

# “We Are Not Dead Souls”

## The Good Petroleum Fairies and the Spirits of the Taiga in Subarctic Siberia

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*To Anna Randoma (1979–2018)*

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**Abstract:** Through the example of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, which has become one of the country’s main energy hubs (accounting for 62 percent of Russian oil production) and a pioneer in matters of native rights, this article sheds light on what is at stake in the Siberian taiga of the early twenty-first century between two worlds that, over the years, have variously clashed, assisted each other, and ignored each other. Based primarily on fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2018, as well as on interviews with local cultural and economic actors, the article outlines a local aspect of a history in movement that is still to be written.

**Keywords:** indigenous people; Khanty herders; Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra; oil companies; sacred landscape

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In Siberia, even vodka is akin to oil. Take, for example, the *Neft’* (oil) brand. The brainchild of three engineers who came to the area in the early 1970s to work in the local oil industry, it was designed to evoke the epic of black gold of the North—and can now be found on store shelves in truer-than-life 0.7-liter barrels. *Neft’* is aimed toward a young, male, urban, and well-to-do clientele, pitching itself as a symbol of success. Perfume, too, embraces the spirit of the land: in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, a perfume called Crystal Flame, which is part of the “Precious Towns of Yugra” range, mixes, according to its creator, “the subtle aroma of the purest snow, the blue-green foliage of the snow-covered Siberian pine, the ardent and blood-orange flame of an oil platform, the oil bubbling up from the bowels of the earth, a fiendishly powerful flaring that rends the sky, the open spaces of the North, the melody of Khanty songs and the energy of the beautiful, strong and young city of Surgut.”<sup>1</sup> Even the coats of arms of some raions, towns, and cities of this district of Western Siberia display stylized black drops that represent oil.

The way of life of the local communities that traditionally populated the banks of the Ob River and its tributaries underwent a massive upheaval with the development of gas and oil fields on their lands.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, indigenous integration into this space, which occurs through shamanism and (semi)nomadism, may be contrasted with the industrial expansion of *promyshlennoe osvoenie*, the “industrial conquest.” Does *osvoenie*, which comes from the verb *osvoit’*, not mean “to make something one’s own”? The massive influx of non-native populations, the destruction of sites for the living and the dead, the massive extraction of natural resources, and the growth of cities and infrastructure linked to their industrial exploitation in the Far North all attest to the appropriation, by agents of industrial development, of the vital spaces of the Khanty, Mansi, and Forest Nenets, or rather of those

families who remain tied to the taiga and its economic activities, and which number around 2,500 people.<sup>3</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1960s, reindeer herders have often had to change pasturelands or encampments in the face of the advance of industrial civilization, as the Russian state has laid railways, charted roads, test-drilled the earth, cut down forests, and erected—like new species of poisonous flowers—derricks and gas stacks. Relations between the promoters of industrial development and local communities have been far from uniform. After the violent industrialization of the 1980s, which forced a large number of families to leave their clan territories without compensation and rent asunder the social fabric of the reindeer herders and the hunters-fishermen of the taiga, the so-called Oil People and Forest People began a period of more or less civilized dialogue. However, despite the enactment of official legislation to guarantee the rights of natives—such as Articles 69 and 72 of the Constitution of 1993<sup>4</sup>—and despite presidential speeches, such as the one given on May 1, 2004, in which it was claimed that “the greatest riches of the North are not even oil and gas, but the cultures of the peoples of the North, in all their diversity,”<sup>5</sup> the situation on the ground remains complex.

### **The Good Fairies of Surgutneftegaz**

The Oil People have worked in the Russian Far North for three generations. During Soviet times, there were too few managerial staff; moreover, many of them had no education to equip them for working in the Far North and were almost entirely unaware of the Arctic environment and its local communities. Earning “long rubles” (that is, increased salaries) owing to the conditions, they contributed to building the dreamed-of society. Heroes of the regime, the Soviet people, and the calendar—according to a decree of August 28, 1965, the first Sunday in September is the Day of Workers in the Oil, Gas, and Energy Industries—they were presented as patriots working both for the common good and for the modernization of the country. Their real or supposed tussle with nature alone gave them some status and legitimated general enthusiasm. However, society at large—no doubt intoxicated by slogans such as “Oil at any price!”—did not even begin to ponder what upheavals in physical and human geography might be occurring beyond the Urals. Workers in the gas and oil industry received state awards. As champions of Soviet propaganda, their praises were sung in the media and books, which painted an ideal portrait of these paragons of virtue, said to embody a simple and healthy life of work in the service of the common good. Poems and songs, such as this one by Lenar Khalikov, celebrated these heroes for bringing back earthly manna from a romantic and exotic Russian East:

Come on, let's smoke, my oil friend,  
Let's chat about this and that,  
About how one yearns for one's home, for example,  
About how far away it is.  
Sometimes one desires  
To forget that there is oil in the land,  
That with it, in a pipeline, life flows by;  
There is no other, beyond it.  
But all will go well for us  
So long as we remember, you and I:

Oil is not like a woman,  
Oil is like a man.  
The atlas may well not give the exact location  
Of Kogalym or Langepas,  
And Uray may be reduced to a point,  
But for us, there are no towns more important than these!  
And Naryan-Mar has joined  
Our oil fraternity today,  
Warm, rich,  
With a generous soul.  
And we are the happiest people on this earth,  
When in a new borehole,  
We dance up to our belts  
In oil, merry, black, young!<sup>6</sup>

Around the mid-1970s, however, the image and exploits of the *neftianiki* began to be viewed with greater qualification, if not in public opinion, then at least in some circles that were sensitive to the “shameless pillage of the North,”<sup>7</sup> which had seen the lands of many families of herders and hunters-fishermen expropriated and the nine seasonal villages on the banks of the Agan River abandoned by their inhabitants—the oil boom had made living there impossible. Henceforth, the title *neftianiki*, a general term for those involved with the oil industry, was considered bittersweet: such work was vital for the country’s independence but brought with it bitter fruit. Accordingly, in their official speeches, politicians began to emphasize the need to reconcile the exploitation of natural resources, on the one hand, with the local inhabitants’ way of life, on the other. Similarly, in their statutes or professions of faith, oil companies declared their good will toward the local environment and the communities of herders and hunters-fishermen living there. One example is the code of conduct the local oil company Surgutneftegaz produced for staff working in the far north of the Beloiarsk raion in the Numto Nature Park, itself created in January 1997:

The Numto Nature Park is called “the gem of the North.” It was created to preserve the unique ecological systems and traditional way of life of the Forest Nenets and Khanty of Kazym. In its task of production on this territory, Surgutneftegaz understands that the company must not ruin the integrity of the immemorial natural environment of the peoples of the Far North. Every worker here has to know that it is prohibited to bring alcohol, weapons, dogs, hunting and fishing equipment, explosives, or dangerous chemical products into the Nature Park. It is also prohibited to go outside the bounds of the workplace, even during breaks, to collect mushrooms, hunt, or gather wild plants. It is formally prohibited to touch or take sacrificial fabrics, whether they are found in trees or have already fallen to the ground, as it is to visit, profane, photograph, or film sacred sites and places of worship. We are responsible from an administrative and penal point of view: do not disturb and above all do not kill animals, birds, or fish; do not touch hunting and fishing areas or encampment constructions. Be as quiet as possible during the reindeer birthing season, which lasts from the end of April to mid-August.

Remember: we are guests here. Respect the masters of these places, their culture, and their traditions.<sup>8</sup>

A cartoon animation was chosen to make the information more accessible and appealing to the oil company workers. In fact, this choice probably enabled a form of distancing or even

humor at the expense of the Forest People, since it arguably sugarcoated a serious situation and played down the violence of human experiences.

Surgutneftegaz has engaged in a twofold policy of internal and external communication. For its personnel and collaborators, the company conceived a memorandum and printed 500 copies. The twenty-nine-page document, which contains a bibliography of about twenty ethnographic, anthropological, and legislative texts, as well as a map of the nature park's various administrative zones and an appendix of the company's rules of good conduct, was written in cooperation with Natalia and Pavel Vylla, two Nenets from the "national"<sup>9</sup> town of Numto, which is located on the border between the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug and the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug:

It is necessary to know how to engage in a reasoned dialogue with the Oil People to find a compromise. The leadership of OAO Surgutneftegaz's environmental security and exploitation is a reliable partner: its specialists have been able to further understanding among the Oil People and the native communities. Our shared project is working well and is highly respected; our neighbors from Nadym, for example, take our memorandum as an example.

We are grateful to the ecologists for the considerable work done and are ready to work together in a fruitful way. Our system of knowledge, our expertise must serve this earth, since it is here that we were born and grew up. Our lands will be those of the generations to come and it is essential to preserve our culture, our habits and our customs, our traditional way of life.<sup>10</sup>

The memorandum presents the history of the nature park, which was created in January 1997 by a decree of the governor of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, as well as the historical, ethnographic, and ecological wealth of the native cultures that have developed in it. It also draws on the work of renowned Finno-Ugrian scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as of contemporary indigenous intelligentsia, such as Tatiana Moldanova, to explain the religious system of the Khanty and Nenets and their essential link with nature. The memorandum synthesizes information, explains key points, and informs its staff, who are often completely unaware of anything to do with the Far North and only go there for a short period of their careers. Do the oil workers read this document? Does it get translated into action? It has the considerable merit of existing and of making a claim to be enacting federal legislation to protect the rights of the peoples of the Siberian North at the local level. And it gives those company employees who are interested a certain degree of access to the universe on which they are encroaching.



**Figure 1.** Natalia and Pavel Vylla. *Source:* Photo by the author, 2006.

Parallel to this internal information campaign, Surgutneftegaz, which claims to be using increasingly effective technologies to ensure environmental protection, also takes action among the native community itself.<sup>11</sup> By way of compensation for the industrial exploitation to which some areas of the park have been subjected since 1999, the company decided to invest in its eponymous town. Perhaps it is because the *Mish ekh*, the taiga spirits that help humans when hunting, never leave their rivers, lakes, or forest villages that a good fairy, Liubov' Malyshkina, emerged to watch over the cradle of the village.<sup>12</sup> Since 2007, Malyshkina has been Surgutneftegaz's director of environmental security and natural resource exploitation; she first joined the company in 1979 upon completing her studies. Among the awards she has received from Surgutneftegaz is that of the "honorary *neftianik*" (honorary oil worker), awarded in 2009.

