Island as a memorial site in the sacral landscape of the Arctic regions of the Russian North

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Abstract. Sacral localities along with the works (monuments) of hierotopic art intrinsic to them hold the most prominent positions in the hierarchy of landmark places and constitute the backbone of establishment (elaboration) of the remembrance landscapes for local and ethnic communities in the Arctic Regions of the Russian North. Sacral topoi are the focal points for storage and transfer of the ultimate, comprehensive and innermost knowledge (memory) of all aspects and modalities of the universe constitution. Fundamental memorability of a sacred place is determined by its appeal to metaphysics, to the origins and the arche, the principles and foundations of existence, as well as by its commitment to the supertemporal rhythms of remembering the eternal (eternal memory represented in the chronotope of the myth of eternal return). The system of sacral places serving as the sacred framework of the remembrance landscape for the Arctic peoples places special emphasis to the topos of the island which became the protosymbol of the Russian civilization due to its powerful numinous potential and semiotic status. This research was conducted in reliance upon folklore and ethnographic materials as well as ecclesiastical and historical sources revealing the semiotics and commemorative generating potential of the island developmental site in the sacral landscape of the Russian North Arctic regions. Studying the island topoi as a place of remembrance in the sacral landscape of the Arctic territories and aquatic areas allows for the conclusion that all cult sites and sanctuaries of the northern indigenous peoples (the Sami, the Nenets and the Vepsians), as well as all the monuments of the orthodox hierotopy specific for the island territories of the Russian North, manifest themselves as eternal keepers of enduring values, commandments and implications of human existence in the sacred space of the high latitudes.

1. Introduction

Sacral localities along with the works (monuments) of hierotopic art intrinsic to them hold the most prominent positions in the hierarchy of landmark places and constitute the backbone of establishment (elaboration) of the remembrance landscapes for local and ethnic communities in the Arctic Regions of the Russian North. Sacral topoi are the focal points for storage and transfer of the ultimate, comprehensive and innermost knowledge (memory) of all aspects and modalities of the universe constitution. Fundamental memorability of a sacred place is determined by its appeal to metaphysics, to the origins and the arche, the principles and foundations of existence, as well as by its commitment to the supertemporal rhythms of remembering the eternal (eternal memory represented in the chronotope of the myth of eternal return). The system of sacral places serving as the sacred framework of the remembrance landscape for the Arctic peoples places special emphasis to the topos of the island
which became the protosymbol of the Russian civilization due to its powerful numinous potential and semiotic status [1].

2. Materials and methods
This research was conducted in reliance upon folklore and ethnographic materials as well as ecclesiastical and historical sources revealing the semiotics and commemorative generating potential of the island developmental site in the sacral landscape of the Russian North Arctic regions.

Research methodology stems from implementation of the phenomenological approach in the field of religious studies, implying a whole set of hermeneutic procedures and methods along with comparative typological and structural semiotic analysis of the Arctic sacred space.

Apart from laboratory study, sociological field research entitled Remembrance landscape of the northern territories in contemporary Russia was conducted in February 2019 with the residents of the Mezen District of the Arkhangelsk Region. The sociological research employed a method known as an in-depth semi-structured interviewing, which involved questions related to the respondents’ biographical details along with their image of the district they live in, of the remembrance sites and agents of memory, as well as of commemorative practices found in the Soviet holiday calendar. Seventeen respondents aged from 33 to 77 were interviewed, all of them have been residents of the Mezen District for at least 10 years.

3. Discussion
Inquiry into historiographical and source-study related aspects of semiotic research of the island topos within the traditional memorial culture of the Arctic peoples suggests that the issue in question has not been duly regarded by both domestic and foreign publications in the field of culture, anthropology and religious studies. At the same time it finds especial significance within the context of actual issues on preservation of arctic cultural heritage [2]. In reliance upon the analysis of historiographical situation in contemporary Russian studies of the North, primarily noteworthy is the fundamental body of research and materials of the Marine Arctic Complex Expedition dedicated to the sacral antiquities [3].

