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THE NORTH-SAMOYEDIC EPIC (SIBERIAN ARCTIC). HOW CAN A NEWLY AFFLUENT SOCIETY SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF ALLIANCE?¹

L'ÉPOPEE NORD-SAMOYÈDE (ARCTIQUE SIBÉRIEN). COMMENT TROUVER UNE SOLUTION A L'ALLIANCE DANS UNE SOCIÉTÉ DEVENUE OPULENTE?

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ABSTRACT: The north-samoyed epic describes an affluent pastoral society. The main problem of this imagined society is its perpetuation because the men have no need of material goods and therefore refuse to give their daughters for reindeers or furs. So, murderous conflicts systematically appear. A solution gradually emerges with an avenger son who reinvents a very simple shape of alliance: the direct exchange which avoids the problem of the "price of the woman." These epics are closely associated with the fast development of reindeer husbandry in North Samoyed groups and imagine what would be a pastoral society having pushed to its limit a logic of accumulation.

Keywords: epic, pastoralism, reindeer, oral tradition, alliance, social change, Siberia, Samoyed, Ugric, Ob.

RESUME: L'épopée nord-samoyède décrit une société d'éleveurs opulente. Le problème essentiel de cette société imaginée est celui de sa perpétuation car les hommes n'ont nul besoin de biens matériels et refusent donc de céder leurs filles contre des rennes ou des fourrures, ce qui entraîne systématiquement des conflits meurtriers. Progressivement une solution émerge avec un fils vengeur qui réinvente une forme très simple d'alliance : l'échange direct qui évite le problème du « prix de la femme ». Ces chants épiques sont étroitement associés au développement rapide de l'élevage du renne dans les groupes nord-

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samoyèdes et imaginent ce que serait une société pastorale ayant poussé à son terme une logique d'accumulation.

Mots-clés : épopée, élevage, renne, tradition orale, alliance, changement social, Sibérie, Samoyèdes, Ougriens, Ob.

An immense space is formed by the Siberian north-west, the eastern Tundras of North Europe, and the Polar Urals. These areas are peopled by northern Samoyeds (Nenets, Enets and Nganasan), Ob-Ugrians (Khanty and Mansi) and northern Komi peoples. They all speak Uralic languages, which are nonetheless rather distant from one another, since they stem from Samoyed, Ugric, and Finnic branches. The economic systems of these societies, which operate in diverse ecosystems (tundra, forest) are various, ranging from fishing and hunting to several types of reindeer herding. However, these three neighbouring groups have all developed a strong epic tradition, which is especially remarkable as it is far from being standard in Siberia. They have certainly been in contact with each other for many centuries and maintain various sorts of relations with one another. While it is therefore perfectly legitimate to ask whether their respective epic traditions are linked in any way, in this article I limit myself to some basic observations.

In all the aforementioned cases, we do not ever find one or two long epic songs of several tens of thousands of lines. Instead we are presented with a multitude of songs, each counting at most 3,000 lines. Each bard may nevertheless know several of them, and, for example, in 1844 Antal Reguly collected close to fifteen Ob-Ugric songs from one informant, Maksim Nikilov, which comprised a total of 17,000 lines, or, as Miklós Zsirai noted (1944, VIII), more than the first version of the Kalevala. Besides, there is good reason to think that Reguly did not have the time to note down all of Nikilov's repertoire. Assuming that it is possible to speak of an epic here, we can ask whether the idea of a "dispersed epic" is apposite here, whether these multiple texts can be considered as functioning together, with each one of them thus calling for comparison with the others and finding all its meaning only when restituted as part of the corpus.

