

# WHAT DOES MATTER?: IDOLS AND ICONS IN THE NENETS TUNDRA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper\* examines a mission encounter in the Nenets reindeer herders' tundra. In post-Soviet Arctic Russia, Pentecostal and Baptist missionaries of Russian and Ukrainian origin have been fighting against idolatry and trying to persuade the Nenets to burn their sacred images or *khekhe''*. They claim that among the indigenous Siberians idolatry exists in its quintessential or prototypical form, as it is described in the Bible. I shall suggest that this encounter takes place in a gap, in which the Nenets and Protestant have different understandings of language and materiality. Missionaries rely simultaneously on the 'modern' ideology of signification and the 'non-modern' magic of the material. They argue that idols, which are 'nothing' according to the scriptures, dangerously bind the 'pagans'' minds. For reindeer herders, for whom sacred items occupy an important place in the family wellbeing, the main issue is how to sever the link with the spirits without doing any damage.

KEYWORDS: Nenets • Pentecostalism • missionaries • iconoclasm • materiality

Monotheism without the charge of idolatry is a bit like *Othello* without Desdemona. There would be little there to move the plot along.  
(Johnston 2009: 3–4)

After three hundred years of the fight against idolatry, in the early 21st century issues of iconoclasm are as acute as ever in Arctic Russia. While cultural activists and scholars are seeking to give legal protection to indigenous sacred sites (Murashko 2004; Kharyuchi 2008), Protestant missionaries see this as a direct challenge to God's will. As one Baptist

\* This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence, CECT), the Estonian Science Foundation (grant no. 8335) and the Center for the Study of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in Russia. In what follows, the abbreviations N. and R. indicate words in Nenets and Russian respectively. In the Nenets words, two apostrophes stand for a glottal stop; at the end of a word they often mark the plural (for example, *khekhe''* or *sidyangg''*). All personal names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity; the pseudonyms have been chosen from an existing pool of Nenets personal names. All biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

missionary put it after his trip to the Nenets on Vaygach Island (using the language of the prophet Daniel, especially 9:27, 11:31):

The island is called Khebidya-Ya in Nenets, which means 'sacred island'.<sup>1</sup> Scholars call it "a historical monument of the Nenets national culture" but the Word of God calls these places "the abomination of desolation" (*merzostyu zapusteniya*) where everything is polluted with idols and idolaters. The world and God value phenomena and facts in a diametrically opposed manner.

The Russian- and Ukrainian-origin Baptist and Pentecostal missionaries who evangelise among Nenets reindeer herders claim that among the indigenous Siberians idolatry exists in its quintessential or prototypical form, as it is described in the Bible. Nenets household god images correspond to the scriptural "graven images".<sup>2</sup> They argue that, knowingly or unknowingly, the Nenets follow Satan, whose ambition is to obtain and destroy as many souls as he can. This link needs to be severed. But what kind of link is it imagined to be in the first place? And how can this link be severed with as little as possible – or preferably no – damage done?

As Johnston puts it (see above), there is a natural relationship between Christianity and idolatry. One can even say that Christianity vitally depends on an opposition with false gods, as it is a monotheism which defines itself "in part by denigrating the gods of others" (Johnston 2009: 3). Throughout the history of the West, these 'others', charged with idolatry, have not only been 'pagans' (or 'infidels') but perhaps even more often other Christians who have disputed correct understandings of God and materiality. This has been a fight over the issue of how the divine can be presented and how the demonic can be absented; and also what kind of objects (if any) can mediate sensuous engagement with the divine. The Byzantine image controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century are only the two best known examples.<sup>3</sup> Protestants among themselves have been involved extensively in accusing each other of idolatry from the very beginning. For instance, Luther cast out the image-smashers from Wittenberg, accusing them of attributing too much power to the images (Eire 1986: 2; Hawkes 2001: 72; Morgan 2005; van Asselt 2007: 300). In a way, Luther warned other reformers not to become idolatrous about the absence of material items.

Developing further the Byzantine iconodulic theology, Russia became a place where sacred images (and neck crosses, etc.) famously came to occupy the heart of not only religious but various everyday practices (Tarasov 2002; Shevzov 2004; Paxson 2005; Hanganu 2010). Partly as a reaction to Orthodox image worship, Russian (many of them ethnic Ukrainian) Protestants grew into a significant religious movement in the 19th century. They argued that only the Word of God (accessible above all in the form of scriptures) is a true medium, which acts directly on the heart and consciousness of a human being. From this stance they addressed their accusations to the Orthodox who venerated icons, wore crosses and otherwise 'wrongly' invested materiality with spiritual efficacy.<sup>4</sup> Yet, for the Orthodox, Protestants seemed preposterous in their claims of being able to communicate directly with God and deny the possibility of the incarnated representation of God (Michalski 1993; H. Coleman 2005).

Russian evangelicals are leading a third wave of iconoclasm in the High North today after the Russian Orthodox and the Soviets. From the 1820s onwards, the Orthodox

Church destroyed spirit statues in the landscape and family spirit effigies in the herders' camps for a hundred years. This was initiated by archimandrite Veniamin who led a baptismal campaign by burning and smashing wooden and stone spirit statues (with the help of freshly baptised Nenets) at dozens of sacred sites scattered all over the tundra west to the Urals (Veniamin 1850; 1851).<sup>5</sup> Other priests followed this example (Shashkov 1896; Mikhaylov 1898; Nevskiy 1906; Yuryev 1919: 64–65; cf. Vallikivi 2003).

In the late 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the anti-religious campaign, Soviet activists confiscated shamanic paraphernalia and other sacred items in reindeer herders' camps. From the Nenets point of view, these incidents, among others, produced stories about the deaths of the communists whose attempts to destroy sacred items backfired – sometimes literally. I was told the story of a communist who fired at a female spirit effigy, *myad pukhutsya*, but the bullet bounced back into his forehead. In the later Soviet period, the devastation was continued by extractive industry, which destroyed numerous sacred sites (Murashko 2004). In addition, many items ended up in museums, taken there by ethnographers, archaeologists and others. As one Nenets explained to me, when a famous seven-headed idol of Vaygach Island was taken to Moscow by an expedition, the people who held it fell severely ill. Museums containing sacred items became places which were especially perceived to be loaded with dangerous spiritual agency. Against the intentionality of the Soviet regime, local people saw these places as either dangerous or attractive places to visit (Ssorin-Chaikov 2001: 14–15; Vitebsky 2005: 323; cf. also Slezkine 1994; Rethmann 2001: 39; Højer 2009: 579; Lukin 2010).

