

Silences of Fieldwork: Investigating Tacit Knowledge in Arctic Communities

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Ethnologists conducting research on religious practices and ideas in distant and diverse cultural settings often depend heavily on the spoken accounts of their interlocutors. This paper discusses the methodological challenges associated with relying primarily on verbal information, particularly when researchers overlook the significance of silences during fieldwork. Focusing on studies among the Nenets and other Northern Indigenous groups—communities known for their preference for practical action over verbal explanation and their cautious use of words for cosmological reasons—I explore what various forms of silence encountered in the field can reveal and how these may index different layers of the tacit in both everyday and ritual contexts.

With physical access to field sites in Russia currently restricted, studying tacit and situated cultural aspects from a distance poses a considerable challenge. Nevertheless previous research experience and established networks can potentially help overcome some of these limitations, allowing for a continued nuanced analysis of religious and cultural processes in Finno-Ugric communities in Russia. Furthermore, a careful re-examination of earlier field notes, photos and videos accumulated over the years can provide a valuable foundation for future research when access is restored and participant observation becomes feasible once again.