

1

Background: The Khanty

Khanty belong to the Ugrian branch of the Uralic peoples.¹ The name *Khanty* (*xanti*) goes back to the word for ‘clan, kindred, community’ in the Uralic proto-language; its cognates are Finnish *kunta* (as in *kansakunta* ‘nation’) and Hungarian *had* ‘army, war’ (‘kinship’ in Old Hungarian). The name *Ostyak* for the people and their language was used by Russians officially until 1930, when *Khanty*, the name the people use for themselves, became official. Until the late twentieth century the term *Ostyak*, despite its derogatory character in Siberia, remained in common use in the West.

Territory and Population

Although small in population, Khanty have their settlements and villages dispersed over a large area. Khanty live east of the Ural Mountains in Western Siberia in Russia, along the lower and middle regions of the Ob River and along its tributaries. These include, to the right of the Ob, the Polui, the Kunovat, the Kazym, the Nazym, the Lyamin, the Pim, the Tromyegan, the Agan and the Vakh; and to the left of the Ob, the Shchuchya, the Synya, the Severnaya Sosva (called Sosva in the epics), the Irtysh (and its tributaries, the Demyanka and the Konda), the Bolshoy Salym, the Bolshoy Yugan and the Vasyugan. This territory, extending from the Urals in the west to the basin of the Ob in the east, has the historical name Yugra, a term for the Ugrian homeland and peoples that first appeared in medieval Arabic and Russian sources. The term’s geographical designation has shifted along with the historical movements of its bearers; in the post-Soviet period the concept of Yugra has reappeared as an important though problematic element of regional politics in Khanty territory. Other Uralic peoples living in the vicinity of the Khanty are Tundra Nenets in the north (whose language belongs to the Samoyedic branch of the Uralic language family), Komi (or Zyrians, of the Permic branch) in the north and west,

¹ The sources used in the compilation of this section as well as suggestions for further reading are listed in the Bibliography.

2 *Background: The Khanty*

Selkups (of the Samoyedic branch) in the east, and, in the west, Mansi (or Voguls, Ob-Ugrians like the Khanty). Turkic Tatar peoples live in the south. Population levels of non-Russians are on the decrease throughout the region.

Today the Khanty homeland is part of Tyumen and Tomsk Oblasts. Within Tyumen Oblast, Khanty live in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra, established in 1931, whose capital, Khanty-Mansiysk, is likewise named after the indigenous peoples of the region, and (roughly a third of the total) in the neighbouring Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. The Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug encompasses 558,000 square kilometres, an area slightly larger than France (see Figure 1.1). The indigenous Khanty and Mansi constitute only about 1.5 percent of the population of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug.

In the 2010 Russian census 30,943 people identified themselves as Khanty, about one-third living in urban areas and two-thirds in rural areas. About 29,000 live in Tyumen Oblast (including Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug), and about 700 in Tomsk Oblast; some live in Sverdlovsk Oblast and the Komi Republic as well. Total population in these administrative territories is increasing, especially where production of oil and natural gas triggers considerable in-migration, mostly by Russians; consequently, the proportional population of Khanty in their homeland is on the decline. Among indigenous peoples facing such unfavourable demographic changes, proficiency in and use of the mother tongue is eroding and being replaced by Russian. Infant mortality is relatively high, while life expectancy is low, especially among males. In the 1980s average life expectancy was forty-five years among men and fifty-five years among women.

Khanty traditional ways of life, economy and material culture have been shaped by their natural surroundings. The southern part of Khanty territory is in the taiga or boreal forest belt; the northern part borders on the arctic tundra (see Figure 1.2). About one-third of this area is upland covered with thick coniferous forests. The rest comprises the floodplain of the Ob and its tributary rivers and streams, where floods caused by seasonal ice jams on its lower reaches have created a vast system of swamps, bogs, marshes, lakes and oxbows. Forests of Siberian pine, spruce, fir, larch, aspen, willow and birch provide Khanty with wood, bark and edible seeds, and support other edible vegetation, including blackberries, blueberries, cloudberries, cranberries and currants. Reindeer moss (a type of lichen) is highly favoured by their herds of domestic reindeer, and the hallucinogenic fly-agaric mushroom is found. Elk (moose), wild reindeer, wolf and brown bear are the large mammals; furs also come from small mammals such as sable, ermine, mink, marten, fox, rabbit, squirrel, wolverine, lynx, muskrat, otter and beaver. The abundant waters contain salmon, sturgeon, sterlet, pike, carp, bream and other fish, and support numerous species of migratory waterfowl. The major game birds on land are various species of grouse and