This good fairy is of her time: she holds a seat in the дума of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, to which she was reelected for a new term in September 2016. She is convinced that it is important to establish personal relationships with the indigenous populations in order to bring people's viewpoints closer together. Accordingly, in recent years, with the agreement of the authorities of Beloiarsk raion, Surgutneftegaz has contributed substantially to the village of Numto, improving the quality of life of the 200 people living there by financing the construction of twenty houses, a post office, a medical center, a fire station, and an Orthodox chapel—at a cost of 3.5 million rubles—devoted to Philophei, the first metropolitan of Tobolsk and All Siberia, who, in the early eighteenth century, conducted the evangelization campaigns desired by Peter the Great.<sup>13</sup>

Each year, Surgutneftegaz pours millions of rubles into the village community, directly or indirectly procuring for its inhabitants items ranging from manufactured products to building materials. Moreover, on December 28, 2018, the children of the encampments of Numto Nature Park gathered in a clubhouse built by the Oil People to welcome *Ded Moroz* (the

Russian Santa Claus), who arrived in a Surgutneftegaz-chartered helicopter to hand out presents from the Oil People to the schoolchildren. Another individual to descend from the skies in this sunshine-yellow helicopter, also sporting a beard and long robe, was Father Evgenii from the Khanty-Mansiisk and Surgut diocese, who came to celebrate the holy liturgy for adults who had converted to Orthodoxy in the village chapel financed by the company.<sup>14</sup> That year, for the second year running, Surgutneftegaz also regularly cleared a *zimnik* (a passable road for the winter) to maintain the village's link with the rest of the world. While it is true that this artery enables the inhabitants to move around and transport the things they require, it also enables the company to transport men and materials for its own needs: Numto is one of those villages that, despite seventy years of Soviet rule, still has electricity for only a few hours a day and is without running water. In these ways, Surgutneftegaz makes reassurances about its ability to preserve the ecosystem during its exploration and drilling operations in the Numto Nature Park, but also declares its intention to open up, develop, and civilize the village.

Some of the villagers seem to participate in this process, whether by working in the company, like Aleksandr Moldanov, or simply by enjoying the advantages brought by this sudden interest in their community. Beyond the positive aspects that such investment entails, however, many questions clearly arise from the imbalance of power between this large company, which is omnipresent and has a de facto monopoly, and the small community. These relations bring with them novelties as well as a dependency that the stronger party could, should it feel the need, choose to instrumentalize. Moreover, the example of Numto highlights, on the one hand, the risk that a relationship may develop between business and political circles to the detriment of the common good if a society is not careful and, on the other, the risk that communities may sell their own soul and hasten their own disappearance.

Such an outcome would run directly counter to the pioneering legislative measures that have been established in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug since 1996. Indeed, since the second regional Duma (1996–2000), there has been the Assembly of Representatives of the Native Minority Peoples of the North from the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra: its president is the vice president of the okrug and all its members (the number of whom varies from three to six out of thirty depending on the Duma) are elected deputies. Eremai Aipin, a Khanty of the East, has been the assembly's president since 2011 and, together with Mansi deputies Tat'iana Gogoleva and Nadezhda Alekseeva, has formulated draft bills based on norms of international law. For twenty years, the assembly has laid the juridical foundations for indigenous matters at the regional level: twelve laws and more than sixty provisions and other legislative acts have been passed on the initiative of its members.

These include bills on indigenous languages, on the *obshchiny* (communities), on indigenous activities on lands in traditional use, on folklore, on factories, and on media support for native languages. On November 8, 2005, on the initiative of the assembly, the regional Duma adopted on first reading bill 92-03, "On the Sacred Sites of the Native Minority People of Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra," which comprised nine articles and was modified on October 12, 2009, in line with the recommendations of a commission that also included deputies representing oil companies and industrial cities.<sup>15</sup> In similar fashion, in 2011 the Sustainable Development Plan of the Native Minority Peoples of the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East—a bill that was passed at the federal level in 2009—was adopted in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug.<sup>16</sup> Besides this legislative work, various other works "on the ground" attest to the assembly's track record: the Department of Affairs of Minority Peoples of the North, the Theatre of Finno-Ugric Peoples, and two institutions

that together now form the Institute of Applied Research and Development of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug.

### **A French Goddess in the Northern Urals**

One no longer knows how to live. There are men who have never seen the sun rise, women who no longer drink humanly, children who no longer speak the language of their grandparents, new towns without soul in which humanity is prisoner of its real or supposed progress. When Mansi deputy Tat'iana Gogoleva suggested that I participate in *Jilpy saly koltagyl* (The New House of the Reindeer), a project of the Assembly of Representatives of the Native Minority Peoples of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, I accepted immediately. To me, it seemed that the project—building a house in the northern Urals with the help of Gazprom Transgaz Yugorsk so that a destitute Mansi family could have reindeer again and remain on its lands—was a challenge to the disenchantment of the native world. This was not merely a pilot project: it was the fulfillment of a promise made by Gogoleva to the former reindeer herder Saveli Sambindalov in 2011 under the moon above the Ritual Games of the Bears in the village of Leplia.

When the helicopter landed in the Sambindalovs' summer encampment, the earth shook. Or perhaps it was only my heart pounding, just as a hero's heart must pound before he awakens a sleeping dragon. We unloaded the building materials and bags of food, had tea, and entered our summer quarters. For ten days, we got to know one another: the hosts—Saveli, his wife, Tamara, their four sons, one of their daughters, and their grandson—and us, the visitors. And each day, each of us in his or her own way leaned over the “wooden cradle,” as the fairies lean over the heroine's cradle in a fairytale, to give the best of ourselves for the house about to be born. When the team of carpenters set to work at dawn on the first day of construction, the lost sky in the clouds had the appearance of an unmade bed. I was asked to bury a coin in the earth. I pulled one from my pocket; it had an effigy of Marianne on it. But this figure of the French Republic was not legal tender here; in the eyes of the others, she was merely a “French Goddess” that I draped in Mansi Mother-Earth for eternity and the well-being of the household. And then, over on the hill, offerings were made to the master spirit of the place.

The Sambindalovs' house emerged before our eyes, born of trees, rubber foam, and our hands. It was a victory over the void and renunciation. It bears witness for all the houses whose obscure birth and death no one had cared to mark in a register, for all the seasonal villages abandoned forcibly or willingly during the Soviet era, during the war of the Kazym or the many others that happened across Siberia, during the Great Terror, the Great Patriotic War, industrialization. It bears witness for a family, a river, a way of life, a world in which the heroes build their dignity with their own hands: they are responsible for themselves, in danger, naked. The log house is a hymn to cohabitation with nature: the seventy-odd reindeer bought at Yamal and transported nearly 1,000 kilometers to the north of Beloiarsk raion, the master spirits of the place, the local spirits of game and fish.





**Figure 2.** Some of the Participants in the *Jilpy saly koltagyl* Project. *Source:* Photo by the author, 2013.

The Sambindalov house is a wager on life. This house is neither a museum nor a heritage, but a creation. The gods who lacerate their own faces, cursing the pettiness of men, will be able to continue to travel the earth on their celestial mount. Soon, the clear-eyed windows will look out to see human lives go by, generations of reindeer herders will follow one another to the taiga, young children will play on their computers as the fish flirt with death and women twirl around, like the clear color of day, to cook the household's bread. In my thoughts, a rainbow straddled our *chum*.<sup>17</sup>

On the day of our departure, the dragonfly—the name given by Khanty of Kazym to the helicopter—took possession of the sky. Let the Sambindalovs be happy in their new house, close to Lake Turvat, a sacred site for the Mansi. Geologists, gold diggers, and poachers look at this site through different eyes. Now it has become necessary to legislate, if not to prevent, then at least to limit, access to the Sambindalovs' territory. For the family, the wealth of this land is in its lichen, as this will enable reindeer husbandry, which vanished from here in fraught circumstances more than twenty years ago, to come back to life. Perhaps families, weary of dragging around their despair or of drinking, will also be reborn in the villages and towns. In the taiga, no idleness is possible: the herder and his loved ones are always busy doing something.

The Assembly of Representatives of the Minority Native Peoples of the North of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug does remarkable work in providing information about laws that have been enacted and are going into effect, yet the situation remains complex. Indeed, concessions must be made to federal laws, which sometimes complicate the reality on



the ground. Accordingly, federal law number 95, dated July 4, 2003, entered into effect on January 1, 2005, shifting twenty-four areas of jurisdiction over which the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug had exercised full authority to the Tyumen region—that is to say, back to the administrative system of the Soviet era. Similarly, amendments made to federal laws since 2013 have dealt a new hand.

### **The Spirit of Laws and the Law of the Spirits**

Against a backdrop of exponential industrial expansion, notably in sub-Arctic and Arctic Siberia, Russian legislation in 1995 established the category of “specially protected natural territories” (OORT for *osobo okhraniaemye prirodnye territorii*). The aim of this classification is to protect from exploitation territories considered important from a biological, historical, ethnic, cultural, and/or scientific point of view. In 2017, there were twenty-five such territories in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, amounting to 2,594,373 hectares, or 4.85 percent of the surface area of the okrug. The subsequent establishment, in 2001, of the category “territories of traditional natural use” (*territorii traditsionnogo prirodopol’zovaniia* in Russian) had a twofold aim: to protect nature and to create the living conditions required by minority native peoples.

Yet new legislation adopted in 2013 excludes the “territories in traditional usage” of the native peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East from the list of “specially protected natural territories.” For the 525,000 hectares of the Numto Nature Park, which had been made an OORT by gubernatorial decree no. 71 of January 28, 1997, this has meant the lifting of prohibitions on constructing industrial complexes, roads, oil and gas pipelines, electrical lines, agricultural farms, etc. The decision affects some three hundred permanent inhabitants, the majority of whom are Khanty from Kazym or Forest Nenets.

Moreover, various amendments to the federal property code, which came into effect on March 1, 2016, have repealed an article stipulating that, where territories on which native peoples live and perform traditional activities are concerned, local authorities’ decision to “create a project” should be based above all on the result of public consultations or inquiries undertaken among the local communities. As such, local authorities have lost a form of legal leverage by which they used to be able to safeguard territories and a share of their natural resources.

