



Imitating Enemies or Friends

Comparative Notes on Christianity in the Indigenous Russian Arctic during the Early Soviet Period

The focus of this article is on different uses of Christianity by northern indigenous peoples of Russia as a reaction to state reforms in the early Soviet period. We shall undertake a comparative study of two unrelated communities, one from the Yup'ik Eskimo maritime hunters, and another from the nomadic Nenets reindeer herders. Although both groups had only sporadic contact with Christian missionaries from various denominations, during this period they experimented with Christian ritual forms in order to overcome the crisis caused by the intrusion of the Soviet state. A group of Naukan Yup'ik imitated Christian church services and called villagers to fight back the growing pressure from the Soviets. Similarly, while keeping away from state farms and schools, many Nenets reindeer herders subscribed to Russian Orthodox identity and rituals. Although there are significant differences between these two cases, practices of imitation, material exchange, and hopes for abundance were at stake in both.

KEYWORDS: Christianity—imitation—Nenets—Soviets—Yup'ik Eskimo

DESPITE THE virtual absence of Christian institutions in the Russian Arctic during the early Soviet period, a few indigenous groups developed rituals that were inspired by Christianity, based either on contact from the past or through existing contact with missionaries and indigenous converts from elsewhere. We shall discuss two such cases. The first case concerns the Naukan Yup'ik Eskimos living on the Chukotka Peninsula who were mainly inspired by Catholics from Alaska, and the second is related to the European Nenets in the Great Land tundra who were influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church. Although these groups are unrelated, as they live 4,500 kilometers from each other, they belong to the same Russian/Soviet empire with its specific relations to different Christian denominations.

In the early Soviet period when the state created obstacles for the activities of ordained ministers, some Yup'ik and Nenets began to perform collective rituals and acted as self-made priests or *popy*.¹ We argue that this kind of unexpected religious intensification was a result of a growing confrontation between indigenous and colonial actors in which the Yup'ik and Nenets redefined ways in which to manage the "Other."

The emergence of the *popy* was an adaptive strategy to changing socio-economic conditions through "colonial mimesis" (TAUSSIG 1993). Many felt attracted to emulate Christian practices in order to assume the power of a certain kind of "Other" and through it remain autonomous and potent. Both the Nenets and the Yup'ik felt a certain openness to the "Other" as a way of being in the world and were thus receptive to change. At the same time, it has to be emphasized that the "Other" is, of course, not a coherent entity. Some "Others" were seen as being worthy of emulation; some were not. Just as the colonial "Other" was fragmented, the indigenous communities were not coherent. One may understand how the Soviet state was able to attract or force many to imitate their practices. Yet the object of this copying, in the northern groups under focus here, was not the state agents but the Christians who were paradoxically "absentees." Why did the Yup'ik and Nenets opt to mimick a distant "Other"?

Before the Soviets reached the Arctic, the sparsely populated northern peoples had had contact with state administrators, settlers, Russian and foreign traders, and Orthodox missionaries for a few hundred years. Yet the extent of the contact was different as it was essentially defined by the remoteness of groups. Orthodox



MAP I. Bering Strait area (as of the 1930s). Cartography: Johannes Vallikivi.

priests had made some impact here and there, although the extent of it varied considerably from one place to another (ZNAMENSKI 1999). Because they encountered missionaries infrequently and at a relatively late stage, most Yup'ik remained unbaptized; however, around three-quarters of the Nenets nomads living west of the Urals (“the European Nenets”) had been baptized by 1830. The change in state regime in 1917 had a significant impact, albeit at different times, on virtually all indigenous communities. As a result, all Christian missionary activities stopped and most priests disappeared from the north. From the late 1920s, priests were effectively silenced, imprisoned, or executed by the Soviet state. The Orthodox clergy, members of Protestant churches, and shamans were categorized as “enemies of the people.” Ordinary people who had been allegedly duped by these enemies had to be shown “the light” of scientific truth and its demonstration was accompanied by iconoclastic acts. Soviet officials and police were sent to the tundra to confiscate shamans’ drums, statues of spirits, and other items defined as “religious.” This attempted materialistic turn, however, induced unexpected spiritual processes in different parts of Siberia, as we shall demonstrate below.

NAUKAN YUP'IK MARITIME HUNTERS

In the overview of the Yup'iks’ contact with Christianity, we have relied on published sources, and particularly on two fascinating articles by anthropologists Golovko and Schweitzer (GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006; SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007). The latter article gives an overview of the heightened ritual activity in the coastal village of Naukan (Nuvuqaq) on East Cape, the north-easternmost point of Asia, where a Yup'ik Eskimo community used to live (see MAP I). The authors dubbed the events that took place in the early 1930s a “revitalization movement” and argued that this was triggered by “a reaction to increasing Russian colonial pressure” (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 39). We agree that

this ritual fervor was certainly shaped by resistance that was widespread across Siberia in these years.

First, we summarize the key ritual events as described by Nikolai Ivanovich Yaken, a Yup'ik informant of Golovko and Schweitzer, sixty years after the events took place. Then we shall give a few additional details based on other non-Yup'ik sources—most of which are not referred to by Golovko and Schweitzer—which help us to suggest a more exact time scale and possible denominational influences related to these events. As these events took place a long time ago many details remain unclear, and there are only scarce and often ideologically driven records available; however, we shall suggest that this movement took place in the early 1930s and that it was mainly influenced by Catholic missionaries from Alaska. We shall return to these points in more detail below.