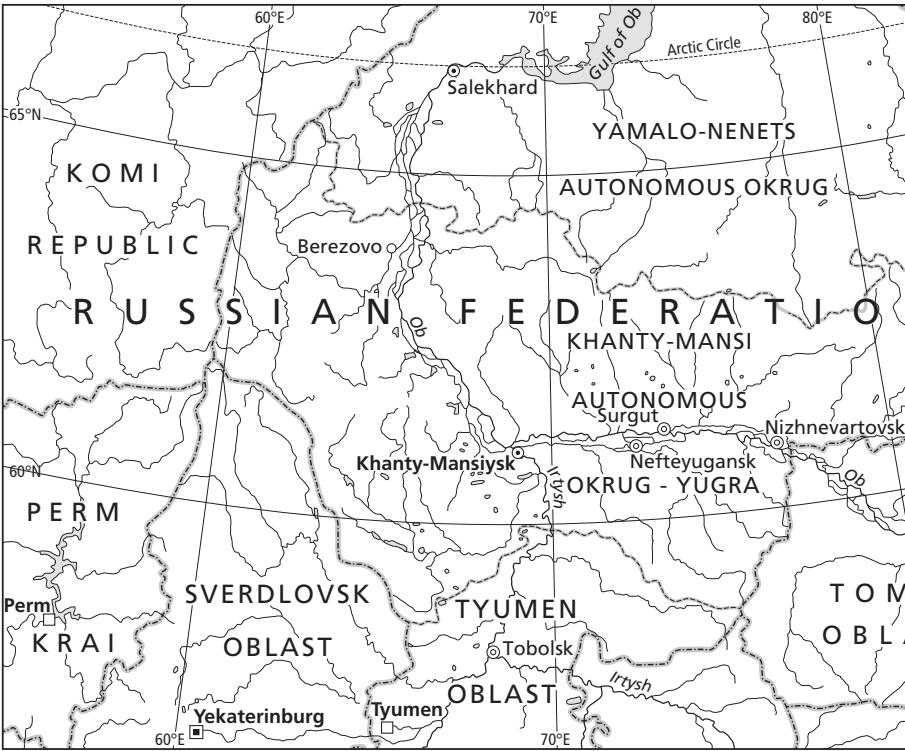


Figure 1.1 Current political map of Western Siberia.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press

their allies (black-grouse, capercaillie, ptarmigan, partridge). The region is characterized by cold, snowy winters of up to seven months with average temperatures around -20°C , and lows not uncommonly reaching -40°C , short and cool spring and autumn seasons, and short summers with average temperatures between 18°C and 23°C .

The Khanty homeland is rich in natural resources: furs, forest products including timber, and minerals, with fossil fuels being of primary economic importance today. The cultural and social history of the people corresponds in some ways to the phases of the region's economic exploitation.

History

Khanty origins are linked both with the history of Western Siberia, the earliest phases of which are known only from archaeological finds, and with movements of Finno-Ugrian peoples as reconstructed by the coordination of archaeological and linguistic evidence, about which there are debatable points. Towards the end of the Bronze Age, around the middle of the first millennium BC, the Ugrian ethno-linguistic community separated into two groups, fishing and hunting communities of the taiga and herding and farming populations of the forest-steppes. At this time the Ugrians may have been located in the Volga-Kama region to the west of the Urals. The two groups maintained contact, as the steppe-derived elements in Khanty culture show. Living to the north of the Sarmatians, an Iranian people inhabiting the steppe from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD, the steppe dwellers absorbed influences from these and later Turkic nomads, and at the commencement of the Great Migrations in the fifth century AD moved off to the south and west as nomadic proto-Hungarians. Meanwhile the taiga Ugrians mingled with a Paleosiberian population who arrived from Asia and adopted their speech, eventually forming the Ob-Ugrians. The two exogamous phratries or moieties into which both northern Khanty and Mansi societies are still divided, the Por and Moś groups, are believed by some scholars to be a persistent reflection of, respectively, the forest Ugrians and the Siberians who mixed with them in the mid- to late first millennium BC.

