

# NOTES ABOUT POSSESSING A HERITAGE IN A KOMI VILLAGE

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## ABSTRACT

In this article\* I try to analyse some aspects of heritage management in the Turya village of the Republic of Komi, Russia. I attempt to demonstrate how the local museum curator, Olga Shlopova, treats her fairy tales, museum exposition and collection of local heritage. My aim is to interpret some dialogue situations between local village people, scholars and officials which indicate how people manage differences in understanding of heritage administration. I presume that local people's ideas and methods of dealing with cultural phenomena and institutions may obtain their own specific value in the course of culture processes. The question is, how flexible can official cultural specialists be in adapting and reflecting these, sometimes, slightly unconventional approaches. I suppose that an ethical approach helps a researcher to distance him or herself from possible prejudices or, at least, to be more conscious about stereotypes or pre-settled patterns of thinking. Unconditional recognition of an indigenous way of understanding local phenomena also helps a researcher to reach a more culture-specific model of interpretation.

KEYWORDS: heritage • museum • fairy tales • ethics • the Komis

## MUSEUM AS A MODEL OF LOCAL LIFE

The Komis are Finno-Ugric people, inhabiting the north-eastern corner of European Russia. According to the official census, there were 293,400 Komis living in the Russian Federation. Turya village is situated in the Knyazhpogost district of the central part of the Republic of Komi. This region belongs to the historical and traditional core area of the Komis.

In September-October 2000, Vladimir Lipin (research fellow at the National Museum of the Republic of Komi) and I conducted fieldwork among the Komi ethnographic group *yemvatas*, on the Yemva (Vym in Russian) River, in the Republic of Komi. Auntie Olga became our key informant there.<sup>1</sup> She graduated from the Komi Pedagogical Institute in 1941, worked as a teacher in various schools in Komi country and was currently,

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as a pensioner, the curator of the Pitirim Sorokin's<sup>2</sup> House Museum, located in the Turya village.

The role of Auntie Olga, as a mediator between folk tradition and the public sphere, is well illustrated by her activities as the head of a museum. The work of the House Museum of the famous sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin (who had been born in Turya village) was almost exclusively organised by Auntie Olga. The museum was located in a traditional peasant house, built in the 1920s.

In 2000, within the first 9 months, 930 visitors had been at the museum. Auntie Olga kept a record of visitors and a chronicle of events that have been carried on at the museum. Turya village is situated at a 50-kilometres distance from the district centre Yemva (Knyazhpogost in Russian). The village lies on the other side of the Yemva River and a ferry takes people and cars over the river only twice per day. A bus goes to Turya village two times per week. It is not very likely that many tourists manage to reach the village and the museum. It means that the museum visitors are local inhabitants (mostly schoolchildren, who step in to see Auntie Olga almost every day).<sup>3</sup>

The museum functioned mainly on money obtained by donations. The official budget of the museum for two years was 100 roubles (approx. 3.5 \$). Local inhabitants and the other visitors ("sponsors") had donated sometimes 5, 10 and 20 roubles to support the museum. Auntie Olga had a museum garden, where she grew cabbages and potatoes. Olga was also supported by her younger son A and his friend B, who both helped to renovate the museum. These voluntary supporters were proud of Auntie Olga's work but also irritated by ignorance on the part of the officials:

Olga: I planted cabbage, potatoes.

A (b. 1960): Our museum is supported only by sponsors, just by sponsors. The support from the side of the village soviet is zero.

B (b. 1960): The fact that Pitirim Sorokin was born here means nothing to anybody.

A: Only my mother does something.

Auntie Olga also made some comments concerning the financial management of the Turya Museum. She criticised the official rules of accounting and described her own simple approach to fiscal issues:

An accountant tells that the money was given to you. You must transfer it through the state bank. Give your money to us. You'll get it back, if you'll buy the house. I told that I didn't get that money from any organisation but it was given to me personally. I'll not give it to you. And I didn't give a kopeck. I have everything registered in a notebook. On one page I wrote down, how much money I got and on the other page, how much I have spent. And that's it. If you wish, you can come and check. I'll not give anything over to state bank. They said that I must sell tickets. Village kids run into my museum several times every day. Nobody has any money. I haven't taken any money from anybody. In fact, I collected twenty six roubles, if strangers arrived.

