

# Continuity and Change in Eastern Khanty Language and Worldview<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In the Ugut folk museum – as in many of the new ethnographic museums springing up around the Russian North – there is an old and cracked wooden idol, darkened with time, yet “rescued” and preserved forever in a nicely lit glass cabinet. Indigenous cultures across Siberia have made these dolls for millennia and venerate them as personal protector spirits, clan deities and shaman’s helper spirits. These representations have a distinctive style: a long straight nose, deep-set eyes made of beads or coins, and a small carved mouth. There are even large collections of them as far away as the museums of Finland.

Yet in several Khanty communities around Surgut, despite years of aggressive persecution of native religion, the traditions associated with venerating the idols remain alive, meaningful and a core element of spirituality. Even today in these areas, the fate of each wooden doll is closely tied to the biography of a particular person. When the carver of clan deities dies, a new set is carved and the spirit is “breathed” into them, while the old set is placed at the fresh tree stump from which the wood for the new set has been cut. Here they are left to rot back into the forest floor, their faces often blackened deliberately with smoke, completing a vital symbolic cycle of birth and regeneration, just as human souls are reincarnated back into the community, and year by year new game animals give themselves up to the hunters. In this way, the dolls were never meant to survive in physical form, but represent a deeper and intimate link between local belief and the natural cycles of nature.

And so an interesting situation has arisen, for not far from the neat collections of the Ugut museum, in the traditional Khanty clan lands of the taiga forest, there are remote sacred sites and holy groves where generations of wooden idols are rotting back into the soil. And therein lies a troubling contradiction, for these *rotting* moss-covered figures are fundamental components of a culture that is *living*. In contrast, the doll that is rescued, saved and preserved in the new museum marks the arrival of something new, a different kind of approach to local cultural objects and representations, and one whose wider implications are not yet full understood.

These local developments are taking place in the context of wider ongoing discussions across the post-Soviet North (Kasten 2002, 2004). The

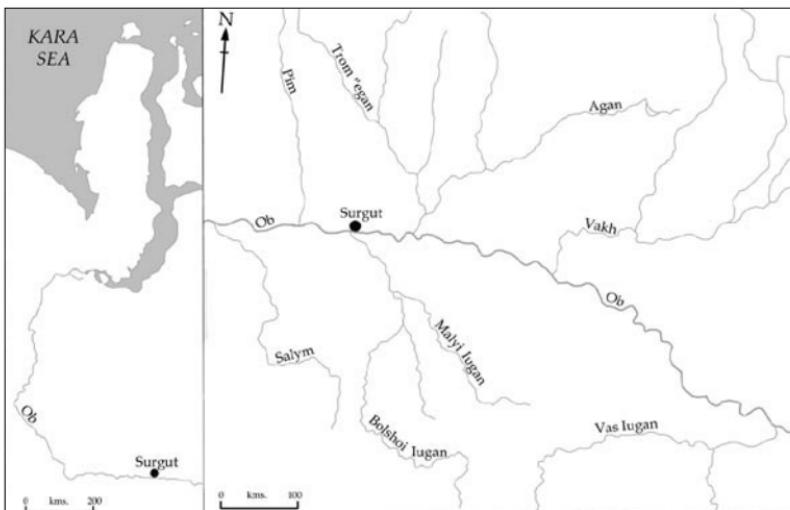
topic is about pathways to reform, and it focuses on ways of securing conditions that will allow active revitalization in aboriginal culture, identity and belief. At the core of these arguments is the implicit hope that a deeper Siberian identity – in some spiritual, economic or social sense – will spring back to life again after having lingered on the very edge of survival out in the bleaker corners of a Sovietized and now increasingly industrialized Siberia. Realistic opportunities for cultural revitalization vary considerably in relation to a number of political, economic and demographic factors, including the wider historical advance of assimilation across the North.

Assessing the wider Siberian situation, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer has suggested that “a schematic continuum depicting degrees of Russification for various Siberian (including Far East) groups would place the Khanty somewhere near the center, and the Sakha and Yukagir at either end of the spectrum” (Balzer 2004, 250). In a longer-term historical perspective, Khanty communities have been remarkably successful at resisting assimilation pressures. In a series of papers, Glavatskaia has traced the long-term persistence of Khanty ethnic identity and spirituality (2001, 2002, 2004; see also: Balzer 1999) despite centuries of state persecution. Most recently, Glavatskaia has discussed the on-going ethnic and religious revitalization among diverse groups of Khanty, contrasting “urban citizens” and those “who live the traditional ways” out on the land (*ibid.* 2004, 240). In her analysis, she focuses on two distinct streams of revitalization. The first is internal, focused *within* traditional Khanty communities that still live on the land, the other *external*, directed toward outside viewers, audiences, and the wider Russian-language mass media. She concludes that the “internal ceremonies” have a deeper religious meaning for the participants than the latter” (*ibid.* 2004, 243), while the latter are aimed at consolidating and projecting a Khanty ethnic identity to urban dwellers and decision makers in a rapidly changing and industrializing western Siberia (Wiget 2002). The presence of new “ethnic” museums in the larger villages (Novikova 2002), alongside the persistence of older traditions out in the local forest, is a striking example of that trend.

### **Eastern Khanty: recent historical processes**

Recent counts indicate that there are approximately 22,500 Khanty (Ostyaks) in western Siberia (1989 census), who have traditionally been divided by ethnographers into three broad regional groupings: Northern, Southern and Eastern. Researchers and administrators have tended to describe each group of Khanty in terms of the river basin they inhabit – different groups occupy different river basins, and contacts between the different

communities were weak (Shatilov 1931, 55). Moreover, ethnographic and ethno-historic records indicate that the different Khanty communities along each tributary river basin distinguished themselves by dress, dialect, material culture, and minor differences in subsistence practices (Lukina 1995, Martynova 1998).



