

# Women and the Tundra: Is There a Gender Shift in Yamal?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article questions the notion of gender shift in the Yamal region. It looks at the migration of indigenous women from the tundra/taiga to settlements and towns, as well as at the specific gender division of space that has resulted from this process in the Russian North. The author provides a detailed analysis of quantitative and qualitative sources dealing with these issues in different regions of the Russian North and compares this material with the situation she observed and studied in Yamal in the 2000s. In this way, the author not only shows that Yamal seems to hold a special position in terms of how gender relations are organized today, but she also stresses that although the general picture of the gender shift may look similar, one should pay attention to differences that challenge generalization for the whole of the Russian North.

**Keywords:** Yamal, Gender Shift, Russian North, Native People, Nenets

Among the phenomena that provoked increased interest at the conference “Gender Shift in Northern Communities of Russia” was the migration of indigenous women from the tundra and taiga to settlements and towns, as well as the specific gender division of space that has resulted from this process. I will use “gender shift” to describe the migration of women from the tundra, and issues related to it.<sup>2</sup> This article will focus on the situation in Yamal, which I will compare with other regions of the Russian North.

To understand the situation in Yamal<sup>3</sup> I had to inscribe it into a broader context of the Russian North in general, examining materials related to various territories and peoples from the Kola Peninsula to Chukotka.<sup>4</sup> It turned out that publications on this topic started appearing more than 20 years ago: some of them are directly related to my subject, while others mention it only in passing. To my knowledge, the authors of these studies do not use the term “gender shift,”<sup>5</sup> employing only descriptive names for the phenomenon. These works may be divided into two large groups, “quantitative” and “qualitative.” The former primarily comprises demographic statistics, or else parts or paragraphs of works in demography, ethno-demography, and ethno-sociology, which compile and analyze statistical data.<sup>6</sup> The latter include various anthropological and ethnological works that analyze not so much figures, but situations and contexts.<sup>7</sup> Materials of both types may often be found within the frames of one work.

Since it is impossible, in one short article, to compare the situation in Yamal with every other region of the Russian North, in the first part of this paper I will provide data from several regions, and then discuss these parameters in relation to Yamal.

## Migration of Women from the Tundra and Taiga: The Situation Outside of Yamal

## ***Quantitative Data***

Let us first look at the quantitative data, i.e., examples from the area of demography.

*Kola Peninsula:* In 2006, in the seven brigades of the “Tundra” cooperative, there were only two tent workers (in Russian, *chumrobotnitsa*) left. Celibacy rate is very high among the reindeer herders, since young men are absent from settlements for long periods of time, and their chances to meet girls are very low. At the same time, young girls are looking for marriage partners mostly among representatives of other ethnic groups (Sherstyuk 2008:280).

*Nenets Autonomous Okrug:*<sup>8</sup> The number of women in the tundra is much lower than that of men; in 1997, the tundra population in this region counted 714 men and 309 women, i.e., women constituted only 30 percent of the whole population (Evsiugin and Vycheiskii 1998:230).

*Taimyr (formerly Dolgan-Nenets Autonomous Region):* With Evenks, inhabitants of the peninsula, almost all women and children live in settlements; family nomadism is virtually absent: “women are not the way they used to be, they don’t want to live in the tundra,” say the people (Anderson 1998:201).

*Kets (along the middle and lower Yenisei):* In 2001, almost half of the male population of marriageable age was single. One hundred twenty women and only 37 men stayed in ethnically mixed marriages. Altogether among Kets, 164 women and only 81 men were married, although in general the number of men and women of marriageable age is approximately the same (Krivonogov 2003:128).

*Western Evenks (Evenks living near the Yenisei):* Only in one out of four marriages do men prefer brides from a different ethnic group, while with women this figure is larger than 50 percent (Krivonogov 2001a:65-66).

*Evenkia (formerly Evenk Autonomous Region):* According to data provided by N. Ssorin-Chaikov in the region where he worked at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, around 80 adults lived in the taiga more or less permanently. Among these people there were only nine married couples, six of which were elderly (Ssorin-Chaikov 2002:18).

*Evens of Sakha (Yakutia):* Only 14 women worked as professional housewives for 14 brigades, or 90 reindeer herders. This work is so unattractive for women that some brigades may live without professional housewives for a long time, as a result of which one man has to do household chores. The majority of reindeer herders are forced to be celibate for a considerable part of their life (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:86).

*Evenk population of Irkutsk Province:* The number of men of marriageable age living in Khatanga Evenks’ camps exceeds that of women, so that the majority of men are not married. Even the choice of a marriage partner may be absent, since Evenk women of marriageable age mostly live in settlements (Sirina 2002:87).

*Magadan Province:* In the 1980s, the number of bachelors in reindeer brigades amounted to 69 percent (Gavrilova 1997).

*Chukotka and Kamchatka*: Approximately half of the adult indigenous population is not married (Pika 1996:33).

As we see, published demographic data related to various regions present a largely uniform picture. It is precisely this uniformity that allows researchers to look at what is going on in the Russian North as a uniform process, even though not happening at the same speed in different regions.

The special section dedicated to numerically small peoples of the North in the demographic report "Population of Russia," by D. Bogoiavlenskii (2005), presents the most well-known example of this perspective. This work contains the most typical and thorough description of this process from the point of view of demography.

This text is usually quoted in later works focusing on the issue:

Differences between men and women of the peoples of the North in relation to educational level (which is much higher with women), in the area of labor interests (men are more engaged in traditional spheres, whereas women—in the non-productive sphere), and often as far as the place of habitation is concerned (men live in the taiga or tundra, women—in settlements; or men in settlements, women—in towns) produce different orientations towards marriage and family. As a result, many indigenous Northern women prefer marriages with men coming from the outside (reverse cases, i.e., marriages of indigenous men with non-indigenous women are extremely rare).

This factor precipitously lowers marriage rate among indigenous men. As compared to a relatively stable percentage of married women, that of married men constantly decreases; thus, in 1959 there were almost 87% of married men aged between 45 to 49 (this age features the highest percentage of married men), but by 1989 this number dropped to 73%." (Bogoiavlenskii 1994:147-148)

Generalizing quantitative data, one may say that with all variety of situations and all mutually dependent reasons and consequences cited by the authors mentioned above, all descriptions deal with several key elements related to each other by the narrative logic and reflecting the demographic structure of the population. I suggest calling them *asymmetries*. They may be divided into three major groups:

1. *Asymmetry in the choice of the way of life* between men and women.
2. *Asymmetry of educational level* of men and women.
3. *Asymmetry of marital behavior* of men and women.

Asymmetry of *the way of life* implies that women prefer sedentary life in settlements and towns to nomadic or semi-nomadic life in the taiga or tundra, whereas men continue choosing

life connected with the tundra, taiga, and traditional activities. As a result, there emerges 1) an asymmetry in the structure of employment (women more frequently connect their life with “new,” non-traditional kinds of activities, whereas men connect with hunting, fishing, and reindeer husbandry), and 2) an asymmetry in territorial distribution (there are more women in settlements, and virtually no women in the tundra or taiga). This is precisely the gender-based space division that was mentioned in the beginning.

Asymmetry of *educational level*: according to data provided by a variety of researchers, indigenous women are better educated than men. This is often connected with the previous parameter: men who work in the tundra need to possess skills rather than a special education, so their educational level is lower. Some researchers even speak about the “female face” of indigenous intelligentsia (Burykin 1999).

Asymmetry of *marital behavior*. In general, men prefer indigenous women as their main marriage partners, whereas women prefer to “marry up” with the “Russians.”<sup>9</sup> According to the authors of the works mentioned earlier, these marriages are rarely stable. As a result, we observe a relatively low percentage of married people (both men and women), a considerable number of single women from dissolved marriages, and a rather high percentage of bachelor men (i.e., men who never concluded a single marriage) (for more detail, see Gavrilova 1997; Bogoiavlenskii 1994; Pika 1996).

This set of asymmetries repeats from one work to another with virtually no exception.

Many descriptions mention that this situation is relatively new and is seen as “troublesome”; this attitude seems to be very significant.