In this unfavorable context, the effective boundaries of the Numto Nature Park were recently challenged. For twenty years now, some of the park’s zones have been completely off-limits to exploitation, while others are open to partial exploitation, and a third group to exploration and drilling. To date, around 60 percent of the park’s surface area has been subjected to oil exploitation, with more than nine million tons of oil extracted. Since 2016, however, Surgutneftegaz has been insisting that the situation has changed and that these zone delimitations are no longer valid: the park’s boundaries, the company claims, no longer need to be fixed, arguing that it now has the scientific knowledge to enable it to extract oil and to respect ecology. Malyshkina makes statements to appease the spirits: all works will be carried out with the greatest possible caution, she claims, “because Surgutneftegaz collaborates with the State Hydrology Institute, because the stakes are also high for the company—if things are done badly, the landscape will change and the drilling infrastructure will collapse, making a given site unusable.”<sup>18</sup>

In the face of the mistrust and anger of a large share of the inhabitants, who do not wish to see “[their] children forced to eat berries in places where oil has spilled,”<sup>19</sup> as Nadezhda Moldanova, president of the Youth Association of Finno-Ugric Peoples from 2012 to 2015, put it, public inquiries have been organized since February 2016 to enable all sides to present their viewpoints and have them discussed. The inquiry’s meetings bring together native

families, biologists, Surgutneftegaz representatives, and the district authorities. At one such meeting, held in Beloiarsk on February 25 and attended by eighty participants, the atmosphere was becoming more or less charged depending on the moment. Proposals were put forward that the stakeholders attempt to come to a more consensual agreement on redefining the boundaries. Then, on June 21, a working group came together in to discuss this question and further improve the agreement, a final version of which was subsequently submitted to the federal government for expert appraisal. Shortly thereafter, between September 26 and 28, 2018, Beloiarsk hosted the biennial “Native Peoples. Environment. Oil. Law” conference. Surgutneftegaz organized transport, enabling Numto villagers and families from remote seasonal villages in the raion to attend the conference. Between 120 and 150 people participated in the event, including Natalia Strebkova, the district’s plenipotentiary for human rights.

What arguments are exchanged at such meetings? Typically, Surgutneftegaz uses a twofold argument to legitimate its project. The first argument is scientific: the company deploys expert assessments to argue that the natural environment will not be affected at all. The company has set up biological monitoring on its drilling sites and also monitors the hydrological regime of the marshes. The scientists confirm that the mining sites have not had any significant impact on the park’s ecosystems. The second argument is financial: the company argues that its very presence in the Numto Nature Park has allowed it to invest almost 22 billion rubles in the economy of the Beloiarsk raion to date. It has also spent more than 120 million rubles in the framework of agreements signed with the local authorities and the park’s management. Moreover, the taxes paid by the company funnel billions of rubles into the region’s coffers each year: one year it paid more than 85 billion rubles, or 40 percent of the entire budget of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug.

For their part, the Khanty and Nenets families who manifest antipathy or opposition to mining activities (in which they are supported by Greenpeace Russia) make an argument that runs along the following lines. First, from an ecological viewpoint, they argue that the area targeted by Surgutneftegaz is the habitat of protected animal and vegetable species (listed in the Red Book of the Russian Federation) and the migratory site of almost 150 species of birds and elk. Its marshy areas serve a regulatory function for the hydrological regime of seven rivers that flow into the Ob River and the Arctic Ocean and are used by inhabitants of the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous okrugs. In addition, industrial exploitation of the site has already weakened the permafrost, which is starting to melt. Second, from an ethical viewpoint, they argue that the exploitation of the area is tantamount to its desecration, since the Numto Nature Park contains a number of sacred sites.<sup>20</sup> The entire exploitable area includes 134 sacred sites, 18 sites of historical and cultural character, and two cemeteries; the zone exploited by the oil companies includes 52 sites of historical and cultural character.

To shed light on this ethical argument, it should be recalled that, depending on the particular map of the world of a given Khanty group, the universe appears either horizontal, revolving around the Ob, the sacred river—its upper stream being the higher world, its middle stream the middle world, and its mouth the world below—or vertical, with an arc of the skies as the higher earth (*mūv*), the earth as the middle earth, and an arc of the earth’s crust as the earth below. Each of these spaces is inhabited by god and spirits: well-meaning ones up high and those impacting the life cycle (from life to death) below. As for the middle earth, it is peopled by human beings, the children and grandchildren of the celestial Torum, as well as by a number of spirits of the taiga, master spirits of rivers, of lakes, and so on.<sup>21</sup> Humans obtain good luck in hunting and fishing in proportion to the strength of their relations with these supernatural entities. Accordingly, ethics defines “that which is done” or “is not done” (*an raxaŋ*), as well as acts of apology for offenses committed against the masters of the sites:

bowing down, offering sacrifice. Each space linked to a god, a spirit, an economic activity, the memory of a hero thus becomes a sacred place (*iim, em*): hills, islands, rivers, copses, rocks.



**Figure 3.** The World of Anna Randoma, a Khanty Woman from Kazym. *Source:* Drawing given to the author by Anna Randoma (1979–2018).

The landscape is thus a network of sites that have meaning for the herder or the hunter-fisherman and of negotiable ties that either protect or doom him. For example, a tree, though a simple log in the eyes of the timber industry, can testify to the sacred, with prayer ribbons, or host memorial traces (notches). As Eremai Aipin, a writer and Khanty deputy from the East, explains:

It is our custom to make notches on the trees. This is also an epigraph in its genre, one that shows the start of a path or a trail for the sleds, the place at which one draws alongside a river or a lake, the place at which to cast one's nets in a *starica* or a tributary. If cuts are then made out of the notches, these are already memorial traces. We leave them at places of luck for hunting, places where one has spent the night and stopped, places of encounter between two or several travelers in the taiga. On the pontoons, on the trees, cuts are also often to be seen. Because here beings have met and separated.

This reminds me of one such trace that my father made the year I went from kindergarten to first grade. He was a breeder; he put the reindeer herd of the kolkhoz out to pasture this side of the Amputa River, a tributary of our natal river, the Agan. At the beginning of September, he took me on a team of four reindeer to boarding school in the village of Var'iogan. We went, as the Ostyaks say, via the black earth. A team of reindeer rarely covers long distances on black earth, doing so only in cases of the highest necessity. Our journey was long. At nightfall, in the density of the twilight, we stopped for the night close to the bank of a river, on some good lichen. We made a fire, drank some tea, and slept on mats of pine needles. In the morning after breakfast, before our team set off, papa got out his ax from beneath the seat. And on an average-age pine, he made some notches and two cuts. Only afterward did he explain to me: "This stands as a memory of you and me. The tree is still young, solid: it will remain standing there for a long time still. One day, if you pass by here with someone, you will recall our

stopover, our night spent at this place. You will say: here is the exact place that I stopped with my father, we spent the night here and made some tea. The hearth is ready for people who stop here again.”<sup>22</sup>

As an integral part of nature, the human being must remove only what he has need of. The reason for this is twofold. First, without partners in nature, he will end up dooming himself. Second, the semi-nomadic way of life renders hoarding vain: mother earth is rich and will provide, for the individual and the community, all that is needed. This is jokingly expressed by Piotr Longortov, a Khanty of the North, who himself refuses to hoard: “We live like bears. There is fish and reindeer meat: what else do we need?”<sup>23</sup>

We should explain that the aforementioned Surgutneftegaz memorandum tries to account for this inherent bond between the native communities of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug and their environment. In the words of Tat’iana Moldanova:

For those who have grown up on the lands of Kazym and have been raised in a traditional milieu, all this earth is nothing other than a living embodiment of the goddess of Kazym; all is permeated with her spirit, with her presence: on that lake over there, for example, the mallard is perhaps the goddess, and over here on this tree, this sable is probably the scrutinizing goddess, and in each house, the green cat eyes of the goddess inevitably welcome you. Everything on this earth is living, sacred. Look at the tree roots, they are the snake-braids of the goddess; if you see them in a dream, you will heal without fail. In the grass, the lizards are the laces of its fur-lined coat, and in the air, attached to the end of its scarf, are small chickadees. If you see a fish in a river, it is the chainmail coat, similar to the scales of a small fish, of the goddess. In the surroundings, all is borrowed from the goddess’ powerful spirit: it protects, provides strength, gives support in difficult moments.<sup>24</sup>

In an era when Russia has a law against offending the sentiments of believers (enacted in 2013), we may more easily understand why Pavel Vylla of Numto village cried out during a public consultation that Lake Numto was, for the Nenets and the Khanty of the region, what the Orthodox Church was for the Russians.

Although Surgutneftegaz bases its pleas on its own expertise and its officially irreproachable work in the Numto Nature Park since 1999, its discourse is unacceptable for many families. In 2017—that is, twenty years after the park was made an OORT—the sub-Arctic ecosystem is already burdened by seventy wells on seventeen mining sites, 510 kilometers of high voltage electrified lines, 585 kilometers of gas pipelines, 1,153 kilometers of roads, and quarries mining various raw materials. If, officially, the negative fallout has had an essentially local character (concentration of oil materials, phenol, lead, or uranium) to date, exponentially expanding exploitation would weaken the ecosystem, diminishing its biodiversity and thereby jeopardizing the traditional economic activities and way of life of the Khanty and Nenets of the region.

The company’s plans are also regarded with suspicion due to previous experience at another sacred site. Significantly, during one of the public consultations, Khanty breeder Aleksandr Aipin was denied permission to show photos and videos of the consequences of Surgutneftegaz’s work for the sacred site of Imlor, despite having the support of the majority of those present. The elements of the Imlor experience seem to explain the issues with the dialogue initiated between the Oil People and the Forest People.

In 2014, a conflict broke out over this sacred place in Nizhnevartovsk raion between Surgutneftegaz and Sergei Kechimov, a reindeer herder, shaman, and guardian of Lake Imlor,<sup>25</sup> who received this office from the preceding guardian and shaman, Boris Antonovich. Since 2011, the company has been mining the shores of the lake on the perimeter of the Fedorovskoye deposit which, according to official estimates, contains one million tons of oil. According to Kechimov, whose traditional clan territory is now surrounded by roads,

wells, and pumps, these operations have continuously degraded the environment, and therefore living conditions. Oil regularly leaks into Lake Imlor, killing birds; the reindeer that drink the contaminated water die; the outlet pipes become blocked up by sand, foam, and waste, leaving the fall and spring water unable to pass through. Kechimov wonders how many trees and plants have dried out as a result, how many animals and fish have died, and how many will never be born.

Thanks to a camera—provided by a journalist from Tuva and the Komi-Permyak president of an association of cultural centers—a tablet, and a drone, the guardian of the lake has been watching the domain of *Sorni nai* (the golden goddess) since a project launched in April 2012 to protect the lake by including it on the district's cultural heritage register was scrapped under pressure from the company and the governor. He has observed that the development of the site has allowed strangers to access the area—including poachers, who litter, place nets (one day Kechimov removed eighteen of them), and even build hunting cabins—whereas he, the descendant of several generations of Khanty breeders, cannot enter or exit his own lands without showing a pass at the oil company's control point.<sup>26</sup> This man, who fled boarding school several times in his childhood to return to the forest, now lives there, but in internal exile: in recent years, he has had to build a home seven times, in different areas of his clan territory, due to the encroachment of industry.