In this paper we will concentrate on two river basin groups from the approximately 5000 Eastern Khanty, who are hunters, fishers and small-scale reindeer herders residing along the middle sections of the River Ob and its tributaries. The process of colonization and accommodation between indigenous Khanty and Russian populations has been well documented in the wider ethnographic literature. After conquest, western Siberia was divided into broad "*Uezd*" territorial partitions. Smaller administrative areas, called "*volosti*," were mapped out within these larger areas. The latter territories were based on pre-existing settlement, ethnic and cultural patterns and tended to follow the lines of the watersheds of rivers tributary to the Ob (Martynova 1995). As a result, rivers like the Yugan, Agan and Tym' regan tended to form single administrative territories. Within the *volosti*, census records detail the extreme stability in both family- and settlement-name composition among many Khanty communities (Martynova 1995, 88; Glavatskaia, 100–3). The ethno-historic record also indicates that, officially at least, interethnic (that is, between different indigenous ethnicities) and Russian-indigenous marriages were extremely rare (Lukina 1985, 15–6). Interestingly, state interests in the highly lucrative fur trade

led to native land rights being protected in colonial law, which prevented movement onto indigenous-occupied lands by incoming Russian migrants (Shimkin 1990; Konev 1998, 127–8; Lukina 1985; Martynova 1995).

This extractive relationship of *de facto* apartheid (Jordan 2001) continued right through until the later Soviet period, with Khanty and other groups contributing fur, meat and fish to the state economy, ostensibly via traditional modes of procurement and mobility, which necessitated long periods of absence in the remote “bush.” In this way, a colonial economic niche also generated isolated geographic spaces within which traditional bonds to the land could be maintained. Nevertheless, the state tried to destroy Khanty religion through a successive wave of campaigns, although the more general outcome was that Eastern Khanty communities residing in remoter areas of western Siberia were affected least (Sokolova 1989). Moreover, among these communities, the “deep” forest hunters and reindeer herders of the upper rivers preserved their religious traditions better, as their contact with external Russian populations was least intense (Glavatskaia 2001, 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, all Khanty communities eventually adopted Russian Orthodox Christianity, although this tended not to result in the abandonment of older ideas, but created a flexible blending between Christian and Khanty religions. More recently, the Soviet era and petroleum development had profound effects on native culture (Wiget 2002). In the rapidly changing modern context of oil and gas development, urbanization and an emerging native rights agenda, Glavatskaia locates her two stream of ethnic revitalization – the first *outward*-oriented, as exemplified by the new festivals and ethnic shows, the other directed *inward*, in secret and having its greatest meaning for the more traditional Khanty communities out on the land (*ibid.* 2004).

In this paper we'd like to move away from sweeping regional analyses and sharpen the focus to look in more local detail at some of the profoundly different local contexts in which different kinds of cultural revitalization might take place. Our aim is to understand in greater detail the local mechanisms and manifestations of cultural and linguistic persistence, including the frameworks and contexts that give rise to continuity in these practices. We also seek to understand the challenges and threats such communities face in securing long-term survival. We do this because land-rights debates have tended to posit the existence of an idealized traditional culture that is cast in the role of a timeless, enduring, unchanging and monolithic entity of fixed traits, such as reindeer-herding, or carefully choreographed events like the famous Khanty Bear Festival. The plethora of Soviet-era normative ethnographies, with their careful descriptions of “traditional” groups at the close of the nineteenth century, tend to reinforce these essentially static

images of ethnic culture, without focusing on the social practices through which cultural traditions persist and have meaning for the communities and individuals involved.

The problem is that this implicit reference to “traditional” lifeways creates a disjunction, indeed a tension, between two opposing tendencies. One is the emergence of the *projective* role of a formalized, standardized and performative native culture that is aimed at, and practiced predominantly by, politicized urban and intellectual groups. The other is the increasingly inappropriate images of *sealed*, conservative, timeless and unchanging habits of traditional communities in remoter places, which increasingly misrepresents the reality, cultural dynamism and flexibility of life out “on the land.” If native culture is really about fixed repertoires and collections of artifacts, then museums can be the repository of everything traditional. However, if culture is flexible, embodied, and created through routines and actions – if it is *living*, not *static* – then the focus, more than ever, needs to be on the wider conditions that enable opportunities for cultural persistence. Without doubt, the overtly public folklore and festival displays and the creation of native culture museums have played an important role in raising wider urban awareness of native identities in western Siberia (Novikova 2002). Moreover, they have enhanced the confidence of native peoples in their own traditions as well. Nevertheless, there is a real danger that, in the eyes of decision makers, the purely public representations may come to stand as a worthy substitute for the more personal living ones, rather than as a complement.

We will combine an analysis of the linguistic, material and spiritual dimensions of local Khanty lifeways. This will highlight how the processes of cultural persistence are extremely subtle, involving change and negotiation in all spheres of society. At the heart of these processes of cultural transmission, which are grounded in social networks and patterns of interaction, are personal choices – whether to subscribe to, adopt, or reject, certain codes of behavior. The irony is that, whereas personal choices and strength of conviction may account for the persistence in beliefs throughout a period of aggressive Soviet policies and exposure to accelerating globalization, individual choices may also generate shifts that lead to the explicit rejection of core forms of Khanty spirituality. Our analysis of Khanty communities living in two different river basins suggests that the picture is far more complex than a simple urban *versus* traditional distinction. It reveals both continuity and persistence, but also some cumulative decline and also gradual transformations in enduring belief, cultural expertise and linguistic ability, even among those still “living on the land.” The overall insight is of indigenous communities buffeted by a

myriad of intense assimilation pressures, a picture that can be extrapolated to cover both the wider region and, indeed, the whole of Siberia. The real challenge in seeking pathways to reform is how to maintain the flexibility and choice, inherent in all cultures, while still securing the local conditions that allow for a broader and viable cultural persistence.

