THE ROLE OF THE REPEAT IN THE BEAR FEAST IN TRADITIONAL KHANTY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is devoted to a role of repeat in Khanty folklore. Songs of a bear feast have served as the source material for the research. The author traces the role of a repeat at different text levels: structure, lexical level, and plot. The repeat is proposed as a fundamental method of traditional Khanty arts.

KEYWORDS: repeat • formula • symmetry • rhythm • Khanty bear cult

The bear feast is a ritual complex associated with the cult of the bear. This is a central ritual act in Khanty culture that still has not lost its significance. Not only does this rite concern all the mythological and religious conceptions, but it is also a concentration of all types of art spread through this culture.

Khanty ritual bear songs (*woj ar*) have served as the material for our research. Bear songs are characterised by rhythmicality. The main way to create rhythm in the traditional Khanty arts is by using the repeat. We take rhythm to be an alternation or repetition of units, with some frequency (evenness) in time and space, i.e. as a characteristic of some periodic process.

The ritual songs of Khanty bear feasts consist of repeating formulas. The formula serves as a minimal unit of the text. We define a formula following Albert Lord and Milman Parry as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Parry 1971: 272). All formulas have a similar syntactic and grammatical structure and are characterised by intonational unity. Their alternation with certain variations set the rhythm of the song. These poetical constants are intertextual (are used in different texts and genres of bear songs).

After Éva Schmidt (1995: 135; 138–140) we recognise two types of formulas: noun and verbal. Their combination is equal to one melodic phrase (period). The text below reflects such a structure, where one line is equal to a combination of noun and verbal formulas, i.e. to one full cycle:

[309] *Ar χor pörmum χuḷaṇ As kutpaḷpi(jə)*	In the middle of the fishy Ob, where many deer are rambling,
Ujaṇ ewi χašmaṇ wön naj aṇkien, ḷuw omsum.	Girl's luck ordaining goddess-mother, she sits.
Śjupar sot wuχi suḷi awat(ə) tam wæḷi(jə)jaḷmaḷ,	There is a glittering land of hundreds of silver coins,

Kamar sot wuχi suḷi awat(ə) tam wæḷi(jə)jaḷmaḷ,	There is a glittering land of hundreds of shining coins,
Al sumtap ḷapat χöχaḷt tam wæḷi(jə)jaḷmaḷ,	There are seven forests with the strong birches,
[314] *Xuś sumtap ḷapat χöχaḷt tam wæḷi(jə) jaḷmaḷ(ə)*	There are seven forests with the supple birches,
Sorni æpat χowi wön naj, ḷuw wæḷi(jə)jaḷmaḷ,	She is a golden haired shining great goddess,
Wuχ æpat χowi wön naj, ḷuw wæḷi(jə)jaḷmaḷ(ə).	She is a monetary haired shining great goddess.

(*Nuχ töti ar* – Lifting up song)[1]

The example above describes a sacred place of the goddess of childbirth *Kaltaś Aṇki*. The mentioning of birches growing in this area is not accidental – this is the *Phratry Moś* sacred tree whose patron is *Kaltaś*. Every symbol is associated with the whole complex of religious and mythological concepts and cannot be removed from this context. The birch symbol is also widespread in ornamentations:
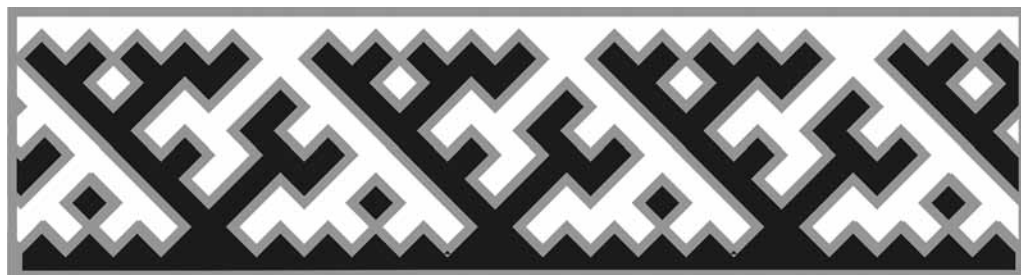

Figure 1.[2]

Figure 1 shows the ornament called "birch branch". Khanty ornament is geometrical. It is formed of triangles, diamonds, rectangles, etc. This is a stylised image, consisting of the elements, the so-called branches (*nuw*). These branches form a complex image – a pattern – that corresponds to a song's formulas. The illusion of motion and rhythm is created by multiple repetitions of ornamental patterns in combination with different types of symmetry. In our case, the resulting movement is a glide reflection. It is a primitive symmetry composed of a reflection and translation along the direction of the reflection axis. Our pattern has both horizontal and vertical reflection axes. Glide reflection is the only type of symmetry that involves more than one step (Weyl 1968: 35). This symmetry the Khanty traditionally call "reflection" (*jeśaḷt wannty*, literally 'looking toward each other').

