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## Religious and Ethnic Revitalization among the Siberian Indigenous People : The Khanty Case

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## **Religious and Ethnic Revitalization among the Siberian Indigenous People: The Khanty Case**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Khanty (formally known as Ostyaks) are indigenous people of West Siberia, numbering approximately 22,000. Three Khanty groups, northern, southern, and eastern, can be distinguished by their means of subsistence, language and culture. The economies of all three Khanty groups are in the main based on fishing, hunting and gathering. In the north, reindeer herding supplements this pattern, in the south, agriculture.

The Khanty lands were conquered and incorporated into the Russian State as early as late sixteenth century. Since that time, Orthodoxy and Atheism have influenced the indigenous religion of the Khanty significantly. However, despite the missionary work of the Orthodox Church and the suppression of religion during the Soviet era, traditional rituals and beliefs are still alive in some areas.

The process of ethnic consolidation of the Khanty started relatively late due to the traditional pattern of settlement. Khanty life has been traditionally concentrated within small settlements because of the distribution of natural resources in the Siberian taiga. In each major river catchment one could find several small settlements, whose dwellers usually belonged to a clan of relatives. Communications between dwellers of different catchments were difficult and limited by the natural water barriers, which did not help the process of ethnic consolidation. Besides these groups of clans developed dialects of their own and even today, six main Khanty dialects are usually distinguished.

The process of ethnic consolidation was complicated by the Siberian Tartars conquest and following Russian colonization of Siberia. The system of rule that was established in Siberia affected the social and political structures of Khanty societies and hindered autonomous development. The major Khanty principalities lost their political independence, and hence their significance as autonomous political centers. Nevertheless, some managed to keep their role as religious centers, each with its own set of sacred places where Khanty used to come at certain times to make sacrifices and worship their deities.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, religious heritage has become a factor of great importance in the ethnic consolidation of the Khanty. The missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as the atheistic policies of the Soviet State effected the religious life of the Khanty and resulted in the religious change among them. I have attempted to distinguish types of religious changes and to define their influence on ethnic identity at different stages of the process. (Glavatskaia 2001). The approach of this paper is to distinguish the main features of the recently started process of religious and ethnic revitalization and to trace their interaction.

## THE KHANTY RELIGIOUS HERITAGE: THE MAIN MANIFESTATIONS

The religious heritage of the Khanty reveals itself in different forms and has different aspects, which are difficult to separate and classify. I shall therefore follow the methods and structure used by Ninian Smart in his description of world religious experiences. (Smart, 1991: 6)

### The Cult Manifestation

According to Khanty beliefs, recorded and described by different researchers, the world is divided into three main spheres: the upper world, the earth and the underworld. Each of these spheres is inhabited by numerous *longhs*-gods and spirits, of different importance for the people.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are good or neutral, while others are evil. People are to establish proper relationship with both types of *longhs*. Thus, each Khanty venerates one or several *longhs*, whom he or she considers to be personal protectors. This connection between a human and a certain *longh* is to be discovered through a special ritual soon after the person is born. There are other *longhs* who are considered to be the protectors of small river basins. All the members of the clan that dwell in the area venerate these *longhs*. There are still other-more powerful *longhs*, protectors of Ob' river's main tributaries, that are venerated by all the Khanty. And finally, there is a Supreme God creator-Torm-who together with his family members is venerated by all the Khanty, the related Mansi people and even by the Nenets.

There is also a well developed tradition of ancestor veneration and the wise-spread cult of the bear is a part of it. The famous Bear festivals recorded and described by nearly all the explorers of Siberia were organized by families, whose members was lucky enough to hunt a bear. The festivals brought together a whole clan and some times members of a few neighboring clans. These festivals lasted for several days and included famous Bear songs, comedy performances, dancing and feasts.

### The Ritual Manifestation

Scholars have never calculated the exact number of the numerous *longhs*, revered by the Khanty. Each of them demanded a certain reverence from the people, mostly in a form of offerings or sacrifices. The harsh conditions for survival in Siberia have determined most aspects of human behavior and even the slightest deviation from these might result in tragedy. So all his/her life the individual is submitted to numerous obligatory rules and rituals, which regulate his/her relationship with the environment: namely with nature, other people and *longhs*. These rituals accompanied a person all his/her life from birth until death. The Khanty practiced different types of rituals. Using Lauri Honko's categorization of the rituals, we can identify calendar rituals, crisis rituals and transitional rituals. (See Honko 1973: 61-77; 1975: 369-390; Rydving 1993:95-96). Usually the central part of the vast majority of contemporary rituals is a prayer (communal, family or individual) and a sacrifice (mostly reindeer or horse) or offering in less significant cases (mostly textile, food, money etc). Offerings and sacrifices are the basic rituals practiced by the Khanty to revere their *longhs*.

