

1 AT THE THRESHOLD OF PERESTROIKA – KHANTY ECOLOGICAL TESTIMONY AND ESTONIAN ECO-NATIONALISM IN LENNART MERI'S "SONS OF TORUM"

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Introduction

The Sons of Torum (*Toorumi pojad*, 1989) is an Estonian documentary about the Khanty bear ceremony and the final film of Lennart Meri (1929–2006), who soon after became the first president of independent Estonia. Midway through the film, the ritual narrative is interrupted by a five-minute monologue by the Khanty participant Spiridon Tylchin (born 1944). Rather than explaining the ceremony, he speaks about environmental destruction, social breakdown, and the transformation of Khanty life under Soviet industrial expansion (*see Appendix*). His account is stark and concrete – describing oil-contaminated rivers, dying fish and birds, and the spread of illness – while also framed in moral and cosmological terms: “For us the earth is like human skin, which must not be wounded.” Environmental damage thus appears not merely as a technical problem but as a violation of a moral order governing relations between humans, land, and other living beings. Its consequences, he suggests, are existential.

This monologue poses an interpretive problem. While the film is generally understood as an ethnographic documentary on Khanty ritual culture and its Finno-Ugric context, Tylchin’s speech offers a direct and politically charged critique of Soviet reality, appearing at first as a striking interruption (Tobias 1990: 24). It raises broader questions: why was this speech delivered and included so prominently, and how should it be understood in relation to its historical context? What conditions enabled it, and how are Khanty experience and environmental knowledge articulated within it? How did Estonian perspectives shape its form, and how does it relate to the transformations of the late Soviet period, particularly *perestroika* and *glasnost*?

We argue that Tylchin’s speech functions as the political core of the film – a point where several distinct but overlapping discourses converge: Khanty environmental experience and historical marginalization; Estonian eco-nationalist concerns linking ecology to cultural survival; and the broader opening of late socialism that made such critiques publicly articulable. The film thus captures a historically specific encounter in which actors from different positions within the Soviet system articulated a shared critique of environmental destruction.

1 This research has been supported by the Estonian Research Council grant no. PRG 1584.

The chapter first situates environmental concerns in the late Soviet period, tracing the emergence of an idiom of ecological crisis during *perestroika*. It then examines how this discourse was reframed in Estonia through an eco-nationalist lens that shaped Meri's perspective. The analysis turns next to the Khanty worldview, emphasizing relational understandings of environment and moral order, before reconstructing the filming process as a negotiated encounter between Estonian filmmakers and Khanty participants. It concludes by analysing how Tylchin's speech is transformed through cinematic mediation into a condensed narrative of environmental and political critique.

This interpretation draws not only on film analysis but also on long-term collaborative anthropological research. Both authors grew up themselves in the Eastern bloc during *perestroika* and bring extended field experience with Khanty communities of the Agan and Tromyogan rivers – Stephan Dudeck through fieldwork and documentation of contemporary bear ceremonies, and Liivo Niglas through visual anthropological work, including collaborations with Yuri Vella and research on the production context of *The Sons of Torum*.

Perestroika and the idiom of environmental crisis

We situate the emergence of a voice such as Spiridon Tylchin's in *The Sons of Torum* within the broader transformations of the late Soviet period, particularly *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Initiated after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, *perestroika* ("restructuring") was conceived not as a rejection of socialism but as an attempt to reform a stagnating system from within.

As Padma Desai emphasizes, *perestroika* cannot be understood "in narrowly economic terms," since its political and cultural dimensions were fundamental to Gorbachev's project. Reform emerged from the broader crisis of the late Brezhnev era, when "the Soviet Union was by all accounts going downhill," and even its vast natural resources "in the wilderness of Siberia and beyond" were becoming increasingly costly to exploit (Desai 1990: 3). Gorbachev initially envisioned *perestroika* as a "revolution from above" (Shearman 1988), later acknowledging that the leadership had underestimated the scale of the nationality question (Gorbachev 2021).

Crucially, *perestroika* was accompanied by *glasnost* ("openness"), which relaxed censorship and allowed previously suppressed problems to enter public debate. Environmental degradation became one of the most visible and politically charged of these. As Nicholas A. Robinson observed in *Perestroika and Priroda* (1988), damage to *priroda* (nature) – understood broadly as the ecological conditions of life – had "become acute," rooted in decades of "heavy and rapid industrialization" (Robinson 1988: 351). Environmental crisis thus functioned as a politically permissible idiom of critique: where direct criticism of the state remained constrained, ecological damage provided a language for articulating systemic failure. At the same time, Robinson

identified a key contradiction within reform itself: the drive for economic acceleration (*uskorenie*) could conflict with environmental protection – especially in the northern regions, where ecological concerns often held greater importance for the local population than developmental priorities (Robinson 1988: 352).

