

Doctoral dissertation – theses

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“Travelling Sound”

Traditional Nganasan Belief in the Light of Folklore Texts

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Topic and Objectives

This dissertation examines the (traditional) religion and beliefs of Nganasan people (referring to themselves as *nya*, formerly called Tavgi Samoyeds) based on folklore texts. The community of approximately 840 people speaks the Nganasan language which belongs to the Northern Samoyed branch of Uralic languages. Nganasans were leading a nomadic lifestyle on the Taymyr Peninsula north of the Arctic Circle, their main activity being hunting reindeer. In the 1970s, Nganasans were resettled into Nganasan-Dolgan-Russian villages and as a result of the resettlement, they no longer had the opportunity to live their traditional lifestyle.

Language attrition has become quite widespread by now, the traditional cultural structure fell apart, the environmental and lifestyle conditions it was based upon no longer exist in everyday life. However, some elements of the traditional cultural structure can still be found today even in the settled, urban environment.

The approximately 3000 pages long epic folklore which serves as the basis of this study is such a large amount of material that it made it possible to introduce more than just a few individual variables: the texts interact with each other, they create a dialogue, completing and explaining one another.

On the one hand, real life situations that are presented in the texts allow us to gain insight into what is regarded as ordinary life, meaning the ideal everyday life that runs according to norms. On the other hand, the texts reveal serious crises. In real life however, there are no average days, only individual situations. The folklore material therefore unfortunately cannot provide information on how the everyday life of individuals and their belief system is related, it does not reveal any deeper or even superficial layers of any individual belief. Sadly, these topics are already lost for scientific consideration because the possibility to ask questions vanished with the disappearance of the traditional belief.

Folklore texts are organized around extraordinary heroes, big deeds and important events. These can relate to the world as a whole or to an individual's personal life, but they are definitely not reports about everyday life. These stories are in strong interaction with the belief system which becomes stable through its repeated occurrence in the stories. As it is well known, myths deeply influence the course of life, they set up a moral and social order and lay down norms. This is true not only for the common mythological heritage of society as a whole but also for personal myths, sacred, self-defining stories of smaller units of society, of clans, families and individuals (HUMPHREY 1999).

This dissertation examines the belief system based on these stories and on the primary environment of Nganasan people.

The study is made up of four major chapters. The first chapter is an overview of the history and the results of both international and Hungarian researches on Nganasans. The second chapter is a detailed presentation of the text corpus that provides the sources for this study. Traditional Nganasan genres are discussed both from an emic and etic approach and the most typical story types are presented as well.

The third and biggest chapter, containing several subchapters is an analysis of the traditional Nganasan belief. Different subchapters discuss the mythology of geomorphological elements (mountain, river, road etc.) that appear in Nganasans' approach to landscapes, atmospheric phenomena, celestial bodies (sun, moon, stars, wind, clouds etc.), plants and animals playing an important role in the belief system (reindeer, dog, wolf, bear, fox, mouse, bird, worm etc.), creatures of lower mythology (half-human, giant that eats humans, illness spirits) and different natural elements (fire, water, ice). Regarding Nganasans' concept of human nature, the study provides detailed explanation of the functions of different body parts in connection with the soul and the symbolism of human clothing. It discusses how communication channels work between people and the supernatural, including the system of sacrifices, the role of idols and the work and role of shamans in the community. Finally, the chapter presents Nganasans' understanding of death and the beliefs regarding the dead. The last chapter of the dissertation summarizes the essence of the Nganasan belief through the anthropology of landscapes and perspectivism.

In the bibliography the most important information is provided about the folklore texts examined by this study that appear in a list in the order of their main topic.

Sources – Different Genres of Nganasan Folklore

This dissertation builds upon the largest Nganasan text corpus ever studied, which was collected through research from different museums and archives. This includes 460 texts. A smaller portion of it is printed, a larger portion is handwritten material which can be found in the Krasnoyarsk Regional Museum, the Kunstkamera archives of Saint-Petersburg, the archives of the Russian academic Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography in Moscow or is privately owned.¹

¹ The author's travels were funded by the Hungarian State Eötvös Scholarship 2010.