For the museum there has been reconstructed a traditional peasant house. Previously, the museum was located at the Turya Secondary School building. Into the reconstructed peasant house the museum was relocated in 1998 and at the same time it became subordinated to the Museum of Local History of Knyazhpogost District.

The museum's building was renovated by Auntie Olga's younger son A and his friend B. Although the museum is officially subordinated to the the district museum in Knyazhpogost, the local museum's activists did not receive much support in their renovation work from the district and village soviet officials.

In 1999, a celebration of the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pitirim Sorokin was carried out in Turya village. The new building of the museum was also opened. For the event, the son of Pitirim Sorokin, Sergey, arrived from US to visit his father's home village. Sergey Sorokin was accompanied by Konyukhov, the Minister of Culture and Nationalities of the Republic of Komi. All together, approximately 200 people participated in the celebration. For the occasion, the museum was renovated in a great rush. These activities did not greatly impress the people who were closely involved with the museum:

B: One day, when we were renovating the museum, C arrived from the village soviet and looked around. We told him that we needed this and that. After that he left. You can catch him in the other end of the village. And it is really tricky to get something from him. He just came and looked around like a shepherd, just for a moment. He checked that somebody is there; it means that some work will be done. That's it.

We were essentially turned down by this museum. There was promised a lot but nothing was really done. They brought some timber. I ordered good timber from them. No. They brought timber but it was frozen. Even a shovel does not take it. But I don't have a place, where to dry these planks. Perhaps, they brought that timber directly from a saw-mill. In winter time! There was a need to repair the floors in the museum's rooms and in the corridor. Many things needed some renovation there. It was said that let's repair something quickly before the celebration, as they [Pitirim Sorokin's son Sergey and minister Konyukhov] are coming. And afterwards we can make the real renovation. And so it remained until now. But now all that we have repaired, just remained as it was and falls apart slowly. But nothing will be done, until that younger Sorokin does not again appear. If he would send a telegram and announce that he will arrive soon, everybody starts to work in panic. In that case there will re-appear an urgent need for a quick renovation. By arguing that he arrives tomorrow, you must hurry up. It will be done this way, always. That's for 100% sure. It remains as it was. Just like in the first case. You must hurry, hurry. I wanted to spit on all this. I thought that I'll do nothing.

A: You can't do anything improperly. Bad causes more bad, again. That was understood by Pitirim Sorokin.

Another issue that troubled Auntie Olga and her team even more than the way of renovating the museum building was the interference of district museum's staff into the process of preparation of the exposition. The approach, proposed by the officials from the district museum about the essential concept of a museum, as such, was profoundly different from the way how Auntie Olga and her comrades saw things and conceptualised the Komi heritage.

During the preparation period, a team of museum workers from Yemva town arrived at Turya village. The district museum team checked the process of exposition-building at the Pitirim Sorokin's House Museum. They ordered the rearrangement of the exposition into a more classical and correct style. District museum representatives

insisted that big standard stands must be used and data concerning famous local artists, writers and athletes must be displayed. Auntie Olga's co-worker A was really upset because of the unsophisticated attitude, expressed by district officials, and because of their stereotypical guidelines:

The museum is interesting, of course. But the way our Knyazhpogost ones tried to manage is wrong. You can never accept this kind of attitude. They arrived here, told us – you must do this and that! And left the scene. You can't arrange things this way. If it was decided that the museum will be arranged, this line must be hold until the end.

It is obvious that the comrades of Auntie Olga had adopted her attitude towards the ideology of their own museum. This statement was the expression of the local idea about the concept of a museum:

A & B: The house-museum must be as a home. [Even better in Russian: *дом-музей и должен быть как дом.*]

#### THE FOREST NENETS' CORRESPONDING CASE

An interesting parallel can be drawn here concerning a Forest Nenets<sup>4</sup> reindeer herder, poet, and activist of indigenous peoples' rights Yuri Vella's concept about his life as a museum.