In its rhythmic organisation Khanty ornament is most similar to a ritual dance. Indeed, Khanty traditional dance, consisting of the same repetitive movements, is surprisingly reminiscent of visual ornament. It does not exist on the two-dimensional plane, but in four-dimensional space (including time). And the pattern of such ornament is a posture. In the performance of the dance, we can see the same kind of symmetry, which is used in the ornament. Repeating the movements to the left and to the right corresponds to the reflection and moving forward – to the translation.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 represent postures in the so-called protecting dance (*sajḷeti jak*, literally 'screening dance').

Figure 2.	*Figure 3.*	*Figure 4.*

The dancer's mittens are embroidered with sacred ornamented images. By making rhythmic movements, the dancer makes a sort of sacred image projection in different directions. Moving along a circular path in his dance, the dancer, with moves and images, creates a kind of magic shield around himself and the participants of the action.

The similarity of the rhythmic principles of the ornamental and dance elements is terminologically emphasised: both a dance step and an ornamental pattern are called *nuw* (branch, twig). This similarity had been noticed by a researcher of Kazym Khanty ornaments, Tatyana Moldanova (1999: 62). The "protecting dance" by its semantics is close to one of the major ornamental patterns – the zigzag. The zigzag pattern in Kazym Khanty ornamentations is, according to T. Moldanova, identified with a branchy tree, and, through this symbol, with the idea of fullness with vital energy. This ornament also has protective power: "Traditionally a zigzag has been associated with a concept of the living, animated and has performed the function of life protection and reviving". The more "branchy" (*nuwaṇ*) a dance or an ornament is the stronger is its protecting and lucky properties (ibid.: 61).

Repeat and symmetry are the basic methods used in traditional Khanty arts. In ornamentation and in dance we can see identical types of symmetry. However, symmetry in poetic texts is of a different nature: here we have parallelism (and variation).

[251] *Xötḷum nuwi pelkaḷa juwiḷumaḷ,*	Dawning light side has come,
Jasṇaḷ χošti tös wort puχ ikeḷ,	Words knowing master wort, the man's son,
Ḷuw ḷonjaśijaḷteḷ,	He rose,
Raχḷa šašpi(jə) kuraṇ sot imtaṇ χot	**With forbidden backs hundreds of the legged in a jolly house**
Muj æwtaśijaḷmem(ə),	How [he] pleased,
[256] **Xanḷa šašpi(jə) tuχḷaṇ sot imtaṇ χot**	**With adhered backs hundreds of the winged in a jolly house**
Muj æwtaśijaḷtem(ə):	How [he] pleased:
Xötḷum χönjaḷa pelkaḷa(ə) juwantumaḷ(ə),	Dawning light side has come,

Ĵisaḷ χuḷam(ə) jisḷi wort ikeḷ,
Ḷuw ḷonjaḷśijaḷmeḷ(ə),
²⁶¹ **Ḷoren ḷant nelaŋ jošan(ə) ḷoḷiḷumaḷ(ə),**
Śupar wuχ(ə) nelaŋ jošan(ə) ḷoḷiḷumaḷ.

Old, ageless man wort,
He rose,
With lake fat in greasy hands[he] rose,
With silver coins in greasy hands [he] rose.

(*Tut ḷewum Mosum* – Fire eaten Nazym)

This episode consists of two parts that describe a man's prayer. Both parts have an identical structure – this is a parallelism on a plot structure level (the bold sentences show the beginning of each part). Every epithet is duplicated (lines 254, 256 and 261, 262) – this is a parallelism in the strict sense.

The same principles of text[3] structure underlie different types of art. Thus, our approach to the study of rhythm is comprehensive. We consider the aspects of artistic time and space interrelated "contrary to the opinion of those scholars who believe that each of these categories is an autonomous, independent, and that there is no ground for their comprehensive study" (Yegorov, Meilakh, Saparov 1974: 3).

The repeat actualises itself at different levels of text. The first level is structural: all formulas are built according to syntactic-grammatical models. The second level is lexical. The combination of the concrete structure with lexical filling makes up one formula. Every formula is devoted to one image, which is to be exposed as deeply as possible. The third level is that of plot. Each genre of bear song is rendered distinctive by its typical plot structure.

