details about her relations to her
husband’s brothers were requested, it is common knowledge that women who live and
work in the tundra are mostly wives to reindeer herders. On more rare occasions, they
can be unmarried daughters, nieces, or sisters to herders (Tuisku, 2001). So, I would see
Agafia’s decision to move to live with her children in the tundra as an indication of a
close family relationship to her husbands’ brother(s), as well as being in the context of
Nenets customary ideas of family and kinship ties. There is no further data to judge the
character of Agafia’s relation to any of her late husbands’ brothers, i.e. if she lived with any of them as a spouse or on other terms. I think that the question is not of such great importance for the main argument of the paper, i.e. care within the traditional family institution. According to ethnographic evidence, Nenets have practiced the custom of levirate. In this practice, if a husband dies, one of his (younger) brothers and his widow are encouraged to marry.

**Levirate**

This widely spread practice throughout the world has been also mentioned in the Bible and has been attributed with different functions and meanings in the literature, depending on the presumptions and theoretical preferences of the analyst as well as the groups in question. In the Soviet context, obviously following older social evolutionary analysis of the phenomenon (Spencer, 1895; Starcke, 1889), levirate has been critically addressed as a remnant of primitive social order. Soviet ethnographers also claim this practice leads to exploitation and domination of rich herding elites over their poor relatives and group members thus enhancing social segregation. As in other parts of the world, the levirate’s main role has been interpreted in the light of bridewealth payment, another custom that Nenets share with a number of other ethnic and cultural groups around the world (Baloyi, 2015; Gluckman, 1950; Holmgren, 1986; Schwimmer, 2003). Through the levirate, the groom’s family manages to preserve the woman in the family and at the same time to avoid the payment of bridewealth for marrying another son in the family (Kostikov, 1930). In the same vein, they also keep the children that might have been born within the family. This said, Soviet ethnographers were careful enough to point out that levirate was not enforced over widows, but it was strongly encouraged (Khomich, 1966; Verbov, 1938). Levirate has been condemned as a method of control and objectification of women (Lutta, 2015; Ngore, 2012) and seen as a trend in the process of commodification of social relations and generally part of the transition toward a new capitalist social and economic order (Khomich, 1950; Kostikov, 1930).

Most studies of other ethnic groups that practice levirate attend more to social complexity. In the first half of twentieth-century levirate, often among people in the Americas, has been studied as part of the attempt to find stable patterns of kinship and social systems, as well as connect these to kinship terminologies (Aginsky, 1935; Brant, 1948; Lowie, 1919; Murdock, 1947; Sapir, 1916; Speck, 1918; Warner, 1930). Currently, levirate is predominantly studied in Africa in relation to ongoing economic and social development as well as the impact of HIV/AIDS. In this last context, more varied picture of its meaning for the individual, family, and society is revealed. Of course, much of this recent discussion builds on older works that have attempted to show the social functions of the custom to insure the continuation of clans and family affiliations (Lowie, 1919; Tylor, 1889, p. 253), to control the continuous belonging of the wives, children, and property within the extended family, or the procurement of heirs and continuation to the name and the lineage (Goody, 1976) (Holmgren, 1986; Starcke, 1889).

Lately, scholars have also turned more attention to local interpretations that had been ignored in earlier evolutionary, functionalist, or feminist perspectives. One such aspect which has been emphasized in emic texts (articulated by bearers of the culture and practitioners of levirate) is care provision and social security for the nuclear family from the
extended family (Beswick, 2001, p. 48; Goody, 1976, p. 88; Malungo, 1999). For example, Dinka people in Africa are shown to practice levirate in order to insure that ‘woman’s procreative capabilities are never ‘wasted’, and she is never without a husband to care for her and her children’ (Beswick, 2001, p. 37). It has been noted that in some African languages, such as Xitsonga, the word meaning ‘to take care’ is the same as ‘to marry’. Thus marrying a widow is interpreted as ‘a way of showing compassion’, and is thus considered a duty and honor (Baloyi, 2015). The levirate custom provides security and smoother continuity to the widow after her husband’s death (Ngore, 2012). It provides basic services offered in a homestead and protects the widow and her children (Goody, 1976, p. 88; Wanjiku, 1997). In other cultures, levirate is seen also as securing a continuous use rights for a wife to her deceased husband’s land and property (Platteau, 2002, p. 4).

