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Female Taboos and the Nenets System of Concepts of the Unclean

In Nenets culture, as in most others, women's behaviour is closely regulated by a system of prohibitions. Thus it is forbidden for a woman to step over tools, or equipment used in reindeer-breeding, reindeer harnesses, and lassos for catching reindeer, nor may she step over men or children. If she comes across bear tracks on the road, she may not cross them, but she must efface the tracks from the road; only then may she continue on her way. A woman may not take part in sacrifices, and she may not visit sacred sites. She is forbidden to cut through the spine of certain kinds of fish. Ethnographers have repeatedly pointed out the existence of these regulations in their works, see e.g. [Lehtisalo 1998: 90–1; Kostikov 1930: 40–1; Verbov 1937, Khomich 1966: 185–6; Khomich 1995: 195–6; Khomich 1988: 75; Golovnev 1995: 212–9; Atsusi 1997: 177–9; Kharyuchi 2001: 155–8]. Indeed, commentators invariably noted these rules straight away, as women were sometimes so obviously inconvenienced by observing them: *'More than once we happened to notice how a woman leading an anas (a convoy of sleighs) had to mend a harness that had*

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broken en route. She kept going round from one side of the sleigh to the other, never stepping on the traces, but instead always crawling under them and passing them over her head' [Kostikov 1930: 40]. The oddity of women's behaviour was striking, and for this reason not just ethnographers, but almost all travellers who have come into contact with this people have noticed the existence of particular rules for women in Nenets culture (see e.g. [Pallas 1788: 94; Lepekhin 1805: 115; Islavin 1847: 25–33; Shrenk 1855: 407; Kastren 1860: 312]).

The issue of restrictions on women's behaviour attracted the attention not only of travellers and ethnographers, but also of the Soviet authorities engaged in the 'construction of socialism' in the region.¹ For the representatives of state power, the Nenets women's observance of their own rules was a serious obstacle: traditional ideas about what Nenets women might or might not do made it difficult to attract them to join collective farms or to employ them in reindeer-breeding, fishing, hunting, etc. [Brodnev 1950]. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, restrictions on women's behaviour were often looked upon as a 'primitive survival' of tribal society, and of the division of labour according to age and sex, both of which it was necessary to overcome to enable women to achieve 'full equality of rights' and to participate fully in modern life.

It is worth noting at the outset that the Soviet regime achieved little in this respect in spite of the pressure it applied to Nenets culture over many years. Materials gathered in fieldwork on Yamal in 1998 and 2001 show that the system of prohibitions has survived almost entirely intact, and has undergone almost no change. Today not only old women, but also schoolgirls, are conversant with it [Liarskaya 1999: 273].

Curiously, this system of prohibitions has for many years not been the subject of separate, independent analysis by ethnographers. Yet, even though the latter often only mention the Nenets taboo system in passing, with reference to lists of prohibitions of varying completeness, they nonetheless usually express precise judgements about its operation.

The interpretation of the prohibitions has traditionally been based on two postulates.

1. A woman, being an outsider in her husband's family, i.e., a stranger, exudes a danger to clan deities, reindeer, tools of trade, and on these grounds she needs to be isolated as far as possible from these

¹ 'Socialist construction' referred to the plan for the transformation of Soviet society that was launched under the First Five-Year Plan, 1928–1932. It comprised crash industrialisation, forced collectivisation, and 'cultural revolution' — i.e. the transformation of infrastructure and of personal attitudes and behaviour. [Editor].

objects. (Such opinions have been ventured by L. V. Kostikov [1930: 40] and L. V. Khomich [1966: 185].)

2. A woman of child-bearing age is *fundamentally unclean*, because she menstruates, and hence harbours within herself a danger to her surroundings (almost all researchers have commented on this, e.g. [Khomich 1966; Kostikov 1930; Golovnev 1995; Kharyuchi 2001]).

I should start by saying that, in my view, explaining the prohibitions on the grounds that women belong to an alien clan, and are therefore a source of danger, is an insufficient, and often quite simply inadequate, argument.

Both previously published materials and those we collected during fieldwork [EU-Yamal 1998, 2001]¹ show that the prohibitions applied not only to wives (who by definition come from a different clan — this is an exogamous society) but also to young daughters, and to unmarried sisters living with their brothers (i.e. women who had remained among members of their own clan into childbearing age). Furthermore, in Nenets culture, restrictions on women's behaviour fall into two categories: those which all Nenets women observe, and those which apply to women of a particular clan [Liarskaya 1999: 289–91]. When a woman gets married, she ceases to observe the rules of her own clan, and is then subject to those observed by all the women of her husband's clan (e.g. his sisters) [EU-Yamal 1998, ENO, KUKh; EU-Yamal 2001, PF-7]. Therefore, one cannot claim that restrictions are imposed on a woman simply because she is an outsider in her husband's clan.