One of the main issues in the mission encounter that comes up again and again is the question: do the material items entail any power, and what, if anything, can they mediate? In other words, what forms of materiality are dangerous? Local (Nenets) and not-that-local (Russian Protestants) understandings of materiality, mediation and personhood are all intricately tied up with this problem. I agree with Webb Keane, who has argued in his recent work that materiality poses a significant threat to Christian moderns who deny that signs are inherently material. It seems that the self-claimed moderns need the Other (or what he calls fetishists), who are imagined to be captives of the material objects to which they falsely attribute agency (Keane 2007; 2008). Matter and materialism pose unusual difficulties for Protestants because they strive for unrealisable transcendence, as Keane argues (2005: 200–201). As I shall demonstrate, Pentecostals fail to maintain a distinction between spirit and matter despite considerable efforts towards this goal of separation. Among other things, this separation is impossible because the missionaries rely simultaneously on the 'modern' ideology of signification and the 'non-modern' magic of the material. In order to illustrate this point, in the following ethnographic part, I shall describe a mission encounter which creates moments of collision and collusion when different understandings of language and materiality meet.

#### A URAL NENETS FAMILY

In 2007 I lived for four months in a Ural Nenets (N. *pynter* 'mountain people') family who were then being converted to Pentecostalism. This is one among many families of the Independents (R. *yedinolichniki*) who remained outside the collective farm system

in the Soviet period and lived with their own private herds in or near the Polar-Ural mountains. Only in the second half of the 1990s did they start to receive identity documents, allowances, and to send their children to boarding school (cf. Vallikivi 2009).

Iriko and Pukhutsya, both around 60 years old, had four daughters and four sons, between 18 and 33. They were all living with their parents, except for the eldest daughter who had married a Khanty reindeer herder. Others had not found partners. Tikyne, the second oldest daughter, told me that this was because they lived most of the time on their own and parents did not visit other camps often enough to arrange marriages. Recently, the prospect of finding a partner had become even slimmer, as they were Pentecostals and most others in the vicinity were Baptists or non-Christians. Now the borders of potential kin were being redrawn and people had to make a careful choice whether to become a Baptist, a Pentecostal or to remain outside these bounded groups. There were only two other Pentecostal Nenets families, although they were not eligible for marriage as they belonged to the same patrilineage. For part of the year, three Pentecostal families migrated close to each other. Sometimes they conducted lay services together; at other times pastors from Vorkuta paid a visit to their small tundra flock.<sup>6</sup>

One day in July 2007 my host mother Pukhutsya called me aside and gave me two items. She asked me not to tell the other members of her family, except for her daughter Tikyne who was standing nearby. One gift was an old Orthodox neck cross that belonged to her husband Iriko. He had inherited it from his great-grandfather who probably received it from the Kolva Orthodox church in the 19th century. Iriko had not worn this cross around his neck for a couple of years, from the time when Protestant missionaries had started to visit his family and when his daughters had been baptised (in 2005).

The other item Pukhutsya gave to me was a curious piece of reindeer skin called *tar'' pad*. This is a special piece of fur that can be found inside reindeer throat on very rare occasions. When a reindeer is slaughtered and a *tar'' pad* is discovered, people say that this family has luck (N. *yab*), and that this luck will bring an increase in the numbers of reindeer in the herd. This luck is seen as the favour of the spirits and gods (cf. Niglas 1997).

Iriko and Pukhutsya's family luck was visible. They were called reindeer-rich (*tysy-vey*) people and were seen as a success story, especially considering that many in the Urals lived in poverty. Their herd had grown to around a thousand animals from a few reindeer when Pukhutsya and Iriko married 35 years ago. They had managed to restore the herd to nearly the size of their grandparents' day (over a thousand head) before the animals were confiscated after an uprising (N. *mandalada*) in 1943 (cf. Vallikivi 2005). After the collapse of the Soviet state, Iriko's family herd began to grow quickly. In Iriko's perception, this growth did not come so much from the altered economic situation and changes in legal environment, but from care, luck and a good relationship with the spirits. He told me: "There are many reindeer dedicated to god in my herd. These are reindeer I do not harness. Because of that, god pastures my reindeer well." By "god" he meant Pe Mal Khada ('Grandmother of the Mountains End') to whom he had dedicated twenty-five of his reindeer. These majestic castrated bulls were called *khekhendy* ('sacred reindeer') or *menaruy*. They were not harnessed for everyday work, earmarked nor were their antlers cut as they had to be kept in peace, because they were the nodal points between guardian spirits and the rest of the herd (Kostikov 1930; Niglas 1997).

Until recently, Iriko sometimes made sacrifices to Pe Mal Khada by strangling a reindeer and feeding her *khekhe* ("sacred images") with sacrificial blood and vodka (more on the *khekhe* below).

When Pukhutsya handed these items to me, I hesitated and said that they should stay in the family. However, she insisted that I should take them, saying: "One day these things would be thrown into the fire anyway." She spoke of this as if it was unavoidable. Yet she did not sound too emotional. I suppose that one reason why these things had remained untouched so far was that these were not exactly graven images and thus not idols proper.

Three months earlier I had witnessed why some *things* caused an acute problem. Vladislav, a Pentecostal missionary from Vorkuta, made Iriko burn spirit figures that were kept in his sacred sledge (N. *khekhengan*). A few years earlier another Pentecostal missionary convinced Pukhutsya to burn her female helper, the figure of *myad pukhutsya*. (This is the most 'public' effigy, as it is kept in the tent separately from the other *khekhe* of the sacred sledge because of her relationship with the dangerous female power, cf. Golovnev 2000.) Tikyne recalled that a big quarrel took place between her parents after that event. This is why Pukhutsya did not want me to tell Iriko that she had given these things away. It was a sensitive matter. While Tikyne and the other children were eager to burn the 'devils' (N. *yavol*), the parents were troubled and obstinate, Iriko being more so than Pukhutsya. After some resistance they relented. One has to bear in mind the overall context: numerous camps nearby were doing the same and many felt that they had no other option than to join in.