### **Vas Yugan**

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Vas Yugan river was an area of extremely rich and well-documented Khanty culture (e.g. Karjalainen 1922, 1927; Kulemzin and Lukina 1977; Sirelius 1983). Small “yurt” settlements of several related families were scattered along the main stretch of the river and also on such larger tributaries as the Nurol’ka (Borisov 1996). The economy was based primarily on fishing and hunting, and many locals also kept horses and cows. Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the river was occupied almost exclusively by Khanty, who spoke a rich and distinct dialect, with some isolated Sel’kup groups to the east (Lukina 1996, 99; Tereshkin 1961; Mogutaev 1995). A hundred years later the picture has changed radically, with most of the transformations taking place in the course of a traumatic decade or two. Today there are some surviving traces of this earlier indigenous culture and language, yet the disappearance of the Vas Yugan Khanty as a distinct cultural formation is clearly imminent.

Several crucial factors led to this current situation of profound marginalization, in particular the closer proximity of the river to larger settlements upstream, such as Tomsk and Novosibirsk. First, in a series of moves from the 1920s into the 1940s, several waves of exiles from various parts of the USSR were forcibly re-settled near traditional Khanty villages on the river. Many of these exiles were dumped ashore from passing barges and had few belongings or the skills and tools to survive the first winters. Many made it through at the expense of native population. In addition, the Vas Yugan was the scene of early collectivization campaigns in the late 1920s and early 1930s, during which new settlements and traditional Khanty villages were amalgamated into collective farms for controlled fishing and hunting production within the targets set by the planned economy. This collectivization was concurrent with first “enlargement” policies and education campaigns, aimed at the erosion of traditional culture and religion, which was considered to be backward and inhumane.

The river was also the scene of very early oil and gas exploration from the 1950s through the 1970s. Immense reserves were discovered and development was speedy and relentless. The area also witnessed the intensive development of a local timber and logging industry. Under sustained pres-

sure, traditional culture, sacred sites and ecological habitats were laid waste by geological research, seismic lines, oil-drilling, pipeline construction and timber felling. In addition, a massive influx of outside populations into local settlements shifted the demographic balance to the point where the original Khanty became an insignificant minority. The oil and gas exploration campaigns also coincided with renewed “enlarge” policies and the imposition of a centralized and mandatory secondary schooling policy, in which native children were forced to attend eight years of formal schooling in mainstream disciplines and Russian media, either in repressive boarding schools or in mainstream majority schools. In both cases, native students’ traditional culture and language were the object of widespread ridicule and persecution, which provided strong incentives for rapid cultural and linguistic assimilation.

Today, in the upper Vas Yugan, Khanty language and culture can clearly be designated as moribund, i.e. bound to become extinct in the next 10 to 15 years (based on Krauss’ 1992 classification of language endangerment). For example, the total number of speakers in the river’s main villages of Novy Vas Yugan, Aipolovo and Tivriz does not exceed 40 people, all of whom are over 50 years of age, and none of them are fully fluent. There are no speakers among the young adults and children. The language is used by elders occasionally in certain specific contexts of home life, especially when discussing hunting and fishing and when gossiping about mutual acquaintances and kin. Even in these “spontaneous” conversations, however, Khanty language is heavily supplemented with Russian loan words and set phrases. At other times, the Khanty language is deliberately used as a secret code speech when in the presence of Russian-only speakers, in order to make comments and to joke at their expense.

All upper Vas Yugan Khanty reside in large settlements, where they are an extreme minority (two to five percent). In these settlements they reside in the same kinds of standardized houses as the others, with house plans, yard arrangements, and house interiors that follow the standard “modern” village style, although there are occasional Khanty clay bread ovens outside at the back. Some families still have hunting cabins out in the forest, normally at the sites of their original clan settlements (e.g. Tukh Emter), which were officially seized in the relocation programs. Thus, many are still inhabited “unofficially,” either full- or part-time by the original inhabitants or by people who arrived from outside and decided to stay away from large villages in favor of living in the “bush.” These camps are attended only occasionally for seasonal hunting and fishing, and even then usually for brief periods of say two months in total in the summer and two to three months in total in winter, all in quite regular two to three week stints. At

the same time, the longer-term trend is toward the growth of larger settlements, which is encouraged by local authorities in a variety of ways.

Similar processes can be observed in Alexandrovo, also a traditional Khanty area but located near the mouth of the Vas Yukan on the main Ob River. Here, several villages are experiencing gradual abandonment, which tends to follow a familiar scenario and downward spiral. Generally, the administration invites people to move to a nearby large village within the scope of a broader federal or *oblast'* development program. The move is encouraged by all kinds of promises: compensation for moving expenses, money to buy up older houses and sponsor the construction of new ones, help in securing new employment, etc. (Usually, only half of these promises are fulfilled.) Some people move, but the sceptical majority tends to stay on, reluctant to move out. Later, the local shop begins to have trouble obtaining supplies, the bus or "water-bus" ("Raketa") begins to experience disruptions in its schedules, local hospitals or schools are damaged in fires and then go through an endless period of repair. As a result, children and the sick have to go to the larger village for these services, which gradually forces their families to move. Eventually, the original village has only older people left. Bills can't be paid, so the electricity is cut off, which sounds the final death knell for the settlement.

On the Vas Yukan there is no history of native education policies that encourage local Khanty language and culture. In fact, it has been a long-standing practice to suppress, prohibit and persecute the use of the native tongue among Khanty students. All instruction was, and is, conducted in Russian, and education covers a standard set of disciplines without any notable "local" specializations. Khanty, and other indigenous minority students, are not usually differentiated from the majority students based on their language, culture, religion, or tradition. Although nominally Vas Yukan Khanty have certain land rights, mainly relating to traditional family hunting grounds, these are practically ignored by the majority public and local administration. Local authorities fail to enforce, and often ignore and effectively violate, existing laws and provisions for indigenous representation, such as priority hunting and fishing licenses, tax and other financial allocations, priority housing and social assistance, etc.

One example concerns Petr M., who is around 70 years old. He was born in the traditional village of Tukh Emter and later worked as a professional hunter, fisher and timber man. He is fully fluent in Khanty, has resided for over 30 years in Novyi Vas Yukan, and is married to a Khanty woman who, however, speaks almost no Khanty. Petr M is a highly knowledgeable expert on local Khanty culture and traditions, reportedly he is a grandson of the main Tukh Emter shaman. However, he admits that, when young,

out of fear he decided not to pursue this family tradition of shamanism. He remains well informed about the local cultural landscape and sacred geography, including holy sites and associated traditions. He even attends some of the places himself, conducts rituals, and leaves offerings (*pory*) for local patron spirits. However, his children demonstrate no knowledge or interest in the traditional culture and language.

