

Epic Tradition Shared and Transformed.  
Comparisons between Kolva Komi and Tundra Nenets Sung Poetry

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*Abstract*

Since the 1960s, a unique Komi singing and narrative tradition has been described in the Kolva region. These materials, sung in the Komi language, were beyond doubt born in interaction with Tundra Nenets sung poetry. Indeed, comparable Nenets songs have been documented from all the regions where Nenets is spoken. We use both published and archived materials to compare individual texts in detail, and show various folkloristic and linguistic parallels. We pay particular attention to shared motives and narrative phases, which we consider very important as in the current state of research where exact parallel texts between the languages cannot be found. These detailed parallel concepts, however, serve as an evidence of the shared origin of these narratives, and also tell us how these Nenets conceptualizations have been transformed when integrated into Komi tradition.

*Keywords*

Komi; Nenets; language contact; folklore

## 1. Introduction

The Komi are a Uralic language speaking ethnic group in Northern Russia. The majority of Komi live in the Komi Republic and Perm Krai. Especially one Komi sub-group known as Ižma Komi (Komi: изьватас *izva-*



tas, Tundra Nenets: *ngis<sup>o</sup>maq<sup>1</sup>*) live also in wider areas in the north outside the Komi Republic where they range from the Kola Peninsula to Western Siberia. They migrated northward in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Contact between Komi and neighbouring ethnic groups, including Nenets and Russians, then developed in the following centuries. The Nenets again represent another Uralic language speaking ethnic group in Northern Russia and Western Siberia. They live in a wide area in the tundra zones ranging from the Kola Peninsula to the River Yenisei. The forefathers of contemporary Nenets have arrived in their current living areas in approximately the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, developing a large-scale nomadic reindeer herding from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward.

Our study focuses on one particular point of contact between Komi and Nenets which has been developing in the Kolva region since the early 1800s. Kolva is a tributary of the Pečora near the Ural Mountains. There were several periods when many Nenets abandoned their traditional reindeer herding lifestyle and settled permanently in the vicinity of Kolva village, which was founded in 1825. A rapid language shift from Tundra Nenets to Komi followed, and in a few generations knowledge of Tundra Nenets was entirely lost (for a recent summary see Blokland *et al.* 2021, 6-7; also Dronova and Istomin 2003). According to Castrén (2019, 502), who visited the area in the early 1840s, the Nenets in Kolva had adopted the Komi language and culture. In 1912, Toivo Lehtisalo reported that there was only one Nenets speaker in the community (Lehtisalo 1956, p. LXXIV).

This community, whose self-designation since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century has been *Kolva yaran* ('Kolva Nenets' Ru *kolvinskije nency*) has identified itself as Nenets despite the language shift (Homič 1966, 22; Panyukov 2009, 5). However, since the community members are speakers of Komi and they nowadays identify themselves as a special group of Komi, one can also correctly designate them as Komi or Kolva Komi. This linguistic community, which we refer to as Kolva Komi, is well known for their epic singing tradition that was widely documented in the 1960s and 1970s. In this study

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<sup>1</sup> Tundra Nenets is transcribed according to the phonological system proposed by Salmiinen (e.g. 1997, 31-35). Komi is transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Russian is transcribed according to the scholarly system.

we aim to contextualize this tradition better in the wider framework of Nenets oral tradition.

The Kolva Komi represent an early adaptation of nomadic Nenets into a settled lifestyle, and acquisition of the Komi language. Thus, they differ from the majority of Ižma Komi, who represent a surrounding community adopting and developing reindeer herding and keeping their Komi linguistic and ethnic identity. It is not entirely clear whether Kolva Komi should be considered a separate Komi group or sub-group of Ižma Komi – linguistically, however, it is transparent that they speak the Ižma dialect of Zyrian Komi. At the same time the exact ethnic identification may not be a central question to ask, and we can recognize their particularity without resolving this. As a whole, one can note that the interaction between Nenets and Komi has not taken place only in the Ižma and Kolva areas, but also in more western areas such as the Mezen' region, the Malozemel'skaya and Bol'shezemelskaya Tundra, Kanin Peninsula and beyond the Ural Mountains. In addition, individuals who have identified themselves as Kolva yaran have lived very far from Kolva, and persons even from the central Ižma area have reportedly known the Nenets singing tradition (Panyukov 2009, 6-7; 2012, 194-195). Additionally, not all Nenets have lived a large-scale nomadic reindeer herding life, but there have been groups focusing more on hunting and fishing or living a semi-nomadic small-scale reindeer herding similar to the Khanty or Forest Nenets. In addition to Komi, the Nenets have had close contacts with local Russian merchants, with whom the Nenets have had contracts concerning fishing, hunting and reindeer herding (Homič 1966, 21; Lukin 2012). Thus, the northern Russian and western Siberian tundra and forest tundra areas represent a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic zone, where different linguistic communities and ways of life have been in interaction for centuries, and Kolva Komi illustrates one example of the interrelationships.