Iriko like some other Nenets had visited the Vorkuta Baptist church once or twice in the early 1990s but did not stick with it. Towards the end of the 1990s, the family had gained contacts with a Russian Pentecostal man who was working in the Sovetskiy Village Council near Vorkuta. He was helping them and other paperless herders apply for documents and welfare payments. From that time Iriko's daughters paid occasional visits to a Pentecostal church in Vorkuta. However, it was only after they met Vladislav that the girls became more seriously engaged with Christianity. As a result, in 2005, Vladislav baptised Iriko's daughters Tikyne, Netyu and Maranga. Being an energetic pastor of Ukrainian origin, he ran a congregation in Vorkuta while also working as a railway inspector. His congregation was one of seven Pentecostal churches of the same union in the Vorkuta area alone.<sup>7</sup>

I met Vladislav in April 2007 in his home church during a service, in the basement of a block of flats near Vorkuta railway station. I was invited there by Iriko's children. After reading scriptures and giving a sermon Vladislav started to sing a song with a pop tune and with a guitar in front of a dozen congregants. The singing was followed by a prayer in which all the congregants spoke together and many of them were waving their raised hands. Vladislav led the rhythm of the prayer, gradually speeding up at the beginning and slowing down at the end in order that everybody could start and finish at the same time. Although for most of the time I could understand Vladislav in a sea of chaotic sounds, as he was louder than the others, at one moment his inspired Russian transformed into glossolalia. Many Russians followed, which reflected that they also had the Holy Spirit acting in them.

Vladislav invited me to witness the rite of baptism of Iriko's three sons (Pubta, Tyakalyu and Kole who made a slower start compared to their sisters), which was to take

place the next day. Unlike Baptists, who baptised only in natural sites, the Pentecostal rite took place in a small pool in the church building. This time though, in April, the parents were not invited to be baptised because they had not yet burnt their idols. Only two months later, in early June 2007, did I attend the baptisms of Iriko and Pukhutsya. With them was their son Ilya who had thought about joining the Baptists but who finally decided to become a Pentecostal.

## THE FIRE

A week after the baptism of the three brothers, Vladislav had planned to visit Iriko's family in the tundra in order to 'prepare' the parents and their unbaptised son for water baptism as well. Basically, he came to convince Iriko and Pukhutsya to burn the spirit effigies kept in the family. Tyakalyu had met Vladislav in the railway station on a reindeer sledge. On a three-hour journey, Vladislav was clad in an extra large thick reindeer fur costume specially sewn for him. He entered the tent, took off his coat under which he had his dark blue railway inspector's uniform with shoulder boards, adding an aura of authority to him. Vladislav filled the tent with fast speech, inspired prayers and melodic songs from the hymnal *The Song of Resurrection*. Like most Pentecostals, for Vladislav the force of the word lies in abundance and repetition (S. Coleman 2005: 169). Vladislav related how he received his Spirit baptism and how powerful he felt when the power of the word came upon him. He recommended being open and waiting for a similar event in the lives of those who we were listening to him.

Vladislav then started a prayer in which he asked Jesus to increase and strengthen faith in Iriko's family and to give them Spirit baptism and the ability to speak in tongues. This time the foreign tongues did not engulf Vladislav, as it often happened in the city. He finished his freely arranged prayer with a fixed rhythmic Lord's Prayer (*Otche Nash* 'Our Father'). Until then Iriko and others were muttering in a low voice, they now joined in louder, as they all knew the prayer by heart. In the background, the voices of the Nenets echoed the minister's words. Yet I never heard any of the Pentecostal Nenets performing glossolalia either. Tikyne once admitted that a Russian woman taught it to her but she gave it up as she was not able 'to get it right'.

After the prayer, Vladislav addressed Iriko.<sup>8</sup>

Vladislav: [Iriko's name], I want to say something to you.

Iriko: Yes?

V: I would like you to take a decision to serve God for ever. For that, as I told you already, there is something you should abandon and burn.

I: Yes.

V: Do you agree with that?

I: I agree.

V: [Iriko's name], perhaps we could do it tomorrow morning in others' presence? [There were Iriko's family, his brother, niece and me.]

I: Okay.

V: Burn the idols?

I: Let's burn them.

V: You agree with that?

I: I agree.

V: [Iriko's name], I just want to say that they give nothing to one's life. To keep them just as a memory from the ancestors does not make sense because behind the idols stand the devils. These idols were once dedicated to another spirit. These spirits acted in the lives of those who believed in them. And they still do. I was convinced of that. I was in the Yamal Okrug among the people who worship (*poklanyayutsya*) devils. And these devils simply keep these people in fear. They appear to them in visible forms (*v vidimyykh obrazakh*). Get rid of... Burn the idols and the devils will not have power over you! So we could dedicate our lives to Jesus Christ. God is only one. The devils take the form of God but they are not God, they are subject (*podvlastnye*) to Him. When Jesus came, there were the devils. The devils were trembling and pleaded [Vladislav speaks in a fearful voice]: "Jesus, don't chase us away!" They are subject to God. Jesus said: "Devils, go out!" They went out. We shall have the same power when we shall burn these idols. God give us good weather! [Vladislav looks upwards.] God, I ask you that tomorrow... [He interrupts his prayer and looks again towards Iriko.] Is this the last devil that is kept in this tent? It has to be given a good kick on the bottom (*pinok pod zad*) and then you could serve Christ with the whole family. Do you agree with me from your heart?

I: [With a dry and subdued voice] Yes, I agree indeed...

V: I want this to be done. Then I will empty my heart and start to teach you water baptism and tell you... In fact, you should have been baptised first. Not the boys but you first. But now I have to make you into a Christian last. They [sons] have long been free. They do not hold to these [idols]. These are not valuable to them. If they are valuable to you, I want you to change these values. Let Christ be valuable. He gives life, but the devils take life away. I saw how they [in Yamal] worship their idols, some even do not return to the tundra [camp] but die of the vodka right there. I saw them lying like that [Vladislav bending forward and letting his arms hang at his sides] on sledges without consciousness after this idolatry. Because they drank blood at the beginning and vodka after. And that is it. They die at a very early age. Suddenly they start to drown at a very early age. They hang themselves. These are the devils' deeds. [Iriko loudly: "The devils' deeds indeed!"] God gives life, Satan takes it away. This is why today Satan has to be chased out from this family. And these fetishes (*fetishy*), these idols (*idoly*) need to be discarded. It is good that you sincerely (*iskrenno*) said it. [Iriko: "Yes."] And do not change your mind by [tomorrow] morning! [Iriko: "Okay!"] In the morning we shall do it.