In the Nenets cultural context, levirate appears to ensure that the reindeer herd of the nuclear family, which is its most important asset, is properly taken care of and preserved. Reindeer herding was considered a male job and reindeer were usually owned by men and marked with their unique earmarks. In pre-Soviet times, ownership was transmitted strictly along the male line, to sons older than 21 (Khomich, 1989). It is hard to say to what extent this rule continues to be observed, but private reindeer within the cooperative is owned by reindeer herders, i.e. men. In Agafia’s case, it is likely that the private reindeer herd of her husband was preserved by his brothers until her sons could take responsibility of it. Another indirect clue is that two of her sons continued to be employed in reindeer herding. Unfortunately, on the occasion of the interview, I did not ask about this, so I cannot discuss it here in more detail.

Levirate is thus a meaningful social institution that shapes a society in multiple ways, both on individual and collective levels. It binds ‘men, women, and children into concrete networks of social relationships’ (Beswick, 2001, p. 37). It insures social cohesion (Lutta, 2015) through the provision of social mechanisms and moral norms for smooth transitions during a crisis, both in respect to individual lives, relationships of care, family integrity, and property ownership (Holmgren, 1986, p. 156). As Odetola and Ademola (1985) describe some of its positive sides in relation to contemporary African peoples, it helps people relate to their cultural roots through a shared sense of togetherness and strong emotional ties, common feeling of solidarity, and reciprocity (Lutta, 2015; Odetola & Ademola, 1985, p. 42).

I also argue that the practice is important within people’s individual, social and cultural identities. Already in the 1930s, scholars examined levirate as part of the shaping of the social personality (Warner, 1930, p. 254), and debate existed around levirate and the individuality or substitutability of siblings (Abrahams, 1973). In the context of such views, the practice can be seen to have meaning in people’s life beyond ‘rational’ scholarly explanations of its functions. In the context of the present paper, I see it as a possibility among others in the life of the generation which Agafia represents. The character of her agency in making this choice is difficult to assess in the current research context, due to limited data about her personal and familial circumstances, and about the precise nature of her personal relation to the men. What can be stipulated, though, is that despite her own unfortunate family life, she invested herself through her decision into building up further familial bonds within her extended family group. In this instance, also through exchange of care: she managed the household work of her husband’s brothers in the tundra, while they took the father’s role in bringing up her children. She entrusted
her sons to the environment of nomadic life in the tundra and the educational and emotional influence of their reindeer herder-uncles. In this way, she most likely predetermined their future in important ways, since two of them became herders themselves. She also reconfirmed or moved toward a certain kind of identity that has at least a few different aspects: family belonging, ethnic culture belonging, nomadic life-styles.

Through her decision to follow a certain cultural tradition, Agafia also positions herself in a transforming social and moral landscape. She stays with traditional solutions and bonds rather than accept other options, offered by the Soviet state, like being a single mother, finding a job in the village, educating herself, or remarrying a richer member of another socially more prestigious ethnic group – all thinkable options in the 1970s, among which other Nenets could select. Her decision was a topic of commentaries and rumors in the village. However, she moved to the tundra and gained spatial distance from these modernizing opinions.

The tundra, as scholars indicate, provides more space for the preservation of cultural practices (‘remnants’) that Soviet authorities did not tolerate, including polyandry, as mentioned above (Liarskaya, 2010). Thus, tundra life has shaped Agafia’s identity, and she expresses sorrow at being too old to travel easily: she longs for the tundra and looks forward to a tundra trip that her son promised for the upcoming summer. Tundra space is an important aspect of her family life, and she travels with her family and helps care for her grandchildren, as she was doing when we visited.

Agafia’s story is interesting also because it marks in an interesting way the re-configuration of Nenets society and personal life in a period of radical changes, which have occurred during her life-time. These changes have created, in some instances enforced, but also prioritized other alternative social security and care solutions. Some of these changes will be addressed and illustrated in the course of the next section.

**State provision and innovative strategies**

The project team, met Elena while she visited the chum (tent) of a close relative of her husband, where we were accommodated for a one-week field visit to Brigade 2 of the Reindeer Herding Enterprise *The Friendship of Peoples*. Elena was accompanied by her two daughters (respectively six and four years old) and they spent two days and a night with us. She is an attractive young woman in her mid-twenties and in our conversations, which she was engaged in, she showed her eagerness to learn new things, travel abroad, and generally have a modern life. She did not see this to be in any contradiction with her family’s nomadic life-style. Elena and her husband are the owners of a small reindeer herd of two hundred head, which provides the necessary minimum for a moderate nomadic existence and does not require extra working hands. Both her husband and she own snow scooters (Russian made) which they drive together when traveling. Elena’s Buran draws a ‘female sledge,’ which is equipped with a fence and warmer and beautifully decorated wool sides, and is where children usually ride.

