

NOTES AND REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW: WORDS AND SILENCES: NENETS REINDEER HERDERS AND RUSSIAN EVANGELICAL MISSIONARIES IN THE POST-SOVIET ARCTIC

Vallikivi, Laur. 2024. *Words and Silences: Nenets Reindeer Herders and Russian Evangelical Missionaries in the Post-Soviet Arctic*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 358 pages.

This book by Laur Vallikivi represents an ethnographic study of religious conversion among Nenets reindeer herding nomads in the Russian Arctic. Through observations of and interviews with Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries and recent converts, as well as by tracing concrete stories of conversion, the author describes and analyses how the Nenets nomads try to assimilate new concepts and establish new relations with material and social realities and learn new practices, verbal as well as non-verbal, of self-expression and self-analysis.

Although description and analysis of this sort have already been made in other regions and contexts, the book by Laur Vallikivi is unique in two respects. First, it studies a rare and difficult-to-approach group. Overall, Nenets reindeer herders, the biggest group of Arctic reindeer herding nomads in the modern world, are relatively well studied: there exists a huge literature on them in several languages, most notably in English and Russian. However, Nenets live over a large territory, and their history, language, culture, and way of life are not the same everywhere. By far the most publications on the Nenets come from Western Siberia, most notably from the Yamal Peninsula. In contrast, the book by Laur Vallikivi is devoted to the European Nenets and could well be the first book in English about them; at least, I am aware only of academic articles on them in this language.

Furthermore, Vallikivi has chosen one of the least known, least accessible and probably most controversial groups of the European Nenets: the group known in Russian as the Vorkuta Group of Nenets Private Herders (Vorkutinskiye nentsy-chastniki/lichniki) whom Vallikivi prefers to call “the Independents” (a term I find quite apt and certainly better than the Russian one). This group of the Nenets, who managed to avoid collectivisation and maintain their way of life as independent herders, hunters and fishermen throughout the Soviet period, is known for their difficult relations with outsiders, including anthropologists. During most of the Soviet period, after attempts to collectivise the group in the 1930s and the 1940s failed and the dramatic story of the Ural uprising (1943) demonstrated to both the herders and state officials that further interaction would be neither pleasant nor easy, the group was largely ignored in public discourse, and its very existence was denied at the public level. Of course, specialists studying the European tundra and its population – including some Soviet ethnographers such as Lyudmila Khomich – were aware of the group and even interviewed its members, but never published anything about it. Therefore, it was Western anthropologists who ‘discovered’ the group in the early 1990s and published the first academic and popular papers on the Independents.

After that, ignorance was replaced by a rather unhealthy boom in sensationalism. I vividly recall receiving an e-mail through a student e-mail list in the 1990s – at that time, I was a student at the University of Lapland – pompously announcing that a previously isolated tribe called “Nenet” (sic) had been discovered in the Arctic tundra and expressing concerns that our sinful civilisation would irreversibly corrupt these naïve savages. As Vallikivi shows in his book, these concerns were also important in Christian missionaries’ rhetoric in the course of conversion. What is significant, however, is that this sensationalist boom was hardly more conducive to establishing rapport with the group and conducting serious anthropological work on it than the politically based ignorance-mixed-with-suspicion of the previous period. My own experience of meeting members of the group during my fieldwork in Bolshezemelskaya tundra in the early 2000s proves this. Once the Nenets herders learned that I was a researcher, they immediately shut down and refused to answer my questions. My attempts to explain that I was not working for the officials or related to the Russian state in any way, and that I was *ngyzma* (‘Komi’) rather than *lutsa* (‘Russian’), did not help. The people told me that, in their opinion, too many outsiders were interested in their life these days and they did not like that. These difficulties explain why, despite the great interest, very little ethnography has been published about the group (and a significant, possibly even the largest, portion of the existing publications has been written by Vallikivi – 2001; 2005a; 2005b; 2022 to name just a few). This shows also that Vallikivi’s establishing a rapport with the group and performing long-term fieldwork among its members is a very significant achievement in itself. Even if the work under review had no other strengths (which it does!), the very fact that it is by far the richest source of ethnographic and historical facts on an interesting but scantily studied and hard-to-reach group would

make it a valuable contribution to our discipline. Furthermore, although the book does not disclose it, the author has done a lot to improve the situation of his informants, the Independents, and a serious deterioration in his relations with local officials was the price. I can imagine that this required quite a bit of bravery on his part, and for me, this adds further authority to his work.

