Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North

Edited by Joachim Otto Habeck
This chapter starts with an episode of a live-action role play organised by Mansi educators (the Mansi being one of the indigenous groups of West Siberia) for the youth of the village Saranpaul’ and its neighbouring villages. In August 2011 during the summer camp Man’ Uskve (in Mansi northern dialect, “Small Town”), I played a bride who was meant to be chosen by one of the Mansi warriors. I and the other brides stood in a line barefoot, in newly made dresses, beautified with traditional Mansi braids, nervously anticipating who will be our “husband” for the next two days of the play. The warriors with the highest status such as the tribe’s chief, his son, and uncle were allowed to choose first. They had the best chances to choose the bride they wished, before she was taken away by someone else. When a warrior made his choice, the bride and the bridegroom told each other their play-names in the Mansi language and the girl followed her guardian to his tribe and stood behind him. The solemn ceremony was observed and orchestrated by one of the educators of the summer camp — a woman aged around fifty — and
recorded by a few camp’s own journalists on a video camera. As a result of the ceremony, I “got married” to a fifteen-year-old adolescent.

This scene is an episode from the role-playing game called the *Time of Singing Arrows* performed near Saranpaul’, a rural settlement in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug — Yugra. We came here together for one week to get immersed into the glorious past of Mansi history. The play is integrated into a larger frame of summer camps for children and youth, designed by indigenous activists and pedagogues to transmit indigenous knowledge to the next generation. This initiative, along with many other educational, juridical, and cultural institutions of indigenous activists, is a product of the post-Soviet indigenous revival movement that has been active since the late 1980s. The ambivalent Soviet nationalities policy led to the reaffirmation of national identities and an uprising of national resurgence movements (Bassin & Kelly 2012). The process of making the summer camp possible requires considerable bureaucratic, financial, and social skills from the side of educators, who each year have to apply for public money on the basis of a competitive grant system in Khanty-Mansiisk. Since the beginning of the revival movement, they perceived ethnic tradition as the source for spiritual and economic revival of indigenous peoples. Especially the young generation is often seen as needing to be grounded in traditional values and practices.

My intention is to show how the medium of play reflects social transformations in post-Soviet Russia as they find an expression in multiple discourses on tradition, gender roles, and a normative lifestyle. It shows how in the logic of the role play, the boundary between what is framed as real and imaginary, secular and sacred, authentic and spurious comes to be blurred and is being continually renegotiated by educators and participants. In his analysis of lifestyle Chaney refers to “Western” metropolises where stylistic expressions become apparent. This ethnographic case study — along with other chapters in this book — is to illustrate that aesthetics as a means of communication and display of particular aspects of identity cannot be limited to urban centres: rather, their use is also widespread in so called “remote” regions of post-Soviet Russia.

In this chapter, I will begin by situating the shared sensibilities of indigenous spokespeople in the socio-political context of the research
region. Then, I will discuss the emic and etic meanings of “style” and in what way the participation in the summer camp can be understood as “lifestyle” in its own right. Following from that, I will deal with the secular and sacred dimensions of the role-playing game; and how the Soviet legacy of military games was translated into indigenous symbols and practice. I will also discuss how gender roles were rendered and legitimated in the role-playing game and how female and male players responded to that. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how play — with its ambiguous nature — became a ritual with the intention to transform the gendered identity of girls and boys, while at the same time allowing them to manoeuvre between its secular and sacred interpretations.

Shared sensibilities: taking charge of local youth

At the beginning of the 1990s, village-based activists and urban indigenous intellectuals responded to a broad range of problems that afflicted indigenous communities such as loss of land use, poverty, decline of indigenous languages, low life expectancy, lack of family care for children, and the alienation of young people from their cultural roots. These activists were women who in the course of the Soviet educational programmes for native women received higher educational degrees than native men. During the Soviet period, women played the central role in the formalisation of ethnicity through literacy of indigenous languages, schooling, and scholarly activities. Subsequently, by the end of the Soviet Union, they also came to lead the discourse on native revival (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2003).

Their concerns can be understood through David Chaney’s notion of “sensibilities” (see Chapters 1 and 7 in this volume). The term denotes a set of responses to social processes, discourses, and changes that appear in modern societies and become expressed in particular ethical and aesthetic practices which in their turn engender new social dynamics (Chaney 1996: 6, 128). The sensibilities of indigenous spokespeople were responses to environmental pollution caused by oil extraction, social disintegration of indigenous communities in the Russian Far North, and economic problems mentioned in the same breath with cultural survival and “ethnic purity” (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 172). In that respect, representatives of indigenous spokespeople started to look
to their own moral values and knowledge as a reaffirmation of their cultural difference.

In their response to societal transformations, native women organised leisure spaces during summer vacations and social patronage for children in need. The main target group for the summer camps was indigenous children and youth from so-called “unfit” families (in Russian, *neblagopolychnye sem’i*). These are families affected by alcohol abuse, domestic violence, lack of social care, and families with orphans or half-orphans. Such families are under state surveillance and eligible for different kinds of state financial help (cf. Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010). Some parents have been deprived of their parental rights. The “unfit” status is changeable and parental rights may be regained when the court considers a family or one parent to be able to resume their responsibilities. Due to a high mortality rate (accidents, lethal illness at a relatively young age, suicide) in the *raion* (district), some children and young people have only one biological parent, others are adopted by relatives or live on their own with the support of relatives and friends (cf. Ulturgasheva 2012). The kin solidarity to integrate children and adolescents of alcohol-dependent parents into networks of support does not happen automatically. Although people say that “here almost everyone is related to everybody”, this is no guarantee for social care.

Berezovskii Raion — where the protagonists of the study live — is the least populated and urbanised region in the Okrug. The accelerated urbanisation process in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug — Yugra — has taken place alongside the oil and gas extraction routes since the 1950s. Today around 96 per cent of the Okrug’s economy is based on petroleum production (Wiget & Balalaeva 2011: 267). However, not all districts of the Okrug are equally involved in the fuel economy and the share of its revenues. Saranpaul’ with its 2,575 inhabitants (as of 2010) is legally designated as a “remote and hard-to-access settlement” (Zakon 2004). Back in the Soviet period the village was famous for its reindeer-herding state farm (*sovkhoz*) as well as state geological enterprise in the Northern Urals. Saranpaul’ was the most convenient reloading point for helicopters, which needed to reach mining parties and reindeer herders in the Ural Mountains. In the post-Soviet period, the former state enterprises were privatised and new ones
were established to extract gold, quartz, and coal, but these operations provide very few employment opportunities for the male part of the local population. The reindeer-herding farm is still in state hands, but due to lack of funding and logistics shrunk dramatically.

The transport system relies on water, air, and winter road transportation and is highly dependent on weather and seasonality. From Saranpaul’, trips to the raion capital Berezovo and onward to the regional capital Khanty-Mansiisk by bus or by car are possible only by winter roads (from mid-December to March). Air transport, monopolised by the Utair company and subsidised by the district, is expensive and does not satisfy the demand. The daily life of people in Saranpaul’ — the food supply, medical treatment, visits of relatives, and funerals — all depend on the availability of transportation. People often say “we live like on an island: you can’t get here, but when you are here you can’t leave again”. Digital communication technology, such as mobile phone connection, arrived in 2007. Internet access is also relatively recent, and virtual mobility is still restricted by the slow connection speed.