Golovko and Schweitzer write that in Naukan two local men called Nunegnilan and Kantaggun and a woman called Aminak organized gatherings and performed rituals inspired by Christianity. Nunegnilan was known to be a shaman who then became a *popy*, the name which the informant Yaken attributed to all three individuals. They came together on Sundays in a tent (*yaranga*) and invited people to participate in these gatherings. The *popy* wore black robes (“gowns”; GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006) with long, wide sleeves and self-made crosses hanging on their chests. One of the *popy* who had a white handkerchief in his hands circled in the *yaranga* and muttered something. After “talks,” dances were performed and one-third of the village population was engaged in this new ritual activity. These *popy* did not hunt for themselves but the “people who believed in them” brought meat and blubber. They also did not allow children to attend school and spoke against washing with soap (GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006, 102–103; SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 40).

This sketchy glimpse is the only available detailed account of these distant events from the Yup'ik perspective. However, there are some other sources that describe related events in Naukan. Most of them are short remarks which nevertheless give some valuable insight into events that are difficult to reconstruct. Most of them are performed in Soviet-style writing, like that of the Soviet ethnographer SERGEYEV (1955, 361):

Shaman Nunegnilan from the Eskimo village Nyvokak [Naukan] agitated persistently against the *kolkhoz* [collective farm]. He threatened those hunters who had joined the *kolkhoz* that they would be punished with “a life in the underground” where there would be always snow, rain, and little food. For those who continued to follow old customs, the shaman promised “a life in the sky” where it was warm and food was plentiful. Following the American missionaries from Alaska, he introduced “Resurrection Day”² when it was prohibited to work and when a shamanic ritual was organized accompanied by exhortations to step out of the *kolkhoz*. In autumn 1932, the intimidated and less well educated part of the population left the *kolkhoz* and in addition, the recently created local organization of the Komsomol [Communist Youth League] broke up.

In order to show that these individuals were only a few of the class enemies, Sergeyev continues by stating that the Eskimos themselves soon started to unmask these people to the authorities: “The same *kolkhozniki* [collective farm, or *kolkhoz* members] of Nyvokak exposed some shamans who damaged the *kolkhoz*, deciding to exclude them from the *kolkhoz* and then asking the local council [*soviet*] to deport them from the village” (SERGEYEV 1955, 361). Tein, an ethnographer of Naukan Yup’ik origin, partly confirms Sergeyev’s account, including the introduction of the “Resurrection Day,” by saying that “it became forbidden to work or hunt sea mammals on *santi*.” Adopted from the English “Sunday,” *santi* was the name the Yup’ik used (TEIN 1981, 231; 1994, 124).

Another Soviet commentator, Garusov, claims that even “in their earlier anti-Soviet agitation shamans were oriented towards Americans.” He reports that Nunegnilan “restarted his anti-Soviet activities” in 1932. Garusov accuses these shamans of profiting from the established Soviet holiday: “On 8 March 1933, he [a local shaman] organized a sports competition with abundant prizes in order to distract the youth from the celebration of Women’s Equality Day” (GARUSOV 1981, 124–25). Interestingly, the Soviet authors blamed the indigenous leaders of conscious techniques of substitution, which were widely practiced by the Soviet authorities themselves.

According to Merker, on this very same day in March rumors started to spread that the district center Anadyr was occupied by the Japanese and that they would soon come to Naukan and shoot all the Russians who sympathized with the Soviets (MERKER 2005, 139). This was not a local phenomenon because at that time there were reports from all over Chukotka (in the Soviet language) of shamans hoping to get support from abroad, especially from America: “Soon an American steamer will arrive and bring dynamite. Those who do not listen to the shamans, and all Russians, will perish.” They also supposedly gave warnings such as not to send children to school, “otherwise there would be no sea mammals [to catch]” (GARUSOV 1981, 124–25). TEIN argues that these shamans “who propagandized certain Christian customs” told villagers to avoid both buying Soviet goods and the visiting Russian physicians (1981, 230; 1994, 124). As was to be expected, Nunegnilan was imprisoned “for missionary activities” later in the 1930s (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 49, 52).

Schweitzer’s and Golovko’s informant Yaken and the Soviet commentators Sergeyev and Garusov claim that the source of this anti-Soviet movement originated from “the American side.” Yaken stated, “They picked it up from Americans” (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 40). Although blaming “Americans” became a cliché in the Soviet period in various contexts, in this case contacts with Alaska undoubtedly played a critical role. TEIN argues that “this group [led by Naukan shamans] was created on the initiative of American missionaries” (1981, 230; 1994, 124). It is, however, unlikely that missionaries themselves envisioned these kinds of half-Christian and half-shamanic rituals for indigenous people. These were certainly acts of emulation rather than the following of instructions by missionaries, but who was being imitated?

We shall briefly look at three potential sources of inspiration for the *poppy*. These are Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic missionaries and converts who were active in the region. Golovko and Schweitzer argue that the Russian Orthodox Church had virtually no presence and definitely had no “success” in converting people in Chukotka. They admit, however, that in the Naukan’s neighboring villages of Uelen and Dezhnevo, nineteen baptisms were performed in 1910 (GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006, 107–108). The same year a permanent mission station was established on the order of the Alaskan Bishop of the Russian Orthodox church in Ureliki, further south from Naukan, where “every summer five hundred natives gathered for a trade fair” (ZNAMENSKI 1999, 169). Ureliki became a local mission center only after Chukotka had been handed over to the Alaskan diocese in 1906 and the Alaskan Bishop, Innokentiy, had paid a visit to the coastal villages there in 1908 (ZNAMENSKI 1999, 168–69). On the easternmost area of Chukotka, not far from Naukan, two missionary schools were established in Uelen and Chaplino in 1916 (ZNAMENSKI 1999, 174). In our understanding, the highly mobile Naukan villagers had enough opportunities to witness Orthodox liturgical rites and priestly attributes. By the early Soviet period, however, contact with Orthodox priests must have been either very rare or nonexistent. Naukan villagers encountered other examples of missionaries whom they met mostly on their trips to the Bering Strait.

