8. 'Spirits' and 'Gods' as Comparative Concepts in Soviet Studies of the Nganasan World View

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Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the technical terminology used by Soviet ethnographers for beings presupposed in the Nganasan-Samoyedic world view. The beings in focus are those that the Nganasan called *ŋuəˀ* (sing. *ŋuə*), which have often been labelled *masters/mistresses*, *spirits*, *gods/goddesses*, or *deities*, both in the Soviet scholarly tradition and in comparative religion in general. I am interested in what motivated Soviet ethnographers in their choice of technical terminology in relation to the *ŋuəˀ*, and how this terminology became meaningful in the context of Soviet research and Marxist-Leninist theory.

One important reason why the Soviet ethnographers are of special interest to the debate on the classification and labelling of beings assumed in world views that are foreign to the scholar is that these scholars understood the Nganasan world view to be on the threshold of becoming a 'religion'.[1] From the perspective of Soviet ethnographers, the material on the Nganasan world view was particularly suitable for trying out new concepts and theorising on the origin and development of religion, and consequently on the origin and development of so-called spirits and gods. This was because the Nganasan culture and way of living were considered to be the most 'primitive' within the borders of the Soviet Union. Up until the Second World War, the Samoyedic-speaking Nganasan had kept their traditional culture, both material and

spiritual, with only a few superficial influences from modernity and Russian culture, including Christianity. Being a 'small numbered people' (approx. 1,000 individuals) who traditionally subsisted on hunting, fishing and reindeer husbandry on the far northern tundra of the Taymyr Peninsula, data on their culture were often used for historical reconstructions of the archaic wild reindeer hunting culture of Eurasia, as well as of ancient human culture in general. From a Marxist-evolutionist perspective, this also meant that remnants of an assumed primitive communist society could be found in their culture, even as it appeared in the twentieth century. Because some ethnographers maintained that humankind's earliest cultures had lacked religion, the study of the Nganasan became particularly interesting with regard to the supposed original materialistic world view of humankind, as well as the transition from so-called primitive materialism to religion.

The question of the appropriateness of comparative terms such as *spirits* and *gods* is fundamental to the study of religions for the simple reason that belief in such beings is a recurring criterion in definitions of the concept of religion. Thus, I will begin with some general theoretical considerations regarding comparative categories such as 'spirits' and 'gods' (or 'deities').[2]

Theoretical Considerations

Definitions of religion that focus on a belief in certain types of beings or agents – whether they are labelled *spiritual*, *supernatural*, *superhuman*, *meta-empirical*, *counter-intuitive* or something else – are sometimes called *Tylorian*, because they are congenial with the minimum definition of religion proposed by Edward B. Tylor in his classic work *Primitive Culture* (1871): 'belief in spiritual beings'.[3] In Soviet research, the common minimum definition of religion was 'belief in the supernatural',[4] but since this category was constituted by subclasses of so-called supernatural beings (Ru. *sverkhestestvennye sushchestva*), such as spirits and gods, I regard it as being just another label for what Tylor meant by his category of 'spiritual beings'.[5] As will be evident below, Tylor's theories had a significant impact on Soviet ethnography due to his influence on the ideas of the founding fathers of early Soviet ethnography, Lev Ya. Shternberg and Vladimir G. Bogoraz.

Thus, in debating the concept of religion (in its Tylorian sense), we cannot circumvent the category of 'spiritual beings' and its cognates. If belief in such beings is regarded as the essence of religion, it would appear that spiritual beings are the basic empirical elements in the academic study of religion, when this study takes its point of departure in a Tylorian definition of religion. However, neither 'religion' nor 'spiritual/supernatural beings', including their subcategories ('spirits', 'deities', etc.), are empirical facts *per se*. A Nganasan's notion of a *ŋuə* or a Christian's notion of *God* is an empirical fact to the extent that we can attain knowledge of this notion (normally through verbal accounts, but also through other media such as images or rituals). In contrast, 'spiritual/supernatural beings' and their subcategories are technical terms, chosen and used by scholars (and others) to sort out and classify certain features of human ideologies that, for some reason, they find interesting and worth highlighting. The use of, for example, 'god' as a technical term has, in fact, a long history. As Jonathan Z. Smith noted, already in ancient Greece, Herodotus (fifth century BC) used *theoi*, 'gods', as a cross-cultural category in his ethnographic comparisons of the cultures of foreign peoples.[6]

Technical terms are comparative categories[7] in the sense that they assemble several different instances from various local contexts. When we call, for example, a Nganasan *ŋuə* a 'spirit', we assume or conclude that *ŋuə* has something in common – if only a family resemblance – with other entities that we would classify as 'spirits', for example, an Arabic *jinn*, a Greek *daimon*, a Finnish *haltija* or a Japanese *kami*. If we call a *ŋuə* a 'god' or a 'deity', we compare and classify it with other entities that we would call 'gods' or 'deities', for example, the Arabic *Allah*, Greek *Aphrodite*, Finnish *Ukko* and – again, as it happens – the Japanese *kami*. However, we do not propose the exact identity among the different members of the category, but we find them meaningfully comparable and the category useful.[8] One way of conveying this argument is to say that *ŋuə* in itself is neither spirit nor god, but may belong to the categories of spirits or gods. This also applies to the Christian *God*. This proposition might seem mere quibbling and indeed, in colloquial language, the distinction between 'to be' this or that and 'to belong to the category of' this or that

is rarely of interest. However, I believe that this distinction contains an important point and that we can learn something from analysing ethnographic descriptions (our own and others') with this in mind.

Much of what I have claimed thus far about comparative categories was expressed, albeit in slightly different terms, by Jeffrey R. Carter in an article on comparison as a method in the study of religions, published in 1998.[9] According to Carter, it is not only that the different members of a category are not equivalent to each other; the different members are also not equivalent to the category itself. 'Bird' is not the same a robin, and robin is not the same as 'bird'. For this conclusion, Carter relies on Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types, the most central principle of which is that a category (or class) exists on a different level of logical abstraction than the members of the same category. Russell called categories 'higher logical types' and their respective members 'lower logical types'. From this logical deduction by Russell, Carter draws two important general rules for how to handle categories and their members in comparative work: first, that different 'logical types […] must not be confused or equated'; second, that 'it is a mistake to predict or conclude things about one logical type by simply examining its paired higher or lower logical type'.[10] This would mean that if we classified a *ŋuə* as a 'spirit' or a 'god', we would not be able to reliably conclude anything about spirits or gods in general by merely learning about the *ŋuə*; and we would not be allowed to predict anything about the *ŋuə* simply by knowing the definition of the concepts of 'spirits' or 'gods'. If the classification of the *ŋuə* in question as either a 'spirit' or a 'god' were adequate, we should, of course, be able to conclude that this *ŋuə* corresponded to the stated definition of either 'spirits' or 'gods'. But we would not be allowed to predict or conclude anything *more*, beyond this definition of the category.