### **The Mythological Manifestation**

Before the Russian penetration into Khanty lands, they probably already had the notion of the Supreme God-Torm. Under the influence of Christianity, a notion of a God triad has evolved: the Supreme God-Torm; his wife (or sister)—Kaltash—and their younger son—Mir Vanty Khu. (Sokolova 1994: 383; Golovnev 1995: 528–558). The contemporary cosmogony of the Khanty includes several generations of the gods: Torm—father, his sons and grandsons, which share different spheres of their influence and responsibility according to their age. Each generation corresponds to a certain level of the landscape: namely Torm's sons are considered to be the creators and therefore patrons of the main rivers—tributaries to Ob', while the grandsons are the protectors of the family lands. Most Khanty extended families (clans) live on traditional family hunting territories, protected by family *longhs* who are considered offspring of the lineage's founding deities. Traditional Khanty believe that sacred power has been historically invested in both the landscape and lineage. (*Ocherki Istorii Khantov* 1999: 141–142; 2002: 151–152). The eldest male of the clan is responsible for the contacts with the *longh*-family lands protector. It is he, who is the keeper of *longh* or "*shaitan*"—according to old Russian written sources. The images of the *longs*, if there are any, are usually carved in wood. The keeper of the *longh's* image is to take care for the sacred "*labas*" [a special hut where the deity is thought to live], namely to visit the place periodically, to protect it, to make offerings and sacrifices, to renovate the image, its dwelling and clothes.

Mythological dimension of the Khanty beliefs is also revealed through the numerous sacred places. Each of them is connected to some story (myth). The landscape and its separate objects appear to be the links between today's life of the family and their distant past, both historical and mythological. It is a common rule not to hunt or to fish or gather on sacred places.

### **The Ethical Manifestation**

The beliefs played an important role in molding the ethical norms and relations in the Khanty society. One of the most important was to follow the tradition and to obey the numerous customs established and prescribed by their gods. These customs were obligatory throughout their lives and were thought to protect the given person from all evil. They were also thought to care for the person's health, luck and happiness. These customs were helpful in regulating relations within the community and family. Numerous restrictions surrounded the daily life of the Khanty and Khanty women in particular, which helped to regulate family life. (See for example Lapina 1998). According to folklore, the ethic norms were not only established by the gods and conveyed to humans, but they also observe how the humans are following the norms. Moreover, in cases when a given person does not follow the prescribed norm, the gods may punish not only the person, but his/her family members as well.

### **The Social Manifestation**

The system of beliefs also has a strong communal and social significance. The religious and ethical ideas and practices have always determined the social life of the Khanty. Participation in communal rituals: calendar, crisis or transitional, brought members of

different clans together and thus unified the society. The process of informing and collecting people for ceremonies like common prayer and sacrifice to a *longh*—clan patron—has been developing ties and a system of communication between scattered settlements and forging a sense of common identity within the society. According to early eighteenth century records, there were a few main sacred places, which were revered by different, if not by all, Khanty groups, and where they held meetings that attracted thousands. (Novitskii 1941; Muller 1722–23). Traditionally public sacrifices are accompanied by a common meal. These rallies have become the places where important questions were discussed and Khanty community considered decisions.

Bear festivals have also played a very important integrative role within the extended family, clans and community. Any kind of asocial behavior like thieving, greediness, or boasting was publicly ridiculed during the bear festivals. Usually there were scenes describing the behavior of a person, who was known as faint-hearted or a boaster in the form of a short comedy performance—the immanent part of the festival. It is always evident to every member of the community whom the scene is describing. The group (gender/age) behavior during the festival and preliminary preparations is also an important factor of socialization for the Khanty. Only men are to perform, children should not disturb the performance, etc.

The role of the religious authorities—*tsherty-ko* (shamans in Russian sources)—cannot be underestimated either. They are healers, prophesiers and mediators with the ultimate world. They are to make important decisions, to call people for public rituals, to remember the details of the rituals and customs, and the whole body of ethnic and religious heritage of the given group. They play an important role in transmitting the cultural heritage from generation to generation and thus help their kinsfolk to survive and maintain their traditional way of life.