Another respect in which the work is unique consists in the choice of topic. Again, there is quite a rich anthropological literature on religious conversion. However, in the case of the Arctic peoples of Russia, academic attention has been focused mainly on traditional beliefs (Eliade 1964; Balzer 1990; 2011; Vitebsky 1995; 2005; Hutton 2001; Znamenski 2007; Siikala and Ulyashev 2011 to mention only the most important book-length studies), while religious conversion has been discussed, if at all, in the context of the influence it had on these beliefs (Znamenski 2007; Siikala and Ulyashev 2011; Wiget and Balalaeva 2011). Furthermore, since open missionary activity was impossible throughout the Soviet period, and hidden conversions though they did occur involved few individuals and were difficult to study, the phenomenon of conversion among indigenous peoples of the Russian North was often discussed only in its historical, pre-communist contexts (for example, Slezkine 1994; Znamenski 1999; Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2020). Studies of post-communist conversion among native northerners do exist (for example, Vaté 2009; Vagramenko 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), although it should be mentioned that the lion’s share of the bibliography on the topic still consists of publications by Vallikivi (Vallikivi 2009; 2011; 2014; 2023; Leete et al. 2015). Even so, it would not be an overestimation to say that the conversion of Nenets reindeer herding nomads to Evangelical Baptism has been more actively discussed by politicians and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church than by social scientists. Vallikivi mentions some of these discussions in

the book, and the reader can easily get the impression that they were both devastating for the Nenets (who, characteristically, did not have any say in them) and profoundly misinformed. It is worth pointing out, however, that the blame for this outcome lies, among others, with social scientists (including myself) who long ignored the topic in their research and, therefore, failed to provide detailed information on the conversion, which allowed Orthodox priests and Orthodox religious activists to lead the discussion and shape public and official opinion.

It is interesting to compare the book to the works of Tatiana Vagramenko (2018a; 2018b; 2018c), who also conducted studies on post-Soviet conversion among the Nenets. Although works by Vagramenko and Vallikivi contain similar observations, Vallikivi clearly relies on larger field material and its analysis is much deeper. Furthermore, the topic that interested Vagramenko most – the explicit and implicit reasons for conversion among the reindeer herders (perhaps her most significant achievement, as she used chronotope analysis to make sense of conversion, Vagramenko 2018a) – is secondary, to say the least, in the work by Vallikivi. For Vallikivi, understanding the transformation of worldviews, norms and behaviour brought about by conversion is the primary aim, which sets his work apart from other studies on the indigenous people of Russia.

To achieve this understanding, Vallikivi employs the analysis of communicative acts (in the wider sense of this word, although the analysis of speech acts as a particular variety of communicative act clearly predominates in the book). In the introduction, Vallikivi suggests that a novelty of his approach consists in paying attention not only to the performance of communicative acts (words) but also to the refraining from such performance (silences), hence the title of the book. However, the role of this refraining (silence) as an element of communication deserving analytical attention in

its own right was recognised and, furthermore, emphasised by early researchers of speech acts such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1970). It is certainly true that in many studies focusing on communicative acts, only “words” (in the broader sense) receive attention, while “silences” are ignored. Vallikivi can be praised for not following this route, and, indeed, the analysis of silences has contributed significantly to the depth of his study.

The book consists of three parts. The first part, titled “Reindeer Nomads and Reformers”, includes the Introduction and a long, incredibly interesting chapter on the history of the study group, its way of life, and its relations with the outside world. For experienced readers of English (or Russian, for that matter) academic literature, it is certainly quite strange to see an introduction to the whole book included in the first part of the book rather than preceding it. The possible reason for this structural anomaly is that the mentioned historical and ethnographic chapter represents a serious work – and certainly a significant achievement in its own right – that will probably be widely read and extensively referred to by historians and anthropologists including those not specifically interested in religious conversion. Indeed, this is the most extensive historical and ethnographic account of the Independents ever published in English. However, its relation to the rest of the book is rather indirect, and it clearly does not fit into either of the remaining two parts. This unusual position notwithstanding, the Introduction is comprehensive, providing the reader with all the necessary information on the theoretical foundations of the work, the study group, the conversion context, aims and tasks of the study, and the fieldwork.

The second part of the book, titled “Conversion of People, Disenfranchisement of Spirits”, is devoted to the “factual” or “material” side of the conversion of the Independents. The first two chapters of this part (Chapters 2 and 3) describe the con-

verted (the Independents) and the converters (the Baptist Christians from the city of Vorkuta), paying particular attention to their varying interests in and reasons for being involved with the work of conversion. One can notice that the author possibly intended to make these two chapters symmetric by describing and analysing the same events as two “opposites”. This aim was generally achieved, although absolute symmetry was, of course, impossible. The third chapter includes a substantial portion of the history of Baptist Christians in Russia and the Soviet Union, as well as the history of the Baptist community in Vorkuta, while the second chapter naturally lacks a similar section (the history of the Independents is described and analysed in the first chapter of the book). On the other hand, the second chapter ends with an interesting analysis of intergenerational misunderstandings among the Independents provoked by conversion. Otherwise, the symmetry is maintained. The chapters start by introducing the key individuals involved in conversion (the two brothers Veli or Valey on the Nenets side and “priest” Pavel on the Baptists’ side), analysing their stories (with careful consideration of the probable distortions caused by retrospective view of a convert), and identifying the likely factors that led to the conversion. The chapters progress from analysing individuals to examining communities and the social factors that accounted for the spread of conversion. The final chapter of this part is devoted to what is probably the most ‘material’ element of the conversion: the destruction of “idols” (objects related to traditional rituals of worshipping and sacrifice). Based on a recorded case of destruction, the author analyses the different meanings attached to the act by the Christian missionary (in this case, a Pentecostal, rather than a Baptist), the old converts, and the people undertaking conversion, as well as how these meanings relate to Christian and Nenets traditional ideas about the relationship between the material

and the supernatural. All three chapters are engagingly written, and their conclusions represent sound hypotheses about – or interpretations of – what has been happening among the Independents.

