# A Short Introduction to the History of Nenets Literature

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The Nenets, like many other Arctic nations of the Russian Federation, developed their first official writing system at the beginning of the 20th century. However, they certainly had a form of literature before this time. Like many other northern nations, they already had highly developed oral traditions and folklore. During the Soviet era, the local administration carried out intensive efforts to educate the indigenous population and produced the first textbooks for primary schools as well as literature, as in other Russian Northern languages. Initially, these books were primarily only available in native languages, but later they started to be published bilingually or just in Russian. In this paper we give a short introduction to the history of the Nenets' written language and literature and the role of the traditional oral culture in its development.

Key words: indigenous languages of Russia, recently created writing systems, minority peoples, Nenets language, Nenets literature

Ненцы, как и другие народы Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока России, получили письменность в начале XX столетия. К этому времени они уже имели основу для литературы, как и многие другие народы этого региона: у них была развитая традиция устного фольклора. При Советской власти местная администрация проводила большую работу по обучению тундрового, национального населения, создавая учебники для начальной школы, формируя литературу на родных языках. С самого начала эти произведения не были двуязычными. В статье дается краткий обзор истории ненецкой литературы и значения устной традиции в ее развитии.

Ключевые слова: младописьменные языки народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока, малочисленные народы, ненецкий язык, ненецкая литература

#### 1. Introduction

Eva Toulouze's [2004] work about the indigenous literatures of Russia was the catalyst for writing this article. Toulouze states that none of the nomadic nations of Russia had any literacy or literature before the Communist Revolution. Only with the coming of the Soviet regime did it become popular to write about the life of the indigenous people, including indigenous people writing about their own history and culture. Toulouze described how the new Northern literature was originally formed. It is pity, however, that she mentioned only a small number of the first Nenets writers. After a short description, she came to the following conclusion: indigenous nomads could not develop their own literary traditions because they did not have any base to start from. Even Christian missionaries, who tried to give their children a basic education, failed to gather and teach the nomads' children [Toulouze 2004: 215-216].

In general, Toulouze is right, because she was speaking mostly about the first indigenous writers who wrote in their native languages. We agree that there is not a large literary collection in Nenets. However, there are many genres in the traditional and recent Nenets oral folklore tradition: besides smaller units like riddles, private songs, and everyday stories, there is also quite a diversity of folklore narratives and epic songs. It is also a pity that in her article Toulouze did not mention Nenets poets and writers of the late 20th century, perhaps because of a lack of information about them. Most of them lived and worked in the northern peripheries of the country, far away from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Usually they published their works in local newspapers and only a few of them managed to publish in their native language and that mostly after the 1990s<sup>1</sup>.

Marina Lublinskaia was at Eva Toulouze's lecture on "Dukhovnye miry Juria Welly" at the European University in St. Petersburg in the spring of 2015. During the discussion, Lublinskaia asked Toulouze why she con-siders that the Nenets do not have any proper basis for their written lit-erature. Toulouze explained that in her paper she was thinking only of the early period of the development of Nenets literature

#### 2. Materials and methods

It could be said that Soviet propaganda contributed to the belief that none of the nomadic peoples of Russia had any literature before the Communist era. It is true that before that time there was no literacy among the indigenous people of Siberia, the North, and the Far East. There were a few church books written in these languages, but they were made for baptizing non-Russians. Still, at that time, these were the only books in these languages.