Carter uses the familiar metaphor of the relationship between map and territory to illustrate his point on logical types. A map is not the same as the territory it is depicting, but a selection of certain highlighted points of reference singled out for a certain purpose. It is an abstraction of reality. Maps of the same territory differ depending on what they are used for. If I were to draw a

map of the area around my summer house in Northern Sweden in order to show my daughters how to find the best marshes for picking cloudberries, or the best rapids for catching trout, this map would most certainly be different from the one used by a mining company prospecting for minerals in the same area. What a cow elk would select on her map of this landscape to guide her calves to the finest grazing land and waterholes, while at the same time keeping them safe from human beings and other predators, we can barely imagine. It is the same landscape – the same reality – that is supposed to be depicted on these maps, but they contain different facts deemed to be important and relevant for navigating through it for a certain purpose.

Carter points out that the 'territory supplies no rules for drawing a map of itself'.[11] Which landmarks end up on the map depends on the cartographer's level of knowledge and on their purpose for the map. This is true, but I would like to add that earlier cartographers have supplied us with, if not rules, then at least a set of guidelines and a model for how to map certain territories. (Arguably, both myself and the mining company's cartographer more or less belong to the same tradition of map making and our different maps would therefore presumably be more similar to each other than to the presumed map of the cow elk.) Nowadays, few areas are completely *terra incognita* and scholars rarely start mapping an area without first consulting earlier maps of their chosen territory of investigation. Previous maps are models for new maps. Because of this, to some extent we become dependent on and influenced by the knowledge, interests, aims and choices of earlier cartographers – or ethnographers, from Herodotus onwards. This is one of the reasons why it is important to critically reflect upon our inherited maps and models (in the shape of concepts and categories) in order to ascertain whether we are merely confirming what we believe we already know, or if we are actually learning something new.

Commenting on Carter's (as well as J.Z. Smith's) map-and-territory-metaphor, Oliver Freiberger concludes that it would be absurd to criticise a map for not being identical to the territory. A map may be criticised for being a poor selection of relevant landmarks, and therefore inappropriate for its purpose, but not for the

fact that it abstracts and generalises.[12] In the same way, generalising comparisons, or the use of comparative technical terms must be evaluated in relation to their purpose – as well as, of course, their accuracy in relation to the facts in the 'territory'.

Using a metaphor – as together with Carter and Freiberger I just did – is a way of comparing two different objects or situations, pointing to some decisive and relevant similarities between otherwise unrelated objects or situations. The purpose of a metaphor is normally to rhetorically or pedagogically elucidate, or even explain, the meaning of an object or a situation.

Using a metaphor is doing an analogy. I have used maps and mapping here analogously with categories and category formation, arguing that, in some respects, they work in the same way. I doubt that this analogy is strong. Analogical reasoning is a common method in scientific and philosophical work. In his article on analogy and analogical reasoning in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Bartha points out that philosophers and logicians have identified some common-sense guidelines for strong or good scientific analogies. Among these are that 'analogies involving causal relations are more plausible than those not involving causal relations'. Already Aristotle contended that strong analogies were derived from common causes or general laws. However, as Bartha shows, in science, many analogies are merely hypothetical and the general laws that cause the similarities among the compared objects are not always proven. This may make the analogy weak but not necessarily untrue since further studies may prove the underlying causal relations.[13]

Comparative categories such as 'spirits' and 'gods' are analogies, and they should be considered weak and as mere hypotheses until proven otherwise. I will get back to this point later on, when discussing the Soviet ethnographers' use of technical terms in relation to beings in the Nganasan world view. However, before I turn to these ethnographers, there is one more aspect of the terminology commonly used for such beings that ought to be discussed: the critique that many of these terms have their origin in Judeo-Christian theological vocabulary and/or European vernaculars.

Regarding the use of the term *god* in the study of religions, Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Kimmo Ketola have argued that it is not

appropriate as a technical or scientific term, among other things, because 'naming various kinds of mythological beings as "gods"' may lead to 'the attributes of the Christian God' being 'silently smuggled into other traditions'.[14] This would mean that the Christian *God*[15] is the main prototype for the category of 'gods' and that, to an unjustified degree, this prototype shapes our understanding of all other members of the category. I realise the problem – if you use a map of your own native territory to find your own way in a foreign country, you are bound to get lost. And indeed, there are examples in the history of scholarship of the suspected overinterpretation of foreign conceptions in light of Christian notions of *God*. In his book *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies*, James L. Cox shows how theologically informed scholars such as Andrew Lang, Wilhelm Schmidt and Mircea Eliade based their theories of a universal 'primitive monotheism' upon such synonymisations, relying on assumptions related to so-called natural theology. Furthermore, Cox provides plenty of examples of how this idea of 'primitive monotheism' developed in indigenous societies, among indigenous academics and social and political activists, who recreated pre-contact indigenous beliefs in the image of the Christian *God*.[16] Thus, the 'smuggling' of *God* into other traditions had real consequences – in such cases, the map caused changes in the territory. Even though Cox admits that it is not possible to ascertain the precise notions of pre-modern peoples, regarding his four case studies (New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Australia and Alaska), he concludes that an indigenous idea of a 'Supreme Being' or 'Creator'

> cannot be construed as commensurate with Western philosophical or Christian ideas of God unless theological presuppositions, idealized notions of pre-modern societies or intentional strategies aimed at promoting indigenous cultural values are inserted into the equation.[17]

Despite these examples, I believe that Pyysiäinen's and Ketola's proposition needs to be slightly nuanced – for three main reasons: First, the Christian concept of 'God/god' is quite ambiguous. Hebrew *'ēl* and Greek *theos* already have multiple, possibly non-congruent, meanings in the Bible[18] and an additional

multitude of meanings in later Christian traditions, including Western philosophy, up to the present day. Thus, the attributes of the Christian *God* that would actually be smuggled in are a bit unclear.