In building up his everyday life as an item to be exposed, Vella is ready to sacrifice privacy, his own and his whole family's, elaborating a kind of ideal micro-universe based on traditional way of life and indigenous values, without neglecting all the comfort contemporary Western achievements may offer to the taiga and tundra inhabitants. (Toulouze 2004: 70–72)

Although in some aspects different (Auntie Olga does not live in the museum building, she is using it more for demonstrating the traditional way of life, although at the same time she also tries to maintain local peoples', especially children's interest in the old Komi way of life by teaching weaving and other skills), both concepts connect the museum to something extremely intimate, personal for a human being. Both museum enthusiasts have similar ideas about the museum to be directed simultaneously to outsiders (the Russians, foreigners, Komi officials from Knyazhpogost district centre and the capital of the Republic of Komi) and insiders (the Forest Nenets and Yemva Komis). Eva Toulouze describes the attitude of Yuri Vella towards his life-museum as a integrated component of the Forest Nenets own living culture:

Yuri Vella is thus convinced that openness and understanding from outside are valuable contributions to his people's survival. Yet he does not incriminate merely the outside world and Russian colonisation for the dangerous situation of his people: according to him, the impulse for survival should come at first from the people concerned themselves. One way to kindle awareness is by making the population itself active in the life of "their" museum: therefore, Yuri Vella's museums are not only collections of classified items, but "places where the Muses gather", where objects live in a web of simultaneous functions. (Toulouze 2004: 72)

## MORE ABOUT TURYA MUSEUM

The conflict of official and popular concept of a museum as such is clearly evident in the Pitirim Sorokin's House Museum's case in Turya village. The local Komi idea of a museum was more explicitly explained in sharp confrontation with demands of standardisation from the "upper spheres", that is, from the district museum and administration:

B: Initially, if Olga Stepanovna ran the museum, it was as if you'll enter into your own home there.<sup>5</sup> But now it is like a *barrack*.<sup>6</sup> A head of the district administration's department of culture forced us to rearrange [the museum exposition].<sup>7</sup> The heart of a village person makes it as necessary. They live there, in apartments. Then they arrive and tell us that it must be done so and so. But how do they know? They don't do it in a right way and that's it. Their hearth is not in pain.

A: It is now an official museum.

B: I am embarrassed. We built and decorated the museum with heart. They arrived, hung up those expensive displays and that's it. And the albums were thrown behind the stove.<sup>8</sup>

Auntie Olga and her helpers have carried out the concept of the museum as a home almost completely. Even formally designed grey displays that were hanging on the walls of one room of the museum could not change the overall impression of being there. Vladimir Lipin and I were accommodated at the museum. So we stayed overnight and prepared daily activities in the exposition. We prepared our meals on the museum's oven, using for cooking and eating dishes from the museum's exposition. We washed our hands, using a century-old copper washstand, also the exhibit of the display. As I wrote down the first impressions about this kind of museum in my fieldwork diary: "Here, indeed, everything is meant for fumbling and plucking."

Auntie Olga even sold us (to the National Museum of the Republic of Komi and the Estonian National Museum) 5 shirts (*kaftan*) from the collections of her museum, 10 roubles per piece, and one kerchief. The trick is that these things were also bought for the museum by her and she could do with those whatever she wanted (at least, in her mind this was the situation with museum property). And, anyway, these items were not registered at the museum. So, we can look on the situation otherwise – formally these things were not public property and Auntie Olga was just holding her personal items at the museum and, consequently, could use those plates and jugs, spoons and mugs as she felt more convenient.

I understand the local peoples' idea concerning the museum in a following way. If the items were in active use for 50, 100 or 150 years and after that got stored in the museum, it does not mean that people must stop using them for practical reasons. You can eat from the plate, wash the dishes and put everything back into the exposition. It means that essentially nothing happens to the item if it is put into the museum's display. It will be not "sterilised" by managing rules that define the exposition in the form of "the gray wall". Without a doubt, this approach is in deep contrast with official principles of professional collection management in a museum.