The epic poetry of the northern Komis indeed seems to have taken up elements that stem from the Samoyed world, and more precisely from the Nenets,³ while everything seems at first glance to oppose the Samoyed and Ob-Ugric epic songs. As we will see, with the Samoyeds, epic is sung for pleasure outside any ritual context, and does not have spirits or gods intervene, while with the Ob-Ugrians each song is performed in a specific place of worship and the god associated with the given place sings its own story through the intermediary of a shaman, which

³ On this topic, see *Komi...*1987.

is presumed to have taken place in a mythical time (see Lambert 2013a and 2013b). A symbolic efficiency is no doubt expected from the interpretation of the song. These ritual songs are understood within the overall context of the general reformulation of the Ob-Ugrian religious system that occurred from the end of the eighteenth century and that may be considered as an indigenous reaction to the propagation of Orthodoxy. From this viewpoint, the new Ugrian religious system can be understood in the mirror of Christianity (Lambert 2012), the difference being that it lacks any appeal to a Book. Instead, the entire set of epic songs is granted the role of relating the story of local gods, such as that of the child that the God of heaven sent to humankind, a point on which it follows the Christian model. This directly raises the question of the relationship between writing and epic poetry. On the other hand, this question does not seem to arise with the Samoyed epic poems. But deeper examination is needed into the relations between the Ob-Ugrian and Samoyed epic traditions. For despite their manifest differences, a shared narrative structure can be highlighted that, as we shall see, is able, when restored, to be analysed differently in accordance with the perspective, Samoyed or Ugrian.

The Samoyed Epic Poem

This very quick general presentation of epic poems in the Siberian west appears crucial for the more careful study herein of that of the northern Samoyeds. These latter live in the vast spaces of the Arctic: the Nenets (44,640 individuals in the 2010 census) stretch from the White Sea to the Yenisey, and the Enets (227 individuals) and the Nganasan (862 individuals) live to the east of this river. We are presented here with a linguistic and cultural *continuum*. The techniques and objects used are generally identical in this area where the share of hunting, inversely proportional to that of herding, increases progressively from the Nenets to the Nganasan. With the exception of two small subgroups (Nenets and Enets) who dwell in the forest, and among whom no epic song has ever been noted, the Northern Samoyeds live a nomadic lifestyle in the tundra.

Nenets oral tradition began to be collected in the 1840s. The first person to do so was Matthias A. Castrén, who, among others, noted down at least nine epic songs that Toivo Lehtisalo later published in 1940. Lehtisalo himself worked among the Forest Nenets and the Tundra Nenets at the start of the twentieth century. His collected epic songs, which he published in 1947, belong exclusively to the latter, however. Russian researchers also did remarkable work collecting epic songs after the revolution. Zinaida N. Kupriianova (1965) and Nataliia M. Tereshchenko (1990) each published an entire volume of Nenets epic songs, but many other researchers also gathered them throughout the twentieth century. Boris O. Dolgikh, for his part, took an interest in the Enets and Nganasan oral traditions, notably in the prose

stories (tales, myths, etc.). In 1948, he nevertheless also noted down an epic song from a Tundra Enets (Dolgikh.E.1948. 27).⁴ In 1992, Evgenii A. Khelinski and I also had the opportunity to gather an Enets song from Denchude Mirnykh, one of the last speakers of this small language.

Among the Nganasan, B. O. Dolgikh and his colleagues, A. P. Lekarenko and M. S. Strulev, gathered ten condensed versions of epic chants, in pidgin, between 1926 and 1938, which are yet to be published. Far more recently, in the 1980s Nadezhda T. Kosterkina took a keen interest in Nganasan epic songs. She sought to gather the repertoire of her father, Tubiaku Kosterkin (1921-1989), the last Nganasan shaman who was also an excellent bard. Tubiaku knew more than thirty different epic songs, and his daughter recorded ten of them in total and extracts of the others. Unfortunately this collection is unpublished and, even more unfortunate still, a large part of it has yet to be deciphered, as Nadezhda had only enough time to transcribe two or three songs before she died – the translation of each of them involves forty or so pages. From the start of the 1990s, several of us recorded complete or fragmentary Nganasan songs in the field.