We know quite well about societies where a specific gender division of space exists (or existed) for a fairly long time and never presented a problem of any kind. For example, this is the situation of raising cattle on distant pastures in the Northern Caucasus, where men spend a considerable part of the year out in the pastures, and nobody expects the same of women.<sup>10</sup> Or else, one may think about the situation of internal outmigration in Russia (both now and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), when men left their families in search of work. The case of sailors on long voyages and their families would be another very representative example of such spatial asymmetry. This list can be expanded *ad infinitum*.

Yet for the situation under discussion, the dynamic aspect is very important, i.e., the belief that in the past the situation was different.

Thus, what is happening in the present-day Russian North may be described as a “gender shift” due to the combination of the following factors: first, the three asymmetries described above; second, the fact that these asymmetries emerged relatively recently, within the life course of presently living generations; and third, the fact that these asymmetries do not just exist as something given but that their emergence and existence provoke people’s reflection. Since it is hard to discover reflection in demographic statistics, there is no sense of speaking about gender shift based on these data alone. They can only be used for preliminary conclusions.

### ***Qualitative Data***

In my analysis of qualitative data, I will follow the same logic as before: I will try to find common traits in a large number of published materials describing not so much the situation in general, but specific and more detailed cases of particular regions.

Certainly, I would not be able to discuss all these texts within the frames of one article. However, the *change of attitude toward the taiga/tundra* by the indigenous dwellers of the Russian North is one of the most common and most significant features in descriptions available.

From the point of view of researchers, how does this change of attitude toward the tundra/taiga manifest itself? For those peoples of the Russian North who at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century used to be nomadic or semi-nomadic, taiga or tundra was the natural element of their existence and everyday reality, the space where they spent more or less all of their life. In this situation, distribution of male and female gender roles was complementary. Women could not exist in the tundra/taiga without men, and vice versa.

Presently, according to existing descriptions, indigenous population starts developing (or has already developed, depending on the geographical region) an image of tundra/taiga as not only a harsh milieu, but a space suitable exclusively for work, and not so much for everyday life. Tundra is seen as a place of work opposed to the settlement, which is a place of life; tundra is also perceived as a primarily male space, as opposed to space suitable for all (Habeck 2006).

As T. Tuisku (2001) and P. Vitebsky (2005) observed, distribution of gender roles changed, and now men can exist in the tundra without women, whereas women can not. Gradually the Northern indigenous population developed an image of the taiga/tundra as a place too dangerous, too harsh, too crude, too uncivilized, etc., i.e., not suitable for women and children. The reasons with which young women justify the lack of desire to go to the tundra are very telling in this respect: the tundra is a dull place, there are no entertainments there, no good company, it is too cold, one cannot wear elegant urban clothes, life in the tundra is very isolated, backward, and uncivilized, there is no Internet, no mobile phones, children have no place for schooling, there is no accessible medical care, work in the tundra lacks prestige. These reasons are quoted by virtually every author, and bring evidence to the fact that the tundra/taiga is indeed seen by the majority as unsuitable for the “normal” everyday life of women (Habeck 2005:141-147; Vitebsky 2005:192-193; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001; Tuisku 2001; Sherstyuk 2008; etc.). It is noteworthy that in many regions not only women and children, but elderly people, too, left the taiga/tundra for settlements upon retirement. Reindeer enterprises gradually transformed from family units into production collectives, although their members may be related to each other by family ties.

V. Vladimirova observes that on the Kola Peninsula the tundra is associated with male space to the degree that when women go there, they change into male clothes (leaving nice traditional clothes for folklore performances) (Vladimirova 2006:210). Other descriptions also suggest that in many regions people working in the tundra start to be viewed as a specifically male community, with the corresponding expectations as to its behavior code: harshness, bad language, drinking, etc., which young women should stay away from.

Naturally, all authors try to explain how this situation came about, and almost everybody gives three *immediate reasons* for this change:

- Soviet *ideology* inculcated to the indigenous population;
- *reform of reindeer husbandry* of the 1960s;
- introduction of compulsory *boarding school education* for all at the end of the 1950s.

What in particular does this all mean?

As far as *ideology* is concerned, the most important aspect here is the attitude of the Soviet state to family nomadism as to “backwardness” that has to be overcome, as well as the fact that the change in the situation of the “women laborers of the North” was one of the objects of special care and attention.<sup>11</sup>

Among the results of the *reindeer husbandry reform*<sup>12</sup> was the introduction of the paid position of a tent worker (*chumrabochnitsa*), the number of which per work brigade was limited by certain economic considerations;<sup>13</sup> as a result, the number of work positions for women in reindeer husbandry was severely limited.

Women who used to roam in the tundra before, and for whom now there were not enough work positions, as well as children and elderly people, were expected (or required) to leave tundra camps and switch to the sedentary way of life. Thus, family nomadism (*bytovoe kochevanie*) was to be replaced by production-oriented nomadism (*proizvodstvennoe kochevanie*). After some time it turned out that the position of the tent worker is not extremely popular on the labor market, and often remains unoccupied. In some regions this problem became so acute that a male version of this profession came into being.

Virtually all authors stress that the female family role as the tent hostess turned into an ordinary job for which a woman was supposed to be paid. Yet it seems that this process never reached its final stage anywhere, since this position is occupied exclusively by wives, mothers, or girlfriends of reindeer herders. Some researchers mention extremely rare cases in which this work was done by their non-married daughters; there is no data about women who would be working in the brigade and yet not be related to any of the reindeer herders (Vladimirova 2006:210; Tuisku 2001:52-53; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:88; Vitebsky 2005:83; Istomin, personal communication).

By means of boarding schools (*internat*) as an element of compulsory secondary education, the ideological position of the state and the ideas brought by the “Russians” from the outside, a new vision of tundra life and the proper place of women in it reached all young people living in the tundra and taiga. In this new system of values, family nomadism was seen as backward, the position of women in the traditional nomadic society as oppressed and not meeting the criteria of modern life, and female work in the tundra as hard and non-prestigious. Moreover, during the time spent in boarding schools children would lose connections with tundra life and get used to a different level of comfort. As a result, upon completion of their studies young women did not want to go back to the tundra and tried to find a place in the settlement or in the town.

Another reason was the very form in which education was organized. Children of nomadic reindeer herders had to leave their families for a long time to stay in the boarding school. Mothers who did not wish to part with their children often had to follow them to settlements and seek a job there (Tuisku 2001:55; Povoroznyuk 2005; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:85).

Researchers argue that as a result of all these factors, the view of the tundra as an inappropriate place to live became widespread. Since this view was characteristic to those who came to the Russian North in order to implement reindeer economic reform, who fought against family nomadism out of economic and ideological reasons, and because it was precisely for the “Russians” who came here in large numbers in 1960s that life outside of settlements seemed to be abnormal, one may say that as a result of all these changes this “external” view of the tundra/taiga became internalized, and indigenous dwellers started seeing the tundra/taiga the same way as those who came from the outside.

Thus, when we speak about the reasons and consequences of women’s migration from the tundra, as well as about qualitative and quantitative features of this process, it seems that we are dealing with a certain general phenomenon that has clear internal logic.

Yet as soon as we address particularities, this clear macro-level picture gets fuzzier and disappears altogether. Attentive reading of anthropological descriptions focusing on women’s migration from the tundra (as I already mentioned, almost all of these descriptions concern particular regions or peoples), it becomes clear that in spite of the seeming uniformity, situations in different regions are far from similar.

While according to V. Vladimirova’s information, the phenomenon of female migration from the tundra on the Kola Peninsula was observed by Charnoluskii already in the 1920s (Vladimirova 2006:208), in the Nenets Autonomous Region this process, in Tuisku’s opinion, started only in the middle of the 1970s. Whereas on the Kola Peninsula and in the Transbaikal region there are now virtually no women left in the tundra, in the tundras of the Nenets Autonomous Region and the Republic of Komi, a female deficit started to manifest itself only recently. Among the reasons that preclude women from going to the tundra in these regions, informants name the insufficient number of tents (*chum*) and household belongings necessary for the tundra life (Tuisku 2001:54; Dwyer and Istomin 2009) rather than rudeness, drunkenness, or obscene language of the reindeer herders, as on Kola Peninsula or in Yakutia. Some authors point out that reindeer herders’ prestige is very low in the eyes of the population as a whole, and that young women do not want to have anything to do with them (Sherstyuk 2008; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001); others say that in spite of everything, traditional types of activity preserve their prestige (Povoroznyuk 2005; Sirina 2002). Some researchers speak about the insufficient number of brides for indigenous men (Ssorin-Chaikov 2002; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001), and others stress that inter-ethnic marriages have been a common phenomenon for several decades, and the question is not about the bride’s ethnicity but about her willingness to go to the taiga (Sirina 2002:87). In some regions, educated young women prefer marriages with people from the outside, who hence possess a higher status (as in Evenkia; cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2002:34); in

others, it is only the less-educated young women who prefer marriages with the “Russians” to obtain higher status (as among the Saami; cf. Sherstyuk 2008:280). In yet other regions, marriages with people from the outside are partially conditioned by the quality of communications: with the decrease of aviation and the loss of ability for independent long-distance travel in the tundra, the range of potential marriage partners with Evenks narrowed down to their own settlement, which leaves a rather small choice, since relatives should be omitted (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:91).

