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Abstract: This article discusses language materialities and the Otherworld through the findings of mammoth remains and text-artifacts representing Nenets verbal art. The remains and verbal art are read together as a network of mythic knowledge that forms a semiotic whole, where different signs interact and create potentials for new significations. The article aims to open up a web of relations in which materialities of differing ages and durabilities meet and affect each other through their semiotic potentialities. The materialities operate on several levels of signification, ranging from basic metaphors for mammoths to larger regimes that organize the signification. Consequently, mythic knowledge concerns worlds that are, on the one hand, imperceptible but, on the other, sensible through narration and imagination in terms of materialities. The key material elements of the mythic knowledge are tainted by the narration, such that they cannot be considered without the mythic qualities. In addition, the knowledge concerning the world affects Nenets rituals and ways of dwelling.

Keywords: language materialities, Otherworld, metaphor, Nenets, mammoth

1 Introduction

Mammoths and mammoth findings have primarily been objects of paleontology or other branches of natural science. As such, mammoth remains are tied to the history of science and man's will to learn about the history of the Earth, as shown by Cohen (2002). This history is often surrounded by "Western" mythologies, ideologies, and views in which the past and the North have been imagined as severe and hostile (Cohen 2002: 122–123). Seldom have mammoths been studied from the point of view of the people who share the land with the mammoth remains. When these perceptions have been studied, the emphasis has typically been on the ignorance of indigenous peoples regarding the scientific reconstructions and thus on the mythic

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nature of the indigenous views (e.g., : Digby 1926: 10, 74–79; Arzyutov 2019 and Janhunen 2011 arenotable exceptions). This article, instead, takes the indigenous relations with the mammoth remains as its point of departure.

Together with several other Arctic indigenous peoples of Russia, the Nenets narrate about and relate their ritual practices using the mammoth bones, tusks, and carcasses that can be found across Siberia. These narratives and practices are not only mediated by these findings but also are bundled with, for example, reindeer herding practices and other materialities of the Nenets living environment. The narratives are about beings who live under the earth and herd mammoths, with whom the Nenets repeatedly come into contact. Not only can the Nenets communicate with these beings, but their mythic and shamanic ritual poems also reenact scenes in which mammoths are encountered and communicated with. This article is about those realms under the earth and encounters with the mammoths, as well as about the mammoths and mammoth-related findings and the Nenets verbal forms of narrating them.

The research material tells about mythic worlds, which are worlds that have often been understood as imagined, beyond the reach of our senses, and even nonexisting or ephemeral in oral performances of myths. My basic argument, however, is that these worlds have material qualities that are central to their existence – that is, that the mythic worlds could not survive without the material terms through which they are narrated. In this article, I will sketch the interaction of mammoth findings, such as bones, tusks, and carcasses, with Nenets verbal art, including tales, mythic narration, and shamanic rituals, and with Nenets reindeer herding and sentient ecology. I take the mammoth findings and the Tundra Nenets lexemes denoting them as my starting points, treating them as semiotic signs. Later, I proceed towards the verbally repeated and repeatable texts that mediate the relations of mammoths and mythic worlds and the reindeer herding practices. My aim is to show that the way the mammoth remnants, narratives, rituals, and reindeer-herding practices inform each other is a matter of making use of potentials offered by materialities with different rhythms of existence. The argument is based on recent discussions on the potentialities residing in signs, producing iconic and indexical meanings when interacting with conventions (Keane 2007; Manning 2012). Along with these discussions, I want to emphasize the centrality of materiality for signs. The semiosis happens only when the sign appears materially, which attaches them to potentialities of meanings. In addition to these semiotic discussions, I treat mythology as knowledge. If we read mythologies as knowledge telling about the structure of the world and the realms of mythic non-human agents, the texts are not only historical – telling about the mythic past – but also very contemporary, informing and providing media for action and reflection to the ones communicating with the mythic world (Frog 2019; Lukin 2015a; Piela 2001;

Siikala 2002; Tarkka 2013). Consequently, the mythic worlds are material not only through the verbal forms and the material terms of the metaphors: because of the materiality of the metaphors, the mythic worlds are radiated by the whole bundles of materialities included in the words and worlds in myths and ritual practices. In the context of Nenets mammoth remains, the words are tied to reindeer and reindeer herding, which opens up a whole network of meanings around mammoths and illuminates not only Nenets mythic worlds but also human–animal relations. My reading of Nenets verbal tradition is based, in addition to the semiotics and linguistic anthropology, on methods developed in folklore studies in recent years. These methods aim at the ethnographic reading of often fragmented archival materials not only through other contextual material but also through the clues provided by language itself (Bauman 2004; Foley 1995; Kallio 2015; Tarkka 2013). The older Nenets materials do include contextual knowledge, and my aim is to open up possible interpretations by focusing on one theme and the language. The analysis does not claim that it produces one and the only view or a totalizing system of Nenets imagery of the Otherworld. Rather, by showing how the verbal tradition and the other materialities might be tied or bundled, I aim to reach the prospects of the co-presence of multiple materialities around the mammoth and the unseen world it takes us into.

In short, I will discuss the mammoth remains and Nenets mythic folklore as two related and equally important fields in the construction of the Nenets Otherworld. The Nenets oral tradition are read as publicly accessible texts written down by researchers who have witnessed its performance. The Otherworld imagined and evoked in the texts cannot be understood without the materialities of the mammoth remains and the consequent other materialities that are tied to them in the semiosis. The materiality and the mythic knowledge are inherently linked.

