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СЕВЕРОВЕДЕНИЕ

V. Skvirskaja

'NENETS MARRIAGE': THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DESIRE AND MATRIMONIAL EMOTIONS

ABSTRACT. Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the northern Yamal Peninsula (2000–2001), this paper discusses people's experiences and expectations of married life and how these expectations are influenced by affective ties to a wide range of relations. Two types of marriage — arranged marriage and love marriages between Nenets women and Russian newcomers — are used to illustrate the ways in which marriage is not only about the sentiments of spouses, but often brings to the fore the political economy of desire and local reflections on the good society. The paper suggests that while Soviet ideology and post-Soviet neo-traditionalist discourses have endorsed particular emotional registers deemed appropriate for 'traditional' Nenets marriage, marriage with Russians often leads to a situation where love, attraction or the excitement of 'alien romance' (Tsing 1993) are not necessarily tied to a nuclear family ideal. It argues that while issues of mobility and spatial orientation (to tundra or settlement) in marriage strategies do not remain static over the course of one's life, tundra marriage is commonly underwritten by subjectively understood chances of leading a good family life.

Keywords: kinship obligations, relatedness, spatial orientation, gender, Yamal

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INTRODUCTION

This paper suggests an new perspective on the question of ‘native families’, and marriage strategies and choices among rural indigenous dwellers of Yamal Peninsula, Arctic Siberia. It departs from the common, indeed dominant, narrative put forward by both representatives of the native intelligentsia and ethnographers, which describes the collapse of ‘traditional’ family structures and negative changes in gender relations among Russian Northern indigenous minorities.¹ In brief, their point is that many native women, preferring village/town modernity, no longer wish to live in the choom. The respective spaces of the village and the tundra are marked by the presence of two complementary social categories — single herders and hunters in the tundra and taiga, and single mothers in the village. The tundra or forest is reported to be unattractive for women, who perceive it as an impoverished and moving domestic space devoid of sociality with other women (Anderson 2002: 38). Since the 1990s, this discourse on the erosion of traditional family values has become integral to the ideology of neo-traditionalism and the pronatalist agenda of the Orthodox Church and the state (see Rivkin-Fish 2010). The argument advanced here is not simply that the situation in Nenets communities on Yamal is unique or different from other Russian regions (e. g. Lyarskaia 2010), but that an different vocabulary and focus would allow us better to understand ethnographic realities on the ground.

This alternative engages women’s own perspectives on marriage and their marriage options. Following insights from the ethnography of international matchmaking in Russia. Research in this area demonstrates that to explain the matrimonial decisions of Russian women marrying foreigners with reference to economic considerations and global asymmetries alone is a simplification: economic issues do not exist in social and emotional vacuum, and the emotional experiences of real people have to be at the forefront of analyses (Patico 2010). That is to say that the political economy of gender systems and people’s desire are recognised as central to marriage strategies.

When I tried to understand women’s spatial orientation (to tundra or village) following the established logic, my interlocutors responded by talking about their relations with various kin, their emotional well-being and expectations of the future. When women were simply evaluating different spatial realms, those in the tundra claimed that women in the village had a nicer and much easier life, while women villagers would dismiss all such claims, pointing out that in the tundra women did not really ‘work’, but led a comfortable life as housewives and mothers. Notably, this contrasting rhetoric did not imply that my interlocutors were eager to swap places. The main contrast regarding marriage strategies that women highlighted was not between village and tundra, but between ‘old fashioned’, i. e. arranged marriage, and ‘ordinary

¹ For a detailed overview of literature dealing with these gendered dispositions and their various causes see e. g. Lyarskaia (2010).

marriage' where people married partners of their own choice. During the last five decades or so, these marriages have coexisted in the locality and have not differentiated successive generations. In this paper, I will discuss the political economy of desire and emotional dynamics that pertain to two generalizable types of marriage: arranged marriage and marriage to Russian newcomers. These two models can also be characterised as corresponding to what I call 'Soviet' and 'Russian' matrimonial styles respectively.

