



**HAL**  
open science

## On Forest Nenets Shaman Songs

Mägi Kaur

► **To cite this version:**

Mägi Kaur. On Forest Nenets Shaman Songs. *Ethnographica et folkloristica carpathica*, , 2002, Mental Spaces and Ritual Traditions. An International Festschrift to commemorate the 60th birthday of Mihály Hoppál, pp.413-431. hal-01284702

**HAL Id: hal-01284702**

**<https://inalco.hal.science/hal-01284702>**

Submitted on 8 Mar 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Kaur Mägi and Eva Toulouze

### On Forest Nenets Shaman Songs

Very little has been written about Forest Nenets shamanism and beliefs in general. Few data have been collected at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More extensive research has unfortunately been started only in the Post-Soviet period: systematic persecution against shamans<sup>1</sup> since the early 1930-ies and the subsequent penetration of materialistic beliefs, transmitted by all the institutional levels of society (school, army, collective and state farms system) have led indeed to very deep changes in the Forest Nenets' worldview and beliefs<sup>2</sup>. Shamanic practice has been particularly affected by these event: we have no reports about the present existence of performing shamans, either in our own extensive fieldwork in two Forest Nenets areas – the Agan river and the lake Num-to –, or in any literature about this people. While questioned, informants use to mention concrete people who were shamans and are now deceased, but add that nowadays there are no real shamans. In the Agan river basin, we have been told about living or lately deceased Khanty shamans<sup>3</sup>, but remembrances of Nenets shamans are much older and faded<sup>4</sup>. This is certainly not enough to pretend that shamans do not exist at all in the Forest Nenets areas<sup>5</sup>, but it allows us undoubtedly to suggest that even if shaman practice may still be found, it is but marginal.

The goal of this article is to sum up our present knowledge about Forest Nenets shamanism and to organise these data around concrete texts of shamanic

---

<sup>1</sup> There are many references about the ideological war against shamanism (Suslov 1931 is one of the most complete articles on the subject) and knowledge about repressions in Western Siberia. Nevertheless few authors give more concrete information about the latter than Sokolova (Sokolova 1992 : 147).

<sup>2</sup> This article deals in particular with Forest Nenets culture. These phenomena are of course not specific to the Forest Nenets: all the so-called small peoples of Siberia have more or less gone through the same historical evolution and deep changes have been noticed anywhere. Many studies have been dedicated to these items, but this is the first attempt to sum up what we know about Forest Nenets shamanic tradition.

<sup>3</sup> As, in the Trom-yugan region, Ivan Stepanovich Sopochnin (deceased in the early 1990-ies), and his kinsman Leonid Mikhailovich Sopochnin, born in 1954 (Kerezsi 1995 : 40).

<sup>4</sup> We have been told about a shaman who was called Yancha: he was the father of Pavel Yanchevich Ayvaseda, who died in the mid 1990-ies. There is thus a generation gap between Khanty and Nenets shamans in the Agan region.

<sup>5</sup> We have no concrete experience at the moment about the third great Forest Nenets area, the upper course of the Pur river.

and ritual songs collected in 2000. The 20. century published material does not present any text connected with shamanic practice, although published texts certainly do not cover the whole of collected data. An interesting article presenting Forest Nenets dream songs, which are actually connected with shamanic practice, has been published in 2001 by Jarkko Niemi (Niemi 2001). Our texts are certainly not spectacular, neither have they been recorded during real shamanic practice. But we have nothing better to start from.

It must nonetheless be mentioned that if Forest Nenets data are very poor, this is not the case for Tundra Nenets material. Tundra Nenets shamanism has been thoroughly studied<sup>6</sup> and there is no lack of illustrative texts and historical background (Hoppál 2000). The Forest Nenets are undoubtedly thoroughly connected with the Tundra Nenets, like two branches of the same people<sup>7</sup>. Is this enough to consider that Tundra Nenets data about shamanism are valid also for Forest Nenets? Toivo Lehtisalo comments both Tundra and Forest Nenets information about beliefs in the same study without structural distinction (Lehtisalo 1924). L. Homich, in her basic monograph about the Nenets, dedicates more than 15 pages to Nenets shamanism, but without mentioning the Forest Nenets at all (Homich 1995 : 230-246). In a former study, she noticed that the few data available about Forest Nenets correspond to what is known about the Tundra Nenets (Homič 1972 : 208).

We would like to be more prudent. The first reason is that despite the closeness of Tundra and Forest Nenets cultures, there are many fields in which analogy may not be applied. The differences between the languages are of such importance that contemporary scholars chose to treat them as separate languages and not as dialects, although their common origin is easy to identify. The Forest Nenets way of life differs considerably from the Tundra Nenets' because of the different character of their ecosystem. As far as we know, the folklore of the Forest Nenets presents some particular features and some peculiar developments (Mägi, Toulouze 2002); the Forest Nenets are aware of having borrowed the Tundra Nenets

---

<sup>6</sup> Also from the point of view of textual analysis: the metric of Tundra Nenets shaman songs has been thoroughly analysed by Hajdú (Hajdú 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Forest Nenets distinguish the other peoples by specific terms. The term used for Russians is *êusa*, which is also used for other "western" people, except the Komis, who are called *£%sma*; it may be supposed that the term *kaœi*, used nowadays for the Khantys, referred formerly also to other non-Nenets peoples: Selkups are called for example *tõsam kaœi*. But Tundra Nenets are not *kaœi*: they are called *òïëô-ê*, 'people of the other country'.

folklore items (narratives and songs), they mention the fact, and true enough it happens that the name of some characters are very clearly of Tundra Nenets origin. Direct analogies do not work automatically in other cultural areas. Therefore we shall not consider as an understatement that both forms have been thoroughly identical.

