

8 CHALLENGING THE STATE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN WESTERN SIBERIA: TAIGA SCHOOL BY THE TIUITIAKHA RIVER

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Introduction

It is common knowledge that indigenous populations who preserve their own lifestyles that are different from the mainstream societies in their home countries face disadvantages in education all over the world. In this regard, Western Siberian reindeer herders of the Khanty, Mansi and Nenets people are no exception (cf. Hairullin 2006; Magga 2005).

The following paper tells the story of an educational experiment, developed and organised by a Forest Nenets reindeer herding family on their ancestral land in the taiga (boreal forest) by the Tiuitiakha River in the Western Siberian Surgutsky *rayon*.

The organisational form and the educational idea of this taiga school challenged the state educational system based on boarding schools in central settlements often hundreds of kilometres from the reindeer herders' campsites. Surprisingly, it was not as much the content of the school curriculum, which was almost the same as that of the boarding school in the village, but the organisation of the educational process and the context of the work of the small taiga school that differed so much from the conventional system of education.

This paper will describe the school project and its educational ideas and place them in the broader context of attempts to reform the educational system for indigenous groups in Siberia and to develop new forms of bicultural education (Kasten 1998) after the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

After thirteen years of existence, the school could not continue its work, not only because of the reluctance of the state authorities to support the experiment further, but also because other obstacles and difficulties arose, which will be described below.

Fieldwork

The paper is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork from 1993 to 2009 in the Khanty-Mansiysky autonomous district – Yugra in Western Siberia, Russian Federation. The main interlocutors and research partners were indigenous reindeer herders and activists of the indigenous *intelligentsia*. A long time was spent at the reindeer herders' campsite at the Tiuitiakha River where the self-organised taiga school was

established by the Nenets activist Yuri Vella (www.jurivella.ru; Niglas and Toulouze 2004). Participant observation as well as collaboration and interviews constituted the main research methods. The author did not work directly for the school but tried to raise awareness for the school in the West and supported the main organiser Yuri Vella in his efforts to defend his land from the oil companies. Before the closing of the school he initiated an open letter (see below) to the authorities to prevent the end of the school project.

History of the Education of Indigenous People

The history of formal education of the indigenous population in Western Siberia goes back to the end of the 19th century when Russian missionaries founded the first schools (Toulouze 1999; Balzer 1999; Toulouze 2011). Education was considered to be the best tool to transform ‘primitive pagans’ into civilised Christians, who were the only proper humans, according to the stereotypes of Russian settlers about Western Siberian natives, brilliantly analysed by Art Leete (1999). The children of Khanty, Mansi and Nenets reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen were then living with their parents on nomadic campsites in the conical tents called *chum*² or in remote seasonal settlements almost never visited by state officials or missionaries. The missionaries had to rely mostly on indigenous orphans who were handed over to them in the Russian settlements, as Roza Laptander writes of the Nenets, in her contribution to the volume. Until the beginning of the 20th century, indigenous inhabitants met with state and church representatives and traders only on the occasion of the annual fair in the Russian cities.

The Soviet administration took over the ideas of the Christian missionaries and considered education as one of the main tools to integrate the Siberian natives into Soviet society and culture. Informed by talented ethnographers, like for instance Vladimir Bogoraz and Lev Shternberg working in the Institute of the Peoples of the North in Leningrad (Bartels and Bartels 1995; Slezkine 1992), early Soviet planners understood that state education had to be adapted to the local lifestyles in order to be successful. Up to the 1930s, plans existed to organise mobile schools that would travel together with the nomads and their herds (see the chapters by Roza Laptander and Elena Liarskaya, *this volume*). But the reality was different in the Khanty area called Ostiako-Vogulskii national district at that time, which later became Khanty-Mansiiskiy autonomous district – Yugra. As far as I know, no nomadic schools were established in the area, probably because of the semi-nomadic lifestyle and scattered family settlements of Khanty, Mansi and Forest Nenets people, and probably because of negative experiences with this school-type in other regions (see Laptander and Liarskaya, *this volume*). The young Soviet state decided to establish stations called ‘kul’tbaza’ (ru. *kul’turnaia baza* – cultural centre) on the territories of the indigenous

population all over Siberia and to collect the children from the taiga (boreal forest) and tundra (boreal steppe) to educate them in residential schools located in these stations. As a result, a *kul'tbaza* was established in 1930 for the Khanty on the Kazym River. Ten persons in three groups travelled 330 km through the surrounding forest tundra and collected 17 Khanty children in 1931, the first year of the school (Sheveleva 2009).

This was only a small part of the local Khanty community's children. Most of the parents were reluctant to give their children to the Russians, and not without reason, as they were afraid their children would suffer bad nutrition and be infected by different diseases. This forced relocation of children recalled the colonial *amanat* system when Russian Cossacks abducted natives as hostages to force their relatives into submission and often to Christianise and culturally assimilate the captured Khanty (Forsyth 1992; Balzer 1999). The local conflict escalated in 1933 when state officials desecrated the most important sacred site of the region, Lake Num-To, and locals took a group of Russians hostage. These were killed after an ultimatum to lower taxes, withdraw from the sacred site and release the children from school. These events and the following punitive expedition became famous as the so-called 'Kazym uprising' (Ernychova 2003; Leete 2004). Open resistance and opposition were finally put down in 1934 by Soviet troops, and the residential school became compulsory for all indigenous children.

Language Development

Knowledge of indigenous languages dropped in Siberia from 75 % in 1959 to 53 % in 1989 (Zhirkova 2006). There are no statistics for demographics or number of speakers for Forest Nenets and Eastern Khanty languages, which are subsumed under the Nenets and Khanty in general. Below I provide some data for these groups in general. They show that the number of Khanty and Nenets has grown significantly over the last fifty years. Nenets have one of the highest birth rates among all ethnic groups in Russia. Another factor explaining the extraordinary growth, especially of Khanty and Nenets between 1989 and 2002, is the affirmative action measures taken by the state since the 1990s that motivated a lot of children from mixed ethnic families to register as indigenous. The change in the number of speakers is difficult to estimate because the questions provided to record knowledge of the native language in the census were formulated differently in 2002 and 2010 and in the former censuses (Sokolova and Stepanov 2007). Especially the 2002 figures seem to be inflated because the census asked only about some knowledge of the indigenous languages, not full proficiency. Especially for the Khanty the language loss is dramatic. The speaker community has lost one quarter of its speakers in the last 20 years. Recent personal communication with Khanty journalist Reonalda Olzina revealed that less than half of Khanty school children study their native language as a subject at school and less than

5% of the indigenous preschool children have the possibility to learn or speak their native language in the preschool facilities. Indigenous school children taking part in the school subject 'native language' in the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district – Yugra diminished from 2,610 in the year 2008, to 2,056 in the year 2009, 1,476 in 2010, and 1,595 in the year 2011.

