

HYBRIDITY IN A WESTERN SIBERIAN BEAR CEREMONY*

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ABSTRACT

Hybridity is often discussed in connection with the postcolonial condition. The cultural revival of the Khanty bear ceremony in Western Siberia could be a perfect example. It is on one hand a key representation of local Indigenous ontology and on the other has become a token in cultural heritage preservation by state actors and a cultural commodity for local tourism and media outlets. Indigenous activists struggle against the loss of authenticity with ideas of purism and scholars identifying the amalgamation of Indigenous ritual elements with Christian ideas and inventions of tradition on the other hand. I argue that the perception of original purity of elements that develop into hybrid forms in the colonial and postcolonial context is somewhat misleading. Instead, I propose that we look at hybridity and purity as intertwined dialectical aspects of cultural politics with a multiplicity of voices and perspectives and negotiated relations at several levels.

KEYWORDS: bear ceremony • Khanty • perspectivism • paternalism • extractivism

INTRODUCTION

I was invited to document a bear ceremony in 2016 on the Trom'yogan River among the Eastern Khanty in Western Siberia. It was the first of such celebration at this river after many years and happened in the context of new attempts to revive the ritual (*Khänty Yasäñ* 2016). Only very few ritual specialists and bearers of knowledge for this ceremony are alive at the moment. (Balzer 1999; Glavatskaya 2005; 2010; Rud' 2007; Moldanova 2016; Csepregi 2019; Balalaeva 2019; Karchina 2020; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022)

The Khanty are an Indigenous people living in the middle and lower Ob River region of Western Siberia as reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen in the taiga and forest tundra. Today the degree of urbanisation among them is growing together with tendencies of assimilation into the mainstream culture of Russian society. Khanty activists are striving for cultural revival and the preservation of Indigenous rights. Margin-

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alisation of the Khanty culture could be considered a result of infrastructural violence by the fast expanding extractive industries of the oil and gas sector, but is also of historical attempts of the Russian Imperial and the Soviet state to integrate the region and its inhabitants politically, economically and ideologically in their empires (Lázár et al. 1997; Martynova 1998; Jordan 2003; Wiget and Balalaeva 2011; 2014; Novikova 2014; Dudeck 2015a; Nagy 2018; 2020; Perevalova 2019).

Those who initiated the invitation¹ made clear that the ritual would follow not only Eastern Khanty tradition, but also included performers, singers and dancers from the Northern Khanty,² with distinct tradition and dialect. The two largely endogamic Khanty groups (Sokolova 1976) did not usually celebrate the ceremony together (cf. for the relationship between Eastern and Northern Khanty traditions Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). Research partners³ pointed towards signs of innovation in form and content and I observed representatives of cultural institutions, state authorities, the media and foreign scholars as active participants in the ritual. Circumstances made it clear that the event represented a mixture of diverse regional elements as well as traditions and innovations from diverse sources – being in this way a perfect hybrid creation in the postcolonial context. On the other hand, I observed discussions among the Khanty and even conflicts around influences considered alien and measures to be taken in order to keep the ritual genuine and free of elements that would contradict its original character and challenge its authenticity.

I encountered the usual paradox, i.e. cultural practices always demonstrate diverse influences and historical change while at the same time changes and influence from outside being regarded as potential threats to the authenticity and efficacy of the ritual. The literature on the bear ritual and even more so the public discourse speaks about the need to preserve the ritual because of the urgent threat of its disappearance (Moldanov 2020; Gogoleva and Gogoleva 2021). There seems to be an urgent need to safeguard it from becoming an ornamental element of public cultural events, serving as entertainment for the representatives of the dominant urban and Russian culture of migrant oil workers who would like to consume it as an exotic commodity (cf. Sántha and Safonova 2011; Dudeck 2014; Shanina 2019). As my research partner Agrafena Semënovna Sopochnina (Pesikova) explained, this will be possible if not only the original context of environmental relations expressed in the ritual is preserved, but also the cultural sovereignty of the Khanty community (FM 2016). The political context of an authoritarian regime, of advancing environmental destruction by the oil industry, growing urbanisation and the spread of new communication technologies and an education system that neglects traditional pedagogy are conditions challenging such cultural difference and autonomy.

