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## Three Crucial Crises in the Development of the Khanty and Mansi Unique Culture

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### Abstract

This paper deals with crucial crises in the development of the unique culture of the Khanty and Mansi. The peoples, who had resided the territory of Western Siberia long before Russian settlements were established, were the Tatar, Chulym Turkic, Khakass, Shor, Teleut, Selkup, Nganasan, Enets, Nenets, Kamasin, Ket, Yugh, Kott, Assan, Khanty and Mansi. They had gained valuable and enormous experience of the climate, nature, wild and animal life of their environment. They had a very complex religious system that was closely connected both with the nature and with their life activities. All this – the unique valuable knowledge gained for thousands of years - has been degrading and degenerating. It is being researched due to major reasons of degradation and extinction of unique cultures of the Siberian indigenous peoples. They include: a) collection of the “yasak” and attempts of forced Christianization of indigenous peoples during the Russian Empire times; b) compulsory boarding education in the Soviet times; c) intensive oil and gas exploration in the 20th century.

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*Keywords:* Khanty and Mansi; indigenous peoples of Siberia; degradation of cultures ;

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### 1. Introduction

The Khanty and Mansi are native Western Siberian people, living mainly in the Ob river basin of central Russia.

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Their present-day territory lies to the east of the Urals along the Ob river and its tributaries. From the administrative division, the Khanty population is concentrated in the Khanty-Mansiyskiy and Yamalo-Nenetskiy Autonomous districts of the Tyumen Region. The Eastern-most Khanty population resides in the Tomsk region. The Mansi live in the Khanty-Mansiyskiy Autonomous district of the Tyumen region and in some districts of the Sverdlovskiy region.

The native population at present is only about 1,86 % of the total population in this district (Saarnit, 2011). But only a smaller part of this native population follows their national ethnic traditions. In fact, the Khanty and Mansi can be differentiated into three social groups. The first group is the smallest one, the members of which lead their traditional lifestyle. Here, the culture is “glimmered” and preserved and needs to be supported. The second group is also not very big. It includes the marginal members, those, who say: “I am a Khanty and you must help me”. The third group is the biggest one. It includes those Khanty and Mansi, who were able to adapt to new life conditions. They are the so-called “urban Khanty”.

The people of Mansi and Khanty have their native languages (the Mansi language and the Khanty language) which comprise together the Ob-Ugric subgroup of the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic language family. As Khanty and Mansi have always lived in a vast area, the differences between their dialects are significant. Some of the Khanty and Mansi dialects are little described and highly endangered (Vorobeva, 2015).

The objective of our paper is to get a closer look at the unique, rich and diverse cultural traditions of the native tribes of Siberia and pinpoint the crucial crises in the development of their cultures.

This research is based on review of the following resources: Jordan P. & Filtchenko A. “Continuity and Changes in Eastern Khanty Languages and Worldview” (2005); Filtchenko A “Landscape Perception and Sacred Places amongst the Vasiugan Khants” (2011); Kulemsin V.M. & Lukina N.V. “Meet: Khanty” (1992); Forsyth J. “A History of the peoples of Siberia: Russia’s North Asian Colony 1581-1990” (1994); Wiget A. & Balalaeva O. “Khanty, People of the Taiga: Surviving the 20th century” (2011); Olekh L.G. “The History of Siberia” (2001), Neil M. Neyman “An Ethnohistorical Dictionary of the Russian and Soviet Empires” (1994).

## 2. Social customs and cultural traditions of Khanty and Mansi

The life style of the indigenous peoples of Siberia is very sensitive to environmental pollution and interventions in nature. The Khanty and Mansi are similar to each other in their way of living, dwellings, religious traditions, clothing and social customs. The traditional activities of Khanty and Mansi are river fishing, hunting and gathering. The Khanty, who live in the north, and some Mansi keep herds of reindeer not far from their homes in the forest, migrating with them to the mountain slopes or to the river-bank in summer. Reindeer for the north Khanty have been of vital necessity. Certainly, they were used as transportation and as food. Traditionally, utilization of reindeer carcasses was practically waste-free. Crude skins of reindeer served as coverings on sleeping places and sledges but processed skins were used for sewing clothes and utensils. Fat, liver and content of stomach were good grease for skins. Horns and bones were materials for knives, axes, handles, tops of arrows, etc.