In other words, situations in different regions are so dissimilar that it is not at all clear whether we are observing various stages of one and the same process, or dealing with altogether different processes. Connections among the choice of the place to live, education, and marriage preference, which seems to be so clear at the level of figures and the general perspective of the situation, now become much less transparent. Attempts to provide a description uniform for all regions seems to be as senseless as calculating the average patient’s temperature in a hospital.

### ***The Situation Outside of Yamal: A Brief Summary***

Available descriptions of the process of female migration from the tundra allow us to draw the following conclusions:

Almost all authors mention or discuss, with the use of qualitative data, the differences in marital and educational strategies between men and women of the Northern indigenous population, as well as the lack of desire, on the part of women, to live in the tundra (called “asymmetries” above). As follows from all descriptions, these differences emerged relatively recently, and provoke reflection within indigenous communities. Virtually all anthropologists testify to the simultaneous change of attitude of the indigenous population to the tundra/taiga, which are now seen as less and less suitable for women, children, and elderly people, and acquire a masculine nature. Among the immediate reasons for this transformation, all authors point out the ideological propaganda of the Soviet state, introduction of compulsory boarding-school education, and the reform of reindeer husbandry of the 1960s, which was accompanied by the creation of the position of a tent worker. When we deal with scholars’ individual local descriptions, each of them looks logical and non-contradictory. Yet as soon as we start comparing different regions, we observe that the processes taking place in them are far from similar both in terms of chronology and in their qualitative aspects. It is clear that if we were to clarify the situation, we would need comparative research data. If we deal with a uniform process taking place in the Russian North, then it is only comparative analysis of how it is developing in different regions that will allow us to more accurately define its nature, principles, and possible consequences. If the uniform process does not exist as such, then, again, it is only comparative research that can prove and explain this assumption.

Proceeding upon these premises, let me describe the situation in Yamal while constantly comparing it with what happens in other regions of the Russian North. To do this, we have to verify whether the asymmetries mentioned above emerged in Yamal in the recent past, and



whether there is reflection about them among the local indigenous population. Then we would turn to the present-day attitude toward the tundra, as well as to the factors that in other places were named as reasons for the changes that happened.

### **The Situation in Yamal**

In the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region there are two districts, Tazovskii and Iamal'skii,<sup>14</sup> where the tradition of reindeer husbandry played a key role in the life of the nomadic population, and where even in the first half of the 20th century virtually all local dwellers were nomads. It would then be logical to find out whether a gender shift took place precisely in these two districts.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Quantitative Data***

*Asymmetry in the choice of the way of life.* As we remember, the nature of this asymmetry consists in the fact that women prefer “modern life” in settlements, whereas men opt for “traditional activities in the tundra.” In 1995, according to Kvashnin's data (Kvashnin 2000:8), there were 903 people living in the Tazovskaia tundra, almost all of them Nenets. Out of this number, there were 476 men and 427 women, i.e., men constituted slightly over a half (53 percent) of the population. Clearly, this does not allow us to speak about any pronounced gender asymmetry in this case.

Yamal Peninsula is inhabited largely by Nenets (10,114 people), with a small number of Khanty and several Mansi families (400 people altogether). Statistical data in this case relates to the local population as a whole. On 1 January 2006, there were 5,278 nomads in the Yamal tundra, with the percentage of men and women approximately the same (2,616 men and 2,662 women). According to I. Krupnik (2000:146), since the 1930s the indigenous population of the peninsula has doubled, yet the absolute number of nomads stays virtually the same as in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (before the introduction of boarding schools and state farms). Thus, nowadays the nomadic population is only one half of the whole population of Yamal; the other half (5,235 people) leads a sedentary way of life, being engaged in nontraditional activities.

If we compare the most recent data (2006) with those of 1998, we will see that no drastic changes in the structure of the tundra population of Yamal Peninsula occurred over the past decade. The population as a whole increased by 198 people (!), yet the gender correlation remained the same (50 percent to 50 percent).

**Table 1:** Change of the quantitative composition of the Yamal tundra population (1998 and 2006) (source: regional statistics)

	1998	2006
Total population	5,080	5,278

Men	2,552	2,616
Women	2,528	2,662

Thanks to the data collected by E. Volzhanina (2007a), we can trace the changes in correlation of tundra men and women of *working age* (i.e., without children and elderly people) over the past 40 years in three districts of the region.

Data represented in Table 2 clearly show that from the point of view of long-term processes, the percentage of working-age men remains stable, with no tendency toward increase over the past four decades, and that in the short-term perspective this percentage is subject only to insignificant fluctuations.

**Table 2:** Number of men per 100 women of working age (16-59 years old) in nomadic households of small indigenous peoples of the North (source: Volzhanina 2007a:235)

District of Habitation	1966		1996		2002		2005	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
Priural'skii	95.3	48.8	111.5	53.6	127.2	56	91.2	47.7
Tazovskii	132.7	56.9	104.5	51.1	106.1	51.5	109.9	52.4
Iamal'skii	109.8	52.2	95.7	48.9	103.2	50.7	121.1	54.7

Two conclusions may be drawn on the basis of the data given above: 1) the population composition in the tundra of Yamal has remained stable over the past 40 years, and 2) there is no significant gender asymmetry on Yamal Peninsula (and only a 3 percent deviation from complete symmetry in the Tazovskaia tundra).

*Educational asymmetry.* This asymmetry is expressed in the fact that the level of education of indigenous women is generally higher than that of men. According to some data, 76 percent of people with secondary professional or higher education in the North are women (Popova 2004). Is this true of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region as well?

In 2001, I collected and generalized data about more than 200 Nenets belonging to different generations and living both in the tundra and in settlements. On the basis of these data I made calculations in respect to the educational level of men and women on the Yamal Peninsula (see Table 3). These data are certainly not exhaustive, yet they still allow for some understanding of the situation.<sup>16</sup>

Even though incomplete, these figures are in full accordance with data given by other researchers for other districts of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. For instance, Iu. Kvashnin (2000:41) gives data on the educational level of the nomadic population of the Tazovskii District for 1995; these data may be presented in the form of table 4.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 3:** Educational level of the indigenous population in Iamal'skii District (2001) (source: Author's field material)

	men	women	total
primary education	5%	13%	9%
Incomplete secondary education <sup>18</sup>	58%	52%	55%
secondary education	17%	18%	18%
incomplete and completed			
professional secondary education	17%	16%	16%
incomplete and completed			
higher education	3%	1%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

**Table 4:** Educational level of the indigenous population of the Tazovskaia tundra (1995) (source: Kvashnin 2000:41)

	men	women	total
primary education	26%	35%	30%
incomplete secondary education	44%	31%	38%
secondary education	29%	31%	30%
incomplete and completed			
professional secondary education	1%	3%	2%
incomplete and completed			
higher education	0	0	0
Total	100%	100%	100%

Thus, just as on Yamal Peninsula, there are more similarities than differences in the structure of education of men and women in the Tazovskaia tundra. The majority of the local population has a partial or completed secondary education. In the smaller group of population with higher education, one cannot notice any major differences, either. The latter is even more noteworthy, since materials from Iamal'skii District concern population *as a whole* rather than that of the *tundra* only.

According to E. Volzhanina (2005), who worked in other districts of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, including big multi-ethnic settlements, the number of women with professional secondary and primary professional education exceeds that of men by 1.7 times, yet there are more men with higher education. The percentage of people with professional secondary and higher education among the population as a whole is 17 percent (14 percent with men and 19 percent with women).