Iriko was *apparently* agreeing while one could sense that he was disturbed by the whole event. Iriko's children confirmed my impression but added that it was good that their father was made to accept the situation and disengage from the devils. After Vladislav had left, Iriko demonstrated his disagreement with much what Vladislav had said, as I witnessed myself. Evidently, he was far from becoming a "*disbeliever*" in idols (cf. Robbins 2007: 33; italics by the author). I shall return to this point later.

Although Vladislav talked of the need for changing values, it was not a matter of mere re-evaluation. He placed the individual consciousness at the heart of the fight between good and evil, which took place simultaneously on a cosmic and individual scale. Essentially, he argued that these doll-like objects displaced a 'pagan's' mind. The herders lying without consciousness after drinking reindeer blood and vodka were

literally deprived of their own agency, hence their wretchedness and the absence of God's protection. Along similar lines, the devils became visible and people were living with fear because of their displaced minds. All this proved that these 'pagans' were not free human subjects but distributed persons, hybrids of human substance and material objects – a possible but an illicit combination. The problem was that it was the wrong kind of distributedness. According to Pentecostal logic, one should become a hybrid of human and divine through spirit baptism. However, this can take place only when freedom and agency proper has been restored to humans.

After this near-monologic dialogue, Vladislav and the others knelt on the reindeer skins. Only Iriko remained seated on an empty box of bottles just moving his lips from time to time, his look wandering back and forth from Vladislav to the floorboard. Others closed their eyes and Vladislav started an inspired prayer, which was basically a continuation of his sermon, containing now direct addresses to God:

My Lord, I wish that you would keep a final victory over the devils in these places. [With an increasingly more inspired and emotional voice.] Because you are the only God. We started to believe in you (*uverovali*), there is no other God. But Satan, Lord, is a fallen angel. He always wanted to imitate you, he always wanted to be higher than you. But he never succeeded in this because he did not resurrect in Christ and did not show us the eternal life. He only takes from us health and life, and does all kinds of dirty tricks, destroying whole nations (*narody*). O Lord, suppress their freedom! O Lord, suppress their intellect (*razum*)! Tie them up, my God! Destroy all kinds of occultism (*okkultizm*)! Today, we want to finish it in this territory, in this family. O Lord. I ask you, my Lord, give us tomorrow a possibility, any possibility – as you God are the governor of all nature – give us a chance to make the fire and burn these idols in the fire. If we cannot do this in the fire, we shall do it right in this stove. [Kneeling just in front of the stove, his eyes closed, Vladislav points his finger towards the stove.] For that there would be a final defeat over the forces of the evil which until now have held back the consciousness (*soznaniye*) of the people living here. O Lord, let the final freedom appear! O Lord! And your victory, Lord. Because Jesus was always a winner and is still today, and in eternity and nobody else, except you, defeated death, the power of death. Only you, My Lord! We are very grateful to you for this truth. That, you Lord, you did not hide from us [still eyes closed, he takes up his Bible and waves it in his hand] but revealed to us that we are eternal. But it depends only from our decision, which eternity we go into, the eternity with the devils, with Satan in the fire of hell or the eternity in the kingdom with you.

The next morning before the idol burning was to take place, Vladislav gave a long sermon. Somewhat surprisingly, it was not about idolatry but love, based on 1 John 4. Eventually, he covered the core narrative of Christianity from the Creation to the Last Day in one hour. He spoke very quickly. Iriko's family who (except for Pukhutsya) had a relatively good command of everyday Russian struggled to understand. Vladislav used unfamiliar words and examples from the unknown world, for instance, he referred to TV programmes, the heroism of the Great Patriotic War or the projects of industrialisation.

Although much of the content must have slipped away, Iriko repeated Vladislav's words from time to time. Vladislav was obviously taking these as an act of agreeing.

What the missionary did not realise was that repeating was a part of the Nenets communication pragmatics, something that many did as a sign of respect or participation. I observed many instances when people were *as if* agreeing by repeating missionaries' words. Missionaries took this for propositional and not for performative value which might have had a subversive component to it.

The sequence of affirmatives was only interrupted after the morning service ended when Vladislav proposed: "Let us go to search for the idols where you have hidden them. Do they fit in the stove?" As usual Iriko started affirmatively, saying absent-mindedly: "They fit in the stove." Then he quickly corrected himself: "No, not in the stove. They need to be... in the field." As I understood later from others' comments, Iriko feared that burning them in the stove would have caused the rage of the deities directly to his tent and his family. The fire spirit (N. *tu yerv*) is known to safeguard the people in the tent. It could be fed with sacrificial meat and vodka but not with *khekhe*'.

Everybody moved out of the tent. Vladislav gathered some firewood while Iriko went with Pukhutsya and Netyu to the sacred sledge behind the tent, took out a box with the Nenets *khekhe*' and another thin box with Orthodox icons which the Nenets call *lutsa khekhe*' ('Russian idols'). Surprisingly, the burning of icons became a source of tension in the few subsequent moments.

Vladislav went ahead, willow twigs on a low metal sledge that he pulled after himself with a rope. Every time he stopped and suggested making a fire, Iriko told him resolutely to move further away until they had reached a mountain slope outside the area where reindeer were lassoed. This was apparently in order to keep the reindeer away from the potential revenge of the spirits-to-be-rejected.

There Iriko put the box with the *khekhe*' down. He looked around and asked where the box with the Orthodox icons was. Vladislav said that he had left them behind for these could be given back to the Orthodox Church. Iriko was resolute and said: "Of course, they have to be burnt!" Pointing at Pukhutsya, he continued with an irritated voice: "The fool said: 'We need these'. I bought these in vain. It cost five hundred roubles each." Vladislav was silent.

While Vladislav was not interested in the slightest what the Nenets spirit effigies were thought to do because their true nature was already explained in the Bible, the icons seemed to be a different case. He opened the box with icons and started to explain.

Look, this is Jesus and this is Jesus but their faces are different. There cannot be different Jesuses. But these [icons] are in millions and on all of these, Jesus is different. That is not right. Who can paint Jesus without having seen him? These are contemporary people who painted these. We do not worship icons. These are mere pictures. [Iriko: "Pictures, of course!"] This is art. This is why I sometimes propose people not to burn these but to give them to the Orthodox Church for whom they are valuable. Somebody has worked on all of these. If they are valuable for them, let them use these. At the same time, the harm lies in the fact that people begin to kiss them.