	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2010	Growth 1989 to 2002	Living in cities	in rural areas
Nenets	22,845	28,487	27,294	34,190	41,302	44,640	+20.8%	21.4%	78.6%
Khanty	19,246	21,007	20,743	22,283	28,678	30,943	+28.7%	38.4%	61.6%

Table 1. Demography of Khanty and Nenets in the Soviet and post-Soviet censuses according to Sokolova and Stepanov (2007), www.perepis2002.ru and www.perepis-2010.ru

	1970		1979		1989		2002		2010	
Nenets	23,844	83.7%	22,081	80.9%	26,730	77.7%	31,311	75.8%	21,926	49%
Khanty	14,516	69.1%	14,126	68.1%	13,548	60.8%	13,568	47.3%	9,584	31%

Table 2. Dynamics of the number of speakers of the Khanty and Nenets languages according to Sokolova and Stepanov (2007), www.perepis2002.ru and www.perepis-2010.ru

Criticism of Soviet Schools in the North

The Tiutiakha school experiment becomes understandable only in light of the background of the educational system that was introduced during the Soviet Union, the criticism it has met since the time of *perestroika*, and the awakening of a plurality of ethnic revitalisation movements in Siberia (see Laptander and Liarskaya, *this volume*).

Mainstream scientific and popular literature about the Soviet boarding school system after *perestroika* denounced Soviet education as one of the main factors contributing to the ongoing cultural transformation in northern indigenous communities (cf. Hairullin 2006; Zhirkova 2006; Eremin and Traskunova 1989; Liarskaya 2005; Bloch 2004). These transformations were described in terms of destructive social processes that resulted not only in the extinction of native languages and loss of traditional knowledge but also in russification and maladaptation to the local living conditions. And one cannot deny that these processes took and take place. But there are also other developments that put the transfer of knowledge and language in danger.

Sedentarisation and 'Gender Shift'

Collectivisation and resettlement in central villages caused a depopulation of the taiga and tundra in many regions of Siberia, which then became a male working sphere of

hunters and reindeer herders. Sedentarisation deprived the reindeer herders of the place and mechanism needed to transfer the predominantly implicit and unwritten knowledge of the indigenous lifestyle to the younger generation. The subsequent loss of prestige and status of the indigenous men accompanied by alcoholism, high suicide rates, migration to central settlements and towns and a high degree of mixed marriage was described as a 'gender shift' in Siberia (Vitebsky 2010; Liarskaya 2009a; Povoroznyuk, Habeck, and Vaté 2010; Liarskaya 2010).

Introduction of the Boarding Schools

This picture contradicts the way in which the bright future of the so-called 'small people of the North' was depicted in official statements in Soviet times. Boarding schools there were seen as the corner posts of progress that let northern peoples participate in the most advanced achievements of technological progress and let them become doctors, soldiers, technicians or cosmonauts.

The Soviet educational programme tried to fight indigenous socialisation in an active way and to replace it with a modern lifestyle and Soviet values. Indigenous culture was treated as a folkloristic ornament, a collection of elements of material culture detached from the original context, manipulated by Soviet cultural specialists, and administered by professionals in official cultural institutions. This concept of culture is still very much alive among cultural workers in the indigenous settlements and towns (see Habeck 2007; Volkov 2002).

The use of native language in the boarding school even in free time was often forbidden, and clothing, diet and organisation of the living environment were adapted to Soviet standards. Separation from parents served as an important tool for the replacement of habits and norms and was a traumatic experience for children as well as their parents (cf. the chapters of Laptander and Liarskaya, *this volume*). The authors own recent fieldwork among the European Nenets relativised this general picture. The pressure on native language and culture varied in different schools and at different times, probably being the harshest after the Second World War and diminishing by the 1980s. It also had different effects on different people, according to their family background and profession after school (see also Liarskaya 2005; Liarskaya 2009b on the Yamal Nenets).

Effects of Boarding Schools on Language and Culture

The intended educational effect yielded various results. On the one hand, the Soviet school system produced an indigenous *intelligentsia* which subsequently became the harshest critic of the system itself, irrespective of the fact that they profited the most from it. Their situation was paradoxical in yet another sense: their educational carriers let many of them become specialists in cultural institutions like village houses of

culture, the public media, local museums, schools and universities. The indigenous culture that was taken away from them by the educational system often became their most important resource in that very educational system or in their cultural institutions. Some specialists in indigenous languages and indigenous linguists had to relearn their native language, because they were inhibited to use them from the age they entered school up to university (personal communication by Roza Laptander for the Nenets). The feeling of cultural and often also language loss was one of the major motivations for the indigenous intelligentsia to become the protagonists of the cultural revivalism and the preservation projects that have spread throughout Siberia since the time of *perestroika* in the 1980s (see Laptander, *this volume*).

Northern boarding schools on the other hand often provided only an inferior education in comparison to the schools in larger Russian settlements. Remote villages experience difficulties in attracting well-trained staff. The reindeer herders' children that live and learn in the boarding schools experience prejudice even from village youth. The drop-out rate is quite high and today nobody enforces compulsory attendance anymore. Especially in the 1990s, quite a lot of parents living in the taiga withdrew their children, often the girls, after some initial grades from the boarding school, and took them back home. In interviews, Khanty blamed the boarding school for the bad habits the children had learned at school, like drinking, smoking and swearing, instead of anything useful. Magga et al. speak about subtractive education, whereby instead of adding knowledge, the effect of formal school education is to diminish the knowledge, skills and language proficiency acquired by indigenous children in their primary socialisation, while not giving the same level of education that children of the dominant social group receive (Magga et al. 2005; Magga 2005).

Indigenous Response to Boarding Schools

Elena Liarskaya (2005) has shown that, in the example of Nenets residential schools, the blaming of the boarding school for all evil is as wrong as the belief that state school education is the panacea for all desired change. She concludes, "that residential schools first, were unable to completely break off intergenerational ties and channels of cultural transmission, and second, became 'inscribed' into ethnic cultures" (Liarskaya 2005: 76).

The positive effect of the negative influences of boarding school education could be found in the resistance strategies that native youth developed towards 'total institutions', to use a term by Ervin Goffman (Goffman 1961; cf. also Williams 2009). I would argue that Soviet state institutions and their practices to enforce the subordination of indigenous peoples under official language and ideology in places like school, army, administration, and party resulted in indigenous people learning how to veil their values and avoid open conflict (cf. Yurchak 2003). Indigenous inhabitants of the taiga developed strategies to safeguard their own cultural norms in the realm of the

informal (the taiga) and to maintain a public façade conforming to the official ideology (cf. Oswald and Voronkov 2003).

One could say that a Soviet bi-culturalism, a double reference frame, allowed indigenous reindeer herders to move between the realm of their own autonomy and the settlement, dominated by what they often call 'the world of the Russians'. It allowed indigenous youth to open up choices for career and lifestyle decisions and in that way broaden the economic basis for indigenous families.