Saranpaul’ is a multi-ethnic village that consists mainly of Komi, Mansi, Nenets, and Russians. When the Soviets came to power, administrators favoured Russians and Komi, allotting them positions of privilege. The inter-ethnic hierarchies intensified after Mansi were resettled from small native villages to larger modernised settlements such as Saranpaul’ towards the end of the 1950s. Mansi children were disadvantaged at school compared to Komi and Russian children. Towards the end and after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, poor living conditions, unemployment, and alcohol abuse turned the previously latent conflicts between these groups into outbreaks of open violence. However, the post-Soviet policy of benefits for indigenous peoples reversed the ethnic hierarchies. Komi, as they did not belong to the “small-numbered peoples of the North” (korennye malochislennye narody Severa), were not eligible to receive the state benefits that Mansi could claim. This policy again refueled the animosities. The inter-ethnic tensions have weakened over recent years, however. Today inter-ethnic marriages between Mansi and Komi are very common and if fights between people happen after a party in the social club, in a bar or just on the street, they are usually not ethnically motivated.
The camp educators in Saranpaul’ try to bridge the gap of social care for children and youth in need, not only in the summer time, but also during the school year. In Saranpaul’, as in many other places in Russia (King 2009: 153 ff.), indigenous activists are worried about the disorientation of the young generation as to their sense of belonging, low level of confidence, and education. Young people are perceived to have a sense of meaninglessness about their life, which is reflected in the high rate of suicide among young people in the raion.

However, the educator’s practice and strategies should not be understood in terms of resilience and coping only, as they are also inspired by visions and aspirations for the young to have a better life than their parents. Summer vacations are seen by indigenous activists as a window in which to organise, control, and channel the leisure time not only of school pupils, but also of young people far into their twenties. The House of Culture, an institution that in Soviet times facilitated extracurricular education and a “leisure to a purpose” that “contrasted with ‘idle’ forms of pastime and alcohol consumption” has partially lost its primacy in cultivating morally responsible citizens (Habeck, Donahoe & Gruber 2011: 146). The diversification of leisure services since the early 1990s in Saranpaul’ offers alternative spaces for children and young people. New services comprise a “National Art School” that incorporates teaching in Mansi music instruments, piano, singing, theatre playing, and painting, a Youth Centre with handicrafts and sports courses as well as summer camps. The authority of the House of Culture has been questioned in Saranpaul’ especially by some Mansi activists, who perceive the staged ethnic performances as not authentic. Discourses on “authentic” and “spurious” culture dominate the scene of cultural production and identity building not only among native people in the district, but also in other parts of Russia (e.g. King 2009: 145–47).

Summer camp as a lifestyle

To immerse children and young people into the great past of their ancestors, the summer camp embraces many different events and activities such as music making, handicrafts, hiking tours, different
kinds of games, and theatre playing. In the opinion of the educators, the embodiment of ethnic identity should not be just a formal (spurious) exercise, but linked to the spiritual worldview and experiences as connected to the exploration of one’s “real self”.

The leisure activity in the summer camp constitutes for many children and youth a significant place to craft their (ethnic) identities and to work on themselves (Schröder 2017). The camp draws together youth of different social orientations and ethnic backgrounds, such as Mansi, Khanty, Komi, Nenets, and Russians, the so-called “active” youth and the dropouts, high school, and university students as well as the unemployed. In that sense, youth who would not necessarily communicate and meet due to (relative) geographical distance and/or generational and social differences are able to develop a sense of community. For participants who repeatedly join in every summer vacation, young camp leaders and educators create a distinct lifestyle which is meaningful to them. As Chaney points out, we need to look at how people use their resources at hand to create a distinct pattern of living and how it makes sense for them in their particular contexts (Chaney 1996). After the camp season, players wait for the next summer and communicate with each other on the Russian network site vKontakte and via mobile phones. Young camp leaders have created a social network group Man’ Uskve where participants can upload their pictures, videos, and songs, and write comments, wishes, and poems. The group is steadily growing from 177 members in 2013 to 420 in 2018. Participants talk about decisive emotional moments in the role-playing game and heroic deeds long after the camp has finished; and some girls even cry when they vividly recall their memories.

The objective of educators is to improve the social situation of socio-economically marginalised children and youth in a remote district and to raise the social status of Mansi. To express their position in the

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1 The camping season generally encompasses three distinct events or sessions, which in Russian are called smena (shift): the first smena at the beginning of July targets the youngest participants, mostly aged between eight and fourteen, and has a particular focus, for example theatre, handicrafts, music, or games; the second smena in the last half of July is dedicated to mountaineering in the nearby Ural Mountains and is open to participants starting at the age of fourteen; and the third smena, starting in the first week of August, has as its focus the role-playing game The Time of Singing Arrows, which is likewise open to participants from ages fourteen or older.
contested field of cultural production educators employ various means, one of which is the process of self-stylisation. The conjuncture of style and ethnicity goes hand in hand with public expressions of identity in Russia and other parts of the world (Eward & O’Hanlon 2007). I understand style by referring to Chaney as “‘languages’ of social identity” that “reflects or expresses in some way distinctive attitudes or values that are themselves part of a broader outlook or life-world” (Chaney 1996: 129, 128). That is to say people reflect upon aesthetics and employ them to voice and to challenge their social position in modern society (see also Chapter 7 in this volume). Public visibility of ethnicity is conjoined with different, contesting political, social, and cultural agendas of social actors. The discriminating power of indigenous intellectuals over symbolic meanings competes against other powerful presentation strategies of ethnicity, such as folklore displays for regional image purposes at the occasion of the World Chess Olympiad in 2010 or the Biathlon World Championship in 2003 and 2011 in Khanty-Mansiisk.

Ethnic self-stylisation as a matter of identity choice and aesthetic taste takes place in relation to another process: the objectification of culture. In the course of Soviet social engineering, ethnic culture was secularised and reified in recognisable forms of “high culture” known from Russian and European contexts, such as dance, theatre, instrumental music, material objects, and poetry. In the post-Soviet period ethnic culture became once again an object of action as a property and heritage that should be saved, remembered, written down, and called into life again (Donahoe & Habeck 2011). In the context of the summer camp, style — as expressed in role-play paraphernalia, traditional dresses, dances, and choreography — is one of the main semiotic devices to convey a set of values to young people and to channel their conduct (cf. Holland et al. 1998: 35ff). Cultural designers select the “best elements” of Mansi culture as pedagogical tools to boost self-cultivation among members of the young generation. Despite the clearly Soviet influence of the way in which ethnic culture is understood and presented, this process is a complex matter, which draws upon people’s affinities, intuition, different forms of knowledge, and sensibilities.

