

BUYING A GOD IN PARIS:  
CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN THE THINKING OF  
YURI VELLA, FOREST NENETS INTELLECTUAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses highly creative and hybrid practices which tie the Indigenous Siberian, European Christian and Soviet worlds in unexpected ways. Reflecting on the Forest Nenets reindeer herder, poet and intellectual Yuri Vella's understanding of the religious, the authors discuss an episode of turning an icon-like painting of Madonna with Child into a Nenets 'god'. This took place in Paris half a year before Yuri's death. First, we present his short biography, emphasising the key moments that shaped his cosmological and religious sensibilities. Then we depict a ritual of 'god-making' by using the ethnographic technique of thick description and then comment on it from various angles and discuss what they reveal about Yuri's understanding of personhood and agency, relations with deities and other humans. Finally, we explain how animist notions and Christian elements become entangled in his religious thinking.

KEYWORDS: animism • cultural hybridity • Forest Nenets • Notre-Dame de Paris • sacred objects

## INTRODUCTION\*

Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a remarkable Indigenous intellectual, poet, reindeer herder and Indigenous rights activist from western Siberia. He spent the last decades of his life in the forest taking care of his reindeer and fighting against the encroaching oil industry that ignored the needs of the Indigenous peoples in the region where he lived, i.e. the Forest Nenets and Khanty. Yuri belongs to those exceptional Siberian Indigenous intellectuals who in the early 1990s returned to the ancestral way of life after being thoroughly immersed in the Soviet, i.e. Russian, world.<sup>1</sup> Although much has been written about Yuri (for example Novikova 2002; Leete 2014; Korniyenko 2016; Toulouze and Niglas 2019), in this paper we endeavour to examine his intimate, inventive and hybrid religious thinking and practice. We rely on a particular event that took place in Paris a few months before his untimely death in September 2013. In order to better understand what happened there, we discuss the development of his religious thinking over decades.

Yuri's thinking went through several important changes especially when he gradually (re)discovered the rich Forest Nenets spirit world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, he began consciously reconstructing his own version of animist religiosity, which had borrowings from the mainstream understanding of monotheisms: his ideas came from the village and the city as well as from Forest Nenets and Khanty elders and from the forest environment that he observed as a hunter and herder.<sup>2</sup>

The ritual episode central to our reflections here may be summed up as the 'making of a god', which, *per se*, may appear both exotic and intriguing as reflected in Yuri's use of language and performative actions. This whole phenomenon is recognisably of an animist kind with its origins in distant Siberia but taking place in Paris, the totally unexpected surroundings of a Western European metropolis. Furthermore, this episode reverberates with some deep historical links to harsh Sovietisation, which forced Indigenous communities with a very different perception of the world find a way to survive in the new reality.

The episode commented on in this article appeared to us as very significant and revealing of Yuri's way of thinking, characterised by situatedness, fluidity and hybridity. We see cultural hybridity to be the act of living in borderlands, involving postcolonial ambivalence and triggering contestation of cultural difference while potentially empowering certain new cultural processes (Young 1995). Before we present a detailed description of the god-making event in the tradition of thick description,<sup>3</sup> we would like to go back to the broader context, both historical and autobiographical, in order to understand better its content and meaning.

### A SOVIET VILLAGE BOY

When the Russian anthropologist Andrey Golovnev first met Yuri Vella in 1992, the latter told him that he learnt about the Nenets supreme deity Num from books as well as when talking to some Khanty. Previously he had used the word *num* only to mark the

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sky and weather (Golovnev 1995: 380).<sup>4</sup> The ethnographer Viktoriya Spodina (2001: 25) also referred to Yuri's "vague" ideas about Num when she wrote that Yu. K. Aivaseda (Yuri's passport name was Aivaseda) considered the word *num* to originate from the Khanty word *nomyn*, meaning the 'upper'. As she writes, he associated Num ve'ku ('Num man') with various fishing, hunting or herding deities but not with the only, supreme sky god, as anthropologists and missionaries have been eager to depict him.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, Yuri's ignorance may reflect the special status of Num in the animist religiosity of the Forest Nenets. This old-man-like deity is not spoken about or addressed often. Instead, the main communication takes place with various master spirits who live in rivers, lakes, trees and elsewhere. Historically, it seems that the importance of the sky deity has grown with the increasing contact of the Indigenous population with the Russian Orthodox Church. Although Forest Nenets were relatively untouched by the direct Christian missionary campaigns, they heard about one powerful god from elsewhere, including their neighbours the Khanty, whose sky deity is called Numi-Torum.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Yuri's ignorance of Num as a supreme deity may reflect that he had just not happened to hear about this aspect. Apparently Num's name was mentioned rarely out of respect (Spodina 2001: 26). As we know from the Finnish linguist Toivo Lehtisalo's (1924: 8–9) meticulous work from the early 1910s, Forest Nenets were well aware of the existence of Num as a demiurge and supervisor of lesser spirits (see also Karapetova 1990: 65; Spodina 2001: 25–27; 2010: 203; Zen'ko-Nemchinova 2006: 201–202). One of the main sacred sites of the region is called Num-To ('Num's lake', which is however further away westwards from Yuri's area in the Agan River basin, see also Logany and Logany 2016: 128–132). As Lehtisalo (1924: 28–29) notes, Forest Nenets made sacrifices and petitioned Num, who was given reindeer as a sacrifice in spring around the time of first grass, leaves and thunder and in autumn when the first snow fell and the migratory birds had left for the south, the purpose of which was staying healthy and happy throughout the season, or the Nenets year. Usually, no material figure was made for Num.<sup>7</sup>

Yuri's ignorance of one of the major religious figures comes from his upbringing. As Spodina (2001: 27) notes referring to Yuri: "The informant himself associates this inaccuracy with his rupture from the traditional way of life".<sup>8</sup> Yuri was born in the taiga, but his parents were soon relocated to the village of Varyogan on the Agan River. His father committed suicide when Yuri was five and he was brought up primarily by his father's mother Nengi. Although his grandmother gave him a deep understanding of the Forest Nenets folklore by telling folk tales and singing songs, he might not have learned much about Num, as the sky deity is not a typical character in songs and tales.

Apparently not much explicit ritual knowledge was conveyed to him by his grandmother. This may be well understood considering that he grew up in the village in a female environment, both at school and at home, not having around him adult men, who were the ones who performed rituals in the forest. Yuri lived in Varyogan, as did both his mother and grandmother, and after his elementary education he continued his studies in the bigger village of Agan, where there were more Khanty than Forest Nenets children. For his secondary school he moved to the Russian-speaking city of Surgut, where he dropped out, as many other Indigenous students did. Being a village boy, he thus lacked the usual male experience of ritual practices that were very much alive in the forest.

