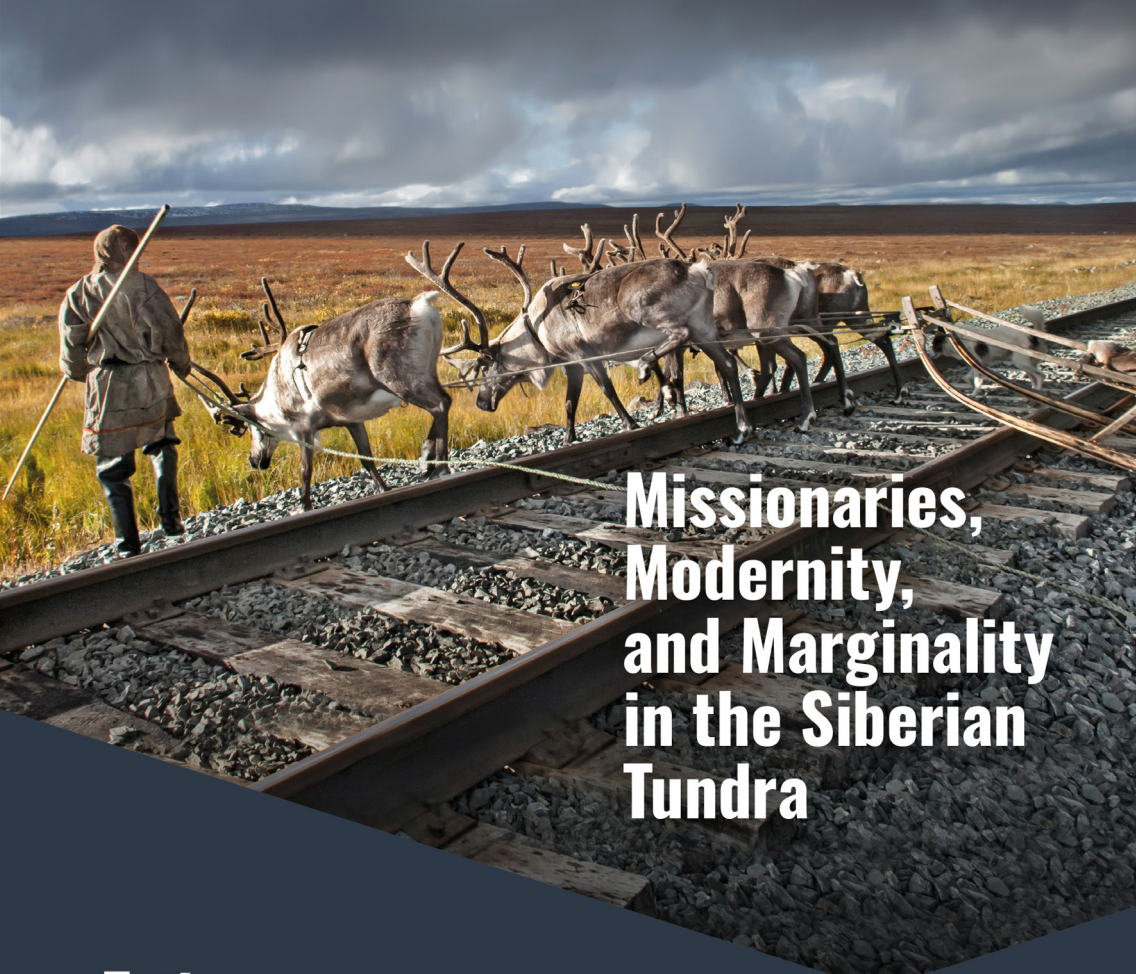


Anthropologies of Eurasia

Indigenous Christianity



**Missionaries,
Modernity,
and Marginality
in the Siberian
Tundra**

**Tatiana
Vagramenko**

 **CEU PRESS**

"This is an exceptional contribution to the anthropological study of Christianity – one of the most original to appear in recent years. Based on long term fieldwork with Nenets people in the Siberian Tundra, and grounded in a strong grasp of Soviet and Post-Soviet religious history, every chapter teaches us something new about how Christianity can shape and be shaped by life in an indigenous community. As the Nenets move through various forms of Evangelical Christianity, we find missionaries taking up the role of traditional matchmakers, Baptist fundamentalism displacing Pentecostalism and coming to represent for Nenets a return to traditional morality, and several different churches leading people to remake their sense of the spaces of tundra, village, and nation-state. And this list only scratches the surface of the unexpected findings Vagramenko presents. Beautifully written, this book should be read by anyone interested in how Christianity moves around the globe."

– Joel Robbins, Sigrid Rausing Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK

"Grounded in detailed, long-standing research among Baptist Nenet communities, this historical ethnography conveys a deep understanding of the appeals and paradoxes of conversion in post-Soviet Russia. Moving beyond the concept of rupture, Tatiana Vagramenko shows how Baptist Nenet disenchant the indigenous spiritual sphere and re-value it as heritage. This marvellous book pushes the anthropology of Christianity to new heights."

– Birgit Meyer, Professor of Religious Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

"A masterful exploration of how Christian fundamentalism takes root in the most unlikely of places – the Arctic tundra. Vagramenko takes us on a journey into indigenous communities of nomadic reindeer herders in the Russian Far North where we come to understand the appeal – and consequences – of conversion to evangelical faith groups. This is truly an ethnography of great distinction!"

– Catherine Wanner, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies, Pennsylvania State University, USA

"This is a beautifully crafted and passionate account of Polar Nenets religiosity. The author has spent a decade travelling between distant encampments and learning about the allure of new forms of the Baptist Brethren, and also the anxiety about how to avoid the stern eye of the Russian state. The book gives a wide overview of the history of missionisation in the region through the Tsarist and Soviet periods. It is a fresh and authoritative work of struggle to be modern and to live a moral life in a region upturned by extractive resource development and war."

– David Anderson, Professor, Chair in the Anthropology of the North, University of Aberdeen, UK

Indigenous Christianity

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Indigenous Christianity

*Missionaries, Modernity, and Marginality in the Siberian
Tundra*

Tatiana Vagramenko



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For my parents,
Alim and Nadezhda Vagramenko

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Note on Transliteration and Terminology

For Nenets and Russian, I use a simplified Library of Congress transliteration system for Cyrillic script (without diacritics), except when a different transliteration is conventionally used. The Nenets nasal consonant H/h is represented as $\text{Ŋ}/\text{ŋ}$, while the glottal stop is indicated by a single apostrophe (e.g., *mania'*, *si'iv*) or a double apostrophe (e.g., *mia''*).

All identities have been changed. Nenets usually have both Russian and Nenets names, with their Nenets names often kept secret in conversations with outsiders. To protect the anonymity of my research participants, I have replaced their names with Russian ones from a common pool of existing names.

Russia has several terms for different levels of federal territorial divisions, which I translate as follows: territory for *krai*, province for *oblast'*, region for *okrug*, and district for *raion*.

The ethnonym Nenets (N.: *nenei nenets'*; R.: *nentsy* (pl.), *nenets* (sing.)) is used for both the plural (referring to the people) and the singular (referring to an individual), as well as in the adjectival form (e.g., Nenets culture).

Part 1

Ethnography of Marginality in a Difficult Field

Introduction

Abstract: The introduction reflects on the author's long-term research among the indigenous Nenets of the Yamal Peninsula and the Polar Urals, offering an intimate account of ethnography in marginalized settings. At the geographic and symbolic edge of the Russian Arctic, the Nenets face layered exclusion shaped by state policies, colonial legacies, and industrial expansion. Central is their conversion to evangelical Christianity, particularly the fundamentalist Baptist Brethren, forged in Soviet-era resistance. Adapted through Nenets cosmology, global evangelical ideals produced a localized "Nenets Christianity" that reshaped ethics, ritual, identity, and notions of time and space. While empowering assertions of agency and alternative modernities, this shift also reinforced marginalization. Ethnographic insights situate Nenets conversion within debates on Christianity's adaptability and the interplay of continuity, rupture, and resilience under persistent marginality.

Keywords: post-Soviet Arctic, Nenets indigenous people, religious conversion, evangelical Christianity, anthropology of Christianity, marginalization

The Final Chapter Never Written

This project was never completed. The research came to an abrupt halt one morning, ended by a phone call in November 2021: "The [Federal Security Service] First Department¹ is waiting for your arrival here in Syktyvkar. They were just at the institute asking about you. Do not come!" The message had been relayed through a chain of colleagues and friends, passing from one to another, until it was safe for someone to finally call me directly.

¹ The First Department of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation is tasked with counterintelligence activities, protection of state secrets, surveillance and monitoring of potential threats, and conducting investigations into espionage and treason.

I received this phone call while preparing for my field trip to Russia, after several years away from the Nenets indigenous communities I had worked with in the Polar Urals and Yamal, north-western Siberia. This trip was part of a joint interdisciplinary project with a team of researchers from the University of Barcelona and several research institutions in Russia. We had been planning to travel to Siberia to study soil and water contamination caused by the oil industry in the traditional lands of indigenous reindeer herders. However, my true motivation was the chance to revisit the Nenets community I had worked with from 2006 to 2014. The phone call served as an alarm. Under Putin's regime, the political climate had become increasingly repressive, and the risk of being detained by the Federal Security Service (FSB) made it too dangerous to proceed. The government's crackdown on independent researchers, activists, and foreign projects only heightened these risks. In light of this, I decided to cancel the entire field trip of the project.

For many years, my life and academic pursuits were bound to the Nenets community in the village of Beloiarsk on the Yamal Peninsula—a small settlement of about two thousand inhabitants, roughly half of whom were recently settled (first- or second-generation) indigenous people, primarily Nenets and Khanty.

I spent many months during those field trips living with Nenets families, sharing their daily routines, traveling with them across the tundra, and witnessing firsthand the challenges they faced as they navigated the tensions between traditional ways of life and rapid industrial and environmental changes. Over the years, my connection to Beloiarsk deepened—not just as a researcher, but as someone embedded in the rhythms of community life. Returning after several years away, I was eager to see how the community had changed, how people were adapting to increasing political and environmental challenges. Beyond the official scope of the interdisciplinary project, the canceled trip in 2021 was meant to be a personal journey—an opportunity to reconnect with old friends, listen to their stories, and understand how their lives had unfolded in my absence.

What particularly prompted my return was a phone call I had received in 2020 from Marina, a Nenets woman from Beloiarsk and my main research participant. She urged me to come back, saying, "I have such a story to tell you—a real love story, a true detective story! You won't believe it! You'll write a book about it. You'll just change the names and write a book." I never discovered the story she wanted to tell me. And so, this book has no final chapter.

Nevertheless, the book chronicles how the lives in a Nenets indigenous community residing in the Arctic tundra of north-western Siberia, Russia,



Figure 0.1. Map of territories traditionally inhabited by the Nenets indigenous people in the Russian Federation.

were profoundly altered by the arrival of evangelical missionaries and religious conversion during the post-Soviet period. These Nenets reindeer herders and fishers continue to lead a nomadic existence in a remote northern world, increasingly influenced by the dominant values of Russian settlers. They maintain a rich shamanic heritage rooted in an animistic ritual culture. Their vivid spiritual and ritual life—sometimes referred to as the “Nenets phenomenon”—remains deeply embedded in everyday practices and seasonal migrations. A wide-reaching network of sacred sites, where offerings and sacrifices are regularly made, continues to shape their relationship with the land and its spirits. Starting in the mid-1990s, however, their community underwent a series of Christian conversions, culminating in the establishment of a tundra church that resulted from missionary encounters and was affiliated with one of the most radical religious movements in post-Soviet Russia: the unregistered Baptist movement. The book examines the challenges these communities faced under increasing state oversight, highlighting their adaptation, resilience, and resistance within a rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscape. It also considers the broader impact of state control on indigenous rights and religious diversity in the Arctic.

The Nenets people were popularly viewed as strongholds of indigenous traditional culture and shamanism, successfully resisting outside influences.



Figure 0.2. Traditional Nenets campsite with nomadic tent (*mia*), Yamal. Photograph by Mikhail Solonenko.

Against the background of a general post-Soviet decrease in the indigenous traditional economy, the Nenets provided the most striking example of flourishing nomadism. In the entire circumpolar Arctic region, they revealed one of the highest levels of engagement in nomadic lifestyle and subsistence economy (reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting), of native language competence, and, finally, of preserving their traditional religious practices rooted in animism and shamanism.

However, in the early post-Soviet period (from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s), the territories of the Polar Ural and the Yamal Peninsula tundra became a zone of intensive international evangelical missionary activities and frequent cases of conversion to Protestant Christianity among nomadic and sedentary indigenous people. And while traditional Nenets customs and beliefs, sacred sites, and ritual practices were being promoted on a public level as the foundation of Nenets survival, rural Nenets often eagerly embraced the Christian evangelical missionary message, challenging commonsense perspectives of the resilience of Nenets traditional culture.

Beloarsk village became a significant frontier site in terms of cross-cultural encounters between indigenous people and missionaries. Located a relatively short distance from urban centers in the region (Salekhard, Labytnangi, and Vorkuta), Beloarsk was, at the same time, the gateway to the tundra, with numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous populations



Figure 0.3. A Nenets herder using a lasso (*tynzian*) to catch reindeer, Yamal. Photograph by Mikhail Solonenko.

living near the village and frequently visiting this sedentary space. Hence, it attracted numerous missionaries from all over the world, turning the area into a true battleground of competing missionary principles and strategies.

Since the mid-1990s, during a short-lived period of relative religious freedom following the dissolution of the USSR, the village became a base for different evangelical missions from all over the world, the platform upon which different conversion principles, social attitudes, and life strategies were being elaborated. Over the course of several years, the religious landscape of Beloiarsk and the Polar Ural tundra underwent a series of rearrangements. A number of international missionary initiatives were followed by conversions and reconversions, mostly among the indigenous population of the village and the tundra. A key concern of this research is a group of Nenets (both settled in Beloiarsk and living as nomads in the surrounding tundra) who initially established the first religious community based in Beloiarsk in 1996 and followed a complicated pathway of reconversions throughout the 2000s.

Religious conversion had profound social implications that extended beyond mere beliefs. The introduction of new religious experiences triggered significant tensions within the local society, as early indigenous converts often rejected elements of traditional Nenets culture. This rejection took the form of burning sacred objects, disregarding nomadic rituals and daily

practices deemed “heathen” by the new Christians, and, in some cases, abandoning the nomadic lifestyle entirely.

When I first arrived in Yamal in 2006, I was struck by the intense anxiety surrounding religious conversion in the tundra. The topic of “sects” became a highly charged issue in public discourse and daily life. Local news sensationalized stories of wandering missionaries who burned Nenets “idols,” destroyed traditional Nenets culture, and exploited indigenous peoples. Local authorities organized conferences and seminars to discuss the harmful influence of “alien cultures” and strategies to prevent the spread of “sects.” Police and the Federal Security Service monitored and reported on missionaries visiting the tundra. On several occasions, they approached me, mistaking me for a missionary and hinting at potential consequences if I turned out to be one of them. Meanwhile, the authorities dismissed newly converted locals from their jobs and launched anti-sectarian propaganda programs on local TV channels.

Conflicts also arose within indigenous clans and families, with children and wives facing punishment for converting to evangelical Christianity, which sometimes led to divorce and, in some cases, violence. Disinheritance became a common threat, as newly converted individuals faced exclusion from traditional economic networks that sustained the community, leaving them vulnerable and isolated. There was rampant gossip about strange and suspicious sectarian meetings taking place in homes, as well as accounts of tundra Nenets children in residential schools secretly gathering in bathrooms to pray and read the Bible.

Many locals I spoke with expressed concern about converted indigenous people abandoning their ancestors’ gods and violating tundra traditions, fearing that such actions would lead to poverty and punishment from both the gods and the community. The changing religious landscape became increasingly fraught with tensions, fostering a climate of fear and mistrust as individuals navigated the complex interplay between faith, tradition, familial ties, and the escalating state politics of Putin’s administration.

The rise of the Putin regime in the early 2000s marked a significant shift in the religious landscape of Russia and profoundly impacted historically marginalized indigenous communities and minority religious groups in the Russian Arctic. Within the same decade, the federal government implemented a series of anti-cult regulations amid a conservative, anti-liberal turn that allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to emerge as a powerful political ally of the administration. In this conservative and traditionalist shift, state-sponsored advocacy for and protection of “traditional values” from perceived threats posed by the “hostile West” drew a clear distinction



Figure 0.4. A Nenets woman feeding domestic reindeer in the Yamal tundra, Photograph by Mikhail Solonenko.

between traditional and nontraditional religions, which encompassed all religious minorities, particularly those of Western origin. Under the guise of protecting the state and society from extremism and terrorism, the government rationalized and securitized restrictions on religious freedoms, reestablishing a Soviet model of total control over religious life. A series of federal laws, including one titled “On Combatting Extremist Activity,” provided a legal framework for religious discrimination, cementing the notions of “traditional religions” and “Russian spirituality” as guarantors of national security and well-being. In this context, “foreign” and “non-traditional” religions were framed as potential threats for state security.² Hence, religious actors deemed unwelcome were subjected to surveillance, blackmail, and harassment.

In this context, Beloiarsk became a focal point of tension between new religious communities and the local administration. Village authorities grew increasingly vigilant regarding the activities of visiting missionaries, and local police closely monitored newly established religious communities. The Federal Security Service surveilled visiting missionaries and converts in the tundra. As a result, the local indigenous community in Beloiarsk became

2 Shterin and Dubrovsky, “Academic Expertise,” 224; Vagramenko and Arqueros, “Criminotheology.”

the epicenter of numerous scandals associated with Protestant missionary initiatives, resulting in heated conflicts between missionaries, converted and nonconverted indigenous people, and local authorities.

What was even more challenging on the emerging religious spectrum was the dominance of a highly conservative form of Protestant Christianity—the unregistered Baptist Brethren, formally known as the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists. As I will delve into later, the Brethren claimed from its adherents the most rigorous alienation from their preconverted past and social surroundings and became the most authoritative religious movement in the Polar Urals and parts of the Yamal Peninsula, and notably the most successful in its missionary efforts among rural and nomadic Nenets.

Continuity and Change in Christian Conversion: An Anthropological Perspective

This study is grounded in the anthropology of Christianity, a shift in the field of anthropology that began to take shape in the early twenty-first century.³ In this book, I focus specifically on themes such as continuity and change in light of the Nenets' conversion to Christianity. Since the mid-1990s, as the Nenets underwent multiple waves of conversion, they encountered and positioned themselves within a larger global Christian narrative—specifically connected to the rapid growth of evangelical forms of Christianity in various postcolonial contexts. Evangelical conversion introduced a new ethical framework that emphasized a deliberate break from their pre-Christian past, as highlighted by a range of anthropologists of Christianity.⁴ I trace how the Nenets, in embracing evangelical Christianity, came to interpret and internalize this concept of rupture that lies at the core of the faith. This compelled the Nenets to either reject or reassess indigenous beliefs and everyday practices through the lens of evangelical teachings, a faith tradition that had traveled far from its place of origin. This

3 A range of scholars has contributed to this discussion, including Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*; Robbins, "Continuity Thinking"; Robbins, "The Anthropology of Christianity"; Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity*; Jenkins, "The Anthropology of Christianity"; Engelke, "Discontinuity"; Engelke and Tomlinson, *The Limits of Meaning*; Haynes, *Moving by the Spirit*; Keane, *Christian Moderns*, to name a few. The survey of the literature that constitutes the newly emergent anthropology of Christianity, see Bialecki et al., "The Anthropology of Christianity."

4 Robbins, "Continuity Thinking"; Bialecki et al., "The Anthropology of Christianity"; Meyer, "Make a Complete Break"; Engelke, "Discontinuity."

transformative process led the Nenets to redefine their identities, engage with their histories and their wider knowledge of the world, and reconsider their own animistic practices, spirits, rituals, values, and, more broadly, their nomadic culture and way of life.

The experience of change was a two-way process in which Christianity reshaped indigenous concepts of personhood, identity, nomadism, history, and the image of the future, while the Nenets indigenous background simultaneously influenced their translation, understanding, and reappropriation of Christian concepts and themes. This new religious experience created a continuous tension for the Nenets between their pre- and postconversion worlds, prompting an ongoing negotiation between preserving their cultural heritage and responding to the evangelical call for a complete break with the past—a dynamic that many anthropologists of Christianity consider fundamental to conversion, particularly in non-Western contexts.⁵ Through this process, the Nenets discovered new ways of relating to their traditional lifeways, ultimately redefining what it means to be both Nenets and Christian.

In other words, in asking, as Fenella Cannell has, What difference does Christianity make?, this study explores the Nenets' changing lifeworld through the perspective of their faith.⁶ It investigates how the conversion experience reshaped their sense of time, place, and relationships—not only with one another but also within a rapidly globalizing and environmentally unstable Arctic world, shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism and Soviet and post-Soviet projects. I examine how space- and time-making practices were reshaped within the context of conversion to various forms of Christianity in the Polar Ural tundra, showing how faith became a key site for engaging with historical legacy, global modernities, and ecological uncertainty.

This book specifically focuses on lived religion, on how Nenets' new religious experience with evangelical Christianity became woven into very fabric of their lives, shaping their routines, migration patterns, and interactions with family or clan members, missionaries, and other newcomers. The study further delves into how Christian beliefs influenced their concepts of birth and death, gender, love, marriage, and family. It explores how Christianity was practiced, talked about, adopted, adapted, and sometimes questioned or abandoned within the Nenets community. This process reflects what is known as the lived religion approach, which

5 Bialecki et al., "The Anthropology of Christianity," 1143–46.

6 Cannell, "Introduction," 1.

emphasizes the ways in which religious beliefs and practices are shaped by and integrated into the daily lives of individuals, often in ways that depart from official doctrines or institutionalized rituals.⁷ In doing so, evangelical Christianity became a dynamic web of meaning that introduced new values and beliefs, ultimately shaping how the Nenets understood their world. This dynamic interplay of ideas, values and practices further fostered the emergence of an indigenous theology, or ethnotheology, as explored in chapter 7. It also influenced the local institutionalization of Christianity, giving rise to new forms of religious organization—the tundra church—and leadership roles that integrated missionary teachings with Nenets cultural traditions (chapter 9).

But to what extent can we speak of the universality and homogeneity of the Christian message—or the Christian notion of rupture—when applied so far from its place of origin, as critiqued by Chris Hann in his essay on the anthropology of Christianity?⁸ More specifically, in the context of this book, can we speak of Christianity—or Christian theology—when referring to highly localized, and at times marginal, forms of Protestantism, such as indigenous expressions of Baptism or Pentecostalism? Do such forms fall within Christianity in its fullest sense, or do they instead compel us to rethink what Christianity means across radically different contexts? In other words, is it possible to draw comparisons between Christianities as diverse as those found in Massachusetts, Ukraine, Oceania, and post-Soviet Siberia when we speak of the anthropology of Christianity? Hann underscores the inherent complexity of Christianity as it intersects with diverse local cultures and global forces, challenging the notion of a singular, coherent Christian identity or message. Yet as argued by a range of anthropologists of Christianity, it is precisely this tension—between unity and diversity—that makes comparison both possible and necessary. If various movements across the globe are identified as “Christianity” by those who practice them, then an anthropological approach must take this emic perspective seriously. From an anthropological perspective, Christianity, as a faith tradition, does not exist as an abstract or fixed entity; it is always embedded in human experience, shaped and reshaped within the lifeworlds of individuals and communities. In the Nenets tundra, I encountered missionaries from Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Russia, Finland, Germany, the United States, Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Cameroon—each bringing a distinct vision of Christianity, yet all identifying themselves as Christian.

7 Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*; Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen*; McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

8 Hann, “The Anthropology of Christianity.”

This diversity makes clear that comparison is more than an academic exercise—it is woven into the lived experience of those engaging with these multiple forms of Christianity.

Decolonizing the study of Christianity—which has long been shaped by analyses of mainstream, Western forms—requires us to attend to the ways Christianity is identified, experienced, and practiced by diverse communities. While anthropologists cannot assume a stable object called “Christianity,” we can trace how certain shared epistemologies, moral frameworks, or narratives of rupture and transformation travel, adapt, or are contested across contexts. Christianity, in this view, is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and often contested category lived out in specific historical and cultural conditions.

Thus, rather than asking whether the Nenets are inventing their own Christianity or reacting to a Western one, I focus on how they themselves understand and live their faith. What constitutes “Christianity,” “Nenets Christianity,” or even “global Christianity,” is grounded in the experiential and interpretive practices of those who claim the term. I place trust in the agency of my interlocutors, whose narratives and actions show that Christianity is not merely adopted or imposed but is actively lived, negotiated, reimagined—or, if I may, owned—in the unique space where local and global forces converge.

As this study demonstrates, within the framework of an anthropology that emphasizes the rich variety and adaptability of local expressions of Christianity, there are strikingly consistent patterns and shared elements across these diverse forms, along with universal dimensions that link them. Central to many of these adaptations is the Bible, with its core messages of faith—such as salvation, the Christian concept of spiritual rebirth, and ethical imperatives rooted in love, forgiveness, and community—that transcends cultural specificities and resonates globally. This dual perspective allows us to bridge the critique offered by Chris Hann, who questions the coherence of a singular Christian message, and the arguments of scholars like Joel Robbins, who emphasizes the shared foundational aspects of Christianity as a global phenomenon. From an anthropological perspective, this interplay between the local and the global is not a contradiction but rather a hallmark of Christianity’s adaptability and enduring relevance.

The Nenets encountered the new faith through their interactions with missionaries. Before the rise of Putin’s regime, these missionaries came not only from mainland Russia and the broader post-Soviet space but also from around the globe. In the Yamal region, I met missionaries and Bible translators who came from Finland, Germany, Canada, the US, South Korea,



Figure 0.5. A Nenets nomadic campsite, Baidarata tundra. Photograph by the author.

Australia, and Cameroon. Many of these missionaries lived alongside the Nenets in the tundra for extended periods, sometimes staying for months or years. Their teachings were shared not only through formal sermons but also in intimate, informal discussions around the fire in a nomadic tent or during long migrations in the tundra. These conversations transmitted a truly global Christian message, inviting the Nenets to interpret it and find their own place within it. While this process involved blending their indigenous traditions and cosmologies with the doctrines brought by the missionaries, it also provided the Nenets with a unique opportunity to encounter a diverse range of Christian expressions. These missionaries, representing a mosaic of global cultures, brought with them various theological perspectives and interpretations of the Christian faith. For the Nenets, this meant their engagement with Christianity was not monolithic, but instead was shaped by a variety of cultural backgrounds and theological emphases.

As a result, the Nenets were able to weave these global influences into their own understanding of Christianity, creating a multilayered cultural experience that reflected not only their own indigenous identity but also the diversity of Christian thought from around the world. The Nenets were fully aware that they had become part of a dynamic missionary and church network within evangelical Christianity that spanned the globe. This connection allowed them to engage with transnational religious movements through travel, education, humanitarian aid, and other resources, as well as through social connections, fostering a profound sense of belonging to a worldwide faith community. This case vividly illustrates the interplay between global and local Christianity (as discussed by anthropologists

Joel Robbins and John Barker), where global Christian practices and beliefs intersect with and are reshaped by the local cultural context, giving rise to identities that are both unique and globally connected.⁹

Failures of Modernity

Nenets religious change was deeply intertwined with political dynamics, social inequalities, and power relations. Evangelical Christianity emerged not only as a catalyst for cultural transformation among the Nenets but also as a framework through which they adapted to, and at times resisted, the challenges of modernity and globalization. “Modernity” functioned here as a dominant narrative frame—a concept actively discussed, imagined, and reinterpreted by both missionaries and the Nenets themselves. Through international missionary movements, this idea of modernity was not simply imposed but became a shared point of reference, shaping how the Nenets envisioned their place in an increasingly globalized world.

Drawing on Jean and John Comaroff, I examine how global religious networks provided the Nenets with new modes of community and communication.¹⁰ These networks provided resources, connections, and a sense of belonging to a larger transnational religious movement, which both displaced and empowered the Nenets. It enabled them to assert their awareness and agency within an increasingly interconnected world, to adapt to rapidly shifting social and political landscapes, and to challenge postcolonial power dynamics. However, while evangelical Christianity arrived as part of a broader global system and was entangled with (post) colonial power, it did not always function as a straightforward mechanism for integrating indigenous nomads into global capitalist systems, as Joel Robbins rightly points out.¹¹ In this sense, the Christian message, while part of the global imaginary, can also be experienced as a force of displacement and disempowerment, particularly for those on the periphery.

As this book highlights, the Nenets actively engaged in bricolage, blending Protestant practices with their own traditions to create forms of “ritualized resistance” and to assert their own vision of modernity—or, at times, to reject what they perceived as modernity altogether. Evangelical Christianity played a key role in mobilizing indigenous sensibilities and social expectations,

9 Robbins, “The Anthropology of Christianity”; Barker, *Ancestral Lines*.

10 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.

11 Robbins, “Continuity Thinking.”

bringing profound changes to their social and moral structures. It provided new strategies of resilience, helping the Nenets maintain their cultural identity and traditional nomadic way of life. Through this process, Christianity became a lens through which the Nenets reshaped their relationship with modernity. It offered them new tools to interpret and respond to the transformations brought by globalization—while, paradoxically, at times rejecting both modernity and the very mechanisms that sought to integrate them into it. This bricolage allowed the Nenets to navigate power dynamics, articulate resistance, and redefine their role within both their local communities and the global religious landscape, either embracing modernity on their own terms or choosing to remain outside it altogether.

Hence, this book seeks to explore how “modernity”—as an emic term—has emerged as a conception within Nenets culture—how it was perceived, adapted to, contested, and resisted. I examine how the Nenets navigated the increasingly blurred boundaries between spaces, times, cultures, and moral systems, forging their own distinct responses to the forces of global change. Drawing on the concept of multiple or vernacular modernities, which challenges the idea that modernity is a singular, universal process originating in the West and spreading outward, I examine how the Nenets vision of modernity was shaped by colonial histories, power dynamics, and global transformations.

The concept of vernacular modernities highlights two key dynamics at play: first, the asymmetry between “modernity” and “tradition,” an experience often accompanied by a sense of inequality and disempowerment; and, second, the creative agency of indigenous actors in the cross-cultural encounter. For the Nenets, modernity was not simply something to be accepted or rejected—it was also something to be spoken about, imagined, and negotiated. Their engagement with modernity was thus a locally constructed, historically embedded, and constantly evolving process, shaped not only by external forces but also by their own histories, aspirations, and acts of resistance.

The conversion experience also exacerbated a sense of inadequacy, bringing to the surface historical contradictions between indigenous Nenets society and the Russian colonial order. It introduced conflicts and ambiguities into the lives of converted Nenets, given that the Christian message was brought by the *Lutsa*—a term that translates from Nenets as “Russians” but signifies more than just an ethnic category. The *Lutsa* were identified as those entitled to power, authority, wealth, and privileges, embodying modernity. While *Lutsa* symbolized access to modern goods and values, they also carried moral ambiguity and ritual danger. This duality reflected

the deep ambivalence the Nenets felt toward modernization—not just as a process of transformation but also as a ritual contamination.¹² Within these tensions, the concept of modernity revealed itself. In the Nenets commonsense view, modernity was not an abstract force but was embodied in Russian people and reified in goods, ideas, and practices associated with the Russian colonial order.

In this context, conversion was not merely a shift in religious identity but a confrontation with the very structures of power and historical memory that had long defined Nenets relations with the *Lutsa* world. This confrontation often intensified Nenets' feelings of inadequacy and failure regarding their understanding of modernity. As they navigated the tension between their traditional ways of life and the expectations of modernity, they often found themselves trapped by the persistent dominance of the Russian colonial order.

As I discuss throughout this book, the shift prompted by conversion left many Nenets caught between two worlds, unable to fully belong to either. This resulted in a form of double marginalization, where their new religious identity was rejected by their own community, while their indigenous identity was marginalized within the dominant *Lutsa* order. This dynamic reflected the historically rooted systems of oppression that the Nenets had long endured under Russian colonialism. And these enduring legacies of colonial domination and marginalization continued to shape Nenets' experiences of conversion.

Christian Fundamentalism in the Indigenous Arctic

A pivotal shift in their religious journey occurred when the Nenets of Beloiarsk converted to one of the most conservative forms of evangelical Christianity, represented by an unregistered Baptist movement named the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists. This conversion to the fundamentalist Baptist Brethren further deepened their marginalization. However, at the same time, it provided them with new tools for self-identification and a framework through which they could reshape their relationship to both modernity and tradition.

The Brethren is a distinct religious movement that emerged as a specifically Soviet phenomenon, born out of resistance during the Soviet period. Its origins trace back to the 1960s, a time when Khrushchev intensified state

12 See also Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen*, 2.

control over religious organizations, seeking to assert total authority over religious life. In response to growing state pressure, including widespread anti-religious and “anti-sectarian” campaigns, a new movement emerged, initially as a breakaway faction from the official Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists. These dissenting groups soon became known as the “separated Baptists” (also referred to as “unregistered” or “young” Baptists, and collectively as the Brethren). Over time, the movement was formally organized as the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian Baptists, but to this day, they are commonly known as the “separated Baptists.”

In the 1960s, the movement was largely driven by young, passionate, radical, and uncompromising believers who initiated the first public protests against religious persecution, church collaboration with atheist authorities, and state control over religious life. They fiercely opposed the multiple restrictions placed on religious life in the Soviet Union. These young believers advocated for religious freedom, the right to openly profess one’s faith, and the ability to preach about God without fear of repression. Their public defense of their right to be Christian believers positioned the movement as one of the first open protests against both Soviet anti-religious policies and the political conformity of official church leaders.

As a result, the unregistered Baptists—as they refused official registration with state authorities—became the primary targets of Soviet-era religious persecutions. By refusing to engage with the state, rejecting official registration, and maintaining their underground status, the movement was considered illegal during the Soviet period. Its leaders were treated as criminals from the 1960s to the 1980s. Dozens of activists were arrested and imprisoned, and some leaders spent more than twenty years in prisons and labor camps.

In the post-Soviet period, the Brethren maintained their anti-state stance, but this resistance evolved into a broader ideological framework characterized by anti-modern, traditionalist, and conservative politics, rejecting the changes brought about by globalization perceived as threats to pristine religious and cultural values. Central to the Brethren’s beliefs is the principle of separation of the church from the outside world. They advocate for a lifestyle that isolates believers from what they view as the corrupting influences of modern society. This separation is manifested in a number of practices and prohibitions that define the Brethren’s way of life. For example, members reject popular forms of entertainment such as cinema, television, and theater, viewing them as gateways to immoral behavior. Party membership, political engagement, and any involvement in the political sphere are likewise prohibited, reflecting the movement’s belief in the church’s independence from worldly power structures.

In addition, the Brethren maintain strict codes of personal conduct, emphasizing traditional gender roles and conservative family values. Women are expected to dress modestly, wearing long skirts and dresses, and covering their heads, with no makeup, haircuts, or fashionable attire. Men are also subject to a strict dress code that prohibits shorts and other forms of casual clothing. These rules are seen not just as cultural preferences, but as commandments, intended to uphold the purity of their religious community in the face of a world that they view as increasingly decadent and morally compromised.

In late 1990s, the Brethren established an ongoing mission in the Russian Arctic, including the Polar Urals and the Yamal Peninsula, with the Nenets indigenous people as one of their primary evangelical targets. Amid the emerging religious diversity of the post-Soviet period, the Brethren gradually became the most successful evangelical mission in the Nenets tundra. Over time, their efforts led to mass conversions in the Polar Ural and Yamal tundra regions, resulting in the formation of small but tightly knit religious communities in the tundra and remote settlements. Through these conversions, they created an expansive religious network spanning thousands of kilometers, connecting isolated groups and reshaping the spiritual landscape of the region.

This shift occurred against the backdrop of the rise of the Putin regime, which was from the start unfriendly toward religious minorities and their missionary activities. Over time, this hostility took on a legal form, as the state introduced restrictive laws that officially outlawed international missionary initiatives and criminalized unregistered religious activity. These measures not only targeted foreign religious influence but also paved the way for the persecution of religious minorities, further deepening the marginalization of the Nenets and isolating them within an already precarious sociopolitical environment.

While facing multilayered marginalization and discrimination, the Nenets nonetheless steadfastly defended their religious choice, embracing the most fundamentalist Baptist movement—one that demanded the most radical transformation in a convert's life, even as it deepened their precarity and further marginalized them.

A key focus of this book is exploring why the Nenets were drawn to Christian fundamentalism. As I show in what follows, the Baptist approach to social space, history, and community reshaped how the Nenets related to their environment. Instead of seeing the tundra as a remote “pagan” area in need of external intervention, the Brethren redefined it as the core of a true Christian church. This rerooting of faith challenged traditional

center–periphery dynamics, positioning the Nenets not as passive recipients of modernity, but as active participants in creating a new moral and social framework.

In this process, the Nenets vision of modernity unexpectedly aligned with that of the Baptist movement. Both rejected Soviet/Russian modernity and global capitalism, instead pursuing an alternative vision—one rooted in authenticity, tradition, and a commitment to cultural and communal renewal that speaks to their way of life and identity.

Ethnography of Marginality

Following this significant transformation in their religious and social landscape, the Nenets' embrace of Baptist fundamentalism can be viewed within the broader context of marginality that has consistently shaped their historical experience. As their religious conversion deepened their marginalization—both within their own community and in the broader sociopolitical context of Russia—their involvement with the Baptist movement offers a valuable lens to examine how the Nenets navigated, resisted, and redefined their place within these intersecting structures of exclusion.

Let me begin with a story that still lingers with me, one that has profoundly shaped both my understanding of marginality and my own engagement with it. It was a moment when I failed—not just as an anthropologist, but as a moral being. Yet, that very failure deepened my comprehension of the complex layers of exclusion and marginalization I was studying.

It was early spring, cold and sunny, with snow reflecting light so intensely that it stung my eyes. I was making my way back from the village of Beloarsk to Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal region. Though the distance between them is less than a hundred kilometers, the journey was anything but simple. I had to cross the tundra via an ice road carved out on the frozen Ob' River before arriving in Aksarka (the administrative center of Priural'skii District in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region). From there, I needed to catch the last private minibus to Salekhard. I remember being anxious about missing the bus. With no place to stay overnight in Aksarka, I frantically tried to think of someone I could call to ask for shelter.

I arrived just in time. The minibus was about to leave, but all the seats were taken. The tired bus driver glanced back and said indifferently, "No available seats." I felt a wave of silent desperation—this was the last bus, and I had nowhere to stay for the night. Just then, the driver's gaze shifted to a woman and a young boy, around eight years old, sitting in the front

seats. Both were wearing the traditional deerskin coats typical of indigenous nomadic people (either Nenets or Khanty), they were laden with plastic bags, and the woman, oddly, clutching a folded bulky rug in her hands. “Get out,” the driver said calmly to the woman and her son. The other passengers, around fifteen in total, all dressed in urban attire—presumably Russian—began to murmur in approval. The woman hesitated but said nothing as she began to slowly gather her bags, carefully cradling the rug. In that moment, I noticed that there was a newborn baby wrapped inside the folded rug! The woman must have just come from the maternity hospital in Aksarka. She and the young boy obediently stepped off the bus, briefly looking back at us, bewildered, before leaving the bus stop. “Don’t worry, they won’t freeze outside; they’re accustomed to living in the tundra,” the bus driver tried to reassure me.

I still vividly remember feeling paralyzed, unable to utter a word. Caught between my fear of being left alone at night in an unfamiliar place in the middle of the tundra and the shocking scene unfolding before me, I felt utterly immobilized. What was most disturbing was how natural everything was made to seem; not a single person expressed concern or dissent. I overheard murmurs of approval: “They stink of smoked fish....” It felt as if I were in a cloud, lost and helpless, as I stepped onto the bus just as it was about to leave. I turned back and looked into the boy’s eyes as he glared at the departing bus from beneath his brow, filled with hatred.

Once the bus had left, I suddenly noticed an old car chasing after us, with the person sitting next to the driver frantically gesturing for us to stop. They appeared desperate, and it dawned on me that they thought the woman was on the bus and that they had missed her—perhaps it was the baby’s father. The bus driver saw them but didn’t even consider stopping.

When I finally arrived in Salekhard a couple of hours later, I sat on the floor of an empty apartment and cried, blaming myself for not intervening, for feeling so helpless and weak. What struck me was how natural, unquestioned, and taken for granted everyday discrimination and marginalization can seem. The indifference displayed by the passengers and their easy acceptance of the woman’s removal from the bus along with her children, my own passive acceptance of this act of discrimination, and her silent obedience revealed a disturbing normalcy that allowed such cruel acts to occur without challenge. Similarly, Nenets people would tell me that on winter roads in the tundra, if a Russian truck passed indigenous people with a broken snowmobile, they would never stop: “They see us in our *mal’tsia* [traditional fur garment made from reindeer hide], on a snowmobile, and they never stop. On the contrary, they speed up, even if we need help.”



Figure 0.6. Nenets men selling reindeer meat on a street in Salekhard, 2011. Photograph by the author.

It seemed that the world of the tundra dwellers and the world of the settlers, although they intersected daily—whether through the sale of fish and reindeer meat at local markets, standing in line at banks, or shopping in the same supermarkets—hardly ever truly met. The tundra dwellers, in their traditional skin coats, moved through the streets of a highly technological, European-style Arctic city, its modern buildings towering over them. For the urban dwellers, these visitors from the tundra seemed to come and go, arriving to sell their foodstuffs, seek provisions, or access medical care before disappearing once more into the white immensity of the tundra. “Get out of here, stay outside! You come in here stinking, and your wool is everywhere!” yelled a cashier at indigenous visitors in a bank in Aksarka, while serving Russians out of turn.

Despite the proximity of their lives, these two groups seemed to exist in parallel realities. This disconnection cultivated an atmosphere in which daily discrimination and marginalization could persist almost invisibly and unopposed. This cultural and spatial divide reinforced the cycle of exclusion and inequality in everyday interactions.

In this context, marginality and margins are not merely peripheral spaces. While the nomadic Nenets living in the Polar Urals and Yamal tundra may occupy the geographical edges of the map (“Yamal” is literally translated from Nenets as “the edge of the world”), their experience of marginalization



Figure 0.7. Nomadic Nenets people shopping at the daily clothing market in Aksarka town, 2008. Photograph by the author.

extends far beyond spatial remoteness. Rather than relying on a simple center–periphery model, I explore how the marginality of the Nenets was shaped by specific technologies of power, state experiments, and forms of disciplinary control. As Veena Das and Deborah Poole suggest, understanding margins requires a deeper insight into the state’s disciplinary practices, as the state continually redefines its modes of order and lawmaking.¹³ Thus, these margins are not just territorial boundaries; they are active sites of practice that embody the state’s power and techniques of governance.

The presence of the state at the local level plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of marginalized communities like the Nenets. This presence is not merely administrative but involves a complex interplay of practices and forms that constitute the modern state. In this book, I argue that Nenets marginality is deeply entwined with the visions of modernity, rooted in their complex and colonial relationship with the Russian state. This relationship has profoundly shaped their identity and has been central to the transformation of their religious and cultural practices.

As I explore in greater detail in this book, the Soviet-era modernization reforms were one of the most intense social experiments in the Russian North, aimed at reshaping the social structures, economic practices, and

13 Das and Poole, “Introduction.”

cultural identities of indigenous Siberia to align with the broader national agenda. Nenets lifeworlds became embedded within a larger Soviet vision of modernity, shaped by industrial, sociopolitical, geographical, and ideological reforms, including the traumatic legacy of the Stalinist Gulag period. The Soviet regime sought to rapidly industrialize and modernize the country, viewing the Arctic as a critical frontier for economic development and national power. These reforms sought not only to alter the material conditions of life but also to redefine the cultural and religious fabric of indigenous communities, often at the cost of their historical heritage and traditions.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Yamal Peninsula and the Polar Urals have undergone unprecedented industrial and urban development, emerging as major oil- and gas-producing regions and coal-mining centers in the country and globally. This period brought significant urban change, leading to new waves of settlements and cities, as well as a substantial influx of workers from the Russian “mainland.”¹⁴ Despite subsequent out-migration and industrial decline following the post-Soviet economic crises, the Russian Arctic remains highly urbanized and is home to the largest cities in the circumpolar region.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Nenets indigenous livelihoods, which are grounded in traditional reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing, face ongoing economic and environmental challenges stemming from industrial development that disrupts their land and resources and threatens their survival. The legacy of Soviet state reforms and social experimentation, combined with post-Soviet industrial development, has profoundly altered the structure of their clans and families, disrupted traditional land use patterns, and significantly impacted their economic, linguistic, and cultural heritage.

In the chapters that follow I explore how, for the Nenets, marginalization encompassed broader economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions,¹⁶ including how the Soviet state’s radical policies accelerated modernization in the North, aiming for the complete sovietization of the region. These policies not only established heavy industries and infrastructure but also fundamentally reshaped social relations and cultural identities to align with Soviet ideology. Indigenous people were often the targets of these

14 For most newcomers, the Far North is a workplace, with their true homes on the “mainland” (*materik*), often imagined as distant, like islands reached after a perilous journey. Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskoe*; Anderson, “Bringing Civil Society,” 99.

15 Reisser, “Russia’s Arctic Cities”; Orttung, “Preface.”

16 Leimgruber, *Between Global and Local*; Gurung and Kollmar, “Marginality.”



Figure 0.8. Nomadic people on reindeer sledges at the central square of Aksarka town, near the statue of Lenin, 2008. Photograph by the author.

social experiments, caught in the ideological framework that prioritized technological advancement and the transformation of traditional lifestyles into what were considered more “civilized” forms.

Initiatives aimed at driving regional development often impoverished and marginalized the indigenous population. The Nenets traditional tundra lifestyle, central to their identity, often viewed as a relic of the past, a vestige of a bygone era, overshadowed by the advancing forces of Russian modernity. This dynamic fostered feelings of loss—whether of land, culture, or authenticity—set against the backdrop of perceived progress. It evoked a sense of inequality, as the Nenets world came to be seen as increasingly peripheral to the modern Russian center.¹⁷

Hence, aspirations for modernity in the tundra both fostered new forms of belonging and amplified feelings of disempowerment and inadequacy. Bruce Knauff’s concept of “oxymodern sensibility” captures this contradiction: marginalized communities may strive for modernity while simultaneously feeling “backward” compared to mainstream society.¹⁸ This reflects the Nenets awareness of their marginalized status, with some of them framing their traditional lifestyle as a site of absence or a lack of modernity.

17 Englund and Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-narratives,” 230.

18 Knauff, “Trials of the Oxymodern.”

Not True Nenets: Authenticity Lost

Perhaps the issue of marginalization, as discussed in the previous section, takes on a particularly sharp focus in this study due to the specificity of the material and geographical context. In this case, focusing on the Polar Urals Nenets offers a unique lens through which to examine and understand the experience of marginality.

The Nenets people belong to the group of the so called “indigenous less-numerous peoples of the North and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (one of forty-four listed in this group). According to the 2021 All-Russian census, the Nenets number 48,985, with 84.3% of them classified as rural population. Historically, they inhabit the tundra of the European north, north-western Siberia, and the Taimyr Peninsula, with smaller groups living in the taiga of the Polar Urals and the territory between the Ob’ and Taz Rivers. The largest groups of Nenets live in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region (35,979 Nenets, comprising 7.04% of the total local population) and in the Nenets Autonomous Region (6,713, comprising 16.2% of the total local population), while smaller groups are dispersed in the Taimyr Dolgano-Nenets District of Krasnoiarsk Territory, the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region, and the Komi Republic.¹⁹

About one-third of the Nenets are engaged in traditional nomadic economy, centered around reindeer herding. Today, approximately 650,000 reindeer are concentrated in the Yamal region, making it home to the largest domestic reindeer herd in the world.²⁰ This is against the background of declining traditional forms of economy and natural resource use in other Siberian areas (among the Evens, Evenki, Sakha, Chukchi, and Koriaks).²¹ Siberian and Polar Urals Nenets also demonstrate the highest level of native language competence among indigenous populations of the Russian North (by 1989, 95.8% of the Nenets of the Yamal region considered Nenets their native language).²²

Geographically the Nenets are divided into European and Siberian groups, with the Ural Mountains serving as a natural boundary between the eastern

19 Materials on the final results of the national census in 2020–21, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020>.

20 Data as of 2006: Mukhachev et al., *Kochuiushchie*, 10. The reindeer stock in the Yamal Autonomous Region has increased by 26% over the last two decades. Mukhachev et al., *Kochuiushchie*, 90.

21 In those areas, reindeer stock decreased to 30% of its levels before collectivization in the 1930s. Gray, “The *Obshchina*”; Stammier, *Reindeer Nomads*, 66–71.

22 Liarskaya, “Boarding School on Yamal”; Liarskaya, “The Place of Northern”; Vakhtin and Liarskaya, “Iazykovaia situatsiia.”

and western groups. The majority of the Nenets live in the tundra regions and are known as the Tundra Nenets; they are primarily engaged in reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting. A smaller, culturally and linguistically distinct group—the Forest Nenets—lives further south in forested areas, with a population of only about 1,500. The Ural or Mountain Nenets can be identified as a local linguistic-cultural group within the Tundra Nenets, whose camps are located near the Ural Mountains on both sides of the mountain range.²³ As Laur Vallikivi notes, the Ural Nenets living on the western (European) side of the Polar Urals are less integrated into the Russian world and have a poor knowledge of the Russian language, because they managed to avoid Stalinist collectivization during the 1930s and 1940s and other Soviet reforms later. This allowed them to maintain their traditional way of life and continue living relatively independently up to the present day.²⁴ The Mountain Nenets (*pe'ter*) living on the eastern (Siberian) side of the Polar Urals position themselves in contrast to the Lowland Nenets (*tăsiniany*), who live in the lower reaches of the Ob' River and further east.²⁵ They spend the winter in the forest zone near the Ob' River, and in summer they migrate north along the Ural Mountains, retreating to the western slopes to avoid mass mosquito outbreaks, where the area is cooled by northern winds. Reindeer herding traditionally constitutes a central aspect of both the subsistence economy and the identity of the Ural Nenets (as well as Siberian Tundra Nenets), and the region remains one of the stable centers of traditional reindeer herding, mainly because of the better weather conditions, relative proximity to the “benefits of civilization,” an abundance of firewood.²⁶

My primary research site was the eastern slope of the Polar Urals, specifically the southern part of the Baidarata tundra and the lower Ob' River zone, where the eastern Ural Nenets traditionally spend their winters. The nomadic population in these areas historically lived near settlements and trading posts, maintained relatively small reindeer herds, and fished during the summer on the Ob' and smaller rivers.

Despite its remote location in the tundra, the eastern flank of the Polar Urals has historically been a region with a relatively dense population, fostering intensive interethnic contacts between European and Siberian Nenets,

23 Adaev, “Gornye nentsy.”

24 Vallikivi, *Words and Silences*, 19–22.

25 The Mountain Ural Nenets were historically not administratively classified and, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, were included among the so-called *kamennye samoedy* (*kamen'*, meaning rock, refers to the Ural Mountains ridge), which encompassed both the Yamal and Ural Nenets. Krupnik, “Liudi v chumakh,” 128–29.

26 Adaev, “Gornye nentsy,” 29.

Northern Khanty, Komi-Zyrians, and Russians. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onward, seasonal and permanent migration, trade, and cultural exchanges across the Polar Urals have been significant.²⁷ This interaction has led to high rates of interethnic marriages and multilingualism.²⁸ Historically, the lower Ob' River region has seen frequent intermarriage between the Khanty and Nenets, giving rise to a Khanty-Nenets ethnocultural community with shared historical and cultural traits.²⁹ Some Nenets clans in this region are regarded as having Khanty ancestry.³⁰

This area historically served as a refuge for impoverished reindeer herders—those who had lost their herds or lacked sufficient stock for migration to the north or the mountains. Many temporarily settled along the Ob' River, relying primarily on fishing until they could rebuild their herds and return to nomadic life. However, some eventually settled permanently, adopting a semi-nomadic lifestyle. They lived in chums (N.: *mia*)—traditional conical tents made of reindeer hides and wooden poles—either in the tundra or along the river, following limited migration routes. While they maintained some nomadic practices, their mobility was significantly reduced, and they often formed more stable, semi-nomadic communities, residing close to villages and cities.

The capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, Salekhard, is located within Priural'skii District. This district holds significant geo-economic importance, as it contains key transport links connecting the Yamal to the rest of the country. Notably, it includes the major transport hub of Labytnangi, often referred to as the “gateway to Moscow,” as well as the Obskaia–Bovanenkovo industrial railway—the northernmost railway in the world—connecting the mainland to the Bovanenkovo gas and oil field, one of the world's largest oil and gas deposits.

In Priural'skii District, the Nenets population is approximately 2,650, making up 33% of the total population.³¹ The majority of them reside in

27 Dunin-Gorkavich, *Tobol'skii Sever*, 286–90; Vasil'ev, “Osobennosti razvitiia”; Kvashnin et al., “Problemy kul'turnogo.”

28 Kvashnin et al., “Problemy kul'turnogo”; Vasil'ev, “Osobennosti razvitiia”; Volzhanina, “Sovremennaia struktura”; Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 114; Perevalova, *Severnye khanty*, 198–210.

29 Perevalova, *Severnye khanty*, 250; Volzhanina, “Sovremennaia struktura”; Zuev, *Opisanie zhivushchikh*.

30 Verbov, “Perezhitki rodovogo”; Dolgikh, *Ocherki po etnicheskoi*, 74, 106; Vasil'ev, *Problema formirovaniia*, 211.

31 Data from 2002: Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 89–90; see also Bakulin et al., *Priural'skii raion*, 236.

the Aksarka and Beloiarsk municipalities. The second indigenous group in the district is the Khanty, numbering around 2,270, or 28% of the total population.³² Of the Nenets population, approximately 1,400 are nomadic, practicing traditional livelihoods such as reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting. They migrate across the tundra and forest-tundra of the eastern Polar Urals, particularly in the Kara, Baidarata, and Shchuch'e River basins, extending to the shores of the Kara Sea at Baidarata Bay.

Beloarsk village is not connected to railway lines or road systems and can only be accessed by helicopter, by boat in the summer, or via *zimnik*—a winter road that runs over snow and/or river ice, operational only in winter conditions. With a population of around 2,000, Beloarsk is relatively large. Half of the residents are indigenous, primarily Nenets (over 900) and Khanty (approximately 300), while the remainder are mostly Russians and Komi-Zyrians.

More than three-quarters of the territory in Priural'skii District is used for reindeer pasture, making it the third largest reindeer-herding region in the Yamal. However, it is sometimes considered peripheral in comparison to Yamal'skii District or Tazovskii District of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, which experienced a boom in private reindeer herding in the post-Soviet period.³³ While many nomadic Nenets and Khanty work for state farms, the majority remain private herders and fishers.

Priural'skii District has experienced significant industrial development, particularly in the extractive energy sector. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the region has been a focal point for mining activities, with a growing emphasis on the extraction of natural gas and oil.³⁴ Despite these industrial advancements, Priural'skii District remains one of the less-developed areas within the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. Approximately 90% of its budget is subsidized by the federal government.³⁵

The rapid industrial development in this area has led to a significant influx of migrants from across Russia, resulting in accelerated population growth in the area's settlements. Since the mid-twentieth century, the expansion of industries in the Arctic has dramatically altered the demographic landscape, with the indigenous population now constituting a minority. For example, the proportion of Nenets in the Yamal region has steadily declined, from

32 Data according to statistics of the Beloiarsk and Aksarka municipality administrations as of 1 January 2011.

33 Stammer, *Reindeer Nomads*.

34 The district is also rich in copper, lead, zinc, nickel, cobalt, ferrous and nonferrous metals, platinum, gold, and silver.

35 Bakulin et al., *Priural'skii raion*, 268.

29.3% in 1939 to 7.04% in 2021, while the Russian population has become the dominant demographic group (49.62%).³⁶ This shift highlights the broader impact of industrialization on indigenous communities, where large-scale migration has transformed the region's cultural and social fabric.³⁷

Another notable feature in Priural'skii District is the high rate of sedentary indigenous populations. The village of Beloiarsk, founded in 1951 as part of the Soviet sedentarization project aimed at settling nomadic peoples, has become a key center for the region's indigenous tundra communities. In the rural Beloiarsk District, the ratio of sedentary to tundra-dwelling Nenets is 1:4.8. A major challenge facing the sedentary indigenous population is high rates of unemployment. Many Nenets and Khanty living in northern settlements like Beloiarsk are generally employed in manual, unskilled labor such as cleaning, assisting nurses, working as watchmen, or performing laundry duties.³⁸ In contrast, positions in local administration, management, education, and public health are typically filled by Russians and other incoming migrants. In general, poor living conditions, inadequate infrastructure, high crime rates, domestic violence, and elevated mortality from tuberculosis, suicide, alcoholism, and violent deaths (often linked to alcohol) continue to define the social landscape of northern villages—often referred to as “ethnic settlements” (*natsional'nye poselki*).³⁹

The boundaries between the tundra and the sedentary social spaces of the Siberian Polar Urals are not clearly defined. Tundra indigenous people frequently visit villages, and the close proximity of their campsites to settlements, along with reduced migration routes, allows some to spend equal time in both the tundra and the villages. Their sedentary relatives often support them in their tundra activities. In the summer, many indigenous people of the Priural'skii District—both nomadic and sedentary—settle along riverbanks for fishing, a practice known as “sitting on the sands.”⁴⁰ This lifestyle has led to the description of “the Nenets on the sands” as semi-nomadic.

36 Data from the All-Russian Population Census (2020–21), <https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020>.

37 Khomich, “Sovremennye etnicheskie”; Khomich, “Opyt izucheniia”; Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 82–82; see also Kvashnin, “Sovremennye etnopoliticheskie.”

38 It is important to note, however, that in recent years, a growing number of indigenous individuals have taken on professional roles, including tutors, teachers, medical assistants, zootechnicians, fur farm workers, bootmakers, and seamstresses. Volzhanina, “Sovremennaiia struktura.”

39 Pika and Prokhorov, “Bol'shye problemy”; Pika and Bogoyavlensky, “Yamal Peninsula”; Pika, “Neotraditsionalizm.”

40 For more on the shifting temporality between sedentary and nomadic patterns in Nenets life, see Volzhanina, “Puti perekhoda s kochevogo.”

It was these Ural Mountain nomadic and semi-nomadic Nenets living in the southern part of the Baidarata tundra with Beloiarsk village (Priural'skii District) as one of its centers with whom I began my ethnographic journey. They were also the ones who formed one of the first indigenous evangelical churches in the Yamal region. Positioned at the crossroads of European and Siberian territories, as well as between nomadic and settled worlds, they occupy a space that is both geographically and symbolically “in between” the traditional tundra lifestyle and the Russian world. The Nenets of Beloiarsk and the surrounding Baidarata tundra I worked with were often referred to as *yonei' ter*—a Nenets term for those living in between the tundra and the settled world.

This liminal space further deepened their marginalization. Positioned closer to urban centers and historically exposed to more intensive cross-cultural interactions with incoming populations, the Ural Nenets occupy a symbolic “halfway point.” Both outsiders and indigenous communities perceive them as neither fully adhering to the old nomadic ways nor entirely integrated into Russian society. As a Nenets man from Northern Yamal explained this sense of displacement and identity loss:

The Ural [Priural'skie] Nenets are entirely different [as compared with the Yamal Nenets]. They've ended up in between two civilizations: they have left the one but haven't entered the other one. They have already lost their own comfort zone but haven't found another one.

Many Nenets in this in-between space live in poverty, facing higher rates of alcoholism and domestic violence, with little to no reindeer herds—unlike their counterparts in the Ural Mountains or Yamal tundra, who are often seen as more prosperous and culturally intact. One local schoolteacher remarked,

They're not real Nenets. If you want to study authentic Nenets culture, the real Nenets, you should go to the north of Yamal or to the Gyda; only there will you meet the real Nenets. But why are you going to the Ural [Priural'skie] Nenets? You won't find anything worthwhile there!”

Furthermore, they are often seen as a blend of identities—Nenets, Khanty, Komi, and Russian—navigating rapid social and economic change while attempting to preserve their cultural authenticity. As a result, they often internalize the notion of being “nonauthentic.” As a Nenets woman who had recently settled in Beloiarsk remarked, “Doctors came here the other day

and did blood tests among the Nenets. It turned out that Nenets don't have pure blood anymore—everything is mixed: Nenets, Khanty, Russians....”