Drawing upon the normative sensibilities of indigenous spokespeople, I differentiate between the discursive use of style and stylisation by them and the analytical term proposed by Chaney. In the emic perspective,
“stylisation” (*stilizatsiia*) is a pejorative term that refers rather to spurious representation of culture (e.g. performed by many folklore ensembles), emptied of its spiritual meaning and detached from a particular regional or local grounding. Such performances need to satisfy the taste of an official jury during public festivals and national festivities, and also stand for the commercialisation of ethnic symbols for tourists. In some respects, this “traditionalist” discourse echoes the processes which Chaney detects in mass-consumption society, where style “comes to supersede substance” (Chaney 1996: 151), always shifting and thus indifferent to fixed meanings. Responding sceptically to this “postmodern” play with forms and their references in the field of ethnic symbols, indigenous intellectuals carefully observe and direct the usage of traditional symbols in the summer camp and the meanings they bear.

This happens by teaching participants to do traditional handicrafts and by appropriating visual technologies. The interpretation of the activities’ meaning and the selection of meaningful moments takes place in the camp’s own “Press Centre”, which consists of older participants and produces daily news (called *Man’ NEWSkve*) about how the common activities in the camp and the role-playing game are unfolding. They are shown daily to all players after breakfast. Documentation, editing, and watching endorses the dramatic character of the whole process and accords the event an official and serious tone. Besides that, the use of material objects, inseparable from the process of their crafting and performing, constitute a normative path to a “good life” and morally heightened personality. The emphasis on crafting traditional objects oneself expresses anti-consumerist values in the camp and criticism against mass production of objects with ethnic stylisation. Sewing one’s own dress for a young woman necessitates particular social actions that are incorporated into the larger outlook of how a harmonious society should function. Thus, young people’s sense of a real self is imagined to be intertwined with an ethnic identity that should be shown and lived in an authentic way.

**Play and self-cultivation**

The role-playing game *Time of Singing Arrows* in *Man’ Uskve* is intended to awaken the “spirit of a warrior” in each of the participating boys.
Camp participants refer to this play as a “battle” (bitva). The basic scenario of the play is a battle between two medieval Mansi tribes in order to win a bride referred to as the “Mansi beauty”. One tribe is local and is hiding in a fortress. The other one is coming from a foreign territory and wants to steal the Mansi beauty. Male players have braids that are tightened with a scarf on their heads. The “killing” of an enemy requires tearing off the braids from the head of the other. When none of the male players of one tribe has got braids anymore, they have lost. The martial spirit — so the hope of the educators — should help especially males to face challenges in their daily life, to stand up for their values, and to fight for what they are striving for.

The role-play idea has been derived from the Soviet military game Zarnitsa (literally, “summer lightning”) that was introduced in Soviet para-military summer camps in the mid-1960s (Kuebart 1989: 106; cf. Barchunova & Beletskai 2009–2010). During the Cold War, patriotic education became a constitutive part of school and extracurricular programmes. Zarnitsa was intended to teach boys and girls aged between ten and fourteen to be ready to defend their motherland against imperialist enemies. Pupils were trained to develop physical strength, team spirit and other military related skills (Kuebart 1989: 106). The transformation of the game Zarnitsa to the Time of Singing Arrows is, on the one hand, in continuity with the Soviet legacy, but on the other, it shows how ideological practices are changing as they are loaded with new scenarios, symbols, and meanings.

Similar to pioneer camps that served as arenas for Zarnitsa performances, new summer camps provide pedagogical spaces for organised and controlled “serious leisure” for children and youth. Games like Zarnitsa stand in the legacy of the discourse on progressive human development. As Brian Sutton-Smith points out, in the “rhetoric of progress” play is rationalised as a way of building

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2 The rules of the game cast two teams as opposite parties. The teams fight for a particular status symbol, e.g. a flag they have to steal from their enemy. Epaulents on players’ shoulders symbolise life. When their epaulents are torn off, players have to leave the game. Zarnitsa was a popular motif in Soviet cinematography of Pioneer camps.

3 In contemporary Russia games of a similar genre are used by military-patriotic clubs (voenno-patrioticheskie kluby) that are mostly based in youth centres or Houses of Culture (Habeck 2014).
children’s development and socialisation (Sutton-Smith 1997: 18). Play in this interpretation has no value in itself, but has to point to a particular use that is external to play. Especially games with a motif of *agon* (competition) have been theorised as “a source and expression of power” and “civilizing force” (Lindquist 2001: 15). Following that logic, the Soviet self-cultivation narrative and patriotic education through competitive play were part of a progress-oriented understanding of self and society.

Nourished by ideas from the Enlightenment and the construction of socialism, culture work became one of the main vehicles to carve out the “new man” (*novyi chelovek*), the ideal person for life in a society teleologically oriented toward communism. The “new man” should incorporate the imperative of constant self-cultivation and improvement based on the Soviet concept of *kul’turnost’* (culturedness) which played the central role in the Soviet mission to civilize the masses. According to my observations, many practices and discourses of indigenous leaders, who instigate the importance of ethnic culture as a source of a meaningful life today, are imbued with Soviet understandings of culture and its normative meaning (see Chapter 7 in this volume). To illustrate this point, I would like to quote the camp director, who once responded to a male participant, who said that his main motivation to come to the camp was to “relax”: “Don’t say you came here to relax! We don’t come here to relax! If any of you say you came here to relax, you will work a lot!” Camp participants are expected to work on themselves in the camp, so as to purify their language from vulgar words (*mat*), to be polite, to have good manners, and to be honest. As scholars on post-Soviet Russia have argued, the idea of “working on oneself” constitutes the most powerful moral discourse and ethical practice in today’s Russia (cf. Zigon 2011). Active self-cultivation of participants was the main premise of the moral education in the camp.

Despite the historical continuities, the indigenisation of *Zarnitsa* clearly departs from Soviet idealised notions of gender equality. Through selective appropriation of history, creating objects, and establishing a role-play scenario, boys and girls were to be shaped in their essentialised identities. The indigenous meanings that were given to the objects and the embedding of the game in the local landscape coloured the image of masculinity and femininity as a way of reinventing Mansi tradition.
Thus, in the role-playing game boys and girls were to cultivate gender specific qualities. For girls these were her sewing skills, tidiness, patience, modesty, taking care of her beauty, and listening to men. For boys these were fairness, courage, virility, physical strength, responsibility, respecting, and protecting women.

The emergence of the summer camp and the role-playing game the *Time of Singing Arrows* stands in the interstice between past and new symbolic connections of present-day Russia. As the camp pedagogues shared with me while they were familiar with Soviet education practices, the content of what ethnic culture consisted of was an unknown signifier for them. In the next section, I will show that a locally grounded spiritual worldview, which nonetheless had also been transformed in the course of Russification and Sovietisation, plays the central role in forming another way of framing reality in the camp and in the role-playing game.