Elena Liarskaya described this effect of boarding school education on the Yamal Nenets (Liarskaya 2009b). In the Nenets case, compulsory school education was introduced only at the end of the 1950s. The quantity and structure of the tundra population on the Yamal peninsula did not undergo serious changes, the family type reindeer herding is still predominant and the language has a firm stand. During the last 70 years the number of Nenets on Yamal has doubled. But half of the population is now living in the newly established settlements. Norms and rules are different if not contradictory in these settlements in comparison with the tundra. Settlement life is sedentary while tundra life is nomadic.

Liarskaya (2009) stresses that the eight years of education in the settlement is considered by most scientists as the main reason behind the alienation from tundra life and from reindeer husbandry of the younger generation (see Laptander, *this volume*). Liarskaya interprets the situation in a slightly different way. According to her view, life in the settlement became just another option for the Nenets who were born in the tundra. They just chose another 'life scenario'. If education plays a significant role in this choice, then one would expect that people who acquire higher education are more likely to stay in the settlement and not choose a nomadic life in the tundra. Liarskaya discovered that this was not the case. She suspects other reasons behind the decision to live in the settlement or in the tundra. It's a rule in Nenets culture that the oldest children help their parents bring up the younger ones, and the youngest children stay with their parents when they grow old. So, the oldest and youngest are more likely to become tundra dwellers, while the middle children have more freedom to choose between the tundra and the settlement. Liarskaya's analysis of about 300 cases shows that, roughly speaking, a third choose a settlement life, a third a life in the tundra and a third change their lifestyle during their life cycle. Liarskaya's conclusion is therefore that there is nothing like two different cultures, but rather a complex cultural system in which tundra life and life in the settlement are connected to each other, even if the norms and values inherent in each are sometimes quite contradictory (Liarskaya 2009b).

But Liarskaya is not numb to the traumatic experiences of Nenets children in the boarding schools. She describes for instance how painful it is for young Nenets to undress and be washed in front of strangers when they first come to the boarding school. And also the changing of clothing from their usual to the European style is experienced as a violation of the Nenets norms for the human body. The different rela-

tion to clothing becomes a marker for the different lifestyles, but the different clothes don't stand in a clear hierarchical relationship. European clothing is not considered to be more cultural. The relationship is more complex than that. What is true for the changing of clothing is also true for the change of language when moving between tundra and settlements.

Liarskaya describes convincingly that, though the boarding school system aimed to change Nenets lifestyles and values, it did not lead to assimilation, but enabled the Nenets to choose and to switch even within the lifespan of one person between life in the tundra and in the settlement and between lifestyles with sometimes not only different but contradictory norms and values.

I agree with Liarskaya that the situation of the eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets in the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district – Yugra is much like that of their Nenets neighbours in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district. Though the number of reindeer herders living on traditional seasonal family campsites in the taiga is even higher than before the Soviet sedentarisation campaign, more than half of the Khanty in total now live in the central villages. The Khanty reindeer herders developed various strategies to retain the autonomy of their norms and cultural practices in the forest and keep the colonising influence out of their taiga settlements without getting into conflict with the official policy. The boarding school experience was probably a crucial one in that respect.

But notwithstanding the positive effects of the boarding school system on the resilience of indigenous communities in the Russian North and Siberia, one should not forget that reindeer herders are, like almost all nomadic communities in the world, disadvantaged in respect to education in comparison with the majority population, as was already stated in the UN 'World Declaration on Education for All' (Dyer 2010). The main problem in Siberia is not the lack of formal schooling, as in a lot of Asian, South-American and African countries. Indigenous people in Siberia are suffering from a low quality of formal education and the worsening of the conditions for the transmission of the traditional indigenous knowledge³ which is usually transmitted outside school.

Tiuitiakha Taiga School

A lot of the indigenous activism in Siberia during and after *perestroika* was directed towards education. Language loss was identified as one of the most visible markers of the social marginalisation of indigenous people, and educational reforms were considered most important to fill the gap in the transmission of knowledge between generations. The school was, besides the local village administration, the most visible institution of the state in indigenous settlements, and the state was blamed for being the force behind the assimilation process and subsequent loss of indigenous identity.

In view of this background, it's no wonder that the 1990s were the decade in which the indigenous Siberian *intelligentsia* developed a broad range of educational ideas and projects, from radio education to ethnographic summer camps. A prominent idea among these projects was a nomadic form of school that would follow the reindeer herders in their annual movement and thus put an end to the separation of parents and children. Roza Laptander describes in her chapter an attempt to establish such a school in the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district.

Since the 1990s, I have tried to collect information about existing nomadic schools throughout Siberia, but with the exception of a rumour from the Evenkiiskii autonomous district, I have hardly found any information. Only in the last few years did I learn about the nomadic school for Evenki children initiated by French anthropologist Alexandra Lavrillier (see her contribution in this volume) and some other examples for Evenki and Chukchi in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (ELOKA; Zhirkova 2006).

The only attempt to realise a similar idea in western Siberia was undertaken by the Nenets poet and reindeer herder Jurii Kylevich Aivaseda (known under his pseudonym Yuri Vella).⁴ In the wake of indigenous activism at the beginning of the 1990s, he tried to revive the lifestyle of his forefathers and returned with his family and a small reindeer herd to the forest tundra several hundred kilometres from the settlement where he and the majority of the indigenous people of the Agan River resided at that time (Dudeck and Ventsel 1998). One of the main motivations for his grown daughters not to follow his example, but instead to stay in the village, was their reluctance to give their offspring to the boarding school and to be that way separated from their education.