Second, one of the usages of the term *god* in the Hebrew Bible is found in the so-called First Commandment, regarding the 'other gods' (Hebr. *ʾĕlōhīm ʾăḥērīm*), those that you shall not have. In earlier (pre-Enlightenment) Christian missionary accounts[19] of non-Christian world views, the term *gods* reflected the idea of *false gods*, *idols* or *demons*, that is, of the opposite or opponent of *God* in the Christian world views in question (and, as will be shown below, Soviet ethnographic material on the Nganasan provides example of this use of the term). As I have argued elsewhere,[20] there is much to suggest that the category of 'gods' in the plural form and as a technical term in the academic study of religions was to some extent shaped by Christian ideas of *other gods* rather than by Christian ideas of *God*. This concerns the term used in what William E. Paden calls the 'rationalistic' Western tradition, in which gods have been interpreted as human projections or phantasies, in contrast with the 'universalistic' interpretation represented by, for example, natural theology and scholars such as Lang, Schmidt and Eliade.[21] It would still be a category and a term imbued with a Judeo-Christian, or at least 'Western', way of thinking, albeit not quite with the kind of attributes I assume Pyysiäinen and Ketola had in mind.

My third objection to Pyysiäinen's and Ketola's proposition is that the more the concept 'gods' has been used as a technical term for designating and categorising various beings in world views throughout the world and in different epochs of time, the more the concept itself has become imbued with the attributes of all kinds of gods, not only of the Christian *God* or of Christian notions of *other gods*.[22]

From these theoretical considerations, I conclude that categories such as 'spirits', 'gods' and 'deities' are quite ambiguous because of the terms used for the categories and because of the variety of usages of the categories. However, this does not necessarily mean that these categories are invalid or redundant. Rather, I believe that they are given different meanings in different contexts.

Thus, they must be evaluated according to the purpose they are supposed to serve in a particular context, and also in relation to the theories that motivate them. The categories in question are analogies, weak or strong. As previously mentioned, what I am interested in here is how the technical terminology used by Soviet ethnographers for ŋuə was theoretically motivated and how this terminology became meaningful in the context of Soviet research and Marxist-Leninist theory.

Soviet Ethnography on Nganasan *Ŋuəˀ*

Andrey A. Popov (1902–60)

The first Soviet ethnographer to publish accounts of the Nganasan world view and the notion of ŋuə was Andrey A. Popov. He conducted his fieldwork on the Taymyr Peninsula primarily in the 1930s and 1940s.[23]

In his descriptions of ŋuəˀ, Popov started by mentioning that the Nganasan themselves, when speaking Russian, referred to them as *d'yavoly*, 'devils, demons', irrespective of whether the ŋuə in question was regarded benevolent or malevolent. This was, he concluded, due to the influence of earlier Christian missionaries who interpreted the Nganasan world view according to Christian classifications and condemned it as idolatry; and it was from these missionaries that the Nganasan had first learned Russian.[24]

Popov himself claimed that 'Nganasan deities [*bozhestva*] and spirit masters [*dukhi-khozyaeva*], of whom the entire people's […] most important necessities of life depend, are known under the general designation ŋuəʾ. These 'spirits' (Ru. *dukhi*), he continued, were never embodied materially.[25] From this short presentation of the ŋuəˀ, two things are evident about Popov's way of classifying Nganasan beings. First, that he imposed his own classification on the Nganasan world view – where the Nganasan used one category, Popov used several ('deities', 'spirit masters' and 'spirits') –; second, that the fundamental category for Popov was 'spirit'.

Popov relied on an animist theory in the tradition of Tylor, although in a slightly modified version conveyed to him by his teachers in ethnography in Leningrad (mainly Bogoraz, but to a certain extent also Shternberg). He would subsequently develop

the theory of animism and speculate on the evolutionary stages preceding 'animism'. The first stage he called 'assimilatism'. This meant that 'original' or 'primitive' human beings (Ru. *pervobytniy chelovek*) started to attribute human characteristics, such as feelings and the capacity to think, to animals. Assimilatism evolved into 'animatism', which meant that human qualities were also attributed to things, such as moving water and weather phenomena, considered inanimate by 'us'.[26] Popov divided animism proper into two consecutive stages. In the early stage, immaterial images of objects that arose in the human psyche were attributed life, they were 'animated'. In later animism, these mental images were assigned autonomy and started being conceived of as independent and immaterial 'souls' and 'spirits'.[27]

Popov was not a pronounced Marxist, although he picked up one important idea from the Marxist version of the evolutionism of his age, namely, that primeval human society did not have an 'idealist' but a 'materialist' world view. Thus, the assimilatist and animatist stages, as well as the early animist stage, were materialistic world views because thus far, there were no conceptions of autonomous and immaterial 'spirits', only of living material objects. Using evolutionist theory, he claimed that the ideas about some of these 'spirits' or 'spirit masters' (of animal species or geographical areas) developed into 'deities' when they were attributed more far-reaching power. Those that Popov classified as 'deities' were celestial bodies like the sun, the moon, the earth and, above all, the sky itself. The firmament (termed *ŋuə* in Nganasan) was the 'highest deity' (Ru. *vysshee bozhestvo*), also mentioned as such in the only pre-Soviet description of some length of the Nganasan world view, written by P.I. Tret'yakov in 1869.[28] According to Popov, this being was called *N'ilytyə-ŋuə*, literally translated as 'Living sky'. This was a male deity, a creator of the universe, who had withdrawn to the highest seventh heaven. To Popov, the conception of *N'ilytyə-ŋuə* was closely related to the Christian idea of *God*.[29] Nowhere did he indicate that he believed that the Nganasan idea was a result of influences from Christian beliefs. Rather, his point was that the origin and development of the idea of the physical sky, *ŋuə*, as the highest divinity among the Nganasan, was parallel to the origin and development of the Christian idea of *God*.