This image sharply contrasts with the widely publicized notion of the “Nenets phenomenon,” which emphasized the unique stability of the traditional culture of the Siberian and Polar Ural Nenets. This concept typically highlighted their nomadic subsistence, particularly reindeer herding, material culture, native language, rituals, and the network of sacred sites.⁴¹

This contradiction—between the celebrated image of the Nenets as guardians of an enduring nomadic tradition and the lived reality of those in the Ural region—raised deeper questions about authenticity, belonging, and the politics of identity. Religious conversion added another layer of complexity, amplifying the struggle for a sense of belonging in a world where they were often seen as neither fully Nenets nor Russian. For both Russian and Nenets outsiders, their conversion was often viewed as yet another sign of cultural loss, distancing them even further from the “authentic” Nenets way of life.

For many converts, however, Christianity offered a way to reclaim agency in a context where traditional markers of identity—such as reindeer herding and nomadism—were increasingly precarious. Through faith, they redefined their sense of “Nenetsness,” grounding it not only in ancestry and subsistence but in a reimagined sense of moral and communal belonging.

Book Outline

I begin this book with the story of religious conversion and the creation of first communities converted in Beloiarsk and the Baidarata tundra, giving voice to those who lived through it. In the first chapter, I recount my encounter with a converted semi-nomadic Nenets family in Beloiarsk, in which Nadia and her sister Marina are central figures—an encounter that would profoundly shape my research. They introduced me to their church and welcomed me into a world where faith was not simply a personal belief but a powerful force reshaping entire communities. As I engaged with them, I listened to their stories of conversion and how their faith intertwined with their daily lives. The Beloiarsk Nenets community were both my research participants and Nenets language teachers. Siberian Nenets are generally

41 Mukhachev et al., *Kochuiushchie*, 10; Stammmler, *Reindeer Nomads*, 76–78; Liarskaya, “Boarding School on Yamal”; Vakhtin and Liarskaya, “Iazykovaia situatsiia.”

bilingual in Nenets and Russian, and most of our conversations were conducted in Russian, mixed with Nenets terms, concepts, and expressions.

My research extended beyond the tundra as I visited missionary centers coordinating evangelization efforts across the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region and the Komi Republic. These centers, located in Salekhard, Vorkuta, and as far as St. Petersburg, played a crucial role in organizing missions into the remote Arctic. In St. Petersburg, I traced the origins of the Beloiarsk church to one of its founders, Sergei, whose influence was instrumental in establishing the Nenets evangelical network in the region. In Beloiarsk, I also met missionaries from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan, all working to expand the growing Nenets church network across the tundra of the Polar Urals and the Yamal Peninsula. Their presence marked a dramatic shift, blurring the lines between the traditional Arctic nomadic world and the onset of global modernity, as the Nenets navigated their place in a changing religious and cultural landscape.

In this chapter, I also reflect on the ethical challenges and anthropological uncertainties that shaped my path as an ethnographer in a politically sensitive and deeply mistrustful field. My presence was not merely observed—it was questioned and, at times, openly resisted. Accusations of being a spy—voiced in warnings, suspicious glances, and quiet rumors—transformed initial openness into silence, closed doors, and wary distance. I came to understand that ethnographic knowledge is not simply collected—it is colived and forged through vulnerability and risk, in moments when I felt stripped bare and unprotected, learning to build trust with others while entrusting myself—and those I love—to their care. Working with a religious community that deliberately sealed itself off from outsiders pushed me to confront the limits of participation and the profound responsibility that comes with representing their lives. Their world, shaped by persecution, surveillance, and enduring suspicion, challenged me to rethink what it means to be present, to witness, and to write with care.

In chapter 2, I further explore the religious conversion of the Nenets within the context of global modernity, arguing that conversion was not just a shift in belief systems but also a response to, and at times a form of resistance against, changing power structures and the global order. The chapter delves into how the Nenets perceived and experienced modernity, shaped by their historical legacy of Russian imperialism and the Soviet period. I examine how their emic understanding of modernity was influenced by centuries of colonialism and Soviet-era social and political experiments in the indigenous Arctic. This chapter also considers how their colonial history continued to shape their lifeworlds and religious experiences, revealing the unequal and

contaminating effects of modernity—perceived as Russian modernity—on their social, political, and religious dynamics.

The subsequent three chapters explore the politics of religion in post-socialism and the era of Putin, with a particular focus on the Arctic. Chapter 3 examines the brief period of religious freedom in post-Soviet Russia, a time marked by religious revival. The early post-Soviet period opened new frontiers, giving rise to an unprecedented wave of international missionary movements across the country. The vast regions of Siberia and the Arctic became focal points of religious change, characterized by the growing presence of various Protestant denominations and churches. As a result of missionary activities, the revival of local indigenous religious traditions, and migrations, a highly competitive, multireligious landscape emerged in the post-Soviet Russian Arctic. This landscape was characterized by a variety of religious domains, including multiple Protestant movements, the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, and indigenous religious practices such as shamanism.

The rise of Putin's regime in the early 2000s and its shift towards an authoritarian state profoundly reshaped the post-Soviet religious landscape, reinstating a traditional Russian model of state control, interference, and policing of religious life. Chapter 4 explores how, through a series of local and federal legislative actions and state-sponsored anti-sectarian propaganda, the regime increasingly restricted religious freedom and pluralism. The conservative and nationalist turn in Putin's Russia led to the growing perception of certain religious movements as threats to state security. What had once symbolized freedom was now seen as a threat, prompting actions against religious minorities that mirrored Soviet-era repression. By crafting and enforcing laws defining religious extremism, the regime sought to control and suppress practices and organizations deviating from state-sanctioned belief. The new policies criminalized nontraditional practices and framed religious minorities—especially Protestant groups, Muslims, and other non-Orthodox communities—as potential subversive forces. This chapter examines how the securitization of religion became part of a broader strategy to reinforce state control over public life while stifling dissent and resistance.

Chapter 5 examines the rise and decline of indigenous movements in post-Soviet Russia, focusing on the shifting political landscape under Putin's regime. As power became increasingly centralized, any form of civil activism or political opposition was systematically suppressed, and the indigenous movements were not exempt from this repression. The chapter explores how the post-Soviet period, with its social, political, and religious

upheavals, initially fostered a wave of indigenous activism in Siberia and the Arctic. A significant aspect of this movement was the resurgence of indigenous religiosity, particularly shamanism, which became a key element of cultural identity in indigenous regions in Siberia. However, as the Putin regime consolidated its authority and implemented policies favoring Russian nationalism, indigenous activism faced harsh repression and the persecution of its activists.

Through this lens, the first part of the book explores the transformation of Siberia and the Arctic into a contested space where religious, political, and cultural forces collide, shaping the lives of indigenous communities and their religious identities in profound and sometimes contradictory ways.

The second part of the book is grounded in the emerging field of the anthropology of Christianity, which critically examines the dynamics of continuity and rupture in Christian communities, particularly in the context of conversion. Anthropological discussions on religious conversion explore how becoming Christian—especially in evangelical traditions—entails a fundamental break with the past, often demanding the rejection of former beliefs, practices, and identities while simultaneously fostering new forms of community, belonging, and moral order. Chapter 6 explores how evangelical Christianity, particularly through the concept of being “born again,” creates a profound rupture in religious and cultural practices, sparking social conflicts within indigenous communities in the post-Soviet Arctic. It examines how this experience creates a disruption in the convert’s indigenous worldview, compelling a complete reshaping of their beliefs, social reality, cultural practices, relationships, and identity. The chapter also delves into the intense rejection of traditional indigenous beliefs and practices, including the burning of sacred items, the destruction of sacred sites, and the abandonment of rituals once integral to community life. It focuses on the tension between continuity and change in this conversion process, analyzing how Christianity interacts with and reshapes indigenous traditions and identities.

Chapter 7 examines how converted Nenets navigated continuity amid change, exercising creative agency in redefining evangelical principles and reframing traditional practices—such as ancestral worship, rituals, spirits, mythology, and nomadism—within evangelical religious structures. Through this process, they actively engaged in reassembling the notion of native culture, forging a dynamic interplay between the new and the old. This transformation was not merely religious but a broader struggle over identity and belonging, where indigeneity and Christian faith became fluid categories open to reinterpretation.

Chapter 8 examines why, among the many religious movements emerging in the post-Soviet Arctic, the Nenets unexpectedly embraced the fundamentalist form of Baptist Christianity—a choice that introduced significant challenges to their lives. The chapter traces the historical origins of the Baptist Brethren, which became the most influential missionary movement in the Nenets tundra. For converted Nenets, membership in the Brethren was more than a religious affiliation; it provided an alternative sense of belonging that reshaped their relationship with Russian modernity and the state. Through this unexpected turn to fundamentalist Christianity, the Nenets discovered new ways to assert their autonomy, reclaim their cultural identity, and challenge long-standing colonial legacies.

The third part of the book explores lived religion and how the Nenets' new experiences with evangelical Christianity became deeply embedded in their daily lives, influencing their migration patterns, kinship structures, and economic networks. The conversion process reshaped traditional gender roles, marital dynamics, and family structures, challenging and redefining traditional understandings of kinship within the Nenets community. Chapter 9 examines the complex and often conflicting relationship between Christian and traditional Nenets kinship structures. This interaction was not a one-way imposition but a reciprocal process in which traditional Nenets kinship networks were reconfigured, while Christian kinship concepts were adapted to align with indigenous cultural logic. While evangelical Christianity was frequently accused of undermining traditional culture, severing family ties, and causing social rifts, it was ultimately the Nenets kinship system itself that provided the foundation for the spread of Christianity in the Polar Ural tundra. At the same time, missionary efforts were shaped by existing Nenets kin networks, internal kinship regulations, and exogamic rules.

The final chapter shows how missionary initiatives and Nenets religiosity, as kin-based activities, led to the establishment of new marriage alliances, which, in fact, constituted the revival of traditional marriage alliances once disrupted by Soviet territorial reforms. Furthermore, missionaries, who became integrated into the existing Nenets kinship networks and traditional nomadic routes, unintentionally became part of these cultural practices. They often assumed the role of matchmakers, facilitating marriage arrangements within the church community, much like the traditional Nenets practices. This chapter further explores how Christian conversion reshapes not only gender and family dynamics but also the very essence of what it means to be a Nenets woman or man. Through the lens of evangelical Christianity, converts revised and negotiated perceptions of love,

sexuality, beauty, and female piety. The chapter ultimately illustrates how, in a paradoxical turn, in this clash of the old and the new, the conversion and the profound changes it brought to the converts' lives, were seen as a return to authentic Nenets culture and a means of resisting the sweeping forces of modernity.

Conclusion

Embarking on a journey alongside the Nenets and the missionaries who traversed the tundra, this book offers a glimpse into the lives of one of the most marginalized communities in the Arctic. It delves into the profound human experiences of love, loss, fear, and hope, as they intersect with broader sociopolitical forces and religious transformations. Through a longitudinal research journey and enduring relationships with the community of Beloiarsk, my work became more than an academic endeavor—it evolved into a deeply personal exploration of both Nenets lives and my own. This book is not only a reflection on their profound shifts in belief and identity but also a testament to the untold stories, unfinished journeys, and complex realities of ethnographic research in marginalized settings. It stands as an account of the personal and ethical dimensions—and sometimes failures—of conducting fieldwork over many years, where relationships evolve, and political landscapes shift in unpredictable ways. In the end, it is a narrative of commitment, resilience, and the unanswered questions that linger when the final chapter remains unwritten.

1. The Nenets Conversion Story: Voices, Choices, and Ethical Dilemmas

Abstract: This chapter follows an ethnographic journey among indigenous Nenets Christian communities in the Russian Arctic from 2006 onward. It introduces local converts, visiting missionaries, and missionary guides, tracing the emergence and transformation of evangelical congregations amid social conflicts. Against an increasingly repressive political climate under Putin, it explores the challenges faced by religious minorities, including surveillance, discrimination, and public suspicion. Long-term ethnographic engagement shows how initial openness gave way to mistrust under real threats of persecution and state scrutiny of “sectarian” activity. Framed within anthropological debates on ethnographic knowledge production, the chapter presents fieldwork as a relational, co-constructed process. Ethnography emerges not as data collection but as a transformative encounter shaped by vulnerability, resilience, and mutual trust amid shifting political landscapes.

Keywords: ethnographic fieldwork, ethics in anthropology, community trust, female religious leadership, boundary-making, children in the field

I begin with the voices of those who made this book possible—the converts, the missionaries, and the families at the crossroads of faith. The stories, doubts, fears, and hopes that they shared with me have shaped my understanding of religious transformation in Beloiarsk, and it is through their words that this journey begins. Their personal accounts offer a vivid glimpse into a community in flux, where not only beliefs but entire lives were tested, challenged, and often redefined. In reconstructing this story, I turn to the testimonies of those who experienced these shifts firsthand.

In the second part of the chapter, I also reflect on my ethnographic engagement, connecting my personal journey with the research process. I discuss the ethical challenges and uncertainties that arose throughout

this experience and that have shaped both the narrative I present and my approach to understanding and interpreting these lived experiences. My path as an ethnographer involved navigating the often-painful process of making sense of people's changing and uncertain worlds. Ethnographic learning is not just about acquiring knowledge—it is a transformative process that demands deep personal involvement. Understanding others requires embracing uncertainty, adapting to the unexpected, sometimes even the dangerous, and learning through inevitable mistakes we make on unfamiliar grounds. This is an immersive journey where our entire being becomes an instrument of understanding. Our past experiences, expectations, emotions, and even our physical presence shape how we interpret and relate to the lives of others.

A Russian “Pope”

The story begins in 1998, when an Orthodox priest from Tobol'sk arrived in Beloiarsk for a brief visit. During his stay, he conducted an all-night service at the local House of Culture, followed by a morning baptism ritual. Some Nenets, curious about the visiting Russian *pop* (“pope,” a vernacular term for an Orthodox priest), were drawn to the event.

“He wasn’t really saying anything,” a Nenets woman later recalled of her first conversion experience. “Just singing some songs—Orthodox ones—and reading from the Bible in some strange language, Slavonic maybe, I don’t know. He was remitting sins [*otpuskal grekhi*], baptizing everyone one after another in a washbasin, and selling crucifixes. Then people were given birth certificates” (referring to baptism certificates).

Some Nenets recalled that, at the time, they were primarily interested in acquiring metal crosses, which they saw as decorative items. Others purchased Orthodox icons, which had long held a significant place in Nenets ritual practices alongside their traditional ritual objects, commonly referred to as “idols.” The central theme of their conversion narratives was not Christians rupture but the integration of Orthodox material culture—crosses, icons, and ritual objects—into the Nenets’ own traditions and spiritual landscape.

The following spring, in 1999, everyone in Beloiarsk was talking about a new *pop* who had arrived in the village and was said to have the power to heal. Nadia, a Nenets woman from the Baidarata tundra, was briefly visiting Beloiarsk at the time. Recently widowed and raising several children alone, she was struggling to care for her six-year-old son, who had cerebral palsy.



Figure 1.1. Baptism by a Russian Orthodox priest at an indigenous tundra campsite, Yamal. Photograph by Sergey Anisimov.

When she heard about the *pop* who could heal, she decided to take her son and secretly attend one of his prayer meetings.

Expecting to meet a bearded man in traditional clerical robes, she was startled to find instead a young man in his early twenties, dressed in jeans. He was a charismatic missionary from Novyi Urengoi, an industrial city in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. Preaching with fervor, he read from the Bible, spoke about God, and emphasized the healing power of prayer. Intrigued and hopeful, Nadia returned the next day—this time bringing her sister Marina, whom she desperately hoped to save from drinking. What began as a single visit soon became a daily ritual. Over the next three months, Nadia, Marina, and several of Nadia's children attended prayer meetings every day, drawn into the missionary's message and the promise of transformation.

The missionary's efforts proved successful, and in August 1999, he baptized around fifty people in the local Yunga River, welcoming them as new members of the independent charismatic church Novyi Svet (New Light), based in Novyi Urengoi and Salekhard. Among the newly converted were Nadia and her family. Even after the missionary departed, the community continued to gather regularly—praying, reading the Bible, and practicing glossolalia, the Pentecostal tradition of speaking in tongues.



Figure 1.2. An indigenous woman holding an Orthodox pectoral cross, Yamal. Photograph by Sergey Anisimov.



Figure 1.3. Evangelical Christian baptism in a tundra lake, Yamal. Author's archive.



Figure 1.4. Blessing prayer by evangelical missionaries in a Nenets campsite. Author's archive.

The following summer, a boat carrying new missionaries arrived in Beloiarsk. This time, it was the Blagaia Vest' (Good News) Church of Evangelical Christians from Salekhard, which had recently split from the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, deliberately omitting the term "Baptist" from its name. Liberal, youthful, and enthusiastic, this mission-church focused its evangelical efforts on the indigenous population, both in settled areas and the tundra, with Beloiarsk as one of its key targets. Their outreach was highly public and visible—missionaries held concerts in the local sports hall, organized Christian camps, and distributed humanitarian aid. After the first concert, a few Nenets approached them, proudly declaring that they, too, were believers and had been waiting a long time for new missionaries. Among them were Nadia and her relatives.

The arrival of new missionaries in Beloiarsk sparked tensions between the charismatic and evangelical churches, eventually leading to a split within the local religious community. Nadia recalls that period as follows:

When all these charismatics and Pentecostals and Baptists came, one pulled us one way, the other pulled us another. And we were like those [Holy Spirit] tongues—hanging between heaven and earth. Couldn't go

up, couldn't come down. So we just dangled [*boltalis'*] like that. Didn't know who or what to believe in.

After a series of tensions, the majority of the newly converted changed their religious affiliation and joined the newly arrived evangelical church. This was the first Protestant community in Beloiarsk that had been officially registered in 2002 under the name Zhivaia Voda (Living Water), as a branch of the Salekhard evangelical church Blagaia Vest' (Good News). The leader of the newly formed church became Arkadii, a man in his early thirties, originally from Ukraine. He had arrived in Yamal a few years earlier as a migrant worker and later married a local Nenets woman. Arkadii had no experience as a minister and had not been ordained. Converted just a year before arriving in Beloiarsk, he lacked the experience and authority of a seasoned religious leader. The prayer meetings were held in the apartment of a Nenets nomadic family that often visited the village.

The Brethren

The conversion saga did not end there. In 2006, new religious rearrangements sparked fresh tensions, conflicts, and debates within the community of the converted. This time, the agitation was fueled by the arrival of new missionaries, who identified as the Unregistered Baptist Brethren, officially named the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ICCECB, Mezhdunarodnyi Soiuz Tserkvei Evangel'skikh Khristian Baptistov). This unregistered religious organization was known for being one of the most conservative and nonconformist religious movements in Russia.

The Brethren missionaries arrived in an unusual manner—not from Salekhard or other northern towns, but directly from the tundra itself. The church focused its missionary efforts specifically on the tundra population, and by the time it reached Beloiarsk village, the mission had already established a religious community on the European side of the Polar Ural tundra among Nenets reindeer-herding communities.¹ The Brethren's missionary base was located in Vorkuta city (Komi Republic), but its primary focus was on establishing religious communities across the Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra (European Far North, the Nenets Autonomous Region), the Polar Ural, and the Yamal tundra regions, targeting Nenets reindeer-herding communities.

1 Vallikivi, *Words and Silences*.

While traveling through the tundra, the missionaries learned about traditional migration routes across the Urals, connecting the European and Siberian sides. Using these routes, they arrived in the Siberian part of the Polar Ural tundra, specifically the Baidarata tundra in the Priural'skii District of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. One of the first groups they encountered was Nadia's campsite, along with her sister Sveta's. Both became the first guides for the newly arrived missionaries in the Baidarata tundra and later invited the missionaries to visit Beloiarsk, the sedentary base for Nadia's family and church. From the perspective of the Beloiarsk community, the Brethren had arrived from the tundra, not from a settled space, and thus was regarded as a *tundra church*.

When the first two Brethren missionaries arrived in Beloiarsk in March 2006, they were met with hostility from the evangelical leaders, who had arrived from Salekhard at the same time after hearing about the appearance of "strange missionaries." The initial meeting quickly escalated into a conflict between the two missionary groups. "Don't touch our flock [*stado*]! These are our lambs [*ovechki*]! We won't let you go into the tundra!" the evangelical leaders argued. The conflict was then put to a vote. The Nenets community was gathered and asked to decide whether to allow the new missionaries to enter the local tundra.

Nadia remembers that day:

D. [an evangelical missionary] gathered us and said, "You are the only ones who can decide whether to allow these missionaries into your tundra or not. Please raise your hands if you want them to go into the tundra." We all agreed. He was, of course, offended and said, "Well, it's your choice. You've made your decision. We won't force our company on you." Then we took these two missionaries and brought them into a chum. We had heard that missionaries from the Baptist Brethren frequently visit chums, and that believing sisters [female missionaries] stay there for long periods, teaching Nenets women how to wash, clean, cook, read, pray, and sing. So, we became interested in all these things, too.

Thus, after debates and arguments within the Beloiarsk community, followed by ongoing tensions between charismatic, evangelical, and Baptist missionaries, the Beloiarsk community underwent another conversion—this time to the most radical form of Baptism. The conversion drama eventually settled with the establishment of the conservative Baptist Brethren's strong authority in the Polar Ural tundra, coupled with growing disillusionment among Pentecostals and evangelicals regarding their missionary outcomes.

Charismatic and evangelical missionaries viewed the religious shift of those days as a “seizure of power” and “occupation of territories.”

Initially, the missionary efforts in Beloiarsk were open to all ethnic groups, including Russians, Nenets, Khanty, and Komi. Over time, however, religious conversion became a predominantly *native affair* with evangelical congregations consisting mostly of Nenets and Khanty, reflecting historical tensions between settlers and the indigenous population. Despite living in close proximity, Russians and natives often maintained distinct cultural boundaries. In Beloiarsk, any interaction between the two, such as interethnic marriages or joint ventures, was seen as unusual. Similarly, the early conversions sparked conflicts, particularly in ethnically mixed communities, as they were viewed as challenging cultural norms.

An evangelical missionary who worked in Beloiarsk from 2000 to 2004 recalled:

This was the biggest problem—they didn’t want to meet with each other. The village is small, but when I invited the doctors, who were mostly Russians, they refused to interact with the Nenets. The same with the club workers, also Russians; they didn’t want to engage either. So, I had to hold several services in one day—first for the Nenets, then rush to meet with the doctors.

Inner Missionaries: Hidden Female Leadership in a Gendered Religious Landscape

Amid these dramatic conversions, the religious community of the Beloiarsk Nenets became informally known as “Nadia’s church.” Although initially led by a Ukrainian man and later by a frequently visiting Russian missionary, the majority of the community was made up of Nenets. Nadia, a Nenets woman in her early fifties who had lived in the tundra, was among the first who converted and later naturally emerged as the group’s unofficial leader and missionary guide.

In the Beloiarsk Nenets community, informal female leadership played a crucial role in the religious conversion process. Typically, a native woman would take on the role of an inner missionary, leading her extended family through conversion. This was especially noteworthy because the Baptist denomination, which the Nenets community largely embraced, forbade female leadership. Despite this, hidden power in the Beloiarsk community remained informally in the hands of women. Although missionaries aimed

to appoint male leaders for each group or congregation, it was often women like Nadia and her sisters who played the de facto role of guiding the community's spiritual and social dynamics.

This pattern of female-centered leadership within a gendered male religious framework mirrors a broader trend in Russia, where women tend to exhibit higher levels of religiosity than men.² Moreover, it aligns with global patterns, where women often play central roles in Christian (particularly Pentecostal) religious activities, being numerically dominant in churches, while formal leadership positions are reserved for men.³ In the case of the Beloiarsk Nenets community, which consisted of around twenty people in the village and approximately fifty-seventy living in the tundra, the gender imbalance was striking. While the majority of believers were women, only three young men, all baptized, were part of the congregation (the number of men in the tundra was difficult to determine, given the scattered nature of their nomadic lifestyle). This tension between informal female leadership and the formal structures of the Baptist congregation highlighted the complex interplay of religious conversion and gender roles within the community, a theme I will explore further in this book.

Women became essential guides for missionaries on their tundra “cru-sades,” helping them navigate the complexities of the tundra’s nomadic lifestyle, herding routes, and fishing campsites. At the same time, these women established a limiting framework for missionary activities—one that was difficult for missionaries to cross, as they relied heavily on the native community for assistance in moving across the tundra and locating nomadic campsites. Given the clan-based structure of Nenets society and the frequent interclan and interfamily disputes, the Nenets were careful about how missionaries operated, ensuring they respected the established social and geographical boundaries. Over time, missionaries found themselves deeply embedded in the native kinship and neighborly networks, dependent on these connections to move through the tundra.

A guide and her family were responsible to missionaries for arranging transportation, facilitating access to people for preaching, and acting as interpreters, both linguistically and socially. As social interpreters, they introduced the visiting missionaries’ aims and helped create a welcoming atmosphere for them.⁴ Her role was to serve as an informal leader and inner

2 Krindatch, “Patterns of Religious,” 128.

3 Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal,” 131–34; Martin, “The Pentecostal Gender Paradox”; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*; Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*.

4 The role of the guide in this context bears a striking resemblance to that of the internal indigenous guides during Russia’s imperial colonial period. Back then, native individuals were tasked with assisting colonial authorities, serving as interpreters, providing transportation, and



Figure 1.5. Nenets women reading the Bible inside a tundra tent. Photograph by the author.

missionary within her kin network and to direct missionary trajectories within a clan network. She was responsible for selecting which clan members, families, or entire branches of the clan would be targeted for conversion. Using an internal cultural logic, she decided who was ready and worthy of conversion and who was not.

In chapter 9, I will discuss in greater detail how the movement of missionaries through the tundra was thus mediated by local kinship networks, which determined the scope and reach of religious outreach. This practice involved a redistribution of power, functioning as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion within kinship networks. As a result, the missionary movement in the tundra but was deeply shaped by and embedded within the social structures of the Nenets community, often relying on existing kin networks, nomadic practices, and the geographical locations and internal relations of specific families. Below I introduce the three women who were the main figures in the Beloiarsk community.

Nadia

The story of the Beloiarsk conversions began with Nadia, and the church I observed in Beloiarsk was primarily composed of her family and clan

facilitating the spread of the *yasak* system (the fur tribute collected from Siberian indigenous peoples. Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, 23–24.

members. Nadia had spent her entire life in the tundra. She had a difficult and tragic life. She was the child of a poor Nenets reindeer herder and fisherman, who struggled with alcoholism, and a Khanty woman from a shamanic family in Southern Yamal. Nadia never had the chance to finish residential school, as her parents called her back to the tundra after the eighth grade to help with the household.

She came from a large family, with twelve children, and when a well-off reindeer herder from the Priural'skaia tundra proposed to marry her, her parents were eager for the match. At the age of seventeen, in 1976, she was married. Her husband worked at the Baidaratskii *sovkhov* (state farm), which was based in Beloiarsk, and her father-in-law was the head of a *sovkhov* reindeer brigade and a people's deputy.

Nadia's married life was incredibly difficult. At the beginning, her in-laws, well-off and well-respected people, did not want to accept the marriage of their son to a poor girl. As an unwelcomed and unloved daughter-in-law, she was treated badly and assigned the hardest tasks in the tent (*mia*). Nadia gave birth to fourteen children, though only nine survived to adulthood. Most of her children were born in the tundra, and she often shared the story of her first childbirth. While heavily pregnant, she got lost in the tundra for seven days, and when labor began, there was no one by her side. With neither food nor water, she spent several days lying on the ground with her newborn baby until her husband finally found her, unconscious.

Alongside the cycles of pregnancies, childbirths, childhood illnesses, and deaths, Nadia worked throughout her life. She was a state-employed tent-worker (*chumrabochnitsa*, a kind of professional housewife on a state farm) who assisted her husband, a reindeer herder, in the tundra—a role institutionalized during the Soviet period. Later, she became personally involved in reindeer herding and fishing as well.

Her husband was a heavy drinker, and in 1986, he had to leave the *sovkhov*, settling near Beloiarsk as a fisherman. Their private herd (many Nenets families were able to keep a small personal herd privately outside the state *sovkhov* system) was entrusted to a relative for pasturing, but over time, it dwindled significantly. The end of her marriage was tragic: in 1996, while intoxicated, her husband set off with a reindeer team and never returned. His body was found six months later. Widowed, Nadia was left alone to care for their nine children, the youngest only eight months old at the time. In the years that followed, she struggled with poverty, working tirelessly as a fisherwoman in the summer and herding the few remaining reindeer in the winter to provide for her children.

Nadia's parental family also had a tragic history. According to family legend, they were cursed by a relative named Lakure, who was a shaman. The story goes that he created seven anthropomorphic images dressed in *mal'tsia* (a traditional male deerskin overcoat) and sacrificed them at a sacred site called Tivterjeva (Walrus Head) on the shore of the Kara Sea. Shortly afterward, all the male members of Nadia's family met tragic fates. Nadia's father succumbed to throat cancer, and within a few years, her five brothers also died, most of them by suicide. Only seven sisters remained, and without any male relatives, the clan was believed to be on the brink of extinction. Two of the sisters settled in one place, while the others continued to live a nomadic lifestyle.

When I first met Nadia in 2006, she was forty-eight years old, living in a tundra campsite with some of her grown children. The family owned a small herd of reindeer and worked as fishermen for the Baidaratskii *sovkhoz* during the summer months. Nadia also had an apartment in the village—a dilapidated one-bedroom unit in a crumbling building, lacking a functioning water or sewage system, with holes in the walls. This apartment was meant to house Nadia's large family, including her six married children and their families, totaling around thirty people. As a result, the apartment served as a temporary sedentary base for Nadia and her relatives.

Nadia and her children often visited the village, sometimes staying for a week or two each month. There was little need for long-distance migration, as her small herd did not require it. Consequently, her nomadic tent was typically located about an hour's distance from the village. Nadia led a half-nomadic, half-settled life, a lifestyle shared by many other Nenets in the Polar Ural region.

In many ways, Nadia remained the center of gravity for her large kin network. She was seen as a model of resilience, someone who faced life's hardships without giving up the "genuine Nenets lifestyle" and never resorted to alcohol, which was a common escape for many Arctic natives, including many of her relatives. As a result, Nadia was held in high esteem by her extended family.

At the same time, Nadia became a symbolic center for the Beloiarsk conversion story. She was the first to embrace the Christian message and be baptized, and then brought her entire family into the church. As a result, the structure of the newly formed religious community closely mirrored the structure of Nadia's kin network—six of her seven sisters, along with their families, were converted and became members of the Brethren church. Consequently, the power dynamics within the church reflected those of the tundra kinship network.

Marina

Marina is Nadia's elder sister and her stronghold in both sedentary life and religious activity. My ethnographic path in the Ural tundra began with Marina's story. Her life story and conversion journey always seemed the most eloquent to me. Throughout the years, I engaged in many conversations with her and conducted dozens of hours of interviews while living at her hospitable house. It was through listening to her never-ending stories that I tried to understand Nenets life in the tundra and in the village, their social expectations, and beliefs.

Marina was a short, thin, and sickly looking woman in her early fifties, never married and childless. Stricken with cirrhosis of the lungs, she spent several years of her childhood in hospitals and health resorts, while her family stayed in the tundra. She survived, and after finishing school in the late 1970s, she returned to the tundra, to her parents' campsite. However, a few years later, she decided to try her luck in settled life. Marina spent several years in the settlements of Yar-Sale and Salemal (Southern Yamal), working as a cleaner in hospitals and doing manual labor at a fish-processing factory.

"These Nenets and Khanty fishermen always live between the village and the tundra," Marina explained, though she regretted her decision to leave the tundra. "I shouldn't have gone there. I would have been better off staying in the tundra." While living in Yar-Sale, Marina lost a child born out of wedlock, who died shortly after birth. It was there that she began drinking, a problem that would follow her throughout her life. Eventually, her parents brought her back to the tundra, where she lived until their deaths.

As was typical for the Priural'skie Nenets, Marina's family engaged in reindeer herding during the winter and fishing in the summer, leaving their herd to graze with relatives. After her father's death in 1990, the family gave up reindeer herding and turned to fishing on the Ob River. Between 1996 and 1998, Marina buried her mother and two brothers. She continued to live in the tundra for some time with her younger sister, but in 1999, she made the decision to settle in Beloiarsk village. There, she worked as a nurse's aid and a cleaner at the local hospital. This was when I first met her.

Nadia and Marina's grandfather was a Khanty shaman, a figure Marina often spoke about with reverence and awe. She was believed to have inherited his shamanic gift, a spiritual legacy that set her apart within her family and community. Some of her relatives even regarded her as someone capable of foretelling the future. Her childhood illness was sometimes interpreted as a shamanic illness, reinforcing the idea that she was spiritually chosen.

Marina's life choices were deeply intertwined with her perceived shamanic destiny. She never married, and her father believed she was meant

to serve the spirits. This belief was rooted in the tradition of the *Numd'siaryv ne*, a woman promised to the deity Num, who thus could not marry. Marina was also considered ritually pure; her menstrual cycles ceased in her early thirties, which, in the context of Nenets belief, allowed her to freely participate in all Nenets ritual activities—an important privilege not granted to all women. Prior to her conversion, participation in these rituals was a vital part of her life. Marina frequently talked about shamanism and the ritual practices of her people, often with a tone of nostalgia and loss.

After settling in Beloiarsk, Marina remained a symbolic hub and a point of connection for her kin network, which spanned both the tundra and sedentary spaces. She was both a bearer of traditional knowledge and a knower in the sense of her familiarity with Russian culture. She possessed excellent skills in both spoken and written Russian and was known for her natural fluency in Russian conversation (“Marina talks well”). She held a permanent job as a hospital cleaner in the village and owned two rooms in a former Soviet communal apartment building. Known locally as “barracks,” these poorly built wooden structures were originally constructed for former Gulag prisoners and exiles and later for Arctic shift workers, and were intended to be temporary. At the same time, Marina maintained strong ties with her nomadic relatives. This unique position made her a vital communication link between her tundra family and the Russian sedentary world.

After Marina's conversion, her role within the religious community became that of a crucial node in the missionary flow between the village and the tundra. Although she had given up nomadic life and settled in the village for the past fifteen years, she remained an expert on the tundra.

During my stay in Beloiarsk, I spent much of my time at her home. At one point, I realized that in order to be at the heart of all the religious, social, and economic activities of the Beloiarsk community, I only needed to sit in Marina's kitchen, drink countless cups of tea, and listen. I observed the continuous pendulum of motion from the tundra to the village and back—the movement of Nenets and missionaries, goods and ideas, values and meanings.

Sitting in her kitchen, I witnessed how Marina anticipated missionaries' visits, interacted with them once they arrived, and how they prepared missionary trips to the tundra together. They cooperatively drew up strategic plans, mapping the nomadic routes of particular campsites, rivers, and bogs, and jointly selecting the best locations in the tundra for future Christian summer camps. Missionaries meticulously recorded every detail about family composition, migration patterns, and the locations of Nenets campsites, thus animating the tundra in their minds.

Marina would describe where particular families were located that year, and what new developments had occurred during the missionaries' absence: who had died, who had been born, who had fallen away from community life, and who had expressed a desire to join it. At the same time, she advised on new directions and relatives who might be potential targets for missionary outreach. For instance, Marina might suggest that the missionaries visit a particular campsite or speak with a specific person whom she believed was ready to accept the Gospel. In reality, Marina was responsible for selecting which families or family members of her clan would be the focus of missionary efforts. She guided the missionaries according to her cultural understanding of the tundra and the internal power dynamics within her extended family.

During the long Arctic nights, Marina liked to dream about returning to the tundra. Her relatives would laugh at her, saying, "Marina is migrating [*kaslaet*] again!"

One way or another, I will return to the tundra, I won't live here [in Beloiarsk village] for my entire life.... I will prepare a chum, sew *mal'tsia* [traditional clothes] and go to live in the tundra. I will set up my chum not far from [the village] and live happily. I'll have everything in my chum—make a bed, put down floorboards, and even lay linoleum. I'll even get a carpet for my chum! And my bed will be good, too.... I'll buy plenty of blankets and pillows. I'll bring gas and get a good gas stove, so when the believing brothers visit me, I can cook for them. I'll get kettles and a cauldron. I'll get everything in my chum!

Valia

There was a charismatic church in Beloiarsk, consisting mainly of Khanty indigenous people. According to the same logic, similar to Nadia's church, the charismatic community was referred to as "Valia's church," with Valia, a Khanty woman in her forties, serving as an inner-clan missionary. Valia's church was located in Aksarka, a village next to Beloiarsk, and the Beloiarsk charismatic group was regarded as an extension of Valia's church. She was also an informal leader of her extended family. A married woman, the wife of a reindeer herder and mother of six, Valia had spent most of her life in the Polar Ural tundra as a *chumrabortnitsa* in a state farm reindeer brigade.

As a child, Valia showed a strong interest in studying and graduated from residential school as one of the top students. Her greatest dream was to continue her education in a big city and never return to the tundra. Despite her family's strong objections, she went to Salekhard and enrolled in a local

college, with plans to further her studies in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). She was a talented student with a sharp memory and a deep passion for learning. However, her family insisted on her return to the tundra. When her mother became ill, Valia gave up her education and returned to her parents' campsite, eventually marrying a reindeer herder. Despite this, her leadership qualities and reputation as a person "who knows" played a significant role in her life. When her daughters grew up and entered residential school, Valia persuaded her husband to settle in the village of Aksarka, so her children could continue their studies. Living in the village, Valia became a people's deputy and a published poet and writer.

Valia was a knower, both in the traditional sense and in the Russian world. As the granddaughter of a famous Khanty shaman, she was the keeper of her family's history and a repository of traditional wisdom. At the same time, she developed the skills and social abilities to navigate and thrive in the sedentary Russian world.

As far back as her life in the tundra, Valia met charismatic missionaries, and after her conversion, she became an inner missionary for her extended family. By the time of my fieldwork, more than fifty of her kinsmen had followed her religious path. She became a key figure in guiding Christianity into the tundra amongst the Khanty indigenous people, and the shape of charismatic Christianity in the Polar Urals owes much to her personality.

Ethical Challenges and Anthropological Uncertainties

By the time I began my research in Beloiarsk in 2006, two religious communities existed—Baptist and charismatic—both predominantly indigenous, with a few exceptions of nonindigenous members (Russians or Ukrainians). Both communities were small, with around twenty and fifteen members, respectively, though the majority of their members were dispersed across the vast Yamal, Polar Ural, and European tundra regions. Neither community had a permanent pastor, and the intensity of their religious life fluctuated with frequent visits from missionaries coming from different parts of the post-Soviet space and abroad. Each time missionaries arrived, numerous tundra dwellers would come to the village to join prayer gatherings. These visiting missionaries would then head into the tundra, reaching even the most remote nomadic campsites by snowmobile, all-terrain vehicle, or reindeer team.

In the following years, I returned repeatedly to Beloiarsk and the Baidarata tundra, closely following the shifting religious landscape among the

indigenous communities. I witnessed the rise of Baptist and charismatic congregations, changing church affiliations, the constant arrival and departure of missionaries, the downfall of leaders, and the emergence of new ones.

The village of Beloiarsk was in turmoil. Conversions—whether to charismatic, evangelical, or unregistered Baptist movements—sparked intense conflicts: between competing missionaries, within the Nenets community of converts, and between converts and nonconverts. Rumors swirled about a missionary dispute escalating into a physical altercation, requiring police intervention. Others spoke of missionaries trekking across the tundra and of traditional shamanic “idols” being burned in acts of renunciation. One account told of a tundra woman who had converted to Baptist, left her “heathen” husband and sought refuge among fellow believers in the village. More unsettling were the grim tales of those who abandoned their traditional faith, only to meet tragic deaths in the tundra—punishment, it was said, by ancestral spirits.

A sense of agitation, even upheaval, hung over these transformations, as if something profoundly significant was at stake. Tensions also grew with local authorities and police. As the 2000s unfolded, the rise of Putin’s regime brought a shifting political landscape that increasingly made religious life precarious. The state’s tightening grip on religious expression, particularly among non-Orthodox groups, led to heightened scrutiny of evangelical movements. Missionary activities, briefly celebrated as expressions of freedom of faith, began to be viewed with suspicion, and the freedoms that had allowed for religious pluralism in the post-Soviet period were gradually eroded. This new climate of repression cast a shadow over the churches in Beloiarsk and beyond, as religious leaders navigated a more hostile environment.

During my second fieldwork trip to Beloiarsk in 2009, Marina, one of the first Nenets members of the local evangelical church, confronted me with a quiet but urgent concern. “You’re writing a book about us. And then what? You publish it, and they come and shoot us all.” Her words were a warning, a reflection of the fear that had settled over the small congregation. She leaned in, her voice dropping. “Last time you visited, after you left, the administration came. Then the police. They asked everyone about our church.”

Two years later, when I returned to Beloiarsk in 2011, the atmosphere had grown even more tense. This time, it was a Russian evangelical pastor from St. Petersburg—the leader and founder of the local Nenets church—who confronted me. He did not hide his suspicion. His questions were sharp and pressing, almost accusatory: Why was I interested in the lives of his community? What did I plan to do with the information I gathered? I had come

to study the struggles of religious minorities, and now, I was the one being interrogated. “Are you a member of the church? Have you repented of your sins? Do you pray, fast, and read the Bible?” he asked. In the end, he delivered a verdict: “These are our internal affairs and do not concern outsiders, we cannot accept a person who is not a member of our community.” He warned that he would instruct the entire congregation not to engage with me.

At that moment, the challenges of ethnographic research consisted not just in scheduling interviews or gaining access to prayer groups and worship services—my very presence was regarded as a threat. The community’s fear of surveillance and repression had intensified to the point that even basic hospitality was withdrawn. Members who had previously been open to hosting me now hesitated, wary of the risks associated with offering me shelter. I found myself struggling to maintain even a foothold in the field.

The Ethnographer’s Path

Ethnographic learning is not merely about gathering information; it is about transformation—both of the researcher and of the understanding they cultivate. Ethnography, as Michael Agar argues, is neither subjective nor objective, but an interplay between personal experience and scientific enterprise.⁵ Methodological debates have long challenged the notion of a neutral, detached observer, instead emphasizing the anthropologist’s embeddedness in the social and cultural worlds they study.⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod calls for “ethnographies of the particular,” shifting focus from broad cultural theories to lived experiences, encounters, and the complex ways that fieldwork is shaped by personal engagement.⁷ In this sense, the anthropologist is not just an outsider looking in but an individual whose own background, inclinations, and relationships influence the very production of ethnographic reality. Ethnographic knowledge, then, is not a fixed or discovered truth; it is shaped, produced, and sometimes even invented through the act of engagement itself.

But what happens when the world of others closes itself to the ethnographer, unwilling to reveal its inner workings? Or, on the contrary, what occurs when your interlocutors demand your complete openness and involvement,

5 Agar, *Speaking of Ethnography*, 12.

6 Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture”; Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork*; Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*; Stocking, *Observer Observed*.

7 Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture.”

pushing the boundaries of your own intimacy? And can the ethnographer's presence cause harm, as my interlocutors suspected?

In the following, I trace my path as an ethnographer, reflecting on my experience of researching and participating in people's religious lives and the often-painful process of making sense of the changing, uncertain, and dangerous world they live in. My ethnographic practice was particularly challenged by the fact that the religious community I studied was highly exclusive, actively seeking to close its boundaries to the outside world—of which, as a researcher, I was undeniably a part. This community, living in a state of constant tension and under the threat of religious harassment, navigated a reality fraught with challenges and marked by tragic narratives. Their religious experiences and life stories were shaped by a climate of persecution, uncertainty, and fear of exposure.

In this context, I was forced to confront a difficult decision: whether to remain a detached, alienated outsider or to immerse myself fully within the community. The ethical dilemma of whether to cross that boundary became even more pronounced as I realized the extent to which my position as an outsider was actually a practical issue. Given the extreme cold of the Arctic winters, the isolation of the region, and the presence of violence in remote settlements, even the status of “alienated outsider” felt increasingly untenable. In a place where survival itself often depended on the support and cooperation of the community, I could not afford to remain distanced. The harsh environment and the risk of danger left me with no choice but to rely on the very community I was studying.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that I was a single mother. For my 2011 field trip, I brought my eighteen-month-old son Fyodor with me, and he became not just a dependent, but an inseparable part of my field research. Fyodor's presence deepened my reliance on the community for practical support—shelter, transportation, and safety—and made maintaining a purely academic or detached stance impossible. My vulnerability as a mother, responsible for my child's care and protection, heightened my dependence on the very social bonds that sustained the people I was studying.

This blurring of the line between researcher and participant became a defining aspect of my ethnographic experience, redefining the relationship between myself and the people whose lives I sought to understand. The journey, then, was not just about understanding their religious lives but about understanding my own role in the process, the personal and ethical boundaries I had to navigate, and making compromises in the face of the dangers and complexities of the field and my own life.

In his article “The Atheist Anthropologist: Believers and Non-believers in Anthropological Fieldwork,” Ruy Llera Blanes raises the long-discussed question, dating back to Evans-Pritchard, of how the anthropologist’s personal belief (or lack thereof) is negotiated in ethnographic fieldwork, and how this negotiation shapes anthropological production.⁸ Like Blanes’s experience, my own ethnographic work demonstrates how the incorporation of personal belief into the anthropological project evolves into a methodological foundation, shifting from a peripheral to a central position within ethnographic research. In studying Nenets religious conversion experiences, the negotiation of my personal belief was not just a starting point for communication but a fundamental framework for my ethnographic project. In many ways, discussions about my status in the community and my personal beliefs were central to understanding people’s own religious experiences and negotiating the place of their religious community in the broader society. If a community professes detachment from the world, especially in an atmosphere of growing religious harassment, compounded by the historical trauma of Soviet-era religious persecution and the ongoing context of marginalization, how can they, or even would they, share the core of their faith and the inner workings of their religious life with an outsider? This question became a pivotal tension in my fieldwork, as it raised deeper issues of trust, boundary-making, and the very nature of religious belonging in a context of marginalization and persecution. The challenge of bridging this gap became an essential aspect of my ethnographic process—where my role was not just to observe but also to grapple with these boundaries, both personal and social.

My personal circumstances and experience of conversion allowed me to connect with the Beloiarsk Nenets and their religious life. My grandmother baptized me in the Orthodox Church at age eleven, in the last year of the Soviet Union, when changes were already in the air and Ukraine, where I am from, was on the brink of a major religious revival. A few years later, at sixteen, I chose to be baptized again, this time in one of the Protestant denominations, during the post-Soviet missionary boom. An American missionary came through my industrial hometown in Southern Ukraine, organizing a series of crowded gatherings in stadiums—an experience that seemed almost unbelievable to me, having been raised in a landscape shaped by state-sponsored atheism.

8 Blanes, “The Atheist Anthropologist,” 224–25.

However, as I shared my own experience of conversion with my research participants, I found myself in an awkward position, caught between being both an insider and an outsider. While this experience initially helped me bridge the boundaries of the religious community, it also complicated my research, as people began to expect my full immersion in their religious life. This blurred the essential self/other distinction crucial for ethnographic work.

When discussing an anthropologist's personal (dis)belief in the field, Ruy Llera Blanes suggests his own methodological answer:

So, rather than a progressive incorporation of myself as a member of a community, what developed throughout the construction of my "field" were certain relationships of a more intense character that built on a sense of familiarity but not belonging.⁹

In my ethnographic case, however, there was no space for the practice of being "familiar but not belonging." In negotiating my status, Beloiarsk believers firmly rejected the position of observer—whether detached (i.e., nonbelieving) or familiar (i.e., believing). "You have to be either a member of our church or leave this place," was their unequivocal stance. This created a dilemma that I had to navigate carefully in order to make my ethnographic work possible.

Perhaps what made the difference in my case was that my research unfolded over several years. I visited and revisited my ethnographic field sites multiple times, staying anywhere from a few weeks to several months at a time. Between 2006 and 2012, when I was in Beloiarsk or other villages and towns across the Yamal region and the Komi Republic, I never lived separately or rented a flat. Instead, I always shared my daily life with my research participants—whether it was sharing meals, sleeping in the same rooms, beds, or nomadic tents, traveling together, migrating in the tundra, hunting, cooking, or going shopping. This close sharing of everyday activities helped me connect with them on a deeper level. Even when I was not physically in the field, we maintained close ties, exchanging phone calls, letters, and small gifts, and regularly doing favors for each other. After 2014, my research continued remotely, shifting to online interviews and staying in touch via phone or email for local updates. Over the years, these interactions fostered strong bonds of friendship and mutual assistance, which became an integral part of the research process itself.

9 Blanes, "The Atheist Anthropologist," 227.

“Are You a Spy?”—Unwelcome and Under Suspicion

When I first arrived in Beloiarsk in 2006, I was warmly welcomed, and the community seemed open and eager to share their lives with me. As my research continued over the years, particularly with the rise of Putin's regime, which began to exert pressure on religious minorities and delegitimize international missionary movements, the ethical challenges surrounding my presence in the community grew more complex and intensified with each visit. I noticed a shift, when the initial warmth gave way to caution, and I began to sense a growing unease. People started to question me more intently, asking the same questions over and over: Who was I? Why was I interested in their religious community? What was the nature and purpose of my research?

Marina, a converted Nenets in her fifties and my main research gatekeeper, repeatedly voiced her concerns, her anxiety growing as the discrimination against believers became more pronounced in the region. “Won't you betray us?” she asked. “You know, there are [religious] persecutions going on, and people keep telling us that you might collect information against believers.” Her words echoed the growing mistrust I faced. Despite my reassurances, explaining my genuine intentions and the academic nature of my research, the questions did not stop. A few days later, I would find myself answering the same doubts, trying to calm the suspicions that seemed to be festering within the community.

This growing discomfort became an ethical dilemma I had not fully anticipated when I first set foot in the village. The constant need to reassure, to allay fears about the potential consequences of my presence, weighed heavily on me. My role as an outsider was blurred, and the ethical line between researcher and participant became increasingly difficult to navigate. The fears of betrayal and the risk of persecution that my presence seemed to trigger added a new layer of complexity to my research and my relationship with the people I had come to study.

Furthermore, I soon discovered that after my departure from Beloiarsk in 2006, some representatives from the local administration in Aksarka village, the center of Priural'skii District, had arrived to conduct an inquiry about “sectarians” in Beloiarsk. This inquiry came at a time when the Beloiarsk community was slowly transitioning into the Baptist Brethren, with its ideology of religious persecution and a politics of social closure. For the community, the arrival of authorities was seen as the first sign of state-sponsored persecutions. And they associated it with my presence.

The community grew suspicious, questioning whether I was a spy or an informer. This mirrored what Jeffrey Sluka described in his fieldwork in

Belfast, where his presence sparked fears of surveillance and persecution.¹⁰ Just as Sluka struggled with being both an outsider and a target of suspicion, I faced the challenge of being perceived as a potential threat rather than a neutral researcher. The trust I had built with the community began to erode as these suspicions mounted.

Sluka's argument—that ethnographers in politically sensitive or violent contexts may shift from neutral observers to active participants—resonated with my experience. As my presence became increasingly questioned, I found myself caught up in the community's internal conflicts. I was no longer just observing religious transformations; I was now implicated in a larger political and ethical situation. This placed me in an ethical bind, as I struggled to balance my commitment to my research with the growing sense of responsibility I felt toward the individuals whose lives I was studying. Sluka's insights into the anthropologist's shifting role are particularly relevant here. My role as a neutral observer was increasingly problematic and the need for objectivity had to be weighed against my moral responsibility to protect both my research participants and myself from harm.

The culmination of these challenges came during my fieldwork between February and July 2011. Continuing my research was not easy for many reasons. First, I knew what awaited me in the field—the heightened suspicion and volatile atmosphere that had begun to surround my presence. Second, by that time, I was a single mother and was hesitating to take my eighteen-month-old son, Fyodor, with me in the field. After discussions with my advisor, Dr. Patty A. Gray, and reading *Children in the Field* by Joan Cassel, I made the decision to take my son with me.

Fyodor's presence in the field dramatically altered my relationships with the people I had been working with. Under harsh living conditions and amidst constant scrutiny, I found myself having to rely on the community for help and support. Entrusting my child to them in such an environment was a vulnerable act, but it opened doors that had been closed off by suspicion. My willingness to trust, combined with Fyodor's innocent sincerity, gradually broke through the barriers of distrust. This shift was pivotal in deepening my relationships with the community and transforming my fieldwork experience.

However, this openness occurred against a backdrop of increasing influence from the Brethren's social orientations within the Nenets community. By this time, winter 2011, the community had fully embraced the Brethren's principles of separating the "church" from the "world," along with a strong

10 Sluka, "Participant Observation," 115.



Figure 1.6. Author's son learning to use a shamanic drum from a young Nenets man. Photograph by the author.

emphasis on the ongoing theme of religious persecution by the state. These ideological shifts led the once welcoming community to become far more closed off and cautious towards outsiders.

In addition to these changes, the community had found a leader in Sergei, a Russian missionary from St. Petersburg, who frequently visited Beloiarsk and the Baidarata tundra. Sergei's absolute authority had grown among the converted Nenets, and his influence helped shape the community's increasingly insular practices. Under his guidance, the community began to view my presence with increasing suspicion, ultimately leading them to openly accuse me of being an informer—someone who, whether knowingly or unknowingly, might betray “God's people.” This new development marked a turning point in my relationship with the community, creating a significant barrier to my work.

A few days after my arrival in Beloiarsk in February 2011, Sergei, the forty-eight-year-old missionary, asked to speak with me privately. His friendly demeanor, with his smile, kindness, and easygoing nature, concealed a deep wariness and suspicion. He straightforwardly said that he did not want to see me in the religious community, explaining that while he might trust me as a person, he could not extend that trust to ethnography as a discipline.

"Some ethnographers came the other day to Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra. They asked questions, took pictures, and then the wave of persecutions [from the local authorities] began," he told me. "You must understand, these are God's people here, and I must protect them from outside harm." Sergei's tone grew more resolute as he added that he planned to instruct the Nenets believers to avoid interacting with me. Given his undisputed authority within the Beloiarsk community, his warning made it clear that my ethnographic project was on the verge of collapse.

This moment marked a profound turning point in both my research and my personal journey, as the field had transformed into a kind of "rite of passage." In that moment, I came to a stark realization: the only way to continue my research was to fully immerse myself, to open up and expose my own vulnerabilities. I understood that if I wanted to gain access to the most concealed aspects of people's lives, I had to completely deconstruct my own boundaries. I had to "strip myself bare" in the most wrenchingly sincere way, offering an authenticity that mirrored the openness I hoped to receive in return.

What followed was a four-hour conversation with Sergei—a conversation that was not just about exchanging ideas, but about complete, unguarded honesty. It was not a negotiation, nor an attempt to win him over. It was something far more desperate, more visceral. I laid out every detail of my personal life, exposing layers of myself that I had never shared with anyone before. In the process, I was not just telling him about my life; I was entrusting him with my vulnerability, my despair, my fears, failures, and expectations—not just as a researcher, but as a person searching for understanding.

I did not believe, even for a moment, that this radical openness would forge a foundation of trust between us. I had no illusions that my confessions would change his mind or erase his suspicions. It was not a strategy; it was a final act of surrender. I simply wanted the wall of distrust to crack, even if only for a moment. As I bared myself to Sergei, I found myself continuously striving to demonstrate my sincerity in a way he could accept. I reassured him that my intentions were not to expose or harm the community but to genuinely understand their experiences and struggles. I emphasized that my research was not about documenting them from a distance, but about engaging with their realities in a respectful and empathetic way. I told him that I wanted to help this community, people who had become so dear to me over the years, and do whatever I could to protect them.

Sergei mostly listened in silence, occasionally interrupting with brief questions or sharing his own stories. Then, without a word, he left the room,

leaving me puzzled. He eventually accepted my presence in Beloiarsk, though he never fully trusted me. He informed the community that I was welcome and even expressed hope that I might one day become a member of the church. At the same time, he carefully controlled the flow of information, allowing the Nenets to interact with me but warning them not to discuss tithing practices or any other economic matters within the church.

The reaction from ordinary members of the community, however, was strikingly different—especially among the Nenets women. They seemed to take Sergei's words with a palpable sense of relief, having anxiously awaited the outcome of our conversation, hanging on his final decision. I do not know exactly what he told them, but just a few hours after our long discussion, Marina ran to me and exclaimed with excitement, "Now you are our sister! Sergei said you can stay!" From that moment, their attitude toward me shifted. They eagerly helped me find accommodation, assisted with childcare, and welcomed me into their homes and daily lives with warmth and openness.

Blurred Boundaries and Shifting Identities in the Field

Yet this moment of acceptance brought with it new challenges. As I became more integrated into the community, the boundaries between my role as an anthropologist and my personal identity began to blur. What started as an attempt to gain access and build trust soon became a deeper entanglement in their daily lives. I was no longer just an observer; I was becoming part of their world. I was invited to prayer meetings, expected to participate in worship, and drawn into discussions about faith. Nenets women began confiding in me, sharing community secrets—some of which raised ethical concerns. My ability to maintain professional distance was slipping away, replaced by a growing sense of responsibility toward the people who had welcomed me as one of their own.

This experience profoundly reshaped my understanding of ethnographic research. I began to grasp that knowledge was not something I gathered from the community—it was something we created together. The research was no longer a one-sided pursuit; it was a shared endeavor, shaped through mutual learning. I had become part of the very process of discovery, immersed in the lived realities of the people around me. This shift marked a true transformation in my fieldwork, turning it from an academic exercise into a collective effort where every voice—including my own—along with my body, senses, and emotions, played a crucial role in shaping our shared understanding.

As I settled into this new dynamic, I deliberately structured my ethnographic approach to ensure that the Nenets were not just participants but active conductors and designers in the production of knowledge. After Sergei acknowledged my presence and expressed hope that I might one day be part of their community, the converted Nenets of Beloiarsk naturally assumed the role of my teachers. They taught me to pray and fast, to read and interpret the Bible, to sing Christian songs. Over time, they began to trust me with aspects of their lives that were often concealed from the missionaries.

I was eventually able to see and experience firsthand the complexities and tensions that shaped Christian life in the Nenets tundra. The community welcomed me into their daily practices: we prayed and fasted together, attended prayer groups, and engaged in heartfelt discussions about faith. People passing by often looked at us with suspicion, viewing us as sectarians. “Are you carrying your God with you?” they laughed, pointing at the plastic bag where Nadia, a Nenets woman, carried her Bible. I also learned how to secretly watch television—banned by the missionaries—huddled under blankets during the night. Young women demonstrated how to swap long skirts for jeans once the missionaries left the village, only to change back before their return. They confided in me their doubts, their struggles to reconcile faith with tradition, their love stories and family fights, their hopes for the future, their expectations and dreams.

In this way, they shaped the contours of my research, revealing aspects of their daily existence at their own pace, in their own time, and on their own terms. Rather than imposing an external framework, I trusted them to guide the process—choosing what was significant and what to withhold. Through this journey, I learned that ethnographic knowledge is not merely about documenting a culture; it is about building relationships, navigating boundaries, and respecting the agency of those who share their stories with us. If I have misinterpreted this experience, then this book would be a missed opportunity.

Part 2

Religion, Power, and Modernity:
From the Soviet Era to the Putin Regime

2. Modernity: Russian, Unequal, Contaminating

Abstract: This chapter explores how Nenets religious conversion intersects with notions of modernity shaped by centuries of Russian colonialism, Soviet reforms, and post-Soviet globalization. Conversion to Christianity signified both integration into “Russian modernity” and a rupture from tradition, reflecting tensions between tundra and urban life. The Soviet era transformed Siberia into a laboratory of modernity through policies of sedentarization, Russification, and anti-religious campaigns, marginalizing indigenous peoples amid industrial expansion. The figure of the “Russian” embodies the ambivalence of colonial modernity—of offering progress alongside cultural disruption. The Nenets negotiated and reshaped (post-)Soviet modernity. They adapted to new economic and social realities, appropriated state symbols, and expanded their cultural and geographic horizons, transforming imposed structures into a dynamic process of cultural mediation and agency.

Keywords: multiple modernities, Soviet modernity, indigenous sedentarization, colonialism, anti-religious campaigns

The train that always moves forward is stopped here, forever.
—A Nenets man

Modernity-Thinking: Living on the Periphery of Space and Time

Conversion is not merely about adopting new beliefs but a broader reconfiguration of personhood, social relations, and ways of engaging with the modern world, as scholars have long recognized. It positions converts within global flows of Christianity, markets, and ideologies of progress, time and space. Among the Nenets, conversion to Christianity has been deeply intertwined

with shifting visions of modernity, governance, and identity within the context of postsocialism. In my conversations with both converted and nonconverted Nenets, they often described the mass religious conversion in the tundra as part of the changing way of life in the Arctic—an inevitable step in the arrival of what they called modernity.