Having only briefly surveyed the main dimensions of the Khanty religious heritage, yet we can see how strongly it is focused on molding and maintenance of the ethnic group and its ethnic identity.

### **CHRISTIANITY, ATHEISM AND KHANTY RELIGIOUS HERITAGE<sup>3</sup>**

The Khanty have been incorporated into the structure of the Russian State for more than 400 years. During that period Orthodoxy, Atheism and the state politics towards religions have influenced the indigenous religion of the Khanty significantly. Five distinct periods can be identified in a history of encounter and interaction between the Khanty religious heritage on the one hand and Christianity and atheistic ideology on the other.

#### **Encounter**

At the beginning of Russian development of the Khanty lands in the seventeenth century the Russian Government policy prohibited forced baptism of people dwelling in northwestern Siberia. The Government preferred to deal with non-baptized but peaceful indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup> Besides, the fur tax “*yasak*” supplied by the Siberian indigenous peoples to the Russian State was one of the bases for its financial wealth and was Russia’s main export

item at that time. The average value of *yasak* at the turn of the seventeenth century was 5–12 sables per person per year, which roughly corresponded to the price of a cow. According to common Russian practice in the seventeenth century, those who became baptized were to be taken away from “heathen” surroundings and way of life and thus exempt from paying *yasak*.

The increasing exhaustion of hunting and fishing resources in the Khanty lands following the intensive Russian colonization of west Siberia inevitably led to the inability of some of them to pay the obligatory *yasak*. That might have given some people a reason to volunteer for baptism, which meant automatic exemption from *yasak*. Voluntary baptism was also attractive for some indigenous individuals because it led to the exculpation of any criminal charges. The adoption of Christianity by noble Khanty, who were not obliged to pay fur tax due to their social status, was welcomed and legally backed up. The conversion also incorporated them into the Russian administrative system in Siberia. These noble converts usually practiced both Orthodox and indigenous rituals. (Glavatskaia 1996: 234).

By the end of the seventeenth century the Russian colonization of Siberia had resulted in a small number of new converts among the Khanty. The obligatory isolation of the converted from their kinsfolk increased Russian cultural influence among the newly baptized, with the result that the converts were gradually losing their ethnic as well as their religious identity. However, during the seventeenth century the Khanty as a whole managed to retain both their religious and ethnic identity.

### Confrontation

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the policy of the Russian State towards the Siberian peoples changed. The Russian political position in Siberia became stronger and more stable, in part because the Russian population had grown to outnumber the indigenous inhabitants of the area. The economic interests of the Russian State in northwestern Siberia turned to mining, iron making and the industrial development of the territories, and away from the fur trade. Russia was also rapidly developing into a powerful empire with a national identity of its own.

In 1701 the Russian Orthodox Church was ordered by Czar Peter I (known as Peter the Great) (1689–1725) to baptize the Siberian peoples. The Metropolitan Phielophei Leschinski, who made several voyages to Khanty settlements, conducted intensive missionary work during the period 1712–1726. Most of the Khanty were baptized during this time, hundreds of Khanty images of *longhs*—protectors—were burned, many sacred places where the Khanty held their meetings, worshiped and made sacrifices to their deities were desecrated and destroyed, and was usually followed by the erection of an Orthodox church or chapel on the same place. (Muller 1722–23; Novitskii 1941). Thus the main aim of the mission was the destruction of the cult and ritual dimensions of Khanty religious traditions, and the introduction of Christian cult and ritual life. Yet, most of the baptized Khanty continued to worship their deities in secret and to perform the same rituals as their forefathers did.

To suppress the Khanty religious heritage, the main blows were then inflicted upon its ritual and social dimensions, namely the Russian authorities made an attempt to destroy

sacred places (ritual space) and persecuted shamans (the religious authorities). Besides the missionaries were struggling not only against Khanty religious heritage, but also against their ethnic heritage. They insisted that baptized Khanty had to leave behind their traditional dwellings, dress, cuisine, customs for good. Yet, the supervisors appointed to observe Khanty everyday life often reported cases of people practicing shamanic séances even by those who were baptized. One of the accused shamans in the Surgut area said that he had been baptized by Metropolitan Phielophey Leschinski and had learned the shaman skill later.