The third and final part of the book is titled “Speaking and Silence”. In the first two chapters of this part, the author finally analyses conversion as an encounter and transformation through the examination of communication acts, the linguistic pragmatics underlying these acts on both sides, and the sets of explicit and implicit ideas and beliefs that underpin these pragmatics, which the author refers to as “language ideologies”. The main idea of the two chapters is that the traditional (pre-conversion) language ideology of the Nenets is largely incompatible with that of Baptist Christians. The latter are highly, even excessively, verbal: for them, verbalisation constitutes an ethical act, which is a pre-requisite for any moral judgement and moral transformation, including the transformation from a pagan into a Christian. One must hear and analyse the Holy Scripture, verbalise one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions, and judge them in the verbal form. In this sense, words are special and powerful. For pre-conversion Nenets, words are also powerful, but in a different way: for them, words possess material power, they can help or harm in a tangible way and, even more importantly, they can bind and commit the speaker both spiritually and physically. Therefore, from their point of view, one should be very careful with words and avoid being excessively verbal. Silence is often preferred over words. This difference and its consequences for the encounter between the unconverted Independents and the Baptist missionaries are analysed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 describes how the Nenets converts work to bridge the gap between the two language ideologies by adopting the practice of verbalising their actions and their very selves. The chapters contain many graphic examples of communicative situations observed by the author

in the field and the analysis of these situations. The last chapter of the book is devoted to the practice of self-reflection and self-analysis, which plays an important role in the spiritual practices of Baptist Christians but is not present in the same form among the traditional practices of the Nenets. The chapter also analyses the concepts of purity and pollution, which are important in both traditions but understood differently in each. It further traces how converts come to terms with these differences.

Of course, the analysis presented in the book has certain shortcomings. One of these shortcomings, in my opinion, is the authors' consistent translation of the Nenets word *lutsa* as 'Russian', which frames the relations between the Independents and the outside world in ethnic terms. Although this translation is certainly possible and can be supported by existing dictionaries and, more importantly, by Nenets-speakers themselves, the fact remains that a significant number of people referred to as *lutsa* by the Nenets would not consider themselves Russian and would not be considered Russian by other Russians. It seems to me that the term *lutsa* is applied to all members of the multi-ethnic community of newcomers regardless of their identity, religion, or even the language they speak at home (although, admittedly, the ability to address and be addressed in Russian does play a role). Therefore, terms such as outsider, southerner, or newcomer would be better translations and would remove the ethnic clash connotation, which, I believe, is not particularly helpful in understanding what has been happening in the region. I should clarify that I do not intend to defend any attitudes, measures, or policies adopted towards the Independents by the Soviet Union, modern Russia, regional authorities or individuals. I would argue that equating these states, authorities or individuals with Russians as an ethnic group is rather misleading. It seems to me that Vallikivi's Nenets informants perfectly understand this,

and their ambivalent attitude toward *lutsa* mentioned in the book arises from exactly this understanding.

Another aspect I found lacking in the book is the author's direct address of probably one of the most frequently asked questions about the conversion of the Independents, which is often raised by the general public and featured prominently in the political discussions briefly mentioned earlier: how did the Baptists and, to some extent, Pentecostals manage in just ten years to achieve more than the Orthodox Church did in 300 years? As I have already mentioned, this question was raised by Vallikivi's colleagues, such as Vagramenko (2018a), but it seems to me that her analysis of chronotopes does not provide a clear answer. Certainly, this question is secondary with regard to the aims of Vallikivi's book. However, its social significance could justify the author taking a position on it. In fact, I could not help re-reading the text with this question in mind, and I got the impression that the author does have some ideas about the answer. Could it be that the similar "sectarian" (secluded) status of the two communities (Baptists and the Independents) and their shared opposition to the wider society played a role? Might the more liberal stance on alcohol consumption taken by the Orthodox Church have made it less attractive for the Independents, given that the desire to give up drinking was their major reason for conversion, according to the author? The book does not provide answers.

Generally, the book represents very interesting and, importantly, easy and thought-provoking reading for anyone interested in cultures and cultural transformations among indigenous people of the Russian Arctic in general, and the Nenets in particular. As already stated, this is the first book in English on the unique group of the Independents. Furthermore, it is a valuable contribution to the literature on religious conversion. Finally, it offers significant insights into the situation of the indigenous

peoples of Northern Russia. I am therefore pleased to recommend the book wholeheartedly to all my colleagues.

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