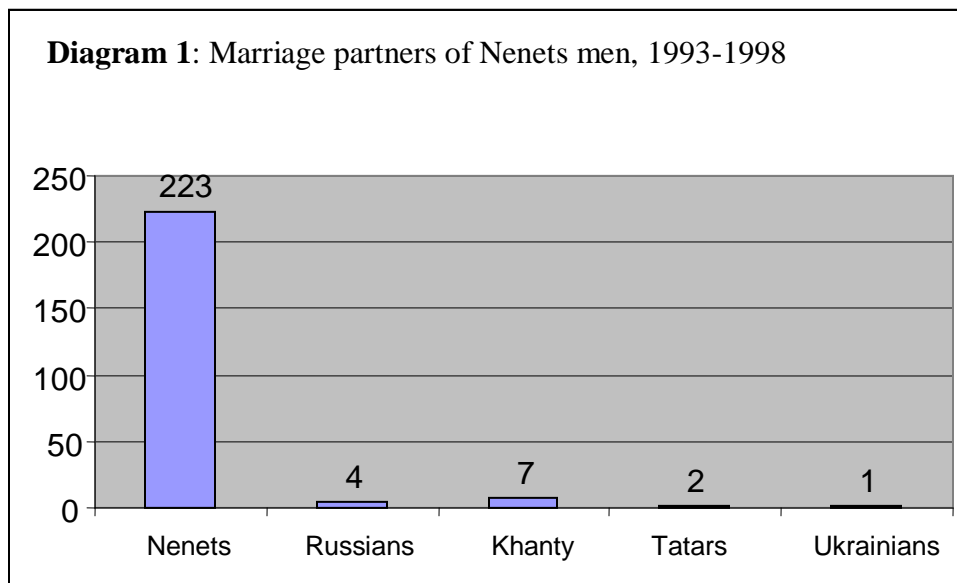
Indirect data provide the following further information: First, young people receive special education mostly in Salekhard, where several educational institutions have been steadily functioning for several decades. One of the main educational institutions is the veterinary secondary school; the domination by male students in this school proves that a considerable number of men receive special education.

Secondly, although it is clear that the majority of schoolteachers, kindergarten tutors, and midlevel medical personnel are women, men are not rare among professional physicians and other specialists. Analysis of family stories also shows that within one generation young men seek education, whether professional secondary or higher, no less frequently than young women, and that this was true already in the 1960s and 1970s.

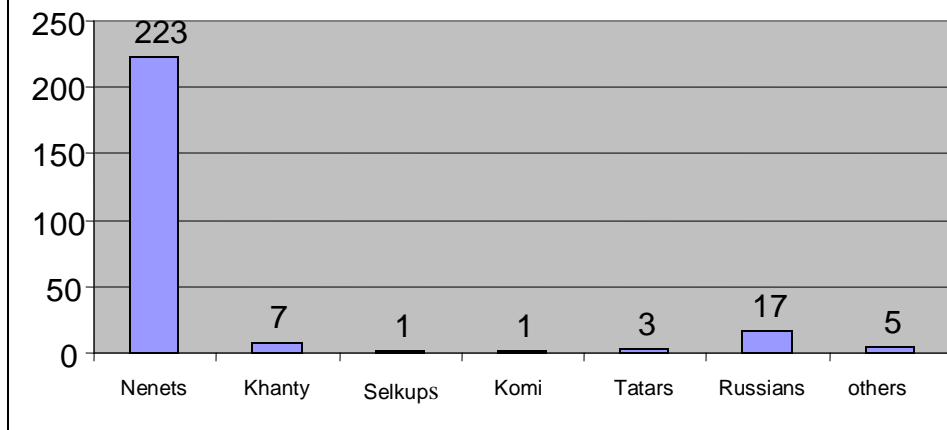
Thirdly, in contrast to other regions, the leading managerial positions in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region are often occupied by men. The best-known examples here are three Nenets men: Sergei Khariuchi, head of the State Duma of Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region; Alexander Iavai, leader of the influential organization Iamal—Potomkam (“Yamal to the Future Generations”); and Dmitrii Khorolia, president of the International Union of Reindeer Breeders.

Thus, for the region discussed, one may not speak about any pronounced gender asymmetry as far as the educational level is concerned.

*Asymmetry of marital behavior.* Here, one of the major indices is the number of inter-ethnic marriages. According to Iu. Kvashnin, in 1995, 100 percent of marriages in the Tazovskaia tundra were mono-ethnic<sup>19</sup> (Kvashnin 2000:13). Data provided by the ZAGS (Office of Vital Records) of the Iamal’skii District (related to *all* indigenous population, living both in the tundra and in settlements) show that in the period between 1993 and 1998, 237 Nenets men and 257 Nenets women entered into marriages (see Diagrams 1 and 2).



**Diagram 2:** Marriage partners of Nenets women, 1993-1998



As we see, the predominant number of marriages in which at least one partner is Nenets are *mono-ethnic*.

Men would enter into such marriages slightly more often than women. The latter would slightly more frequently choose a non-indigenous partner.<sup>20</sup> In any case, these data do not lead to the conclusion that men of Iamalskii and in *Tazovskii* Districts could not find brides.

Iu. Kvashnin's data show that in 1995 there were only 11 people in the *Tazovskaia* tundra who did not have a family of their own. Only four of them were men, and the other seven were women (Kvashnin 2000:13 and 43, Table 7).

Analysis of family composition among "my" Yamal informants (about 400 people) shows that bachelors and unmarried people are very rare in all generations.

This information stands in sharp contrast with data from other northern regions of Russia. For instance, I. N. Gavrilova's article reports that at the end of the 1980s the number of bachelors in reindeer brigades in the Magadan Province reached 67 percent (Gavrilova 1997). According to A. Pika's information, approximately one half of all the adult indigenous population of Chukotka and Kamchatka was not married (Pika 1996:33). E. Volzhanina (2005) provides data on the regions where members of the Nenets population lead a sedentary way of life and where inter-ethnic contacts have a long history behind them (e.g., in large multi-ethnic settlements): here, mono-ethnic marriages and marriages between Nenets and their traditional marriage partners (Khanty and Komi) constitute 85 percent, whereas "Russian" marriages constitute only 15 percent. The latter figure certainly supercedes that on Yamal Peninsula by twofold, so we may argue that large settlements show a tendency toward an increase of the number of inter-ethnic marriages.<sup>21</sup> Yet in any case, when 85 percent of marriages in the region are concluded between traditional marriage partners, one may not speak about any significant asymmetry in the marital behavior of men and women. Moreover, due to a specific demographic situation on Yamal,

“starting with 1940s, percentage of married men to the total number of men of marriageable age is higher than the respective percentage of married women”<sup>22</sup> (Volzhanina 2007b:15-16).

Thus, analysis of quantitative data for Yamal shows *neither migration of women from the tundra nor any considerable dominance of women with higher or professional secondary education, nor a large number of inter-ethnic marriages*. In other words, as opposed to other regions, demographic indices on Yamal do not present any of the asymmetries singled out in the beginning.

### ***Qualitative Data***

Following the logic characteristic to the description of qualitative data outside of Yamal, we should first of all pay attention to *the attitude of the indigenous population toward the tundra*. On Yamal, the tundra is the place where people continue not only to work, but also to live and still think about it as a largely suitable space for both. Already the very composition of the tundra inhabitants brings evidence of this. First, there are equal numbers of men and women living in the tundra, and second, the tundra population features *all* age groups. According to regional statistics from Iamalskii District, in 2006 only 56 percent of the nomadic population was of working age, while the remaining 44 percent (or 2,306 people) were children and elderly people. For virtually all of them, tundra, chum, and camp were their home, the place of permanent residence. On Yamal, family nomadism was not replaced by the production-oriented type.

For the indigenous population, life in the tundra is necessarily tied to reindeer husbandry, fishing, hunting, etc., yet it does not depend directly upon the existence of state farms or other enterprises. Both statistical data and anthropologists' field research data show that the tundra population is composed of families rather than of “labor collectives.” Thus, in 2006, according to official statistics, on Yamal Peninsula 485 tundra households with a population of 2,304 people were connected with some agricultural enterprise, whereas in 491 tundra households with a population of 2,974 people, an individual entrepreneur or a pensioner was the head of the family. Thus, approximately one half of present-day tundra dwellers are not directly connected with any collective enterprise.