Vladislav took an icon and kissed it while saying the word "kiss" in order to demonstrate how people misplace their devotion on a *mere* material item.<sup>9</sup> Unlike with the idols, there was nothing behind these things. Iriko, who was bending over the shoulder of squatting Vladislav, took another icon in his hand, said another affirmative "yes" and kissed the icon as well.

V: They begin to worship these. [Iriko: "During Pascha..."] This is not right. God says not to worship any images (*izobrazheniye*). This is an image. Do not worship it. But when it hangs as a picture (*kartina*), then there is no damage. This is why I do not teach burning [of icons]. But if you want to get rid of these... They are not valuable. Just give these to an Orthodox church. [...] They are not valuable.

I: But we bought these from a shop in the church...

V: Yes, a shop. Furthermore icons are sold in shops. That is why... I say that these are not Christian valuables. God is live. Paint and worship are not good for... When one worships pictures and not the live God. [Iriko: "Yes, the live God."] For that reason, do not feel pity for these.

I: Should they be burnt then?

V: As you wish!

After a moment of confusion, Vladislav gave up the idea of returning the icons to their place of origin. He made an attempt to salvage the frames of the icons, inspired probably by Iriko's comment that he had paid money for the pictures in a church shop. Vladislav took it as a matter of rational calculation and as an attempt to avoid wasting an investment. He proposed to Iriko: "Take out the pictures and put later photos of your family in there." Iriko said abruptly that this should not be done. For him, most likely, the magical efficacy of the icons were not only in their image-like representations but in the objects as wholes. Furthermore, placing their own photos in the frames of the *lutsa khekhe*" would have potentially set their own selves on a dangerous conjuncture of human and spirit worlds. These *khekhe*" are sometimes called *sidyangg*" meaning 'shadows' in Nenets. As photos are also called *sidyangg*", this move would have possibly created some kind of a rhesus conflict or a clash of perceptions. Despite Iriko's protests, Vladislav took the icons out from the box where they were placed above the *khekhe*" to be burnt all together. Iriko was once more overridden. As soon as the flames covered the box, he left in a hurry.

After Iriko had left, Vladislav told me in front of the fire, holding under his arm the salvaged icons:

Thank God! You see how the person had been sinning. Many years he had resisted. His sons were worrying. They were saying that their dad was keeping idols there. Today the person made the last step on his path to God. I am pleased. It is written in the Bible that an idol is nothing in the world. Let this [fire] burn them up! Would it no longer bring misfortune!

Vladislav continued:

What is remarkable is that it is done on a hill. The Nenets and other Northern peoples – not only the Northern people but [all] Oriental peoples – they always worshipped idols on high places. They dedicated them in high places. High places are the best places they could choose for their idols. Today, in these places, these idols are finished. Let us dedicate this hill to our God and to the Lord Jesus Christ. For believing people would visit these places and would praise God who gives everything so abundantly. [He gestured towards the flat snowy tundra below.] That people could enjoy life here. And He gives the eternal life. [He pointed at the icons under his arm.] From these we shall do beautiful frames with photos. These all can be used.

I asked Vladislav whether he still planned to give these pictures to an Orthodox church himself. He replied:

No, I shall not. I shall simply take out these pictures and put in here [frames] mother [Pukhutsya] and father's [Iriko] photos. Let them... As already they have spent money on these frames, let them be used normally (*v normalnom ispolzovaniye*). I do not teach burning the icons or smashing them. There is no point in tilting at wind-mills. You know how it was in Cervantes. One has to fight what is there inside. [He points his finger at his heart.] But to smash the icons... No... In the beginning thinking has to be changed. If you destroy the icons, he would buy the new ones. Thinking has to be changed.

Vladislav did not make the same argument about the Nenets *khekhe'*. He did not consider these as replaceable items, neither did he call them "pieces of art" that represented somebody's work. As he had said the previous night, Nenets idols were not good for souvenirs ("a memory from the ancestors"). Most importantly, they were not something one could just change an opinion about.

From Iriko's perspective, obviously, there were too many asymmetries at play. Bruno Latour reports of a semi-fictitious encounter between Portuguese Catholics and inhabitants of the Guinean coast in the early colonial period: being accused of fetishism, the aborigines could not understand in which respect the whites' relations with their sacred items were different from theirs. Latour writes that the Guineans could have argued back in "symmetrical anthropology" that the Catholics' amulets of the Lady were fetishes (Latour 2009: 20–5; cf. Spyer 1998). In a similar manner, for Iriko, it was difficult to understand why Vladislav was keen to preserve the icons or dismantle them because this would not have changed the fact that these were related to the spirits. Furthermore, for Iriko, Orthodox saints were just another kind of spirits, "the Russian spirits". The question was obvious: why did the Nenets images had to be destroyed while the Russian ones did not.

With the tension over the Orthodox icons, the introduction of the ideology of immateriality threatened to fail. On the one hand, Vladislav seemed to be convinced that there were positive prototypes for the icons (for example, Jesus, Our Lady). On the other hand, there could not be positive prototypes for the idols because of their link to devils. As the idols could not be re-evaluated, they had to be destroyed because they *made* people drink, hang themselves and drown, independent of people's volition and thoughts (even if, at another moment, he argued for a change in thinking). For the same reason, a mere verbal disavowal of the idols, and keeping them as souvenirs, would not have been enough because they carried in themselves automatic efficacy. Vladislav did not notice Iriko's irritation over why the Nenets *khekhe'* needed to be burnt while Russian *khekhe'* did not. Vladislav was not interested in the economy of the sacred taking place through these *khekhe'*. Instead, he referred to Iriko's changing mind and growing faith.

The whole scene was taking place in a gap where the two sides had different understandings, sensibilities, and motives at play. Their intentions never seemed really to match each other's. Vladislav was never quite able – and as we saw he was not really trying – to control what and with which intentions Iriko was quoting and imitating him. The moment of kissing alongside Iriko's quotations (for example, "There is no God!") encapsulates the superficiality of the whole dialogic event.

This situation also echoes well Derrida's notion of iterability, which refers to the idea that all kinds of language live through a combination of repetition and alterity, being therefore unpredictable and in some sense always prone to 'non-serious' uses, as in the case of citations said by an actor on the stage (Derrida 1982: 325; cf. Austin 1975: 22; Keane 1997). Because the context in which a speech act is produced is always different, its meaning cannot ever be fixed in advance. Derrida crafted this notion to mark the inherent qualities of writing. As a speaking subject is not present, the written word depends on the social code and repetition.