2 Mammoth imageries

In "Western" imagery, the mammoth has a long history, in which science and fiction intertwine. As has been eloquently shown by Claudine Cohen in *The Fate of the Mammoth* (2002), the modern picture of the mammoth became increasingly accurate through analysis of findings made since the 18th century. The discovery of whole carcasses, found especially in Siberia, together with the development of anatomy, was central to the ultimate precision of the image. In addition, the relation of the mammoth to the elephant and to the history of the Earth became increasingly detailed in the 19th century. Still, the image, and especially the explanations given for the findings, found their roots in biblical narratives, which is why "Western" ideas around mammoths were, and can still be seen as, mythic

(Cohen 2002: 2–10, passim.). More precisely, the images, the research done on mammoths, and the popular representations of the animals are all tied to contemporary ideologies and politics. As persuasively discussed by Arzyutov (2019), mammoths have served as subjects in various kinds of interactions between indigenous peoples, traders, researchers, and political actors.

Because of the research, we know that the bones, tusks, and carcasses found in the tundra can be interpreted to belong to the mammoth, which again refers to "[a]ny of various very large elephant-like mammals of the genus Mammuthus (family Elephantidae), typically hairy with a sloping back and long curved tusks, which became extinct during the late Pleistocene period but are known from fossil remains, frozen carcasses, and Palaeolithic drawings in Eurasia and North America" (Oxford English Dictionary: "mammoth, n. and adj."). This definition, aiming at objectivity, is also shared by the indigenous people living in Siberia: they have been aware of the scientific images probably from very early on because of their contacts with traders and officials or, at the latest, since their exposure to Soviet education. However, they combine this definition with imageries that rise up from their ontologies and their people's daily life in a landscape where mammoth bones and tusks occasionally appear on the surface of the earth (see Arzyutov 2019: 143–145).

The indigenous peoples in Western Siberia relate mammoth remains to mythic beings such as *jūr*, *ūťši* or *witkəś* (Mansi), *wes* (Khanty), and *košar*/*koža* (Selkup). What unites the imageries is the relationship of the remains and the characters to water and landslides, bad omens, and horns. The mammoth remains tend to be related to reindeer and elk and, more often than not, also to pikes. Consequently, the Mansi mythic being *jūr* can evoke landslides and is imagined as a giant fish or bird; *ūťši* is a hairy beast, to whose horns the mammoth tusks are related; and *witkəś* is a water spirit that translates to "mammoth" and is often associated with mammoth remains. The Khanty *wes* is similarly a mythic, water-related giant spirit with horns, who is related to landslides and mammoth remains. The Selkup *košar*/*koža* is imagined as a giant horned beast living in the earth or water, and finding its remnants is related to misfortune (Baulo 2008: 78; Kulemzin 2006: 146–147; Kuznetsova 2010: 141–142; Lyutsidarskaya 2008a, 2008b; Tuchkova 2010: 142). Moreover, in general, the Siberian indigenous images related to mammoth bones and tusks refer most often to some kinds of gigantic animals that have been considered as sacred or as spirit helpers of the shamans (Ivanov 1949; Novikov 1949; Prokof'eva 1949; Senkevič-Gudkova 1949; Vasil'evič 1949[1]).

1 There is a large body of literature about Native American oral tradition presumed to be about mammoths, which I omit from the article for the sake of readability. Good summaries can be found in Lankford (1980) and Strong (1934).

The Nenets mythic discourse, which will be discussed in detail below, shares many of the features of these neighboring indigenous discourses. However, the variation in the images within linguistic communities or among them is enormous, and more importantly, the discourses are often attached to local contexts, to experiences with some particular remains (or related to them), or to some actual rituals. The mammoth remnants have bundled with multiple practices, people, and conventions, producing marvelous diversity in the mythic knowledge on mammoths. Furthermore, it has become obvious, during my own fieldwork among the Nenets, that the mammoths and narratives related to them and the Otherworld fascinate many (e.g., Lukin 2012). In addition, the mammoth is used as a regional symbol, for example in Salexard. Consequently, the discourses and imageries continue to circulate and thus bundle with still more materialities – something which is beyond the discussions of this article but should remind of the fluid and variable nature of folklore, vernacular religion and materialities.

The Nenets form an indigenous group living in the northernmost areas of Russia, on both the European and Asian side of the Urals. The areas are mostly tundra lowlands, crossed by with several smaller or bigger mountain ranges and rivers. Nenets is an ethnic category consisting of speakers of two linguistic varieties: Tundra Nenets and Forest Nenets. According to the 2010 census, there are 44,640 Nenets in Russia, of whom most live in the Arctic or Northern regions of Russia and Western Siberia (VPN, 2010). In the following, I will concentrate on the verbal tradition of Tundra Nenets speakers, who have traditionally been nomadic reindeer herders, fishermen, and hunters. The nomadic way of life has undergone many significant changes in 20th and 21st centuries, as the Soviet state aimed to sedentarize the reindeer herders and also otherwise influence many practices related to reindeer herding (Stammler 2005; Tuisku 2001). Though some of the research material is collected after these changes, I consider the nomadic large-scale reindeer herding and the intimate yet fragile human–animal relations related to that subsistence and way of living as a significant background for my analysis.

3 Mythic knowledge and material affordances

The focal orientation of this article is towards different kinds of materialities *bundling* together and thus enabling practices and signification and their analysis in the documents related to Nenets knowledge about and encounters with mammoths. Bundling refers to the inevitable, either random or consistent, coming together or co-presence of material qualities and discourses and the ways in which these signify each other as things manifest (Keane 2003: 414, 421). The materialities can be of different kinds and of different temporalities, such as mammoth remains

from the Pleistocene era, current reindeer herding practices, oral traditions and their entextualizations, or landscapes. In short, they represent linguistic or non-linguistic signs. I consider the materialities as affordances. With this, I denote to the range of relational possibilities that the different kinds of materialities provide for practices and signification. The concept has been borrowed from perceptual psychology, where the affordance often denotes to perceivable possibilities offered by items or media. My discussion most relies on the work of Keane (2007) and Manning (2012), whose discussion is tied to semiotics and linguistic anthropology. Keane and Manning have recently noted that the iconic and indexical meanings of signs are merely potentialities before they are constructed based on conventions. The conventions always require an interpretive community and a regime organizing signification. These regimes are multiple, ranging from ontologies to contextual details. They rely on basic conceptions of the world, its structure, and its beings and on semiotic ideologies (Keane 2007: 16–20; Manning 2012: 7–20). Introduced by Keane (2003: 419), *semiotic ideology* denotes the shared assumptions about what signs are and how they do things, and these assumptions relate to, for example, ideas about the possible agents and their agency in communication and signification. Concerning these, I will first sketch views on narration and mythic worlds then discuss the materialities related to them and verbal art. Next, I will discuss metaphors and their materiality, as I argue that metaphoric use of language and imagination are vital to understanding how mythic worlds are mediated and related to.