Boris O. Dolgikh (1904–71)

Contemporary to the Leningrad-based Popov, Moscow ethnographer Boris O. Dolgikh conducted his first field work among the Nganasan in 1926–27 in connection with the first Soviet census in the Polar region. He would subsequently conduct more extensive field trips on the Taymyr Peninsula, and in his publications he primarily relied on the fieldnotes he made during visits between 1948 and 1961.[30]

Dolgikh's depiction of the Nganasan world view was quite different from Popov's, a fact which is quite remarkable considering that the two ethnographers collected data during the same period among a group of people comprising up to one thousand individuals. We also know that, in certain cases, the two ethnographers interviewed the very same individuals, even though Dolgikh appears to have interviewed more women than Popov. This could explain the discrepancies between his descriptions and Popov's descriptions of the Nganasan world view. I believe that another important factor regarding the disparity between their accounts is that they had slightly different theoretical starting points. Consequently, they may have interpreted their data differently and probably also chose varying pieces of information from their material in order to ensure that their accounts fit their respective theoretical views.

In translating the Nganasan category of *ŋuə*, Dolgikh used Russian terms such as *bog*, 'god', *boginya*, 'goddess' or *bozhestvo*, 'deity'.[31] Not once did he use the term *dukh*, 'spirit' for *ŋuə*. He never explicitly commented on this although it is reasonable to assume that he avoided the term *spirit* – which was very common in both Soviet and non-Soviet ethnographic research at the time – because he wanted to avoid an animist interpretation. At the time of his writing (1950s–1960s), the animist theory was condemned by Soviet scholarship as a 'bourgeois' theory.[32]

Instead, Dolgikh relied on another theory that was at times popular in Soviet ethnography: the theory of a matriarchate in the earliest societies of humankind. This idea was derived from Friedrich Engels's depiction of primeval society as being fully egalitarian, with complete equality between men and women. Unequal gender relations and patriarchy first appeared with the introduction of private property.[33] Dolgikh assumed that this matriarchal social

structure must have been reflected in Nganasan religion, in the 'mythology' and in what he called the Nganasan 'pantheon'.

In contrast to Popov, Dolgikh found 'female deities', 'goddesses', to be the most high-ranking and ancient in the Nganasan world view. At the absolute top of their pantheon, he contended, were seven *n'emy?*, 'mothers'. These were *Məu-n'emy* ('Earth mother'), *Syrəðə-n'emy* ('Permafrost mother'), *By?-n'emy* ('Water mother'), *Tuy-n'emy* ('Fire mother'), *Kou-n'emy* ('Sun mother'), *Kičəðəə-n'emy* ('Moon mother') and *D'aly-n'emy* ('Day mother'). They were the 'primordial mothers', synonymous with the natural phenomena they personified, while also anthropomorphic 'goddesses' autonomous from the actual earth, permafrost, water etc. Dolgikh concluded that the original conception was that of, for example, Earth mother as the actual earth, and that her anthropomorphisation took place at a later evolutionary stage. Earth mother was, he contended, the most important deity of all the categories. She gave birth to and nourished all living creatures. All of the primordial mothers belonged to the category *ŋuə?* and, apart from them, there was only one male being at the top of the pantheon, *D'oyba-ŋuə*, the 'Orphan *ŋuə*', and one additional female being, *Bakhi?-n'emy*, 'Mother of wild reindeer'.[34]

Dolgikh denied that *N'ilytyə-ŋuə* (or *Ŋuə* in heaven) was anything like a 'creator god' or 'high-god', as Tret'yakov and Popov had reported. Instead, *N'ilytyə-ŋuə* was an alternative appellation for *D'oyba-ŋuə*, who had all the characteristics of a 'culture hero' but had assumed the position of a deity for the Nganasan. In the myths he is an orphan who had been raised by one of the main mother goddesses (these vary from one narrative to the next). He is the husband of either Day mother or Moon mother, together with whom he provides the life-threads that keep all individual humans alive. All phenomena of vital importance to Nganasan culture and survival – such as dwellings, fire and domesticated reindeer – are his inventions, and in the narratives, he constantly struggles for the well-being of humans (i.e. of the Nganasan).[35]

D'oyba-ŋuə has recurrent sexual intercourse with several of the mother goddesses, something which, for example, results in fine weather. Together with Earth mother he creates the souls

for humans to be born. The Nganasan also told Dolgikh that *D'oyba-ŋuə* was their special 'god', who protected and bestowed them with life's necessities. According to Dolgikh, this deity is the 'male principle, without whom life on earth would not be recreated'.[36]

The designation *N'ilytyə-ŋuə* ('Living god' in Dolgikh's translation) is close to the appellation *Nilu-ŋuə* ('Life's god'), a name that could be used for both *D'oyba-ŋuə* and for other beings, notably *Bakhiʔ-ŋuə*, 'God of wild reindeer'.[37] This being could also be known as either *Bakhiʔ-n'emy*, 'Mother of wild reindeer', or *Bakhiʔ-d'esy*, 'Father of wild reindeer', depending on whether it was female or male. She (or he) could manifest as an actual deer, with some extraordinary features, in a herd of wild reindeer. Since the Nganasan were traditionally entirely dependent on wild reindeer for their survival and well-being, Dolgikh found it logical that they called their 'god of wild reindeer' *Nilu-ŋuə*. Furthermore, they told narratives of how they (the Nganasan people) had originated from Earth mother – narratives in which she was depicted as a wild reindeer doe.