A. Iuzhakov presents very interesting data in his work of 2001. Interviews conducted among reindeer herders of collective enterprises showed that although the majority of these people prefer to work in brigades, if the enterprise were to be closed, they would not abandon their nomadic way of life and leave the tundra. Moreover, 72.7 percent of interviewees do not intend to leave the tundra even when they retire. The fact that the tundra is not only a place of work (let alone employment) is further supported by the fact that almost all Yamal reindeer herders who participated in interviews not only live in the tundra all year round, but also spend their legal vacations there (once every several years).<sup>23</sup>

The majority of Nenets and Khanty do not have any doubts that the tundra is a harsh place, and that life in it is not easy; most people would probably agree that living conditions in a settlement are much better. Yet I never came across an opinion that tundra life is not suitable for

or too hard for women. People here still think that nomadism is completely normal not only for healthy, strong men but also for women, for elderly people, and even for newborn babies.<sup>24</sup> As much as I could gather from conversations with Yamal indigenous nomads, they do not think that a child growing up in the tundra is disadvantaged in comparison to a child living in a settlement, or that his or her life is jeopardized.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the Yamal indigenous population does not equate the tundra with a male space. For them it is the space for normal family life. This can be illustrated by a number of various examples.

Almost every text describing the situation outside of Yamal stresses that if nowadays a woman lives in tundra, she is in most cases either a wife or a mother of a reindeer breeder, while daughters and sisters present rare exceptions. For Yamal, it is seen as a normal order of things when girls, like boys, return back to the tundra after completing their school education.

I would also like to stress that in Yamal, in contrast to many other regions of the Russian North, a woman can go to the tundra even if her husband or son is not there; moreover, she does not necessarily have to have any family connection with a man living in the tundra. A woman can go there to help her mother or aunt, to visit her sister or classmate, to take care of her brother's children while his wife is delivering another baby, etc. All this is possible both because a woman's stay in the tundra is generally seen as an everyday practice and because full families are living there, which creates many occasions for visits.

When girls return to the tundra after having received their education in a boarding school, they start helping their parents, acquire household skills (thus making up for the time spent for studies<sup>26</sup>), and decide upon their future life. They can marry either a reindeer herder or a man living in the settlement, continue studying elsewhere, or stay with their parents (later on, with one of the brothers). Between the end of school and marriage, a girl may live in the tundra for more than five years, and this is seen as a normal course of events.

Besides the fact that women continue to live in the tundra, the traditional distribution of gender roles is fully present in Yamal—in contrast to other regions. A woman takes care of the fire, cooks food, brings it to the table, watches over small children, sews, mends, and dries clothes. A man takes care of the reindeer and makes sledges.<sup>27</sup> This complementary distribution is featured not only in economic but in other spheres of life as well, e.g. in the ritual sphere<sup>28</sup>: only women can perform purification rituals, only men may prepare certain kinds of fish, men are not supposed to touch the reindeer harness of the special women's sledge, called *siabu* in Nenets, etc.<sup>29</sup>

As mentioned above, nowadays taiga and tundra may lack any association with female elegance and nice clothes, which makes young women from the Kola Peninsula to Yakutia stay away from tundra camps. V. Vladimirova (2006) observes that a woman going to the tundra changes into male clothes. In Yamal, however, women in the tundra are dressed like women; moreover, they do not see tundra clothes as crude and unsuitable. These clothes did not turn into museum exhibits, or paraphernalia for folk performances, or an element of family lore. Not only

are Nenets clothes a part of everyday life, but one can suggest that they are sensitive to fashion, both as far as cuts and the way of wearing are concerned.<sup>30</sup>

All fur clothes are still sewn manually by women themselves. The ability to sew well is still considered indispensable: young girls are proud of their skills, and mothers boast the daughters' sewing talents. Many of my informants stressed that even today if a young girl cannot sew well, she is much less attractive as a bride, since the well-being of a tundra family is judged by how people are dressed, and a woman who cannot or does not like sewing is considered a lazy body and a bad wife.

These examples may be continued. In Priural'skii District, not only warm clothes, but ethnic dresses made of bright colored fabrics are popular; most festive dresses that are worn on special occasions, e.g. when a woman visits the settlement, are sewn of brocade. Demand for goods necessary for the production of Nenets clothes (beads, broadcloth, colored fabrics, ribbons for trimming, etc.) is very high. It was commercially profitable to bring brocade even to the small settlement of Shchuch'e, a place situated at the very foot of the Ural Mountains, seven hours away from the district center, with no mobile phone network: it was sold right off the sledges on the Day of the Reindeer Herder (*Den' olenevoda*), when people from all nearby tundras came here for the holiday. One more noteworthy example: many young girls of the territory make additional money through net distribution of cosmetics; one of them told me that she always tried to bring advertisements to young tundra women, since many of them readily buy skin-care items.<sup>31</sup> Thus, from the point of view of present-day indigenous women of Yamal, constant living in the tundra does not preclude a woman from being feminine and elegant.

The fact that many young women live in the tundra, and there exists a special "tundra fashion," brings us to one of the most essential aspects of the Yamal situation. Not only are there labor collectives and families with traditional distribution of gender roles in the tundra; it is the "society and sociability that were preserved there. In spite of huge spaces which divide people, they visit each other, keep friendships, gossip, quarrel, envy, work, fall in love, get married, share news, bring up children (and sometimes even give birth to them in the tundra), and die—generally, they live there. All this is taking place in the tundra the same way as in the settlement, where the other half of Yamal Nenets and Khanty live. Moreover, the tundra has its own norms and rules of behavior, its own ideas of what is permissible and what is not. These ideas largely coincide with those in the settlement, and yet may slightly differ from them. My own observations suggest that moral and ethical norms in the tundra are stricter than in the settlement, and the societal control is stronger. I know at least several cases in which, in order to punish for the breach of the accepted norms of behavior, parents would leave their daughters in the settlement and would not let them roam in the tundra with the rest of the family.

As a result, being in the tundra, a person does not feel isolated from the rest of the world; he or she enjoys the company of people whose opinions are important and whose values are shared. Thus, life in the tundra becomes much less boring and much more sensible even for those who from an early age got used to "civilization" (*tsivilizatsiia*) with its TV sets, shops, discotheques, advertisements, and large numbers of friends.<sup>32</sup>



All this explains why young men living in the Yamal tundra are not familiar with “bride deficit.” In the course of my field research I always paid attention to families and their histories, and never came across a situation in which a young man living in the tundra would not be able to find a wife because young women would not be willing to live there. Yet I recorded cases of a different kind—for instance, a young man would decide to quit school; his parents would agree with his choice under one condition: he has to get married at the age of 17. The young man is afraid of this perspective and returns back to school (Author’s field material 2006). It is noteworthy that the feasibility of the parents’ plan to quickly find a bride is never put under doubt. In other words, the Yamal tundra does not doom a man to celibacy, as happens on the Kola Peninsula or in Yakutia, but on the other hand, it may threaten with forced marriage. In another case, a woman told me about quarrels between her brother and his wife, who both live in the tundra; her advice was: “Get divorced, and that’s it! Period. Get married to another woman! Look, there are so many women around in the tundra!” (Author’s field material 2007).

Not only a girl who returned to the tundra after school and lives with her parents may get married to a man living in the tundra; this is also possible for a woman who lives and works in the settlement. There are known cases in which young girls with a professional education (e.g., in child upbringing or in medicine) would leave for the tundra to roam; this phenomenon does not occur frequently, but on the other hand, such cases are not seen as extraordinary or surprising.

To my understanding, the only problematic situation would be if a young man living in the tundra would marry a woman who for various reasons does not want or cannot live in the tundra, and he himself cannot move to the settlement (in one case, the couple met only when he was visiting the settlement).<sup>33</sup> Such relations could perpetuate for a number of years, but the result in all cases was the same: everybody saw the territorial separation of the family as abnormal, the husband’s relatives were extremely unhappy about the fact that there was no hostess in his tundra household, and they would finally match him with a more suitable woman who was ready to lead a nomadic way of life. In two cases the woman who stayed in the settlement gave consent for the new marriage of her husband and even encouraged him to do so. Eventually the man would put up with the inevitability of the new marriage.<sup>34</sup> Most important for us in situations like this is that the spatial division of families—which in many regions of the Russian North is seen as quite habitual, although not necessarily a desirable practice—becomes completely intolerable in Yamal, and people take all possible steps to put an end to it.