Boris Osipovich Dolgikh travelled to gather data in 1935 and as a result, his first folklore book was published in 1938. This thin, hardly 130 pages long volume contains mostly myths of origin and epic texts. In 1974 Dolgikh published a new, larger folklore collection to which he added his detailed notes, explaining concepts that are unknown or difficult to understand and sometimes he even wrote down whole sentences and expressions in Nganasan. The author had the opportunity to examine the researcher's fieldwork diaries and handwritten notes both in Krasnoyarsk and in Moscow (DOLGIKH 1938 and 1976).

Another great researcher of this period was Andrei Popov. He was first sent to gather data in 1930-31 by the then called Leningrad Kunstkamera, the anthropology and ethnography workshop. Popov had the opportunity to meet two great shamans from the Avam region, Dyukhade Ngamtuso and Ivan Gornok and write down the details of the clean tent rite usually held in the spring. In 1935, he defended his dissertation entitled *Tavgitsy* on Nganasan lifestyle (Popov 1936).

The young researcher spent two more years with the kolkhoz that was still leading a nomadic lifestyle back then and thus gained insight into the activities of an entire marketing year. He published the findings of his new researches in two well-known volumes. The first part of the monograph about material culture was published in 1948. Due to ideological issues, the planned second volume was only published 25 years after Popov's death thanks to the efforts of Galina Gracheva (POPOV 1948 and 1984).

Popov's place in the Kunstkamera was taken over by Galina Gracheva, therefore her writings can also be found there. At first, Gracheva accompanied the archaeology expedition of the Kunstkamera to the Taymyr Peninsula as a technical staff and gathered important material from there in 1969 as well as during her later fieldworks. Her first fieldwork diaries mainly write about the traditional belief and shamanism. In these early fieldwork notebooks, she noted down myths of origin, tales, initiation stories as well as data on deities. She also led a detailed travel journal about every little event and experience of the journey. While she was gathering text folklore, she did her best to note down the entire material. She made voice recordings and listening to it again, she asked informants to translate it sentence by sentence. Her notebooks only contain the Russian translation, but it is such an authentic translation that it even recorded small noises, laughs and involuntary noises as well. This can be a small compensation for the fact that the valuable voice recordings were lost. An especially important material is a '*seetebi*', a Nganasan heroic epic song that takes up 92 handwritten pages. Two complete shamanic seances are also noted down together with several tales of varying lengths. Her main published work is about the spiritual culture of hunting people of

the Taymyr Peninsula (Gracheva 1983).

Yuri Borisovich Simchenko started his research in Moscow with Dolgikh. He first visited Nganasans in 1961 when he accompanied Dolgikh. Simchenko's main interest was spiritual folklore but he also made a glossary to his best knowledge. After his death, folklore texts gathered by the researcher were published in two volumes that included his notes and more texts can also be found in his handwritten PhD dissertation. He collected longer, epic texts in Russian and these are not written in the form of abstract. Names of people and mythological creatures are written in Nganasan. This volume also contains prayers and supplications. The second volume gives room for studies that were never published and the script of a shamanic ceremony in Nganasan language (SIMCHENKO 1996 1-2).

Labanauskas Kazys, Lithuanian researcher and cultural manager lived in Dudinka and focused on the folklore of all ethnic groups living on the Taymyr Peninsula. Nganasan texts can be found in two volumes (LABANAUSKAS 1992 and 2001). The first volume contains information about several ethnic groups on the Tymyr, while in the second volume the author published Nganasan folklore in the original language and in Russian.

Oksana Dobzhanskaya is currently active in Dudinka, the central town of the region inhabited by Nganasans. Her main area of focus is the musical organisation of shaman ceremonies (DOBZHANSKAYA 2002, 2008). Her archives contain quite a large amount of material but unfortunately, only a small portion of the reference material she collected was published in printed form.

Besides the results of ethnology research, texts collected by linguists are important additional resources. Eugen Helinski was a real polymath of the research of peoples of Samoyedic languages, an expert in the areas of linguistics, history and culture as well. His linguist colleague in Moscow, Valentin Gusev and members of his research team made several collections among Nganasans for language documentation. The collector himself handed over a part of this large amount of material also valuable for folklore researchers to the author of this dissertation. The rest of the material is available in English and Russian on their website (<http://www.philol.msu.ru/~languedoc/rus/ngan/index.php>).

In 1997, French researcher Jean-Luc Lambert also visited the Taymyr Peninsula and published the findings of his comparative mythology research in a volume entitled *Sortir de la nuit*. In this book he analyses several folklore texts that he collected himself. (LAMBERT 2002-2003).