Recently, ethnographic surveys carried out by Nenets have appeared, which are notable both for the selection of material analysed and for the standpoint of the author. G. P. Kharyuchi states in her recent study that among the Nenets of the Yamal Nenets district, special sacred sites for women existed, in addition to the sacred sites for men that were extensively documented in classic ethnographical studies [Kharyuchi 2001: 97]. Furthermore, there is a particular sort of funeral wake in Nenets culture which is held inside the *chum* (Nenets tent) and is attended only by women. All women who live in the *chum* take part in it irrespective of their paternal tribal affinities [EU-Yamal 2001, PF 7].

Thus it is not the case that a woman is surrounded by prohibitions and excluded from participating in religious events on the basis of her being a 'stranger'.

Let us return to the second basis upon which explanations for the prohibitions and interpretations of them are based. It is that a

¹ The code refers to interviews carried out under the aegis of expeditions organised by the European University, St Petersburg, followed by a place name and date. [Editor].

woman of child-bearing age is considered unclean because she menstruates.

‘Uncleanliness’ of some kind is without doubt ascribed to women in Nenets culture, as can be adduced from a whole variety of material. But this begs the question of *the nature of this uncleanliness*, of what it is connected with in the Nenets consciousness, and of *how it is imagined*.

In the Nenets language, this uncleanliness is designated by the particular concept of *sya "mei*.

While an analysis of the *entire* system of ideas connected with this concept has never been the subject of separate independent research, much work has been done by Y. B. Simchenko on accomplishing this task with reference to the culture of another Samoditic people, the Nganasan [Simchenko 1990; 1996: 93–111].

It is worth noting that researchers on the Nenets usually associate concepts of uncleanliness *exclusively* with women. Thus Tereshchenko’s Nenets-Russian dictionary [Tereshchenko 1965: 608] defines this term as follows: *‘sya "mei — ethn. 1. menstruation; 2. “unclean”, “filthy” (in relation to a menstruating woman and her belongings)’*. However, after analysing material gathered during field-work as well as published material, one can claim that in practice things are slightly different; the definition given in the dictionary is not wholly accurate.

1. It is not just a woman and her things that are *sya "mei*, but everything which has become ‘unclean’ as a result of rules having been broken (the term *sya "mei* is also applied to a lasso a woman has stepped over, or to a child who has crawled beneath an unclean sledge, etc.)

2. As analysis has shown, the source of *sya "mei* is not understood by the Nenets to refer to menstruating women *only*. A newborn child and its mother, those who have died and everything connected with them (all their things, the place of burial etc.); and everyone connected with them (relatives, anyone with them at the time of death or who took part in the funeral etc.) are also sources of the same form of uncleanliness. So if a child is born during a journey, then the sledge on which it was born becomes ‘unclean’; it may not be used any longer and is immediately burnt, the deer hauling it are slaughtered, and their meat is fed to the dogs [Maksimov 1890: 541]. A *chum* in which someone has been born or has died is *sya "mei*, and is unsuitable for habitation until it has been cleansed. In literature there are references to the fact that women used to give birth in a special, separate *chum* [Khomich 1966: 177], whereas now, if the birth takes place in the tundra, then it is most likely to be in the same *chum* as the family lives in, but everyone leaves it apart from the

woman giving birth and the midwives. Furthermore, all objects that, according to the Nenets, have the capacity to spread dangerous contamination [Kharyuchi 2001: 43], are taken out of the *chum* in which a person dies [Ibid.].

When describing funerals and births, researchers tend to draw attention to the particular status possessed by the participants in these rituals, and to the rules governing the use of things forming part of them, but they do not mention the Nenets term used to describe this condition [Khomich 1966: 180, 185, 221; Lekhtisalo 1998: 103–4; Atsusi 1997, and even, in a few cases, Kharyuchi 2001]. Even if this idea is named, the authors restrict themselves to merely mentioning it, and do not provide any commentary on it at all (e.g. [Khomich 1966: 208, Khomich 1995: 188]). Let me emphasise once more that though the perception of dead bodies and funeral-goers, of new born babies and mothers, and of women of child-bearing age, as unclean manifestations, has repeatedly been described by researchers, this has never been regarded as a single system of ideas of cleanliness/purity and uncleanness/impurity.