As we have seen, a live verbal engagement can function similarly and consequently become vulnerable to a slippage. In the encounter described above, it is important to mark that seemingly overdetermined spoken words like the affirmatives of Iriko were in fact heavily underdetermined, as they eluded control and worked *against* the semantic context that Vladislav was trying to impose. This kind of slippage is not only a matter of language but also of other semiotic forms. One can say that Iriko was recycling Vladislav's words while Vladislav was recycling icon frames, both sides departing from their understandings of language and materiality.

#### RESPONSIBILITY AND RETURNABILITY

When I asked Iriko if he was afraid of any consequences, he said: "I do not know what is going to happen." After a pause he said: "Vladislav wanted to burn them, not me. The spirits will take revenge not on me but on Vladislav. You see, he already got divorced from his wife." Tikyne interrupted: "His wife was a drunkard. That is why he left her."

From time to time, the daughters kept on at their father because he had not abandoned his 'old ways'. After the spirit images were burnt, a week before Iriko's baptism, I heard him saying to Netyu: "You think that you will go to God after your death. Who will want you over there? This is a deception made up by people. I have not yet seen Jesus. If he sat just next to me here, I would believe then." The idea that some people go to live in the sky where everything is pure has been around for a long time among the Nenets. Yet, only exceptionally good people could do this, like a mythic shaman called Urier who drove on a reindeer sledge to the sky from a mountain top in the Urals (Castén 1853: 234; cf. also Lehtisalo 1924: 115).

I asked Iriko whether he had seen Pe Mal Khada. He replied: "Of course, I have seen her many times in my dreams." Iriko continued, with a burst of irritation: "This is all communist shit. The communists will come again. Vladislav is a prick. They all lie. You think that God is here. Where is he?" Tikyne said: "In one's heart." Iriko said: "This is all bullshit (*khambanzi'*)." Netyu interrupted: "I am going to fly to heaven anyway." Iriko replied: "When I see you flying, then I will really believe in God. But I have not seen it yet." Netyu started to sing an evangelical hymn quietly in Nenets, and at the same time his father continued in an agitated voice: "This is all deceit. The believing people are weak. If they were strong, then the pastures would open up more quickly." (It was late spring and because of the deep snow the reindeer cows with newborn calves were struggling.) After a while, he said (despite having just called Vladislav a "communist"): "I recently dreamt that the communists would come and the believers would be imprisoned first. Then my dream stopped."

Another time, Iriko made a remark to his daughters that you did not need the *khekhe*'' right now but once you fell ill, then you might need them again. Tikyne, on the other hand, said to me that when they had the idols they were frequently ailing. She described a case when she had fallen seriously ill. Her father went to Vorkuta, bought a scarf and a bottle of vodka. He poured vodka on the mouth of the effigy of Pe Mal Khada and tied the red scarf around her doll-like *khekhe*. I asked whether this helped. Tikyne did not deny that the offering might have helped with her recovery, although she still called it "devil feeding". She also recalled how she and her sisters, in their childhood, secretly took these idols (calling these *vandaku myu* 'the internals of the sledge') and unwrapped their many layers to see what was inside. They discovered in there stones. At the time of our conversation, these stones were already on the mountain slope blackened in the fire.

In summer 2007, when we arrived at the northernmost camp (*myadyrma*) of Iriko's family, we could see in the north-east on the horizon three mountains called Ngutos Pe, Khadam Pe and Khabtam Pe. These formed the very end of the Ngarka Pe ('Big Stones'), i.e. the Ural Mountains. Iriko explained that in the middle was Pe Mal Khada's (Khadam Pe) tent, north of this was her sledge for tent poles (*ngutos*) and south of it lay a reindeer bull (*khabt*).<sup>10</sup> When visiting these or other sacred mountains, men took stones from there for the inner part of the effigies of the *khekhe*''. In return they sacrificed a reindeer there or left some offering like a cloth ribbon or coin. The stones were clothed and they grew more voluminous every time the deity was sewn a new miniature overcoat or a scarf was added as an offering. In Iriko's family, the *khekhe*'' were Pe Mal Khada and her children. While Iriko had inherited three *khekhe*'' from his father, he had made himself two for which he collected stones from another sacred mountain in the Urals called Yaptam Pe. These, he said, were also daughters of Pe Mal Khada. Until recently, most people had similar anthropomorphic figures on their sacred sledges but most had got rid of theirs like Iriko.

As I was told, Pe Mal Khada helped with giving birth, healed, guarded reindeer and kept away disease. One could see that among Iriko's *khekhe*'', Pe Mal Khada was most powerful, as she had the thickest layer of coats on her. In other words, all the sacred items were charged with power over the life of their existence: they had their biographies, which people took into account when solving their problems (cf. Appadurai 1986). They were fed with reindeer blood, fat and vodka a few times a year. Iriko used to put Pe Mal Khada on the back of a reindeer which he strangled as a sacrificial animal in his camp. He asked Pe Mal Khada for protection from malevolent agents like diseases and Russians.<sup>11</sup>

People were warned with stories of the wrong way to cut a relationship with the spirits. Before moving to Iriko, I briefly lived with another Independent family in the Urals. Papa's family had been Baptists for three years by then. Papa complained that his reindeer had been dying since baptism. He argued that this was because of the overgrazing of the fragile mountain slopes he was pushed to because of the growing density of people and reindeer. When I moved to Iriko, I heard an alternative explanation. Pubta and Tyakalyu said that when deciding to become a Baptist, Papa had left his sacred sledge in the Khadam Pe sacred place, Pe Mal Khada's home. In the following three years he lost hundreds of his reindeer: he had had over one thousand reindeer but now only a few hundred were left. Pubta said:

Look, Papa's *khekhe*'' took revenge on Papa. The shadow soul (*sidyangg*) of the idol (*khekhe*) still wanders around and causes harm to people. It is like with a person whose shadow soul moves around for forty days after the death. The shadow soul of the idol does it as well, the one who is left behind and not fed. But if one burns the idol, its breath soul (*ind*) or spirit breath soul (*khekhe ind*) [Pubta smiled realising that what he had just said coincidentally also meant the Holy Spirit in the Christian register] will go to heaven as the human breath soul does. Once in heaven, it cannot do any harm.

Pubta's brother Tyakalyu who stood next to us, added to this:

Look, the one who took care of the reindeer, he is hungry now and comes and takes revenge by eating the reindeer.

Pubta continued:

You see, the spirits of the dead (*khal'mer ngyleka''*) cooperate with each other. That is why his reindeer are dying.