In 1747, a number of the accused converts were questioned in a court about the reasons for their attachment to shamanism. All of them said that they wanted to know if they would be lucky in hunting or fishing and that was why they asked a certain shaman to perform the rituals (Ogryzko 1941: 76–78). Both clerical and secular powers had special institutions to control the converts and used severe methods against the shamans and those who requested the shamans to perform their skill. The common practice was arrest and subsequent inquest with the use of torture. The powers, both clerical and secular considered the shamanic practices as contacts with the Devil. One of the active participants of the Christian mission in Siberia colonel Grigory Novitskii wrote: "...And for the sake of the nasty profit their numerous priests called *shamanchiki* passed themselves into eternal Devil's bondage..." (Novitskii 1941: 53). Those who were accused of performing shamanic séances in 1747 admitted under the torture that they indeed had a deal with devil while practicing shamanism. (Ogryzko 1941:100). The usual penalties for practicing shamanism or inviting a shaman to perform a séance in the eighteenth century were fines, imprisonment and public corporal punishments. Sometimes, torture during an inquest in a prison, or following corporal punishment, caused the death of the accused shamans. This severe politics towards the beliefs of the indigenous peoples had changed by the end of the eighteenth century.

In general, however the majority of the Khanty, even after being baptized, managed to keep their religious heritage during this period of enforced baptism. The failure of the Russian Government's policies towards Christianization of the Khanty may be explained by the fact that mass baptisms did not give missionaries the opportunity to isolate converts from their former ethnic, cultural and religious environment. Meanwhile the Russian cultural and religious influence increased along with the growth of the Russian population in Siberia, with the erection of numerous churches and chapels in the Khanty area and the implementation of a system of control over the converts. Some of the Khanty gradually accepted various elements of Christianity, but preserved their indigenous heritage as well. As the Russian authorities realized that enforced Christianization of the Khanty was not having the desired results, namely that baptized people usually kept worshipping their indigenous deities, they abandoned this form of direct action.

### **Acculturation**

A new wave of missionary activity occurred on the eastern frontier of the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century and Christian ideas gradually penetrated further into Khanty life. Radical economic and lifestyle changes affected Khanty people in regions where the Russian population predominated, and it was inevitable that they would become Russified. As to the majority of the Khanty, even if they were baptized by that time,

numerous priests and explorers reported that the Khanty (as well as other Siberian peoples) did not attend church on a regular basis, did not follow Christian ethics, and kept making sacrifices to their indigenous deities. Missionaries were faced with the problem of making baptized Khanty follow the prescribed Christian disciplines which, given the nomadic Khanty life as hunters, fishermen and reindeer herders, was difficult.

The Russian State interests of that time were understood by the majority of Russian society as a quick and absolute incorporation of all non-Russian peoples into the Russian Orthodox community structure, which inevitably implied ethnic acculturation. Converted Siberian peoples were expected to become "Russians," live like Russians, speak Russian, to be faithful Orthodox believers and active parishioners. From this time, intensive theoretical work actively pursued the elaboration of missionary programs and special missionary organizations to fulfill them. A network of schools for training missionaries appeared at that time; work on the translation of Holy Books into Native languages were activated and supported; special instructions and recommendations for missionaries were published. Most of the missionary thinkers agreed on the necessity and advantage of Russification for the indigenous peoples in general, although they did not agree on the methods, *terms and priorities in a process of its realization in practice. Some of them thought that Russian language and education should be used as the main tool in a process of successful introduction of the new religion. Others argued that promoting the achievements of European civilization in indigenous everyday life would have achieved it much better.* (Glavatskaia 1997: 73–81)

It is interesting to note that a close connection between ethnicity and religion was also clear for the Khanty themselves. This view is obvious from the argument, which some Khanty used when they refused to be baptized and yet wanted to be polite and reasonable. They used to say that they certainly would like to be baptized but could not, because they did not speak the Russian language and did not live like Russians. That is, they did not consider themselves Russian enough to become Christians. It means that Khanty considered their language and everyday life as the main Khanty (ethnic) characteristics, which matched their religion perfectly, but did not match Christianity.

Probably it would not be a mistake to assume, that from the Khanty point of view at that time to be Khanty meant to speak the Khanty language, live the Khanty way of life and keep the Khanty religious heritage. Graphically this model of Khanty ethnicity could be presented as a triangle with equally important sides: language, way of life and religion.