The herder denounces the methods of the *neftianiki*: according to him, it is not rare for them to use intimidation, threats, the name of the district's governor or of the president of the Russian Federation, and even one's limited knowledge of Russian to influence an interlocutor or force their hand. (In response to the last concern, Kechimov travels with an interpreter, Khanty linguist Agrafena Sopochina.) This is because the official tendency is now to conclude agreements between industrial exploiters and native communities. To take one example, in 2014, 944 agreements were signed concerning 3,753 persons or 277 lands of traditional nature use; the total amount of compensation paid was 442.2 million rubles, with average individual compensation of 117,800 rubles.<sup>27</sup> For its part, Gazprom concluded more than 200 agreements in 2016. Although it is possible to focus simply on results, the conditions under which such contracts are made should not be ignored, since they illustrate the complexity of the procedure and the interests at play.



**Figure 4.** Sergei Kechimov, Herder and Guardian of Lake Imlor (The Sacred Lake).  
*Source:* Photo by the author, 2018.

On top of these sometimes unlawful methods, Kechimov was forced to appear in court under shady circumstances in 2015. Despite an official prohibition, the Oil People have been known to bring dogs with them and then abandon them; these stray dogs can become dangerous. In September 2014, Kechimov heard the barking of a dog on his traditional land.<sup>28</sup> The next day, September 12, he alerted one of his interlocutors from Surgutneftegaz at Fedorovskii, Vladimir Popuchei, who gave him permission to kill the dog if nobody was nearby. The herder then set out on his motor boat to look for the dog, which he ended up finding close to well No. 197. The animal attacked Kechimov; the herder fired two shots before returning home. Around 8 pm, the daughter of his guests, Oleg Andreevich and Antonina Dmitrievna Tevlin, informed him that two men were approaching the house. Kechimov went out to meet them. One was a civilian but armed with a small rifle; the other was in uniform and was the only one to reply to the herder's questions. To the request to see their documents, the man in uniform replied that he would show Kechimov everything once they got to Fedorovskii; as to the reason for their visit, he stated that they had been sent by the Oil People. Kechimov immediately telephoned Popuchei, who assured him that he had sent no one. The man in uniform added that the breeder had killed a "vital" dog. After this, Kechimov was summarily arrested: he was thrown to the ground and beaten in an attempt to drag him to the car. At this point, the Tevlins stepped in, promising that they would take their relative to the village the following day. Kechimov then rang one of his acquaintances at Surgutneftegaz,



who advised him to request an official investigation and to get a hospital report to document the blows received.

This incident occurred soon after the breeder had run into problems with the *neftianiki*. He had gone to see someone who had recently visited his clan territory, wanting to find out when he would be sent the money stipulated in the signed agreement and meet with a senior manager. In reply, some workers held up a cell phone with the following recorded message: “Comrade Putin is busy and unable to talk with you at this time.” In reply, Kechimov brandished his unloaded gun (one of those present filmed the scene), then returned home without obtaining anything at all.

On the evening of September 13, the two men came to seize the gun on the grounds that Kechimov had killed the dog, taking advantage of the occasion to make Kechimov sign a confession of attempted homicide for the scene that had occurred three days earlier. This made it possible to put the breeder on trial; he appeared in court in April 2015. Neither the testimonies of the *neftianiki* nor the video were added to the case file. The breeder was sentenced to two years in prison. Denis Fetisov, manager of the section that works with natives from Surgutneftegaz’s management team on resource exploitation, judged in his declarations that Kechimov was an embittered man working under influence: “American journalists provided an expensive camera with which he now records everything. That is interesting: why would they have given it to him if not to get him to say things that work in their favor?” Fetisov nevertheless tried to reassure those present, arguing that the company also worked in concert with the breeder, that every project conceived was validated, that nothing could go forward without Kechimov’s signature, and that the latter’s demands had always been met. The guardian of the lake put it somewhat differently, seeing the trial as part of a new strategy to weaken him: “We all know that they are in the wrong, that they acted illegally. We are defending a sacred site, but they only ever act with arrogance and think that we are idiots. If the court issues me a fine or really does put me in prison, the spirits will punish them. They would do better not to go into the forest.”<sup>29</sup>

In the end, Kechimov was sentenced to 400 hours of work before being amnestied on February 2, 2017. Despite this, and despite the political accords made to avoid the natives engaging in pickets and attention-grabbing acts, or indeed to “normalize” the informal arrangements of the previous decades,<sup>30</sup> the guardian of the lake became the emblem of new tensions between the companies and some of the *traditsionshchiki*, those who keep a traditional way of life.<sup>31</sup> However, in a certain way, the sacred sites of Imlor and Numto have served only to revive an endless history of desecration of the space of the natives.

### **Dancing Spirit of the Sunny Earth: Reserves as Sanctuaries?**

Russian medieval chronicles portrayed the conquest of Siberia as part of a divine purpose.<sup>32</sup> Native communities, however, had a different reading of these events, as is attested by the Voguls from Tabary, who, chased away by settlers, composed a letter to the “unknown tsar” indicating that they had been “henceforth orphaned from their land.”<sup>33</sup> In imperial Siberia, many sacred sites of the Khanty and Mansi were pillaged by Cossacks, who stole furs and precious objects intended for the protective spirits; others were desecrated and destroyed during the evangelization campaign decreed by Peter the Great that was conducted on Ugric land by the Metropolitan Philophei between 1712 and 1715, with chapels or crosses immediately erected on their ruins.<sup>34</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the transported convict Ivan Neklpaev collected from among the Russian families of Surgut stories about inhabitants who had desecrated the “sanctuary” of Ostyak divinities,<sup>35</sup> acts that were sanctioned by mortal punishment: sickness, death, madness. Similarly, since the building of a church in the village of Chaim, explained an old Vogul, Ivan

of Orontur, to the young writer-traveler Porfiri Infantiev, “there are no longer any fish in the rivers, the wild animals have fled the forests,” whereas some decades earlier “there were more Voguls in these places, they lived better and more richly.”<sup>36</sup> As for Father Popov of the Obdorsk mission, he was confronted with shamans who claimed that “since the Russians had come to trade with them and the evangelists had come to spread their Christian faith, misfortune had deeply afflicted their land, illnesses had appeared that were unknown to their ancestors, people became more impoverished, the amount of game and fish diminished.”<sup>37</sup> A neighboring people of the northern Ostyaks, the Selkups, also formulated a notion of a deleterious time of the seven-toothed Devil (*sēld’ə tiwən tābi jawol*) and of Christ (*Kāristos*), the father of all Russians, who gave to the Devil the humans that the latter demanded: at this time Icha, the cultural hero, went into “dormition” beyond the seas, taking peace and the affluence of his own people, but not without having announced to the Christ: “Today is yours, but tomorrow will be mine.” Upon his return, Icha would gather together all his people and chase the foreigners from his land.<sup>38</sup>

In the Soviet era, the appropriation of lands and the desecration of native landscapes continued. We need only recall that in 1930 the assembly of Russian *kolkhozniki* from Polnovat village suggested plowing up an Ostyak cemetery, provoking protest from the natives.<sup>39</sup> As for Numto, it was the theater of a conflict between Soviet functionaries and the families of the sacred lake. Many Nenets, Khanty, and Mansi of the Ostyak-Vogul’sk National District felt their voluntary or forcible integration into the path of progress to be a declaration of war involving administrative division, the voluntary or forced influx of non-native populations, and the implementation of Soviet policy in the tundra and the taiga (collectivization, schooling, imposed plans, desecration of sites of worship). To the waves of arrests, psychological threats, and mediations of the local Soviets, the natives responded with ritual assemblies and counterclaims, as well as by pillaging and setting fire to symbols of Russian presence.<sup>40</sup>

The lake, which is sacred to the Forest Nenets and Khanty of the region, is in the shape of a man lying down, arms folded, staring at the sky with his eyes (two islets). The lake is alive: this man’s beating heart is the mid-lake island (*Iemang pekhar*), on which rituals are organized from which women are excluded. Lastly, a headland on its northern bank and two islets on its western bank are also sacred. Four of the lake’s sites are held to be sacred sites by both the Nenets from Numto and the Khanty from Kazym.<sup>41</sup> The Nadym, which flows from part of the Numto, cannot be diked, or cut off, by nets or other fishing tools: containing the river would mean cutting off the breath of the living Numto. It is therefore easy to understand that the decision to organize a fishing cartel led many Khanty to refuse to take part in the fishing brigade formed in March 1933. Worse still, on April 9, eight Nenets representatives threatened to burn down the Soviet cultural institution and demanded the release of four previously arrested Khanty. The heads of the cultural institution and of the cooperative, whom the natives had summoned, were not at all conciliatory. In a letter from the Nenets and Khanty dictated by Grigorii Nikitin, the director of Ural Furs, and dated December 4, 1933, it is stated that the two Soviet functionaries were armed to exert pressure: “If you do not let us fish, then we will send in three, four, five airplanes as well as soldiers who will crush you all.”<sup>42</sup> The natives felt that the Russians were preparing for war. The same day as this letter of grievance was written, some Nenets and Khanty asked the spirits during a ritual gathering about the fate of the Russian delegations that they were holding prisoner. The ax in the hand of the shaman Iakov P. Moldanov grew heavy: for the first time, “the divinity demands the death of the Russians.”

The sources here are lacunary and even contradictory, inviting great caution as to the exact unfolding of events. However, according to one of those accused of the crime, shaman Mikhail Ia. Moldanov of Vovr vosh iugan, the Soviet officials were bound and taken up to a

sacred hill. All the members of the delegation were then ritually, simultaneously strangled with ropes, just like sacrificial reindeer, “for the spirits of Numto.” Indeed, according to one native oral tradition—real or imagined—the Soviet delegation was put to death because the Red commissioner of the delegation, Polina Schneider, reportedly desecrated the lake by treading upon the soil of the sacred island and shouting at the divinities with a weapon in hand.<sup>43</sup>

Amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, the desecration of native land persisted beyond the Urals. A black legend continued to be written, plunging the gods, animals, and humans into mourning. Many sacred sites, whether familial or clan sites, disappeared simply because they hindered the building of a road or the laying of gas or oil pipelines. Near Novoagansk, the tombs of Nikolai Andreevich Aipin, Piotr Nikolaevich Aipin, and Efim Andreevich Aipin were desecrated, their corpses dug out of the earth. Their living descendants attempted to bring public attention to this. Tekliu Aivaseda, an old reindeer breeder from the village of Variogan, did not possess the art of reading and writing. He had the Forest Nenets dictate a letter to President Mikhail Gorbachev in which he expressed his anger at the Oil and Gas People’s acts of desecration and thus at their flouting of the laws of the taiga. In March 1992, eighty-five Khanty from land upstream of the Trom-Agan addressed a letter to President Boris Yeltsin about operations on the Tian oilfield in Surgut raion, which were forcing them into the void:

The *neftianiki* chased us away, hunted us out of our land, pillaged our *chum*, our *labaz*, killed our reindeer for meat, fish our fish, shoot our game, deceive us, and make us drink. And the representatives of Soviet power take the side of the Oil People. . . . Mr. Yeltsin! We are also human beings! We want to live on our lands, raise our children in accordance with our customs. Without our land, we are no longer a people. Why do you allow people to drive us to despair in this way? Why do you push us natives to hate those who take our land away from us? This is leading us along the path to armed warfare, during which, we are fully aware, we would die. The Oil People have oil, they just do not want to extract it in a responsible way. They can perfectly well do without our remaining land and give the country as much oil as it needs.<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 5.** Tekliu Khallovich Aivaseda (1920–2005), the Breeder from Variogan Who Wrote to President Gorbachev. *Source:* Raisa Ernazarova, Archives of the Ethnographic Parc-Museum Variogan. Reproduced with permission.