In the context of wider theoretical discussions about pathways to reform, cultural continuity and creating “spaces” for cultural persistence, it is interesting to note that his feelings of marginalization are felt strongest when in the village. He admits that he does not feel completely comfortable there, regardless of the material attractions of the urban-style house, social and medical services, shops, etc. Unlike his wife, he feels more “at home” and healthy out in the forest and at his former clan village of Tukh Emter, which is now a cluster of three or four hunters’ huts that are inhabited seasonally. In this remoter landscape context, he communicates on issues of traditional culture and language more openly and willingly when he leaves the large village and finds himself out in the forest:

“I feel like an old sick man in the village, can’t talk or remember how things used to be. In the forest I feel much better, and I can tell (you) much more once we are out there on the lake, fishing and checking traps.”

He feels a sense of discomfort, inferiority, disorientation when in the village, where Khanty are a marked minority that often experiences discriminatory treatment from other villagers – including close acquaintances – and from local authorities as well. By contrast, when in the forest he admits to a sense of higher self-esteem, greater competence, and a higher energy level. One manifestation of this is the markedly smaller amount of information that could be elicited from him in interviews and free conversations that were conducted in the large village, as compared to those done out in the forest and former clan village. In the large-village situation, he provided barely complete and tedious word-lists; outside the village, he told extended hunting stories and folk tales, revealed legends about sacred sites and the local landscape, and provided biographical sketches, descriptions of rituals and demonstrations of traditional crafts.

A similar situation characterizes the experiences and outlook of the A family in Staro-Yugino, part of lower Vas Yugan. Yury and Ekaterina A, both in their late 60s, are native to lower Vas Yugan but not to Staro-Yugino. They have lived in Staro-Yugino for over 30 years, and both are near fully fluent in Khanty. Occasionally, they even use Khanty for daily communication between themselves and, albeit very rarely, with other

local elderly Khanty. Yet none of their adult children or teen and pre-teen grandchildren speak Khanty, perhaps due to the fact that all the children are married to non-Khanty (Germans, Tatars and Russians, many of them the descendants of exiles who were relocated to the river). Both Yury and Ekaterina admit to knowing and very occasionally using a few elements of traditional culture in everyday life. For example, they prepare some Khanty dishes and preserves, and make and use traditional tools and containers (including knives, birch-bark containers, skis, traps and items of winter clothing). Both spent extended periods within the mainstream environment of formal schooling, professional training, professional experience, and social interactions, and had almost no exposure to traditional culture beyond their late childhood (mid teens). As a result, they retain only some disconnected knowledge of the traditional social system, kin nomenclature, individual elements of local cultural landscape, sacred sites, and social behavioral norms (taboos). Yury continues to hunt, often for bears, and practices some of the traditional behavior when dealing with this “sacred” animal (such as treatment of the skin, bones and skull, and also his general attitude concerning bears). As with Petr M (above) it was readily apparent that Yury preferred talking about the traditional culture and language while outside the context of the village. He was much more talkative out in the forest, repeatedly making reference to the fact that things are remembered more easily and readily when in the “more natural” environment.

Yet despite these isolated and surviving “fragments” of knowledge and custom, Khanty language and culture are clearly moribund, and will probably disappear entirely from the Vas Yukan within the next 15 years. In a pattern that is repeated all over the Siberian North, the core problem is that the conduits feeding the trans-generational transmission of culture and language have been ruptured. For example, the total number of variably fluent speakers in the villages Srednii Vas Yukan, Napas, Myldzhino, Kargasok, Staro-Yugino, Novo-Yugino, and Bondarka is fewer than 50 people, all of them over 50 years of age. Among these surviving Vas Yukan Khanty, it is difficult to see any pathways to reform, any real and lasting chance to forge new, or even salvage old, identities that draw directly upon the older Khanty heritage that existed everywhere along the river at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With only elderly Khanty left – and those are generally swamped by the number of in-migrants – there’s simply little opportunity (or broader inter-ethnic community desire) to build upon, or make reference to, this older aboriginal heritage.

## **Yugan River**

In our second case study we move north across the watershed to the Yugan River basin, which is located on the south bank of the Middle Ob River. Here, several hundred Khanty reside along the main “Big” Yugan River (Bolshoi Yugan) as well as the major tributary, the “Small” or Malyi Yugan River. To the west is the Salym River basin, which includes both a group of Yugan Khanty, who migrated there in the 1930s, and, traditionally, another “indigenous” group of Khanty, the Salym Khanty. All the Salym Khanty were collectivized very early in the Soviet period, and have largely disappeared into the larger multi-ethnic settlements, as opposed to retaining a distinct identity. Conversely, the newer Yugan Khanty arrivals, who dwell in the bogs separating the Salym and Yugan basins, have maintained their ethnic traditions to a much greater degree (e.g. Vizgalov 2000), probably due to the fact that they live in a remote area but also maintain active contacts with the wider Yugan Khanty community.

The Yugan Khanty community is better organized than many others, and the area may well be the scene of some of the most promising cultural conservation frameworks in the entire region (Wiget and Balalaeva 1997a, 1997b for early plans in this direction). Nevertheless, local leaders are far from complacent about the community’s future, even though, overall, Yugan Khanty cultural traditions and their more general ethnic identity have proved remarkably resilient through decades of profound changes, including the troubles and deprivations of the war years (1941-45). In addition, perhaps as the result of collectivization, some small groups moved over to the Salym, Vas Yugan (Lukina 2004, 320), and there were also Khanty diasporas to the Demianka River, some of whom later returned to the Yugan, while others remained there. Despite the persistence of this favorable demographic balance, the Yugan community has not escaped change. However, a set of unusual factors has meant that, both in terms of culture and settlement, there has been remarkable long-term continuity in this river basin.