In the following, we will focus on a fascinating body of epic poetry performed in Komi, but one which takes its themes, structures, and performance style alike, from Tundra Nenets epic poetry. The tradition is most strongly associated with the Kolva region, but it is evident that similar texts have also been recorded in a wide area elsewhere where the Komi practice reindeer husbandry. The wider geographical presence is clear from the numerous recording locations where these texts have been found. Furthermore, they are

usually not found in those areas where Ižma Komi practice more sedentary subsistence, such as settlements along the rivers Ižma and Pečora (Panyukov 2009; 2015; 2018) This phenomenon has been noted earlier, and there are several collections of this Komi epic poetry or Komi epos available. In the Komi research tradition, the Kolva epos has been incorporated into the Komi national narrative tradition. Despite the abundant collection and publication of this epic poetry, there are only few studies focusing on the details of the thematic, structural and linguistic variation and the possibly hybrid forms in the texts. It has long been recognized that these texts are born in close interaction with the Nenets culture and are essentially borrowed from Tundra Nenets. On the other hand, for example, Panyukov, who has lately studied the texts in detail, emphasizes that despite the similarities, none of the Komi epic texts are exact translations or variants of texts known from Nenets epic poetry (Panyukov 2015, 110; 2018, 32). Furthermore, Panyukov has lately argued for the reciprocal relations between Komi folklore worlds and Nenets epic poetry themes in the texts (Panyukov 2018, 111-114).

In the following, we aim to open some of this variation and hybridity through looking at four cases. Our aim is to look at the ways in which features of Nenets epic poetry continue and change in the epic sung in Komi on the one hand, but also to discuss the Komi creativity in the texts, on the other. In our analysis we will focus primarily on the content and poetic device of the texts, not on the form and metrics, which would deserve wider research of their own. Our methodological premise underlines that movement and circulation together with change and variable contents and structures of narration are defining features of folklore, which make it a hybrid phenomenon in itself. In the context of ethnic and linguistic encounters, however, the strategies of remodeling and adapting different cultural elements becomes of interest for performers, the audience, and the research community alike. These kinds of processes have been studied under terms such as syncretism, creolization, bricolage, and hybridity (see Siikala 2002, 56-59; Kapchan & Strong 1999; Haring 2003). We will discuss this hybridity as a creative phenomenon and concentrate on inter-linguistic and inter-ethnic negotiations that are present in the choices of the performers. These reflect the understanding about the identities, ways of life and religiosity of the narrators, their protagonists, and listeners.

In the following, we will first introduce our research material and the historical and ethno-linguistic context of Kolva Komi epic poetry. After that, we will make some analytic notes about the narrator's position and some general poetic device that denote the mythic nature of the poetry. In the end, we will discuss the nature of the poetry as a hybrid form that points to the Nenets origins of the epic narration, on the one hand, and highlights the individual creativity of the narrators, on the other.

## 2. Material used in this study

There are several publications that contain Komi epic poetry. Anatolij Kontantinovič Mikušev (1969) published numerous complete texts among other Komi sung tradition examples. One important collection is also the text collection of Erik Vászolyi (2001). More recently, Panyukov (2009) published various texts both in Komi and Nenets. Additionally, Yoltyševa *et al.* (2017) present a large collection of new, transcribed recordings from Komi spoken in Siberia, including various folklore genres. For our analysis, we have selected four complete longer texts from different sources and conducted a detailed analysis of them for different linguistic, folkloristic and cultural symbols and concepts. What is novel in our study is that we analyze the materials hand in hand with the body of Tundra Nenets materials. To our knowledge such comparisons have not been done earlier. We believe that by contrasting the Nenets and Komi texts, whether they are analysed as source and target variants, or simply parallels, can reveal something about the nature of the ethnolinguistic contact in which the Komi texts have been created. Several folklore expeditions were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s to record these materials, which resulted in approximately 51 hours of recordings and 400 works of folklore (Panyukov 2009, 4). Many of the texts have been recorded and published in distinct versions. At the same time this epic tradition still inevitably has a lot to give for further research, and still remains a largely uninvestigated field. It is also unclear how large portions of recorded texts remain unpublished.

We are not aiming to show that one should study Kolva Komi texts as distortions of Tundra Nenets epic poetry. Quite the contrary, we argue that their epic poetry should be treated as an interesting hybrid phenomenon of

its own. Still, in order to show the interface between Komi and Nenets epic poetry, we will provide a brief introduction to Tundra Nenets epic poetry, which has been collected systematically since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The Tundra Nenets epic poetry has been archived and published for almost 200 years, but it is still not very well studied or even known. The first systematic collection was made by the Finnish ethnographer and linguist M. A. Castrén in the 1840s, after which the linguist Toivo Lehtisalo made notes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lehtisalo edited and published both Castrén's and his own collections in the 1940s (Castrén 1940; Lehtisalo 1947). The epic narration was abundantly collected and published by Soviet scholars and the most important publications include *Ėpičeskie pesni nencev* (Kupriyanova 1965), *Neneckij epos* (Tereščenko 1990), and *Fol'klor nencev* (Puškarëva & Homič 2001). Lately, Yelena Puškarëva's (2003a; 2003b) work on systematising and studying the texts has produced an important overall picture on the folklore. Jarkko Niemi's ethnomusicological research has been groundbreaking in revealing the interface of musical and verbal signification together with earlier research on the metrics by Péter Hajdú and Eugen Helimskij (Hajdú 1978; Helimskij 1989; Niemi 1998; Niemi and Lapsui 2004).