However, the oral poetry he heard from his grandmother gave him a sensibility of an ontologically rather different world where spirit beings were abundant, active and powerful. Later on he spent much time out in the forest when working in a state enterprise as a hunter. This provided him with an intimate perception of the environment where the spirits live (Vella 2012: 91–92).

Yuri's early fictional writings from the Soviet period also reflect some contacts with the local spirit world. His writings were rarely pure inventions: he relied on his personal experiences and sometimes merged several encounters with various personalities into a fictional character (Toulouze 2017). For instance, he writes about an old man who has just broken a finger and then repairs it miraculously, or he speaks about an old shaman who crosses a lake in an inexplicable manner. While expressing his perplexity he presents these instances as facts. Another interesting case is how he reproduces a prayer in one short story about an old man, Shay-iki, who utters a prayer at a meal with a guest who had brought a bottle of pure spirits according to the custom. The old man said petitionary words but without naming the names of particular gods (for more detail see Toulouze and Niglas 2019: Chapter 12). Curiously, the words are very similar to some of Yuri's prayers to deities we recorded in 2009.

At the same time, Yuri was definitely influenced by his Soviet school education, in which gods had no positive value and the Christian God was the placeholder for absolute backwardness and ignorance. Much of his early education came from the boarding school where he received a typical atheist Soviet education, which ridiculed shamans and the natives' 'backward superstitions'. This is also a period when Yuri applied thrice for Communist Party membership, not doubting the truths that had been given him by the state school and authorities. Becoming a well-known Indigenous intellectual in the 1990s required from him considerable self-transformation in the years when the wider society also began talking about various gods, world religions and the dangers of the extraction industry.

## BACK TO THE FOREST VIA MOSCOW

Yuri's moment of revelation took place after he was accepted at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow at the age of 35 (graduated in 1988). His studies, which truly fascinated him at least in the first years, opened his eyes to the multitude of other cultures he was not aware about before. He discovered world literature and classical music. He understood that Russian culture was not the only great one in the world and there were the Ancient Greek, Ancient Roman and other cultures. This led him to the thought that the Nenets also have a 'culture' – a significant and not a primitive one that is inferior to that of others as the Soviet education system suggested.

Furthermore, he realised that the Communist Party had been lying, for instance, presenting all the Whites in the Russian Civil War as bandits while at the university he was told that there were bright intellectuals who held their own laudable values. Reading abundantly Russian and foreign classical literature and learning new things about the world which were not in line with the doctrinal teachings of the Party revolutionised his thinking. He stopped trusting implicitly any authoritative words by developing his own highly critical and sceptical mind. In the late 1980s, aged around 40, he began

consciously shaping himself and embracing his new Indigenous identity. He strove to become 'a real Nenets', who is proud of his customs and worldview, which he now dared to call a culture. Looking for his own roots, he discovered the gods, spirits, sacred sites, and sacrificial rituals of his own people.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after his almost Pauline revelation, Yuri radically changed his whole way of life and moved with his wife Yelena to a camp in the taiga in 1991. He quit his work as a state hunter, bought some reindeer and restarted his life from scratch in the forest, building log cabins and learning how to be a reindeer herder. He asserts in his autobiography (Vella 2006: 158–159) that this was the period of his life in which he depended very much on his older neighbours – Pavel and Vakhalyuma Aivaseda, Auli and Oysya Yusi. These elderly Forest Nenets reindeer herders taught him not only how to deal with reindeer, but also how to think and behave like a Nenets. Most likely he learnt from them how to make sacrifices and how to pray. They also kept his Forest Nenets language alive. After the deaths of these elders, Yuri complained that he had nobody with whom to speak proper Nenets. In the Varyogan region, Yuri was probably the last to master several aspects of the Forest Nenets language and cultural ways. When someone asked him information about how something was said in Nenets, he often explained first how the Nenets would think which he claimed to be radically different from Russians (much less when compared with the Khanty though, see Golovnev 1995: 262; Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 55).

During that period, he also came into more direct contact with Christianity as the post-Soviet wave of evangelisation in the Russian North had not left his family untouched. In the 1990s, Baptists had arrived in Forest Nenets and Khanty villages. They came first from Moscow, then from Surgut, which is the central city of the region. They managed to convert some Indigenous people, mostly women, mainly by the lure of their fierce anti-alcohol stance (Wiget and Balalaeva 2007).<sup>10</sup> Among them were Yuri's mother as well as one of his daughters who lived in Varyogan. Although his personal stance on alcoholism was similar to the Baptists', Yuri shared the traditional Soviet suspicion of 'sects', as the majority of denominations far from the Russian Orthodox Church are called. Yuri interpreted their attraction to Baptism as a mere fashion, like superficial shamanism, and he even stressed the similarity of the two phenomena in his literary texts being united by the absence of seriousness.<sup>11</sup>

When we became acquainted in the late 1990s, Yuri was comfortable with his new Indigenous world. One well known incident showed his creativity in managing his heritage and the new political situation particularly well. In 1996, in a collective sacrificial ceremony of Khanty and Forest Nenets at lake Num-To, Yuri publicly announced to the TV camera that he was about to give a reindeer cow to the president of Russia (then Boris Yeltsin) who, as Yuri declared, was free to take it away or leave it in Yuri's herd (Leete 1997; 1999; 2014). His initial idea was to get the president's attention by saying that he would do everything in his power to keep the reindeer alive against all the odds – the expanding oil drilling that threatened to pollute his pastures, or take them away altogether, the oil workers who poached on his lands and let their dogs stray on the reindeer pastures. He said:

According to the beliefs of my tribe, this reindeer can live forever. How? When it becomes old, it becomes ill, and when I think it feels badly, I kill it for meat. I replace it by a young healthy reindeer from my herd. At the same time the reindeer

can also pass away. It may die in an accident, or from an illegal hunter's gun near the oilfield. Only then the President's reindeer can disappear. (Leete 1999: 23)

In 2001, he showed the president's reindeer to Liivo and gave a more specific explanation by saying that the reindeer now served to monitor the new president's (Vladimir Putin) health and whether his deeds were approved by the gods. When the president's reindeer cow was lost, Yuri stated that the gods did not approve Russia's war in Chechnya: "Probably the gods did not like that he started another war" (Niglas 2003).