The most widespread model we call a "model of characterisation". This type of formula is close what M. Parry called a noun-epithet formula. Its structure is:

$$N1 \rightarrow Adj1$$
$$\rightarrow (Adj2)$$
$$\rightarrow [N2 \rightarrow Part / Adj]$$

A noun (N1) is the core of the formula, it is an image to which the formula is devoted. The adjectives and participial or adjective construction extends the noun, characterising it. For example:

³⁵⁶ *Ḷor wuji nelaŋ još(ə) ḷoḷiḷataḷ(ə),*
Śupar wuχija nelaŋ još wośχiḷataḷ(ə)…

[He] rose with lake fat in the greasy hands,
[He] rubbed the greasy hands with silver coins…

(*Torum śir joχ ar* – Torum people song)

The metaphor *nelaŋ još* (greasy hands) means 'not empty', 'hands full of gifts'. This is a lexical level of the formula. The same construction with other lexical content produces other formulas: *Xor kuri šemḷaŋ još* (The road cut by the deer hoofs), *Wesan šemḷaŋa šemḷaŋa repijə* (As a sturgeon's stepped back stepped cliff). Such images are very visual and are taken from everyday experience.

Combinations of formulas can also be coherent. Their sequence depends on a plot type. Each genre of bear song has a typical plot sequence. Thus, the songs called *miš ar* (the songs of luck) represent the generalised character of deities. A deity visits a bear feast to present to the people his luck-bringing dance. The song's structure is as follows:

1) Introduction and greeting;

2) Descriptions of territories as being within the power of the entered deity (this part is always unique);

3) Everyday life of the deity (e.g. the generalised character of a goddess is a seem-stress);

4) Becoming a news from a crow about conducting a bear feast;

5) Packing for travel;

6) Entering the ceremony house (*woj hot* 'bear's house');

7) *Miš ar* always ends with a particular deity's dance – an actor passes three circles in front of a bear.

We follow a broad understanding of the repeat principle underlying traditional culture as a way of preserving the culture and entire world order. Indeed, numerous repetitions of ritual songs fix in the mind a certain image of reality, which acts as a model. All activities should be undertaken in accordance with these models. Different kinds of art reflect the reality and secure important patterns in culture. The image of reality, stable and unchanging, is imprinted in the consciousness of a person, who carries out all his activities according to this model.

The Khanty reflect different ritual actions in the ritual songs: how to conduct the bear feast, how to behave, how to make a sacrifice, all this is fixed in formulas and repeated in the songs many times. Poetic formulas are intertextual and can be employed in every bear song, despite their genre affiliation. Such repetition of ritual practice in songs serves to maintain and transmit the practise over time. All the examples are built on the symmetrical principle. Each verse consists of parallel lines, which means repetition with variation. Thus, the songs describe bear hunting:

[56] *Njaχsum juχi(jə)ḷeḷtaŋ χot njar(ə)æsḷiḷumaḷ(ə),*	[He] sinks the whittled wooden pole into the house,[4]
Ḷanḷaŋ χoti(jə) ḷanḷiem nuriḷateḷ(ə),	Covers the roof of the roofed house,
Njar juχi(jə) ḷeḷtaŋ pur(ə),	[He] binds damp woods to the raft,
Ḷuw nuri(jə)jaḷteḷ(ə),	He puts [it],
Sorum juχi(jə) ḷeḷtaŋ pur(ə),	[He] binds dry woods to the raft,
[61] *Ḷuw nuri(jə)jaḷteḷ(ə).*	He puts [it].
Ḷanḷaŋ χoti(jə) ḷanḷiem æwaḷt,	There, in the roof of the roofed house,
Jis χö(ə) ḷiḷ jir wus(ə) putḷuptateḷ(ə),	[He] drills a hole for breathing as ancient men made,[5]
Ewi χuwija jisaŋ wuśa manem ḷoḷśeḷ	[He] wishes [me] a girl's long years of life and health
Śi ušḷam(ə) kutatni juwmem kutni,	Then, when the time comes,
[66] *Kart turpija turaŋ puškan(ə) suχuptateḷ(ə),*	[He] takes an iron barrel rifle -
Ḷöŋχ puχi(jə) šiwaŋ χot(ə) wertaśataḷ(ə).	[I] wake in a misty god's son house.[6]

<div align="right">(Torum śir joχ ar – Torum people song)</div>

Ritual carcass dressing:

[244] *Njörum woji wet kiwnen uwman eṇtaḷ,*	[He] unbinds, crying, five clasps of the tundra beast,[7]

Njörum woji wet piśen uwman wertaḷ.   [He] makes, crying, five laces of the tundra beast.