In addition to addressing official letters to regional and federal authorities and making statements to the media, on April 9, 1996, a major collective ritual was organized on the island to the south of Numto, allowing women and children to participate in it. Here it was agreed that prayers to the gods were needed to protect everyone from the advance of oil exploitation, including the operations that had already begun nearby and which the companies involved were intending to develop further at a later date. An attempt was also made to get the Other to face up to his responsibilities: the ritual was filmed by the TV cameras of the local *Ugoria* station; one white female reindeer from the herd was dedicated to the then-president of Russia, Yeltsin, and another to the then-governor of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Aleksandr Filipenko. The aim of this symbolism was not only to compel those who might threaten the goods of the two interested parties to take responsibility, but also to oblige all future Russian presidents and district governors to prevent any damage that would compromise the life entrusted to them. Yuri Vella, a reindeer breeder and poet, was one of the organizers.

Every man who has heard the beating heart of the North should mourn Vella (1948–2013). When I think of him, I remember a Forest Nenets tale called *Pe iakha*. This tale was about a hunter, Nahany of the clan of the Aivaseda, who saw tears flowing down the face of a stone spirit and thus decided to sacrifice a reindeer to him every year. Vella's personal and literary commitment seems similar to me. Amid the chaos, he could see the despair in his people, but he did not give up, as so many did and still do. Thanks to his will and his tenacity, he created another world. Out of his hands came two museums and two schools, as well as books. It is as if the whole story of the Forest Nenets was held in his hand, as if the future of the Forest Nenets culture was born in his palm. All were free to share in his worldview and visit him, just as people may open a book and read about what is killing them: the spleen of the bruised Earth and our fear of struggling for life, the silent colonization of souls by alcohol and oil, our own indifference to learning and dying.

When I think of Vella, I also remember a Forest Nenets tale called *Starshii syn Numa* (The eldest son of Num). It is a tale about celestial Num's eldest son coming down to earth to find out how people live there. The *Starshii syn Numa* has a task to accomplish: to remind the Nenets people of the rules that old Num has prescribed for them. Through the traditional masculine and feminine *kisy*,<sup>45</sup> he shows men and women how to live as harmoniously as possible. To the women, he says:

Your and your husband's responsibilities are represented by the front part of *kisy*. Look, the nose of the boots is your *chum*. The triangle is smoke above your tent. The upper rim on the nose of the boots is the sky above your head. The stripes are the rays of sun above your tent. Transverse stripes are taboos. Ornaments around the boots show that you are not alone beneath the sky.

Around your *chum* are other tents and people. Here is a road. This is a road to and from your tent. Along this road you will bring your son his future wife. Along this road you will send your daughter to a different family. You ought to live with your neighbors peacefully and agreeably.

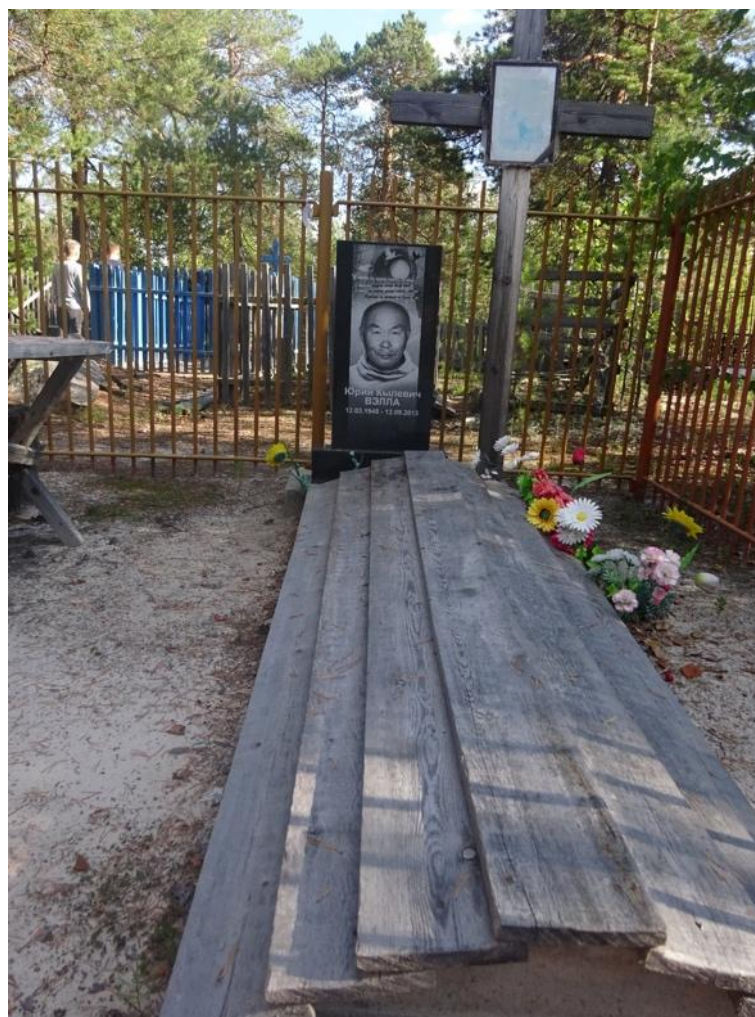
And to the men he declares:

The front part of male *kisy* is absolutely necessary. It shows that a man should protect his family. The transverse stripes beneath the knees are taboos. A bit higher on the knees is a quadrilateral. The stripes on it are boards on a dogsled. The deeply-rooted longitudinal stripes are harness belts. Patterns in the form of people's heads are people. They live around us. This shows that you are not alone on this earth. Do not forget about this.<sup>46</sup>

Then Num's *starshii syn* rode away, vanishing on his celestial reindeer. As for Vella, by reminding his people of their own culture, by showing them another way to live in the forest

today, he fought for the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. It is thanks to his words, thanks to his *Reindeer Herder's ABC*, through each reindeer sacrificed to the presidents of the Russian Federation, that he renewed the conception of indigenusness in the Russian North. Of course, he did not find the going as easy as Num's *starshii syn*. Many people did not get his point, his love for the Nenets language: *zachem vse eto* (why is all this necessary)? That question is part of the pain of the indigenous intelligentsia, which, for the most part, is doomed to loneliness, because neither the central political authorities, nor the local authorities, nor (on occasion) even their own people were ready to go their way. Vella assumed his choices, his joy and anger, his failures, his doubts, and carried them as far as he could.<sup>47</sup> And he has left us standing face to face with his heritage.

When I think of Vella, I think of one of the rules in his *Reindeer Herder's ABC*: “When talking to other reindeer herders, be attentive. Listen, ask questions, memorize. But in life, do as your heart tells you to do. Don't try to copy anybody.”<sup>48</sup> To bear witness to the history of the Far North, he chose to tell his truth, thus revealing some of his weaknesses and hiding most of his qualities. He did not become a traditional politician. He wrote only when he was not kept busy by something more important. He continually collected songs and tales,



**Figure 6.** Yuri Vella's Tomb, Variogan Cemetery. *Source:* Photo by the author, 2018.

like an orphan searching for his roots. He devoted himself to his reindeer, as if each day were his last. Despite financial difficulties and trials and threats of all kinds, including illness, he



did everything he could to keep the taiga alive, so that human beings, dead people, animals, and spirits would not succumb to the hectic world of machines and pipes.

Yuri Vella was not sure that his prayers were still being heard by the forest gods, so the Nenets reindeer breeder and poet ended up writing to the president of the Russian Federation, informing him of the deleterious climate that the company Lukoil had created among the reindeer breeders despite the requests addressed to the district governor and the president of the company. These letters went unheeded, as if “the authorities considered that a taxpayer as important as this oil company ought henceforth to have the right to kill our lakes, our rivers, our reindeer pastures, to have the right to violate the rights given to us as citizens in the Constitution of Russia,” reported Vella. One day he received a simple reply from the services of the presidential plenipotentiary of the Urals Federal District, assuring him that the situation “was in very good hands.”<sup>49</sup>

While discussing the state of interactions between the oil and gas industry and the natives, we ought to mention ethno-tourism, a topic that merits its own article, but also the distant echo of the Indian reservations of “Sunny Land,” according to the expression of Richard Mermejo, the chief of the Pueblo community visited by a Khanty and Mansi delegation in 2005. The idea of creating reservations on the American model was envisaged in 1922 by Vladimir Bogoraz,<sup>50</sup> but the young Soviet power rejected this option because it considered that reindeer breeders and hunters-fishermen of the Siberian North ought not to be exempted from, but instead ought to contribute to, the making of this historic new community, the Soviet people. To this end, a Committee for the North was created in 1924, tasked with “helping [the natives] straddle millennia” and catch up with the New Life as quickly as possible. Today, the question of reservations no longer seems to be a topic in Siberia, but rather is confined to debates on relations between oil companies and native peoples. The image of reservations is generally rather negative, but a more qualified view is sometimes presented. For Eremai Aipin, a Khanty deputy and writer, for example, it is more interesting to see not what divides Indians and Siberians but instead what unites them across the oceans: the question of land, the juridical status of the native, and the safeguarding of heritage in the era of globalization are challenges that both sides share.<sup>51</sup> How do the reservations reconcile their traditional way of life and the century’s perpetual race for profitability? Can the experience of each side be useful for the other?