Indisputably, the Enets and Nganasan epic songs are Nenets in origin, and this is one reason why Dolgikh took little interest in them. His elder Nganasan informants indeed spontaneously recognized this exogenous origin (Dolgikh *Fol'klor*, 5-6). What is more, the point is easily seen in the materials collected hitherto: the names of characters were not translated into Nganasan and are therefore still Nenets names. Moreover, in Nenets tradition a distinction can be made between two major types of epic song: the *s'udbăbc*, literally the “songs of ogres (*s'udb'a*)” and the *jarăbc*, or the “songs of tears (*jarc'* to cry)”, though these latter are not lamentations. In contrast with the *s'udbăbc*, the *jarăbc* are sung in the first, and not in the third, person. They treat varied topics, even if the quest for a spouse often has a central place in them. These songs are also considered as more realistic than the *s'udbăbc* (see, for example, Kupriianova 1965, 40-48), and would merit a separate study. Here I concentrate on the “songs of ogres,” as these are the ones that were taken up by the Enets and the Nganasan, who call them, respectively, *s'udobiču* and *s'itaby* (*s'igi* “ogre”). Manifestly, the Nganasan and the Tundra Enets did not remain content with passively borrowing their neighbour's songs. They made them their own and most certainly created new ones. Besides, they did not entertain good relations with the Nenets, at least their oral traditions include many stories in which they fight together to repel the Nenets from trying to set up on the right bank of the Yenisey.

⁴ The archive of B. O. Dolgikh at the Academy of Sciences (Moscow) is not classified, or at least was not classified when I worked there in 1993. The author's materials were then simply stored in large unordered folders. Instead, for each year of collection, an order number was written, by hand, on each "folk song text", collected by Dolgikh himself or by A. P. Lekarenko, M. S. Strulev or I. I. Baluev. These indications are reproduced here according to the following system: name of the collector.year of collection.serial number of the text. The letter E is inserted between the name of the collector and the year of collection for the Enets texts, as is the case here.

Context of performance

Most often these songs are long, and their performance frequently lasts for seven or eight hours. They are sung without musical accompaniment and by anyone at all – male or female – and need only be known for one to be able to interpret them. There is thus no specific “bard” class, and whoever sings them is then simply called, *s’itaby’i* in Nganasan and *s’udbāla* in Nenets (Tereshchenko 1965, 588).⁵ Moreover, there is no moment at which, or particular place in which, they always have to be sung and no efficacy is, it seems, awaited from their recitation. They always seem, then, to be sung outside of any ritual framework and out of pure pleasure, which they always procure much of, as they are particularly appreciated. At least, this observation is made by all those who have witnessed an interpretation of a Samoyed epic song. The context is therefore far removed from the ritualized interpretation of Ob-Ugrian songs, which paint scenes of the history of the gods or, again, of the Buryat epic, itself closely associated with hunting. Moreover, in contrast to them, and as we shall see, Samoyed songs do not offer a model of exemplarity. It is therefore legitimate to ask if these various Siberian songs really belong to the same class and can be qualified as “epic,” as the Folklorists postulate, who nonetheless are careful not to define the term. In all cases, we are dealing with long versified heroic songs, which speak of marriage and armed conflicts, and only through a comparative analysis will we be able to know if they belong, in spite of their differences, to one and the same category, which might be regarded as epic on the condition that the term is precisely defined. For the time being, therefore, it is only for convenience that the terms epic poem and epic are used here.

Epic setting

Samoyed song patterns are, as such, quite varied, but they take place within a setting that is particularly stable and easy to characterize. From the point of view of the natural environment, that in which these societies operate, this setting is quite simply the tundra, with its immensity, rivers and lakes. In the vast majority of cases, these spaces are not precisely located, so the action is not assumed to take place in any specific, known place, but in a neutral or even fictional tundra. For the Nganasan, epic heroes are also fictitious, they are not recognized as ancestors and they are not figures who receive any kind of worship or who appear in myths or elsewhere in the oral tradition. From this point of view, these songs plunge us right into a world of pure fiction. The characters have names that refer to their physical characteristics (Old Man with White Teeth), their clothes (Four Sleeves), or their sleighs and reindeer (Reindeer

⁵ For other examples of usage of this suffix *-’i*, see Lambert 2002-2003, 282.