Although *glasnost* enabled open discussion, environmental critique predated *perestroika*. Works such as Boris Komarov's *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union* (1978), published abroad under a pseudonym, argued that ecological degradation was structurally embedded in Soviet governance. As F. Egerton notes, Komarov and also Goldman (1972) suggested that the Soviet system was "less willing and probably also less able" to address pollution, as centralized planning prioritized production and secrecy over ecological accountability (Egerton 1982: 128). Siberia appeared here as a paradigmatic extractive frontier. Komarov's warning – "if we want to survive, we must know the truth. And tell it to others" (Komarov 1980: 140) – anticipated the moral language of later environmental debates.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, environmental concerns were already present in Soviet media and scholarly discussion (Atkinson 2005: 55), including publications such as A. Silin's "For Ourselves and Our Descendants" (newspaper *Izvestiia*, 17 November 1977) and the discussion "The Economy, Ecology and Ethics" in the journal *Ekonomika i organizatsiia promyshlenno proizvodstva* [Economy and organisation of industrial production] from 3 March 1982, cited in Atkinson 2005: 55). At the same time, official discourse continued to emphasize that "nature protection is valued as one of the most important state tasks of our socialist system," contrasting it with capitalist profit motives (cited in Bruno 2016: 14, fn. 20). These tensions show that environmental critique circulated within both official and unofficial spheres prior to the political opening of the mid-1980s.

By the late 1980s, ecological disaster had become a central lens through which Soviet citizens understood the crisis of governance. Events such as the Chernobyl reactor catastrophe, the ecological collapse of the Aral Sea, and conflicts over Lake Baikal exposed the consequences of secrecy, large-scale planning, and industrial expansion (Josephson et al. 2013). In response, state measures such as the 1987 decree on Baikal and subsequent calls for "radical reorganization of environmental protection" signalled growing recognition of systemic crisis (Robinson 1988: 374–377). Environmental issues were no longer treated as isolated technical problems but as symptoms of a broader breakdown in relations between state, society, and nature.

At the same time, environmental discourse developed unevenly across the Soviet Union. This divergence must be understood within the ethnic-territorial order established in the Soviet Union, which Yuri Slezkine described as a "state-sponsored conflation of language, 'culture,' territory and quota-fed bureaucracy" (Slezkine 1994a: 414). While the Soviet system recognized the "small peoples of the North" as political subjects and granted them alphabets, schooling systems, and limited participation in administrative structures, it simultaneously pursued policies – such as

sedentarization, collectivization, and industrial integration – that undermined traditional lifeways. During *perestroika*, this contradiction became increasingly visible. As censorship weakened, public debate revealed the cumulative effects of state intervention: fragmented communities, declining subsistence practices, and structural dependence on centralized systems (Slezkine 1994b). Environmental degradation emerged not as an isolated issue but as part of a broader pattern of social and cultural disruption. At the same time, dispersed local grievances began to coalesce into coordinated political action. A key moment was the 1988 open letter to Gorbachev, signed by Indigenous intellectuals including Vladimir Sangi (Nivkh, born 1935) and Yeremei Aipin (Khanty, born 1948), which linked environmental destruction to the survival of northern Indigenous peoples and demanded rights to land and resources and political representation (Sangi et al. 1996).

This articulation soon took institutional form. By 1989, initiatives such as the Association of the Khanty and Mansi peoples “Spaseniye Yugry” [Salvation of Yugra] transformed ecological protest into organized mobilization, and in 1990 the founding of RAIPON (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North) and the First Congress of the Small Peoples of the North formalized demands for land rights, environmental protection, and self-determination (Pika et al. 1996; Fondahl and Poelzer 2010; Balzer 1999; Abramov 2019; see Chichlo, *this volume* – E.K.). These developments marked a shift from moral critique to structured political activism, even as they remained constrained by systemic inequalities.



Fig. 1 Observing Khanty dugout boats on the Agan River. From left to right: Agrafena Sopochina, Maie Jõgi, and Lennart Meri using a video camera for field documentation. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

For Indigenous communities, however, environmental crisis was not only discursive but lived. Industrial expansion – especially oil and gas extraction in Western Siberia – transformed ecosystems, polluting rivers, disrupting forests, and fragmenting reindeer pastures. As Robinson notes, conflicts over development involved not only pollution but also “wilderness, cultural sites, or traditional historic land uses” (Robinson 1988: 414). Ecological conflict was therefore simultaneously environmental, cultural, and political.

Seen in this light, *perestroika* exposed a fundamental contradiction of Soviet governance: the coexistence of official recognition of cultural diversity with a developmental model that treated many regions as extractive frontiers. Environmental crisis became politically powerful because it condensed multiple grievances – demands for truth against secrecy, local control against central authority, and cultural survival against industrial transformation. It functioned as a shared but flexible idiom through which diverse actors articulated critique. It is precisely this convergence – and its internal divergences – that becomes visible in *The Sons of Torum*, where environmental destruction operates simultaneously as political critique, reflection on national survival, and expression of Indigenous moral relations to land.

The Estonian prism: Eco-nationalism and existential survival

In late Soviet Estonia, environmental discourse extended beyond concerns about industrial pollution to encompass questions of national survival, demographic change, and political autonomy. Ecological protest thus developed into a form of “existential politics,” shaped by the fear that the Estonian nation might not merely be subordinated within the Soviet system but could disappear as a historical community. As Kaarel Piirimäe argues, these concerns were grounded in visible processes such as centrally driven industrialization, large-scale in-migration, demographic imbalances in urban areas, and the dominance of Russian-language administration. Cultural and political survival increasingly appeared inseparable. Although Soviet authorities publicly dismissed fears of cultural disappearance as hostile propaganda – most notably when the First Secretary of the Estonian Communist Party, Karl Vaino, explicitly rejected such claims at a 1982 conference in Tallinn – these concerns persisted beneath official discourse. With the advent of *perestroika* and the relaxation of censorship, they gained new visibility and were increasingly articulated in the language of imminent and potentially irreversible crisis (Piirimäe 2020).

