CHAPTER 8

LANDSCAPE PERCEPTION AND SACRED PLACES AMONGST THE VASIUGAN KHANTS

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will examine 'traditional' Khant perceptions of landscape from two perspectives, focusing in particular on the veneration of sacred sites. First, I will draw on the published ethnographic literature to provide a general analysis of Vasiugan Khant cultural landscapes; second, I will present the results of my own recent fieldwork (1997–2005) among the few elderly Khants who remain active hunters and fishermen out on the land.[1] The main aim of this study is to explore how Khant cultural perceptions and cosmological beliefs are manifest physically, that is, how Khant spirituality, economic practices, settlement patterns and social organisation are manifest in the creation of cultural landscapes, and in particular, how they are exemplified by activities at sacred sites.

The Vasiugan Khants (formerly known as Ostiaks; Steinitz 1966) reside in Western Siberia, along the Vasiugan tributary of the main Ob' River. The low-lying local landscape consists of a multitude of rivers and lakes, which drain the world's largest bog lands—*Vasiuganskie Bolota* (Vasiugan swamp). Traditionally the Vasiugan Khants were subsistence hunters and fishermen who lived in widely-spaced settlements—*iurts* (toponym of Turkic etymology), or *pukhol* (native Khant term). The rich spiritual life of these communities was described by late 19th and early 20th century ethnographers (Karjalainen 1921, 1922; Sirelius 2001). However, after a period of tumultuous change—beginning in the 1930s with forced resettlement of *kulaks* and Volga Germans into what

had formerly been traditional Khant territories, followed by collectivisation, mandatory education and the rapid development of local oil and gas reserves—there are today only about 20 Vasiugan Khant speakers left on the river (Jordan and Filtchenko 2005).

Ecology, Settlement and Kinship

In contrast to other Khant groups, for example, those living along the Middle Ob' tributaries (Iugan, Agan, Tromagan and Vakh), the Vasiugan Khants had no local tradition of reindeer husbandry. The local ecology lacks extensive reindeer pasture and consists of denser mixed forests and vast expanses of wetland (Figure 8.1). Vasiugan Khant patterns of seasonal migration were therefore guided primarily by the scheduling of hunting and fishing, rather than the need to move between reindeer pastures. As a result, migrations were smaller in scale, consisting of repeated trips from permanent riverside villages out to family hunting territories, which were not particularly extensive.

The prevailing majority of the traditional Vasiugan Khant permanent settlements are located along Vasiugan and its main tributary the Niurol'ka (Figure 8.1) or on the region's major lake, Tukh-Emter. The extended family settlement pattern is also reflected in the main structures of traditional social organisation (Martynova 1995). This is based on patrilocal, patrilineal exogamous lineages, each resident in a particular riverside settlement (Kulemzin and Lukina 1976). The native reference term used for this social grouping is *aj pukhol jakh*, meaning 'one village people'. A typical Khant settlement of 2–3 wooden cabins, located at the river or lake edge, would comprise a small community of 10–15 people. These local lineages formed exogamous clans *sir* (Kharuzin 1905; Sokolova 1983) and were further grouped into larger unities described in hydronymic/toponymic terms, e.g., *tukh-emter jakh* 'lake people', *as jakh* 'Ob River people', *wakha jakh* 'Vakh river people', and *wat' jokhen jakh* 'Vasiugan People'. Thus, at one end of the continuum, there was the notion of the nuclear family—a married couple with children (Kulemzin 1993), while at the other, there was awareness of some equivalent to localised 'ethnic' groupings, which distinguished themselves from the neighbouring and in-coming groups on grounds of linguistic and cultural affinity. Finally, at the general level, all Khant groups describe themselves in relation to unrelated outsiders as *qantekh jakh* 'Khant people'. According to folklore, the ancestors of Vasiugan Khants, warrior-heroes, progenitors of the modern clans (*areng jakh* 'ancient people') have long settled in these territories, fending off frequent attacks by the outsiders (Lukina 1976). Vasiugan oral folklore includes interpretations of local