with Large Antlers, and so on). These names can only be understood in the context of the song in question. For the Nenets, this is not always the case and some heroes carry the names of known clans (Sərotəta, Lamdo, for example), yet they are not considered distant ancestors and also appear to be entirely fictitious, or, in the rarest of cases, to provide some sort of rationalization.⁶

What distinguishes the heroes from one another, who are largely interchangeable, is their names. The psychology of the North Samoyed epic hero is indeed quite summary: the characters are endowed with immense physical strength, but lacking in *mètis* or psychological finesse, whereas other genres of Samoyed oral tradition contain characters that are extremely astute and subtle. This is not the case here, and it is quite understandable, since the prototype of the epic hero is the ogre, which is found in Samoyed tales and is in every way comparable to our own. The Nenets' epic songs are, let us recall, literally called the "songs of ogres" and Matthias A. Castrén writes that he has noted North Samoyed songs in which "the *s'udubei* [*s'udb'a*] are represented as fearsome giants and cruel ogres who, before devouring the unfortunate individual who has fallen into their hands, make him suffer mercilessly by swinging him on an iron swing" (Kastren [Castrén] 1860, 298). Unfortunately, in the Nenets epic songs collected by Castrén, or at least in those published later by Lehtisalo, no ogre appears, but in the first Nganasan song noted in 1927 by A. P. Lekarenko (Lekarenko.1927.19), an ogre does replace an epic hero at the end of the text.⁷ Thus, to have an overall idea of the North Samoyed epic hero, one must have in mind the image of an ogre who is socialized, i.e. a character who is psychologically coarse, animated by an unquenchable greed, but who, unlike the ogre, distinguishes between alimentary and sexual issues,⁸ and lives in society.

These heroes therefore live in society, but this society is profoundly different from those in which the Nganasan or the Nenets live. Indeed, in epic society, the camps are made up of members of the same lineage, most often by a group of brothers, and each of them is associated with a territory; the songs thus speak of the land of the Nositəta or the Hermine. The epic heroes are also extremely rich and own a fantastic number of reindeer. One song (Lekarenko.1927.19) even reports there being several million head of reindeer, and so many furs that they rot in the sleigh. So epic society is an opulent society that wants for nothing economically. In reality, the North Samoyeds do own domestic reindeer, some Nenets or Enets

⁶ Thus Dominique Samson noted an example where it is said that at such and such a place in the landscape there is the mark of the passage of an epic hero (personal communication).

⁷ The torture to which Castrén refers is found at the heart of a Nganasan tale noted in 1938, see LAMBERT, 2002-2003, 442-443.

⁸ When he meets a pretty girl, the Samoyed ogre dreams of boiling her in his cauldron as if she were a piece of reindeer meat, whereas the epic hero dreams of accumulating women.

even have a few thousand head. However, the average Nenets herd was only 200-300 reindeer at the beginning of the twentieth century (Khomich 1966, 50). This number was far rarer for the Nganasan, for whom someone with a few hundred reindeer is considered rich. Moreover, in each Nganasan settlement there are members of several lineages, often linked to each other by matrimonial alliance relationships (see Lambert 2002-2003, 489-516). It is certainly possible to find Nenets camps with representatives of only one group, but this is by no means the rule and the territory is not claimed, as in an epic poem, in an exaggerated way. In any case, the reality is very far from this fiction.

Epic storylines

The crucial problem of this imagined society is that of its perpetuation, and thus that of the alliance that is its condition. In practice, Nenets social organization is supported by an alliance structure of delayed direct exchange, so that for a woman taken from one generation, a daughter of that woman is returned to the donor group in the next generation. In the past, the Nganasan also used this system, but most probably it evolved in the nineteenth century into a semi-complex structure, most certainly in order to integrate neighbouring groups (see Lambert 2002-2003, 39-54). In all cases, the marriage associated with these exchange structures is a marriage by purchase, with the “price of the woman” (*ny d’ens’a* in Nganasan) being hotly debated between the two parties. In epic society, however, marriage by purchase does not and cannot work, because, as the epic heroes make clear, why would they give their daughter or sister for reindeer or furs when they already have more of these things than they could need? In some texts, the service of a son-in-law also appears, where the suitor tries to fulfil the tasks imposed on him by the daughter’s father, but even if he succeeds, this father does not hand over his daughter, because he does not need a son-in-law in his service either,⁹ and considers his own son more competent. The songs envisage only one solution to this impasse, namely armed conflict between the one who wants to take a girl and the one who refuses to give her away, and the stronger of the two wins. Epic society is thus traversed by systemic conflicts with heroes who kill each other.