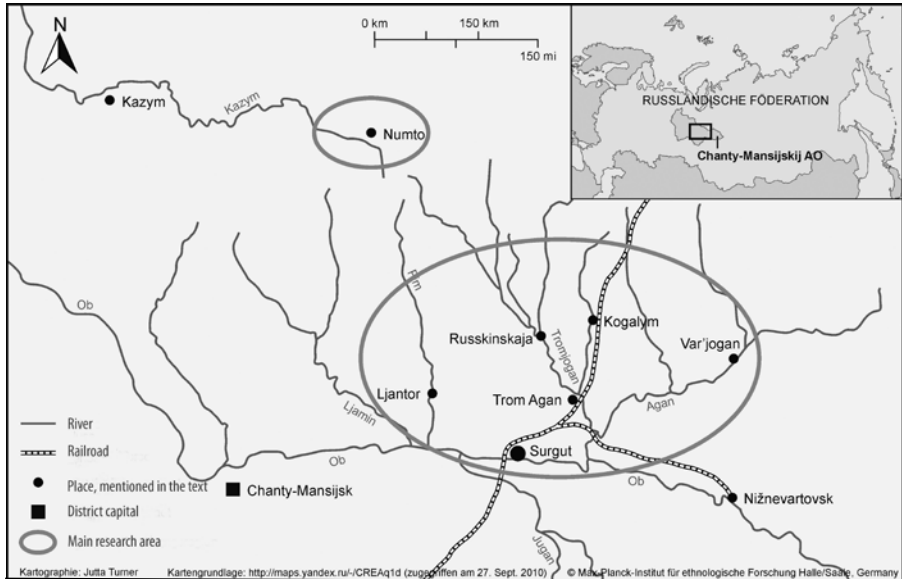
To establish a school in the reindeer herders' campsites in the taiga was therefore one of the priorities of the revivalist project that he planned as an exemplary model for the neo-traditionalist movement and as a 'living museum' of the reindeer herder lifestyle. Neo-traditionalism is used here as the term for the *intelligentsia's* activism aimed at a return to their 'roots' and native traditions, and is slightly different from its use by Alexandr Pika (Pika and Grant 1999). In 1996, Yuri Vella succeeded in establishing a small school for his own children and the children of the neighbouring reindeer herders in a building that looked similar to the usual log houses of the Eastern Khanty winter settlements. The first teacher was an anthropologist from Moscow who agreed to live at the campsite for one school year. But the greatest challenge was to convince the bureaucrats in the education department of the *rayon* administration to accept the school as equivalent to the usual village school. Yuri Vella came to an agreement that the school would be considered a branch of the school in the village in Var'yogan, in the Nizhnevartovskiy *rayon* of the Khanty-Mansiiskiy *avtonomnyi okrug* – Yugra, where the taiga inhabitants were registered, and that the teachers of the taiga school would be on the payroll of the department of education of the Nizhnevartovskiy *rayon*. The building was maintained by the Vella family at their own cost,

but the department financed some equipment and in some years even some food for the school children.

The model for this kind of nomadic school was adapted to the way of life of reindeer herders and fishermen in the Western Siberian taiga, which differs considerably from the tundra zone further north. The northern nomadic reindeer herders live in tents and migrate with their big herds of several thousand reindeer across huge distances up to several hundred if not thousands of kilometres. The taiga inhabitants have up to four seasonal settlements not far from each other consisting of log houses and different other buildings. The type of school adapted to this way of semi-nomadic life differs therefore from the one for tundra reindeer nomads. Therefore, I will call it in the following not a nomadic school but a taiga school.

There was one permanent problem standing in the way of the official recognition of the school. The Tiutiakha is a tributary of the Agan River, one of the tributaries of the main water artery of the region – the Ob River. Ethnic boundaries of the indigenous population were maintained within the river basins. And the administrative subdivisions of the district followed the same rule. The Agan River basin was part of the Nizhnevartovsky *rayon* and the indigenous people were bound administratively to two central villages on the shores of the Agan River. When the district became one of the main producers of crude oil in Russia, some of the administrative borders were adjusted to meet the needs of the oil companies. Near the Tiutiakha River, a huge oil field, called Povkhscoe, was explored and supplied from the newly established oil town of Kogalym. The Tiutiakha River basin thus was administratively transferred to the Surgutsky *rayon* which Kogalym belongs to. Reindeer herding families in the region appeared to be administratively registered in the Nizhnevartovsky *rayon* but their land belongs to the Surgutsky *rayon* now. Traditional seasonal settlements of reindeer herders are officially not considered settlements at all. In the case of the Tiutiakha School, the school appeared to territorially belong to the Surgutsky *rayon* but hosted children from the Nizhnevartovsky *rayon*. Both *rayon* departments of education thus had a reason to refuse funding and support for the school. As described above, in the end Yuri Vella succeeded in convincing the Nizhnevartovsk authorities that his school should be considered part of the boarding school of the village of Var'yogan.

Through the first years, the school existed in one log house on the winter settlement, which also served as the teachers' home. The house was divided for that purpose with a wooden wall. After some time the teachers got their own cabin. They used the same facilities as the two or three indigenous families living on the site. There was a toilet outside, a sauna, water from a nearby lake and supplies from the village brought by Yuri Vella himself with his all-terrain vehicle UAZ. Electricity was produced by a little generator in the evenings or during the day when it was needed for the computers in the school. Subsequently another school building was established on the late summer and autumn settlement. It was a wagon formerly used as living quarters by oil workers. All school children were taught in the one room. The parents of the school



[18] Map of field research area. *Source:* Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung, Halle/Saale

children heated the school building in the morning and teachers and students maintained the buildings and prepared firewood. In 2008, Vella's family decided to move to a new winter settlement several kilometres away from the old one. The older school children reassembled the school building in the new place. For the teachers there was a separate little cabin there.

Yuri Vella explained to me in an interview the further plans for the school which could not be realised because the school was closed after two of the elder children left the settlement for further studies in 2009. Teachers and parents developed a project for such a small school on a taiga settlement which would meet the conditions of the Khanty and Forest Nenets type of reindeer herding. School, teachers' flat and a sleeping room for the children of neighbouring settlements would be joined in a log house heated by a common stove. Electricity would be delivered by a small generator or from a neighbouring oil field. Besides the teachers, there would be one additional educator or housekeeper to care for the children and the school. As Yuri explained, such a small school and dormitory should be even cheaper than the residential school in the village because the school did not need so much technical staff and it could use local resources like firewood and fresh fish.

Concept of the Taiga School

Yuri Vella explained to me his thoughts about the school in several interviews, and the Forest Nenets poet and political activist was the 'master mind' behind the school.

Additionally, I was able to interview three teachers and meet and have conversations with six of them. When I visited Yuri Vella's place in 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2006, 2008 and 2009, I experienced the operation of the school and lived there together with the families that had children in the school.

The educational aim of the school was not so much to change the socialisation of the children as to give their parents the possibility to change their lifestyle. A lot of Khanty and Forest Nenets reindeer herding families move to the village when their children reach school age. They give up their taiga lifestyle and search for jobs in the central villages. Living in the village far from their former settlements and the reindeer, the parents cannot transmit their knowledge of reindeer herding to their children, even when they themselves would later return to the lifestyle of the reindeer herders.

One of Yuri Vella's educational concepts relies on the idea that it is not as much the parents or educators but the reindeer that are educating the young reindeer herder. Adapting to the needs and behaviour of the reindeer is an important skill in the Nenets way of reindeer herding. This idea links up to the concept of native education in general in which knowledge is transmitted in an implicit way. Cognitive research associates this knowledge with the processual memory of behavioural sequences storing predominantly habitual knowledge like practical skills and habits (Anderson 1976; cf. also Derlicki 2004). Only a small part of traditional knowledge belongs to the so-called declarative memory, where facts, meanings and events are memorised. But this knowledge stays connected to the memory of practical skills and behaviour sequences and cannot be transmitted unless the learner takes part in and observes these practices. As a Khanty proverb says: "You have eyes: see! You have ears: hear! You have hands: do! You have legs: go!" (Vagt 2012).