Naukan Yup’ik Eskimos made frequent trips to the Diomed Islands in the Bering Strait as well as to the Alaskan coast where Iñupiaq Eskimos lived (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 1995; 1997; 2007). On the American side, most Eskimos had become active Protestants and by the 1920s they were probably the most important proselytizers in the region. As Ernest Burch shows, the majority of the northern Iñupiaq were converted to some form of Protestantism in one generation from 1890 until 1920, and soon the Iñupiaq converts began actively spreading Christianity themselves (BURCH 1994). Protestants had gained their momentum due to the activity of Sheldon Jackson (1885–1907), a Presbyterian missionary and the special federal agent for education in Alaska. He described his task as “uplifting” natives “out of barbarism into civilization” through the “literacy (in English) of cleanliness, industry, and Christianity” (BURCH 1994, 84; JOLLES 1989).³

By the end of the nineteenth century, a few Protestant missionaries had made evangelization trips to Chukotka. From time to time, ministers met Siberian Eskimos in Alaska (BURCH 1994, 89). In the early 1920s, missionary trips to Chukotka and visits of the Naukaners across the strait continued. For the Naukan Yup’ik, the closest stronghold of Protestants was founded on Little Diomed, which belonged to the United States. It was situated across the International Date Line and only four kilometers from the “Soviet” Big Diomed where many Naukan villagers had recently relocated. In 1923, a Swedish Lutheran missionary, Nils Fredrik Højjer, and Norwegian Lutherans Gustav and Laura Nyseter arrived on Little Diomed where they had many opportunities to meet “the Siberians.” The Naukan villagers, who were generally open to the outsiders, were curious about the missionary

Gustav Nyseter. According to his account they were, “wanting to find out if I was a medicine man of reputation” (RODLI 1999, 74; JOLLES 1989, 19).

Missionary Højjer, who had been preaching in Russia for years, managed to visit Naukan in 1923 and he was accompanied by a young couple called the Earnests. A local Soviet state representative welcomed them and allowed them to conduct missionary work after learning that they “came to teach the principles of Christianity and not Churchanity” (cited in SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 47). Yet regular missionary work did not start because after they witnessed an incident in which a Soviet official was murdered by another Soviet official on the day of their arrival, they hastily left Naukan (RODLI 1999, 53–54; GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006, 108–109; SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 47). Despite this, Højjer made another attempt at settling in Naukan later the same year. He took with him Gustav Nyseter who was supposed to rebuild a house for their mission. Unlike half a year earlier, missionaries were now given permission only to stay in Naukan as private visitors. Nyseter described Naukan Yup’ik as not being particularly interested in Christian customs and teachings (RODLI 1999, 81). When Nyseter proposed that his Yup’ik workmen set aside Sunday as a special day, the Yup’ik could not understand the need (RODLI 1999, 82). Although Nyseter reports only modest successes regarding his teaching, it did leave a few traces in the Yup’iks’ memory. For example, ten years later some observed Sunday as a special day.

In the early Soviet period, state officials were rather ambiguous in their feelings towards Protestant missionaries coming across the Bering Strait. Bonch-Osmolovskiy wrote in 1925 that during the tsarist period, some American missionaries had worked in Chukotka and taught English to the Chukchi (a general name for all indigenous groups on Chukotka, including the Yup’ik). According to him, after the Bolshevik Revolution, Americans intensified their missionary activities. We learn that groups of evangelical missionaries (“young American men and women”) arrived in Chukotka. These missionaries preached “in *yurtas* [tents], under the blank sky, on the rocks and boats.” The missionary work was reported to be successful: “Naturally, our natives feel attracted towards America. They see that the living standards of their American relatives are higher, and everything looks attractive there” (BONCH-OSMOLOVSKIY 1925, 84). Somewhat surprisingly, Bonch-Osmolovskiy admits that American economic, political, and cultural impact had a positive influence on the development of the Chukchi. The same attitude was expressed by another Soviet author, MELNIKOV (1925). These kinds of attitudes, however, did not last long.

The hopes of the Lutherans of evangelizing on Chukotka were destroyed by changing Soviet policies. This was caused by the tightening up of Soviet statehood and a growing hostility towards Christians in general. In 1924, a local Soviet administration was established in Uelen and border posts were built in several places in Chukotka. From then on foreigners needed to present a special entrance permit, which was extremely difficult to obtain.

The authors of this paper suggest that the Catholics became the main source of inspiration for the Naukan *popy*. After Lutherans had left Little Diomedé around

1930, the inhabitants of Naukan had contacts mainly with Catholics from 1932 onwards on the Diomede Islands. In summer 1932, the Jesuit missionary Bellarmine Lafortune established a permanent mission on Little Diomede (RENNER 1979, 94). Most of the likely visitors from Naukan witnessed in summer 1932 Catholic services by Lafortune and became attracted by these (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 51). Among the Little Diomeders, there were already some Catholics who had been baptized in Nome, Alaska, and many others were now converting to Catholicism. Later the missionary work was continued by Tom Cunningham who made attempts to convert the “Soviet” Big Diomeders and people from Chukotka whom he met on the islands. In 1937, he visited the “Soviet” Diomede repeatedly, where one time he was arrested by the Soviet patrol officers, but the local Eskimos forced officers to release Cunningham using the threat of firearms (RENNER 1985, 38).

Descriptions of the ritual action of the Naukan *popy* leave an impression that the elements of this were borrowed either from Orthodox or Catholic rituals (black robes, crosses around the neck, moving around in the tent and muttering prayers) rather than from Protestant ones. As there was no institutional presence of any churches in Naukan, the *popy* were free to carry out their “services” as they liked, acting like bricoleurs who experimented with novel rituals and spirit agents from elsewhere. Instead of rejecting local religious practices, as Christians and Soviets alike wished, they imitated and integrated Christian elements into their shamanic rituals.