Elena shared with us that she gave birth to their third child only a few months ago. The baby, she explained unwillingly, is still in town, because he is not well enough. It was obvious that Elena is not at ease in providing more details about the case and we did not enquire the issue further. Only later, while recording an interview with a woman of another ethnic group in the village of Karataika, we heard that it is becoming a new
trend among nomadic Nenets women to leave their newborn children for some time in the orphanage in the city of Narian-Mar. In a few months, the mothers would travel back and pick up their children who are then considered old and strong enough to become part of a nomadic family life.

Unfortunately, since the topic was avoided in the nomadic camp, I cannot provide direct evidence of the way Elena and mothers like her think and speak of this practice. What is their reasoning and motivation to leave their babies for a short time in the care of social organizations? I can only speculate that this is related to a consideration about the health and well-being of the babies and their older siblings in the tundra, for whom mothers would also have more time. Ethnographic accounts of Nenets child care practices, as well as my limited field observations, raise no doubts to such a conclusion. Nenets people who live in the tundra have many children, and, according to ethnographers they attribute strong values and emotion to parenthood (Khariuchi, 2010). This is what I witnessed during my fieldwork in the tundra and in the village too.

Elena is a member of the group of private herders, which I introduced above, and has shown to us her eagerness to be a modern person. The desire of Yamb-To to modernize has been noticed already by scholars (Vallikivi, 2008). Laur Vallikivi, one of the few anthropologists who has worked with this group, also points out to the role that Baptist Christianity, taken up by the group, and especially the Nenets initiator of this conversion, have in spreading modernizing ambitions. I can only add here, that Elena, even though born in a relatively poor family, was adopted and brought up until the age of twelve by the only Nenets Baptist pastor. She thus was sent to the boarding school in Karataika very early, at the age of 6, where other Nenets children in her class could be 11 years old. It was unfortunate, Elena thought, that her parents picked her up from the boarding school at the age of 12 in order to make sure she is bound to her relatives and culture, to the tundra and nomadism. The latter seems to be a common idea among private reindeer herders, as teachers at the school assert.

In her revealing work about the establishment and interaction of the state system of boarding schools and indigenous Nenets in Yamal, Elena Liarskaya represents a multi-scale picture of complex development. After an initial phase of general establishment, in the 1950–1960s, the system was more forcefully imposed on indigenous tundra residents with the well-described practices of obligatory collection of children from their parents and rigid enculturation into modern Soviet norms and habits of life and education. Starting with the 1970s, however, Liarskaya shows that both boarding schools patterns and Nenets perception of the system evolved to a state, where Nenets saw the boarding school as a normal phase of children growth and life-cycle. In this way, it was adopted as a part of indigenous culture, and as such, used as a media for culture transmission among generations. Another important point the author makes is that such attitudes contribute to the coexistence of two cultural variants, tundra and village, among Yamal Nenets of today that are not mutually exclusive. Rather tundra and village culture are perceived as providing different and richer choices and alternatives among which contemporary Nenets can decide how to shape their own life-paths. Shifts between these different arrays of options are also common (Liarskaya, 2013). Admittedly, this work pertains to Yamal Nenets, but there is no reason not to extend some of its the conclusions to the neighboring NAO, all the more since, as the author underlines, the boarding school
system and modernization efforts toward indigenous people, in general, were pretty much unified in the Soviet Union (Slezkine, 1992).

While the cited study mostly addresses the boarding school system, there is a lack of related contemporary analytical work devoted to Nenets people’s interactions with other state institutions. Soviet scholars and ideologists provide critical comments on what they call ‘remnants of primitive customs’ or even ‘cultural resistance’ to modernization as phenomena to fight with. At the same time, they predominantly extol the successes of Soviet modernization among women of the North. The first institution of radical reformation whose role has been emphasized is collectivization of reindeer economy and its effect on social life in general (Khomich, 1950). The resettlement of Nenets women and children in the village is another policy with far-reaching impact on family and society patterns. It reconfigured the social institutions of care and family life in a profound way. Soviet ethnographers also write about the extension of state legal provisions that regulate Soviet family, women’s equality and rights, and finally state social support for families and women in the shape of employment opportunities, financial supplements for children, kindergarten and educational organizations (Khomich, 1950). Another important change regards state health care that has acquired primary importance. It is relevant to the empirical study above, that hospitalization at child birth has become a rule. In Soviet times, a helicopter would even be sent to pick up a pregnant woman from a reindeer herding camp and transport her to a hospital (Khomich, 1950). This must have changed radically previous birth rituals and child socialization practices described by pre-Soviet and early Soviet scholars (Bolgova, 2008). This topic, however interesting, is not directly relevant and will not be discussed here.