**Indigenisation of Zarnitsa:** retrieving one’s ancestral memory

The re-stylisation of *Zarnitsa* takes place by building connections to Mansi spiritual ways of seeing the world. The role-playing game in its contemporary shape is being created by accumulated and interweaved knowledge and practices of many different actors involved. The camp staff consists of people from several generations, aged between eighteen and seventy. They are teenagers, students, teachers, scientists, craftspeople, representatives from the settlement’s administration, and retired elders. All of them have a different approach to “native culture”, depending on their biographies, age, gender, ethnic background, and education. Older educators and young leaders negotiate the meta-communication language, symbolic connections, rules, and meanings of the role play. What is central in the re-imagination of *Zarnitsa* is the process of post-Soviet desecularisation of ethnic culture and imbuing it with spiritual meanings (cf. Luehrmann 2005).

Play-theorists (Sutton-Smith 1997; Bateson [1972] 2000; Lindquist 2001) see play as an ambiguous action and as a paradox because it is and is not what it appears to be. Here I use the notion of “frame” by drawing on Gregory Bateson’s model of meta-communication in play.
Bateson suggests that it depends on communication partners to send each other signals to frame their communication in such a way that what they do is understood as “play” (2000: 185). The battle is understood by educators and players as a game and as a feigned signifier for war. Yet, the ambiguity of the play allows multiple frames of communication; as Galina Lindquist argues, “frames nest within or braid with other frames, carrying competing or constructing messages” (Lindquist 2001: 18). André Droogers’ definition helps here to understand the paradox of play as “the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality” (2012: 81). Droogers refers to Victor Turner’s usage of the “subjunctive” as an “as if” mode of doing things in contrast to the “indicative” way of “as is”. He suggests that especially religion is the field where humans apply ludic capacities. I argue that in the role-playing game actors are constantly moving between the subjunctive and indicative frames.

Many practices incorporated in the role play and their interpretations by players suggest that the battle has a semi-religious connotation, where authentic tradition is getting revived. As one player had said: “Maybe it is not just a game. Maybe we resurrect here something, what used to be at this place. We show it in the game” (Maxim, aged 22 at the time of interviewing). Preparations for the role play, the “playground” and play paraphernalia gain their legitimacy by being linked to the past and ongoing beliefs. Thus, the battle carries multiple framing, in which the distinction between what is playful and real is blurring. Elderly educators give young people lectures about the origin of the world, initiation, local spirits, dances and music. They serve to “immerse” young people into the Mansi worldview and to prepare their emotional state for the battle. The knowledge sources of lecturers are manifold: they draw on their own memories and observations, scholarly activities with informants, and ethnography books. Two lecturers tried to reconstruct war craft strategies and martial arts of the ancient Mansi people by looking at Mansi dances and historic literature on war craft.

Stylistic elements borrowed from religious practice are playfully inscribed into participants’ body fashioning. To refer to Droogers again, playfulness is an intrinsic feature of religion: “play has potential for the sacred, a serious play — but play” (2012: 25). The crucial symbols in the game are braids, which shift the life-containing substance from epaulets
in *Zarnitsa* to the players’ bodies — the hair. Participants and educators connect braids to Mansi tradition, where they are a symbol of life and strength. Ethnographic research by Russian scholars provides evidence of scalping practices in the war craft of Khanty and Mansi (Sokolova 2009: 256). The hair used to be seen as the site of one’s reincarnated soul: cutting the enemy’s hair and scalping was equal to destroying the soul (Sokolova 2009: 254). Soviet ethnographer V. N. Chernetsov described a boy’s game related to scalping: players were divided into two teams and representatives of each team met for a wrestling competition. The winner took a knife and cut a piece of hair from the head of the “enemy” (quoted in Fedorova 1988: 89). In pre-Soviet times, both men and women used to plait artificial braids into their hair, a fact that was not known to most participants of the summer camp. Some of them mentioned that when seeing old family photographs, they mistook their male relatives for women because of their hairstyle. Tightening one’s own hair into braids is also supposed to provide protection against evil forces trying to enter one’s head. Mansi women inserted metal rings, animal figurines, and coins into their artificial braids. Having dreams about hair or teeth falling out was a sign of the imminent death of a relative. This symbolic connection is still alive among some young and older people I have met, although none of boys grow long hair anymore.

In the role-playing game, boys’ braids are tightened on their head with a scarf, but in the case of girls they are plaited into their hair. The braids were crafted by female elders when the game was designed. The incorporation of braids into the game turns girls’ preparation for the performance into a laborious endeavour, since it requires time and skill. The meaning and value of style is generated in the “right” action. Authentic bearers of tradition produce objects for the game and offer advice for the proper usage of the objects. Elders help girls to sew their dresses and to plait braids into their hair. Educators stress the idea that culture is alive only if crafting and usage of objects are interlinked, thereby implicitly critiquing the fact that self-made ethnic objects are often made merely for exhibition purposes.

According to lecturers, life in the camp and the role play should awake “genetic memory” (*geneticheskaia pamiat’*) or “ancestral memory” (*pamiat’ pokolenii*) in young people. That would make them aware of the life of their ancestors, ideally all the way down to the mythical
beginnings. Educators believe they see the utterance of ancestral memory in young people in different situations: when the boys fight, when they look after the fire, and when the girls sew their dresses. This implies that the summer camp as an educational space and the role play are seen as merely a framework for young individuals to reveal their “true selves”, to activate the immanent knowledge that is thought to be manifest in them by the heritage of their ancestors.

Such discourse on genes appears in Russia also in other contexts where identity claims are crucial (Brož 2009). Apart from primordial ethnicity claims, I suppose that the discourse on “genetic memory” is also fed by local beliefs of reincarnation of souls. A newborn baby is not seen as a psychological tabula rasa — free to be sculpted for the good of the society, as it was thought in the Soviet Union (cf. Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010: 316) — but contains a soul of a dead relative, who therefore affects the character and predilections of the person during their entire life. Even if birth rituals are not performed anymore, the reincarnation beliefs continue to exist. Some young participants are named after their deceased relatives, assuming they have been reincarnated. However, the (cyclical) trope of “ancestral memory” is seemingly in conflict with the (progressive) narrative of self-cultivation, since it dismisses a conscious and rational effort of children and youth to improve themselves. From the “ancestral memory” point of view, the characteristic tendencies of a person are already embodied in their self and revealed in particular time and space.

Educators suppose that ancestral memory wakes up in the “traditional environment”: in the forest or some ancestral village, since these places are believed to be inhabited by various spirits and deities. The safety and good fortune of the camp depend on the local protecting spirits. Elderly women — grandmothers — conduct a ritual and feed local spirits at the start of the summer camp season. The spatial location of the role play therefore has an important symbolic significance.

The camp is located at the confluence of two mountain rivers, Khulga and Mania, ten kilometres upstream from Saranpaul’, next to the old Mansi village of Yasunt. The village consists of several households and is almost uninhabited throughout the year. In the course of the Soviet consolidation policy in the 1950s and 60s, the entire working population of the district was relocated from small villages into larger settlements.
Today, some camp participants own houses in the village where their grandparents used to live and where their parents grew up. The old cemetery in Yasunt, where the dead are buried exclusively according to native beliefs, is also still in use. Some of them consider Yasunt as their “home” and have acquired new land there, although the actual time they spend in the village is only a few days or weeks in the summer. There are remains of an ancient settlement next to the village in the forest, presumably from the Middle Ages. There have been no excavations of the settlement and local leaders want to prevent any archaeological engagements at the site. For the role-play purposes a wooden fortress has been reconstructed right next to the ancient settlement in the taiga, providing players with the historical ground for building connections to their ancestors and triggering their “ancestral memory”.