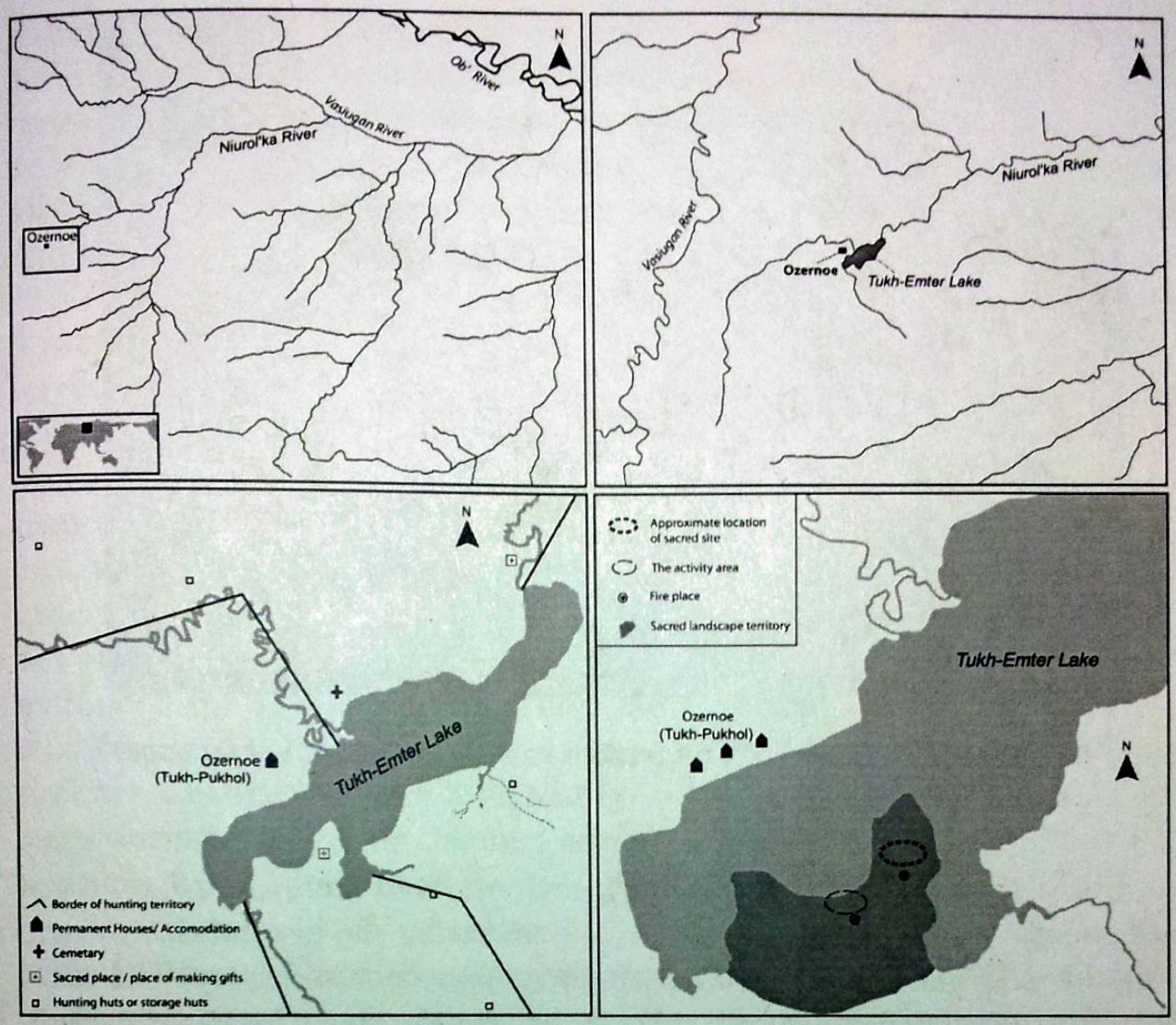

Figure 8.1 Location map of the upper reaches of the Vasiugan River, Tomsk Region, Western Siberia, showing details of local settlement, land use and sacred landscape geography. (Map drawn by Alison Sandison based on field work data collected by Andrei Filtchenko.)

archaeological sites, including the remains of fortified settlements, pit houses, scatters of metal arrow heads, swords, pieces of body armour, and burial mounds which shape Vasiugan Khants' sense of a historically-constituted identity grounded in the material and folkloristic features of the local landscape.

The Seasonal Economy

The Vasiugan Khants' traditional procurement activities focused on hunting for meat (mainly elk [*Alces alces*]) and hunting for furs (sable, squirrel, Siberian weasel, hare) which were used to trade and pay fur tax. Most hunting and transport equipment was made locally out in the bush, and included the manufacture of wooden traps, self-triggering bows, sledges and skis, fencing and baskets for fish weirs (Figure 8.2). Dogs (*qantekh amp*) were of special value to the hunter who usually kept two.

Figure 8.2 Upper Vasiugan fish weir located near the settlement of Ozernoe. (Photograph by Andrei Filtchenko.)

In Ozernoe village (*tukh-pukhol*), each of the hunters had his own rather compact territory (approximately marked by the boundaries shown in Figure 8.1) so that extended hunting trips were not necessary. The winter season was broken up into a series of four shorter trips out to small hunting cabins (*uri-qat*) and tending to the winter fish traps on the smaller streams which continued to provide fair yields over the cold season. In some cases, two hunters shared a single territory, cabins and equal portions of all meat and fur. Large game kills, for example elk, usually involved transporting the carcass back to the village and sharing the meat out.

In spring, as the rivers opened, the residents of remote clan villages such as Ozernoe (*tukh-pukhol*) travelled downstream to the big villages of Aipolovo or Timelga to visit relatives, share the spoils of the winter hunting and fishing, and to trade. For this longer-distance family travel, larger boats made from cedar planks were used (*seran-rit*— 'Zyrian boat'), while dugout aspen canoes (*ajrit*) were employed for more localised journeys. Later in the summer, the groups would descend to the lower river to fish sandy shallow backwaters and smaller lakes from known fishing spots (see Figure 8.1).