For a long time, Aipin was familiar only with the United States of Mark Twain and Jack London, of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. Later, he would become familiar with a different America, that of García Márquez. And then in 2005, Aipin, Khanty poet Maria Vagatova, and Mansi deputy Tat’iana Gogoleva traveled from Moscow to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and El Paso, visiting five Indian reservations. Thus, Aipin discovered his America. Above all, he encountered the spirit of the places: those landscapes—the Rio Grande, the Sierra Blanca, the Canyon de Chelly—embodied in protective spirits and in their inhabitants, who evolve in a sunny and fresh space. Nevertheless, the Khanty writer-deputy was not about to leave the problems he encountered on the reservations in the shadows: a lack of doctors (in some cases, only one doctor per eighty patients); alcoholism and unemployment; the replacement of territorial colonization with cultural colonization; and so on.<sup>52</sup>

Having visited the Indian reservations, Aipin noted that self-determination and communal ownership of land might be helpful in Siberia. If reindeer breeders and hunter-fishermen are to have some kind of a future, it might help if Councils were organized in the communities to distribute tasks and if the Khanty, Mansi, and Forest Nenets had greater representation on the official bodies, giving them greater ability to discuss and decide. It might help if the space of traditional clan territories recognized and reinforced by the state were not only considered land in a location for an indeterminate period of time, but belonged to the communities, who could then decide which territory was best suited to their traditional



way of life and which other territory might be rented or ceded to oil and gas companies and under what conditions. In Siberia and America alike, each being counts. This way of completing the universe by likening the Khanty of Siberia to their cousins in America and beyond is reminiscent of their kinship. The Apaches said that those who live under the Polar Star and the Siberians who live under the Great Bear are of the same world. When Vagatova, Gogoleva, and Aipin returned to Siberia, they did not speak about America, but about the “Dancing Spirit of the Sunny Earth.”

### From Good Fairies to Bad Spirits?

In Siberia today, one can witness black snows. In 2017, in Novosibirsk Oblast, black, greasy snow fell on Kuybyshev even before the cold arrived. It was waste from an asphalt factory. As for the mining town of Mysky, the snow black with dust and soot has been repainted white in December 2018, to the great astonishment of the inhabitants, for a more traditional Christmas. In Chukotka, Chukchi writer Yuri Rytkeu (1930–2008) had to leave the village and go to the tundra in order to see the snow of his childhood—so pure white and changeable, the symbol of a new and better life. This was a snow far removed from the perfectly black icebergs that would drift into the Chaunskaya Bay, covered in soot by the passing ships, steeped in fuel oil down to their unfathomable and cold depths.<sup>53</sup>

On the basis of all this, one might consider only the generally divergent approaches of the *neftianiki* and the native communities. The first group is made up of foreigners who pass through an environment, test drill, drill, and then start again elsewhere, because for them this environment is above all linked with economic activity. The Khanty and Forest Nenets, meanwhile, are inscribed in and live in a landscape of sacred sites, gods, and protective spirits of which they are the guardians or partners. The sacred sites do not feature on maps; the natives hold them in memory from generation to generation. The Oil and Gas People arrive on conquered terrain en masse, turning everything upside-down, whereas the natives are aware that it is only in the forest that a minority can revitalize its ethnicity founded on a land, a way of life, a language. The *neftianiki* are employees who adhere to a policy subject to economic and changeable interests; the *traditsionshchiki* are the masters of the place. They observe atemporal ethics and believe that, as Catherine II wrote, what belongs to one, one must treat with more care.<sup>54</sup> The Gas and Oil People claim that the Forest People “politicize” the situation and exploit the “native crenel,” whereby they receive a lot of money<sup>55</sup> and jeopardize, through their reticence, the economic balance of the region. For their part, the Nenets and Khanty argue that the sums paid are modest considering the profits of the companies, that a human’s value cannot be measured by the riches that he extracts and squanders but by the way in which he conducts himself with nature and by the future that he prepares for future generations, and so on. Nevertheless, for both parties a common stake exceeds the economic level.

Indeed, today’s oil epic appears to be a way of updating “holy” Russia’s civilizing mission, in which the country has been invested since the first Siberian chronicles, such as that of the self-taught cartographer of Tobolsk Remezov. Concerning Imperial Russia, it set about sanctifying Siberian space through Orthodox Christianity: with Moscow and its Kremlin occupying this world’s center, it extended out to the *krasnyi ugol* (the beautiful Corner) and its domestic icons (the hearth) and included all the monasteries and churches (the territory made sacrosanct by the country’s holy sites), and the divine was that which prevailed over time. Soviet Russia, in turn, sacralized space through ideology: with Moscow and Kremlin again at the center of the world, this world extended to the Soviet villages and their new holy trinity (Lenin’s statue, the building of the local Communist Party, and the war memorials) by way of a martyr territory reborn from its ashes (the hydroelectric dams and

other technological feats peppering the countryside), and the human prevailed over temporality (Day of the Geologist, Day of the Reindeer Herder, Day of the Law-Enforcement Agent). Today's Russia also sanctifies space, this time through official patriotism: with Moscow and the Kremlin again forming the center (the last bastion of Christian values in a decadent world), this world extends to the model citizen (competition for family of the year, ball of pregnant women)<sup>56</sup> by way of its sanctified territory involving "noble acts, real breakthroughs and the creation of real *chefs-d'oeuvre*,"<sup>57</sup> as well as patriotic programs, military-patriotic youth clubs, and so on, and its temporality is prevailed upon by an ideal, namely the celebration of the unity of the people, or the Day of Family, Love and Fidelity.

The trauma of the end of the Soviet Union and of the economic slump of the 1990s inspired a rebuilding of society around traditional Church- and state-promulgated values. In their way, the *neftianiki* are part of this reconquest of territory and spirits. They qualify their work as an "honorific mission," claiming, for example, that "if there is darkness, there must also be light."<sup>58</sup> One-quarter, or about 26,000, of Surgutneftegaz personnel are women, of whom close to 20,000 are mothers and more than 2,000 are mothers of large families (between three and seven children). As if echoing Modest Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* (1867), inspired by a Gogol short story from 1830, these good fairies of Surgutneftegaz gather together amid the July greenery and flowers of Mount Barsov—named after Prince Ostyak, who threw himself into a river after his defeat at the hands of the Cossacks during the conquest.<sup>59</sup>

These women of Surgutneftegaz and its subsidiaries have formed a Women's Council,<sup>60</sup> which created a festival called "The Summer of the Council of Women." The festival motto in 2018, the year of charitable and voluntary work, was "Do good deeds without waiting for recompense." In their desire to "make the world a better place,"<sup>61</sup> they formed sixteen teams, among which were "The Altruists," "The Feminine League" (Surgutskoe UTT no. 6), "The Babki-eiki" (Fedorovskoye UPNPiKRC), "Unity," and so on, which brought along culinary specialties and supplied "visiting cards"—that is, mini-performances such as a version of *Cinderella* adapted into a fable in which the stepmother's egotism comes back to haunt her when she is in need, and *Namaste*, in which the Surgut UBR-2 "goddesses" of Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga, who personify beauty, wisdom, and equity, respectively, remind the audience that strength resides in unity and that one cannot be a goddess but that one must love one's profession. The highlight of the contest was the performance by the SurgutNIPIneft "godmother-fairies," who adopted the personas of Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather, the good fairies of the Walt Disney film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). The "Fairy Godmothers" won first place in the 2018 edition of the festival. In this way, at this beginning of the twenty-first century, the good fairies of oil are working to spread their civilized empire across the natural landscape of the North.



**Figure 7.** The Fairy Godmothers at the Festival “The Summer of the Council of Women,” Base of Mount Barsov, 2018. *Source:* Union of Russian Women, “Tvorcheskie otchety o dobrykh delakh,” October 2, 2018, <http://wuor.ru/news?id=3274>.

Whereas in the forest, the good Russian fairies watch over the cradle of the world, families, and the most destitute in order to spread good, many of the *traditionschiki* paradoxically try to play down the degraded living standards imposed on them, which divide communities as they do families. Even the written word becomes a way of averting fate and warding off the maleficent spirits released by the holes that humans dig in the living earth.<sup>62</sup> The crumbling bond with nature has weakened all beings. On the ground, the example of Yekaterina Kunina, spouse of a breeder and mother of four boys, sheds particular light on the pain of the earth that the Khanty feel.

Kunina’s entire life has been tied to the Vakh: she was born, grew up, loved, and lived under the tutelary spirit of that river. That is, until the oilfields of Samotlor and many others were discovered. The sables and squirrels that her husband hunted in the woods and the *urman* of the left bank soon deserted due to the roads and railway lines; the brightly colored berries that she gathered from the marshes in the fall slowly disappeared beneath the endless oil and gas pipelines. Thus, the family lost its lands and its reindeer.<sup>63</sup> Kunina then lost her four sons in succession. Mad from the pain, she began to drink until she killed her husband. For seven years she remained far from the river, in prison. Upon her release, she was condemned to wander from distant relative to distant relative in order to find some hospitality.

Similarly, boarding schools sometimes tear apart the household, interrupting the transmission of knowledge, language, and rituals, provoking qualms of conscience in parents, such as this villager from Numto: “I do not want to give my Khanty child away to the boarding school. He will be a reindeer breeder; higher mathematics will be of no use to him. It is hard to tear him for an entire year from his family, his customs. But I am told that according to the law I must have my son educated.”<sup>64</sup> Living far from his loved ones and his universe for a period of nine to ten years—except during summer vacations—the child returns a stranger.

He is all the more foreign to his culture because low life expectancy, particularly among men, means that it is not always possible to maintain the spiritual link between generations, as Natalia Vylla laments:

Why have we, all forty-somethings, kept up our ethnic consciousness so well? Because, I believe, many of us got to know our grandmothers and our grandfathers, who instilled in us what was essential: a spiritual awakening. This is not the case with those who are now around eighteen or twenty years old. And that creates a lot of fear. To look at them, I now understand how scary it is that the youth have no spiritual basis. Whenever a strong wind blows, they vacillate. How will they defend their spiritual basis, the sacred sites, when they no longer know what is at stake? Clearly, it will then be very easy for the industrialists and Protestants [the evangelical churches] to take from them the little land that remains under their feet.<sup>65</sup>

In December 2017, Vylla wanted to create a contest around “the traditional family” for those inhabitants of Beloiarsk raion who still lead a way of life tied to the economic activities of the taiga. Five categories of nomination were envisaged: “The Family as Miracle,” “Traditional Crafts of the Peoples of Lake Numto,” “Traditional Cuisine,” “Legends and Traditions of Our Region,” and “The Nature of Our Region.” Not all Khanty and Nenets want to live in town or from compensation: for them, digging holes in the earth means creating holes in the memory of those who people it, tipping them into the void without hope of return, without hope for the future. They bear responsibility to the gods who entrusted them with these parcels of the earth.