Significant contribution to the archaeological research of the Arctic sacral islands is made by the participants of the Kola Archaeological Expedition led by V.A. Shumkin [4]. The findings of the long-term archaeological research of the Solovetsky Archipelago sacred antiquities are reported in the works of A.A. Kuratov [5] and A.Ya. Martynov [6]. Considerable contribution to the study of sacred sites and sanctuaries of the Russian Arctic indigenous peoples is made by A.V. Golovnev [7], G.P. Kharyuchi [8], A.M. Murygin [9], O.V. Ovsyannikov, N.M. Terebikhin [10]. The importance of the orthodox churches construction to the development of sacral space within the memorial culture of the Russian North long-term residents is ascertained in the works of A.M. Tamitsky and N.M. Terebikhin [11]. Foreign research in the subject area of the Island as of geographic concept are carried out through the lens of interdisciplinary discourse of island studies and nissology. Basic ideas and constructs of contemporary island studies are developed in a comprehensive publication by P. Hay under the title A Phenomenology of Islands [12]. Works of the Norwegian archaeologist B. Olsen [13] are essential in providing insights into the semiotics and topology of the island in the sacred Arctic space.

4. Results
The island topos played an important role in spatial arrangement of burial and memorial rituals which established regular and reliable connection between the world of living and the world of ancestors, who would ensure stability and inviolability of the ethnic group’s sacred lifestyle. This ritual communication channel between the three co-temporal and co-spatial ethnocentric domains (the chthonic world of the dead, the world of the living people and the world of the descendants) [14] was itself the very mechanism of eternal memory reproduced in a set of memorial rites, which chronotope coincided with the rhythmics and geometry of cosmos. Developing an idea of commemorative ritual in
sociology coined by E. Durkheim, a renowned Russian expert in the field of memory studies. A. Vasilyev notes that since the ancestors were the first objects of worship and recurrent remembrance, memorial rites turn out to be the first commemorative rituals, while graves appear to be the first memorial sites [15]. Ritual remembrance of the ancestors involved not only memories of the past, but primarily the memory of the eternal, where each and every temporal and spatial dimension of the universe was fused together. In this regard, the island topos was the most adequate image (symbol or model) of the universe constitution to be reflected in the funeral and memorial rituals of the Russian North peoples, whose mythopoetical world view ascribed chthonic semantics to the island territories juxtaposing them to the otherworldish topography of the realm of the dead. The archetype of the island of the dead in Russia is embodied in its northern and Arctic archaeological landscape manifested by such remarkable monuments of funeral and memorial culture as Oleny Island burial ground on South Oleny Island of Lake Onega [16] and Oleny Island burial ground on Bolshoy Oleny Island of the Kola Bay [17]. Along the White Sea coast there is a variety of monuments reflecting the funeral and memorial culture [6]. Islands as memorial sites occupied an important position in the sacral space of Fennoscandia. A well-known researcher of the Lapland archaeology and anthropology N. Stora pointed out that 98 out of 220 Sami burial grounds explored by E. Manker were situated on the islands [18]. Necropolis constituted an integral part of the Sami island sanctuaries, which architectural complex would also include labyrinths, sieidis, cairns and stone figures. B. Olsen, a famous Norwegian archaeologist and a researcher of sacral antiquities found in Finnmark, came to the conclusion that as a rule, the stone labyrinths in the Northern Norway are located on small islands in the immediate vicinity to the Sami burial grounds. Spatial conjunction of labyrinths and burial grounds reveals a relation between the former and the funeral ritual, where the transition from the world of the living in to the world of the dead takes place as the ritual unfolds [13].

The island topos was of paramount importance to the spatial arrangement of the funeral and memorial ritual for the Karelians [19] and the Vepsians [20], as well as for the traditional memorial culture of the northern Russians residing in the pristine sacral area along Lake Onega [21]. Kenozero island cemeteries are associated with archaic notions of isolating the world of the dead by means of a water barrier, which one could only cross in a funerary boat. A reference to the boat of the dead is also recognized in the funeral ritual of the Bolshoy Oleny Island burial ground in the Kola Bay [17].