As I could observe in the camp and also in everyday life in Saranpaul, Mansi who continue to practice religious rituals find themselves in a grey zone of being uncertain about the “right” and “wrong” form of ritualistic actions in relation to spirits (cf. Halemba 2006). Besides that, people dispute and negotiate which elements of “culture” are “allowed” to be disembedded and displayed for outsiders. One reason for the disputes is fear of serious consequences for their own and their relatives’ well-being if a staged performance and/or religious ritual dissatisfy the spirits.

Although in the pre-Soviet past Mansi could consult male or female community members who would be specialised on different spiritual issues, today there are no strong religious leaders who can provide guidance on how to communicate with invisible forces. Sometimes accidents or suicides are interpreted as a consequence of social misconduct (that may reach back to their ancestors) towards spirits, but often without knowing where the infringement of rules happened and what can be done to re-establish an equilibrium between human and non-human beings. Thus, playful and creative attitudes in designing a role-playing game exist alongside, or within a spiritual sphere of influence; and as a consequence, they may have positive but also negative transformative effects on practitioners. Elders also may ask local spirits for help to assist one or the other tribe to win the role-playing game.

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4 Personal communication with Valentina I. Semenova, archaeologist and specialist on Ob-Ugric ethnography.
The religious connotation of the role play is not only revealed in the spirituality of the place and the symbolic meanings of play paraphernalia, but also in the way that the game is interpreted as an initiation ritual. It is seen as an enactment of the long-forgotten initiation of Mansi boys. When during the game one 22-year old participant broke his finger while rushing into the fortress, he was celebrated afterwards as a man who just had passed the liminal phase of adolescence and reached adulthood. The Mansi folklorist Svetlana Popova, one of the educators and advisors of the camp, published a book on initiation rituals in traditional Mansi culture (Popova 2003) where among other life-long rites de passage, she specifically paid attention to the initiation ceremonies for boys and young men. She argues that initiation rituals can be reconstructed from folklore material such as songs, folktales, and especially from the oral repertoire of the bear ceremony. The bear is believed to be the sacred animal among Khanty and Mansi, who used to dedicate the bear a feast with long epic songs, dances, and theatrical plays, which took several days. This feast is traditionally performed mainly by men. Although there are attempts to revive the bear feast today, there is a lack of male performers who would know the sacred songs, especially with the sacral speech that was used in the bear cult.

In the camp, particular elements from the bear feast are decontextualised and now serve new purposes. For example, to raise the warriors’ spirit, one sacred male dance was disembedded from a bear ceremony and made suitable for the game. In a process of negotiation among educators, the movements were simplified and religious clothing removed lest to offend the spirits. The transformation of the dance’s style carries the message to the spirits to be “fake”, i.e. it does not imply dialogue between the human and the non-human world. Nevertheless, even if the warrior dance is desacralised, it still may contain a spiritual power and links to invisible forces.

Thus, the dance continues to be an exclusively male performance, as in the original context. During the spirit-raising exercise, girls are not supposed to watch the boys dancing. In this context, old and new elements are intermingled, and the transformed dance exerts a novel magical power on the dancers. One male leader told me: “I sent the girls into the hut. I think girls should not watch a martial dance. I don’t know why. But it’s better to be cautious. You don’t know what might
happen”. He based his decision mainly on his intuition and intended to protect the girls from male spiritual energy. These actions reflect an interplay between religion, play, and power.

What I see at the core of this endeavour is the constant shifting between the secular and the sacral, between the subjunctive and indicative frames, the real and imaginary. Play is here a way to dive into the unknown: to explore one’s own indigenous roots via trial and error and to create a bricolage of different forms of knowledge and historical legacies.

**Gender norms, roles, and experiences in the role-playing game**

The vignette at the beginning of the chapter and the emphasis on the initiation ritual for boys show how important educators take gender issues. While the Soviet *Zarnitsa* was played by girls and boys alike, the *Time of Singing Arrows* excludes girls from fighting and limits their roles to “wives” and “beauties”. In fact, naturalisation of gender roles plays the main role in the reimagining of *Zarnitsa*. The agency of girls and boys and their relationships are mediated through rules. The beautification of women in the role play and the emphasis on masculinity of boys serve the purpose to accentuate gender differences and sharpen their moral values. The retro-gender turn in the play resonates with current political discourses in Russia, asserting the role of the family as “the main site of social regeneration and enculturation” (Povoroznyuk, Habeck & Vaté 2010: 21) but contrasts concurrently with social distress in the everyday family life of many young people. It seems that camp educators internalised widespread discourses and media rhetoric in Russia that “[t]he ‘emasculcation’ of men, their loss of responsibility and power within the family […] led directly to high levels of male alcoholism, poor physical and psychological health, apathy and indifference to their wives and children” (Kay 2006: 20).

As the afore-mentioned studies on gender shift in the Russian North have shown, Soviet social engineering of such societal institutions as family and marriage and also post-Soviet socio-economic ramifications have resulted in a widespread discourse about the crisis of the conventional male role of breadwinner and protector. Evidence from
my own ethnographic study shows that a comparatively large number of indigenous women have a higher level of formal education and take leading positions in the community, while men often work outside the village, e.g. for the mining companies in the Ural Mountains. The discrepancy between the conventional male roles and the factual cases are discussed by women and men alike. Frequently, men complain about lack of employment possibilities and women about the unreliability and alcoholism of their husbands. The low economic status of reindeer husbandry in the sovkhoz, and tough jobs in private mining companies and on the construction sites in Saranpaul’ leave men with few and rather unattractive occupation options. The high percentage of suicide and death accidents among indigenous men finds various emic explanations and one of them refers to the “weakness” of men when it comes to facing difficulties in life (cf. Kay 2006: 19ff).

Up until the 1950s or 60s, before the whole Mansi working population was forcedly relocated from small villages into large settlements, Mansi married generally among themselves. Today inter-ethnic marriages are most common and native women with higher education normally leave rural communities for the city and/or marry a non-indigenous partner. Female educators respond to the socio-economic marginality of Mansi men with resurrection of gender roles that supposedly existed in “traditional Mansi society”. Their strategy is to make boys more masculine, that is responsible for their future family, physically strong and handy, capable of taking initiatives and leadership, and therefore more attractive for girls. These particular sensibilities of educators exemplify the paradoxical situation that has been also observed in other parts of the Russian North (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 172ff.): the fact that the revival and re-invention of tradition is headed by indigenous women in the first place, contradicts the naturalisation of female domestic roles in the role-playing game.

Female educators reflect upon their own role in respect to their leadership positions. For instance, one sixty-year-old scholar questioned whether she was entitled to teach boys, since in “tradition” the transmission of knowledge was assumedly gender-specific. Recently however, she found an answer in some folklore research publications arguing that in ancient times, Ob-Ugric peoples used to live in a matriarchal society, until men took over power at a certain moment.
These findings released her tensions of not being authorised to pursue the task of supervising boys’ education as warriors. These considerations show that although women try to reinforce patriarchal family relations, nevertheless they back up and legitimise their own leading position by discovering matriarchy as an ancient state of Mansi society.