The tensions surrounding religious conversion amplified often apocalyptic images of times fading away and the inevitable end of the “true Nenets life.” While living with Nenets in Beloiarsk, I often overheard discussions about the turning point in the history of Nenets nomadism and traditional culture. A Nenets woman in her fifties expressed her anxiety in the following way:

What is happening now—civilization is coming. *Kaput* [the end] is going to be with us soon. Surely, the gas pipeline will be laid soon. They will put a railway [in the tundra], and then I don’t know what will happen. Surely, civilization will get us in trouble.... Even worse [things] will happen here, everything is bad.... So, I tell her [referring to her adult daughter], send them to school, because Russian life is coming now. We can do nothing without the Russian language. Life is changing now.

As Mathijs Pelkmans suggests, societies experiencing high rates of religious conversion are often those where grand projects of modernization have faltered or been destabilized by the effects of global capitalism.¹ Religious conversion in the post-Soviet Arctic tundra was framed by the discourse of modernity—what James Ferguson refers to as the “expectations of modernity” and others as the “dreams of modernity.”² Expectations, predicament, failure, and success in becoming modern shaped the sense of inevitability surrounding changes in Nenets tundra life. For the Nenets, as for other indigenous communities in the region, religious conversion was not merely a matter of religious transformation but an integral part of the broader historical processes of modernity.

This sense and experience of modernity was imposed on the Nenets through centuries of colonial rule by the Russian Empire, followed by the Soviet state and the post-Soviet transition, each marked by sweeping social reforms and the integration of the Nenets into a modern state system and the global order. Hence, to grasp the complexities and ambiguities of religious transformation in the post-Soviet Arctic, it is essential to first understand the historical backdrop and what the Nenets themselves call, and perceive

1 Pelkmans, “Introduction,” 5.

2 Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*; Pelkmans, “Introduction,” 2–9.

as, modernity. This notion of modernity—often contrasted with tradition or traditional culture—formed the backbone of social and religious change, shaping how the Nenets interpreted their shifting world, their evolving lives, and their experiences of faith.

Modernity, along with the dichotomy tradition vs. modernity, are used below as primarily emic terms. While these notions are social constructs, they were frequently articulated by the Nenets and played a significant role in shaping their expectations, social tensions, and life choices. The dichotomy between tradition and modernity became an inescapable lens through which the Nenets viewed their experiences, deeply embedded in their worldview—a hierarchical framework that shaped their understanding of themselves and the world around them. As we will see, the experience of religious conversion further exacerbated these tensions, as conversion to Protestant Christianity was frequently interpreted as the adoption of a Russian faith and modern life. It presented both new opportunities and threats: it was viewed as a means of integration into the global order, yet it was also perceived as a threat to Nenets authenticity and a severing of ties with traditional ways of life.

In this chapter, I conduct an archaeology of Nenets modernity, exploring the historical processes that have shaped their experience and understanding of modernity, primarily through the lens of the Russian colonial order. I examine how the Nenets have adapted, reshaped, and reinterpreted this experience, revealing the complexities of modernity as it is lived and redefined by the Nenets. In doing so, the chapter offers an alternative, indigenous perspective on what it means to be modern in a globalized world.

Modernity (*sovremennost'*) was often used synonymously with culture (*kul'tura*), equating both with civilization and contrasting them with a perceived absence of it.³ As Caroline Humphrey points out, the term “culture” in this context is linked to a set of ideas that Soviet ideology merged, including being scientific, modern, correct, true, and communist.⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod observes that such distinctions—modernity vs. tradition—have historically enforced separations that carry a sense of hierarchy.⁵ Both culture and modernity thus served as instruments for “othering,” reinforcing a hierarchical social structure that positioned Arctic indigenous societies as objects to be observed by the collective “Russians”—a term that, for the Nenets, symbolizes colonial power. The Nenets had long internalized this

3 Anderson, *Identity and Ecology*, 188; cf. Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture.”

4 Humphrey, *Karl Marx Collective*, 364.

5 Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” 137–38.

colonial perspective, viewing themselves as the periphery in relation to the Russian colonial center—both spatially and temporally.

Once, I spoke with two settled Nenets men in Salekhard, both of whom lived in the city. One was a strong advocate for Nenets traditional nomadic culture, while the other was more reluctant. Their conversation eventually turned into a lively discussion:

First man: “Bro, why should we go back to that monkey world? Let’s live in the modern world! We won’t need reindeer meat—soon it’ll be meat made from paper. And it is cold living there [in the tundra].... This is a step backwards, to this primitive communal system. But this is really bad. Anyway, in about fifty years, there won’t be any tundra Nenets left at all.”

Second man: “But in the tundra, it is only reindeer that you depend on. A man is a master of the tundra, of reindeer, and he supports his family. And a woman in the tundra does women’s things. And their whole life is organized. There are no power structures weighing upon them. Freedom! And the Nenets would never exchange this freedom for anything.”

First man: “I would exchange this freedom for television, a telephone, hot water in the bathroom—for progress.”

Second man: “You change it for the sake of a good Russian life. But this ‘good life’ is in quotes. You would need to travel a thorny path to be one of them.”

In local vernacular discourse, the tundra lifestyle was often perceived as a relic of the past, accompanied by an image of loss—whether it be the loss of land, ancestral heritage, culture, or authenticity. This perception was consistently overshadowed by the notion of advancing modern life, which spread, displaced, and disempowered the tundra people. The conceptualization of Nenets culture within the framework of progress and development evoked a prevalent perception of inequality in relation to modernity, which was often perceived as “Russian modernity.”

“Stop sending me back to the Stone Age!” a settled Nenets exclaimed during a discussion about his time living in the tundra, as we talked about nomadism and reindeer herding in Yamal. For him, and many others, tundra life was linked to the past, “out of step with the rest of the world’s time,” as Ferguson writes in regard to African communities, which are often viewed as temporally disconnected from global modernity and existing in a state

out of sync with the prevailing global timeline.⁶ This is reminiscent of a late 1970s South African apartheid joke, where a pilot announced, “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to South Africa.... To adjust to local time, please set your watches back thirty years,”⁷ Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov recalls an example from the 1930s: A pilot flying from the city of Krasnoiarsk to the remote Taimyr Peninsula perceived his journey not only as a flight through space but also through time; he felt as though he had landed in the seventeenth century.⁸ From the perspective of those living within the center of global modernity, northern Siberia represents not only deviant spatial disarray but also a breach of the commonsense temporal order.

What is crucial to emphasize in this process is that the Nenets were not merely passive recipients or victims of the (post)colonial order. Rather, they were active agents in shaping their own experience of modernity. In their encounters with external forces, they did not simply absorb or succumb to the pressures of globalization and colonialism; instead, they negotiated, resisted, and reinterpreted these forces in ways that aligned with their own cultural values and identities.

The concept of multiple, alternative, or vernacular modernities provides valuable insight into this dialectical interplay between the global order and the Nenets universe.⁹ It sheds light on the asymmetry between what the Nenets perceive as modernity and tradition, revealing a dynamic where inequality and disempowerment exist alongside Nenets responses and agency. Within this gap, they elaborated a unique response—becoming “differently modern.”

In this chapter, I aim to reconstruct the Nenets ideologies of modernity by examining the diverse and heterogeneous ideas, values, and concepts that shaped their imagination and expectations of what it means to be modern. Drawing on Marshall Sahlins’s understanding of culture as a creative project of indigenizing modernity (an idea that adapts Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of bricolage), I explore how the Nenets appropriated and recycled various external values, practices, and concepts to construct their own versions of modernity.¹⁰ This process involved the selective reconfiguration of elements

6 Ferguson, “Theory from the Comaroffs.”

7 Ferguson, “Theory from the Comaroffs.”

8 Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*, 80.

9 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*; Knaft, *Critically Modern*; Englund and Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-narratives”; Van der Veer, *Conversion to Modernities*; Sahlins, “On the Anthropology of Modernity.”

10 Sahlins, “On the Anthropology of Modernity”; Sahlins, “What Is Anthropological.”

from their history and external influences, allowing them to shape an indigenous understanding of modernity. As this book will demonstrate, religious conversion became one of the key tools in this broader process of becoming “alternatively modern,” offering a framework through which the Nenets navigated, adapted to, and resisted the forces of change that sought to redefine their place in the world.

Siberian Colonization

The Nenets, a nomadic people, were drawn into the orbit of Russian imperial expansion as early as the sixteenth century. This incorporation was part of a broader colonial movement in which the Russian state pushed eastward into Siberia, transforming vast, sparsely populated lands into extensions of the empire. The conquest of Siberia was a centuries-long, complex process involving military campaigns, economic colonization, and shifting alliances, during which indigenous groups, including the Nenets, sought to resist, adapt, or negotiate their place within the expanding imperial order.

The Russian state formalized its control over Siberia through the imposition of the tax system (*iasak*), a fur tribute levied on indigenous communities. More than just a mechanism of economic extraction, *iasak* served as a tool of imperial sovereignty, compelling tribute-paying peoples to acknowledge the authority of the tsar.¹¹ To administer these distant lands, the empire established fortified settlements that functioned as centers of governance, trade, and missionary activity. These outposts not only symbolized the Russian presence but also played a crucial role in expanding state control, often serving as launch points for deeper incursions into indigenous territories.

Despite state efforts to consolidate its rule, the vastness and remoteness of the Siberian frontier made governance precarious. Many indigenous communities, including the Nenets, retreated deep into the tundra to evade direct Russian control. Yet, even in these distant regions, the empire's reach was felt through expanding trade networks, taxation policies, and Russian Orthodox missionary efforts that gradually reshaped local ways of life. The spread of Orthodox Christianity from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century further reinforced Russian influence, often through the forced resettlement of indigenous populations into villages where their traditional belief systems were systematically undermined. Although the religious impact of Orthodox missions was uneven, they played a key role in the

11 Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, 38–45.

broad process of cultural transformation, leaving lasting imprints on Nenets society.

The nineteenth century brought new pressures as the abolition of serfdom in 1861 spurred Russian and Ukrainian migration to Siberia. Seeking to expand agricultural production, the state encouraged peasant settlers to cultivate the land, intensifying competition over resources and further marginalizing indigenous groups. This period also saw a surge in resource extraction, with western Siberia becoming a hub for fur trading, gold mining, and, later, oil and gas exploration.

By the early twentieth century, the Russian presence in the North was firmly established. Yet, for centuries, Russian administrators perceived the Arctic as an empty, lawless periphery, devoid of social order. Indigenous peoples of northern Siberia were cast as the ultimate other—wild, stateless societies existing at the margins of civilization. This ideological framing justified successive waves of territorial reorganization, from the establishment of trading posts and Orthodox missions to the sweeping collectivization campaigns of the Soviet era. The state sought to impose order by constructing fortresses, trading posts, villages, state farms, and towns—transforming the tundra into a governed space. As Aimar Ventsel notes, these “civilized” spots were imagined by state officials and Russian newcomers as culturally significant—lived—spaces that stood in the contrast to the vast “wilderness”—a social and cultural construction of tundra as a wild and empty territory.¹² To enliven what it saw as empty, unstructured land, the state inscribed its presence onto the landscape through settlements and roads, asserting control over both space and people. This imposition of hierarchy, governance, and legal structures reflected a broader colonial logic—one that cast indigenous societies as backward and in need of assimilation into modern statehood. Northern Siberia, depicted as the state’s borderlands, embodied an idealized wildness—a “primordial emptiness” that stood in stark contrast to the structured, meaningful space of the sedentary center.¹³

Throughout history, what the Russian state saw as an unstructured void—a frontier awaiting civilization—was, for the Nenets, a landscape

12 Ventsel, *Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity*, 129–35.

13 As Yuri Slezkine writes: “From the birth of the irrational savage in the early eighteenth century to the repeated resurrection of the natural man at the end of the twentieth they [the inhabitants of Russia’s northern borderlands] have been the most consistent antipodes of whatever it meant to be Russian. Seen as an extreme case of backwardness-as-beastliness and backwardness-as-innocence, they have provided a remote but crucial point of reference for speculations on human and Russian identity,” Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, ix.

deeply embedded with kinship networks, seasonal migrations, and sacred geographies. While the state viewed the tundra as an empty expanse to be ordered and developed, the Nenets experienced it as a lived space, rich with meaning and orientation.¹⁴ Their intimate knowledge of the land—its rivers, lakes, hills, campsites, migration routes, and even the tracks left behind—shaped their sense of place. What appeared to outsiders as a vast, featureless terrain was, for the Nenets and other indigenous peoples of Siberia, a landscape inscribed with stories, histories, and relationships.

In the Nenets tundra of the Yamal Peninsula and the Polar Urals, what the state perceived as chaotic and ungoverned was, for the Nenets, a structured and organized world, shaped by cyclical movements tied to the seasons, kin-based territorial organization, reindeer migrations, and economic strategies.¹⁵ Where the state imposed maps, borders, and administrative divisions, the Nenets mapped their land through campsites, migration routes, fishing spots, hunting trails, graves, and sacred sites. These places were not mere locations but living markers of kinship, social organization, and spiritual knowledge—elements that sustained Nenets life in the Arctic.

The Nenets engaged with the state on their own terms, navigating Russian rule through resistance, adaptation, and negotiation. Despite centuries of colonial imposition, they ensured that the tundra remained not only a space of state control but also a landscape of indigenous agency and resilience. This long history of interaction shaped the contours of Russian–Nenets relations, laying the groundwork for the even more radical transformations of the Soviet era, when modernization policies sought to reshape Nenets society on an unprecedented scale.

Conversion to Soviet Modernity: The Early Soviet Period

The Soviet “century of *perestroikas*” was marked by sweeping reforms across all aspects of life in Siberia.¹⁶ The North became a laboratory of Soviet modernity. “Lenin’s nationalities policy and cultural revolution substantially shook up the previously sleepy and immovable North,” reported a Soviet newspaper in 1932.¹⁷ A significant body of literature examines the history

14 Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 224; Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 542–43; Khomich, “Materialy po narodnym znaniiam.”

15 Brodnev, “Ot rodovogo stroia”; Brodnev, “Iz istorii zemel'nykh”; Dolgikh, *Ocherki po etnicheskoi; Stammler, Reindeer Nomads*; Kvashnin, *Nenetskoe olenevodstvo*.

16 Grant, *In the Soviet House*.

17 Sovetskii Sever, “Sovetskii Sever,” 8.

of Soviet modernization reforms in northern Siberia.¹⁸ Below, I briefly outline the key aspects of “Soviet modernity” as it was conceptualized and implemented in the region.

The first steps toward implementing Soviet modernity in northern Siberia were led by the Committee for Assisting the Peoples of the Northern Periphery, known as the Committee of the North.¹⁹ This committee’s mission was to integrate the indigenous peoples of the Arctic into the broader Soviet system, aiming to bring them into the economic, cultural, and political fold of the state. Under the Committee’s guidance, the Soviet government’s first major actions in the 1920s and 1930s included the classification and legal definition of Siberia’s indigenous groups—referred to as the “lesser [*malye*] peoples of the North”—alongside the implementation of reforms in northern territorial administration. These reforms aimed to enhance control over the Arctic territories and their indigenous populations.²⁰ Siberia and the Arctic were divided into regions and administrative units to facilitate governance. Initially, the administrative division was established on an ethnic or “nationality” basis, with federal republics and districts founded according to the principle of ethnicity. However, the ethnic borders that the government sought to implement were problematic in the North, particularly among the nomadic populations. Indigenous groups who migrated across vast territories were expected to adhere to the administrative boundaries they were assigned, even though these territories did not always align with their traditional migratory patterns. This marked an early attempt at reshaping indigenous administration through territorial reforms.

The government established various forms of indigenous governance to oversee these new territorial arrangements. These included the creation of indigenous administration bodies, such as “tribal assemblies” and “tribal soviets,” which had executive authority over designated tribal territories.²¹ These bodies were intended to maintain the traditions and customs of each tribe, provided that they did not conflict with the laws of the new socialist state. The tribal soviets, in particular, were seen as an extension of Russian state power, despite the idea that genealogical clans were meant to form the basis of these local councils. This process of administrative reorganization

18 Balzer, *The Tenacity of Ethnicity*; Slezkine, “From Savages to Citizens”; Grant, *In the Soviet House*; Fondahl, *Gaining Ground*; Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*; Kuoljok, *The Revolution in the North*; Vakhtin, “Native Peoples.”

19 Gurvich, “Printsipy leninskoi natsional'noi”; Zibarev, *Sovetskoe stroitel'stvo*.

20 Kiselev et al., “Sovetskoe stroitel'stvo”; Popov, “Ekonomicheskoe raionirovanie”; Kantor and Suslov, *Mestnye organy*.

21 Shipikhin, “K sozdaniiu natsional'no-tuzemnykh”; Averchenko, “Nekotorye problemy.”

was a key part of early Soviet efforts to control indigenous populations and integrate them into the broader framework of socialist governance.

In the early years of the Soviet state, these communities were viewed as living in a stage of “primitive communism,” a concept derived from Lenin’s vision of a “noncapitalistic path” for the development of “backward peoples.”²² According to this ideology, these indigenous groups were seen as being at a unique stage of social development—without class stratification or class struggle. This theoretical framework suggested that the absence of capitalist structures in their societies could enable a smooth transition to socialism, bypassing the complexities of capitalist development. The Committee of the North, therefore, became the vehicle for what was seen as the “uplift” of these communities, attempting to guide them through Soviet modernization while shaping their economic and cultural futures. Their goal was to “pull up” (*podtiagivat*) these “backward peoples” into contemporaneity, leading them forward into the modern future. This process involved implanting new rhythms, technologies, and representations of time, alongside different patterns of land use and spatial conceptualization. A vice-chairman of the Committee of the North, Anatolii Skachko, wrote in 1931:

This means that if the whole of the USSR, in the words of comrade Stalin, needs ten years to run the course of development that took Western Europe fifty to a hundred years, then the Small Peoples of the North, in order to catch up with the advanced nations of the USSR, must, during the same ten years, cover the road of development that took the Russian people one thousand years to cover.²³

The integration of Siberian indigenous peoples into Soviet society occurred through various reformist projects, collectively referred to as “Soviet construction” (*sovetskoe stroitel'stvo*). In this context, the Northern peoples became the focus of “radical socialist reformation.” The ultimate goal, as Soviet ethnographer Ilia Gurvich wrote, was to help these “extremely backward non-Great Russian [*nevelikorusskii*] peoples catch up with central Russia, which had already advanced far ahead.”²⁴

Speaking at a meeting of the Committee of the North in 1925, the distinguished Soviet ethnographer Vladimir Bogoraz declared, “We have to

22 Sergeev, *Nekapitalisticheskii put'*; Gurvich, “Osushchestvlenie leninskoi”; Antropova, “Problema nekapitalisticheskogo.”

23 Cit. by Slezkine, “From Savages to Citizens,” 58.

24 Gurvich, “Osushchestvlenie leninskoi,” 17.

send to the North not scholars, but missionaries—missionaries of new culture and Soviet statehood.”²⁵ This statement highlighted the extent to which the Soviet state became deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Northern peoples. Soviet reforms were often framed as part of a broader mission of modernization, with the state presenting its policies as efforts to implant Soviet order in the region.²⁶ These reforms were viewed by the state as missionary projects designed to bring Soviet civilization and culture to the northern periphery.

Zealous cultural expeditions (*kul'tpokhody*) were organized to the North with the goal of conquering the Arctic and integrating the so-called backward Northern peoples into Soviet modernity. These missions brought a wide range of Soviet “soldiers of the cultural battlefield” to the region—scholars, graduating students, social activists, soldiers, doctors, teachers, state employees, and collectivizers. They stayed for months and years, attempting to master the North and bring “civilization” to its indigenous populations while fighting against what they saw as backwardness.²⁷

One of the core elements of the early Soviet campaign to integrate the indigenous peoples of the North into Soviet modernity was the establishment of new educational initiatives. These efforts included literacy campaigns, the creation of written languages, and the development of school networks and training courses. The goal was to provide the Northern indigenous peoples with the tools to participate in the socialist project, thereby shaping a utopian society based on Soviet principles.

The Soviet government also focused on training new teachers and cultural workers specialized in working in the North. One of the most innovative educational projects was the creation of mobile education units, designed to reach remote nomadic groups. These units were called “red chums,” or, depending on the region and the type of vehicle or structure used, “red yurts,” “red boats,” or “red yarangas.”²⁸

The red chum project aimed to raise the “cultural level” of indigenous peoples. Teachers, doctors, and cultural workers traveled with these mobile units, providing education, medical assistance, and promoting socialist construction. They were tasked with educating nomadic populations, explaining Soviet policies, and disseminating anti-religious propaganda.

25 Bogoraz, “Podgotovitel'nye mery,” 48.

26 Cf. Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*, 88, 132.

27 Antropova, “Uchastie etnografov”; Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, 221–25; Voskoboinikov, “Podgotovka v Leningrade”; Voskoboinikov, “Ob intelligentsii malykh”; Kuoljok, *The Revolution in the North*, 63.

28 Khazanovich, “*Krasnyi chum*”; Khazanovich, *Druz'a moi*; Skachkov, *Antireligioznaia rabota*; Suslov, “Piatnadstat' sovetsskikh.”

A red chum outfit in the Nenets tundra typically consisted of a portable tent, around fifty reindeer, some five sledges, musical instruments (such as a balalaika and accordion), a billiard table, a small library, a chess set, and even a portable cinema. These mobile schools and cultural hubs allowed teachers to live and work with nomadic groups for extended periods, sometimes traveling with them for months or even years. Teachers in these units would migrate over two thousand kilometers alongside indigenous groups, teaching subjects like language, math, and Soviet history.²⁹ Through these initiatives, the Soviet state sought not only to educate but also to instill its own values and vision of modernity, transforming the nomadic lives of the indigenous peoples into part of the larger socialist project. Eventually, a picture of indigenous people converted to Soviet modernity was drawn in reports from the North, such as the following from 1938:

Fifty Nenets [from Novaia Zemlia] study at secondary school.... Women deliver not in chums, but in district hospitals. Nenets listen to radio. Those who did not have their own written language nowadays read books in their native language. There are more Nenets teachers, poets, students ... and social activists each year. Novaia Zemlia is not a distant outskirts anymore.³⁰

Stalinism and the Accelerated Pace of Modernity

By the 1930s, with Stalin's "Great Transformation" and the acceleration of Soviet modernization (what Golovnev and Osherenko call "galloping sovietization"),³¹ the state began to implement radical approaches towards sovietization and industrialization in the North. As part of the final war against the backward past, ethnic and clan-based systems of administration were replaced by territorial and economic ones; traditional indigenous leadership was sidelined; the "class war" was redirected to target shamans and wealthy herders (*kulaki*); and nomadic lifestyles, viewed as a form of cultural backwardness, were subjected to complete eradication.³² Northern industrial development was prioritized over the traditional indigenous economy. With the abolition of the Committee of the North in 1935, the Arctic

29 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 307–10; Kuoljok, *The Revolution in the North*, 66–69.

30 Cited in Zelenin, "Narody krainego Severa," 34.

31 Golovnev and Osherenko, *Siberian Survival*, 69.

32 Dolgikh and Levin, "Perekhod ot rodoplemennykh"; Golovnev, "Indigenous Leadership."

regions were placed under the authority of the Main Administration of the Northern Sea Route (Glavsevmorput'), which became the "shock brigade" tasked with mastering the North. This body interfered in all spheres of economic and social activity in the region.³³

The accelerated pace of modernization led to the forced collectivization of property, including land and livestock, and the subsequent forced sedentarization of nomadic populations. Soviet policy sought to transform reindeer husbandry from a communal way of life into a productive industry, attempting to reduce the landscape to a vast open-air factory floor and reindeer herders to factory workers.³⁴ Nomadic lifestyles (*bytovoe kochevanie*) were declared a form of cultural backwardness, with the expectation that they would transition into the socialist future. As such, nomadism was seen as obsolete and destined to be replaced by what was termed "industrial nomadism."³⁵

In the following years, Soviet policy toward Northern indigenous peoples focused on the total sedentarization of nomadic populations. Nomadic lifestyles were seen as hindering the progress of modernization, while sedentary economies were viewed as essential for successful socialist construction and, therefore, modern.

One of the first projects targeted to change tundra space was the program of establishment of cultural bases (*kul'turnaia baza* or *kul'tbaza*) in the North.³⁶ Cultural bases were set up along migration routes, far from regional centers, with the aim of introducing Soviet ideals to remote indigenous communities. Designed as mini-Soviet towns, cultural bases were meant to serve as models of ideal Soviet life. Each base included a range of facilities: hospitals, kindergartens, boarding schools, shops, veterinary and agricultural units, a local research center, power stations, residential houses, bathhouses, meteorological stations, and House of the Native (*dom tuzemtsa*) or House of Culture (*dom kul'tury*) where indigenous people could watch movies, attend lectures, and receive hygienic instruction. Over time, some of these bases grew into large villages and district centers, integrating into the nomadic lifestyle.³⁷

33 Trautman, *Stalin's Last Frontier*.

34 Vitebsky, "Withdrawing from the Land," 188.

35 Bol'shakov, "Problema osedaniia kochevogo"; Kantor, "Problema osedaniia"; Gurvich, "Puti pereustroistva"; Vdovin, "Malye narodnosti Severa."

36 Suslov, "Piatnadstat' sovetskikh"; Terletskii, "Kul'tbazy Komiteta Severa"; Zelenin, "Narody krainego Severa."

37 On the creation of Yamal *kul'tbaza* in Yar-Sale see Shmyrev, "Yamal'skaia kul'tbaza"; Lipatova, *Sava Lutsa*, 70.

During the 1930s, and particularly after WWII, numerous trading posts, settlements, villages, and cultural bases emerged in the most remote Arctic tundra regions. These new settlements began to influence nomadic migration patterns, altering traditional routes and becoming centers of gravity for the exchange of goods, information, and cultural practices. Beloarsk village was one such newly established settlement, featuring its own school, hospital, clubhouse, and shops. In subsequent years, institutions such as Houses of Culture, Houses of Folk Art (*dom narodnogo tvorchestva*), theaters, clubs, propaganda teams (*agitbrigady*), libraries, and cinemas became common features in every northern town and village.

During the Stalinist period, mobile education units like the red chums were abolished and replaced by a boarding-school system, where children from the tundra were forced to spend around nine months per year away from their families. The use of their indigenous languages was forbidden for many decades, even in informal conversations between the children.³⁸

With the shift in Stalin's political course from the late 1930s onwards, the earlier Soviet nationalities policy for the Northern minorities transitioned into a policy of "Russification."³⁹ The language of instruction in schools gradually shifted to Russian, and native languages were banned in residential schools. Later, the policy of Russification was further promoted by Khrushchev's ideology of the "Soviet people." This Soviet Union-wide entity was meant to be ethnicity-neutral; however, as Nikolai Vakhtin notes, this monolithic unity "formed very quickly around the central core of the Russians."⁴⁰

The battle against religiosity became another priority of Soviet modernity. Over more than seventy years of anti-religious campaigns, religious persecution, the closure and destruction of places of worship, the activities of the Union of the Militant Godless, lectures on scientific atheism, and widespread anti-religious propaganda—all aimed at displacing religiosity from the minds of Soviet citizens. In Siberia and the North, the struggle against shamanism became an integral part of the anti-religious campaign and the process of socialist construction in the region.⁴¹ The first administrative sanctions against shamans, including the deprivation of voting rights, exclusion from participation in tribal soviets, the destruction of shamanic drums

38 Lunacharskii, "Zadachi Narkomprosa"; Prokof'ev, "Tri goda v samoedskoi"; Stebnitskii, *Shkola v tundre*; Bazanov and Kazanskii, *Shkola na Krainem Severe*; Liarskaya, "Boarding School on Yamal"; Bloch, *Red Ties*.

39 Vakhtin, "Native Peoples"; Vakhtin, "Iazyki narodov Severa."

40 Vakhtin, "Native Peoples," 53.

41 Suslov, "Shamanstvo i bor'ba s nim"; Skachkov, *Antireligioznaia rabota*.

and ritual items, as well as imprisonment and execution, developed into a systematic anti-religious battle. Cultural bases, red chums, schools, hospitals, village reading rooms, and state collective farms were targeted to become centers for the dissemination of anti-religious ideology. Anti-religious meetings, lectures, study groups, “godless corners,” and anti-religious wall newspapers became indispensable features of every public office. The Soviet public education system was prioritized toward promoting godless and anti-religious education. As a Soviet educator and activist, Innokentii Suslov, stated in 1931, “Not a single student should graduate from these educational institutions without proper godless training.”⁴²

This is how an elderly Nenets man narrated the story of Soviet anti-religious propaganda from the perspective of an indigenous person in the Arctic:

When he [a Nenets man] goes to a village, he hears from the Soviet power that God doesn't exist. But when he returns to the tundra, he sees his sacred sledge behind his chum. So he has a dilemma: “Damn, I have a sacred sledge, and yet the Russians tell me that there is no God. What shall I do?” Then he decides: “Well, let there not be a God in the village, and here [in the tundra] I have my own life, and I will keep my sacred sledge and will sacrifice. Just in case.”

From the 1950s onwards, industrial development in the northern territories became a key priority for the Soviet economy, fundamentally altering the environment, social landscape, and the lives of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic. As Nikolai Vakhtin observes, industrial enterprises often behaved “like a victorious army in an occupied town,” with Northern minorities reduced to mere suppliers of food and transport for the massive industrial projects.⁴³

The rapid pace of industrialization led to an influx of workers from various regions of the Soviet Union, dramatically altering the demographic composition of the Arctic. This incoming population outnumbered the indigenous inhabitants, turning them into minorities in their own homelands.⁴⁴ As Art Leete and Aimar Ventsel highlight, the construction of new settlements, the expansion of infrastructure, and the arrival of diverse populations gave rise

42 Suslov, “Shamanstvo i bor'ba s nim,” 148.

43 Vakhtin, “Native Peoples,” 49.

44 Khomich, “Sovernennyye etnicheskie”; Khomich, “Opyt izucheniia”; Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 76.

to a unique polar society, where different ethnic and social groups coexisted, united by shared economic interests. This interdependence facilitated the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and practices, significantly reshaping the region's social fabric.⁴⁵

However, to this day, Russians who may have lived in Siberia for several generations continue to refer to the other side of the Urals as the *materik* (mainland or continent) or *bol'shaia zemlia* (big land), framing the vast expanses of the Arctic or Siberia as if they were isolated islands.⁴⁶ As David Anderson points out, these newcomers “allegorically placed their adopted homes on islands—as if their life histories were those of colonists who had traversed wide and dangerous seas to reach a new land.”⁴⁷ These “islands of civilization” were scattered across the imagined sea of the “wilderness.” Many of the newcomers, even those who had lived in the North for decades, often lacked knowledge and respect for the local people and their “strange” way of life. Even during my fieldwork in the Arctic, for many of them, the only understanding they had of the indigenous people of the tundra was that they were “children of nature,” “savage Asians,” whose way of life belonged to the Stone Age—lagging behind in culture.

“You, *Lutsa*, Are Higher Than We Are”: Contaminating Modernity

You know, if *natsionaly* [ethnic minorities, indigenous people] spoke here among their own [people], our people would never even notice them. We need someone from the Russians to come here and to preach. If a Russian [missionary] arrives here, local people will come to his gathering. But they won't come if a *natsional* preaches. They are ashamed of each other.... Today a woman came running into the shop and yelled, “The bosses have arrived [*nachal'stvo priekhala*]! They said there will be a meeting tonight at six.” I asked her, “What bosses?” She said, “I don't know, some Russians from Vorkuta!” We all went to the meeting, and there was a priest [*pop*] talking about his Russian god.

A Khanty woman from Zelionyi Yar village (in the Polar Urals) narrated this story, which reminded me a song written many decades ago by Tyko Vylka (1886–1960), the first Soviet-raised Nenets painter and writer:

45 Leete and Ventsel, “Introduction,” 9.

46 Ventsel, *Reindeer, Rodina and Reciprocity*, 127.

47 Anderson, “Bringing Civil Society,” 99.

On the shore of Kara Sea, on a high earthen hill, there is an old hut. It used to be a new one a long time ago, but now it has tumbled down, overgrown with grass. Reindeer bones show up white in the grass. They, too, are overgrown with grass. Here Tyko Vylka used to live, hiding from tsarist gendarmes. He has seen much sorrow, suffered a lot. I could not expect then that I would live a happy and radiant life. Now I live in town, in my own house. I am better off, I do not wish to die at all. Who gave to Vylka such a happy life? The pure [*chistye*] Soviet people, Soviet power. They adopted my people as their own children. Thanks to the great Russian people, thanks to the hero, Lenin [*Lenin-bogatyr*']!⁴⁸

In Nenets, the term *Lutsa* refers to Russians, though it loses its distinct ethnic boundaries. It can also refer to the incoming population, often associated with power and privilege. *Lutsa* is the “other” for the Nenets people. It functions as a social category, akin to the concept of the “whiteman” in postcolonial contexts, often viewed by Third World populations as an archetype of Western modernity, wealth, cultural and political dominance, and the force of globalization.⁴⁹ Similarly, the term *Lutsa* contrasts with *natsionaly*, which refers to people with distinct ethnic features, that is, those who are ethnically marked, while Russians remain ethnically neutral.

The long history of interactions between the Russian state and the Northern indigenous peoples has been complex and ambiguous and, similarly, the image of *Lutsa* in Nenets culture is both ambivalent and polysemous. In Nenets, *Narka Lutsa* (Big Russian) can mean “master” or “boss.” *Lutsa* embodies state power, much like Ssorin-Chaikov’s example from Katonga (in central Siberia), where the collective farm was nicknamed after its Russian director, making the institution inseparable from his figure.⁵⁰ The state was represented by local Soviet administrators, teachers, and Communist Party officials, collectively referred to as *Lutsa*. They brought modernity, but also disrupted traditional ways of life. During my stay in Beloiarsk, my Nenets friends and interlocutors often asked me to approach local authorities—whether a governor’s reception, a notary, or the village head—on their behalf. “You are Russian, so you belong there [*ty tam svoia*],” they insisted.

Lutsa is also associated with vernacular perceptions of beauty. The Asian phenotype, more common among Siberian Nenets, is often excluded from

48 Vylka, *Tyko Vylka*, 58.

49 Cf. Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen*, 2.

50 Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*, 11.

local ideals of attractiveness. The closer a Nenets person resembles Russian features—light hair, wide blue eyes—the more they are considered beautiful or handsome. Conversely, individuals with darker hair, skin, and almond-shaped eyes are less desirable in marital arrangements.

When I asked a young woman from the Baidarata tundra why she rejected a Nenets suitor, she replied, “But look at him! He looks Asian [*asiat*], he is dark and has narrow eyes [*uzkoglazyi*].” Similarly, a young Nenets mother of three admitted she found her eldest daughter unattractive due to her pronounced Asian features. This preference contributes to the stereotype that Nenets women seek to have children with Russian men, not only to acquire symbols of modernity but also to pass on features considered beautiful in local perceptions. Harri Englund and James Leach use the metaphor of “‘the darkness’ of underdevelopment” to describe how development and progress are often linked to cultural ideas of race and modernity.⁵¹ In this context, the metaphor becomes a visible, lived stereotype.

Lutsa also bring their Russian gods, *Lutsa khe-khe*’ (or *Lutsa ŋeva*, “Russian head”), into the tundra world. In the nineteenth century, the Nenets incorporated Russian Orthodox icons into their traditional rituals, offering sacrifices to them.⁵² During the Soviet period, a bust of Lenin was placed in the same context, receiving ritual sacrifices and being fed with reindeer blood. Likewise, in the post-Soviet period, an evangelical brochure about the *Lutsa* God Jesus was found at the heart of the Nenets *miad’ pukhutsia*—a female ritual figure, usually a wooden doll dressed in numerous female coats, believed to protect the chum and its residents.⁵³ The *miad’ pukhutsia* was ritually fed with sacrificed reindeer blood, vodka, and tobacco. At the same time, *Lutsa* means devil, so in Nenets folklore, Russians are described as the children of the devil.⁵⁴

Lutsa is also a source of moral and ritual contamination. Russian modernity was often perceived by the Nenets as disrupting their moral norms, which were thought to be more strictly regulated in the tundra than in sedentary spaces. The introduction of modern (Russian) goods and commodities, or their inappropriate use in the tundra, was seen as a violation of the Nenets moral and ritual order. As one tundra woman described the shift to sedentary life:

51 Englund and Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-narratives,” 230.

52 Shemanovskii, *Izbrannye Trudy*, 18–21; Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 365–66; Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 229.

53 Elena Liarskaya, personal communication.

54 Golovnev and Osherenko, *Siberian Survival*, 2.

When a tundra dweller lives in a settlement, it seems to me that he cannot live there at all. Many who used to live in the tundra now live in settlements.... They are getting totally spoiled—in Nenets it is *sia'mei*,... everything goes wrong.

The Nenets often describe the Russian world in terms of *sia'mei*, a concept that refers to ritual impurity. *Sia'mei* includes menstruation, death, and birth, as well as objects associated with these states and the underground world.⁵⁵ Thus, the *Lutsa* sedentary life was often described as a form of symbolic pollution, and objects from this world are seen as sources of ritual contamination. The risk of such contamination was not only in the act of settled living itself but also in the misfortunes, diseases, and disasters it can bring to the violator, their family, and their household. The presence of Russian objects, especially in traditional spaces like the chum, complicated the observance of ritual order. A young Nenets tundra man expressed this concern:

We don't keep the majority of sacred objects in chums anymore. A chum is now believed to be not entirely pure anymore. There is a lot of civilization in it. So, we don't know all the traditions and could violate something. Therefore, everything is kept now in sacred sledges [far away from a chum], in order not to make a lot of trouble by mistake. Because we still don't trust Russians. And this remains from Soviet times.

This is why using the word “Russified” (*obrusevshyi*) to describe a Nenets person is considered an insult. Often spoken with negative intonation, it refers to those Nenets who were blamed by their community for betraying Nenets culture, abandoning the Nenets language, and forsaking their traditional way of life—those perceived as becoming “like Russians.” While recounting her childhood memories, Marina recalled an incident when her father once struck his younger daughter upon hearing her sing Russian songs in a chum. “You are singing Russian songs as if you had a Russian father and mother! This is a Nenets chum, and there are Nenets gods here—you can't sing Russian songs here!” Marina herself expressed regret about those Nenets who live, speak, and dress “as if they are Russians,” offensively referring to them as “Russified Nenets.” She would often say that she hated them, describing them as people who do not acknowledge their culture, who deny or are ashamed of being Nenets. She was once outraged when her niece named her dog with a Russian name: “You call this dog as if it's Russified!”

55 Liarskaya, “Zhenskie zaprety.”

The ambivalence and complexity of the *Lutsa* concept, shaped by centuries of Russian colonial order, reveal that for the Nenets, modernity is seen as an essential attribute of the Russians/*Lutsa*. It is, fundamentally, Russian modernity—a modernity to which the Nenets attempt to align, adopt, and, at times, resist, or to which they may never fully feel adequate. Russian modernity carries with it specific ideas about personality traits, commodities, technology, social institutions, and lifestyle. *Lutsa*, as the construction of otherness, has become, to borrow from Ira Bashkow, “an ambiguous, morally complex, and culturally creative ‘intimate alter’” for the Nenets.⁵⁶ With *Lutsa* come money, transport, electricity, new technology and tools, but also alcohol, discrimination, displacement, and disempowerment, embodying both the promises of modernity and the realities of marginalization.

Unmaking Modernity

Writing about the relationship between the Soviet state and indigenous peoples in Siberia, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov argues that the Russian/Soviet state positioned itself as both a benevolent provider and a force of discipline and displacement for indigenous Siberians who had long been viewed as living in stateless, backward societies. This narrative, however, tells only part of the story. Ssorin-Chaikov continues that the indigenous Siberians were not merely passive subjects of Russian and Soviet rule, actively engaging with the state in ways that went beyond submission. He describes the interaction between Siberians and Russians as a “two-way traffic of symbols and representations,” where indigenous people did not just absorb state-imposed categories but also appropriated, reinterpreted, and even repurposed them for their own ends, where “the state symbols and identities were traded back.”⁵⁷

Rather than simply suffering under state presence in the Arctic, indigenous groups navigated and mediated their relationship with Russian power structures in complex ways. They actively engaged with state institutions, symbols, and ideas, reshaping them within their own cultural framework; they resisted policies that threatened their autonomy; and they selectively incorporated elements of Soviet and post-Soviet modernity into their own traditions. This process of cultural mediation has allowed them to reshape imposed identities and practices and exert agency in ways that challenge the

⁵⁶ Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen*, 14.

⁵⁷ Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen*, 4.

simplistic portrayal of indigenous people as mere victims of colonialism. In this light, the history of Nenets–state interactions should not be understood solely as one of domination and subjugation but as an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance—one in which indigenous actors played an active and often strategic role.

The Soviet reforms were often met with resistance from indigenous populations, leading to uprisings.⁵⁸ Among the Nenets, this resistance took the form of a series of armed rebellions known as *mändälä*. Nenets herders rose up against Soviet state-building policies, opposing the repression of wealthy reindeer herders (*kulaki*) and shamans, the imposition of residential school education, forced collectivization, and the establishment of trading posts that brought an increasing number of Russian settlers into their territories.⁵⁹ Although these uprisings were often violently suppressed, Nenets resistance did not disappear but instead shifted to more subtle, tacit forms.

Among these tacit forms of resistance was the continuation of hidden practices, particularly in the ritual sphere. When state officials confiscated shamanic drums and ritual costumes, indigenous people would often recreate them, ensuring that shamanic rituals continued in secret.⁶⁰ As one Nenets woman in her forties described:

When *Lutsa* in 1917 were destroying and burning their towers or cupolas, their churches, we hid our deities. The Nenets people have a small religion, closer to nature, so we could preserve everything.... During the 1970s, as soon as *Lutsa* drove up to a chum, as soon as one could hear the bells of a red sledge, we hid everything ... because, you know, they were going into the tundra, checking everything. And we hid everything. We took away sacred sledges [N.: *khe-khe'khan*] and kept them in the forest so that no one could see them, or we hid them in the snow.

This approach extended beyond mere survival; it was a means of asserting agency, maintaining cultural continuity, and integrating external forces into the Nenets world on their own terms. Marshall Sahlins describes a similar process among indigenous peoples in Papua New Guinea, calling it “develop-man.”⁶¹ Rather than being passive recipients of colonial or

58 Leete, “Anti-Soviet Movements.”

59 Golovnev, *Govoriashchie kul'tury*, 183; Golovnev and Osherenko, *Siberian Survival*, 69, 81; Khariuchi and Petrova, *Nentsy v istorii*, 79.

60 Suslov, “Shamanstvo i bor'ba s nim,” 129.

61 Sahlins, “The Economics of Develop-Man.”

state-driven modernization, indigenous societies actively appropriate and redefine imposed structures.

Engagement with Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet institutions often allowed the Nenets to adapt and even strengthen their traditions. They frequently incorporated Russian goods, symbols, and practices—whether material objects, state structures, or ideological concepts—indigenizing them to uphold and sustain their traditional social order. Florian Stammer, for instance, demonstrates how the Yamal Nenets have learned to navigate and benefit from the post-Soviet market economy, strengthening their nomadic economy while integrating the market and gas industry into their internal economic exchanges. In his work, Stammer challenges the much-publicized notion of the Nenets phenomenon, examining the mechanisms by which nomadic society has integrated into the global economy and highlighting the agency of indigenous people in a shifting social, political, and geographical landscape. By exploring the workings of the market economy in Yamal, he argues that it is not cultural resistance or the isolation of nomads, but rather the complex interactions between the nomads and their environment—such as state government, state-controlled enterprises, and gas companies—that forms the foundation for the success of Nenets traditional livelihoods.⁶²

Similarly, Elena Liarskaya illustrates how the nomadic Nenets not only adapted to but also indigenized the Russian sedentary spaces. Through their engagement with Yamal villages and towns, the Nenets integrated these areas and their resources into their social production systems, transforming the Russian-settled environment into a localized variation of Nenets culture.⁶³ In this process, the nomadic order of the tundra gradually extended into the sedentary spaces, reshaping them in accordance with Nenets cultural practices and values.

The sedentary space of Beloiarsk, for example, has become an integrated part of Nenets culture. Many indigenous herders and fishers now have homes or apartments in the village, which have become an essential part of their nomadic lifestyle. These stationary bases outside the tundra were now integrated into the seasonal patterns of their movements. Moving between the tundra and the village, many Nenets split their time equally between both spaces. At times, they stay for longer periods, and occasionally, they decide to settle down permanently. For Nadia, the decision to settle in the village was something she contemplated daily. Her sister Marina had made

62 Stammer, *Reindeer Nomads*, 295.

63 Liarskaya, "Kul'turnaia assimiliatsiia."

the choice years ago, leaving behind her forty-plus years of tundra life to move to the village. During my stay in Beloiarsk, I observed several families and individuals undergoing this vital transition. They were transferring their remaining herds to relatives, dismantling their chums, exchanging traditional tundra clothes for European attire, moving to Beloiarsk, and beginning the long and often distressing process of sedentarization. In a few years, they might rebuild their herd and return to the tundra—or they might stay in the village forever.

Thus, the power to reorganize and transform space was not solely controlled by the dominant metropole or state; rather, it was a two-way process. The Nenets actively resisted and remade the structure of their surrounding space, remapping and reappropriating the world around them according to their own cultural logic and social needs.

The Nenets universe has expanded beyond the margins of the tundra, and their cognitive map has dramatically broadened as they began to embrace new borders and territories. Many Nenets, who had never left their native tundra before, started traveling to mainland cities. Indigenous children went on sightseeing tours, and herding families were on summer holidays to the South of Russia. During World War II, a number of Nenets joined the Soviet military and participated in battles across Europe, with some even reaching Berlin.

In the post-Soviet period, newly arrived evangelical missionaries also played a role in expanding the Nenets geography. Nadia, a Nenets converted woman, once shared: “Before, I didn’t know at all where Ukraine or Moldova was, and I didn’t even know there was a city called Mineral’nye Vody. Now I know that believing brothers and sisters come here from everywhere. And if I wanted to go there—say, if I wanted to visit Ukraine or Belarus—I could go everywhere, because brothers live all over the world.”

Sometime later, during a peaceful night on the tundra, we were watching a melodramatic Bollywood movie in a chum, powered by a generator. A lively discussion about the exotic Indian landscapes and clothes broke out among the Nenets women. Natasha, a tundra woman in her early thirties who had never traveled outside the Yamal region in her entire life, said, “Imagine, there are believing brothers and sisters in India, too. What if we could go there? Imagine if we could travel there!”

The integration of modern technologies such as satellite television, the Internet, snowmobiles, and helicopters into Nenets life on the tundra has significantly expanded their geographic and cognitive horizons. These innovations have become integrated parts of Nenets indigenous tundra livelihood, both enhancing mobility and facilitating the rapid flow of images, ideas, and values, reshaping their social and cultural dynamics.

Centuries of Russian colonial rule have profoundly shaped Nenets life, expanding their lifeworlds and shaping their perception of modernity—along with their sense of alignment or misalignment with it. These historical entanglements set the stage for the sweeping transformations that followed the collapse of socialism, an upheaval explored in the next chapter.

3. The Politics of Religion After Socialism and the Predicament of Religious Life in the Russian Arctic

Abstract: Post-Soviet Russia experienced a profound religious transformation, shifting from clandestine Soviet-era practices to a public resurgence marked by pluralism, including Christian denominations, indigenous beliefs, and new spiritual movements. Fueled by foreign missionaries and a brief surge in religious freedom, religion became increasingly entwined with political change. In Siberia, Christian denominations expanded alongside revived indigenous and shamanic traditions, making religion central to cultural revitalization and indigenous activism. The Nenets tundra reflected these dynamics, as competition among Protestant missions sparked social divisions and contested identities. Missionaries established churches, translated scriptures into native languages, and embedded evangelical Christianity within a landscape shaped by Soviet legacies. This era of religious fluidity was later curtailed by the securitization of religion under Putin, as state policies imposed restrictions and reshaped the region's religious landscape.

Keywords: Post-Soviet religious revival, Siberia, Protestant missionary movement, church planting, evangelical Christianity, Russian Orthodox Church

Alioshka, I hold your father in high regard. He is a clever and good man. And I respect your grandfather. But when I think that you are all Baptists, I could have ripped them both to pieces!

—Baptist Bishop Alexei Teleus, recalling a childhood memory

There is a believing woman, Liuda. The entire village calls her "Baptist! Baptist!"

Thus "Baptist" came to be her nickname. All I know is that Baptists are crazy [nenormal'nye], they are sectarians.

—A Nenets man

The Post-Soviet Religious Revival: A Brief Era of Freedom

The following story was narrated by a Russian evangelical missionary from Salekhard. Although it describes his evangelical work in one of the remote indigenous settlements in the country, it most strikingly reflects the dynamics of the religious landscape in the post-Soviet Arctic and, perhaps, all of Russia:

Something was burning inside my heart. I thought, “I’ve already evangelized Russians, but Nenets and Khanty still didn’t know. What if I were to tell them?” So, I took skis and went to the Khanty. First, they set dogs on me, but I escaped onto a pile of logs, praying to the Lord. Then a woman rescued me, driving the dogs away and saying, “Come on, I’ll give you some tea!” I was happy enough. Eventually I pestered them all by telling them about God. They were giving me tea and I was telling them about Jesus Christ. So, this is how our first communication happened.... They were all living in such poverty, miserable hovels, half underground. I visited them every second day, skiing many kilometers. Then Canadian missionaries arrived. Although they were Pentecostals, it didn’t make any difference to me, as long as I didn’t preach alone. They began to bring a lot of clothes; they brought [humanitarian] aid, money. As a result, they provided clothes for the entire settlement, although Khanty began to sell the clothes or to exchange them for bread—ten loaves of bread for one jacket—and to put their old clothes back on again.

Then I went to ask the mayor for a little house for our prayer meetings. He didn’t give me a house, but instead he gave me part of a *barak* [a dilapidated Soviet-era communal housing block], where nobody wanted to live, for it was believed to be a cursed place. We took it, brought chairs and a pulpit and began to preach. Eventually an entire settlement was converted—everybody except the mayor and his family.

Then I joined efforts with Tolik [another Russian missionary] and his American missionaries. There were also Germans who often visited us; together with them we plowed through the whole tundra. They were really hard workers. And they supported our church a lot, setting it on its feet.... But at the end of the day, I once arrived at the settlement and found that the prayer house was closed. When I asked the mayor what had happened, he answered that an Orthodox priest had come here, arguing, “Have you allowed sectarians here?” And that was it—they closed us. We couldn’t do anything. That priest made a big upheaval. And the mayor asked us not to come here anymore—otherwise he’d call the police. He also said

that the Orthodox Church was going to build its house here to gather people. But they haven't done it yet. Instead, they are going to build a new church near the government [in Salekhard].

When this village was closed to me, I simply went on and started my missionary work in the next village and so on, until the story stopped repeating itself.

Post-Soviet religious transformations are often described as a “revival” or a “boom,” with some scholars claiming that Russia experienced the greatest religious resurgence in human history.¹ This characterization rests on the assumption that Soviet society was entirely secularized—an idea shaped by Cold War information gaps and heavily filtered information. While some insights trickled through informal channels or were smuggled in during the late Soviet period, Western perceptions were largely shaped by Soviet propaganda emphasizing the triumph of atheism.² It was assumed that few believers were left to be revived after seventy years of enforced secularization and religious oppression. While the Soviet Union officially promoted atheism and persecuted religious institutions—through church closures, imprisonment, deportations, discrimination against believers and clergy, and anti-religious propaganda—religious life persisted and sometimes thrived. Religion was driven underground and became hidden, practiced outside of state structures in private homes, dissident circles, or rural communities where Soviet control was weaker. Groups such as the Old Believers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals maintained clandestine networks, holding secret services, and copying religious texts by hand. Some were operating underground printing presses across the Soviet Union and were smuggling in religious literature from abroad.

Religious institutions also survived by adapting. The Russian Orthodox Church, though heavily controlled by the state, maintained a presence through officially sanctioned parishes. Meanwhile, unregistered Protestant groups and underground Greek Catholic and Orthodox communities quietly persisted, despite government repression and total secret police infiltration.³ This hidden religious life was largely invisible to the West, which assumed that Soviet secularization had been total.

1 Greeley, “A Religious Revival”; Krindatch, “Patterns of Religious.”

2 One of the first organizations that started collecting and smuggling information about religious life in the Soviet Union was the Keston Institute and its founder, Michael Bourdeaux. Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment*; Bourdeaux, *One Word of Truth*.

3 Kapaló and Povedák, *The Secret Police*; Vagramenko and Beliakova, *The Lives of Soviet*.

One of the first national studies of religion in postsocialist Russia, conducted by the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) in 1991, found that by the time of the USSR's collapse, approximately half of the Russian population identified as theists. About 30% of them reported having recently shifted from atheism to theism, with their religious transformation occurring during the late Soviet period, particularly in the 1980s.⁴ Although post-Soviet religious changes seemed radical, there was continuity in religious life from the Soviet period to the post-Soviet era. As Alexandr Panchenko argues, the division between "Soviet" and "post-Soviet" religious cultures was not as distinct as often assumed. New religious movements in post-Soviet Russia, while sometimes viewed as eclectic or influenced by foreign ideas, can be seen as the continuation or evolution of late Soviet cultural practices, with their foreign elements often linked to domestic religious heritage.⁵

What happened after the collapse of the USSR was not simply a revival but rather a dramatic transition of religion from the private to the public sphere, and, later, into the realm of politics. Religious services were held in stadiums, Bibles were openly distributed on the streets, and religious programming appeared on state television. By 1993, the Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research reported that the proportion of Russians identifying as believers had risen from 30% in 1989 to 50%.⁶ By 2002, this number had climbed to 57%.⁷ According to Andrew Greeley, the proportion of newly converted believers in Russia was higher than in any other formerly communist Eastern European country.⁸

The newly open religious landscape attracted a massive influx of foreign missionaries, particularly from the United States, Canada, South Korea, and Western Europe. According to surveys by the *East–West Church & Ministry Report*, the number of evangelical missionary organizations operating in Russia increased from just 311 in 1989 to over 5,600 by 1997.⁹ However, this number is only an approximation, as many solo missionaries entered Russia on tourist visas, making them statistically invisible.

This missionary wave brought large-scale evangelistic campaigns. With financial, material, and logistical support, foreign missionaries gathered thousands of people for preaching events in stadiums, cultural centers, and public spaces, while also organizing concerts, utilizing mass media,

4 Greeley, "A Religious Revival."

5 Panchenko, "Morality, Utopia, Discipline," 141.

6 Borzenko, "Religiia postkommunisticheskoi."

7 Krindatch, "Patterns of Religious," 126.

8 Greeley, "A Religious Revival," 257.

9 Elliott and Corrado, "The Protestant Missionary Presence"; Elliott, "Updated Statistics."

distributing Bibles, and conducting humanitarian aid efforts.¹⁰ Numerous institutions involved in Bible publishing and translation established branches in Russia. Organizations such as the American Bible Society and the Russian Bible Society printed over 6.4 million copies of the Bible and New Testament between 1987 and 1996.¹¹ Wycliffe Bible Translators, the American Bible Society, the Russian Bible Society, Pioneer Bible Translators, and the Institute for Bible Translation initiated translation projects for the Bible and the New Testament in seventy-five languages across Russia.¹²

Religious programming also proliferated on television. By the mid-1990s, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant broadcasts reached millions of viewers, shaping public discourse around faith. At the same time, universities and schools introduced new religious studies programs, and religious themes increasingly appeared in history textbooks and public debates. When I enrolled in a newly established BA program in Religious Studies at a college in St. Petersburg in Russia in 1997, I remember the open lectures organized by the college, which gathered dozens of unregistered attendees—people of all ages who came to learn about the history of religions and theology.

The change appeared to be rapid and swift. From an officially atheist country with religious life banned, Russia, in a few years, had turned into a land where multiple religious practices and beliefs were flourishing both in public and personal spheres. In November 1991, nineteen American evangelical leaders met with Mikhail Gorbachev and a KGB vice chairman, Mikhail Stoliarov. Philip Yancey, a member of the delegation, recalled General Stoliarov telling them,

Political questions cannot be decided until there is sincere repentance, a return to faith by the people.... I have been a member of the party for twenty years. In our study of scientific atheism, we were taught that religion divides people. Now we see the opposite: love for God can only unite.¹³

(Later, Stoliarov would oversee the distribution of 1.5 million New Testaments to the Russian armed forces.) As John Anderson sarcastically notes, “Increasingly the authorities were discovering that in a time of political reform even opium had its uses.”¹⁴

10 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 131–46.

11 Elliott and Corrado, “The Protestant Missionary Presence,” 345.

12 Elliott and Deyneka, “Protestant Missionaries,” 202.

13 Cited in Elliott and Deyneka, “Protestant Missionaries,” 198.

14 Anderson, *Religion, State*, 141.

Religion became fashionable, though often more as a cultural identity than a deeply practiced faith. At the peak of the “religious boom” in the mid-1990s, the percentage of those identifying as Orthodox was 2.3 times higher than the percentage of those who defined themselves as “believers in God.”¹⁵ In terms of everyday religious practice—such as regular church attendance, participation in prayers and the Eucharist, and adherence to core Christian doctrines—Russia remained one of the most secular countries.¹⁶ Only 10% of those who considered themselves Orthodox regularly attended church or participated in Orthodox rituals.¹⁷ Among those newly converted in Protestant churches, many were drawn more by humanitarian aid and financial support provided by foreign missionaries than by religious teachings. An American missionary, Mark Elliott, lamented that elderly women were given meal tickets in exchange for attending worship services.¹⁸

Post-Soviet restructuring revealed a highly diverse religious landscape in Russia, one that had quietly flourished beneath the surface of the Soviet regime. A broad spectrum of traditions, including Orthodox Christianity, Islam, various evangelical movements, Roman and Greek Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Judaism, Buddhism, shamanism, and numerous indigenous religious practices, surged and revived in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Multiple forms of religious revival, invention, reconstruction, and creativity marked a transformative new chapter in Russian history. By the late Soviet period, a variety of alternative cultural movements had ignited a diverse range of religious, quasi-religious, and pop-religious beliefs. This era saw the emergence of new spiritual practices, including healing rituals, witchcraft, neo-shamanism, astrology, occultism, esotericism, UFOlogy, and extrasensory phenomena, reshaping the spiritual and cultural landscape of the country.¹⁹

Bringing the Word to the Ends of the Earth: Post-Soviet Church Planting in the Arctic

Siberia has become one of the most striking areas of religious change in post-Soviet Russia, marked by the growing presence of various Protestant

15 Krindatch, “Patterns of Religious”; Knox, “Religious Freedom,” 288.

16 Borzenko, “Religiia postkommunisticheskoi”; Filatov, “Religioznaia zhizn’.”

17 Borzenko, “Religiia postkommunisticheskoi,” 232.

18 Elliott, “Evangelism and Proselytism.”

19 Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope*; Panchenko, “Morality, Utopia, Discipline.”

denominations and churches across its vast territories.²⁰ By the early 1990s, the growing global phenomenon of short-term missions had reached even the most remote regions of Russia, reshaping the religious landscapes of Siberia. With the fall of the Soviet Union and newly opened borders, numerous Protestant missionary movements targeted Siberia and the Russian Arctic—lands perceived as godless and as “pagan strongholds,” considered spiritual blind spots on the map of world evangelization. Evangelical ministries from the former Soviet Union, along with visiting missionaries from the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and other regions across the globe, played a significant role in reshaping the religious landscape of Siberia and the Russian Arctic. They actively engaged in evangelizing, organizing large-scale conferences, and establishing religious infrastructure, including churches, prayer houses, and educational centers. These ministries also prioritized translating and publishing religious literature in local languages to reach indigenous communities more effectively. Their coordinated efforts contributed to the rapid spread of evangelical Christianity across the region.²¹

Siberia and the Russian Arctic, however, were not just marked by external missionary movements but also by a diverse and historically rich religious landscape shaped by both local and migrant populations. Historically, Siberia had long served as a place of exile, with numerous prison camps established in the Polar Urals and Yamal during the Soviet era. During the Stalinist period, the vast territories of these areas were dominated by the Gulag network of forced labor camps. Former prisoners were often resettled to remote areas, with some choosing to stay permanently after their release. Many Protestant believers, labeled “enemies of the state” during Soviet anti-religious campaigns, were imprisoned or deported to these regions. Many of these persecuted individuals later settled in Siberia and the Far North, where they continued to nurture and expand religious communities, contributing to the development of a unique and resilient religious presence in the region. For example, the Arctic city of Vorkuta (Komi Republic)—in the area with the biggest Soviet prisons, forced labor camps, and places for deportation—eventually became a home for numerous Pentecostal communities and one of the most significant mission sources for the Arctic tundra in the 1990s and 2000s.