Consolidated in historical and toponymic tales, the cultural memory of local and ethnic communities of the Russian North links the origins of sacral island landscape of the northern and Arctic territories to the chthonic mythology and the cosmogenetic mythologemes from which the most important are the motives of floating islands and petrification. These tales reproduced the prehistoric events keeping alive the memories of the deeds of shamans, cultural heroes and primal forefathers, who had created the Arctic geocultural space and developed the first lands emerging in the bowels of primeval chaos of water. The Sami shamans - noiaides - were able to swim in the Lapland lakes, rivers and seas on a lump of earth. While doing so, the shaman could not speak and had to keep absolute silence. In case this ban was violated, the lump of earth would become an island and the shaman would turn to stone [22]. Petrified shamans, heroes and primal forefathers (prauredki) turned to stone sculptures, or sieidis, became pivotal memorial sites of the motionless Lapland sacral landscape with its stone ritual stillness and quintessential silence of the Arctic midnight sun.

The topos of the island being both the border and the center of the other world was integral to the development of a sacred map of the most prominent memorial sites in the ethnocultural landscape of the Nenets people, who traditionally believed that sacral centers emerged regardless of people's will or discretion - they were hierophanic and only revealed to the masters and keepers of the sacred knowledge, i.e. the shamans. A famous researcher of sacral geography and topography of the Tundra Nenets G.P. Kharyuchi emphasizes utmost importance of island geoetics in the development of the Tundra Nenets sacred landscape. "Islands are of crucial importance. All big islands are sacred: Vaygach, Bely, Shokalsky, Sibiryakov. <--.> Nenets toponyms for "island", or "ngo", also contain information about the sacral status of the island. "Ngoya Khaebidya Ya" means "islands are sacred lands", and "Khaebidya ngo" stands for "sacred island". "Khae khae ngo" is translated as "island of
spirits, or idols” (marked as Vaygach Island on the map). The island were considered sacred to such an extent that women could not set foot on them without having an iron plate inside their shoes, and household waste would be taken away to the mainland. Sacred islands are difficult to access, which is why there are special twin islands created on the mainland in order to perform rituals intended for the principal sanctuaries <…>. Thus, sacred islands are marginal (boundary) cult objects used to identify ancestral (ethnic) territories of the Nenets people” [8].

Vaygach Island played a dominant role in the hierarchy of sanctuaries and sacred sites of the Nenets ethnocultural landscape (“Khaebidya Ya”, i.e. sacred land), the epiphany of which is reflected in the cosmogenetic myth about the emersion of the first land from the abyss of primeval and chaotic ocean. A stone cliff emerged from the depths of the sea and kept growing up to the size of an island, which later became the focal point of the Tundra Nenets’ sacral geography giving rise to all secondary sanctuaries and sacred sites, which indicated the borders and the end points of a nomadic ecumene. Vaygach Island was the place to celebrate the major Nenets festival, which symbolic program included ritual hunting and a sacrifice of a polar bear as zoomorphic symbol of the World Center and the Pole. The Bear Festival was held at the most sacred time (Elijah Day) in the most sacred place and rendered total universal metaphysics of the northern nomads along with their sacred science of symbols, structures and values in existence in the Arctic. The ritual of sacred polar bear hunting held on the Elijah Day reminds of a cosmic duel, which served as the root of cosmovision. It shall be construed as the primordial festival of the Tundra Nenets. According to V.N. Toporov, primordial festival is a kind of encyclopedic body of archaic culture, as well as a means of production of new forms of culture in its symbolic images in the course of a festive “game” [23]. One of the most powerful sacral island centers of secondary importance that originated from the numinous power of Vaygach is the sanctuary called Kozmin Coppice (Kozmin Perelesok, Harv Pad) located on the western border of the Kanin tundra in the Mezen District of the Arkhangelsk Region. This is a sacred site for those on the road, and its island topography is determined by an isolated location in a grove (coppice) surrounded by a treeless landscape on the fringes of the swampy forest-tundra. In 1986, this sanctuary was explored by the Arctic division of the Arkhangelsk archaeological expedition, with the participation of one of the authors hereof. Phenomenological analysis of spatial, temporal, attributive, action-related and gender levels (codes) of rituals performed by the nomadic reindeer herders in the sacred grove of Harv Pad allowed for the conclusion that it was, on the one hand, a boundary cult object indicating ancestral (ethnic) Nenets territory, and on the other hand, a place to perform calendar (spring/summer and autumn/winter) rites to commemorate the most significant transitional moments in the reindeer herders’ seasonal migrations [24]. Sacrifice rituals performed in a way-pointing island sanctuary serving as a filtering (initiatic) border-crossing point, or signpost, stirred the deepest layers of nomadic memories of their ancestors' sacred terrestrial and celestial ways.