Not focusing on the belief but on the ontology behind narration and religious practices has been one of the central methodological bases for numerable studies in vernacular religion (Knuuttila 2014; Koski 2011; Severi 2015; Siikala 2002; Tarkka 2013; Valk and Bowman 2014; also Keane 2008). This focus has enabled scholars to concentrate on understanding the narration or oral tradition as knowledge and notions about being and as models that organize social and normative reality contextually (Koski 2011: 67–68). In this article, I discuss Nenets folklore as mythic knowledge that recreates, together with other materialities, Nenets ontology. I focus on prose narratives, myths, and shamanic ritual texts that all recreate this knowledge. In previous studies, mythic knowledge has been held to concern the unknown and the Otherworld and to be revealed in "oral tradition, in songs and tales of shamans and also in narratives of individual experiences, initiations, and visions" (Siikala 2002: 47–48). Here, *Otherworld* denotes to those parallel worlds that are unseen and in constant interaction with this world through transcending spirits and shamans either through rituals or random and accidental encounters. When treated as knowledge, oral tradition has been interpreted to concern information about the structure, laws, and agents of the Otherworld. Knowledge about the Otherworld is knowledge of the unknown, and we need language and linguistic

practices to imagine worlds that are directed elsewhere; in other words, as has been formulated byUrban (1996: 67), "discourse is needed to fill in what cannot be seen [and] what requires words to make its existence known." The knowledge is available to most of the members of an interpretive community, but there is typically great variance in the competence or abilities to share the knowledge (Hymes 1981: 82–86). Thus, the prose narratives discussed later can typically be told by broader range of adults than mythic narratives sung or the shamanic rituals (Siikala 2002: 59–60; Siikala and Siikala 2005: 48–52; Tarkka 2013: 104–127). Consequently, the knowledge is bound to contexts that vary considerably: the prose narratives tend to reflect experiences and the possibilities of the Otherworld, while the performances of the myths create mythic scenes (Lönnroth 1979: 95; Tarkka 2013: 15–179), and rituals are communication with the Otherworld. In all cases, however, sensory access to the invisible is achieved with the help of linguistic and non-linguistic mediations.

According to Siikala, one central model in shamanic knowledge is the topography of the Otherworld, which she describes to be reflecting, to some extent, "the ethnographic, geographic, and socio-economic reality of the culture in question" (Siikala 2002: 158). Tarkka (2013: 390) has emphasized the subjectivity of the accounts of the Otherworld, writing: "Calling attention to the unknowability of the Otherworld requires a speaker familiar with his own world but incognizant of the Otherworld." Analyzing the forest and the Otherworld, Tarkka stresses the intersignification of the spheres so that the forest depicted in the myths comes to be sensed but, in a parallel manner, the forest becomes saturated with the myths (Tarkka 2005: 299).

Although referring to materialities, the studies mentioned above do not emphasize materiality, which is inherent in narration or other performative contexts of the oral tradition and in the bundling of practices (Keane 2003: 414–415). This has been emphasized in recent discussions over the materiality of religions and languages that help us to understand the Nenets mythic knowledge around mammoths. The discussions come back to Charles Peirce's semiotics, on the one hand, and to the challenges to the simplified dualism between materiality and representation, on the other (see Keane 2003; Manning 2017; Nakassis 2012; Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017). In relation to Peirce, it has been noted that he insists on the role of materiality in semiosis: the qualities (Firstness) exist only when materialized (Secondness) (e.g., Nakassis 2013). As has been noted recently by, for example, Irvine (2017: 277–284; Keane 2003: 411–414), the dualism and juxtaposition between language and materiality seems to be very persistent. Indeed, language – as a system of signification – is often negated with materiality. However, the so-called language materiality (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017) aims to overcome dualism through emphasizing the materiality of language and the

interaction of language with other kinds of materialities. The interpretations aim to reach the shared fields or moments that often cut across each other and turn dualism into reciprocity and process.

An important point of departure is the materiality of speech and language *per se*. The materiality of speech, narration, or singing renders it sensible and enables the movement of the knowledge in the speech (Agha 2007: 2–3; Keane 2008: 124; Urban 2001: 42). Oral performances of folklore, whose documents as text-artifacts constitute the bulk of my research material, are material in multiple ways. Rather than the bodily production of the language or the text-artifacts produced by the recorders of folklore, I emphasize the repeatability and recognizability – what has been called objectification or textualization. The sensuous qualities of verbal art make the texts perceivable, an object of reflection, and thus possibly of objectification (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012: 360–362; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Urban 2001). Last, the idea of tradition as practices, expressions, and forms of thinking that create and maintain continuity also invokes the recognition of repeated elements, and hence authority (Bauman 2004: 25–28; Siikala and Siikala 2005: 41; Urban 2001).

The materiality of utterances is evanescent, which, as Agha notes, is a matter of durability, not of materiality (Agha 2007: 3). Because the materialities have different temporal qualities – i.e., some materialities are more durable than the others – they also have different rhythms, which establish a movement and circulation where different temporalities of the materialities get enmeshed or bundled. In this circulation the objects of different age and durability are dynamically related and may affect each other. This kind of interaction of multiple and diverse rhythms is constitutive for the semiotic practice, and as argued by Keane (2008), it results in new inferences in new contexts, into impurities and heterogeneity. While Keane discusses the new inferences in terms of history, it is quite clear that the contexts might also vary otherwise. Verbal art, in addition to relying on the textuality and thus repeatability, is also a play with and adjusting of different temporal, material, and ontological planes into this kind of dynamic interaction. When either representing religious language (DuBois 1986, Keane 2008: 117–119; Lempert 2015) or narrating about encounters with the supernatural (language about religion; Lukin 2012: 365–367), this kind of verbal art aims at giving agency to non-human agents that are beyond everyday perception but have material qualities or are materially mediated.