3. The circulation and effects of all sources of *sya "mei* are strictly regulated. Thus, it is not just the behaviour of women of child-bearing age that is regulated by this system of prohibitions and rules concerning uncleanness: a man returning from the cemetery may not take part in everyday activities until he has undergone a rite of cleansing, in exactly the same way as a woman who has just finished menstruating [Kharyuchi 2001: 159], and a newborn child may not be put in a cradle, otherwise the cradle will be 'defiled' [EU-Yamal 2001, PD]. By linking the particular concept of uncleanness that is *sya "mei* exclusively with women, we run the risk of seriously distorting our perception of the Nenets world-view.

In my opinion, the notion of *sya "mei* is one of the fundamental concepts of Nenets culture. An analysis of some of the constituent parts of the principle of *sya "mei* has already been given in my earlier article [Liarskaya 1999]. In the present article, I should like to set out a few basic points to clarify the arguments of my previous article.

The materials which I have had at my disposal permit the hypothesis that everything connected with this concept is in some way *related to the perception of another, 'different', world*. Likewise, Y. B. Simchenko [1996: 98–9] and E. D. Prokofieva [1976: 127] came to the conclusion that concepts of feminine uncleanness and of the other world were linked, after analysing Nganasan materials and Selkup data respectively. By extension, analysis of the origins of perceptions of uncleanness says much about the connections between Nenets ways of seeing uncleanness and their ideas of 'the other' world.

As mentioned above, sources of uncleanness are, firstly, people, when they are *sya "mei*; and secondly objects considered by bearers of the culture to be *sya "mei*.

Those who attend funerals, new-born babies and their mothers and all women of child-bearing age fall into the *first category*.¹

It needs to be emphasised that the claim that women are fundamentally 'unclean' in themselves is false. Views concerning this 'uncleanliness' are more complicated. Women are constantly a potential source of *sya "mei*. Mary Douglas has defined the concepts connected with '*deseccration*' as a particular class of dangers, '*which are not powers vested in humans, but which can be released by human action*' [Douglas 1970: 136]. My materials confirm this in every respect. The assertion that women are not basically unclean is corroborated, firstly, by the fact that a woman can be *sya "mei* to varying degrees. And secondly by the fact that it is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the woman herself who performs rites of purification when, during her menstrual period, or immediately after giving birth, the level of her perceived 'uncleanliness' increases sharply. And, finally, by the fact that a woman herself can become the object of 'defilement' (when, by contrast, it would be hardly possible to 'defile' the source of uncleanness itself).²

Objects connected with the source of *sya "mei* (e.g. items belonging to a dead person, the *chum* in which a woman has given birth, floorboards, hearth sheet,³ women's shoes and bags for keeping them in, women's clothing worn below the waist,⁴ sleighs used for carrying these things and the reindeer that pull them. etc.) fall into the *second category*.

The spreading of uncleanness attracts misfortune, illness and bad luck to the 'defiled' person, his or her family or to the owner of a 'defiled' object. Certain rules need to be observed to prevent the spread of *sya "mei*. Should they be broken, voluntarily or involuntarily,⁵ misfortune can be avoided by carrying out procedures of purification.

The classic principle forbidding the mixing of 'clean' and 'unclean' forms the basis of rules for the prevention of the spread of unclean-

¹ See [Liarskaya 1999] for a more detailed treatment of which women are considered *sya "mei*.

² See [Liarskaya 1999] for more detail.

³ [Golovnev 1995] suggests that this object is considered 'unclean' is because it covers the opening to the 'underworld'.

⁴ This appears primarily to be outer clothing and that worn below the waist. (See [Liarskaya 1999] for a more detailed description.)

⁵ In this sense, Nenets views on uncleanness completely coincide with the rule formulated by Douglas: '*pollution can be committed intentionally, but the intention is irrelevant to its effect*' [Douglas 1970: 136].

liness. While people are *sya"mei*, they must be isolated as far as possible from the rest of society; they can only return to normal life after undergoing procedures of purification. At other times, the spread of 'uncleanliness' is prevented by the observation of established norms.

According to Nenets tradition, in the majority of cases, 'defilement' occurs not through physical contact, but when the source of *sya"mei* happens to pass *over* that which may be defiled. A woman may touch a lasso, a reindeer harness or a *simzy* (sacred tent-pole) — which she is expected to pitch whatever happens — as much as she likes with her hands. Nor will anything bad happen if a woman touches a child or a man. The only things (according to our materials, which we do not claim to be exhaustive) a woman may not touch during her menstrual period are the objects kept in the sacred sleigh. In all other cases, both those recorded by us, and those described in the literature, a woman has to *sit on* or *lie on*, or *step on* or *step over*, an object to make it unclean.