This concept of museum may be also a popular reaction to professional scholarly practices. People live in a village, on one day the scholars arrive and see in old, ordinary everyday items some special value. Afterwards people rearrange one building from an

ordinary house to a house-museum. Thus, the difference between a house and a museum is quite tiny, and it may depend very much just on naming. In this case, an active everyday use of museum exhibits is not a violation of an ethic of museum work. This unaffected museum is a phenomenon, controlled by a local community and its traditions.

#### AUNTIE OLGA'S FAIRY TALE CASE

Auntie Olga's awareness of possessing a tradition is also, for me, well illustrated by the following incident. Once a Komi folklorist, Yurii Rochev, had arrived in the Turya village and had asked Auntie Olga to tell him a Komi fairy tale. Olga told the story<sup>9</sup> and Rochev wrote this down. Then, Rochev asked her to tell another fairy tale. Because it was summer, haymaking season, Auntie Olga was short of time and she promised to write down the fairy tale herself and send it to Rochev in the autumn. When autumn came, Auntie Olga had doubts about why she should give away her "own" fairy tale, just like that, for no particular reason.

Although Auntie Olga wrote that other tale down, she did not send it to the folklorist but to one journal. The tale was published and Olga got 120 roubles as a royalty. It was equal to her monthly salary at that time. After that Olga started to regret that she "gave away" the first fairy tale just for free. The first fairy tale that was "given away" was later published in the fourth grade textbook. Then Auntie Olga decided that publishing of her fairy tale in the textbook for kids is also acceptable and even nice.

Performance of fairy tales was contextualised and ritualised for Auntie Olga. She had drawn a huge map of Yemva River on a roll of wallpaper. On that map, Olga had depicted most of the important hunting and fishing camps and objects of nature that can be found around the Yemva River. Demonstrating that map, Olga described locations where she had been with her father during hunting and fishing trips. During camping in these places, Olga's father had told her these fairy tales. Before Auntie Olga started to narrate her fairy tales, she put always a kerchief on (usually Auntie Olga wore a knitted hat). Olga explained this by the argument that only if she was wearing the kerchief, she could get into a singing and telling mood. Auntie Olga also asked me to stay out of her sight during the performance because the camera and microphone could distract her and ruin her fairy tale mood. We can conclude that performing of fairy tales was an activity that demanded a specific concentration and was ritualised to a certain extent.

#### HOW AUNTIE OLGA OWNS A HERITAGE

Both, an "ownership" of the museum and fairy tales, demonstrate Auntie Olga's attitude towards heritage. In the case of establishing and developing the Turya Museum Auntie Olga followed the idea of preserving and transmitting local culture as a certain holistic collective model of intercourse between material items, knowledge and feelings. In the case of fairy tales, Auntie Olga's relationship with the heritage is much more individual and intimate. Although, in this respect the way Auntie Olga managed the issue was also in a somewhat traditional manner.

Here I should like to draw a few Komi parallels.

My fieldwork experience among the Komi hunters enables the supposition that narrating about hunting is a location- and situation-specific activity. Often hunters started to describe hunting episodes when we reached a point in the forest where something memorable had occurred. This could happen in a hunting cabin or by a fireplace near the hunting path. Often these situations, somehow closer to actual hunting events, have caused relevant associations.

Narrating in a hunting cabin has been important for the Komi hunters in the past and has been connected to traditional hunting ethics. "A popular belief existed that the forest spirits liked stories, and so the Komi told stories in the evening in order to have success in hunting on the following day" (Konakov 2003: 343).

We can take these notions as a context for Auntie Olga's case. Olga did not connect her narrating practice so directly to certain places as the hunters I have observed. And ritualisation or sacralisation of her narrating was certainly not as detailed as some older data about Komi mythology might relate. But even this somehow remote authenticification of Auntie Olga's narration practice may give ground for few interpretations.

Thus I provide a hypothesis that every case of telling a fairy tale by Auntie Olga was grounded in her forest experience from her childhood, when she spent time with her father on hunting and fishing grounds. The situation of narration must be settled in a certain way for Auntie Olga. And even if it was not possible to (re-)create a totally "authentic" situation, Auntie Olga managed to reconstruct and experience it in given conditions. The mechanism of telling tales, even at the museum, was anyway principally authentic.