This kind of gift-giving to someone – however usually to a friend – has been common in the region, reminding us of other gift economies elsewhere in the world (Mauss 2016 [1925]). In Yuri's thinking, it seems gift reindeer are taken to be extensions not only of the giver but also the new owner. As such these reindeer serve as indices of the health, well-being and moral actions of those involved and their relationships, which can be read from a distance.<sup>12</sup> This could create occasional tension as well, as Eva witnessed. Once Yuri gave a reindeer calf to Yeremei Aipin, a Khanty writer from the same village, as a 50th birthday present (in June 1998). But Yeremei did not come to take it from Yuri's herd, and when the two had a verbal argument, Yeremei declared he was not interested in the gift. As a result, Yuri decided to castrate the reindeer calf in order to leave it alone without offspring. Shortly after the reindeer began behaving strangely and soon died. Perhaps Yeremei did not want to be subjected to the giver as this would have created an obligation to reciprocate putting him in a relationship he did not desire. We do not know for sure what the motives of either man were but obviously there was a lot at stake in this act of offering a gift and declining it.

#### SACRIFICIAL RITUALS, SACRED PLACES AND GOD FIGURES

Sacrificial rituals were common in Yuri's everyday life in the forest. Whenever a reindeer needed to be slaughtered for meat, there was a ritual dimension to it. For instance, in October 2000, when Eva was working in the log cabin, Yuri came in with a piece of reindeer fur smeared in blood. He climbed to the shelf high up on the back wall, opened a sacred box and ritually fed the blood to the anthropomorphic god figures wrapped in reindeer fur and textile. The moment had come to slaughter the first reindeer of the new season and to sacrifice it to the home or family gods, as the first snow had just fallen.

Another example of a regular sacrifice was captured on video by Liivo in the yard of Yuri's house in Varyogan in the winter of 2000. Yuri slaughtered three reindeer he had brought with him from the forest in order to distribute the meat among his relatives living in the village. The ritual contained long prayers, the participants turning themselves around sunwise (i.e. clockwise) and drawing a mark with reindeer blood on the eastern wall of the house.

There were irregular occasions of reindeer sacrifice as well, especially when Yuri sensed a danger lurking somewhere nearby. One of the triggers could be an ominous dream. In February 1999, when Eva had just arrived at his winter camp, Yuri dreamed that death was around the corner. The next day he chose three reindeer to be sacrificially slaughtered and in the afternoon the entire household – Yuri, his wife, their daughter Lada and her two sons Kolchu and Anton, also Eva – went to their family sacred place a few kilometres from the camp and carried out a sacrificial ritual. Later he



received news that an older Nenets neighbour had died in the village. The underlying logic here seems to be that he had deflected death from attacking his family by making the sacrifice in time. This experience rather supports our impression that Yuri took addressing the gods, especially when there was immediate danger involved, very seriously. Furthermore, as this incident was a source of great anxiety for Yuri, he prohibited taking photos this time.

In normal circumstances, when there was no ongoing crisis, he was not against recording sacrificial rites. Liivo and Eva filmed one of these regular sacrifices in the summer of 2009. It was one of so-called bloodless sacrifices that Khanty and Forest Nenets perform without involving reindeer slaughter (Spodina 2001: 30–33). The ritual we witnessed and participated in clearly manifests the importance of sacred places in Indigenous religious practices and the vulnerable state of these sites. Yuri took us to the main sacred site of the region, which was located on the top of a small hill overlooking the Vatyogan River, where there were some reindeer skins and skulls hanging on the trees. We had brought to Yuri as a gift a piece of white fabric, which is one of the most used items for bloodless offerings in the area. Yuri, knowing that we were interested in filming rituals, proposed that we be part of the rite. The ritual itself was a traditional one: Yuri prayed to the local forest and river spirits asking that they take care of reindeer and humans, accompanying this with sunwise turns and then asked Liivo to climb on the pine tree and tie the white fabric on the branch of the tree (Niglas 2016).

What was not that ‘traditional’ about the situation was the current state of the sacred hill and Yuri complaining about it. As with many other sacred places in the Indigenous Russian North (Murashko 2004; Dudeck et al. 2017), the hill had been physically damaged. There were many truck tracks and a freshly dug ditch on the hill. Yuri explained that after he had informed the authorities that non-natives (Rus. *nekorennyye*) should keep away from the sacred hill, oil workers brought in heavy machinery and dug up the soil to prevent cars driving to the hilltop. Yuri was furious that the Russians were so ignorant and were not able to understand that the entire hill was sacred. At the very top of the hill, a metal pole had been rammed into the ground, probably serving as a geodetic mark. Yuri noted to Liivo who was filming: “Just imagine that in the church you attend with your children, some people would come and stick such a pole in the very middle. How would your soul sing? How happy would you be?” (Niglas 2016)

When we were present, Yuri often drew an analogy between Indigenous religious and Christian practices, probably in order to make his ideas comprehensible to an audience more knowledgeable about Christianity than about the tacit and fluid Nenets ontology. In a way, this event may also demonstrate how Yuri reinforced the value of Nenets animism with non-traditional, especially Christian conceptions and values. But clearly Yuri’s analogy went deeper than that. He once commented about a researcher who had visited him in his forest camp, wanting to understand something about his religious thinking. The researcher apparently admitted that he was a non-religious person himself and Yuri gave us a harsh opinion about him: “He is an idiot. He himself is not a believer. How may he even think of understanding how we feel?” We are not sure if he had ever reflected on the different mechanisms at work in different religions, but evidently he operated with the notion of religion (Rus. *religiya*) as a phenomenon, as well as with religions (Rus. *religii*) in plural when he compared different religiosities.

Depending on the situation, it seems that for him there was often a hybrid area where different religions overlapped and became part of the same phenomenon.

This kind of hybridity is not so uncommon in the religious thinking and practice of Indigenous people in the Russian North. From the early 18th century when the forced baptismal campaigns began, the local Indigenous population adopted several material features from Russian Orthodoxy and integrated them in their own cosmology. We know that in early conversions to Christianity neck crosses were given and they became appreciated amulets offering protection in particular contexts. In many households, icons of saints also became common from since the late tsarist period (Mitusova 1929a: 9; 1929b: 16; see also Vallikivi 2003: 111).<sup>13</sup> Today, the icons are seen as protective sacred items that supplement other animistic religious objects, providing a household with necessary protective power. These can be bought in Orthodox church shops (see Vallikivi 2011: 83).