Within this context, environmental issues acquired a distinct political meaning. Industrial development was understood not only as ecological threats but as a driver of demographic and cultural transformation. Large-scale projects required imported labour, contributing to the growth of Russian-speaking populations. Environmental protest thus became one of the first relatively legitimate arenas for expressing politically sensitive concerns. The most prominent example was the “Phosphorite War” of

1987, when proposed mining projects in northeastern Estonia triggered widespread opposition. While framed in terms of ecological risk – groundwater contamination and landscape destruction – the protests were equally driven by fears of demographic change and cultural erosion.

Scholars have described this convergence of ecological and national concerns as eco-nationalism. As Jane I. Dawson argues, environmental activism in the late Soviet period often functioned as a surrogate for nationalism and a means of demanding greater local self-determination (Dawson 1996). In Estonia, ecological discourse provided a politically acceptable language through which broader claims about sovereignty, identity, and cultural continuity could be articulated.

Lennart Meri played a key role in shaping this connection. In his 1987 article published in Russian for the all-Union cultural newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Meri 1987a) and later in Estonian under the title “*Kahjulik kasu*” [Harmful Profit], in *Eesti Kommunist*, he framed the phosphorite mining project in moral and existential terms (Potapov 2024). Opening with a personal reference to his mother’s death, he constructs a metaphor in which Estonia itself appears as a vulnerable and irreplaceable mother facing destruction. Environmental degradation is thus recast as an ethical imperative, culminating in the warning: “We once again stand at a fateful crossroads, and we have only one mother” (Meri 1987b: 64).

Environmental activism soon became a catalyst for broader political mobilization during the “Singing Revolution,” which contributed to the restoration of Estonian independence on 20 August 1991 (Auer 1998: 670). Ecological concerns provided both a mobilizing force and a legitimizing framework, allowing political demands to be voiced in terms difficult for Soviet authorities to dismiss. This growing awareness was also shaped by earlier intellectual influences, including the Estonian translation of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1968, which introduced international debates on the ecological consequences of pesticides and became a key reference point in emerging environmental consciousness (Carson 1968; Kaljundi 2018).

This convergence of environmental and national concerns was rooted in earlier intellectual developments. From the 1960s onward, Estonian scholars increasingly turned to folklore, mythology, and Finno-Ugric heritage as sources of cultural continuity, at a time when recent political history remained censored. As Andres Lange-mets (2006) notes, the post-Stalinist period saw renewed cultural exchange, including translations of Western European literary and scientific works alongside Soviet publications, and a growing interest in traditions marginalized under Soviet cultural policy, such as vernacular folklore and pre-Christian belief systems. Within this framework, Finno-Ugric peoples were seen as carriers of enduring, nature-oriented ways of life, and Estonians increasingly understood themselves as part of a wider community of northern “forest peoples” or “small peoples” (Jonuks and Remmel 2020: 466–467).

This orientation was reinforced by a broader circle of cultural producers. Composer Veljo Tormis (1930–2017) drew on runic song traditions in his choral cycle

Unustatud rahvad [Forgotten Peoples, 1970–1989], while Estonian artist Kaljo Põllu (1934–2010) reinterpreted Finno-Ugric mythological imagery in graphic series such as *Kodalased* [The Dwellers], 1973–1975, and *Kalivägi* [Ancient Power], 1978–1984). Writers including Jaan Kaplinski and Hando Runnel developed landscape-centred idioms of cultural continuity. As Linda Kaljundi observes, these authors did not simply preserve older traditions but transformed them into modern cultural forms, a process that Annus similarly describes as a turn toward the poetics of a shared Finno-Ugric ancestry in which nature-oriented old traditions became a source of contemporary creative renewal (Kaljundi 2018; Annus 2025: 52)

Within this constellation, Lennart Meri's work occupies a central position (Toulouze and Runnel 2008). His writings and films articulate a sustained reflection on the relationship between numerically small peoples, cultural memory, and environment. In books such as *Hõbevalge* [Silverwhite], Meri 1976) and *Hõbevalgem* [More Silverwhite], Meri 1984), he combines archaeology, folklore, linguistics, and geography to construct a vision of identity rooted in the northern landscape and in a broader Finno-Ugric cultural sphere (Young 2025). Environment here functions as a repository of cultural memory, preserving traces of human experience across time.

This perspective also shaped his ethnographic filmmaking. In earlier films such as *Veelinnurahvas* [The Waterfowl People], 1970, and *Linnutee tuuled* [The Winds of the Milky Way], 1977, Meri sought to document Finno-Ugric cultures within their ecological contexts, emphasizing the interdependence of human practices and environment (Lõhmus 2020). As he himself noted, the aim was to record “living activity” and the accumulated experience of generations in relation to their surroundings (Meri 1971: 546). This approach anticipates his later engagement with the Khanty bear ceremony and his concept of an “ecology of culture,” developed in dialogue with Veljo Tormis, in which cultural traditions are understood as forms of collective memory requiring protection analogous to that of the natural environment (Meri and Tormis 1987).

In his book *Virmaliste väraval* [At the Gateway of the Northern Lights], Meri expresses this idea through a stark analogy: cultural loss is comparable to biological extinction. Culture, as “the sum of the creative work of all the hundreds of generations that have preceded us,” is cumulative and essential; its disappearance is irreversible – “like the extinction of the mammoths” (Meri 1974: 243). This formulation collapses the distinction between natural and cultural loss, emphasizing their shared finality.

