Collective and Individual Memories: Narrations about the Transformations in the Nenets Society

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Abstract. The Tundra Nenets have a very well developed oral history tradition, and they use different ways to disseminate this knowledge and memories. This paper examines Nenets’ oral history within the transformation of collective and personal memories about early collectivization in the tundra under the Soviet regime. The Nenets are a flexible society and accommodated most of the external changes in their life without abandoning their nomadic life with reindeer on the tundra. However, even though Nenets elders speak quite positively about the time of Soviet collectivization, relocation, and industrialization in their homeland, it seems that they constantly try to conceal all negative memories and stories connected to tragic events of that time. In place of these memories, they create positive stories to tell young people that selectively edit out the negatives of the past.

The goal of this article is to reflect Nenets individual and collective memories through an example of the historical events surrounding Soviet collectivization in the tundra. This work assigns different meanings and gives explanations to how Nenets regulate communicating their memories about their past. Personal censoring in some cases can be quite strict: narrators can select topics that are safe to discuss and conceal those that are better to keep in silence or simply forgotten. People share their individual memories of the past, especially those which also include family, and personal stories very carefully. Therefore, during audiences with family members, friends, researchers, or other listeners, elders prefer to tell premeditated and edited versions of their biographies and stories (Halbwachs 1992). Quite often, the selections and editions happen because many narrators try to “disremember” parts of their tragic past; therefore, they tell positive versions of their life stories. Their explanation for this revision is a desire to protect their family members and children from the negative emotions (Adler 2013:22). Also, the bitter feelings of shame and desire to avoid victimization became the basis for a new Nenets collective identity, which may explain their silence. Nevertheless, processes of collective and individual remembrance and controlled forgetting of the past are tightly connected, and they can vary in many different ways.

As a result, children only know carefully edited accounts of their parents’ life histories. Such stories make a collection of various evidence and interpretations of the past, which helps to understand a process of transmission of memories about the past from the point of view of Nenets elders and young people. Anna Green (2004:18) observes such focusing helps researchers to look at stories
through a lens that links emotional expressions to the vocal expression and metaphorical language of the narration.

People forget their past and rebuild new versions of their history quite fast. One explanation for this process can be found in John Plumb’s ([1969]2004) *The Death of the Past*, which states that everybody believes to be part of his or her national history, and everybody makes his or her own interpretation of past historical event and narrates about it from his or her own perspective. It is the memories from the past that dictate what people should remember and believe in the present time (Plumb [1969]2004:116). Consequently, personal stories about the past not only purely tell about it, but they could have sanction for it. Such stories give a very objective point of view about the national past and tell about it in many different individual voices. Zarubawel (2011:20) called this process of controlled transformation of memories—when the detailed description of the past helps young people to remember it, but the concise concession of the story lets them forget the past—the “commemorative memory.”

Paul Connerton (2011) noted that the process of storing personal memories depends very much on the social context; society selects memories that are good to remember and others that should be forgotten. Such social conditionality of remembrance is an important basis for collective identity and memories about significant or difficult moments in the past. At the same time, if there are many stories about the past with contradictory information and feelings, it makes one think back to the original version of the story looking for reasons why it was changed.

Rosaldo’s (1980:99) concept of undertaking oral history is based on stories that people tell about themselves. Paul Thompson (1981:292) observed on such life stories:

The evidence in each life story can only be fully understood as part of the whole life; but to make generalization on any particular social issue, we must wrench the evidence on this question from the whole series of interviews, viewing it and reassembling it from a new angle, as if horizontally rather than vertically; and in so doing, placing a new meaning on it.

This approach of following one historical event by collecting of people’s narratives concerning it helps to understand the reasons behind the transformation of the storyline. Studies of oral histories conducted in many different countries on different examples of controlled memories passed from one generation to another show that after a challenging and painful life experience with psychological trauma, people make a tacit decision not to discuss it. Adler and Leydesdorff (2013) distinguish that such silence creates new stories inside the historical frames when people make their own versions of the story that are acceptable to tell to others. Despite these conscious revisions, it is still possible in some cases to see such transformations in people’s story line by comparing many accounts by others of one historical event (Rosaldo 1980; Portelli 2003). Such “unpacking” of stories helps to focus on the narrative of the story and to connect it to people’s narratives: not in terms of chronological order but on the cognitive meaning of emotional intonation.