- First, collectivization in the 1950s was only weakly enforced, resulting in long-term continuity of residence on the land. After a brief period residing in Ugut, and in two artificially created settlements on the Bolshoi Yugan, most Khanty families gradually drifted back to the yurts occupied by their ancestors, although to this day official maps of the river list Khanty yurts as “uninhabited.”
- Second, and perhaps critically, petroleum development arrived late. Logistical difficulties meant that, although development licenses were defined on maps, they were sold off very slowly (Balalaeva and Wiget 1998, 2).

- Third, even in Soviet times there was early recognition of the environmental devastation, if not yet the indigenous cultural destruction, that was resulting from massive oil development on the middle Ob. Following a long historical tradition of preserving exemplary instances of key ecosystems (Wiget and Balalaeva 1998, 3), the Soviet authorities established the *Yuganskii Zapovednik* (Yugan Nature Reserve) in the area between the two branches of the Yugan River. The reserve comprised 622,000 hectares, with access permitted only to the park's scientific staff, plus a two-kilometer buffer zone around the perimeter, with strict controls on land use and access. Although traditional Khanty hunting lands formed a broader ring of traditional land use around the reserve, they were not formally linked to the project (Wiget and Balalaeva (1997a, 1997b, 1998).
- Fourth, following the collapse of Soviet Union the Yugan Khanty were quickly registered as the *Yagun Yakh* ("People of the River") community, part of the wider *obshchina* movement to create local organs of native community self-government. As a result, families were officially allocated clan hunting territories. Strictly speaking, the *Yagun Yakh* is a more of a political entity dedicated to Khanty issues, interaction with local authorities, especially over land rights, granting licenses, oil industry, conflicts, etc. However, it is also run by the same people who run the local trading store, or "Pokh." This represents a reincarnation of the Soviet *zagotovitel'naia kontora* (collection and stocking station) that used to buy fish, meat, berries, etc. from local people and sold it in the towns. Now it is owned by a parent company based in the oil town of Surgut.

All the same, this remarkable *relative* continuity does not necessarily translate into a wider feeling of cultural confidence or general optimism. In an era of rapid petroleum development (cf. Wiget 2002), all concerned are acutely aware of the closing net of industrialization that surrounds them on every side. Most Yugan Khanty are generally aware of the deplorable condition of the traditional Khanty culture and language in the adjacent areas of Vas Yugan, Demianka and Salym. Repeatedly during our field visits, people asked eagerly about the status of these communities, land rights and other topical issues, wanting to compare it to that of their own. They heard to their dismay that, for all their own local challenges, they are probably better off, especially considering that the level of assimilation is nearly 100% among the Vas Yugan and Alexandrovo Khanty, and only slightly better on the Vakh river. All these rivers had a more or less exclusively Khanty population in the 1900s. The Yugan basin is probably

unique, however, in that, despite a significant Russian and Ukrainian presence in the main settlement of Ugut, the rest of the river remains populated only by Khanty, many of whom live in the traditional “yurt” settlements strung out along remote sections of the river.

New efforts at cultural conservation have recently appeared. There is, of course, the new folk museum in Ugut, which was built in the late 1990s, and some limited attempts to establish local festivals, including especially a so-called “Day of the Canoes.” This could develop into a significant vehicle for expressing broader community solidarity and cultural confidence. The event draws some inspiration from an older tradition, still practiced upstream, of making offerings (*pory*) at the riverbank at the beginning of summer. In the new version of this event, local participation, especially by people from the more remote stretches of the river, is limited. Though initially perceived by the Khanty as a legitimate effort at cultural revitalization, this celebration, which is sponsored by the local authorities, is now viewed by many Khanty as a form of souvenir culture that is tainted by bad organization, high incidence of alcohol abuse, and general disorder. The prizes offered to winners in the traditional competitions have diminishing value, which to many Khanty simply reflects a lack of seriousness about the event on behalf of local authorities, and generally compromises it. In the summer of 2004, many informants on the upper rivers said that they had no spare fuel available to make the trip to the celebration, yet if a boat motor had been offered as a prize, and not merely a fishing net, they would have made the effort and attended.

Out in the traditional settlements in the forest, many elements of clothing, architecture, handicrafts and other commonly produced items of material culture show long-term continuity with those illustrated in 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic depictions (e.g. Martin’s survey in 1897). Cultural shifts include the abandonment of most male traditional clothing and the replacement of bow hunting (passive and active) in favor of firearms. Although reindeer have been replaced by skidoos, there has been long-term continuity in canoes, skis, sledges, basketry, female clothing, and many forms of built structures, including store houses on stilts and clay bread ovens. In particular, the female *sak* (top coat) is an important means of expressing ethnic identity and is widely worn in all forest yurts and even on trips into the main village. On the other hand, the older traditional footwear (*nyriki*) has been largely replaced by the prevalent use of rubber boots. (One woman explained that, although she was wearing a long *sak* decorated with bead decoration, she didn’t wear the older, locally made footwear because “I am a modern Khanteika now.”)

At first glance, Khanty language preservation may seem to be very solid; even the younger generations remain fluent in both Russian and Khanty (Wiget and Balalaeva 1997a). However, closer inspection reveals that the level of overall competence in use of the mother tongue is undergoing significant changes. Some of these changes are manifestations common to any language development, such as the marginalization of archaic expressions, gradual sound shifts, and lexical and grammatical innovations of varying scale and persistence. Others, however, are typical of the language assimilation process. In particular, although knowledge of basic vocabulary and command of basic speech registers persists in all social strata and across the generations, it is also evident that a deterioration in the diversity of available genre and the repertoire of speech registers points to deeper shifts in traditional culture. For example, there is a lack of ability among the prevailing majority of speakers under 40 years of age to recite traditional legends and sing songs, or to show competence in the traditional story-telling genre, which is characterized by a particular phraseology structure and lexicon. These are clear evidence of attrition in some aspects of traditional Khanty culture, such as the oral folk tradition, native modes of education, and inter-generational information transfer. In other words, a whole range of native oral folk traditions is simply disappearing. This includes extended story telling by elders, as well as festivals and community events at which representatives from different clans or lineages exchange clan legends and histories, thereby co-constructing the folk history of the whole river community. All are rapidly being replaced by the modern mainstream media.