SOVIET MARRIAGE NENETS STYLE

Soviet ideological discourse on family and gender politics was inconsistent for decades (Skvirskaja 2006; Rivkin-Fish 2010), and the extent of its departure from Nenets cultural dispositions was not clear cut. From the perspective of non-indigenous, Slav migrants, and the general dogmas of Soviet Marxism, the nomadic way of life as well as the gender relations that supported it were seen as backward. Marriage payments, marriages arranged against the will of men and women, and polygamy were formally outlawed in the mid-1920s and equal civil rights for men and women were introduced. The Soviet legal system had, however, less impact on local practices than actual political economic arrangements and their ideological underpinnings. While generations of researchers have justifiably focused on the paternalistic role of the Soviet state in framing modern socialist family ideals and gender equality, the ways in which the Soviets naturalised pre-existing family forms have often been overlooked. For instance, care for the elderly was seen as a responsibility of the family — sending one's parents to an old people's home was stigmatised in both popular and state discourses alike. Although patriarchal authority was formally undermined in matters like marriages, this emphasis on obligations within the familial domain accorded well with practices in native communities.

The status of Soviet women is yet another example, although the female domestic role was devalued by prioritising employment and education as sources of social prestige, the state's concerns with declining birth rates, especially after World War II, also attached social status to women's role as child bearers. In the 1970s and 1980s, one-child families were deplored in the mass media as breeding grounds for egoistic individualism (Lapidus 1978: 265–302), while childbearing and childrearing were defined as 'women's mission'. In the late Soviet period, official encouragements to have larger families were backed up by informal practical measures on Yamal: to keep the ethnic statistics high, local medics were instructed not to promote contraceptives and they were not made available to native women (Skvirskaja 2006).

The post-Soviet media language of 'dying out' and 'degeneration' has also been used to describe Russia's demographic situation more generally (see Rivkin-Fish 2010). Yet, if in urban settings on the Russian mainland, the

unified ‘worker and mother’ might not fit some cultural stereotypes, among the indigenous herder and hunters on Yamal this ideal has replicated the gendered division of labour and been supported by employment structures within the (former, restructured) state farms. The state farm’s herders and hunters could have their wives, mothers and sisters join the production brigades as officially employed choom workers. To fit the official wage allocation per tundra brigade, herders’ wives or other female relatives have to share a fixed number of wages between themselves but they could also retain full pension rights and the status of (agricultural) workers.

Moreover, during Soviet times, native dwellers were subjected to a pronatalist discursive regime that saw a conjugal union as a ‘collective’ of equal members where both men and women were, first of all, workers and biological reproducers, rather than ‘lovers’. The repercussions of the puritan stance on sex (cf. ‘there is no sex in the Soviet Union’²) and its conflation with ‘traditional’ narratives (or narratives on indigenous practices and traditions) could still be heard in the tundra in the 2000s. Many of my female interlocutors told me that ‘love and looks do not matter for us and are not important for a good married life’. The desirable characteristics of an eligible spouse were that he or she be hardworking and have an agreeable character and agreeable kinsfolk. In casual conversations, some women in their forties and fifties openly denied interest in sexual matters and in front of younger women in the choom claimed that after childbirth a woman should do a *nibtrava* (purification rite in Nenets) and sleep again with her husband only when she was ready to have another child. Of course, not all of my married female acquaintances shared this attitude to sex, but the persistence of a discourse that undermined the importance of desire and eroticism was one of the reasons why arranged marriage had not lost its appeal and had not failed to produce families that were a focus of enduring emotional bonds.

RELATEDNESS AND POWER RELATIONS

A specific emotional register of ‘Soviet marriage Nenets style’ is related to its role in producing and maintaining emotional attachments and social networks that would hardly have been sustainable on their own. ‘Old-fashioned’, arranged marriage implied that various relations are renewed and reaffirmed in the local post-Soviet political economy. One such relation is ties of patronage and political power, the other is agnatic kinship; in both cases, material transfers are as important as the emotions they generate and sustain.

People of status and power, like for instance local-level officials, support their social standing by arranging and/or facilitating marriage for a wide circle

² The phrase was used by a Russian woman in 1986 during a television talk show between the USSR and the USA. Ever since, it has been used as a reference to puritanical attitudes towards sex in official Soviet mass culture.

of their kin and relations, thus cementing a loyal following. In the market-oriented economy, loyal following has also become increasingly important in securing membership and labour in various new economic enterprises, such as indigenous communes (*obshchina*, Russian) and shareholding companies. Arranged marriages help establish a 'match-maker' as a patron in kinship and social-economic networks, creating or strengthening alliances between asymmetrically positioned individuals. The arranged marriage of one of my tundra hostesses, whom I call Tatiana, can serve as an example of the emotional links established by match-making.