Taken together, these developments reveal a distinct Estonian interpretive framework in which environmental crisis is inseparable from cultural continuity and national survival. The destruction of nature is understood not only as ecological damage but as the erosion of the conditions that sustain collective identity. Within this perspective, Estonians increasingly perceived their own situation as comparable to that of the Khanty, identifying shared threats of environmental degradation and cultural loss driven by Soviet industrial expansion and its underlying political and moral

ethos. This identification was reinforced through the notion of a broader community of northern “forest peoples.”

It is within this framework that *The Sons of Torum* can be understood. The film does not simply document an Indigenous ritual; it refracts the Khanty world through Estonian concerns with history, identity, and vulnerability, creating a conceptual bridge that situates the fate of Siberian Indigenous communities within a broader reflection on the survival of “small peoples” in modern industrial society.



Fig. 2 A break during filming of the bear ceremony. From left to right: Ivan Spochin, Vasilii Tylchin, Ago Ruus with a film camera, and Yosif Sopochin. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

The Khanty prism: Environment, the bear, and the moral order of the forest

In the late Soviet period, Khanty elders, hunters, and intellectuals increasingly transformed environmental grievances from dispersed complaints and literary expression into elements of a more public discourse that would later develop into political activism. In this respect, developments in Western Siberia followed broader Soviet patterns. At the same time, the ecological situation in the region was particularly acute: the rapid expansion of oil and gas extraction produced environmental transformations of extraordinary scale (Atkinson 2005; Wiget and Balalaeva 2014; Kuik 1989).

Yet the emergence of ecological critique cannot be explained solely by reference to Soviet environmental debates or state frameworks of protection. Within Khanty society, alternative environmental ethics already existed, rooted in Indigenous con-

ceptions of moral economy and relationships between humans, animals, deities and the land. These understandings were expressed in everyday discourse, literature, and ritual practice. Ecological critique thus did not arise only from concerns about pollution and resource management but from long-standing moral and cosmological frameworks (Wiget and Balalaeva 2011).

Among the Khanty, the bear ceremony offers a particularly clear expression of this worldview. The brown bear is treated as a relative or ancestor and serves as a representative of the wider community of beings inhabiting a shared environment. Through songs, narratives, and performances, the ceremony stages relationships among humans, animals, and spiritual entities, reaffirming the rules and taboos that govern their coexistence. The environment appears here not as a collection of resources but as a moral and social field. This framework rests on the understanding that the world is a shared and ordered domain in which humans, animals, and spiritual beings are bound by mutual obligations. Humans do not stand above nature but exist within a broader community of life. While similar relational ontologies have been documented across northern Eurasia (see Brandišauskas 2017; Kasten 2021:174–183), Khanty ritual practice gives this perspective a particularly explicit and sustained form (Dudeck 2022; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022).

The bear ceremony makes these relations tangible. After a successful hunt the animal should be reconciled and is received simultaneously as guest, kin, and powerful other, requiring respect and strict adherence to ritual norms. These relations can also be highly specific: in the Agan River region, members of the Kazamkin lineage – associated with the bear – traditionally refrain from certain performative elements of the ceremony (Perevalova and Karacharov 2006:162). Such restrictions illustrate how ritual practice encodes concrete moral relationships between human groups and particular animal beings. In this way, the ceremony not only commemorates the bear but reaffirms a broader ethical order structured by restraint, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Within this perspective, late Soviet environmental destruction was experienced not only as material damage but as moral injury. As Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer notes, outrage over forced relocation and environmental devastation was widespread, even if “public, organized protests have been rare” (Balzer 1999:4). She cites, for example, the reaction of Ronalda Stepanovna Olzina (born 1955), director of the Khanty-Mansiisk ethnographic museum, who, after witnessing the impact of oil development, remarked: “I have a deadening pang of hurt when I see the road and what people have done near it. How much does one have to hate the land to do that to it?” (Balzer 1999:146–147). Such statements indicate that environmental transformation was perceived not merely as a technical problem but as a violation of the moral order of the taiga.

These forms of critique can be understood, following James C. Scott (1990), as part of a “hidden transcript.” They expressed privately anger at dispossession and eco-

logical destruction while remaining rooted in local moral worlds rather than fully articulated political programs. This discourse stood in increasing tension with dominant Soviet ideology, which framed nature as a resource to be harnessed for collective progress and presented extraction as a patriotic duty to the *Rodina* [Motherland] – like in the famous slogan “Siberia’s wealth to the Motherland!” In contrast, Khanty perspectives articulated a moral economy grounded in restraint, reciprocity, and obligation. By the late 1980s, these conflicting visions of human – environment relations began to confront each other more openly.

A key literary articulation of this perspective appears in the works of Yeremei Aipin. In texts from the 1970s and early 1980s, he depicts oil development, the destruction of forests and rivers, and the moral disorientation of hunters facing rapid change – anticipating themes later central to public ecological discourse. In *In the Dark* (1977; Aipin 1993), outsiders who present themselves as “conquerors” and “discoverers” are reinterpreted as “first robbers” and “first burglars,” while the raiding of a traditional storehouse symbolizes the breakdown of both moral and ecological order. Other works, including *I Listen to the Earth* (1983; Aipin 1998) and *In the Urman Forest* (1972–73; Aipin 1993), similarly emphasize the sentience and sacredness of the earth and the taboos against damaging it. Aipin’s writing demonstrates that ecological critique did not emerge only through late-Soviet public debate but was already embedded in Khanty cultural expression. Environmental destruction appears not simply as resource loss but as the collapse of a world in which humans, land, and moral obli-



Fig. 3 Ivan Spochin (seated) playing a drum, with Yuri Vella leaning against the cabin roof. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, September 1985. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

tions are inseparable. The earth is treated as sentient and vulnerable; damage to the landscape becomes injury to a living moral person.