Tundra Nenets epic poetry represents an intermediate form of so called short and long epic forms (Honko 1998, 35-36): they are typically several hundreds or even over a thousand of lines long texts that are ideally performed by the main singer and his/her helper, who repeats and clarifies the main singer's performance consisting of the so-called basic text where vowels and syllables are added in word stem and line borders. The poetry is divided into genres of *syud°bøbc°*, *yarøbc°*, and *xinøbc°*. The mythic histories and the worlds of the *syud°bøbc°* tell about the heroic deeds of the god-like heroes moving between this and other worlds. The *yarøbc°* and *xinøbc°*, instead, focus on the social and temporal worlds closer to the lives of the Nenets performers and listeners and chronological time, but they might also be mythical in nature. As has been noted lately, the borders between the genres are rather fluid. Most clearly they are divided by the mode of narration so that the *syud°bøbc°* are told in third person singular, while the *yarøbc°* and *xinøbc°* in the first person singular. The *syud°bøbc°*, *yarøbc°* and *xinøbc°* share the themes of marriage, inter-tribal and inter-ethnic wars and blood vengeance together with shamanic motives. One of the striking fea-

tures of the narratives is travel that typically takes place in the tundra, but also at sea and between the northern Russian and Siberian towns and cities. One would meet supernatural beings, such as giants rather in *syud°bøbc°* and more worldly characters, such as Russian administrators or tsar, in *yarøbc°* and *xinøbc°*. Nevertheless, the differences are not strict and there is both regional and temporal variation in the generic system (Kupriyanova 1965; Niemi 1998; Lukin 2017).

We are still far from a situation where all the available materials can be systematically compared, but with the current data the possibilities for comparative work are strong. We also have not restricted our analysis to only texts recorded in the Kolva area but take into account various texts in this genre that are published in different sources discussed above. This also raises the question of whether Kolva epic poetry should be distinguished from the epic poetry recorded from other Ižma Komi areas, and in this study, we do not aim to do any more detailed distinctions. We do, however, indicate the sources of each text carefully, which possibly allows finer comparison as well.

As already noted by earlier scholars (Mikušev 1990, 10; Panyukov 2018, 35-37), the Komi texts repeat similar themes, such as marriage and blood vengeance, with Tundra Nenets epic poetry. Panyukov notes that in addition to these shared themes, the Komi epic texts «are adapted to the fairy-tale and mythic worlds of Komi traditions» (Panyukov 2018, 36). Additionally, the generic system of Komi epic texts is as fluid as the Nenets one so that one may have told the narrative both singing and in prose. What is peculiar for Komi performers, is that the best of them could perform either in Nenets or in Komi or even translating their primary narration into the second language. We thus agree with Panyukov (ivi, 37-38) noting that the Komi epic poetry is not only a hybrid phenomenon in itself, but also tells of multi-linguistic communities and therefore also multi-linguistic audiences.

### 3. Illustrating individual texts

As noted above, we have selected four different texts from different sources to be used in our analysis. Epic song *Soft haired sister* was performed by Ulita Koskova on October 22, 1966 in the Kolva village (Mikušev 1969,

218-227; published repeatedly, for complete publication history see Blokland *et al.* 2021). The second text is from the same performer and recorded during the same fieldwork trip on October 24, 1966: *Long ago there was a Samoyed* (Vászolyi-Vasse 2001, 43-65). The third text, *Yeol'o*, was performed by M.G. Terentyev in 2001, in the settlement of Beloyarsk in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (Yoltyševa *et al.* 2017, 13-22, 259). The text *Long ago there was a Syudbei* (Mikušev 1969, 107-148; Mikušev 1987, 127-148; Panyukov 2009, 48-101) was performed by Aleksandra Ivanovna Vyučeiskaya in the settlement of Haruta in 1968. All the texts are sung narratives.

The texts vary greatly in their length. *Long ago there was a Syudbei* is the longest with over a thousand lines. *Soft haired sister* and *Long ago there was a Samoyed* are both a bit over 200 lines. *Yeol'o* spans five pages, without numbered lines. Two of the four texts are performed by Ulita Koskova. She was, indeed, the best known Kolva singer and focusing the analysis on her material is no considerable disadvantage, especially when two other songs are from different performers. Haruta is relatively close to Kolva, although already in the Nenets autonomous region. Beloyarsk is further away on the other side of the Ural Mountains, also representing a Komi speaking area. Further research should also take into account areas more widely in the Bolšezemel'skaya Tundra and Kanin Peninsula.