The songs really explore the universe of possibilities of such a society and thus seem to imagine the whole range of logical combinations that can be produced from these simple rules – the situations and outcomes are thus varied. Very often the song’s outcome cannot be predicted; it is impossible to guess who will win or how. Each text thus follows a path among other possible paths without any possible anticipation. In the field, while reworking epic texts,

⁹ Doing the service of a son-in-law is in reality conceived to be humiliating (LAMBERT, 2002-2003, 40).

Tatiana Zhdanova and I unwittingly tested this hypothesis with Nganasan informants. As we stopped to work on a text at a given moment, and without knowing the rest of the story, we asked ourselves how this or that character – they are independent of each other – would react: would this character or that one win? It was only the song that would tell us, us and our informants. The plot can always develop in one direction or another. For example, when the father or brother of the girl is to be killed, he may agree to give his daughter or sister to the suitor if he lets them live. If the suitor accepts – this is not a necessity, as he may also choose to kill him – the father, once he regains his strength, can go to war again to try to take back his daughter. Of course, a new suitor can also always emerge and engage in combat with whoever has, at least for the time being, the young woman in question, and so on. For the song construction as such, the idea is that of a patchwork, with blocks, episodes that are independent of each other, that combine and that, depending on the song, can be arranged in one order or another. From this point of view, each song can undoubtedly be thought of as a more or less singular arrangement.

The simplest plot involves three, four or five brothers, and at least one of them is single. The single brother desires to marry a magnificent girl who lives far away and manages to convince his brothers to set out with him to fetch her despite the dangers involved. The girl's father refuses to give her up and finally the hero manages to take her by force and bring her home. This elementary scheme also frequently underlies the Ob-Ugric epic songs (e.g. Erdély 1972, 12-163), in which it is, however, understood differently. This is nonetheless the only narrative structure common to the Ugrian and Samoyed epic songs, and it can perhaps reasonably be considered as the core of these epic songs, from which the North Samoyeds and the Ob-Ugrians arguably elaborated and developed their own multitude of songs, though from quite different perspectives.

The story can, of course, immediately become more complex, with, for example, the father giving away his daughter under threat, but then returning to confront the one who took her. The fighting thus resumes and only ends with his final defeat (for a concrete example, see Kupriianova 1965, 199-210). The outcome then seems moral, but this is only one particular case and others are equally possible. Thus, at the end of one song (Strulev.1938.1), in which multiple characters die during various armed confrontations that last for many years, there are only two remaining survivors, who then proceed to kill each other... Thus, the song ends on an image of total desolation and impasse since everyone dies! Another song (Dolgikh.1938.10) opens with the image of three brothers who terrorize the tundras where they have taken several women by force and are pursued by those, of whom there are many, who have only given up their women under threat. The pursuers will all be defeated in bitter battles, though the eldest

eventually succumbs, with his weapons in his hands, but he is immediately replaced by his younger brother, and a new woman is taken, again with violence!¹⁰ Sometimes those with daughters or sisters manage to repel all suitors: in one song (Lekarenko.1927.19), an extremely wealthy father manages, with the help of his son, to rout all the suitors, even killing them on occasion, which he does without any qualms and despite the fact that they have tried very hard to fulfil all the extraordinary tasks he has assigned them. In the end, an ogre arrives to steal the girl and not to marry her, nor even to devour her, but to sacrifice her. The girl herself begins to fight her captor, eventually managing to tear out his heart. Clearly very happy, she returns to live with her father. All those who coveted her are dead or have been definitively defeated. The situation seems near incestuous.¹¹

How to understand this epic society?