In late summer, the group would slowly return upstream, the men continuing fishing, while the women processed the catch and rendered fish oil. Each species of fish was caught with a special technique. The most widespread methods involved the use of fixed nets in the shallows and sweep nets in large open waters and lakes. On smaller rivers and

tributaries, such as Chvorovaia or Tukh-Sighat, fixed weirs (*war*) were set (Figure 8.2), the baskets oriented according to the fish migration patterns. When water levels dropped to a minimum, fishing shifted to the still-water techniques in the lakes and backwaters. The fish were typically procured in large quantities with only a portion processed for food and storage, while the rest was kept alive in fenced deeper bays.

The later summer also marked a period of intensive gathering of a range of berries, wild herbs and Siberian pine nuts, which were preserved with a portion traded off. Birch bark (*sukhmat*) was also collected for making various containers (*qin*). Mid autumn was also the time of Vasiugan trade fair, typically taking place in Aipolovo village (see Figure 8.1). Men from the surrounding area, sometimes with their families, would bring furs, fish and gathered resources, which they traded for imported products. The fair was also an event marked by general festivities and interactions. Occasional trade networks also linked the Khants with adjacent Tatars, with flax and sheepskins for coats exchanged for wild furs and fish (Lukina 2005). The trade fair marked the end of the summer season, and was followed by a period spent in the family villages during which time the men would make and repair skis, sleds and hunting gear while women prepared fur winter clothing and foot wear.

The routines of seasonal mobility were reflected in the traditional calendar terms. These terms do not equate directly to European notions of months or seasons, and may vary in length, from one period to the next, and from one year to the next depending on climatic, ecological or other practical factors. These concepts map a sequence of behaviours, each linked to different parts of the landscape. For example, the period of making and setting fish weirs (*war-iki*) was approximately June of each year but could vary relative to river-ice breaking, water levels and fish migrations. Nevertheless, each period had a common lexical component of *iki*, the loose equivalent of 'moon'. Others include: *korek-iki* 'time of eagles' (approximately March); *urn-iki* 'time of crows' (approximately April); *lontwasek-iki* 'time of geese and ducks' (approximately May); *luwt-iki* 'time of oars' (approximately September), *walek-iki* 'time of bare trees' (approximately October); *pojaltew-iki* 'time of the snow crust' (approximately December) and so on (Filtchenko 1998–2005; also see Gulya 1966; Lukina 2005; Sirelius 2001; Tereskin 1961).

Landscape and Cosmology

Commonly for Siberia, the Khant universe was structured into three vertical 'worlds'. This cosmological model was also projected horizontally over the rivers and wetlands where downstream (and North) was

equated to the lower world, the middle world was represented by the immediate surroundings and upstream (and South) represented the divine upper world. East and West had much less significance, mainly relating to the directions of the sun's motion, and places 'where strangers come from' (Karjalainen 1927; Kulemzin 1984; Kulemzin and Lukina 1977).

The life of all Khants and animals was created and predestined by Torum (*torem*), a very vaguely-envisioned chief deity, but universally recognised as the highest spiritual being (Lukina 1995). Linguistic evidence of the status of Torum is, for instance, in the fact that most of the major natural phenomena have the same common reference term—*Torum* 'thunder, weather, heaven, wind storm'. Another ultimately-powerful deity is the female progenitor-spirit, *pukhos angki*, the giver of life and soul (*il*), the judge of its length and quality (Karjalainen 1927). Finally, there is an awareness of the powerful masters of elements: the river deity, the oldman of Ob' *as' iki*, the master of fish and water spirits; and the forest deity, the forest oldman *wont iki*, the master of animals and birds and of the forest spirits.

Among the Vasiugan Khants, the exact whereabouts of the highest deities is generally unknown, with a vague understanding that Torum is present everywhere; the mother-spirit is also omnipresent, but physically somewhere in the east or north; the oldman of Ob' 'lives' somewhere in the lower Ob' flows; while the forest oldman is generally in the forest. Offerings and worshipping of them is in a way a part of every and any ritual ceremony with added emphasis in cases of addressing the specific domains: health, hunting, wellbeing, children—*torem* and *pukhos angki*, fishing and security on water—*as' iki* (*jengk iki*), rich spoils and safety in the forest—*wont-iki*. These perceptions and beliefs are reproduced in the daily activities of Khants.

Perceptions of the Animal World

While fishing provided the bulk of the diet, activities associated with hunting had a much more important role in traditional Khant spirituality and belief. The practical and religious aspects of hunting fused into a general cultural tradition, which combined ethics of self-sufficiency, cosmological concepts and relations with the world of spirit-masters and other deities who were associated with sacred shrines located in various parts of the landscape. As Kulemzin (1984) notes, much of the ritualised behaviour associated with hunting served two overarching aims: to secure current and future success in hunting and to mitigate the danger stemming from killed animals. Hunters often retained parts of animals (skulls of sable, hare, otter, fox, elk and bear), the skins or body

parts of unusually formed animals (white squirrels, six-fingered sable, one-horned wild reindeer) which were thought to be chief exemplars of a particular species (*mit*). One primary motivation for the special treatment was the general belief in the rebirth of killed animals, which ensured future stocks of game for successful hunting, safe-guarding the welfare and prosperity of the community dependant on the animals for food and fur clothing.