Using a traditional evolutionist approach, Dolgikh delineated three stages of the development of Nganasan conceptions. In the first stage, the people identified with the wild reindeer; they were the 'wild reindeer people' originating from the earth. In the second stage, they recognised wild reindeer as the source of life and, consequently, the mother of wild reindeer, *Bakhiʔ-n'emy*, was the mother of their lives. She was occasionally visible in the herd as a reindeer with special features. This was still during the era of the matriarchate. Only in the third stage of development did patriarchal social structures emerge, which gave precedence to the father of wild reindeer, *Bakhiʔ-d'esy*, which came to be synonymous with *Nilu-ŋuə*. Since *D'oyba-ŋuə* was portrayed anthropomorphically with reindeer antlers, Dolgikh speculated that this conception had its origin in the conception of *Bakhiʔ-n'emy* as the sustainer of life, at a time when the ancestors of the Nganasan still identified with wild reindeer. When patriarchal social structures appeared, she was split into two beings: *D'oyba-ŋuə*, as the 'god of the Nganasan' and *Bakhiʔ-d'esy*. Both of them could be given the epithet *Nilu-ŋuə*, 'Life's god'.[38]

Yuriy B. Simchenko (1935–95)[39]

Yuriy B. Simchenko belonged to the next generation of Soviet ethnographers studying the Nganasan, after Popov and Dolgikh. He conducted his fieldwork on the Taymyr in the 1960s and 1970s.[40] In his works on the Nganasan world view, Simchenko relied on the analysis of his main tutor, Dolgikh, that it was possible to find traces of primeval human society in their myths, and that their ideology was shaped by the supposed original matriarchate. He also picked up the idea – shared by both Popov and Dolgikh[41] – that original human society had an essentially materialistic world view. As Simchenko put it, the original human world view was 'naively rationalistic' or 'mechanistic'.[42]

As for the concept of *ŋuə*, Simchenko noted that it originally meant 'heaven, sky', but when it was used for certain beings it should be translated as 'inhabitant of heaven, celestial being', even if it was considered that the being in question resided underground or on earth. He preferred not to translate *ŋuə* into 'god' and he denied that the Nganasan had any 'main god'. Neither of the numerous *ŋuəʔ* were believed to be almighty. In terms of their importance and assumed influence on people's lives, they were all equal.[43] In his last (posthumously published) work, Simchenko classified what he called the 'sacred beings in the Nganasan pantheon' into three main categories: (1) *N'emy-ŋuəʔ* or 'the Great Mothers'; (2) *ŋuəʔ*, who were the offspring of the Great Mothers; and (3) the offspring of *ŋuəʔ*, the 'third generation of supernatural beings', comprising visible *kojkəʔ* ('idols' or 'fetishes') and *d'yaməðəʔ* ('helping spirits of shamans').[44] Simchenko did not specify which mothers were the great and most original mothers. In the creation stories for which he accounted, 'in the beginning' there were three mothers – *Məu-n'emy*, *Syrəðə-n'emy* and *Kou-n'emy* – who emanated from an original unity. The sun (*Kou*) gave warmth to the earth (*Məu*), freeing her from the grip of the subterranean ice (*Syrəðə*), and aroused the earth's potential for giving birth to living beings.[45] However, Simchenko also contended that what he called the 'demiurges', placed at the top the hierarchy, were Earth mother, Sun mother and Fire mother (*Tuy-n'emy*). These were all designated the kinship term *imidima*, 'grandmother' (ego's mother's mother), as opposed to second-rank mothers, who

were termed *kotu-oma*, 'aunt' ('ego's father's or mother's older sister; ego's father's or mother's older brother's wife').[46]

That these mothers had been granted the epithet *ŋuə* signalled that they were 'supernatural beings', Simchenko suggested.[47] However, his Nganasan interlocutors contended that it was a modern misconception to add *ŋuə* to terrestrial and subterranean beings, and that the term was originally reserved for celestial beings.[48]

Simchenko saw, in effect, two different, but interrelated, world views among the Nganasan – one held by 'ordinary people' and the other by 'shamans' (sing. *ŋə*ˀ, plur. *ŋəðə*) and those who believed in the cosmology proposed by the *ŋəðə*. The first he called 'canonical' or 'traditional' – because it was the most ancient – and the other 'shamanic'. The canonical world view was characterised by realistic and materialistic conceptions of visible and concrete beings. Furthermore, the most prominent beings in this world view and its mythology were feminine, such as the three original mothers described in stories of the creation: *Məu-n'emy*, *Syrəðə-n'emy* and *Kou-n'emy*. They were synonymous with the actual and visible earth, the subterranean ice (permafrost) and the sun. The 'shamanic' world view, on the other hand, was characterised by irrational and religio-magical conceptions and its mythology contained 'supernatural beings', the most important of which were male.[49]

Galina N. Gracheva (1934–93)

Working in the late Soviet period, Galina N. Gracheva came to synthesise much of the earlier findings and theories on the Nganasan world view. Before starting her career as an ethnographer in the mid-1960s at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Kunstkamera, in Leningrad, she had taken courses on the history of the Soviet Communist Party and was employed at the institute for the study of the party's history. Between 1969 and 1992, she conducted field research among the Nganasan on numerous occasions.[50]

Gracheva's main contribution to the Soviet study of the Nganasan world view was that she contributed more profound analyses based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy. She did not

contradict the earlier Nganasanologists but rather attempted to reconcile what seemed to be contradictions among them. For example, regarding the question of a hierarchy among various beings in the Nganasan world view, Gracheva denied neither the presence of a male sky god in heaven, *N'ilytyə-ŋuə*, as Popov had reported, the intertwining of this 'highest god' with *D'oyba-ŋuə* as Dolgikh had suggested, nor the prominent position of the nature mothers, first and foremost *Məu-n'emy*, in line with Dolgikh and Simchenko. Instead, in her reconstruction of the Nganasan world view at the turn of the twentieth century,[51] she found three different tendencies towards the 'hierarchisation' of beings among different members of the community. The first tendency was to designate one of the original nature mothers – the Earth, Sun or Moon mother, in Gracheva's account – the position as the most high-ranking being. Which mother was considered to be the female primogenitor of all living creatures (including the other nature mothers and their offspring) varied among Nganasan families. A second tendency was to place *N'ilytyə-ŋuə*, identified with *D'oyba-ŋuə*, at the top of a pantheon of otherwise subordinate beings. She also noted that *N'ilytyə-ŋuə* (or variants of this appellation with the meaning 'Living', 'Life' or 'Life's *ŋuə*') could be used for other beings that were perceived as sustainers of life, for example, the Mother of wild reindeer. Gracheva found the third tendency in 'shamanism', in which a male father in the highest level of heaven was depicted as the most central being. This being was named according to the number of heavenly layers that was recognised (normally seventh or ninth *ŋuə*), or just *Bənduptəə-ŋuə*, 'Highest *ŋuə'*.[52]

These three tendencies were simultaneously present, but to Gracheva they also reflected different stages in the evolution of the Nganasan conceptions of reality and, by extension, those of humanity. Just like her predecessors, she aimed to explain the evolution of an original materialistic world view into a religious world view, and from an ideology coloured by the assumed matriarchal social structures to an ideology formed by later patriarchy. She also maintained Simchenko's distinction between the conceptions held by ordinary people and those held by the supposedly younger shamanism.