Even so, each of the Russian northern indigenous nations is well known for its own historically developed folklore tradition, rich in symbolism and forms. For example, the Nenets have their own special epic songs: s'udbabts, jarabts, khynabts<sup>2</sup> [Пушкарева, Бурыкин 2011b: 193]. These genres of folklore are characterized by their own vocabulary, composition, phraseology, and expressive manner. They also have their own rules of performance, and a special figurative language for describing things, people's character, behaviour, and natural phenomena [Лаптандер 2008]. We believe that Nenets oral tradition constitutes the main basis of the Nenets national literature. Literary theory informs us that every style (whether classical or social realism) has its own composition rules and lexical compendium mainly influenced by preceding cultural stages. For example, E.A. Helimski showed that the oral traditions of the Nganasan formed a standardized and highly developed literature [Helimski 1995]. We should not forget that Nganasan is the nearest neighbour and relative of Nenets, and they both have very similar epics. Helimski also mentioned that the Nenets, like many other nomadic nations, are very fond of folklore poetry — epic songs, fairy tales, and riddles, with their own rhythm and musical structure [Добровольский 1965; Хелимский 2000]. Their society

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> S'udbabts are ancient Nenets legends about humans' battles with giants and other hostile forces. Jarabts is the Nenets epic narrative about the misadventures of the hero, who is looking for his family, reindeer or a wife on the tundra. Khynabts were characterized by Elena Pushkareva as historical songs [Πγιικαρεβα 2000].

respects men and women who are familiar with poetry and poetic devices. Narrators could tell their traditional stories for several days at a time. Even nowadays, Nenets people greatly appreciate performances in which a storyteller uses traditional colourful turns of speech, comparisons and old-time expressions. Here we would like to give a few examples of such literary devices:

- Исьда вэңгартм' тамна нись хае". (1) 'He didn't leave even a brainless dog there' means 'he took harsh revenge'.
- Нябакоми нями нябимда нобамда ни' мара' тяхамна (2) текал" нидав'.
  - 'My sister tucked her glove behind the belt-buckle' means 'my sister wasn't agitated; she was self-confident'.
- (3) Ненэй Ваи нена сядо"мы — ямдако мал' сарадава' пир. 'The Vai woman [i.e. from the Vai family] is really beautiful (lit: with-face) — her skin is so delicate that it can be pierced by even a fir-needle'.

[Терещенко 1990: 306]

# 3. The first native writers and poets

The Institute of Northern Peoples was founded in Leningrad in 1930. It played a very important role in educating the first indigenous intellectuals. Young indigenous people who were selected to eventually become Soviet party leaders were sent there to study to become teachers and administrative workers. They had to learn to read and write in their own languages in order to help the Soviet state carry out its propagandistic work among the inhabitants of the tundra and taiga. Afterwards, most of these students returned home and continued working there. When the indigenous people were offered the opportunity to become literate and receive an education in order to develop their way of life, it was like a revolution in their communities as well. Before this, in Tsarist times, there were only scarce occasions for people from indigenous nations to get an education, except maybe in parochial schools. The Tsarist administration was mostly interested in getting taxes from the Northern peoples, and let them live on the tundra without influencing their traditional way of life.

The new Soviet state embarked on the huge endeavour of developing written languages for the Northern peoples. By the end of the 1930s, a unified alphabet was developed for many indigenous northern languages, including Nenets. This made it finally possible to write texts in these languages. At first, thin books of fairy tales were published only in Nenets, without translation [Пыря 1935; Пыря 1936]. All the following books were supplied by a Russian translation (the Nenets authors necessarily) or were translated from Russian. The number of these books wasn't large, see the list of the books in Nenets in [Буркова и др. 2010: 216] and in the list of Monographs in Nenets [Monographs 2013].

In 1931 a training college for Nenets teachers was opened in Narian-Mar. At the same time, a literary circle was organized in the editorial office of the newspaper *N'arjana wynd'er* (The Red Tundra-inhabitant). A similar circle was started almost at the same time in the capital of another Nenets district, Salekhard, in the *N'arjana ngerm* (The Red North) newspaper office. In 1935 the literary circle in Narian-Mar published its first book of collected stories, written by young Nenets writers. However, all of the stories in this book, *Zapol'arie* (In the Arctic), are only in the Russian language, probably for ideological reasons.