Yet in the course of the nineteenth century it was still unrealistic to do anything with the Khanty language and way of life despite the heroic attempts of some missionaries. Thus, religion was still the main target in the politics of Russification. Since the tactics of destroying the cult, ritual and social dimensions of Khanty religious traditions did not bring about the expected results in making them abandon their religious heritage and accept Christianity, a new approach was made. Namely, some of the missionaries made an attempt to reconcile the two different religious systems and make it easier for the Khanty to accept Christianity. Some missionaries were familiar with the Khanty religious heritage and used that knowledge in their work. They tried to explain Christian Credo using terms understandable by their congregation. For example, to express the idea of Christian God they

used the idea of Torm, the Supreme Deity of the Khanty. To express the idea of Jesus Christ they used the idea of Mir Vanty Khu, the younger son of Torm. The idea of the Virgin Mother was explained through the image of Kaltash, a female deity, who was considered to be either the sister or the wife of Torm and the mother of Mir Vanty Khu, according to Khanty beliefs. This type of promoting Christianity increased syncretism in beliefs and ritual practice of some Khanty.

### **Destruction**

The atheistic ideology of the Soviet State, and the system of compulsory education in particular, as well as economic change, led to father acculturation and the destruction of both the religious and the ethnic identity of the Khanty. The policy of the Bolshevik party towards religion was that of uncompromising fight against any manifestations of religious heritage (*KPSS v rezoljucijah i reshenijah* 1983: 83). By that time, they had the vast experience and programs developed by previous governments in fighting both Khanty religious heritage and traditional way of life. This background enriched by new technologies (mass media) and methods (mass repression) was used by the Soviet authorities. It adopted a completely different approach to the religious heritage of Northern and Siberian peoples and a fight against shamans, who were regarded, as counter-revolutionary elements, became one of the primary objectives.

The Soviet authorities had considerably developed the understanding of shamanism based on Marxism in the late 1920s. It considered shamanism as an “alien ideology,” “reactionary phenomenon,” which allegedly “consecrated and sanctified bondage and exploitation.” The shamans were treated as “enemies of the revolution.” This understanding of the phenomenon ensured that “the fight against shamanism was the part of the building of socialism itself” (Suslov 1931: 89–152).

Thus, the main blow was inflicted upon the social dimension of Khanty religious heritage. Purposefully and consistently, the government pursued a policy of destroying Khanty religious heritage and persecuted shamans. In order to isolate shamans from their kinsfolk, and to prepare for their effective extermination, different measures were used. First, the Soviet power tried measures of social isolation. Shamans and their family members were deprived of their suffrage. They were not allowed to participate in parliamentary or local elections; they were not allowed to be present at meetings of their communities. Measures of economical pressure were also directed against shamans and members of their families. They were not allowed to become members of collective farms even if they wanted to; they were forced to execute extra obligations compare to other kinsfolk. They were restricted in the use of common pastures and hunting estates, and were obliged to pay extra taxes. Shamans and their family members were restricted in obtaining higher education. The reason was the widely held opinion that educated shamans might have used the knowledge of experimental chemistry or physics to prove their alleged supernatural gifts, to exert more power over their kinsfolk, as shamans.

Methods of political and psychological propaganda were established in order to slander shamans. The mass media was used to set indigenous people against their religious leaders. One of the commonest tricks was to publish articles describing the alleged cupidity,

greediness, lies and sexual crimes of religious leaders. Numerous newspapers, magazines and special booklets were full of anti-shamanic articles (See example Eristov 1933). Atheistic posters, both aggressive and offending, were displayed at schools.

The direct persecution of shamans began after 1932, when the extermination of religion was proclaimed to be one of the general aims of state politics for the next five years period. Arrests and deportations of shamans became common practice. As the commanding administrative system in the area developed, shamans tended to lose their importance as prophesiers and the curative functions were taken over by the state health service. Ritual religious activity was banned and persecuted. However, despite the severe measures, most of the rituals were still practiced secretly even during this period of aggressive atheism.

Visible manifestations of religious heritage had to be kept exclusively within the clan, family or sometimes even restricted to the personal level. The public rituals, which were important for the ethnic consolidation, were strictly forbidden. The public sacrifices addressed to the *longh*—clan protector, which had collected all the members of the clan, gave way to sacrifices held by a single family. Some rituals were slowly losing their religious meaning and turning into ordinary profession-based holidays, like Fishermen's Day or Reindeer Herder's Day. Bear festivals had also undergone some changes; namely they could be organized only after buying a license and only be performed at the established time.