Gracheva further elaborated Popov's explanation of the origin of animism, and of the belief in souls, spirits and deities. With reference to Lenin's so-called copy theory – according to which conceptions or mental images are reflections of external objects and reality – she understood what has been described as 'soul beliefs' among the Nganasan as quite materialistic conceptions. These ideas were not conceptions of the 'supernatural', but rather of the 'natural', she contended.[53] In fact, Gracheva claimed that the Nganasan world view lacked a sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural: 'the natural is ascribed what, from our perspective, are supernatural properties, and the supernatural manifests itself in entirely "material" objects.' However, a tendency towards the development of such a distinction could be traced.[54] Her point was that the origin of belief in the supernatural is to be found in the 'material practice', as Marx and Engels had put it. It is not ideas that cause material practice, but the other way around. Gracheva also appears to have been inspired by Marx's alienation theory when she explained Nganasan 'soul beliefs' from the notion that every individual (human or other) leaves some of their life or life force (*n'ilu* in Nganasan) – some of their 'being' or 'essence' (Ger. *Wesen*) as Marx would have put it – in their offspring, in the landscape in which they travel, in objects they manufacture or use and so on. In the evolutionary process, this life force subsequently became objectified as separate 'souls' and later as autonomous 'spirits'.[55]

Regarding the concept of *ŋuə*, Gracheva noted that it had both a 'profane' and a 'sacred' level that corresponded to different stages in the development of Nganasan ideas. She regarded the translations 'god', 'goddess' or 'devil' for *ŋuə*, either as a single word or in compound form, which was common among the Nganasan when speaking Russian, as conditional. Thus, in her 1983 monograph, she preferred to use the 'literal' translation 'heaven' (Ru. *nebo*), even when it denoted terrestrial or subterranean beings such as *Məu-ŋuə*, 'Earth heaven' or *Syrəðə-ŋuə*, 'Permafrost heaven', while acknowledging that this way of translating was also conditional.[56]

In order to explain her idea of the evolution of Nganasan ideas, from material and profane into spiritual and sacred, she used

the example of the Deer mother (a version of Dolgikh's example of the development of *Bakhi²-n'emy* mentioned above).[57] To the Nganasan, the concept of Deer mother (according to Gracheva) could basically mean five different things. First, it could mean a material and fully visible doe, that is, an ordinary mother of calves. Second, it denoted a material and visible doe, who gave birth to the very first calf, and who is thus the ancestress of all deer. She is still alive and sometimes visible in the herd, and she can be identified by some characteristic traits (for example, by deformities on her body). The third meaning is that of a material doe, but invisible and considered the ruler or mistress (Ru. *khozyayka*) of all deer. All living deer are her offspring. Fourth, the appellation could denote a semi-anthropomorphic mistress of all deer (half-human, half-reindeer). And finally, Deer mother could mean a fully anthropomorphic and invisible mistress of all deer.

According to Gracheva, this list reflected the stages of evolution from a 'profane' deer mother into a 'sacred' one. The first stage was completely profane. Already by the second stage, a process of 'sacralisation' had occurred. By the third stage, the Deer mother began transforming into a 'goddess' and the Nganasan supposedly gave her the epithet *ŋuə*. By the fourth and fifth stages of development, the term *ŋuə* was being used and it had then evolved from a concept denoting something concrete (heaven, sky, weather, air) into a term, as she put it, 'identical with the words "god" or "spirit"' through a process of 'deification' (Ru. *obozhestvleniye*).[58]

Gracheva claimed that all these different meanings were present at the time she conducted her fieldwork among the Nganasan. However, she commented that the third notion of the Deer mother was the most common one and that there were only rudimentary tendencies towards the fourth and fifth notions. This comment is revealing for two reasons. First, because it indicates the stage of development at which Gracheva considered the Nganasan world view should be understood (the third stage). Second, she does not appear to have had any clear empirical evidence regarding the last two stages. Instead, they were predicted, under the condition that the evolution of the Nganasan world view had been allowed to continue without the influence of modernity in the twentieth century.

Concluding Remarks

The translation of *ŋuə* into 'god' (alternatively 'devil, demon') was already at hand when Soviet ethnographers met the Nganasan. The Nganasan themselves used it when speaking Russian. This translation was a legacy of Christian missionaries and earlier ethnographers, who had coupled *ŋuə* with the concept of 'god'. In this sense, Soviet ethnographers were dependent on previous cartographers and maps, and it was difficult for them to entirely disregard this translation and classification. However, they managed to make this translation meaningful in the context of a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the evolution of human thought and religion.

Soviet ethnographers apparently found the Nganasan category *ŋuə* to be complex and not easily translatable into Russian. Nonetheless, with evolutionism as a fundamental theoretical tool, they thought it would be possible to come to terms with the complexities of *ŋuə* in relation to the technical terminology they had inherited, re-evaluated from a Marxist perspective. Evolutionism also allowed them to not only speculate about the past or original conceptions of the Nganasan, but also about primeval human beings in general, in the material that they gathered in the twentieth century. They could also hypothesise about what would become of these conceptions. Originally, the *ŋuə*ˀ were not gods, but quite material entities that had been rationally conceptualised as such by the ancestors of the Nganasan. It was only as a consequence of the changes in the 'material practice' and in the social structure – practices and structures that Nganasan ideas and world view reflected – that *ŋuə*ˀ became abstracted and 'spiritualised' into spirits, goddesses of nature, and eventually gods on par with deities in other world views.

Soviet ethnographers were schooled in Marxist evolutionism. This was more pronounced during the second half of the Soviet period and this is why Popov, compared to the other Soviet Nganasanologists, relied on a more general, non-Marxist evolutionist theory. Marxist-Leninist theory was virtually the only theoretical model that was accepted or credible in Soviet ethnographic research. From the perspective of Soviet ideology, it was important and meaningful to show how human conceptions had

originally been materialistic and realistic, how they reflected a primitive egalitarian society with females in dominant positions, both among humans and in mythology, and how these conceptions had finally developed into conceptions that were 'identical with the words "god" or "spirit"', to quote Gracheva. This became a way of revealing the worldly origin of religion. In doing so, Soviet ethnographers also implied that it was quite possible for humans to have a non-religious, materialistic and egalitarian world view.