A more explicit political articulation appears in the documentary *Kolybel* [Cradle] by R. Yernazarova (1989), which centres on the voice of the reindeer herder, poet and political activist Yuri Vella (1948–2013) from the Forest Nenets and Khanty community of Varyogan. Vella describes the landscape as socially alive: where outsiders see resources, local inhabitants perceive rivers and forests as living beings embedded in moral relationships. Referring to the small river Yegorishka as a companion or elder, he contrasts this understanding with the logic of infrastructure development, which simply filled the river in. At the same time, Vella connects this relational ontology to ecological devastation – oil pollution, forest fires, and the loss of hunting and herding grounds. Such destruction is not only material but also moral and spiritual, as it severs relations between people, land, and memory. The fate of the Yegorishka becomes emblematic: what appears minor to outsiders is, for local communities, the loss of a living foundation of life. Vella concludes that Indigenous inhabitants are treated as “a conquered people,” underscoring that ecology is inseparable from subsistence, land rights, cultural continuity, and political inequality.

Taken together, the bear ceremony, Aipin’s writings, and Vella’s reflections reveal a coherent Khanty understanding of nature as a moral and social field inhabited by humans, animals, spirits, and memories. In this perspective, the bear is not merely an animal but a central figure through which relations among beings are enacted; the earth is not inert but sentient and vulnerable; and rivers and forests are not resources alone but living presences embedded in kinship networks and reciprocal obligation. Environmental damage thus signifies not only ecological degradation but the disruption of a broader moral order. It is within this framework that the filming of *The Sons of Torum* must be understood. The encounter between the Estonian film crew and the Khanty community did not take place in a neutral observational space, but within a field structured by moral obligations, ritual authority, and cosmological meaning. As a result, the act of filming itself became a site of translation and negotiation, where differing understandings of nature, culture, and authority had to be aligned in practice.

Site of encounter: Filming as intercultural negotiation

We propose to understand the encounter between the Estonian film crew and the Khanty community during the making of *The Sons of Torum* as a dialogical zone in which differing ethical systems, political expectations, forms of authority, and knowledge had to be negotiated. The question of how the “Khanty voice” and Lennart Meri’s vision intersect cannot be answered through the edited film alone; it requires attention to the conditions of its production. Tylchin’s speech entered the film through a specific form of collaboration shaped by Khanty ritual authority and environmental ethics, Estonian ecological discourse, and the openings created by *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

The film was thus shaped as much by Khanty social relations as by Meri's intellectual engagement with Finno-Ugric traditions and his reflections on small cultures.

Within this negotiated context, a key dimension of Meri's ethnographic practice becomes visible: his effort to represent Indigenous peoples not as objects of modernization but as cultural equals, even as symbolic kin. As Anvar Samost and Jaan Undusk note, Meri's films enact an ethical gesture – “this is my brother” – that challenges both Western hierarchies and Soviet narratives of backwardness (Samost and Undusk 2025). This stance aligns with Meri's view, expressed in his interview with Kazuo Okada (Okada 1992), that all cultures must be preserved as repositories of ecological knowledge. His metaphor of humanity as “a small boat in a vast ocean” underscores that survival depends on not discarding even what appears small or insignificant. By aligning Estonians with other “small peoples,” Meri constructs a counter-hierarchy that privileges cultural continuity and knowledge over political dominance. The inclusion of Tylchin's speech thus reframes the ethnographic encounter as one of shared vulnerability under Soviet modernity.



Fig. 4 Lennart Meri with Vasilii Aivaseda, a participant in the bear ceremony. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

Our analysis of this negotiation draws on interviews with members of the film team – Reet Sokmann (born 1953), Enn Säde (born 1938), Mart Meri (born 1959), and Ago Ruus (born 1949) in 2024 (Niglas 2024 a-d) – as well as interviews with Nenets and Khanty participants like Yuri Vella (Niglas and Toulouze 2013) and Yosif Sopo-chin (born 1958, Dudeck and Tenetz 2016), and conversations with Yeremei Aipin, and Agrafena Sopochina (born 1951). The bear ceremony was filmed at the Agan

River settlement of Tylchiny in September 1985 and again in August 1988, producing approximately 20 hours of film and 28 hours of sound recordings. Participants came not only from the Agan community but also from neighbouring river systems: the Kuplandeev family from the Yugan River, the Kechimovs and Sopochins from the Tromyogan, and members of the Aivaseda family from the Forest Nenets.

As Reet Sokmann recalls, the idea of filming the bear ceremony first emerged during *Kaleva hääled* [Voices of Kaleva] (Meri 1985), where it was initially conceived as a short segment. During the 1985 expedition, limited film stock allowed only fragmentary recording (Niglas 2024c). However, encountering the ceremony revealed the inadequacy of this approach. Yuri Vella emphasized that the ritual had already become rare and urged the crew to “shoot everything,” noting that many elder performers would soon be gone. Acting as chairman of the village council, he also mediated the filming locally. For him and other Khanty participants, partial recording was not merely insufficient but contradicted the ritual’s logic of continuity and completeness. This became explicit when Meri asked whether the ceremony could be shortened and was told: “Why did you come if you are in such a hurry? For us the bear is a matter of life and death” (Niglas and Toulouze 2013). The encounter marked a shift from collecting illustrative material to documenting the ritual on its own terms.