This knowledge, Yuri was sure, cannot be transmitted in formal schooling. The only place to learn to live as a reindeer herder is the reindeer herder's settlement. On the other hand, he is not a revivalist in the conservative sense. He always stressed that he would love to see his grandchildren become doctors or lawyers. Important from his perspective was to keep the ability alive, so that children could become reindeer herders, fishers or hunters if they wanted to. The idea of the school on the Tiuitiakha River was to give the children a formal education on the same level as every school in Russia. The school curriculum should not contain local or traditional knowledge, which is almost impossible to integrate into the usual school teaching process. This knowledge should be transferred in everyday life together with the reindeer and the parents in the taiga.

Another important aspect of the relation between so-called indigenous and school education was not explicitly stressed by Yuri Vella, but became obvious in talks with the parents and the teachers. The symbolic relationship of the school-book knowledge and indigenous knowledge is determined by the relation of taiga versus urban lifestyles. In the settlement, the lifestyle of reindeer herders has low social prestige and is



|19| Yuri Vella, the founder of the school ↑

|20| Schoolboy in the classroom ↓



often considered to be less cultural and less advanced by the people living there. Reindeer herders' children feel marginalised by that dominant opinion, which is supported by the way culture, history and progress are presented in school books. The situation in the taiga is different. The value of indigenous knowledge is obvious there, while the superiority of school-book knowledge is not at all self-evident. This dependence on

the norms and rules of forest life was sometimes a big challenge for teachers trying to adapt to life on the reindeer herding settlement. This was already the experience of the first nomadic school experiments in the 1920s, as Roza Laptander describes in her chapter. From the perspective of the mainstream concept of school education in Russia, the parents' educational function is completely secondary. Education is delivered by formal schooling, not through the upbringing by parents. If the parents fail to transfer certain knowledge or values, it is the school which should take over this function. Being trained in such an environment, it was quite difficult for some of the teachers to recognise their own sometimes marginal position on the taiga settlement. They had to follow the same everyday routines, eat the same food and obey to the same religious taboos as everybody else there. They experienced the culture shock that indigenous children usually experience when they are transferred to the boarding school.

To sum up the concept and contrast it with other alternative schooling programmes, one could stress that it pursued not the 'integration' of indigenous knowledge into the school curriculum, but the adaptation of the school itself to the conditions of the reindeer herding lifestyle. The same could be said about the school project described by Alexandra Lavrillier (*this volume*). In this way, the school circumvented the value conflict between different knowledge that is taught in one curriculum. The content of the curriculum was identical to that for all other children, but the institution itself and the teaching process had to be integrated into the everyday life on the indigenous settlement.

According to my interpretation, Yuri Vella did not believe in the reformation of the institution from within. He did not believe that indigenous knowledge could remain alive and valuable to manage everyday life if it was transferred to the formalised learning process at school. On the other hand, he was well aware of the importance of the formalised knowledge and the educational methods of the school system for an urban lifestyle and for communication with mainstream society.

Teachers' Adaptation to the Taiga

Most of the teachers adapted quite well to the taiga conditions. But almost none of them stayed more than one or two school years in the taiga school. Their motivations were quite different, and as well, they experienced many difficulties. Some were interested in the salary, others mainly in the exotic experience. Some had to cope with loneliness, some had personal conflicts with some of the parents, and others were asked to leave after an evaluation by the parents themselves. In the first years, mostly non-professionally trained school teachers were hired as teachers. Some anthropologists and some intellectuals interested in the experience and the educational experiment agreed to live for one school year at the Tiutiakha River school. Later, Yuri Vella hired teachers from the region itself. I witnessed this hiring procedure twice. He put

an advertisement in the local newspaper. The booming oil cities of western Siberia are popular places to live in Russia. But changing demographics and educational politics produced unemployment among the teachers in the district. So it was not difficult to find teachers from the oil towns who would be interested and agree to live one year in the forest.

This was of course an exceptional situation which was very different from almost all other regions in Russia inhabited by indigenous people (see Alexandra Lavrillier, *this volume*). I was quite surprised at why indigenous students or teachers were not applying for the job. Pedagogy is the most popular subject among indigenous students and there is a lot of state support for indigenous youth who want to study at local universities in Surgut, Khanty-Mansiisk or Nizhnevartovsk. But I learned that the main motivation of indigenous students to get a higher education is to change their lifestyle and become urban dwellers. None of them wants to go back to the small villages some of them came from and even more not to the taiga settlements. This is all the more noteworthy because in other regions going back to the small settlements or nomad camps seems to be still an option for some students, as the article by Alexandra Lavrillier in this volume shows. New educational experiments in the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district will hopefully prove that the situation can change. Even if students know the rules and norms of the life of the reindeer herders, they don't aspire to live and work in a small taiga school. There is only one example of a young teacher from a northern Khanty village who is married to a reindeer herder and almost agreed to come to the Tiutiakha, but unfortunately she had to refuse because of personal circumstances.

Changing Conditions in the Taiga School

In the meantime, the taiga settlement has a mobile phone connection. In emergency cases, the next town, with a modern hospital and airport, could be reached in several hours, or even a helicopter could be called. In the last two years of the existence of the school it was possible to access the internet via satellite through the "multimedia point" that was established there.

The plan was originally to collect children from the neighbouring settlements to the school at Tiutiakha River. The settlement is located between Forest Nenets and Eastern Khanty reindeer herding territories. There are five or six neighbouring families. Some of the Forest Nenets families have kinship ties with the Vella family, and Yuri thought they would be interested in sending their children to their relatives. But most of the time only the children of two of his daughters were attending the school. The reasons for that were manifold. One very shy boy from a neighbouring Khanty family was hiding in the forest during the daytime or running away to his parents' settlement. The lack of enforced discipline which is usual in the boarding school made this behaviour possible, and nobody tried to force him back to school.

Obstacles and Difficulties of the Taiga School

Some of the neighbours were not convinced that the taiga school could provide the children with the same level of education and the same experience of enforced discipline as the boarding school that would be necessary for them to survive in the hard world of wage labour outside the forest, or in case of the boys, the tough experience of army service. The contributions of Cecilia Odé and Alexandra Lavrillier (*this volume*) mention also the often overlooked motivation of parents to secure future chances for their children by the mainstream form of education. Additionally, the high degree of what I would like to call individualism got in the way of Yuri Vella's plans to attract neighbouring children. Khanty and Forest Nenets reindeer herding families live with a high degree of competition that against all obligations of solidarity sometimes leads to mistrust and quarrels between neighbouring families, even if these families are linked by kinship ties.