Among researches on Nganasans, it is imperative to mention the members of the Ngamtuso family (Kosterkin in Russian). Four generations of this family counting several members who

have shamanic skills worked together with scientific researchers who noted down several texts and important data they provided.

The traditional epic genres of Nganasan folklore are the '*seetebi*' and the '*djyremee*'. *Seetebi* is a heroic poem about the challenges of mythic heroes (especially of the cultural hero) and about the origin and the structure of the world. When performed, some parts are in recitative followed by ordinary reciting. *Djyremee* is also an epic genre that is recited normally. It often tells of great deeds of shamans that saved their communities. Another typical topic is a trickster and the adventures of this godly mischief-maker. Several folklore researches failed to note down the informant's position on what genre this would be.

Based on the topic of these stories, most of them are creation myths or are about the origin of some phenomenon in the world. These stories take place in the mythic age, before the appearance of humans, when mythic heroes walked the planet, now inhabiting the sky in the upper world.

The characters of texts that can be interpreted in historical times are people who had an extraordinary experience in their life which is worth telling. These stories are often about the great deeds of shamans and serve as a self-defining foundation of shaman families.

In several occasions, an average person encounters the supernatural in some way, meets fantasy creatures, deities or dead people.

Conflicts with neighbouring peoples, wars and events from everyday life also appear in these stories.

Epic genres	Supernatural aspect	Characters	Time	Explanation of origin function, influence on the world	Number in the study material
Myth (creation)	+	Deities	Mythic	+	54
Story about mythic heroes	+	Mythic heroes	Mythic	+	40
Mythic trickster story	+	Trickster	Mythic	+	15
Mythic shaman story	+	Shamans, supernatural creatures	Mythic	+	32

Story about historical heroes	-	Humans	Distant past, at least 1-2 generations ago	–	66
Story about a historical trickster	-	Humans	Distant past, at least 1-2 generations ago	-	15
Story about a historical shaman	+	Shamans, supernatural creatures	Distant past, at least 1-2 generations ago	+, influence on the clan	72
Supernatural encounters	+	Humans, supernatural creatures	Distant past, at least 1-2 generations ago	+, influence on the individual's life	95
Story of an experience	+ and -	Humans, shamans	Recent past	+, influence on the individual's life	38
Animal story	-?	Animals	Timeless	-	30
Other epic genres	<i>'kineghersha</i> , counting rhyme, game text, riddle, proverb, folk knowledge elements, prayers				Approx. 50

Results of the Dissertation

The basic characteristics of an ethnic group's belief system can be described with the help of folklore stories, especially through the approach to the environment and landscapes and the system of norms structuring the stories. Approach to the environment and landscapes means the interrelation between people and the world (animals, plants, other peoples, supernatural creatures, objects, weather conditions etc.) and the general view of this connection. This study believes that the relationship between the person and the world surrounding him is especially important therefore this is the basis of this study. It can be observed that out of the many geomorphological elements and living creatures of the environment one or more elements

stand out to play a prominent role in the specific culture. The same can be said when we examine the taskscape (INGOLD 1993). These elements are central organizing points of the world and the universe with all its diversity evolves around these few cornerstones. This is the key to stay alive, the most basic experience of everyday life.

In the case of Nganasans, migrating is a fundamental activity as they follow reindeer, their main source of food. In addition to migrating, hunting is another activity that appears to be an organizing principal. People learned how to hunt from the cultural hero while according to the myths, migration existed since before the creation of the world, the latter being the primary experience.

The directions of migration as they appear in folklore texts depict a world that is divided into three parts both vertically and horizontally. “This earth” they regard as their own is the world inhabited by people. North and south and above and below this place there are supernatural creatures that can influence people’s life. The horizontal and vertical landscape interpretation gives a similar structure. In the north, beyond the sea and also below the thick ice, deep below the earth is the realm of the dead and this is where illness spirits live as well. The south gives home to hostile, mythic people and the God of Thunder who brings warm weather. Mythic heroes and other deities reside in the upper world but they seldom affect people’s life directly. For ordinary people, certain prominent places such as places where water runs, mountains, special trees, different holes, cavities, fire and abandoned graves and tents serve as passageways between these worlds. One must be very careful not to offend the mythic creatures which might be living at these places and these are the venues where suddenly it might be possible to make contact with them.

Folklore texts repeatedly describe the three worlds with distinctive features which make it obvious where the hero is at.