This rich complex of traditions and beliefs was highly developed in relation to the elk, but especially to the bear, with a rich special vocabulary existing to describe the body parts, and to appropriately treat them. Across Siberia, the bear is regarded as the most sacred animal of the forest. For the Khants, the bear is an embodiment (or a son) of the powerful patron spirit 'forest master'; at other times, the bear is regarded as a dead relative. In both concepts, the bear is regarded as a special guest entering the realm of humans, either as a heavenly messenger, spiritual creature who has come to earth, or as a relative who has returned in a new guise. The elaborate events and festivities surrounding the killing and entertaining of this special emissary were termed the 'bear festival' and formed a tradition of central cultural significance, attended by members of local and distant settlements. These events expressed fundamental ways in which the Khants understood their place in the world and also brought together social groups that were dispersed over the vast landscape for extended periods of the year.

In Khant language, direct reference to bear is a strong taboo, instead it is typically referred to as 'master' (*em wosh-iki*), 'animal' (*wajakh*), 'younger brother' (*qaqi-wajakh)*) or 'forest man' (*wont-iki/qu*) but almost never as 'bear' proper (*ikh* 'bear'). Likewise, the names of the bear's body parts were taboo and so metaphorical (euphemistic) substitute terms were used. Instead of *sojqa kokh* 'kidney (human or animal)', the term *nakhri kera* 'bear kidney' was used; the term *katel* 'bear's paw' replaced the regular *kot* 'hand, animal front paw'; *kil* 'bear's stomach' (cf. *qon* '(human/animal) belly, abdomen'); *lakhl'ip* 'bear's teeth' (cf. *pongk* '(human/animal) tooth'; *kalek* 'bear's ribs' (cf. *angti (lokh)* '(human/animal) rib bone'), etc.

Analysis of language use also reveals that events surrounding the killing of the bear are recounted periphrastically, for example, *wakhelteta* 'to lower/send down a bear' replaced the term *welta* 'to kill (*generic*)'. In addition, in verbal recounts, attempts are made to shift responsibility for the animal's death by the use of a special 'demoted agent' syntactic constructions, such that the hunter as a volitional agent (*bear killer*) is coded in a way that makes him a passive observer or a mere space landmark of the event, i.e., instead of saying '*I killed a bear*' the hunter would say '*near me/in my presence a bear got himself killed*' (Filtchenko 2006).

The most frequent use of these constructions is in hunting stories, tales of bear hunts in particular.

Bear dens were usually found in winter by dogs during routine hunting trips. A small party of hunters would then be assembled who would return to the den and slay the bear. The body was dragged out and skinned on the spot so that the head and paws remained attached to the skin. The meat and skin were brought back as separate loads, and, as the group got close to the settlement, the skin and head were mounted on poles so that the 'living' animal guest could be 'walked' into the house that would hold the festival (Kulemzin 1984, 86). This 'visit' was marked by an extended event made of days of singing and dancing during which the bear was venerated, and the ancestors remembered and commemorated. The slain bear, as sacred guest from the world of the forest, took an honoured position at the centre of events, usually being placed at the rear-centre of the house of the hunter who discovered the bear den. In addition to the distinctive language, the Vasiugan Khants traditionally used nicknames and special birch-bark masks during the festivities in order to disguise from the bear the identities of the hunters, or men acting as the hunters (Figure 8.3).

The meat was cooked in a single cauldron while the bones were carefully disarticulated rather than chopped up, carefully gathered up and disposed of in a special manner, either placed in special log houses similar in form to human graves, or else taken to the forest (Kulemzin 1984, 84, 1995, 68–69; Kulemzin and Lukina 1977, 90–91; Lukina 1990). The skull was typically retained and stored either in the attic of the house, or on the roof, in the belief that the bear could protect the

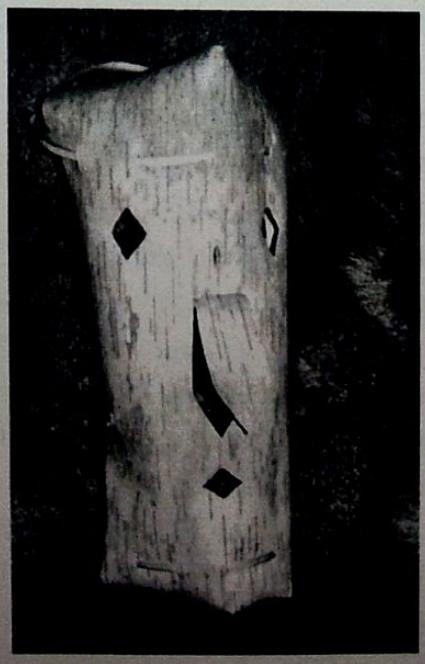

Figure 8.3 Bear festival mask (birch bark). (Photograph by Andrei Filtchenko.)

house and its occupants from illness-causing spirits welling up from the lower world. The skull itself was occasionally wired up with tree roots for fear that the bear would learn who had killed it and then savage this hunter (Kulemzin 1984, 84–85). However, after three years, the skull would be taken back into the forest and hidden away from dogs.