**Personal and Collective Memory in Oral History**

In Green’s (2011:107) work about personal and collective memory, she highlights the importance of incorporation of personal memory into collective memory and reiterating the value of autobiographical memories to our understanding of both past and present. According to Green, personal experiences are remembered and understood through the frameworks of personal memory. Personal memories can tell us when and why ordinary people actively endorsed, acquiesced, or opposed inherited perspectives or dominant discourses. Green also wrote collective memories are created by societies by themselves, who are telling about selected individuals among each other, transmitting such stories further.

Citing Halbwachs (1992), Green (2011) wrote that “the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people […] it is individuals as group members who remember.” In this way, people linked their lives to the special historical events through what they had experienced in their life. Here again, referring to Halbwachs (1992), Green notes that the deep social process of remembering both personal and group memory connects people together into a cohesive whole.

**Reflections of Nenets Collective Memory (Fieldwork Practices and Interviewing; Nenets Ways of Telling)**

In 2010, I did my fieldwork on the Yamal peninsula among a group of seminomadic Tundra Nenets reindeer herders, who live near the Yuribei River for summer fishing.

The Nenets are a northern nation of the Arctic. Their historical development followed a path that helped them to keep their unique reindeer-herding culture safe until today. Despite ongoing changes in traditional Nenets family life, they
maintain regular contact with their relatives and neighbors and speak the Nenets language. When people meet, they usually discuss many things, but sometimes, when there is a skilled storyteller, he or she can tell Nenets legends and stories about the past and sing songs in Nenets. However, even if people seem to be very open in telling their stories, there are some parts of their oral history they prefer not to talk about with strangers. Most of these silenced themes are connected to the Soviet collectivization in the tundra in the 1930s. It was a time when many positive, but also negative, changes took place among the Nenets. Despite occurring over 80 years ago, what is remarkable is that tundra people are still cautious about sharing their memories of these tumultuous times. However, when elders break their silence and start to speak about their past, their memories tend to reflect more the present perspective than the past one.2

As a native Nenets, I have undertaken “native anthropology” research inside of my nation for a couple of decades before this study. In 2010, I walked from one tent to another in the tundra, talking with Nenets people, collecting their stories about the past. Usually, people tell different kinds of stories to strangers, mostly their folklore texts and songs. However, this time when I started to ask about the early collectivization, I was surprised that people were ready to share their life stories with me. Possibly, the new openness related to the fact that nobody previously worked on documenting Nenets oral history. My interest in investigating the subject began because many people used to tell about their family history from the period when the Russians came to the tundra and started collectivization. However, not all of them were ready to disclose their family tragedies directly, but they used to speak about their parents having to give their reindeer to the state in order to build a new soviet life in the tundra.

At the beginning of the last century, it was impossible for Nenets to survive without reindeer, which provided them everything that is necessary to live in arctic tundra conditions. At that time, there was no electricity, shops, transportation, and telephone connection, and reindeer used to provide almost everything that was necessary to survive in the region: food, clothes, transport, and shelter. Most of the Nenets used to live far in the Yamal tundra until the Sovietization of the tundra. When Soviet authorities started their collectivization campaign in the tundra in the 1930s, their main idea was to organize the state reindeer collective farms, known as kolkhozy. To initially set the kolkhozy up, it was first necessary to acquire reindeer for the state. However, it was not possible to make tundra people give their entire reindeer to the state voluntarily; therefore, many of kulaks, individuals who had large numbers of reindeer, were arrested and sent on pretenses to jail. Subsequently, their entire reindeer herds were confiscated for the state. Their families would receive a few reindeer from the authorities, but there were not enough to survive on the tundra (Golovnev and Osherenko 1999). This period of early collectivization is still one of the painful parts in the history of the Nenets people, similar to many other people and nations within the former Soviet Union. It was also a time of the beginning of “new life” on the tundra. Therefore, even though many Nenets witnessed much cruelty towards to their fellow tribesmen, their fear and respect of the Soviet authorities was so great that they decided not to speak much about this part of their history. Because of this suppression, many stories of the tragedies of collectivization were concealed and fell into oblivion.