Medieval Russian sources characterize Yugra (i.e. Khanty and Mansi) society as a number of 'principalities'. The 'princes' headed polities stratified into different social classes, rallied the warriors of their retinues, and sought allies among other princes for their political and military causes. Princes' settlements were located at important geographic locations such as mouths or bends of rivers and were essentially wooden stockades or strongholds enclosed by earthen ramparts. These served as the dwelling place of the prince and his family and servants. The forts had special storage structures for food, weapons, clothes and other goods and had a separate structure to house warriors. The families belonging to the principality

6 *Background: The Khanty*

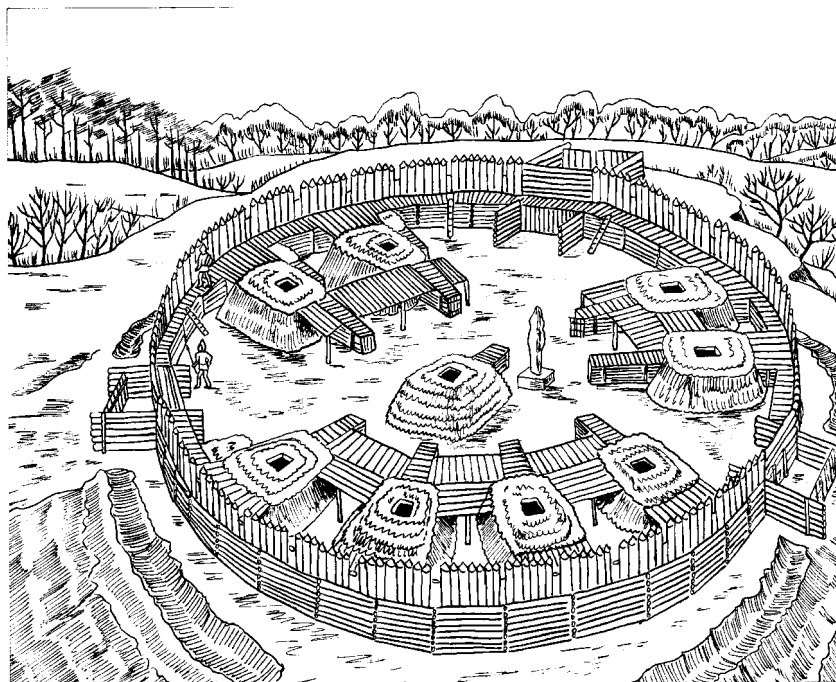


Figure 1.3 Settlement, late sixth to seventh century AD (reconstruction based on archaeological finds of the Surgut I fortress). (Drawing © Aleksei Zykov, from A. P. Zykov et al., Ugrian Heritage, fig. 19.)

(servants and, perhaps, slaves) lived in small villages by the fort, in semi-subterranean huts or in tents. Archaeological research has revealed several dozen such fortified settlements in the area today inhabited by Khanty (see Figure 1.3).

Finds unearthed at these sites indicate significant warfare activity in the region as early as the third century and up until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These finds provide concrete examples that confirm various details of the weaponry, armour and costume described in the heroic epics (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5).

Besides their blood feuds and internecine raids for the purpose of stealing women, reindeer herds and food, Khanty princes also faced outside enemies. From the middle of the first millennium AD hostilities were ongoing between northern Khanty and Samoyeds (Nenets), their tundra neighbours; these clashes subsided only as both peoples came under the increasing domination of Russia.

As early as the twelfth century, Rus princes of Novgorod fought with their Yugra counterparts. During subsequent centuries Khanty apparently



Figure 1.4 Heavily armed warrior, first century BC (reconstruction based on pictures and archaeological finds). (Drawing © Aleksei Zykov, from A. P. Zykov et al., Ugrian Heritage, fig. 13.)

moved, under pressure of Russian and Komi encroachment in the west, across the Urals into the Ob basin where they are found today. Further Russian expansion was checked for a few centuries by the Tatar Khanate of Sibir, ruled by an offshoot of the Mongol Chinggisid dynasty, whose khans had similar aims of exploitation in the region. By the late fifteenth century Khanty had become tax-paying subjects of Sibir in the south and of Russian principalities in the north, even as Tatar rule collapsed and was usurped by Moscow (whose rulers were the Czars). Beginning in the late sixteenth century, Russian expeditions in Siberia for the purpose of trade, conquest

8 *Background: The Khanty*



Figure 1.5 Reconstruction of the burial costume of an Ugrian princess, first half of the fourteenth century AD (based on burial 31 at Saigatinskiy III cemetery). (Drawing © Aleksei Zykov, from A. P. Zykov et al., Ugrian Heritage, fig. 20.)

and exploration gained new territories and markets for Moscow and began collecting taxes, the most important currency for which were the furs of sable and other animals. The assimilation of Ob-Ugrians to Russian political interests was facilitated by some of the Ob-Ugrian princes, who provided assistance to Russian efforts to expand taxation and trade, for which they received various favours in return. This was also about the time when Khanty in the north began adopting the economic specialty of reindeer breeding from their Nenets neighbours.