*Long ago there was a Syudbei* presents a character called Syudbei, who has one daughter. Notwithstanding the length of the narrative, the text focuses solely on the matchmaking and marriage between Syudbei's daughter and the seventh brother of a group of brothers. In the beginning of the narrative, the daughter, seeing the approaching sledges of the seven brothers and foreseeing their intentions, asks her father to send the group away saying that it is still too early for her to get married. The father does as asked, threatening the brothers with his might and a grenade. When the brothers arrive for the third time, the daughter has already prepared herself and is also guiding her parents to prepare a proper dowry. Leaving for her future home, the daughter finds the family of the seventh brother, her future husband, decent, while the other six families in the camp seem to be poor and shabby. The good and wealthy nature of the girl is also noted by the pleased Syudbei parents, when the seven brothers' community travels back to the Syudbei in order to pay the lavish bridewealth. In the end, the



seven brothers travel back to their home camp together with the Syudbei's daughter, and the narration emphasizes the mutual understanding and love between the newly-weds and between the bride and her mother-in-law.

In our sample there is also another text that shares a similar theme of marriage proposal. *Long ago there was a Nenets* is a story about a Nenets man who goes to ask a girl's hand in marriage. He gathers his reindeer and dresses up in a way that the maiden cannot realize who he is. The maiden refuses. A large ship approaches, they also propose to the girl, and this time her father gives her hand, although reluctantly. The boat gets into a storm and sinks, but the girl survives. She swims until she reaches a shore, and though exhausted, continues walking. She finds a tent, but is not allowed to enter, as it belongs to the suitor who she already refused. The women of the camp, however, give her some food, equipment and advice on how to get back home. She comes to her parents' camp, and finds out that her father has aged and her mother has died. The daughter gives half of the remaining herd to an old worker of their camp, who had stayed with her parents all this time, and lives well with the rest of the herd.

These kinds of long, grim and solitary travels form the core of Tundra Nenets *yarabc*<sup>o</sup>, which can also be related to the genre name based on the verb *yaracø*- 'to cry'. It is also quite typical that the faith of the protagonist is settled by a group of elderly women, who recognize the protagonist and feel empathy for her. Nevertheless, the protagonists are often than not men, although the Nenets performers might have been women. We also have to note that though the theme of marriage is central for Tundra Nenets epic poetry, where the good qualities of the bride, lavish bridewealth and dowry and the negotiations over them are often mentioned, the bride herself is seldom in the focus of the narration or a main protagonist – as in these narratives. Instead, the Nenets epic poetry emphasizes the power of the father and the matchmaker and the solidary relations born under good circumstances (see e.g. Kupriyanova 1965, 213-396). Accordingly, the two poems are striking in their strong female point of view. Panyukov (2018, 34) argues that *Long ago there was a Syudbei* represents part of what he calls a female epos («*ženskij èpos*») with its lyric characteristics, poetic device, and emphasis. While this is not totally mistaken, we would like to note that the strong female emphasis and point of view seems also to represent

a feature in the Komi epic narration, while the Nenets narration tends to be more conservative in its points of views. This could be related to the fact that there is a strong tradition about the bride's position in the new household among the Komi, for example in the wedding laments, which makes these kinds of reflection and point of view more tellable (Ochs, Capps 2001) in Komi context.

The next two texts represent a different plot type. *Soft haired sister* is a story where the protagonist, the youngest of four brothers, leaves his brothers and sister first to outdo the other three brothers in strength and then to hunt the polar bear. Meanwhile the enemies kill his brothers and take their wives and reindeer. While hunting the polar bear, the main protagonist combats a giant, and eventually finds a familiar campsite with strange hosts. He explores the premises at night without being noticed and finds out that his three brothers have been killed and the killers have taken the brothers' wives. With the help of his sister, he contests and kills the enemies. In the end it is also found out that one of the brothers had survived and lived with his family under the ground hiding all this time.

*Yevl'o* is a bit shorter story about a character with this name. While Yevl'o is still sleeping, his sister hears cracking branches and realizes that there are several sledges riding towards their camp. Apparently, also one of their reindeer tries to warn Yevl'o about the troops. In order to escape, Yevl'o leaves his campsite and skis a long distance, during which the enemies come to his camp and kill everybody. He finds that his wife and sister had hidden children and equipment from the enemies. Yevl'o tracks down the enemies together with his sister, traveling ten days, and finds their former camp with several heads of slaughtered and eaten reindeer. Catching up with the camp, he kills the enemies and returns to the original campsite, living well from that day onwards.

Although *Yevl'o* and *Soft haired sister* are relatively different as shown in their plots, they partly share a common structure. There are the protagonists traveling away, having been attacked by the enemies during this period, and then resolving the situation in the end and living happily ever after. If the first two texts focus on the theme of marriage and matchmaking, these two latter ones revolve around war and vengeance between families. Additionally, they tell about the deeds of siblings or peers, and imply their

orphanhood. The orphanhood is also a core theme of Tundra Nenets *yarob-c°es*. Blood vengeance is one of the driving forces behind the Nenets epic texts that revolve around ruthless violence and a twist of revenge. A child or children living together with only one parent or typically a grandparent represents a stereotypical beginning of a Tundra Nenets epic poetry's plot type. The growing hero often finds out about the bloody history of their family and prepares for the revenge by building solidary relations with people who recognize him by his appearance or his reindeer. *Yevl'o* and *Soft haired sister* are undoubtedly related to this kind of narrative plots, but they seem to focus on travel and violence and not to give reason for it.