Yet, when I started to work with Yuribei people, there was one story among their narratives that stood out from all narratives. It concerned a family that no longer lives near the Yuribei River. Talking about collectivization, elders told me about one Nenets man, Laro K., whose father, Narja K., was a very affluent and powerful man in the Yuribei Nenets society at the beginning of the last century. After Narja’s death, all of his reindeer were confiscated by Soviet authorities. This loss was a big trauma for the reindeer herder’s son to realize that after being one of the richest families in the tundra, his family became poorer than his father’s workers. Nobody knew about his feelings at that time.

The Nenets woman, Irina A., who told me this story, said when the Soviet Russians came to arrest Narja and confiscate his reindeer, Laro was eight years old. Narja died suddenly in the winter; therefore his family did not bury his body but packed it on a sled to carry to the family cemetery. This story was continued by Luba P., who also had heard this story from her old uncle, who was the same age as Laro. He told her that when Russians came to arrest Narja, they thought that he was hiding inside the sled. Therefore, they started to thrust their bayonets into Narja’s body to check if he was really dead.

When Laro grew up, he made his personal song about his father and how his herd was confiscated and driven away. In this song, he reflected all his feeling of loss and grief. Narja had 3,000 reindeer, but only 30 reindeer were left to the family, which were later lost as well. The family then suffered from hunger and cold until the mother started to work for the Russians to earn a little food.

Irina used to see Laro when he used to work in the state collective farm as a reindeer herder and later as a brigadier. There are also people who know his personal song about confiscation of reindeer. His song was familiar to Luba, who
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Table 1. Laro K.’s song in Latin and Cyrillic script with the English translation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nenets text</th>
<th>In Latin script</th>
<th>In Cyrillic script</th>
<th>Translation into English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After Njarja’s death.</td>
<td>Няръя ха”махад</td>
<td>Няръя ха”махад</td>
<td>After Njarja’s death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After my father’s death,</td>
<td>Нисяни ха”махад</td>
<td>Нисяни ха”махад</td>
<td>After my father’s death,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The red Russians</td>
<td>Нарьяна луша”</td>
<td>Нарьяна луша”</td>
<td>The red Russians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All three thousand reindeer</td>
<td>Няхар” ёрре”ым</td>
<td>Няхар” ёрре”ым</td>
<td>All three thousand reindeer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved with dogs.</td>
<td>Вэн” танэйду’</td>
<td>Вэн” танэйду’</td>
<td>Moved with dogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the big Khadite’e River,</td>
<td>Нгарка Хадыте”э</td>
<td>Нгарка Хадыте”э</td>
<td>Of the big Khadite’e River,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between its two banks,</td>
<td>Яха’ подхана</td>
<td>Яха’ подхана</td>
<td>Between its two banks,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only old larch trees are broken.</td>
<td>Сив тяя” харв”,</td>
<td>Сив тяя” харв”,</td>
<td>Only old larch trees are broken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was sound of breaking larch.</td>
<td>Харв” мардурнга”.</td>
<td>Харв” мардурнга”.</td>
<td>There was sound of breaking larch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silently only to my tears,</td>
<td>Мунги” сидя хайлми</td>
<td>Мунги” сидя хайлми</td>
<td>Silently only to my tears,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silently dropped down.</td>
<td>Мунги ха”амъяха’.</td>
<td>Мунги ха”амъяха’.</td>
<td>Silently dropped down.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

heard it from her uncle and another Nenets woman (Table 1):

After Njarja’s death.
After my father’s death,
The red Russians
All three thousand reindeer
Moved with dogs.
Of the big Khadite’e River,
Between its two banks,
Only old larch trees are broken.
There was the sound of breaking larch.
Silently only to my tears,
Silently dropped down.

Luba explained that the reindeer herd was so massive that while moving it trees were destroyed in its path. By this way, 3,000 reindeer were directly herded to another side of the Ob River to Purovskii raion (county). The Russians did not even change the owner’s personal earmarks on the herd, and even nowadays in the state reindeer-herding brigade still uses it to mark animals.

Such songs have personal names, names of family members, and they could give information about people’s kinship and family relationship to others.