According to the authorities, in the framework of the socioeconomic agreements reached, Surgutneftegaz has already invested 120 million rubles in the village and the nature reserve over twelve years and has reiterated its intention to invest, from 2017, in the development of infrastructures in order to transport goods and ensure the territory’s supply of potable water. As of the end of August 2016, nine families had given their agreement to the new boundary divisions of the nature park. Villagers who opposed the move addressed a letter, dated October 17, to the governor of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, Natalia Komarova, asking her to intervene and prevent the new borders from signing the death warrant of the land’s inhabitants:

Dear Natalia Vladimirovna! We, the inhabitants of Numto, have learned that the current boundary divisions of Numto Nature Park will soon be up for review and a proposal be made to change them. If this occurs . . . the lands of our ancestors, our lands, and those of our children will be lost. Where, then, will we be able to put our reindeer herds out to pasture? Where will we be able to gather berries? In among the derricks and flares? We ask you to intervene. For the nature park was created with the aim of protecting and safeguarding the natural environment, the native communities, our cultures and ways of life. We place all our hope in you!<sup>66</sup>





**Figure 8.** Khanty Seasonal Village in the Agan Countryside. *Source:* Photo by the author, 2013.

The document, which was signed by fifty-nine natives, seems to have sown some doubt, since according to Yevgenii Platonov, the director of the Regional Department of Natural Resources, at least ten of the signatories are said not to have been at Numto on that day. Nothing more was needed than for the officials to speak of “dead souls.” But Khanty and Nenets dwellers are still born and bred, live and die in the taiga. After all, that is the sacred place where—among living gods, spirits, and nature—they can regenerate their identity.

To conclude, from the mid-1990s oil companies have been forced to improve their brands and show some “social corporate responsibility.” They had to improve their image among indigenous peoples, notably by taking ecology into account and by sponsoring activities (cultural meetings, publishing, scholarships for students). This has resulted in a series of initiatives and pieces of legislation by the Representatives of Native Minority Peoples in the Duma of the Khanty-Mansi Okrug–Yugra that aim to safeguard the territorial and cultural interests of the Khanty, Forest Nenets, and Mansi of the region. The establishment of official agreements between the *neftianiki* and communities does not necessarily preclude tensions from arising, since the reindeer breeders and hunters-fishermen sometimes feel that the agreements are not respected and that decisions are being made at a different level, as expressed on occasions such as the aforementioned public inquiry convening Oil People, local authorities, and natives. As such, indigenous communities have sought support from various actors—ecological (Greenpeace Russia), political (successive presidents of the Federation), or national (the media)—as well as organizing media-oriented collective rituals that they hope will allow them to occupy the public space and garner the support of Russian public opinion.

For instance, by way of celebrating the New Year, the good fairy-in-chief of Surgutneftegaz, Liubov’ Malyshkina, brought out and waved her magic wand, thus transforming the village’s children of breeders and hunters-fishermen through the spell of an abecedarium on the love of nature:

This is a fundamental book devoted to the ecologist movement. And we have also brought you magnets, lapel pins, and forage caps: these are all insignia of the “young ecologists” movement (*ekoliat*). On each of these items you will find the Surgutneftegaz logo, since we are the sponsors of these actions. In this respect, the company is the sponsor of the abecedarium. In the old days, your fathers and your mothers were *oktiabrionok* and pioneers. Presently, those who love nature, who want to look after it, will be called “young ecologists.” These youths are the ones who will transmit their knowledge about ecology to their peers.<sup>67</sup>

However, do the children of the taiga and the tundra not learn from childhood about the ethics of breeders and hunters-fishermen, ethics that enabled the latter to keep the earth intact until the industrial age? As for the adults, they have learned to integrate into their oral tradition “the old Russian man with the head and stomach of iron” (the derrick) and “the old Russian women with the red dress” (the flare). However, they have also integrated into their everyday lives “the oil pumps [that] bend down and rise up the entire length of the way. As if those were praying endlessly to a god; perhaps this is why everything works out for the *neftianiki*: they prostrate themselves before the earth, and the earth, regardless of what they ask for, gives them everything,” as some informants put it. For the *traditionshchiki*, how else could it be?

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## Notes

1. Based in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, Surgut was established in the 1950s after the discovery of a first oilfield and then boomed again in the 1970s. One of the main local employers is the company Surgutneftegaz. The perfume line created by Natalia Kikor of Surgut’s Vinchera company aspires to sell perfume from the capital of the Khanty-Mansiisk district and from five other towns, perfumes based notably on the essence of pines, of sandalwood, of grapefruit, of cardamom, and of white musk. These blended scents evoke “the icy freshness of early morning, the lights of the night, the lightening passage of a heavy Land Cruiser, the Siberian grasslands and the roots of pine trees.”

2. See, for example, E.D. Aipin and V.B. Shustov, eds., *Sbornik materialov mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii Korennye narody. Neft'. Zakon* [Nauchnaya Konferentsiya Indigeous Peoples. Oil. Law] (Moscow: OOO FKX, 2001).

3. At the last official census in 2010, the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra had 31,483 natives—19,068 Khanty, 10,977 Mansi, and 1,438 Forest Nenets—out of 1,532,243 inhabitants (1,655,074 in 2018). These three native peoples therefore represent 1.5 percent of the overall population.

4. On the legal aspect, see, for example, Natal’ia I. Novikova, *Okhotniki i neftjaniki, issledovanie po iuridicheskoi antropologii* [Hunters and neftjaniki. Research of legal anthropology] (Moscow: Nauka, 2014).

5. “Informatsiia o poezdke Prezidenta RF Vladimira Putina na Iamal,” [Information about the trip of the president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin to Yamal] *Ilebs*, May 1, 2014, <http://ilebs.narod.ru/putin.htm>.

6. The two largest cities are located in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, more than 3,000 kilometers from Moscow. The largest, Kogalym (currently about 60,000 inhabitants), developed notably after the discovery of the Vatyeganskoe and Tevlinsko-Russkinskoe fields in 1971; the city is now the stronghold of oil company Lukoil–Western Siberia. The second largest, with about 44,109 inhabitants, is Langeepas, which is located on the right bank of the Ob River. It gained city status in 1985, and its economy depends in part on the nine deposits run by Langeepasneftegaz, which is part of the Lukoil group. As for Uray (currently 43,500 inhabitants), it is located on the banks of the Konda River and now links up with Shaim, the site of the first operational field of Western Siberia in 1960. Similarly, Naryan-Mar (24,775 inhabitants), located on the Pechora River, is the capital of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug. At the start of the twenty-first century, the town underwent an oil industry–generated revival; in addition, the Total E&P Russia group financed the creation of a French cultural and language center there in 2002, as well as at two other points near where the group has developed the hydrocarbon fields of Usinsk and Krasnoselkup in the Russian Far North.



7. Slogans from the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s demanded ever more without quid pro quo: “Provide 500,000 tons of oil in 24 hours!,” “A million tons of oil, a billion cubic meters of gas in 24 hours!,” and so on. See, for example, Mark Soosaar’s *Isa, poeg ja Püha Toorum* (Weiko Saawa Film, 1997); Eremai Ajpin, “I ukhodit moi rod,” in *Obrechennye na gibel’. Publisistika poslednikh let* (Moscow, 1994); Ol’ga Kornienko, *Ukhodiashchaia natura* (Voronezh: OOO Izdat-Print, 2016).

8. L. Malyshkina, A. Artemenko, and F. Lunochkin, *Pravila poveniia na territorii prirodnogo parka “Numto”* [The rules of behaviour on the Numto Natural Park] (VremiaMedia, 2014).

9. “National” is clearly to be taken in the Russian sense—that is to say, relative to its nationalities.

10. See *Pamiatka dlia sotrudnikov OAO Surgutneftegaz, rabotaiushchikh na territorii prirodnogo parka Numto* [Memorandum for the employees of OAO Surgutneftegaz, working in the Numto Nature Park] (RIITs “Neft’ Priob’ia,” 2017).

11. In 2016, the third ranking of environmentally responsible oil and gas companies in Russia saw Sakhalin Energy come in first place, followed by Gazprom, with Surgutneftegaz coming in third. In addition, the company communicates its policies and projects through the media (*Rossiiskaia gazeta*, *Novosti Iugry*, *Beloiarskie vesti*, etc.) It also sponsors contests (such as Eco-Childhood) and festivals (like The Angels of Nature) linked to ecology and the youth.

12. The *Mish* (lit. “chance”) are spirits that give chance. Their relationship with humans is founded on an exchange: whoever offers them a sacrifice or an offering obtains good luck in hunting and fishing.

13. See Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg, “‘Un troisième ciel sans maladies, sans impôts et sans Russes’: Brève relation des vices chrétiens et des vertus chamanistes dans l’Arctique sibérien (xixe–xxe siècle),” [A third sky without illnesses, without taxes and without Russians : Brief account of the christian vices and shamanistic virtues in the Siberian Arctic (19th–20th century)] in *La vertu des païens*, ed. Sylvie Taussig (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2019), 645–649.

14. Mikhail Piak, for example, converted while on military service in the Far East: “We were put in a line and baptized. Among us there were Yakuts, Nenets and members of other peoples. At the start, we resisted somewhat, but everything turned out well. Ever since I consider myself a Christian.” Natalia Vylla embraced Orthodoxy after a serious foot injury healed in three days when a Russian applied to it some holy oil from relics of St. John of Tobolsk; she was baptized by Hegumen Zosima of Tobolsk, who was passing through the region and who gave her his blessing to evangelize to her own people.

15. For more on the district’s sacred sites, see, for example, Arkadii B. Baulo, *Sviashchennye mesta i atributy severnykh mansi v nachale XXI veka. Etnograficheskii al’bom* [Holy places and Northern Mansi in the early 21st century] (Khanty-Mansiisk and Ekaterinburg: Izdatel’svo Basko, 2013).

16. In light of male life expectancy dropping to forty-five years of age, of infant mortality, and unemployment rates almost twice (1.8 and 1.5 times, respectively) the federal average, and so on, a governmental provision No. 132-r was introduced on February 4, 2009, to enshrine in law the principle of sustainable development of the minority peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation and to elaborate a seven-goal, three-stage plan to return native statistics to the norm between 2000 and 2025.

17. This conical tent of reindeer herders from Western Siberia is made of a framework of poles stuck in the ground and covered with hides sewn together in winter and a tarpaulin in summer.

18. Anton Stepygin, “‘Surgutneftegaz’ vnov’ posiaet na sviatuiu zemliu,” *Ura*, February 4, 2016, <https://ura.news/articles/1036266968>.

19. “Korennnye zhiteli parka ‘Numto’ ne veriat ‘Surgutneftegazu’ posle intsidenta na ozere Imlor,” [Indigenous peoples of the Numto Nature Park don’t believe Surgutneftegaz after the incident on the Imlor lake] *Nakanune.ru*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.nakanune.ru/news/2016/02/25/22428710/>.

20. On the link between landscape and sacred space, see especially chapters 6 and 7 of Peter Jordan, *Material culture and sacred landscape: The anthropology of the Siberian Khanty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

21. It is telling that the polysemic word *iakh* designates a place animated by a form of life, be it humans, animals, or spirits. See Vladislav M. Kulemzin, *O khantiiskikh shamanakh* (Tartu: Otdelenie fol’kloristiki Estonskogo Literaturного Muzeia, 2004), 142.