In the next section we analyse both the narration and individual parts of these narratives for which we can find exact parallels. We also emphasise some of the structures which are present in the Komi texts, but do not find anything similar from the Nenets counterparts. The fact that even features of the latter type can also be detected shows that this Komi tradition needs to be investigated in its own light.

#### 4. Narrators, the narrated ones, border zone interpretations

As these texts are understood to have a Nenets origin, which was clear already to the narrators themselves, it is worth inspecting what the roles and viewpoints are. We may even have to ask who is actually the narrator? Most of the characters in the texts are clearly identified as Nenets, and in texts beyond our current sample there are also Ob-Ugric participants<sup>2</sup>. But we do not find mentions where someone would be identified as Komi or Ižma Komi. Indeed, even though at least linguistically Kolva Komi belong to the larger Komi sub-group of northern Komi reindeer herders, there are no specific mentions that the protagonist or narrators would be ethnic Komi either. Giants are giants, and Nenets are Nenets, but there is some

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Ostyak* is used in Komi and usually would refer to the Khanty, but in our fieldwork experience we have also encountered situations where this term in Komi is used to refer to Mansi. Thereby we do not consider it entirely clear into which group these narrators refer to. At the same time the term *Ostyak* was used commonly in different languages of Western Siberia to refer non-Turkic indigenous peoples.

ambivalency in the narrator's point of ethnic affiliation. This comes out in phases, where the narrator notes that listening to the Nenets, she manages to understand it. Additionally, there are phases where Nenets conventions are explained. Although this might have been done to the outsider, the ethnographer in order to make him understand better, the explanations imply that the narrator is not explaining her own conventions. We do not think that defining the identification of Kolva Komi more specifically would be necessary or even a fruitful line of research, but it may tell us something about these texts. As Komis are not active or common participants in these narratives, one could suggest that the texts probably have not originated anywhere close to the Komi-Nenets contact area and context. In Lehtisalo's Nenets texts there are individual mentions of Komi, one in reference to the Zyrian (Komi) traders (Lehtisalo 1947, 572) and in another a young Zyrian is a side character (ivi, 386-389). Compared to more than a hundred mentions of the ethnonym Ostyak present in these texts, it seems the Komi play a rather marginal role in this text genre. And even when the Komi versions have emerged, the Komi themselves have not been adapted as active participants. The texts, even in Komi language, discuss the Nenets and Nenets world, which, in the multilingual and multicultural tundra, may have been very similar to locally emergent Komi traditions.

In the end of the *Soft haired sister's* prose version, however, there is a concluding remark where the narrator, Ulita Koskova, indicates that she would have been present in the celebration that takes place in the end of the story where the family is rejoined. She states that she was also given four reindeer bulls, which suddenly disappeared in front of her. According to Vászolyi-Vasse this was one of the concluding patterns that she used in several narratives (Vászolyi-Vasse, Lazar 2010, 71), and this can be interpreted as a concluding exaggeration underlining the ambiguous truth-value of the narrative. However, from the point of view of participant roles and narrator's perspective it is an interesting example of a moment where the narrator places herself in the story. Otherwise, the narration tends to proceed in a third person and highlight the distance of the narrator to the events.

Another related phenomenon can be seen in the names of the characters. It is common that the names of the protagonists are present in the titles of the texts. On the other hand, we are not entirely sure if the current titles are

results of editorial decisions or how these texts were traditionally known. Some of the names are clearly unusual for Komi. There are instances where the protagonist is called, for example, *kij roza vidzie* ‘polar fox face keeper’, literally in construction ‘the one having (four reindeer) whose faces (are colored like) a polar fox’. This naming convention is entirely atypical for Komi, with a participle in the name, and the name being constructed as a reference to a specific event. In this case the protagonist took in the early phase of the narrative the reindeer with special muzzle coloration. There are, however, clear Nenets parallels. For example, the protagonist of one Nenets text is *syakuq wæ°era-tyet°* ‘goose knuckle hair master’ (Lehtisalo 1947, 439) or *nyamt° pøj° wæsako* ‘twisted horn old man’ (Kupriyanova 1965, 694, *passim*, see also Kupriyanova 1965, 31-32; Lukin 2017, 194). In the materials of M.A. Castrén these are particularly prominent, with examples such as *yalyenasy° xabt°* ‘light colored ox’ and *xəryoy° xabt°* ‘Crooked-Antler Ox’ (Castrén 2018). It should be noted that these kinds of names are not usual for Nenets everyday language either, but they are prevalent in Tundra Nenets epic poetry. Very often, the names refer to the quality of the riding reindeer of the protagonist or to their physical appearance. It seems that the unusual names have intrigued Komi narrators, too, and there is some similarity in the constructions used.