In general, the Samoyeds do not talk about the meaning that can be conveyed by their oral tradition, and this is particularly true for the epic songs, which are sung but not discussed. In order to try to grasp the overall meaning of this fictional universe, it is necessary to place it in the context of North Samoyed societies, doing which allows us to measure the gap between epic and real societies. If we take into account North Samoyed history, it becomes clear that these stories are closely linked to the development of reindeer husbandry. This led to a real economic change among the Nenets. In the seventeenth century, the Nenets were still reindeer hunters, and anyone who had forty animals was rich, whereas a hundred years later some of them already owned two thousand domestic reindeer (Kolycheva 1956, 79). This very rapid transition from hunting to herding is even sometimes described in this field as a “reindeer herding revolution” (*Narody...*, 2005, 410), the roots of which are still debated today (Pax Russica, the shift of nomadism as it moved away from the Russian world, climate change, the disappearance of wild reindeer, and so on). It also seems to have led to a real demographic explosion¹² (Krupnik 1976, 67), and no doubt to many other changes, including religious ones.

Could it not be that the Nenets shamans gradually gave way to bards who sang the epic, as is attested elsewhere in Siberia?¹³ The advancement of livestock breeding among the Nenets

¹⁰ Polygyny is well attested among the Samoyeds, where it remains the privilege of the great shaman or the large herder.

¹¹ This is one of the few epic songs in which a religious dimension appears through the idea of a sacrifice, albeit at the hands of an ogre. As far as the Samoyed epic heroes are concerned, there is no mention of sacrifices, spirits or gods, and no bards or shamans appear in the texts, which are also very far from reality in this respect.

¹² The European Nenets numbered only 1300-1400 in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and gradually increased to 5000 or 6000 individuals by the end of the nineteenth century.

¹³ We have very little concrete data concerning the rituals undertaken by Nenets shamans of the tundra, whereas descriptions of Enets or Nganasan shamanic rites are much more numerous, despite the demographic small population of these two groups. Moreover, in one Enets myth I have noted a clear opposition appears between bard (Nenets) and shaman (Enets) society (Lambert 2002-2003, 283-294). From this point of view, the adoption by the

continued until collectivization and gradually passed over to the Enets and then to the Nganasan in the nineteenth century, whose reindeer herds rapidly grew. However, the Nganasan have always remained hunters, and those who had a very large herd left it to shepherds to go and hunt wild reindeer in more remote regions. The epic songs thus followed the same trajectory from the Nenets to the Enets to the Nganasan, and this context is the one in which the Samoyed epic takes on its full meaning.

Might we not consider that these groups, which were undergoing deep and essential economic changes, were trying through their songs to envisage how they might live in a pastoral society where nothing was lacking, a society towards which they perhaps felt they were moving? Epic society remains, however, a society thought up by hunters at heart, and in the end it is no longer reindeer that are hunted, but rather women. It is most probably in this context of profound and lasting transformations that the Nenets developed their epic poetry, one of the main objectives of which is to imagine what society would be like had it taken a pastoral logic based on accumulation to its conclusion. According to this projection from a group still deeply marked by hunting life, the figure of the herder is envisaged through that of the ogre. Like the latter, the rich shepherd is supposed to be driven by an unquenchable voracity, which only brute physical strength can serve.¹⁴

Polyphony

Thus far, the texts, very quickly presented here, present no idea of polyphony. If it is the image of an imagined future that epic proposes here, the outlook is clearly not optimistic, on the contrary. Who would want to live in a society torn apart by systemic and deadly conflict, with the possibility that no one will be left standing? True, the heroes are brave and show great physical courage, which is socially valued, but the proposed social universe seems absolutely unliveable.

Here we might note one character who progressively emerges in certain songs and who makes it possible to pacify epic society. The various songs featuring him attest to a genuine textual work. These songs open with the image of a woman who lives alone with her son or nephew, as all the men are dead. They may all have been struck down by a devastating disease during their sleep – this is a *topos* of North Samoyed oral traditions – and the song then focuses

Enets and Nganasan of the Nenets epic songs did not lead to a retreat from shamanism and several Nganasan shamans – Tubiaku or his sister Noboptie – were also excellent bards.