By 1988, Meri adopted a dual approach: alongside a one-hour broadcast film, he planned a much longer ethnographic version in collaboration with the Institute for Scientific Film (IWF) in Göttingen. This shift responded to the earlier mismatch between cinematic practice and Khanty expectations. For the Khanty, filming was not neutral but part of the ritual process, carrying an obligation to document it as a complete whole – for future generations and for spiritual accountability. The tension between ritual time and film time thus reflects a broader negotiation between different regimes of knowledge: broadcast media, ethnographic documentation, and Indigenous practices of preservation.

While the project was shaped by Meri’s vision, it depended equally on the cultivation of trust. From the outset, he instructed the crew to put away cameras and first establish personal contact with local residents. In the small settlement of Tylchiny, this approach facilitated acceptance. Meri’s strength lay less in detailed preparation than in his ability to orient the team socially and symbolically. As Enn Säde recalls, he encouraged the crew to distinguish themselves from Russian outsiders – speaking Estonian among themselves and avoiding behaviours associated with officials or oil workers. This positioning was both strategic and ethical: it signalled distance from Soviet authority and fostered trust through restraint and respect rather than claims of sameness (Niglas 2024a).

This stance reflected a broader Estonian self-understanding as a small Finno-Ugric people, creating a limited sense of affinity with the Khanty. At the same time, asymmetries remained: the Khanty controlled ritual legitimacy, while the Estonian crew-controlled filming, editing, and circulation.

The establishment of trust depended crucially on mediation from within the Khanty community, above all by Yeremei Aipin. More than a logistical facilitator, Aipin acted as a central intermediary: he arranged contacts, negotiated with elders, and mobilized performers through kinship networks along the Agan and neighbouring rivers. As Enn Säde recalls, without Aipin “we would never have got there.” Aipin also emphasized the urgency of documentation while knowledgeable performers were still alive. At the same time, he operated under pressure from Soviet authorities, who warned him against supporting the project, making Meri’s diplomatic skills essential in securing access and transport. The encounter was thus co-produced: while the Estonian crew initiated the project, Khanty actors shaped its conditions and purpose (Niglas 2024a).

Crucially, the crew’s presence had to be ritually legitimized. Filming was not treated as neutral observation but required cosmological approval. This is illustrated by the episode known as the “bucket test,” in which the ritual elder Ivan Sopochin performed a divination to determine whether outsiders could be present. As Sokmann, Säde, and Ruus recall in varying detail, the outcome – whether the bucket could be lifted or the water remained still – signalled acceptance. The positive result allowed filming to proceed, demonstrating that the camera’s presence had to be ritually authorized (Niglas 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).



Fig. 5 Spiridon Tylchin with a song stick. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

This interaction is also reflected within the film itself. After an initial depiction of Khanty life, *The Sons of Torum* shows a tally stick used to record events and songs through notches and pictograms, including animals, tools, and dates. For a brief moment, a pictogram of a film camera appears – the only instance in which the act of filming is directly represented. The Khanty thus register the filmmakers within their own system of notation, while the film records this inscription in turn. This moment encapsulates the structure of the encounter: filmmaking becomes part of the ritual context, even as the film remains focused on the ceremony.

Against this background, filming appears not as straightforward documentation but as an ongoing

negotiation between different systems of knowledge and authority. The production of *The Sons of Torum* unfolded through improvisation, technical constraints, ritual obligations, and a gradual recognition that the bear ceremony could not be treated as a conventional documentary subject. Two ethical orders overlapped: the crew's effort to act responsibly within a ceremonial setting, and Khanty ritual and environmental ethics, which determined what could be done, by whom, and when.

This also involved negotiating different regimes of temporality. In film production, time is structured by logistics – equipment, schedules, and deadlines – whereas in the ceremonial world it is governed by ritual sequence and obligations to humans, animals, and the land. The elders' responses made clear that the ceremony could not be shortened without ethical consequences. Learning this meant adapting the film, however imperfectly, to the ritual's own rhythm.

Seen in this light, *The Sons of Torum* emerges not simply as a record of a ritual but as the product of a contact zone in which Khanty cosmology, Indigenous ecological critique, Estonian Finno-Ugric identification, and late-Soviet political openings intersected. Its significance lies not in the erasure of difference but in the negotiation across it: a historically specific collaboration shaped by mediation, ritual authority, trust, and competing temporal and ethical frameworks.

Analysis of the interview: From textured dialogue to protest narrative

This section shifts from the conditions of encounter to the interview itself. The central question is not only what Spiridon Tylchin said, but how his speech was transformed from a recorded exchange into a five-minute monologue that constitutes the most explicitly political moment of *The Sons of Torum*. To grasp this transformation, the interview must be read in two forms: first, as a socially embedded conversation recorded after the bear ceremony; and second, as an edited film sequence (32:50–37:50), comprising nearly ten percent of the film (see *Appendix*). This comparison reveals a process of selection, condensation, and political reframing.

The interview took place on 30 August 1988, the day after the ceremony, and involved Spiridon Nikolaevich Tylchin, his relative Vasilii Antonovich Tylchin, and the ritual specialist Ivan Sopochin. Meri appears to have immediately recognized the significance of Spiridon Tylchin's testimony: working from an ad hoc Russian translation by Agrafena Sopochina, he recorded only Spiridon's statements in Estonian, indicating an early focus on themes of ecological critique and Khanty-Russian relations.