The beginning of the intensive industrial development in the area in 1960s to 1980s (oil and gas production in particular) caused a sizeable reduction of the lands appropriate for traditional use. These lands were not only economic bases for Khanty wealth but also the reserves where they could recreate their Khantyness—the main features of their ethnicity by using their language, living the traditional way of life and practicing religious traditions. In general, during the Soviet era both religious heritage and the traditional way of life were under severe pressure. The Khanty language was in a relatively better situation. Except for the short experiment (in the 1950s) to substitute the Khanty language with Russian at schools, in general a lot was done during the Soviet era to support the Khanty language. Namely, the Kazym dialect of Khanty was available in its written form and school textbooks, as well as some newspapers, were printed in Khanty. So during the Soviet era, two main parts of the triangle model of Khanty ethnicity suffered a destructive influence, while the third, the language, was supported.

The number of new settlers from central Russia dramatically increased during the oil boom and threatened the very existence of the Khanty by rapid assimilation. The reaction of Khanty intellectuals to this threat was the foundation of "*Associacia Spasenija Jugry*" (The Association for the Jugra's Salvation) in 1989. This organization made the protection of Khanty sacred places, beliefs, customs and traditions a part of its program (*Programma Associacii* 1999: 125–126). That was a sign of Khanty ethnic awareness in the face of the threat of assimilation.

### **Revitalization**

The 1980s were marked by the rapid weakening of the power of the Communist party in the country, and a decline in the strength of its ideology, influence, and control over the minds of the Soviet people. From that time, the idea that all the peoples of the Soviet Union

were becoming a so-called “sole Soviet nation” was put aside, and the dramatic rise of national identities became the main tendency. The increased role of religion in that process (despite of the 70 years of suppression) had much to do with the collapse of Communist ideology. This process was developing in a similar way in many (if not all) former “Socialist” countries. As the old identity namely “Soviet,” which had been imposed during the Soviet era, was gradually disappearing from the “post communist” stage (alongside the collapse of the Soviet Union itself), people again started to search for their identity and/or labels of that identity. As was pointed out by Paul Mojzes, one of the most available identifying labels was “ethnoreligiosity” (a term introduced by Paul Mojzes and derived from the two words “ethnic” and “religious,” but creating a single word in order to signify the symbiotic unity and overlap of the two concepts) (Mojzes 1999: 52).

In times of social crises, instability and general disillusionment with the contemporary situation, the feeling of nostalgia for the “good old times” overwhelms people. In the case of the Khanty, such a Golden Age was associated with times when there were not so many newcomers in the Khanty lands and they managed there by themselves. For the elder generation, this was pre-Soviet times, the memory of which is still alive among them. For the middle age Khanty, it is the time before the era of oil discovery in the area. Both have a strong sense of danger for their existence, caused by the Russian dominance (both economical and cultural) in the region and are looking for rescue in something completely non-Russian (pre-Russian), namely the revitalization of the Khanty old ways.

Why then has religiosity become an important factor in Khanty ethnic revitalization? There are probably several reasons. One of them is the very essence of the religion in the Khanty’s case. As has already been explained, the religious traditions of the Khanty have always played an important role in molding and maintaining them as an ethnic group and supported their ethnic identity.

Besides, many of the “pure ethnic” (not religious) manifestations of Khanty identity: such as language, dwelling pattern, traditional dress, cuisine, etc, had almost been lost by the majority of the people by the 1980s, as a result of assimilation and the urbanization process. Apart from the language perspective, Khanty still have six main and nearly 30 local dialects plus Russian as a language in common use. There are significant differences in economy and other features of the different Khanty group cultures.<sup>5</sup>

Differences between urban citizens and those who still live the traditional way of life are even more crucial. Bearing in mind the triangle model of Khantyness, we may say that neither language, nor way of life could have been used as a universal factor of Khanty consolidation in these circumstances. While all the other features of the Khanty way were significantly degraded, religious traditions, despite all of the persecution, had been preserved secretly, mainly at the clan and family level and remained a visible manifestation. Khanty indigenous religious traditions had remained the main feature of their ethnicity and at the same time the main target of the Russian/Soviet State. No wonder the Khanty developed extensive experience to protect and restore different aspects of their religion, namely to restore and move sacred places, to practice all the rituals secretly in a narrow circle of close relatives and trusted people, to keep the knowledge about their shamans hidden from outsiders. That made religious matters not only 100 percent Khanty-like, but also 100 percent

non-, or even anti -Russian attractive for the whole community.