This hybrid use of Christian images in native religious life is illustrated well by the ethnographic event we present next. This involved Yuri, Liivo, Eva and the small icon-like painting of the Madonna and Child that was bought in Notre-Dame de Paris. We are able to describe the event in full detail because it was recorded with the help of two video cameras. Liivo also filmed Yuri's action and reflections before and after the process of god-making. So the presence of things, cameras and anthropologists were part of the evolving scene.

#### FINDING, MAKING, BUYING AND SELLING GODS

Before we focus more closely on the ritual episode in Paris, we provide just a short overview of another 'god-making' episode we have written about elsewhere (Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 242). This happened in 1999 when Eva had just arrived at the winter camp with Yuri and his wife, and they had guests, Vadim and Raisa, a couple from Num-to to whom Yuri had promised an old snowmobile and who were supposed to spend a couple of weeks at the camp. At one moment Yuri asked Vadim: "Do you know how to make a god [Rus. *bog*]?" – "No, I have never made any." – "That's good! The result is better when one makes a god for the first time. Mine is too old. I must have another."

This unexpected dialogue took place in an ordinary setting in front of everyone, that is Yuri's and Vadim's wives, and Eva. Eva did not interrupt the proceedings with the many questions she had at that moment, but observed further, knowing that something would become clearer later on. Indeed, a few days later, when they were all indoors, Yuri gave his guest a piece of wood and a knife and asked him to start carving it into a roughly anthropomorphic shape. Vadim did it and Yuri wrapped the figure in fabric and performed a short ritual. At the end, Yuri addressed Eva and said with a hint of a smile: "Well, this is how we entertain ourselves".

Yuri must have thought that Eva did not understand what was going on. This perhaps explains his ambiguous statement "entertain ourselves". Eva had been with them less than one month and they did not know whether she might behave like a typical 'Russian', who might misjudge this dimension of local life. Yuri was apparently protecting himself from the possible derision by an outsider and preferred to present it as something not entirely serious.<sup>14</sup>



The ritual under focus in the current article took place on the afternoon of March 6 in 2013, half a year before Yuri's demise. He had travelled to Paris to read his poems at the National Institute for Eastern Languages and Cultures (INALCO), where Eva works as a professor of Finno-Ugric studies. He travelled to Paris from Estonia with Liivo, who had time to spend with Yuri, while Eva also had her university obligations.

The ritual had a prelude which began a few days before the actual event. Liivo and Yuri were sightseeing in the city and one of the sites they visited was the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris. When they came out, Yuri expressed that he immediately felt a sense of pure sacredness in the cathedral. A couple of days later, they returned to Notre-Dame but they did not go in as there was a long queue at the entrance. They stopped on the Pont au Double, one of the nearby river bridges. There Yuri made an improvised ritual, a discreet one, as he used to do in his home forest when crossing a river. He took some coins out of his pocket and picked a number of coins according to the number of the people he was invoking the deities' blessings on – his wife, his four daughters and his mother with their families. He threw the coins one at a time into the Seine River while uttering prayer words in Forest Nenets. He prayed for the wellbeing of humans and reindeer, for people not to lose their hunting and fishing luck, and for guests to find their way. When there were no more coins to throw, he switched to Russian and added more universal prayers that he adapted to the current context:

May the local gods be always benevolent so that a man who walks the earth would not stumble, so that there would be happiness, so that people would smile at each other when they meet. May all be well with the women who give birth to children, and may the children who are born not suffer, may their birth be easy. And may the dark man be not very greedy. We will die anyway one day but may he not be too greedy when we die. May he take us one by one, not many people at once. (Niglas 2016)

Between each prayer he made a sunwise turn and uttered "Oukh, oukh, oukh, oukh", a traditional formula accompanying Forest Nenets and Khanty prayers.

After that Yuri and Liivo went to a nearby café and had some tea. When they returned to the cathedral the queue was gone and they went in. He bought a small painting of the Madonna and Child on a wood panel which reminded him of an Orthodox icon. Immediately after, while still inside the cathedral, he told Liivo to give him some coins and take the painting from him, explaining: "Now, you must buy it from me. For any sum. Later we'll do the ritual [Rus. *obychai*]."

Back at Eva's place, Yuri arranged the ritual, which required Liivo's active participation. Liivo was ready to film, but Yuri ordered him to sit next to him on the bed. Liivo set up one camera on a tripod and gave Eva another camera to film with. When Liivo asked what was going to happen, Yuri replied: "I cannot say in advance. How can I know what will happen? I already told you that I cannot control this. He himself... they themselves control it", most likely referring initially to a single spirit being and then switching to the plural. And then adding: "What they say we will do."

Yuri had bought three scarfs in a shop and asked Liivo to choose the one he liked most, which he put aside. Yuri wrapped the icon in another scarf, giving it a kind of anthropomorphic form with a recognisable head, explaining: "It's a mother, after all.

She has to be in a scarf." Then he gave the wrapped icon to Liivo and said in Forest Nenets:

*jaa-mna jaatiL'a-tam-š, nginL'i jaa-mna jaatiL'a-tam-š,*  
I have walked along the land, I have walked along the foreign land,  
*man' jaa-mna-j jaatiL'a-t-am-š, La"khä"-j jaa-mna jaatiL'a-t-am-š,*  
I have walked along my own land, I have walked along my kin's land,  
*kähä-j jo"-nga-t, kähä"-j joh.*  
I have lost my god, my god has disappeared.  
*pi"-t-i jaatäl-ma-nt šeeL ngami kähä n'i-ša-n ku-", n'i-ša-n manäs-", n'i-ša-n ngami-hät*  
*ngami-hät kähä-Laha-m?*  
You, when you have walked along the land, have you not seen, have you not found something similar to a god?

Yuri then translated his words into Russian, adding a few new details in Russian such as: "How shall I live without a god [Rus. *bez boga*]?" or "Have you not found some god? Have you not found my god somewhere?" He then dictated Liivo what the answer should be using whatever language he wanted: "I was in many lands, I have been everywhere [...] Yes I saw one god. Yes, I picked up a god. Or then, I bought a god. Then say, yes, I have a god, I found it. Look, isn't this god yours?"

Liivo said in Estonian that he found a god that might be Yuri's. Then Liivo explained what he said in Russian. Yuri took the god and examined it by unwrapping it a little bit, saying in Russian: "Yes, it seems to be a good god, he is somewhat similar to my god. But my god was beautiful, was good. He brought me luck." He then switched to Nenets for a short moment:

*w'aap-ta homa-š, man' kähä-j-i, t'ukä" ngaL'a jeeti-Lka ngä-Lha.*  
He had good luck, my god, this one here seems to be like a new one.

He continued in Russian: "It is a new god. It has appeared not long ago. It is not an old god. I had an old god. No, it is apparently not mine. But if it is a spare one, would you sell it to me?" Liivo spontaneously answered "Yes, I may sell it to you, if you like it." But Yuri corrected him: "No, you must not agree right away, you should have said that you also need it, that you also like it. You may agree only the third time."

The scenario was set and Liivo kept acting accordingly. Yuri then started to explain why he needed it: he has reindeer and he needs a helper who would guard them; he has children and grandchildren and he needs an assistant who would help to raise them. Then he said that he had good money: "Not our money but foreign money." Liivo acknowledged that money would be good, but he likes this god and is not keen to give it away. Then Yuri took the scarf Liivo had chosen earlier and started praising it and added: "In addition to money, I could give this to you, you have a daughter, wife, mother-in-law, teacher, neighbour. You can give it away as a present to someone perhaps. Maybe for this scarf you would agree? I add the money." Liivo started also praising the scarf and finally agreed to the deal, as he had declined the offer twice already. Yuri took from his pocket some coins and they acted as if it was a lot of money. When Liivo had given him the wrapped painting, Yuri explained: "Thank you, god, I will go home and straight away make a sacrifice. I will prepare fresh blood in honour of this god. Let's see, perhaps this god will serve well. Thank you."

That was the end of the ritual part. Liivo took a camera from Eva and continued filming. Yuri offered additional comments on what had just taken place:

Look, when we were for the first time in the house of this goddess [Rus. *boginya*], at Num's mother [Rus. *u materi Numa*]. First time we went in, I had no particular thoughts. We were there, visited it, and went out. And after that I had a dream, I received a hint [Rus. *podskazka*], I need to go there once more. I was still not sure what we would do there. But when with you I approached this house, there was a very long queue. I was alarmed by this. God knows that I do not like long queues. This is why we seemingly went away. We had tea. Then it rained a bit. We say that a little bit of rain on the road brings luck. Under the rain we went back to this house. The rain is for the luck. We went in with you. I don't know what there is or not, whether there is what I am looking for. We went in. We looked on the one side and then on the other and suddenly we found what we needed. This was the second hint. And later when we went out of the house of God's Mother [Rus. *doma Boga Materi*], the clouds parted and the sun appeared. This was the third sign that we had done everything right.

Then he explained what will happen once he will be back in the forest with his family: "When I go back home, we will consecrate it with other gods, sit them down together, give a name. With the name it is easier, she will tell the name herself."

At Liivo's question whether it is common to have such icons (Rus. *ikony*) as gods, he answered that it was and that he had seen these among both Khanty and Nenets (he named several persons) to have icons among their gods, such as Jesus Christ and Nicholas the Miracle-Maker: "Therefore, I find this to be ok." Yuri clarified that he came from a 'pagan' family (Rus. *yazycheskaya sem'ya*) where apparently no one was baptised. He explained that in Notre-Dame he did not behave as a Christian:

I did not take [buy] this as a Christian. What I just did with you was a ritual of pagans. And it is like a pagan deity [Rus. *yazycheskoye bozhestvo*] now. But a pagan deity can be of any form, it can be depicted in various ways – in the form of a human being, frog, bird, animal. Currently it is a woman with a child. Well she has such a name – Num Nemya.<sup>15</sup>

He also noted that his wife came from a family where her father and mother were baptised, even if she regarded herself a pagan (Rus. *yazychnitsa*). Yuri supposed that she would be glad to see it. Yuri then continued with explanations:

I cannot make a god for myself. I cannot directly buy or find a god. You have to buy it from someone, from some other person. It is desirable that this person would live long. Because if the person from whom you bought the god dies – you learn the news that he is dead – then the god has to be reconsecrated. This god has to be left in nature,<sup>16</sup> another god has to be bought instead, undergo the ritual of reconsecration and the name has to be given to the new god.

As it turned out, Yuri had already planned to replace two of his family gods for some time as those who made them had passed away. One godfigure he had in the forest camp was made and consecrated by his late friend Yegor Stepanovich Kazamkin. Another he bought from another person who had also recently died. He said that he had to change

these two some time soon, adding that he would do this in spring or summer: “Also a rite must be followed. Death has to move a little bit further away. A year should pass. We consider winter to be one year and summer another year.” As winter was about to end, Yuri planned to proceed with the replacement.

He stressed by indicating with his hand on the new god in his hand: “Look, someone has crafted it. I bought it from you. Here is not only one person, here are many people.” And a bit later he said to Liivo: “You are a young person, you will live long. Therefore, this god will serve me a long time.”

A few times Yuri slightly corrected himself as he was rethinking some of details of what he had just said. At one moment, he thanked Liivo for “giving the god as a gift” (Rus. *podaril*) and then corrected himself, adding “selling” (Rus. *prodal*) it. Later when Eva asked whether Liivo could have just made a gift to him, Yuri replied, “anyway I would give a coin or something. Anyway, I would buy it”.

Another example is with the scarf. Yuri had said that Liivo could give it away as a gift to a woman but later insisted that it was to be used preferably by Liivo himself or by one of his sons, changing his idea about it being a good gift for his wife or other woman. As Yuri noted: “Because the scarf was used as an exchange for the god.” In the Nenets ritual world, dealing with family god figures is the male domain. Although the representation was of a female goddess, the scarf had been given as payment in exchange for a god and functioned as a “relic”, which mattered in Yuri’s reasoning. Yuri held a similar scarf around his neck, which he held out when explaining this. However, finally he admitted that nothing bad would happen if women wore it.

Yuri concluded the topic by saying with a smile: “When you find a new god, it is a feast [Rus. *Prazdnik*]. We have to make a food sacrifice for the new god.” It was a hint that it was time to drink tea and eat something in Eva’s kitchen.

#### “THOUGH EVERYTHING IS SYMBOLIC, EVERYTHING IS REAL”

Let us now reflect on these experiences of producing material gods. We will try to understand what we may infer from this data about the significance of this activity. However, we have not managed to find such depictions of the ritual trading of sacred objects in the scholarly literature on the area.<sup>17</sup>

Let us start by commenting on the ideas of finding, buying and making a god. All these verbs refer to different aspects or stages of the same episode. In order to have the bought artefact function as a god, Yuri had to obtain it by ritually buying it. The verb ‘to find’ has a taste of fortuitousness (unlike in the episode in his home forest with Vadim, when Yuri asked the unsuspecting friend to make a god for himself). In Paris, he did not know beforehand what he was going to find in Notre-Dame. So, the sacred object came to him in a combination of his own and the spirit being’s volition.