These very careful attempts to maintain the integrity and dignity of the bear's remains were aimed at ensuring the subsequent rebirth of the animal, and maintaining, at the same time, the animal's favourable disposition towards the human collective. If its bones were damaged or chewed by dogs, the bear would take revenge and attack the hunter the next time it encountered him in the forest. In this way, responsibility for the bones of the animal guest laid with the hunter until it was reborn again. Normally a little meat was left near the joints of the bones to help this process of regeneration. Veneration of the bear also stemmed from the fact that this animal was an emissary of the high god, Torum, and so treatment of the bear was regarded as reflecting the community's general attitudes towards this deity. Linked to this notion was the idea that the bear had a wider influence over all the animals of the forest, and could herd game towards a hunter who had shown an appropriate degree of respect towards it (Kulemzin 1984; Kulemzin and Lukina 1977; Tschernetsov 1974).

To varying degrees, attitudes similar to the bear cult can be traced through Khant perceptions of other large animals. Amongst the Khants living on the Vasiugan, these were particularly well-developed in relation to the elk (*Alces alces*) whose treatment and veneration approaches that of the bear. These similarities included individual aspects of behaviour towards the animal's body, as well as the underlying motivations and beliefs related to this behaviour, namely to ensure the continued rebirth of the animal, thereby the welfare of the human community who acquire much of their meat from this animal (Kulemzin 1984, 86–87; Kulemzin and Lukina 1977). Respectful treatment of the animal demanded that bones were left intact, sinews left uncut with iron knives,[2] dogs were kept away from either meat or bones and the hair of the animal's face was never to be singed. Special value was accorded to the elk's nose and lips, which were eaten by the hunter to guarantee success in further hunting. The elk's eyes could be boiled, but never salted while the brain was to be eaten raw (Kulemzin 1984, 86; Kulemzin and Lukina 1992, 91).

In many areas of the Vasiugan, specialised treatment of the elk's head was attested, as the focus of communal feasting *wajakh okh por* 'the animal's head sacrifice' (Lukina 2005; Sirelius 2001). These events took place at sacred places, where the elk's head would be boiled in a large cauldron and then consumed ceremonially by the assembled family, accompanied with prayers and fortune-telling led by a shaman (*jolta*

qu). One such location was the sacred Old Lady of the Lake Isle (*paj-imi*) near Ozernoe village (see details in Figure 8.1).

The image of the elk was also a general symbol of prosperity for the Eastern Khants in general. Stylised images were placed on various household and practical items, decorated clothing and birch-bark containers as well as some elements of the shamanic paraphernalia (Ivanov 1954).

General: Sacred Sites

Among the Vasiugan Khants, hunters still believe that animals gave themselves to the hunter and often address the bear and elk during hunting, asking them to give up at the moment of killing. The sighting of the animal meant that it was revealing itself to the hunter, and the appropriate response was to kill it. The process of hunting was also influenced by a host of local spirits and deities, including the masters of the elements, such as the forest spirit (*wont-iki*) and the water spirit (*jengk jungk*), who were said to despatch game and fish to the community. In response, a community was expected to address gifts and prayers to these deities during visits to sacred sites and adhere to the restrictions and behaviour (for example, Vasiugan Khants avoid scaling fish with a metal knife, or cooking certain fish species together out of respect for the water spirit).

In landscape terms, these beliefs were linked to notions that particular areas, such as those rich in fish and game, had local supervisor spirit-masters. Passing through the area or any economic activities conducted there had first to be preceded by acknowledging local spirits by giving offerings. Frequently, the exact names and descriptions of the spirits were unknown or vague, so the sacrifice would be generally addressed to 'local spirits' (*jungket*) (Karjalainen 1927; Kulemzin 1984; Sirelius 2001). Generally unfriendly spirits of local forests could also be placated through the gift offerings to eventually assist in fishing/hunting, once sufficiently appeased (Kulemzin 1984; Kulemzin and Lukina 1976). Finally, individual family spirits were also given offerings to secure luck and rich spoils.

As a result of this multiple involvement in the conduct of any subsistence activity, it was not uncommon during a single ritual for a Vasiugan hunter to address and offer gifts to all the 'parties' involved, starting from the domestic spirit to the local spirits of the area, and further on to the master-spirit, and finally, the animal itself (particularly in case of bear and elk).

More identifiable both in their physical character and spatial location were the local spirits of Vasiugan, mostly of anthropomorphic

nature. It should be noted though that, as observed fairly early on (Karjalainen 1927; Sirelius 2001), Vasiugan local spirits, such as that of Old Lady of the Lake Isle (*paj-imi*), lost their physical shape as it were. That is, the tradition of making wooden or other figures to symbolize the spirit was abandoned sometime in the late 19th–early 20th century (Kulemzin 1984). However, it is still strong common knowledge that a particular spirit had a shape of a woman or a man (Sarkany 1989), and elderly Khants still remember the image of the old wooden figures. The sacred sites, 'homes' of these spirits continue to be distinct to local families and are regularly attended for offerings and paying respects. They are also a strong part of the oral folk tradition where the majority of the local spirits may have an 'earthly' embodiment—an animal, bird, fish, and each clan/family worshipping a particular deity would also have strong association with the corresponding animal. For Eastern Khants, it is also typical to have anthroponymic group-names, which were a subject of occasional descriptive research (Lukina 1976; Vertes 1967). Such names typically corresponded to the names of the hero-warriors or clan progenitors, exemplified in Vasiugan Khants by *kotch-et* 'badger' (official name Isubakov), *kotcherki* 'chipmunk' (Milimov), *qirakh* 'sack' (Karaulov), *polikh* 'stomach' (Pechikov), etc (Filtchenko 1998–2005).