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, when the Ob region was absorbed, conquered and annexed to the Russian state under Muscovite rule, the Khanty princes' fortified settlements served as the bases of towns established by the Czar's administration; the cities of Berezovo, Surgut and Obdorsk (now Salekhard) originated in this way. The last, largely unsuccessful, uprising against taxation was kindled by the Khanty princess Anna of the Konda and prince Vasiliy of Obdorsk in the beginning of the seventeenth century, but although it spread to the entire Western Siberian area, it was quickly put down and its leaders put to death. As a result of their loss of independence Khanty had to yield to aggressive proselytizing efforts by Orthodox Christian missionaries. Nevertheless they never entirely gave up their traditional beliefs. With colonial subordination and the distortion of the forest economy towards large-scale extraction of furs came increasing poverty and, sometimes, famines. The influx of cheap liquor, virtually unknown to Siberians before, added alcoholism to the list of causes of the destruction of traditional life. New diseases from outside took their toll as well, and by the late nineteenth century the indigenous populations had decreased by about 20 percent.

In some ways the early Soviet state continued to use the Khanty homeland after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution just as the Czarist government had, as a site for exiling and incarcerating the authoritarian regime's undesirables from European Russia and for extracting raw materials. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks also instituted some measures intended to bring development and special status to the sparse indigenous populations neighbouring the Gulag camps. By 1930 the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug had been formed, book publishing and mother-tongue education was initiated, and education aimed at producing an intelligentsia among the indigenous peoples was established. However, the long-term effects of Stalinism also include the forced collectivization of the economy and reshaping of traditional forms of settlement, persecution of shamans and so-called *kulaks* or rich peasants, and the forcible removal of indigenous children to boarding schools. These policies triggered major uprisings by Khanty in the period 1931–1934, known as the Kazym rebellion, which was brutally suppressed.

Oil and natural gas have been extracted from Khanty lands on an industrial scale since the 1970s; at present the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug accounts for about half of Russia's oil production. The appropriation and development of oil and gas fields has progressed at the expense of indigenous lands and to the detriment of indigenous interests. Extraction operations cause pollution, lead to irreversible environmental damage and jeopardize traditional lifestyles. Economic pressure upon indigenous peoples is further compounded by their disadvantaged position in the market for skilled labour. All these factors have created a situation in which indigenous Siberians, Khanty among them, are largely deprived of the

10 *Background: The Khanty*

rewards that the post-Soviet Russian economy has realized through extraction of natural resources on their lands. Cut off from access to the benefits of economic growth and social mobility enjoyed by other Russians, they are nevertheless forced to give up many aspects of their traditional lifestyles, economic activities, cultures and languages in favour of assimilation.

Traditional Way of Life

Today, traditional economic patterns vary across the enormous territory inhabited by Khanty. The traditional economy is based on a semi-settled lifestyle involving fishing, hunting and herding domestic reindeer for meat and transport. In the lower Ob region, on the tundra, herds of reindeer in the past numbered sometimes in the thousands. Hunting is also particularly important to the economy of those Khanty who live in the north, while fishing is characteristic especially of Khanty living farther up the Ob, in the taiga to the south. The seasonality both of pasture resources in reindeer herding and of fishing opportunities in various parts of the riverine environment is the reason for the regular mobility of the Khanty lifestyle. Families have permanent winter and summer camps in their territories. Traditional settlements – seasonal camps and villages alike – consist of small log huts (*kot* or *khot*) and tents (*nyuki-kot* ‘reindeer-skin house’, so called for their covering; the common Russian word across Siberia is *chum*) positioned close to the waterfront; residents share hunting grounds. Winter camps are small, with three to five semi-subterranean huts. The larger summer camps consist of the tents, which are easy to disassemble, transport and reassemble. The waterways are extensively used for transport in the spring and summer; during the seven-month winters when snow lies two metres deep, sleds and skis are crucial means of transport.

Khanty were influenced by tundra Nenets in adopting reindeer herding as early as the fourteenth century, by Komi and Russians in developing trade, and in the south, since the seventeenth century, by Siberian Tatars and Russians in developing cultivation and the raising of horses, goats, sheep and poultry. Fishing, hunting and trapping provide the meat and fat of animals, birds and fish for subsistence, as well as the furs used in trade, which forms an important part of the Khanty economy. Reindeer are of primary importance for transport and skins, and since the Soviet era in meat production as well; animals hunted and trapped for their fur include sable, ermine, fox, rabbit and squirrel (skins of the latter were formerly used as a form of currency). Today both meat and furs are produced for the market. The brown bear deserves special mention: as the most venerated animal of the Ob-Ugrian peoples, all parts of its body are used in one way or another. Khanty also practice gathering, primarily of various berries with high vitamin content and, in the autumn, the seeds of the Siberian pine, both for subsistence and for sale.