The interview was conducted by Sopochina, with Meri intervening only once through a relayed question: "In the past, people said this land was protected by taboo. Now everything has been turned upside down. Tell about this." This moment marks a shift from biographical inquiry to a theme central to the film: the inversion of moral relations to land.

In the edited sequence, Tylchin's speech becomes a concentrated account of environmental destruction and moral disruption. It foregrounds oil pollution, declining animal populations, forest destruction, illness, and social breakdown, structured through a series of vivid and cumulative statements: "The Vatyogan River is covered with a layer of oil as thick as your finger;" "The corpses of pike drift downstream;" "Birds cannot take off from the river and die in the oil;" "For us the earth is like human skin which must not be wounded, skinned, or turned upside down;" "When the Russians came to skin the earth, the Khanty began to die." These are reinforced by images of industrial extraction and environmental damage, creating a tightly composed narrative of ecological crisis.

The fuller interview, however, is broader and more gradual. It begins with biography and everyday life: Tylchin discusses his work in the Soviet fishing enterprise,



Fig. 6 Recording an interview with Spiridon Tylchin (seated). From left to right: Agrafena Sopochina, Lennart Meri, Spiridon Tylchin, Ivan Spochin, and Ago Ruus. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

technical improvisation, fuel shortages, and relations with state institutions and Russian actors. This context is crucial, as it shows that the monologue emerges from a wider discussion of subsistence, labour, and moral economy. The original conversation does not take the form of a coherent protest. Rather, it combines complaint within Soviet frameworks with elements of a hidden and private critique rooted in local moral worlds (Scott 1990). Importantly, this critique is not reducible to ethnic opposition: while institutions are criticized, individual relations remain more differentiated and can involve reciprocity.

The transformation into the film sequence is therefore not simply a matter of shortening, but of reconfiguration. Biographical detail and everyday texture recede, while politically legible elements – pollution, social breakdown, and existential threat – are foregrounded. The result is less a situated conversation than a cinematic articulation of environmental and moral crisis. Yet the monologue remains grounded in lived experience: the film amplifies and concentrates existing themes rather than introducing them from outside. It thus functions as a political rearticulation of locally embedded testimony for a broader audience.

This also explains the sequence's striking position within the film. Ronald B. Tobias criticized its "sudden introduction of a new story," suggesting that the pollution theme belonged to "another film" (Tobias 1990: 24). Yet this rupture is analytically revealing. The monologue interrupts the ritual frame and voiceover narration with a direct, contemporary voice, shifting the film's register from ethnographic representation to political intervention. Given its duration and placement, it cannot be treated as incidental. Instead, it reorients the viewer's understanding: the bear ceremony appears not only as cultural practice, but as a world under pressure and capable of articulating its own critique.

At the same time, Tylchin's speech departs from conventional Soviet petitionary forms, which typically combined grievance with deference to authority. As the interview unfolds, his account becomes increasingly cumulative and affective, approaching what James C. Scott describes as a "hidden transcript" entering a more public register (Scott 1990). The speech not only describes environmental damage but implicitly challenges the moral legitimacy of state practices and extractive development. The political conditions of *perestroika* and *glasnost* enabled such critique to move beyond private or localized expression into wider circulation.

In this sense, the monologue represents an early moment in the emergence of Khanty environmental critique within a semi-public sphere. It does not yet constitute a formal political program – unlike later developments such as *Spaseniye Yugry* or the activism of Yeremei Aipin, who, like Lennart Meri, moved from literary and cinematic cultural production into active politics during the late Soviet period (Kuik 1989; Kuik 1996; Okada 1992) – but it already articulates a convergence of ecological, social, and moral concerns.

A key feature of this speech is its holistic understanding of ecology. Environmental destruction appears simultaneously as a problem of subsistence, territorial loss, social disintegration, cultural continuity, and political injustice. Rivers, forests, and animals are not resources alone but part of a shared moral world. Ecology thus becomes the central arena in which the conflict between Indigenous lifeways and the extractive logic of the Soviet system is made visible.

Taken together, the comparison between interview and film allows for a more precise understanding of voice. The monologue is neither purely "authentic" nor simply constructed. It is both grounded and mediated: rooted in Tylchin's lived experience

yet shaped through Meri's selection and cinematic framing. It is best understood as a collaboratively produced political utterance, in which Khanty experience and filmic articulation converge. Its force lies precisely in this dual character – anchored in a specific social world while rendered legible within the broader late Soviet context.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Spiridon Tylchin's speech in *The Sons of Torum* must be understood as the product of a specific historical threshold during *perestroika*. At this moment, established Soviet forms of complaint and petition began to give way to more explicit modes of political critique. The film captures this transition: a point at which previously constrained voices could enter a wider public and visual sphere, but before they were stabilized into organized Indigenous activism.

Central to our analysis is that Tylchin's speech emerges from lived experience – of work, land, and ecological change – yet is shaped through a concrete encounter: between Khanty participants and Estonian filmmakers, between local moral worlds and broader interpretive frameworks. The result is neither transparent transcription nor external imposition, but a convergence of situated experience and filmic articulation.

The chapter has further shown that this articulation draws on distinct but intersecting discursive fields. The late Soviet idiom of environmental crisis provided a politically legible language of critique. In Estonia, this language was reframed through an eco-nationalist perspective linking ecology to cultural survival. Among the Khanty, environmental degradation was understood within a moral and cosmological framework in which land, animals, and humans are bound by reciprocal obligations. Tylchin's speech brings these perspectives into alignment without collapsing their differences.