Both, the museum and fairy tales were owned by Auntie Olga. Invasion of district museum officials and scholars into these ownership relationships made Auntie Olga feel that some sort of aggression (practical and mental) was going on. At the same time these negotiations with *the Other* enabled Auntie Olga to evaluate the local knowledge and heritage and to concentrate even more intensively on preserving the local way of treating cultural issues.

These cases illustrate also different approaches to culture and heritage by local people and representatives of more public sphere. For Auntie Olga the museum was a model of local lifestyle. For district officials, however the local Turya Museum embodied just a regular example among the other village museums which are, in most cases, run inadequately by non-professionals. Therefore, the district museum's specialists attempted to fix the problems they revealed.<sup>10</sup> But for Auntie Olga and the other local people these standardising rearrangements did not make any sense.

In the case of telling and recording fairy tales there was much bigger common ground for understanding between Auntie Olga and the scholar. They could reach the mutual understanding or recognition, despite some initial difficulties. Auntie Olga accepted the way of how the scholar treated her fairy tale but the approach, applied by district museum specialists, made her very sad.

There is one more issue that seems to me important for understanding Auntie Olga's attitude and some layers of her worldview. Auntie Olga had collected a vast amount of texts for the museum regarding the communities nearby and the entire Yemva River settlement area. There were tens and tens of volumes of manuscripts ("million", as said Auntie Olga) in the museum, which Auntie Olga described as albums. Some materials had been written by Auntie Olga herself, and some had been collected by local

schoolchildren. Olga had collected part of the materials during recent times from the neighbourhood villages, but partially her knowledge originates from her childhood, her mother and father (mostly, Auntie Olga underlines the role of her father as the transmitter of the tradition). The oldest albums were written in 1986, and the latest in 2000.

These albums consisted of all kinds of material about history and culture of Turya village area. I give a short list of some topics covered by the albums: the first Komi female painter of icons Kosh Sash (Aleksandra Petrovna Sukhareva, 1880–1968), history of Turya and neighbouring villages (Lug, Zhiganovka, Keros), history of the museum, 45th and 50th anniversaries of the victory in the World War II, Turya village during the Russian Civil War (1918–1920), toponyms around Turya village, folklore of the Turya village, etc.

During the hours I spent copying Auntie Olga's albums I started to realise that her writings indicated that her worldview consists of two components. First, she expresses deep interest in local life, traditions and history. At this respect Auntie Olga also follows the local pattern of thinking. She had chosen topics that were important for local identity and she treated these issues, following the local value system. The other part of Auntie Olga's approach was rooted in experiences of the Soviet time. At first, this combination confused me to some extent, but soon I realised that there is no contradiction in the fusion of these two approaches. This is just the way how people in Russia think about things in the World. They evaluate their nearest surroundings and the other important issue is World War II. These two components are very much adapted into people's lives. Ideas about the heroic, patriotic past concerning the two main wars of the Soviet period are firm components of the identity of many people in today's Russia (cf. Mendonça 2004: 27).

At the same time, there were things Auntie Olga did not talk. I got from her albums some hints about personal tragedies of her life she was silent about. On the other hand, she was a very talkative person and could tell and write about Komi traditions long and elaborative stories. But we spent only a short period in Turya village. Thus, we could not expect that everything would be disclosed to us during this time.

## DISCUSSION

I start my final discussion with some statements concerning research ethics. This analysis can be initiated by a notion of Umberto Eco who writes that an ethical approach starts, if *the Other* steps onto the stage (Eco 2000: 14). In our case, it means that if ethnographers meet local people, simultaneously a cultural and an ethical dialogue begin. And if we later confront any ethical problems during the process of analysis, these difficulties also get their initial cognitive impulse from the fieldwork process.