We shall start from the existant Forest Nenets materials, comparing them to the very few indications from the past and only in a second stage with what we know about other peoples.

### **1. About Forest Nenets shamanism in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The main researcher on Forest Nenets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undoubtedly Toivo Lehtisalo. The Finnish scholar spent some time in 1914 in the Forest Nenets area, where he recorded not only the comparatively few folklore texts we find in his collection (Lehtisalo 1947 : 70-72, 79-86, 101-104, 132-147, 343-344, 406-420, 546-548, 604-607) but also a huge amount of linguistic data which are to be found in his extensive Nenets dictionary, which includes Forest Nenets as well as Tundra Nenets lexical forms (Lehtisalo 1956). One of his main informants was a man from the Ngahany clan called Kallyat, whom he met in summer 1914 (Lehtisalo 1947 : X). As far as we know, Kallyat was already an old man when he got acquainted the Finnish linguist and agreed to answer his questions and practically to teach him his tongue. Lehtisalo learned very much from Kallyat: many examples from his dictionary have been heard from him and many of the data included in his Nenets Mythology (Lehtisalo 1924) have the same source. Kallyat was a shaman and he considered Lehtisalo as a shaman as well, i.e. as a colleague; we know that Lehtisalo could have been initiated to his shamanic knowledge. But Kallyat required 50 roubles, asserting that it is not allowed to teach shamanic knowledge for free; Lehtisalo considered that he was not allowed to spend in this way the money given him as a scholarship, but he managed to gather nonetheless some information, by convincing Kallyat that if he would just speak Russian, the Nenets gods would not understand (Lehtisalo 1959 : 154).

This data are extensively referred to in Lehtisalo's Nenets mythology. In this study, a whole chapter is dedicated to what the Finnish researcher calls "the

enchanters” (Die Zauberer, Lehtisalo 1924 : 145 and following), where he mentions Forest as well as Tundra Nenets shamans. According to the Forest Nenets, the shaman is the one who knows the origin of things (Lehtisalo 1924 : 165).

There is another fairly unknown researcher who had the opportunity of participate to a shamanic seance: Raisa Mitusova, after a previous pilot expedition (Mitusova 1927), spent one year among the Agan Forest Nenets and she dedicated an article to her experience (Mitusova 1929). Unfortunately, as Homich notices, her article is nowadays a “bibliographic rarity”. We have nevertheless some excerpts in Homich’s article dedicated to the Forest Nenets (Homich 1972): the Russian ethnographer quotes entirely the parts describing the shamanic seance (Homich 1972 : 209-210). As Mitusova reports, her arrival was followed by a seance whose aim was to ask the spirits whether she was to be accepted or rejected. The shaman was an elder man, rather shabby, whom she had by chance given presents at her first meeting with the elder. During the seance, the spirits informed the shaman that Mitusova was a great healer, and this approval simplified considerably her work during her sojourn in Siberia. We shall present later more in detail some elements of this seance.

Anyhow, this is all we have to insert present data into an historical perspective.

## **2. About Kallyat and his songs**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kallyat was probably quite well known as a shaman. Nowadays Nenets tell legends about him. We asked one of his descendants, who is also a member of the Ngahany clan, to tell us who Kallyat was. Our informant, called Tatva, is a 43-years old Forest Nenets from the Num-to area, who is blind (as Kallyat was at the end of his life), and therefore has lived all his life in a Nenets environment, without school either army, and has a very deep knowledge of his people’s traditions.

He told us some legends about Kallyat. One of them is about how he became a shaman:

*“When Kallyat was a young man, he hunted wild reindeer. Once in the spring, he walked for a long time, he didn’t see any animal. On one lake, he got a grebe. He thought: “since I have nothing else to eat, I shall boil this grebe for dinner”.*

*He made a fire in his camp, which was set on the shore of a subterranean river. Suddenly, he heard someone coming from the other side of the river. He looked at the person who came towards him, and he thought: "Hereabout, I have never seen this kind of man, he looks strange to me". The stranger said: "Haha, Kallyat, you went hunting..." So he knew Kallyat's name. He carried a bottle of vodka. They sat down and started to drink. They drank for some time, and Kallyat got drunk. Then the stranger said: "Kallyat, when you grow up, you shall be a great shaman and you will live a long life". They drank, sung and embraced each other. Suddenly, the stranger said: "Look at me!" Kallyat looked at him. The stranger's face was weird, distended. The stranger said: "You will experience thrice misfortune in your life". Kallyat got scared and thought: "This is no common man, I must hold distance with him". And he moved over. He fell asleep. When he woke up, it was about noon. No man was in sight. The pot was still on hanging over the fireplace, but the fire was extinguished. He looked to the other side of the fireplace: there was a cedar looking like a man who holds a bottle in his hand.*

*Kallyat went back home and told the others what had happened to him. Later on, his kinsmen looked after the place where he had camped and they saw that the grass was trampled as if two men had been there. And there was also the cedar looking like a man. Kallyat lived further on. Before this event, he hadn't felt any shaman powers. After this, he became a shaman. During his life, he had three wives, and all of them died. These were the three misfortunes forecasted by the stranger. The man who had visited Kallyat was probably some kind of forest spirit, but nobody knows whether he was good or bad"<sup>8</sup>.*

The way Kallyat became a shaman reminds closely the experience of the two Khanty shamans mentioned by Ágnes Kerezsi: "Both of them were chosen as shamans in most ordinary conditions, while they were hunting or during a longer trip, while there were no other persons around, when they were alone in the nature. When they talk about this event, they describe the nature around them and the weather and the hunting circumstances most realistically. Both confirmed that they did not expect the appearance of the supernatural being and there were no sign announcing it" (Kerezsi 1995 : 40). It is interesting to notice the stronger similarity of this story with the Khanty shaman's ones, while Tundra Nenets data seem to

emphasize hereditary transmission of shamanic power and earlier appearance of signs from childhood (Homich 1981 : 8-9).