Yuri had received three signs, two beforehand, one after. The first was given in a dream, which is a canonical way to communicate between the worlds in this area (Moldanova 2001) and beyond (for example Anisimov and Toulouze 2021). Yuri was induced by a dream to go back to the cathedral. Then they did not enter because of the huge queue, but they returned later. Then Yuri found what he was looking for. And the rain that fell while they were walking towards the cathedral (another favourable omen)

ceased when they came out, confirming that Yuri had done what needed to be done.

Over the years, Yuri had developed the skill of sign reading in the environment and people who surrounded him. He knew that nothing happened by mere chance. Once Eva witnessed how Yuri went one day from his camp to the city of Nizhnevartovsk and everything went against his plan. The people he wanted to meet were not available, the car stopped functioning. Yuri, sitting at the wheel, started thinking about what these punishments – as he called them – might be for. Similarly, when his health failed and he needed repeated surgery, he expressed the wish to speak to Eva via Liivo. When Eva called him, he had nothing to say in particular, but she understood that he wanted to check whether she was angry and held a grudge against him. He was at once reassured when Eva was relaxed and friendly. So, he was very keen to deal with all the signs from what he considered to be linked to the spirit world that were interwoven into the human relations around him (see also Vella 2012: 108–110).

A fundamental feature that appears in these cases of god-making is the use of another person, a mediator. Yuri says it explicitly: he cannot make a god himself, he cannot directly buy it himself. He could not carve a piece of wood for himself: it would lack the force another's hand would give it. And this hand is particularly valuable if it is inexperienced in Yuri's view. Vadim had never carved a god. Liivo, at the beginning of the ritual, had no idea what Yuri wanted. And Yuri himself declared that he was not entirely sure what was going to happen, even if he apparently had some plan ready in some form. In short, other humans, in this case men, were indispensable in order to achieve what he needed from the gods.

In this event, money has a role of an exchange item for marking the transfer of ownership. Although Yuri is the one to bring forth money to buy the icon, this is not what counts as it takes place before the actual ritual of buying the *kaekhae* (*kähe*). He could not have just put the icon in his luggage and brought it back home. Thus, he sold the icon to Liivo by asking him for a few coins already in Notre-Dame. And when he took out the icon from the bag at Eva's place and gave it to Liivo, he said explicitly: "This is yours". Liivo was thus the necessary mediator who could sell the icon to him and prove it to be useful by being young and having a long life ahead.

We would like to stress that the Forest Nenets word 'buy' (*temtash*) has not necessarily a mercantile dimension to it as Westerners understand it, but it marks any transaction which corresponds well to the Maussian scheme according to which a gift requires a counter-gift creating an obligation to reciprocate that not only exchanges things: "one gives *oneself*" as well (Mauss 2016: 144). In Yuri's scheme, once the person dies, the link disappears and the god loses some of its efficiency. This is why Yuri needed to find another *kaekhae* or *bog* after the death of the maker or mediator. Part of his logic seems to parallel with that of the president's reindeer as Yuri explained in 1996 at the collective sacrifice in Num-To ("I replace it with a young healthy reindeer from my herd," see above).

This event was also linguistically loaded. As a fluent bilingual of Russian and Forest Nenets, Yuri switched from one language to another, preferring in key moments to use his mother tongue. Yuri uses the word *bog* or *bogi* in Russian ('god' or 'gods') and *kaekhae* in Nenets for both the invisible deities and spirits as well as for their material images,<sup>18</sup> both animistic wooden god figures and Christian icons.<sup>19</sup> These are not really representations in the way most Westerners are used to seeing these things, even if



Orthodox believers' relations with icons can be more complex.<sup>20</sup> This shows that material items may become extensions of particular invisible spirit beings.

Yuri's notion of god (*bog/kaekhae*) does not have the status of the omnipotent god of a monotheist religion: a god is not the one who fully decides how its owner is going to fare but is there to primarily to guard and assist. When in the forest, Yuri addresses very different gods in his prayers, among them the gods of particular places, such as the river Agan and its tributary Vatyogan, or the small river Tyuyt'yakha on which his winter camp is located. Yuri's gods (god figures) are there to support him in his daily activities as well in extraordinary and threatening moments (as with the case of having the ominous dream described above, see also Vella 2012: 132).

We think that what summarises the entire event well is when Yuri says: "Though everything is symbolic, everything is real" (Rus. *Khot' vse simvolicheski, vse po-nastoyashchemu*). As we clearly see there was no contradiction in this claim as the ritual framework itself guaranteed the efficacy of the entire event, and acting it out was a necessary part in it. In everyday life, Yuri often acted or gave the impression that he performed an act. But nevertheless, this kind of acting was very much being himself as we had seen in numerous situations over the years. And thus, everything is acting indeed, and in spite of it, because of it, everything is right. As Roberte Hamayon (2016) has argued, play is of the utmost importance in Siberian ontologies; in many contexts this does not disregard the uttermost seriousness and yet allows the implicit ambiguity to be productive in human experience (see also Willerslev 2013).



Photo 1. Yuri wrapping the painting of the Madonna and Child in a scarf.

Photo 2. Yuri checking whether it is the god he had lost.

Photo 3. Yuri offering money to Liivo for the god.

Photo 4. Yuri offering a scarf to Liivo for the god.

Photo 5. Liivo filming Yuri's further explanations after the ritual.

## CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

There are several aspects of cultural hybridity we would like to point out in this final section. On the one hand, this concerns space, temporality and sociality in Yuri's relations to the spirit and human worlds. On the other hand, in these relations there is a complex entanglement with the Christian or European cultural layer that surrounds the Western Siberian Indigenous people in the early 21st century.

For us, it was unusual to see the prayer performed out of the Siberian context. However, it demonstrates well how Yuri's mind worked in unfamiliar situations and environments. He found elements that fit well in his worldview (the sacredness of certain places, a river as a channel for communication with spirit beings, gods being connected to specific places or areas, universal concerns of birth and death) and that answered to his needs. This, and his choice of a Christian image as a new god (figure), shows how creatively and inclusively he acted towards his religious tradition.