Research ethics are closely linked to general ethics of human behaviour (see Eco 2000: 19) and principles of human rights (Alver 1992: 53). Besides the dialogue between a researcher and local inhabitants, research ethics also concern the problems of scholarly truth, as Bente Alver recognises:

Problems of research ethics appear mainly for two reasons: First, because norms of truth are violated, for example, when fake or fabricated data are utilised, and

secondly, because of normative conflicts between canons of truthfulness and norms relating to the welfare and integrity of human beings. (Alver 1992: 53)

If we think in a situational way, again, then we can again assume that possible problems with interaction during the fieldwork would also provide significant ground for the deterioration of truth. Research truth may be violated for several reasons, but if fieldwork practices have been unethical, it is unlikely that research results can be in accordance with local knowledge, with the ways as to how culture-specific cognition really functions. In this respect we can also conclude that ethical problems have a holistic character (A Statement AFS 1988; Alver 1992: 53; A Statement ASAC; AAA Code of Ethics).

The relationships between the researcher and the informant may be determined differently. The person, passing on the tradition to the researchers, may be viewed as a data reservoir, a text carrier, research participants or subjects, a dialogue or negotiation partner (cf. Ethical Guidelines ASAC 1999). The question also lies in the fact whether, while communicating with a scientist, the informant gains or loses or whether he is totally indifferent about the matter. Or in fact, what do both parties – the researcher and the researched – think about this act of research or what happens to them.

Relationship between a researcher and a local community are often complicated and conditions of fieldwork may be unpredictable (A Statement AFS 1988). Research process is especially intricate during fieldwork when “situations may be so complex, involve so many parties and so much factionalism, that it becomes difficult to decide what must be done” (Cassell, Jacobs 1996).

Thus, ethics are important not only for behaving correctly within a local community or on a number of general humanistic purposes. In our case the central issue is that ethical approach helps a researcher to distance him- or herself from possible prejudices or, at least, to be more conscious about stereotypes or pre-settled patterns of thinking. Unconditional recognition of an indigenous way of understanding local phenomena also helps a researcher to reach a more culture-specific model of interpretation.

## SOURCES

FM – Fieldwork materials of the author among Yemva River Komis (yemvatas), September-October 2000.

TAP – Topographic Archives of the Estonian National Museum.

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## NOTES

1 In this paper I have used Auntie Olga's real name because she is quite well identified by data presented here, anyway. She has also been a key informant to members of other expeditions that have visited Turya region and is used to the role of a kind of a mediator of Komi traditions to outsiders. Public figures, as Sergey Sorokin, Konyukhov, and others, are also mentioned by their names. Other inhabitants of Turya village are not mentioned personally, following some calculations concerning research ethics (cf. A Statement AFS 1988; AAA Code of Ethics; Ethical Guidelines ASAC 1999; Alver 1992: 55–57). All quotations of the interviews below are excerpts from my fieldwork materials among Yemva River Komis in 2000 (FM).

2 Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968) was a world-famous sociologist, born in Komi land, Turya village. In 1922, according to Lenin's decision, he was exiled from Soviet Russia with other outstanding scholars and philosophers. In 1930 he established the Faculty of Sociology at the Harvard University (the first one in the USA) and became the first dean of this. From 1964 he was a president of the American Sociological Association (Sorokin 1999: 6–16).

3 Turya village is one of the oldest settlements in Komi land. As early as in the 11th century there was a castle in Turya. A permanent settlement was established in Turya during the 15th century. Between 1851–1867 the stone church was built in the village, in the 1870s a school, and in 1899 a library were established there. In 1926, 896 inhabitants lived in the village. By 2000, the population was reduced to 214, forming 96 households. In the village there was a house of culture, library, secondary school, two shops, medical clinic, post office, village soviet, and museum (Zherebtsov 2000: 376–379).

4 The Forest Nenets are a small group of the Nenets, approximately 2000 persons, living in Western Siberia.

5 At the museum some local festivities were also carried on, for example the celebration of the Day of St. Paraskeva (November, the 10th), the Guardian Saint of Turya village. Another feast dedicated to St. Paraskeva was celebrated in summer on the streets of the village. There were organised processions with a big icon, dances, competitions, and beer was sold (both home-made *sur* and bottled ones).