Characteristics	Underworld	This world	Upper world
Light	No light or half-light	Sunlight or clouds	Strong light
Material of the Earth	Ice or earth	Earth	Copper
Geomorphological elements	Flat	Divided by mountains and valleys	Flat
Roads	Made of ice	Winter-summer roads	Wide, made of metal

According to the Nganasan belief, the world is inhabited by people, mythic creatures, animals and plants. All of these groups are regarded as separate societies that have their own inner set

of rules, customs, language and clothing. Through the notion of hunting, the different creatures of the world can be interpreted as parts of a network. For people, some of the animals are preys while others are predators. As for mythic creatures, people are considered prey. Nganasans believe that when someone is ill, it is an illness spirit that is biting the person's inside, his soul. Preys look at humans as mythic creatures who hunt them but sometimes need help or protection. On the other hand, they always regard predators to be hostile animals. The different mythic communities live like humans and often perceive each other with a human body.

The world becomes a place with multiple perspectives through the unique perception of different creatures. These are all accepted and all follow their own truth. The same structure was observed by Viverios de Castro (1992, 2012) during his research in the Amazonas region and also by Rane Willerslev (2004, 2007) later during his field work by the Siberian Yukaghirs. Using de Castro's term, this approach is called perspectivism.

Perception is closely linked to the soul concept. For Nganasan people, the soul and the body form a very close unit, they are completely connected and every main body part carries one of the characteristics of the soul.

According to the Nganasan belief, eyes are the primary reflection of the soul. The eyes of each creature see the world according to the creature's inner self. What can be seen through the eyes of another creature is the real essence of that being. Therefore, appearance carries important and profound information. The hair, skin, body form of animals clearly define that animal. People's bodily features, clothing and its decoration play a similar role. Their cut, pattern, colour, material and motives carry information about the person's life story, family situation, origin and which helping spirits protect the person.

In addition to sight and eyes, a very important sensory organ is the nose that perceives the exhaled breath and smells. Predators and harmful supernatural creatures often rely on their noses during hunting. Human odour is also very typical and when it is absorbed, it can make things come alive and make someone human if it spends a long time beside a person. Sounds that can be perceived by the ears also define an individual. Every person has an individual autobiographical song with a unique melody (OJAMAA 2002) that belongs to the person's inner essence. The same can be observed when the shaman sings the spirit's individual melody, inviting the particular spirit. Human-like creatures belonging to different words have very special physical characteristics, thus it is always clear for characters what they are facing. Just like the important elements of the approach to landscapes, these characteristics have remained the same throughout researches from the beginning until today, which means

that they are part of the basic layer of culture that does not change easily. These characteristics are the following:

Characteristics	Underworld	This world	Upper world
Body size	Small or half-body	Average	Large
Body shape	Skinny	Average	Fat
Quantity of hair	Few but long hair	Average	Lot of thick hair
Size of eyes	Small and narrow or no eyes at all	Average, (squinting if hostile)	Large and sparkling
Face	Long-shaped	Average	Round, shiny
Quantity of body parts	May be more or less from some body parts	Average	Average
Special features on the body	Connected with earth – grass, mouse bite on the face	None	Connected with metal – body parts made of silver or iron
Spine	Bent	Average	Long, straight
Cover	Covered by hair or naked	Human clothing	Human clothing
Characteristic of the cover	Covered by hair or naked	Clothing made of reindeer skin with features of the specific group of people.	Clothing made of metal or special skin (bear, white wolf, grey partridge)
Smell	Smell of dead body, smell of earth	Human smell	No data, human smell harms them
Voice	Human voice, the speech is the crackling of fire or the growl of animals or may not give sound	Human voice	Loud, thunder-like voice
Appearance in the everyday life of humans	In the form of illness, crackling of fire or strongly shivering flame	Average, spirits may appear in the form of idols	In the form of idols of strong shamans

Among animals, the appearance of reindeer in the three worlds is rather nuanced, just as their symbolic connection with people. Human life can be saved by reindeer sacrifice because illness spirits regard people to be reindeer and gods also need these animals. Besides reindeer, dogs also have different forms in the worlds but they are not as important and not so carefully described in texts as the appearance of reindeer.