Additionally, during World War II, millions of people were forcibly deported to Siberia, including to Yamal and the Polar Urals. These groups included Germans, Kalmyks, Finns, Lithuanians, Moldavians, and others,

20 Krindatch, “Patterns of Religious,” 131; Dudarenok, “K voprosu formirovaniia.”

21 See statistics on Siberia in Brumbelow, “The Other Side of Russia.”

each carrying with them their own distinct religious traditions. The presence of these diverse religious groups added complexity to the religious landscape of Siberia and the Russian Arctic, creating a dynamic environment in which indigenous beliefs, Soviet-era religious repression, and new religious movements, including evangelical Christianity, intersected and interacted.

The region's diverse indigenous populations have long practiced animistic and shamanistic traditions, deeply rooted in their connection to the land and traditional ways of life. These belief systems, centered on the powers of nature, spirits, and ancestors, coexisted with Russian Orthodox Christianity, as well as newer movements like Islam, Protestantism, and others. This created a dynamic and multifaceted religious landscape, often leading to tensions and inter-religious conflicts.

The post-Soviet economic crisis also played a key role in the growth of the evangelical missionary movement in Siberia, especially in the Russian Far North. Many of the early missionaries and founders of Arctic churches I spoke with were migrants from Ukraine and Southern Russia, drawn by job opportunities in the extractive industries during the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these migrants, who were believers from Protestant communities, established religious communities similar to those back home. Among them were Baptist bishops Pavel Rodak and Sergei Kubata, who began planting churches in the 1990s. As these initial evangelical groups grew, they attracted new members and sent for additional religious workers, mainly from Russia and Ukraine, who played a key role in the development of Arctic churches.²²

Alexei Teleus, a Baptist bishop in the Yamal region, moved from Ukraine to work as a geologist in the Far North in the 1980s. He shared his story of church-planting in the post-Soviet Tiumen' Region. At the start of missionary activities in the 1990s, only two officially registered Baptist churches existed in the entire Tiumen' Region, an area nearly the size of California. In 1991, the first Baptist church was registered in Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, paving the way for the spread of evangelical Christianity across the Yamal and Polar Ural regions. Within a few years, Baptist, evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic churches and communities were established in towns, villages, and even remote tundra settlements throughout the area.

In the early stages of the missionary movement in post-Soviet Russia, religious communities experienced a period of relative freedom. During this time, before federal policies shifted toward restricting foreign missionary

22 Here and below, the data come from narratives of missionaries collected during my fieldwork in the Yamal region and Komi Republic between 2006 and 2014.

activity, local missionary communities in the Russian Arctic established effective collaborations with international Christian organizations. These partnerships provided substantial financial support, enabling the construction of prayer houses across Yamal, the purchase of essential transportation for remote outreach, and the organization of charity initiatives among northern communities. This period of religious openness facilitated the rapid growth of evangelical movements in the region. As I discuss in the following chapter, under Putin's regime, increasing restrictions on foreign religious influence and tighter regulations on missionary activities signaled a return to state control over religious life, significantly impacting the dynamics of religious communities in Siberia and the Russian Far North, as well as across Russia as a whole.

In the 1990s, multiple missionary expeditions brought evangelical Christianity to the Russian Far North. This included the "Jesus to the Peoples of Siberia" project led by former Soviet dissident and political prisoner Iosif Bondarenko. The Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists launched the "Multicolor Russia" (*Mnogotsvetie Rossii*) project, specifically targeting indigenous peoples and migrant workers in Siberia and the Arctic. Peter Deyneka's Russian Ministries (later Mission Eurasia) organized missionary trips targeting northern populations, trained over five thousand missionaries, and helped plant around a thousand evangelical churches, many in remote areas of the Russian Far North. Pentecostal and charismatic international missionary movements played a significant role, including the Canadian Bill Prankard Evangelistic Association, which ran the Arctic missionary project well into the mid-2010s.

In the late 1990s, a growing number of missionary programs were launched with a specific focus on the indigenous populations in the tundra and remote ethnic settlements. Bible translation teams traveled to Yamal and the Polar Urals with the goal of translating the Gospel into the Nenets and Khanty languages. To reach even the most isolated communities, mission centers equipped themselves with snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, and boats. An evangelical minister in Salekhard shared his experience:

We made an original discovery: strange people arrived from the tundra and came to our church. And the church's face began to change, because increasingly more Nenets began to come to the church and to appeal to God. Then we realized that local Russian people who have been living here all their lives know nothing about the Nenets. If you ask them right now, "Who are the Nenets?" they couldn't answer you. People don't know. So, we realized that they [Nenets] are pagan people. And the question



Figure 3.1. Visiting Pentecostal missionaries showing world news on a laptop to nomadic Nenets in a tundra tent, Polar Urals. Photograph by the author.

arose: How to work with them? How to bring the Gospel to them? They suffered social needs and spiritual needs, but we didn't know what to do with them and couldn't understand any words [in Nenets]. How can we give them spiritual food if we don't know their language and culture? This is how we began our research, our social work and preaching among indigenous people.

Among the emerging religious movements, one missionary church stood out for its significant impact in the Arctic mission. The International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ICCECB)—or the Baptist Brethren—became the most successful in reaching the indigenous populations, particularly the tundra Nenets. With its mission center in Vorkuta (Komi Republic), equipped with modern vehicles, satellite communication, and, most importantly, a well-organized religious network across the post-Soviet space, the Brethren extended its influence throughout Yamal, the Polar Urals, and the European tundra region.

The Brethren, an evangelical movement with a fundamentalist orientation, followed the “narrow path” of believing ascetics who, in the name of Christ and His Kingdom, renounced the world's prosperity, wealth, commodities, and attractions. The motive of ongoing religious persecutions (deeply rooted in the Soviet-era history of the Brethren) and the position of



Figure 3.2. An evangelical missionary performing Christian songs in a Nenets tundra tent, Polar Urals. Photograph by the author.

flatly refusing any kind of relationship with state and local authorities are still the most important constituent motives in their identity-building. Its adherents describe themselves as living as in the olden times (*po-starinke*): they follow the most severe discipline rules affecting every aspect of everyday life, have an ascetic morality, and follow a strictly prescribed dress code.

Initially, many missionary visits to the remote regions were short-term, focusing on activities such as organizing summer camps or concerts to introduce evangelical Christianity to the indigenous population, as well as distributing religious literature and humanitarian aid. Over time, however, these visits evolved into more long-term missions, with young missionaries spending months in the tundra and villages. They engaged in Christian education, preaching, and Bible reading, while also assisting with practical tasks such as household chores and child minding. They taught literacy to illiterate Nenets, providing lessons in reading and writing, and offered guidance on hygiene and sanitation. A converted Nenets family once shared a story about a believing sister who spent several months at their chum, teaching them music and singing.

Missionaries, in their efforts to evangelize, sought to offer both spiritual sustenance in the form of the Gospel and practical support through material aid, alongside imparting their own vision of social order and cultural norms. Their goal was not only to spread religious beliefs but also to introduce new

ways of living, with an emphasis on the missionaries' own cultural values. For many of these missionaries, even after spending many years in the Arctic, the tundra and its way of life remained unfamiliar and strange. The stark contrast between the nomadic, nature-bound existence of the indigenous people and the missionaries' own urban or industrialized upbringing created an inherent disconnect.

However, some missionaries adapted to the rhythm of tundra life. They began to understand and appreciate the indigenous way of living, with many even becoming proficient in navigating the vast, open tundra, familiarizing themselves with nomadic routes, and mapping out the locations of traditional campsites. Over time, certain missionaries found themselves deeply integrated into the daily life of the tundra. They became accustomed to living in chums, eating tundra food, and following the unique seasonal and spatial patterns of the indigenous communities.

A Note on (Dis)continuity: Orthodox and Protestant Christianity

It is important to note that missionary efforts in the 1990s and 2000s were not the first encounter the Nenets had with Christian missionaries. From the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century, interrupted by the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Soviet period that banned all forms of missionization, the Russian Orthodox Church conducted a series of missionary projects among Siberian indigenous groups as part of the Russian state's broader colonial agenda in Siberia.²³ The Russian Orthodox Church organized missionary expeditions, established permanent missions, and founded parishes and monasteries across northern Siberia, with the goal of baptizing the indigenous "pagans."

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Russian Orthodox Church established special missions to evangelize the Nenets people. One of the first significant conversions among the European Nenets occurred between 1825 and 1830, led by the Russian Orthodox archimandrite Veniamin (Smirnov), who documented his work among the Samoyeds (an old name for the Nenets people) in his diaries and notes.²⁴ In 1832–33, the Russian Orthodox Church founded its mission in Obdorsk (present-day Salekhard), with its final head, Father Irinarkh (Shemanovskii), becoming the most

23 Bazanov and Kazanskii, *Missionery i missiionerskie*; Ogryzko, *Khristianizatsiia narodov*; Toulouse, "Indigenous Agency."

24 Veniamin, "Obrashchenie v khristianstvo"; Toulouse, "Movement and Enlightenment."

influential figure in the history of Orthodox evangelization among the Siberian Nenets. From 1898 to 1910, Father Irinarkh worked among the tundra reindeer herders and fishers, established missionary residential schools for Samoyed and Ostiak (Khanty) children, and founded the Missionary Brethren, along with a library and a museum. He also conducted historical research and wrote ethnographic diaries, which were later published.²⁵

Similar to contemporary Protestant missionary efforts, Russian Orthodox missions in Siberia often involved the destruction of “idols,” sacred sites, and the struggle against “heathen” culture. The evangelization of the nomads also raised questions of authenticity, as missionary school students were often seen by Nenets society as Russified (*obrusevshye*). Converts were frequently required to sever ties with their families and relocate to Russian settlements.²⁶

In the nineteenth century, Russian Orthodox missions attempted to develop more nuanced approaches to evangelism, which included learning the languages, cultures, local beliefs, and lifestyles of indigenous peoples. However, this approach was never fully realized.²⁷ Eva Toulouze offers a comprehensive comparative historical analysis of Orthodox and Protestant missionary strategies in Siberia, shedding light on their shared challenge of contextualizing the Christian message within local indigenous cultures.²⁸ Both missions grappled with how to adapt Christianity to the unique languages, beliefs, and practices of the Siberian indigenous peoples, but their approaches were shaped by differing theological and institutional frameworks.

Orthodox missionaries, as Toulouze highlights, were typically less concerned with adapting Christian teachings to local traditions than with integrating indigenous communities into the larger vision of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian statehood. Their efforts often focused on translating Christianity into Russian cultural and social norms, thereby reinforcing Russian imperial control. This meant that Orthodox missionaries aimed to assimilate indigenous peoples into Russian society, sometimes suppressing or transforming indigenous rituals and beliefs to align with Orthodox doctrine.

While Orthodox and Protestant missionary cultures intersect in some ways, there is no continuity between the two. And this is not only due to

25 Shemanovskii, *Izbrannye Trudy*.

26 Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, 43.

27 Alekseenko, “Khristianizatsiia na Turukhanskom”; Gracheva, “K voprosu o vliianii khristianizatsii.”

28 Toulouze, “Movement and Enlightenment”; see also Vallikivi, “Minority and Mission.”

the seven decades of Soviet anti-religious policy that legally prohibited any form of religious missionization, but also because of significant differences in their approaches. The prerevolutionary Orthodox missionary model did not directly influence the post-Soviet Protestant movements. While certain elements of Orthodox tradition, such as the veneration of icons and the image of St. Nicholas (once recognized as a Christian saint but now regarded by some Nenets as a deity within their pantheon), were historically integrated into Nenets indigenous beliefs, contemporary Nenets perceive Orthodoxy and Protestant Christianity as entirely distinct and unrelated religions.²⁹

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church regained influence in public and political life. However, it did not establish specific missionary initiatives for indigenous populations like the Nenets in the Russian Arctic. This absence of ethnic-focused missions stems from political, ideological, and historical factors, further reinforced by the consolidation of power under Vladimir Putin.

The growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in the nationalist discourse during the Putin era was centered around a model of Orthodoxy that prioritized the defense of the “Russian world” and “traditional values.”³⁰ This shift was supported by a primordialist view of religion, in which Russians (or those within the “canonical territory” of the Russian world) were seen as inherently Orthodox—a concept described as “ethnodoxy.”³¹ Under this framework, indigenous communities like the Nenets were expected to adopt Russian Orthodox practices without consideration of their unique cultural identities, or to continue practicing their “traditional religion.”

In sum, the Russian Orthodox Church’s failure to develop ethnically targeted missionary initiatives among indigenous populations in the post-Soviet period was rooted in historical patterns of colonial assimilation and the rise of state-sponsored nationalism. In its efforts to align with Putin’s regime and uphold a conservative vision of Russian identity, the church shifted away from religious contextualization and toward a model that treated Orthodoxy as an integral part of Russian national identity. This approach sought to transcend ethnic diversity and homogenize religious practices across the country, discouraging the development of indigenous-specific missions.

Unlike Orthodox attitudes, evangelical religiosity has never conflated religious/congregational identities with national or ethnic ones. The evangelical

29 Cf. Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 363.

30 Kolstø and Blakkisrud, *The New Russian Nationalism*; Surzhko Harned, “Russian World”; Suslov, “The Utopia.”

31 Karpov et al., “Ethnodoxy.”

notion of being “born again” and the pathos of rupture it entails (rupture from the social and personal past and surrounding present) notably differs from the Orthodox concept of inherited ethno-religiosity.³² This is what allows evangelical Christianity to avoid cultural barriers more easily, but simultaneously it is particularly what makes its missionary initiatives in Russia so challenging.

In the post-Soviet period (and continuing under Putin), the Orthodox Church was almost invisible on the missionary landscape of the Arctic; it did not engage in intensive missionary work among the indigenous people in the tundra either, and Orthodox adherents in Yamal were mainly Russian incomers. In most cases, Orthodox activities in the North were confined to building churches and chapels in towns and villages as markers of territory control. However, being associated with state policy and staying under government protection, the church claimed to hold power over the territory and cooperated with local authorities in order to resist Protestant expansion. According to the assumption of historical priority and strengthened by state support, Orthodoxy cultivated the idea of being traditional and pristine in the Arctic.³³ Hence, local indigenous activists and intellectuals in Yamal and the Polar Urals often presented the Russian Orthodox Church as a truly traditional Nenets religion that never came into conflict with indigenous Nenets religious practices, unlike Protestant churches.

Religious “Warfare”

The Nenets of Beloiarsk village and the surrounding tundra became the epicenter of missionary activity. Situated near Salekhard and Vorkuta, Beloiarsk served as a gateway to the tundra, becoming a key platform where various missionary movements implemented their strategies, competed for influence over both people and territory, and established their networks.

This became the starting point for ongoing tensions, power redistributions, religious conflicts, and rearrangements across the diverse and competitive religious landscape. The religious life in Beloiarsk vividly mirrored the broader Arctic religious environment, with blurred boundaries between religious domains and frequent, noticeable tensions between them. Yamal transformed into a “battlefield,” where every missionary and religious community competed against one another for influence and dominance.

32 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 136.

33 Cf. Wiget and Balalaeva, “Crisis, Conversion,” 4.

When I first arrived in Salekhard and Beloiarsk, I was struck by the intensity of the tension between different religious communities. On one occasion, when I was mistakenly assumed to be a visiting missionary, I was met with overt hostility from other missionaries. No one would speak with me, repeatedly insisting, almost as a mantra, that they would manage their own affairs. Later, one local missionary explained the situation to me, offering the following insight:

Nowadays there are many missions that want to come here, but we don't let them [come here]. Because they do only harm. I am sure there exist destructive sects. Never mind that they want to evangelize and so on, we don't let them come here, don't cooperate with them, and sometimes even prevent them from their activity. I would rather complain against them to the local administration than let them go to the tundra.

These words, spoken by a Protestant missionary, capture the prevailing atmosphere of religious relations in Yamal and reflect the broader situation in post-Soviet Russia during the religious boom, where the growing diversity of the religious landscape led to competition and conflicts among various religious movements.³⁴

In the religious landscape of Yamal and the Polar Urals during the 1990s and 2000s, symbolic boundaries between different religious domains were flexible and blurred. People frequently navigated between different faiths, experiencing multiple conversions or simultaneously belonging to more than one religious tradition. While crossing these religious borders, individuals encountered conflicting attitudes, leading to a form of religious "warfare" that spilled over into daily life. This tension affected social relations, with examples of Baptist Nenets refusing to cooperate with Pentecostal fellows in everyday activities.

Most missionaries recognized that the religious tensions within their own communities had been transferred to the social fabric of the tundra. As one missionary put it, "Unfortunately, this is transmitted into the tundra. And people there are beginning to get separated, arguing with each other and saying: 'You are a Baptist, and you are a Pentecostal!'" This division, rooted in the religious competition, led to multiple splits. Different groups of Nenets and Khanty had been converted by various missions, each with their own distinct teachings. Often, missionaries would denounce others as not being true believers. As a result, the religious conflicts transcended

34 Pelkmans, "Introduction"; Anderson, *Religion, State*, 186–92.

doctrinal disagreements, shaping social relations in the tundra and creating a landscape of division and tension.

This situation reflected the dynamic nature of religious life in post-Soviet Russia, where rebuilding identities often involved multiple conversion experiences. The process of constructing, maintaining, and crossing boundaries between different religious domains became a key feature of this period. The fluidity of religious identity in post-Soviet Russia reflected broader social and cultural upheaval. The 1990s religious revival saw intense competition between traditional, newly introduced, and foreign faiths, challenging individuals to navigate a shifting religious landscape. These changes not only shaped personal spiritual journeys but also underscored the broader transformation of Russia's religious and social fabric during this period of profound change.

Religious and Political Shifts

The religious tensions that emerged among evangelical communities in the Russian Far North after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were soon challenged by the rise of the Putin regime. In the 1990s, evangelical Christian communities, particularly those of Protestant and charismatic traditions, had flourished in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, aided by foreign missionaries and the post-Soviet religious boom. As I discuss in the following chapter, by the mid-2000s, the political environment began to shift as the Russian state, under Putin's leadership, sought to consolidate its control over all aspects of society, including religious life.

A significant aspect of Putin's governance was his increasing reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church as a pillar of state power and national identity. This partnership between the state and the church reshaped the religious landscape, particularly in the Arctic and Siberian regions, where evangelical Christian communities had established a strong presence. The state's policy toward religious pluralism grew more restrictive, with greater scrutiny of foreign influence, including missionary activities. Evangelical groups, which had once thrived in the relatively open religious environment of the 1990s, now faced increasing hostility from both local authorities and the Orthodox Church.

The government's stance on religious life became more closely aligned with an anti-sectarian discourse, which painted evangelical Protestant communities as foreign and disruptive elements in Russian society. The Orthodox Church, backed by the state, played an instrumental role in

promoting this rhetoric, portraying Protestant denominations as “sects” that undermined traditional Russian values and national unity. Local authorities in the Arctic and Siberian regions, where many evangelical missions had flourished, began to implement policies that were hostile to these religious groups. This hostility was not just limited to official state actions; it permeated social relations, creating an environment of religious conflict and division.

In the next chapter, we delve deeper into how these shifts in state policy and the growing power of the Orthodox Church reshaped the religious dynamics of the Russian Far North and Siberia, particularly in relation to the evangelical communities that had once found a foothold in these regions.

4. Religion and Power: The Rise of the Putin Regime

Abstract: Protestant missionary activity among indigenous Nenets communities in the Yamal Peninsula and the Polar Urals reshaped local religious landscapes. Converts faced suspicion and discrimination, shaped by enduring Soviet-style anti-religious narratives and state policies portraying non-Orthodox groups as threats. Regional authorities closely monitored missionary activity, while believers navigated precarious social positions and marginalization. Early post-Soviet legislation privileged Russian Orthodoxy and legitimized anti-cult rhetoric, framing minority and foreign-origin religious movements as dangerous sects. Under the Putin regime, religion became further securitized, with the Russian Orthodox Church aligning with state and nationalist agendas to monitor, restrict, and marginalize nontraditional faiths. These developments illustrate the complex interplay of state power, law, and social dynamics in shaping religious identities and lived religion in Russia's increasingly authoritarian context.

Keywords: religious persecution, Putin regime, securitization of religion, minority religions, marginalization, religious extremism

Religious Persecutions that Never Ended?

It was early spring 2011 in Salekhard, a city nestled in the Russian Arctic. I was sitting in a small but cozy wooden house in the private sector that served as a Protestant church. The prayer meeting had just ended, and the pastor, along with a few other believers, lingered behind, sipping tea and discussing their upcoming missionary trip to nearby villages and the tundra. The pastor unexpectedly invited me to join the trip, suggesting it would give me the opportunity to meet new faith communities in the region. I was taken aback by the invitation, knowing that missionaries in the Yamal Peninsula

and the Polar Urals were usually cautious about outsiders, operating in an atmosphere of suspicion. For the first time, I sensed a subtle shift—perhaps a glimmer of trust, or at least a willingness to let me step a little closer. Sensing my hesitation, the pastor quickly added a cautionary note:

We had so many incidents, so much trouble. Both the prosecutor's office [*prokuratura*] and television were here [in our church]. How many bulldogs were set on us, it is terrible to think! Here everything is different [from the rest of Russia]. Everything is like in Soviet times. In big cities, in Moscow for instance, they cannot even imagine that anything like that is still possible. They came to us, they filmed us, telling all sorts of foul things about us. Then they showed that on TV, saying, "Look at this! Here is a woman in the tundra who is handing over her last money to these sectarians!" They tried to shut us down. Every year we have to write various humiliating reports, answering so many questions. It seems that the only thing they are interested in is how much money we get, where we get our financing from, and how many foreign missionaries visit us. In other words, we've got major hardships and scandals. After such incidents, several of our church members were booted out of their jobs. One of our women used to work in the [municipal] Duma. And Volodia was also booted out of his good job. A boss called him and said: I don't need sectarians here, I don't need problems here, at work. And that was that, he booted him out. The same with me: when I used to work in Labytnangi—they took me to jail [*katalazhka*] in the middle of the night and then let me go back home in slippers when it was freezing outside! So we've gone through a lot.

The pastor later shared his experience of attending a Christian conference in Moscow in the mid-2000s, where a pastor from Pakistan had requested not to be recorded for safety reasons at the beginning of his presentation. He then explained, "When I began my presentation about our community in Salekhard after him, I also asked not to be recorded... Christian believers in Salekhard face the same troubles as those in Pakistan, and nobody knows how bad it is here."

This story reflects the general atmosphere surrounding missionary activities by newly established Protestant communities in Yamal and the Polar Urals. Religious harassment in these regions began long before the federal-level religious restrictions or the rise of the Putin regime. The increasing visibility of converted religious communities, particularly among the indigenous population, triggered local suspicion and hostility. These early

tensions set the stage for the later repressive climate reinforced by state-driven narratives about the dangers of nontraditional religious groups. This environment shaped the religious experiences of believers in these regions.

While the post-Soviet period brought dramatic changes to the Siberian Arctic religious landscape, particularly with the influx of international Protestant missionary activities, the region also continued to be shaped by Soviet-era atheistic discourse surrounding “destructive foreign religious sects.” The anti-cult and anti-sectarian narratives persisted, shaping local attitudes toward religion and remaining a dominant theme in public discourse. This environment contributed to the discrimination and suppression of religious minorities.³⁵ The impact of this rhetoric was significant, as it shaped how local authorities responded to recent religious changes, framing the resurgence of religious diversity within a context of suspicion and control.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the politics of religion in post-Soviet Russia became deeply intertwined with state power, creating an environment where religious movements—especially non-Orthodox ones—were closely scrutinized and often repressed under the guise of national security. This framework was particularly pronounced in the Russian Arctic, where it had a more visible and enduring impact on the development of religious life than in other regions of the country.

This can be explained by both the remoteness of the Russian Arctic from Moscow and its significant strategic importance to Russia, particularly Yamal, due to its vast natural resources, including gas and oil reserves, as well as its position relative to Arctic Sea routes. The region's distance from the central government meant that local authorities often had greater autonomy in managing affairs, including religious matters. Given Yamal's strategic importance, local authorities were empowered to act in ways that aligned with Russia's broader geopolitical and economic interests, including taking a more active role in regulating religious activities. The combination of local autonomy, strategic significance, and the state's priorities allowed local authorities more leeway to impose their own policies on religious diversity, often resulting in the scrutiny, control, and suppression of religious movements—particularly those perceived as foreign or non-Orthodox. As a consequence, religious life in Yamal and the Polar Urals was subject to more intense regulation and discrimination, in line with the broader state agenda of maintaining control over this strategically crucial region.

In a 2017 propaganda article titled “God, Sects, and Intelligence,” published in a local Salekhard newspaper, the author portrays evangelical missionaries

in Yamal as foreign intelligence agents working in areas critical to Russia's strategic interests. He highlights that many of these missionaries come from Ukraine, the United States, and Western Europe, implicitly linking them to the image of state enemies in Putin's Russia following the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that these missionaries are promoting Western values, undermining Russian presence in the region, and advocating for the replacement of Russian Orthodoxy with their own beliefs. It further connects these religious movements to broader geopolitical concerns, suggesting they are tools of Western powers attempting to influence the indigenous populations of northern Siberia, particularly the Nenets, and contributing to their "degeneration." The piece claims that these groups, through psychological manipulation and unhealthy ideologies, are part of a larger Western conspiracy to destabilize Russia's northern territories.³⁶

In the Yamal region, the emergence of new "sects" was a frequent topic of debate, whether in regional TV programs, seminars, or local media publications. Discussions often centered around "sectarian missionaries," who were accused of manipulating ordinary people, turning them into "converted zombies" who gave away their last possessions to the church. These missionaries were also blamed for burning sacred sites in the tundra and eroding the traditional culture of indigenous peoples. For instance, in November 2012, a seminar titled "Indigenous Peoples as an Object of Influence by an Alien Culture in the Russian North" was held in the Komi Republic. Participants, including social and political activists, businessmen, and Russian Orthodox priests, discussed the impact of "alien cultural components," such as Baptist missionaries among Nenets reindeer herders. They argued that such "sectarian" missionary efforts posed a threat to the traditional cultures of the Northern peoples.

In my conversations with Yamal officials, they too expressed concerns about the arrival of "sectarians." Sergei Khariuchi, by that time the Head of the Yamal State Duma and President of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), a Nenets himself, told me, "With great regret, in my opinion, Protestant culture is a culture that pursues other objectives, as I suspected. I always receive signals from various parts of the tundra about the presence of missionaries. In my view, they are interested in putting people into economic bondage and dependence." He gave me to understand that it was the Federal Security Service that was in charge of monitoring these activities and overseeing the surveillance of missionary movements in the region

36 Morozov, "Bog, sektanty i razvedka."

Another official, who requested anonymity, confirmed that nearly every missionary arriving in Yamal was under surveillance by the Federal Security Service. The official believed that some missionaries employed hypnotic or other illegal psychological techniques to convert individuals. Arguing that “every new religious movement is founded primarily on a physiological approach,” another Yamal official even petitioned the Moscow State Research Center of Social and Forensic Psychiatry to investigate the psychological methods of pressure allegedly used by “sectarian missionaries.”

Likewise, Lidia Vello, the head of the Department for Indigenous Peoples of the North in Salekhard, shared her worries in an interview:

Unfortunately, there are suspicions that they [Protestant missionaries] exert massive pressure. They deliberately travel all over Russia, focusing specifically on indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East. This reflects the unhealthy nature of their activities. And why isn't our state concerned about this? They intrude, impertinently and shamelessly, and preach. We can only guess and suspect what kind of methods they use, yet we never publicize it anywhere.

Although the officials I spoke with framed their remarks as personal opinions, and regional policies were regulated by federal laws that formally guaranteed religious freedom and freedom of conscience, the reality at the local level was very different. In everyday life, newly converted individuals often faced a range of social inequalities and discrimination, because they were stigmatized as “sectarians.” Urban believers risked being fired from their jobs due to their faith, while their counterparts in the tundra experienced even more severe hardships in their interactions with state authorities. For these individuals, conversion often meant not only a spiritual shift but also a highly precarious social position, with state officials and local communities frequently subjecting them to suspicion and marginalization. This stark contrast between the legal framework and the lived reality of religious life in the Russian Arctic was characteristic of the period when Putin's authoritarian system was just beginning to rise.

For example, there was an incident where some Baptist nomadic Nenets were denied provisions at a tundra trading outpost. A woman who refused to sell them food explained that a state deputy had recently visited the outpost, instructing her to treat the tundra believers as harshly as possible and not to serve them at all.

Nadia, a Nenets converted woman in her fifties, told me:

We are teased as Baptists, as if Baptist is an abusive word. When we went to prayer meetings, we were ashamed when people asked where we were going. We lied, saying we were just visiting a friend. Once, a believer was carrying a Bible in his bag, and someone asked him, “Aren’t you carrying God in your bag?” People stopped interacting with us. When we arrived at someone’s campsite, they would close their chums and not let us in for tea—they were afraid of Baptists.

Her sister Marina later added:

At the beginning we were cursed out, “Oh, Baptists, Baptists!” saying that we are sectarians. But we tried not to notice that. We are not sectarians—we don’t scarify anybody, don’t tear up cats or anybody else, don’t sacrifice our sisters or brothers. We just believe, read, and glorify.

The notions of religious persecution, martyrdom, and spiritual resistance were central to the life of the Beloiarsk religious community (and many others in the Polar Urals). These experiences shaped not only their religious practices but also their identities, social expectations, and political attitudes. The ongoing oppression they faced became the dominant narrative, influencing how they understood their place in the world and how they responded to both local and state authorities. The struggle against religious persecution thus became a defining element of their collective identity and a powerful force in shaping their worldview.

As I discussed earlier, this experience became one of the most wrenching moments of my fieldwork. Living in Beloiarsk and interacting with believers, I was consistently met with suspicion, feared as someone who might betray “their people” and cause harm. This leitmotif of fear of persecution, prevalent in conversion stories, deeply shaped the believers’ social expectations, framed their interactions with authority, and influenced how they perceived both themselves and their surroundings. It also underscored the pervasive sense of vulnerability that defined their religious lives.

Traditional and Nontraditional Religions in the early post-Soviet Period

In 1993, the Russian Federation adopted a new constitution that guaranteed full freedom of conscience and religion, regardless of denomination. However, the period of religious freedom and pluralism in post-Soviet Russia

was short-lived. By the mid-1990s, the political landscape began to shift towards a more structured and controlling approach.

As early as 1996, courts and some government bodies began to question the need for religious freedom.³⁷ Before legal shifts on the federal level, local regions in Russia had already adopted anti-sect laws that mirrored Soviet-era “strategies beyond the law,” openly discriminating against religious missionary activities and minorities.³⁸ Between 1993 and 1997, more than one-third of Russia’s eighty nine provincial governments passed laws restricting the rights of foreign religious organizations and religious minorities. Some of these laws were highly repressive, effectively denying believers the right to practice their faith freely, forcing them into “tightly restricted, and presumably invisible, places.”³⁹ Religious groups labeled as “sects” were placed in an inferior status compared to the so-called “traditional religions,” which primarily referred to the Russian Orthodox Church. These groups were required to undergo annual registration, providing detailed information about their funding sources, membership numbers, methods of attracting new members, and how their doctrines differed from those of traditional religions.

Gradually, the government shifted its approach to regulating religious life, adopting a more traditional Russian model of state–church relations. This approach drew on centuries of state control over religious activities, linking political stability to religious uniformity maintained through state oversight. A chain reaction of policies led to stricter regulations that limited religious diversity and freedom in Russia, ultimately reinstating the Soviet model of state-religion relations.⁴⁰ Under this model, the coexistence between the state and religious institutions was defined by total state control and interference, a pattern that solidified under the Putin regime.

In 1997, the Russian Federation adopted the federal law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,” a legislative act that formalized, at the federal level, restrictive practices that had already been implemented in various regions.⁴¹ While the law ostensibly guaranteed freedom of religion, it

37 Urazmetov and Benin, “Destructive Religiosity.”

38 Homer and Uzzell, “Federal and Provincial”; see also Knox, “Religious Freedom”; Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 134.

39 Homer and Uzzell, “Federal and Provincial,” 296–97.

40 Vagramenko and Arqueros, “Criminotheology.”

41 For the original text of the law, see Federal’nyi Zakon ot 26 Sentiabria 1997, no. 125-FZ, “O Svobodesovesti i o religioznykh ob’edineniiakh,” in *Sobranie Zakonodatel’stva RF*, 29 September 1997, no. 3, article 4465. See also Krasikov, “From the Annals”; Elliott, “Evangelism and Proselytism”; Knox, “Religious Freedom”; Daniel and Marsh, “Russia’s 1997 Law.”

simultaneously introduced a legal hierarchy among religious groups, granting preferential recognition to Orthodoxy. This was explicitly articulated in the law's preamble, which acknowledged "the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia, in the formation and development of its spirituality and culture." The law also introduced key criteria for differentiating between so-called "traditional" and "nontraditional" religions. Central to this differentiation was the so-called "fifteen-year rule," which stipulated that only those religious groups that had operated in Russia for at least fifteen years prior to the law's enactment could be registered as religious organizations and enjoy full legal rights. This provision, while formally neutral, later functioned as a hidden mechanism of exclusion—disproportionately disadvantaging minority and newer religious communities. Groups that could not prove their existence in the USSR during this period—including century-old communities that had been persecuted, outlawed, and forced to operate underground in the Soviet Union—were excluded from registering as religious organizations.

Without registered status as religious organizations, these communities were stripped of key rights: they could not own or rent property, receive tax benefits, establish educational or charitable institutions, hold public religious ceremonies, invite foreign religious personnel, or publish, import, or distribute religious literature. Additionally, only centralized religious associations that had operated legally for at least fifty years (i.e., since the Stalin era) could use the terms "Russia" or "Russian" in their titles. Those unable to comply with these regulations, including many religious groups that had existed in Russia for centuries, were categorized as nontraditional and, by implication, foreign. Echoing Soviet policy, the registration procedure became a key feature of the 1997 law. Religious groups unable to prove their existence in Russia since 1982 were required to seek annual approval from local authorities. According to Catherine Wanner, this difficult and discriminatory registration process systematically disempowered those denominations now classified as nontraditional religious groups.⁴²

Since its adoption, the 1997 law has undergone a series of amendments reflecting Russia's increasing authoritarianism and state-backed religious traditionalism. These changes have progressively curtailed the rights of non-Orthodox groups. The 2016 Yarovaya–Ozerov package, in particular, imposed strict limits on missionary activity, effectively prohibiting foreign religious organizations from engaging in religious or missionary work.

This legal framework marked the start of a broader conservative turn in Russian politics, with the Russian Orthodox Church becoming an influential

42 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 133–34.

ally in the state's efforts to shape a unified national identity and fortify state security.⁴³ Over time, this shift deepened the entanglement between church and state, cementing the Orthodox church's role in defining and reinforcing the country's political and social order. The state began to promote Orthodoxy as a central element of Russian national identity, incorporating religious themes into school curricula, military training, and state ceremonies. By the 2010s, the Russian Orthodox Church had become an influential force in political discourse, shaping debates on morality, national values, and foreign policy. As nationalist sentiment and conservatism grew, the dichotomy of "traditional" versus "nontraditional" faiths transformed into a broader and more divisive binary of Russian versus foreign, legitimate versus illegitimate, and safe versus dangerous.⁴⁴

The concepts of "totalitarian sects" and "destructive cults" emerged with lasting impact, especially as Russia began to label nontraditional religions as dangerous. Negative portrayals of foreign religions as "destructive cults" gained traction, contributing to the narrative that these movements were a threat to Russian spirituality. Even long-established evangelical movements in Russia were increasingly viewed as foreign. Terms like "alien," "dangerous," and "totalitarian sects" became common in public discourse, often used to describe non-Orthodox religious movements.

The anti-cult discourse in Russia was promoted and reinforced by the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, later patriarch, stated that for many Russians, "non-Orthodox" religions were seen as forces trying to destroy the spiritual unity of the people; he labeled them "spiritual colonizers" that were attempting to tear Russians away from their church.⁴⁵ This rhetoric further deepened divisions between the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups, reinforcing the state's alignment with Orthodoxy as central to Russian identity. In 1994, the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church defined sects as groups that "purposefully undermine centuries-old traditions and foundations of the peoples and come into conflict with social institutions."⁴⁶ Ambiguous as it was, the definition nevertheless laid the groundwork for legal mechanisms to delegitimize and criminalize minority religious movements. In 1993, with the blessing of Patriarch Alexii II of Moscow and All Russia, the St. Irenaeus

43 Shnirelman, "Russian Neoconservatism."

44 Knox, "Religious Freedom," 304.

45 Kirill, "Gospel and Culture," 73–74.

46 Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, "Definition: On Pseudo-Christian Sects, Neo-paganism, and Occultism," <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/530422.html>.

Center for Religious Studies was established “to address the problems posed by new religious movements, sects, and cults.”⁴⁷ A new discipline called sectology (*sektovedenie*), introduced by Orthodox anti-cult activist Aleksandr Dvorkin and Orthodox protopriest Alexander Novopashin, aggressively targeted minority religions, particularly those of non-Russian origin. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Dvorkin and Novopashin extensively published, lectured, and provided various consultations for policymakers.⁴⁸

This emerging public discourse, reinforced by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy, laid the groundwork for legal actions against minority religions, consolidating the view that foreign-origin or nontraditional beliefs posed a threat to Russia’s stability. By the early 2000s, this Orthodox-sponsored rhetoric was increasingly reflected in the legal system, resulting in legal restrictions and, eventually, open persecution of religious minorities. Amid growing fears of terrorism, Russian policies intensified their focus on minority religious groups, leading to further suppression of religious freedom. In 2000, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s annual report identified Russia as a country that discriminated against human rights and religious freedoms.⁴⁹ The 2006 report further noted,

The deterioration in conditions for religious freedom and other human rights appears to be a direct consequence of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Russian government and the growing influence of chauvinistic groups in Russian society, which seem to be tolerated by the government.⁵⁰

Hence, the religious sphere, shaped by contradictory legislation and public discourse on “foreign religions,” emerged as a key site of conflict in the early post-Soviet period. With the formation of the Putin regime, the Russian Orthodox Church has solidified its position as one of the most influential and powerful institutions in the country. Its growing political influence, coupled with the close relationship between the Kremlin and the Patriarchate, has been driven by the merging of national and religious identities. The historically entrenched link between Orthodoxy and Russian identity has been revitalized through the neocolonial ideology of the “Russian world.”⁵¹

47 St. Irenaeus Center for Religious Studies, <https://iriney.ru/>.

48 Dvorkin, “Protest svidetelei.”

49 Knox, “Religious Freedom,” 282–83.

50 Cited in Knox, “Religious Freedom,” 303.

51 The model is based on a primordialist understanding of religiosity, wherein Russians (or those residing on the “canonical territory” of the “Russian world”) are considered to be born

This strengthened state–church alliance has turned religion into a central instrument of state control and security policy.

The Rise of the Putin Regime: Securitization of Religion and the Politics of Religious Extremism

As the Russian state increasingly instrumentalized religion, the securitization of faith became a central pillar of its governance, shaping policies on religious minorities, national identity, and foreign influence. Religion started to be seen either as pledge of or a threat to national security, an idea inflated by the global fear of terrorism that affected not only the life of Muslim communities, but many Christian denominations in Russia. The previously formulated notion of destructive religiosity soon became associated with extremism and terrorism.

The 2002 federal law “On Combatting Extremist Activity” (amended in July 2022) laid the foundation for legal discrimination against religious groups. As noted by Marat Shterein and Dmitry Dubrovsky, while the law included a broad list of acts considered extremist, including those motivated by religion, it did not specifically define “religious extremism” as a legal term. Instead, the law reinforced the notions of “traditional religions” and “Russian spirituality” as pillars of national security, implicitly suggesting that “foreign” and “nontraditional” faiths posed potential threats.⁵²

The concept of religious extremism was further legally codified through multiple other federal laws and decrees, including the 2006 federal law “On Counteracting Terrorism,” and the 2009 order of the Federal Ministry of Justice “On State Religious Expertise.” Framing religious extremism as a primary threat to national and military security, Russia elevated it to a strategic priority in the 2010 “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation” and the 2015 presidential decree “On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation.”⁵³ Additionally, criminal legislation introduced measures for the “protection of religious feelings” of the Russian people, creating a legal tool that could be creatively and selectively used against undesirable religious organizations and movements. Notably, this provision was added

into Orthodoxy, a phenomenon referred to as *ethnodoxy*; see Karpov et al., “Ethnodoxy.” For a discussion on the role of Orthodoxy in shaping national, ethnic, family, and community identities in Russia, see Coleman, “Tales of Violence,” 206.

52 Shterein and Dubrovsky, “Academic Expertise,” 223–24. See also Dubrovsky, “Religioznye men'shinstva.”

53 Vagramenko and Arqueros, “Criminotheology.”

to the criminal code following the Pussy Riot case, in which prominent figures within the official hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church played a key role in advocating for the prosecution of the three women on trial.

The government justified and securitized restrictions on religious freedom under the pretext of protecting the state and society from extremism and terrorism. As I argue elsewhere, this approach effectively reinstated the post-Stalinist and late-Soviet model of total control over religious life.⁵⁴ Central to this authoritarian shift was the resurgence of the secret police in the form of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor of the Soviet KGB. The continuity of the KGB's legacy never truly ended, as the FSB inherited not only the organizational structure but also the methods and operational tactics of its predecessor. The agency regained significant political influence, becoming a powerful tool for maintaining state control, monitoring dissent, and enforcing loyalty to the regime. Its role in domestic surveillance and political repression marked a return to the practices of the Soviet security apparatus, reinforcing the authoritarian nature of the Russian state.

In 2008, President Putin established the Centre for Combating Extremism within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, later renamed Centre E. This department quickly became the primary state body responsible for gathering criminal evidence and ensuring religious groups' compliance with the new anti-terrorism laws. Acting as a modern-day secret police force, Centre E, much like the KGB's Fifth Chief Directorate, assumed responsibility for overseeing and suppressing ideological dissent in Russia. In a manner reminiscent of the Soviet era, the control of religious nonconformity and the monitoring of religious and ethnic minority movements fell under the jurisdiction of this security agency in post-Soviet Russia.⁵⁵

On 20 April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court banned the Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist" organization, shutting down 395 local congregations and the Russian headquarters, seizing all property. As of January 2025, a total of 138 Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned, with most receiving sentences ranging from four to eight years.⁵⁶ House searches, confiscations, police raids by fully armed Federal Security Service officers, and show trials have become routine for many other religious minorities. The Federal Security Service has employed surveillance, hidden cameras, infiltrating agents, money transfer tracking, and the interrogation of former believers.

54 Vagramenko and Arqueros, "Criminotheology."

55 Vagramenko and Arqueros, "Criminotheology."

56 Data from "Imprisoned for Their Faith—Russia," *JW.org*, n.d., <https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/russia/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>.

In recent years, multiple anti-religious publications, news reports, and films have sensationalized the discovery of yet another “extremist organization cell,” alongside a surge in “anti-sectarian” TV programs, publications, and films in Putin’s Russia. Drawing from Soviet-era anti-sectarian rhetoric, various religious minorities—whether Protestant, new religious movements, or alternative spiritual practices—were portrayed in the media as dangerous, conspiratorial sects. These groups were depicted as enemies hiding behind a religious mask, secretly gathering strategic information for foreign intelligence or as deceitful manipulators exploiting and draining society.

For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses were openly branded as agents of Western intelligence services, with authorities accusing them of recruitment and passing information to foreign powers. A seven-minute news segment that aired on state-run news channel Rossiia-24 in 2022 depicted a local Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall that had been raided and repurposed as a Center for Patriotic Education in the newly occupied Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine. An official from the occupation authorities, Andrei Zinchenko, claimed that Jehovah’s Witnesses were not merely a religious group but “agents of Western intelligence,” alleging that their preachers were professional spies who had “conducted recruitment within the region formerly known as Ukraine, passing vital information to the United States.”⁵⁷

Unlike its Soviet predecessor, this new authoritarian regime strategically fused religious and nationalist narratives to construct a powerful ideological foundation. This fusion promoted the notion of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church as messianic forces destined to preserve traditional values against perceived Western moral decay. This shift unfolded alongside the rise of nationalist and fundamentalist currents within the mainstream Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁸ Religion became a political weapon, with Patriarch Kirill emerging as a powerful ally to President Putin, actively supporting Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine.

This weaponization and securitization of religion were key components of the revised and militarized ideology of the “Russian world,” which reemerged in political discourse under Putin, acquiring new geopolitical significance. It portrayed Russia as the spiritual and political leader of the Eastern Slavic world. In Putin’s Russia, the “Russian world” represented a calculated fusion of religious and nationalist narratives, infused with neocolonial and anti-liberal aspirations that justified domestic authoritarian rule and

57 Rossiia-24, “Shtab ‘Svidetelei Iegovy’ obnaruzhili v Zaporozhskoi obliasti—Rossiia-24,” *YouTube*, 27 October 2022, <https://rutube.ru/video/98a65434dob311b84265d30foof77ca2/>.

58 Kostiuk, “Pravoslavnyi fundamentalizm”; Mitrofanova, *Politizatsiia “pravoslavnogo mira.”*

expansionist policies abroad, including the aggression against Ukraine.⁵⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church stands as the main defender of “traditional values,” positioning itself as the sacred guardian of the “Russian world” at both national and international levels.⁶⁰ In this context, the strengthened state–church connection allowed for the further securitization of religion in Russia.

Despite its pronounced religious rhetoric, however, Putin’s “Russian world” is deeply rooted in the Soviet past, when the Russian Orthodox Church was tightly controlled by the Soviet secret police and strategically used in Soviet foreign policy. This historical continuity persists today, as the church remains under state control, with its official structures manipulated, repurposed, and weaponized to serve the regime’s interests—reinforcing authoritarian rule and legitimizing Russia’s geopolitical ambitions.

With the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia’s authoritarian system reached its full consolidation. In just a few decades, Russia transitioned from an attempt to build democracy and cultural pluralism in the post-Soviet era to the establishment of a highly centralized, authoritarian political system reminiscent of Stalinist rule. Under Putin’s leadership, power became increasingly centralized, with decision-making authority concentrated in the Kremlin. Any form of civil activism, political opposition, or religious dissent was met with harsh repression. Independent media outlets were either shut down or forced into compliance, while propaganda and state-controlled narratives dominated public discourse.

By positioning the state and church as guardians of a unique Russian identity and civilization, the regime effectively suppressed religious and cultural diversity. A wave of persecution and systemic discrimination of religious minorities fostered an atmosphere of fear and repression reminiscent of Soviet-era persecution. Religious freedom was increasingly curtailed under the guise of combating extremism, terrorism, and separatism.

This shift marked a dramatic reversal from one of the most significant religious revivals in the early post-Soviet period, when religious freedom flourished and various faiths gained prominence, to the emergence of an authoritarian state that mirrored the darkest elements of Soviet policies. The government’s anti-sectarian propaganda, eerily reminiscent of Soviet-era tactics, resurrected the ghosts of the past, bringing religious life once again under the surveillance and control of the secret police. Many religious

59 Surzhko Harned, “Russian World”; Suslov, “The Utopia.”

60 Suslov, “The Utopia.”

communities, once empowered by newfound freedom, found themselves subjected to surveillance, restrictions, and persecution. Alternative forms of religious life, outside of state-sanctioned practices, were pushed back into underground, private, and hidden spaces, or forced into exile. Religion, once a symbol of liberation, became a perceived threat to state security, prompting actions against religious minorities that replicated the most repressive practices of the Soviet era. In the end, history repeated itself.

5. Contested Identities: The Rise and Fall of Indigenous Movements in Russia

Abstract: Indigenous movements in post-Soviet Russia pursued complex strategies to assert cultural, territorial, and political autonomy amid shifting legal, economic, and political pressures. Neotraditionalism and clan-based *obshchiny* movements aimed to reclaim cultural practices, protect natural resources, and institutionalize indigenous rights across Siberia. Shamanism became central to ethnic identity, creating “sacred geographies” that linked spirituality to land and reinforced territorial claims. In Yamal, this mobilization was expressed through sacred site preservation and ritual practices, intertwining faith, ecology, and social cohesion. Organizations such as RAIPON initially facilitated advocacy, legal recognition, and international support. Under Putin, however, state control, corporate interests, and NGO restrictions curtailed activism, co-opted organizations, and marginalized grassroots movements, producing a post-Soviet rise followed by decline under authoritarian governance and industrial expansion.

Keywords: indigenous movement, Siberia, indigenous activism, shamanism, neo-shamanism, neotraditionalism

The precariousness of religious life in the Russian Arctic was shaped by a complex interplay of legal, political, and social factors. In this chapter, I examine another critical issue that sparked intense conflict when the evangelical movement arrived in indigenous Siberia and the North: the politics of indigenism, the indigenous movement, and the role of indigenous religiosity and shamanism within it.

Protestant missionary efforts often clashed with regional policies that supported indigenous religiosity. In the Yamal region, this tension was compounded by the profound impact of extractive industries, which affected not only the local economy but also the livelihoods of nomadic peoples. Indigenous activism, therefore, increasingly focused on land protection

and securing financial support for those displaced by industrial development. As a result, the promotion of indigenism—and the preservation of indigenous traditional culture and religion—became closely tied to the financial interests of the gas and oil industries.

Protestant missionary initiatives, along with the growing number of conversions among the indigenous population, were seen by many as a dilution of indigeneity, threatening both the cultural and economic claims of indigenous peoples. This perceived threat to indigenous identity and autonomy rendered the evangelical movement not just a religious challenge but also a political and economic one, complicating the position of Protestant communities in the region.

Reclaiming the North: The Indigenous Movement in Post-Soviet Russia

Post-Soviet social, political, and religious changes, along with the wave of sovereignty declarations and the rise of nationalism in Russia, also affected the indigenous peoples of Siberia, stimulating the emergence of indigenous activism as a political and cultural movement in ethnically based regions of Siberia.¹ Across post-Soviet Russia, there was a growing awareness and defensiveness around ethnic identities, leading to the transformation of ethnic self-consciousness into various forms of politicized nationalism and regionalism based on ethnic distinctions. Ronald Niezen defines indigenism as “a social movement with a strategic focus outside of states that seeks to activate rights to autonomy within states.”² Siberia became a post-Soviet laboratory for developing political, social, cultural, and spiritual projects of indigeneity. Balzer and Vinokurova, focusing on the Sakha Republic, argue that

The explosion of ethnicity and nationalism came not simply out of a newly created post-Soviet societal void, nor a reemergence of pre-Soviet identities, but rather as the result of a cumulative series of dynamic interethnic encounters that evolved throughout the twentieth century.³

A wave of neotraditionalism and more politicized indigenous activism emerged in the public arena, leading to the revitalization of ethnic-based

1 Gray, *The Predicament*.

2 Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism*, 136.

3 Balzer and Vinokurova, “Nationalism,” 114.

autonomous districts and republics with their own legislative bodies. This period also saw the foundation of indigenous organizations and groups focused on addressing indigenous issues and defending indigenous rights.⁴

In the 1990s, a series of federal laws, legislative decrees, and presidential edicts, along with the new constitution in 1993, sought to secure indigenous rights to land and self-government. However, significant obstacles remained in the practical implementation of these indigenous rights.⁵ The Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East (RAIPON) was founded in 1990 as a public organization dedicated to protecting indigenous peoples' human rights, defending their legal interests, assisting in solving environmental, social, economic, cultural, and educational issues, and promoting their right to self-governance.⁶ It focused on improving regional and federal legislation in favor of indigenous minority groups, operated internationally by sending delegations to thematic sessions at the United Nations, participating in UN expert and advisory bodies, and openly opposed the expansion of large resource-extracting companies onto the traditional lands of indigenous peoples in Siberia and the North. It also became a permanent participant of the Arctic Council and garnered international financial support.

For a long time, the organization maintained its independence from the authorities and even resisted large oil and gas corporations that sought to claim the lands traditionally inhabited by indigenous peoples that were rich in natural resources like oil, gas, coal, and gold. In the early years of RAIPON's operation, and with its support, three federal laws were passed to protect indigenous lands: "On the Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Less Numerous Peoples of the Russian Federation" (30 April 1999, no. 82-FZ); "On the General Principles of Organizing Clan-Based Communities [*obshchiny*] of Indigenous Less Numerous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (20 July 2000, no. 104-FZ); and "On the Territories of Traditional Natural Resource Use of Indigenous Less Numerous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (7 May 2001, no. 49-FZ).

On the ground, in the regions, the *obshchina* movement emerged as a vital force for indigenous empowerment. Initially supported on the federal level

4 Averin, "Problemy malochislennykh"; Gray, "Chukotka's Indigenous"; Gray, *The Predicament*; Pika, "Neotraditsionalizm."

5 Fondahl and Poelzer, "Indigenous Peoples"; Murashko, "Obsuzhdenie proekta"; Sokolova et al., "Etnografy pishut."

6 RAIPON, "General Information," <https://en.raipon.info/association/index#common-information>.

and by smaller local activist organizations and individuals, the indigenous clan-based community movement sought legal recognition, becoming an important element of the broader indigenous movement in Russia.⁷ As Gail Fondahl observes, the movement enabled the reterritorialization of indigenous peoples, helping them regain control over their homelands and cultural identities.⁸ This initiative aimed to become part of the political and social restructuring of the Russian North, with indigenous communities repositioning themselves within the post-Soviet transition.⁹

The *obshchina* movement sought to revive indigenous social, cultural, and political structures disrupted during the Soviet era. By establishing territorial, clan-based communities, indigenous peoples aimed to reclaim traditional practices and protect their lands, resources, and cultural heritage from the pressures of industrialization and state policies. This movement also enabled the reassertion of autonomy and self-governance, empowering communities to manage their affairs independently from the state and affirm their right to self-determination. It became a crucial tool for navigating the complex political landscape, safeguarding heritage, and ensuring indigenous voices were heard in decisions regarding land, resources, and future development.¹⁰ As *obshchiny* were established across the Russian North, they formed a network of indigenous territories, symbolizing the broader struggle for cultural preservation and political recognition.

Various local indigenous organizations, associations, museums, and folk ensembles sprang up throughout Siberia and the Far North, playing a crucial role in promoting the revival of indigenous cultures and languages, as well as protecting indigenous lands and the environment. However, as Debra Schindler aptly notes, the organization of indigenous peoples into such associations also led to heightened ethnic tensions—both among different indigenous groups and between indigenous and nonindigenous populations in the Russian Far North.¹¹

Among other factors, the indigenous movement grounded its policies in the development of an indigenous religion, portrayed as crucial for the survival of indigenous peoples, closely connected to environmental issues, and essential for maintaining moral order and social cohesion.

7 Fondahl, *Gaining Ground*; Gray, "The *Obshchina* in Chukotka"; Stammler, "The *Obshchina* Movement."

8 Fondahl, "Everything Is as if Beyond," 103.

9 Stammler, "The *Obshchina* Movement."

10 Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*, 167.

11 Schindler, "Redefining Tradition," 201.

Indigenous Religiosity and Neo-shamanism

In the summer of 2004, during the International Congress on Siberian Shamanism organized by the Moscow Center for the Study of Shamanism, I had the opportunity to witness the shamanic initiation ritual of a Yamal Nenets man named Ivan Yadne. The so-called “ritual of opening a way” was performed by a New Age neo-shaman using the pseudonym Olard Elvil Dikson. He was a Russian man who had acquired knowledge of shamanic practices from Koriak, Kazakh, and Khakass elders, and had been initiated as a shaman by the Tyvinian throat singer-turned-shaman Nikolai Oorzhak. Olard Dikson was also a member of the Society of Tyvinian Shamans, “Dungur.” The ritual I attended took place at a health resort near Moscow, as part of the congress’s program. Numerous anthropologists, shamans, spiritual entrepreneurs from various countries, as well as health resort guests, were present. After the solemn ceremony, the newly initiated shaman was awarded a diploma, signifying his successful initiation and his obligation to adhere to a special ethical code in his shamanic practice.

Nenets religion and shamanism also became key ethnic symbols in the Yamal region. In Salekhard, the capital of the Yamal region, culture and politics remained closely intertwined, with the image of Nenets religion largely shaped by intellectuals. Nenets writers, social activists, cultural workers, and educators worked to establish traditional Nenets culture and religion as integral, complete, and objective—an essential aspect of the shared identity vital for their ethnic survival. In this context, the rise of Protestant movements naturally came into direct conflict with the regional policy of indigenism.

Here, as elsewhere in post-Soviet Siberia, religion became a tool for mobilizing cultural and ethnic identities, playing a crucial role in Siberian indigenous activism.¹² As Andrei Znamenski argues, spiritual revival has turned into “a planned ethnocultural enterprise.”¹³ The construction of indigeneity became intertwined with the revitalization of indigenous religiosity and the institutionalization of indigenous ethnic religions alongside Christianity and Islam.

Across Siberia, the diverse local religious beliefs and practices that had been repressed and driven underground throughout the Soviet era began to emerge into the public sphere, becoming important ethnic symbols and sometimes political tools in nationalist claims. During the 1990s, amid the

12 Balzer, *Shamans, Spirituality*; Balzer, “Beyond Belief?”; Humphrey, “Shamans in the City.”

13 Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 346.

ethnocultural revival of indigenous Siberia, shamans and shamanic rituals gained public visibility. Regions such as Sakha (Yakutia), Tyva, Buryatia, Khakassia, and Altai embraced and supported emerging neo-shamanic trends, viewing them as essential expressions of indigenous identity and cultural renewal.

In regions where shamanic practices and rituals had continued in secret during the Soviet period, albeit in fragmented forms, practitioners began to step out of the shadows and openly assert their roles as spiritual leaders. In areas where the shamanic tradition had been completely disrupted by Soviet anti-religious propaganda and had not been practiced for decades, the reconstruction or revival of shamanism was often based on ethnographic literature and archival sources. This revival was stimulated and supported by local authorities, urban intellectuals, foreign indigenous NGOs, and individual Western spiritual seekers.¹⁴

Scholars, cultural workers, and spiritual entrepreneurs reprinted classical ethnographic books, initiated international spiritual exchanges, and organized seminars and workshops. They also launched numerous expeditions into remote Siberian regions to seek out elders who could share fragments of ancient wisdom. Notable examples include Valentina Kharitonova's shamanism revitalization project—led by a Moscow anthropologist who became a prominent shamanic promoter—and the 1993 expedition to Tyva by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (USA) in search of shamanic traditions.¹⁵

Shamanism was officially recognized as one of the national religions alongside Buddhism and Russian Orthodoxy in the Tyva Republic.¹⁶ In 1992, the first shamanic organization in Siberia, the Dungur Society of Tyvinian Shamans, was established, led by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan, who was declared the “lifelong supreme shaman.”¹⁷ Supported by the government, Dungur operated several shaman houses where ritual healing sessions were conducted by practitioners from diverse backgrounds, including Tyvinian, American, French, German, and Russian.

Similarly, the Thundering Drum Association of Buriat Shamans was established in Buryatia in 1992, with around forty members. Caroline Humphrey observed that in Ulan-Ude during the early 1990s, long queues would form at the association as early as 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, with

14 Hoppál, “Shamanism in a Postmodern”; Johansen, “Shamanism and Neoshamanism”; Hamayon, “Shamanism.”

15 Kharitonova, “Bez very i nadezhdy”; Kharitonova, *Religioznyi faktor*.

16 Hoppál, “Tracing Shamans in Tuva.”

17 Hoppál, “Tracing Shamans in Tuva,” 474; Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 349–51.

cars lined up outside, waiting to transport shamans to perform healing rituals at patients' homes.¹⁸ In the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the capital city of Yakutsk sponsored the construction of a shamanic temple known as the House of Purification.¹⁹ Similar shamanic revivals occurred in Khakassia, Altai, and other parts of Siberia, reflecting a broader trend of indigenous cultural and spiritual resurgence.²⁰

Shamanic and neo-shamanic practices, sometimes referred to as urban shamanism, became a significant component of indigenous movements in certain regions of Siberia. This cultural revival was largely driven by the indigenous elite. In regions like Tyva and Sakha (Yakutia), where indigenous intellectuals held substantial political power in the 1990s and early 2000s, new shamanic trends received political backing. These practices became powerful tools for constructing ethnic identities and reterritorializing indigeneity.²¹ This process transformed shamanism into what Eva Fridman termed "sacred geography," where indigenous lands were demarcated and sacralized.²² By emphasizing an environmentally sensitive, nature-based spirituality that connected identity to the land, these practices rooted people within these territories, reinforcing their indigenous status.