After Kallyat became a shaman, he had the opportunity of competing with other shamans:

*“Once Kallyat was in a town. He drank and met a Khanty shaman. It was probably a Khanty from the Kazym River. The Khanty said: “Let us compete to see which of us is the stronger shaman. Kallyat answered: “I have no great power, just a little bit”. The Khanty took seven knives; he heated them on the fire and plunged six of them into his throat. But he didn’t manage to plunge the last one. Kallyat heated also seven knives on the fire and plunged them all into his throat. So Kallyat was the winner”.*

The shaman plunging knives in his flesh is a recurrent theme in literature about the Nenets, starting from Richard Johnson’s report in the XVI<sup>e</sup> century (Hoppál 2000 : 116). The following report is from our fieldwork in the Agan region in 2000<sup>9</sup>. The Nenets Awahylu (50) (whose father Vahalyuma was saved as a child by a shaman) remembers having seen in his childhood a man plunging a knife into his flesh and pulling it out without any visible wound. He commented further on that this was a common way for weaker shamans to show their abilities. Homich’s comment is somehow different, as she asserts that this kind of practice was characteristic not of weak, but of the strongest of shamans (Homich 1981 : 13).

There are still some interesting episodes from Kallyat’s life, and some of them are connected with songs.

*“Once in summer Kallyat was again looking for something to do. Once he saw a stork and its young woming towards him. He asked them: “How long will youn live in this world?” The stork answered: “We shall live as long as the sons of this place’s gods, as long as the sons of this place’s heavens will”. The stork started singing:*

**kaóat kaëu£-k%naws**

**Kallyat’s stork song (Tatva)**

kaóat mant%	Kallyat says:
Łđíapt liëiwsuta	“How much longer will you live.”

<sup>8</sup> This and the following legends have been referred by Tatva in Yuri Vella’s winter camp on the river Tyuytyakha (ion the Agan region), on October 10., 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Referred during his visit to Yuri Vella’s winter camp on the Tyuytyakha River, on October, 16. 2000.

Kaëu iõtmaĵ	The stork walked,
òumta wõtđł	taking his child by the hand.
Kaëu taëam ma	The stork said:
òuñi numuç òu	“The child of these heavenly beings,
òuñi kãhuç òu	the child of these gods,
p%jtu£ kaòitu£	their noses, their nails
Husđł kđn	when they end,
Maj kđn£aj	we will die,
Tajna kđn£aj	then we will die.”
òiñi kaóat kaëu£- k%naws	That is Kallyat’s stork song.

*Kallyat said: “Yes, it seems that you will live long indeed, I think I should come with you.” People do not say that Kallyat went with the stork, we just don’t know whether he went or not. “*

*“The once again, I don’t know whether it happened before or after the meeting with the stork, in the autumn Kallyat met six grebes. The grebes asked him: “Will you come with us? You could very well come, but you have bad clothes. They are not waterproof. We have good clothes, given by the heavenly father”. Kallyat threw his malitsa<sup>10</sup> into the water and it remained there, floating on the surface. Kallyat flew away with the grebes to warmer countries where he spent the winter. He came back in the spring. His relatives had found nothing but his malitsa, they didn’t know whether he was dead or alive. In the spring Kallyat showed up.*

**kaóat kđëikđt-k%naws**

**Kallyat’s grebe song (Tatva)**

Maptëi maptëi paiaê	Only six, only six grebes,
paiaê paiaê	grebes, grebes,
wapptu£ mđnłtuç mđnłtuç	Say, beginning to speak:
Kaóat tzižn	“Kallyat, come and be the
łiçwimt%£ä	seventh!
òđnanaç òđnanaç tzižn	Come, come with us!”
Maptëi paiaê	Only three grebes
wapptu£ mđnłtuç	start to speak, saying:
tohomaç tĐm!n £%ižłiç	“If only you would come with us,
£aiëa pan%ižt hđ£uëžn£aç	your clothes are rotting.
maòaç num ò-łanaç	Our clothes,
Tđm% pan%ižnaç	given by heaven, by our father
úıpkđt úıpkđt man%ëa	repel water,
h!£uêta niç £aç	they are not rotted.”
Kaóat ôiki wđta namtał	Kallyat, hearing this talk

<sup>10</sup> Malitsa: a typical men’s cloth like a long anorak worn with a belt.

kḐpaj malta malta	threw his leather <i>malitsa</i>
ûiḡt mḐḐata	into the water,
Êæœhaëata	cast it in.
kaḡtaḡ kaçmaj	[Into the water it] fell, and floated.
ḡiçwimt%£ä kaóat paêaçaj	Kallyat flapped his wings as the seventh.
ìupaç iaḡaçna	In a warm lands
Kaóat ìḡt%êa	Kallyat goes,
Kaóat mant%	Kallyat says...
Ôi	That's all.