Another quite serious obstacle was the resistance of the official educational bureaucracy. I've already told the story of the administrative difficulties the school had to deal with. The project was met with varying responses on the part of the authorities. Many of them saw it as just another attempt by the indigenous population to get additional subsidies and benefits, summarily called '*lgoty*' in Russian. Others feared that the establishment of a small school so far away would cause them to lose control over resources and political power. Yuri Vella tried to convince them that the school would not cost so much and that it would be under the permanent supervision of the main school in the village of Var'yogan. Teachers had to report regularly to the village school and the pupils had to pass exams at the end of every school year to prove that the school provided the same curriculum. As far as I know, educational progress was always above the average of the village school (see also Alexandra Lavrillier, *this volume*).

Appropriating Media Competence

But there was also open support from some of the authorities, which saw the school as an opportunity to gain additional resources for innovative projects. The regional department of education in the Nizhnevartovsky *rayon* gave their approval in 2002 for the existence of the school under the supervision of the village school, and agreed in 2005/6 to finance the salary of the teachers. The institute of language, history and cultures of the Ugrian people of Yugra University in the regional capital of Khanty Mansiisk supported the establishment of a multimedia centre in the school, financed by UNESCO. Information about the project is available at two websites (UNESCO-doc, UNESCO-Moscow)

The project provided the school with a satellite phone and access to the internet, and encouraged the inhabitants to communicate with other indigenous communities and the wider world via the internet. The project was launched in 2007, but when I

visited the school in 2008 and 2009, it was still in the starting phase, as teachers and children were getting acquainted with the new technologies. Technicians had to travel a whole day from Khanty-Mansiisk to fix technical problems. And the children were using the computer mainly to play ego-shooter computer games. They had just started to use a video camera and a photo camera to produce little reports about their life in the taiga and put them onto the internet. Due to the restructuring of the University in Khanty-Mansiisk, the institute of language history and culture was unfortunately closed, along with the websites, so the content was lost. My personal impression was that even if the planned educational effect of the multi-media centre probably failed, one cannot underestimate the overall media competence the youngsters got by playing around and experimenting with the computer, the internet and audio-visual devices. I was impressed by their self-awareness in front of a camera and by the quality of their own photographs. The process of acquiring media competence is now one of the biggest challenges native communities face, and it will change the way they are able to defend cultural diversity seriously (see for instance Stammler 2009; Miller 2006; Horst and Miller 2005).

In 2009, I witnessed three pupils learning in the school at the Tiuitiakha, but two of them graduated the same year, and Yuri could not find enough children to prolong the existence of the school.

Foreign Support

The support and advocacy of scholars and activists for indigenous rights played a significant role in the establishment of and struggle for various reform projects in ethnopedagogy in the Russian North. Generally speaking, one could distinguish three parties that joined forces in the process of the establishment of new forms of schooling for the indigenous people: the native *intelligentsia*, parents who remembered their problems with the boarding school system and wanted to spare their children some of the side effects of that system, and as a third party, activists and scholars from outside the indigenous communities. Therefore, I consider it necessary to shed some light on my own involvement in the school project. The focus of my research and my plans of study did not allow me to consider working in the school as some Russian scholars did. But, as a known foreign visitor paying extraordinary attention to the project of Yuri Vella, mentioning the school in talks and papers, and being present at the official celebration of the 10th birthday of the school in 2006, my presence had some effect on the life of the school.

Only once did I decide to take a more active step in supporting the school, when I visited the school together with my colleague Carolin Grosse and her two children and the German translator of Yuri's work, Ines Baumgartl, in November 2008. As an example of the engagement of foreign anthropologists in such projects, I will describe our involvement briefly in the following paragraph.

Yuri Vella heard 2008 about the *Law on nomadic schools in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)*. I helped him to download the text of the law: *Zakon Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiia) ot 22 iiulia 2008 g. 591-3 N 73-IV 'O kochevykh shkolakh Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiia)'* – from the internet (www.chebgym5.ru/federal/regional_law/016.rtf). The law described in detail the functions and different forms of schools for indigenous people according to their specific lifestyle, such that the education of children next to the living place of their parents would be possible, even if they led a nomadic way of life.

Thereafter, he tried to initiate a similar law in the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district to give his own school legal basis and force the regional government to support it. He was backed by a member of the regional *Duma* (parliament), Aleksei Andreev, in this effort. Later on, the regional *Duma* accepted the initiative. The law on nomadic schools for the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district was still in the process of getting support by a special working group of specialists in 2010, and probably still will be until the publication of this book.

I asked Yuri Vella at the same time if I could support the school with some public action such as, for instance, an open letter. He agreed with the idea but refused to give me any hints as to what he would like to have written. He explained to me that the effect of such a letter would be even greater if the form and content including spelling mistakes would prove that the foreigners themselves were really the creators of the letter. He only provided me with the address of the head of the administration of the Nizhnevartovskiy *rayon*, Boris Aleksandrovich Salomatin, and the head of the department of education in the administration, Shermadin Yasonovich Gogoshidze.

Carolyn Grosse, Ines Baumgartl and I drafted the letter and then used the internet connection available at the Tiuitiakha settlement at that time to send it to some colleagues and friends we thought would agree to sign the letter. Johannes Rohr, who was at that time the coordinator for the work with the indigenous people in Russia at the international NGO IWGIA (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs), and Florian Stammler, the leader of the Anthropology Research Group at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, agreed very quickly to be co-authors of the letter. They then asked the group members of the Anthropology Research Team of the Arctic Centre, Nuccio Mazzullo, Anna Stammler-Gossmann, Alla Bolotova from the St. Petersburg Centre for Independent Social Research, Pekka Aikio, the former president of the Finnish Saami Parliament and coordinator of the Saami higher education and research programs in Lapland, and Professor Bruce Forbes from the Arctic Centre, to support the letter.

The main purpose of the letter was of course to support the idea of the legislative initiative, but also to secure further financing of the school by the local authorities. Our main argument was the role of this specific school type for the maintenance of indigenous cultures and the specific socialisation of children and its effect on the development of responsibility and self-reliance in the school children. We tried to

provide the ethno-pedagogical idea of the school with scientific legitimisation by stressing our competence in indigenous education issues and our own experiences with the tundra school. An important point was also to emphasise the role of the new communication technologies available at the school that linked the remote settlement with the surrounding world.

The letter was sent on November 19th, 2008 to the administration of the Nizhnevartovskiy *rayon* and published on the internet on Yuri Vella's homepage: <http://www.jurivella.ru/index.php/2009-09-01-06-41-19/127-kiri-koolist-2008>.

Unfortunately, there was never a direct or public reply to the letter, but I am sure that the responsible people in the administration took notice. In order to keep a low profile, we did not involve any regional or international media in the publication of the open letter. It's hard to estimate the effect the letter had, because the school was closed a year later when two of the school children left the school and there were not enough children to replace them. The legislative process is still ongoing and much depends on the policy of the new governor, Natalya Komarova, who came to power in the district in March 2010.