Field ethnoscociological research of the Mezen District memorial sites conducted in 2019 allowed to define an invariant core image of the sacred Kozmin Coppice island grove of the Nenets people in the context of contemporary configuration (topology) of the remembrance landscape among Russians residing in the Mezen River area. In-depth interviews demonstrated remarkable durability of structures pertaining to the mythopoetic memory of Kanin tundra as of distinguished sacral topos characterized by the piercing numinous power that strikes with awe and terrifies all strangers either traveling the sacred road of reindeer herders or crossing it (this fact is reported by all respondents who took part in the research).

The orthodox invasion into the pagan and outlandish sacral space of the Arctic and the northern territories was taking place along with conversion of the Sami, the Nenets, the Karelia, the Vepsian, and the Komi peoples to Christianity. The works (monuments) of Russian hierotopic art (crosses, chapels, churches, monasteries) were erected right in the place of the sacred sites belonging to the indigenous inhabitants of the North to stay embedded in the very heart of the pagan sacredness manifested in the island topos. "An island is not just a border dividing the universal space into the earthly and the otherworldly ones, an island is the center of the new world. Central position of an island in the coordinate system of sacral geography accounted for its transformation into the focal
point of monasticism in the Russian North. It was not a coincidence that islands were among the main places where monasteries were erected. Quite the opposite, this choice was clearly determined by the archaic chthonic semantics of an island as the world of the dead, as well as by the very teleology of monastic heroism. <…> The idea of monastic asceticism on the island of the dead resided both in the mortal conquest of death and in self-preparation to assumption <…>. Being precisely the kind of land situated in the heart of the otherworldly realm, an island became the sacral center of the Northern Thebaid” [24].

The image of an island monastery as quintessential and comprehensive memorial ensemble, a depository of memories of the northern saints’ wonders and heroic deeds, as well as of the events and endeavors of the Sacred history, is embodied in hierotopy and iconography of the monasteries in the Russian North (Solovki, Valaam, etc.). The most magnificent example of church construction on the White Sea islands, which sacral geomorphology and architectonics incorporate the entire treasury of crucial symbols inherent to the Pomor sacred horizon (stone, island, cross, ship, sea) is the Monastery of the Cross erected on Kiy Island in the Onega Bay according to the will and godly intention of Patriarch Nikon, for whom this stony island in the White Sea was the stone of faith and truth, and the island of salvation. To commemorate this wonder in full conformity with the church canons and the Pomor sacred votary tradition, Nikon ordered to erect the Monastery of the Cross on this rock island, which before the adoption of Christianity could presumably be a pagan sanctuary of the Baltic Finns residing in the area [25], and which this temple building Patriarch included in his hierotopic project of salvation island divinity [26]. "Symbolic program of the Monastery of the Cross, which Patriarch Nikon apparently designed together with Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich in conjunction with the Valday Iversky Monastery and the Resurrection Monastery in the vicinity of Moscow, managed to incorporate one of the facets of heaven, namely the image of the Promised Land on a remote northern island” [25].

5. Conclusion

Studying the island topos as a place of remembrance in the sacral landscape of the Arctic territories and aquatic areas allows for the conclusion that all cult sites and sanctuaries of the northern indigenous peoples (the Sami, the Nenets and the Vepsians), as well as all the monuments of the orthodox hierotopy specific for the islands territories of the Russian North, manifest themselves as eternal depositories of enduring values, commandments and implications of human existence in the sacred space of the high latitudes. While enjoying the highest sacral and semiotic status, the islands serve as datum points underpinning the entire communicative framework of the memorial landscape of local and ethnic communities in the Russian Arctic regions.

6. Gratitude

The research was supported by RSF (project No. 17-78-10205 «Landscape of memory and memory of landscape: memorial culture of indigenous population of Russian Arctic in the context of social-cultural transformation»).

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