Nenets Indigenous Projects

While Nenets shamanism and religion did not develop into a highly visible public phenomenon like it did in Tyva or Buryatia during the post-Soviet period, indigenous activists and public figures in Yamal actively sought to promote Nenets culture and religion as being central to indigenous land and rights claims.²³ Moreover, the concept of indigeneity was actively promoted within Yamal's educational system through initiatives like integrating traditional indigenous knowledge into school curricula and creating tundra schools for the children of reindeer herders.²⁴ These efforts brought Nenets

18 Humphrey, "Shamans in the City," 7.

19 Balzer, "Beyond Belief?"

20 Van Deusen, "The Sleeping Warrior"; Tiukhteneva, "Neoshamanstvo' na Altae."

21 Hoppál, "Shamanism in a Postmodern"; Humphrey, "Shamans in the City"; Balzer, *Shamans, Spirituality*; Anderson, "Shamanistic Revival"; Ventsel, "Religion and Ethnic Identity."

22 Fridman, *Sacred Geography*.

23 Khariuchi et al., *Sotsial'nye normy*, 52; Khariuchi, *Sovremennyye problemy*; Khariuchi, *Pravovyye problemy*.

24 Barmich, "Traditsionnaia kul'tura"; Niarui and Serpivo, *Nensty*; Laptander, "Model for the Tundra School."

indigenism into broader social and political discussions, aligning it with contemporary discourses on indigenous rights, land rights, ecology, and culture heritage.

The religious aspect of the Nenets indigenous movement focused not on the public display of shamanic practices, which remained secretive and clan-based, but on the protection of sacred sites that were increasingly threatened by industrial development, particularly the extensive oil and gas extraction on the Yamal Peninsula. Nenets (as well as Northern Khanty) nomadic families, particularly among Siberian groups, have long carefully preserved their ancestral sacred objects—*khekhe'*—adhering to detailed regulations, rituals, and sacrifices associated with them.²⁵ Away from public life, in the tundra, Nenets have retained traditional animistic practices, shamans and shamanic attire, drums, and rituals, all of which were well described by travelers and ethnographers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The religious landscape of the tundra is marked by a network of sacred sites. Hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas are believed to have their own spirit-guardians, known as *ia'erv* (literally “master of the land”) or *khekhe'ia* (“spirit of the land”). Sacred images of these spirit-guardians, *siadei*, are created to represent the spirit-guardian of a specific place. Sacred sites built upon them—homes of the spirit-guardians—are a distinctive feature of the landscape in the areas inhabited by the tundra Nenets.²⁶ Nenets perform ritual sacrifices on these sacred sites that otherwise are kept in secret.

Nenets dwellings and everyday life are also saturated with multiple ritual regulations, governing interactions with sacred objects, household activities, and the movements of people within and around the chum. Nenets *khekhe'* (often referred to in Russian as *idoly*) are representations of deities or spirits, as well as being ritual objects used in ceremonies. These sacred figures, made from wood, cloth, stone, or metal, can take anthropomorphic or zoomorphic forms and are placed either at open-air sacred sites (*khekhe'ia*) or kept inside the chum or stored in sacred sledges (*khekhe' khan*) within clan territories. Domestic sacred objects—particularly ritual images of deceased persons—are often treated as living beings. One example is *miad' pukhutsia*—a wooden doll dressed in multiple female coats, regarded as the

25 Islavin, *Samoedy v domashnem*, 116; Khomich, “Predstavlenie nentsev”; Khomich, “Religioznye kul'ty”; Kostikov, “Zakony tundry”; Prokof'eva, “Materialy po religioznym”; Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 358–62; Veniamin, “Obrashchenie v khristianstvo.”

26 Khomich, “Religioznye kul'ty”; Khariuchi, *Traditsii i innovatsii*; Khariuchi, “Nenetskie sviatilishcha.”



Figure 5.1. Two Nenets anthropomorphic female ritual figures, known as the Mistress of the Tent (*miad' pukhutsia*), Salemal tundra. Photograph by the author.

female master of the chum. Another category includes *sidriang*, images of deceased male relatives, and *nytarma*, representations of a deceased shaman or an honored elder. The *sidriang* is typically created after the death of a male relative and is kept inside the chum for about three years. During this time, it is treated as part of the household—seated at the table during meals, given food, put to sleep, and honored with monthly sacrifices of reindeer meat and blood. At the end of this period, the *sidriang* is either burned or buried. For especially prominent figures such as shamans or highly respected elders, new receptacles are made (*nytarma*), which remain in the dwelling and continue to serve as sources of guidance and protection.²⁷

Sacred sites, seen as open-air temples infused with a unique ecological philosophy, emerged as prominent symbols of Nenets indigenous religiosity and became key focal points for regional policy. In 1999, a debate took place in Salekhard over a draft law, “On Religious Sites and Places of Worship of Indigenous Peoples of the North,” aimed at providing

27 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 208–9; Khariuchi, *Traditsii i innovatsii*, 140; Khristoforova, “Ngytarma.”



Figure 5.2. A Nenets anthropomorphic ritual figure representing a deceased male relative (*sidriang*), Baidarata tundra. Photograph by the author.

government protection for sacred sites in the tundra.²⁸ While advocating for this law, Sergei Khariuchi, then chairman of the State Duma of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, stressed that local policy should not only support the socioeconomic development of indigenous minorities in the North but also prioritize the preservation and protection of sacred sites, which he described as having profound “moral significance” for Northern society.²⁹

In 2000, a project was initiated to map and protect Yamal’s sacred sites.³⁰ Between 2001 and 2002, under the auspices of the Arctic Council and with support from RAIPON, the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat (IPS), and the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF), an international pilot project titled “The Conservation Value of Sacred Sites of Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic: A Case Study in Northern Russia” was launched. The regional authorities in Yamal supported the project, which aimed to map sacred sites and sanctuaries in the tundra for legal preservation and protection.³¹

28 Khariuchi, *Sovremennyye problemy*, 30; Khariuchi, “Nenetskie sviatilishcha.”

29 Khariuchi, *Sovremennyye problemy*, 69–72.

30 Khariuchi, “Nenetskie sviatilishcha”; Lar, “Sviashchennyye mesta.”

31 Khariuchi, “Kul’tovyye mesta”; Lar, *Kul’tovyye pamiatniki*; Murashko, *Znachenie okhrany*; Yefimenko, “Sacred Sites.”

The project led to the identification and mapping of 263 sacred sites and sanctuaries of the Yamal Nenets. This mapping effort was viewed as a crucial tool for preserving indigenous cultures, especially in the face of the rapid industrial development encroaching on Yamal's tundra regions. Additionally, the project served to define the boundaries of indigenous lands, reasserting Nenets culture within specific territorial limits. Any violation of these symbolic and physical borders was seen as an infringement on indigenous rights, often leading to accusations of encroachment on sacred territories.

Nenets religiosity is deeply intertwined with ecology, seen as a force that sanctifies and protects the land. The land itself, along with its sacred spirits, is considered essential to their way of life. Many believe it plays a crucial role in maintaining the delicate balance of the northern environment. Rooted in Nenets traditions, this religiosity emphasizes a profound connection to nature, the tundra, and all its inhabitants—especially reindeer, which are central to their way of life. As a Nenets woman from Yar-Sale in Southern Yamal once told me, “If there is no faith—there are no reindeer—there are no people. We will die out if we lose our faith.”

Thus, sacred sites became visible symbols of Nenets indigenous religiosity and key targets for regional policy. As the following chapters demonstrate, *khekhe'*—labeled “idols” by evangelical missionaries—also emerged as a focal point in the process of religious conversion.

In the indigenous artistic sphere, the image of pristine indigenous tradition and shamanic beliefs also became a significant source of inspiration. Leonid Lar, an artist, ethnographer, and occasionally referred to as a shaman, played a distinct role in shaping and popularizing the concept of Nenets religiosity. Through his works and paintings, Lar constructed a vision of a unified and structured Nenets religion, complete with a pantheon, a hierarchized system of shamans and spirits, and other elements that imbued the tradition with both depth and order.³² His artwork not only depicted Nenets religious practices but also framed them within modern ecological discourse, emphasizing the deep connection between spirituality and the environment.³³ Lar promoted the idea that Nenets shamanism served as the central pillar of religious life for the Nenets people, and he advocated for its preservation and revitalization as a core element of their cultural identity.

A galaxy of Soviet-educated indigenous intellectuals, including Nenets writers and poets such as Leonid Laptui, Anna Nerkagi, Yelena Susoi, Liubov' Neniang, Nina Yadne, and Yuri Vella, alongside new indigenous folklore

32 Lar, *Shamany i bogi*.

33 Lar and Vanuito, “Shaman kak khranitel'.”

groups, local festivals, exhibitions, and celebrations of indigenous holidays, laid the foundation for promoting pristine Nenets traditional culture, religion, and moral order. Through their work and initiatives, they fostered a cultural revival that highlighted the significance of Nenets heritage, shaping the narrative around the preservation of indigenous identity and values.

State Control and Corporate Interests: The Decline of Indigenous Activism in Putin's Russia

Many of the newly established indigenous associations were able to thrive and expand in the early post-Soviet period thanks to international grants and financial support, which played a crucial role in funding their activities and initiatives. These associations benefited from partnerships with global organizations, NGOs, and governments, which helped them promote indigenous rights, preserve cultures, and protect lands. However, with the rise of Putin's government and the tightening of state control, securing such international funding became impossible, which led to significant decline in financial support for indigenous groups. In addition to restrictions on foreign influence, other measures, such as laws limiting NGO activities, increased surveillance, and pressure on activists, further curtailed indigenous activism. These restrictions led to a broader decline and, in some cases, the suppression of indigenous organizations and their efforts to protect cultural heritage and land rights.

At the same time, indigenous groups faced growing pressure from large businesses and resource-extraction companies that sought to exploit the natural resources located on indigenous territories. The lobbying efforts of these powerful corporations often clashed with indigenous advocacy. As Putin consolidated his power, building his authority with the backing of big business (especially those in industries like oil, gas, and natural resources), the state increasingly sided with economic interests over environmental and cultural protection, further diminishing the influence of indigenous movements. This dynamic of political and economic influence significantly weakened indigenous activism in Russia, particularly as the state prioritized corporate interests and development over the protection of indigenous territories and rights. The situation was even more intensified on the Yamal Peninsula, which became a "new oil-and-gas province" during Putin's presidency.³⁴

34 Magomedov, "How the Indigenous Peoples"; Magomedov, "Oil Derricks or Reindeer?"; Staalesen, "In Russian Tundra Tragedy."

By 2024, most indigenous movements, public organizations, associations, and media outlets had either been shut down or reduced to organizing decorative events featuring ethnic costumes, traditional singing, dancing, and cooking. Many were outlawed as extremist or separatist groups, including “Free Buryatia,” “Free Yakutia,” “New Tyva,” “Aborigen-Forum,” “Indigenous Russia,” and the International Committee for Indigenous Peoples of Russia (ICIPR). All founding members of ICIPR were expelled from the country for various political reasons. The *Komi Daily*, an independent indigenous media outlet, was declared a “terrorist” organization by the Russian authorities.³⁵ The Center for Assistance to Indigenous Peoples of the North, a human rights NGO supporting indigenous peoples of the Russian North, accredited by UN agencies, UNESCO, UNEP, and other international organizations, was added to the list of foreign agents and liquidated in 2020.³⁶

RAIPON remained one of the few legal representative bodies for indigenous peoples, comprising thirty-four public organizations based in Siberian and Arctic regions of Russia. However, although it was initially an independent advocate for the protection of indigenous peoples’ human rights, it gradually transformed to become fully controlled by the Russian government, and was even one of the initiators, alongside the Federal Security Service, of the persecution of some indigenous associations.

By the mid-2000s, politicians and government officials began joining the association, and by the mid-2010s, they had taken control of the entire organization. By 2025, more than half of the seats on the presidium of RAIPON were held by government officials, lawmakers, and senators, with former politicians and businesspeople—or their relatives—holding leadership positions in regional branches. As a result, RAIPON has received funding from large industrial companies and even lobbied at the UN for the removal of sanctions on Norilsk Nickel. Led by Vladimir Potanin, a close ally of Putin, Norilsk Nickel is the world’s largest producer of nickel, palladium, and other precious metals, operating on indigenous lands in Siberia.³⁷

In 2023, RAIPON issued an open letter in support of the invasion of Ukraine. This came against the backdrop of mobilization efforts that have

35 *Komi Daily*, “The FSB Has Added *Komi Daily* to Its List of Terrorist Organizations. What Will We Do?,” <https://komidaily.com/2025/01/23/we-are-not-terrorists/>.

36 Ksenia Nikulina, “Center for Assistance to Indigenous Peoples of the North,” *List of Foreign Agents of the Russian Federation*, 8 January 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230804074858/https://spisok-inoagentov.ru/tsentr-sodeystviya-korennyim-malochislennym-narodam-severa/>.

37 Verstka, “‘They Work for the Benefit of the Elite’: How the Association of Indigenous Minorities Became a Tool for Enrichment and Lobbying,” 2 August 2024, <https://verstka.media/rassledovanie-kak-assotsiatsiya-korennykh-malochislennykh-narodov-stala-instrumentom-obogascheniya-i-lobbizma>.

disproportionately targeted regions in Siberia with significant ethnic minority populations. Reports from areas like Buryatia, Primor'e, Tyva, and other Siberian regions highlight new mobilization lists and casualty reports, underscoring the severe impact on local men, many of whom belong to indigenous communities. Beyond the loss of lives, there was growing concern that the mobilization could push these already vulnerable ethnic minorities to the brink of extinction, with little regard from the Russian government for their cultural survival.

In a manner similar to RAIPON, indigenous shamanic organizations have also aligned themselves with the Putin regime. The Centralized Religious Shamanic Organization of Tyva, established in 2019 as the "Office of the Supreme Shaman," has unified various shamanic groups under a more centralized structure, amplifying their political and social influence. In October 2022, shamans from across Russia gathered to perform a ritual in support of Russia's war in Ukraine. This event brought together religious practitioners from cities such as Kazan, Yekaterinburg, Kemerovo, Krasnoyarsk, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Sochi, along with those from numerous settlements in Khakassia, Tyva, and Transbaikalia.³⁸ The ritual highlighted the political alignment of certain shamanic communities. Leading this movement was the supreme shaman of Tyva, Kara-ool Dopchun-ool, who became an outspoken pro-Kremlin advocate, vocally supporting the invasion of Ukraine and President Putin. His position and influence symbolized the growing intersection of organized shamanism with state politics, much like the shift observed in RAIPON.

The indigenous movement in Putin's Russia was reduced to a decorative role, serving as a tool for international image-making rather than fostering meaningful change or advancing the rights of indigenous peoples. While the Russian state projected an image of ethnic and cultural diversity for foreign audiences, at the grassroots level, indigenous communities were often confined to performing at traditional festivals, dressed in cultural regalia, and performing ritual dancing and singing. This ceremonial spectacle obscured the severe lack of political agency and the systemic marginalization faced by these communities on the grassroots level.

Meanwhile, many indigenous rights activists faced increasing criminalization, persecution, and silencing, with some being forced to flee the country. Their organizations were labeled extremist and shut down. Pavel Suliandziga, the first president of RAIPON and an indigenous human rights defender,

38 Office of the Supreme Shaman, "Shamanic Rituals in Defense of the Fatherland," VK, 10 October 2022, https://vk.com/wall-69632504_2674.

was added to the list of foreign agents in 2023. In 2014, he and other activists were prevented from attending the First World Conference of Indigenous Peoples in New York, with border guards at the airport tearing pages from their passports. This escalating discrimination severely undermined the effectiveness of indigenous activism and its role in political and social decision-making.

To sum up, the post-Soviet process of what Caroline Humphrey refers to as the “unmaking and making of relations”³⁹ unfolded along multidimensional trajectories, one of which was the emergence of diverse new and revived religious movements. The rapid influx of foreign missionaries and evangelicals, alongside the rise of indigenous religious communities across the post-Soviet landscape, led to a flourishing of various forms of religiosity and para-religiosity. This transformation dramatically reshaped the religious landscape, with the construction of shamanic temples, Orthodox churches, Protestant prayer houses, mosques, and Buddhist temples becoming a defining feature of the highly competitive religious environment in Siberia and the Arctic.

By the late 1990s, the boom in religiosity, folk medicine, and healing practices began to subside across the Russian Federation. Churches, temples, and prayer houses that had previously seen rapid growth began to experience a decline, settling into a steady but moderate number of parishioners. The introduction of a new federal law restricting folk medicine practices led to the closure of some shamanic houses and the decline of shamanic associations.⁴⁰

Under Putin’s leadership, state policies increasingly restricted the activities of indigenous movements, particularly those advocating for greater autonomy and indigenous rights. These movements, which had gained momentum in the 1990s, were increasingly viewed by the government with suspicion, as they were often linked to wider nationalistic and separatist trends. The state implemented stricter control over indigenous activism, limiting the ability to organize and protest, and suppressing any efforts that could be perceived as challenging state authority. Indigenous groups faced mounting pressures, as the Russian government prioritized centralization and national unity over regional and ethnic rights. This shift occurred alongside the prioritization of energy development, which transformed Siberia and the Arctic into industrial zones. Oil and gas extraction, often at the expense of indigenous populations, took precedence over concerns

39 Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet*.

40 Humphrey, “Shamans in the City”; Balzer, “Beyond Belief?”

for preserving indigenous lands. In the Yamal Peninsula, giant resource extraction projects further threatened the lands and livelihoods of the Nenets and other indigenous peoples, while corporate and state interests sidelined indigenous rights in favor of profit and the securitization of the Arctic.

Although the intensity of religious life in post-Soviet Russia fluctuated, the religious landscape remained dynamic, marked by a diversity of movements and forms of religiosity, with intense competition for followers and influence between religious organizations. This landscape was closely intertwined with local political and cultural movements, often intersecting with nationalistic and ethnic concerns. However, this diversity operated within the framework of the authoritarian state. As the government consolidated and tightened its control, particularly over indigenous movements, the scope and impact of religious and cultural expressions were increasingly restricted. State authority often suppressed indigenous initiatives, intertwining religious and political struggles and limiting their ability to shape social and cultural landscapes beyond state-sanctioned boundaries.

This complex, dynamic, and challenging context provided the backdrop against which the life of the Beloiarsk community unfolded, as will be explored in the following chapters.

Part 3

Continuity and Rupture: Nenets Christianities

6. Burning the Sacred: Christian Conversion and Cultural Discontinuity

Abstract: Indigenous conversion generated profound social and moral tensions in the tundra. Early converts embraced radical “rituals of rupture,” burning sacred objects and abandoning traditional lifeways, signaling a break from ancestral life. This provoked conflicts, marginalizing converts and highlighting collision between global religious frameworks and regionally embedded lifeworlds. Missionaries framed the tundra and indigenous practices as demonically charged, casting conversion as spiritual warfare, while converts navigated the pressures of a “born-again” identity within a culturally distinct environment. Over time, many Nenets reconciled Christianity with ancestral practices, expressing regret over destroyed idols and renegotiating social norms. Conversion thus evolved from rupture to negotiated continuity, reshaping identities, moral orders, and understandings of indigenous belonging, revealing the dialogical, contested, and spatially mediated nature of religious change.

Keywords: indigenous conversion, rituals of rupture, cultural continuity, cultural change, religious conflict

Num Is Angry

In the cold, blustery spring of 2011, I stayed in Marina's home in Beloiarsk, a small, snowbound house, a former Soviet communal apartment building (known as a Soviet barrack), huddled against the backdrop of the Polar Ural Mountains. Marina was a slight, frail woman in her early fifties, her health bearing the toll of a hard life spent on the tundra. Several years earlier, she had left behind more than four decades of nomadic existence, settling in the village. Her life had been marked by tragedies and countless losses in her family, as well as the struggles of alcohol that had cast a shadow over her years. Despite these hardships, Marina was known for her deep wisdom, her

rich understanding of indigenous knowledge, and her gift for storytelling, which carried the weight of a unique and storied past.

As a child, Marina had suffered from cirrhosis of the lungs, an ailment that, in the eyes of her family, was seen as a sign of a shamanic calling (the so-called shamanic illness). Perhaps this is why her father had kept her from marrying, believing that she was destined for something beyond the ordinary—a belief that extended to the idea that she might be *Numd' siarvy ne*, the bride of God, promised and devoted to Num, the chief spirit of the Nenets.

"They think I'm a shaman," Marina once told me with a quiet laugh. "They always ask me to tell them something. But I don't know who I am. I don't beat the drum. What can I tell them?"

As the last surviving member of her clan—having lost all the male members, while her sisters married into other families—Marina inherited the clan's sacred sledge (*khekhe' khan*), a traditional vessel where the Nenets keep their ritual objects and spirit figures. This inheritance, it was believed, made her responsible for protecting the clan's gods, as well as safeguarding family wealth and fortune.

However, Marina chose a different path for her life. Shortly after settling in the village, she converted to Protestant Christianity and became one of the most active members of the local Baptist community. "You will be happy," were the last words her father said to her before his death many years ago. "I don't know why he said that, 'You will be happy.' Maybe he had a revelation, because I am with God now, and *Numd' siarvy ne* means a bride of God. Truly, a believer is a bride of Christ. Perhaps that was his prophecy—that I would be chosen by God and become a believer."

After her conversion, Marina went into the tundra to find the sacred sledges, intending to burn them. A colleague of mine from St. Petersburg, ethnographer Elena Liarskaya, convinced her to donate them to a museum instead. Many other converts, though, chose to destroy theirs. Christian conversion was not only a spiritual transformation but also a profound cultural rupture. In order to sever ties with what they saw as their ancestral pagan beliefs, many converts burned sacred objects—*khekhe'*—that had been passed down through generations, objects that were deeply tied to their clan's identity. These ritual items and spirit figures, often referred to as "idols" in the Russian context, were viewed by the Nenets and Khanty as sacred representations of their gods and spirits.

Marina's sister, Nadia, recounted these events as follows:

When we were baptized, we returned to our tent [*mia*"], took all our idols and went out with all my children in the night to the forest—we were

afraid that people might see us. Then we poured petrol on the idols and set them on fire. We were terrified that anyone would find out what we had done. But rumors spread quickly that we had burned our idols. People cursed us, that we had lost our minds, that our children would all die soon.

Her daughter added later:

At that time, we didn't really understand; we simply burned them, and that was that. We were told that idols were bad, so we just took them and burned them.... We were so afraid! I can say that it terrified us to burn *miad' pukhutsia* [N.: a ritual doll personifying a master of a tent, *mia*"]! But later, we no longer feared it, because we already knew that it was just dolls, with nothing inside them.

At the beginning of the conversion era in the Polar Urals the anxiety over missionary activity was particularly enhanced by a number of cases when the Christian rupture and born-again impulse led to a rigorous denial of "traditional Nenets culture"—whatever it might be that converted indigenous people understood by these words: from the burning of Nenets sacred sites and ritual articles, violating traditional norms and customs of the tundra way of life, to the point of giving up an entire nomadic way of life and settling down in villages and towns.

This radical stance on conversion directly contradicted the politics of indigenism and indigenous movements in the region, which prioritized the preservation of indigenous traditional religious practices and sacred sites. The tension was particularly pronounced in relation to sacred sites, which had become powerful symbols of indigenous religiosity and key focal points for regional policy. As I wrote earlier, efforts to legally protect these sites, such as the mapping and conservation project for indigenous peoples of the Arctic, reinforced their significance as markers of indigenous identity and territorial autonomy. Any perceived violation of these spaces was regarded as an intrusion into indigenous heritage and self-determination. Protestant missionaries promoted a conflicting moral framework, viewing traditional sacred objects as pagan and urging their rejection and destruction. This stance directly opposed regional policies that sought to institutionalize indigenous religious heritage as part of cultural preservation efforts.

The practice of burning the sacred sites and objects—*khekhe'*—in the Polar Ural tundra was an expressed ritualization of discontinuity, or, as Joel Robbins calls it, "rituals of rupture," a tangible manifestation of complete conversion, an impulse that pushes converts to break with their past in



Figure 6.1. Evangelical missionaries and Nenets men burning sacred items. Author's archive.

dramatic ways.¹ One converted tundra Khanty woman put it: “It is most important for me: if a person burns his idols, [that means] he is one hundred percent converted,... because nobody can serve two masters.”

All these emphatic denials of everything that was considered by the indigenous society as traditional, ancestral, or sacred sparked a series of complex confrontations and negotiations between different religious communities, created tensions within indigenous society, and ignited heated debates in regional public discourse. Everywhere, one could hear stories about wandering missionaries who burned Nenets “idols” and destroyed Nenets culture. People spoke of Nenets converts who had abandoned the gods and spirits of their ancestors, who were violating tundra traditions and, as a result, were doomed to die in poverty as punishment from both spirits and fellow Nenets. Rumors swirled about strange sectarian gatherings held secretly in homes, about Nenets children in residential schools who gathered in bathrooms to pray and read the Bible, and about sectarian campsites in the tundra—places that others warned were best avoided when migrating with reindeer herds.

This chapter examines the social life of the newly established Christian communities, shaped by both the global religious network they had joined

1 Robbins, “On the Paradoxes of Global,” 224.

and the everyday life of the local society. Robert W. Hefner refers to this as a “secondary community”—a new structure within the local society that creates a system of “secondary moral and ideological identity,” existing beyond the local cultural meanings and identities. Hefner suggests that while a secondary community can coexist with a local one for a time, it will eventually lead to conflict, shaking the foundations of the local society and prompting a conscious discussion of their relationship.²

A similar shaky foundation existed in the Nenets tundra. The newly established Protestant community in the Polar Urals and Yamal was integrated into the broader translocal network of believers while also striving to indigenize and adapt new religious practices within the indigenous community. However, the tension between these two levels of community continued to grow, and the process of identity formation, along with the legitimization of this new community of believers, revealed its inherent complexity.

Below, I focus on the anti-cultural attitudes and ideology of rupture initially adopted by converted Nenets and evangelical missionaries, exploring the social consequences of this stance. I analyze the complex Nenets engagement with evangelical Christian theology, particularly focusing on the challenge posed by the experience of a Damascene conversion. This understanding of conversion represented a profound disruption in the convert’s indigenous worldview, demanding not only a change in belief but also a reshaping of their entire social reality, including cultural practices, relationships, identity, and individual subjectivities.

Dynamics of Conversion

One of the earliest anthropological discussions of religious conversion and its implications for cultural change was sparked by Robin Horton’s essays on the historical and anthropological perspectives of religious conversion in Africa. His work, emerging in the 1970s, framed conversion as an intellectual process in which traditional religious systems were not simply displaced but adapted to wider social changes. Horton argued that the shift from indigenous belief systems to Christianity or Islam mirrored broader transformations in African societies, particularly increasing political centralization and economic integration. His “intellectualist” theory of conversion suggested that people do not abandon old beliefs wholesale but instead reinterpret and modify them in response to new circumstances.

2 Hefner, “The Political Economy,” 74–75.

Horton's work ignited a key debate in the anthropology of religion, centering on questions such as: Who changes whom? Are "world religions" like Christianity and Islam localized through cultural adaptation, or do they instead reshape their converts, imposing new forms of thought and practice that challenge existing worldviews?

Scholars responding to Horton's thesis took different positions on this issue. Humphrey J. Fisher challenged Horton's emphasis on continuity, arguing that conversion is not merely a process of assimilation but can involve radical rupture—a profound break with indigenous worldviews. While some scholars saw indigenous traditions as rising anew after conversion (like a phoenix), others highlighted how Christianity and Islam function as a transformative power that demand the abandonment of preexisting beliefs.

Later, Joel Robbins and the emerging anthropology of Christianity built upon these critiques, shifting the focus from continuity to rupture. Robbins introduced the concept of "the ontology of discontinuity," arguing that Christianity—particularly in Protestant missionary traditions—demands an absolute break from the preconverted past. The evangelical model of conversion requires the converted to reinterpret their entire lives through a Christian framework, rejecting former traditions and reordering moral and social structures. Robbins conceptualizes rupture as both a moral and temporal break, which includes redefining moral behavior and reevaluating past traditions, practices, and even kinship structures. This approach stood in contrast to earlier anthropological perspectives that had prioritized adaptation and syncretism, instead framing Christian conversion as a totalizing shift in identity, morality, and worldview.

Expanding on this idea, a number of anthropologists emphasize that Christian conversion, with its focus on "second birth," not only reshapes personal identities but also disrupts cultural histories, introducing an ideology of discontinuity that challenges existing social and religious structures.³ Similarly, John Barker, in his study of conversion among the Maisin people of Papua New Guinea, argues that conversion is not merely the adoption of new beliefs but a profound cultural transformation. This transformation often leads to the emergence of new social roles and shifts in social structures, unsettling existing social relations and identities.⁴

While some scholars emphasize the agency of indigenous peoples in shaping Christianity to fit their own traditions, others argue that conversion often

3 Meyer, "Make a Complete Break"; Engelke, "Discontinuity"; Van Dijk, "Pentecostalism, Cultural Memory"; Dombrowski, *Against Culture*.

4 Barker, "Mission Station."

leads to profound cultural and social transformations, sometimes at the cost of indigenous ways of life. This tension between continuity and rupture has shaped long-standing debates in the anthropology of Christianity, often framing conversion as a binary—either indigenous traditions assimilated Christianity on their own terms, or Christianity enforced a decisive break with the past. Challenging this dichotomy, in this study I rather focus on the dynamic negotiation between new religious teachings and existing social and cultural structures. This dynamic mirrors broader patterns observed in the study of conversion, particularly within evangelical Christianity, where change is neither absolute nor entirely accommodating. Rather than a simple rejection of the old in favor of the new, conversion unfolds as a dialogical process in which both the introduced religion and local traditions undergo transformation.

As Frédéric Laugrand notes, “Studying conversion means studying an interaction, with Christianization being the result of constant cultural negotiation.”⁵ Through this negotiation, Christianity is not merely adopted but reshaped, just as indigenous worldviews are realigned in response to new religious frameworks. As Fenella Cannell eloquently points out, “Christianity, then, does not always and equally convert people to the idea of conversion.”⁶ Each case of conversion is uniquely shaped by how missionaries and converts define what constitutes “religion” and what is considered “culture” in a specific locale. This helps explain the wide variety of distinct Christianities across the globe, often with little resemblance to one another. For instance, Naomi Haynes, in her study of Pentecostalism in the Zambian Copperbelt, argues that conversion does not simply displace local traditions but becomes embedded in and reshapes social life. It involves cultural negotiation where traditional practices are reinterpreted and reworked in light of new Christian teachings. Similarly, Jon Bialecki observes that conversion often involves not just adaptations but also redefinitions of Christian principles in locally specific ways, while traditional practices are reframed within Christian religious structures.

Philip Jenkins, in his study of Christianity’s growth in the Global South, challenges the idea of a simple break between old and new. He suggests that Christianity, rather than displacing local culture, often becomes deeply integrated into local social structures, with converts reconciling their previous beliefs with their new Christian faith.⁷ This process, argues Matthew Engelke in his analysis of Pentecostal and Apostolic movements in Zimbabwe, can

5 Cit. by Vaté, “Redefining Chukchi Practices,” 39.

6 Cannell, “Introduction,” 28.

7 Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.

give rise to new forms of cultural expression that simultaneously blend and transform both Christian and local elements.⁸

Birgit Meyer, in her study of Pentecostalism in West Africa, emphasizes the persistence of cultural continuities in the midst of religious transformation. For her, continuity is not static but a dynamic, ongoing process, shaped by both Christian teachings and local cultural practices.⁹ This highlights that the relationship between conversion, Christianity, and local traditions is far more complex than a simple rupture or continuity. While conversion often involves a break with traditional beliefs and practices, it simultaneously includes adaptation, negotiation, and reinterpretation of local traditions, sometimes in unexpected ways.

This chapter and the following one delve into the complex ways in which the Nenets negotiated the tension between rupture and continuity, addressing the challenges brought about by the arrival of a new faith that introduced a distinct system of meanings, values, and moral order. In this chapter, I focus on the initial negotiation of the ideology of born-again rupture that was embraced by converted Nenets. This ideology, grounded in the idea of a radical and absolute break from the past, became a defining feature of the conversion experience, where traditional beliefs and practices were viewed as incompatible with the newly adopted Christian faith. In the following chapter, I explore the creative responses of the Nenets to this ideological challenge, examining how they accommodated continuity within the rupture. I analyze how they reinterpreted and adapted both Christian doctrine and their traditional practices and cultural heritage, creating innovative expressions of faith that preserved elements of their traditional worldview while integrating new religious teachings.

A key aspect of this process was the challenge of reinterpreting Western concepts of “religion” and “culture” in relation to indigenous ontologies, symbols, language, and practices. This issue has long been a subject of debate among Christian missions—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—since the early centuries of Christianity.¹⁰ Similar to Webb Keane’s analysis of missionary ethnography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this process revealed a tension between understanding local cultures and the missionary goal of transforming them.¹¹ Nenets religious conversion brought these tensions into sharp focus, raising fundamental questions about the role of indigenous

8 Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*.

9 Meyer, “Beyond Syncretism”; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

10 Cannell, “Introduction,” 26–27; Jackson, “Rights to Indigenous,” 232.

11 Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

culture in Christian life. Since conversion was viewed as a radical personal transformation, it sparked debates about whether aspects of Nenets traditions should be abandoned as pagan remnants or whether elements of their culture could be integrated into Christian practice. Was indigenous tradition a barrier to salvation, or could it, in fact, enrich the Christian faith?

Both missionaries and converted Nenets formulated various, and at times conflicting, responses to these questions, leading to tensions not only within the missionary movement itself but also in broader social relations across the tundra. During my fieldwork in Yamal and the Polar Urals, I observed how these debates extended far beyond the church, engaging local officials, scholars, schoolteachers, shop workers, and tundra dwellers alike. Even missionaries working in the same villages disagreed among themselves, with the very concept of Nenets culture becoming a central point of contention. Should missionaries accommodate Nenets traditions, or should they view them as obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of Christian transformation?

For Nenets converts, these debates carried an urgent weight, directly impacting their daily lives, relationships, and sense of self. In navigating the break between past and present, they became deeply engaged in articulating, revising, and reinventing what they understood as Nenets traditional culture or “Nenetsness.” Their conversion triggered this process of revision, as they were perceived by their society as betraying their people and their ancestral legacy. As a result, they were often considered morally corrupt, socially dangerous, and, ultimately, not “Nenets enough” by their community. “If you are Baptists, you are no longer Nenets,” was the response of indigenous society. This dichotomy became a foundation for most discussions and tensions aroused around religious conversion. As in Kirk Dombrowski’s study of Christian conversion among Alaska Natives, the concept of Nenets culture was often treated as a fixed, predetermined, and reified category in regional policy, local academic discourse, and even by the Nenets themselves.¹² It was framed as a uniform entity—something that could either be preserved or lost—essentializing indigenous communities and overlooking the fluid and dynamic nature of identity and social life.

At the core of these debates was the missionary effort to determine which aspects of the indigenous lifeworld could either serve as precursors to, or be transformed into, elements of Christianity. Missionaries aimed to reshape Nenets religious and cultural practices, often by drawing a sharp distinction between the two, viewing the former as demonic and

12 Dombrowski, *Against Culture*.

demanding a complete break from them. This attempt to distinguish the religious from the cultural was central to the broader mission of transforming the Nenets' entire worldview, aligning with what Keane terms the moral narrative of modernity, with Christianity positioned as a key element in this process.¹³

This transformation was not a one-sided process; it involved both the missionaries and the Nenets. Nenets converts were not merely passive recipients of missionary influence—they actively shaped their radically changing world, creatively reinterpreting both indigenous and Christian ontologies. The distinction between what constituted “religion” and what constituted “culture” was not always straightforward. Whereas missionaries drew a sharp divide between the two, viewing many indigenous practices—especially rituals and symbols—as inherently tied to paganism or shamanism and thus incompatible with Christianity, for the Nenets, ritual practices, symbols, and everyday activities were deeply intertwined, reflecting a different and often conflicting economy of the sacred.

To sum up, the interactions between the Nenets and evangelical missionaries were shaped by both theological and cultural struggles. Both parties were involved in a complex negotiation of religion, the sacred, culture, and identity, each bringing its own assumptions and priorities to the table. The issue of the compatibility of Christianity with Nenets life and culture in many respects defined the development of missionary strategies, as well as indigenous responses. This question did not remain theoretical—it generated social conflicts, inspired new forms of collaboration, and often led to the fragmentation of Nenets families and clans. It also stimulated new life strategies, influenced local public discourse, and even played a role in shaping regional policies toward missionary activities. As I will show later, this tension also mobilized a language of indigeneity and contributed to the emergence of a growing ethno-consciousness among the Nenets.

“Uncomfortable Faith”

Irina, a Khanty woman in her fifties, told me that two of her children had settled in cities and soon after converted to charismatic Christianity, whereas her other children remained in the tundra, continuing their traditional way of life. When I asked what she thought about her settled daughters' religious conversion, she responded with a shrug: “If it helps them in their life, why

13 Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 98.

not? Let them go [to church]. If they benefit from it.... In a difficult moment, her faith in God probably helps her.”

But when I asked how she would feel if her tundra children converted to Christianity, her reaction was markedly different—astonishment. She could not even imagine such a scenario and was certain that her tundra children would never do such a thing. “This faith is so uncomfortable [*neudobnaia*] in the tundra,” she said firmly.

I heard the phrase “uncomfortable faith” many times in conversations with Nenets and Khanty who opposed the spread of Christianity in the tundra. While they accepted the possibility of joining new churches in the “Russian” space—villages and cities—they saw the establishment of such churches in the tundra as not only ill-fitting but also harmful. The tundra was a space set apart, a world where Christianity simply did not belong.

Elena Liarskaya, in her comparative study of settled and nomadic Yamal Nenets, argues that sedentary life has been internalized within Nenets culture as an alternative way of living rather than as a contradiction to nomadism. As a result, the Nenets perceive life in settlements and life in the tundra as two distinct yet equally valid life scripts.¹⁴ According to Liarskaya, Siberian Nenets have developed two culturally distinct modes—sedentary and nomadic—each tied to a specific spatial setting: villages and towns versus the tundra. Every space comes with its own set of cultural norms and practices. When Nenets move between these domains—whether temporarily visiting a settlement or permanently relocating—they shift their cultural behavior accordingly, adopting the expected norms of each environment. For instance, in settlements, wearing Russian clothing, eating Russian food, and speaking Russian are seen as natural and necessary, whereas in the tundra, these same behaviors are regarded as inappropriate.

Liarskaya’s research highlights that this movement between spaces is not just physical but also social and symbolic. Nenets do not merely transition between two ways of life; they actively switch between different sets of cultural practices and discourses. Any violation of these symbolic boundaries—such as bringing settlement customs into the tundra—is seen as inappropriate, absurd, or even dangerous. The careful maintenance of these boundaries shapes all aspects of Nenets everyday life, reinforcing the distinctiveness of the two cultural domains.

What they referred to as the “new faith” or “Russian faith” was seen as part of a broader set of sedentary social practices—something that could

14 Liarskaya, “Kul’turnaia assimiliatsiia.”

be adopted as a resource for life in settlements. In this view, “Russian faith” belonged to the Russian, or settled, world, while “Nenets faith” was essential for life in the tundra.

As a result, religious practices introduced in settled life were sometimes temporary and reversible. A Nenets who had embraced new religious beliefs while living in a village might revert to older traditions when returning to or even briefly visiting the tundra. For example, certain Nenets purifying rituals and prohibitions, which might seem unnecessary or irrelevant in a settled environment, could regain their full significance upon entering the tundra, where traditional cosmology and practices remained deeply embedded in daily life.

The perceived inappropriateness or unsuitableness of the new faith in the tundra was not just a matter of cultural misalignment but also of moral significance. The tundra was seen as a sacred and autonomous space where Nenets spirits and ritual practices served to maintain balance and order, while the settled world, with its Russian influence, operated under a different set of moral expectations. Accepting the “Russian faith” in the tundra was not merely an issue of spatial misplacement but a deeper transgression—a disruption of the moral fabric that governed life in each realm. Just as Russian customs and practices were considered unsuitable or uncomfortable for the tundra, so too was Russian faith, which was perceived as a foreign intrusion into a sacred landscape. The distinction between the two worlds was thus not only cultural but also moral, and violating these boundaries was seen as a breach of the moral order that sustained Nenets life.

However, evangelical conversion, with its totalizing “born-again” pathos, could not tolerate the spatial division between the tundra and the settled world. Unlike Nenets perceptions, which maintained clear boundaries between these two realms, evangelical faith demanded full transformation, refusing to be confined to one space while being left behind in another. For evangelicals, being “born again” meant an all-encompassing break with the past, making no distinction between the religious practices of the tundra and those of settled life. This refusal to recognize spatial and cultural boundaries was precisely what fueled the deepest conflicts. Furthermore, it was not merely the introduction of the new faith into the tundra that disrupted the moral order; it was the active struggle of the newly converted against the traditional tundra moral order itself. By burning the sacred and rejecting what was considered the heathen past, the new converts sought to dismantle the very foundation of their previous moral and cultural framework.

Blood and Idols

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). This commandment, central to Christian doctrine, became a guiding principle for the early converted Nenets. Burning traditional ritual items and spirit figures—*khekhe*’—was not just an act of rejection but a profound ritual of rupture, marking a complete break from the past. For them, it was a way of solidifying their “rebirth in Christ,” symbolizing their transition from the old ways to a new spiritual identity. As Nadia expressed when I first met her, “The living God is the only God. One must not worship two gods at the same time, only the One.”

In his study of the European Nenets and their encounters with evangelical missionaries, Laur Vallikivi recounts a striking moment he witnessed in a Nenets nomadic camp. An evangelical missionary sought to persuade a Nenets family to burn their clan’s sacred objects, which they kept in the sacred sledge. The act of destruction was not merely a symbolic renunciation but a deeply ritualized moment—accompanied by a Christian sermon and prayers, reinforcing the missionary’s narrative of spiritual purification. For the Nenets family, however, this act was far more complex. While they may have felt pressure to conform, their understanding of what was taking place did not necessarily align with the missionary’s intent, as a few examples from my fieldwork will illustrate. The sacred objects—the spirit figures—held profound significance, embodying ancestral connections and the presence of spirits. Different perceptions of materiality and the sacred economy shaped this tense and deeply personal moment, highlighting the clash between two worldviews and the conflicting ideologies at play in the process of religious conversion.¹⁵

The mass destruction of “idols” by one Khanty¹⁶ family in the Baidarata tundra, a highly publicized event that sparked widespread discussion, triggered particularly deep tensions within the indigenous society. This Khanty clan, known for being one of the most powerful shamanic families in both Khanty and Nenets communities, had sacred “idols” that were revered as among the most powerful. Many Khanty and Nenets people worshiped these idols. However, when most clan members converted to charismatic Christianity, they began burning their ancestral sacred sites. The following

¹⁵ Vallikivi, *Words and Silences*, 148–63,

¹⁶ The Khanty are an indigenous people of western Siberia. The Siberian Polar Ural tundra historically has been a territory of strong Khanty–Nenets communication, resulting in a general historical and cultural Khanty–Nenets community.

is the story of Valia, a Khanty woman and the first in her family to convert to charismatic Christianity:

When people repent, they stop worshipping idols. You wouldn't imagine how many idols we destroyed! We destroyed all our clan's [sacred] sledges. My brother once said, "You keep coming over and talking about God, so I repented, but our brother O. [who recently died] left his wife and kids with idols. Let's go there and burn them." I was scared—how can we burn someone else's idols!? Even though it was our ancestral [sacred] sledge [where ritual items are usually kept], passed down from father to son, the brother's wife wouldn't let us do it.... Eventually, we did it. We burned that huge sledge. We were all praying so much because we were so scared! The sledge was enormous, really huge! Sacred! But we destroyed it, even though we were terrified of those idols. Then we destroyed all our brothers' and my sister's idols. Liuda, my sister, and her daughters took their [sacred] sledge into the woods. They poured gas on it and destroyed it. Liuda said she was absolutely terrified. I remember when we were destroying her idols and icons, she said, "Burn this one, no, don't burn it!" Then she'd take something back. I told her, "Stop messing around! Hand it over! I destroyed all my idols, all my icons; I even destroyed that "grandfather" [a ritual image of her deceased relative]. And look, nothing happened to me. See? God's protecting me!"

Valia added that it was no coincidence that the families who had come to God were the ones with the biggest "idols" and the most powerful shamans in their clans; all of them ultimately burned their sacred heritage. She told a similar story of a Khanty man, Igor, who belonged to a famous shamanic clan. He decided to destroy his famous lodge with sacred objects with the help of a Russian charismatic pastor. The pastor noticed how indigenous people were so afraid of burning them. They said to him: "We are mortally afraid, we are praying, because we are exorcizing the demon." Valia concluded the Russian missionaries would not share this fear,

because he did not understand where this fear came from. We have been worshipping them [idols] all our lives. We were afraid that something terrible could happen to our families, but moreover, we were afraid of the people around us, that they would do something bad to us.

People who burned "idols" knew what to fear, and what often remained hidden from the eyes of missionaries. The burning of "idols" quickly became

widely known and discussed within indigenous society, sparking terrifying rumors that spread across the tundra about the punishment of the sacrilegious. In the Se-Yakha tundra (Northern Yamal), it was rumored that, shortly after a young woman burned her family's sacred sledge, her mother mysteriously disappeared. Her frozen body was found several months later, half-eaten by dogs. This tragic death was seen as punishment from the spirits for burning the sacred. In another part of the tundra, a converted man was attacked by a bear, which mauled and crippled him. "The bear was a sign for him, surely a sign to stop attending the sect," people said.

Perhaps it was the people around them who were more dangerous than spirits or animals. Born-again indigenous people whose parents disinherited them and took back all the reindeer; converted families left isolated, without crucial support; husbands punishing wives for ritual disobedience—these converts surely knew of such stories when they were burning "idols."

A tragic story was shared with me by an old missionary who had worked with indigenous people in Yamal for many years. He told me about a young woman, a convert to Christianity, originally from a shamanic family, with a close relative who was a shaman. Her body was found in a cemetery, tied to a grave. "She was ritually killed—little by little, strangled by seven knots, by that shaman, because she gave up her ancestral faith and accepted Christ in her heart," the missionary whispered to me.

Converted Nenets were often seen by their indigenous peers as morally corrupt and socially dangerous. This stigma often led to their marginalization from traditional tundra society. In some parts of Northern Yamal, converted Nenets were excluded from nomadic campsites, traditional interrelations, and ultimately from tundra life. A Nenets tundra dweller explained, "They are not Num's children anymore. Num gave them reindeer as his children, but now he is taking them back because they no longer belong to him."

A Baptist missionary in Se-Yakha, a northern village on the Yamal Peninsula, shared the story of a Nenets reindeer herder named Yangova and his wife. Yangova's parents were so enraged by his conversion and his decision to abandon the worship of ancestral spirits and traditional Nenets rites that they disinherited him and reclaimed all their reindeer. Left without reindeer, Yangova was forced to move to a local settlement. With the assistance of missionaries, he and his family were settled into a trailer and began their new life as converts. During his presentation at the Brethren's annual conference in 2009, the missionary showed a photo of Yangova's final day in the tundra, explaining, "Here is a photo of him taking down his tent once and for all, despite spending his whole life there. He was afraid of a settled life, but God helped him."

Conversion therefore was not merely a matter of religious preference; it was seen as a threat to the continuity and well-being of an entire family or clan. “If he stops believing in his traditional gods, if he burns his idols, how will he survive? They [the converted] will die in poverty because they’ve burned their roots!” exclaimed a Nenets woman from a wealthy reindeer-herding family.

A similar sentiment was echoed by a settled Nenets woman, a teacher at an indigenous residential school in Yar-Sale:

In the Nenets region, in the Arkhangelsk province, the Nenets gave in to the missionaries, and now there are no Nenets there anymore—no reindeer, no language, no people. The missionaries burned all the [Nenets] gods, and now there are no Nenets. The same will soon happen here.

Local authorities also reacted strongly to the burning of sacred sites and items, portraying these acts as vandalism that directly contradicted regional laws protecting the religious site and places of worship of indigenous peoples of the North. In public discourse, missionary activity in the Polar Ural and Yamal tundra was pictured as a threat to traditional culture and a challenge to cultural authenticity. In an interview, Lidia Vello, head of the Department for Indigenous Peoples of the North in Salekhard and a Nenets herself, described it as “blurring of spiritual authenticity [*razmyvanie dukhovnoi samobytnosti*].” She argued that Protestant conversion was “a system of destruction of traditional culture, undermining values that have preserved indigenous people from time immemorial, helping them survive in harsh climatic conditions.”

The blood issue and the violation of traditional nomadic rituals and everyday prohibitions by newly converted Nenets was another widely debated issue. Traditionally, nomadic Nenets and Khanty consume raw reindeer blood and meat (N.: *ŋaĩabad*) as a vital source of nutrition. They typically strangle a reindeer to prevent blood from spilling on the ground. During communal meals, they fill the animal’s abdominal cavity with blood, dip raw meat into it, and drink the blood directly.

However, the use of the blood and meat from strangled animals is forbidden in the Bible, with the prohibition mentioned several times in both the Old and New Testaments (Lev 17:10–12; Acts 15:20). As a result, the traditional Nenets practice of consuming blood was seen as incompatible with Christian teachings. Converted Nenets often ceased using blood for food and changed the way they slaughtered animals.

The changes in dietary practices and slaughtering methods did not go unnoticed among the community, and this shift in behavior became a

significant point of concern, with the local discourse painting the new religious movement as a threat to the health and well-being of the tundra people. In interviews with several government officials from Salekhard, the issue was framed with urgency: one of them argued that converted Nenets “can’t live in the tundra, they can’t eat meat, and they can’t drink blood. But blood is hemoglobin, it is the only source of vitamins in the tundra! How will they survive?”

One Nenets woman from the tundra expressed this concern as follows: Nowadays, it seems, almost all the Ural Nenets have become believers, Baptists. I think that it just harms them. Because they must not eat meat with blood, they should wash the meat, thus washing away all the vitamins. But they have no vegetables; they have nothing to replace [blood]. It doesn’t suit them to be Baptists. In the tundra, everything is connected with blood, with reindeer slaughtering.

Furthermore, Nenets and Khanty tundra life is shaped by a web of prohibitions and rules of conduct, particularly those that restrict women’s behavior. These practices, often viewed as unusual by outsiders, have been documented by numerous travelers and ethnographers throughout history.¹⁷ Typically, Nenets women are excluded from many ritual practices: they cannot participate in sacrifices, eat sacrificial meat, visit sacred sites, or touch sacred objects. Beyond ritual restrictions, women’s everyday lives are governed by a range of prohibitions. For example, a Nenets woman is not permitted to step over the clothes, tools, or harnesses of men and children, particularly those associated with reindeer husbandry. She is also forbidden to eat or even cut certain types of fish (like pike), or to consume the reindeer’s head.

The space of the tent, where a woman is the mistress, is equally regulated. Climbing the framework of the tent or stepping on the bed is prohibited, and even when she sleeps, her feet must not touch the bed. She is not allowed to cross behind the fireplace, where a wooden pole, *symsy*, marks a sacred space within the tent. Additionally, a woman’s periods and childbirth are surrounded by numerous prohibitions and purification rituals (*kýv-kýv*).

The violation of these rules is believed to bring misfortune, disease, or even damnation—not only to the individual woman but also to her family, the family’s herds, and the success of the men in her family’s hunting and herding endeavors. Thus, adherence to these traditional regulations is seen

17 Islavin, *Samoedy v domashnem*, 25, 120–21; Khomich, *Nentsy*, 185; Kostikov, “Zakony tundry,” 40; Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 425–26; Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 217; Liarskaya, “Zhenskije zeprety.”

as essential to maintaining the social order and ensuring the well-being of the entire family and their economic success. The observance of these rules directly impacts the survival and prosperity of the community.

However, within the context of conversion, the deliberate rejection of these traditional customs often became a symbol of a new religious identity and often an important pattern in conversion narratives. Many Nenets women said that shortly after their conversion, they began to break previously sacred taboos—eating fish that had once been forbidden, crossing behind the fireplace, climbing the framework of the tent, and abandoning other tundra regulations. Nadia recalls her own experience of conversion:

Soon after I became a Christian, I started cutting fish, pike. Before, I was so afraid to even touch it, let alone cut its bones. Pike is considered a sacred fish, and women aren't supposed to cut its bones, nor eat it.... [I]f I did, something bad would happen to my family—either I'd get sick or the reindeer would fall ill or die. But now, I cut everything myself and eat everything. Now we can do whatever we want. We've gotten rid of the fear.

When I first visited Nadia's tent in 2006, our host made a bed and insisted that we sleep in the Nenets tent in a "Russian" way—lengthways with our feet on the bed—rather than according to Nenets tradition, where one sleeps across the bed, with feet left outside. This was a clear violation of a strong cultural prohibition, one that would not have been allowed in any other Nenets tent.

As a result, converted Nenets were increasingly seen as violators of traditional ritual norms, leading to their growing marginalization within nomadic communities. Their rejection of customary practices was perceived not just as religious nonconformity but as a fundamental disruption of social order. As one of Nadia's unconverted neighbors explained,

When you arrive at their [Baptist] nomadic camp, you see that they don't follow any customs. Women run anyplace, wherever they want and however they want, they jump everywhere, step over everything. All prohibitions in the tent are violated, for example [the prohibition] to cross behind the fireplace. They put women's things everywhere; they never clean up garbage.... It is a total mess [*polnyi bardak*] there, it is impossible to stay with them in the same campsite.

In this way, conversion was interpreted as not merely a religious shift but a breakdown of the moral and cultural fabric that traditionally governed Nenets social life.

Diabolization of Culture

The anti-cultural stance adopted by some missionaries was further exacerbated by the diabolization of traditional practices, a tactic that framed indigenous culture as inherently evil. The first Protestant missionaries (both Pentecostal and Baptist) who entered the tundra in the early post-Soviet period to convert the “last pagans” often perceived the Nenets sacred objects and sites not merely as empty effigies, but as dangerous entities inhabited by real evil spirits, which they called “demons” (*besy*). They did not see these idols as cultural symbols or artifacts; rather, they were treated as manifestations of spiritual corruption and evil.

Similar to Birgit Meyer’s observations about the missionary context in Ghana, missionaries’ perceptions of indigenous objects in the tundra were shaped by a worldview that cast these items as agents of the Devil.¹⁸ In this context, missionary work went beyond conversion—it became a form of spiritual warfare. As Meyer notes, the mission was framed as a battle to eliminate demonic forces, with indigenous culture seen as deeply entrenched in these evil powers.

In some cases, the diabolization extended beyond specific Nenets ritual artifacts, with the tundra itself viewed as a realm infused with demonic forces. For example, the landscape was often described by some evangelical missionaries as being populated by demons. Shamans were labeled Antichrists or servants of the Devil, reinforcing the missionaries’ belief that the indigenous religious leadership was directly aligned with dark forces.

Missionaries often described the tundra people as having a special “idol consciousness” (*idol'skoe soznanie*). This went beyond mere idol worship; it was understood as a distinct mode of being, where the Nenets were believed to be uniquely attuned to the spiritual world. In this framework, the nomads were seen as possessing a heightened sensitivity to spiritual forces, enabling them to communicate with the supernatural in ways missionaries considered perverse or threatening.

For missionaries, the aim to convert the tundra people was not just about spreading Christianity—it was about confronting what they perceived as a profound spiritual threat. Traditional Nenets culture was not simply viewed as backward, but as actively harmful, rooted in a spiritual system they believed had to be eradicated for the people’s own salvation.

18 Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

“Why do they worship their traditional spiritual beings? Because they can see them,” confidently stated a Pentecostal missionary from Vorkuta, one of the first to work with the Nenets of the Polar Urals since the mid-1990s.

Because this spiritual power influences their lives. Spirits make them feel terrified; their children die when they stop worshiping these spiritual beings, or if they do it in the wrong way. This is big. So, if you, as a missionary, don’t understand the spiritual world, if you can’t feel it, and if you’re not strong enough in your faith in God, you have no business being in the tundra. You’ll just break yourself.

This perspective is especially prominent in Pentecostal communities, where the materiality of spiritual warfare is a central aspect of theology.¹⁹ Pentecostals interpret traditional spiritual practices as manifestations of demonic power that can influence individuals’ lives and health. As a result, demon exorcism and defeat of demonic forces are integral to Pentecostal mysticism.²⁰ Missionaries believe that without the proper understanding and spiritual strength, engaging with these spiritual practices could lead to destruction, as missionaries might be overwhelmed by demonic forces.²¹ Thus, conversion is not merely a religious act, but a liberation from demonic powers, with the missionary’s success framed as victory over spiritual forces threatening both the individual and the community.

On the Yamal, this perspective of spiritual warfare was not confined solely to Pentecostals but permeated various Christian evangelical circles. Missionaries from other denominations also viewed indigenous spiritual practices as dangerous and demonically charged. An evangelical missionary who worked in Beloiarsk in the late 1990s and early 2000s described his understanding of the tundra in the following way:

The land here [in Yamal] is affected by pagan sacred places. It is a quiet place, nobody is here, there are no people here, but only spirits. Do you know how powerful [*krutye*] these spirits are? There is a special war here. A team of evil spirits possesses a village. And these are real idols with real sacrifices and real blood! Terrible things are happening here!

19 Onyinah, *Spiritual Warfare*; Lindhardt, “Mediating Money”; Coleman, “Spiritual Warfare in Pentecostalism”; Csordas, *The Sacred Self*.

20 Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism*; Adelakun, “Demons and Deliverance.”

21 Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*; Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

In similar terms, a Baptist missionary described his goal: “Our aim is to break this coherence and this possession.” Another Baptist missionary emphasized, “We cannot tell them to preserve [all their sacred heritage]. It prevents them from being Christians. It is all against Christianity.”

A passage from the published diary of one of the first Baptist missionaries who ventured into the Nenets tundra in the mid-1990s illustrates this missionary approach:

All people here [on the Kara Sea shore] consider themselves believers, each in their own way. We explain to them the difference between God and idols. We tell them that serving idols means serving evil spirits. I ask them, “Do you have idols?” An old man and a woman looked at one another, and the mistress showed me idols that she kept under pillows in their tent. The Lord let me convince them to burn their idols. The woman was already about to throw them into the stove, but a teacher [who was in the same tent] interfered and began to dissuade them from burning the idols. The old man hesitated. I talked to the teacher this time.... When we were ready to go out, the woman asked me to stay and pray; she still wanted to burn the idols in my presence. The idols went in the fire. The couple was begging God’s forgiveness.²²

This narrative reflects the missionaries’ deep conviction that the destruction of indigenous spiritual objects was not just symbolic but a necessary act for the salvation of those they sought to convert. It also underscores the materiality of the sacred and the hesitance some Nenets felt in burning their spirits.

Thus, as a result of this diabolization approach, the first converted Nenets—who began embracing Protestantism in the late 1990s and early 2000s—did not merely reject or deny the old meanings and practices; they actively fought against everything associated with spirits and demons. For the early Nenets Protestants, stories of burning idols became essential parts of their conversion narratives and Christian testimonies.

Shifting Boundaries: From Radical Break to Negotiated Continuity

The spiritual warfare against tundra “heathendom” sometimes led to the perception of the tundra as a place unsuitable for Christian life. A sedentary

22 Goncharov, “U kraia zemli.”

Nenets woman in Beloiarsk was convinced that “there are no believers in the tundra: when they become Protestants, they move to the settlements.”

As a result, soon after the first cases of conversion, “born-again” Nenets found themselves increasingly excluded from tundra life. The Nenets way of life and the new faith became symbolically and geographically divided, with the former belonging to the tundra and the latter to settled spaces. In the eyes of Nenets society, this faith was seen as coming from the Russian world, hence as the “Russian faith,” which should remain in the world from which it originated. In contrast, Nenets beliefs and rituals were viewed as inseparable from the tundra’s nomadic existence. This growing dichotomy reinforced the perception that conversion was not merely a change of religious belief but a complete departure from the traditional way of life.