*This is his song, he sang it while he flew away with the grebes.*

Songs accompany thus two of the main episodes of Kallyat's life. The interpretation of these songs is ambiguous: as a matter of fact they may be interpreted in two different ways. Tatva considers them as shaman songs: the stork and the grebe are at this point the spirits helping the shaman. In the grebe song's texts, the birds call Kallyat to come with them, to become one of them, to identify him to them by acquiring of some of their attributes. We may notice that the original number of the grebes is six, "only six" as emphasized in the text, which means, as seven is a positive and often sacred number, that one more is needed. And the one who completes the set is the shaman.

Nevertheless, other interpretations are possible. Most of shaman songs may be characterised as personal songs<sup>11</sup> as well: they are not spread on a regional basis, they are not used by other people practising the same craft, they are thoroughly individual. Each shaman has his or her own songs. The specific characteristic of the shaman's personal song is its function during the shamanic performance. "Each spirit lives in a specific place and the ways leading to them are also different. Therefore, according to Kallyat, the enchanters have different songs depending on the spirit they want to summon. Also the god of the heaven has his song. Forest Nenets shamans do not address more than one spirit at a time, because they may be mixed up and that would not do any good" (Lehtisalo 1924 : 161).

---

<sup>11</sup> Personal songs are one of the main "genres" in Nenets musical tradition (as well as by other small peoples of Siberia) : each person has a personal tune which usually while consuing alcohol he or she performs with words adapted to the circumstance. The words may vary, the tune is directly connectid with its « owner » (Mägi, Ojamaa 2002 : 178, Toulouze 2002 : 94).

Kallyat's songs may also be interpreted as more trivial personal songs. According to Tatva, his intercourse with Lehtisalo was not one-sided: if the latter learned a lot about Forest Nenets culture and language by listening to Kallyat, the latter was also curious of the Finn's country, of its culture and way of life. According to an oral report, he used to tell the other Nenets what he had heard from Lehtisalo about Finland and the West in the form of a mental travel as a migrating bird. These songs could also be the introduction to this kind of tales. It is also to be noticed that flying as a bird is a recurrent theme in Forest Nenets worldview: we have collected in the Agan region the remembrance about an elder man, who disappeared for two months. When he came back, he explained that he had gone to the Pur River region under the guise of a grebe<sup>12</sup>.

Still these songs do not have all the features of personal songs. Their text presents the action from an external point of view: the person used is the third, not the first. They do not have either some features characterising the shaman song, which, according to Helimski, is allocutive and not narrative (Helimski 1989 : 247), And their contents are not very ordinary, either as a shaman song<sup>13</sup> either as a personal song: the birds are not presented explicitly as helping spirits, there is no reference at all to the "other world", the scope of the trip in the grebe's song is totally absent.

Finally Tatva reports a legend about the last years of Kallyat's life:

*"Kallyat got old. At that time, there was another shaman, from the Nichu clan. He was a shaman with an evil power. Kallyat was a shaman with a positive power. Once the Nichu shaman said: "Let us compete to see who is a stronger shaman!" They competed in dream. The Nichu shaman threw dust into Kallyat's eyes and therefore Kallyat went blind. Once this same Nichu and his wife visited Kallyat. Kallyat understood that it was the same man who had caused his infirmity and said in low voice: "If he, who made me blind, should come here, I would not show any mercy to him". Nichu said to his wife: "Let us go away, Kallyat's words are somehow bad". They went away. During their journey, they arrived upon a cedar grove. When they went by, Kallyat had already been there with the help of his powers and had put there a magical self-shooting trap. An invisible arrow was shot; Nichu felt pain in his heart and collapsed dead. He was buried in that cedar grove. The place exists still*

---

<sup>12</sup> Tatina, village of Varyogan (Agan region), September 2. 2000.

*nowadays, somewhere on the shore of the River Lyamin. After that Kallyat still lived some time, then he died too”.*

The same kind of fight between shamans, with the use of invisible self-shooting arrows, is mentioned by Kerezsi as common by the Eastern Khantys (Kerezsi 1995 : 48).

### 3. About the fly agaric songs and their functions

Fly agaric use is often mentioned in connection with Siberian shamanism. The consumption of fly agaric is supposed to help the shaman getting into the necessary trance, during which he communicates with the spirits and gets answers to his questions. This is how Munkácsi presents Vogul data about fly agaric: “To achieve the ecstatic state necessary for the shaman to begin his shamanic activity, Vogul shamans generally use *Amanita muscaria* ‘fly agaric’. (...) The mushroom produces shamanic ecstasy and enhances the performances of the shaman (...) There are male and female varieties, which are used by men and women, respectively.” (Munkácsi<sup>14</sup> 1995 : 181). Fly agaric has certainly been used also by the Forest Nenets. We have collected the texts of three fly agaric songs, and shall present hereafter two of these “vipi”-songs. The name of this mushroom in Nenets is « vipi », and this word is abundantly repeated throughout the songs.

But how did the Forest Nenets use fly agaric and who did it? Was it indeed an attribute of the shaman practice?

According to one tradition the shaman used to sing these songs during the performance, standing on one leg and imitating thus the external aspect of the mushroom<sup>15</sup>. Maret Saar asserts – but without mentioning any source – that by the Forest Nenets only “sacral persons” used fly agaric (Saar 1990 : 503). As the other shaman’s songs, « vipi »-songs as well are personal songs: each of them is connected to the concrete name of a concrete person.