In their own conversations, many adults reflect that they remember their grandfathers and other elders being able to tell the old stories right through the night. Those stories had a special style and structure to them; they dealt with the origins of Khanty people and specific clans, with warfare and particularly outstanding relatives, and with migrations and major events. Some were also about recent events, but were still described in the proper, genre-specific, way. These adults admit, however, that although they may be generally fluent as everyday Khanty speakers, they cannot even imitate the story-telling style, and do not know the meaning and proper usage conventions appropriate to some of the lexicon and constructions characteristic of these traditional speech genres. Moreover, even if they are able to recite or perform prayers and chants for special occasions, many admit to not knowing or recalling the meaning of some of the expressions, and they cannot guarantee that they are using these appropriately. Further evidence of ongoing language change can be seen in such features as the increasing frequency and extent of the use of Russian for specific topics, speech registers, and genres (code switching). All have been generally

increasing among the younger age groups, and indicate a shift in the status of the mother tongue, from the single code of a monolingual community to one characterized by the codes of a bilingual community. Here, the mother tongue is increasingly restricted in its function to a particular set of topics and speech registers, which is, again, a classic early sign of linguistic assimilation.

Overall, the larger Yukan Khanty community can be roughly divided into two groups, those residing on the upper and lower sections of the river respectively. The lower river Khanty may be best seen as representing a stage along the transformation/assimilation continuum between the almost entirely assimilated Vas Yukan Khanty and the upper river Yukan Khanty who preserve much higher levels of traditional culture. On the lower Yukan there is the powerful presence of the wider urban Russian-speaking culture in the form of large settlements with a majority non-native population. Here, there are various social and economic pressures, and the dominance of Russian media in daily communication, education, local authority, commerce, employment, etc., both individually and in combination, affecting the status of traditional language and culture. The lower Yukan Khanty reside predominantly in the local administrative center, Ugut, and in adjacent villages along the Yukan river. The majority of them are functionally bilingual. However, there are also some individuals (possibly the only ones on the Yukan, which is perhaps an indication of further changes to come?) who are *passively* bilingual, that is who understand Khanty to varying degrees, but are unable to communicate effectively in it.

Officially there are provisions for mother-tongue education in local schools, mainly at the level of primary school. In reality, these are very limited and often highly dependent on subjective interpretations by current educational authorities and individual instructors. They also suffer from inadequate teaching aids and methodological recommendations. Although there is currently no overt discrimination against Khanty language and culture – and curiously, they become a factor that contributes additional revenue to local budgets – it is still the case that traditional Khanty culture and language are objects of colloquial ridicule for the majority public and local authorities, and they are generally considered inferior and backward even by some Khanty themselves. Many local residents are aware of traditional Khanty spirituality yet mock it openly. One man who regularly spends time hunting out in the forest described how Khanty leave special offerings at sacred shrines to give thanks for their hunting success – “it’s all complete nonsense though.”

Among the factors that have contributed to the higher degree of assimilation on lower Yukan are those common to all cultural and linguistic

minorities in Siberia: collectivization, social engineering, mandatory Russian media education, and the dominance of Russian mass media. All have been aggravated recently by the advancing oil industry, bringing with it the influx of an outside population with little knowledge or respect for native culture. Even though they have been guaranteed land rights and regular federal and local financial compensation, many lower Yukan Khanty find that these often turn out to be, if not a lost opportunity, a counter incentive to remaining out on the land and continuing to hunt. Once they are provided with a guarantee of regular cash income, many find themselves reduced to spending most of their time away from their traditional lands and occupations. They end up in local administrative centers in chronic alcohol abuse and asocial behavior, while their children spend almost all their time in the local, predominantly Russian-media, boarding school.

The picture changes dramatically as one moves upriver from Ugut. On both the Malyi and Bolshoi Yukan the settlement and mobility patterns have remained remarkably similar to, and indeed are directly descended from, those documented 100 years ago. Most of the 800-strong native community still lives in around 36 isolated yurt settlements strung out along the full length of both branches of the river, where the majority maintain traditional forms of clan kinship and social organization (Bakhlykov 1996, 164; Dunin-Gorkavitch 1996) and migrate to the more remote forest for winter hunting. Hunting, fishing and gathering remain primary economic pastimes, whereas small-scale forest reindeer herding died out by the 1980s due to a variety of factors.

With these multi-faceted cultural and spiritual bonds to the land surviving virtually intact, an older sacred geography has endured, and a multitude of sacred places still plays a central role in annual community and household rituals (Jordan 2003). Overall, however, the trend is not toward *revitalization* but one of various degrees of *continuity*, perhaps due to the demographic and settlement factors noted above. This is in marked contrast to the most common situation across much of Siberia, where natives find themselves to be demographic minorities within larger amalgamated settlements that were mainly founded in the Soviet era.

Even as state hunters they spent extended periods in the bush, and this is still a feature of local life, although with modern transportation trips into town became much more frequent. Sacred geography and a deeper Khanty spiritualism continued to play important roles in binding community and individual life, yet they were also balanced with the wider needs of the Soviet economy. Within these worlds, the Khanty became adept at balancing dual identities in different spheres. For example, the state hunters provided a steady stream of furs and meat to the state collec-

tion agencies, yet they also left gifts and offerings and performed prayers at secret shrines so that their hunts would be successful and the animal spirit masters would “give” up the animals to the hunter. Elk heads were, and are, also cooked as special fare for the deities that reside at particular shrines. Khanty cosmological beliefs also extend to taboos about the careful treatment of the animal’s carcass and the deposition of its bones. Over time, it appears that the strictness of these taboos is changing, generally becoming more flexible, although elk bones are still never burnt, and the heads never fed to dogs. Older reports (e.g. Kulemzin 1984) suggest that a much more prohibitive set of taboos used to prevail.