As Schweitzer and Golovko rightly argue, the Christian practices among Naukan villagers have to be seen in the wider framework of exchange. Naukan was an important intermediary location through which material, linguistic, and spiritual “items” moved between the inland and coastal areas as well as across the Bering Strait. Yup’ik Eskimos traveled to Alaska often in order to exchange fox pelts, old ivory, and other local raw materials for food, rifles, clothes, and other modern commodities that were scarce on the Russian side (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 1995; 1997). Also in the second half of the nineteenth century, American whalers became very active in the area and some from Naukan even worked on these ships (SCHWEITZER and GOLOVKO 2007, 40).

Population movements also had a role to play as Naukan Yup’ik Eskimos were important in restoring the dwindling Iñupiaq communities on the Diomede Islands. American Eskimo settlements had already attracted Yup’ik Eskimos in the pre-Soviet period for various demographic and economic reasons. According to Krupnik, one of the incentives for the “Siberian” Eskimos to move was the opening of a school on Little Diomede in 1915 which supposedly attracted children from the bigger island (KRUPNIK 1994, 69). In the 1920s, the majority of the Big Diomeders moved to Little Diomede in order to avoid growing pressure from the Soviet authorities who made restrictions on trading with Americans and who promised goods that never arrived. Soviet officials recorded “pro-American sympathies and the islanders’ deep suspicion of the Soviet regime” (KRUPNIK 1994, 69; see also RASMUSSEN 1927, 364). During the 1930s, many Naukan villagers

moved to Big Diomedes. All the indigenous population was deported back to Naukan from there in 1948, when the international border was closed.

Christian practices and services became a part of the economy of exchange (like the Soviet ones carried out in parallel through Komsomol, for instance). If we look closer at these Eskimo communities, we see that borrowing from external spiritual sources was a common practice. Moreover, the Naukan villagers were never really keen on keeping borders but rather on welcoming cultural exchange and allowing various sorts of engagements to take place. Accommodating people, items, and ideas from the outside was widespread. There was a certain “receptivity to transformation” (TURNER 1994, 152). And yet, there are limits to permeability and receptivity. In colonial situations, especially when the pressure is understood to jeopardise existing social and religious forms of relatedness, boundary drawing can become crucial.

The way the Soviets and missionaries imposed changes—and how they succeeded—differed a lot from each other. Unlike the Soviets, Christian missionaries had to limit themselves to persuasion. When the Soviets started to introduce collectivization and imprisoned shamans in the early 1930s, the missionaries in Alaska probably began to look rather benevolent in comparison.

NENETS REINDEER HERDERS

Our next ethnographic case is the Nenets of the Great Land (Bolshezemelskaya) tundra in the northeastern corner of Europe, more precisely the Yugor Strait area and Vaigach island (see MAP 2). This region offers an insight into another complex pattern of social relations in which Orthodox Christianity came to play an increasingly important role. The following remarkable event we outline here only briefly in order to return to it in more detail later.

In 1934, Nenets reindeer herders demanded that the Gulag prison camp authorities who had occupied the Khabarovo church on Yugor Strait return it to them with all the church items restored. The local Soviet authorities, who were trying to collectivize the Nenets at the time, complied with their demands and asked the Gulag to restore the church. Partly as a result of this compromise, some Nenets promised to join collective farms, yet others distanced themselves from the Soviets and kept away from all the new state institutions throughout the Soviet period (VALLIKIVI 2009). In these non-collectivized families, some men came to take on the role of Orthodox *poppy* and used the word *pop* to designate themselves. Before looking at the reasons behind this, we need to map out the region and its history more closely.

It has to be stressed that the region under focus enshrines places of great ritual significance such as Vaigach island, one of the oldest sacred islands continuously in use in the Arctic (BOYARSKIY 2000). The Nenets call it Khekhe Ya, “the spirit land,” as it is a home for two major deities called Vesako (Old Man) and Khadako (Old Woman) and every year dozens of reindeer and polar bears are sacrificed to them. In 1827, Archimandrite Veniamin, the baptizer of the European Nenets,



MAP 2. Nenets areas (as of the early 1930s). Cartography: Johannes Vallikivi.

compelled fresh converts to destroy 420 wooden and 20 stone statues of spirits (*syadey*), including the statue of Vesako with seven faces (VENIAMIN 1850, 438; 1855, 122–25). Although the Nenets did not stop making sacrifices to the deities on the island, this act marked the beginning of long-term missionary pressure (SCHRENK 1848, 356–58; OKLADNIKOV and MATAFANOV 2008, 167).

Before the Russian Orthodox missionaries arrived, Saint Nicholas and others like Saint Elijah—what the Nenets called “Russian spirits” (*lutsa khekhe*)—were already present. The missionaries came to baptize and write converts into the church registrar books with their new names after many had already accepted Saint Nicholas as their own through contact with Komi and Russian lay persons (VALLIKIVI 2003). The latter had erected crosses and built chapels dedicated to Saint Nicholas in the best hunting areas before the arrival of missionaries (ISLAVIN 1847, 90). One of those was built alongside a few other huts in the early nineteenth century on the Yugor Strait at the mouth of the Nikolskoe River opposite Vaigach. This settlement became known as Khabarovo or Nikolskoe. Inhabited only in summer, it attracted Pustozersk Russian traders, hunters, and herd owners, Great Land Nenets herders and sea mammal hunters, Orthodox priests, and occasional ships with foreign explorers and merchants on board who all engaged in various forms of exchange, both material and spiritual.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Khabarovo boasted three ecclesiastical buildings. In addition to the tiny log chapel (SCHRENK 1848, 348), a slightly bigger church and monastic skete were added in the late 1880s and 1890s (OKLADNIKOV and MATAFANOV 2008, 144–51). Establishing a monastic community failed though, after monks and servants of the skete (avoiding raw meat in their diet) died from scurvy by the end of their first winter in 1892 (KOZMIN 1903, 73). The nomadic Nenets met Orthodox priests very rarely, once or twice a year at best. Since the late nineteenth century, almost every summer a priest has made the five-hundred-kilometer journey on reindeer from Telviska to Khabarovo in order

to hold services for the Russians and local Nenets. Most of the time they were occupied with conducting liturgies and private services (*treby*) such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals (SHEVZOV 2004, 188). By the early twentieth century, the baptism of children had been largely accepted as a necessary ritual by the Nenets. Often though children were baptized at the age of ten and couples were given a church wedding after years of living together (BORISOV 1907, 61). Orthodox burials were rarely carried out and instead priests read the funeral service when passing by the burial grounds of the recently dead. They also distributed icons and crosses (to be worn around the neck) to the tundra dwellers who valued the items because of their magical potency.