Other Educational Initiatives

What is the place of the above-described educational experiment in the overall picture of the attempts to reform indigenous education, and how did it contribute to them?

First, I will try to sum up the educational reform initiatives in the region itself, and then give an outlook on educational projects for indigenous and nomad groups in general, and to then compare them with the approach of the Tiutiakha School.

As already mentioned in the beginning and described in the contribution of Laptander in this volume, indigenous voices became louder during *perestroika*, claiming that the younger generation in Siberia was losing its cultural knowledge and native languages, and that educational programmes should be initiated to reform and adapt the school curriculum to the special needs of northerners.

The KASH

The first project to be realised was the '*Kazym'skaia kul'tur-antropologicheskaia shkola*' (Khanty: *Kasum KASH* – Kazym River cultural-anthropological school), founded in 1991. The first experiment to reform state education was undertaken by some Khanty scientists and teachers at the place of the first Soviet *kul'tbaza* and the first open acts of resistance against state education. The idea was to find completely new forms of education adapted to traditional indigenous ones. Instruction was executed in ethnically homogeneous classes and in the native languages, Khanty, Russian and Komi (Kravchenko s.a.). But one of the main ideas of the school was also to reform the boarding school system without abandoning it. The project developed new ideas like

the establishment of 'social parents' for the children who came from distant reindeer herder settlements. Social parents meant in that case that the traditional role of educators based on discipline and subordination was changed to a relationship built on trust and emotional support. The educator was meant to become in that way a supportive confidante, a person a lot of boarding school children are missing.

The main purpose of reforming the curricula was to adapt them to what the educators called the 'ethnic worldview'. Taboos and behavioural conventions of the reindeer herders were to be maintained and even taught in the boarding school. The school was closed in 1998 due to the refusal of further support by the authorities of the Khanty-Mansiisky autonomous district. Since then, the teachers and activists around the school are organising summer camps for school children and youngsters, where they try to pursue their ethno-pedagogical ideas. Indigenous religious practices and world views, like the bear-feast or traditional crafts and hunting and fishing skills, lie within the focus of this ethno-pedagogical endeavour. Summer camps for the indigenous village youth are now quite common all over the region. But the focus group of these educational projects is children who lack native socialisation in the taiga or tundra and the knowledge of reindeer herding or shamanism. Their outreach is not so much to the children who have grown up in reindeer herding families. The ethno-pedagogical ideas that were developed in the region for reindeer herders' children, like for instance, a system of distance education by radio, never reached the stage of realisation, as far as I know.

Conclusions

Language Preservation

The starting point for almost all ideas to develop alternative educational ideas for native northerners is the problem of language preservation. The ubiquitous processes of language loss seem to be the most visible sign of the loss of indigenous knowledge and subsequently identity and social prestige (Jääsalmi-Krüger 1998; Jordan and Filchenko 2005; Toulouze 2003). On the other hand, language is considered to comprise the way of thinking (Anderson 1976; Basso 1992). To use an ethnically distinct language is therefore considered to be naturally the first step towards establishing an ethnically distinctive teaching (Kasten 1998; Pikunova 1998; Ball 2004; Deyhle and Swisher 1997; but, challenging that concept, see also Henze and Vanett 1993). This language-oriented approach is often pursued by activists coming from the indigenous *intelligentsia*, many of them trained linguists. It is also understandable in view of the background of available financial resources for research on endangered languages in the scientific funding environment. Applied scientific projects in the field of ethno-pedagogy face here a similar dilemma to people active in nature conservation projects.

The aim of these advocating projects is to support people in their everyday struggle for survival. A distinct language is only one element in a whole complex of culturally distinct practices and knowledge that help to retain social cohesion and solidarity and to survive in a specific natural environment. Institutions like kinship or complex ecological knowledge are other elements. But the concept of a native language fits so well the Western perception of ethnic identity and makes the tragedy of a dying language understandable to public discourse in Western nation states that it is much easier to present the need for support of indigenous people as a need for the preservation of a dying language. In this way, one could compare nature conservationists who have to present a beautiful dying-out species, something like the snow leopard, to justify their projects to save complex ecosystems, with applied anthropologists. The tragedy of the death of an exotic language is easier to represent to a western public and to funding institutions than the complex cultural and economic changes indigenous people have to cope with.

Mainstream Ethno-Pedagogics

To describe the mainstream concept of ethno-pedagogics in the Russian North I will quote here the paper by Sargylana Zhirkova about nomadic schools in Yakutia: “The main goal of a nomadic school is to preserve the traditional culture, minority language and traditional way of life” (Zhirkova 2006: 39) and “the aim of the nomadic school is to keep the language as part of traditional culture even if the language is not officially used” (Zhirkova 2006: 42). Hairullin even states that, “the curriculum ... must introduce children to the world of their own ethnic culture” (Hairullin 2006). The educational programmes of state institutions often lack any imagination of the role of the primary socialisation given by parents to their children. I would interpret this ignorance as being a result of the still existing conceptual division between the world of the official and that of the informal in which ‘culture’ is considered part of the official and therefore part of what state education has to provide. But, as for example the Russian linguist Olga Kazakevich reported, attempts to transmit the mother tongue outside the family in Ket, Selkup and Evenki villages were not successful (Kazakevich 2009: 12).

But besides this linguistic focus, ethno-pedagogy is often also focussed on the educational content of the curriculum. It aims at the development of alternative subjects based on indigenous folklore and crafts (cf. Derlicki 2004). The state concept of development of education for the indigenous people still favours the splitting of the educational programme: one for the indigenous population oriented towards the traditional forms of economy and one for those oriented towards an urban lifestyle. Subsequently, these two groups are taught with different educational ideals and different educational content (Hairullin 2006). It seems to me that this approach cemented the differences and the disadvantages of indigenous people in education.

Ethnic Components

Another less radical approach is the introduction of an ethnic and regional component to the school curriculum. But the very concept of ‘component’ deals with cultural forms as detachable objects that can be included in conventional forms of teaching. Culture is here presented in a musealised form, as a collection of elements of so-called ‘material and intellectual culture’ that are detached from the original social context and transformed into teachable knowledge or sometimes mere ornamentation. Ethnicised pictures in school books, local elements in examples and paradigms and some additional information about the local environment and history are some ways in which these types of objects serve as ethnic and local components. The danger of the content-oriented educational projects in general is that they remain a pure ethnic decoration to the usual schooling procedure, not changing the disadvantages and shortcomings of inferior rural education for indigenous people. The role of this ethnic ornamentation in the school curriculum should on the other hand not be underestimated. It serves as an official legitimisation of cultural difference and emphasises the equality of different ethnic belonging and identity. There is a clear positive effect of the inclusion of knowledge of the local indigenous cultures and their language in the school curriculum on children that grew up without direct contact to the reindeer herders’ lifestyle. But the everyday reality in northern villages shows that these components have no power to call into question the existing vernacular hierarchy of ethnicities, which positions Russians on top of the civilisation scale.