Still we have contradictory information about the use of fly agaric: on the one hand, we may assume that fly agaric was a common accessory of Forest Nenets shamanic practice as in their neighbour’s. Tatva connects it expressly to Khanty

---

<sup>13</sup> If comparing to Tundra Nenets material.

<sup>14</sup> Munkácsi’s data about the Voguls have been collected during his fieldwork in Siberia in 1888-1889.

<sup>15</sup> Oral information by Triinu Ojamaa.

shamanism. In specialised literature, we find confirmation of his assertion. Barkalaja comments the use of fly agaric by the Khantys, observing that if wrongly used, it may bring no results or be dangerous, even mortal, to its user (Barkalaja 1996 : 100). He mentions a shamanic seance in 1994 during which one shaman used fly agaric, but without any results. He commented that “the mushroom’s spirit might possess someone else” (Barkalaja 1998 : 62). On the eastern Khanty river of Vasyugan, there is a special category of shamans using fly agaric in order to have visions about the future (Lukina 1978 : 118). Anyhow shamans not using fly agaric were considered as more powerful than those who did (Barkalaja 1996 : 101).

The main arguments in favour of this hypotheses are both Lehtisalo’s and Mitusova’s reports.

Lehtisalo’s comments about fly agaric use concern the Forest Nenets as he got information from Kallyat. According to him, Forest Nenets shamans knew the use of fly agaric. They used it dried and washed. Only those were allowed to eat them who knew the origin of the plant. Those who did not see correctly the spirits of the mushroom may die or go mad. Usually shamans ate two and a half agarics. The shaman saw a number of human-shaped spirits corresponding to the number of mushrooms. Half a mushroom represents half a spirit. They start to run, following the sun on its way from sunset to sunrise and the shaman runs after them. He could not keep pace but the half spirit runned more slowly and looked constantly behind as if waiting for his other half<sup>16</sup>. All is dark and the shaman does not see anything. The spirits disclosed what the shaman wanted to know during this journey (Lehtisalo 1924 : 165).

Mitusova describes the seance she attended in 1928: “On his clothes, Payata [the shaman] put on a long white calico shirt that reached his knees. He sat down and started to chew tobacco with bits of fly agaric. At the same time other Nenets brought the drum and started to warm it. It seemed to be an ordinary Nenets drum - rather big, and the strut used by the shaman to hold it supported chains to which small bells were suspended. The shaman’s face reddened, his eyes became vague. He sipped some water, probably in order to strengthen the effect of the fly agaric, but perhaps only to quench his thirst. Because of the fire, it was very warm in

---

16 In this report there is a theme reminding us of the above-mentioned grebe song: it is the shaman seen as completing the spirit’s group – six grebes + 1, half a spirit waiting for his other half running after him.

the tchum<sup>17</sup>. He started by beating softly the drum. The blows got stronger and stronger. And Payata started to sing. He called his spirit-protector, in order to get assistance from him in his fight against the illness sent by the evil spirits. His way “to the other worlds” was apparently hard, the shaman sweated profusedly. He stood up and started walking around the fire, beating the drum with all his strength. His eyes were closed; dribble appeared at the corner of his mouth, all his body was shaken. All the men started to shout “Ou ! Ou ! Ou !”. This shout, the strikes on the drum, the jungling of the bells mixed in a deafening noise. For a long time Payata jumped around the fire. The people sitting in the tchum chased the evil spirits away by shouting “Ou ! Ou ! Ou !”, in order to protect the soul of the shaman. Finally the shaman collapsed with a groan beating himself in a nerve crisis. The other Nenets lifted him seven times on the fire while one of the men went on beating the drum. When they put him back at his place, Payata regained consciousness and continued the séance” (Homich 1972 : 209).

On the other hand, Tatva has expressed two contradictory opinions: according to one of them<sup>18</sup>, “vipi” was connected with shamanic practice by the Khantys, but not by the Nenets. Everybody could eat fly agaric and get “drugged”, but the visions given by the mushroom did not allow the consumer to help anybody else: he could get messages for him, see events of his own future, but did not get revelations about somebody else’s illness or the way to solve it. This was the peculiar function of the proficient shaman, who did not need this means to get into trance and to communicate with the spirits. This opinion is interesting: as Tatva is a younger man, who most probably did not have personal experience of shamanic practice, it may reflect a certain development in Forest Nenets shamanism. This possibility is mentioned also by Saar: the Estonian mycologist mentions the individual or collective use of fly agaric in order to obtain “a pleasant psychic state” (Saar 1990 : 513). True enough, she does not explicitly mention to what ethnic group this information refers, but we may assume it concerns the Khantys, for her field work was achieved by the Yugan Khantys.

Somehow his assertion is confirmed by another informant, the Nenets poet Yuri Vella, who comments thus the use of fly agaric: “The fly agaric song is sung when fly agaric is eaten. That is done when a person feels the need to attain

---

<sup>17</sup> Russian word for the conic tent in Western and Central Siberia.

the condition occasioned by the use of fly agaric. This need is felt when someone falls ill and the shaman is not nearby, yet it is necessary to perform supernatural procedures. Anyone can do this to a certain extent, by the way, even without fly agaric, if he is able to concentrate. Fly agaric helps a person to concentrate more quickly and effectively on his/her inner self" (Mägi, Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002). According to this assertion, fly agaric is used when "the shaman is not nearby", therefore we can assume that it is not an attribute of the shamans, but of lower categories, who have not the necessary spiritual strength to concentrate by their own means<sup>19</sup>. As a matter of fact, Mitusova does not give any indication of the category Payata belonged to either of his strength. We cannot exclude that the Nenets she visited had no stronger shaman. But they had to face an unknown problem, the coming of a Russian ethnographer who intended to sojourn with them; and they had to find a proper answer. This is of course merely a hypothesis allowing conciliating Mitusova's account of fly agaric use with other data concerning the Nenets as a whole and the Forest Nenets in particular.