Russian Orthodox priests did not focus on instructing doctrines to any significant extent, not only because there were linguistic barriers but also because the Russian Orthodox Church put only limited value on propositional content and interiorized states in their mission work (HANN and GOLTZ 2010). Although a few mission schools educated a handful of reindeer herders, mostly orphans or children of poor households, in general the Nenets did not consider giving their children to school as necessary (BAZANOV and KAZANSKIY 1936). As a result, missionary reports entail complaints that the natives did not understand the idea of human sinfulness and salvation through Christ; at best, they were told to memorize only the shortest and simplest instructions (MAKARIY 1878, 72; VENIAMIN 1850, 417). All in all, the Nenets neophytes remained largely uninterested in basic Christian doctrinal teachings. Not surprisingly, their Christianity always remained a way of acting upon the world through Orthodox things and places rather than engaging with its propositional content.

The Nenets visiting Khabarovo considered entering the old chapel, which they treated as an indoor sacred site where the master spirit Mikola (the Nenets version of Saint Nicholas) resided, to be unavoidable. Leaving fox pelts, reindeer skins, or money to Mikola was a part of the sacrificial exchange, crucial for granting hunting luck, growth for the herd, and health for the family. Offerings and prayers in the chapel were performed in order to guarantee a safe passage over the Yugor Strait to Vaigach. After arriving on Vaigach, the Nenets sacrificed to Vesako or other spirits embodied in wooden statues, first asking for good fortune in hunting and, on their return, a safe passage back to the mainland. To the deepest regret of the Orthodox priests, not only were the baptized Nenets making sacrifices to the spirits on Vaigach, but also the Russians did not object to making sacrifices in sacred places of the Nenets (BORISOV 1907, 75; MIKHAYLOV 1898, 294–95; NORDENSKIÖLD 1882, 64, 68–69, 76).

The old chapel was especially popular among Nenets and Russians. Traveling priests repeatedly complained that, despite being the only clerics in Khabarovo, their recently built church received fewer donations than the old chapel where there was no acting cleric. Priest Koshev reported that Pustozersk Russians were not only taking Nenets to the icon of Saint Nicholas in the old chapel but the Russians themselves went there instead of attending a liturgy in the new church at the same time. Although the new church contained an icon of Nicholas, the one in the

old chapel was considered more powerful both by the Nenets and their Russian trade partners. Koshev, who asked for donations for the new church, received a negative reaction from the Nenets: “We sacrifice only to our Mikola” (OKLADNIKOV and MATAFANOV 2008, 160).

Most of the donations made to the churches in Khabarovo were given on St. Elijah the Prophet’s Day (*Il’in Den’*, in the old style the twentieth of July). That day was considered to be the biggest feast day of the year in many parts of Orthodox Russia, having its roots in the folk calendar which associated it with changes in the natural cycle and the protection of cattle (PAXSON 2005, 292–93). This echoed well with reindeer herders’ concerns. For the Nenets, that day marked midsummer (*ta’ yer yalya*, the end of the period when the sun is above the horizon throughout day and night), the beginning of the move towards their winter pastures in the south. That day hundreds of Nenets reindeer herders came to Khabarovo not only to trade but also to compete in games (wrestling, lassoing, axe throwing, sledge races) and to drink vodka (KERTSELLI 1911, 98). Most people also visited the churches and made then their offerings, mainly to Mikola. Some herders paid a priest to perform a liturgy in the old chapel as well.

Until the end of the tsarist period, the missionaries’ success had always remained fragile. For instance, during his last trip to the Nenets reindeer herders on the Kara shore in 1918, the priest Yurev complained that there were still many who were not interested in baptism, and even among the baptized, there was virtually no interest in confession, church weddings, and funerals (YUREV 1919; see also MIKHAYLOV 1898, 128, 173–74). Although attitudes varied here and there and they were definitely changing over time, for most western Nenets, Orthodox priests and churches had become meaningful links to the spirits of Russian origin. At the same time, despite these innovations, the Nenets continued to rely on intimate relations with local spirits and ancestors either directly or mediated by shamans. One could imagine that herders and hunters could live without Orthodox priests when they disappeared. Although most of them could, there were many who, after the disappearance of the institutionalized church, became more “Christian” than they had ever been before. We shall return to this point below.

Things changed considerably with the introduction of Soviet statehood. When the first Bolshevik activists arrived in Khabarovo, they instantly demonstrated their interest in material items. They looted the local church and took away donations made by the Nenets to Mikola. On 16 August 1920, the Soviet officials made a protocol in which they wrote (cited in BOYARSKIY 2000, 67–68):

By taking into account since a long time ago progressively increasing [...] fanaticism [...] the propaganda by the *batyushki* [Orthodox priests who were] yearly dispatched to the tundra [...] concealing the exploitation of Samoyeds [Nenets] under the guise of religious obligations [...] comrade Meletev explained to the Samoyeds their incorrect understanding of religious questions, as their hope for impunity for their “sins,” instilled to them by the *batyushki*, [who are] parasites

extracting furs from the Samoyeds that are offered to the Khabarovo chapel [and which then] fall into the hands of the priests of Telviska [...].