One of the ways the materialities become bundled with the oral tradition is through metaphorical use of language. Language materiality has paid much attention to the ways Peirce carries materiality in semiotics. In similar vein, I would like to note that Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 59) are insistent on the role of materiality in metaphors and imagination, indicating that metaphors have a material

basis. In metaphor, one thing is understood in terms of another, which is exactly the kind of situation in which certain semiotic potentials are enabled while others are constrained in order to let two fields interact and produce new affordances. Ricoeur (1994) notes that the metaphorical use of language and the imagination are bases for the very basic human faculties of empathy and intersubjectivity. These faculties are also needed when diverse historical or cultural fields are paired in order to grasp an understanding of the others' social worlds. Thus, we can also create fictive worlds through imagination: they are directed elsewhere – or even nowhere – and they can open up new dimensions of reality. These kinds of unseen worlds that are imperceptible are often characterized as mythic. If, instead of on the untrue and insensible, we focus on the material basis of the metaphors and metaphoric thinking and the techniques and efforts of making the unseen perceptible during narration and ritual, we will be able to cross the line between sensible and insensible in language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 185–194; Keane 2008: 121–122; Ricoeur 1994).

Returning to mythic knowledge, I would like to summarize what has been said above and argue that mythic knowledge not only *reflects* the realms inhabited by the interpretive community but also is *part of it* and in constant dynamic relations with the other parts. The knowledge cannot exist, circulate, or become signified or imagined without the material objects and practices with which it is enmeshed. Making connections between different realms using metaphors, verbal art renders agency to kinds of agents that cannot be otherwise sensed and perceived. Following Keane (2007: 19), I would like to emphasize that although the texts are objectified and despite the regimes organizing the movement and interpretations of the community, the way language, non-linguistic signs, and other materialities become bundled and signified is not a totalizing system.

Hence, in the following, I shall read Nenets mythic narration and shamanic rituals as an arena of possible significations in which material objects, such as voice, repeatable texts, mammoth remains, ritual scenes, and gestures, come together. The research material consists of archived or published texts of folklore. The main body of the texts was collected by Castrén (2018) in the mid-19th century and Lehtisalo (1947) in the beginning of the 20th century. Both Finns carried out fieldwork among speakers of Finnish-related languages in order to collect material that would open up knowledge about the history of the Finnish and the Finns. Later, Soviet scholars did remarkable documentation and publication work in a more colonial context, which has also provided fine source material (Kuprijanova 1965; Puškarëva and Xomič 2001; Tereščenko 1990). All of these collections have served the so-called text-centered paradigm (Frog and Savolainen 2016: 21–30) that does not give attention to the contexts and pragmatics of oral tradition. I aim to

move beyond the texts collected and analyze the material, non-linguistic contexts with which the oral tradition has been enmeshed.

4 Bones and tusks in the landscape and as material

One of the curious features of the mammoth as a mythic being is that it is so conspicuously physically present, accessible through perception. The mammoth and the consequences of its movement can be perceived in the tundra landscape, where the mammoth bones and tusks appear on the surface of the earth, often in river banks and landslides. As has been noted by Arzyutov, the visual and material traces are one of the grounds for the "in-betweenness" of the mammoth – that is, the recurrent idea of it being at the same time "extant but not extinct" (2019: 144). The remnants found on and in the earth are also the obvious reason for the frequent Tundra Nenets determinator, *ya*[2] 'earth' for phenomena related to mammoth remains: *ya' ngamuratè* 'earth's gorger', *ya' nyamd* 'earth's horn', *ya' xora* 'earth's male [animal]'. The name *ya' ngamuratè* 'earth's gorger', a being who seems to cause the landslides, is one of the terms that has been related to the mammoth in everyday language (Lehtisalo 1956: 86). It emphasizes not the material remains but the consequences of the movements of a being living under the earth, near its surface. In addition to the gorger, which can be related to the neighboring Khanty and Mansi folklore, Tundra Nenets has a more frequently used name, *ya' xora* 'earth's male [animal]', which is related to the remains, bones, and tusks that one comes across in the tundra. Tundra Nenets *xora* denotes a "male animal, wild reindeer bull, ox; stallion, ram; milt" (Lehtisalo 1956: 87, 191; also Lehtisalo 1932: 12). As we can see, the range of the meanings is large, from a quite general name for a male animal to special meanings related to uncastrated male animals. Because of the multiple occurrences of Nenets translations, I take as a point of departure that the *xora* in *ya' xora* denotes a male reindeer. Accordingly, the mammoth remains are imagined in terms of a male reindeer.

In addition to the above-mentioned metaphors tied to mammoth remains, there are other phenomena that relate to mammoth material remains in the Nenets mythic poetry. The word *ya' nyamd* 'earth's horn' denotes the tusks that can be found in the earth. Some epic heroes possess *ya' nyamd yagcya*, namely a batlet made of mammoth tusk[3] (Kuprijanova 1965: 470, 507), arrows with mammoth bone

2 Tundra Nenets is transliterated according to the system introduced in Niemi and Lapsui (2004, 10), except for the schwa, which is not indicated with °.

heads (*arka ya' xora xewa' li' mungg*; Kuprijanova 1965: 221, 477, 521), or drums made of mammoth tusk (*ya' nyamd' pyenzyer*; Lehtisalo 1956: 87).