As our experience on the sacred hill damaged by oil workers demonstrates, Yuri took the sacredness of a site of worship seriously and compared it to a Christian church. He stressed that the sacred ground is much larger than the actual place where religious rituals were carried out. Yuri illustrated this conception eloquently with his small offering ceremony on the bridge by Notre Dame, asking for, among other things, luck for reindeer herding, hunting and fishing. It was not only the cathedral itself but the natural environment around that was sacred. The river – the only major natural feature around the church – shared the church's sacredness. Furthermore, a river is regarded as "the centre of the world", as Yuri put it after praying on the bridge. It is a channel of communications with the spirit world, through which the souls of dead people also travel to the other realms.

At the same time, the ritual event in focus here has to be seen as part of a longer series of events that encompassed reading divine signs, finding the god, buying it from someone else, to be followed by a consecration through the sacrifice of a reindeer. Even after that, the god who acts as an assistant will be still observed over time to see if it brings lucks and solves the necessary problems.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Christian devotional images, which ideally should last forever, we see that Nenets god figures have a biography. These biographical trajectories are particularly complex as these material figures have their own personhood as well as being linked to a more distant entity whose personhood entails material figures. And furthermore, there is a biographical trajectory of humans who use them, who evaluate their usefulness and also sometimes return them to the original place (see Vallikivi 2022).

As we have seen, it is a world in which relations with humans and deities are entangled. In Yuri's thinking, it is important to know whether the person who had made or sold the god figure is alive and well. The president's reindeer, Vadim carving an anthropomorphic sacred figure, Liivo selling him the icon show how he created connections between himself and other people and spirits and their material extensions. Yuri's world was interconnected, like a huge network in which different agencies were at work – not only his own, but also, among others, the gods, presidents and anthropologists who all exercised different kinds of power. These people are so deeply embedded in various material forms and transactions that their fates and powers were connected with his.

One of the key aspects in Yuri's culturally hybrid practice is his situated use of Christian notions and objects. The contact of these two worlds became a complex set of meanings. Answering a question by Liivo, Yuri commented that indeed it is natural to have an icon among one's gods. He enumerated examples of two Khanty and another older Nenets who own icons among their personal or family gods. Then he explained that the ritual was a 'pagan' ritual, and that through this ritual the meaning of the picture has been changed. We see the object that lies at the core of the transaction in the god-making ritual is a polysemic representation that is a kind of interface between two worlds: on the one hand it represents the Christian character (the Mother of Jesus Christ), which is a powerful symbol of divinity especially in the Catholic (also in Russian Orthodox) tradition, and on the other hand it has the new meaning given by Yuri, who took this Christian symbol for his own, and gave it a different power, of a Nenets kind, calling it Num Nemya (Num's mother). He speaks of God's Mother (and not Sky Mother, Mother Sky, God Mother or similar which could be other possible versions, see Zen'ko-Nemchinova 2006: 201–202). It was now a Nenets god(dess) with a Nenets name, her Christian identity and status as Our Lady were as if deactivated.<sup>22</sup> This also means that for the Nenets, his own worldview integrates, encompasses various others and provides the means to reinterpret all symbols according to its logics.

As we saw above, Yuri's contact with Christianity was limited. He had grown up in the Soviet environment. He also grew up in a 'pagan' environment, nobody among his close ancestors had been baptised. Apparently, he had not much specific knowledge of Christianity, perhaps except for seeing icons and crosses here and there. Although in later years some of his family members converted to Baptism, he remained a devoted 'pagan'. In any case, as we have demonstrated, he regarded Christianity, at least in its classical form, with respect, as he did all other forms of 'proper' religious devotion.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Yuri's attitude towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, was complex and included contradictory elements that merged into a creative personal worldview. Undoubtedly, what characterises Yuri's overall approach was inclusivism, which is common to the local Indigenous pattern. It seems he relied on his rediscovered or reconstructed Indigenous worldview to incorporate Christian elements and to give them a place in his peculiar and individual perception of the world. Yuri's religion was very much relational and extended, much more than the usual Western (Christian) ones are, but at the same time it was deeply individual, being composed by different personal ingredients connected with particular events in his life.

At the same time, his approach to the religious also reveals a rather ordinary pattern used by Siberian Indigenous people to face the challenges of their history: instead of merely adopting the new standards that both missionaries and Soviets attempted to impose, they integrated new elements into their own world structure – be this St Nicholas the Miracle maker becoming a god in the Indigenous cosmology, or, in another sphere, the hunters and reindeer herders integrating the state enterprise system into their own patterns of subsistence. Therefore, despite Yuri Vella's originality, inventiveness, and occasional idiosyncrasies we recognise his situated choices as a deeply embedded expression of Indigenous thought and agency.

## NOTES

1 Another well-known example is the Tundra Nenets writer Anna Nerkagi (born in 1952) who returned to the tundra after living for many years in the city of Tyumen.

2 The three authors of this article became acquainted with Yuri largely in the same period between 1998 and 2000: Eva in June 1998, Laur in January 1999 and Liivo in November 2000. Liivo and Eva have spent several months with Vella's family, alone as well as together, in his forest camps. We rely here on the materials of our fieldwork, our multiple conversations with Yuri, both in Siberia and elsewhere (Tartu, Helsinki, Paris), as well as on his writings as a poet and prose writer.

3 Despite many criticisms, thick description as a nuanced hermeneutic approach is still widely used in anthropology and other social sciences. According to Joseph Ponteretto (2006: 543), it

accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher's understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. (See also Geertz 1973; Scheff 1986; Ryle 2009 [1968]; Leete and Torop 2020.)

4 For instance, when a Forest Nenets says *khoma num*, it does not mean a 'good deity' but 'good weather'.

5 Towards the end of his life, Yuri considered Num to be just one out of many gods and not the principal deity – he says the principal deity is Tya-Makhang-Shcheishchi, 'The master of the earth's back without heart (immortal)'. He writes about Num that he lives on the lake of Num-To, calling him Num le'tpyota Num Vä'ku, 'The sky guarding Sky Man' (Vella 2012: 108). Apparently, for Yuri, sorting out a strict pantheon was not of interest.

6 For instance, Toivo Lehtisalo (1924: 29) writes that Forest Nenets considered that Num had predestined the time of death of each person. This is just one possible example of the ideological impact of Christianity.

7 Lehtisalo (1924: 29) argues that Nenets never make an image of Num. However, Raisa Mitusova (1929b: 15) reports from her expedition to Forest Nenets that during a sacrifice among the wooden images of deities (Rus. *derevyannyye izobrazheniya bozhestva*) there was "Num, the deity of the sky, with lead eyes and nose, [that] holds in the lap one of his wives – Agan pushya with the head of an otter".