Thus, the Yamal situation differs from other regions by a number of parameters, although the same factors that brought about women migration from the tundra were also at work here. Yamal also went through the reindeer husbandry reform, with the introduction of the institute of professional housewives, which reduced the number of women in tundra. Boarding schools were established on Yamal the same way as everywhere else, and ideological pressure was not less strong compared to other regions of the Russian North.

And yet women’s migration from the tundra did not happen. Why?

### *Analysis of the Yamal Case*

Let us first look at the specific features of these three factors on Yamal.

*Introduction of the tent worker (chumrabotnitsa) position.* In 1998, out of 2,528 women living in the Iamalskaia tundra, only 43 percent were of working age. Among these 43 percent, only 40 percent had work. Over the next eight years the percentage of working women reduced to 27 percent (2006). As we have seen, this produced no influence either upon the number or upon the structure of tundra population. This means that on Yamal there is no dependency between the introduction of the institution of tent workers and the number of women in the tundra, that the gender role of the “tent hostess” was not replaced here by a new, non-prestigious position of an employed worker. These roles proved to be perfectly compatible.

*Boarding schools.* Since the end of the 1950s, children in Yamal were to go to boarding schools irrespective of their parents’ will. Today virtually all indigenous population under 50 years old went through boarding schools; grandchildren of the first-generation students are now attending them. In contrast to many other regions of the Russian North, boarding schools on Yamal were not closed after Perestroika (cf. Vitebsky 2005:192), and still perform the role of the largest educational institution for indigenous children (the boarding school in the settlement of Yar-Sale is the biggest one in Russia).

Ideological pressure on the part of “Russian” teachers has always been very intensive. No doubt, boarding schools produced a very strong influence upon the indigenous culture, and presently Nenets consider school education an important value.<sup>35</sup> However, boarding school education on Yamal did not entail consequences characteristic of other northern regions. First, indigenous girls who got “saturated with non-Nenets values” (Tuisku 2001:56) at the boarding school relatively easily return back to the tundra. Second, nowadays women living in the tundra themselves send their children to boarding schools as the only place where they can get education. I have never heard or read about cases in which mothers would move to the settlement in order not to part with her children or to “defend” them from schooling. So it turns out that the consequences of the boarding-school education, usually described as inevitable, do not take place on Yamal. Boarding schools have become a habitual part of tundra dwellers’ life cycle.

*Ideology.* Although Soviet power changed the ideological principles of its presence in the North of Russia, ideology and politics were established in relation to the indigenous population as a whole rather than to individual regions or people. Apart from this, the “Russians” who came to the North and produced a considerable influence upon the local population used to bring similar ideas about the nomadic way of life, which did not vary much from region to region.<sup>36</sup> In Yamal, the ideological background of interaction between the state and the indigenous population was the same as in Evenkia or Yakutia. Everywhere nomadism was seen as backward, and women were supposed to understand that they have to liberate themselves from the tethers of old customs and traditions (e.g., the necessity to observe female prohibitions, bride-money, etc.) to become free citizens of the country, fully endowed with civil rights. In other regions of the Russian North, this rhetoric was relatively successful, and the process of women’s

“liberation” went far enough for the indigenous women to describe their state in the “olden times” as oppressed in comparison with the present-day “dignified” life (Tuisku 2001:51). In Yamal, although women were subjected to the same ideological treatment, they did not develop the idea that their life in the tundra was not worthy of a contemporary human being. Moreover, virtually the whole complex of ritual rules and prohibitions continues functioning in Yamal the same as it did 100 years ago (Liarskaya 1999, 2003). Sometimes women fulfill very strict prescriptions controlling their behavior, and yet do not feel disfranchised. On the contrary, they speak about these prescriptions with a degree of pride, because in their eyes it is women who are responsible for the health and well-being of the whole family.<sup>37</sup>

To sum up, one may argue that in Yamal, *the external view upon tundra and traditional life was not internalized*. What does this imply?

From the point of view of the “Russian” population, the tundra is a place for those who could not do well at school or failed to find a place in the settlement; life in the tundra is primitive and backward.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly enough, many Russians are also convinced that even if ethnic culture used to have some kind of value in the past, present-day Nenets have already forgotten everything (Author’s field material 2001). Yet from the indigenous perspective everything looks quite different. During my field trips, I always asked women of different age, from 11-year-old girls to elderly people, where they prefer to live—in the tundra or in the settlement—and why. Analysis of their answers may become a subject of a separate article; right now I would like to mention only one interesting tendency.

Explaining their preferences, my female informants almost never referred to the general set of ideas about the tundra (e.g., “it is cold there,” “life there is too uncivilized,” “there is too much work there to do,” etc.) or to generally shared practices such as “when children go to school, their mothers always have to move to the settlement.” Virtually all my female informants, irrespective of the generation or the place of living (tundra or settlement), explained their choice exclusively by *personal* circumstances or preferences. Not that it is cold in the tundra in general, but “it is too cold in the tundra for *me*,” not that it is hard to live there, but “*for me* it feels like too hard to live there,” “I like living in the tundra,” “I had to help my mother,” “I always wanted to continue studies,” “I fell ill and couldn’t stay in the tundra anymore,” etc. With all that, in their responses people almost always implied or even explicitly admitted the possibility of other, completely opposite preferences.<sup>39</sup>

This means that people do not ascribe any objective qualities either to the tundra or to the settlement, they do not see either place as inherently suitable or unsuitable for living. One’s choice depends exclusively upon one’s subjective feelings and/or circumstances.

I would argue that in a certain sense indigenous dwellers see the tundra and the settlement as equal to each other. Analysis of family stories shows that almost every woman faces the necessity to choose between life in the tundra and life in the settlement. The topic of “equality” of both variants is often present in their responses: “There is no difference for me, where to live, in the tundra or in the settlement. I can do both. Depending on how life will go.”

In many other regions mentioned before (Kola Peninsula, Transbaikial Region, Yakutia), women virtually do not live in the tundra anymore: very few of them have to answer the question of whether to go there, whereas for the majority this question is purely rhetorical, with the answer known in advance.

In Yamal, the opposition of the tundra (as a place where one works, a male space par excellence) and the settlement (as a place where one lives, a place for all) has not developed, nor have the contrasting categories of “backward” vs. “modern” life. On the other hand, indigenous dwellers of Yamal, whether living in the tundra or in settlements, are alien to the rhetoric of the “loss of traditional culture,” the necessity of its “salvation” or “protection,” or “returning back to one’s roots,” or “cultural revival.” Changes that took place over the last half-century in customs, habits, everyday practices, and way of life are perfectly recognized by the Nenets/Khanty, yet they are not seen as a threat to the very existence of Nenets/Khanty culture (about this see: Kupina 2004).

Tundra and settlements are certainly opposed to each other—not as a place of nomadic and sedentary life, but rather as “Nenets/Khanty” cultural space and the world where “Russian” norms of life dominate. Over the last 50 years life in the settlement became a possible scenario both for women and for men, while tundra life has not lost its *prestige* and attractiveness (Liarskaya 2001, 2003). That is why upon graduation from school, young men and women so easily go back to the tundra, and why over the last 50 years the number of people living in the tundra stayed almost the same. F. Stammeler (2005) continually stresses the high prestige of tundra life among the Nenets. I myself never heard indigenous people from Yamal calling reindeer herders drunkards, loudmouths, or rude. They may speak so about a certain person or even a brigade as a whole, but not about all who live in the tundra. Most probably, this group is so large, and its position is so stable and prestigious, that it may not be seen as marginal, as in Yakutia or the Kola Peninsula.