The separation of gender roles echoes the old Mansi view that male and female components complement each other in the cosmological order of the world. Both sexes have different ritual responsibilities and their movement in space is also regulated. A man is associated with the upper world and is entitled to communicate with territorial and regional protection spirits and to conduct a bear feast. A woman is especially subjected to higher control of behaviour and regulation of movement during her period and while she is of child-bearing age (Fedorova 2000: 396–97). For example, girls are not allowed to climb to the loft or go behind the right-hand corner of a traditional Mansi house, since these are held sacred. In the camp only a limited set of traditional rules about men’s and women’s behaviour are in force.

Female educators foster the role of boys in the camp because of their important role in the ritual life of Mansi. However, their traditionalist approach is a “selective representation of the past” (Linnekin 1992: 251) that should provide a solution to contemporary sensibilities and political agendas. One young educator shared with me a story that his grandfather had told him, about how during a bear feast, men could not beat a physically strong woman in a playful competition. When I asked him whether they could consider involving girls in the role play in the same way, he replied after some silent moments of consideration, that now they live in a different time. Women have to give birth to children, raise them, and not fight. Taking also safety reasons into consideration, girls should employ their “female” side of influence.

Young women made into wives and sisters

In the warfare scenario, girls are supposed to turn the camping site into a working household: they cook for their “husbands” and serve the warriors food and drink whenever they have a moment to rest. In a similar vein they paint their husbands’ faces to make them look more frightening for their enemies. During the attack in the fortress, all girls
have to hide themselves in the earth hut built for them, so that they do not disturb the warriors, stay safe, and protect the Mansi beauty from being robbed. The supposed agency of a woman lies in her accuracy to sew her clothes and fulfil her responsibilities with dignity and attentiveness. Recently a new rule was introduced, that women cover their faces with a self-made Mansi scarf in the selection of brides at the beginning of the game, so that warriors choose a bride for her ability to sew and decorate her clothes rather than for her pretty face. The incorporation of the headdress in the role-playing game resonates with the pre-Soviet practice of Mansi women of concealing their faces from older relatives of their husbands. Moreover, this rule leads back to the past, where the value of a woman supposedly depended on her ability to sew clothes for the whole family, her accuracy in making invisible stitches, and ultimately her responsibility for survival and comfort in the harsh northern environment. The materiality of clothes was connected with the spiritual meaning of ornaments that had a protective function. Therewith the woman’s field of responsibility was different, but at the same time not of less importance than that of a man.

Yet certain rules have been challenged by some girls, who complain about not being able to even watch male players fighting. The feeling that girls are bored while boys have fun has been discussed in common meetings between educators and players more than once. Girls were urged by educators to take the situation of war in the game seriously and to fulfil themselves in their roles as wives. Ironically, in their daily life educators and young leaders of the camp do challenge the normative patriarchal gender contract through their own practices and comments on other people’s relationships. Thus, a woman can be the head of the family and the main breadwinner.

Although artificial braids and scarfs follow a “traditional” model, girls are more or less free to play with the style of their dresses out of the limited resources brought to the camp. The crafting of an authentic traditional dress is a time-consuming activity that cannot be done during the few days of preparation for the battle. Another consideration of designers is that the mediaeval dress of women was different from the contemporary Mansi dress. The research on the “authentic” historical dress model is on-going; in the meantime, all girls get a simple linen cloth to cover the body down to their knees, which they can fashion
according to their own taste. Yet the hierarchy of traditional attire is still preserved, since the chosen Mansi princess must wear a traditional Mansi dress and have the most beautiful braids. The “princess” must endure some pain, since she wears heavy braids beautified with metal rings and coins, amounting to two kilograms of extra weight. The quality of a girl’s dress stands in direct relationship with her ability to work on herself and her skills, and simultaneously if she is doing well, organisers stress her links with the female side of her family, for example by saying “look, she is just like her grandmother!”.

The introduction of such rules is meant to channel the attention of participants to “right” actions and objects. By setting the frames and inventing new rules, educators and older participants exercise power over younger ones. A rule prescribes that the girl who has the best hand-sewn dress and scarf takes the role of the “Mansi princess” for whose sake the battle takes place. The jury commission who makes the decision consists of female educators as well as “grandmothers” who are seen as authentic representatives of tradition. In contrast, during previous years, the role of the princess was given by chance: all girls had to draw lots. The transfer from random chance to a formal process of election signals a more educative thrust in the play and emphasises the importance of hand-made aesthetics. One young female educator and long-term
participant of the camp laughed: “When we are in the city I can’t force these girls to sew anything. They are always busy with something else. But here they do it by themselves”. This observation suggests that the medium of play, especially when embedded in a particular place, speaks to young people and seems to resolve the problem of their lack of interest in ethnic tradition and language. In Saranpaul’ or Khanty-Mansiisk young people may find “ethnic tradition” as worthy of being preserved, but still too “boring” to get engaged with.

But even if educators expect the young warriors to select their respective bride on the basis of her skills rather than her bodily appearance, in general boys do know in advance whom they would like to “marry” or they mutually arrange “marriage” with the girl they like. They memorise the dress or scarf of the girl before the ceremony. Girls also leave signs for boys, so they stay recognisable. One nineteen-year-old girl stated that she would prefer the role play without a scarf, so she stays recognisable for elite warriors and can be married to a chief. Remarks and strategies of players show that their views diverge from the camp leaders’ educational thrust. Contradictions, inconsistency, and fluidity in attitudes not only between players and educators, but also within the groups make the role play and the revival project a continuous playful process of negotiation over power and meaning.

Girls have diverging opinions about their own role in the role-playing game and the reference framework beyond the play. Thus, sewing is not every girl’s favourite activity. For some of them it is a question of personal “talent” and “endurance” rather than a task to be mastered by each and every woman, as it used to be in the past. Some of them mentioned that if they had a choice they would rather contribute to the game with other skills and talents they have. The degree of devotion to the educational objectives of the camp may impact on the benevolence from the side of leaders.

Other female participants pursue ethnic self-stylisation as their own leisure-time project. They take an initiative to talk to elders in their community outside the camp and are eager to learn how to sew a traditional dress, plait braids, and make other accessories. After the crafting process they hope to enjoy the possibility to wear their accessories during ethnic festivities in the district or other events such as future summer camps. However, the personal motivation of girls to
get skilled in handicraft is usually rooted in their wish to take part in the role-playing game and in the internal competition among them to have the best outfit during the marriage ceremony. I was amazed how much creativity and sophistication they employed within a very short time to decorate empty sheets of fabric with old shreds, coloured threads and beads to attain an individual and outstanding look.