At the same time there was still only a small number of indigenous students at the Institute of Northern Peoples. All of the students had a very intensive study program and had to learn how to read and write in Russian very fast. They also attended intensive courses in world and Russian literature. This introduction to written literatures was designed to explain to these young indigenous people the necessity of developing a new written literature in their native languages.

The first pioneer of Nenets literature was Nikolai Vylka with his novels Mar'ia (Marya) and Dohona (On the Island)<sup>3</sup>. These novels were published in 1938 in Nenets with a Russian translation produced by linguist Georgii Verboy. During the same period of time, the first Nenets linguist Anton Pyrerka wrote the novel Wedo n'udia n'iu (The Wedo's Junior Son). Unfortunately, it was allowed to be published only in the 1960s and only in Russian<sup>4</sup>. Both authors gave a very realistic picture of the Nenets' difficult life on the tundra. Of course, this material exhibited the influence of Soviet propaganda, with the new Communist regime portraved as helping tundra dwellers to survive on the tundra. For example, in his novel Pyrerka described Lenin as follows:

(4) Ленин хуна пин' тарпбата марад' нгоб" вархад няби варханда нгади. Лаханаб"нанда вабида марад" тавнасось пэрнга".5

> 'When Lenin goes out into the streets he is visible from all sides of the town. When he talks, his voice is heard all over the town'

> > [Пырерка 1959: 136]

In any case, these new Nenets writers based their storyline on their folklore traditions, in which the hero was commonly quite poor and struggled with his enemies — rich reindeer herders. Khazankovich [2014: 142] observed that in their literary reflections on native mythology and the realities of life on the tundra, the new Nenets writers found a new way to implement and transform their nation's

In 1932 the N'arjana wynd'er newspaper published the very first Nenets novel, written by G. Suftin — N'arjana numgy (The Red Star) — but this was based on a translation from Russian by I. Vyucheiskii and M. Antonova [Буркова и др. 2010: 187].

The part of the novel N'esej<sup>?</sup>ji<sup>?</sup>  $\eta ud^{?}$  (New thoughts) was published in Nenets in the book by N.M. Tereshchenko [Терещенко 1959].

The first Cyrillic version of the Nenets orthography used the character' for glottal stop and the digraph HZ instead of the letter  $\eta$ . Some spellings differ from modern Nenets spellings.

sociocultural world model. Their Nenets origin formed their own way of writing and expressing themselves through the traditional rules of narrating and the peculiarities of their national culture.

For example, the Nenets novel *Mar'ia* is a realistic story about the Nenets' everyday life on the tundra. The heroes come from poor Nenets and Komi families. They move to an uninhabited island in order to get far away from merchants and other Russians who were always taking all of their belongings as tax payments. The first lines of the novel [Вылка 1938a: 5] are uncommon for Nenets folklore because they contain a beautiful and impressive description of nature:

- (5) Ибанда сейхад мерця warmth:px.-gen.-3sg. heart:abl. wind минхальй', яникако мерця. come:3/3sg. mild:dim. wind 'The wind started blowing from the south (lit. from the heart of warmth), a gentle wind'.
- (6) Мерия mup' минхальиь. енена wind cloud:pl. go:inh.-inf. draw:*prtpr*. нгэрмда сеян' мюсельяд'. North:px.-3sg.-gen. heart:dat.-sg. migrate:3/3pl. 'As soon as the wind started blowing, stratus clouds started migrating to the heart of the North'.
- (7) Нгамгэда нгэвна mupu' мюселкава, somehow cloud-only:gen.-pl. migrate: VN.-emph. пудангана ям' итя нгабтеняр Water smell:*prtpr.-px.2sg.* behind:*prtpr*. sea вуни нга, not:neg.-3sg.-emph. be:coneg. хыркари мерцяхад нгод пыда нгод wind:abl.-sg. also he also any нгаркада хамбда. хамбда large:px.-nom.-3sg. wave:px.-nom.-3sg. wave:px.-nom.-3sg. илавы. heave:prtps.