However, over time, this radical approach to traditional culture began to evolve, leading to new ways of negotiating faith and cultural identity among converted Nenets. Gradually, they started to explore how to reconcile their new religious commitments with elements of their ancestral traditions, navigating a complex landscape of cultural preservation and religious transformation.

For most of converted Nenets, abandoning their nomadic lifestyle was unthinkable, even for the sake of their new religious identity. It was therefore not surprising that, several years after my first visit to Yamal in 2006, I began noticing a shift. Many of the same Nenets converts and missionaries who had once been the most fervent advocates of spiritual rebirth from their “heathen past” started to reconsider their earlier radical positions. Increasingly, I heard notes of regret from tundra converts about their former intolerance toward indigenous culture and traditional tundra norms.

Mikhail, the first missionary in Yamal of Nenets origin, told me, “Yes, our culture has many prohibitions. But if you ignore them, you’ll find yourself outside of society. Ask Nadia if she wants to be left outside. No, she doesn’t!”

Nadia—one of the first converted Nenets in the tundra, who has spent years striving to bring her large family into the light of Christianity—would later echo this:

They say about us that we have completely given up our [ancestral] faith, yes, that we do wrong things. They call us Baptists. And they are afraid of [us].... If we are Baptists they won’t even have tea with us, they won’t let us come into their homes. If I arrive somewhere, they won’t let me come in, I mean, they won’t invite me to their tents. They are so afraid of this word—Baptists—I don’t know why. When they hear these words, “Oh! Baptists have arrived!” they all close up and nobody even goes out. We

are having a hard time now. It is difficult now to communicate with our people, especially for my sons, because men always travel a lot in the tundra, gather reindeer, visit other campsites.... And people laugh at them, treat them differently, and say that we are Baptists, that we betrayed our faith, that we don't drink blood.

Over time, more and more Nenets converts began to express regret over the ancestral "idols" they had once burned and the too radical behavior that had brought conflict to the tundra, even leading to the fragmentation of extended families. Looking back, some realized that these ritual items were not merely personal belongings but family heirlooms, cherished as the only remaining memories of deceased fathers and ancestors.

They also came to understand that the prohibitions and codes of conduct they once rejected were not just "heathen rites" but deeply rooted cultural norms—important practices for preserving social cohesion in everyday tundra life. This evolution marked a shift from the initial, radical rejection of their cultural heritage to a more nuanced negotiation between faith and cultural identity.

Only a few converts continued to view religious conversion as Arthur Nock defined it: "definite crossing of religious frontiers, in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one once and for all."²³ Many others sought to give their indigenous cultural heritage new meaning. While some Nenets and Khanty believers still saw indigenous culture and Protestant Christianity as irreconcilable, many of those who had once strongly rejected any continuity between their pre- and postconversion lives later became deeply committed to asserting, reshaping, and expressing what they considered their traditional culture. They began to explore alternative ways of bridging Christianity and Nenets culture, and within this framework, the idea of contextualizing or indigenizing Christianity emerged as one of the most debated issues within Protestant communities.

In the face of the difficult choice between conversion and exclusion from their traditional way of life, born-again Nenets were compelled to define what it meant to be both a Nenets and a Christian. As I discuss in the following chapter, this process of navigating religious conflicts and cultural tensions during the early stages of conversion played a crucial role in prompting Nenets to consciously construct and articulate their cultural and ethnic boundaries. It also sparked the reshaping of their understanding of Nenets indigeneity, as they sought ways to reconcile their faith with their cultural heritage.

23 Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

7. The Nenets Christian Project: Ethnotheology and Reindigenization

Abstract: Nenets converts negotiated tensions between cultural continuity and religious rupture, forming a distinctive “Nenets Christianity.” They reinterpreted traditional practices, rituals, cosmologies, and nomadic lifeways through Christian frameworks, casting ancestral elements as spiritually significant and analogous to biblical traditions. Many framed their past as “Old Testament” Nenets, presenting nomadic life, moral codes, and rituals as precursors to Christianity and aligned with divine law. Key figures in Nenets cosmology, like Num and Nga, were linked to God and the Devil, integrating indigenous beliefs into a monotheistic soteriology. This reindigenization allowed converts to assert cultural authenticity, maintain social norms, and claim spiritual and ethnic legitimacy. Conversion also became a tool for political mobilization, enabling claims to indigenous rights and local authority under state restrictions.

Keywords: indigenous conversion, reindigenization, ethnotheology, religious politicization, indigenous agency

“Who will we eventually become—Russians, Nenets, Baptists?” a Nenets believer wondered aloud during our conversation. Does the “great transformation” inevitably lead to cultural loss? This question emerged among Nenets converts as they grappled with conflicts, tensions, and even tragedies following religious conversion. In this chapter, I explore the creative agency exercised by Nenets converts as they navigated the tensions between rupture and continuity that arose with the introduction of evangelical Christianity into their lives. They actively redefined evangelical principles and reframed their own traditional practices—such as ancestral worship, rituals, spirits, mythology, and nomadism—to fit within evangelical religious structures. Through this process, they became deeply engaged in the process of reassembling the notion of indigenous culture, being actively engaged in a dynamic

interplay between the new and the old. By negotiating the tension between the evangelical call for rupture—forces aiming to disrupt traditional belief systems—and their efforts to sustain continuity in a rapidly changing and globalizing world, the Nenets integrated evangelical Christianity into a new framework where their traditional practices and Christian teachings became mutually embedded and redefined in relation to one another.

As I show below, this process sparked a broader cultural and political awakening, reinforcing both Nenets ethno-consciousness and political agency. Converted Nenets developed a strategy of reindigenization, legitimizing their right to claim and embody their cultural identity and authenticity. This entailed bringing Christian and Nenets ontologies into dialogue, not as a passive blending of worldviews, but as a deliberate strategy to strengthen their claims to authenticity and power. In doing so, they engaged in a process where legitimacy was not just inherited from the past but continuously negotiated, as authenticity itself became a critical source of authority.¹

Rather than merely adapting to or resisting external forces, converted Nenets actively shaped a vision of the future that upheld both cultural continuity and a Christian-based narrative of rupture and salvation. This chapter explores how these negotiations unfolded, examining the tensions and adaptations that emerged as the Nenets reconciled inherited cultural practices with Christian theology. The encounter between indigenous worldviews and Christian modernity did not fit neatly into a break model or a continuity model, but rather involved a complex interplay of power, agency, and identity, ultimately leading to a reconfiguration of what it meant to be both Nenets and Christian.

The result was not just a religious transformation but a deeper struggle over identity and belonging, where indigeneity and Christian faith became categories open to reinterpretation rather than inherently incompatible opposites. Through this process, Nenets converts positioned themselves as agents of their own transformation, asserting their place within both their indigenous heritage and the global religious landscape.

The Project of Nenets Christianity

Somebody accused us of having forgotten our gods and not worshipping them anymore. But, in general, we preserve our culture all the same; we never forget our culture. Although I don't follow [Nenets ritual prohibitions], I follow my culture.

1 Gable and Handler, "After Authenticity," 568.

This was how a Baptist Nenets woman from the Baidarata tundra defended her authenticity, affirming her distinct cultural identity. Finding themselves at the crossroads of different worlds, converted Nenets often faced accusations of abandoning their *Nenetsness*—their indigeneity. Under the threat of exclusion from their natal society, many began to reconsider their previously rigid stance toward traditional Nenets culture.

Through the rhetoric of cultural rupture and continuity with their traditional past, Nenets converts engaged deeply in a cultural discourse that allowed them to reinterpret and reshape their sense of identity. As they integrated Christianity into their lives, they reassembled the elements of their traditional Nenets culture, adapting and modifying these practices to fit within a new religious framework. In this process, new cultural constructions emerged, where “culture” was increasingly perceived as something one can lose—reified, objectified, and transformed into a marker of ethno-consciousness. As Jean and John Comaroff have noted, the objectification of identity leads to a more acute awareness of its essence, including its affective, material, and expressive dimensions. This process generates new sensibilities surrounding cultural belonging and transformation, making individuals more attuned to the ways in which their cultural identity is being reshaped and redefined in the context of social, political, or religious changes.² For Nenets Christians, the dynamic of religious conversion led to what Marshall Sahlins described as “a self-consciousness of indigenous culture” or self-conscious movements of cultural differentiation and essentialization, in which new believers became increasingly aware of and defensive about what they referred to as their “indigenous culture.”³

The experience of religious conversion thus became a catalyst for the Nenets people to actively construct and articulate new cultural and ethnic boundaries. This reconfiguration of identity was not merely a passive acceptance of Christianity; it was a conscious and deliberate act of reshaping their indigeneity in relation to the new faith.

Both Nenets converts and missionaries working in the Arctic also endeavored to contextualize the Christian message within the familiar landscape of Nenets culture, framing it in ways that resonated with local sensibilities. They engaged in a strategic dialogue between Christian ontology and Nenets cultural patterns, using it as a means of empowerment and a claim to authenticity. One way the Nenets have shaped their indigeneity is

2 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, 2.

3 Sahlins, “The Economics of Develop-Man.”

through the concept of Nenets Christianity—a uniquely developed ethnic version of Christianity.

In his study of the Swedish Faith Movement, Simon Coleman observes that such contextualization, which celebrates “the virtues of locality and patriotic attachment,” contributes to a globalizing orientation. He notes that in such contexts, faith rhetoric appropriates symbols of nationhood in a way that facilitates the imaginative construction of translocal influence and empowerment.⁴ Similarly, the Nenets localizing approach served as a form of empowerment. By envisioning their specific place in the history of Christianity and the broader world, they asserted their unique identity and agency within a global context.

The evangelical church Good News (Blagaia Vest'), based in Salekhard, was a primary advocate and promoter of this adapted Christianity, translating and contextualizing it within Nenets culture. The Beloiarsk community, previously affiliated with this church, often manifested a similar approach. The church project's initial aim was to reconsider the previous rigorous conversion strategies and missionary principles that frequently brought social conflicts and tensions to the Polar Urals and Yamal. The goal was to make these strategies more compatible with local cultures, facilitating the acceptance of Christianity without necessitating the rejection of key cultural patterns.

A Russian evangelical missionary, a proponent of Nenets Christianity, expressed his perspective on the project in an interview in 2006:

They [nomadic indigenous people] are not ready to accept [Christianity] with our context, they are not ready to accept our culture. We need somehow to get the message across [*prepodat'*], but change the packaging [*podmenit' upakovochku*]. Let them keep their own culture. If I respect their culture and pray to God in their language, it will be the same anyway. We'll just slightly adjust.... In other words, I am totally convinced that Nenets culture should be fully preserved, fully. Their language, their prayers, and even their ritual sphere, you know. We need to bring the Gospel while not disturbing their culture.

Evangelical missionaries from Salekhard developed their indigenization strategies in line with traditional Protestant approaches. The indigenization of Christianity has a long history in Protestantism and is considered a major global trend in Christian missions in the twentieth and twenty-first

4 Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic*, 209.

centuries. Various Protestant institutions have established compatible relationships with indigenous cultures. From Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson in the nineteenth century, the World Missionary Conference in 1910, the works of the Fuller Theological Seminary, David Bosch, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, to Billy Graham and the International Congress of World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974 with the subsequent Lausanne movement, Protestantism has been developing its new missionary theology, indigenous mission church theory, and the idea of reframing Christian missions in the modern world.⁵

This tendency in world Protestantism was also influenced by new doctrinal ideas emanating from the Catholic Church, particularly after Vatican II (1962–65), Paul VI's call in Kampala in 1969 ("You may and you must have an African Christianity"), and the 1991 encyclical of John Paul II entitled "Mission of the Redeemer," in which he expressed the necessity of "inculturation" in the contemporary mission of the church—understood as both the intimate transformation of cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the adaptation of Christian faith within various cultural contexts.⁶ Eventually, missionary principles of church planting, group targeting (the development of mission work for particular social groups), involving indigenous people in religious work and leadership, and translating the Bible into indigenous languages came to characterize the global mission trend.⁷

Notably, while some evangelical missionaries in the Russian Arctic attempted to develop indigenization projects, these efforts largely failed to gain traction among the Nenets and were never fully embraced by the indigenous communities. The project of Nenets Christianity remained largely confined to the evangelical church Blagaia Vest' in Salekhard. This missionary church also served as the sole host for projects focused on translating the Bible into Nenets and Khanty languages, carried out by Wycliffe Bible Translators, Pioneer Bible Translation, and the Institute for Bible Translation—global advocates of the indigenization of Christianity.

All attempts to develop indigenized versions of Christianity sparked heated debates both within the missionary community (leading to intercongregational tensions) and within indigenous society. Furthermore, the main adversary of the indigenization projects was the Baptist Brethren, the church

5 Stoll, "The Summer Institute"; Burridge, "Missionaries and the Perception"; Hunt, "The History of the Lausanne."

6 Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel*; Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation."

7 Gallaher, "The Role of Protestant Missionaries."



Figure 7.1. Pentecostal prayer in a Khanty nomadic tent, Salemal tundra. Photograph by the author.

most successful in its mission among the Nenets tundra, which claimed the most significant rupture in converts' lives. While targeting its mission specifically to the Nenets and Khanty people, the Brethren remained extremely cautious about incorporating ethnic elements into religious practices. They also rejected the Bible translations carried out by the evangelical church. In fact, the Baptist community in the remote Yamal village of Se-Yakha even burned portions of a translated New Testament sent to them by evangelical translators. The Brethren leaders sent a letter to the evangelical translation center in Salekhard, accusing the translators of unacceptable syncretism and the use of "pagan Nenets notions" in rendering key Christian concepts.

To sum up, in the post-Soviet Yamal and Polar Urals regions, there was no significant adoption of the indigenization practices that have been observed in other parts of the world, such as exotic Christian services featuring drums and indigenous music, liturgies that mirrored shamanic rituals, or the creation of indigenized images of Jesus. Instead, the evangelical presence in these areas remained predominantly Western/European in character, with little to no effort to blend indigenous cultural elements into Christian worship.

Unlike Pelkmans's assertion that the most successful churches in the post-Soviet space were those that sought to contextualize their religious messages, the indigenized version of Christianity in the Polar Urals produced ambiguous



Figure 7.2. Pentecostal healing prayer in a Khanty nomadic tent, Salemal tundra. Photograph by the author.

outcomes.⁸ It resulted in a complex situation marked by missionary “warfare” over the nature of contextualization and the perceived danger of syncretism.

At the same time, regardless of their stance on indigenization projects, various missionary churches specifically targeted their initiatives at the indigenous populations in the Polar Urals and Yamal. These churches organized missions and conferences focused on indigenous communities, actively sought to engage indigenous converts in their efforts, and worked to prepare them as future leaders, pastors, and deacons within their own communities. Ultimately, the goal for all congregations was to establish a distinct Nenets church, one that would be grounded in the local context and meet the needs of the indigenous people.

Politicizing Conversion

Although the indigenization project was not highly developed in the Polar Urals, attempts to contextualize the Christian message within Nenets culture

8 Pelkmans, “Introduction,” 10.

undeniably stimulated a heightened sense of Nenets indigenous awareness. This process of engaging with Christianity in ways that resonated with local cultural practices and beliefs led to the development of Nenets indigeneity as a dynamic and evolving force. As a result, their conversion experiences became not merely acts of religious transformation but also strategies for empowerment and a form of indigenous political agency.

In this context, the notion of converted indigenous people holding legitimate claims to Nenets identity and culture gained significant traction. The converts began to assert their rights to retain their Nenets identity, even as they navigated the complexities of their religious conversion. This sense of entitlement to both Christianity and their indigenous heritage allowed them to concretize their indigeneity, using it as a tool to protect and assert their cultural and ethnic rights.

When converted Nenets faced the threat of exclusion from their indigenous society—accused of being “too Russian” or “not Nenets enough”—they responded by developing a strategy of “reindigenization.” Drawing from Jean Jackson’s study of indigenous movements in Latin America, where communities actively reassert their cultural and ethnic identities in the face of external pressures such as globalization, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism, I show how the Nenets converts reframed identities. As Jackson highlights, the question of rights to indigenous culture often becomes deeply intertwined with the construction of a “real” or “authentic” indigeneity.⁹ This concept provided the framework for the converts as they faced accusations of cultural inauthenticity. For them, reindigenization was not just about religious conversion—it became a necessary strategy for reasserting their belonging within the Nenets community, solidifying their connection to both the land and their ancestral traditions. By claiming their rights to Nenets culture, the converts not only fought to preserve their place within the community but also pushed back against narrow, exclusionary definitions of what it meant to be truly Nenets.

The situation in the post-Soviet Polar Urals was not unique and mirrored many other cases of Protestant conversion within colonial and postcolonial contexts. As noted by several scholars, the interaction between neo-Protestant missionaries and indigenous cultures in Latin America and Africa has often resulted in “indigenous awakening” and the politicization of indigeneity.¹⁰ In Latin America, particularly during the late twentieth

9 Jackson, “Rights to Indigenous,” 232.

10 Gallaher, “The Role of Protestant Missionaries”; Parker Gumucio, “Religion and the Awakening”; Dow, “The Expansion of Protestantism”; Trejo, “Religious Competition.”

and early twenty-first centuries, new-wave Protestant missions have been notably successful in regions with significant indigenous populations. Scholars argue that the emergence of indigenous movements, the formation of indigenous ethnic identities, and the development of ethnic claims on the political scene have been profoundly shaped by the widespread expansion of indigenous neo-Protestantism, as well as by the revitalization of Catholicism through liberation theology.

In post-Soviet Siberia, scholarship has demonstrated that Protestant leaders were often at the forefront of local indigenous revivals.¹¹ While it would be an overstatement to characterize Nenets conversion as a fully developed political opposition or indigenous movement, the Protestant influx among indigenous populations in the Polar Urals aligned with the logic and strategies of post-Soviet indigenous movements. In many ways, it contributed to a recovery of ethnic identity, mobilizing indigeneity as a political tool. In this context, indigeneity revealed its potential for political agency, as well as its social and political relevance. Consequently, the Protestant conversion experience became a new avenue for engaging with the broader, transnational discourse surrounding indigenous culture.

It is worth noting that almost all the missionaries I spoke with—whether charismatic, evangelical, or Baptist—were not particularly concerned with political issues themselves. However, officials in Yamal generally believed that it was Protestant missionary initiatives that made the Nenets more politically mobilized, thereby making them harder to govern. I would argue, however, that it was not the missionary work in the Nenets tundra that was politicized, but rather the Nenets themselves, who reinterpreted the missionary message in ways that strengthened their indigenous awareness and agency.

The most politically and socially active church in the region had been the evangelical church in Salekhard, which organized various social projects aimed at the indigenous population and supported the Nenets and Khanty in establishing fishing and herding clan-based communities (*obshchiny*). However, the degree of politicization within a community often depended less on its denominational affiliation and more on the public activity of its indigenous members. As such, charismatic and Baptist indigenous communities were also politically mobilized to varying degrees.

This new mobilization among indigenous groups was often perceived as an expression of opposition sentiment and, therefore, viewed as a threat to regional stability. In the broader context of the rising Putin regime, which

11 Broz, "Conversion to Religion?," 23–24; Vaté, "Redefining Chukchi Practices," 41.

aimed to consolidate power and suppress dissent at all levels, any form of opposition was met with suspicion. The state's strategy under Putin sought to curtail public or cultural activities that could foster political mobilization or challenge state authority. As a result, the indigenous mobilization of the Nenets, partially fueled by religious conversion, became an unintended flashpoint in the early years of the regime, which steadily worked to restrict or ban any expressions of opposition sentiment across the country.

A charismatic minister from Salekhard captured this tension, saying, "Here [in the Yamal region] Protestants were treated badly by local administrations because we taught indigenous people to speak proudly, and they became more confident. But nobody needed that here." This sentiment reflected the local political climate, where any form of empowerment or political awareness among indigenous groups was seen as destabilizing. Similarly, a leading politician in Salekhard accused Protestant missionaries of teaching nomadic Nenets basic legal principles (*pravovoi likbez*), portraying this as the reason "sectarian" Nenets became difficult to communicate with:

They [converted Nenets] become so competent [*gramotnye*]. An absolutely uneducated reindeer herder or fisher tells you, "Why do you force me to believe in other religions? According to the constitution I have the right to choose for myself." And our *FSBeshniki* [Federal Security Service workers] are thereby put into a corner. They cannot do anything.

In the same way, the widely publicized conflict that erupted in the 2010s between the cooperative Krasnyi Oktiabr' (based in Vorkuta, Komi Republic) and private reindeer herders of the Polar Ural tundra saw Baptist missionaries frequently cited as a key factor fueling the tension. The dispute centered on land rights: the cooperative management argued that numerous private Nenets reindeer herders were grazing their herds on land owned by the cooperative. The cooperative demanded that these private herders either vacate the pastures—facing limited alternatives due to the harsh polar mountain environment—or join the cooperative, which would result in their herds becoming the property of the cooperative. The head of the cooperative, Georgii Pasyнков, publicly claimed that Baptist missionaries were propagandizing among the nomads, encouraging them to defy the law. He argued that the missionaries incited the herders to assert that the land actually belonged to them and that the tundra as a whole was the rightful territory of indigenous peoples. According to Pasyнков, following the missionaries' instructions, the private herders sought to reclaim their

land and filed complaints about violations of their rights as indigenous people.¹²

In a way, Pasyukov was correct; several missionary churches in the Yamal region and Komi Republic supported indigenous cooperation in *obshchiny*, fostering indigenous political claims-making and reinforcing the identity of people as those with the right to have rights. Anatolii, an evangelical missionary in Salekhard, shared a story about how he and his missionary church helped converted Khanty fishers unite into a fishing *obshchina* and their subsequent struggle with local authorities:

We helped them organize a fishing community; we registered it and took care of all the legal matters for them. They say, “They will kill us!,” but I told them, “Nobody will kill you.” And when they’d already started fishing on their own, their former boss [*khoziain*] saw them fishing on the same part of the river [*peski*], and he shouted at them, “What you are doing here?!” But I said to them, “Don’t be afraid and answer him that this land is yours and you are its rightful masters.” And since that time, they have become rightful masters of their river.

The evangelical church in Salekhard registered an NGO with a typical name—Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North “Our Land” (Nasha Zemlia). In collaboration with various charity organizations, the church conducted several projects in support of nomadic indigenous people. From 2000 to 2010, they ran various initiatives, such as veterinary programs, health projects like Healthy Children of the Tundra, First Aid in the Tundra, and First Aid Kits in Every Tent, as well as other humanitarian aid efforts.

As a result, some converted indigenous people became involved in social and political initiatives and played a significant role in the region’s social life. Mikhail, the first Nenets missionary in Yamal, was the organizer and head of two indigenous communities—the reindeer-herding cooperative Yasavei and the indigenous community Obnovlennaiia Zhizn’ (Renewed Life) in the Priural’skii District of the Yamal region. He was also active in the indigenous association of the Nenets people, Yamal–Potomkam (Yamal to Its Descendants), where he headed one of its departments. One of the leading Khanty charismatics was a people’s deputy in the Aksarka municipality of Priural’skii District. Both viewed their social and political engagement as part of their Christian mission.

12 BNKomi, “Orthodox Christians Intend to Recapture Reindeer Herders from Baptists,” 2 November 2012, <https://www.bnkomi.ru/data/news/16254/>.

Although the majority of indigenous converts were not deeply involved in the social and political life of their region, their religious experiences and their efforts to justify and defend “indigenous culture” had a significant impact on the growing indigenous awareness. Through their conversion, they contributed to the revitalization of indigenous identity and played a part in shaping a new form of cultural and political engagement, which influenced the broader indigenous movement in the region.

This potential for an indigenous movement to grow, however, was abruptly stifled with the Putin administration’s decision to ban all foreign missionary activities, coupled with an increasing discrimination against religious pluralism and indigenous movements. As a result, such movements were reduced to being no more than a framework for ethnic festivals with no political significance, severely limiting their influence and development.

Nenets Ethnotheology

The interaction between Nenets culture and Christianity unfolded on a deep symbolic and conceptual level, as both missionaries and converted Nenets engaged in a complex process of translation, interpretation, and reevaluation. This was not merely a linguistic exercise but an attempt to reconcile two distinct worldviews by redefining traditional categories through Christian ideas and vice versa. The ultimate goal of this negotiation was to construct a bridge between Christianity and Nenets culture, allowing converts to integrate their faith without severing ties to their indigenous heritage.

In this process, converted Nenets developed what Michael Scott terms “ethnotheology”—a framework through which converts critically engaged with Christian doctrine, evaluating their own ideas and practices in relation to Christian beliefs while situating their ancestral identities and histories within biblical narratives.¹³ Similar to Scott’s observations in the context of the Arosi people of the Solomon Islands, Nenets Christians selectively reinterpreted Christian teachings to create a version of faith that did not erase their preconversion past but instead incorporated it into their born-again present. This act of theological adaptation allowed them to maintain a sense of cultural continuity while embracing a new religious identity.

In this framework, Nenets Christianity emerged not merely as an ethnified version of the faith, but as something that could have transformative

13 Scott, “I Was Like Abraham,” 102.

force in Nenets history, where Christianity was seen as essential to Nenets spiritual and historical destiny. This vision positioned Christianity as a salvific force in Nenets history, restoring and elevating them as a people uniquely blessed by God. This approach situated the Nenets within the history of Christianity, granting them agency within a broader global religious narrative and offering the possibility of translocal presence and empowerment.

In 2006 when I first met Mikhail, a Nenets evangelical missionary in Yamal and local indigenous activist, he said:

Today, there is a new page in the history of our [Nenets] life—everything has changed, and Christianity has arrived. I am telling you, here and now, history is happening, something entirely new that has never happened before in the world. It is the history of the awakening of the entire people. And while we are deciding these issues, we are hindered by people of another culture. They impose their own will. But we must decide for ourselves. Christianity is a good thing, but together with Baptists comes Baptist culture, together with Pentecostals—Pentecostal culture, together with Americans—American culture, and Russian culture comes with Russians. And all these are wrong. Don't be hard on us! We should sort it out ourselves.

Several years later, in 2011, he told me that he had seen God's foresight: Christ does not want the Nenets to believe like the Russians; He wants to see the creation of Nenets churches "within their own culture." Mikhail added, "God desires glorification in the Nenets language." Hence, Mikhail saw the preservation of nomadic culture and the creation of purely indigenous churches (Nenets or Khanty) as the fulfillment of God's will.

Conversion of History: The "Old Testament" Nenets

An evangelical missionary from Salekhard recounted a story of how he once witnessed a traditional Nenets reindeer sacrifice ritual. Instead of condemning the ritual, he employed a strategy of reconciling the "heathen" practice with Christian teachings. He persuaded the community that the ritual was good and righteous, comparing it to Old Testament traditions. However, he explained that this ritual belonged to the Old Testament, and now he was introducing the New Testament. He then continued with his usual preaching.

As Jean Jackson argues, “a group’s vision of its future ... arises out of its embedded understanding of its past.”¹⁴ Similarly, Marshal Sahlins observes that when people undergo culture change, they embed their present in their past, combining the existentially unique in the conceptually familiar.¹⁵ This is what converted Nenets did when they bridged Christianity with their traditional system of knowledge. In this framework, Christianity and Nenets culture were not merely compatible or complementary, but possessed essential unity and continuity. By embedding Christian logic and the Christian message into their personal and social histories, they not only defended their “culture” but also sacralized it in Christian terms.

In this framework, Christianity was seen as reflecting the most profound aspects of authentic Nenets culture, with conversion symbolizing a return to the true “Nenetsness” or *Neneil’*—the essence of Nenets life. This perspective enabled the Nenets to embrace Christianity by highlighting the shared values between their indigenous traditions and Christian teachings, rather than focusing on the perceived conflicts with their “heathen” past.

One common technique for symbolically bridging Christianity and the Nenets worldview was to equate traditional Nenets culture with the Old Testament, casting nonconverted Nenets as Old Testament or biblical figures. Their tundra life and nomadic existence were seen as closer to Christianity than those of others in the modern world, as they were believed to have been living according to the Old Testament all along. Within this framework, converted Nenets saw themselves as lifelong custodians of God’s law, inherently part of God’s divine plan for humanity. Their traditional culture and the religion of their ancestors were seen as “expressions of imperfect but innate inclinations towards Christian truth.”¹⁶

Nenets culture was no longer regarded simply as heathen or their people as backward, but, rather, they were reimagined as a biblical, God-chosen people, who were prophetically destined to find salvation. Their traditional way of life was seen as having always aligned with the laws of the Old Testament, positioning them as living according to ancient, divine commandments. This reinterpretation of their cultural heritage allowed converted Nenets to embrace Christianity without abandoning their sense of identity, seeing their past as a precursor to their Christian future.

This approach was not unique to Nenets conversion; it can also be observed in other instances of missionary–indigenous encounters. In many such cases,

14 Jackson, “Traditional, Transnational,” 537.

15 Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 146.

16 Scott, “I Was Like Abraham,” 109.

indigenous cultures were framed in biblical terms, often compared with Old Testament Hebrew culture, thereby ensuring a sense of continuity between pre- and postconversion identities. This strategy allowed converts to view their cultural traditions as prefiguring Christian values, fostering a narrative of spiritual and historical continuity rather than rupture.¹⁷

It is noteworthy that the image of the reindeer, central to Nenets nomadic life and worldview, became an important means of translating Nenets culture into an Old Testament framework. The reindeer, which plays such a crucial role in Nenets life—providing food, transport, clothing, housing, and facilitating economic exchanges—emerged as an important symbol within Nenets Christian life as well. In Nenets culture, the reindeer is a dominant category, and much of the social structure, rites, and regulations are geared toward ensuring its safety and well-being. As one Nenets woman from the village of Yar-Sale in Yamal put it, “Reindeer are life, reindeer are everywhere, they are all around in [Nenets] life. Reindeer, reindeer, reindeer.” As Liivo Niglas argues, the reindeer is a key molder of the ethnic identity of the Yamal Nenets.¹⁸

The reindeer, in this framework, was seen as a biblically pure animal, drawing parallels to the ancient Jewish pastoral society described in the Old Testament. In this interpretation, reindeer herding was not just an economic activity but a divine vocation that echoed the biblical way of life. Through their connection to reindeer and the nomadic lifestyle, the Nenets were presented as living in a way that aligned with the purity and righteousness of biblical teachings. As such, reindeer herding became a legitimizing practice within Christianity, affirming the Nenets place in God’s plan.

The reindeer also symbolized God’s blessings. A true believer, people used to say, would be blessed with a large and healthy herd, which became a visible sign of divine favor. Moreover, this spiritual economy extended to the practice of tithing. Converted Nenets saw their herds as both a material and spiritual asset, and therefore offered slaughtered reindeer as a form of tithe to the church.

Even Nenets rituals and sacrifices were seen as analogous to ancient Hebrew practices. Many Nenets enjoyed reading the Old Testament and interpreted the description of Hebrew nomadic pastoral society as a prophetic reflection of their own traditional way of life. They often compared Hebrew shepherds with Nenets reindeer herders, drawing parallels between the

17 Badmaev et al., *Protestantizm i narody*, 97–99; Broz, “Conversion to Religion?,” 23; Vaté, “Redefining Chukchi Practices,” 51–53; Wiget and Balalaeva, “Crisis, Conversion.”

18 Niglas, “Reindeer as the Moulder.”

two groups' shared experiences of living in close communion with nature, tending to their flocks, and adhering to religious laws.

Mikhail, a Nenets missionary, used this technique as the main strategy in his justification of Nenets culture:

The Old Testament is still alive among us because we, the Nenets, live according to the Old Testament.... Take the Nenets people—they are nomadic. They have cattle—reindeer. And take Israeli people—they used to be nomads, too. Then, in the Old Testament, there is the notion of clean and unclean animals. And Nenets people also have the same notion! Birds, fish. Scavengers are unclean animals, as well as all those that eat someone else's flesh. Whitefish [*muksun*] have proper scales, so everyone understands that it is a clean animal. But pike is unclean. We also have peaceful sacrifices: when we wish to thank God, we can bring, for example, berries, cloudberry.... That is, we have the same system in our culture.

When I stayed in Beloiarsk, in a community of converted Nenets, we often read the Bible, and this reading became the best way to evoke memories of Nenets tundra life. Beginning with "We also used to live according to the Old Testament," Marina, my hostess, would then describe various Nenets traditional rituals, customs, and myths. The Nenets' prohibitions on using certain species of animals and birds for food reminded readers of the ancient Jewish distinction between clean and unclean animals. All Nenets rituals and behavioral regulations surrounding women during their periods and childbirth could now be justified by the Old Testament concept of ritual impurity and defilement, reflecting the Jewish belief that a woman's impurity "infects" others (contamination by menstrual blood). When reading the story of the Flood, Marina explained the legend of the *sikhirtia*, the Nenets mythical small underground people with conical heads, believed to be the Nenets predecessors.¹⁹ She interpreted the *sikhirtia* myth through the biblical image of the Flood:

Sikhirtia is closely connected with the biblical story about the Flood. All the earth was flooded—everything, and the land where the Nenets lived was also flooded. And when the water had gone all the people had died. But *sikhirtia* must have survived, hidden under the ground. The water stayed for a long time, therefore they stayed under the ground for a long

19 Vasil'ev, "Siirtia—legenda."

time and did not see the sun. It might be because of this that they are now afraid of sunlight. So, everybody died, but these conical ones survived.

Alternative Soteriology

Another discursive technique employed in the process of converting the Nenets to Christianity was the construction of Nenets religion within the Christian monotheistic framework. This strategy, however, was not entirely new; it had been used by Orthodox missionaries since the nineteenth century to align indigenous beliefs with Christian doctrine. For example, one of the key spiritual beings in Nenets cosmology—Num (N.: *num'*, sky)—was reinterpreted by missionaries as a supreme deity, analogous to the God of heaven in Christian theology. In this reimagining, Num was regarded as the protector of human life and the guardian of moral order, concepts central to Christian monotheism.²⁰ Similarly, another important figure in Nenets cosmology, Nga—a spirit associated with the underground world—was recontextualized as the Devil or an embodiment of moralized evil, mirroring the Christian understanding of Satan. The Russian Orthodox archimandrite Veniamin, the head of the Arkhangel'sk Orthodox mission among the European Nenets, wrote in the mid-nineteenth century that the Samoyeds (an old term for the Nenets) believed God to be the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all living things. He described their belief that all beings depend on God, who alone rules over everything, and that He is the bearer and source of all good.²¹

Protestant missionaries in the early twenty-first century, much like their Orthodox counterparts in the nineteenth century, utilized a similar concept of a supreme deity that bridged two cultural systems of meaning. Post-Soviet religious shifts within Nenets society inspired the same methods of reshaping and constructing traditional beliefs within the Christian framework. The names Num and Nga were incorporated into Bible translations into Nenets to refer to God and the biblical Devil, respectively. Nenets converts interpreted

20 Cf. Khomich, "Predstavlenie nentsev"; Kostikov, "Bogovy oleni"; Islavin, *Samoyedy v domashnem*, 109; Beliavskii, *Poezdka k Ledovtomu*, 149.

21 Veniamin, "Obrashchenie v khristianstvo." Finnish researcher Mathias Alexander Castrén was one of the first to record the shift in Nenets beliefs about Num in the mid-nineteenth century, attributing this change to the influence of Christianity. He noted that the Nenets revered Num as the creator of the world, who blesses virtuous people and brings poverty and death to sinners. Castrén also observed that the Nenets often referred to the earth, the sea, and nature as a whole as manifestations of Num. Castrén, *Puteshestvie Alexandra Kastrena*, 293.

the Christian concept of God as aligning with their own supreme being, drawing on these ideas to justify and reframe their traditional culture. As one Nenets believer stated:

The Nenets are very spiritual people. They believe in gods, they believe that there are good and bad gods. And they understand that there is a Supreme God, the Creator. And when they hear the Gospel, they already understand that the Bible's God and their own God are one and the same.

The Nenets ethnicity was eventually reconceptualized in religious terms: some Protestant missionaries argued that the Nenets “are not just an ethnic group, but spiritual people.” This shift reflected an emphasis on the Nenets spiritual identity over their ethnic or cultural roots. An evangelical minister from Salekhard expressed it:

The Nenets and all their culture are soaked with spirituality.... They have a clear understanding of God the Creator—it is Num. They have their understanding of evil and sin. They have a biblical conception of sacrifice for the sake of God's forgiveness and propitiation [*umilostivlenie*].... They are highly spiritual people.

Prophetic narratives and the idiom of prophecy were central to the way Nenets history was converted. Even though some Nenets continue to live according to what they interpret as Old Testament practices, believing in “idols” and relying on shamans for guidance, their fellow converts perceived their lives through the lens of prophecy. For them, these traditional practices were not simply remnants of a “heathen” past, but rather prophetic signs pointing to an eventual fulfillment in Christianity, a divine plan, an unfolding story that will culminate in their salvation.

Converted Nenets saw their entire life trajectories—both personal and communal—through the lens of Christian prophecy. In telling their conversion stories, they often spoke not just of their personal experiences, but of the spiritual destinies of their ancestors. The past was not merely a foundation for the present but was also a signpost pointing toward the future. Through their conversion, they saw themselves as fulfilling prophecies that have been unfolding in the history of their people.

This process of religious conversion entailed the creation of new oral histories, where personal testimonies and collective histories were reenvisioned as part of a larger divine narrative. Converts renarrated their stories, drawing on Christian tropes such as salvation, predestination, and the

promise of eternal life. These concepts allowed them to reinterpret their ancestors' lives, not as separate from or incompatible with Christianity, but as part of God's divine plan. Converts often spoke of their grandparents or great-grandparents not as mere figures of the past, but as people whose lives were also part of God's prophecy and providence, leading to the moment of their own spiritual awakening.

By placing themselves within this prophetic framework, Nenets converts also positioned their people's future in Christian terms. They envision themselves as fulfilling a larger divine purpose, carrying the Christian message to the world as part of a larger, ongoing story of salvation. Their religious conversion becomes not just a personal transformation, but a prophetic fulfillment, bridging the past, present, and future in the story of salvation.

In the winter of 2011, I arrived in Aksarka to visit Liudmila, an indigenous Khanty charismatic leader and a key missionary within her extended family. My purpose was to listen to her conversion narrative. What unfolded was a six-hour story—the story of the spiritual transformation of her entire clan. Notably, she began her narrative by recounting the life of her grandfather, who had lived at the turn of the twentieth century. A reindeer herder and a well-known shaman, her grandfather had never encountered terms like “charismatic” or even “Christianity,” and “knew only a little about the Russian god.”

Liudmila's story centered on her grandfather's miraculous salvation. He had been lost at sea, drifting on an ice floe for three days. According to Liudmila, this harrowing experience was not just a tale of survival but a prophetic sign—a divine prelude to the future conversion of their entire clan. For Liudmila, the miraculous event was not just a personal story; it symbolized the spiritual destiny of her people. It was a divine sign woven into a broader, prophetic narrative that spanned generations, ultimately leading to the salvation and transformation of her entire family.

He never knew God as we know Him now. But he began to pray to God the Father, because he realized that there was no sense anymore to ask “idols” for help—none of them could help him now. So, he began to pray, “God! Save us! Help us!”... And then God made a path for him—a path made of ice that led him to the coast.... Imagine, we were all destined to be saved, Satan knew that from the clan of this man a big branch [of Christians] would come out. Because there are many believers in our clan nowadays. And Satan wanted to cut this branch down, to uproot it. Our grandfather prayed, not even knowing God, and God replied to him. It was a miracle.

Liudmila then continued with the story of her father, a reindeer herder who had inherited the ancestral shamanic gift. He served in World War II, where he encountered Russians for the first time praying to their God, to “some Jesus.” During a moment of crossfire between the Germans and Russians, he followed a group of Russian soldiers, knelt down, and invoked God’s name. Liudmila recounted the event in the following way:

There was heavy fire from the German side. And my father often told us, “People around cried, ‘God, save us!’ And I knew, too, that God the Father helps, since he saved my dad out of the sea. So, I also knelt and prayed. And I heard God’s voice, ‘Don’t be afraid, you will return home alive.’” You see, he did not know God, but God spoke to him anyway. Afterwards, he had so many revelations in his life; he didn’t know the Bible, but he had such big revelations about the spiritual world.... There was a miraculous salvation—God saved my father and therefore all his offspring, because He knew that through him his descendants would be reckoned and saved as Christians.

While renarrating their oral histories, indigenous Christians constructed an alternative soteriology, where God thwarted the Devil’s intentions and saved those whose descendants would become future religious leaders. Notably, key concepts such as prophet, priest, shaman, and God’s chosen leader were integrated into a shared semantic field. As Liudmila said, “Simply because now we do not have a worthy priest.... But we had one, and we called him a shaman.”

The sacralization of culture and the integration of Christian logic and concepts into indigenous history served as a strategic approach to reconcile Christianity with indigenous identity. This process, developed by both indigenous converts and missionaries, transformed religious conversion into a tool for empowerment. It replaced the conventional perception of the Nenets (and Khanty) as “second-class” citizens with a sense of chosenness and prophetic status within the Christian framework, affirming their unique place in God’s divine plan.

Disenchanting Traditional Culture

Another challenge that arose during the conversion era was how to handle the indigenous symbols and practices that, at first (at the beginning of the conversion era), were widely regarded as heathen by converts and missionaries.

One discursive method that allowed traditional culture to persist within a Christian framework was the process of disenchanting these elements. Symbols and practices once considered “dangerous” were desacralized and redefined as “cultural.” In this disenchantment of traditional culture, once “religious” elements were reinterpreted as secular or “rational” patterns, thus removing them from the spiritual realm and situating them in the sphere of culture. The discourse surrounding culture and religion again played a key role in this shift. As Virginie Vaté observes, “[D]issociation of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ appears to be a way for converts to reconcile their indigenous identity with Christianity.” In her study of the contextualization of Protestant Christianity among the Chukchi, Vaté highlights how missionaries mirrored Soviet rhetoric, adopting a strategy that was “national in form, Christian in content,” much like the “national in form, socialist in content” rhetoric of the Soviet era.²²

For example, “pagan” practices were frequently reinterpreted as aspects of etiquette or ethnic identity, grounded in rational or even scientific reasoning. The religious significance of these practices was either denied or considered to have been completely lost over time. The concept of “Nenets religion” gradually shifted into that of “Nenets philosophy.” A common justification I encountered in indigenous Christian communities was, “All these are not heathen, but ethnic—these rituals, customs, and prohibitions.”

A Korean translator of the Bible into the Nenets language, who had lived in Salekhard for many years and was one of the most dedicated advocates of Nenets culture, argued:

When you ask them [why a woman is not allowed to cross the space behind a fire place in a tent]—nobody will answer you. It is simply a custom now, simply a custom. Even if it used to have a previous religious meaning, nowadays they [Nenets] separate it, hence, it is simply their custom.... It is philosophy, Nenets philosophy. They purify with smoke [meaning ritual purification, *kŷv-kŷv*]—it is a science, but not religion. We should respect this. There always is a reason, we just don’t know it yet.... It kills bacteria, it is necessary, and if you destroy it people in the tundra will get sick.

The multiplicity of indigenous ritual practices and traditions that had previously been regarded as “heathen” were rationalized and essentialized—“the culture” was no longer seen as a “heathen” construct, but as something that ran in people’s blood and was inherent in their genes.

22 Vaté, “Redefining Chukchi Practices,” 48–49.

The practice of using reindeer blood for food was also reinterpreted and rationalized, taking on a new significance in the context of Nenets identity and survival. It was now viewed not just as a traditional or heathen practice, but as a vital source of nourishment, particularly in terms of its nutritional value, with a focus on vitamins that were essential for the health and well-being of the nomadic community. The consumption of reindeer blood was framed as something deeply ingrained in the very biology of the Nenets people—"Nenets genes." It was believed to be a crucial element of survival and vitality for the people, without which the Nenets would "wither" (*zachakhnut*).

At times, Nadia, the born-again Christian who had been the first to burn her ancestral "idols" and adopt the most rigorous stance toward "Nenets heathendom," returned to her "Nenets culture" and sought to justify it, following the same logic of disenchantment. When I stayed in Nadia's tent for the third time in autumn 2011, she once again recounted her conversion story. This time, however, the framework and tone of the story differed from the one she had shared with me five years earlier. When I first heard it in 2006, she focused primarily on burning her ancestral "idols" and her liberation from society's traditional prohibitions and behavioral restrictions. The message of rupture had been central to her narrative.

Significantly, something had changed in her story by the time she retold it a few years later. Nadia now spoke of returning to certain traditional customs, sometimes even regretting her previously strict stance toward "the culture." She told me about the prohibition against crossing the space behind the fireplace near the *symsy* pole, which traditionally marked the sacred space in a Nenets tent. She explained that some converts had believed that their conversion had freed them from such prohibitions, and she had, too, stopped following it. "But this place [behind the fireplace in the tent] is like a kitchen for us, we keep groceries and kitchen utensils there." She then asked, "You don't step over dishes and groceries in your kitchen, do you? So, we don't either. We used to call it a sin, in Nenets *hyvy*. But now I don't call it a sin—it's just something inappropriate [*neudobno*]." She went on to explain the Nenets prohibition against stepping over clothes and men's tools, similarly removing the "sinful" connotation from these practices:

To step over [clothes and tools] is inappropriate, too. How can I step over my child's pants or shirts?! I won't call it a sin, but at the same time I wouldn't feel comfortable putting these clothes on my child afterwards.... *Hyvy*, I used to call it a sin, but now that I am in God, I won't cross over

men's lassos [*arkan*], not because it is a sin, but because it is unpleasant [*nepriiatno*] and inappropriate.

The woman who, five years earlier, courageously said, "Now we can do everything.... We have gotten rid of fear," the woman who, in 2006, put me, a young woman, on the Nenets bed with my feet on it—thus violating the prevailing prohibition in the Nenets tundra—has now restored all these customs. She argued that she needed them because, she believed, these regulations maintain order in tundra life. She criticized her converted daughters-in-law for being "too modern" and not following the tundra rules, violating the regulations surrounding male and female social spaces. Now, she taught them to live as they once did. At the same time, she remained a sincere believer—someone who read the Bible, prayed, attended community gatherings, and taught me how to live a truly Christian life.

By disenchanting her culture, Nadia effectively legalized it within her life in Christ. She revaluated the system of knowledge and meanings underlying those traditional practices, now grounding them in new concepts such as "ethnic," "rational," "cultural," or even "genetic." She stretched traditional categories, infusing them with new values. This was essential for her to maintain a sense of continuity amidst change.

Initially, Nenets converts embraced a strong rupture with their traditional culture, rejecting indigenous practices and symbols deemed "heathen." This created tensions within their communities, with converts often accused of losing their Nenets identity. Over time, however, many reconsidered their stance, reconciling Christianity with their indigenous heritage. They reshaped their cultural practices, either by rationalizing or sacralizing them within the Christian framework. Through this process, they developed a strategy of reindigenization, asserting their rights to Nenets identity and culture, and positioning themselves as empowered agents in the global Christian world.

8. The Production of Christian Fundamentalism in the Nenets Tundra

Abstract: On the emerging post-Soviet religious spectrum, the Nenets embraced fundamentalist Baptist Christianity over globally popular neo-Pentecostal movements. By choosing a strict, anti-modern path, the Baptist “narrow path” doctrine distinguished Nenets converts both as indigenous people and as believers apart from wider society. This choice resonated with historical experiences and sociocultural anxieties, while the Soviet legacy—embedded in Baptist Brethren discipline, hierarchy, and oppositional stance toward the state—mirrored Nenets colonial histories. Framing religious identity within a Soviet-shaped temporal order, Baptists offered a retrotopian vision where spiritual renewal aligned with continuity, stability, and moral order. Their anti-modern ethos fostered distinct religious and political agency, turning Nenets conversion into a form of “ritualized resistance” against the Russian state and colonial legacy.

Keywords: Baptism, Christian fundamentalism, space and time, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, retrotopia, world-making and world-breaking in religion

Why did the Nenets—long regarded as a stronghold of traditional culture and historically resistant to both Christian missions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Soviet efforts to reform nomadism, enforce sedentarization, and suppress religion—so widely embrace evangelical Christianity in the post-Soviet period? While this book as a whole seeks to answer that question, another question humbled me: Why, among the many religious movements emerging at the time, was it the fundamentalist form of Baptist Christianity that the Nenets—unexpectedly to many—ultimately adopted, a choice that brought considerable challenges to their lives?

The Baptist Brethren—officially known as the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian Baptists—demand that followers walk the

“narrow path,” which entails resisting worldly influences, often resulting in the double marginalization of converted Nenets. If social change and globalization were the driving forces behind religious conversion, why did the Nenets not gravitate towards the more globally popular neo-Protestant or neo-Pentecostal movements, which focus on the prosperity gospel and might have offered more practical strategies for adapting to a rapidly changing world? These questions are crucial for understanding the religious transformation of the Nenets within the context of broader sociocultural and political changes.

As scholars often emphasize, neo-Protestant movements—particularly the neo-Pentecostal and charismatic global networks—have become some of the most dynamic religious movements worldwide and the fastest-growing branches of Christianity, especially in the Global South. Jean and John Comaroff argue that neo-Protestantism, particularly the prosperity gospel ideology, serves as a means of making sense of capitalism, functioning as one of the enchantments of neoliberal economics.¹ The role of Protestant Christianity in fostering capitalism, first explored by Max Weber, has gained renewed attention with the rapid growth and global success of neo-Pentecostal and charismatic movements. These movements have sparked increasing scholarly interest in their potential for political and social transformation.² Once seen as “apolitical” and “otherworldly,” Pentecostalism now engages with social issues and politics, adapting the global market economy, motivating new economic behaviors, and empowering marginalized communities.

During the early post-Soviet period, a variety of neo-Protestant movements also became a form of desovietization, an anti-Soviet alternative, and a way for the region to engage with the global capitalist community.³ As scholars have noted, newly arrived evangelical mission churches played a significant role in social and cultural changes after socialism, offering new visions of society, promoting capitalism, and reshaping moral orders and everyday life.⁴ Mark Elliott remarked that Western missionaries working in post-Soviet states “champion in one and the same breath Christ crucified, market economics, and Western democracy.”⁵

1 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.

2 Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 283–99; Berger, “Max Weber Is Alive”; Brouwer et al., *Exporting the American Gospel*.

3 Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 136–37.

4 Elliott, “East European Missions”; Elliott and Deyneka, “Protestant Missionaries”; Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*.

5 Elliott, “East European Missions,” 11.

The Nenets tundra seemed like an ideal setting for neo-Protestant church planting, given its highly rural indigenous population, the social marginalization of nomadic communities, and the challenges of poverty, alcoholism, and limited education in many rural areas. However, the globally successful neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel movement did not gain much traction. Instead, the rural Nenets of the Polar Urals and Yamal largely rejected this system of beliefs, which aligned with neoliberal culture. Instead, fundamentalist Baptist ideology, emphasizing separation from the modern/Western/secular world and resistance to “corrupted” modernism, dominated the local religious landscape and rapidly grew in influence. Some charismatic and other neo-Protestant leaders often expressed regret over the decline of what had initially been a successful missionary effort in Beloiarsk and the Polar Ural tundra. A charismatic pastor from Salekhard remarked:

We lost the chance and missed the village [Beloiarsk], perhaps because we didn't carry out missionary work extensively. You know, all the believers now in Beloiarsk were initially ours! It all started with us! We awakened them all! Dima [the first charismatic missionary in Beloiarsk] baptized many people, and there was a large church there. We used to fill a whole sports hall, and everything was ready for successful evangelism. We would have had a big church there if the Baptists hadn't arrived.... And what do we have now? Nobody's there!

This chapter aims to understand the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the Nenets tundra. Focusing on a comparison between the charismatic church and the fundamentalist Baptist Brethren, both active in the Nenets tundra, I explore the spatial and temporal perceptions that shaped these movements in the North and how they intersected with the Nenets world-view, revealing the factors behind the growth of Christian fundamentalism in this context.

Building on the Beloiarsk conversion story, I explore how the charismatic movement reflects broader processes of “world-making” and “world-breaking” described by Joel Robbins in his analysis of Pentecostalism's globalization.⁶ These processes mirror Peter Berger's understanding of religion's dual capacity to maintain or shake the world.⁷ Drawing on Birgit Meyer's interpretation, I view the “world-making” process as the spatial expansion of Pentecostalism, its success in building communities, and its

6 Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal.”

7 Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4–6.

role in shaping or imagining the broader world.⁸ “World-breaking” refers to the temporal aspect of the movement, emphasizing rupture—a complete break from the “sinful” past or disconnection from the present—capturing the essence of the concept of being “born again.”

World-Breaking and World-Making Principles in Christianity: Why Not Pentecostalism?

The Beloiarsk conversion saga began with the arrival of charismatic Christianity, when a young missionary visited the village, spent a summer preaching, and ultimately baptized around fifty people who would go on to form the first evangelical church in the village. The charismatic mission church, Novyi Svet, where the Beloiarsk conversion story began, was a typical neo-Pentecostal independent church. It appealed to marginalized groups and the poor, embraced modern cultural trends, and employed contemporary methods of evangelism, such as Christian business seminars, network marketing, modern media, and global infrastructures. With a strong emphasis on prosperity and grounded in neoliberal attitudes, it fit within the category of “passionate religious movements” as described by Mathijs Pelkmans, focused “less on tradition and ritual and more on truth, morality, and visions of the future.”⁹

As both Meyer and Robbins argue, the spatial conceptualization of the Pentecostal movement is grounded in the principle of “world-making.”¹⁰ This view of the world is deeply tied to the doctrine of spiritual warfare, where the world is seen as a battleground between the forces of the Devil, including local demonic “territorial spirits,” and God.¹¹ In this context, the idea that the Holy Spirit should fill the entire world is justified as a sign of God’s triumph in this ongoing spiritual struggle. The rise of megachurches, the increasing visibility of Pentecostalism in public spaces, the expansion of media empires, and the prominence of the prosperity gospel ideology all serve as means by which Pentecostalism spreads its reach into the global sphere, working to “convert the world.” Goods and commodities are not inherently evil; rather, they can be sanctified or infused with the Holy Spirit, as long as they are

8 Meyer, “Pentecostalism and Globalization.”

9 Pelkmans, “Introduction,” 2.

10 Meyer, “Pentecostalism and Globalization”; Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal.”

11 Englund, “Cosmopolitanism and the Devil”; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*; Robbins, “The Globalization of Pentecostal,” 122.

used in the spiritual mission to convert the world. Meyer also links this idea to the spread of capitalism, suggesting that Pentecostalism, in its global expansion, integrates neoliberal economic principles into its teachings.¹²

The charismatic church in Beloiarsk and Salekhard was far from being a megachurch with media and commercial empires, yet it remained a typical neo-Pentecostal organization. Lacking the resources to evangelize the entire world, believers still harbored world-making dreams and aspirations. They were encouraged to be active in local public spaces and engage in business, visibly demonstrating God's blessings in their lives. Adhering to the prosperity gospel, they often justified wealth and material goods, as long as these could serve as part of a born-again life and function as tools for evangelism.

Once, a young Nenets woman, not a member of the church, said to me with a hint of jealousy, "Charismatic women are so modern; they all have their own businesses and drive their own cars." This observation was accurate—almost every woman in the community was involved in network marketing, and several were the most successful Amway and Mary Kay business owners in the entire region. For example, a young charismatic Khanty woman from Aksarka village was a Mary Kay business leader and had recently received a pink Ford car from the company as a symbol of her success. She believed, however, that her business was also a form of missionary work, skillfully blending her Mary Kay network with evangelism, spreading both cosmetics and the message of Christ. Her own business network was actually her church, and her material success was seen as a reflection of God's blessings. "You know, this [my business] is similar to faith. Faith without works is dead. So, I believe, and I do my work," she explained.

The charismatic church attracted missionaries from across the globe, and during my field trips to Beloiarsk, I observed how the village church was gradually transforming into a kind of missionary-tourist destination. Several international Pentecostal missions from Canada and the US, with global backing, were drawn to the Polar Urals by the allure of the region's exotic edge. The church minister also encouraged believers to travel outside the region, attending Christian business seminars, Bible schools in Tiumen', Moscow, and even abroad. The church aimed to connect its members with a broader global network—an imagined, transnational, deterritorialized, and decentered community of believers.¹³ As a result, the importance of locality and cultural difference began to diminish in the charismatic conceptualization of space.

12 Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," 118; see also Coleman, "Studying 'Global' Pentecostalism."

13 Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium"; Corten and Marshall-Fratani, "Introduction"; Marshall-Fratani, "Mediating the Global and Local."

The globalizing Pentecostal network, as scholars suggest, is not tied to any specific place: "It becomes local without ever taking the local into itself," argues Robbins.¹⁴ It displaces cultural phenomena from their "natural" territories.¹⁵ While Pentecostalism has the capacity to adapt the Christian message to local forms, it operates within a transnational, global network, seeking to connect every local point to it.¹⁶ In this way, the Pentecostal project of "reaching out into the world" transforms locality itself: "The local becomes a site that is enveloped in a broader scheme," writes Birgit Meyer.¹⁷

In this context, the charismatic church, with its universalist and deterritorializing impulse, posed a threat of displacement—particularly for the Nenets, for whom locality and the microcosm of tundra life are central to their sense of identity. These delocalizing attitudes, in turn, may have been among the first signs of the charismatic movement's eventual failure in the Nenets tundra. While Pentecostalism aimed to draw believers into a broader global community, the Nenets perceived it as uprooting them from their traditional connection to the land. A charismatic minister in Salekhard once shared his perspective during a conversation about preserving nomadic culture and economy in the Yamal region. "What is the sense of keeping them in the tundra? This won't solve their problems in the future," he said. Later, he added:

If we look at the history in general, the history of Christianity—what did Christianity lead to? Because they [indigenous people] are not the first, and not the last, and even not the hundredth people that are being absorbed by Christianity.... What does Christianity lead to? To destroying per se. Or, to assimilation. That is, they won't stay in that form for long, in which they try to stay now. They either will be assimilated, or most likely....

With that, he deliberately fell silent.

The Historical Roots of the Baptist Brethren

One of the most radical and fundamentalist religious organizations in Russia, which presents itself as following a narrow, uncompromising path,

14 Robbins, "On the Paradoxes of Global," 223.

15 Casanova, "Religion, the New Millennium," 428.

16 Corten and Marshall-Fratani, "Introduction"; Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization"; Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal."

17 Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," 119.

has achieved the greatest missionary success among the nomadic and rural Nenets of the Polar Urals. The Nenets of Beloiarsk recognized the Baptists' fundamentalist stance and their hierarchical, paternalistic attitudes in the way they structured their church. This approach, in some ways, aligned with their own expectations and felt familiar. Nadia explained it this way:

So, we said yes to them because we enjoyed their ministry, enjoyed that everything was so simple, so good, and so clear. Everything was simple, so even a small child could understand. And the voice of Sergei, and the voice of Nikolai Ivanovich—like a father: so quiet, so clear, as a tender father speaks with his child. Sergei spoke to us in such a way. In general, everything was so good. But ours [meaning the previous evangelical missionaries]—they usually visited us for half a day, brought foreigners to the tents, took pictures of everything, and went away. Maybe it's romantic to them; they've never seen people living in the tundra. But they've never sacrificed themselves in the name of the Lord.

The charismatic spatial framework stands in contrast to how the Baptist Brethren envisioned the world and organized space. The fundamental postulate of the Brethren was the complete separation of the church from the state, and, by extension, from the secular world. This was not just a clause in a church charter; it was an evangelical credo and a core element of the Brethren's value system and practices. Separation from the world served as a constitutional principle of Christian fundamentalism, creating a distinct and fortified boundary between the secular realm and the church, while claiming new cultural and social territories.¹⁸ This stance positioned fundamentalism in opposition and confrontation, forming a unique spatial ideology.

To this day, the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian Baptists remains unregistered with state authorities and rejects any form of cooperation or communication with the state. The movement emerged in 1961 as an act of defiance against Khrushchev's aggressive campaign to tighten state control over religious organizations. In the face of escalating repression—marked by arrests of religious activists and intensified state persecution—a group of Baptist believers refused to comply with state-imposed restrictions.¹⁹

This new wave of persecution, part of Khrushchev's broader anti-religious campaign, began in the late 1950s and was accompanied by an extensive

18 Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism."

19 Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals*, 160; Glushaev, "Raskol v baptizme"; Glushaev, "Ispovedal'nye praktiki"; Glushaev, "Turbite trevogu"; Drozdov, "Protiv tserkvi."

propaganda offensive. Anti-religious films, public lectures, articles, books, exhibitions, and staged events specifically targeted so-called “sectarians”—a label applied to all Protestants in the Soviet Union. These materials depicted religious believers as fanatical, deceitful, and socially harmful, juxtaposing their supposed backwardness against the Soviet Union’s narrative of scientific progress and modernization.