After their exhortations, the Bolsheviks carried out a general search in the Khabarovo church where they confiscated a number of reindeer hides and polar-fox furs. They took these with them as “income for the national property [*narodnoe dostoenie*].” For the Nenets, this was their first encounter with the changed power relations in which the flow of material items was redirected again as the state substituted the church as the receiver of offerings.

After 1920, priests no longer came to Khabarovo and the church buildings were taken over by state institutions. In 1926, the former monastery-skete and the church were used as an office and a storehouse by the Komi state trade organization called Komigostorg (BABUSHKIN 1930, 12). In 1932, the local Gulag prison camp (the so-called “Vaigach Expedition”) took over the local church and accommodated convicts-geologists prospecting for minerals (YEVSYUGIN 1993, 25). During these years the campaign of forced collectivization started drastically changing the indigenous way of life. In summer 1934, the authorities in Naryan-Mar (the center of the Nenets national region) requested that the local authorities of the Bolshezemelskaya district intensify attempts to collectivize the Nenets in the Kara tundra who, unlike in the western areas, were told they were “lagging behind” schedule. Most of the Nenets areas were embroiled in resistance when the Soviet administrators came to force the Nenets and their reindeer into collective farms.

Arkadiy Yevsyugin, the first secretary of the Bolshezemelskaya district, was responsible for collectivization in the region. In order to encourage the Nenets to join the collective units, in a highly unusual step for a Soviet activist, he asked Gulag officials to restore the church. The reindeer herders had complained to the Soviet officials that they had not been able to use the church on Saint Elijah’s Day anymore. In summer 1934, Yevsyugin requested Ditskalin, the head of the Vaigach OGPU (secret police), “to fix, paint and lime-wash the chapel and put the religious items back in their place” (YEVSYUGIN 1993, 26). On 2 August (St. Elijah’s Day on the new calendar), the Nenets arrived and “stopped at the church and were satisfied with the church looking better than before” (YEVSYUGIN 1993, 26). A big tent was erected nearby for the meeting where herders were given free tea and vodka. Prourzin, the first secretary of the regional party organization and some other high ranking officials arrived from Naryan-Mar, and representatives of the Gulag were also present. Following the Soviet practice of replacing saints days with days of new heroes, events, and professions, party officials had already declared in 1932 St. Elijah’s day to be a “mass agricultural-political holiday—Reindeer Day instead of the clerical holiday” (cited in TOLKACHEV 1999, 112). Yevsyugin describes the event as a significant success in working towards collectivization. Being encouraged by the ideology of replacement, the Soviets were probably hoping to gain symbolic capital from overlapping their time and place with the Orthodox time and place (recall the accusations made towards the Naukan *popy* of using the Women’s Equality Day for their own purposes).

Many Nenets worked as sledge drivers for the Gulag (GURSKIY 1999, 6; VIT-TENBURG 2003). One of those working as a sledge driver in these years was the Nenets called Mikul (1904–1976).⁴ His duty was to carry post and transport various goods and people along the coast of the Arctic Ocean between the Gulag camps of Khabarovo and Amderma. Despite Yevsyugin’s collectivization efforts, Mikul, together with some other families did not join the *kolkhoz* and remained outside all the state institutions until the end of the Soviet period. They were not anyhow interested in any other things that the Soviet microcosm had to offer in these daunting prison camps, especially after witnessing violent scenes there. Like Nunegnilan, Mikul abhorred the idea of collectivization and giving children away for schooling and he had every reason to avoid *kolkhozes* and the army, as he had witnessed the disappearance of his two brothers and the family’s two-thousand-strong reindeer herd.

Mikul was the main *pop* among the Yamb To Nenets. He was called either *pop-vesako* or *pop-iri* (both stand for “priest-old-man”) or *khekhbedangoda* (“performer of baptism”). He gained his name from performing baptisms and he kept them simple by imitating what he had seen Orthodox priests doing. Usually the parents of a newborn child invited a *pop* to perform a baptism (*khekhbedambava*) taking place in the pure part of the tent (*singgana*) where icons were exhibited, hanging on a shelf that was tied up on tent poles with candles alight in front of the icons. The *pop* took a child in his hands and sprinkled him/her with water or immersed the body thrice in a metal washbasin that served as a font. Then he handed the baby over to the godfather. During the rite, he asked Num (sky god) and Mikola for good luck and protection for the child. What every informant also stresses today when talking of baptisms is that it was a big feast accompanied by a sacrificial slaughtering of reindeer and drinking. Usually, the *pop* was given a reindeer or some other gifts for performing the ritual. Also, godparents were supposed to make gifts to the newborn baby throughout its life. Not only material items but spiritual qualities were circulated in a way that was understood to act in all ritual events. Mikul was considered powerful and efficient at getting protection from gods and spirits (an important quality of a shaman as well). After Mikul’s death, two other *pop*y emerged. One was his youngest son, who stated that he had a very good hand: “Not one child I have baptized has died” (Vallikivi’s field notes from 2006).

For Mikul though, being Orthodox was not only about an exchange between humans and spirits and getting it right as priests would have liked it, but was also about morality and belonging in a rather idiosyncratic way. He crossed himself before sitting at the table, he strictly observed Sundays, and he also fasted before Pascha (Easter) for seven weeks. His grandson Yegor stressed that unlike others, when Mikul was playing cards, he did not do it for reindeer or for lassos. Nor did he use swear words or let his sons use them. “But when his daughters were swearing he only laughed at it,” stated Yegor. The explication given to this difference in his attitude towards his sons and daughters was that the sons carried on his lineage

while his daughters did not. He was thus constructing his own line that was morally viable and defined by the rules he had learnt from the Orthodox church.