Related to the names, it is also interesting to note that some Nenets common nouns recurring in epic narration seem to have become proper nouns in Kolva Komi texts. One interesting feature in the poem is the character of Syudbei, which has been interpreted as a name by Panyukov (2009), where the first letter of the word is capitalized. The word obviously refers to Tundra Nenets *syud°bya* ‘giant, hero’. Some of the Nenets epic songs depict relations and negotiations between the Nenets and the *syud°byas*, while in other songs again, the *syud°byas* represent malevolent spirits who torture the Nenets heroes (e.g. Kupriyanova 1965, 239-250; 371-382; Tereščenko 1990, 43-48; 59-68). Syudbei could also be analysed here as a personal name of the character, but there are references to the fact that they are giants. For example, in the lines five and six the size of the Syudbei’s daughter is compared to a large conical tent. Interestingly the mythical nature of the Syudbei family is not highlighted in the text further, and the relationship and dynamics of engagement are similar, or equally complex, as in relationships between

clearly human participants. There are also suggestions that the three brothers could be Nenets, as they are referred to with the Komi ethnonym for Nenets, *yaran*, at line 96. Another such interesting name is Saju in *Yevl'yo*. In the narrative Saju is the family name of the enemies who attack *Yevl'yo*'s tent and with whom he continues to fight through the narrative. Tundra Nenets *sayu*<sup>o</sup> 'troops, enemies' is also met in their epic poetry, but obviously there, it always refers to the enemies who have their own names. *Yevl'yo* again, can also be related to the Tundra Nenets word *yeva* 'orphan', about which meaning we already discussed. In *Yevl'yo* the nouns have transformed into proper family names, and we do not know if the performers and listeners know about their Tundra Nenets meanings.

To illustrate a bit more how the narrative is structured and interpreted, in the example below we see how one event unfolds. The protagonist arrives at the camp. At line 121 the dogs do not bark, which they would usually do when the campsite is approached. The reason for this is that the dogs originally belonged to the protagonist's family and recognize a familiar person. This also illustrates how in general the events take place in everyday recognizable surroundings. Accordingly, many meanings in the poetry are based on implicature and their interpretations' demands for basic knowledge of life in a reindeer herding camp.

119	<i>rit taj loi da i pendi,</i>	evening came already
120	<i>teomje, taj teom dore j93 i muni,</i>	he went slowly to the tent
121	<i>ponjas taj iz u:tnis jin da,</i>	the dogs did not bark
122	<i>ecik cima ruze muni,</i>	he went to the smoke hole
123	<i>vidzede a seten taj jin,</i>	looks (inside) and there
124	<i>ŝrkos vokisløn babais jin.</i>	is the middle brother's wife

Table 1. Lines 119-124 in *Soft Haired Sister*,  
the lines based on Mikušev's version (1969, 222).

The transcription is the revised version published by Blokland *et al.* (2021)

At times, however, some episodes can be hard to understand. On lines 122 and 123 we see an event where the protagonist goes to the tent and

looks through the smoke hole. As this is the uppermost structure in the tent, looking through it this way should not be possible. The expression *šima ruž* 'syim hole' is a very idiosyncratic Nenets borrowing in itself with Komi adjective derivation in the first component, and it could refer to the sacred *šimci*<sup>o</sup> pole going through the smoke hole. In this case the exact interpretation of the events – mythic or ordinary – depends entirely on how these details are read. Actions such as flying and physical transformations are possible in Nenets epic texts, and the movement of mythic heroes and shamanic figures including their helping spirits is often told to happen through the smoke hole. This detail is a good example about changes that happen when the narrators and listeners change their lifestyle from the nomadic one into a semi-nomadic one, and there appear shifts or changes in the semiotic fields of the expressions or utterances. On the level of narration or plot development, these kinds of phenomena can be noted when one tries to look for justification for the events or for the actions of the protagonists. For example, in *Yevl'yo*, it is difficult to understand why the protagonist hides, when the Sayu troops are approaching and why there is enmity between the families in the first place. Similarly, in *Soft haired sister* the narrator does not depict what happens to the three brothers while the fourth one is hunting for the polar bear. It thus seems that at times small and even very large details are omitted and left to the audience to interpret in the context. This might be related to the contexts of field work, limited time frames or nervousness of the performers, for example. Another reason could be related to the irrelevance of the kinds of patriarchal ideologies or logics of blood vengeance that act behind the Tundra Nenets epic poetry and make the violence justifiable.

## 5. Traveling

Coming closer to the storylines of the narrations, we would like to note that traveling or moving in the tundra are recurrent motives or driving forces of basically all the texts discussed in our article. It is very typical that the storyline creates a geographical circle so that the protagonist returns, after a long journey, back to the starting point in the end. Usually, it is emphasized that the surviving protagonist lives well or to an old age, or

that not everybody died due to some clever arrangement. The travel does not represent a mere movement between different places and events and scenes taking place in the camp sites. Rather, the traveling tells about the physical and mental strength and stamina of the one who moves. The heroes in their might move fast with their light sledges, yet the resilience of the protagonists can also be depicted through their movement despite fatigue and loneliness. In Komi texts, the might is customarily accompanied with a metaphor where a snowstorm follows behind the sledge or skis. Common expression that illustrates the travel is a description of the blizzard that follows the travelers: *purga bergale* ‘snow storm turns’ or *purga pete* ‘snowstorm appears’, and these can be found from almost all of the texts in some form. Example below illustrates this.