In Nenets thinking, a *khekhe* is not a representation of a deity, it *is* a deity. In other words, it is a relational being tied to the sacred site of its origin, being a *person in person*. According to Iriko's sons, just as with any other human or non-human person, a *khekhe* has a shadow soul and a breath soul, the image that copies a living person who consists of three parts: *ind*, *sidyangg* and *ngaya* ('body') (Lehtisalo 1924: 115; Lar 2003: 64). In Pubta and Tyakalyu's view, idols do exactly the same things as recently deceased humans whose shadows wander around for forty days (the number is borrowed from Orthodox Russians) before they finally move to the hereafter and cease to be overtly dangerous.<sup>12</sup> It also seems that once the idol's breath soul has gone to the sky through burning, its *sidyangg* would not be able to take revenge. Another time, Tikyne explained to me that spirit figures cannot be stored on a sledge with other items, left alone and not fed over the winter or summer "because the *sidyangg* would then leave the body of the *khekhe*". Although there are many overlapping and contradicting claims about 'part-persons' and their names, what is important here is that the biggest changes in the lives of human and non-human persons alike take place when one or another part is gained or lost.

The burning of items can be an alternative to their returning, as it frees the soul of the *khekhe*, who is able to return to his home. Lehtisalo wrote that shamans made a wooden image called a *syadey* from a tree that grew in a sacred place (*khekhe ya*). They gave it to somebody for a certain period so the person could hunt or fish successfully, after which it should have returned to the sacred place (Lehtisalo 1924: 65). If one could not yet take it back, some considered burning as an alternative to returning. Soviet administrator Yevladov, on his expedition to the Yamal Peninsula in 1928–29, asked Pudynasi, a Nenets guardian of the Khaen-Sale sacred place, to give him a wooden spirit statue (*syadey*). Pudynasi gave it to him but warned Yevladov that he should return this statue in three years time and, if he or his son would not be able to do that, then the idol should be burnt, as then "the spirit of this *syadey* [R. *dukh etogo syadaya*] will come to its own place" (Yevladov 1992: 150). According to this view, burning frees the souls of the *khekhe* who is able to return to his home place.<sup>13</sup>

Even if Iriko burnt his *khekhe''* and had himself baptised – what he saw as Vladislav's acts – he had not necessarily passed the point of no return. As he was not counting on the protection of Jesus, he could only shift the responsibility to Vladislav in order to avoid possible dire consequences from the spirits. Having destroyed the *khekhe''*, which had so far helped him against all kinds of malevolent agents including Russians, Iriko could only hope that the relationship with missionaries would not make things worse but rather give some protection to his family and reindeer.

#### IDOLS, MINDS, AND MATERIALITY

While the missionaries argued that the tundra dwellers were 'persuaded', the Nenets who lived in settlements were convinced that the missionised tundra dwellers were 'coerced' into burning their sacred images; the reindeer herders themselves used neither persuasion nor coercion in their explanations. Analytically speaking, I would align myself with the reindeer herders and I suggest that, in some cases, becoming a Christian is not necessarily a result of coercion or persuasion, but rather a result of a complex interaction in which gaps between linguistic and material ideologies are created. It is not solely a matter of intentionality of individual actors but relationships which emerge between people, be they missionaries or missionised, converted or non-converted family members.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Iriko and Pukhutsya, the hope for protection from the powerful Russians, and relations with their children and neighbours certainly played a part in their 'becoming Pentecostals'. Yet I suggest that their acts of acceptance can be described as a set of situated acts that are not necessarily guided by a single set of motivations. It comes down mainly to the use of language and the management of the material, which produces moments of susceptibility in the new relations of authority. Like many other elderly Nenets, their acceptance was less enthusiastic and was set against a general background of dislike towards Russians and their projects. Iriko and Pukhutsya were not convinced that their lives should be changed in any radical manner. They were not actively seeking to be agentive towards their own thoughts and feelings: they did not become subjects in a comparable sense like many converts around them. They were just trying to adapt themselves to the wishes of their children, who were willing to change the current ways.

The missionaries argued that those Nenets who agreed to burn their idols had become persuaded with God's help: they were convicted by the Holy Spirit. In other words, their consciousness was changed from the outside. Before that moment these 'pagans' could not understand what was right, as they were prisoners of false knowledge. Recall what Vladislav said: "The devils take the form of God but they are not God." As for Marxists who make a link between fetishism and false knowledge, so in the eyes of Vladislav, the 'pagan' Nenets fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the idols.<sup>15</sup> They appear to them as living gods. Vladislav believes that only spreading the saving Word can save these people because 'pagans' cannot understand the mire they stand in, and as a result they live their lives in fear. Like the missionaries among the Tswana in South Africa described by the Comaroffs (1991), Vladislav sets hierarchies through this kind of hegemonic discourse. However, unlike the English Nonconformist

missionaries of the 19th century who were obsessed with reason, the Russian-Ukrainian preachers are convinced that the problem does not lie only in the values of the 'pagans' but also in their minds, which are consubstantial with idols.

Missionaries' statements about idolatry come from a literal reading of the Old and New Testaments. This enables two kinds of ideology and practice to flourish in parallel: an idol can be both understood as a separate sign (a representation of the devil) and a dangerous material object through which Satan captures one's mind and consequently also one's soul. Vladislav (like the Baptist missionaries I met) called the idols "devils"; at another moment he confirmed that "the idols are nothing", adding "as the Bible says", stressing that these, as 'mere' material objects, lack any agency of their own. And yet, deciding by the actions taken in relation to these items (and their owners) and all the efforts that were put into their destruction, these objects seemed to abound with agency.

This 'nothingness' of idols acquires a specific meaning in this light of the ethnography presented above. These objects are the most powerful kind of 'nothing' one could confront: for this reason this 'nothing' had to be destroyed and turned into something. The acutely perceived absence made them more present than ever. The presence and knowledge of absence is often a vital condition for the creation of the new (Strathern 2004: 95–98; cf. also Højer 2009) – in the current case, the relationship with God, which appears to erase other possibilities. This is a principle that works in all revolutions either on the scale of the interiority of an individual or society as a whole. The missionary ideal (bearing some similarities with Hegelian dialectical thinking, cf. Cannell 2006) is to create an absence that is not cherished but which is there to exist, to be remembered in general terms (for its dangerousness) in order to boost the presence of the right kind of relationship with God.