From an early age Tatiana had to master all basic women's skills to help in the choom of her ill mother. After graduating from eighth grade at boarding school, she went back to the tundra for the summer, but when the school-helicopter arrived in autumn to collect children for school she was told to stay in the tundra by the local official who had with him a herder called Igor. Two years later she was brought to the choom of Igor as his wife. When I met Tatiana, she had ten children with Igor and was content with her 'fate'. Both Tatiana and Igor considered themselves closely related to the official's family and used the story of their marriage to indicate that this relatedness was actively recognised by him.³ Both spouses were not only proud of this connection, but also actively encouraged their children to visit the official (a patron) and support various enterprises of his children.

My second example deals with the transfers of bride-price (*ne mir*, Nenets) that often accompany Nenets tundra marriage and are considered an important element in the formation of a marriage. As a normative practice, bride-price is paid in reindeer and should be equivalent to the dowry. People's insistence on the economic equivalence between bride-price and dowry disguises the emotional attachments (re-)created by these material transfers. The mother strives to provide for her daughter as richly as possible. Yet, the new wife's dowry should not make her too independent in the household of her in-laws. A new marriage is a joint endeavour of many people. My tundra hostesses mentioned that making their own choom together with their female in-laws was a way to 'make good relationships'.

Bride-price is, in turn, a token of respect shown to the bride's family. It is also seen as necessary to emotionally affirm and maintain the relationship between the new wife and a fraction of her agnates — the recipients of her bride-price — whom she leaves behind (e. g. brothers, uncles). Those agnates who volunteer to receive a share of the bride-price, commit themselves to a lifelong obligation to provide the woman with gifts every time she comes to visit their choom,⁴ and they are the ones whom the woman should visit. The emotional

³ Here it is important to acknowledge the difference between kinship and the idea of relatedness (Carsten 2000). On Yamal, formal structures of classificatory kinship and clans are used very selectively and pragmatically to regulate social life and recognise actual kin (e. g. Skvirskaja 2012).

⁴ See also Kharuchi (2001: 129).

dimension of bride-price becomes visible in cases where it is not given or accepted. One woman told me how upset she was when her only brother in the tundra refused to accept a share from her bride-price. He told her that he did not want to participate in a backward practice, but the woman suspected that the brother did not want to host her and make her gifts in the future. It is due to its emotional, rather than economic, significance, that even very poor tundra households would offer a bride-price as a symbolic transfer of value.

MARRIAGE 'RUSSIAN STYLE' AND NORTHERN WIVES

In the same pastoral households where some children are being engaged to carefully chosen partners, others are left to find their partners by their own means. As one mother told me, it was often pointless to look for a suitable match for a young man who had many girlfriends. 'Sergei knows womenfolk and he knows what he likes', she told me about her eldest son in his late twenties. 'I shall only look for a girl for my Andrei, he just came back from the army and would like to have a wife'. While rural Nenets men rarely find spouses among Russians and other newcomers, women in settlements often point out that alcoholism among local Nenets conditions their preference for non-indigenous men. On the other hand, some native women- villagers, especially those at the bottom of the social ladder, have a reputation as 'loose girls' (*guliashchie*) due to excessive socialising with newcomers. This reputation diminishes their chances of finding a good Nenets suitor in the village or in the tundra.

Interethnic marriage with newcomers is largely formed around the idea of spousal 'love'. It is notable that there is a shortage of ethnographic studies of intimacy and romantic love life among indigenous minorities (but see Rethmann 2000). This gap reflects an old anthropological assumption that 'love' and 'romance' are a product of cultural refinement not commonly available to non-Westerners/non-Europeans (e. g. Jankowiak 1995). My focus on 'love marriage' with Russians, rather than on Nenets love marriage, should not be mistaken for a continuation of this tradition. It is meant to highlight dynamics in the local political economy of desire that provoke negative attitudes (cf. Lyarskaia 2010: 31–32) and engenders the stereotype of so-called 'Northern wives' (*severnnye zheny*).

For the Nenets tundra women I talked to, relationships with 'Russians' were not unlike the 'alien romance' discussed by Tsing (1993) in her analysis of 'out-of-the-way-places' where images of distant places and the challenges associated with different lifestyles had connotations of exciting possibilities. 'Alien romance' is exciting and risky and the risk is twofold. It is a source of desire that runs in tandem with perceptions of Russians' promiscuity. 'I do not know how we could have lived with our men if they were as loose as those Russians,' I heard from my interlocutors. There is also social risk

related to understandings that Russians 'do not have kinship'. It is this latter perception that allows some women to challenge ideas of victimhood implied in 'Northern wives' — a category produced by short-term marriages and romantic liaisons with the male migrants (newcomers, geologists, shift-workers, etc.) that signals the absence of lasting emotional and economic commitments by male partners.

