

## **The Khanty of Western Siberia: Elements of Shamanism as a Form of Cultural Identity**

**HELEN SAARNIIT**

In this paper I will deal with the cultural identity of the indigenous Khanty people of Western Siberia. Particularly, I will explore the aspects of Khanty culture and how closely they are linked to Khanty identity through the phenomena of shamanism, and the bear feast as the most important cultural manifestation.

The research was triggered by my participation at the 5. Finno-Ugric World Congress in the city of Khanty-Mansiysk, Western Siberia in June 2008 as a member of the Estonian delegation. The oil production city Khanty-Mansiysk, administrative centre of the Khanty-Mansiysky Autonomous Okrug - Yugra (KMAO), has taken its name from the indigenous peoples of the region, the Khanty and the Mansi. In this paper I will concentrate on the Khanty.

I have explored the identity of the Khanty people through four different issues: legal concerns, language and education, shamanism as a form of cultural expression as well as issues related to land and resources. All these four aspects have a strong influence on Khanty identity. In this paper I will concentrate on shamanism and bear feasts as expressions of Khanty culture and their importance as identity markers for the Khanty people.

The Khanty are an indigenous people, with a population of about 28 000 individuals. They are hunters-gatherers with reindeer herding being one of their main sources of livelihood. The Khanty live on the banks of the River Ob and its tributaries in Western Siberian taigas, tundras and swamps in a territory as big as France. However, being a minority, they constitute only 1,86% of the mainly Russian population of KMAO and the neighbouring Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

The shamanistic-animistic belief system of the Khanty is strongly connected to nature and surrounding landscapes inhabited by gods and spirits to whom sacrifices are offered. The Khanty

cosmos is divided into three worlds – the upper, the middle and the lower world with the upper and lower worlds having seven more levels. The latter are inhabited by a hierarchy of gods and spirits, but deities are present also in the middle world, the world of human beings. The shaman is the mediator between these three worlds, the realm of the spirits and the human world, capable of acquiring information from other spheres, reconciling gods and thereby healing. He is also able to control energies and fight with spirits, go through unthinkable physical transformations undergoing a symbolic death and rebirth during a shamanic ritual. He is the doctor, psychologist and priest of the Khanty world, one of the most important figures of society.

Shamans, thanks to their ability to “translate“ and „mediate“ information between the different worlds, are key figures in important rituals and ceremonies, including the bear feast, the most important manifestation of Khanty culture. The bear is considered to be the youngest son of the principal deity Num Torum living in the upper world. Num Torum had his son descend to the earth in the form of a bear and it is believed that the Khanty are direct descendents of the son of Torum. Therefore the Khanty are the people of the bear. Every time a hunter’s gun kills a bear, a ritual lasting several days, the bear feast, is celebrated. The whole community participates in a ceremony full of recitation of songs and stories with a strong theatrical element governed by a rigid set of rules in order to ask forgiveness from the bear, relative to the man. The ritual serves to ask the bear to “stay friends” with the people - reestablish the balance between the community and spirits. The ceremony is estimated to be about 3000 years old and has absorbed in itself the ethnic history, social organisation and culture of the Ob-Ugrics (Kulemzin 2004:191).

The bear feast has regional differences, but in general terms follows a similar structure having an obligatory framework. It can last from 3 to 7 days in different Khanty regions, but is more commonly carried out during 3 nights for a cub, 4 nights for a she-bear and 5 nights for a he-bear. In the past, the bear feasts are known to have lasted even longer (Soldatova 1990:37).

The bear feast used to take place every five to seven years (Lazar 1995:198). The feast combines various genres like songs, instrumental music, dances, improvisation, theatrical performances, mime and feasting. The bear is „danced to“ and entertained, but the ceremony serves also to entertain the whole [Khanty] community (Väisanen 1937:XXVII).

Khanty cultural identity was seriously threatened during the Soviet Union, especially in the light of its atheistic policies. The objective of the Soviet regime was the eradication of the institution of

shamanism as the shamans were seen as the oppressors of the proletariat. In an indigenous society with no “upper class” the shamans were found to qualify as the oppressors of the society for having supernatural powers and being respected by the community. Therefore, all expressions of shamanistic culture were banned.

Already in 1926 “the crime – prevention committee in the Tobolsk region decided to consider shamanism as a crime, and hence used the militia to persecute shamans who insisted young people should participate in worship or in sacrificial rituals (Glavatskaia *online*:21). The aftermath of the Kazym Rebellion of 1933 further complicated the situation. After the happenings of the rebellion every manifestation of shamanic culture such as owning a shaman drum was declared illegal and subjected to persecution. Anyone who took part in the Bear Funeral Rites or other rituals of Khanty culture was subject to 10 years imprisonment. Bear hunting was also forbidden and anything connected with Khanty culture, such as sacred ground, pagan shrines or burial grounds were destroyed. These laws were only relaxed during the 1980s as part of the glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Another important aspect for Khanty identity in relation to its culture is the issue of traditional land. In the 1960-s huge oil territories were discovered in the traditional living areas of the Khanty. This marked the beginning of an oil boom which forms the basis for KMAO economy today as well as making up 40% of the total income of the Russian state. The industry has had a devastating social and environmental impact on the indigenous peoples and their traditional living territories, hunting grounds and fishing areas. For an indigenous culture the land is of utmost importance as it is not only the living territory but the source of life and energy in all its senses. According to the belief system of the Khanty, the surrounding nature and landscape is inhabited by gods and spirits. But the petroleum development in addition to heavy pollution of the traditional territories, has forced Khanty families to relocate, thereby limiting their contact with the protective gods and their ability to perform cultural and religious practices.