However, the question remains whether this analogy between *ŋuə*ʔ and *spirits* and *gods* is reliable and meaningful outside the Marxist evolutionist context in which the Soviet ethnographers worked. I would say that the analogy is still rather weak, primarily because it was taken for granted. It was an inherited analogy, and no real attempts were made by Soviet ethnographers to establish criteria for comparisons among *ŋuə*ʔ and other so-called spirits and gods. When Popov described *ŋuə*ʔ, he used his own technical terminology – the higher logical types 'spirit masters', 'spirits' and 'gods' – rather than the lower logical types present among the Nganasan. Thus, his systematisation relied more on evolutionist theories than on his own empirical material. The same applies to the systematisations made by Dolgikh, Simchenko and Gracheva. The acquaintance of the scholars with evolutionism and Marxism preceded their acquaintance with the Nganasan world view and it is obvious that the evolutionist and Marxist theories made them select and understand their empirical data the way they did. Thus, it is difficult to see how the reconstructions of the Nganasan world view they proposed could be substantiated without the help of Marxist evolutionist theory.

However, for the sake of argument, let us assume that they were correct in their conclusions about the evolution of the notions of *ŋuə*ʔ. Would we then be able to draw any general conclusions about the evolution of so-called spirits and gods from this? If we were to follow Russell's and Carter's rules we would not, at least not before we had traced the same common causes of notions of spirits or gods elsewhere – of *jinn*s, *daimon*s, *haltija*s, *kami*s, *Allah*, *Aphrodite*, *Ukko*, etc. From a strictly scientific perspective, I would say that the Soviet ethnographers' analogies between *ŋuə*ʔ

and *spirits* and *gods* remain weak analogies and hypotheses, not substantiated results. This does not mean that their analogies and explanations are entirely implausible. I admit that, by virtue of their sheer logic, to some extent they are rhetorically persuasive and pedagogical. However, these analogies were first and foremost made meaningful in the Soviet context. Thus, if Soviet studies on the Nganasan world view are to be used as sources for future studies of religion (Nganasan religion or religion in general), the meanings and meaningfulness assigned to the technical terminology of Soviet ethnographers must be taken into account. We should not perpetuate their terminology without critical reflection, just as earlier Christian theological terminology should not be perpetuated uncritically.

Notes

1. See Sundström 2008: 217–220.

2. Since the present volume (and the seminar preceding it) is on comparison and source criticism, it could be added that my discussion here partly serves as a source critical evaluation of the ideological and theoretical biases of the ethnographies concerned. This is an important task because the lion's share of the data we have on the Nganasan world view, up until the end of the twentieth century, stems from Soviet ethnographers. However, in this chapter I confine myself to discussing the comparative categories used in the Soviet texts.

3. Tylor (1871) 1958: 8–11. Tylor further defined 'spiritual beings' as beings that 'are held to affect or control the events of the material world, and man's life here and hereafter; and it being considered that they hold intercourse with men, and receive pleasure or displeasure from human actions'. Such beliefs inevitably result in reverence, propitiation and worship of the beings in question. Tylor called this doctrine 'animism' and contended that it was found among 'savages' and 'civilized men' alike.

4. See e.g. Kryvelev 1956: 183; and the entry *bog* ('god') in *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya* 1950 and 1970.

5. Regarding this common scientific definition of religion in Soviet research, the ethnographer of religion, Yuriy Semenov (1980: 56),

felt a need to specify that: 'The essence of religion is not belief in the supernatural in general, but in [belief in] supernatural power. Furthermore, not in supernatural power in general, but in such [a power] that controls every concrete human being in daily life, [and] that decides whether after death, they are rewarded with salvation in heaven or condemned to torment in hell. Where there is no belief in such a power, there is no religion. In particular, deism, in which god emerges as a supernatural power who has created the world, but who does not interfere in human affairs, is not religion.' Semenov's clarification is in accord with Tylor's concept of spiritual beings (cf. note 3). In Semenov's way of phrasing, it is more obvious that it was mainly Judeo-Christian beliefs that served as a prototype for his definition.

6. Smith (1971) 1993: 244–249. It is interesting to note that Smith states that what is described and compared in Herodotus' history book are the different peoples' 'religions'. However, Herodotus never used, and probably never implied, any concept of religion in the modern sense. He wrote about 'gods', 'sacrifices', 'customs', 'oracles', 'burial practices', etc. as separate features for comparison among different peoples. It is rather Smith, together with many of us present-day readers, who imply 'religion' to be a unifying concept for such features (cf. Nongbri 2013 for a discussion on the lack of correspondences to the modern concept of religion in Antiquity). As Schilbrack (2010; 2017), to my mind, has convincingly argued, this does, however, not disqualify the applicability of 'our' modern concept of religion to foreign or historical cultures, in which it was unheard-of.

7. Kenneth L. Pike (1967: 37 f.), who coined the dichotomy of emic/etic for linguistics, with etic terms corresponding to what are usually called technical or scientific terms, emphasised that an etic approach was tantamount to a comparative approach in anthropology (and related disciplines).

8. Even in so-called universalistic interpretations in which conceptions of 'gods' (or 'spirits') of all times and places are understood as human responses to either the same transcendent reality or the same material (worldly) reality, the *differences* among the various conceptions of 'gods' (or 'spirits') are normally acknowledged (together with the similarities).