The lexical examples above show how the very material remains of mammoths are treated in Tundra Nenets. The recurrent mode of talking about the remains is a metaphor that emphasizes the earth itself, on the one hand, and the non-human characteristics of the remains, on the other. These parts of the metaphor point to different affordances in the semiosis. The direction of the earth as an affordance opens up the underworld as a place with life but constrains us from seeing how things really happen there. This has to be imagined, and the bones and tusks make it possible. The remains obviously point to an animal, which is big, and as the Nenets are familiar with working animals, their meat, and their bones, the idea of a quadruped with similar structure to elks or reindeer is an evident inference. The tusks have been imagined in terms of horns, which tells about the semiotic affordances of the tusks themselves, as well as the constraints that the contemporary fauna sets to the semiosis: the tusk was not an option, but a horn was. Consequently, the earth underneath, hiding from our senses, is opened up in the material remains of the mammoth, *ya' xora*. The mythic and shamanic value – the religious power – of the mammoth remains is built as much through these materialities as it is through the mythic poetry that renders sensible those mythic worlds that are insensible in the everyday nomadic life. These sensibilities add mythic value and thus the avoidance of the remains in the everyday. In order to understand how the mythic value of the remains is narrated, we shall first look at the ideas about *ya' xora* as a herd, then move deeper into the possibilities of coexistence with them.

5 The *Syixyirtya* – Herders of the *ya' xora*

In the context of Nenets ethnography, the mammoths are most often discussed together with the *Syixyirtya*, a community of beings living under the earth (e.g., Lašuk 1968; Lukin 2011: 172–194; Xomič 1970). The *Syixyirtya* images and motives are both historical and mythic in nature, such that the Nenets connect archaeological findings such as dwellings and utensils as well as mammoth remains to the narratives that tell about their visits to worlds that are beyond everyday perception (see Černecov 1935: 125–130; Golovnëv 1992; Lepexin 1805: 203; Vasil'ev 1979: 48; Xomič 1976: 55–60). Myth and history interact in a powerful way in these narratives, situating places in which one has been or can be in

3 *Yagcya* or *yanggac'* are batlets for clearing seats, clothes, or earth of snow (see Lehtisalo 1932: 63; Xomič 1966: 110).

contact with both historical and mythic beings around the everyday landscape of the Nenets. The *Syixyirtya* are conceptualized as people who once lived on the earth but moved under for one reason or another. Consequently, the chronological and mythic history are in tension in *Syixyirtya* imageries and narration. The world of the *Syixyirtya* is, on the one hand, imagined as a historical realm of which one knows through remains but, on the other, also as a mythic one, with which one can get into contact through unexpected encounters. In this imagery, the above-mentioned affordances related to the earth underneath and the animal structure provide an important point of departure.

The *Syixyirtya* world is an underworld that mirrors the Nenets everyday life. This underworld is referred to in everyday conversational narration, *wa"al*, and in mythic narratives, *xebyidya laxanako*. In the narration, the *Syixyirtya* are imagined as a community of unusual good. Their life is joyful, and they are wealthy and beautiful. They might also be said to be extraordinarily strong, although small in stature. The happiness and plenty of the *Syixyirtya* becomes echoed in the picture according to which they have mammoths as their reindeer. Thus, not only are the archaeological findings related to *Syixyirtya*, but other materialities of the earth are also bundled with them. The mammoths, whose remnants and traces of activities can be perceived in the tundra, are imagined as the herd of the *Syixyirtya*. The *Syixyirtya* world resides close to the surface of the earth, and the border between the Nenets and the *Syixyirtya* world is porous and easily crossed. Narratives about unexpected encounters with *Syixyirtya*, who vanish as sudden as they appear to a person who moves alone in the tundra, form a popular body of everyday narration. One can also end up in a *Syixyirtya* tent through holes in the earth, especially on top of conically-shaped hills. The narratives about people who have wed *Syixyirtya* or had a child abducted by them also belong to the imageries around the underworld (Lukin 2011: 172–194; Xomič 1970).

In the narratives, the earth, *ya*, as a material thing is something that is shared with *Syixyirtya*. Nevertheless, the earth serves not only as a porous and crossable material, which enables the encounters both with *Syixyirtya* and their mammoth herds but also as a plane that turns the worlds into metaphorical relations. The earthly is understood in terms of the human world above the earth, but it is also different from and in contrast with the human world. This comes up in two ways. First, the human and *Syixyirtya* communities are parallel societies that are often compared and described through hyperbole or contrast. For instance, the underworld community's gigantic dimensions are told together with the shortness of the beings that people claim to have seen. As often happens with narration, the imageries bundle together so that the *Syixyirtya* community is a wealthy community contrasted with the human one and can share characteristics with the community of the deceased, which is also a parallel community for the living Nenets. The beauty of the *Syixyirtya* girls, for example, tends to be blended with ideas about

their shabby clothes and scary eyes. The possibility of obtaining the valuable *Syixyirtya* items is at the heart of such narration. It is based on the idea of reciprocity: the items accidentally left by *Syixyirtya* on the ground should not be taken without consent or leaving something in exchange.

The *Syixyirtya* community is in metaphorical relation to the human community, and the *ya' xora* are in metaphorical relation to the Nenets reindeer herds. Although the *Syixyirtya* narratives emphasize the difference between the human and the non-human community in multiple ways, they also point to the shared features of these communities. It is in terms of Nenets community that the life of the *Syixyirtya* becomes imaginable. This applies also to *ya' xora*, which is imagined in terms of reindeer, as an animal that can be herded, harnessed, ridden, and lived with. The narration also tends to highlight that Nenets and *Syixyirtya* communities share the land or earth, and each is to respect the other's existence on the other side of the earth surface. What is more, when the *ya' xora* are depicted as herds of the *Syixyirtya*, the material remains of the mammoths gain their meaning in terms reindeer, but through the *Syixyirtya*. The *ya' xora* are seen as a herd, but nothing about their relationship to the *Syixyirtya* is known or told about.