The sacred sites (*jim takhi*) were typically marked by a tree (*jireng jukh*) on an elevated river bank (*jireng toj*), where objects were left as material offerings (*por*) or sacrifice (*jir*) to local deities: coins, sheets or strips of cloth, tools (fish-kebab skewers for luck in fishing, wooden hammers for fishing success, arrows and bullets for hunting luck) and shapes of animals and fish (Kulemzin and Lukina 1976; Lukina 2005; Sirelius 2001). This may be viewed as a symbolic fishing/hunting, an explicit request for rich yield in exchange for an equivalent offering.

Images of elk, cut in wood or carved from stone or sheet metal, were a central feature of some of the sacred sites venerated in the upper Vasiugan. For example, one shrine was located on a small river Tukh-Sighat (*tukh-sikhat*) between the Lake Tukh-Emter and the River Niurol'ka (see details in Figure 8.1). Here, the elk images were left as gifts to ensure safe and successful hunting (Sirelius 2001). The use of elk images is significant because the success of hunting for other animals was the domain of the chief deity of fur-bearers—the forest spirit/old man (*wont-iki*), whereas elk and bear were the only animals accredited with a sense of volition to the extent that each animal 'chooses' to give itself up to the hunter. On the other hand, fish images were seen as male and female masters of the species (Sirelius 2001) who were manipulated so as to command the others, i.e., seasonally re-oriented downstream/upstream to drive fish into weirs, etc. (Filtchenko 1998–2005).

Shamans and Sacred Sites on the Vasiugan

It should be noted that the above rituals, ceremonies, verbal addresses, sacrifices and requests were typically performed by the hunters themselves without involvement of the shaman (*jolta qu*). Shamans were employed on occasions to make offerings to the spirits but mainly in the roles requiring specialised knowledge and abilities (Dmitriev-Sadovnikov 1911; Karjalainen 1922; Kulemzin and Lukina 1976; Zuev 1947). Common for Siberia, the role of shamans was to 'walk the worlds', communicate to spirits, act on people's souls in case of illness, represent people in the spiritual realm and foresee the future. Thus, at the beginning of the hunting period on upper Vasiugan, the shaman from the Lake-people clan (*tukh-pukhol jakh*) would be asked to foresee possible outcomes and help build the strategies for successful hunting, make a prognosis for an individual hunter's fate, advise on large-scale fish migrations and times and places for fishing, etc. A shaman would enter the state of trance by playing the shaman drum, occasionally consuming fly agarics,[3] dancing and singing. In trance, the shaman's spirit (or helper-spirits inhabiting shaman's paraphernalia), would travel to a place of a particular spirit (*jungk sur*) and communicate the people's requests. In case of illness treatment, the shaman's spirit was typically expected to travel to the lower world to find and return the stolen spirit of the ill person that would have been snatched and eaten by either a powerful deity the Oldman of Disease (*kin' iki*) or by one of the multitude of ill-spirited demons associated with dead relatives. Alternatively, the shaman would heal a person by expelling the spirit of illness from the body and fighting it in the spiritual realm, often in alliance with either the family spirit or the local patron spirit. On some occasions, shamans could appeal to the high god Torum with requests to affect some specific lower spirits as all deities and spirits were perceived subordinate to Torum (Kulemzin 1984).

Shaman's skills were understood to combine both the intimate experience-based knowledge of the pantheon of central, areal, local and family deities, types and times of addresses and offerings, sacred places as well as general close familiarity with the landscape, flora and behaviour of and towards animals. The core of this knowledge was viewed as transferable from person-to-person in a single ceremonial event. However, a need for some prerequisite abilities and rich personal experience was also recognised. In the Tukh-Emter Lake area, a boy was expected to inherit the shaman's knowledge and abilities from his grandfather by looking into the dying shaman's overcoat sleeve. This did not happen as the boy was too young and did not feel he had either predisposition or courage to follow through. Though later in his life, this man came to be a

prominent hunter and knowledgeable practitioner of traditional religion still residing in the area (even suspected to act as a shaman), he realised that he missed the opportunity to become a shaman, the last in the area of the upper Vasiugan.

Case Study: Routine and Ritual Land Use around Lake Tukh-Emter on the Upper Vasiugan

This case study explores at the local scale how upper Vasiugan Khants construct and inhabit cultural landscapes, marking beliefs with material deposits.