Moreover, although the value of the “Russian culture” is fully recognized, Nenets are convinced, the same way as a hundred years ago, that they are unsurpassable in the tundra, and the word “Russian” may not only describe someone’s ethnic background but also refer to a stupid and good-for-nothing person. This prejudice affects the attitude to marriages with the “Russians”: these marriages are not prohibited, yet they are not looked at favorably, and the majority of families are mono-ethnic. One of my informants who has a high education and who married a Russian at the end of the 1980s told me that her siblings staunchly opposed their marriage and treated her future husband with contempt, and one brother who lived in the tundra refused to come to the wedding ceremony or give even a single deer for the festive meal, saying: “If she were marrying a Nenets, I would spare any number of deer” (for the festive dinner) (Author’s field material 2007).<sup>40</sup>

This situation has not principally changed over the last quarter-century. In 2006, a Nenets woman with five daughters told me that she would never allow any of them marry a Russian because she “did not trust the Russians” (Author’s field material 2006). Another woman, whose daughter married a Ukrainian in the middle of the 2000s, told me that she liked her son-in-law a

lot, that he was caring, helpful, and respectful of all family members, and yet, “When Tania married him, I felt so much ashamed, so much ashamed!”—“Why?”—“Well, my daughter married a Russian! How is this possible? What will people say? Now I got used to this a little bit” (Author’s field material 2006).<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Thus, comparing the situation on Yamal with other regions of the Russian Far North analyzed in the first part of this article, we discover that the Yamal case is quite different from all the rest in that production-oriented nomadism did not oust family nomadism, women did not migrate from the tundra, there is no serious asymmetry in the educational level of men and women, and tundra men do not experience “deficit” of brides. Local inhabitants do not see the tundra as a space where men work, as opposed to the settlement, where everybody lives. Life in the tundra is not considered primitive and uncivilized. “External” vision of the tundra was not internalized. All these factors are so tightly connected with each other that the present-day situation in Yamal, if not studied comparatively, looks very logical and non-contradictory.

Thus, E. Volzhanina writes that the marriage rate is still high in the tundra because for people living here “the union of man and woman is of vital necessity” (Volzhanina 2007b:16). F. Stammer argues that “the tundra version of the Soviet ‘worker-mothers’ *chumrabortnitsa* (tent worker)—fits very well with the pre-existing division of labour in the tundra. The difference is that in the tundra the workplace and mother-place are one and the same. This continuity is responsible for the fact that women in the tundra unlike their post-Soviet counterparts in villages and cities, do not experience an identity crisis because of unemployment” (Stammer 2005:119). Frankly speaking, before I myself looked from the outside at the situation on Yamal, I not only shared both authors’ positions but did not see anything unique about it.

Right now, having compared the situation on Yamal with what is happening in other regions of the Russian North, one has to ask a question: why is the difference so large? I do not have a ready answer for these questions; rather, I can suggest several possibilities to be further explored.

1. The easiest answer would be that due to some combination of circumstances, the impact of the asymmetries described in the first part of this article was milder in Yamal than in other regions.
2. It is possible that migration of women from the tundra is a uniform process developing along successive stages, and what we see on Yamal is just an early stage of it (yet in this case we will still have to answer a question: why the process of migration was so delayed here).
3. Another possible hypothesis is that migration of women from the tundra/taiga may be not a *direct* consequence of the ideological and economic transformations described above,

but a result of some other deeper and covert processes that are taking place in the Russian North. What do I mean by that?

Let us get back to the boarding schools. Why is it so that in some regions it is seen as quite natural that a woman does not want to part with her children and moves to the settlement when they start their studies at the boarding school, while in other places, moving to the village is seen as inevitability that nobody tries to escape? Is it because people in different regions have different views of family and female responsibility? Could it be that contemporary dwellers of Yamal place men's interests, rather than emotional ties with children, in the center of family life? Could it be that a child's future is secured not so much by the constant presence of the mother, but by the possibility to return to one's own place, which can be inherited? Could it be that Yamal families are now much less centered on children than other indigenous peoples of the Russian North?

One may recall the aforementioned attempts to create delocalized families on Yamal, in which the husband lives in the tundra and his wife stays in the settlement. These attempts failed because women could not be continuously next to their husband and take care of the household. Despite the emotional link that still existed between husband and wife and despite the fact that the woman was able to take better care of the child thanks to this separation, this kind of delocalized situation proved to be unacceptable for the couple: this turned out to be insufficient for the family to continue to exist as such.

Something else beyond having personal relations and even children together appears to be more important, and the "normal existence" of the family becomes something larger than just a problem of two people and their children (as is maybe more common for Europeans today). Correction of the situation becomes an extended family business,<sup>42</sup> and the interference of relatives is considered acceptable and inevitable.

The case of Yamal reminds us that the structure of the family and family relations may be different. Historians and ethnographers of the family demonstrated through a large number of examples that economical, emotional, and sexual characteristics of family life in different cultures does not necessarily coincide with those habitual to contemporary Europeans.<sup>43</sup>

The very possibility of a different situation and the relativity of the notion of "natural" family relations allows us to raise a question about more profound and less "mobile" structures behind the versions of the gender shift and cultural changes entailed by it. Most probably, to explain them one has to look at people's ideas about themselves, their place in the world, the private and the public, or about what Ph. Aries called "family feeling" (Aries 1999), or what N. Elias referred to as *Changes in the We-I Balance* (Elias 2001). These processes develop slowly and have long-term consequences (cf. F. Braudel's concept of "longue durée").

Hypothesizing about the less obvious and more profound character of the reasons that brought forth the present-day situation, we may ponder not so much about how the introduction of the tent-worker position drove women away from the tundra, but about how these

considerably slowly changing deep structures were interacting with drastic changes brought about by the last century. This approach seems to be much more fruitful.

Certainly, there may be other variants apart from those three mentioned above. Yet one thing seems clear to me from the methodological point of view: study of this topic is impossible without a comparative perspective. This is a very strong example of the necessity of the comparative approach.

Only placing the Yamal case in the context of the general situation in the Russian North will allow us to see its specificity. Besides, this would be useful for the understanding of the major regularities as well as specificities of the processes taking place in the North of Russia in general.

From the methodological point of view, the most erroneous approach would be to regard the situation in Yamal as some kind of exception that should be studied with special methods, and then study all other regions as if Yamal does not exist or does not share common regularities.

The case of Yamal warns us against using simplistic explanatory schemes, and stimulates us toward a more attentive and detailed investigation of the situation on Yamal and in the North at large. It is possible that the situation on Yamal is not as unique as one would initially judge it, and perhaps more systematic comparative research would reveal not only multiple differences, but multiple similarities as well. It is not excluded that the results of such comparative analysis will allow us to understand not only visible phenomena, but also deeper processes taking place in the Russian North and causing, among other things, the migration of women from the tundra.

And then, we will probably be able to give a more sophisticated answer to the question of why the situation on Yamal developed the way it did. In any case, one cannot understand what is going on in Yamal by studying only Yamal—the same way as one may not ignore the case of Yamal when studying other regions of the Russian North.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Anna Kushkova.

<sup>2</sup> It is clear that the issue of gender shift(s) in the region should be studied from other perspectives as well, yet these are topics for a special research.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Yamal” is used in two senses in this paper: in a broad and a narrow sense. In a broad sense, Yamal is understood as the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region—a region of Russia located in the north of western Siberia beyond the Ural Mountains (on the eastern side). This paper mostly refers to the tundra areas located on Yamal Peninsula (Yamal Tundra), the basin of the river Taz (Tazovskaia tundra), and the eastern slope of the Ural Mountains (Baidaratskaia tundra). From the administrative point of view, these territories correspond to the districts Iamal’skii, Tazovskii and Priural’skii of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region. “Yamal” in a narrow sense means the territory of the Yamal Peninsula itself (Iamal’skii District of the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region). If nothing is specified, “Yamal” is used in its broader sense.

<sup>4</sup> I do recognize the fact that the list of works involved here for comparison is not exhaustive: it lacks data on many regions and peoples, as well as works concerning peoples I am describing here.

<sup>5</sup> The only exception is the article by A. Burykin (2002), which is also different in that it characterizes the North as a whole and offers a very interesting explanation for reasons and consequences of the gender shift: specificities of boarding-school education in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> Among the key works of such kind are: Pika 1994, 1996; Bogoiavlenskii 1994; Bogoyavlensky 2000; Pika and Bogoyavlensky 1995. A large body of data on Evenks and Enissei Nenets may be found in Krivonogov 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Pivneva 2000 and *Ethno-Social Processes in Siberia* (2003); as well as in a number of anthropological works that will be discussed later.