Other Nomadic School Examples

Unfortunately, information about the evaluation of existing alternative school models in the Russian North is not easy to obtain. Scientific literature on this topic is all but missing or remains in a very generalised form. Analysis of concrete examples and a critique of different pedagogical approaches are still rare. Most of the nomadic schools were founded in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) during the 1990s, and this was also the region where the first regional law on nomadic schools was drafted, this after federal Russian legislation had already allowed indigenous nomadic groups to have such schools (cf. Hairullin 2006, Robbek et al. 2009). I can refer here to the paper by Alexandra Lavrillier (*this volume*) for the description of the situation in the Sakha Republic concerning nomadic schools and for the situation of Evenki reindeer herders on the border of Yakutia, in particular.

Another Evenki nomadic school is mentioned by Sargylana Zhirkova: the *Amma* nomadic school in the Aldan *ulus* in the Sakha Republic (Zhirkova 2006). It is, as in the case of the Tiuitiakha School, a sub-branch of the ordinary rural school in the village called *Khatidir*. Zhirkova mentions another nomadic school supported by the *Snowchange project* in the Chukchi community of Nutendli. She describes it as “one

of the well-organised nomadic schools in the Republic of Sakha” (Zhirkova 2006: 48). It was initially deprived of state financial support but later got financial help from outside sources. Similar to the school initiative of the Vella family, the school fostered strong involvement of the local community in the organisation of the school, and this was a precondition of the success of the school (ELOKA; Snowchange Cooperative 2007). Konstantin Klokov describes the school in a slightly different way, which shows how contradictory the information about nomadic schools is at the moment: “The community was formed on the basis of one extended Chukchi family that included parents, several brothers and sisters, and many grandchildren. The economy of the community is based on reindeer husbandry (it has about 2000 reindeer) and fishing. The main part of the income is derived from state subsidies. The community is settled 20 km from the nearest neighbour village. There are two houses (a dwelling house and school), slaughterhouse, garages for snowmobiles, ice-house, bath-house, and hen-house with about 50 hens. The school was established in the autumn of 2003 and it includes a kindergarten. There are 11 children in the school; 6 in the first grade and 5 in the kindergarten. The school-staff comprises two persons: one teacher and one educator. It is financed by the state (50%) and the Nutendly community (50%). One day a week, everybody speak the Chukchi language in order to practice their mother tongue. The fathers of some of the children are herders and move with the herd around the community at distances from 20 to 80 km. Other children in the school are from Chukchi families that live in indigenous villages far away from the Nutendly community. Thus, in reality the ‘nomadic’ school is a tundra indigenous boarding school where children receive common primary education” (Klokov 2007).

I found some information about a project of nomadic school project that was opened in October 2008 on the Taimyr Peninsula and was initiated by the local college in the town of Dudinka. The small schools were opened in the Ust'-Eniseisky *rayon* in the Polikarpovska and Tukharska Tundra. There is no more information available than that about “equipping the single teacher in the school with a field telephone and two laptop computers” (Grenoble 2010: 81).

According to Zhirkova (2006), exams are passed in the main school in the village in a similar way to the practice of the school on the Tiuitiakha River. The main advantage of these nomadic schools is to avoid the separation of the children from their home community and to allow them to live under the same living conditions as their parents. In the Sakha Republic the curriculum of these schools includes, besides special native language courses, special subjects like reindeer breeding, fishing, hunting and crafts (Zhirkova 2006).

Challenges for the future

Ole Henrik Magga (2005) provided some keywords that mark the preconditions of successful solutions for the problems indigenous communities have with exist-

ing state education. Among them was the participation of the people concerned in decision-making as well as employment in the school itself. This was one of the main conditions of the Tiuitiakha School and probably also the main reason for the conflict with the conventional educational system. The participation of indigenous groups and especially parents in decision-making and management of education seem to be still one of the biggest challenges for state bureaucracies, as you can also see in the contributions of Cecilia Odé and Alexandra Lavrillier (*this volume*).

As a second important point, he mentioned the equal access of all indigenous persons to the same level of school education. In a situation where some indigenous parents decide for different reasons not to send their children to the boarding school in the village, the nomadic school could be a way of giving these children the possibility to have equal access to education.

But I would also like to summarise here the main challenges the school on the Tiuitiakha River posed to the conventional educational concepts:

- 1 The Tiuitiakha School challenges the prevalent hierarchy of urban versus rural schools in Russia, in which the latter provide only inferior education. The individual attention given to the children and the social embedding of the school give reindeer herders' children better chances to adapt to the usual school curriculum.
- 2 It challenges the clear hierarchy of lifestyles which is presented in the formal school curriculum. The dominant lifestyle in the environment of the school is not the urban one presented in the school books as the norm. The contradiction between life as presented in school books and the everyday reality in the settlement facilitates a more relativistic view of different lifestyles.
- 3 The school concept challenges the prevalent concept of an ethnic component in school education. Ethnicity is the everyday identity in the social environment and does not become a folkloristic ornament for some special events.
- 4 The concept of the Tiuitiakha School challenged the dominance of a language-oriented approach. Its only language of instruction was Russian because it recognised the role of the parents as the ones who should provide the children with their mother tongue. The nomadic school should render it possible to transfer traditional knowledge and indigenous languages in the natural way in everyday life (see also the Evenki nomadic school presented by Lavrillier in this volume).
- 5 The biggest challenge was probably that the parents at the reindeer herder's settlement took over the initiative and direct control of the school, and thereby put implicitly into question the power of the educational bureaucracy in the urban centres and the influence of scientific advisers.

To conclude the lesson learned from the experiment at Tiuitiakha River, I would say that the problems that nomadic schools are facing are not in the content of the curriculum or the adaptation of content to the nomadic way of life. The purpose of the

school curriculum in the narrower sense is neither the preservation of language nor the transmission of traditional knowledge. The setting of the school itself enables the primary socialisation by parents to fulfil its proper function.

But the main problems that have to be addressed by projects to establish nomadic schools for reindeer herders in the Russian North are:

- the set-up and financing of infrastructure;
- the recruitment and education of the teaching staff;
- the resistance of the state educational bureaucracy;
- and the participation in and control of education by the nomadic communities themselves.

Notes

- 1 I must gratefully note the support of the Max-Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany and the Finnish Academy ORHELIA project, funding decision 251111 of 2011.
- 2 The term *chum* is used in the Russian language for the conical tent of nomadic reindeer herders in Western Siberia. The name has its origin in the Komi language. It is now besides the reindeer one of the main symbols of indigenous culture in the Russian North.
- 3 This is also called TEK – traditional environmental knowledge in policy documents and scientific literature.
- 4 The following information about the Tiutiakha School derived from numerous interviews with Yuri Vella and fieldtrips to his settlement between 1996 and 2009.

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