A considerable area of upper Vasiugan, particularly the territory around Lake Tukh-Emter (see details in Figure 8.1), is known to be the domain of the 'Old lady of the Lake Isle' (*paj-imi*). The focal area of this domain has been considered the peninsula which is cut off from the main land in spring by seasonal flooding forming an island. Located on the largest lake in this area, the Island of the Old Lady (*paj-imi*), is known to most Vasiugan-River Khants as an important sacred site for making offerings, asking for luck in hunting/fishing and for general welfare. The most elevated part, the northeastern end of the island (Figure 8.1), is where there was a regularly-maintained structure—the *labaz* 'shed', a log cabin elevated on stilts, containing anthropomorphic figures of the deities (see also Sirelius 2001). As a result of this 'powerful' presence, the Khants residing along the lake (*tukh-pukhol*) for at least 5–6 centuries (Kulemzin 1984; Kulemzin and Lukina 1976) 'co-ordinate' their routine subsistence activities conducted in the area—and especially around the lake—with this local master spirit, the Old Lady of the Lake Isle (*paj-imi*). Degrees of perceived success and failure in the outcome of these activities are reflected through the prism of the relationship linking the community or individuals and this spirit, as well as, to some extent, other local and more general deities. Evidence of a deteriorating relationship demands an immediate response through additional sacrifices and prayers.

The area of the lake is located some 35 km east of Vasiugan, in the dense boggy terrain, demanding in summers the better part of the day of tedious walking, for which the traveller is rewarded by the site of the large serene lake and forests around it, rich in fish and game. This makes it still natural nowadays to appreciate the distinctness of the place (see, for example, the panorama in Figure 8.4). The village Ozernoe (*tukh-pukhol*) faces the lake and directly the point of an island (peninsula) crowned with massive conifer grove—a distinct landmark immediately encountered. During the first visit to the area, newcomers are given an

Figure 8.4 A member of the Milimov clan (with Tukh-Emter Lake in the background). (Photograph by Andrei Filtchenko.)

outline of proper conduct in relation to the site, for example, the need to offer coins to the water spirit of the lake; the ban on hunting or gathering anything, or talking loudly on site; advice against walking around in a complete circle (particularly against the sun movement); restricted access of strangers, etc. If possible and deemed appropriate, offerings of fabric or shawls are to be left for the spirit under the guidance of the local site attendant; or offering a self-made hammer to the water and forest spirits at the cedar grove nearby, at the mouth of the Tukh-Sighat (*tukh-sikhat*) River.

Ozernoe village (*tukh-pukhol*) is known along Vasiugan as the clan lands of Milimovs and Sinarbins, comprising the *tukh-pukhol jakh* 'lake-people', whose patron deity is the Old Lady of the Lake Isle (*paj-imi*) and whose sacred site (*jor takhi*) is the island itself (see Figure 8.1). This local spirit is recognised by other clans as a powerful local patron for the whole of the Vasiugan area, for hundreds of kilometres all the way to the confluence area, and is seen connected to other deities and spirits. Adjacent clans, not necessarily closely related (though quite often it is to some extent the case), would also worship the lake spirit and would be typically referred to as the people of the same local patron spirit (*ej jungk jakh*). This manifests significance as a cultural and landscape element for the whole large ethnic sub-group of Vasiugan-River Khants (see Figure 8.1). For example, many locals, in order to have a child, make offerings

apart from *paj-imi* also to the powerful deity *pukhos angki* who gives life to newborns, as well as the family spirit *qat jungk*, and to the chief creator deity *torem* (Kulemzin 1984). The regular simultaneous paying of respects to both the local master spirit *paj-imi*, and the general powerful deity *pukhos angki* is a reflection of the conventionally-perceived kin relation of *paj-imi* and *pukhos angki*. Engagements with the spirit world are therefore rich and tangled, involving both ritual activity and offerings to a variety of divine agencies at various sacred sites and at home, but are also played out through the conduct of different kinds of practical activities over the landscape.

Normally, the worship consists of verbal addresses with acknowledgements and requests for health, prosperity, luck in hunting and fishing and ceremonial sacrifices, and offerings of bands of cloth or shawls tied to particular trees. The events also include preparation of a a meal at the site, with pieces of food, and the steam rising up from the cooking, also offered to the spirit. The sacred places were regularly attended, serving as a venue for clan gatherings with both religious and social function (hardly differentiated). Thus, for example, it was a long-standing tradition for the lake people (*tukh-pukhol jakh*) and their relatives to attend the island on special occasions of 'elk-head feast', celebrating the successful season of hunting and fishing by cooking and consuming the elk's head, saved for this occasion (see also Kulemzin and Lukina 1976, 167).

On most sacred sites, often for contemporary Vasiugan, there are no anthropomorphic figures *per se*, and as a rule, no more continually-maintained structures. Though undoubtedly previously existing, and often still identifiable, the constructions, as well as the wooden figures, went out of active use at some point, and currently, the location itself, normally a tree or a group of trees, or a homorganic grove is treated as the sacred site. This can be justly viewed as a sign of gradual departure from a more archaic fetish-type worship of anthropomorphic shapes inhabited/animated by spirits to a more abstract construal of a particular, especially higher-hierarchy spirit (Karjalainen 1927; Kulemzin 1984). Similar spirits and their sites are commonly known to exist in mid-Vasiugan at the confluence of Vasiugan and its main southern tributary Niurol'ka near the village of Mildgino.