6 *Barrack* – a Russian-style, usually not very well-built house that has not been taken care about for some time but where somebody may live in, anyway.

7 Yuri Vella was also forced to rearrange his first museum at the village Varyogan under the pressure of local cultural officials so that museum lost its original value for local Forest Nenets people. (People could no longer visit the museum buildings whenever they wished and carry on whatever activities they wanted there, they could not just live at the museum.) So Yuri Vella got his next idea to re-conceptualise his own forest settlement as a living museum. (Text of Eva Toulouze's presentation at the 45th Conference of the Estonian National Museum "Museums and Reality", Tartu, April 2004; see also Toulouze 2004: 70, 71.)

8 Not only Auntie Olga and her comrades had troubles with officials from the Yemva District Museum. Vladimir Lipin and myself also had problems. We were supposed to visit the district museum before going to Turya village and check our travel documents. But we arrived from Syktyvkar, the capital of the Republic of Komi, at Yemva town on one Friday afternoon and, naturally, nobody was present at the museum. We did not want to lose all the weekend just waiting to check-in and left for Turya village. A week later Vladimir arrived at Yemva (50 kilometres from Turya village) and tried to get our documents ready, but, again, nobody was available at the district museum. At the same time district museum officials called on Auntie Olga, asked about our activities and ordered her not to help us in any way – not to give us ethnographical items, in the first place (as they considered, objects must be given only to the district museum) – because we had ignored them by not checking in for fieldwork. Auntie Olga just laughed about this claim, but anyway the whole situation got a little bit tense. The absurdity of all this process becomes

even clearer, if we take into account the fact that Vladimir was a representative of the National Museum of the Republic of Komi (NMRK), and, thus, representing an institution to which the Yemva District Museum was subordinated. And, so, our fieldwork was approved by a national museum, denied by a district museum, and, approved again by a village museum. As we can see, not a single museum followed orders delivered by their superiors.

We can go further in history and find a similar, but even more curious case. In 1976, the first joint expedition of the Estonian National Museum (ENM, at that time State Ethnographical Museum of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic) and NMRK (at that time the Komi States' Research Museum of Regional Studies) was organised in the Republic of Komi (then Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic). Head of an Estonian team, director of the ENM Aleksei Peterson and a director of NMRK, Alice Kachalova were invited to a meeting in the Cabinet Council of the Komi ASSR in Syktyvkar. Peterson describes this event in his diary in a following way: "The person who met us emphasised that we are not allowed to take cultural, valuable items out of the republic. I cannot comment on this, it is news to me that ethnographic objects are not allowed to be taken to other Soviet republics. Kachalova calmed us down, saying that this is just a formality, and we need not bother." (TAp 679, Peterson 1976: 6; see also Leete 1998: 53, Leete, Lipin 2007: 316.)

9 Auntie Olga called these stories fairy tales and I decided to follow in present paper her terminology. Olga's stories can be interpreted as being on a borderline of different genres of oral folklore, like a fairy tale and a legend. Some figures in these fairy tales were real persons from the past (ancestors and other relatives of auntie Olga), these texts described some real events (Russian Patriotic War against Napoleon in 1812), but, at the same time, also dragons were involved into these stories.

10 The relationship of local and institutionalised understandings of a heritage is linked also into global discourse concerning indigenous heritage. As Norwegian scholar Kjell Olsen describes the overall situation: "The 'indigenous' and the 'ethnic' are integrated in, and have become a part of, global and national discourse that are embedded in institutional settings. This is not to say that cultural expressions and artefacts become 'standardised' by their interlinking with global and international institutions. Although part of what is regarded as belonging to globalising processes, they still are part of highly localised and local discourses. These processes highlight the differences between institutionalised discourses and what is found in local contexts. One of these discrepancies is between the institutionalised categories that subsume different cultural features under the heading of heritage, and the local and individual experience of culture in the life course." (Olsen 2004: 31; see also Olsen 2000a.)

Olsen also points out the difficulty of "representing ethnic boundaries in a cultural context where such boundaries are changing from context to context" (Olsen 2000b: 140).