Elena Liarskaya mentions that among Yamal Nenets most women try to give birth in a hospital and only a few remain in the tundra. Nevertheless, most mothers strive to return with their newly born babies in the tundra in the course of a month, depending mostly of weather conditions, transport availability, and the child’s health condition (Liarskaya, 2010, p. 22). In this light, Yamb-To’s practice of leaving newborn babies in the city seems unusual. It, however, seems to fit with a note by another, this time indigenous ethnographer, who during fieldwork recorded Nenets mothers expressing their preference for village-located boarding schools against nomadic schools as a way for their daughters to spend the winter in better living conditions than the tundra camp could provide (Serpivo, 2013).

Applying Liarskaya’s insights, one should not interpret this latter reasoning as an interruption in or rupture with nomadic life in the tundra. Rather, it is a temporary choice among different possibilities. In this light, I interpret Elena’s and other young mothers’ strategy to leave their babies in town in better living conditions for the first months of their life as a good decision to use the social security that the state offers. This decision by itself does not represent a radical rupture with Nenets culture or nomadism. Even though among European Nenets the number of women among nomadic reindeer herding families is decreasing (Tuisku, 2001), such is not the case in Yamal, where women’s presence has been stable for the last 40 years (Liarskaya, 2010). So, the reasons for this decrease should be sought somewhere else. According to a male member of the Yamb-To group, the reason for decay in Nenets culture should be seen in the lack of enough educated and well-prepared Nenets people to take the jobs such as medical staff and administration in the towns and villages in NAO. The positive
developments in Yamal Peninsula of the last decades, he sees in the better education indigenous people there have received and their better ability to run many organizations and services in the interests of local people.

This text, as well as the practice described above, indicates that at least some of Yamb-To members have changed their attitudes to the state and its institutions. In a state of crisis, when many Russian citizens have limited their expectations and trust in the state provision of social services and security, Yamb-To women are ready to entrust their babies to public care organizations. This tendency can indicate both more trust in the power of the state to regulate and insure the proper operation of such institutions, as well as in universal human empathy toward children, that can insure that babies left there receive good care. It is likely that both of these ideas have been influenced by the Christian faith that these mothers have embraced. As already mentioned, Baptist faith tends to harmonize and express the group’s aspirations to modernity (Vallikivi, 2008). It is likely that Baptists might have an influence on the image and the relation of Yamb-To to the state too. One source of such influence is through the encouragement of parents to educate their children in boarding schools. It is quite possible that for Elena her early schooling experience creates more positive expectation towards state care institutions, which she does not perceive as something unfamiliar and threatening. Rather, care run by the state is a convenience and provides opportunities that one can take advantage of.

Discussion

The two life choices, discussed above, are separated in time and certainly illustrate historically evolving ideas in Nenets women of familial links, care and security, as well as state institutions. Nevertheless, I doubt that the analysis should be limited to history, social change, and cultural adaptation alone. Neither should the respective choices be solely attributed to the different historical paths of the groups of settled collectivized Nenets, whom Agafia represents, and the private reindeer owners, among whom Elena grew up and lives today. As explained earlier, both groups are related by kinship ties and pre-Soviet culture, as well as the profound influences that Soviet and post-Soviet transformations imposed on them in different ways. Even though today Yamb-To can be presented by some ethnic or regional politicians as the ‘most traditional’ Nenets nomads who can serve as a contrast and a corrective to remaining Nenets both living in the village and working in reindeer herding, this image mostly serves political purposes. The presented empirical illustrations can undermine such a simple dichotomy.

Both the cases of Elena and Agafia can be inscribed in a complex process of dynamic and evolving Nenets culture and social life, but these changes can hardly be demarcated into notions such as tradition and modernity. All the more so because both these concepts have been questioned and are nowadays seen in processual sequences. To illustrate this, I would insist that for Agafia her choice to insure care for her children following an old customary recipe did not have the same meaning and consequences that it would have had for some of her female ancestors. Her decision, I think, could not have changed her identity as a Nenets woman in the 1970s, when the practice of levirate was not as widely supported as earlier in the century. And finally, I cannot even assert that her choice is an instance of levirate custom application per se. At the same time, it in all likelihood reaffirmed her
solidarity relations and emotional bonds with her extended family through the exchange of care. In a broader sense, after the failure of her marriage because of the alcohol addiction of her husband – a problem that many Nenets continue to share, the successful upbringing of her sons with the help of her extended family can even be interpreted as a reaffirmation of Nenets family and kinship as a locus of care. In the context of NAO, where alcoholism is a common affliction experienced by most Nenets who underwent collectivization, whether tundra employees or village residents, such an example is an important model. This perhaps could have also influenced our Nenets field assistant’s choice of Agafia as our informant.