Other types of sacred sites with increasingly more abstract connotations are the places with sacred significance, such as outstanding or abnormal ravines, massive groves or individual trees. The location of some such sites was common knowledge in the area, others—at a more local scale. The latter are, for example, the village/clan cemeteries, the location of which is normally kept secret from strangers and which is usually set at the vicinity of the village not far from the shore, but preferably separated by a stream (see Figure 8.1). At a certain distance from the

Tukh-Emter Lake along the Tukh-Sighat River (*tukh-sikhat*), there is a massive Siberian pine grove dominating the landscape which is known as a sacred site (*jor takhi*) to most of the upper Vasiugan Khant families. Although nuts can be gathered in the sacred grove, it is inadvisable to stay there overnight, or to behave casually and disrespectfully to trees or objects in the area. It is also obligatory to make an offering in the form of a wooden hammer placed under a tree. This can be a life-size or a miniature version of the hammers that are widely used for driving in the vertical posts of the fishing weirs, and also for stunning larger fish after they are pulled into the canoe. Each person attending the event, including all adults and children, should leave such a hammer, and this gesture expresses a desire for rich and safe fishing in the future, as well as general respect for the master-spirits of the local river, the lake and the grove itself. Though considered to be a powerful local spirit, the exact shape or description of it is generally unclear, sometimes associated with either the river spirit *jengk iki* and unnamed water-demons or forest-master spirit *wont iki*.

On a smaller scale, only few members of local families on Tukh-Emter Lake also consider sacred a particular old tree (actually two intertwined trees of different species) located on the bank of a small river approximately half-way between Vasiugan and Tukh-Emter Lake. This location is an old river-crossing over fallen tree trunks and a half-way place of rest during a tiresome trip to the lake, knee-deep in a bog overrun by clouds of mosquitoes and on constant guard for vipers, along with omnipresent caution for bears.

Conclusion: Reproducing the Cultural Perceptions of the Vasiugan Landscape

This local case study illustrates the ways in which local upper Vasiugan community construct, inhabit and structure their local cultural landscape with regard to general ecology, belief, kinship, delimited into a variety of domains: sacred/spiritual vs. routine economic; restricted vs. unrestricted. The territory of upper Vasiugan known as Tukh-Emter Lake is known to all on the river as populated by particular clans and as their economic territory. The general terrain and landmarks are usually known to local Khants from personal experience and indirectly to most Vasiugan Khants. This area is also known to most Eastern Khants as an important sacred/spiritual place—the domain of the powerful local spirit Old Lady of the Lake Isle (a kin to powerful deity *pukhos angki*) which is conceptualised as a distinct landscape entity, requiring special attitude, restrictions and veneration. Yet again, to local lake-people, the site is known in much deeper personal detail, integrated into clan/family traditions, oral folk history and everyday activities. Apart from this larger sacred landmark, the local community also

shares the knowledge and behaviours focused on other, smaller-scale sacred places.

How do Khants bring symbolic meanings to the vast tracts of taiga they inhabit, creating and structuring an enduring cultural landscape? The process of associating meaning with the landscape—forests, lakes and rivers—appears to be essentially grounded in the conduct of practical and ritual activities, including seasonal movements around the landscape, which were timed according to the different seasons and natural ecological patterns, such as fish and waterfowl migrations. At the same time, these routinised activities were an important manifestation of the overall traditional cosmology: the differentiation of the landscape into a series of multifaceted interlocking domains, zones, places, sites, each inhabited by a plethora of beings, smaller animals, elk and bear (able to decide on their own fates), human individuals and groups, spirits and deities. Some of the latter are viewed as residing in specific locations, others omnipresent, but all demanding acknowledgement of their presence, power and influence through gifts and offerings, prayers and addresses. The daily routine activities for the people inhabiting this landscape consisted of an indivisible mixture of practical economic and ritual events resulting in the daily creation and reproduction of the cosmology *on* and *in* the materiality of the land. Hunting of bears and elks combined with special treatment of animal remains and worship, and hunter identity concealment, is rooted in beliefs of regeneration and spirituality of animals. The shared knowledge of the landscape and its spiritual salience was part of a broader set of communal knowledge which linked families and individuals to historical hunting-fishing territories, whose *de facto* 'ownership' was generally respected. Thus, for Vasiugan Khants, local cosmology was not merely a cognitive overlay on the routine practical landscape, but rather was routinely reproduced through practical and spiritual making and marking of space and cosmological concepts. Cultural mapping and perception of the landscape by the Vasiugan Khants also had a strong 'granularity' characteristic of all the domains: proper geographical as well as spiritual. Most individuals, through localised and relatively circumscribed patterns of yearly movement, developed a general understanding of the river's overall topography, but also acquired a much finer-scaled knowledge of their own local territories, with associated patron spirits and sacred sites.

Notes

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2 Admittedly, elk sinew was widely used in the household for a variety of purposes as solid thread.

3 Incidentally, some Eastern Khant words for *shaman, shamanising* and *fly-agaric* are etymologically related, manifesting a strong cognitive affinity.

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