¹⁴ This should not be seen as a secondary effect of Soviet policy, as many of the songs were noted down long before the time of the Soviets. On the other hand, communist propaganda could have relied on these representations, but if it did not do so, it was probably simply because the propagandists did not know or at least did not understand them!

on the fate of the woman and the child, with several heroes appearing one after the other, each of whom fight each other while proposing different solutions: taking the woman and killing the child; taking the woman and abandoning the boy; or taking both, in which case the newcomer is a parent. This last possibility is the one retained by a Nganasan song (Dolgikh.1938.63). In it, the dead men are more often than not murdered in their sleep. This introduces a new element, since the song then ventures to make a value judgement on the murderers: the enemy is negatively valued for having killed disloyally. Z. N. Kupriianova took a keen interest in these songs, presenting us with five examples in all of which the boy grows up and avenges his father and uncles.

In the simplest version (Kupriianova 1965, 59-95), the hero, having learned the story of his people, takes up the weapons of his father and six uncles – he is called Dressed in Seven Pieces of Clothing, because he has also donned their clothes – and goes to fight his hereditary enemies. Other characters then offer him military help, on account of his parents having been murdered in an act of cowardice. He systematically rejects their offers and prefers to fight alone. He manages to kill many opponents, but still ends up in a desperate situation. Those who had offered him help intervene, doing so not only to save his life, but also to enable him to destroy his enemies. So the avenging son is nevertheless forced, in spite of himself, to make military alliances. He then proceeds to share with his allies the booty (a herd of reindeer) taken from his opponents and they all end up living together in harmony. The outline of a solution emerges here, while other texts go even further by proposing a more elaborate initial situation involving three survivors, a mother, and her two children, one boy and one girl. The avenging son, then called the son of the master of the slender headland, now has a sister. In the most innovative version (Kupriianova 1965, 96-149), the two children are forced to flee, as the one who murdered their father returns to kill the boy and take the girl. They seek help and eventually find it: the sister of one of their enemies allows them to survive and then a military ally steps in – his military help will not be turned down. Now, instead of systematically slaughtering all his enemies, like a classic Samoyed hero, the avenging son lets some of them live. At the end of the song he gathers all the survivors. While he marries the girl who helped them, he gives his sister to his military ally and the latter's sister to one of his former enemies. The reindeer are also shared and a world of lasting peace is finally established.

What, then, has changed? The avenging son, who is gradually forced to accept help, ends up with military allies and, in the text that goes furthest, invents a new form of matrimonial alliance, an extremely simple one, as it happens. As we have seen, traditional marriage by purchase, combined with a delayed direct exchange structure, is no longer an option, as the father refuses to sell his daughter, arguing that he already has enough reindeer and furs. The

son of the master of the slender headland therefore opts for immediate exchange: he gives his sister to his military ally while he marries the girl who helped him and the sister of his military ally is given away elsewhere. This is a good example of a generalized, non-delayed exchange, and this immediacy – one girl for another right away – excludes the question of purchase. Finally, the adoption of this simple formula permits escape from this world of conflict. The other versions of this song (Kupriianova 1965, 150-198) help to clarify what is really at stake here, as they envisage other possibilities. Thus, in two of the songs the sister does not marry, since the hero is not yet ready to give her away; indeed, he takes a wife (the girl who helped them), or even two (this one and the daughter of his enemy), so nor is he ready to give a woman to anyone else. By keeping his sister and taking two wives, he still seems to be driven, like classical epic heroes, by the sole logic of accumulation. On the other hand, in another version he still marries the girl who helped them, but also gives his sister to her brother. Here we have another example of immediate exchange, but in a different form, since it is now a very banal, direct exchange of sisters.

In a society that has become extremely affluent, the key thing is to decide for a formula of immediate exchange, regardless of the underlying alliance structure. This is the way out of this world of constant wars.