The general concept of Nenets personal songs is to place an individual in a chain of a family line and maintain people’s memories about their community members. People perform personal songs of individuals that have already passed away as memory songs, or commemorative songs (Pushkareva 1990). Since sometimes these songs concern not just the individual to whom it used to belong, but also their family members, it means that personal songs can work as identity markers. They have also many special rules and regulations surrounding their performance. In the past, every individual in the Nenets society used to have their own personal song, which used to belong only to this person. It was possible to perform personal songs by other people, but not in the presence of the song’s author. Personal songs are never sung in Russian; even if they could be easily translated because people prefer to perform them only in Nenets. According to Nenets folklorist Elena Pushkareva (2001:34), there are three ways of performing Nenets personal songs:

The first one is a song which is performed by its author with a lyrical digression, comments, and replicas of the author and the listeners.

The second is a text, which is repeated by another person with or without an introduction to the song’s author, without any lyrical digression, comments, and replicas.

The third is a text with information about author’s name and replicates what he and audience used to say during the first performance (translated by the author).

The Finnish ethnomusicologist Jarkko Niemi (2004:26) has noted:

Place of Personal Songs in the Nenets Collective Memory

There are many different ways how societies store memories about the past. Nenets oral history is based on people’s personal songs, which tie their memories to the past events and people’s life stories. Personal or individual songs tell about the life of individuals, their life experience, memories about their past, and about their family members.
There are strict rules for the performance of one’s personal song. The composer of an individual song tends to sing it in solitude and maybe in the presence of the closest relatives, but not willingly to other people, especially to non-relatives. On the other hand, it is considered insulting to sing or to reveal the songs of one’s close relatives to strangers. These rules can be circumvented, if the performer can be sure that the owner of the song will not have her his song performed by somebody else.

So, we could say that Nenets personal songs provide us with an important example of forms of remembering that are beyond the personal narratives often searched for by oral historians.

Concealment of the Past

The story and the song that I collected from Luba P. made me go back to my own memories when I used to meet Laro K. in Panavevsk in a Nenets national village on the Ob River.

Personal Story: Laro K. (1929)

The interview with Laro took place in 2005. At the time, I had just started my work on documenting Tundra Nenets language, and I was traveling on Yamal to get samples of different dialects of the Nenets language. The local head of administration told me that one elder had just come from the tundra to the village where I was staying. She gave me an address and told me where I could find his house. I went there without a telephone call just to ask this man if he would like to talk with me. It was a new house near the riverbank of the Ob not far from the settlement center. When I came inside, I saw an old woman making a winter Nenets dress. I started to talk to her and asked if her husband was at home. I saw a young-looking man there, and my first thought was that he was probably her son. “No, it is Laro,” she said. I was amazed because according to documents he was 20 years older than his wife. I talked to him just once, and our meeting was short, and for me it gave an impression to be not very informative. Later, I even forgot about this interview with him. However, after my trip to the Yuribei River in 2010, I found the interview record again, and this time I listened to it more carefully. After this second listening, I had to evaluate the informativeness of the interview anew.

In Nenets culture, there is a special etiquette for strangers to introduce themselves to people whom they meet for the first time. It is important to define, as detailed as possible, the circle of relatives and family elders so that people who know them can recognize the newcomer. The communication network is very tight, and usually, Nenets who live in the same territory know each other’s kinship relation quite well. Such a way of defining the family circle gives the host a chance to appraise the person who comes to visit him. The main language norms, selected for an occasion, are based on the Nenets norms of politeness, the concretization of a topic of conversation when people use more demonstrative pronouns, possessive suffixes, and personal names. By this way, people can define a newcomer’s place in their family and tribe’s circle.

When we began our interview, Laro firstly asked me where I am from, who are my relatives, where they were from, and what surname they have. My answers did not give this old man any clear information about my background but just information about my relatives from the Yarongo village. This lack of knowledge made this old man decide not to talk to me about his personal life so much. Eventually, he told me one Nenets fairy tale, and at the time, I was quite happy to record it. During our interview, he gave me the advice to look for the history of my own family but not to look for other people’s stories.

RL: Could you tell me about the past?

LK: All right, but, maybe, I forgot all the old stories. Perhaps, I do not forget them. But I am not ready to tell them to you.

RL: Tell me one, even one story.

LK: Of course, there are many stories.

Wife: Of course there are such stories. Even there are a lot of them.

LK: There should be a lot of them.

Wife: People who used to live before have passed away; their stories died with them.

RL: That is right. There are no more stories.

Wife: Some of these stories died with people from Yarongo. Some of the old stories passed away for forever. It is good that there are still their children left.

In this part of the interview, Laro did not talk much, and his wife talked mostly with me about their life in the tundra. She also likely tried to get Laro to join our conversation, but he refused. While talking about their past, the wife mentioned that it was hard for them to live in the tundra when they were small children. Especially when she started to talk about hunger in the tundra, she underlined that it was hard for their mothers to earn any food, and what surprised me was that she did not mention anything about their fathers.

Wife: It was not easy to live in the tundra before.

LK: It was not easy at all.

Wife: It was a hard time before here.
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Family Story, Told by Vera K. (1957)

1. My father is 92 today. He is as fit as a fiddle. He lives in a place 5 km from Panaevsk. He walks there by himself, as he told me, to the nearest shop and back. It is 5 km there and 5 km back.

2. I know one young Nenets woman. When I once asked her about her dream, she answered that her dream is to earn a lot of money and to buy three cases of vodka. To bring them all it to Panaevsk and make a huge party with all her friends there. Just to have a good time. Two years ago, I asked my father, what he is dreaming about, as he is now in his 90s. He told me that he has three dreams. First, he would like to visit his father’s grave and roam there on his reindeer. Our family cemetery is in the tundra on the Cape Beluzhyi (Beluga) nose. One-hundred years ago their family used to live there. They hunted there for sea mammals. Second, he would like to go to Saint Petersburg and visit the biggest church there to pray for good future for all of us, his children. And third, he wishes to visit T’umen. He was there in 1968 when our mother died there. He wants to visit her grave. How different are his and this young woman dreams?!

3. My grandfather had 6,000 reindeer. They were all confiscated during collectivization. He was rich, but he used to help other Nenets when they had difficulties. One winter the snow was so encrusted with ice near the Yuribei River in Yamal that the reindeer were unable to break through it to forage for food. One man from a large Serotetto family clan asked him for help. Of course, my grandfather helped them; he just told his workers to move his 6,000 reindeer herd to run in the tundra near the Yuribei River. This herd was so big that when it ran there, the ice was destroyed completely. By this way, my grandfather helped other reindeer to save their herds from hunger. It was in 1927–1929 when my grandfather used to help his tribe people; he used to help paupers by supplying them with bread and giving them reindeer. He also paid taxes in gold to the Russian State in Salekhard. Sometimes he used to pay taxes also on behalf of his relatives and people who used to live close to his camp.

Spoken Narratives of Eyewitnesses: The Changing Nature of Testimony

According to the Nenets collective memory, Narja K. was the richest reindeer owner on the whole Yamal tundra. He had 3,000 reindeer, which was an enormous number of reindeer at that time, so much that people continue to tell stories about him and sing his son’s personal song. As previously discussed, it is a very old Nenets’ tradition to have a personal song: every personal song has its owner, and it follows their owners all their lives.
When sung, people can recognize to whom it belongs to from the way it is performed and to which community they belong. While personal songs can be performed by nonfamily members, it is important to give an introduction about the owner of it and where the song was obtained. There are also Nenets rules of politeness: children should not sing their parent’s songs in their presence. Nenets personal songs, according to Elena Pushkareva’s (2001) classification, are divided into gift songs, autobiographical songs, confession songs, memory songs, and fortune songs. Every one of these songs should have its own author:

If a song is performed by a person who made it, an audience should memorize his or her name and lyrics of this song. If somebody else performs this song later, then, before singing it he or she should tell who is the owner of this song, and this song’s story (Pushkareva 2001:33; translated by the author).

Following this custom, people, when they are talking about others, could accompany their narratives with individual personal songs. Quite often, it could be just a starting point to begin a typical Nenets collective-memory narration with descriptions of certain memories about the past. It explains why people keep memories about it and by this way they tell their stories to their children, relatives, or friends. Nenets collective memory reflects the memories of the people of their own and closest Nenets community, with the same background and the same living conditions in the tundra. These stories could give interpretations to many historical events, and they could also explain why Nenets try to hang on to some of their memories about specific historical events and try to forget others. It also reflects how the public memories’ time-varying amplitude on the example of Nenets works. One explanation could be that people tell other people’s stories because they try to keep a distance from their personal past because it is a very intimate and personal to talk about it with strangers. At the same time by telling other people’s stories, who are from the same community, narrators reflect the public and also individual memories about the past. This way of telling the past helps to develop Nenets interpretation and evaluation of historical events, here on the example of the early collectivization in the tundra.

During my research, the old Nenets man did not mention to me, to a stranger, anything about his father and his family history. However, his daughter told a story that her grandfather used to have 6,000 reindeer, doubling the number of reindeer that was told first time by people, who still keep memories about Narja. This man used to support his relatives and other people, and he was a prominent member of the Nenets society of that time such that the Nenets’ collective memory saved memories about him. Such memories are kept until nowadays even after more than 80 years after his death. This man and his family were not the only ones who lost their reindeer during collectivization. It is not the only example of Nenets’ collective memories about the past.

**Ngati S.’s Story**

In the tundra, there are many other stories about families who suffered because of Soviet collectivization policies. There are elders who tell stories about their family tragedies to their children, but some of them try to be silent or replace their family stories by new ones, which are happier to listen to.

I came back to the Yuribei River in the summer of 2013. In one of the Nenets’ camps, I interviewed Ngati S., an elder who had just moved to the Yuribei region. Previously, he worked as a reindeer herder at a local state collective farm. He owned a few private reindeer and had been employed all his life tending for big state reindeer herds.

During my interview, I asked this family about their life during the Soviet regime and what changes in their life were the most radical at that time. Ngati did not understand my question, and he asked me again what exactly I would like to know, while his wife replied to him that I am probably asking about how Russians used to confiscate reindeer.

Wife: She asked you about your family reindeer.

N.S.: I do not remember when it was. Maybe in war time.

Wife: They left us just a few reindeer.

R.L.: Did somebody tell you about this?

N.S.: Now I do not remember how it was.

R.L.: Did somebody tell you about this?

N.S.: It was during war time.

Wife: But what about recent confiscation [of reindeer]?

N.S.: I was a small boy when they collected our reindeer. I do not remember how it was. It had happened when I was small.

N.S.: Now I do not remember how it was.

Wife: About recent, I do not remember when it was. (Singing a song).

Wife: They left us just a few reindeer.

N.S.: No, I do not remember when it was. Maybe in the fifties. . . .

This old reindeer herder never did answer, but Ngati continued to hum a kind of song in Nenets. Later, when he went outside, his wife told me that that song was his father’s song, who was arrested during collectivization in the 1940s, and whose reindeer were confiscated to create part of the state reindeer collective farms in Yamal.

After this interview, I was flabbergasted that even after such a long time, people still have very
sensitive memories about their past. However, they are not ready yet to share their family tragedies. They try to hide their complex feelings of pain, fear, or malice between the lines of their narrations about their family past or just simply be silent (Simpkins 2010). As it was also noticed by Michael Lemon (2001:108) people’s stories about the past are not always told to answer questions what actually had happened in the past, but they could also raise many new questions about people’s perception of the past. Especially, in cases where the family’s history might be tragic, it can be hidden or simply silenced and not told to children.

Quite often elders, who had experienced tragic events in their life, tell stories in a double line of transmission, which is difficult to understand to a person who is not familiar with the background of the story. Like Laro’s wife said, it was difficult for mothers to raise their children, but nobody said what had happened to the fathers of these children who were arrested and how his or her families became social outcasts.

In this story about the Naanja and Laro, it was possible to recognize the feeling of pain after getting more information about this family’s history and elucidating recollection of other people’s knowledge of the history of this family. The dual nature of such memory transmission is quite a convoluted process: these two lines of narration could not be transmitted further if people do not understand the relation between the stories. Narrators balance their stories between the two processes of introducing the historical past and cloaking it from others at the same time. Naanja was singing his father’s personal song, using this way to reflect on his family’s tragedy. And, of course, his personal tragedy as well when he later lost the reindeer that he managed to earn by himself. However, it was the starting point of the new Nenets historical period under the regulations of the Soviet administration, and it could be interpreted as a sign of survival and adaptation to new rules. From another viewpoint, this old man did not wish to let his children know his feeling of victimization. It is understandable that he wanted to let his children have a sense of confidence and protection in their nation and from the Russian state. This reindeer herder’s children probably know their family history, but that part of his father’s tragedy is not told of them yet. Therefore, they are not familiar with it.