As a matter of fact Homich does not mention at all fly agarics in her global presentation of Nenets shamanism (Homich 1995 : 230-246). It is interesting to mention that also other scholars presenting Nenets shamanism omit to mention the use of this mushroom (Basilov 1997). This is to be emphasised, because during the Soviet period all kind of materialistic explanations about shamanism were most welcome (as Bogoraz-Tan's pathological explanations, Bogoraz 1910). Nevertheless, Homich assumes that fly agaric could play a certain role, although it was not common among the Nenets: "There are interesting data showing that Forest Nenets shamans used stimulating means, the fly agaric (...) As far as the Nenets, and especially the Tundra Nenets, are concerned, the use of fly agaric was not typical. They did not use either alcoholic beverages before the seances" (Homich 1981 : 29-30). Probably the Forest Nenets data she quotes (without precise indications) are no more than the above-mentioned report by Mitusova. Anyhow, in the same article, Homich explains the shaman's trance not by the use of hallucinogen mushrooms, but

---

<sup>18</sup> Oral information to Kaur Mägi, Num-to, October 2001.

<sup>19</sup> This deduction corresponds to Mircea Eliade assertion about the use of fly agaric by the Uralic peoples of Central Russia and of Siberia as a "vulgar substitute for 'pure' trance" (Eliade 1974 : 401). Maret Saar also mentions this principle and emphasises that shamans using fly agaric were less respected than those who did not need the help of the mushroom: this information comes from oral information given by the Russian scholar Simchenko (Saar 1990 : 504).

by other reasons: “The shaman’s ecstasy was due to a complex set of factors: special training and teaching, a system of representations acquired from childhood, the development of fantasy, the conditions of the seance etc.” (Homich 1981 : 38). Thus, we must consider the use of fly agaric by the Nenets shamans as marginal. Mitusova’s example comes from the Agan river, where Forest Nenets are clearly a minority population and certainly were particularly such when Mitusova visited them, as most of the Forest Nenets migrations either from the Pur region or from Num-to took place in the 1930-ies. Many authors have presented descriptions of Tundra Nenets shamanic seances, most of them from the 1920-1930 (for example Yevladov 1992 : 122-126) and in none fly agarics are mentioned. We may explain the presence of fly agaric by the Forest Nenets by Khanty influence, as Khanty are dominant in the Agan area. Probably geographical factors are also essential, as the availability of the fly agaric, which is mostly a forest mushroom.

Anyhow, as soon as 1981, Homich explains the shaman’s trance not by the use of hallucinogen mushroom, but by other reasons : “The shaman’s ecstasy was due to a complex set of factors : special training and teaching, a system of representations acquired from childhood, the development of fantasy, the conditions of the seance etc.” (Homich 1981 : 38). Lar, who does not either mention the use of fly agaric, emphasises the importance of the drum as a means of communication with the spirits (Lar 1994 : 99).

Homich, following Mitusova, observes that Forest Nenets shamanism differs considerably from Khanty’s shamanism on one basic point: as by the Tundra Nenets, “not everybody was able to be a shaman” (Homich 1972 : 210). Although we have no data about how shamans learned their skills (Homich 1972 : 209), “[Forest Nenets] shamans were distinguished by different steps of skills (Mitusova met also “small” shamans, who had very low authority)” (Homich 1972 : 210) : besides the categories of “good” and “evil” shamans, many authors mention the existence of “strong” and “weak” shamans (Homich 1981 : 13). This gradation of shamans according to their power may explain Tatva’s assertion: only “smaller” shamans used fly agaric, strong shamans able to cure and to predict did not need this means to fulfil their tasks. We find a possible confirmation of this hypothesis in Hajdù’s observation, that readers of dreams were the lowest category of shamans: the basic word for shamans (TN/ tðibe, FN/ tðicea) was not used for them, they were called *jütt/sðmmi/ òieïeä* (Nj) “Zauberer, der nur aus dem Traur wahrsagt” or *jütt%rtai òieïeä* (Nj)

“Zauberer, der nur aus dem Traur wahrsagt”, according to Lehtisalo’s dictionary (Hajdú 1960 : 59). It is interesting to notice, though Hajdú does not comment this fact, that the linguistic forms presented by him come from the Forest Nenets area and are clearly Forest Nenets dialectal forms. The translation is also not absolutely correct, for *ò-la*/*ò-la* in Forest Nenets does not mean “sorcerer”, but just “person, human being”. Therefore this expression is quite simple.

But in October 2000, in a conversation with Yuri Vella recorded in Tartu’s Literary Museum, Tatva commented his performance of fly agaric songs expressing a contradictory position. When answering to Yuri Vella’s question about the number of mushrooms to be eaten, he asserted that occasionally people ate three agarics, but seven (as in the songs he performed) was the maximum they could eat. Only the strongest shamans were able to ingest up to ten. The matter is that to each mushroom corresponds one spirit. If you call many spirits, it is much more difficult to control them, they may mislead you and even cause your death. This assertion seems to indicate that Forest Nenets shamans, and even the strongest ones, did really use fly agarics. But this does not mean that this use was regular or compulsory. Further on, we do not know the real reason of fly agaric use, as nothing is said about that nor in the songs neither in the comments.