The staple items of food were fish and animals, the flesh of which was boiled, dried or smoked. Mainly, fish were eaten raw. Such tender parts of animals as kidney, liver, marrow, eyes were also eaten uncooked. The blood of animals was either drunk fresh or mixed with other food. Flesh was dried and powdered for eating during hunting. In the forest they gathered wild onions, cedar nuts, berries and bird-cherries, etc.

The Khanty and Mansi were used to living in small communities of two or three families isolated and remote from other settlements. The nearest neighbours could reside at a distance of 15-20 km. A family possessed from one to three or four dwellings, where it spent a part of the year, making a living out of hunting or fishing. Log huts or lodges made of branches were covered with soil and served as permanent winter homes. In spring many of them moved out from their permanent quarters and put up the light rectangular shelters made of poles and birch-bark on the hunting ground (Forsyth, 1994). In the north, the Khanty built a ‘chum’ – a traditional dwelling, covered by reindeer skin in winter and birch-bark in summer. In modern days, a canvas is used for covering. There was also a movable dwelling, a big covered boat. Nowadays, those Khanty, who follow the lifestyle of their ancestors, live in nomad camps in the rural areas.

In a land where a heavy snow cover lies for half of the year, skis were an essential means for movement in winter. Wooden skis were nailed on with fur. The fall thaw turned the territory of their residence into a vast territory of rivers, lakes and marshes. For this period using a canoe was important.

Animals provided the Khanty and Mansi with the most items of clothing. Also, clothes were made from plants (nettle, hemp, etc.) and decorated with rich embroidery designs. Utensils and different things made from wood and bark were decorated with stylized forms of animals or plants, some of which had religious significance as tribal totems.

The tribal religion of the Khanty and Mansi resembled that of all the native peoples of northern Eurasia (Forsyth, 1994). They had a pantheon of nature Gods. Num Torem (Mikola Torum) was the chief God. All natural phenomena were alive for them. They believed that stones, rivers, plants, lightning, animals etc. had spirits and souls (Forsyth, 1994; Kulemzin & Lukina, 1992). The family had a totem animal, such as a goose, a beaver, an elk, an eagle, etc., from which the clan was supposed to be descended. Effigies of spirits were kept in sanctuaries in the forest (Forsyth, 1994). In these sacred places, the ritual ceremonies were performed from time to time, sacrificing animals. Sacrificed rites were also performed in the cemeteries, where the dead were laid in wooden boxes, along with their vessels, weapons, etc. for using in the other world (Forsyth, 1994). The Khanty cosmos was divided into three worlds – the upper, the middle and the lower world with the upper and lower worlds having seven more levels. The shaman was a mediator between these three worlds. He was also able to control energies and fight with spirits, go through unthinkable physical transformations, experiencing a symbolic death and rebirth during a shamanic ritual. He was the doctor, psychologist and priest of the Khanty and Mansi world (Forsyth, 1994).

The vital necessity of killing animals for food was penetrated with the feeling of reverence for nature. A brown bear occupied a unique position among animals being '*a master of the forest*' and the embodiment of justice on the earth. The bear was considered to be the youngest son of the principal deity Num Torum living in the upper world (Kulemzin & Lukina, 1992). Num Torum had had his son descend to the earth as a bear and it was believed that Khanty were direct descendants of the son of Torum. Therefore, the Khanty were the people of the bear (Kulemzin & Lukina 1992). Nevertheless, the indigenous peoples of Siberia killed bears for eating. Their flesh was considered a rare delicacy. In order to justify this, the "bear feast" was celebrated to ensure that it would not take vengeance on its killer and there would always be more bears. The dead bear was welcomed by settlers who performed a ritual dance around it. The bear skin with its head was placed in a successful hunter's house. The bear head was decorated with a hat or a shawl and food and drinks were laid in front of it. The bear was the 'guest' of the feast and people danced, sang, swore and told tales. The Khanty and Mansi had a very rich tradition of oral poetry and stringed musical instruments. After several days of celebration, the bear flesh was cooked and eaten. The skull and sometimes skin of the bear were kept in special buildings (Forsyth, 1994; Kulemzin, 1972).

Unfortunately, the traditional cultures of the Khanty, Mansi and other indigenous population are at an acute risk of extinction.