The use of the resources of state cultural institutions, research infrastructure, the assistance of allied scientists and political mechanisms of protecting ‘cultural heritage’ can be seen in the attempts of cultural activists such as Timofey Alekseyevich Moldanov (see more at OUIPIIRa; *Bear Games*) among the Kayzm Khanty, the YAOUN-YAKH Yugan Khanty Community Association (see the official YAOUN-YAKH website) and Svetlana Popova (OUIPIIRb) among the Mansi to find a way to reconcile hybridity with cultural purism (Moldanov 1999; Popova 2015; 2017; 2018; Lukina 2000; Golovnev et al. 2016; Lukina and Popova 2020; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). The critique of the legitimacy and authenticity of such attempts has not been silenced among the Khanty, although neither is it expressed publicly.⁴ Yet, I consider these attempts worthy of analysis, not to

decide if they are successful but to make the complicated negotiations and principles of today's cultural activism among the Khanty understandable.

The main question is therefore how the organisers of and participants in the event deal with the hybridity of the ritual and how they discuss and evaluate it. Where did they employ ideas of purism in order to safeguard the ritual? How can different forms of hybridity be seen as a threat or a precondition for the preservation of the ritual and its meanings.

History of Research

As one of the main big carnivores in the Holarctic realm the brown bear shares the same ecological niches as humans. Bear ritualism appears all over the northern hemisphere. The basis for the bear ceremony is the social relationship between humans and bears (Hallowell 1926; Findeisen 1941; Vasil'yev 1948; Paulson 1964; 1965; Paproth 1976; Kwon 1999; Sokolova 2002; 2009). As an example, I will speak here about the bear ceremony among the Ob-Ugrians, i.e. the Khanty and Mansi peoples, in the Western Siberian forest zone.⁵

The Khanty inhabit this environment with small-scale reindeer herding (Kerezsi 1997; Wiget and Balalaeva 2011; Dudeck 2014). The typical settlement structure consists of up to four seasonal settlements of one or a few related families who keep herds of a few dozen up to several hundred reindeer. The abundance of waterbodies in the Western Siberian lowlands provide plenty of fish and forested areas serve as hunting grounds. A mosaic of forested areas, open marshlands and waterways allow for a transhumance between different reindeer pastures during the seasons. This obliges cohabitation with the brown bear, who finds plenty of diverse food in this landscape. Usually the brown bear avoids contact with humans and only in spring, when it is easy for them to hunt new-born reindeer, does it become a predator for the reindeer herds.

According to the Khanty, bears follow particular ethics in their relationship with humans. They know the human settlements and they are able to hear and understand human language. The use of taboo language before a bear hunt is usually explained with this ability to hear, which exceeds that of humans by far. The bear knows that it should not attack humans, limit predation in spring to a few calves and avoid frightening his or her human neighbours. Such knowledge and unwritten contract of peaceful coexistence is transferred between generations in the bears' population according to the Khanty. Bears are not hunted because of the risk of emptying an area and therefore opening it up to 'foreign' bears, who might lack the appropriate knowledge and contract with the local human community (Rud' 2007; Nagy 2017; Dudeck 2018; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022).

Performers consider the Eastern Khanty bear ceremony to belong to a ritual complex that all Ob-Ugrians celebrate (with certain local differences). Early ethnographic and historical sources mention the veneration of the bear in Western Siberia, but rarely refer to evidence from the eastern groups of Khanty as the focus of research was on the Northern Khanty in the lower Ob region (Gondatti 1888; Yadrintsev 1890; Kharuzin 1898a; 1898b; Kannisto 1906; 1938; Kálmán 1963; Bakró-Nagy 1979; Bartens 1986; Schmidt 1988; 1989a; Baulo 2016). Questions relating to potential hybridity in the ritual

complex were discussed in the literature exclusively in order to reveal the diverse origins of elements as well as the influence of different traditions on the historical formation of the ritual (Gondatti 1888; Mitusova 1926; Chernetsov 1939; 1968; Tschernjetzow 1974; Gemuyev 1985; Lambert 2008; 2010a; Popova 2018; Balalaeva 2019; Lukina and Popova 2020; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022).