22. Eremai Ajpin, “De la mémoire des arbres,” [About the memory of the trees] *Slovo* 39–40, no. 2 (2016): 188.

23. Anna-Leena Siikala and Oleg Ulyashev, *Hidden rituals and public performances: Traditions and belonging among the Post-Soviet Khanty, Komi and Udmurts* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2011), 52.

24. *Pamiatka dlia sotrudnikov*, 5–6.

25. Born in 1957, Sergei Vasilievich Kechimov is one of the rare authorities on the oral tradition and the musical instruments of the Khanty of the East. On this topic, see the documentary *Master i Evdokija* by Olga Kornienko, col. (SurgutinformTV, 2004). Lake Imlor is located thirty kilometers northwest of the village of Feodorovsky. According to one of the legends recounted by Sergei Kechimov, the lake is the origin of the first Khanty: “Here sacred beings lived. A long time ago. Thousands of years of this and that. They were valiant, audacious, good. But a war broke out with a bear, who killed them all. The last person killed transformed the bear into stone. The Khanty issue from this man.” By decree No. 71-p

of the government of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug–Yugra, from March 7, 2013, the holy Lake Imlor was included on the state register of the religious heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation.

26. Sergei Kechimov remarked that these control points ensure that no one steals from the mining sites, but the people manning them do not bother to monitor other natural resources, including those vital for the inhabitants of the forests, that are stolen by visitors passing through.

27. See “Informatsiia ob ispolnenii Zakona Khanty-Mansiiskogo avtonomnogo okruga–Iugry ‘O territoriakh traditsionnogo prirodopol’zovaniia korennykh malochislennykh narodov Severa regional’nogo znacheniiia v Khanty-Mansiiskom avtonomnom okruge–Iugre,’” 6.

28. Owing to the circulation of different versions in the Russian media, the present article provides only the data of the instruction protocol established by the local authorities on September 15, 2014.

29. Anton Stepygin, “‘Moi ded byl sil’nyi shaman, on umel predskazyvat’ budushchee,’” Ura.ru, August 27, 2015, <https://ura.news/articles/1036265682>.

30. A family of breeders and a company might thus agree to one or several trips in the helicopter in exchange for furs, fish, and so on.

31. The name sometimes given to families who maintain their traditional way of life in the taiga.

32. See Valerie A. Kivelson, “Rivers of blood: Illustrating violence and virtue in Russia’s early modern empire,” *Journal of the British Academy* 3 (2015): 69–105.

33. Sergej V. Bakhrushin, *Ostiakie i vogul’skie kniazhestva v XVI–XVII v.* (Moscow: Nauchnye Trudy, 1955), 98–99.

34. See, for example, Grigorii Novitskii, *Kratkoe opisanie o narode ostiakom* (Novosibirsk: Novosibgi, 1941), which inspired a French version *Les mœurs et usages des Ostiacks. Et la manière dont ils furent convertis en 1712 à la Religion chrétienne du rit Grec. Avec plusieurs Remarques curieuses sur le royaume de Sibérie, & le détroit de Weygatz ou de Nassau*, by Jean Bernard Muller, who was a dragoon captain in the service of Sweden during his captivity in Siberia (Paris, 1725).

35. Ivan Neklepaev, *Obriady, obychai, pover’ia* (Tiumen’: SoftDizain, 1997), 50–54.

36. Porforii Infant’ev, *Puteshestvie v stranu vogulov* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 71.

37. *Izdes’ poiavliaetsia zariiia khristianstva: Obdorskaia missiia 30–80-e gg. xix v.* (Tiumen’: Mandr i Ka, 2003), 185.

38. Kai Donner, *A Samoyed Epic* (Helsinki, 1913), 8.

39. N.D. Radchenko, M.A. Smirnova, ed., *Sud’by narodov Ob’-Irtyshskogo Severa (Iz istorii natsional’nogo i gosudarstvennogo stroitel’sтва 1822–1941)* [Destinies of the Peoples of the North of the Ob-Irtysh Region (From a History of State and National Construction. 1822–1941)] (Tiumen’, 1994), 211.

40. See Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg, “La guerre perdue des Khantes et des Nénètes des forêts (la soviétisation dans le district Ostjako-Vogul’sk, 1930–1938),” *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* 38–39 (2008): 149–152.

41. With the Senguepov, the Moldanov, and the Vylla are the guardians of the goddess of Kazym. Thus, only the Moldanov and the Vylla can, for example, visit the western bank of the Sem Pai, one of its islands and the foremost place of worship to *Kasoum imi*, “the Nenets Reindeer Goddess, the Nenets Sable Goddess.”

42. Letter dated December 4, 1933: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh i politicheskikh ob’edinenii Tiumenskoi oblasti, collection 107, inv. 1, dos. 121, 94–95, cited in <<AU: as meant?>>Normand de Chambourg, “La guerre perdue.”

43. This version is reprised in the two literary texts devoted to this tragic event: Tat’iana Moldanova, *V gnezdyshke odinokom: Literatura Tiumenskogo kraia* (Tiumen’: SoftDizain, 1996), 189, and Ereimei Aipin, “Je vois déferler . . .,” *Slovo* 28–29 (2003): 20. The discovery of the corpses in March 1934 triggered a tragic campaign of reprisals. Case no. 2/49, which opened on February 1, 1934, and closed on June 10, 1934, failed to reconcile the points of view: the Soviet authorities saw these acts as counterrevolutionary, while the natives considered them a display of resistance against Sovietization. Whereas the authorities saw it as an assassination, the natives viewed it as a sacrifice. As late as 1993, the descendants of the “war of Kazym” were still unable to achieve the exoneration of their forebears.

44. State archives of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug; personal collection of A.S. Sopotchina (Pesikova).

45. *Kisy* are a type of boots made from deer fur and worn by people of the Far North.

46. Tale collected by the author from Pavel Ianchevich Ayvaseda (1941), Forest Nenets from the village of Varyogan, summer 2013.

47. Ol’ga Kornienko, *The last monologue* (Studiia O.K., 2014). See also Olga Kornienko, *Ukhodiashchaia natura. Shto ostalos’ za kadrom* (Moscow: Izdat. “Pero,” 2017), 172–204.

Yuri Vella, *A Reindeer Herder’s ABC* (Studiia O.K. Ltd, 2011).

49. Author’s interview with Yuri Vella (1948–2013), Kogalym, summer 2013.

50. Exiled in Siberia between 1889 and 1899, Vladimir Bogoraz (1865–1936) became a specialist of the North, especially of the Chukchis, and was one of the founders of the Leningrad School of Ethnography. Professor at the Institute of Geography from 1921, he participated actively in the creation and work of the Committee of the North (1924–1934). At his instigation, the Faculty of the North was opened; it would later become the Institute of the Peoples of the North, in which he worked, notably on creating a system of writing for the languages of the peoples of the North. He authored scientific books

and articles on the Chukchi, literary texts influenced by Chukchi oral tradition, and educational textbooks in Russian (*Bukvar' dlia severnykh narodnostei*, 1927) and in Chukchi (*Krasnaia gramota*, 1932). Bogoraz participated in several expeditions, including the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897–1902) organized by the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where he lived for several years.

51. Eremai Aipin, “Rezervatsii sokhraniat' narod,” *Mestnoe vremia* (2002): 2, 8; “Korennye zhiteli Iugry otkazyvaiusia predostavit' neftianikam svoiu zemliu,” *Argumenty i fakty* 50 (December 11, 2013); Eremai Aipin, “Rezervatsiia kak instrument sokhraneniia ekologii Severa,” *Izvestiia vysshikh uchebnykh zavedenii. Sotsiologiia, Ekonomika, Politika* 1 (2015): pp. 83–7; 2 (2015), pp. 60–5.

52. “Indeitsy SShA vdokhnovilis' primerom Kryma i vziali kurs na nezavisimost'” [Indians of the United States take Inspiration from the Example of Crimea to take the Path to Independence], <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/917218/>.

53. Iurii Rytkeu, “Chernye snega,” *Narodov malykh ne byvaet* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1991), 13.

54. Catherine II, *Nakaz*, 1776.

55. Ever since the political agreements between companies and communities began, the average compensations have included such things as means of transport (a snowmobile every four years, a boat every ten years, and a boat motor every four years), the supplying of electricity (1 generator every four years, for example), fuel (two tons a year of petrol and 100 liters of oil fuel) financial assistance of between 4,000 and 5,000 rubles per month for each member of the family, paid each trimester, building materials, and (more rarely) funds for studying or medical treatment.

56. See Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg “*Ce ne sont pas les oeufs qui embellissent l'homme, mais l'homme qui embellit les oeufs*”: *Initiatives citoyennes sibériennes et Église russe orthodoxe* (forthcoming).

57. The results of Russian patriotism, according to the speech of the president of the Russian Federation at the solemn reception at the Kremlin on November 4, 2018, held for the Unity Day celebration.

58. See *Neft' priob'ja* 34 (August 2018).

59. Located on the right bank of the Ob River, west of Surgut, Mount Barsov is one of the five archaeological sites of the Surgut raion.

60. Created in 1987, this Women's Council, which gathers the members of fifty-five Surgutneftegaz subsidiaries, is tasked with developing the role of women, improving their living and working standards, restoring the company's image and strengthening the family, and re-establishing the dynasty of oil workers. It has initiated many of Surgutneftegaz's social policies for women, large families, the handicapped and families with handicapped children. Besides its charitable works, the Council organizes lecture series, round tables and masterclasses focused on family values and the spiritual and moral development of children. On these occasions, company employees are able to meet with specialists: doctors, psychologists, and priests. The current president of the Women's Council is Galina Galimova.

61. “For a better world!” is the name of a contest in which the company's female employees tell of their good deeds and experiences of voluntary work.

62. See Eremai Aipin, *Les Khanty ou l'Étoile de l'aube*, trans. Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2005); Tatiana Moldanova, *Les caresses de la civilisation*, trans. Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg (Paris: Éditions Paulsen, 2007).

63. The *urman* are composed of clusters of conifers hanging over the marshes.

64. Author's interview with Yuri Vella, Paris, 2013.

65. Ol'ga Kornenko, *Ukhodiashchaia natura* (Voronezh: OOO “Izdat-Print,” 2016), 121.

66. To ensure the anonymity of our informants, the document is provided without sources.

67. Surgutneftegaz, “Odnazhdy na Severe. V Numto,” <https://www.surgutneftegas.ru/responsibility/ecology/prirodookhrannye-aspekty-khozyaystvennoy-deyatelnosti/publikatsii/odnazhdy-na-severe-v-numto/> (accessed February 28, 2019).