All this does not mean that he or other Yamb To Nenets excluded pre-Christian practices from their repertoire. Mikul ritually slaughtered reindeer, carried bear's teeth on his belt, smoked a tobacco pipe, and drank vodka "as it all helped to ward off evil spirits" (as Yegor put it). Some herders called Mikul a *tadibe* (shaman) and addressed him with requests for healing. But he denied being a *tadibe*. Indeed, his grandfather Grigoriy had been a shaman and he himself as a young man had performed once or twice as a shaman's assistant (*teltangoda*), repeating what another shaman was singing. It seems that in the changing times shamanhood was losing some of its earlier appeal, at least for some.

For Mikul, the aspect of subscribing to Orthodox identity played out most clearly when contrasting himself with malevolent "Russians" (*lutsa*). By these *lutsa* he meant Communists who came and took their reindeer and sent children to school, interrupted earlier trade relations with merchants, killed the Nenets in an uprising (in 1943, known as *mandalada*) or in punishment, and eradicated shamans and priests. Mikul used to say that the Communists did not believe in God and they traced their origin from monkeys. The word he used for "monkey" was *ngayatar* ("a hairy body" in Nenets) or *obezyana* ("monkey" in Russian). *Ngayatar* were known as dangerous spirit agents from the underworld where the Russians originated from, according to creation myths, and thus the *lutsa* were essentially considered to be non-people. "Unlike the *lutsa*, we are from God," said Yegor, referring to his grandfather's words. For Mikul, the Russian priests were different; they were called *yuryo*, the term for non-Nenets friends. Imitating God-believing Russians marked his and other *popy*'s difference from the Soviets they tried to avoid.

For the non-collectivized Nenets reindeer herders, engagement with Orthodox rituals and saints, interpreted as Russian spirits, offered an affiliation with the powerful "Other" whose earlier mediators (Russian priests) had disappeared. By taking over the role of *popy*, these Nenets found not only a way to retain the link with the Russian spirits but also distance themselves from a new kind of malevolent "Other" who fought against all known spirits.

DISCUSSION

There are several similarities and differences between the cases of ritual activities among Naukan Yup'ik and Nenets reindeer herders. Most of the western Nenets nomads were baptized as they had been exposed to missionary pressure significantly earlier and more systematically than the coastal Yup'ik. Thus, the Nenets' engagement was a longer conversation in which the priests had a right to demand certain ritual obligations from their nomadic flock and, as a result, some of these became accepted. On the other hand, the Naukan Yup'ik had only occasional encounters with missionaries, who were not in a position to demand anything. However, all in all, both had only sporadic contact with missionaries

who stayed for relatively short periods in their communities and, as a result, the Nenets and Yup'ik had very little knowledge of Christian teachings, including the corresponding meanings of rituals.

In the early Soviet period, even if the wider political landscape was the same for both groups, the dynamics of the described religious engagements differed. In the case of the Yup'iks, it was a relatively short period of religious intensification driven by an attempt to appropriate the power of Christians *against* the Soviets explicitly. In these years, they found themselves under direct pressure by Soviets residing in their community. By contrast, for the Nenets this was rather an attempt at restoring widespread pre-Soviet practices and retaining links with powerful spirit agents from the outside (like Saint Nicholas) which enabled the keeping of atheists at bay. Thanks to their nomadic lifestyle the reindeer herders who were resisting collectivization largely managed to avoid surveillance by the Soviets. Yet what is common to both is that the *popy* were differentiating themselves from the Soviets by impersonating priests who were seen as potent external figures.

It has to be noted that, especially in the Stalinist period, the Soviet ideologists used a template according to which the majority of the Soviet people were surely backing state policies which were countered by “the enemies of the people” (shamans and priests included). The rhetoric of their existence was used to justify extensive repressive measures against individuals irrelevant of their real activities or status. This did not though exclude notable concessions in some cases, as in the example of Soviet collectivizers acting among Nenets reindeer herders during the harshest years of the systematic eradication of religion. The overall stress caused by the socioeconomic changes is evidently causally linked to the religious intensification described here.

Although we have to acknowledge the impossibility of knowing exactly how the participants themselves perceived the change, we propose that from the viewpoint of the Yup'ik and Nenets *popy*, state actions and innovations could be seen as entailing some hidden purpose or “spiritual” source (it has to be borne in mind that from the indigenous point of view the split between “spiritual” and “material” in the modern Western sense did not exist). Above all, the Soviet reforms had materialistic aims ranging from institutional politics to the politics of the human body (introducing a new administrative system, collectivization, medical care, reorganizing people's everyday lives such as cleanliness of households and personal hygiene). Christian missionaries and Communists, both being militant iconoclastic agents, engaged in destroying sacred objects, and added their own regalia (for example, portraits of Lenin). These items were believed to have the agency to change the natives. In one way or another, material exchange was at the heart of this relational complex in which different sets of ideas and desires clashed. As described above, while Orthodox priests were accusing Russian traders of forcing Nenets to make donations to Saint Nicholas and thus attempting to erase their own sins, Soviet officials accused priests of instilling the idea of sinfulness to the Nenets, which was said to be merely a pretext to get valuable items from them.

For the Nenets who had been engaging in a meaningful exchange with priests and traders over the years, confiscation of their donations “on behalf of” the state must have seemed unacceptable, as it did not involve a return in any meaningful sense.

Christian rituals and items often become a part of a wider set of exchange practices, especially through mimetic practices. Compared to the Protestants, the Orthodox Church, like the Catholic Church, was less able or keen to transport “Christian logic” (ROBBINS 2007) and instead let imitative performing actions flourish. It can be argued that the Soviets were the first ones who intensively imposed their ideology on northern indigenous communities. But even they, despite ruthless measures, were struggling to get the “Soviet logic” across, at least in the beginning. Yet they were more efficient in the long run in most places.