Secondly, the earthly as different from or in contrast with the human community comes out in the ways in which *Syixyirtya* encounters are narrated, how this affects Nenets dwelling and movement in the tundra, and their caution with the mammoth remains. What is typical for the *Syixyirtya* narration is that the beings are encountered not only suddenly but also when one is alone or far away from other members of the community. The earth, when journeyed so that it produces social distance, becomes a potentiality, which, in the context of *Syixyirtya* narratives, is typically made use of as a strategy of narration: it creates tension and expectation around the encounters. On the other hand, this kind of narrative also affects movement in the environment: those most vulnerable should not walk alone in the tundra, and social distance is allowed only to those who have technical and practical knowledge of the environment and its beings and the abilities needed to move through the tundra. While this sentient ecology (Anderson 2000: 116–134) has been mostly related to knowing the landscape and the animals, it also includes the other non-human agents, such as the *Syixyirtya* and their mammoths.

6 The spirits and coexistence

In contrast to the *Syixyirtya* narratives, mythic poetry and prose portrays *ya' xoras* as non-human partners of heroes and shamans. The following example was noted down by M. A. Castrén, presumably during his first expedition around 1842 and 1843. It is an excerpt from a longer and more complicated plot, in which three brothers,

after being married, experience conflict with families who have already negotiated marriage with the same family. The brothers end up waging war with their adversaries. In its contents and poetics, the narrative represents a typical Tundra Nenets *syudbabts*, a sung, epic poem with godly, human-like heroes (see Kuprijanova 1965: 27–40; Lukin 2017; Niemi 1998; Puškarëva 2001: 29–31). In the course of the events, the younger brother is separated from the two older ones. Before leaving to seek them, he gives his wife advice to follow in case she needs company. He tells her to walk along the shore of a lake in order to find company. As time passes after her husband leaves, the wife walks long along the coast of the lake:

Nyumde minyelnga'
toyenda' pewan'
xami'
toya' maran,
marawna yada
(Castrén 2018: 247)

[carried her son
to the river mouth of the lake
she left
along the shores of the lake
along the shores she walked]

She arrives at the camp of Xatarye xabt, whose wife advises the woman and her son to continue further along the coastline, saying:

ya' nyernya
to' marawna
aryi xayedyi"
myado' xongudyi",
syidya ya' xora
syi"yiwboyi myato"
nyadaryi' xodyi".

[forward
along the shores of the lake
go further
you will find tents
of two ya' xoras
seven tents
you will find friends for yourselves.]

The wife continues her wandering and finds the seven tents of Two Ya' Xoras.

Anyi xayaxa
Syi”yiw myatan’ tewyaxa
syidya ya’ xora
nyom ne’
tyekaxartad’
weseyi me’
xasawa nyumdye
myatan’ tyulye,
wesako manyiyeda:
“tyuki atseki
nyanaeyi nyeru yu’”
Nye ma’:
“nyadu xosiyam.”
syidya ya’ xora
ya’ ngild
myudm’ tarpara
to maran
tawredo
nye tyi
nye atseki xaryeda.
(Castrén 2018: 247–248.)

[again they two left
they came to the seven tents
Two ya’ xoras’
door she opened
from the previous
older was [the man in the tent]
her son
she took to the tent
the old man said to her
“this boy
is a real Nyeru yu’
the woman said:
“I am looking for a friend for myself.”
two ya’ xoras
under the earth
took a caravan

to the shore of the lake
they took [the caravan]
the woman sat
a girl rode.]

After the successful alignment, the whole camp of Two Ya' Xoras leaves for the camp of Xatarye xabt, where also other partners of the family gather. This negotiation happens in the end of the epic poem, and the spiritual strength of Two Ya' Xoras ends up benefitting the three brothers in their wars. The strength is indexed by the bundles of the materialities of the landscape and the characters and non-human beings within. To open the bundles, we should first look at the journey of the wife, then give attention to the *ya' xora* 'mammoth'. The woman walks first towards the river mouth of the lake *toyenda pewan* 'along the shores of the lake' and arrives at the camp of Xatarye xabt, from where she continues to the camp *ya' nyernya, to' marawna* 'forward [across the land], along the shores of the lake.' Her journey takes her along the water, and she ends up in the camp where *ya' xoras* 'mammoths' are available. These kinds of passages close to water or through water lead, in the mythic worlds, towards the underworld. In the poem above, thus, the husband had sent his wife to find allies in the underworld.

The underworld is built poetically with the help of materialities and the metaphors built on them. The imagined, what is beyond the senses, is made reachable through modes that can be sensed, the discourse. In the Tundra Nenets mythic discourse, the characters can reach the underworld, with its non-human agents, by walking or otherwise travelling often long distances that are usually embellished. The journey and the distance act as figures of speech of reaching the underworld. The journeys take place in the familiar tundra landscape, which the expressions of temporal and spatial distance transform into the Otherworld (Lukin 2015a, 2015b; Tarkka 2013: 385–391). In the extract above, the distance is constructed with the help of narrating repeating passages of walking. Moreover, the names of the characters encountered during the journey emphasize the advancement of the journey. The wife first arrives at the camp of *Xatarye xabt*, meaning literally 'Spotted Reindeer Male', and, only after that, at the camp of 'Two Earthly Reindeer Males', of Mammoths. One should note that *syidya ya' xora* 'Two Ya' Xoras [Earthly Reindeer Males]' is here a personal name for a mythic being, indicating him having (two) *ya' xoras* at his disposal. Similarly, *Xatarye xabt* is not a spotted reindeer but a mythic character who rides with spotted reindeer (also Kuprijanova 1965: 459–504). In the extract above, the underworld and the journey there are described through scant figures of speech, which is why the *ya'*

xora gets weighty status as amplifier of the underworldliness of the landscape. In other words, because the *ya' xoras* are attached to the underworld in Tundra Nenets imageries of the Otherworld, they can also be used to index it. In the Otherworld of the mythic landscape, the *ya' xoras* are reachable and available for use as reindeer-like animals. The layers are represented concretely, when Two Ya' Xoras takes his caravan *ya' ngild* 'from under the earth'.