    (Taḷ uḷum woj – Winter sleeping beast)

Delivery of the bear to the camp:

[70] *Jem juχi(jə) kuseṇ ontup(ə) wæḷtiḷataḷ(ə).*   [He] lays [me] in a cradle of a twisted bird cherry tree.

    (Torum śir joχ ar – Torum people song)

The sacrifice:

[71] *Kart nörpi(jə) nöraṇ aj put(ə) iχtiḷumaḷ(ə),*   [He] hangs an iron little pot on the bail,
Pori wesnaṇ(ə) ḷapat an χoniḷataḷ(ə),   [He] fills sacrificial seven dishes,
Juχaṇ wænti(jə) šanšeḷ æwaḷt uwiḷumaḷ,   [He] cries on a wood's backs, there -
Puruχpi(jə) ar jaḷi(jə) pojkiḷataḷ(ə)…   [So he] prays many sharp headed yaly…

    (Torum śir joχ ar – Torum people song)

Meeting hunters in a nomad camp or a village:

[342] *Kært teḷaṇ ar najaḷ woχaḷḷajum,*   Women from the whole camp are coming out,

Woš teḷaṇ ar χöjaṇ woχaḷḷajum,   Men from the whole town are coming out,

Jiṇki saχ tarnieḷ manem töteḷ,   [They] are bringing to me a handful of purifying water,

Ḷonśi saχ tarnieḷ manem töteḷ,   [They] are bringing to me a handful of purifying snow,

Joḷ tut kušaṇ još keratḷajum…   [They] are surrounding [me] with a smouldering fire in the hands…

    (Taḷ uḷum woj – Winter sleeping beast)

Conducting the bear feast:

[305] *Araṇpija ḷapat χatḷaḷ ḷiw omsteḷ(ə)…*   They spend seven days full of songs…

    (Torum śir joχ ar – Torum people song)

[312] *Ḷor ḷænti(jə) sijup χot(ə) wertaśateḷ(ə),*   [They] create a house with voices of lake ducks,

As ḷænti(jə) sijup χot(ə) wertaśateḷ(ə).   [They] create a house with voices of lake geese.

    (Torum śir joχ ar – Torum people song)

[358] *Ewi njaχaṇ kašaṇ χot wertaśateḷ,*   [They] create a jolly house with laughing girls,

Puχ njaχaṇ kašaṇ χoteḷ wertaśateḷ.   [They] create a jolly house with laughing boys.

    (Taḷ uḷum woj – Winter sleeping beast)

The example of how to conduct the bear feast can be found in the *Polum Torum ar (*The song of Polum Torum), which runs: "[…] the myth of the origin of the bear and the bear feast. This song is a model, an etalon of conducting the feast." (Moldanov 2004: 7)

Depicting the elements of nature in a stylised form, a man of traditional culture reproduces reality by means of art. Due to this, the natural, on the one hand, is introduced into the human sphere; on the other hand, by being frequently repeated, it is magically fixed in reality: the songs reflect the sequence of the seasons, the time of day, the surrounding nature, the terrain, the events of the sacred history, the actions that a person must perform in certain situations and much more.

The seasons follow each other in the bear songs. Therefore, all the songs are divided into spring, autumn, summer and winter songs. The songs of a particular time of year are performed on their own day. People start to sing about the season in which the bear feast takes place (ibid.: 6). In this way the periodicity of time cycles is reproduced:

[106, 158] *Torum tow χö(jə) pelkaḷa(jə) muj(ə) katḷi(jə) iaḷmal(ə)*

[He] turns to the side of a spring Torum man

(*Taḷ uḷum woj* – Winter sleeping beast)

[12] *Xöḷum uχpi(jə) šaṇkaṇ sæj weriḷataḷ*

[He] creates three-headed hot summer
(*Tut ḷewum Mosum* – Fire eaten Nazym)

[271] *Neḷum sus χö(jə) peḷkala ḷuw juwant(ə)jaḷmaḷ*

[He] becomes a man of a full autumn
(*Kew peḷak ar* – The song of a stone side)

[21] *Taḷ šoχtaṇa χuw nuwija muj(ə) kari(jə)jaḷmaḷ(ə)*

[He] turns to the light side of the prolonged winter

(*Kew peḷak ar* – The song of a stone side)

The same episodes appear in the song of Polum Torum. This song describes the life of a deity, *Piti woj mil punmaṇa wön wort(ə)* (The great wort in the black beast's hat), the way he lives in his forest, the way the seasons replace each other and the way the surrounding nature changes. Repeated many times, these episodes create an image of a steady way of life.