The descriptions of the Eastern Khanty bear ceremonial complex are far less detailed than descriptions of the ritual among the Northern Khanty. The earliest source is Kustaa Fredrik Karjalainen, who took part in a bear feast on January 10, 1901 near Surgut and collected texts of bear feast songs among the Eastern Khanty (Karjalainen 1927; 1983; Vértes 1976; Csepregi 2019; 2021). During the Soviet period Raisa Pavlovna Mitusova witnessed a bear ceremony on September 3, 1924 at the Agan River Khanty settlement of Yaur-Yaun-Pugol (Mitusova 1926; 1929; Karapetova and Kitova 2006); and Mikhail Bonifat'yevich Shatilov (1931) provides his informant Yegor Stepanovich Prasin's description of such a ceremony in the settlement of Ogort-Yukh-pugol on the Vakh River. A Russian researcher E. M. Titarenko collected oral information at the Yugan River (Lukina 2010: 148–154; Lukina and Popova 2020). One of the most valuable sources on the Eastern Khanty bear ceremony is the film *Sons of Torum* by Estonian filmmaker Lennart Meri, filmed in September 1985 and August 1988 at the settlement of the Tylchiny family at the Vat-Yaun river mouth on the Agan River (Meri 1989). Two monographies focusing on material from the Yugan River Khanty by Peter Jordan (2003: 115–123) and Andrew Wiget and Olga Balalaeva (2011) provide some material from the post-Soviet period. The Finnish musicologist Jarkko Niemi and Hungarian linguist Márta Csepregi published Eastern Khanty bear feast songs (Csepregi 1997; 2019; Niemi 2001). During fieldwork performed from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day Wiget and Balalaeva witnessed the biggest number of bear feast performances among the Eastern Khanty, mainly performed by representatives of the Yugan River Khanty. Wiget and Balalaeva recently published an article with an overview of the initial results of analysis of the recordings they made (Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). Work on the transcription and translation of the recorded folklore is still underway (more details at the project homepage, see ELOKA). None of these publications aims to provide a complete description of the ceremonial complex, rather they shed light on particular aspects. It serves nevertheless as important material for comparison and allows us to see the particular features of the material collected in 2016 at the Trom'yogan River.

The Khanty consider the bear to be the personification of a deity and a totemic animal for some of the patrilineal kinship groups of the Ob-Ugrian people (Kharuzin 1898a; 1898b; Perevalova and Karacharov 2006; Popova 2017; Grinevich 2020; Lukina and Popova 2020; Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). Apart from being an ancestor, the bear is integrated into the pantheon, being considered one of the sons of the heavenly upper god Torum, who was punished for misbehaviour and sent to earth to live in the forest and share the environment with humans and other animals (Shmidt 1989a; Gemuyev 1992; 2000; Moldanov 1999; Kulemzin et al. 2000). The bear is considered a moral authority executing the will of his father and is considered to punish people if they violate customary law (Kharuzin 1898a; 1898b; Lambert 2010b; Perevalova 2013). The oath on the bear's paw is one famous example, as people consider the bear would punish a person giving a false oath. The bear is allowed to get his share from the reindeer herd, especially in springtime after waking up in his den at around the calving period. He

should only be hunted if he attacks humans, breaks into the dwellings of the humans or destroys storage houses.⁶

Khanty interlocutors such as Agrafena Sopochina (FM 2016) describe a functional logic behind such mutual adaptation and negotiated balance between avoidance of contact and killing. Only old or ailing bears might collect insufficient reserves for the winter, wake up too early in spring in search of food and become dangerous to humans. Hunters discovering the traces of such bears will hunt them down. Bears known to have killed humans are treated differently and deprived of honourable rites by hunters.

The need to honour the totemic animal, to provide a rite of passage for the bear in order to return its soul to the heavenly father and to celebrate a reconciliation ceremony to honour and entertain the divine guest are the main motivation for the feast. The bear feast is part of a whole ceremonial complex that does not start with the bear hunt, and does not end with consuming bear meat and deposition of its remains. The bear feast encompasses complex forms of interaction with the bear, including stories and myth, a certain way of addressing him and ritual behaviour, when moving in shared environments. Bear hunting is accompanied by language taboos and particular taboos on relations between women and men. The bear killing and transfer of its body to the human settlement are symbolically and ritually transformed into an invitation to become a guest in the community of the one who celebrates. Apart from the hunting party and their relatives, a wider range of human guests are often invited, as well as non-humans. The content and structure of the Ob-Ugrian bear ceremony are well described in the ethnographic literature (Schmidt 1989a; Lukina 1990; Moldanov 1999; Popova 2017; Moldanova 2016).