In this sense, the monologue within the film about the ceremony articulates a holistic understanding of ecology. Environmental destruction appears not as an isolated problem but as a nexus linking subsistence, land use, social relations, moral order, cultural continuity, and political injustice. Ecology becomes the central arena in which the conflict between Indigenous lifeways and the extractive logic of the Soviet system is made visible.

Equally important are the conditions that made this articulation possible. As the reconstruction of the filming process has shown, *The Sons of Torum* emerged from a negotiated encounter shaped by mediation, ritual authority, and asymmetrical control over representation. The Khanty determined the terms of ritual legitimacy; the Estonian crew controlled recording and circulation. The resulting film is therefore not simply a document of a ritual, but the outcome of a space of encounter in which different regimes of knowledge, temporality, and authority had to be aligned in practice.

What makes this moment analytically significant is the convergence of perspectives that rarely coincide so closely: Khanty moral and cosmological understandings,

Indigenous ecological grievance, and Estonian eco-nationalist concerns. Rather than a case of unilateral appropriation, the material reveals a partial and situational alignment across differences. This alignment was enabled by shared experiences of constrained self-determination, perceived violations of moral and ecological order, and a limited but meaningful sense of affinity – sometimes articulated through the notion of related “small” or Finno-Ugric peoples.

The case thus clarifies both the possibilities and limits of such collaboration. It shows how, under the specific conditions of *perestroika*, locally grounded experience could be translated into a broader political and cinematic form without being fully detached from its social context. At the same time, it underscores that this translation remained shaped by asymmetries of power and mediation. *The Sons of Torum* should therefore be understood not simply as an ethnographic record or a political statement, but as the product of a historically specific moment of dialogue in which new forms of expression, alliance, and critique briefly became possible.

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Appendix

Text of the speech of Tylchin from *The Sons of Torum* (orthography of the original subtitle preserved, Meri 1989):

I was born 44 years ago here in our summer encampment. The name of the place is Wat Jawon On, the Narrow River Estuary.

Fish and animals have become scarce. The Vatugan River is covered with a layer of oil as thick as your finger. The corpses of pike drift downstream. The fish are permeated with oil and are inedible. Birds cannot take off from the river and die in the oil. We all suffer from liver disease because of the oil. On hunting trips, we melt snow for drinking water. In the spring, the snow is thickly covered with a layer of soot. In the past I fished here in my boat. Now there is a settlement of roughnecks on our riverbank. You turn your back and the nets are stolen in ten minutes.

Petrol is not for sale. We have to trade fish or squirrel skins for it. The boss does not care whether I have a boat or whether there are fish in the river. I am not lazy as he says. There were fish in May, but none in June. The fish go to the fisheries. In June and July, I earn only 30 roubles.

The forest is felled with machines, but the logs remain there. Everything is burned; only charcoal is left of the forest. The timber collective razed the forest, destroying the home of the animals. To hunt we have to wander far away, taking our families with us.

In the past there was always fish in the Holy Lake. The lake has been turned topsy-turvy and the fish are gone. They dredge sand out and pump it to the opposite bank. Six tons of fish used to be the norm; now 700 pounds is considered a good catch. Fish die when water from the Agan is pumped to the oil derricks. In the forested tundra, the lakes around the derricks are pumped dry. Fish can be found only in distant lakes. They are so far away that you cannot fish there alone.

We do not know what to do; the Russians have taken away all our land. I cannot even hunt anymore. Everything that one leaves in the storehouse on stilts is stolen. You have to carry all your possessions around with you. A road was built alongside the Agan that the oilmen drive on. They fire shotguns at our reindeer from their cars and from the derricks.

We watch carefully to keep fires from breaking out in the forest. It is not right even for an axe to wound the earth. For us the earth is like human skin, which must not be wounded, skinned, or turned upside down.

When the Russians came to skin the earth, the Khanty began to die. In the past we lived until seventy. Nowadays we die at fourteen, twenty, or thirty from liver failure. Now the Khanty have begun to commit suicide. In the past this was unknown to us. At school children are not taught how to work but how to steal. This too was previously unknown to us. We do not know whether our sons will ever become hunters and fishers. I considered living in the tundra, but oil rigs have sprung up there as well. We do not know how to go on living.

Figures

All photos courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.

- 1 Observing Khanty dugout boats on the Agan River. From left to right: Agrafena Sopochina, Maie Jõgi, and Lennart Meri using a video camera for field documentation. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann.
- 2 A break during filming of the bear ceremony. From left to right: Ivan Spochin, Vasilii Tylchin, Ago Ruus with a film camera, and Yosif Sopochin. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann.
- 3 Ivan Spochin (seated) playing a drum, with Yuri Vella leaning against the cabin roof. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, September 1985. Photo: Reet Sokmann.
- 4 Lennart Meri with Vasilii Aivaseda, a participant in the bear ceremony. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann. Courtesy of the Estonian Film Database.
- 5 Spiridon Tylchin with a song stick. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photograph by Reet Sokmann.
- 6 Recording an interview with Spiridon Tylchin (seated). From left to right: Agrafena Sopochina, Lennart Meri, Spiridon Tylchin, Ivan Spochin, and Ago Ruus. The Tylchin camp on the Agan River, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Russia, August 1988. Photo: Reet Sokmann.