Girls’ opinions on their own engagement in the role-playing game cover the whole range from wishing to be involved in fighting to deliberately respecting the “tradition” and performing their roles as wives the best they can. One girl named Nastia (aged 22 at the time of interviewing) stated: “For me the game is a connection with the world of our ancestors. Everything has been lost and now we try to resurrect that. I see how boys are fighting with so much enthusiasm and interest and I like it. And then I fantasise that the gods in the sky are happy that it is all preserved, it is alive and not forgotten”. Most of the participating girls agree that they would like to have different, more exciting tasks, e.g. in the strategy-planning and decision-making process of the game. Some of them voice their wishes during common meetings, but also put to use their agency during the course of the role play, finding possibilities of action that are not yet codified in rules. However, they often find themselves restricted by fear of being excluded from playing...
for breaking the rules. Most girls keep their minds on plaiting friendship bracelets, telling each other stories, and supporting their husbands, while the warriors are thinking of strategies and searching for their enemies in the forest.

In the first year of the *Time of Singing Arrows*, girls were not even allowed to go to the fortress and did not play any role in the game at all. They beautified the camp and waited until boys came back from the battle. In the following years they were granted roles as wives and were eager to take part in the playing process. As of 2012, however, even the “Mansi princess” played a merely symbolic role and did not decide the course of the game. While in previous years girls used to scream, shout, and cry when their tribe faced an attack, now they restrain themselves from showing emotions and sit together silently in a circle, holding each other’s hands. They channel the “energy” to their husbands to make them strong and courageous. Some girls report about an inner feeling of “strength” that emerges in them during such exercises. Their behaviour is a result of a comment made by a Mansi scholar on some girls’ emotional outbursts during attacks. She reminded them that a Mansi woman used to be even-tempered, did not show her emotions, and cried only if a situation required it (for example, during a funeral ceremony).\(^5\) This “traditionalist” view was indirectly challenged by a psychologist, who was also invited to the camp to assist adolescents and youth to foster their self-confidence. She counselled participants from a “western” psychology perspective, implying that it is healthier to express one’s emotions instead of suppressing them. Both contrasting views on personhood find their implementation in discourses and practices of the role-playing game depending on the situation. Especially men are seen to be prone to unrestrained emotional and physical behaviour. As one young woman, 23-year-old Zhenia, stated:

A man is a warrior anyway. It does not depend on their nationality. For a long time it is written in their genes. It is better if they get rid of their energy (*vypleskivat’ energiiu*) here than in brawls in discos and cafés. It happens anyway. And men are fairer than women. The female [gender] is always about emotions. Look at psychology! And men can stand it if they have a bodily injury. Girls should have another role [than men].

\(^5\) Lapina (2008) provides similar accounts of female ethics among Khanty.
Her argument mirrors public discourses in Russia that embrace two contrasting views on men: on the one hand, their physical as well as mental superiority in relation to women, and on the other, men’s susceptibility to aggressive behaviour, drinking, and violence (Kay 2006: 21ff.). While men need spaces to channel their excessive energies — as in the logic of the role-playing game — in order to be rational and reliable, women are naturally involved with emotions such as care and tenderness. This view dismisses the fact that girls are also now and then involved in quarrels and express aggressive behaviour. In everyday life in Saranpaul’, girls and women face violence in a direct or indirect way and need to defend themselves. As one girl expressed it: “I have a third world war at home: my father is drunk”. I often heard from young women about how they try to let out their aggression at home, in a bar, or a disco. I would like to quote a young female participant, twenty-year-old Ania, who stressed the importance of resurrecting the image of a “female warrior” too. We were locked in the fortress for the whole day and waited for attacks from the invading tribe. Ania passionately commented:

I came here and wanted to play […] And then on Mansi territory it is forbidden for girls to fight. OK, but [at least] I want to see the fight […] there should be rules, but not that fixed. I don’t see the sense [in it if] as soon there is an attack, we have to run into the hut. We cannot see anything, we can only listen […] We came here and can only cook tea and soup. And I don’t think that it is so interesting. We stay just like slaves. I want to see this fight. If I cannot participate, I would like to look at it. But we can’t […] I need to see the tactic, so that it helps me in the future. But I don’t see anything […] Women in our modern time are like victims. Daughter[s], wife[s], sister[s] are mainly like victims. But there are female warrior archetypes; they disappeared a long time ago. And now we have to try to resurrect that. Because indigenous people, Khanty and Mansi, they are also like victims. I think it would be very important.

Ania mentions a double vulnerability of indigenous women: as being subjects of Russian colonial power and a paternalistic state as well as patriarchal family structures. She is also looking for empowerment through “tradition”, but with an alternative message. Similar to educators she also wants to instrumentalise the role-playing game for the purpose of self-cultivation and at the same time to retrieve her ancestral memory of a female warrior archetype.
Young men: “the spirit of the warrior”

Fantasies of male participants expand the notion of local ethnic belonging and reach out to game avatars and other media heroes they associate with. As Pasha, aged nineteen at the time of interviewing, puts it: “The strategies we use are from computer games and literature. We combine the old written sources and computer games, so that no-one knows what our next step is”. Most adolescents and young men play computer games such as Warcraft or Counter-Strike at home (a public computer salon was opened in Saranpaul’ in 2012).

Young people emphasise that because of physical involvement in the battle they experience it as emotionally more intense than a computer game. For example, 22-year-old Tolik says: “In the computer game I don’t have such a feeling. In the battle I felt myself as a real warrior. I had a sensation, I wanted to go and fight”. However, young people also incorporate the rhetoric of elders into the reflection of their own experiences. Tolik goes on to say:

> During the camp the spirit of the warrior wakes up. Exactly through the dances, taking part in martial art workshops, you start to open your treasure chests and the ancestral memory wakes up. This memory is revealing itself during the battle when you run through the forest or direct the troops or fight with someone.

From my observation, the imaginative connection of warriors to their powerful, skilful ancestors stands often in sharp contrast to the loose links between (living) members of different generations and to the lack of knowledge of one’s family history. So Tolik admitted that although he visits the camp every year, he has never been to his grandfather’s old house located in a Mansi village not far from Saranpaul’.

Most male players are interested in making the role playfairer among themselves and are less concerned with addressing the girls’ wishes and ideas. Nevertheless, they comment that the boredom of girls sometimes undermines the fighting spirit of warriors and disturbs the course of the game. The direct or indirect support of the strict dichotomy in gender roles echoes their views about the ideal of patriarchal family relations at home. “A woman should listen to her husband” is one frequent answer, but at the same time some are admitting that in daily life everything can be different.
Masculinity should not only be displayed at home but also on the street. Risk-taking behaviour and quarrels happen almost on a day-to-day basis, especially when alcohol is consumed in a disco or a bar. The term patsan is commonly applied as a respectful reference to an adolescent or a young man who is fair, “straight”, can stand up for himself and the “weaker” sex. A patsan should not show fear to enter a fight, but also be eloquent in colloquial language. Expressing one’s weaknesses means to be bullied by others, a fact that can spoil a boy’s self-confidence and affect his performance in the army where bullying is part of hierarchical relationships (cf. Kay 2006: 48–49). As one young man mentioned, the role-playing game can provide an adolescent with skills to use his head first, and to think of a strategy when he is insulted or bullied rather than responding with physical force.