On the other hand, natural phenomena are mythologised. Each area appears as a possession of a certain deity. The songs always refer to the important sacred sites. Thus the song *Tut ḷewum Mosum* (Fire eaten Nazym) mentions a "dog town", a sacred place of *Kušet jem iki*:

[65] *Niwaḷsot kuśi pelkaḷ wön wort,*
Ikem omsum
Wænt ḷöŋχi teḷaṇ awat,
Śitem wantem.

The side of the great wort with eighty dogs,
By [this] man occupied
Terrain, full of wood deities,
This [I] saw.

The bear songs are inseparably connected with the terrain. It is sufficient to visit the places a song is devoted to just once for it to become clear how realistic traditional Khanty art is. Performing a song at the feast is equal to a kind of a journey through the sacred places and the invitation of supernatural creatures to participate in the event.

Repeating the most important mythological concepts, describing sacred places, etc. in songs is the way to fix reality, to keep it intact, to preserve the existing balance. Thus traditional culture focuses on the primary states. For example, experiencing events of the sacred history in the ritual, reproducing the initial time is the main purpose of the rite. This is evidenced by Mircea Eliade (1994: 48): "Every religious holiday, any time of the liturgy is a reproduction in the present of some sacred event, happened in the mythological past, in 'the beginning'."

Sigmund Freud pondered on the nature of the repeat. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he relates repetition to the pleasure principle and the way of its achieving, through instinct.

> But how is a predicate of being 'instinctual' related to the compulsion to repeat? At this point we cannot escape a suspicion that we have come upon the track of a universal attribute of instincts […]. It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it in another way, the expression of the inertia in organic life. (Freud 1961: 30)

"The conservative nature of the living" fully characterises the nature of traditional culture, which first of all aims to repeat prior states and maintain experience. Freud, taking into account the regressive nature of instincts, considers the most important instinct to be the aspiration of the animate nature to the inanimate one, i.e. to death (as a restoration of the status quo). But analysing the character of traditional culture, we come to the opposite. Traditional culture focuses on repetition, on preserving the old, prior order, on reproducing the surrounding world and nature not from the instinct of death, but from the desire to preserve an existing way of life, to maintain life itself. This is also the question of what culture sees in its beginning. Drawing upon images from nature around them, and reproducing these by means of various arts, traditional culture copies them, repeats them by different means, seeking to maintain and extend their existence. This is surely opposite to Freud's principle, the instinct of life.[8]

Thus we come to the idea of the ecological compatibility of traditional culture. In many traditional cultures rituals are called to restore or maintain the existing order, to harmonise relations between man and nature. The bear feast is this type of ritual. It is intended to revive the bear, to preserve the population of this fur-bearing animal: according to traditional beliefs, lifting up a bear's soul to his father *Numi Torum* helps him to reincarnate. This means that in traditional culture the mechanisms of preserving not only the culture, but also the environment can be found, and this is traditional cultural ecology. The same has been noted by Mihály Hoppál, who reflected upon "eco-animism", which is called to protect the environment. Indeed, the experience of traditional cultures can be a valuable message for modern civilisation, because traditional beliefs are "a message that has been serving to the protection of the environment from the most ancient times up until today" (Hoppál 2007: 26).

Traditional culture is strikingly integrated. We believe that this integrity is mediated by "inclusion of its creator into the universe" (Isakova 2001: 18). The principle of repetition pervades all aspects of traditional culture and is rooted in the rhythms of nature and space. We believe that the study of rhythm allows us to see the unity that lies at the essence of cultures.

1 All text cited in the article are recorded in Kazym village, Khanty-Mansi Autonomus Okrug, in 2002 from Petr Ivanovich Sengepov. The examples are taken from the manuscript "Kazym Khanty Bear Feast", which is to be published in an academic 60-volume series *Monuments of Folklore of Siberia and the Far East*. The author of this paper is a co-translator of the lyrics and the editor of the translation into Russian. The texts are cited with the permission of the manuscript's author Moldanov. The numbers of verses in the middle column show the sequence of formulas in the songs. The song title is specified in parentheses after the example. In some examples we have also saved some of the comments made by the author of the manuscript T. Moldanov.

2 All illustrations are by the author of the paper.

3 Text in the broad sense of the word.

4 That is the way to detect if there is a bear in the den. If he is in, he seizes the pole.

5 Thereby the hunter prepares a hole, through which he is going to make a shot.

6 This is a steady formula meaning that an animal is already dead.

7 The bear's skin is called a "fur coat" and the first cuts are called "clasps unbind" in the taboo register.

8 The aspiration to life is manifested in Khanty culture, albeit via the notion of reincarnation.

S O U R C E S

Manuscript "Kazym Khanty Bear Feast" by Timofei Moldanov.

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