The spontaneous thought thus arises, "all this fuss for nothing," especially since, in North Samoyed societies, marriage through the immediate exchange of sisters is theoretically possible. Yet, it is not valued at all and ethnographical studies never report it, though they do devote some beautiful pages to the very long negotiations undertaken by the matchmaker who haggles over the "price of the woman." Moreover, we have no concrete example of such marriages in North Samoyed ethnography, and the analysis of the 1926-1927 census for the Eastern Nganasan (the records for the Western Nganasan have been lost) did not reveal a single irrefutable example (see Lambert 2002-2003, 489-516). How could it not appear that marriage through the immediate exchange of sisters pertains only to the most deprived, to those whose only wealth is their sister? This exchange even seems to function as the unthinkable, blind spot that structures this epic poetry, because the heroes, who are always rich, absolutely never consider it and prefer to kill each other, with immediate exchange only returning with the figure of the avenging son. In this latter case, the marriage of those who have nothing but a sister becomes the only possible marriage for those who want to live in a peaceful society but who have everything... except a wife!

Moreover, thanks to the great number of texts in which this avenging son appears, it is possible to underscore a polyphony in what functions as a "dispersed epic." It is indeed once he has a sister that this son is able to conceive a new solution to a world torn apart by conflict,

meaning in turn that the future can be imagined in a more acceptable, optimistic form. The perspective that this character offers represents a real alternative to the other epic heroes. However, to reach this conclusion, the corpus of "ogre songs" must be considered as a whole; no single song can be relied upon, as it can present a singular case only, a particular situation. In this instance, it seems perfectly legitimate to think in terms of "dispersed epic," and it remains to be seen whether this type of analysis can be undertaken in other Siberian societies that did not elaborate a single great epic, but instead a multitude of epic songs.

A contemporary adaptation

In conclusion, it may be interesting to show how these songs can continue to evolve in a new context. Indeed, from the point of view of content, these texts have certainly not been relevant since collectivization, especially for the Nganasan, who ended up losing all their domestic reindeer. These songs continued to be performed until recently, but only by the Nganasan born before the 1930s and who kept a "traditional" view of their culture. However, one of my younger informants, Nina D. Chunanchar (b. 1947), herself the daughter and niece of great bards, also knows some songs and offered to write them down. In general, her texts (myths, tales, etc.) must often be seen as "modernized" forms of "traditional" stories adapted to the contemporary world. Nina has also tried to transform the narrative structure of epic songs. For example, one of her rather short songs begins, in the classical way, with a hero who wants to take a fourth wife, of course the brothers refuse to give their sister away, which leads to an armed conflict and the injured suitor is repelled. In a further development, the Russian justice system intervenes, summoning the brothers to appear before the "great Russian chief with eyes of fire." They have no choice but to go. On the way, however, they meet a fourth man, their elder brother, who has spent many years in prison for killing a whole camp. He tells them that he will go and see this chief himself, as he has come to know the Russians well. He convinces the chief that the attacker is the real culprit, as he was after a fourth wife – Soviet Russia forbade polygyny early on, as it did marriage by purchase – and they both get drunk together. When he returns home, he discovers that his brothers and sister have been murdered by ogres wanting to annihilate the human race. He kills them and revives his own, then tells his brothers that they will become the seasons and his sister that she will marry and give rise to human beings. He ascends to the sky. He climbs into his sleigh, which flies off, his reindeer having become winged, and disappears through the clouds.

This contemporary and individual creation is to be understood as a contemporary adaptation of these songs, with of course the introduction of Russian law, which prevents the epic heroes from behaving as they used to. We can only note that the song lyrics here lose their

epic dimension, and become immediately religious instead, as the brothers come to originate the seasons and the sister, the woman, gives birth to humans. As for the main hero, he ascends to the sky on his sleigh. The story is obviously inspired by Elijah's ascension, which is very popular in Siberia and often adapted. Through this contemporary reinterpretation in religious terms, the song is now understood as being about the origin of the seasons, humanity and perhaps even the God of heaven – the Russian presence is obviously not fortuitous, but that is another story...

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