### **3. Crucial crises in the cultural development of indigenous peoples of Siberia**

#### *3.1. The "Yasak" duty and attempts of forced Christianization in the Russian Empire times*

The first attempts to conquer Siberia by the Russians dated back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Olekh, 2001). In 1598, Siberia finally began to form a part of the Russian Empire (Olekh, 2001). The tribes residing in Siberia for the Russians bore the name tuzemtsy" or "yasachnye inorodtsy". In the 17<sup>th</sup> – early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the government, primarily guided by the interests of the state treasury, didn't interfere into the traditional lifestyles and the system of self-organization of local tribes. The traditional forms of social organization concerning land tenure and land-use were saved. So, for the Russian government the indigenous people were a source of income for "yasak" or fur tax, but the land was state property (Dameshek, 2007).

In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the situation changed. There was a transition from the tax in kind to the monetary tax. Missionary activity expanded, the times of struggle with paganism and the process of Christianization of indigenous peoples started. In 1702, aggressive efforts were made under Peter the Great to extinguish the Khanty native religion by destroying the Khanty idols, attacking their sacred sites, and establishing Christianity in the Khanty communities (Glavatskaia, 2001; Saarniit, 2001). In fact, the majority of the Khanty, Mansi and other native peoples managed to keep their own religion. The failure of the Russian Government's politics of Christianization of the Siberian indigenous peoples can be explained by the fact that the converts were not isolated from their former ethnic, cultural and religious environment (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011). Paganism was closer to the prosaic lifestyle of those people which was based on the spiritualization of all living and non-living things. The interference into the religious life of the natives gave rise to the increase in the flow of the colonists, the changes in the marital-spousal

relations, the rapid progression of epidemics and other. Ultimately, all these national political actions brought to changes and reductions of population and to transformation of the indigenous people's culture. The Russians creditors nearly robbed the natives. The later worked as slaves to pay off their debts and taxes. And it should be mentioned that destroying the natives' diet eventually contributed to the complex process of erosion of traditional patterns of the native life in Siberia. Bread – which was the staple food of the Russian population soon became the essential necessity for the indigenes. The constant pressure on them to hunt sable and foxes in order to pay the “yasak” and trading debts disrupted their natural economy. As a result, their vulnerability to the severe climate increased, so that they gradually became dependent on this new, but not cheap, kind of food (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2001). The Russians always raised prices on flour and grain for the indigenous population. At the bottom of this pyramid lies the fact the native peoples became addicted to alcohol and that was exploited by the Russian traders. So, the Russians imported a hierarchy of power into Siberia which practically lacked effective laws (Olekh, 2001). All these actions of the St. Petersburg government and local authorities stimulated the degradation of a spiritual life of the native people of Siberia. In the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century some Mansi accepted the Russian lifestyle and language. The policy of Christianization provided full exemption of payment of duties and taxes for the baptized indigenous peoples for three years (Olekh, 2001; Glavatskaia, 2001). As a result, by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population number of the Siberian indigenous peoples decreased and surely the amount of fur taxpayers was constantly decreasing.

It was obvious that practical methods for the native peoples governance were not applicable. In 1822 M. Speransky, an outstanding politician, provided the project “The charter of Siberian natives governance”. It was the first law that set the equality in civil rights of indigenous and Russian people with preservation of their traditional ways of life. It confirmed the rights of the native peoples for the exclusive use of specific territories on which they lived and which they used for seasonal transhumance (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011). Also the Speransky's codes asserted that the Khanty, Mansi and other indigenous peoples had to be “governed by their clan founders and honorable people, according to the steppe customs” (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011). The migrating population was prohibited to settle on the territory of the native population and it was deprived of the rights to make a living out of hunting and fishing. M. Speransky developed a distinguished system of relationship between state authorities and indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, the law failed for all the usual reasons: the abuse of local authorities.

### *3.2. The development of natural resources of Siberia, persecution of the shamanic culture and compulsory boarding education in the Soviet times*

In the Soviet times, the state policy of natural resource extraction and development led to an enormous increase of migrating population and the significant reduction of the territory of residence and economic activity of the native peoples of Siberian native peoples. Since 1926, the population of Siberia has been increased due to migration. Production units, such as fishing, hunting, and reindeer-breeding collectives, were made. The developments of the Soviet period have brought most of the Khanty and Mansy into a settled life-style, in fishing and hunting villages. Most live and work alongside their Russian neighbors in such settings. The result has been a blend of indigenous and Russian ways (Heyman, 2001). Changes in the economic sphere were exacerbated by major changes in the cultural sphere in the 1930s chiefly, as a result of ideologically oriented programs emanated from Moscow. The atheism campaign persecuted shamans and native religious leaders throughout Siberia (Wiget & Balalaeva, 2011). The Kazym Rebellion in 1933 further complicated the situation. Every manifestation of the shamanic culture was declared illegal and subjected to persecution. Anyone who took part in the Bear Funeral Rites or other rituals of the Khanty and Mansi culture was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Bear hunting was also forbidden and many other things connected with their ritual culture, such as sacred grounds, burial grounds were destroyed.

The other fact that undermined the base and ethnic grounds of the traditional culture was the implementation of the general compulsory education. Traditionally, the Khanty and Mansi lived in widely-scattered extended family settlements, therefore, boarding schools were arranged for them. The boarding school practice began in the 1930s. Children were taken to the boarding school located far from their settlements. A forced withdrawal of children from their parents caused anxiety, nervousness, deep pain and distress in the family, etc. A sense of loss of their mother tongue and the pain of being torn from their native roots didn't leave them. In some boarding school, speaking native languages was strictly banned. By the 1950s, most children had completed more than five years of schooling, had basic math skills and were bilingual. Loss of native languages has led to acts of assimilation of unique knowledge, cultural elements and religion. Traditional culture lives in those environments where grandfathers are sure that their

grandsons will follow ancestral traditions. Breaking off the family relations, loss of the native language, deprivation of access to the sacred places directly “contribute” to eliminating traditional culture and spiritual life of the indigenous peoples. Great words of the founder of the department of Siberian Indigenous languages within Tomsk State Pedagogical University, Prof. A.P. Dulson - “No language – no nation, no nation – no culture” help to shed light on the nowadays situation. There are only 20-25 native speakers of the Eastern Khanty language and less than 10 speakers of the Southern Selkup language and all of them are the elderly. We regret to predict that by 2035-2040, their languages will have died out. The languages will disappear and so will the invaluable knowledge and experience, gained for thousands years.

### 3.3. *The man-made civilization. Intensive oil and gas exploration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

At the end of the 1960s, due to the economic expansion of the oil and gas companies, environmental degradation and market reforms, there was a sharp downturn in the development of traditional economic sectors. Industrial development of diverse Siberian lands had an extremely negative impact upon hunting and reindeer herding. There were enormous areas of burned lichen around drillings - the main food of reindeer. Pollutant content in the rivers exceeded the maximum allowed levels. Major area was polluted. The taiga was crossed by pipelines and was cut off by railways. A number of new towns and a range of working settlements rose. Heavy deforestation was started. By the late 1980s, the Soviet economic policies had left Western Siberia in shambles. With intensive and relentless development of Western Siberia, basically, the Khanty and Mansi were forced from their ancestral lands. Industrial exploitation of Siberia has been accompanied by the destruction of the habitat of indigenous peoples, artificial unification and standardization of traditional lifestyles. Under sustained pressure, traditional culture and ecological habits were laid waste by geological research, oil-drilling, pipeline constructions and timber felling (Jordan & Filtchenko, 2005).

## 4. Conclusion

The rich unique cultural heritage of indigenous minorities of Siberia is endangered and at risk of extinction. Looking through the prism of the history it needs to be clarified what place is being given to the indigenous population in Russia. Then and there, now and here their rights for existence as a person, self-determination, freedom to religion, education in their mother tongues, divestiture of the environment for their traditional way of living and traditional nature – are being violated. Assimilation of native people is a result of political discrimination that goes on to “kill” their land and to damage their cultural heritage using natural recourses for economic benefits. The nature for the Kanty and Mansi is not only a source of living; the natural environment of these ethnic groups directly influences on their self-identification and traditional culture. The Khanty, Mansi and other indigenous population of Siberia strongly feel the particular imbalance caused by the industrial civilization. Facing the challenges of the industrial development in their ancestral land and enforced leaving the native communities by their children, the indigenous minorities are discouraged from preservation of their traditional and linguistic cultures. The state efforts should be strengthened upon supporting the preservation their historical, cultural, religious and linguistic roots. Measures of state support have to foresee the development of small settlements, communities or camps for the native peoples organized in their ancestral territories. Not without a reason the Khanty and Mansy beliefs, language and culture practices have survived mainly among the minority of those who continue to live in an isolated nomadic existence. Culture is dwelling in a language, a language exists, when speakers feel it, love it, use it, carefully protect it and transmit it from generation to generation, when children heard their native fairy-tales and when they are told their native stories by their parents from the cradle.

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