Carvings in a cedar tree  
commemorating a bear hunt,<sup>2</sup>  
Malyi Yugan 1998.  
photo: P. Jordan

While the bear remains an important and sacred animal, the well-documented bear festivals are no longer performed. However, kills are still marked by the carving of trees, the serving of special meals, and the retention of the skulls within the yurt and the deposition of other bones in a wet and quiet place, which is to ensure rejuvenation. The older bear festival involved days of feasting and collective celebration, a chance to recite literally hundreds of songs and legends that were etched in special batons to record the event. In one yurt, an attempted festival (1991) ended, because no one could remember enough songs, which reflects a wider attrition in folklore knowledge that appears to be directly associated with the advance of Russian and the imposition of the boarding school system.

One informant living on the upper river even suggested that “if my 18 year-old son witnessed a bear festival, he wouldn’t have the faintest idea what it was all about.”

Yet despite these shifts, an enduring sense of the importance of traditional beliefs remains and pervades many dimensions of Khanty life. For example, there is a strict taboo that prohibits walking in a full circle around sacred sites while hunting. One informant, Andrei A, recalled that as a young man he was too tired one day to retrace his steps when returning to the yurt after a long day’s hunting, thereby violating this taboo. He told his father about what had happened and, although he was scolded,

decided to sleep. In the months that followed, despite frequent sightings of elk and sable, he was simply unable to kill anything. Finally, he went to the sacred site, left cloth, and recited prayers (*pory*) to the deity there. Immediately, his fortunes changed and he was able to kill several sable. In many ways this story epitomizes Khanty perceptions of the landscape as being inhabited by a multitude of deities and spirits, as well as animals and humans. To move through, and act in, the landscape is to engage in a dialogue or interaction, obligation and exchange with all these presences, and leaving the appropriate offerings at sacred sites is a core feature of local belief (Jordan 2003).

Thus, despite the official organizations and economic structures of the Soviet period, there were always strong indigenous dimensions to life, especially in the deeper forest. Even on the summer fishing migrations, when all upriver families engaged in collective fishing on the lower river, families carried certain important deities in their boats to provide for mutual protection while away from home. After the post-Soviet collapse of expeditionary fishing in the early 1990s, the tradition changed to housing the dolls for some weeks, not at the local sacred site but in the yurt, thereby transforming the land within the yurt into a sacred landscape. In the same way that it is forbidden to walk around other sacred sites out in the landscape, while the idols are resident in the yurt, it is forbidden to walk around the building housing the deities.



Setting nets on the Bolshoi Yugan River in August, 2003.

photo: P. Jordan



Community visit to a local shrine,<sup>3</sup>  
Malyi Yugan 2004.  
photo: P. Jordan

At certain times in the year each yurt community visits its local shrine, where carved idols are housed in a *labas* (a stilted structure on legs). The visits are an important time for coming together, discussing concerns, and giving thanks not just to the local deity, but also to other deities on the river. These deities, which reside in different areas of the land and in the various realms of the wider universe, are invited to attend via prayers and recitals. In this way, the events are an important time not only for reaffirming ideas about the world, but also for linking the local group into the much wider inhabitation of a broader sacred landscape. Gender roles are also strictly enforced, including the exclusion from certain areas, or even entire landscape zones, for fear of insulting the spirits there.

For example, on the upper river there is a complex of two sacred sites that is usually visited in sequence. From a tributary stream downward, the whole bank is considered sacred, so women are first left on one river bank, and then the men cross to the other bank to visit the shrine there. This ritual completed, the group reunites and moves downstream to a second shrine, which marks the end of the sacred bank and where both men and women go ashore together. However, the ritual meal there is consumed on two tables, one for men, the other for women. This latter shrine houses the most important deity of the river (*Lon Lor Iki*), and so draws offerings just from the local community but also from the wider one. Along the middle sections of the river is another important site that houses female deities (daughters of the mother goddess *Pugos Anki*) venerated by the regional community. Likewise, on the Bolshoi Yugan the most important deity there (*Yagun Iki*) draws visits and reindeer sacrifices from Khanty communities living beyond Surgut, on the Trom'egan River.

There are other ties that bind the community together around the activities and obligations associated with sacred sites. The maker of the new

idols must be drawn from outside the local yurt community, and when he dies a new set must be carved by a different man. Personal protector dolls are also made for women who marry out of the local yurt community. In an essentially patrilocal society, this means that women carry idols from local sites all over the wider river basin, and the married couple must return regularly to the sacred grove from which the doll was cut in order to give thanks. As Nikolai A, an older informant, recounts, much of this sacred geography has remained secret and was never abandoned during the Soviet period; with traditions “passed on from generation to generation.”



Khanty elder demonstrating how items are discarded in the forest behind the yurt settlement,<sup>4</sup>  
Bolshoi Yugan 2004.

photo: P. Jordan

Moreover, most local communities knew about and visited their own shrines and several other major ones, but many had never visited, or even knew about, all the shrines on the river. In this way, all were, and remain today, involved in upholding and maintaining their obligations to a broader regional sacred landscape. Judging from information gathered about current and recent practices (i.e., those prevailing within living memory), as well as from the older ethnohistoric literature, it seems more accurate to describe the current situation as one of general cultural *persistence*, rather than as a deliberate or recent revival.

Yet rips and tears in the broader social and spiritual fabric have occurred. Certain shrines on the river were not visited for long periods. One was rebuilt and new dolls made in the early 1990s. Another shrine was long abandoned. Other Khanty on the river carried memories that a spirit dwelled at the site; left cloths on trees by the river bank, not knowing that a collapsed *labas* lay deeper within the forest. Today the current residents at the yurt have no interest in rebuilding the site or carving new dolls, so eventually the site may well cease being used and disappear from the broader *collective* memory.

Some important beliefs are also expressed and honored in quieter ways, rather than through public ritual. Skis and sledges are never burned, for fear that this will destroy the maker's skills. Likewise, old skis and clothing are still hung from trees, so that after death a person will continue to have a supply of them. As one man said, "I'm just the kind of man that does that." Coins and pots are left under new houses to symbolically buy the land from the earth goddess (*Myg Anki*) and to prevent illness spirits from the darkness of the lower world from welling up inside the home.