The border between these two lines of Ngati’s story marks the transition between two epochs of the Nenets society. It is important to mention that most of the Nenets narratives are linked to the topic of collectivization in the tundra when people had to give their reindeer to the state. It is often the starting point of their storylines. Reflection of such stories marks the borderline between changing periods in the Tundra Nenets history in the tundra. However, elders tried not to talk much about Sovietization periods to keep their younger generation from feeling resentful.

In “Narratives of Personal Experience,” Labov (2011:548) states that most narratives of conflict involve linguistic devices that contribute to the polarization of protagonists and antagonists and other linguistic forms lead to the integration of participants. Farrell (2011) explains that oral culture endures in the sense that people continue to talk with one another. He concluded that

> In oral culture people are culturally conditioned so that they tend to favour cyclic patterns of thought and expression, to have a world-as-even sense of life, to put manliness to work in socially constructive ways, to use oral stories of heroes as ways to help orient and put manliness to work, and to use ritual process very effectively to promote and support socially constructive behaviour (Farrell 2011:573).

Such reconstruction of the life narratives means that people have their own chance to retell alternative narratives of their life, which helps them to realize that past events are not meaningful to them but are given significance by the configuration of one’s narrative. However, there are still voices of people who tell openly about the Nenets past:

> Here in Yamal, there are many state collective farms, where ALL reindeer belong to Russians. Tell me—asked the old man—did Russians have reindeer herding culture before? No! But why do they say that these reindeer belong to them. These reindeer belonged originally to Nenets, they belonged to Nenets families, and Russians bereaved them.

This way of talking about the experienced pain reflected that people still have a deep trauma in their memory, which continues from the times of the collectivization, and still is one of the most traumatizing events in the Nenets history. People maintain memories within their personal songs, and these songs provide a connection between their present life and their life in the past with their ancestors. It seems that when people start to sing their family songs, they are bringing their family history back to life, but in a very implicit way, which cannot be detected by their younger generation.

Looking to make stability and certitude about their future, some parents prefer to keep silent about their families past or discuss it in a superlative manner. In many situations, they explained that they consider their past to be difficult for their children to understand. However, children are told their family stories, even though they could be edited several times and transformed into new ones.
Conclusion

These two different narratives about elderly reindeer herders who are struggling with memories of their past show that their feelings are quite polarized. In their narratives, there are two separate storylines working together: one tells what people are ready to share, while another line keeps memories about the old trauma, like an aching pain. It could be reflected in the way of humming their or their fathers’ personal songs. At the same time, present sociocultural changes in the Nenets society, when people switched to speaking the Russian language, ask from people new stories about their past in Russian. Russians and Nenets are very different nations, and even the Russian language is limited to render all the diversity of performance present in the Nenets language. There is a very Nenets way of performing the tundra people’s personal songs; therefore, many of them are already lost now through acculturation. Also, different versions of collective and personal stories can mismatch because when elders transmit their narratives about transitional periods of their past, they do this with differing intents.

The Nenets do not want to talk much about difficulties of their past, much like many individuals do not like to speak about a long, serious illness. However, Nenets elders are still struggling with themselves and with memories of their personal and family tragedies. As Michele Crossley (2000:57) suggested, traumatic events in a person’s life can lead to a radical sense of disorientation and the breakdown of a coherent life story. This suggestion appears to have merit because after looking into these Nenets examples, it seems that people try to repair the life they experienced by retelling it in a way what hides the feeling of pain, sorrow, depression, disorientation, and loss. Such memories about the big historical break in the life of the tundra dwellers help to evaluate how Nenets see their past and how they tried to build their present relationship with the Russians. Consequently, it is beneficial that modern Nenets people, who now live following Russian rules, manage to save their memories about those who stayed on the other side of the Nenets history.

Endnotes

1. This paper is part of a series of publications focusing on Arctic Oral History. The series is one outcome of the Finnish Academy Project ORHELIA (Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic), decision number 251111.

2. For example, see Laptander (2014).

3. When I interviewed Nenets about their oral history, I distinguished three groups of people: old people who tell their life stories in Nenets; middle-aged and young Nenets-Russian bilinguals; and young people who do not speak Nenets language at all, but just Russian. There are also Nenets elders, who used to speak Nenets in their childhood and when they started to work switched to the Russian. Most young people do not feel any sorrow for the loss of the Nenets language and Nenets narratives. One explanation for this is that their parents simply raised them to speak Russian to help them integrate faster into Russian society, which they hope will give them a better future.

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