Many scholars have argued that the appropriation of Christianity can be seen as a form of resistance to dominating social forces. ERRINGTON and GEWERTZ argue that the Karavaran in Papua New Guinea resisted colonial forces through “strategic emulation” of the practices of the whites “by which local groups attempted to maintain or enhance their own worth” (1995, 22). Robbins sees a similar case among the Urapmin on mainland Papua New Guinea: “For the Urapmin, what I am calling incorporation, founded on practices of emulation, allowed them throughout the colonial era to maintain control of the institutions that shaped their lives, even if those institutions were borrowed from white culture” (ROBBINS 2004, 49). Copying can be highly creative, or as Jebens has put it, imitation can be conceptualized as an “active mimetic appropriation” (JEBENS 2004b, 166).

According to Taussig, humans have a mimetic faculty that is “the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other” (TAUSSIG 1993, xiii). Using this faculty in numerous colonial contact zones all over the world, many indigenous and non-indigenous groups have hoped to gain the power of outsiders. SANTOS-GRANERO, who discusses Taussig’s ideas when speaking about the body-centered Yaneshá ontology and cultural change in Amazonia, claims that many actors of mimesis do it partially and temporarily, and can thus retain their own way of being (2009, 487). This specification brings out an important point which seems to fit with the case of the Nenets and the Yup’ik, namely the openness to the “Other” and readiness to transform, even if temporarily. But this openness does not always remain static.

We propose that the border management practiced by the Soviets and Christians was, to a certain extent, mimicked; colonial pressure compelled the natives to imitate similar boundary practices by natives. This was the case especially in the early 1930s when the class enemy campaign against the kulaks and shamans was launched, and sources from all over Siberia show that collectivization, schooling, and new rules of hygiene caused significant stress and resistance among indigenous groups (LEETE 2005). Conversions to Communism had to rely largely on repressive methods and so it was not so much a matter of the institutions themselves than the “imposed choice” which drove many indigenous peoples to become defiant. The Soviet practices of exclusivity were introduced without much opportunity

for manoeuvring; as a result, organized resistance emerged here and there all over Siberia where it often took some form of ritual intensification, based either on non-Christian practices (LEETE 2005; VALLIKIVI 2005, 39–41) or Christian ones, as discussed here.

We would like to make another, broader point: treating the “Other” as a coherent agent in the analyses of colonial encounters may be unfruitful. We would rather suggest that there is no one “Other” that is imitated but various kinds of “Others” (from state agents to Christian missionaries) which can all make a difference in the process of imitation (see also Fausto’s comment in SANTOS-GRANERO 2009, 497). Both Nenets and Yup’ik tried to use “a distant Other” in order to keep at bay “a close ‘Other.’” Christian missionaries and Soviet state agents, in many ways similar missionary forces, were evaluated differently. There were some who became interested in the Soviet ideology in the Nenets and Yup’ik societies in the early Soviet period. They assumed the official view by taking the role of representative of the state and in the end yielded to this.

Vitebsky has asked about the impact of the Soviet regime reaching indigenous communities: “How could one have any career, even in a remote settlement, without mimicking these values to the point where one ultimately internalized them psychologically?” (VITEBSKY 2005, 234). This is certainly a justified question bearing in mind that “Soviet logic” transformed indigenous communities and people radically over the Soviet period. There are cases—as discussed here—when the “Soviet logic” failed to find a way to any significant extent into northern communities in the beginning (the Naukan Yup’ik) or throughout the whole period of its dominance (the uncollectivized Nenets).

It appears that the *popy* from both groups tried to retain the difference and keep the intruding forces at bay by mimicking another kind of “Other.” As Tausig makes clear, mimesis is not mere copying and as Willerslev argues through the example of the Siberian Yukaghir, the perception of difference in mimetic relationships remains crucial as it helps to avoid yielding into the “Other” (WILLERSLEV 2007). In the case of the Yup’iks and the Nenets the perception of difference was temporally and spatially structured. By emulating priests, the Nenets and Yup’ik did not necessarily aim to become the “Other” but they hoped to assume power over a certain kind of “Other.” Thus, openness to one kind of “Other” was replaced by closeness to another kind of “Other.” Therefore what Christianity and Soviet ideology alike have been able to do is to change the structural disposition to be open to the “Other.” For this reason, what was imitated was not what was at hand but what was distant either in time (Orthodox priests among Nenets) or space (American missionaries next to the Yup’ik). In other words, the object of imitation for those maritime hunters and reindeer herders who opted for Christian practices stayed elsewhere or in other times, thus giving more control over the here and now.

NOTES

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1. *Popy* means “Russian Orthodox priests” in Russian (*pop* in the singular). The term is used in this article specifically to signify the self-made indigenous religious leaders. While the Russian word *pop* was used by Nenets in the early Soviet period, we cannot be sure that the word was used by the Yup’ik in that period. However, we know that *pop* was used by a Yup’ik informant in 1993 when characterizing past events (GOLOVKO and SCHWEITZER 2006). Based on the sources we have, we believe that the word *pop* was used by Yup’ik and Nenets themselves.

2. Sergeev uses the Russian phrase *den’ voskresen’ya* in quotation marks, which denotes Sunday. He, like other Soviet authors, does not pay attention to Christian denominational differences.

3. Congregationalist missionaries were the first to arrive in the Bering Strait region. In 1890 they opened a mission and a school on the Cape Prince of Wales (approximately ninety kilometers from Naukan, across the Bering Strait). Despite the resistance of shamans, by 1901 there were already about a hundred converts. Other denominations followed, including the Presbyterians, the Covenants, the Lutherans, and the Quakers who evangelized there and elsewhere in the region (BURCH 1994, 81, 84, 87).

4. Vallikivi has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork among the descendants of Mikul. This is an area where the two biggest communities of non-collectivized reindeer herders (*yedinolichniki*) live today. One is known as the Yamb To (around 200 people) and the other as the Ural Nenets community (around 400 people). All personal names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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