

## RELIGION, GENDER AND ETHNIC ORGANIZATION

The focus of this article is on the mutual relations between the feminine orientation, the every-day character of traditional culture (including religion), marginality and possibilities of women's traditions to be transformed into a part of an ethnic cultural movement. I shall concretize the problems by means of Vepsian feasts, which are called **'avowed feasts' (zavetni praznikad in the Veps language)**.

My approach to civil society is to emphasize civil activism. As T.H. Rigby puts it: "the most central component in understandings of civil society is the salience of socially relevant activity and relationships which are more or less autonomous of the state", (Rigby 1991, 107). But later on I will explore what this 'socially relevant activity and relationships' could be. It is a question of value and concerns the visibility of the activity; therefore it is also a question of gender.

Organizations like trade unions, organizations of the intelligentsia, new political parties, etc., have been studied. It seems to me that Western researchers tend to overestimate civil activity like 'green' eco-campaigns. The campaigns of these groups have been visible, they have been quite popular in the Western mass media. Paradoxically, when small Siberian nations have been fighting for their lives (for the right to fish or hunt on their ancient land and when they try to protect their rivers from pollution, etc.) this does not seem to interest the Western media very much. Only people like Lennart Meri and other ethnographers have raised their voices. I see this kind of value judgment as a reflection of our own cultural and political system and the enormous influence of the mass media.

But strangely, scholars of civil society have not been interested in religious nor, as a matter of fact, ethnic movements either, at least in the early 1990s (see Alapuro 1993). This is connected with theories which define and divide societies and socio-cultural phenomena too narrowly into the modern and premodern or traditional. And all the sympathy is given to the modern ones. The concept of nationalism is according to this line.

William Maley is very typical in his tone. In his article "Ethnonationalism and Civil Society in the USSR" he separates two types of nationalism, communitarian nationalism and extended-order nationalism. 'Communitarian nationalism' is characteristic of traditional societies, and 'extended-order nationalism' characteristic of diversified societies with complex productive processes based on contract; church and state are separate, (Maley 1991, 184-185).

The concept of two types of nationalism is generally accepted. For instance, among the Russian scholars, L.D. Gudkov speaks of 'open' (otkryti) and 'closed' (zakryti) nationalism: 'closed' nationalism is rooted in language, race, common origin, culture, cultural symbols, and the locality. It is easy to notice that these criteria are the most typical ethnic ones. 'Open' nationalism is connected more with a socio-political community, it is more political (Gudkov 1994, p. 176). Both these scholars, and many others as well, take examples of 'negative' nationalism from the Caucasus and other, mostly Islamic, parts of Russia and of the 'positive' nationalism from the Baltic countries.

Along with the process of liberation in Russia, there has been a radical change in the interpretation of national movements, made by Russian and Western scholars. Before the collapse of the Soviet regime, national activity was welcomed (see Starovojtova, 1989). Today this sort of activity is regarded as something which destroys unity. Most Western scholars seem to agree with this opinion. Some Russian ethnographers, who as a matter of fact are studying ethnic problems, also share this view (see Cheshko, 1994, 36; Paun, 1994). In Cheshko's opinion 'ethnos' and 'ethnicity' are some sort of myth, invented by ethnologists (Cheshko 1994, 36).

On the other hand, many ethnographers criticize the polarized opinion concerning the nationality question in Russia. They support some sort of cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities (Starovojtova 1990, Drobizheva 1994, S.Ja. Kozlov 1995, V.I. Kozlov 1995, M.N. Guboglo 1995, Heikkinen & Mullanen 1994). For instance, Leokadija Drobizheva states that the non-Russian population is nowadays forgotten, that Russia is regarded as a Russian state, which is defined as Russian (russkij) and not a multinational state. She speaks about consensus-democracy, which should also include the rights of minorities. To achieve this it is necessary to develop mass-media - to give people 'a voice' (Drobizheva

1994, 188-189, 192-193).

We now come to the point. In most Western theories of civil society **publicity** is one of the main factors or spaces in which civil actions take place. This is a reality that ethnic movements also have to face. They have to make themselves visible and gain a voice. Ethnic movements as movements cannot be hidden; they have to organize some sort of public display and symbolic action. They must be seen and heard. In other words, they have to 'invent' useful traditions (according to Hobsbawm 1983). But on the other hand, it is common knowledge that women and the public sphere do not come together well.

### **Zavetan praznikad**

I shall now explore some less public traditions among Veps and then compare them with more organized and public forms of old traditions. The old zavetni praznikad-feasts have been preserved in Vepsian villages until the present-day. The structure of the feast is briefly as follows: women and children gather at a certain place, to which they take icons and gifts; an icon is placed on either the chapel altar or on an altar erected outside; prayers are said; the women pass beneath the icons, kissing them; they go down to the water; the icons are "washed" and the water is blessed; the holy water is taken in bottles. The women may, depending on the time of year, go for a ritual dip (Vinokurova 1988, 1989, Heikkinen 1992, 1995). The performers of the rites are women. Women also act as 'priests', which is unique and as a matter of fact strictly forbidden by the Orthodox Church.

What struck me most at the feast was the lack of show, the way the women worked together, the simplicity of the ritual and the intensity of the spiritual charge. There was little outward splendour or aesthetic element in the conventional sense. There is nothing showy about these feasts.

In trying to understand the existence of the feasts in question I consider their special social and political environment as being decisive. For they clearly involve **marginality**. As regards the structure of the cultural field of the former Soviet Union, which been officially was an atheistic state, they to a very great extent represent a form of unofficial culture.

### **Traditions becoming visible**

The Vepsian movement has developed some organized forms of festivals (prazdnik). The so-called "Tree of Life" festival has been held ever since 1991. It consists of gatherings, speeches, amateur concerts, different games, marketing (jarmanka), drinking and eating. Some Vepsian symbols (eg, the Vepsian flag) are displayed. Some Vepsian folk beliefs (forest spirits) have been concretized as types of fairy-tale characters. National festivals such as these have been developed among every minority nation in Russia. The structure is similar to the so-called 'new Soviet feasts' (novie sovetskie obrjady) which were developed earlier, but without the Soviet and antireligious tendencies (see Budina & Shmeleva, 1989, Budina 1994, Heikkinen 1985, Lane 1981). Vepsian and other Finno-Ugric festivals are quite popular. They demonstrate the rising ethnic consciousness of the Finno-Ugric people.

### **Summa summarium**

But there is another side of entering the public sphere. I believe it is thematically and emotionally quite narrow and limited to just develop formal folklore festivals and other performances. Even if I could accept such a theory of civil society which emphasizes the importance of visibility provided by public opinion and official institutions, it is indeed essential for an ethnic movement to come forward and be accepted. But a movement such as this is only capable of cultivating a small part of ethnic heritage. In addition to the language, elements can be used which tend to develop into aesthetically-beautiful performances. The most deeply-rooted elements in every-day life tend to resist this kind of cultivation. And like most phenomena in every-day life they concern women more. They are performed in the private sphere without aesthetic components and power elements. They are ethnic in the very primary sense of this definition. They are by nature unconscious and carried on by every-day routine, as Anthony Giddens maintains (Giddens 1984). When ethnicity 'lives' in this way, it is difficult to mobilize it for some rational

purpose. This type of manipulation is, of course, necessary in the organized Vepsian movement, but it involves the same dilemma which is so familiar in many fields of women's culture.

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