From this is derived the fundamental rule that can be seen operating in Nenets culture: 'clean' people and objects must avoid coming *beneath* the source of uncleanliness, and conversely, whoever can pass on 'uncleanliness' must not pass *over* anything or anyone clean. Thus, for example, a woman may not step over a man, a child, clothes, equipment used for reindeer breeding and hunting, or fishing tackle. She may not enter a *chum* from behind the hearth (the Nenets regard this as a 'clean' space), or walk around the outside of the *chum*, nor may she visit 'male' sacred places.

It should be noted that although such prohibitions are often characterised as prohibitions for women, *not just women of childbearing age, but anybody else as well, has the capacity to break these rules and thus make someone or something sya"mei*. Men (and children) may not therefore pass beneath women's clothing when this is hung out to dry, put on women's shoes, or clean or lay down floorboards; nobody may put boots in the 'clean' area behind the hearth [Kharyuchi 2001: 138], nobody may pick buttons and belts up off the ground (by tradition, the belts and buttons of a dead person's clothes are cut off and thrown away — if one picks up a belt it may belong to a dead person [Ibid.: 149], one must not put tools on an unclean sleigh etc. And conversely, this same system of rules assigns particular actions to men: only they may prepare pike, sturgeon and burbot, they must sit cross-legged, and never stretch their legs out etc. Thus the rules connected with the concept of *sya"mei* regulate the life of the entire group.

The spread of 'uncleanliness' beyond the permitted boundaries, as we have said, endangers the life, health and fortunes of the family in which the 'defilement' has taken place. This can be avoided by

observing the rules and, if necessary, carrying out the rites of purification.¹

What happens, then, if a prohibition is broken, but no purification is takes place?

It has long been noted that breaking a prohibition does not endanger the transgressor herself (see [Simchenko 1990; Golovnev 1995: 214]). The principle of the effects of the prohibition is simple — if reindeer lassos, harnesses and staffs become *sya "mei*, then one will be out of luck where reindeer are concerned, if fishing tackle is defiled, fish will be hard to catch, and if a woman steps over a man's legs, the man may become unwell or suffer ill-fortune, primarily where reindeer are concerned. This set of perceptions undoubtedly placed a great responsibility on women for the well being of their family and clan: they were seen, in most cases, as the source of danger, and by breaking the prohibitions they could harm not so much themselves personally, as the health of their immediate family and household.

Sya "mei, then, is a particular kind of uncleanness; the concept has no parallels in Russian. It is a type of uncleanness associated with 'another' world. In my view, *sya "mei* is one of the central concepts of Nenets culture: rules and norms regulating the life of the entire group are connected with it. The prohibitions and prescriptions concerning women undoubtedly occupy a particularly important place in this system of ideas, but nevertheless only form part of it; in seeing them in isolation from other parts of the system, we run the risk of severely distorting the overall picture.

In conclusion, I should like to return again to the question of why the persistent and single-minded campaign against the observation of traditional female norms by the Soviet authorities ended in failure. If the uncleanness ascribed to women had been related only to their inferior status, and women had been declared unclean only because they were women, the activity of the Soviet campaigners for equal rights for women might have met with some success: they would have been able to convince Nenets women that they were in no way inferior to men, and that it was only prejudice that prevented them from hunting, from cutting through the spines of fish, and from going where they liked. But in fact, the Nenets regard these rules as being connected with much more profound concepts. And in addition, so far as I know, Nenets women did not in fact (and do not in fact) feel that having to observe these prescriptions meant that they were being denigrated or their rights constricted.

A Nenets woman of the Yamal considers that the life and well-being

¹ For a more detailed description see [Kharyuchi 2001: 159-61].

of her nearest and dearest and the fate of her family and children, rather than her own health as such, depends on how she behaves and how precisely she observes these regulations. In my view, this very *sense of responsibility* prevented Nenets women from breaking age-old laws. Their position is comparable to that of workers in a plant handling dangerous chemicals, who have their own individual means of protection; it is not primarily their own safety, but that of those around them, that depends on whether or not they observe established regulations on the production line. If one is to extend the metaphor, the struggle for equal rights for women would appear akin to a call to ignore elementary safety precautions in a dangerous industrial process.

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