1	<i>kikæ si:en mune,</i>	He travels 200 fathoms,
2	<i>lampä bərsis tołko jin</i>	behind his skis only,
3	<i>vixer-purga bergale.</i>	snow storm-blizzard turns.

Table 2. Example from text *Yevl'o* (Yoltyševa *et al.* 2017, 14)

In Nenets epic poetry, one meets similar metaphors. Moreover, traveling and the circular geographical outlines of the storyline are also typical for the Nenets epic texts (also Lukin 2015). The fast movement of the powerful protagonists can be expressed for example as in the following excerpt from Lehtisalo's *Volksdichtung* (1947, 395):

344	<i>ηædalyo-y°q</i>	[He] rode
345	<i>syexari-n°h xaqm-i°q</i>	along the road went down
347	<i>wurnaryida myiŋa.</i>	roaring [he] went.

Table 3. Example from Nenets movement description (Lehtisalo 1947, 395)

In the examples above, the image of fast movement is described through the snow and air as they lift up on the one hand or through the soundscape on the other. While the idea is similar, the imagery differs so that the aural



imagery recurrent in Nenets epic poetry is rendered with the help of visual metaphors in Komi texts.

As can be noted, it is not only the speed, but also the length of the travels that characterize the epic narration. The distances are often announced in very large numbers. For example, in the *Soft haired sister* the protagonist even travels so far north that he reaches the Arctic Ocean, and then travels even further onward along the ice. We will discuss these traveling episodes below in more detail. For now, we would like to turn our attention to the exaggerations and repetitions of specific numbers, which are typical in other numerical expressions as well: the tent is circled three times, four or five (or four or five hundred!) reindeer bulls taken, traveled distance is one or two hundred fathoms, traveling time is ten days. In some texts the protagonist sleeps for years, although not within our current sample. Different decorations are marked or exchanged five or ten times. In the story *Soft haired sister* the most commonly occurring counted items are in groups of three and four, and in *Long ago there was a Syudbei* one of the main characters are the seven brothers. In the Komi versions of the texts there is thereby clear variation in the preferred numbers, but the same items are repeated consistently. The numbers themselves are cultural conventions, and obviously three is a universal met in most oral traditions of the world. Similarly, the three also recurs in Nenets epic poetry, but mostly, items, times and distances are counted in seven, which is considered a sacred number. When it comes to the amount of reindeer, the protagonists usually have either none or several thousands. Here, it is not so much the exact number that counts, but the image of plenty implying power and wealth.

The items made from metals, especially copper and iron, are both commonly present in Komi and Nenets texts. These items can be lassos, boats, and sledges. Often these items have mythic or supernatural associations, and we can see one example in the Komi fragment below, taken from the *Soft haired sister*. The protagonist is in the traveling phase of the story and encounters a giant in the forest. He finds the giant's copper boat and hears loud voices of wood cutting from the forest nearby. The sound is so loud that it cannot be human, as observed by the protagonist. In the following episode he fights the giant for the possession of the boat. Later in the story the boat is only used for brief traveling upstream, so it is not a central property of the story.

1	<i>ju-vom vois da i ju-vome vois,</i>	(He) came to the mouth of the river,
2	<i>neuna katjfts, a irgen pi3.</i>	he went upstream, (sees) a copper boat.
3	<i>irgen pi3. jagin kile keræe kodke.</i>	Copper boat. He hears someone cutting wood.
4	<i>keræe. ki:ze a:</i>	Cutting wood. He listens and (thinks):
5	<i>«abu taj nin taja mort keræem,</i>	«This is not a man's cutting,
6	<i>mijke taj beda nin jon» viçtale «goris!»</i>	this is something really strong», says «the sound!»

Table 4. Example from *Soft Haired Sister* lines prose version (Vászolyi-Vasse 2001, 88).

Line numbering added by authors. The transcription is the revised version published by Blokland *et al.* (2021)

In one of the Nenets narratives (Lehtisalo 1947, 449) there is also an episode where the protagonist has been laying at the sea ice for a long time, and after landing on the shore meets a group of reindeer herders and enters their tent. He mentions the iron jewelry, and notices that their sledges are made of copper, and one item is embroidered with silver.

1	<i>mənyiyeb°qnanyih puyidoh nyarawa</i>	I see the tops (of the sledges) are copper,
2	<i>xaənc°dodoh yal°ryiq nyarawaq.</i>	even the runners are copper.
3	<i>səw° ser°q ηarka metada tyúr°da</i>	The driving rod hold by Old White Eye is
4	<i>nyenyey° pad°rota.</i>	embroidered with silver.