Characteristics	Underworld	This world	Upper world
„Reindeer” type	Mouse	Reindeer	Mammoth
„Dog” type	In the water: pike	Dog	Raven

The different worlds are connected through actions and similar lifestyles. Folklore texts discuss the roles of their inhabitants in detail. In the supernatural world, we can distinguish between the mothers (and fathers) of certain animal species and living creatures; deities (*‘nguo’* in Nganasan) and idols (*‘koika’*); and different mythic people among which the most typical is *‘barusi’*, a half-man with one arm and one leg and *‘segee’*, who eats humans.

The mother is the supernatural owner of living creatures who takes care of her children but at the same time also exercises control over them. The many living creatures and phenomena are all children of some kind of mother. However, not every animal species has an owner, only those that are important for humans. The role of these supernatural mothers is contradictory. It is more differentiated in some informants’ belief while for others, the mother is not as unique and appears as the sender and owner of the given animal species. According to the simplest approach that is definitely present in myths of origin, there is one (or two) mother for every world. The characters of Mother Water and Mother Ice sometimes overlap. She is living in the underworld and she ruled over the world in the beginning of time. Now, Mother Water is the mother of fish while Mother Ice is the deity of death. Mother Earth is the mother of the animals and plants living on the ground. The whole world is her body. Mother Sun lives in the upper world and she gives fire and metals to people. Furthermore, myths of origin mention Fire Mother, the owner of all fires and Mother Moon who is also responsible for the birth of people.

Shamans also talk about additional mothers that are not present in other folklore texts. For animal species they have Reindeer Mother, Arctic Fox Mother, Dog Mother, Rabbit Mother, Mouse Mother etc. – so the mothers or owners of animals that are important for people appear in a differentiated way as well. Sacrifices are offered to mothers during important ritual events

or at certain milestones of life for example in the beginning of the hunting or fishing season, at birth etc.

Compared to mothers, *nguos* (deities/spirits/souls) play a much more active role in everyday life. Everything can have a *nguo* that lives in the given object or being. According to the rules of sympathetic magic, even very tiny particles can symbolize the whole (the hair or a piece of clothing can symbolize the person for example) and therefore it is also vulnerable. However, not every object is regarded as a living being, a person possessing a soul, only if there is some kind of indication for it. A special form, sparkling or the extraordinary circumstances of finding the object can suggest that it is something with a *nguo*. Wind, snowstorm, thunder are all considered to have *nguos*. These *nguos* that are linked to weather are masculine and if they appear in human form, they take the shape of adult men.

Orphan Deity, '*Djoiba*' *nguo* is the father of humanity, a cultural hero who created the current form of the world and made it suitable for life. People of our times rarely meet him but he comes to help in case of great danger. He is an important helping spirit of shamans and people often offer him reindeer.

Illness spirits are all *nugos* wandering in the world, waiting to chew on somebody's soul. Pox is a separate *nugo* who appears as a Russian old lady or as an elderly person without ears or eyes, representing the terrible epidemic.

'*Koikas*', idol spirits are also *nguos* who become helping spirits. They help during hunting or in case of minor illnesses (that don't require a shaman's intervention). If they receive their part of the prey and when respected, they bring health and good life. In the meantime, they can be dangerous and take revenge if people upset them or ungratefully neglect them.

Different mythic creatures such as human eaters, headless people, half-people, hairy people etc. appear as societies with their own culture. The shaman as a mediator between worlds is not the only one who can help in the fight against these creatures. Ordinary people can also gain victory. Besides Nganasans, there are other human ethnic groups living in the world. They can be friendly (Dolgans, Enets), hostile (Nenets, Evenks) or neutral, maybe authoritarian (Russians). Hostile peoples' appearance is similar to those of mythic creatures.

Among animals, the species that are important in terms of food, clothing and migration are the ones that play a greater role. Above all, the most important animals are reindeer, meaning domesticated and wild reindeer.

Ordinary people can travel between worlds and communities of different creatures only occasionally, in special circumstances. The shaman is the person who knows how to travel between worlds and uses this skill when he/she embarks on a shaman journey for the benefit

of the community. Since beings are recognized through their outer features, the colours of the shaman's dress and the objects fixed to it show which worlds and which animalistic or spirit creatures he/she is able to visit. Different materials and symbols refer to mythic times, to the creation of the world and to the different deeds of the shaman. The whole universe is there in the shaman's appearance, in the respect of both space and time. The shaman is a person with supernatural powers, standing in the centre of the universe, fighting and reshaping the world based on traditions and personal experiences.

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