In response to mounting state pressure, severe restrictions on church life, and sweeping anti-religious campaigns, a new resistance movement emerged, initially as a split from the official Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. This group, initially known as the Initiative Group (Initsiativnaia Gruppa), came to be called the “separated Baptists” or “unregistered Baptists” (also referred to as the “young Baptists” or Baptist Brethren). In the following years, the movement formally organized as the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christian Baptists, yet, to this day, they remain widely known as the “separated Baptists.”

At its core, this was a movement of defiance. Led by Baptist believers who opposed both the Soviet state’s anti-religious policies and the conformity and compliance of registered church leaders, they stood for religious freedom at great personal cost. By refusing official registration—a requirement they continue to see as a tool of state control to this day—they became outlaws in the eyes of the Soviet government and bore the brunt of Soviet-era religious persecution, enduring relentless state harassment. The Brethren remained illegal throughout the Soviet period, with its leaders labeled as criminals until the late Soviet era. Dozens of activists were arrested and imprisoned, and some leaders spent over twenty years in prisons and labor camps. However, despite their illegal status, state persecution, and the heavy infiltration and surveillance by secret police agents, the reformed Baptist movement gradually expanded its organizational networks and underground activities.²⁰

Until the end of the Soviet period, the Brethren operated one of the most complex underground networks in the Soviet Union, maintaining a vast clandestine infrastructure that included one of the largest underground printing presses, an extensive system of couriers, secret hideouts, and covert communication channels. While their activism remained largely underground, they also sought to bring attention to religious persecution, establishing secret contacts with human rights activists and organizations abroad.²¹

20 Beliakova, “Undercover and in Faith”; Dick, “Targeted by the Intelligence Services.”

21 For more archival and oral history sources, see the digital exhibition *Underground* as part of the Hidden Galleries project, <https://hiddengalleries.eu/underground/>.

The Brethren sought to expose the persecution and discrimination of religious believers in the USSR as widely as possible. They organized protest actions during court sessions, public campaigns, and direct demonstrations, including protest marches. One of the most remarkable protest actions took place in May 1966 when over four hundred delegates from 130 cities across the Soviet Union gathered outside the Central Committee of the Communist Party in central Moscow. They demanded a direct meeting with the party's general secretary to address the escalating religious repression in the country. They advocated against the destruction of prayer houses, home searches and confiscations, arrests and trials of believers, and discrimination in workplaces and schools. The protesters remained on the streets overnight, praying and singing hymns, but by the following day, police forcibly dispersed the demonstration, arresting nearly all the participants (410 people).²²

They also wrote open letters, petitions, and complaints—known as “letters to power”—to the highest state authorities, including Khrushchev and Brezhnev personally, as well as to Soviet judicial bodies, newspapers, and journals, openly documenting cases of religious persecution.

In February 1964, a group of Baptist women founded the Council of Prisoners' Relatives. Their mission was to document and expose information on religious persecution and discrimination against believers across the Soviet Union. Beyond informing domestic audiences, the council aimed to raise international awareness. They smuggled samizdat publications containing details of arrests, imprisonments, and discrimination to human rights and religious organizations abroad, including Amnesty International, the Red Cross, Defence for Children International, UNICEF, Keston College, and others. Through their efforts, cases of religious repression in the Soviet Union gained global attention.

The politics of the Council of Churches has shown little change since the Soviet period. Even today, themes of religious persecution, spiritual warfare, and martyrdom remain central to the Brethren's ethos, shaping their defensive stance against both the state and the secular world.²³ Conservative Baptists keep rejecting the official registration of their communities and churches, viewing it as a form of separation from Christ. They renounce state authority over church affairs and oppose any political or social involvement, steadfastly maintaining a clear divide between the church and the world. They refrain from participating in elections and reject membership in

22 State Archive Branch of the Security Services of Ukraine, fond 16, op. 1, spr. 955.

23 Drozdov, “Protiv tserkvi.”

political parties. In the Brethren's dynamic of trust and distrust, memories of Soviet-era religious persecution and state interference continue to play a foundational role in shaping their identity.

The anti-missionary and anti-cult legislation during Putin's years intensified the Brethren's anti-state sentiments, leading them to perceive the shift in the politics of religion as a new wave of persecution, reminiscent of the Soviet era. In July 2016, two anti-terrorist legislative acts, known as the Yarovaya–Ozerov package, were adopted in Russia. These laws, among other measures, restricted the public activities of religious organizations, outlining permissible locations for missionary work, and required missionaries to obtain special certificates from authorities verifying their status. This soon led to law enforcement obstruction of prayer meetings and judicial persecution of Brethren community members for holding illegal gatherings in unregistered places of worship.²⁴ For the Brethren communities, this triggered old responses, a renewed commitment to defending their faith and church against state interference. Their historical resistance to state control over religious matters, which had long been the foundation of their independence, remained a defining aspect of their identity, continuing to serve as a lasting expression of their commitment to religious freedom.

Baptist Space: At Odds with the World

For the Baptist Brethren, the world is not a space to be filled or transformed. Instead, this sinful world is something to be escaped or avoided. The conversion of space—particularly public space—does not align with the Brethren's missionary goal. Rather, their focus is on protecting the church space from the influence of the world by establishing clear boundaries. This perspective, centered around separation, represents the core spatial vision of the Brethren.

Baptist believers identify as fundamentalists; they consistently resist any form of “corrupted modernism,” whether it be social evangelism, liberal movements within Protestantism, prosperity gospel values, or ecumenism. Church members are expected to avoid social activities such as engaging in politics or business, attending theaters and cinemas, listening to secular music, or watching television. Modern religious practices, including involvement in Christian business ventures, Bible-based business seminars, Christian theaters, or Christian political parties, are seen as major threats

24 Drozdov, “Protiv tserkvi.”

to their “narrow path.” Preachers within the Brethren emphasize an anti-prosperity message, expressing strong opposition to capitalist values, the market economy, neoliberalism, spiritual democracy, and individualism. Sergei, a Baptist missionary in Beloiarsk, once began his Sunday sermon with the following words:

There are many Calvinists nowadays,... and we condemn them outright, because they are too modern. They keep talking only about prosperity and wealth, instead of following the narrow and thorny path of Christ—the path of suffering and hardships. The problem is that modern evangelism has turned into a concert, a pantomime, a total theatricalization of evangelism. This is happening now in the registered churches of the official Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, who used to gather whole stadiums of people. All these are very colorful, attractive, and modern. But where are they all now? On the contrary, we have everything as it was before, in the old-fashioned way: skirts and veils, as if we are survivors of the past. But our Brethren are steadily increasing, even though we are on a narrow and thorny path.

Sergei taught that the church should remain focused solely on its spiritual mission and should not engage in any form of social activism. In fact, the Brethren rejected all forms of faith-based charity activities or the social gospel (a socially oriented form of Christianity). As one of its leaders, Mikhail Khorev, stated, the church is not concerned with improving earthly life. Instead, the Brethren position themselves as detached from any worldly concerns, including common activities such as Christian rehabilitation centers for drug addicted people, orphan care, and charity programs. They believe that the true church of Christ is not meant to promote social justice, cure social ills, or fight for a just economic system. As Khorev argues, the church should resist adapting Christian principles to “modern culture” or “modern thinking.” Church prosperity or social activities are not signs of truth—rather, it is being persecuted by the world that makes the church truly Christian.²⁵

The Brethren disapprove of any form of collaboration with the state and any politicization of the church. Unlike many other Christian denominations, the Baptist group never prays for the authorities. In doing so, it establishes its core political principle: to remain independent from state authorities and the political mainstream. In this context, their political neutrality becomes

25 Khorev, “Evangelie ili sotsial’naia doktrina?”

a deeply political stance, similar to the position of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union, as observed by Emily Baran—both groups reject political involvement and state collaboration, positioning their religious practices as independent of political influence.²⁶ The principle of the separation of the church from the world often leads to objections to serving in the armed forces and sometimes a refusal of public education and child daycare; however, this separation is not absolute—in practice, it takes a relatively mild form, as believers generally accept civil obligations such as obtaining passports, registering births, marriages, and deaths, and accessing medical care.

This understanding of being “the separated” (*otdelennye*, the Brethren's popular name) gives rise to a specific spatial conceptualization. While establishing a strict divide between the church and the world (often associated with Western culture), the Brethren reject both a world-embracing attitude and the expansionist ideals seen in charismatic ideology. Baptists do not seek to convert the world or dominate space; their focus is rather on isolating and protecting the church.

Ultimately, the Baptist spatial worldview contrasts sharply with the charismatic world-making doctrine. The Brethren's ideology does not involve a tendency to reach out into the world. On the contrary, the further one moves from the state's center of control toward its periphery, the more opportunity there is to live a religiously unspoiled, pure Christian life, free from the corrupting influence of urban civilization. In this sense, the periphery offers the possibility of creating the most pristine “church-space.”

The significance of border experience and the imaginary of spatial distance—the idea that the church must exist somehow beyond the boundaries of modernity—leads to the construction of a spatial utopia. This vision imagines the church being as distanced as possible from the metropole and the modern world, with minimal interference between the two. These ideas are foundational to Baptist missionary projects, which seek to realize this utopia through the creation of God's church. Many followers of the Brethren today prefer to avoid urban spaces, instead choosing peasant life in remote areas to build their ideal church-space.

Baptist spatial semantics—the search for a space on the frontiers of modernity and the idea of a true church distanced from the center of modernity—found a natural resonance within Nenets culture. The Nenets spatial order and social expectations are deeply influenced by their historical experience as part of the Russian state. This frontier ethos is especially evident in the history of Arctic nomadic societies.

26 Baran, *Dissent on the Margins*.

As discussed earlier in this book, for centuries, Siberian nomads have been regarded as people on the periphery—“outsiders” disconnected from the sedentary center. Northern Siberia, often viewed as a borderland of the state, has symbolized wildness and emptiness, in contrast to the orderly, structured space of the sedentary center and state authority. Throughout Russian colonization, the indigenous peoples of northern Siberia were portrayed as the quintessential Other, living on the frontier of the civilized world. This spatial periphery was framed in moral terms, seen as a place lacking social and moral order.

In their quest for a pure space to establish the true church, fundamentalist Baptists ultimately found the Nenets tundra. They remoralized the frontier ethos and the perceived emptiness of the tundra. While those in the Russian center have historically seen the tundra as empty and wild, and charismatic missionaries have viewed it as inhabited by evil spirits, for Baptists, it represented an unspoiled space where their utopian project could be realized. The tundra, long perceived as being outside the reach of state structures and severed from the center of modernity, appeared to be the perfect environment for the church’s construction. It was precisely this remoteness of the tundra, its frontier status, exempt from state structures and modern influences, that became attractive to missionaries, making the tundra a holy land and the key target of their missionary activities.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Brethren established a mission in the Russian Far North, with the rural Nenets—residing in the vast tundra regions of the Nenets Autonomous Region, the Komi Republic, and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region—becoming the primary focus of their missionary efforts in the region. The tightly knit and well-coordinated religious network of the Brethren facilitated well-equipped mission trips, with missionaries, pastors, and ordinary church members from various parts of the Brethren’s network—spanning the entire post-Soviet space—traveling to the most remote areas of the Arctic tundra. They traveled widely across the tundra, including the European North, the Polar Urals, and the Yamal, Gyda, and Taimyr Peninsulas. Equipped with snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, satellite communication devices, and more, they ventured deep into the European and Siberian tundra regions, living for three to six months in northern villages or migrating with herders from campsite to campsite. When one group of missionaries left, another was on its way to replace them, ensuring that places like Beloiarsk, along with many other northern settlements, remained under continuous missionary influence throughout the year. Each year, an “army” of devoted youth traveled north to

carry out missionary work in the tundra. Their activities included preaching and teaching the Bible, organizing Christian camps, educating illiterate Nenets, and providing practical assistance with household chores and childcare.

Filled with enthusiasm, a romantic spirit, and religious zeal, some missionaries spent much of the year in the tundra. Marina once remarked, "They are the romantics of the tundra, much like the romantics of the 1970s who first came to master the North." Much like the Soviet "missionaries" of the past aimed at mastering the Arctic and integrating the Northern peoples into Soviet modernity, contemporary Baptist missionaries dedicated their lives to bringing the Christian message to the indigenous North. In doing so, they also drew the indigenous people into various aspects of their own culture, which they communicated both verbally and nonverbally through their everyday actions, instilling their own vision of modernity.

Missionaries became intimately familiar with the tundra's landscapes, migration routes, and campsites. In doing so, they made it their own, "domesticating" it by building prayer houses and establishing Christian tents, transforming them into new "fortresses" of governed space. This transformed the tundra and its nomadic life into a space with Christian meaning and spiritual significance. Through their efforts, the missionaries reshaped the tundra landscape and helped reindigenize the Nenets people and reroot them in this newly consecrated space.

A Baptist missionary once told me,

I've been traveling in this tundra for years, evangelizing in nearly every tent. And this is what I can tell you: this land is where God lives, and these people are His people. The Nenets have the greatest, richest culture, which is close to biblical visions. These people don't need to discover that God exists, unlike the Russians who lived in an atheistic society and believed they came from monkeys.

Religious conversion reshaped the symbolic landscape, transforming the tundra from a perceived periphery into a moral, Christian center. The heart of the Nenets Baptist network was now located in the tundra, while urban spaces were regarded as cultural and religious peripheries. When converted Nenets, settled in local villages, were asked about their religious affiliation, they often replied, "We belong to the tundra church." For them, the tundra was the true Christian center, the heart of their religious community.

Baptist Retrotopia: Breaking and Bridging Time

To revisit Robbins's second point, "world-breaking"—the pathos of rupture and discontinuity—is central to evangelical Christianity. Robbins examines this also through the lens of temporality: "Christianity represents time as a dimension in which radical change is possible. It provides for the possibility, indeed the salvational necessity, of the creation of ruptures between the past, the present, and the future."²⁷ Christian conversion, particularly the born-again experience, signifies a rupture in time, whether as a complete break with the past—local traditions, ancestral gods, and memories—or a disconnection from the present, including the believer's social environment, kin, or earthly society. The Christian emphasis on discontinuity and transformation is particularly developed within Pentecostal-charismatic movements.²⁸ Birgit Meyer suggests that a discourse centered on temporality is fundamental to Pentecostal identity, which is grounded in the present and oriented toward the future.²⁹

Converted Nenets, embracing Christian ideas of time and spiritual transformation, faced the challenge of understanding their past through a new lens. They experimented with their local history and perception of time, while trying to express the evangelical ethos of rupture and the concept of being "born again" in their everyday lives. For converts, the experience of being "born again" was central to their faith and needed to be visibly reflected in their daily lives. As I discussed earlier, many Nenets converts embraced this notion fully, rejecting their traditional culture and practices, which they now viewed as "heathen." Consequently, they burned sacred objects, abandoned sacred sites, and ceased observing tundra rituals.

As we have seen, the rituals of rupture led to significant conflicts within Nenets society, as the destruction of *khekhe'* was seen as sacrilegious, disrupting the well-being and moral order of the tundra. Converted Nenets often found themselves alienated from their traditional community, sometimes being fully excluded from tundra life. Over time, however, many converted Nenets began to reconcile with and even return to their traditional culture, as previously hostile attitudes towards their heritage shifted, and they became increasingly committed to expressing and reshaping it.

While I explore these processes in greater detail in previous chapters, here I focus on another key aspect—Baptist temporality—which, I argue, played a

27 Robbins, "Continuity Thinking," 10–11.

28 Robbins, "Continuity Thinking"; Robbins, "On the Paradoxes of Global."

29 Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," 121.

crucial role in reconciling the Nenets Christian vocation with their traditional culture. Specifically, I suggest that the temporal framework of fundamentalist Baptism enabled a reinterpretation of the Nenets past, creating a bridge between the “born-again” experience and their cultural identity.

The Baptist Brethren missionaries in the Arctic, like their Pentecostal counterparts, emphasized the born-again experience and the need for a decisive break from the “pagan” past and sinful present. They often led the charge in opposing “paganism” and burning sacred sites in the tundra. While the Baptists were just as rigorous in their rejection of “heathen native culture,” their retrospective teleology, as I call it, softened their impulse for temporal rupture. Here, conversion was often seen as a return to a sacred past.

Baptist believers, who viewed themselves as “pristine Christians,” idealized both the ascetic values of early Christianity and the origins of their own Brethren. Emerging as a protest reform movement during the Soviet era, the early figures of the Brethren were seen as courageous, uncompromising, and devout believers. They sought to purify and revive evangelicalism, advocating a return from a state-corrupted religious institution to a truly Christian church.

“We live as of old,” a Baptist leader in Beloiarsk often repeated:

People always tell us, “You can’t live in the past! Stop going back! Look ahead to the future!” But we believe the modern world is trying to destroy the foundation of the church. We live looking back at the past, for only the past preserves the ideal of Christian purity.

For the Baptist Brethren, the past was not merely a point of reference but a sacred domain—whether it was the biblical past, the late-nineteenth-century Russian evangelical movement, or the evangelical revival of the late Soviet period. This sacralization of the past deeply influenced their worldview, linking their religious identity to a specific spatial-temporal vision. Their perspective was not so much utopian—focused on creating an ideal future—but rather *retrotopian*, in line with István Rév’s concept of “retrotopia.”³⁰ In the context of postcommunist Europe, Rév defines *retrotopia* as a utopian vision rooted not in the future, but in the past. For the Baptists, this meant a longing for an imagined, purified past that needed to be reclaimed or restored. In their view, the ideal Christian society was not something to be built anew but something to be retrieved from history. Within this framework, spiritual progress was not seen as a forward

30 Rév, “Retrotopia.”

movement but as a return to a time of uncorrupted faith, reversing the trajectory of time and focusing on recovering what was perceived to have been lost or morally corrupted.

The Baptist Brethren practiced what Johannes Fabian terms “allochronism,” denial of coevalness, typically characterized by a group distancing itself by imagining others as living in a different time.³¹ In the case of the Baptists, however, this manifested as a self-denial of coevalness—a refusal to accept that they share the same time as the modern world. For the Baptists, particularly in their engagement with the Arctic indigenous communities, this allochronic stance allowed them to position themselves outside the corrupting forces of contemporary society. They rejected modernity, (neo) liberal ideas, and secularism, seeing the modern world and its institutions as spiritually corrupted. Instead of aligning themselves with the present, they embraced a temporal space rooted in the biblical past or idealized early Christian practices, especially those associated with Russian evangelical movements or the late-Soviet revival.

Baptist allochronism shares many similarities with the historical experiences of the Nenets, particularly in relation to the experiments with time they were subjected to during the Soviet period. This similarity in their complex relationship with modern time offers valuable insight into how both the Baptists and the Nenets struggled to preserve their identity, reshape their understanding of time and history, and restore a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world.

The Soviet Past as the Golden Age

The Baptist Brethren's denial of coevalness parallels the Nenets relationship with time and history, which was deeply affected by the ruptures and reconfigurations brought about by Soviet reforms. As mentioned earlier, Soviet ideology aimed to accelerate time, from the “backward” past towards the promised bright future as key milestones in the march toward modernity. Indigenous peoples, including the Nenets, were cast as belonging to the past, stuck in a temporal space disconnected from the present, and in need of modernization to be integrated into the Soviet future. This temporal divide, which framed indigenous peoples as “living antiquities,” continued to shape perceptions long after the Soviet era, with time serving as a tool for measuring difference and power in both Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

31 Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

Thus, the cultural divide between the Nenets and the rest of society was not only spatial but also temporal—revealing how the Nenets were positioned as being out of sync with both the present and the future.

The Baptists, in turn, saw the Nenets' "backwardness" and pastness as a unique alternative path—a stage of primitive Christianity, untainted by the corruption of modernity. In this view, the Nenets were placed within the same retrotopia.

Alexei, a former evangelical leader of the Beloarsk community, explained his understanding of the Baptists' success among the Nenets. He argued that the Nenets accepted the fundamentalist Baptists because the latter live as of old, which is more familiar for the Nenets. The Nenets never could accept what he called "emancipated" [*raskreposhchennyi*] or "advanced" [*prodvinyti*] churches: "And when they go to other churches, they call it [in Nenets] *siadkobtā*, which means ashamed, uncomfortable. So, Tolik's [evangelical] church is a liberated and emancipated one. Therefore, the Nenets feel uncomfortable in there. They are straight away *siadkobtā*." He continued:

This is as if you use an automatic washing machine and don't even know that nonautomatic ones exist. But when you arrive here, where the civilization is much lower, less developed, you have to become like them, you have to become less developed, so they could understand you and you could understand them. And *sovetovtsy* [as he called the Brethren] fit them, because they live in the old way [*po-starinke*] and keep the Nenets under subordination. And Nenets cannot do anything without them.

Interestingly, Alexei referred to the Baptist Brethren as *sovetovtsy*, a term derived from their formal name, Sovet Tserkvei (Council of Churches). This label, however, highlights a deeper paradox. Although the Baptist Brethren emerged during the Soviet period, their religious ideals and practices somehow became entrenched in the very time they were born into—the Soviet era. In this sense, the Brethren's identity seemed to be trapped in a Soviet-shaped temporal space. The Soviet habitus—the ingrained behaviors, attitudes, and structures—seeped into the fabric of their religious piety. Despite their religious opposition to the Soviet regime, the conservative Baptists' organization increasingly mirrored the Soviet model they had long resisted. As one evangelical leader from Salekhard observed:

They're *sovetovtsy*, because they look like Soviet people and everything is Soviet-like in their church. Even their meetings are called and look like

Soviet party congresses [*s"ezdy*]. They are dressed as Soviet party officials. They are always against the Soviet, against the communists, though they look Soviet themselves, having faces of prosecutors, as I call them.

The Soviet legacy, in this case, was not just something to be resisted but had become ingrained in the very structure of the Baptist community, creating an intricate entanglement of opposition and assimilation that shaped their religious expression and identity. The Soviet habitus of the Brethren, with its familiar structures and routines, became more appealing to the Nenets, as it aligned more closely with their past experiences than the unfamiliar Western-oriented shape of the charismatic movement. As Piers Vitebsky aptly observes, "The Soviet past had already moved up into at least one of the positions of a golden age—it has become 'traditional.'"³² This transformation of the Soviet past into a form of tradition made it easier for the Nenets to connect with the Baptist Brethren, as they saw in it a continuation of a cultural and temporal framework that was not entirely foreign to them.

In this context, the appeal of the Baptist Brethren also speaks to a larger process of making sense of a rapidly changing world. While global neo-Pentecostalism, aligned with neoliberal economics, often promises a new future through integration into the capitalist system, the Nenets were not necessarily seeking integration into the capitalist order. Instead, they found in the Soviet-style discipline of the Brethren a way to return to a familiar structure—a form of hierarchical stability that mirrored the social order they had known. Thus, the Baptist community, with its deep-rooted ties to Soviet structures, became a form of resistance to the uncertainty of post-Soviet transformation, allowing the Nenets to reassert control over their social and spiritual lives.

Against Russian Modernity

Sergei, the leader of the Baptist community in Beloiarsk, often emphasized that they live in the old way, looking to the past and resisting modernity's influence on the church's inner life. He viewed modernity as morally corrupting. He once shared with me his perspective on the morality of different regions in Yamal, explaining that the further one goes into Yamal, the more corrupted the people become, as they refuse to accept the Word of God. According to Sergei, this resistance was because people in those areas

32 Vitebsky, "Withdrawing from the Land," 187.

are literate, having been educated in state boarding schools where “they learned depravity and sin from the world.” In contrast, he emphasized that the Polar Urals Nenets, many of whom were illiterate, have pure souls, are meek, and are closer to God.

For Sergei, as for other Baptist leaders, and now for the Nenets adherents as well, the conversion experience exacerbated their relationship with the global system and modernity. At the same time, it offered a set of conceptual tools through which these tensions could be understood, embodied, and acted upon.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Brethren are steadfast in their disapproval of any collaboration with the state and their firm stance on maintaining independence from political structures. This political neutrality, however, becomes deeply political in itself. By distancing themselves from state authorities and refraining from engaging in state-sanctioned activities, the Brethren not only distance themselves from the state’s influence but also politicize its religious stance. The act of rejecting political involvement serves as a political act in its own right, a stance that redefines the relationship between church and state.

The Brethren’s rejection of state collaboration and their opposition to the politicization of religion also had significant effects on their converts, particularly among the Nenets in Beloiarsk. As converts appropriated the discourse of religious persecution and the Brethren’s opposition to state collaboration, they began to see themselves as part of a distinct group and its historical legacy. Through conversion, the Nenets were introduced to a new form of political awareness—one that highlighted their marginalization and resistance to state control. This was not just a matter of religious faith; it became an assertion of autonomy and a claim to self-determination in the face of long-standing historical oppression. This fundamental principle influenced the growing anti-state sentiment among the converted Nenets, who viewed the unregistered Baptist church as a symbol of resistance to state control.

Nadia quite quickly adopted this idea when she was comparing a neo-Protestant church from Salekhard (Tolik’s church) and the Baptist Brethren:

Tolik’s church is depraved, because it is registered. That means that they serve the world, but not the Lord. Our church [Baptist], on the contrary, is not registered. That means that it doesn’t stick to the state, but stands aside from it, on its own.

What is even more significant is how the Baptist anti-modernity stance was indigenized by the Nenets, adapting it to their own historically grounded

understanding of modernity as Russian modernity. The Nenets did not simply adopt the Baptist rejection of modernity in a blanket sense; rather, they reframed it through their own experiences of Russian colonization. Marina often told me that she regretted the path her life took when she became too integrated into a settled lifestyle and the Russian world and that she would live it differently if given the chance to start anew.

If I could live my life all over again, I would rather not study at all and live somewhere in the mountains, being illiterate. I would speak only Nenets. Because those who are illiterate and don't know Russian don't make mistakes—life mistakes, I mean. If I were illiterate and lived in the mountains, I wouldn't make my mistakes. I wouldn't speak Russian and would only speak through an interpreter, and would never make my mistakes.

Similarly, Laur Vallikivi cites a Baptist missionary who believes that uneducated and illiterate Nenets, those who do not speak Russian, “are like children who are open to the Christian message.”³³

As discussed earlier in this book, for the Nenets, modernity was inextricably tied to Russian state power and the colonial history that had shaped their lives. The Baptist Brethren's anti-modernity pathos, combined with their historical experience of marginalization and Soviet-era underground resistance, resonated with the Nenets because it mirrored their own centuries-old oppression under the Russian colonial order.

Hence, anti-Russian discourse was far more pronounced within the Nenets Baptist community than in other churches. The Nenets converts in Beloarsk, by embracing the worldview shaped by the Brethren's stance on the state, found themselves increasingly alienated from Russian authorities. They adopted a more vocal and nuanced anti-Russian discourse, framed within the context of religious persecution. As a result, they increasingly viewed their new religious life as one that was persecuted by state authorities—a concern vividly expressed by Marina, who feared that if I published a book about them, the police would come and shoot them all.

The long-standing marginalization of the nomadic Nenets in the Polar Urals made the tundra a difficult place for political mobilization. The conversion into Christian fundamentalism became a mode of their assertive self-determination. It became a mode of what Jean and John Comaroff call “ritualized resistance”—a form of passive yet profound resistance to the

33 Vallikivi, “Christianisation of Words and Selves,” 73–74.

colonial powers. The act of converting and joining the Baptist Brethren allowed the Nenets to reframe their relationship with Russian authorities, positioning themselves as spiritually and culturally independent. In doing so, they forged a new form of solidarity and resistance that blended religious and political dimensions. The Baptist stance against modernity became an ideological tool for asserting their cultural autonomy, enabling them to confront the colonial forces that had long sought to reshape their identity and existence.

The Baptist missionary in Beloiarsk, himself Russian, argued: “The Russians have had a diabolical influence on the Nenets people.” By Russian influence, he was referring to the complex history of Russian colonization in the North. The missionaries’ task was to protect the Nenets from the destructive force of the Russian order. This framing cast the Baptist mission not only as a religious undertaking but as a form of protectionism—shielding the Nenets from the “diabolical” forces of modernity that had been imposed upon them by the Russian state.

Membership in the Baptist Brethren became more than just a religious affiliation; it became a form of alternative citizenship for the Nenets. This new identity helped redefine their relationship with both Russian modernity and the state. By resisting the state’s influence and control, the Brethren provided the Nenets with a way to reclaim their cultural identity, assert their autonomy, and oppose the long history of colonial subjugation, all while navigating the very structures and practices that were once part of that colonial legacy.

In this context, the Nenets conversion to Christian fundamentalism presents a fascinating paradox: while the Brethren themselves embodied what the Nenets referred to as the *Lutsa* (Russian) world, it simultaneously provided them with new forms of anti-Russian agency. By adopting *Lutsa* religious practices, the Nenets paradoxically gained the tools to resist the *Lutsa*.

Part 4

Lived Religion in the Nenets Tundra

9. Blood and Faith: Rethinking Kinship Through Christ

Abstract: This chapter explores the encounter between two ideologies of kinship—“natural” or blood kinship and Christian “spiritual” kinship—among newly established Nenets evangelical communities in the Polar Ural and Yamal tundra. Christian kinship, emerging from “spiritual rebirth,” often conflicted with and supplanted ancestral kin ties. Yet Nenets kinship became the framework for conversion. Missionary initiatives and Nenets religiosity operated as kin-based activities. Missionary outreach followed kinship routes, was shaped by exogamy and reciprocity, and was mediated by indigenous guides, who translated Christian messages and regulated missionary access through family dynamics. Missionaries engaged in “participant conversion,” acting as mediators within kin networks. Over time, evangelical missions became embedded in clan-based structures, giving rise to “clan churches” that mirrored traditional clan compositions.

Keywords: Christian kinship, indigenous kinship, missionary guide, clan churches, tundra kinship network

In the spring of 2011, a family conflict involving a married Nenets woman who had been living a nomadic life in the Arctic tundra with her husband took a dramatic turn. She fled from him and sought refuge in the village of Beloiarsk, where she hid in the home of distant relatives. While such incidents were not uncommon in Nenets society, this particular case escalated into a significant religious conflict involving several evangelical churches, local authorities, and even the police. The conflict escalated further when the husband's relatives revealed that the woman had recently converted to Baptist. She remained with her hosts in Beloiarsk, whose home served as a gathering place for local Baptist prayer meetings. Rumors soon spread that the Baptist church and its leaders had urged her to cut ties not only with her husband but with her entire extended family. A local official in

Beloarsk angrily told me, "These sectarians are destroying Nenets traditional culture! They invade Nenets camps in the tundra, forcing indigenous people to burn their sacred sites. They shatter traditional clan bonds and tear families apart!"

There is a popular joke in the Yamal: in the tundra, all Nenets are relatives. Kinship issues were particularly significant within newly established Protestant communities. The concept of Christian "second birth"—a spiritual rebirth through baptism and conversion—conflicted with existing beliefs about kinship, family ties, tundra clan networks, as well as ancestral obligations and ancestral curses, which were seen as powerful and inescapable forces that could affect the lives of descendants within a clan.¹ In this case, the woman never went back to her husband.

Scholars note that kinship ties are fundamental to the social organization of Siberian indigenous peoples, particularly nomadic groups, playing a key role in social regulation, subsistence economies, resource allocation, and in general maintaining social cohesion.² This is equally true for the Nenets, where kinship bonds serve to integrate society and hold both cultural and economic significance in the tundra. Mutual assistance, reciprocity, and exchanges within kin groups are essential to the economic system in this environment. The interconnectedness of Nenets tundra society is often described as "Nenets radio"—a network of kinship webs that span the tundra, where every nomadic campsite, despite its seeming isolation and geographical distance, is connected to others dispersed across the vast expanse of the landscape.

Although Protestant missionaries were largely accused of destroying traditional culture, severing kin ties, and causing family conflicts in the tundra, it was, in fact, the Nenets kinship system that provided the platform upon which the conversion process was advanced and shaped in the Polar Ural tundra. Nenets kinship practices, as well as Nenets "kin thinking," significantly influenced the way evangelical Christianity was appropriated. In this context, kinship itself became Foucault's grid of knowledge—it was not just a social structure, but a mechanism through which authority, legitimacy, belonging, and religious transformations were negotiated. Kinship was an active, structuring force that determined how evangelical Christianity was received, understood, and adapted by the Nenets.

Moreover, Nenets kinship also shaped missionary work in the tundra. Missionary trajectories were often influenced by existing Nenets extended

1 Cf. Meyer, "Make a Complete Break," 329.

2 Dolgikh and Levin, "Perekhod ot rodoplemennykh."

kinship networks, internal regulations within Nenets kin groups, and exogamic rules. These kinship structures determined how the conversion process was framed, how missionaries interacted with the community, and how power dynamics were organized. Nenets kinship became a contested space where new religious practices, narratives, and identities were negotiated. It served as a site of both resistance and adaptation, allowing converted Nenets to reshape traditional clan practices within the framework of their new religious beliefs, while also reinterpreting religious practices within their traditional kinship system. The conversion experience on the Nenets tundra proved that kinship is not just a system of family relations but is deeply woven into the moral and cultural fabric of society.

As such, both missionary initiatives and Nenets religiosity were kin-based activities, resulting in two significant outcomes. On the one hand, there was the revaluation and realignment of traditional Nenets kinship networks. On the other, there was the indigenization of the Christian concept of kinship according to local cultural logic. Converted Nenets navigated kinship as a strategy to transform social relations and interpreted the conflicting encounter between two ideologies of kinship: First, there was traditional Nenets kinship, grounded in the concepts of blood, land, and temporality, extending also into the spiritual realm. Second, there was kinship as a Christian category, stemming from the “second birth,” through which all believers became united as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Through the negotiation of traditional Nenets kinship and Christian kinship, converted Nenets created new imaginaries, forged new forms of exchange, and even developed new forms of mobility. As Janet Carsten notes, “kinship constitutes one of the most important arenas ... for creative energy.”³

A Christian Kinship as Substance and Code

The story of the Beloiarsk evangelical community began with Nadia, a widowed Nenets mother of nine, who had spent her entire life in the tundra, fishing and herding reindeer. She was one of the first in the tundra to convert to Baptist. The Beloiarsk evangelical community I observed was primarily composed of members of her extended family.

During one of my visits to Nadia's tent, we sat by the fireplace, sipping tea as she shared news about their congregational life in the tundra. They had gained new “brothers” and “sisters” in the church, while some members had

3 Carsten, *After Kinship*, 9.

broken away and were no longer considered part of the Brethren. Finally, she said to me, “Tanya, if you were to repent, you would become our sister, and no one would be closer to us than you.”

Relationships in Nadia’s religious life were framed within the idiom of kinship, but what meanings and social practices underpinned her concept of sister and brother? How did the Christian understanding of kinship align with Nadia’s view of traditional Nenets kinship and her natal tundra kin networks? In other words, what did it mean to be a sister or a brother among converted Nenets, and how did this new category intersect with the existing indigenous kinship system?

In his classic study of kinship, David Schneider distinguishes between kinship as substance (commonly referred to as “blood” or “natural” kinship) and kinship as a code of conduct (the socially constructed and culturally specific aspects of kinship), a duality that forms the foundation of kinship systems.⁴ The Nenets often described their kin relations through the notion of shared blood and flesh. However, what they referred to as blood kinship was also shaped by various social factors; it was not merely a system of family relations but was deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of tundra society, thus aligning with Schneider’s concept of kinship as a code of conduct. Religious conversion further reshaped the relationship between substance and code of conduct.

Nenets conversion exposes how both substance and code are heterogeneous and flexible idioms—that “blood” crosses beyond its domain of corporeality, while code is “naturalized.” In short, substance is constructed as code, as Marshall Sahlins replied to Schneider’s dichotomy.⁵ In other words, the seemingly natural or biological aspects of kinship, such as blood ties, are not purely intrinsic or static; rather, they are socially and culturally shaped by codes of behavior, norms, and practices. Likewise, the Nenets conversion experience led to the denaturalization of kinship: aspects of kinship once believed to be natural or inherent were reinterpreted and transformed into elements of social construction. At the same time, the creation of evangelical communities in the Nenets tundra implied a “naturalization power,” where relationships within the religious community, which seemed to lack a basis in blood ties, were understood and shaped according to the “natural” logic of kinship. Silvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney define this as a process of naturalization, where social relationships are framed in the idiom of kinship, making them appear inherent and foundational to social

4 Schneider, “Kinship, Nationality, and Religion.”

5 Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, 3.

order.⁶ In this way, the conversion process not only redefined kinship but also revealed its flexibility in both spiritual and social contexts.

The notion of kinship is a foundational concept in Christianity. The use of kinship terms and kin thinking plays a distinctly functional role in the life of evangelical Christian communities. As Schneider argues, Christianity shifted from substance to code, “so that commitment to the code of conduct becomes paramount, and the substantive element is redefined from a material to a spiritual form.”⁷

Christian kinship, the spiritual brotherhood in Christ, is also grounded in the concept of embodiment. A range of scholars emphasize the significance of blood as both a literal and symbolic substance in forming spiritual kinship. Blood is not merely a symbol, but an embodied reality that bridges the physical and the divine.⁸ United by the blood of Jesus, or reborn in His blood, Christians form a spiritual unity that is experienced as corporeal unity. In his work, Harri Englund illustrates how Pentecostal Christians in Chinsapo, Malawi, understand that the blood Jesus shed on the cross is not merely a religious symbol but an embodied force that flows through the veins of every believer, forging a deep spiritual kinship between them.⁹ Similarly, Caroline Bynum shows in her work on medieval Christianity how the concept of Christ’s blood was perceived as both a physical and spiritual substance, it was not just symbolic, but “alive,” playing an active role in the faith and practice of believers.¹⁰

This corporeal unity, however, is not a matter of inheritance but a relatedness that is gradually constituted and requires ongoing verification through religious practice. It is not something substantively given, but a matter of perfection and practice that can be temporarily or permanently lost if one stumbles morally. In the Beloiarsk Baptist community, there was a practice of temporarily or permanently excluding a member from the community, preventing them from participating in the religious life of the church. This exclusion was perceived as a detachment from Christ’s body and, consequently, from His blood, as the individual was not allowed to partake in the Eucharist. Community members were typically cautious about referring to a violator as a “brother” or “sister,” terms that were ordinarily used to address fellow church members in everyday life. Thus, spiritual rebirth establishes a relatedness built on both substance and code. This fluctuation between

6 Yanagisako and Delaney, *Naturalizing Power*.

7 Schneider, “Kinship, Nationality, and Religion,” 69.

8 Englund, “Cosmopolitanism and the Devil,” 304–5; Cannell, “The Blood of Abraham.”

9 Englund, “Cosmopolitanism and the Devil,” 305.

10 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*.

corporeal, substantive, constructed, and socially regulated elements becomes a site where two kinship ideologies meet and negotiate.

Nenets Kinship as Substance and Code

The Nenets have historically had a distinctive clan (*yerkar*) and phratry (*tenz*, meaning a group of clans) system.¹¹ Within each group, members refer to one another as *niami* (from Nenets *nia*, meaning brother), or *namzanipelia* (a piece of my flesh).¹² This implies that clan members are united by a bond of shared blood and flesh.

The concept of blood goes beyond just physical material and the body, representing both Nenets kinship and their sense of ethnic identity. One Nenets woman once remarked, “Doctors came here the other day and did blood tests among the Nenets. It turns out that the Nenets don’t have pure blood anymore—everything is mixed: Nenets, Khanty, Russian.”

However, the emphasis on blood and procreation can be easily overlooked in Nenets kinship practices. A notable example of this is the widespread practice of adopting and sharing children, whether within polygamous families or between different families. Nenets kinship is also closely tied to territoriality, with clans or groups of families associated with specific lands, pastures, fishing and hunting grounds, cemeteries, and sacred sites.¹³ Despite Soviet efforts to dismantle the clan system and replace it with territorial organization, the principle of clan lands and the territorial integrity of Nenets clans continues to play a crucial role in their social and economic relations today.¹⁴

Social interaction in the tundra is also fundamentally kin-based. A Nenets nuclear family household¹⁵ is not an economically independent unit; rather,

11 Verbov, “Perezhitki rodovogo stroia”; Khomich, *Nentsy*, 141–55; Dolgikh, *Ocherki po etnicheskoi; Vasil’ev, Problema formirovaniia*; Golovnev, *Kochevniki tundry*, 37–70.

12 Verbov, “Perezhitki rodovogo stroia.”

13 Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 205–8; Verbov, “Perezhitki rodovogo stroia,” 65; Brodnev, “Ot rodovogo stroia”; Dolgikh, *Ocherki po etnicheskoi*, 92–95; Evladov, *Po tundram Yamala*, 153–56; see also Stammer, *Reindeer Nomads*, 207–38.

14 Dolgikh and Levin, “Perekhod ot rodoplemennykh”; Stammer, *Reindeer Nomads*, 129, 131, 218–19. Even during Soviet-era reforms on the Yamal, Nenets reindeer-herding collective farms (*kolkhozy*) and fishing brigades were organized according to kinship principles, despite resistance from the authorities. The territories of the *kolkhozy* often coincided with traditional clan territories, and the members of these state farms were primarily drawn from a single clan. See Brodnev, “Ot rodovogo stroia”; see also Ssorin-Chaikov, *The Social Life*, 48.

15 In the Nenets language, there is no specific term for “family.” In Nenets society, family relations are expressed through terms such as *miad’ter* (“kinsmen living together in one tent)

what holds crucial importance is *nyesy*, a nomadic campsite made up of several related households migrating together within a particular territory. The diverse social ties that bind these households integrate dispersed *nyesy* into a clan. Mutual assistance among kinsmen is a fundamental rule of this system.¹⁶

Kinship relations among the Nenets are fluid, shaped by factors such as migration routes, resource availability, and animal epizootics, which can shift power dynamics within kin networks. While the integrity of Nenets clans is socially important, they have never functioned as stable entities. Kin-based economic associations are unstable, fluctuating with the seasons and changing circumstances. As a result, the kin network can either form a well-organized structure or temporarily disintegrate.¹⁷ Depending on the season, time, and location, different patterns of this network can emerge.¹⁸

While previous kin networks may be deactivated, long-term social ties within a neighborhood can generate kinship, with endurance through time serving as the basis for an alternative kinship ideology.¹⁹ The Nenets heterogeneous clan system illustrates this point. Since the nineteenth century, prolonged contact between the Nenets, Enets, and Khanty groups in the Polar Ural tundra led to the integration of some Khanty and Enets groups into the Nenets clan system through marriage alliances. Today, several Nenets clans are considered to have Khanty and Enets origins.²⁰

Nenets kin networks extend into the spiritual realm through ritual objects (*khekhe*'), including doll-like wooden figures dressed in traditional clothes to represent deceased relatives—*nytarma*, typically symbolizing a deceased shaman, and *sidriang*, representing any deceased adult relative. They are considered extensions of a person's life, with the belief that the spirit of the deceased continues to reside in them. The Nenets treat these spirits as

or *nyesy* (a nomad campsite). See also Volzhanina, "Problemy demografii nentsev," 117.

16 Cf. Brodnev, "Iz istorii zemel'nykh"; Stammler, *Reindeer Nomads*, 172.

17 Golovnev, *Govoriashchie kul'tury*, 51; Stammler, *Reindeer Nomads*, 225–26; Volzhanina, "Puti perekhoda s kochevogo"; Khomich, *Nentsy*, 153; Brodnev, "Iz istorii zemel'nykh," 73.

18 Another example is the Nenets' seasonal economic associations between different nomadic households, who cooperate for specific tasks. In Central and Southern Yamal, reindeer herders could form *parma*—united summer camps where several herd owners consolidate their efforts for joint pasturing during the summer months. The temporal economic bonds are usually formed according to kinship principles, although not necessarily. In other seasons, the associations disintegrate. See Maslov, "Kochevye ob'edineniia"; Terletskii, "K voprosu o parmakh"; Brodnev, "Ot rodovogo stroia," 95; Golovnev, *Govoriashchie kul'tury*, 53; Stammler, *Reindeer Nomads*, 132, 195–96.

19 Carsten, *After Kinship*, 144–45.

20 Castrén, *Puteshestvie Alexandra Kastrena*, 192; Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia"; Dolgikh, *Ocherki po etnicheskoi*, 74–77.

living beings, engaging with them and incorporating them into daily life. *Nyrtarma* and *sidriang* reside in the tent, sleep in the same bed as the living, share meals, receive tobacco, and participate in rituals. After several years, *sidriangs* are buried according to traditional Nenets customs.²¹

In sum, territorial integrity, lifestyle, extended temporality, economic collaboration, and spiritual beliefs form an alternative foundation for Nenets kinship, shaping a unique way of conceptualizing social relations. As Schneider put it, kinship serves as an idiom “in terms of which social relations are expressed, formulated, talked, and thought about.”²²

As I show below, Nenets evangelical communities were shaped by the kin-based networking of the Nenets tundra, with kinship serving as an idiom to codify religious relations. The fluidity of Nenets kinship allowed them to adopt the Christian ideology of kinship while maintaining their nomadic way of life. However, reconciling these two ideologies proved challenging, sometimes leading to broken families and disrupted kinship ties within the Nenets tundra.

Ancestral Curses

Christianity is often seen as opposing “ancestral blood” and combating “the dark side of kinship.”²³ In particular, evangelical Christianity’s emphasis on discontinuity prompts a significant revision of traditional kinship, often involving the severing of blood ties. It seeks to reconstitute these ties within new social relationships and foster new forms of community, acting as a “surrogate family” or “family-like community.”²⁴ Ruth Marshall-Fratani argues that true conversion is widely believed to involve cutting ties with one’s past, including not only sinful habits but also family and friends who are not part of the church, as they are seen as the greatest threat to the life of a born-again individual “precisely because of the power in ties of blood and amity.”²⁵

In her study of Ghanaian Pentecostals, Birgit Meyer observes that the newly converted seek to free themselves socially and economically from extended families, thereby severing ties with the ancestral past and rejecting

21 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 208–9; Khristoforova, “Ngytarma.”

22 Schneider, *A Critique*, 50.

23 Geschiere, “Witchcraft as the Dark Side.”

24 Englund and Leach, “Ethnography and the Meta-narratives,” 235.

25 Marshall-Fratani, “Mediating the Global and Local,” 86.

the sins of previous generations. All family ties are viewed as potentially dangerous, and the newly converted inform their families that they are breaking a covenant with Satan through their familial connections. As Meyer notes, the “complete break with the past” ultimately translates into a break with one’s family.²⁶

Similarly, in the Russian Arctic, conversion was often seen as directly challenging “ancestral blood” and the traditional family lineage. A Baptist missionary in Beloiarsk once explained it to me as follows:

In general, genetics is of great importance here, because the curse is transmitted by inheritance, through generations. And I am grateful to my service in the North, because it showed me how strong this cohesion of generations [*stseplennost’ rodov*] can be.... I believe in genetics. Here the curse is inherited in genes ... and our task is to break this cohesion, this curse of sin transmitted in a clan.

Blood and genes were believed to carry the Devil’s curse and sin. “The Devil played a cunning trick—he divided them [the Nenets] into clans and descent groups,” argued a Baptist evangelist, who went on to say that the curse and sins were passed down through generations.

Many missionaries working in the Polar Urals believed that evil spirits operated within family and descendant groups, gaining access to individuals through blood ties. Severing these blood ties was seen as breaking the vicious chain of sins and curses. The very foundation of Nenets kinship had to be converted—now, it was Jesus and His blood that formed the basis of the new kinship. Evgenii, an evangelical missionary who worked in the Nenets tundra, expressed this in the following way:

[A family] is held by a team of spirits, evil spirits! And there is real worship! And when you stop worshiping spirits, they begin to demand that you worship them; if not, people die, drown, commit suicide.... There was one tent keeper [he is referring to the Nenets *miad’ pukhutsia*—a female spirit in the form of a wooden doll]. She was five hundred years old! Can you imagine? So, all these years she has been keeping the whole family in dependence.... And the Holy Spirit eventually liberated them from this dependence.

What was seen as Nenets ancestor worship was perceived as an inherent part of their identity, much like being born into a family or nation. The stance against this ancestral legacy, and against kinship—the very

26 Meyer, “Make a Complete Break,” 329.

foundation of survival in the harsh Arctic tundra—was met with a fierce reaction from indigenous society. To convert and renounce the ancestral faith was viewed as a profound betrayal, an affront to both kinship ties and the spirits of their ancestors. In the Nenets tundra, these acts of conversion led to dramatic consequences. Families, unable to reconcile such a rupture, punished those who embraced foreign faiths by expelling them from the kin network entirely. Parents would disinherit their “sectarian” children, reclaiming all the reindeer and severing all bonds, leaving them isolated from their community and their heritage.

New faith itself was seen as a rupture in kinship and neighborly networks, but the impact of newly formed religious communities extended beyond belief. Their social and economic practices were perceived as disruptive, threatening both the wealth and survival of tundra dwellers, which relied on well-organized kin and neighborly cooperation. A particularly contentious issue was the practice of tithing—typically paid in reindeer and fish—raising concerns about the redistribution of vital resources.

A Nenets woman in Beloiarsk said:

They [converted Nenets] give money to some strange community, they slaughter reindeer. Because they say that if you enter their community and follow their way, you have no right to look in a different direction or choose another path. So, in search of money, they [converted Nenets] slaughter reindeer every year! In the end, they lose their very sense of life in the tundra. Without reindeer, what can they do?

By the same logic, a prominent Nenets politician in Salekhard argued:

They [missionaries] want to take away the most valuable thing we have—our land, our territory. And now, they [tundra Nenets] are paying with reindeer. Little by little, all the reindeer will end up in the hands of those who made them believe in this religion.

In other words, cutting ties with relatives and abandoning reciprocal networks in the Arctic tundra seemed nearly impossible. Outside the family and kinship system, a nomadic Nenets simply could not survive. Caught between two competing kinship ideologies, many born-again Nenets were unable to completely sever ties with their families and kin networks. Navigating between the two systems, they neither fully rejected nor passively upheld traditional kinship. Instead, they sought continuity within rupture, attempting to bridge both kinship frameworks.

As I demonstrate below, born-again Nenets sought to bridge these kinship idioms in two ways. First, they denaturalized traditional kinship by redefining and legitimizing blood ties through the framework of religious kinship. Second, they essentialized religious kinship, framing newly formed relationships in the language of natural ties.

In practice, Nenets converts integrated their new religious networks into traditional kin-based social and economic structures. Brothers and sisters in Christ became active participants in Nenets systems of reciprocity, engaging in mutual support and resource sharing. While establishing an alternative kinship network—rooted not in their own blood ties but in Christ's blood—born-again Nenets sought to embed it within the familiar rhythms of tundra kinship life.

A Missionary Guide

One day, two tundra dwellers visited Marina, my hospitable hostess during my fieldwork in Beloiarsk. Marina, a Nenets woman in her early fifties, had recently settled in the village after more than forty years of nomadic life in the tundra. Her visitors, Pasha and Sasha, were her nephews, briefly stopping in Beloiarsk to buy provisions (*snabzhat'sia*) and get some petrol.

Despite the strong Nenets tradition of hospitality, I noticed that Marina did not invite them in for tea. Instead, she spoke to them curtly from the porch, grumbling in an unfriendly tone. After a while, she gestured toward the dimly lit entrance corridor of her house and raised her voice: "Behind this door, there is a believing brother, a missionary. Go in there and listen to God's Word, let him talk a little about God. Go, go there! All you ever think about is vodka!" I was surprised to see these two robust men obey the small woman's command. They hesitated for a moment, then knocked on the door to Sergei's room—the Russian Baptist missionary who was also staying at Marina's house at the time.

Marina continued grumbling. "Pasha! Take off your hat! Take off your coat! How are you entering a house? You can leave your shoes on."

Pasha fidgeted nervously, unsure of where to put his clothes. It was clear they felt uncomfortable, perhaps even ashamed. Finally, they stepped inside the missionary's room. They stayed there for about half an hour.

When they emerged, they were holding a few Christian magazines. This time, Marina's tone shifted. "Once they have become our brothers, once they have listened to God's Word, then we can invite them for tea. Lena, make some food for them!"

Lena, Marina's niece, who was living with her at the time, immediately began cooking—boiling macaroni and frying sausages for the guests. Marina turned back to the men. "Once you've listened to God's Word, you can have tea then."

Marina's life in the village was always like that. Almost throughout the year, missionaries from various parts of the world stayed in her guest room. At the same time, her house was constantly filled with tundra relatives who often came to the settlement to buy provisions or collect social welfare payments. Despite settling in the villages, many Nenets remained deeply connected to their tundra kin-based system of social and economic reciprocity, fully integrated into the social practices of their extended families. Similarly, even after settling, Marina continued to be a central figure in her kin network, serving as a communicative hub—an informational, social, and economic junction for her extended family.

In every family dispute or conflict, whether in the tundra or in the village, Marina played the role of mediator or arbiter. With mobile phones available even in the tundra, she was able to maintain control over her family remotely, staying connected and overseeing matters online.

Marina also served as an internal missionary guide within her extended family network. As I discussed earlier in this book, missionary trajectories in Beloarsk and the surrounding tundra were shaped by indigenous missionary guides like Marina, typically female members of extended Nenets or Khanty families. These guides coordinated the movement of missionaries between the tundra and villages, assisting with the logistics of their travels. They opened up the geographical and social landscape of the tundra, providing knowledge about the location and composition of campsites, interclan, and interfamily relations.

Beyond logistical support, the guide played a crucial role in translating not only the language but also the missionary message. She prepared potential converts, socially translating the faith, ensuring that the conversion process was rooted in her family's social practices. The guide provided a welcoming and cooperative atmosphere for evangelization. Marina's role went beyond facilitating communication; she integrated her kin network into the missionary web, carefully managing the missionaries' interactions with her family.

Marina made sure that missionaries respected the conventional social rules of kin-based societies and observed the boundaries of her kin network. This was her role—to serve as a central node in the missionary web. She decided which relatives, families, or campsites were ready to receive the Christian message and which ones were not. She guided missionaries according to her deep understanding of the tundra's social dynamics and the

power relations within her extended family. This process of mediation not only facilitated conversions but also led to power shifts within the kin group. The inclusion or exclusion of family members from the religious community became a tool for regulating kin-based interrelations and reciprocity.

When anticipating missionary visits, Marina would gather detailed information about her extended family's life—conflicts, family disputes, marriages, divorces, births, deaths, economic relations, and nomadic movements. She would then negotiate with relatives, gradually preparing them for a meeting with the missionaries.

At the same time, Marina leveraged her authority as a missionary guide to manage family conflicts and power dynamics. When she said, "I might send a brother [missionary] to Kolia this year, let [the missionary] speak to him, let him repent," these words signaled internal family realignments, conflicts, and shifts in power. It essentially meant that Marina was preparing to include this relative in the new kin-religious community. By doing so, she legitimized both the traditional kinship ties and the economic reciprocity with this relative, making the relationship both religious and blood-based. Conversely, excluding a family member from the religious community could also mean their exclusion from kin-based social and economic networks. In both instances, the underlying cultural logic shaped the practice of inclusion and exclusion within the newly organized religious-kinship network.

Participant Conversion and "Clan Churches"

Indigenous kinship became the foundation upon which the process of religious conversion unfolded, with missionary trajectories shaped by its internal logic. This is what I term participant conversion—the strategies for establishing alternative, converted kin-based networks in the tundra, where missionaries were deeply immersed in the reproduction of Nenets traditional social patterns.

Missionary trajectories were heavily influenced by the clans and families with which missionaries collaborated, and by the kin networks that their guides opened to them. In the Polar Urals, the direction of missionary work, shaped by existing clan networks, led to the formation of "clan churches." Much like the Soviet-era state farms, *kolkhozy*, these were often composed of members from the same clan despite the authorities' resistance to it. The newly formed religious communities also often followed Nenets kinship principles, even though missionaries frequently opposed traditional Nenets kin bonds.

Clearly, the kinship principle was not always strictly adhered to. At times, blood relatives were excluded from the newly formed religious community, while nonrelatives were included. However, even in these instances, the Nenets continued to use the kinship idiom, attempting to reinterpret, reinvent, or selectively “stretch” or “forget” kinship ties. For instance, when a new member joined the Baptist community in Beloiarsk, Marina began to recall her family history, searching for connections with this person. The man turned out to be a distant relative on her mother’s side. It was important for her to emphasize that this new “brother in Christ” was a legitimate member of both the religious and kin-based community. At the same time, converted Nenets would distance themselves from those excluded from the religious network, often trying to “forget” their existing kin relations with them.

The clan-based structure of small-scale evangelical communities in the Polar Urals resulted in the division of larger mission churches along ethnic lines. Two dominant evangelical missions shaped the religious landscape of Beloiarsk and the Polar Ural tundra: the Baptist church and the charismatic Pentecostal church. The Baptist church was primarily composed of Nenets, while the charismatic church was almost entirely made up of Khanty people.

The charismatic church, in particular, was closely tied to the Taishiny clan, a Khanty group, with the congregation predominantly composed of Taishiny clan members, as well as those with longstanding familial ties through traditional marriage alliances to the clan. It was often referred to as “the church of Taishiny.” At times, it seemed that one could trace the history of traditional marriage networks by examining the family compositions of the churches in the Polar Urals. This division between the Baptist and charismatic communities—rooted in ethnic identity and clan affiliation—underscored the importance of kinship ties in shaping both religious and social life in the region. The churches were not just places of worship; they were also sites where traditional kinship networks were revised and given new religious meanings.

When the kinship principle was breached, the community inevitably faced internal conflicts. A pastor from the charismatic church (predominantly composed of Khanty) once told me: “You know, all those in this community who caused a disturbance [*korki mochil*] and later left the church were Nenets. They simply do not accept that Nenets and Khanty can be together in one church.”

Similarly, when a religious community included members from different family groups, it often led to tensions. This was the case with the Nenets Baptist community in Beloiarsk, which had two factions from unrelated

Nenets families—Marina's camp and Valia's camp. These competing factions were a constant source of conflict within the church. The two families vied for the right to provide resources for missionaries, particularly their tundra relatives who were to be converted. When missionaries arrived in Beloiarsk, Marina and Valia would often argue over which campsites the missionaries should visit—Marina's or Valia's. At the same time, both parties tried to shift responsibilities, such as accommodating, feeding, and transporting the missionaries, onto one another—tasks that were often costly.

Overall, the social life of religious kinship followed the traditional patterns of Nenets kinship. However, this traditional kinship was also adapted to fit a Christian understanding, where kinship was seen as something that could be gained, controlled, or lost. Deciding who would be considered a new family member and who would be excluded from these new kinship ties—and therefore from the social and economic networks—was very important within the community of Nenets believers. These new forms of kinship became a way to redistribute power within the Nenets community, helping to reshape both their nomadic and settled social networks. In this way, kinship became a space for social construction and power struggles.

10. More About Love: Gender, Family, and the Return to Tradition

Abstract: This chapter examines how Christian conversion reshaped gender roles, marriage practices, and family structures among the Nenets. Evangelical missionaries introduced Christian kinship categories, hierarchical gender ideals, and regulated marital practices that both challenged and reinforced traditional Nenets norms. Missionaries assumed the role of matchmakers, arranging marriages in ways that mirrored Nenets exogamic customs while emphasizing religious endogamy, moral discipline, and ritual propriety. Baptist gendered values—patriarchal leadership, female domesticity, and moral piety—aligned with Nenets cultural expectations, enabling conversion while preserving traditional ideals amid modernizing influences. Baptist teachings were interpreted by many Nenets as a return to the “pristine Nenets tradition”—whether lost, imagined, or desired—becoming as a means of cultural continuity.

Keywords: marriage, gender, family roles, patriarchal society, bride-price, religious piety

The conversion process in the Nenets community reshaped traditional gendered understandings of kinship, marital dynamics, and family strictures. The introduction of Christian kinship categories, such as “brother” and “sister,” along with the new Christian piety surrounding the spiritual roles of women and men in the church and family, posed significant challenges to the traditional gender norms within Nenets society. This also raised questions about how Christian gender roles influenced or conflicted with the moral frameworks that guided familial and social obligations in the Nenets tundra.

Religious conversion is a deeply gendered process, and moral transformation in Christianity is often framed in gendered terms. It represents a restructuring of social life, moral authority, and personal agency, where

distinct roles are assigned to men and women, often justified through sacred texts and teachings. Among the Nenets, Christianity created a space for the reinterpretation of gendered distributions of power, marriage practices, and family structures. At the same time, the lived religious experience in the Arctic tundra, where evangelical Christianity was introduced, was always filtered through the lens of traditional Nenets gender roles and relations, creating a dynamic interaction between Christian teachings and local cultural understandings.