A contrasting view of a patsan was mentioned by another young warrior, Aleksandr (aged twenty at the time of interviewing), who explained to me that from his own observations young men today are not self-reliant, are afraid to take any initiative in love affairs, and cannot cope with broken relationships. From his point of view, a short-term role-playing game is an insignificant contribution to strengthen the willpower (ukreplenie voli) in young people, which should rather be trained throughout the whole year at school and other institutions. He sadly mentioned a friend who recently committed suicide. The deceased boy attended the camp in 2009 and was chosen as a tribe’s chief in the role-playing game. Being back in the settlement he could not handle the problems that accumulated in his family, relationship, and job. According to Aleksandr, people might lose their “inner core” (vnutrennii sterzhen’) when “tradition” becomes just an attachment to the everyday life. According to his view, “tradition” and beliefs give a human a “core” in life. For him the game is less about “fighting”, and more an “immersion into ancient times”. Players should sense the atmosphere of that period, try to use their head when making decisions, and be less concerned about winning the game.

In fact, the emotional and physical investment of male players causes them even to lose their voices for a day or two at the end of the game. Denis, a 22-year-old tribe chief stated:

It is really a lot of adrenaline, a surge of adrenaline. You can say [people are] fully engaged in the battle and they are tearing off each other’s
braids. It means that skill and strength are the most important factors. It depends on your own level of development. It makes you think: if you are a good warrior, then you are a good warrior. If a man is somehow weak, then in the battle he will lose very fast.

Particular actions in the play frame may give players a feeling that they are surpassing their present selves. For example, the experience of dancing may change the self-perception of a young person. As one young warrior mentioned: “We danced and raised our spirit. I felt myself higher than a warrior somehow […] Not as a warrior, but something higher”. He did not have exact words for his experience and turned silent after mentioning it. Other warriors experience unexpected strength and are able to do things that go beyond their usual everyday abilities. One young man reported that he jumped over a two-meter high fortress wall in one jump in order to “save his life”.

The “full engagement” in the game means that warriors not only have heroic feelings, but are also confronted with their own fears. Some adolescents tear down their own braids to leave the game, or are strongly frightened when they have to jump down into the fortress. Players who are particularly fearful are an object of discussion between educators and adult players in supervision meetings, who then think of strategies to involve them into the game. One young man told me in an interview: “There are people you have to work with a lot, so they overcome their fear”. Again, the narrative of gendered “working on oneself” and on others is coming through in such value judgments of one’s own and other people’s performances. Those warriors who have shown extraordinary courage, agility, and cunning are publicly rewarded by educators as well as co-players at the end of the game.

Not all players use a meta-language to reflect upon the role-playing game rules, its goals, and educational thrust. That may differ according to their age and status in the game and in the camp. In interviews young players spoke passionately about their experiences, emotions, victories, and defeats in the role-playing game. Their comments support the view of play-theorists that “rhetoric and the play are never identical” (Sutton-Smith 1997: 77). For many of them the role play is self-referential and does not point to anything beyond the play itself. It is about fun, performance, friendships, and courting the opposite sex.
Conclusion

As this case study shows, play entails competing and contrasting messages. I argue that play with its ambiguous nature enables social actors to shift between the secular and sacred, the subjunctive and indicative, the real and imaginative. According to Sutton-Smith (1997) religion and play have something in common — a power of alterity. The role-playing game allows players to imagine themselves as someone else and yet to anchor themselves in their own local history and identity. The play offers an experimental way to reimagine the pre-colonial Mansi past and to make it more appealing for youth. Yet the playful engagement with the indigenous past in the camp should not be seen as fake, superficial, or "stylised". As the statement of the camp director indicates, it is a serious endeavour: “we don’t play life here, we live here” (my ne igraem v zhizn', my zdes' zhivem). The imaginative past is played out in the present Mansi village, where spirits may be evoked and where the game has tangible effects on its participants.

The Soviet legacy and post-Soviet turn to essentialised identities and the desecularisation of culture provide a sounding board for social actors to shift between the secular and the sacred. Therewith female educators contested the Soviet view on pedagogy that a human can be shaped like a sculpture and claimed that nature plays an important role in the right upbringing of the young generation. Such characteristics as one’s sex and ethnic background should be taken into account when encouraging young people to cultivate themselves. I suggest that the Soviet secular ideal of “working on oneself” and the semi-religious idea of “ancestral memory”, even though they seem to contradict each other, are intertwined and at times complement each other. Engagement with objects and practices rendered as “traditional” serves both ends: it is integral to cultivating one’s skills and moral attitudes on the one hand, and potentially evokes one’s innate knowledge, belonging, and spirituality, on the other. Ideally, educators hoped that each participant of the camp would recognise themselves in terms of their ethnicity and would be interested to find out more about their ethnic roots after leaving the camp.

The generated world of the role-playing game and the camp in general are rendered to be more authentic than everyday life since they stimulate participants to discover their “real self”. In the context of a
marginal socio-economic situation, educators’ rhetoric and practice is such that play is framed as a ritual that intends to transform the players — firstly young men and thereby indirectly also young women — to alter their sense of self and the meaning of their existence. Visual aesthetics serves a double function that is oriented inward and outward: on the one hand, to mediate particular values to young people, and on the other, to communicate social difference in the public space. It is meant to oppose negative aspects that are publicly associated with youth from a socially disadvantaged background in general and with Mansi in particular. The distinct mode of being in the summer camp amounts therefore to a temporary lifestyle within a micro-community of the camp, which may turn into a sense of lifestyle (in Chaney’s terms) for those who participate repeatedly. Participants are meant to acquire a sense of life in their “real life” which would translate into particular sensibilities and certain practices.

Participants in their turn negotiate and perform values of what they consider Mansi tradition, re-fashion themselves, and accumulate particular forms of knowledge. As I argued elsewhere: “Youth emphasized various self-subjectivation practices and used a range of possibilities to articulate their ethical sensibilities, which selectively embraced values promoted in the camp and combined them with other practices and conceptions that surrounded them” (Schröder 2017: 182). The multiple framing allows girls and boys to manoeuvre between the interpretation of the role-playing game as “just play” or “tradition” according to the situation. While both sides were interested to raise their stakes for the opposite sex, girls felt that their aspiration to play a more prominent role in the game did not find resonance among educators. Similar to boys they also wished to have fun and to engage themselves in the playful side of the event. In her analysis of play, Lindquist challenges a conventional romantic view of play as intrinsically free. For her, play can serve the relations of domination and submission (Lindquist 2001: 18). The recognised Mansi identity inside the camp implied that girls needed to accept gender hierarchies and male leadership as “natural”. Yet, they were also able to shift to the subjunctive mode and refer to gender hierarchies as “play”.

For many participants, the role-playing stays self-referential as an intense experience within the liminal space of the camp. The camp life
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is contrasted to life in the settlement or the city as two different and not reconcilable realities. After the camp season is over it continues to live in their memories, on visual media, and the social network side VKontakte. They dream on about who will be their spouse in the next year’s role play and a few get involved in the social organisation of the camp for the next summer vacation.

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