Following the Pentecostal logic to its end, the eradication of idols not only creates a path for a true conversion but it is a symptom of an inner change. Yet it is not a mere act of destruction but an act of faith (a kind of auto-da-fé) through which one's renewed consciousness is born in a quasi-magical way. Thus, freeing one's consciousness from the material object has to be as much an intellectual as a physical act proving the destruction of idols to be unavoidable. However, as Latour (1993) has argued, these kinds of purification practices are always destined to fail because hybrids are there to proliferate.

## NOTES

1 A more correct translation would be 'sacred land' or 'the land of the spirits'.

2 The most important scriptural passage read in this context is: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:3–6)

3 The Byzantine iconoclasts were suspicious about the efficacy of icons for mediating the divine; instead they preferred the bread of the Eucharist (cf. Buchli 2010: 194). Protestant Refor-

mation in its Calvinist form fought against all kinds of material mediation, yet others like Lutherans were less resolute in that respect (Michalski 1993).

4 There were other iconoclastic traditions in Russia earlier as well. For instance, in the 18th century there were groups known as Ikonobortsy or Iconoclasts (later known as Dukhobors) who preached direct revelation of God through the indwelling Holy Spirit and who denied the efficacy of the icons as mediators. The Russian Orthodox Church considered them as one of the many strands of Protestant thought (Shubin 2005: 60–69; for various other sects and their relationship to icons, cf. Panchenko 2004).

5 Veniamin kept a Nenets wooden statue as a souvenir on his desk until the end of his life (Okladnikov, Matafanov 2008: 85), which is something that the evangelicals missionising in the region today would consider utterly unacceptable.

6 Finding a partner is an important factor in the choices of becoming Christian in the tundra. I know several cases when young people have made their decision to become Christian based on the denomination to which their potential partner belonged (Vallikivi 2009: 72–73).

7 This Pentecostal mission in Vorkuta was founded by Fyodor Velichko from Lutsk in Ukraine. He first arrived in Vorkuta in 1990 working for the Ukrainian mission Voice of Hope (affiliated to the All-Ukrainian Union Churches of Evangelical Pentecostal Faith). Once settled in Vorkuta, the Vorkuta Pentecostal church was integrated into the Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith. Velichko became a bishop of the church union in the Republic of Komi. In addition to this union, there were a couple of other Pentecostal churches present in Vorkuta (Bourdeaux, Filatov 2005: 195–200; cf. also Wanner 2007).

8 The following is taken from a video recording of the event.

9 In the Eastern Orthodox traditions, there are around four hundred image types depicting the Mother of God alone, for instance, which all have their own names, corresponding to the strict canon of iconography, to the rules of painting and consecration. Every icon also has a textual inscription that fixes the icon's meaning. Thus, the efficacy of these objects partly relies on the words attached to it (Tarasov 2002; Hann, Goltz 2010).

10 In literature this is also known under the name Minisei or Minesei. According to Islavin and Veniamin, Minisei was one of the four sons of the Vaygach deities called Grandfather and Grandmother who settled in the different ends of the tundra (Polar Urals, Vaygach, Kanin, and Yamal) (Islavin 1847: 118; Veniamin 1855: 125). According to another version, the Grandmother of the Mountains End (Pe Mal Khada) came from the south and settled in her stone tent-mountain (*pe* means both 'stone' and 'mountain'). Pe Mal Khada is known among most Nenets nomads alongside some other gods whose dwelling places are visited from afar (for example, Ya Mal Khekhe, Ser Iriko, Num-To). Some Nenets identify her as the Goddess of Earth (also according to Tikyne) or the daughter of the sky god Num, whose caravan was transformed into stone (mountain) after the master of the underworld Nga attacked her (Khomich 1966: 199–200, n. 20). She is considered to be a protector of calves and newborn babies (Lar 2003: 107–108). Golovnev, who attended a sacrifice on Minisei, quotes how Nenets addressed Pe Mal Khada: "Grandmother, we brought to you this calf that the rest would remain intact" (Golovnev 1995: 491–492; cf. also Lehtisalo 1924: 106–107; Yevladov 1992: 42; Lipatova 2005: 309; Templing 2007: 36, 195; Tkachenko, Kharyuchi 2009: 142).

11 Local spirits are not always protective but can be threatening as well. Some Nenets told me that they could be moody and unpredictable or outright malevolent (cf. also Lehtisalo 1924: 118). Golovnev quotes a Nenets midwife after she assisted the delivery of a child who died during birth: "And these (she pointed to protective spirit figures, *myad-pukhutsha*) do not want to help when it is a difficult one" (Golovnev 2000: 213). Thus, there were no guarantees comparable to those preached by missionaries.

12 The soul of a dead person and other things of the hereafter are not necessarily imagined to be immaterial. Depictions of shamans' journeys to the spirit world reveals that this is a material

world, although often things may not appear the same for the living and the dead (for instance meat is bone, etc.). It is possible to retrieve things from the hereafter. For instance, Lehtisalo describes a shaman who accompanies the soul of a dead person beyond the big waters and brings to the realm of the living fish scales, reindeer fur, etc., as these procure fishing and reindeer luck (Lehtisalo 1924: 133–134).

13 Smashing may also become an option as it releases the soul of all kind of items. For instance, when things are left in a burial place they have to be broken for the same reason that their breath needs to be released, then they can live ‘on the other side’ where these things are perceived to be intact and usable. Things can speak and think and for this reason an old household item has to be left in a place “that will be not trodden by the feet of humans”, like a tree hollow (Lehtisalo 1924: 116). Iriko said that he used to leave things in the places that are not trodden by unclean human feet. Probably for this reason, he wanted the burning to take place in a place that was trampled neither by reindeer nor people.

14 As Timothy Mitchell noticed some time ago when discussing colonial domination, coercion and persuasion are not opposites that would describe adequately how people are acted upon or act upon in a colonial encounter (1990). He refers to the idea that this opposition is derived from the dichotomy of mind and body. This distinction itself comes from a historically specific ideology based on individual autonomy, as Talal Asad (1993) and Saba Mahmood (2005: 11) have demonstrated.

15 Using Lukács’ (1971) expression “reified consciousness”, Sheehan summarises the Marxist concept of power relations like this (2003: 73): “For Marx the criticism [against modern society] is directed at the social consequences of an economic order that alienates the majority of those producing goods over which they exercise no control. The result is a reified consciousness, an ideology that allows the workings of market forces to appear natural and eternal, and a commodity fetishism that ultimately makes people unhappy.”

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