'As soon as the clouds started to migrate, the Kara Sea, which is not a very calm sea, heaved up its waves, its large waves'.

[Вылка 1938а: 5]

The story starts by describing the life of the heroes, who moved to an uninhabited island and lived in a tepee/tent (chum) in the tundra. Then Norwegian merchants arrived at their camp and started trading with the Nenets, asking for expensive polar fox furs but offering a very low price. The merchants gave these Nenets a little food, but mostly vodka. After this it was very easy for the traders to take from the drunken Nenets all their warm winter clothes and boots. After this they left the island. However, the Nenets did not blame these traders for this brigandism, but knew that it was their own fault and continued to live as before.

...помнандо' и' ни хант. (8) 'they live in peace and friendship' (lit. 'water can't seep between them').

This story is quite realistic and is probably based on true events which happened on either the Kolguev or the Waigach Islands.

In 1937 a new play entitled Shaman was published. It was written by the Nenets poet and dramatist Ivan Nogo with a Russian translation by Georgii Verbov. This play had a stunning success among Nenets and even Russian-speaking people. It tells about young Nenets people who tried to modernize life on the tundra and to get rid of the old traditions and strict religious rules. It was quite relevant at that time and even nowadays it is still performed in local theatres on the Yamal peninsula.

We agree with Eva Toulouze that early Nenets writers such as Nikolai Vylka (1911–1942), Anton Pyrerka (1905–1941), Ivan Nogo (1891-1947) and many others have been almost forgotten by young Nenets people today [Toulouze 2004: 227]. Still, children learn their names and their stories at school during their classes in Northern literature. Also, people who are interested in the Nenets language, literature, and history of course know their names, novels, and poems very well. We may say with confidence that these writers managed to establish a strong foundation for the written Nenets language and literature.

# 4. Nenets literature in the 1950s-1960s

In the 1950s and 1960s special literary courses were organized to prepare young native writers in the Department of Northern Peoples at Leningrad's Herzen State Pedagogical Institute. The courses were organized in such a way that indigenous students could attend the literary lectures of well-known Soviet writers and participate in discussions with them<sup>6</sup>. Among these young Nenets writers were Vasilii Ledkov (1933–2002), Alexei Pichkov (1934–2006), Lubov Nen'iang (Komarova) (1931–1996), Alexander Kan'ukov (1932–1972), Prokopii Javtysyi (1932–2005) and Elena Susoi. There was also a talented Nenets poet named Leonid Lapsui (1932–1982), who used to come to Leningrad quite often.

By that time, young indigenous writers wrote not only in their native language but also in Russian<sup>7</sup>. These new authors reflected their traditional worldview in their novels and described their people's lives, cultural heritage and traditional knowledge even when writing in Russian. For example, in Tyko Vylka's<sup>8</sup> novel

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> One of the first students at the Institute for Northern Peoples was an Evenki, Mikhail Voskoboinikov, aged 30. He returned to Leningrad in 1945 and began to work at Herzen State Pedagogical Institute in the Department of Northern Peoples, where he taught the Evenki language. Professor Aleftina Zhukova, who worked in this department at the time, knew Voskoboinikov very well and said that many Northern writers and poets were trained with help from Voskoboinikov (see [Воскобойников 1967]).

We should remember that Russian was not the native language for young Nenets authors, but the language that they learned at school. They were mostly Nenets-Russian bilinguals, and their knowledge of their mother tongue always influenced the way they spoke Russian.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Tyko Vylka (1886–1960), Russian name Il'ia Konstantinovich Vylka, was the most famous Nenets painter and author, noted for

*Pro tsingu* (About Scurvy) the author described how the spirit of Scurvy comes to a Nenets family in human form. The old woman, in order to protect her family, splashes the spirit's face with blood, following ancient Nenets traditional beliefs about battling scurvy. Only after this action does this malady go away [Вылка Т. 1965].