Table 5. Example from Tundra Nenets narrative (Lehtisalo 1947, 449)

What is common for both narratives is that there is an episode of traveling or staying at the sea, in both on ice, and the next encounter on land is with characters whose possessions are marked with these unusual properties. The Kolva Komi narratives tend to use copper as an epithet for spiritual power or an index of the Otherworld, which also occurs in Nenets texts. For example, in *Lad° ser wəsako* (Kupriyanova 1965, 613-624), a hidden underground store is marked with a copper handle. Nevertheless, the Nenets texts are likely to use *yəsya* 'iron' or *nyamt°* 'mammoth tusk' to index supernatural qualities. The items made of beaver fur also seem to carry some specific significance.

We argue that the travel by the sea marks some type of a transition to elsewhere, the nature of which is not highly elaborated. Also, in *Long Ago There was a Syudbei* we see an interluding episode related to a boat and its subsequent crash, leading the protagonist to end ashore. In the Nenets epic, the Arctic Ocean, named as *yitya ηəbtyena* ‘smelly watered’, represents a far-away margin. Additionally, the north also indexes the underworld. Very often, the Nenets epic protagonist ends up meeting supernatural beings, when they come to the seashore or travel on the sea (e.g. Kupriyanova 1965, 315-328; 656-663; 710-721). Nevertheless, these kinds of directions and their meanings are not systematic within an oral tradition, and, as also noted by Andrei Golovněv (1995, 198), the distance often marks sacredness in itself. Moreover, the sea is an alien element for the reindeer herders and traveling there can also increase the knowledge and might of the protagonist. Sea travel and other mythic events may not necessarily be always central to the narrative’s plot, however. Especially in texts such as *Soft haired sister* the encounter with the giant is used mainly as a plot carrying device, but it is typical for such oral narratives that fragments are combined in various ways. In these Komi and Nenets examples we see a similar combination of event sequences taking place.

## 6. Conclusions

After examining in detail both Komi texts and comparable Nenets materials, we must emphasize that finding exact parallels is extremely challenging. The texts are rich in similarities, and they can be compared in various ways, but especially at the linguistic level of expressions we do not easily find fragments from the Nenets side that would repeat the identical content that we see in Komi. As Panyukov (2009, 6-7) has described, individual singers have been able to sing the same text in Komi and Nenets, but we are not aware if the same text has ever been recorded in both languages. At least parallel versions like these are not among the published sources.

In the Komi materials there are various expressions, such as the blizzard in the traveler’s trail, that do not have any clear Nenets parallels. Whether these have parallels in Komi oral tradition itself should be studied further, and especially so in relation to Ižma Komi oral tradition, which is clearly the other component of the Kolva epics, the other originating from Nenets tradition.

According to Mikušev there are similarities between the topics of the Kolva epic songs and folklore collected from the Vym region (Mikušev 1990, 9), which is the area from where Ižma Komi themselves have originally emerged and separated from the other Komi dialects, in which light the similarities are expected. It is also important to ask what the role of the Russian folklore tradition is, as parallels between Komi epic songs and Russian songs have also been noted (ivi, 6). Vlasov and Filippova (2000, 89) also describe bilingual folklore tradition from other Komi regions where the same performer has been able to reproduce the same performance in Komi and Russian. In this light the phenomena we have described between Komi and Tundra Nenets may not be entirely unique but could be located within wider intercultural and multilingual practices of the Russian North.

The performers of our sample texts and their audience have to be understood as a community that lives in the border area between two linguistic and ethnic communities and between two lifestyles. This has also been stressed by Panyukov. In addition to the shared area of reindeer herding of these communities, the poems indicate that the relationship of the Kolva Komi performers and audience to the nomadic lifestyle seems not to be straightforward despite their Nenets sense of identity. This results in the strained or uneasy position of the narrator, who, on the one hand, knows about the conventions in the tundra and is able to explain them in the course of narration. On the other hand, it seems that the narrators are, though, looking at the tundra from the outside, not within the nomadic lifestyle, in other words. This outside position might concretely be the village of Kolva – or Haruta and Beloyarsk – where the Kolva Komi and Ižma Komi reindeer herders stay, when they are not herding reindeer. In a more abstract level, this outside position might be the cultural and linguistic border zone, where the performers and the listeners move living not only together with the reindeer herding Nenets, but also within the Komi, Russian, Orthodox village community. On this border zone, a fruitful possibility and need of making narrative decisions arises that not only reproduce Tundra Nenets conventions but would also be interesting for Kolva and Ižma audiences.

Obviously, the traveling, the strength and might of the heroes, marriage and violence have been fascinating themes. They reproduce the thematic landscape of the Tundra Nenets epic poetry, but the performers have

omitted some scenes that are central to the Nenets narration. Additionally, the poetry's changing point of view – producing an outside or in-between gaze – looks at the Nenets from an external point of view. What is more, the Kolva Komi have produced a fascinating poetry on marriage that has not only a female point of view, but also strong and active female characters, which one does not meet in Tundra Nenets epic poetry. What we have also found omitted in the poems is the patriarchal ideology and the logic of blood vengeance. Here, it is important to emphasize that we do not consider these omissions as deprivation. Rather, they are creative adaptations that have been made in order to make the poems interesting and tellable.

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