In our collection we have recorded three fly agaric songs: two of them come from the Num-to region and one from the Agan basin. One of them – presented below – belongs to Allyu Vylla (Num-to), but we do not know for sure whether he was considered as a shaman or not. Another song’s owner is Myty Pyak (Num-to) who was a shaman, as well as Yancha (Agan). But they had not the reputation of being strong shamans.

**w\$çla aóu ûŽpi-k%naws      Allyu Vylla’s fly agaric song (Tatva)**

Łeçew ûŽpi-òe	Seven fly agaric girls,
łeçew ûŽpi-òe	seven fly agaric girls,
Ł%èi òahaŁ paiiëðêaç	go farther in that direction!
ôoêaj taia	I have a belt,
łihiêôič iðtm%	forged by the <i>šihilhča</i> ,
òahaê Ł!suŁopta	It has three joins.
ôoêaj tadaŁa	I have a belt.
łeçew ûŽpi-òe	Seven fly agaric girls,
iðêaç kuna	where is your land.
łihiêôič iðtm%	Made by the <i>šihilhča</i> .

£%ëi ôaha£ paiëðêaç	Go farther in that direction.
Kuñi£am%häna mant%	Another time he says:
iïwsuṗta pžían	“The infants that remained after us,
£aṗukiç tuêaç œaṗta£ðta	children, add wood to your fire.”
ļeçew ûŽpi-òe	Seven fly agaric girls
tun pakaêiat	climbed into the fire.
aóÐê haçmaj	Al’u was able,
œemali tun nžêiat	he stood in the fire without his boots,
tuhuna taêa£a	dances in the fire.
tuṗta tu£ òiòà	Above a burning fire
ļeçew ûŽpi-òe	seven fly agaric girls
ìohoêkuçòiciw	bewilder him.
tajna mant%, m\$	Then he says, well:
£am% iðëahana	“Some day
taëam mant£ðtaç	you will say:
£upuna £aṗukiç	Infants,
òieïmaç taêlðt	our grandfather was like that.”

The first interesting feature is that the owner of this song, as well as Myty in another one, call for seven fly agaric “girls”. Lehtisalo mentioned already the fly agaric spirit as being human-shaped<sup>20</sup> but he did not mention the gender of the spirits. According to Tatva, the mushroom spirits are usually young females. In our third “vipi”-song, the spirit is the “mother of fly-agarics”. The second interesting element is the number of the mushrooms – seven in both songs coming from Num-to, while in the third song the number is not explicit.

Allyu’s song reminds of some particulars in Lehtisalo’s report, as the running of the spirits in a precise direction, or the question about the origin of the mushrooms. Wa may also mention the importance of fire in this song, while standing in the fire is, according to Tatva, a recurrent theme in “vipi”-songs. Anyhow the contents of this song show that most probably Allyu was a shaman, whose song is directly connectif with shamanic practice.

Anyhow, the active practice of shamanism, as mentioned previously, seems to be by the Forest Nenets deprived of present reality. This appears well in the evolution of some songs connected to the fly agaric. We have a good example in

our repertoire with a “vipi”-song being performed nowadays as humorous song: the performer imitates an old shaman, who used to fall asleep some times during the performance of his song. Yuri Vella has repeatedly performed this imitation in front of us, adding though that he did not see the old shaman himself, but had seen him imitated by another Nenets. This shows already some distance between the performer in 1999 and 2000 and its model.

Mother of fly agaric.../sigh, snoring/  
 Mother of fly agaric, I here present my mother’s song.  
 Mother of fly agaric, I here present my mother’s song. Carrying my children, carrying them (holding hands) here I climb under the tent’s cloth... /snoring/  
 So that my children may see one day, day, I will take them out, out (=save them).  
 On one foot, foot, I begin to sing. /Speech/ Tomorrow, tomorrow I can see /speech, snoring /  
 Well, then he apparently fell asleep again.

We tried to sum up what we know about Forest Nenets shamanism in connection with songs and we must recognise that the existent material is quite thin. Anyway, from the quantitative point of view, we have at our disposal three « vipi »-songs and two quite questionable shaman songs. As we have come to the conclusion that probably the use of fly agaric, though well-known and existent, was not a norm in proper shamanic practice, we may assume that more persons that real powerful shamans were addicted to fly-agaric consumption and performed these songs, explaining thus that these have been transmitted more easily than true shaman songs. The two possible shaman songs we presented seem, compared with the examples we have from Tundra Nenets shaman songs (Homich 1981 : 39-41; Lehtisalo 1924 : 167), much more simple and fragmentary : if they were really performed by Kallyat during a shamanic seance, they were probably much longer and detailed. Anyhow they have been preserved upon a form that allows a functional shift and permits them to be received nowadays as personal songs.

---

<sup>20</sup> So did Barkalaja about the Khanty fly agaric spirits, who were somehow similar to little men with sharp heads (Barkalaja 1996 : 100).