We see that above all else. Nenets authors wrote their novels and poems using a fully Nenets expressive and figurative folklore style. For example, Lubov Nen'iang's expressive poem Tu'sud (The Fire Court) [Ненянг 1994] symbolically tells about the coming of the Red Russian into the tundra, an allegorical reference to the Communist Revolution. Published in the late 1980s, the poem was originally written in Nenets and later translated into Russian. The Fire Court gives the following powerful description of the Yenisei River9.

(9)Енсяна" хамба". Yenisey:px.lpl wave:pl 'Waves of the Jenisey'.

> Ирикэна" хамба" grandfather:px.lpl. wave:pl. 'Waves of grandfather'.

Ниду' нёраку", fellow:px3pl. catch:1/3pl. 'Catch their friends'

Xapmy' сянаку". themselves:3pl. play:1/3pl. 'Play themselves'.

his Arctic landscapes. He was also active in politics and was elected the chairman of Novaya Zemlya Island during the Soviet era. Tyko Vylka also took part in polar expeditions.

Marina Lublinskaia was very fortunate to have read the original Nenets version first, and was greatly impressed by its poetic language and meter

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Ям' сырараха, sea snow:sim.
'Like sea-snow (foam)'.

Нирциртарха.
eyebrow:pl.px.3sg.
'Like his eyebrows'.

Хамба" лабаңга", wave:pl. crush:1/3pl.
'Waves are crushing'.

Сыра пеляраха" snow part:sim.pl.
'Like snow pieces'.
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[Ненянг 1994]

The meter of the poem is not really a Nenets traditional folklore rhythm. Here Lubov Nen'iang uses a different meter, probably invented by herself. As already mentioned, Nenets poets often use every possible poetic device available in their traditional folklore, such as idiomatic expressions, and these sound very harmonious and graceful.

At that time, Nenets poetry employed various subjects and devices, but the main theme remained life under Soviet Communism. For example, Leonid Lapsui wrote a wonderful poem about a Nenets boy in the tundra entitled  $E\partial \ni \check{u}\kappa o$  (Jedeiko), which was published in Russian in Sverdlovsk in 1978. Later it was reprinted twice in Tyumen.

We should not forget to mention Ivan Istomin (1917–1988), who wrote both in Nenets and Komi, Gennadii Puiko (1935–2000), and Ivan Juganpelik 1925–1990 or 1991).

# 5. Nenets literature in the 1970s-2000s

In these decades, the vast majority of Nenets authors, such as L. Lapsui and P. Javtysyi, started to write only in Russian or translated their works into Russian. We do not know the poems

and stories of Tyko Vylka in Nenets, since nearly all of them were translated into Russian. Furthermore, some Nenets authors, like Alexei Pichkov, wrote all their poems and stories exclusively in Russian. Still, even in Russian, Pichkov's texts directly rely on the Nenets language and thus do not lose their uniqueness or expressiveness. It should be mentioned that some of Pichkov's poems were later translated back into Nenets by V. Ledkov [Пичков 2000].

We should also not forget Vasily Ledkov, who was not only a famous Nenets poet and writer, but also a translator. One of his last works was a translation of the Karelian epic song Kalevala into Nenets [Калевала 1, Калевала 2: 1994]. Ledkov started this work after one of his trips to Finland, where he was amazed by the beauty of Finnish epic songs. He was so inspired that he decided to translate these into the Nenets language. The beginning of his translation was published in the newspaper N'arjana wynd'er, but unfortunately the whole work was never published as a book. After Ledkov's death, the manuscript of the Nenets translation of the *Kalevala* was presented by the poet's widow to the Arkhangelsk Museum of Literature [Торопова 2014].

At the beginning of the 1990s, another Nenets poet, Prokopii Javtysyi, published his Ngobkad p'er'en'a sonet (Crown of sonnets) [Явтысый 1994a, 1994b].