8 At the same time, Spodina (2001: 27, 74) refers to some other Forest Nenets men who gave particular details about Num as a sky deity who occasionally punished his children, i.e. humans, for their misdeeds.

9 It was not strictly an ethnic matter for Yuri. He saw the local Indigenous world as his own and the neighbouring Khanty – the dominant Indigenous group in the Agan region – to be part of it. Moreover, his wife was a Khanty. Yuri, according to the evidence of numerous examples, used to think more in terms of the Indigenous (Rus. *korennoy*) versus Russians (Nen. *lusa*) than in distinguishing the Nenets from the Khanty (see for more details Toulouze 2012).

10 As in many Siberian villages, drinking is a plague indeed. Yuri had the experience of having been intoxicated, as he drank before his military service and abandoned drinking a couple of years afterwards. He never touched alcohol again. He could not stand having drunk people around him, which set him apart from most other villagers. His hostility to alcohol was absolute: for instance, he refused to serve women wine even when he was the only man at the table (as is expected in Russia).

11 Yuri had an ambiguous attitude towards the word 'shaman'. He kept a more positive assessment for Forest Nenets *tadibya*, which Russians translated as 'shaman' (Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 274; see also Spodina 2001: 13).

12 Among Tundra Nenets in the Polar Urals, Laur learned that when somebody received a reindeer as a gift, killed the animal for meat and boiled the heart, if the heart remained hard to chew, it was said to mirror the giver's greed and negative attitude towards the recipient. Herders said that the donor kept thinking of this gift reindeer in terms of pity or regret.

13 Mitusova (1929b: 16) reports how after a shamanic seance she saw an Orthodox icon, that of the Mother of God (Rus. *Bogoroditsa*) among other god figures being ritually fed with the blood of a sacrificially slaughtered reindeer. Furthermore, in 1915 Mitusova took a "wooden Num-Nemya idol" back from her expedition to Agan, which is now in the Tobolsk museum (Perevalova and Karacharov 2006: 30; see also Lehtisalo 1924: 152).

14 When Laur was in the Malozemelskaya tundra among the Tundra Nenets in 1999, he once took a chunk of wood and started carving it. His host jokingly commented: "Oh, you are making yourself a god" (see also Chernetsov 1987: 160; Leete 1996: 107).

15 Unlike Tundra Nenets, Forest Nenets seem to have a special relation with Num nemya. The ethnographer Mitusova (1929b: 17), who travelled among Forest Nenets in 1924, records that the old man called Ilyuko, who was ill, organised the sacrifice of two reindeer: "Ilyuko himself killed the white one, saying a prayer-request loudly to Num-Nemya, god's mother (Rus. *molitva-pros'bu Num-Nemi, materi boga*), a deity who is very revered among the Forest Samoyeds." (See also Vella 2012: 124.) In Forest Nenets myths, Num-Nemya also figures as Num's wife (Golovnev 1995: 394; see also 487; Alekseyev 2010: 390; Spodina 2010: 204). According to Zen'ko-Nemchinova (2006: 201–202), Num-Nemya in Mitusova's material should be seen as Mother Sky relating it to Numtana nyama, 'The mother who rules the sky' or 'The mother who lives in the sky' known among Forest Nenets on the river of Khalesovaya.

16 The Khanty scholar Agrafena Pesikova Sopochina said that Khanty used to take older gods to sacred places before finding new ones (oral information by Stephan Dudeck; see also Vallikivi 2011: 88).

17 In historical sources there are notes about buying things to turn them then into idols:

Ides, a 17th century diplomat who passed through Siberia on his way to Beijing, wrote that the Ostyaks (the former name of the Khanty and Mansi populations of North Siberia) had come to him and saw a clockwork bear toy. When the Ostyaks saw the toy working, they performed the necessary rituals and begged Ides to sell them this bear figurine so that they could make an idol of it. (Baulo 2002: 149)

We cannot be sure, however, whether this reflects actual practice or the exoticizing rhetoric of the author.

18 For Christians, especially missionaries, the name of this object would be an 'idol', referring to the worship of 'false gods' prohibited by the Christian God (Vallikivi 2011). One can sometimes hear, when speaking in Russian Indigenous people, that they themselves call these objects 'idols' (Rus. *idoly*; the same goes for the word 'pagans', Rus. *yazychniki*), interiorising thus alien-imposed notions. However, Yuri does not beat around the bush and calls them 'gods' (Rus. *bogi*), perhaps also refusing to accept the implicit hierarchy of these Russian words.

19 Lehtisalo's (1924) material also reflects the idea that Forest Nenets signify with the word *kaehe* (*kaekhae*, *kähe*) both invisible spirit beings and their material forms.

20 Consider what John and Carol Garrard (2008: 6) have argued:

To the believer, icons (from the Greek 'image') are more than art; they are portals into the spiritual world. The Orthodox hold that as they look at the icon, the icon gazes back. Believers talk to them, and the icons answer.

21 Using sacred figures temporally is widespread in the region. For instance, among Tundra Nenets, Lehtisalo (1924: 65) noted that shamans made a wooden image called a *syadey* from a tree that grew in a sacred place (*khekhe ya*). They gave it to somebody for a certain period so the person



could hunt or fish successfully, after which it should have returned to the sacred place (see also Vallikivi 2011: 88).

22 Yuri also lit candles in Notre-Dame. They have their own meaning for him, which may, or may not coincide with the meaning for Christians. Consider what he writes in a published text from 2008:

It is not only us pagans who make sacrifices. A Christian goes to church, buys a candle and burns it. It is a sacrifice, too. A Christian buys an icon, sanctifies it and puts it into a venerable corner. We buy or bring up a deer, sanctify it, then send his soul to the gods, we give away the meat, and put his hide up on a sacred tree, in a sacred place. (Quoted in Toulouze and Niglas 2019: 267.)

23 In one of his last books, Yuri (Vella 2012: 133–135) recalls how in 1989 he gave one thousand roubles that he had earned to set up the local museum in Varyogan to the Foundation for the Restoration of the Church of Christ the Saviour in the village. He thought of this as a sacrifice from his family “for the museum existed, for our family to have well-being”. That night when travelling on the snowmobile with his wife he found 500 roubles near a small stream called Myl Soyem. He said jokingly to his wife: “God accepted our sacrifice and sent his gift to thank us.” After that he threw a coin into the stream once a year, adding that perhaps in the future this would be known as the personal sacred site of Yuri Kylevich (Vella).

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