<sup>7</sup> In my research I was using the following works. On the Kola Peninsula: Vladimirova 2006 and Sherstyuk 2008 (the latter work was written by a librarian from Lovozero); on the Republic of Komi: Dwyer and Istomin 2009; on the Nenets of the Nenets Autonomous Region: Tuisku 2001; on various groups of Evenks: Sirina 2002, Povoroznyuk 2005 (my thanks to the author for the chance to read the manuscript), and Ssorin-Chaikov 2002, 2003; on gender shift among the Evens in Yakutia: Vitebsky 2005, Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The Nenets Autonomous Region is situated on the western side of the Urals (in the European part of Russia).

<sup>9</sup> In this context, “Russian” is not an ethnic term; rather, it is used to denote everybody who does not belong to the indigenous population of the North. In a number of cases, the “Russians” have been living in the North for such a long time, or were even born there, that it would hardly be correct to refer to them as “those who came from the outside.”

<sup>10</sup> For more detail, see, e.g., Karpov 2001:221; Smirnova 1983.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Slezkine 1994 and Bloch 2003.



<sup>12</sup> One of the aims of this reform was to substitute family nomadism for production-oriented nomadism, when only reindeer herders permanently stay with the herd, whereas their families (wives, children, elderly people) live in settlements. This production-oriented nomadism was seen as more progressive and effective. In some regions reindeer herders' brigades were divided into so-called "shifts": while one shift was out in the tundra with the animals, the other one stayed in the settlements with their families. Various means of transportation (e.g., airplanes, helicopters, cross-country vehicles, tractors, reindeer and water transport) were used to facilitate the change of the shifts.

<sup>13</sup> Permissible norms of correlation between men and women varied from region to region.

<sup>14</sup> Iamal'skii District is situated on Yamal Peninsula (see endnote 3); *Tazovskii* District lies on Gydan Peninsula.

<sup>15</sup> I collected data on the Yamal tundra in the course of my four expeditions (1998, 2001, 2006 and 2007) to the region (information from ZAGS (Office of Vital Records) and Yamal Region Department of Statistics), and used data provided in Stammeler 2005. Information on the Tazovskaia tundra may be found in the work by Iu. Kvashnin (2000), which is based on the analysis of household registers. Generalized data on the region's demography may be found in: Krupnik 2000; Volzhanina 2005, 2007a, 2007b; and Iuzhakov 2001.

<sup>16</sup> This table reflects 137 cases—people whose level of education was known to me.

<sup>17</sup> Iu. Kvashnin singles out school students into a separate category, so in his calculations the percentage of people with incomplete secondary education is lower.

<sup>18</sup> The fact that all people over 10 years old, i.e., those who are still attending school, were taken into consideration, explains the extremely high percentage of people with incomplete secondary education.

<sup>19</sup> Only *one* mixed Selkup-Nenets marriage was found.

<sup>20</sup> Although Nenets women would enter into marriages with the Russians four times more frequently than Nenets men, the numeric values are so insignificant that they would not warrant serious attention.

<sup>21</sup> We are speaking here about Priural'skii (Aksarka, Beloiarsk), Nadym'skii, and Purov'skii districts. Among other things, Volzhanina's data show that there is no correlation between the growth of inter-ethnic marriages and the increase in educational level: out of all Nenets women who concluded mono-ethnic marriages in the settlement of Aksarka, 36 percent had professional secondary education, whereas among those who married "Russians" this percentage equaled only 28.1 percent. At the same time, women who marry Russians may have a higher educational level than their husbands (see Volzhanina 2005: tables 3 and 4).

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<sup>22</sup> Because of the specificity of gender and age structure of the Nenets population of Yamal, the proportion of adult males in absolute numbers is less than that of adult females: men die more often, and women become widows more frequently. As a result, the proportion of married men among the adult male population is higher than the proportion of married women among all adult women.

<sup>23</sup> Compare with Komi reindeer herders, who spend their vacations in settlements (K. Istomin, personal communication), or herders of the Kola Peninsula, who spend only seven months a year in tundra; both move to the settlement upon retirement.

<sup>24</sup> Although until now several babies per year were being born right in the tundra, the majority of women prefer to give birth in the hospital. However, roughly one month after the baby is born, irrespective of the time of the year, the mother returns to tundra with her baby. Delays or earlier return may be called forth either by medical reasons or by transportation problems.

<sup>25</sup> Moreover, I know several cases in which women who live in the settlement and occupy good positions there would join their parents in the tundra during the maternity leave. This practice is not widespread, yet it is very old; the earliest of my examples dates back to the beginning of the 1980s, and the last known case comes from 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Incidentally, this practice helps Nenets solve a problem that, according to T. Tuisku and K. Istomin, is regarded as pretty serious with Komi reindeer herders and Nenets of the Nenets Autonomous Region: young girls get knowledge and experience of keeping the household before their marriage, and thus are not as dependent later on their mother-in-law or their female neighbors.

<sup>27</sup> For more detail, see: Kostikov 1930; Khomich 1995; Golovnev 1995. However, certain changes did take place, and nowadays men often help women put up the chum or even preserve firewood, yet this does not alter things in principle (Khariuchi 2001).

<sup>28</sup> This complementary distribution is seen as natural, whereas the lack of male or female hands, as a threat to the very existence of the family household, is a threat that should be immediately removed (for more discussion, see Liarskaya 2001). I had a chance to observe several families where there were not enough male hands in the household, and the sons were too little; in this situation it would be a daughter who would help her father with reindeer—until the time of her marriage comes. Yet I never heard that even under necessity a son would learn sewing or mending clothes (Author's field material 2001, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> For more detail about the complex of prohibitions and ideas associated with it, see Liarskaya 1999, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> According to Iu. Kupina's (2004) observation, elderly Nenets from Nadymskii District were not happy with the new way of wearing traditional male clothes that became popular. In 2006, I myself observed how several Nenets women living in the tundra viewed an issue of the journal *Severnnye Prostory* (Northern Spaces), which had many pictures of people from various areas of

tundra in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region; as they looked at native clothes in these pictures, they made comments such as: “Look, how she did the trimming here,” or “Who could have thought that these hats are in again,” etc. It was as if they were examining a fashion magazine (Author’s field material 2006). All this supports the idea that native clothes on Yamal are far from having the status of a museum exhibit.

<sup>31</sup> However, one should observe that skin-care items, as compared with decorative cosmetics, only start getting popular on the territory, and have not become a daily routine with most of the women in settlements.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the observation by T. Tuisku (2001:57) that if a brigade member already has a wife, this makes it easier for other shepherds to get married, since young women want to have company in the tundra.

<sup>33</sup> I know four stories of this kind; the earliest one goes back to the 1960s, and the most recent one was recorded in 2000 (Author’s field material 2001, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> If they had common children in the settlement, the father would continue taking care of them.

<sup>35</sup> For more detail about boarding schools on Yamal, see Liarskaya 2003, 2004, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> In post-Soviet Yamal, the influx of the newcomers to settlements not only did not reduce but, on the contrary, increased. The majority of these people still see nomadic reindeer herders as savage and exotic.

<sup>37</sup> For more detail, see Liarskaya 2005.

<sup>38</sup> I discussed several stereotypical views of the “Russians” in respect to the indigenous culture (see Liarskaya 2006).

<sup>39</sup> For example: “I’m the only one out of seven children who doesn’t live in the tundra. All my brothers and sisters live in the tundra. My life just went a different way” (Author’s field material 2007).

<sup>40</sup> The Russian husband spent a lot of time and considerable efforts to normalize their relations and to be fully accepted into the family.

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly enough, many Russian women in settlements think that the majority of Nenets women dream about marrying Russians or at least having a baby by a Russian, and that they regard it as very prestigious and are being encouraged to do so by their mothers (Author’s field material 2001, 2006, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> A very nice description of the situation, together with its very insightful analysis, may be found in Nerkagi 1996.

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<sup>43</sup> For bibliography on the history of family, home, and ties of kinship, see, e.g., Sokoll et al. 2004:272-281. Research in ethnography of childhood in Russia is largely connected with the book by I.S. Kon (1988). For historical and comparative analyses of family and kinship in Europe, see also the fundamental three-volume work edited by P. Heady (2010).

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