After years spent in Yamal, newcomers often retire, or find other employment on the mainland. There are numerous stories in circulation describing spousal and filial neglect experienced by Northern wives — from their children being excluded from inheritance by their fathers to the husbands' kin indifference towards the well-being of their wives. One of my acquaintances who followed her Russian husband to Moscow told me that when the husband was killed in a car accident, she and their son were rejected by his parents. The mother of the deceased asked her to vacate his Moscow apartment indicating that with the death of her son their relationship was over. Given these experiences, native women do not unequivocally accept a role of abandoned women or temporary wives. Instead, many stress that despite having had a good marriage and children together, it is their decision to leave their Russian husbands and remain at home when the husbands move back to the mainland.

At the end of the day, the political economy of desire in the love marriage 'Russian style' thus tends to undermine the ideological enclosure of the centrality of stable or life-long marriage to human life (cf. Borneman 1996: 228–229) that is postulated by the neo-traditionalist agenda of the Russian state, the Orthodox Church and 'official' native cultural norms. As part of a matrix of power relations in the locality, the very idea of marriage becomes subordinated to the affirmation of a 'strong' subject-position of those 'Northern wives' who are unwilling to compromise this position by moving away from 'their people' and networks of relatedness. 'Alien romance' can be enticing, but there are also risks not worth taking.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have discussed two marriage options of rural Nenets women and attempted to show that the folk dichotomy of 'arranged' and 'love' marriage should be understood in a context where women consider the decision to marry as entirely their own. Rather than choosing a particular spatial realm (tundra or village), women privilege particular economies of desire and relatedness. In arranged marriages women often expect to establish emotional connections and intimacy with certain in-laws who become an effective and/or affective part of their families. In love marriages with Russians women are well aware that they are, primarily, establishing only a dyadic relationship with a particular man; their affection and desire are subject to the migration calendar of their spouses and their expectations of the marriage's durability

are often circumscribed by their willingness to accept their partners as the only 'relation' in far-away places.

When women opt for an arranged marriage today, they do so because this is where kinship obligations and their concomitant emotional security are believed to be present. Today, arranged marriage only appears to be a reproduction of an old custom, or a filial 'duty' because it is an individual choice realised within the framework of new economic-political conditions that provide new reasons for making it. Those young women who marry in the tundra do not take this option because they are necessarily longing for a 'traditional nomadic' life: a small and continuously moving domestic space is found attractive because it is the space where nobody really 'moves' and affective ties are scattered around.

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НЕНЕЦКИЙ БРАК В СОВЕТСКОМ И РУССКОМ СТИЛЯХ: ПОЛИТЭКОНОМИЯ ЖЕЛАНИЯ И СОПЕРНИЧАЮЩИЕ ЭМОЦИИ МАТРИМОНИАЛЬНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

АННОТАЦИЯ. В статье рассматривается ненецкий брачный опыт и ожидания от брака, а также то, какое влияние на эти ожидания оказывает эмоциональная связь с различными родственниками. В основу статьи легли полевые исследования автора, собранные в 2000–2001 гг. на севере полуострова Ямал. В браке важны не только чувства супругов, часто на первый план выходит политэкономия желания и местные представления о «нормальном обществе». С целью иллюстрации этого положения рассматриваются два типа браков: брак по договоренности и брак по любви, заключенный между местными ненками и приезжими русскими. Отмечается, что, в то время как советская идеология и постсоветский неотрадиционалистический дискурс поддержали концепцию определенного эмоционального регистра «традиционного» ненецкого брака по договоренности, в смешанных браках, то есть браках между ненками и русскими, любовь, влечение и «экзотика» романтических отношений с «другими» (Tsing 1993) в значительной мере регулируются «рассудком», и не связаны с идеалом нуклеарной семьи. В статье показывается, что хотя вопросы переселения и пространственной ориентации на тундру или поселок при выборе брачного партнера могут меняться в течение жизни, тундровый брак основывается на субъективной (и положительной) оценке шансов на успешную семейную жизнь.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: родственные обязательства, родство, пространственная ориентация, гендер, Ямал

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