The feast celebrated after the hunt to honour the bear consist of different performances, songs, dances and theatrical scenes. Many of them are playful and humorous and are based on the mimetic ability of the performers and the idea of human perspectivism. Men take the roles of diverse beings, male and female humans, deities, animals, even body parts of the bear (see Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). There are no other props needed than birch bark masks and wooden staffs to perform a broad variety of theatrical sketches, songs and dances. In certain scenes the performers wear particular clothing and put on particular protective elements – gloves and headgear, a belt, sometimes a ribbon around the neck, headscarves.⁷

Traditional hunting cultures are based on the hunter's knowledge of animal behaviour, his mimetic skills to simulate the perception of the environment and motivations to act from the animals' point of view (Willerslev 2004; Ingold 2015; Oehler 2016; Leete 2017a; Brandišauskas 2018; Simonova 2018). These skills and knowledge are based on concepts that emphasise commonalities between human and animal ways of sensing and abilities to act and to know, but also on an awareness of differences. The Khanty perceive the bear as surpassing them in certain abilities, although obviously inferior in others (Lukina 2010: 148–153). They believe in his ability to listen and understand the human language and are aware of striking similarity in his anatomy. His meat is consumed, but treated with great care. His bodily remains are buried in special storage houses above the ground or under the water and ritual activities that ensure the return of his soul to his father (Jordan 2003; Wiget and Balalaeva 2011; 2022). His head is either deposited in particular places or becomes a sacred object for veneration as a protector in the house of the hunter or in sacred storage nearby (Wiget and Balalaeva 2022). The

events of the hunt are memorised in marks left on trees in the forest and also next to the grave of the bear hunter.⁸ The paraphernalia of the bear ceremony, the four-edged memorial staff with symbols to mark the performances, and the masks and other items of the feast, are stored at sacred places in elevated storage houses.

The bear ceremony can be considered a performance that expresses in condensed form the general relationship of the Khanty with their environment and with non-human beings. It stresses both the difference and the affinity of the bear and the human community, transforms the dead bear into a divine protector and establishes a long-lasting relationship between the hunter and the prey, as well as between the humans and the non-human spiritual beings. The ceremony becomes a place where a worldview is preserved, a place that is silenced in the public sphere in Russia's Western Siberian oil province by the more powerful discourse of extractivism (Wilson and Stammler 2016; Ivanova and Stammler 2017; Dudeck et al. 2021; Vaté and Eidson 2021). The hegemonic view of the majority of oil workers is one of domination over the environment, views on predators as a threat and risk to human wellbeing, as an object of protection and preservation, or as trophies a valuable proof of the social status and prestige of urban hunters (Puchkovskiy 2021). The Khanty ways of cohabitation with predators is under pressure from these mainly urban discourses that demand management and control, not a balanced negotiated coexistence.

The Revival of the Khanty Bear Ceremony

I will provide some historical background in order to introduce the colonial context in which today's Khanty bear ceremonies and the activism to preserve and revive them are embedded. While the bear ceremony did not receive much attention from the missionaries converting the Khanty from the 18th century in the Russian Empire (Glavatskaya 2005; 2021), the early Soviet period showed an ambivalence towards the tradition of the bear ceremonies. State policies addressing Indigenous peoples were influenced by scholars who did research in the North, ethnographers prominent among them (as described in Forsyth 1992; see also Slezkine 1991). Early Soviet politics were full of anticolonial rhetoric and therefore paid special attention to the Indigenous groups inhabiting the northern peripheries (Siegl and Rießler 2015; Liarskaya 2018). German linguist Wolfgang Steinitz, who worked at the Institute of the People of the North and collected Khanty folklore could serve as an example. He was convinced that the bear ceremony was of high cultural value and should be preserved despite the social and political changes inherent in the new Soviet system (Steinitz 1951). There was also an opposite opinion, hostile towards the bear ceremony, which turned out to become dominant. This claimed the bear ceremony was part of religious tradition that was hindering the process of political and economic change and integration of the Indigenous people in the new Soviet political system and economy (Slezkine 1994: 227). Shamans were declared enemies and persecuted and their cultural practices blamed (not without reason) for fostering resistance to the changes attempted by the Soviets (Balzer 1999; Yernykhova 2003; Perevalova 2016). The opposition between the ideological place of nature as a force to be conquered according to Soviet ideology, and the complex and negotiated social relationship with the environment reflected in Indigenous rituals,