Above, I noted that mythic poetry can be treated as knowledge that shamans use in ritual contexts. Ritual contexts are themselves also treated in mythic narration that provides us with information about the landscapes of the shamanic séance, which shares the mythic landscapes already described. In the following, I summarize a myth telling about the origins of Likas xexe 'Likas spirit'.[4] The narrative was told by a Nenets shaman, Syamp Laptsui, in the town of Obdorsk, Western Siberia, during the winter of 1911–12 to Toivo Lehtisalo, a Finnish linguist who worked among the Nenets in the beginning of the 20th century. The narrative tells about a poor man who leaves for the Arctic Ocean on a hunting trip. As in the *Syixyirtya* narratives, the spatial and social distance produces a potential for encounters with the Otherworld, and the lonely hunter is pulled into a whirlpool and finds himself in the tent of the *Yid' yerw* 'Water Spirit'. Whirlpools function often as a channel to the underworld in Nenets narration. In this story, the social and spatial distance and the water as an index of the underworld is coupled with the concrete image of going under: "yid' ngilna xernyeryida xayi. Tad tasyi maran tewmaxadanta, syilyi': nganyi yid' yerw yiryinta mya", syi"yiw mokadada. Syi"yiw mokodanta syer' syi"yiw ngewa' pa"neruyi." [[He] left under the water [as a] humming. Then, having arrived on the other side of the sand, he looked around: the tent of the Water Spirit, his grandfather with seven smoke holes, was further. In the seven smoke holes, there were seven [spirits] with pointed heads.]

The environmental affordances of the distance – the water and whirlpool as a channel to the underworld – are consolidated with images that index the nonexistent: tents with seven smoke holes and their guardians with pointed heads. These are not *Syixyirtya*, who offer a parallel, metaphorical community for the Nenets. These are spirits, whose world is narrated in terms of the Nenets materialities with mythic qualities. The mythic qualities are based on linguistic conventions that index them: in the extract above, that convention is the word seven.

4 The field of meanings of *xexe* is extremely complicated and context-dependent, which is implied by, e.g., Xomič 1966: 199–208. While this is clearly another very interesting point between language and materiality, I shall not discuss it here, where readers must be content with the term 'spirit', a being that often has a wooden or stone representation of itself in the landscape.

The Water Spirit says that he has called the man because he wants to ask him to travel further to the underworld, beyond the Icy Mountains, to meet *Ngerm' xora*, the male [reindeer] of the North.[5] The Water Spirit explains that *Ngerm' xora* has stolen the fish shoals, and the man should go to *Ngerm' xora* and take the fish back so that the people will no longer starve. Having received a silver shaman drum from the Water Spirit, the man decides to leave for the north, but before that, he goes back to his own tent, where his wife advises him to use her father's *ya' xora* 'mammoth' for traveling. This is what the man decides to do:

> Tad yiryinta nyeneyi pyenzerm' yadyemta. Tad syi"iw ngedalawa xenggatada. Ngawo' yolcyenggana ya' xora xabt tobta tibaru towantu.Tyiki yaxad ya' xora xabtanta nyi tyi". Syi'yiwxaw yalya syi"yiw salaba xoyi nyimnya tobsryida myari". Syibimdeyi yalyanta ngadyimgawa Ngerm' xora nyimnya ngadimya. (Lehtisalo 1947: 27)

> [Then, he warmed up the silver drum of his grandfather [i.e., the Water Spirit]. Then, he glided seven passages. At some point, the pawing of the *ya' xora* ox approaching was heard. From this place he sat on the *ya' xora* ox. Sevenish days the paws spread on the Seven Icy Mountains. As the seventh day came, *Ngerm' xora* could be seen above.]

This is a description of an opening of a shamanic séance that relies much on inference – i.e., audience's anticipatory knowledge of the séance and shamanic ritual poetry, as well as on the rituals' metaphoric ties to reindeer-herding imageries (Puškarëva 1999). In recent studies on reindeer herding, this nomadic way of life has been examined through the lens of reciprocity of reindeer and humans and the need for both parties to have freedom of movement and protection in the shared landscape (Anderson 2014, 2017; Anderson et al. 2017; Davydov 2014; Stammler 2005; Stepanoff 2012; Stépanoff et al. 2017). This comes close to Anderson's 'sentient ecology' noted above (2000: 117–131), where "knowing the land" requires more than mapping it – it is about being aware of and engaged with the other sentient beings around one. This kind of knowing is also crucial for mythic poetry as knowledge, which, in a similar manner, is built not only on knowing the non-human others but also on sharing the mythic landscape with them in a flexible manner.

The shaman's journey takes place in the unseen and imagined reality, while the shaman himself physically stays in the ritual setting. The imagined journey takes the material shape in the words that tie the shaman to the everyday materialities of reindeer herding and riding. The shamanistic séance is bundled with the practices of reindeer riding and the engagement with the landscape through knowing not only the physical appearance but the relations of other beings in the same landscape. The riding and the reindeer are tied to the séance not only through

5 According to Yelena Puškarëva, Ngerm' xora is a character that is often connected to the Arctic Ocean and hostility towards the humans (2007: 74).

the material qualities of the non-human agent and its harnessing, but also through recurrent materialities of the sounds. The description of the séance begins in the warming-up of the drum, which is one of the central parts of the séance in the ritual setting: the sound of the drum is the material that carries the shaman to the worlds that cannot be seen but only heard through the shaman's singing (Dobžanskaja 2008: 88–90; Niemi and Lapsui 2004: 27–29). The expression *ngedalawa* in the phrase *syi"iw ngedalawa xengatada* 'seven passages [he] glided' denotes a journey one can take with a sledge without disruption. At the same time, it refers to the action of riding and to the distance and acts as a standard measure (Lehtisalo 1932: 61; Lukin 2015b). Riding with a sledge is also a metaphor used for the travel that the shaman takes during the ritual. The mythic worlds, then, are reachable in the ritual through actions that are expressed in terms of riding a light reindeer sledge – or the sledge *gliding*, to be precise – and the geographical distances related to that. After the seven passages, *ya' xora xabt tobta tiberu towanta* 'ya' xora ox's pawing was heard'. This is again an idiom that indexes a ritual setting and the presence of an otherworldly, non-human being. The *ya' xora xabt* is coming closer, because the man shamanizing is obviously calling him to come for help. The imagery materially tied to reindeer, *tobta tiberu* 'his paws pawing', opens up a scene with an animal pawing the earth or snow in search of food or anticipation of a ride. As the *ya' xora* arrives, the man sits on it and takes the journey to *Ngerm' xora*. The journey is long, and it takes him through the Seven Icy Mountains until the *Ngerm' xora* comes into sight.