The brutal persecutions of shamans as well as decades of life in a state of fear have definitely left their mark on Khanty culture and identity and have benefitted to its extinction. However, cultural expressions do not easily die overnight and shamanistic rituals and manifestations of Khanty culture also continued to be celebrated in secret or in disguise.

An example the renown nganasan shaman family Kosterkin was able to continue their activity under the masque of an actor during the Soviet period. Folklore performances connected to atheist propaganda were common during the Soviet Union and actors were needed to imitate the shamans for such spectacles. Accepting this kind of a job was a way of escaping the repression. For the Soviet regime the folklorization and dramatization of rituals was a way of devitalizing the tradition, but for the performers maybe the best of the worst options and still a way of being in contact with their culture.

Nowadays only the older Khanty generation seems to carry on their traditional lifestyle including the shamanistic worldview in all its manifestations, including the bear feast. This is definitely a sign of threat for the persistence of the Khanty culture. The younger generations are constrained by strong language barriers which further alienate them from their culture and being able to participate in rites and rituals. They have been educated in Russian and thereby their access to their culture and possibilities of its sustainability are limited. Besides, once a Khanty lives in the town, there is little space left for cultural manifestations connected with the natural living environment as Khanty culture manifests itself through the land where the spirits and deities live. More and more Khanty have had to leave their traditional lands as survival there has become impossible due to pollution caused by the creation of new oil fields. Therefore, in a way, the oil industry has given even a stronger blow to the traditions and cultural life of the Khanty in the last decades than the period of Soviet atheism. This seems to be the fate of many northern indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation.

However, some scholars discuss that the expressions of shamanism are by no means extinct in 21st century Western Siberia. Henri Lecomte gives examples of new forms that the shamanistic culture has found and expressed itself in. For example the „financier“ shamanist operating at an urban level offering services to the needy that traditionally were performed in the village context. Or the „financier“ shamanist in the waves of the global new age trend organising courses and performances, thereby attracting tourists and economic benefits all over Siberia.

Ethnorock bands made up of young people are another example of the vitality and moreover, the revival of traditional culture. Such groups are gaining popularity in various regions of Siberia and enrich their performances with shamanistic elements such as ritual robes, amulettes, shaman drums and ritualistic dances. The artists also use traditional shamanistic singing techniques such as throat or diaphonic singing by the Tuvan band Yat Kha. The artists feel often a need for transmitting their

traditional knowledge and are thereby giving a contribution to the continuation, revival and dissemination of their culture as well as their identity. The phenomena of ethnorock bands after half a century of prohibitions of owning a shaman drum or practicing any shamanistic ritual can be seen as something very positive. A sign that cultural representations cannot be subdued overnight. And although they are carried on in another form by the young, they are testimony of the fact that the information about their culture and the need to express it still persists.

According to Lecomte, shamanism lives on in Siberia on very different levels that intertwine. It can be said that this ancient concept of the world has remained deeply anchored in the collective imagery of the Siberian peoples in the beginning of the 21st century.

In conclusion, despite the Soviet repressions and atheist policies aimed at eradicating the Khanty cultural manifestations, such as shamanistic rituals or the bear feasts, we can see that Siberian indigenous communities are also exploring ways of reviving their culture. There are examples of younger generations feeling the need to express their cultural legacy through music and shamans continuing to practice their craft out of their traditional contexts: in the cities. The continuation of shamanistic elements in daily Khanty life constitutes a fundamental aspect of preserving their identity and survival as a people.

## References

Glavatskaia, Elena. "Religious and Ethnic Identity Among the Khanty: Processes of Change" *Senri Ethnological Studies* 56 [http://ir.minpaku.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10502/941/1/SES56\\_004.pdf](http://ir.minpaku.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10502/941/1/SES56_004.pdf)

Last access 1 March 2010

Kulemzin, Vladislav. 2004. *About Khanty Shamans*. Tartu. Estonian Literature Museum

Lazar, Katalin. 1995. *Põhjähantide kaupeite laulud. Rahvausund tänapäeval* Tartu. Eesti TA Eesti Keele Instituut.

Lecomte, Henri. 2006. *Approches autochtones du chamanisme sibérien au début du XXIe siècle Chamanisme et possession. Cahiers de musiques traditionnelles. 19. Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie*. Genève. InFolio Editeurs.

Meri, Lennart. 1989/2009 *The Sons of Torum. Encyclopaedia cinematographica gentium fenno-ugricarum*. Tallinn. Estonian Institute

Saarniit, Helen. 2010. *Indigeneity and Identity: The Khanty of Western Siberia*. Master's thesis at the University of Milan

Soldatova, Galina. 1990. "Mansid. Keelesugulaste muusikast". Tallinn. Teater Muusika Kino no.8

Väisanen, Armas Otto. 1937. *Wogulische und Ostjakische Melodien aufgenommen von A. Kannisto und K.F. Karjalainen, herausgegeben von A.O. Väisanen*. Helsinki. Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura