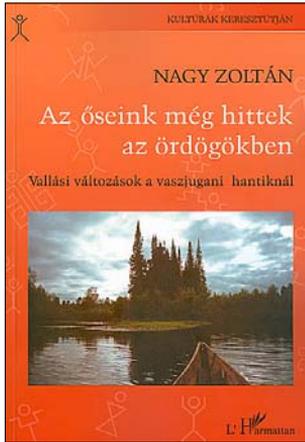


A BOOK ABOUT CHANGES IN THE RELIGION OF THE VASYUGAN KHANTY



Nagy, Zoltán 2007. *Az őseink még hittek az ördögökben. Vallási változások a vaszjugani hantiknál. [Our Ancestors Still Believed in Devils. Changes in Religion among the Vasyugan Khanty.] Kultúrák keresztútján 6. Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatóintézete, PTE Néprajz-Kulturális Antropológia Tanszék, L'Harmattan, 352pp.*

Research into the religion and folk belief of the Ob-Ugrian people is a traditional research topic in ethnology. What new can be said about such a thoroughly researched field? This question is even more relevant if we are talking about the religious system of the Vasyugan Khanty, as this group of Eastern Khanty has nearly disappeared by assimilating into the Russians. Vasyugan

lies in the middle of the West Siberian Plain, east of the Ural Mountains, the western tributary of the Ob River, in the Kargasoksky district of the Tomsk Oblast.

Zoltán Nagy, head of the Department of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Pécs, Hungary, attempts to use new methods of approach to this question in his recently published PhD dissertation. He consciously knows what he is looking for, and interprets the earlier studies to serve his purpose. In order to achieve his objective “to describe and analyze the religious system, or rather the change of the religious system” he compares his own, contemporary fieldwork with descriptions of earlier papers of those who have conducted fieldwork. The main topic of the book is the description and analysis of the sacred places that have been found in the surroundings of the investigated village. Beside the temporal comparative study the author has tried to draw parallels between the religious and the social structure of the Vasyugan Khanty. Nagy has carried out his fieldwork in one village, Ozernoye, which has only five houses. To concentrate on the present day of such a small community is also a new approach in Ob-Ugrian studies.

The title of the book, which translates as ‘Our Ancestors Still Believed in Devils’, provocatively throws light upon the trends in religious changes with a single sentence. The Khanty informant makes it clear that he himself does not believe in “devils”, or at least he has not founded his life on the belief in “devils”. In the Russian sentence the pejorative word “devil” represents the devaluation of the Khanty native religion, marking the former deities that were called Father and Mother, and were revered as helping forces are now only demons.

Nagy has carried out three longer fieldworks among the Vasyugan Khanty, first in 1992, then in 1998–1999 and 2001. As the area is becoming even more Russian, it has not been in the focus of academic research. In Ob-Ugrian studies, and in the ethnographical studies about the Fenno-Ugrian peoples in general the unity of language and culture

has played a major role. The Vasyugan Khanty dialect has nearly disappeared, so contemporary research seemed to be useless. But Nagy has a different opinion, claiming that “[t]he Vasyugan Khanty culture cannot be regarded as an extinct one, as according to the logical formula of the subsistence, as long as Vasyugan Khants exist, they have culture, and therefore there is a Vasyugan Khanty culture” (p. 10). Within the dissolved community in the Vasyugan basin the author explores a small but coherent Khanty group and his results refer mainly to them. The researched village, Ozernoje, used to be the area’s religious center, as one of the most important sacred places of the Vasyugan Khanty is found near the village. Nagy was a guest of the Milimov family, who were the keepers of this sacred place.

After the introductory chapter of the book we get acquainted with the habitation, settlement construction and demographic data of the Vasyugan Khanty. Khants traditionally lived quite far from each other. This hunter-fisher community amounted only to 1,024 people in the whole river-valley. After the immigration of Russians – who came there first because of political reasons and later, after striking petrol in this region because of the work opportunity – this number increased by 50 times. This affected the development of the settlement system, many new villages were founded, and they increasingly acquired a more important role in the region. The occupational system changed completely, too. The role of hunting and fishing was dwarfed by the work in the industry, so the Khanty, who could not adapt to these changes because of their educational qualification and traditional life, were reduced to a second-class minority. As a result of these changes the Khanty social structure disintegrated and the former forms of communication that had served as a cohesive force disappeared. The natives had to breast this new situation, being separated from each other or in smaller communities. The Khanty group living in Ozernoje is such a community. Ozernoje became independent of the neighboring Aipolovo in 1910, and then the village had 31 inhabitants. In its prime there were 140 inhabitants in the village, but today only a few desolate houses have remained. After introducing the village, Nagy analyses the social organization of the village using the parish register of the church and other written sources. The clan’s marriage habits refer to the social structure. Among the Vasyugan Khants, five clans which include several families can be distinguished. According to earlier literature, the clans are exogamous, but examining the parish books, it is not so obvious. Families that had the same family name composed a lineage and were severely exogamous. The lineages diverged even in location. For the sake of perspicuity, the author presents the system of connections between the clan of the Vasyugan Khanty families and their settlement. According to this, we learn about the two important aspects of the Khanty social organization: the relationship and the location. These two aspects will have a great role in the examination of the sacred places.

In the second part of the book Zoltán Nagy introduces the Vasyugan Khanty system of deities. He uses mainly Kustaa Karjalainen’s (1922) order, and after that talks about the present situation of the system and the tendencies of change based on his own fieldwork. Christianity had a great influence on the pantheon of the Vasyugan Khanty. Torem became the most important deity; his figure has fused with the Christian God, so compared to him, all the other deities became simpler and more or less evil and demon-like. The former helping spirits are now regarded as devils. This belief

can be found also in Russian folk belief. The cult of local deities and house spirits is disappearing. In the present culture the elements of Russian folk belief and scientific theories have a great role. School and television are the sources of this knowledge. Nagy convincingly presents on the example of a television advertisement how the image of a Khanty house spirit has changed (see further Nagy 2003).

While demonstrating the Ob-Ugrian system of sacrifices, Nagy again uses Karjalainen's system (Karjalainen 1922), as he finds this the most useful. Nowadays the system is less complicated: there are only a few living sacred places and local deities. The communal feasts have disappeared together with the community, the sacrifices are only individual. The feasts of the Christian religion can be found in the Khanty religion, too, but some elements of the Khanty folk belief are present in the local Russian folk belief.

Nagy's research focuses on the sacred places and on the beliefs, activities belonging to them. His novel method of distributing these places is worth explaining here, as it can be applied also in other research topics. The first group is the sacred places in nature. Firstly, they are the living sacred places, where a local deity resides, where sacrificial ceremonies are held, and where strict rules of behaviour and taboos are observed. Secondly, they can be former sacred places, where people no longer make sacrifices, but still remember these ceremonies. They can be mythical places, in which deities used to live, and memorials of a heroic past. This group also includes cemeteries. The second group is the sacred places in houses. Three important places are mentioned: the sacred corner, the loft, and the stove.

Ozernoye is the ritual center of the Vasyugan, so the network of sacred places is dense around the settlement. Zoltán Nagy investigates 13 sacred places. The most important of them where worship is still carried out is the Păi Imi Peninsula, first mentioned in 1882. The goddess of the peninsula, Păi Imi, is regarded as the mythical mother of the local Khanty community, so she has to take care of the wellbeing and good fortune of the inhabitants. She or the members of her family appear in the origin myths of nearly all the sacred places in the area. In the 19th century male members of the community used to address her at the turn of seasons and made a sacrifice in front of her idol chamber. The men also brought some food from the women's sacrificial meal, so all the Khanty people were joined in the community with the goddess. By the present day the communal food sacrifices have disappeared, but individual, mainly object sacrifices are still made in order to gain health and good luck. The sacred place is still actively visited, but it does not function to strengthen the ritual unity of the community.

The next sacred place that is discussed is the so-called Hammer Island Sacred Place. Apropos of this place the systemization of the material used by Zoltán Nagy is clearly evident in the further part of his book. As there is often only little to say about the sacred places, he digresses into several topics which lighten parts of the Khanty culture. These digressions are interesting and valuable, but sometimes they are only loosely connected to the sacred place. The Hammer Island used to be a sacrificial place for good hunting luck, so we can read about elk worship. Discussion about the Musical

Peninsula introduces Ob-Ugrian cultic musical instruments and the connection with the supernatural. Of course these shorter essays cannot explicate the topics in depth.

While talking about the memorial places of the heroes, the author notes that the sacred places often coincide with archaeological quarries. The Khanty believe that these places are connected with the time of heroes. This period and the local heroes, who are bound to a clan, are known in the epic tradition. Nagy takes the heroic epics one after another and tries to draw conclusions from them by showing the Khanty system of world periods. According to this system, the first period is the time of creation, the second is the time of song and tale, when the heroes turn into deities, and the third period is the above-mentioned time of heroes, which is a warlike time. This is partly the time of heroes, who do not turn to deities any more, partly the time of humans. Decadent time also appears in this worldview.

In connection with the cemetery the author compares a particular funeral, researched by participant observation with traditional descriptions and rules of funeral. He demonstrates that the customs change, lose their importance or disappear, as in this particular case. Still, the customs and rules seemed to be living and of decisive importance. As we do not have any description of specific funerals from the time of the traditional material, it is difficult to say whether these changes in the custom's force are a new development (as the author suggests) or the "ideal funeral" never reached fruition.

Explaining the sacred places of human sphere, Zoltán Nagy differentiates between the woman and man, holy and profane, clean and unclean part of the Khanty house and community. He offers several illustrations to show these differences, but unfortunately these apply only to the Vasyugan region (Pesikova 1997).

The author tries to extend his research of the sacred places to the whole basin of the Vasyugan. The lack of earlier collected material leaves this part incomplete, as the above introduced system cannot be used, but the known data of the sacred places can be found in the appendix. In this chapter Nagy tries to reveal the social definition of the holy places by drawing parallels between the local and affinity factors of the worship of the sacred places. The comparative tables present radically new information: the Khanty clans are seen as cult communities. Every clan had its own local sacred place, own hero, and own deity at the culmination of the culture. Today the table cannot be filled completely, but it still demonstrates the statement of the author. According to Zoltán Nagy the clan/village cult community seems to be a masculine ritual group, where local and genealogical aspects become mixed. Though women could not take part in sacrifices, there were sacred places for the women in the village, so the women, who came from several clans, visited the same sacred place. This fact demonstrates that the village was also a cult community. This point of view should be applied in the research of other Siberian ethnic groups.

As we have seen, this book is based on new and modern research and poses several new questions. It demonstrates that a well-known research field – the Ob-Ugrian religion – has persistent topics for anyone who would try to find deeper contexts.

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