The Icy Mountains are the darkest parts of the underworld, and it is only the *ya' xora* who can travel there. The narrative's agents are mythic actors and are thus in metaphorical relation to the contemporary Nenets community but in a different sense than the *Syixyirtya*. While the *Syixyirtya* are historical and mythic beings, whose life is often contrasted with that of the Nenets, the mythic actors are situated in mythic history. Mythic history, together with its actors, is in metaphoric relation with contemporary, chronological time and people (Hastrup 1987; Siikala 1991; 2002: 327–328). Accordingly, the mythic actors' deeds occur in mythic history, which produced the world order. The man's deeds end in him becoming a spirit with whom the Nenets still communicate through rituals, whereas the *Syixyirtya* can be encountered outside the ritual contexts. The *Syixyirtya* community's metaphoricity depicts a contemporary community living beyond the everyday landscape in the underworld, while myth depicts a historical world whose agents have acted in times before the contemporary historical one. Hence, the narration regiments different layers of the unseen underworld: the porous one, which is shared with the *Syixyirtya* and suddenly and unexpectedly encountered, and the mythic one that can be evoked through ritual practices. Both take advantage of the potentialities of the earth, reindeer, and movement and of the repeatable elements of

the language that create expectations and recreate unseen worlds with the help of linguistic practices.

7 Conclusion

In this article, I have opened up and sketched different parts of a Nenets bundle tied to the findings of mammoth remains and text-artifacts representing Nenets verbal art. These form a network of mythic knowledge that cannot be understood either only in terms of poetry and poetics or only in terms of materialities. Instead, they form a semiotic whole, where different signs interact and create potentials for new significations. It is crucial that the mythic worlds that cannot be perceived and are invisible are, firstly, narrated and thus become sensible and, secondly, also imagined in terms of materialities. Furthermore, the key material elements of mythic knowledge are tainted by the narration so that they cannot be considered without mythic qualities. Third, the kind of knowledge concerning the world affects Nenets ways of dwelling, their movement in the tundra, and their rituals. I have used text-artifacts as my source material, with the presumption that they contain objectified elements that have circulated among the Nenets, though in different times and communities. I am not suggesting a totalizing system based on the sources but rather have aimed to open up the marvelous web of relations where materialities of differing ages and durabilities meet and affect each other through their semiotic potentialities. In addition to the semiotic affordances of signs and the objectified language, I also emphasized the importance of a regime that organizes the signification in the beginning of this article. As a conclusion, I would like to untie and weave the bundle again, in order to discuss the system that regiments the kinds of semiosis that I have sketched.

My argument is that mammoths are signified within the system of what refers to sentient ecology (Anderson 2000) and the ontologies of cooperation, which include an ambiguous scheme of simultaneous comfort and control between human and non-human agents. These are most visible and analyzed in the contexts of reindeer herding and hunting but significantly inform Nenets ritual practices and become involved in the Nenets ways of movement and dwelling in the tundra. It should be remarkable that the very mundane and everyday practices of gathering reindeer in the corral and riding the sledge are inherent in the metaphoricity of the ritual, and it is important to note that it is not only about understanding the Otherworld in terms of the everyday but also about bringing the non-human actors under the same regime of cooperation, comfort, and control. The world of the spirits is available through mythic poetry and prose and shamanic sessions, in which the spirits are called for and gathered and are spoken to as if they were the herds of the shaman. However, they are also spoken to as

if they were the closest relatives and allies, partners with whom the Nenets interact as they interact with other human beings.

What is more, the sentient ecology regimes the Otherworld, its presence, and communication with it within the faculties of movement and communication. As Anderson has noted, sentient ecology is about knowing the land and its human and non-human agents, and this knowledge enables one to move farther alone. The Nenets share their environment with multiple human and non-human agents, and knowledge regarding their life, existence, and movements is crucial in the Nenets engagement with the tundra. This regime is most obvious in the context of *Syixyirtya* narratives, where one is prone to encounter the *Syixyirtya* when the social and spatial distance is greater. Nevertheless, the sentient ecology concerns also the Otherworld, where the shaman also must know where their spirit helpers are and from whom to ask for them. The strength of the shaman is tied to their knowledge of the Otherworld in the same sense as knowing in the sentient ecology is tied to travels in this world. The spirits are allies and partners of the Nenets heroes or shamans, and they inhabit the parallel, imaginative, mythic worlds.

Returning to the mammoths, I emphasize that the environment informs the imagination: the earth, the findings, and the parts and whole skeletons of mammoths provide points of departure for the imagination. However, the environment makes many things also insensible: the fragile and fragmented findings appear on the surface from under the earth, which is imagined both as past and mythic realm. Though their earthly quality links the *ya' xora* to the underworld, one must cross the line from the material remnants to the imaginative worlds that cannot be seen but only narrated about and come back to the very material practices of reindeer herding and link them to the virtual social systems that frame the Nenets society.

In these conceptualizations, we might think that we are moving far away from materiality, the physical environment, and the material remains of the mammoths found in the Nenets tundras. However, the root metaphor of the *ya' xora* is never lost. It ties the beings in Nenets mythology and the environment where the Nenets live to the findings made under the earth but also to reindeer herding, its practices, and the general domestication of animals. The *ya' xora*, the mythic spirit helper, the mammoth, is a domesticated being.

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