The collapse of the Soviet system entailed the destruction of the system of social security it guaranteed. The Soviet government together with the local authorities always had to make certain provisions to alleviate some of the economic and social stress of the destructive industrial intervention into traditional Khanty life. They made adjustments to state subsidies, employment guarantees for the Khanty people, organized a system of purchasing their hunting, fishing, gathering production, medical care, education facilities, etc. The movement toward privatization led to the dissolution of the state oil monopoly along with the dissolution of its social guarantees for a certain standard of living. The social role of religion that the Soviet social security system eroded has become of vital necessity. The following process of fast revitalization of the Khanty religious traditions, including shamanism has proved Roberte Hamayon's statement that shamanism's availability becomes manifest especially in crisis periods, when such practices easily revive or emerge. (Hamayon 1994: 76). So it is not surprising that the process of ethnic revitalization of the Khanty manifested itself through and was developing alongside religious revitalization.

#### **KHANTY ETHNORELIGIOUS REVITALIZATION: FORMS AND PRIORITIES**

When a process of Khanty ethnic consolidation revitalized in the 1980s, it was first focused on the problem of legitimizing the right of the indigenous people to live a traditional way of life. It raised the question of land distribution and its traditional usage. Interestingly, different Khanty clans claimed traditional use rights for different tributaries of the Ob' river, in part because they believed their lineage was founded by divine ancestors who also created the river systems on which the majority of the clan lives (*Ocherki Istorii Khantov* 1999: 141–151). They thus connected the problem of land rights and traditional Khanty mythology, which became one of the arguments in their claims. There is further evidence of Khanty traditional mythology revitalization thought in a special form. It manifests itself in a huge number of recent publications of Khanty folklore records, tales, and songs. A few centers were found to collect Khanty oral history and mythology. Among those who are most active in collecting and publishing Khanty Mythology are representatives of the Khanty themselves. Mostly they are the people who have obtained a college education and prepared dissertations.<sup>6</sup> The process of Khanty ethnic revitalization manifests itself also through a restored practice of the organization of famous Bear festivals in a public form. Such traditions were restored back to life in early 1990s after a long break. Thus the Kazym Khanty organized public Bear festivals in 1991—in a village of Juil'sk and in 1993 in a settlement of Polnovat (Moldanov 1999).

The practice of public sacrifices with a common prayer to a Supreme God-Torm also has become a feature of the Khanty contemporary life. Such a ceremony was organized during celebration of the 400-d anniversary of Surgut City in 1993 with the mass media reporting the event, foreign participants and many guests invited. The restoration of previously destroyed sacred places started in many areas. These events marked a significant revitalization of the ritual and social dimension of Khanty religious heritage.

Historical data, as well as the contemporary field research, prove that Khanty shamanism as a phenomenon has successfully survived the four centuries of direct and indirect

persecutions by the authorities and was never abandoned. It also has successfully lived through the danger of assimilation within the frames of centralized agricultural, industrial and even postindustrial society. "The adaptive character" of shamanism and latent availability of shamanic practices in all types of society has preserved it until the time when it gains public favor again. Shamanic practice is becoming more and more popular among the Siberians. Shamanic drum—*koip*—according to the author's field research in 2000 can be found almost in every family, living traditional way of life in forest camps. There are several practicing shamans—*tsherty-ko*—of different abilities and authorities among the traditional living Khanty. They are responsible for calling people to the sacred places to worship and sacrifice in public. They are again becoming the decision-makers for their kinsfolk. This process indicates a revitalization of the social dimension of Khanty religious heritage.

It may seem that ethical manifestation of the Khanty religious heritage had no chance for survival in a postmodern society. Yet, there are some signs of its revitalization. Namely, there are two different aspects of Khanty ethics that can be distinguished and each of them may have its own future. The first deals with the ecological situation in the area, which in some places could be with no exaggeration considered as an ecological catastrophe. Claims to return to the traditional view on nature, which is based on a relationship of equality between humans and other beings, and deep respect towards them, represents the first type of traditional ethic's revitalization. The second can be found in the field of family relationship. The former state official ethics, both the "ethics of the communist builder" common during the Soviet era or the Christian one, were considered as alien since both were imposed by the Russian State and often contradicted the Khanty traditional values. No wonder that as soon as the state pressure was removed, people returned to their traditional values. Those, who used to live the traditional way of life, partly returned to their traditional ritual behavior. Some of the Khanty traditionalists started to follow some strict ritual behavior prescriptions, which had been put aside by their communities during the Soviet time. In atheistic surroundings, people either did not dare to follow them being afraid of being ridiculed by the others, or simply found them inappropriate and hence not obligatory in modern life.