- Barkalaja 1996 – Barkalaja Anzori – *Handi rahvausundist ja selle seostest vene õigeusu ja teadusliku mõtlemisega* – MA Thesis in Folklore (manuscript), Tartu University, Tartu 1996.
- Barkalaja 1998 – Barkalaja Anzori – “On the Sacrificial Ritual of the Pim River Khanty in December 1995” – *Pro Ethnologia 5, Arctic Studies I.*(ed. Art Leete) – Tartu 1998 – pp. 57-68.
- Eliade 1974 – Eliade Mircea – *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy.* Bollingen Series LXXVI. Princeton University Press 1974
- Hajdú 1960 - Hajdú Péter – “A szamojéd sámánok kategóriáiról” - *Nyelvtudományi Közlemények* – 1960, LXII - S. 51-71 .
- Hajdú 1978 – Hajdú Péter – “The Nenets Shaman Song and its Text” – *Shamanism in Siberia* (eds. V. Diószegi and M. Hoppál) – Budapest 1978 – pp. 355-372.
- Helimski 1989 – Хелимский, Е.А. – “Глубинно-фонологический изосиллабизм ненецкого стиха” – *Journal de la Société Finno-ougrienne* 82 – Helsinki 1982 – pp. 223-268.
- Homich 1972 – Хомич, Л.В. – “Некоторые особенности хозяйства и культуры лесных ненцев” – *Охотники, собиратели, рыболовы* – Ленинград 1972 – стр.199-214.
- Homich 1981<sup>21</sup> – Хомич, Л.В. – “Шаманы у ненцев” – *Проблемы истории общественного сознания аборигенов Сибири (по материалам второй половины XIX – начала XX вв)* – Ленинград 1981 – стр. 5-41.
- Homich 1995 – Хомич, Л.В. – *Ненцы. Очерки традиционной культуры* – Санкт-Петербург 1995.
- Hoppál 2000 – Hoppál, Mihály – “Shamanhood among the Nenets” – *Studies on Mythology and Uralic Shamanism. Ethnologica Uralica 4.* Budapest. pp. 115-130.
- Kerezsi 1995 – Кережи А. – “Особенности восточно-хантыйского шаманизма в наши дни” – *Народы Сибири* – Москва 1995 – стр.38-53.
- Lar 1994 – Лар, Л.А. – “Основные черты современной религии ненцев” – *Народы Северо-Западной Сибири* вып.1– Томск 1994 – стр. 92-100.
- Lehtisalo 1924 – Lehtisalo, T. – *Entwurf einer Mythologie der Jurak-Samoyeden* – MSFOu 53 – Helsinki 1924.
- Lehtisalo 1947 – Lehtisalo, T. – *Juraksamojedische Volksdichtung*, MSFOu XC – Helsinki 1947.
- Lehtisalo 1956 – Lehtisalo T. – *Juraksamojedisches Wörterbuch*, Lexica Societatis Fenno-Ugricae 13 – Helsinki 1956.
- Lehtisalo 1959 – Lehtisalo T. – *Tundralta ja taigasta. Muistelmia puolen vuosisadan takaa* – Helsinki 1959.
- Lukina 1978 – Лукина, Н.В. – “Об особенностях культуры отдельных групп хантов” – *Этнокультурная история населения Сибири* – Томск 1978 - стр. 114-119.

---

<sup>21</sup> Extensive excerpts from this article are presented and rearranged in Homich 1995.

- Mägi, Ojamaa 2002 – Mägi Kaur, Ojamaa Triin – “Neli metsaneenetsi laulu: lingvistiline ja muusikaline tasand” – *Fenno-ugristica* 24 – Tartu 2002 – lk. 175-200.
- Mägi, Ojamaa, Toulouze 2002<sup>22</sup> – Mägi Kaur, Ojamaa Triinu, Toulouze Eva – *Discovering Siberia : Songs of the Forest Nenets. Songs of the Finno-Ugric peoples* 1 – Estonian Literary Museum 2002 (expected).
- Mägi, Toulouze 2002 – Mägi Kaur, Toulouze Eva – “Laulu ja proosa seostes metsaneenetsi narratiivides” – *Mäetagused* 2002 (expected).
- Mitusova 1927 – Митусова Р. – “На далеком севере. (Экспедиция в Надымский край и на р. Тром-Юган)” – *Уральское Краеведение. Орган краеведческой и научно-исследовательской работы Урала.* – Свердловск 1927 – стр. 66-69.
- Mitusova 1929 – Митусова Р. – “Год среди лесного народа” – *Вокруг света* – 1929, нн 9-15.
- Munkácsi 1995 – Munkácsi, Bernát – “Aspects of Vogul Religion” – *Vogul Folklore* (eds. O. von Sadvoszky and M. Hoppál) – Budapest 1995.
- Niemi 2001 – Niemi Jarkko – “Dream Songs of the Forest Nenets” – *Shamanhood, Symbolism and Epic* (ed. Juha Pentikäinen) – Budapest 2001 – pp. 135-147.
- Saar 1990 – Saar, Maret – “Punane kärbseseen animistlik-šamanistlikes kultuurides” – *Akadeemia* 1990/3 – lk. 502-526.
- Sokolova 1992 – Соколова, З. П. – “Еще раз об изучении обско-угорского шаманизма” – *Ранние формы религии народов Сибири* – Санкт-Петербург 1992 – стр. 145-149.
- Toulouze 2002 – Toulouze Eva – “Les Nenètes des forêts et leur patrimoine oral : un aperçu général” – *Boréales* N° 82 2002 – pp.89-98.

---

<sup>22</sup> The quotations are from the booklet of the CD.