9. Carter 1998: 136 f.

10. Carter 1998: 139–145.

11. Carter 1998: 141.

12. Freiberger 2016: 60.

13. Bartha 2019.

14. Pyysiäinen & Ketola 1999: 209. This quote is very similar to the contention of the Ugandan anthropologist Okot p'Bitek who, in 1971, wrote that the 'African deities' described in scholarly books on indigenous African religions 'clothed with the attributes of the Christian God, are, in the main, creations of the students of African religions'. p'Bitek criticised, among others, the theologian and scholar of African religions, John S. Mbiti, for having 'smuggled enough Greek metaphysical material to hellenise three hundred African deities' (p'Bitek quoted in Cox 2014: 1 and Westerlund 1985: 62, respectively). In a later article, Pyysiäinen proposed the concept of 'counter-intuitive agents', instead of 'gods', and found that by this reconceptualisation 'we arrive at a precise, theoretically motivated, and empirically testable concept' (Pyysiäinen 2003: 163). However, as far as I can judge, his suggestion entails merely a change of term rather than a redefinition of the concept or category labelled by this term. From the above quote, it appears that p'Bitek also believed that a change of term from *gods* to *deities* avoided the problems he had identified.

15. I take this to include, beside the Germanic *god* (and cognates), all translations of the Hebrew *ʾēl* / *ʾélōah* / *ʾĕlōhīm* and Greek *theos* from the original Christian canon to other languages, such as the Latin *deus* (etymologically related to the Greek term), the Church Slavonic *bog'*, and so on.

16. Cox 2014.

17. Cox 2014: 143.

18. See e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza & Kaufman 1998: 137 f.; Gericke (2017: 1–3) provides an elucidating sample of different usages of *ʾēl* / *ʾélōah* / *ʾĕlōhīm* in the Hebrew Bible and comments that this shows that these words could 'be used to denote an almost inordinate variety of phenomena'.

19. As well as in certain present-day missionary understandings, for that matter, see e.g. Vallikivi 2011 for examples of Pentecostal Christian missions among a group of Samoyedic speakers.

20. Sundström 2012.

21. Paden (1988) 1994: 122.

22. For a more extensive discussion of Pyysiänen's and Ketola's argument, as well as of Carter's theories and the problem of category formation regarding 'spirits' and 'gods' in the academic study of religions, see Sundström 2008: 29–73.

23. Apart from the Nganasan, Popov specialised in the ethnography of the Dolgan, a hunting and reindeer-breeding people on the Taymyr Peninsula. The Dolgan language is closely related to Sakha, which was Popov's mother tongue together with Russian. He also studied so-called shamanism among the Sakha. For biographical information on Popov, see Sundström 2008: 116–121.

24. Popov (1945) 1984: 43. Even though the Nganasan avoided contact with Christian missionaries, there had been a mission on the Taymyr Peninsula ever since the end of the seventeenth century. There were no schools for the Nganasan until the 1930s. On the Christian mission among the Nganasan, see Gracheva 1979.

25. Popov (1945) 1984: 65.

26. Exactly whom Popov included in this 'us' is a bit unclear, but I take it that he meant the prototypical mind of rationalistic moderns, or just his fellow Soviet scholars. But this might be the same thing.

27. Popov presented his theory on the evolution of animism, using data from his studies of the Dolgan as empirical examples. The article was published in 1958, but the publication was preceded by a heated peer-review debate involving several renowned Soviet scholars, including ethnographers, archaeologists, a historian of religions, a psychologist and a philosopher. Many of his reviewers criticised Popov for putting forth un-Marxist ideas. For a detailed presentation and discussion of Popov's article and the peer-reviewers' criticism, see Sundström 2008: 121–144.

28. Tret'yakov 1869: 414.

29. Popov 1936: 48 ff.; Popov (1945) 1984: 47 ff.; for a summary in Swedish of Popov's presentation of ŋuə, see Sundström 2008: 223 ff.

30. Dolgikh 1976: 20. For biographical notes on Dolgikh, see Sundström 2008: 205–210.

31. Dolgikh 1968; Dolgikh 1976.

32. Kryvelev 1956.

33. Engels presented his theory in the book *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigenthums und des Staats* in 1884. For further information on the role of the theory of matriarchy or mother-right in Soviet scholarship, see Sundström 2007: 39 f.

34. Dolgikh 1968: 214 ff.

35. Dolgikh 1968: 214, 224 f.; Dolgikh 1976: 21.

36. Dolgikh 1968: 216, 224 f.

37. The Nganasan language has different words for wild and domesticated reindeer, *bakhi* and *taa*, respectively. According to Dolgikh's information, the Nganasan also conceived of *Taa-n'emy*, 'Mother of domesticated reindeer'.

38. Dolgikh 1968: 224 ff.

39. The reason why I present Simchenko's research here before Gracheva's – despite the fact that he was a year younger than her – is that he conducted his fieldwork among the Nganasan earlier than she did, and his first publications on Nganasan ethnography appeared before hers. Thus, his research influenced Gracheva's more than Gracheva's research influenced his.

40. See further, Sundström 2008: 210–212.

41. Dolgikh 1976: 24 f.

42. Simchenko 1996a: 14; Simchenko 1976: 289.

43. Simchenko 1963: 169

44. Simchenko 1996b: 28.

45. Simchenko 1976: 268; Kortt & Simčenko 1990: 31; Simchenko 1996a: 13; Simchenko 1996b: 5 f., 12 f.

46. Simchenko 1976: 264 ff.; Kortt & Simčenko 1985: 120, 136.

47. Simchenko 1996a: 14.

48. Kortt & Simčenko 1990: 33, 100 f.

49. Simchenko 1976: 289; Kortt & Simčenko 1990: 31 f.; Simchenko 1996a: 13–15, 182.

50. See further, Sundström 2008: 212–215.

51. This was the common period referred to by Soviet ethnographers studying the peoples of the Soviet North in the 1970s and 1980s, because they often chose to rely on the information of informants born at the turn of that century, i.e. persons who had been brought up before the Russian Revolution and the subsequent modernisation of the indigenous northern societies.

52. Gracheva 1983: 31, 48.

53. Gracheva 1983: 52–75; see also Gracheva 1975 and Gracheva 1976.

54. Gracheva 1983: 15.

55. Gracheva 1983: 52–75.

56. Gracheva 1983: 23, 27.

57. Regrettably, Gracheva does not mention any Nganasan name or term for this being. She only discussed the Russian *Olen'-mat'*, literally translated as 'Deer mother'. For this reason, it is unclear whether the concept referred to the mother of wild or domesticated reindeer, or perhaps the mother of deer in general. The lack of a Nganasan term for this being also gives the impression that she is a theoretical construct of Gracheva's, rather than an empirically documented notion collected from the Nganasan.

58. Gracheva 1983: 49–50.

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