Traditional costume is becoming more and more popular among both female and male Khanty, especially during holidays and public events. It has undergone some modifications, obtained a more theatrical form and become one of the symbols of Khanty identity. The growing worldwide fashion for everything ethnic, contributed to the revitalization and development of traditional Khanty skills and handicrafts, which in their turn inspired a revitalization of the traditional economy and way of life.

By the end of the twentieth century, some of the Khanty, who were not living a traditional way of life, had almost completely lost their Khanty ethnicity, and in some cases had developed a new identity (Glavatskaia 2001: 22–25). Their newly obtained Soviet identity was no longer valid after the collapse of the Soviet State and did not guarantee them the social security either. Their search for an ethnic identity: namely their place in a relative group in order to obtain social security and comfort was based and appealed not to language or way of life issue, but to their historical memory. Having associated themselves ethnically with the Khanty, in their own way, they also became involved in a process of ethnic and religious revitalization. For people, who could not actively participate in a process of direct

ethnoreligious revitalization, the obtaining of some identity symbols became important. They participate in public ceremonies like worshipping with sacrifices or Bear festivals, though they may not consider them as having deep religious meaning but mostly as a symbol of group identity.

It seems that the very process of ethnoreligious revitalization is developing in two main streams. One is directed inside the Khanty community and plays an important role in molding Khanty identity and their consolidation. The other is mostly directed outside to demonstrate this identity to outsiders-non-Khanty. In real life, these two streams are reflected for example in different approaches in organizing public ceremonies. Some of them are organized only for private purposes, with no outsiders and information about the event. Others are organized, or sometimes even at the special requests of outsiders, with wide invitation of the mass media, foreign guests, video recording and public demonstrations. The former version has a deeper religious meaning for the participants than the later. Nevertheless, both types, as well as two simultaneous processes of consolidation and self-presentation, are supporting the development and enforcement of the Khanty ethnic identity.

## CONCLUSION

Summarizing this short survey of the Khanty ethnic and religious revitalization it is possible to make the following statements:

- (1) Khanty religious traditions have always played an important role in the molding and maintenance of their ethnic identity. The Christianization of the Khanty alongside the rapidly increased Russian influence, or isolation from kinsfolk, led to a loss of both religious and ethnic identity for some Khanty. Preservation of the Khanty religious traditions even partially resulted in the preservation of their ethnic identity, while the forced destruction of religious heritage during the atheistic period meant the destruction of ethnic identity as well. It gives us grounds to call Khanty religious traditions an ethnic religion since it has always been focusing on molding and maintaining the Khanty as an ethnic community with its own social structure.
- (2) The contemporary maintenance of the Khanty ethnic identity is closely connected with a process of Khanty religious revitalization. Both are vitally connected, influence each other and can hardly be separated. So it seems worthwhile to talk about ethnoreligious revitalization in the case of the Khanty.
- (3) The process of the Khanty ethnoreligious revitalization is manifested mainly through ritual and social dimensions, although signs of mythological and ethical manifestations are also sizable.
- (4) This revitalization is developing into two main streams: one of which is mainly directed towards preservation of its sacred religious meaning within the group of devotees, and thus is a conservative in its nature. The other is directed towards self-presentation and self-expression for outsiders and tolerates some inevitable innovations. Both are playing an important role for the Khanty ethnic and religious revitalization.

## NOTES

- 1) For a map of main Khanty settlements and sacred places see *Ocherki Istorii Khantov* (1999: 71, 77; 2002; 79,85).
- 2) Several alternative spellings exist. I use the spelling of the Surgut dialect of Khanty because it is the group from which I have collected most of field data.
- 3) This part is an outline of the revised paper, presented at CHAGS 8 in Osaka in 1998. For more details, see Glavatskaia 2001.
- 4) Even if the state laws prohibited enforced baptism of the indigenous people, the Russian local military frequently broke them down. However, such legislation together with a system of punishments for violators significantly limited the process of forced baptism in Siberia and the number of new converts in the seventeenth century.
- 5) For example Elena Martynova has distinguished five different Khanty ethnographic areas on the base of analyses of their economy, social relations, culture, identity, ethnic and marriage ties. (Martynova 1998: 6)
- 6) Among these collectors are Timothy Moldanov, Tatiana Moldanova, and Agraphena Pesikova.

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