Among other factors that influence such life choices, personal circumstances, social and family environments, individual history should be given a prominent place. This is well illustrated by the case of Elena. Her education and enculturation both in nomadic tundra life and village boarding school have created preconditions for a wider array of choices accessible and thinkable to her (Liarskaya, 2013). Elena seems to aspire both to spatial and social mobility that seems somewhat unusual for other Yamb-To female members of her age and older at the moment when this research was done. Her cultural experience provides her with knowledge and security in the contemporary world that NAO represents for her. In this context, she feels trust in the state and some of its institutions, enough to leave her newborn child in its care. At the same time, she puts a claim to the state that she expects it to take care of her as a citizen, i.e. she claims her citizenship rights in a more direct way, consciously or not. In the same vein, she introduces her children as citizens with full rights, also by establishing the state as part of their identity since their birth. In this way, like many other contemporary Nenets, she also puts a claim that her culture and her people are legitimate members of the state and multicultural society, of which certain implications are expected. At the same time, she does not show persuasion that the state is in opposition to her own cultural traditions and a threat to them. Her use of state social security institutions is indeed helping her adhere to cultural practices such as nomadism by offering innovative solutions and opportunities.

Elena’s insecurity about the social propriety of this decision, which is perhaps still new in the context of Yamb-To, found expression in her unwillingness to talk about it. In the wider society, such practices are also questioned. Yamb-To are private reindeer owners, but they do not register their property or economy, and consequently make no financial contribution to the state through paying taxes. But by using state social security institutions they take advantage of these common resources. Thus, even in this context, where state budgets receive only minor support from the generally low taxes, such an arrangement can be seen as not entirely acceptable by other members of society. In contrast to Soviet authorities, who readily and even forcefully modernized indigenous people, imposing strict controls, the contemporary state is less willing to support the globally influenced ethnic revival projects developed by indigenous politicians and activists. Even a group like Yamb-To, who tends to be entirely self-sustainable, is thus seen competing for valuable natural and financial state resources. On this basis, young Yamb-To women’s strategies can be seen as morally controversial and even condemned.

During this research, I was not able to make contacts and interviews in the orphanage where Nenets babies are being left. My general impression, though, during conversations with clerks and the indigenous representative in the regional administration, is that the authorities are positive and looking for ways to improve the situation and further integrate
Yamb-To. An indication of this is the attempt from above to organize the official registration of the group as a kin community (obshchina), a form provided in the Russian indigenous legislation that can give title to grazing land. Further, the community has been allotted a piece of land, although it is far away from their preferred pastures and thus not in use at the moment. These developments make me believe that orphanage administrators are willing to accept Nenets babies for shorter periods of time. Older people describe experiences with Soviet doctors and cultural workers who took babies from tundra-living mothers and put them in urban orphanages in order to ‘rescue’ the child from harsh tundra life. Although these involve the more radical state interference imposed in Soviet times, it is likely that it has left traces on ideas about contemporary practices.

Elena’s choice indicates a new and different relation of Yamb-To Nenets to the Russian state and its social institutions. Further consequences may emerge from this change, both in Nenets society and in the way the state imposes controls on them. The notion of state control evokes Soviet power and indigenous policies, and the dominant academic and political narratives about them, which emphasize negative aspects. The impacts of the state are not necessarily the product of centralized power. State social institutions can shape the ideas and practices of kinship and family relations, while at the same time these kin relations, affections, and empathy can shape the functioning of state institutions and the organization of centralized care. Recent anthropological discussions of evolving mechanisms of social security in postsocialist states offer multiple examples (Thelen, 2015; Thelen & Alber, 2017). In this respect, the mutually evolving patterns of indigenous family, kinship, and community care and that offered by the Russian state deserve further research.

This article attempts to promote such analysis with two examples of women securing care for their young children through mobilizing combinations of social and state offered resources. In both cases, the choices have been interpreted as relatively acceptable from community moral point of view, although perhaps slightly controversial. The interplay between dynamic state policy and resistant but flexible cultural social forms appears to create an environment where renegotiation of socially acceptable norms and practices is an ongoing process.

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