At this period of time, Nenets writers started to change their style of writing from an ideological, Communist way of writing to a more modern and free style. It was the time after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when sentiments of democracy and free speech were beginning to emerge. The most striking among these writers is Anna Nerkagi. She is a Nenets from the Yamal peninsula who studied at Tyumen University. Nerkagi joined the Union of Soviet Writers after publishing her novel Aniko iz roda Nogo (Aniko from the Nogo Clan) [Неркаги 1977]. Even though she returned to live on the tundra and migrate there with reindeer like many other Nenets, she wrote all of her novels exclusively in Russian. This may be because she is from the generation of Nenets who studied at Soviet boarding schools, where it was more important to speak good Russian than Nenets. She later reflected in her

books a strong and very negative attitude against the politics of russification, sedentarization, and intensive gas-extraction on the tundra [Laptander 2013]. These processes caused many Nenets people to leave their traditional lands on the tundra and move to Russian settlements, where they are not welcome at all. As a protest she wrote the novel *Molchashchii* (The Silent One), where she reflected her own vision of the Nenets future as a warning to make Nenets people think about it [Hepkaru 1996].

Another interesting Nenets writer is Nina Jadne. Even though Jadne writes about ordinary Nenets people, she writes all her novels only in Russian. Jadne explained that she would simply like to make her novels accessible for Russian readers. It could also be that most of her novels were edited by her husband, the Chuvash writer Dmitrii Verendeev, who also wrote all his novels in Russian [Ядне 1995, 1999].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, not much was done to educate new native writers at the university level. Some literary works were produced in the western part of the Nenets land by Prokopii Javtysyi and Alexei Pichkov. They organized a literary circle for young writers, called Suiukotsia (The little reindeer calf), and later some of their works were published in Nenets. A. Pichkov translated his students' poems into Russian [Родимый край 2000]. A few of these poems were translated back into Nenets [Ханзерова 2000].

### 6. Conclusion

Written Nenets literature does not have a long history. However, although it came into existence less than a century ago, it developed intensively from the end of the 1930s through the 1990s. Not many works were published in Nenets from the end of the 20th century to the present day. The most famous and politically active writers, like Vasilii Ledkov, Lubov Nen'iang, Prokopii Javtysii and Juri Wella (1948–2013) had already passed away.

One reason that very few literary works have been published in Nenets over the last decade may be that educated Nenets, especially young people, have almost stopped speaking and

especially writing in Nenets. Another reason could be recent changes in the regional educational system. Many Northern schools have stopped teaching Nenets and other minority languages as a school subject. Of course, there are still local newspapers, radio and television programs in the Nenets language, but these programs are mostly oriented towards the older generation of Nenets-speaking people.

Even though there are many reasons to be doubtful about the place of Nenets literature among the world's literatures, we should still remember that every Nenets writer is unique and has developed his or her own style of writing. Nenets authors came to the literary endeavour in many different ways, but mostly by chance due to their personal desire and writing talent. Special official courses in literature have never been held at the university or the high school level, although there have been advanced courses for professional writers. During the Soviet era, indigenous writers simply emerged, writing about things that were important and relevant for them, for their nation, and for the Soviet political system. It is true that most Nenets writers did not have any proper classical written literature tradition as a base of their education and background, but they did have a different sort of knowledge, grounded in their ancient Nenets oral traditions. This could be the main key to the uniqueness and relevance of their works. It may also explain why it is sometimes so difficult to render the original beauty of Nenets texts into other languages.

# List of abbreviations

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sg. — singular number
pl. — plural number
1/3 — conjugation type (1 — subjective, 2 — objective,
   3 — reflexive)/person
px. — posessive declination
sim. — similative
prtpr — participe present
nom - nominative
gen — genetive
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dat — dative
abl — ablative
neg — negative verb
coneg — conegative
emph — emphative
VN — verbal nome
prtps — participe past

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