If the Soviet era can be characterized by an overbearing and official sense of Soviet ideology, along with the persistence of an underlying, quieter but resilient local Khanty identity and spirituality, then the post-Soviet era has exposed the communities to other forms of belief that are beginning to make headway. Since the mid-1990s, Baptist missionaries have made significant inroads at gaining converts on the Bolshoi Yugan River. In addition, the focus of their activities appears to have been targeted at the yurt communities that venerate the most important regional deities. For example, in the yurt that tends the main god on the whole river (*Yagun Ik*), the majority of the community are now devout converts who explicitly reject any form of "pagan" belief.

These proselytizing activities have generated mixed responses, with some people stating that "after the Baptists have been here, someone always dies," and that "I have my gods, I do my offerings for them, I don't need theirs." It is also a situation that creates certain ironies. In one yurt, we

viewed a local protector idol (*Sopor Iki*) that was housed locally within the yurt, yet everyone in that yurt had become Baptists and no one had any idea what to do with the dolls or how to do *pory* (traditional offerings) for them. The dolls were stored in the stilted *ambarchik* within the yurt, with the storehouse also utilized for hanging skins and storing sacks of flour. Farther upstream, Baptist converts had asked to burn the personal protector dolls of others in the yurt who had not yet converted.

Yet even among such converts, women still favor Khanty ethnic dress, including the use of head scarves. In the face of this advancing newer religion, there appears to be no specific revitalization of Khanty religion and spirituality, although one man is renowned for experimenting with fly agarics (mushrooms) in order to (re)discover the art of shamanizing. This was once widespread on the river in the form of playing both drums and harps, but now appears to have disappeared, although many elements of the wider worldview that supported shamanism remain.

Judging from the existing literature, and from preliminary fieldwork visits to other rivers, the situation on the Yukan has much in common with other “traditionally” Khanty rivers like the Trom’egan and Agan. On the broadest scale, there are fundamental challenges relating to land rights, integration of the traditional local economy with regional urban demands, the incompatibility of mineral extraction and hunting, fishing and reindeer-herding, problematic health and welfare provision, and the gradual attrition of language despite a deep and enduring sense of Khanty spirituality. On more local and personal scales, individuals are now being exposed to an increasingly diverse array of choices, commodities and influences as they come to interact more and more directly with a globalized world culture and a regional urban and Russian culture.

### **Pathways to reform: the challenges of continuity *versus* revitalization**

During and after the final collapse of the USSR, the evaporation of overarching Soviet or socialist identities led in many areas to more localized identity politics. The focus in different areas across the former Soviet North was often upon the resurrection or revitalization (and even the “invention”) of older forms of identity and belief. In this context, many indigenous groups witnessed a deliberate revival of older traditions or a conscious manipulation of identities, all aimed at securing group cohesion and a sense of belonging during a time of rapid socio-cultural change.

Evidence from these Khanty areas – the Yukan, Vas Yukan, and, to a limited extent, the Alexandrovskoe area – suggests that there are few local signs of revitalization, that is, a conscious desire to *return* to the tradi-

tions of an idealized past. Rather, in an atmosphere of constant buffeting by many multi-faceted and powerful assimilative pressures, there exists a deeper concern that important elements of a broad sense of cultural persistence must be secured, along with the conditions enabling such persistence. And this must be done in ways that allow both overall cultural survival and local community choice. These individual and community concerns are about securing a wider set of mechanisms and general understandings, ones that will ensure that the quieter and more private moments of belief and tradition have the necessary spaces in which to endure. Many people we interviewed articulated a desire that their children should be able to live on the land as they do (and their ancestors did), and maintain hunting and other traditional pursuits.

Clearly, a more public broadcast of Khanty identity is taking place *via* the larger orchestrated festivals and new museums, and this can be an important political instrument. The danger is that key players and decision-makers may come to assume that these external projections of identity *are* an equivalent substitute for a deeper, enduring, and in many ways a deliberately invisible “traditional” culture. At the same time, they seem content to believe that the culture out on the land is degraded, destitute, and that perhaps it disappeared long ago. The real challenge – and it is a profound one – is to link up these two foci of identity (the external and internal). The goal would be not so much to make the projective culture come to *replace* or *determine* the form and content of lived tradition. Rather, the hope is to *reinforce* the conditions that ensure that land use, land rights and native language education become practical paths forward into the future, ones that ensure that a deeper and more personal cultural and linguistic persistence has the necessary spaces, opportunities and inherent flexibility to endure.

And so we end with an open question. Thinking back to the different fates of the wooden idols recounted at the start of this chapter – some rotting into the earth of the dark forest, the other spot-lit and saved in the new museum cabinet – *what exactly is it that needs to be preserved?*

## Notes

- 1 Materials presented in this chapter were collected by Peter Jordan during several periods of fieldwork conducted between 1997 and 2004. Financial support was provided by the British Academy, the Leverhulme Trust, the Royal Anthropological Institute, and the Hossein Farmy Trust at the University of Sheffield. The material that is used by Andre Filtchenko in this publication was collected over the course of eight field projects with the support of OSI Budapest IPF 1999 Fellowship, and Rice University Presidential Fellowship 2000-2004, Yale

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- 2 The bear is represented by a head and two paws at the base; the diagonal slashes above mark the number of hunters involved. The carvings are said to communicate the outcome of the bear hunt to the deity of the upper world, who is also master of the bear.
- 3 Traditionally men and women sit in separate areas, although this depends on the gender of the spirit. If he is male, as here, then women cannot look at the images, walk past the line of the fire, or, in some places, even set foot on the river bank where the sacred site is located.
- 4 Old clothing is hung from trees to be of use in the next life. It is thought that people live their life in reverse after they die, even walking backwards through all the places they were when alive. Their old possessions also become new again. Animal skulls are also hung as a sign of respect to the spirit masters. If the hunter allows bones to be chewed by dogs it is thought that the deities may become angry and take some form of revenge, either by reduced hunting luck or in the form of some other misfortune.

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