As anthropological studies of Christianity have shown, religious conversion often leads to significant changes in gender roles and marriage. As Linda Woodhead argues, gender influences religious practice and its significance, emphasizing the close and often constitutive relationship between religion and gender. She contends that both are central to the unequal distribution of power, with their interplay either reinforcing or challenging existing power structures in various ways.¹ Scholars particularly emphasize the role of Pentecostal Christianity in reshaping women's positions in traditional societies, offering new opportunities for social community, faith healing, and moral authority.² It both empowers and constrains women, granting them moral authority and new spiritual roles while simultaneously upholding male dominance and gender hierarchy in formal religious leadership. Joel Robbins, for instance, explores how the introduction of Christianity in Melanesia has led to complex shifts in gender and marriage dynamics. Among the Urapmin, he highlights the emergence of new ritual roles for women within the church community (for example, the rise of women as "Spirit women," or women who can become possessed by the Holy Spirit) illustrating how conversion both reshapes gender roles and preserves traditional cultural elements.³

Christianity is not simply imposed on local communities; it both challenges and is shaped by preexisting gender norms, creating a dynamic process where religious transformation and local gender ideals influence and reshape each other. Annelin Eriksen, for instance, examines how gender shapes the organizational structures of different Christian churches in the South Pacific island of Vanuatu. She explores how various Christian denominations interpret and institutionalize what she calls "gendered values" in distinct ways. Her work highlights how pre-Christian male- and female-gendered values influence the formation and functioning of Christian

1 Woodhead, "Gender Differences in Religious Practice."

2 Robbins, "Spirit Women, Church Women"; Hackett, "Women, Rights Talk"; Griffith, *God's Daughters*; Cole, "Women and Pentecostalism"; Soothill, *Gender, Social Change*.

3 Robbins, "Spirit Women, Church Women."

organizations, shaping leadership roles, community dynamics, and religious authority.⁴ Maya Mayblin's ethnography of Catholics in a north-eastern Brazilian village beautifully demonstrates how religious dogmas and local gender norms are negotiated in everyday married life. She highlights the intersection of gender and morality, examining the "moral paradox" and "gendered morality" of marriage, through which Catholics navigate the tension between religious ideals and lived experience.⁵

Among the Nenets, Christian conversion introduced similar paradoxes in the reshaping of gender roles, particularly in marriage and family life. The conversion process was not a simple imposition of foreign ideals, but rather a negotiation between Christian gender values and the Nenets traditional kinship-based social order. These traditional understandings of family, leadership, and gender roles were deeply embedded in the Nenets way of life, including their practices around marriage, familial hierarchy, and communal leadership. As a result, conversion reshaped both traditional gender roles and the structure of the tundra church, as Christian teachings influenced the understanding of gender and marriage, while traditional Nenets norms also shaped the way Christianity was lived and practiced in the Arctic tundra.

This chapter explores how Christian conversion transformed Nenets marriage alliances, gender dynamics, and family roles, creating a new form of religious kinship while continuously negotiating traditional norms and values. The integration of Christian beliefs into the Nenets worldview redefined what it meant to be a Nenets woman or man, challenging the moral foundations of family and marriage. In examining this transformation, we uncover the tensions between the emerging Christian framework and longstanding gendered expectations of family and social structure, revealing the shifting perceptions of love, marriage, and family influenced by religious conversion.

Missionaries as Marriage Matchmakers

In the winter of 2011, the Beloiarsk community was buzzing with anticipation. Believers were awaiting the arrival of missionaries, knowing that the missionary leader was set to arrange two marriages that year. The fate of two young women from the Baidarata tundra—both church members—became

4 Eriksen, "The Pastor and the Prophetess."

5 Mayblin, *Gender, Catholicism, and Morality*.



Figure 10.1. Evangelical missionaries conversing with a Nenets woman in a nomadic tundra tent, Polar Urals. Photograph by the author.

the subject of widespread speculation, jokes, and excitement. Who would be their chosen husbands? From which part of the tundra would they come? What were their names, their wealth, their standing? What about other unmarried brothers and sisters, when would the missionary arrange their marriages? Families with sons and daughters of marriageable age subtly put them forward, hoping the missionary leader might take notice and arrange their futures as well.

Missionaries, finding themselves entangled in existing Nenets kin-based networks and traditional nomadic routes, inevitably became part of the reproduction of these cultural practices, often acting as intermediaries in the tundra. Evangelical missionaries in the Polar Urals and the Yamal tundra often took on the role of traditional Nenets marriage matchmakers, responsible for finding marriage partners within the church community.

If a Nenets man was ready to marry, a missionary would travel to meet a potential bride and negotiate the marriage with her parents. In fact, marriage matchmaking within this emerging religious network strikingly resembled traditional Nenets marriage practices, with missionaries assuming the role of customary matchmakers. Following Nenets tradition, the bride herself did not take part in these discussions, and the same practice was upheld in the newly established evangelical communities. In many cases, the couples had never met before and often lived in completely different parts of the

tundra. The following is the story of the engagement of a young Nenets woman, a tundra dweller from the Baidarata tundra, as she told it herself:

Sergei [a Russian Baptist missionary] and Aleksei, a [Ukrainian] minister from that place [Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra] brought the groom with them. Sergei explained to the groom that there was a good girl here in our tundra, a believer, and her mother is a believer, too. So, they arrived, two matchmakers [*dva svata*], Sergei and Aleksei. They arrived at Beloiarsk. My mother was in the village at that time. They were holding a sermon in the village and then they traveled to the tundra together with my mother, to our tent. We did not know anything. They did not even say anything to my mother. So, they arrived at our tent and held a sermon there, too. They prayed. And then they said to us: "We have one more thing to talk about, on another topic." Then Sergei opened a Bible and read a passage, I think it was from Genesis, where there is a passage about a husband and a wife. And then he said to my parents that I am already grown up, that I am already a marriageable girl and that they already have a groom. I was taken aback! All this was so sudden to me!

The story mirrors a traditional Nenets marriage arrangement ritual, but with one key difference: the matchmakers were Russian and Ukrainian missionaries. These missionaries took on the traditional role of matchmaker within the Nenets marriage system. Historically, matchmakers held a vital position in Nenets society, whether as specially invited individuals or the groom's father. As early as the mid-1920s, Russian ethnographer Leonid Kostikov highlighted the importance of the matchmaker (N.: *hev*) in the marriage process, noting that the matchmaker was a respected figure whose opinion the bride's father had to consider before proceeding with the marriage.⁶ Traditionally, Nenets marriage alliances aimed at redistributing wealth and restructuring social relations between clans. Bride-price (N.: *ne'mir'*) was a key part of the negotiation between marrying families, serving as "payment for a bride's soul," as a Russian ethnographer Kostikov noted in the 1930s.⁷

In a similar way, in the converted community, marriage arrangements were equally significant. A missionary, possessing indisputable authority within the community, was regarded as the ideal matchmaker. Once, a

6 Kostikov, "Zakony tundry," 13–14; see also Khomich, *Nentsy*, 164–76; Kuroptev, "Svadebnye obriady samoedov," 20; Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 221.

7 Kostikov, "Zakony tundry," 30.

Nenets young woman told me a story about her cousin's marriage arrangement. When I asked who the matchmaker was, she answered, "Sergei [a missionary] was, he was a father."

Christian marriage arrangements served as a means to unite believers into a cohesive religious community. Missionaries sought to control this aspect, believing that the establishment of new Christian families was essential for strengthening the church and solidifying the bond among the "born agains." These arrangements were simplified and freed from economic obligations, as Baptist matchmakers rejected the concept of bride-price altogether—now, it was Christ's blood that was considered the payment for the bride's soul. A Nenets converted woman, a mother of an engaged daughter, said, "We are now believers and therefore a Christian does not need any bride-price or dowry. Believers do not buy brides, indeed."

Traditionally, finding a marriage partner in the Nenets tundra has always been a significant challenge due to exogamic rules and complex bride-price regulations.⁸ These exogamic rules prohibited marriages within the same clan group. As early as the 1930s, ethnographer Gennadiy Verbov highlighted the difficulty of finding marriage partners in the Nenets tundra due to the limited number of clans residing in a given area.⁹ The Nenets were consistent in adhering to these traditional exogamic practices, and breaches were rare.¹⁰ Young Nenets men often traveled hundreds of miles, from the northernmost regions of the Yamal Peninsula to the southern reaches of the Ob' River, or to the Gyda Peninsula in the east, in search of suitable wives.¹¹

Finding a suitable marriage partner remains a significant issue in the Nenets tundra to this day.¹² Some scholars highlight the issue of a "bride deficit" among the nomadic Nenets, especially on the Yamal Peninsula.¹³ In my own observations in the Polar Ural tundra, I found that a similar concern was often raised about a "groom deficit." Young Nenets women often expressed frustration about the scarcity of suitable husbands: "It's so

8 Islavin, *Samoe dy v domashnem*, 126; Schrenk, *Puteshestvie*, 429; Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 216–17; Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia."

9 Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia," 47.

10 Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia," 51; Brodnev, "Ot rodovogo stroia," 96–97.

11 Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia," 47–48.

12 This is a particular concern of the European side of the Polar Ural tundra. During my field research in winter 2011, I met a Nenets family in the Ural Mountains. The two daughters were in their thirties and were still unmarried, while their thirty-year-old brother had recently married a thirty-nine-year-old woman; this did not seem normal for Nenets society, in which people usually marry very young.

13 Liarskaya, "Zhenshchiny i tundra," 26.

difficult today to find a proper husband in the tundra, someone who isn't an alcoholic and can properly support a family!"

Additionally, the rapid influx of migrants to the Arctic, driven by the region's industrialization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has disrupted traditional Nenets marriage practices. As a result, indigenous groups have increasingly become ethnic minorities due to the influx of labor migrants, leading to significant changes in social dynamics and traditional norms. Although traditional clan exogamy rules continue to govern most Nenets marriages, statistics show an increase in interethnic marriages, single-parent families, and breaches of exogamic rules, along with other violations of marriage and family norms within Nenets society.¹⁴ These changes were often framed by the Nenets themselves as signs of cultural loss.

Interethnic marriages among the Nenets have gradually increased, particularly in areas with more intense contact between the tundra and sedentary spaces.¹⁵ As Elena Volzhanina observes, while mono-ethnic marriages still predominate and the Nenets continue to prefer marrying within their own group or with traditional partners like the Khanty and Komi, marriage selection patterns began to shift in the second half of the twentieth century. Specifically, Nenets women increasingly started to marry nontraditional partners, including Russians, Ukrainians, and migrants from Central Asia.¹⁶ Marrying Russian newcomers has become prestigious, as they are perceived to hold a higher social status.

However, this trend can also be stigmatized within Nenets society and seen as a breach of tradition. Marina expressed her frustration:

I cannot understand at all why they [Nenets women] marry Russian men. As if they don't realize that a Nenets woman and a Russian man are incompatible. They will never understand each other. They won't be able to live together. She will leave him eventually and go back to a Nenets man. It's impossible for Nenets women to marry Russians.

Even Nadia, a cornerstone of the Beloiarsk religious community, described how upset and ashamed she felt when her daughter married a Ukrainian man (even though he was the leader of the religious community by that time!). She recalled, "I didn't want my daughter to marry a Russian because

14 Volzhanina, "Sovremennaiia struktura"; Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, ch. 4.

15 Volzhanina, "Sovremennaiia struktura."

16 Volzhanina, "Sovremennaiia struktura"; see also Kvashnin, "Sravnitel'nye sotsial'no-demograficheskie," 13.

people would laugh at us.... They might say something. It was so bad. I was even ashamed to go out at first.... I felt so uncomfortable, so bad.”¹⁷

Religious conversion—particularly within the Baptist Brethren—further complicated the marriage issue due to strict religious endogamy: a church member could marry only another believer.¹⁸ If a believer married someone who was not converted, they would be excluded from community life. As noted earlier, in the Nenets context, exclusion from congregational life could also lead to exclusion from kinship and kin-based reciprocity.

To prevent the violation of a fundamental religious principle and to strengthen the newly established community, missionaries often took on the role of marriage mediators. Their involvement was crucial in ensuring that marriage practices adhered to the strict religious endogamy required by the church. At the same time, the Nenets, adapting to the new religious context, shifted the traditional role of the marriage matchmaker onto these new religious leaders. This shift was not just about religious conversion but also served as a way to address longstanding social challenges in the tundra to find a marriage partner.

The Baptist missionaries also aimed to preserve the mono-ethnicity of marriages and adhered to the “tundra–tundra” rule when arranging unions. Consequently, instances of Nenets–Russian marriages within these Baptist circles were rare. As I discuss further, it turned out that the missionaries’ concepts of marriage, family, and gender roles closely aligned with traditional Nenets norms and expectations. This unexpected alignment led the Nenets to view the missionaries’ role in marriage arrangements as a way to preserve, or even revive, their cultural norms, including traditional marriage and family structures. Through their agency, the missionaries provided a sense of cultural continuity, reinforcing the connection between religious conversion and the maintenance of Nenets cultural traditions.

Renewed Marriage Alliances

In missionary mediation, there was another crucial aspect—territory—which bridged Christian and Nenets ideologies of kinship, thereby strengthening the tundra kin networks. In the Nenets tundra, there was historically a tendency

17 Cf. Liarskaya, “Zhenshchiny i tundra,” 31–32.

18 Interestingly, in the European part of the Ural Mountains tundra, the principle of religious endogamy has led to the opposite social problem. Here most the Nenets were converted, and few families left unconverted. Therefore, it was the latter who experienced difficulties in finding marriage partners because converted Nenets refused to marry them.

to seek marriage partners from distant places. This practice developed within Nenets society as a result of exogamic norms, which required young Nenets men to travel hundreds of miles to find wives from different clans. These days, as many of my research participants observed, Nenets still often arrange marriages between people from different villages and regions of the tundra, even though the principle of exogamy is no longer explicitly cited as the reason for this practice. A Nenets woman from the Baidarata tundra explained it this way:

Often matchmakers come from other villages. They come to us, we go there. We won't know the people yet, who they are. But here, we know them like the back of our hand [*znayem kak obluplennykh*]. It is better to marry a stranger so that you don't know her. Or maybe she [a bride] would not show what she is made of in front of strangers. She would be ashamed and quiet.

Evangelical missionaries, using snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, traveled across the vast expanses of the Nenets tundra as part of their missionary work. Their journeys took them far beyond the traditional nomadic routes of the Nenets. This wider reach allowed the missionaries to bring together Nenets families who would have otherwise remained isolated due to the limitations of their traditional nomadic paths. By facilitating these connections, they helped form new marriage alliances and strengthened social bonds between groups that, in the past, would not have had the chance to meet. This newfound mobility, provided by modern transportation, facilitated not only religious conversion but also the reorganization of social ties and kinship networks in the tundra.

In some cases, missionaries even unintentionally helped reestablish previously lost marriage alliances, such as those between the European and Asian Nenets. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nomadic routes across the Ural Mountains, which divide the European and Asian tundra regions, were more commonly used than they are today.¹⁹ Inter-marriage between Yamal clans and European Nenets (from the Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra) was widespread.²⁰ However, Soviet territorial reorganization significantly reduced contact between the European and Asian tundra dwellers. The establishment of state-own Soviet collective farms (*kolkhozy*, *sovkhozy*), and new rural districts altered traditional migration routes.²¹ Yet, the expanding religious network in the tundra helped restore these lost connections across

19 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 151; Khomich, "Sovremennyye etnicheskie"; Vasil'ev, "Osobennosti razvitiia."

20 Verbov, "Perezhitki rodovogo stroia," 48.

21 Cf. Volzhanina, "Sovremennaiia struktura."

the Urals. I observed several cases of Christian marriages between Siberian Polar Ural Nenets and Nenets from the Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra, which the Nenets themselves regarded as a return to old marriage alliances.

Each year, more than two hundred converted Nenets from across the Yamal, Polar Ural, and European tundra gather in Vorkuta (Komi Republic) for a major religious event—the all-tundra Christian conference organized by the Baptist Brethren. They come to pray, study the Bible at the Bible school, and listen to God's Word. These annual gatherings have become a unique space where Nenets from different regions—from the Bol'shezemel'skaia tundra and Vaigach Island to the northernmost parts of the Yamal Peninsula—can meet and reconnect. Naturally, this venue became a common place where many marriages were arranged and where the majority of Christian weddings were celebrated.

The traditional principles of marriage among converted Nenets were not prioritized, and rather than adhering to clan exogamy, they shifted to a focus on congregational endogamy. Despite this shift, one aspect remained unchanged: the strong preference for marrying within the same ethnic group. Even with this change in marital customs, Christian Nenets in the tundra continued to prioritize the mono-ethnicity of their marriages, maintaining a sense of cultural and ethnic continuity within their community.

Missionaries often encouraged converted Nenets in the tundra to marry other believing tundra Nenets. When helping church members search for potential marriage partners, they were careful to maintain the traditional tundra framework—a nomadic believer preferably marries another nomadic believer. Evangelical missionaries traveled for months, even years, across the vast tundra regions of the European North, the Polar Urals, and the Yamal, Gyda, and Taimyr Peninsulas. They gained a deep understanding of the tundra's landscape, migration routes, and campsites. In their efforts to build a Christian presence in the tundra, they focused on establishing more Christian families within the region, viewing these families as vital nodes for spreading the Gospel. By doing so, missionaries helped create a foundation for new marriage alliances, thereby forming an alternative kin-religious network. This emerging network not only facilitated the spread of Christianity but also realigned and strengthened the traditional Nenets nomadic system, reinforcing both their social and religious structures.

More About Love

To understand how Christian practices became embedded in Nenets life, one need only look at the transformation of wedding ceremonies. Evangelical

missionaries introduced new rituals, altering many traditional elements they deemed pagan or incompatible with Christian beliefs. A missionary who attended a Nenets wedding in the Polar Ural tundra vividly described the scene:

The wedding ceremony was very good. This was a real Christian wedding. The bride was in a white dress, the groom in a black suit. Everything was just like in the city, but it was in a tent. The tent was decorated with Christian posters—the sisters did their best. I took the floor and preached a long sermon.... Then there were a lot of songs, poems, congratulations, gifts.... It was a real Christian wedding. Everything was like in the city, but in a tent.

Although the setting remained a traditional tent, the event itself was reshaped to reflect what the missionaries imagined as Christian ideals. Wedding preparations, even in the remote tundra, became the responsibility of missionaries. Visiting female ministry workers—known as believing sisters—played a particularly active role, spending months in Nenets campsites and normally overseeing the organization of Christian weddings. They introduced new customs, such as printed wedding invitations that quickly spread across the tundra. They also assisted in sewing wedding attire, replacing traditional Nenets garments with European-style white dresses for brides and formal suits for grooms. Believing sisters took charge of decorating tents, adorning them with Christian posters, bright curtains, bows, and balloons—bringing elements of modern urban wedding aesthetics into the tundra.

However, despite these outward changes, converted Nenets viewed evangelical marriages not as a break from tradition, but as a return to what they saw as the true essence of Nenets customs. This perception was largely shaped by the influence of the Baptist Brethren mission, which placed strong emphasis on family unity, hierarchical gender roles, and moral discipline—values that resonated with traditional Nenets ideals of kinship and social structure. As I discuss below, the Baptist vision of marriage reinforced a hierarchical but stable family model, where men assumed the role of spiritual leaders and women embodied devotion and obedience, mirroring longstanding Nenets expectations of gendered responsibilities within the household. In this framework, marriage was not simply about individual choice, love, or romantic relationships; rather, it was a reaffirmation of social and moral order and spiritual commitment. Love, if anything, was a central issue—but one that had to be carefully redefined within the boundaries of faith and duty.

Many Nenets I spoke with often reflected on the stark contrast between life in the tundra and the sedentary world, emphasizing that moral norms in their nomadic society were far more strictly upheld. They often voiced concerns that modern influences—particularly the spread of television and the Internet, accessible even in the most remote camps—were reshaping social behavior in ways they found troubling. As contact with urban life intensified, many felt that traditional values surrounding gender roles, family, and marriage were being eroded.

For some, the Russian sedentary world was not just different but fundamentally tainted, described using the Nenets concept of *sia'mei*—ritual impurity. From this perspective, shifts in marriage customs, gender, and sexual norms were not merely signs of changing times but profound disruptions of the social order, threatening to unravel the moral fabric that had long governed life in the tundra. To them, these changes were not about progress but loss—the loss of a way of life that had once been tightly regulated, deeply meaningful, and resilient in the face of external pressures.

These sentiments echo broader scholarly discussions on the impact of mass media, television, and the Internet—now freely accessible in the tundra—on gender roles and family dynamics.²² Research also has noted that indigenous families in the tundra tend to be more stable than those in villages, where divorce rates are significantly higher.²³ For many tundra dwellers, the increasing intrusion of urban influences into their world was not just a cultural shift but a destabilizing force, threatening the very foundations of their social structure.

Within this framework, the notion of *love* and *sexuality* often emerged as subtle yet disruptive forces in marriage decisions. In Nenets popular discourse, love was often spoken of not as a cherished ideal but as a deviation from tradition. “In the tundra, there is no such thing as love!” Marina insisted. “Now people marry for love, and that’s why everything is falling apart.”

The language of love and romantic attraction was frequently described as something new—something Russian, rather than authentically Nenets. While Nenets oral histories are rich with tales of deep, passionate love, these stories were often framed as transgressions—exceptions to the norm rather than models to be followed. Love, in this sense, was a force that could threaten the carefully structured world of family alliances and social obligations. As one Nenets tundra woman put it:

22 Habeck and Ventsel, “Consumption and Popular Culture”; Ventsel, “Hidden Sex.”

23 Cf. Liarskaya, “Zhenshchiny i tundra,” 25–26.

[Nomadic Nenets] often come to a village from the tundra, and now there is electricity and light bulbs everywhere in tents; they watch a lot of TV, all sorts of films. There was a young woman.... And she watched films so much, so ... she could not live without men at all! And this was the only reason she got married to the first man, she nearly even split someone's family.... They [Nenets women] watch films about love, so they want love and chase men.

Many elderly Nenets lamented the growing trend of young people making their own marriage choices without parental guidance, viewing it as a violation of the tundra's moral order. Such cases were often met with disapproval by the older generation and became a subject of gossip in both tundra and village communities. In the Nenets understanding of tradition, marriage was not meant to be a personal decision between a man and a woman; rather, it was the responsibility of their parents, with the help of a matchmaker, to arrange a suitable union.²⁴ This parental involvement was seen not as interference but as an essential safeguard for preserving family honor, social stability, and the integrity of Nenets customs. In his 1930 account of Nenets marriage arrangements, Leonid Kostikov described how only parents negotiated the terms of a marriage, with daughters entirely absent from the discussions. As Kostikov was told, "We do not have cases when a daughter disobeys her parents' will."²⁵

"It is different now with the youth," a Nenets woman in her forties remarked, "they choose for themselves whom to marry. As a result, they often choose wives who can't live in the tundra, who can't sew or manage life in a tent." For her, as for most of the tundra Nenets, the key criteria for choosing a bride were supposed to be adherence to exogamy rules and the economic and social standing of her family. However, the most important factor was the bride's ability to work hard, particularly her skills in sewing and managing the household, which were essential for life in the tundra. To this day (in a traditional Nenets setting where Christianity has not been adopted), a young woman who is known for her sewing skills and hard work is regarded as a highly valuable wife, and her parents expect a substantial bride-price. As the Nenets say, "If you can sew properly, you can get married."

While these criteria for marriage arrangements do not always define everyday practices, they clearly exist as an ideal pattern in Nenets discourse—representing what is considered genuine and traditional in

24 Kostikov, "Zakony tundry"; Khomich, *Nentsy*, 163–65.

25 Kostikov, "Zakony tundry," 15.

Nenets culture. In this framework, love is often met with suspicion, seen as a potential disruptor of the balance between traditional roles and duties. These expectations are intricately tied to gender roles, family structures, and the strict regulation of behavior.

Love and the Brethren

Narratives that view love as a form of moral contamination, undermining the carefully preserved social and moral order of tundra life, marriage as a socially controlled institution, and strictly regulated gender roles—all of these provided a platform upon which Nenets and evangelical social expectations converged, with the Baptist Brethren playing a central role in this context. This convergence was seen in contrast to the morally deteriorating influence of modernity.

The concept of love was an ongoing discussion among the Brethren, too. While the context was different, the basic principle remained the same: love is not to be the driving force behind marriage. For the Baptists, marriage is divinely ordained, and love is not the primary motivation for choosing a partner. Instead, the key is to listen for God's guidance in selecting a spouse. The notion that marriage should be guided by the church (and thus by social order) rather than by personal desire aligns with the view of marriage as a socially regulated institution, similar to the traditions in Nenets culture.

These ideas are realized in the structured and ritualized procedures for marriage in the Baptist Brethren, where strict guidelines govern the process, much like the regulated customs in Nenets marriage practices. Here, the personal, emotional element of love takes a backseat to the moral and social imperatives that shape marriage in both cultures.

In Brethren congregations across the former Soviet Union, from major cities like St. Petersburg (where I also conducted my fieldwork), Moscow, Kyiv, or Kharkiv, to the remotest Arctic settlements, community leaders play a central role in overseeing and regulating the behavior of believers, ensuring it aligns with congregational standards. Within these communities, a minister is responsible for facilitating marriage arrangements, suggesting potential matches for members of the congregation. In some cases, the minister may find a marriage partner for a congregant in a different region, meaning the couple may have little or no prior personal knowledge of each other. Even when a believing brother intends to choose a marriage partner independently, he is still expected to consult with a minister first, seeking their preliminary approval before making a proposal.

Among the Brethren, activities such as dating, going out, dinner parties, giving flowers, or even sharing a first kiss are strictly regarded as inappropriate behaviors for a believer. Instead, when a young man wishes to propose, he must first discuss his intention with a minister. Afterward, he is expected to spend several days in prayer and fasting, seeking God's guidance and blessing for his choice. Once he has done so, he approaches the woman—who, of course, must also be a member of the Brethren—and presents his proposal using specific, conventional phrases with Bible citations that express his intentions. The proposal itself is expected to resemble a prayer rather than an emotional or romantic event. The woman is not expected to give an immediate response. Instead, she should wait three days, during which time she too must engage in fasting and prayer before giving her answer. As one Brethren missionary explained:

In general, it is not the sister who should think about a marriage partner; she must not think of marriage or choose a husband for herself. It is the brother who should consider this, not the sister. A brother must listen to God's will regarding marriage, not follow his own heart—who I like or do not like—but listen to God to know which sister He gives him as a wife. Once the brother has made the proposal, it is then the sister's turn to consider. She must pray and fast before deciding whether to accept the proposal or not.

After the engagement, the couple never dates, and their relationship does not involve intimacy or expressed emotions. The community closely monitors the couple's conduct, and their first kiss will be a "holy kiss" during the wedding ceremony. In general, expressing emotions in everyday life is not seen by Brethren members as true Christian behavior, unless these emotions reflect the believer's religious feelings. Even then, conservative Baptists, in contrast to Pentecostals and charismatic Christians, emphasize sedateness and abstemious conduct.

If we compare these regulated and ritualized engagement practices and bodily experiences, we can see many similarities with Nenets attitudes and expectations of how things should be. Lena, a young Nenets woman from the tundra, was a member of the Beloiarsk community. She had recently gotten engaged, although she met her future husband for the first time at the engagement. Sergei, the Russian missionary and matchmaker, brought Ivan, a young Nenets from the European side of the Polar Urals, to the Baidarata tundra for the occasion. The couple's next meeting was set for two years later, the marriage date arranged by Lena's parents and the missionary. However,

unexpectedly, Ivan began calling Lena. Each time, Lena felt confused and uneasy—it seemed like a breach of social norms. She refused to take his calls and asked an older woman to speak with him instead. Soon after, Lena and her family were preparing to travel to the town of Labytnangi to buy summer provisions. They found out that Ivan's family was staying near the town at the time. I asked Lena if she and her family planned to visit Ivan's family on their way to Labytnangi. She blushed and replied, "No way! How could I go and stay overnight at my groom's tent? It's impossible! Besides, we'll all be in Russian coats and won't have our *iagushki* [traditional Nenets fur coats] with us. You don't expect me to show up in a coat at a tent, like an urban dweller, do you?" Eventually, Lena's typical Nenets behavior was interpreted by the missionaries as genuine Christian modesty, and the missionaries' attitudes were seen by the converted Nenets as a return to traditional Nenets values.

Another striking similarity between Nenets culture and the Baptist Brethren can be found in their shared perceptions of beauty and appearance, particularly in how these perceptions are deeply linked to moral values. Baptist asceticism shapes strict ideals of beauty, emphasizing modesty and simplicity. Baptist women are expected to wear long skirts and dresses, never pants, and married women must always cover their heads with veils. Makeup, short hair, modern hairstyles, heels, and other contemporary beauty practices are strictly forbidden, as they are viewed as distractions from spiritual devotion and modest living. Similarly, men—at least during their religious duties—are expected to wear trousers and shirts with long sleeves, fully buttoned, as a sign of respect and propriety.

Interestingly, this ideal of Baptist female piety closely mirrors the traditional image of the Nenets woman. In the tundra, Nenets women traditionally wear long dresses and cover their heads, never cutting their hair. These practices are not only a reflection of their cultural identity but also of the moral code and ritual regulations that govern everyday life in the tundra. In both Baptist and Nenets traditions, there is a deep connection between appearance and ritual purity. Tundra Nenets often lament the changes they see in the appearance of settled Nenets women, who often adopt modern trends, such as wearing jeans, using makeup, and cutting their hair. This shift was often seen as a break from traditional values and a loss of cultural identity. As Marina would often exclaim when she saw a Nenets woman dressed in pants: "It's as if she's no longer a Nenets, she's become Russianized [*obrusevshaia*]."

For Baptists, the regulations of marriage and appearance were expressions of piety, while for the Nenets, they were integral to cultural identity. In both

communities, strict adherence to customs surrounding marriage, behavior, and appearance served to preserve moral and social order and safeguard against the corrupting influence of modernity.

Baptist Gendered Values

Annelin Eriksen uses the concept “gendered values” to indicate contexts in which masculinity and femininity are moral ideals that most women and men seek to achieve.²⁶ In the context of Nenets society and the Baptist Brethren community, these gendered values played a crucial role in mediating the interaction between traditional Nenets social structures and Christian missionary network, eventually affecting the organization and form of the tundra church, with gender norms shaping power dynamics and social control. The alignment between Nenets and Baptist gendered values—particularly the difference between what Eriksen calls male-gendered values and female-gendered values—was pivotal in bridging the two systems, allowing for a reconciliation of seemingly opposing networks. In this process, the Christian ideal of the family gradually blended with Nenets cultural expectations, creating a shared framework for social order.

The concept of family is central to Baptist ideology, with the nuclear family structure reflecting the broader values of the Brethren. Brethren families are typically large, often consisting of ten to fifteen children due to the strict prohibition against contraception, with clearly defined and regulated gendered values. Men not only occupy leadership roles within the church but also hold authoritative positions at home, reinforcing a deeply entrenched patriarchal structure. This system portrays women as the pious backbone of the household, embodying resilience, yet denies them social agency and leadership roles both within the religious community and in their everyday lives.

The emphasis on hierarchical male leadership is further evident in the fact that men hold all key positions within the Brethren, including ministers, evangelists, and deacons, and are entrusted with doctrinal teaching and preaching. In this structure, women are excluded from spiritual or communal leadership roles.²⁷ Even the female missionaries I encountered in the Arctic were not referred to as missionaries, but rather as “believing sisters.” They

26 Eriksen, “The Pastor and the Prophetess,” 104.

27 Drozdov, “Protiv tserkvi,” 160.

supported ministry work, but were never allowed to preach, as only men were permitted to hold the position of missionary.²⁸

Although the informal leaders and key communicators within the Beloiarsk community were mostly Nenets women, official leadership positions were held by men. It was only men who were allowed to preach and lead religious sermons and prayers, despite there being only three male members in the community. All of these men were young (two in their early twenties), unmarried, and in the eyes of the Nenets, far from gaining any authority within Nenets society, where social power is typically entrusted to elder men.²⁹ Nonetheless, visiting missionaries involved these three young men in religious leadership, training them in preaching, Bible reading, and prayer.

Brethren leaders generally resisted the social activities of believing sisters. Leadership qualities such as business and management skills, energetic social engagement, sharp temper, and abrupt manners were seen as inappropriate for a true Christian female virtue. These characteristics were viewed as incompatible with the ideal of female piety within the Brethren, which emphasized humility, sincerity, respect, submission, and devotion to the role of motherhood.

Women's social roles in the Brethren were strictly confined to the domestic sphere, with clearly defined family responsibilities. A Baptist woman's primary role was within the home, where her work was focused on caring for her family. Given the strict prohibition of contraception and any form of family planning, a believing woman was expected to have as many children as possible. In some respects, the number of children could even be seen as a measure of a woman's devotion to her Christian faith. For example, in Beloiarsk, my personal faith was judged by both missionaries and converted Nenets based on my status as a mother. On one occasion, Sergei, the missionary leader, openly accused me of never having lived a Christian life or truly following Jesus. "Why do you think so?" I asked.

28 Note that while leadership roles in the Baptist Brethren were traditionally reserved for men, the Soviet period saw an exception to this norm. As many Baptist leaders and activists were arrested and imprisoned, their wives and mothers took on prominent roles in their communities, often defending them against religious persecution. In February 1964, a group of Baptist women founded the Council of Prisoners' Relatives, which became one of the first human rights organizations in the Soviet Union to protest religious discrimination. These women directly engaged with state authorities, ensuring that prisoners received medicine and clothing, petitioning for sentence revisions and transfers to lighter labor, and organizing protests during court hearings. They also led large-scale petition campaigns and wrote "letters to power"—mass appeals to higher authorities, publicly challenging the increasing repression of believers.

29 Cf. Brodnev, "Ot rodovogo stroia," 51, on the Soviet struggle against the Nenets practice of nominating elder men for leadership positions in brigades, *kolkhozes*, and *sovkhazes*.

"Because you have only one child!" he replied. In contrast, the larger the family was viewed as a sign of greater devotion to God.

The priority of motherhood was one of the reasons why believing women were discouraged from continuing their education beyond school—higher education was regarded as unnecessary or a potential distraction from the Baptist "narrow path." On one occasion, when discussing a young Nenets girl studying at the college in the town of Labytnangi, a Baptist missionary expressed his concern:

It would be better for her not to study there at all. While studying there and living on campus, she has completely gone into the world [*sovsem v mir ushla*]. And she is already wearing pants and having worldly conversations. It would be better to make her get married as soon as possible and bring her back to a tent. She does not need this education at all. Generally speaking, I cannot understand why girls study! In any case, they get married afterward, and none of them works. Why do they need this education at all? They get married and that's it! The only things they have are their homes, children, husbands, and how to make their homes comfortable—things like curtains and so on. All those sisters [*sestrichki*] I know who used to study, none of them works now, after they got married.... I can't see any sense in women studying.

The ideal Christian family constructed within the Brethren reflected a deeply rooted vision of a peasant patriarchal life, where family roles were strictly regulated and hierarchized. The man was seen as both the head of the household and a Christian mentor, guiding his family in faith. The woman, in turn, embodied the ideal of modesty, dedicating herself entirely to raising children and managing the home. This structure was not only a reflection of familial order but was viewed as a direct manifestation of devotion to God. For devout parents, a true Christian act involved deliberately distancing their children from secular influences, often opting not to send them to schools or public day care, as part of a broader separation from what they perceived as the morally corrupting modern world. Ideally, this family existed in a rural setting, removed from the sins and temptations of urban life, embodying an existence that is pure, simple, and focused solely on religious devotion.

This image of social order—rooted in patriarchal family structures, rural life, and rejection of modernity—became the foundation for successful conversions among the Nenets. For them, the Baptist Christian family model resonated deeply with their traditional values, seen not as an imposition

but as a return to an idealized version of their cultural heritage, preserving the essence of their way of life in the face of modernity's encroachments.

Nenets Gendered Values

Although there is no direct term for family in the Nenets language, the concept of *miad'ter*—meaning tent dwellers—reflects the fundamental importance of the family for social order and survival in the Arctic tundra. The traditional Nenets nomadic family, typically consisting of two generations (parents and their children, sometimes with grandchildren), forms the core of community life.³⁰ Traditionally, the Nenets had few children, which can be attributed to the high infant mortality rates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³¹ However, by the twentieth century, family sizes grew, influenced by improved medical services in the tundra, traditional attitudes toward fertility, and less widespread use of contraception compared to urban areas.³² Single-parent families were more common among settled Nenets, but they were rare in the tundra. For example, between 2002 and 2005 in the Beloiarsk region, over one-third of settled families were single-parent households, while only 10% to 17.5% of nomadic families were single-parent.³³

As previously discussed, in the tundra, maintaining the family unit was seen primarily as a matter of survival. Violations of strictly prescribed gender and family roles were believed to jeopardize not only the well-being of individual family members but also the viability of the entire nomadic household. Each member had a specific role in ensuring the household's survival, and the differentiated yet complementary roles of men and women were essential. As a result, many scholars argue that it was only within the context of a family that a Nenets could survive in the tundra.³⁴ For instance, a man who lost his wife faced the risk of having to abandon his nomadic life as an independent reindeer herder or fisher, while a woman in the tundra relied on her husband's ability to perform his duties.

In the tundra, women rarely held the role of heads of families, with leadership and management typically falling to the husband. Men's responsibilities

30 Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 230–64.

31 Islavin, *Samoedy v domashnem*, 123; Zhitkov, *Poluostrov Yamal*, 219; Khomich, "Nenetskaia zhenishchina," 63–64; Volzhanina, "Problemy demografii nentsev," 119–20.

32 Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 250–52.

33 Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 236–39.

34 Kostikov, "Zakony tundry"; Tuisku, "The Displacement of Nenets Women"; Liarskaya, "Zhenshchiny i tundra."

were centered around reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting, while women's roles were confined to the tent, where they took on essential tasks related to the household. This included building, setting up, and taking down the tent during migrations, as well as managing everything inside it. Women were responsible for caring for the children, cooking, supplying water and firewood, and sewing and mending clothes. As Stammmler puts it, in the tundra, the "workplace" and "mother-place" of a Nenets woman are one and the same.³⁵

Traditional family and gender roles were often disrupted by Soviet policies aimed at women's Soviet-style emancipation.³⁶ The Soviet ideology sought to abolish the division of labor between the sexes. Among indigenous communities in Siberia and the North, Soviet authorities pursued a policy of women's liberation, aiming to transform traditional gender relations and eliminate old customs and patriarchal roles.³⁷ In the 1920s, the newly created state introduced laws banning polygamy, bride-price, and levirate.³⁸ Thus, Nenets women began participating in Soviet clan councils (*rodovye sovery*), although this was met with resistance from local men, who refused to engage in councils that included women.³⁹

Soviet projects of industrial nomadism and state-owned reindeer herding aimed to transform the tundra into an increasingly mechanized, male-dominated space, while encouraging women and children to settle in villages and towns. In many indigenous societies in the Russian Arctic, these policies dramatically reshaped the indigenous understanding of space, family structures, and gender roles, with sedentary spaces becoming predominantly female domains and the tundra and its nomadic economy becoming masculinized.⁴⁰

Despite these Soviet interventions, in contemporary Nenets society the clear division of gender roles and family hierarchy remained essential to maintaining social order, and is regarded as a core element of traditional Nenets culture. While the distinctions between male and female spaces have become less rigid, with men occasionally assisting women in tasks like constructing the tent or logging firewood, the traditional understanding of

35 Stammmler, *Reindeer Nomads*, 119.

36 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 303; Volzhanina, *Etnodemograficheskie protsessy*, 244.

37 Khomich, "Nenetskaia zhenishchina," 297–98; Tuisku, "The Displacement of Nenets Women," 42–43.

38 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 297–98; Kostikov, "Zakony tundry."

39 Khomich, *Nentsy*, 186.

40 Tuisku, "The Displacement of Nenets Women"; Vitebsky and Wolfe, "The Separation of the Sexes"; Vitebsky, "Withdrawing from the Land," 182–84.

gendered roles persists, seen as central to the social order and the functioning of both family and community life.

Marina once expressed with regret and irritation her thoughts on the contemporary changes in gender roles:

Nadia has no luck with her daughters-in-law. Both are too modern. All the time they go against her, [saying,] "Don't teach me" or "Why are you jumping on me?" Nowadays, women in the tundra aren't the same as they used to be. They are too modern and want equal rights. They don't want to obey. Why don't they keep silent and do as their husbands and mothers-in-law tell them? A woman in a tent has to be prompt and obedient,... otherwise there won't be any order in a tent.... A woman in a tent should be able to do everything; she has to be prompt. But now men even chop wood and bring water, and women don't do anything! When Misha arrives late in the night, his wife doesn't even wake up, but lies in the middle of the bed. He makes a fire himself and makes tea himself. And when her mother-in-law points out that this is wrong, she resents it.... They are now so modern.... But if men do everything, what will women do in the tents?

Gender issues became particularly significant when Nenets converts in Beloiarsk sought to explain their shift in religious affiliation from charismatic and evangelical movements to the more conservative Baptist church. As many scholars have noted, Pentecostalism often promotes the idea of women's emancipation, encouraging female involvement in leadership roles and providing opportunities for women to develop public leadership skills and forge new relationships beyond traditional kin networks.⁴¹ In the Polar Urals and Yamal, charismatic churches nurtured these ideals, fostering women's autonomy, equality, and social enterprise.

A Nenets man who had converted to Baptism explained it as follows:

If we take charismatic churches—it is mostly women who have power and dominate.... They tend to dominate and to be first. Most Nenets consider it abnormal. On the contrary, Nenets women themselves try to raise men's status, because, as they say, they don't want to doom their families to misfortune. Khanty people [who were converted to Pentecostalism] got such religious freedom, and they violated the prohibitions.

41 Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal," 131–34.

In contrast, conversion to the more conservative Baptist church, with its traditional views on gender roles, was seen by some as a return to “true” Nenets values, reinforcing hierarchical gender roles that had been altered by modernity and decades of state-imposed policies. Paradoxically, this shift was viewed as a way to restore traditional norms and resist the changes brought about by the rapid pace of modernity.

Tundra Web

At the northernmost point of the Yamal Peninsula, near Malygin Strait, lies one of the largest Nenets sacred sites, known as *Si'iv'mia'*—Seven Tents. The site features seven tent-like hills made from reindeer antlers, each representing a specific Nenets clan, with the central tent believed to symbolize the unity of all Nenets people.

In the winter of 2011, at the foot of the Yamal Peninsula near the Polar Urals, a large Nenets nomadic campsite was established. It featured seven tents, marking one of the largest gatherings of the tundra organized by converted Nenets. They celebrated a Christian wedding, with missionaries from various parts of the world arriving to attend. It became a new Nenets sacred site, known as the Christian Seven Tents, as people referred to it.

Religious conversion within the Nenets community was a profoundly gendered experience, serving as a means to negotiate and redefine gender order within both the family and the wider community. Nenets kinship practices and concepts of gender and family were being redefined within the Christian framework. Despite these changes, the new religious and kinship network helped sustain traditional Nenets practices, including economic reciprocity and marriage alliances, ultimately reinforcing *Neneil'*—the idea of “authentic Nenets life.” The united community of Nenets believers established a new, extended network of brothers and sisters across the tundra, creating a new foundation for the traditional nomadic system.

The Christian concept of spiritual kinship was adapted to fit the Nenets internal logic of natural kinship. This process of indigenization unfolded in such a way that the newly formed communities of brothers and sisters in Christ either aligned with the existing tundra kin network or created an alternative kin network within the tundra, all functioning according to traditional nomadic principles.

Facing contemporary challenges, such as the growing frequency of breaches in clan exogamy and other traditional marriage norms, the Nenets saw in the cultural mediation of missionaries a means to restore their



Figure 10.2. Nenets children, Baidarata tundra. Photograph by the author.

cultural continuity and traditional tundra social bonds. Kinship relations and marriage trajectories, once carefully managed by clan elders, were now controlled by new religious leaders, helping to preserve these essential social structures.

A young Nenets man once explained his understanding of the system of traditional Nenets sacred places by comparing them to the Internet, or the World Wide Web. These sacred sites, located across Yamal and the European North, are believed to be interconnected, forming a kind of spiritual hyperlink. When you visit one sacred site and make a sacrifice, it is believed that the sacrifice can be referred to another site. In this way, the sacred web envelops the entire Nenets universe.

The contemporary Christian network in the tundra developed according to the same logic. Though distanced from one another, the newly formed religious communities were interconnected, establishing a new foundation for Nenets unity. Many Nenets I met in the tundra saw this new web of controlled and regulated religious and kinship communities as a way to return to the “pristine Nenets tradition”—whether lost, imagined, or desired.

Conclusion

Last year, our reindeer died, and we have about twenty head left. The winter was harsh, and many were left without reindeer. This is sad, of course, but life doesn't end there. Mom now lives permanently in her apartment. Olia got an apartment, and Tania is renting. I also live separately, and Natasha lives separately, too. Sergei [the missionary] always comes. They built us a prayer house; now we don't gather in the apartments anymore.

This was an update from Nadia's daughter during our phone conversation in the summer of 2018. She shared news about the Beloiarsk community and her family, telling me how they were expecting a new minister and how Nadia's extended family—her many children and grandchildren—were adjusting to their new settled lives, some more successfully than others.

In the following years, I stayed in touch with Marina, Nadia, and her daughters, nieces, and nephews, who kept me updated on the changing dynamics within their extended family. Some members joined the church, while others distanced themselves from it. Tragedies and hardships were an inseparable part of life for this typical Nenets family in the Polar Ural tundra: a relative tragically took his own life; a young woman killed her abusive, alcohol-addicted husband in a desperate act of self-defense and was now in prison, while her sister took in her three children. Another woman ran away from her husband while pregnant, never to return. In the harsh environment of the tundra, one couple suffered the heartbreaking loss of their newborn—a fate tragically common in the Arctic tundra. Many of Marina's and Nadia's family members eventually settled in the village.

The community was deeply shaken by the sudden death of Sergei, the missionary who had played such a pivotal role in their lives. His passing in 2023 left a profound sense of loss, and the entire community mourned not just the loss of a religious leader and the founder of their church but also a guide who had helped them navigate years of transition. Yet, they were awaiting the arrival of a new church minister. "Life doesn't end there," as Nadia's daughter said.

By the time I was writing these words, the Beloiarsk community had gained a brand-new prayer house, a permanent minister of Ukrainian origin married to a Nenets woman, and a long-stay missionary family responsible for evangelization in the tundra. “We don’t have tents in the tundra that aren’t Baptist,” Marina laughs over the phone. She proudly sends me a photo of their growing church situated somewhere in the snowbound tundra.

Nenets life in the Arctic tundra has always been deeply dynamic, shaped by centuries of colonial imposition, *perestroika*, state-led experiments, reforms, seasonal nomadic fluctuations, and the systematic suppression of their nomadic economy and cultural practices. Over time, these changes and the need to adapt to or resist them became defining features of their traditional lifeworld.

The post-Soviet period marked a profound shift, opening up new frontiers that were influenced by an increasingly globalized world. This era brought with it new ideologies, cultural influences, technologies, communication networks, and religious movements, all of which began to reshape the Nenets relationship with the broader world. In parallel, the securitization and militarization of the Russian Arctic, along with the launch of large-scale industrial projects in the region under Putin’s leadership, introduced new economic and political forces that further reshaped the landscape for indigenous populations. One thing became clear: the Arctic no longer appeared as a remote, isolated corner of the world, but rather as a region increasingly interconnected with global systems, where traditional ways of life were swiftly shaped by both internal and external forces.

This book examines these rapid changes through a very particular lens: the phenomenon of mass evangelical conversion among the indigenous population of the Polar Urals and the Yamal Peninsula. By examining the factors that contributed to the widespread acceptance of these beliefs, this book seeks to explore how evangelical Christianity, including its fundamentalist variations, became a powerful force for both transformation and resilience in the tundra. This book examines how the experience of religious conversion revealed the many layers of marginalization endured by Siberia’s indigenous peoples under the Russian colonial regime. It explores how this process was deeply intertwined with colonialism, the Soviet legacy, and post-Soviet societal shifts. It considers how new forms of Christianity and religious networks resonated with indigenous peoples, creating a new framework for identity, community, resilience, and resistance.

This book also explores the precarious context in which religious conversion unfolded, highlighting how following Christ and embracing the fundamental tenets of evangelical theology often led to double

marginalization for indigenous converts and sparked conflicts within the Nenets community and positioned converted Nenets in a vulnerable place within wider society. The adoption of evangelical Christianity involved a reshaping of social relationships and moral codes, leading to increased exclusion in multiple forms. Converts found themselves at odds with their communities, who often viewed their new faith as a betrayal of their people and ancestral legacy. As a result, they were often considered morally corrupt, socially dangerous, and not Nenets enough. The evangelical focus on personal salvation and born-again rupture demanded a profound rejection of ancestral traditions, often leading to the destruction of sacred sites and ritual objects, the abandonment of traditional rituals, and, in some cases, the displacement from their nomadic communities. This deepened the divide within Nenets society, leaving converts caught between their new faith and their marginalized position within their own cultural world.

The increasing precariousness of religious life in Putin's Russia has been shaped by the state's tightening control over both religious and indigenous minorities. As the Putin regime sought to consolidate authoritarian power through conservative and nationalist ideologies, the state implemented a series of regional and federal laws aimed at restricting religious freedom and pluralism. This legislation has reintroduced Soviet-era anti-sectarian rhetoric that portrays non-state-sanctioned religious movements, including some forms of evangelical Christianity, as extremist and a threat to the stability of the "Russian world." Along with the prohibition against foreign missionary activity, the state's increasing surveillance of religious groups, and restrictions on unregistered religious organizations, this legal framework has created a stifling environment for indigenous converts to evangelical Christianity.

In this climate, religious minorities found themselves increasingly marginalized and vulnerable. The state's emphasis on religious orthodoxy and national unity, which often excluded religious diversity, fostered an atmosphere of hostility toward groups perceived as foreign or disruptive to the national narrative. For indigenous people who adopted evangelical Christianity, like the Nenets from the Polar Urals and the Yamal Peninsula, this created a double bind: not only were they estranged from their traditional cultural and spiritual practices, but their religious beliefs also placed them in direct opposition to both mainstream Russian society and the state's authoritarian agenda. In this context, the increasing securitization of religious life, coupled with the suppression of indigenous movements, made the experience of conversion even more precarious.

While the increasing precariousness of religious conversion in the Russian Arctic highlights the historical and ongoing marginalization of indigenous

peoples, it also sets the stage for understanding how these communities have engaged with global religious networks and navigated the challenges brought on by global mobility.

Nomadism: Imagined and Extended

In the spring of 2011, two recently converted Nenets women in their late twenties were returning to their parents' tent in the tundra of the Polar Ural Mountains after a journey to Ukraine. This trip marked their first journey outside their natal nomadic circle. It was Ukrainian missionaries who served as guides for the Nenets, helping them navigate the unfamiliar urban spaces by providing the necessary organizational, logistical, and financial support. The women eagerly shared their experiences, describing their first-time encounters with large urban areas like Moscow, meeting new sisters and brothers, and witnessing their lifestyles and social environments.

In the years that followed, they carefully preserved the memory of these trips, organizing photo albums and telling stories about the new places they had visited and the experiences they had gained. Proudly, they showed me their albums, capturing every moment of their journeys. The photos brimmed with images of flowers, fruits, fountains, dresses, and houses, as well as holidays, prayer services, weddings, funerals, picnics, dinner parties, harvests, local sightseeing, and shopping. These were the kinds of novel experiences that most captivated the traveling Nenets. The pictures were vivid with bright colors, showcasing everything that, from an Arctic perspective, seemed unusual and strange.

Once, a young Nenets man from the Polar Ural tundra, in his late twenties, proudly showed me a piece of paper he kept in his Bible. It was a handwritten list of thirty two churches he had visited during a recent trip to Ukraine and Russia. This reindeer herder, who had never attended school and could barely read, had twice participated in the International Congresses of the Brethren in Tula, becoming, as Laur Vallikivi describes, a "supernomad."¹

This piece of paper with the list of visited places, along with the photo albums, served as evidence of the expanding geography of the Nenets. Their conversion experience marked a shift toward new spatial practices that broaden their cognitive map of meaningful spaces, allowing them to develop a sense of connection to a global religious network.

1 Vallikivi, *Words and Silences*, 88.

In the early post-Soviet period, missionaries from around the world (including former Soviet states, Germany, the USA, Canada, Finland, and Korea) visited Beloiarsk and the surrounding tundra. Through these encounters, the Nenets gained access to an unexpectedly close-knit global network. This new religious network, now at their fingertips, was highly structured, with organized relations between communities that provided an easy pathway for increasing mobility.

A young Nenets woman from the tundra once said, “I need to learn English because so many foreign missionaries visit our tents, and I can only speak with them through a translator.” Others in her community began to learn Ukrainian to better communicate with the missionaries from Ukraine who lived among them for months at a time, becoming part of their daily lives.

The Nenets connection to the wider world was also forged through prayer. In their tents and village churches, they prayed not only for their own community but for believers across the globe. Ukrainian and Belarusian churches were frequently mentioned in their prayers, as were persecuted Christians in Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and India—places that had previously been absent from their mental map of the world.

Contemporary evangelical organizations operate on both local and trans-local levels, fostering religious mobility and shaping “mobile selves.”² For the Nenets, evangelical membership offered a layered sense of belonging—local, national, and global—connecting their remote tundra existence to a vast Christian network. As many scholars argue, however, globalization and the global imaginary has often been experienced as a force of displacement and disempowerment, particularly for those on the periphery, disrupting local communities through vast flows of people, media, and capital. It generates a deep sense of uncertainty, particularly among marginalized groups, often reinforcing their exclusion. The era of rapid mobility leads to what Said describes as “a generalized condition of homelessness”—a situation in which returning to one’s native land becomes impossible, or the native land itself disappears altogether.³

In this context, the Nenets, like many other indigenous peoples, faced the unsettling forces of displacement and an uncertain future. As we have seen, their conversion experiences initially challenged traditional notions of native land, cultural heritage, and even the very essence of indigeneity and authenticity.

This book argues that it was the rise of Christian fundamentalism that took on a paradoxical role in answering the dual challenges faced by the

2 Wanner, “Conversion and the Mobile Self,” 169.

3 Said, *Orientalism*, 18.

Nenets. On the one hand, it addressed the disruptive forces of globalization, offering a sense rootedness amidst the displacing energies of an interconnected world. On the other hand, it also resonated with the deep-seated anxieties stemming from the Soviet legacy, particularly in the context of the Putin regime's anti-sectarian and anti-extremism rhetoric.

Tundra as an Authentic Source of Christianity

The fundamentalist Baptist Brethren not only operated in a strikingly different way than other evangelical movements in the Arctic but also produced different outcomes in the indigenous tundra. Born as an underground resistance movement during Soviet-era anti-religious persecution, the Baptist Brethren's separation from state control was not merely a survival strategy but the foundation of its religious and social identity. This legacy shaped its insularity, its theology of martyrdom, and its rejection of both state oversight and modern secularism as incompatible with true faith. This perspective has persisted into the present, where the Brethren continue to refuse state registration, viewing it as a form of submission to an earthly authority that contradicts the principles of the church.

The strict rules imposed within Baptist Brethren communities function not only as mechanisms of internal control but also as a deliberate stance against global modernity. Their rejection of mainstream entertainment—banning television, theaters, and other forms of leisure—reflects a broader resistance to the cultural influences of secular globalization, which they view as morally corrupting. Hierarchical gender roles, the prohibition of contraception, and strict dress codes further reinforce this separation, framing the community as a bastion of purity against an intrusive and morally corrupt world. In this sense, the Brethren's strict community boundaries serve as a protective enclosure, shielding believers from the disruptions of modern secular life while reinforcing their distinct and oppositional identity.

In this sense, the Baptist Brethren's success among the Nenets was not merely a matter of religious doctrine but of deep historical and social resonance. Its rigid separatism, underground legacy, and defiance of modernity aligned with the Nenets historical experience and social expectation. The Nenets reinterpreted Baptist fundamentalist anti-modernity stances through their own historical experience under Russian rule. For them, modernity was inseparable from Russian state power and the longstanding state structures that had shaped their lives.

Furthermore, Baptist patterns of insularity and social separation were recycled by the Nenets into ethnic awareness and defensiveness. As a result, anti-Russian sentiment was more pronounced among Nenets Baptists than in other churches. For Nenets converts, this fundamentalist theology offered an alternative framework for navigating both globalization and state interference, including everyday discrimination and land appropriation driven by large-scale resource extraction. Aligning with a movement that saw the state as an oppressor, they found not only new religious belonging but also a way to reconnect with their roots and reshape their sense of authenticity. This alignment provided continuity and empowerment, helping them navigate displacement while reinforcing their indigenous identity and sense of belonging. The Baptist value system with its social attitudes, gendered values, and even clothing and appearance aligned with the existing Nenets cultural framework.

In their search for spaces beyond state control, Baptist missionaries encountered the Nenets tundra, viewing it as a land untouched by the corrupting influence of the state and modernity—an ideal place for creating a church. In doing so, they reshaped the Nenets perception of history and land, presenting the remote tundra and its indigenous people as the truest embodiment of Christian values. Through conversion, the symbolic landscape was reimagined: the tundra, once seen as a distant and marginal periphery, was now envisioned as a religious heartland. This transformation turned the tundra into a hub of religious life and a genuine source of Christianity. As a result, the Nenets experience of displacement and estrangement was reversed into one of rerooting and relocalization, infusing the tundra with new religious significance and turning the symbolic periphery into the center of religious life.

At the same time, within the framework of religious conversion, Nenets integrated into a global community of believers, expanding their social and spiritual horizons beyond the tundra, developing new patterns of mobility that expanded beyond their traditional territorial boundaries. This newfound affiliation connected them to a wider evangelical world, yet their social orientations remain deeply territorialized, with the tundra continuing to serve as the foundational and meaningful space of their livelihood.

To sum up, religious conversion was a two-way process: while Nenets converts became part of a transnational religious network that transcended local boundaries, this global network did not remain an external force. Instead, it was woven into the fabric of the Nenets' existing social world, adapting to their cultural logic and ways of life. The newly formed community of brothers and sisters in Christ became integrated into Nenets

subsistence practices, kinship structures, and daily routines. The religious network was intertwined with traditional systems of social and economic exchange, as Christianity was reinterpreted and transformed through Nenets cultural frameworks. At the same time, missionaries themselves became involved in the reproduction of local Nenets cultural practices, contributing to the reframing of Nenets nomadic or sedentary lifestyles onto a new, religiously infused canvas.

As a result, conversion was not a passive act of assimilation, but an active process of both change and continuity. New religious practices were adapted to align with Nenets worldviews, values, and subsistence strategies, giving rise to a distinctly Nenets form of Christianity. This highlights the agency of Nenets converts in shaping and changing their own lifeworld—not merely adopting evangelical faith, but recycling and reinterpreting it, weaving it into the fabric of their historical memory, social structures, and cultural sensibilities.

A Nenets woman from the Yamal tundra, a mother of six, once shared with me the story of her encounter with a Canadian evangelical missionary. Her narrative offers a profound reflection on the agency of the Nenets in cross-cultural encounters. One Canadian missionary embarked on a journey to the Russian Arctic as part of an international mission to reach the Arctic's indigenous peoples, organized in the early 2000s. The initiative was far from easy. He faced numerous challenges, including obtaining a Russian visa and navigating the country's anti-missionary laws, which made foreign evangelical activity unwelcome during the early years of Putin's regime (later, such activity would become impossible). He also needed special permission to enter the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, a strategically important and closed region. Local regulations and the public discourse surrounding "dangerous foreign sects" only complicated his mission further, with the security services closely monitoring him.

After overcoming these hurdles, the missionary embarked on a long and arduous journey, relying on trains, snowmobiles, reindeer teams, and GPS to navigate the harsh, unfamiliar terrain. After many days of travel, he finally reached a remote Nenets reindeer herder's camp. Upon entering the tent, he began preaching and singing Christian hymns, declaring, "God sent me here to preach to you and to teach you about Jesus Christ." A Nenets woman looked at him and responded, "Maybe God sent you here so that *I* should preach to *you* and teach you about Jesus Christ." She then opened the Bible and began sharing her own understanding of the faith, a powerful reminder that even in the most unexpected of encounters, it is the indigenous voice that shapes the narrative and redefines the meaning of belief.

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