should not have gone unnoticed (even if people like Steinitz might have ignored this). On a practical level feasting was blamed for distracting workers in the newly created state-controlled enterprises from disciplined work (Slezkine 1994). Nevertheless, the tradition never disappeared completely even if evidence for its existence in historical sources is rare. In some communities of the Eastern Khanty nobody remembers having seen such a ceremony, and some informants doubt that it ever existed (Glavatskaya 2005; Rud' 2007; Shanina 2019). In the 1980s Soviet-trained Khanty intelligentsia stated the need for rehabilitation of their culture and ethnic belonging more and more publicly (Balzer 1999). Cultural revitalisation went hand in hand with protests against the ruthless expansion of oil extraction infrastructure. Awareness of Indigenous rights, primarily land and resource rights, was growing. The environmental ethics of the Khanty, based on an episteme opposed to the Cartesian worldview of objectification underlying Soviet, but also in general Western, notions of progress as increasing mastery over nature and effectiveness in extracting benefit, were clearly enshrined in the forest lifestyle and the associated ritual practices and oral traditions (Barkalaja 2002). Land rights, persistence of small-scale reindeer herding on ancestral lands and the revival of cultural practices and first of all religious ones, seemed for the Khanty intelligentsia the epitome of future survival. Among the Eastern Khanty this is very much visible in the fight to get land rights acknowledged but also in the preservation of individual and collective sacrificial rituals (Barkalaja 1997; 1999; Wiget and Balalaeva 2001; Rud' 2016a; 2016b). Solidarity from abroad, mainly from other Finno-Ugric countries, and collaboration with researchers played an important role (Csepregi 2009; Moldanova 2015). In Meri's film an ecological critique already goes along with demands for respect for a distinctive culture and an anticolonial undertone. Nevertheless, the ceremonial practice of the bear feast became rare in the last decades of the 20th century, until the Ob-Ugrian intelligentsia started their revival activities in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Moldanova 2016). First of all, Moldanov, who holds a PhD in folkloristics and comes from a family of known ritual specialists and performers, custodians of an important sacred shrine on the Kazym River, engaged in activities to document and simultaneously revive the ceremonial tradition from the beginning of the 1990s (Moldanov 1999). He received state support, archived materials, published texts and organised the community based and state-sponsored feasts. Working in a state cultural institution in the regional capital of Khanty-Mansiysk he succeeded in getting the Bear ceremony on the list of the region's intangible cultural heritage (Ryndina et al. 2015; Yeliseyeva 2016). Of course, heritage discourse fits into the dominant paternalist orientation of state cultural politics, putting responsibility for the protection of a cultural object into the hands of the state (Shanina 2019). It also implies preservation according to scientifically legitimated standards, guaranteeing the authenticity of the heritage. The third factor would be the safeguarding of cultural sovereignty over the ritual as a particular expression of ethnic cultural identity. Negotiation between all these factors became the task of the activists and performers, as well as of the cultural institutions involved as organisers and sponsors. Scientific researchers, musicologists, ethnographers, visual anthropologists all became actors joining these efforts as proclaimed allies of the Khanty activists, but surely also pursuing their own agendas (Mazur 1997; Vasylenko [Mazur] 2016; Grinevich 2020). In the following, I will explore this relationships and negotiations on the example of the *pupi jek*⁹ ceremony performed 2016 near the village of Russkinskaya on the Trom'yogan River.

The material to be discussed here is based on information that I collected during the event and in discussion with diverse participants before, during and shortly afterwards in spring 2016. The ceremony took place from 21st to 24th March some kilometres north of the village of Russkinskaya in the Surgut rayon of the Khanty-Mansiyskiy autonomous okrug, on the shores of the Trom'yogan River in a wooden cabin at the Kar-Tokhi holiday camp built by an oil and gas company for the local school administration.

The question of hybridity will be discussed on three levels. First the scenario of the event and the composition of diverse performances that we¹⁰ not only recorded, but also discussed intensely after the ceremony with participants Agrafena Semënovna Sepochina (Pesikova), Sergey Vasil'yevich Kechimov, Semën Grigor'yevich Rynkov and Lyudmila Nikolayevna Kayukova. The scenario was the first suspect of hybridity as it was clear from the beginning that representatives of two distinct and largely endogamic cultural-linguistic groups of Khanty were taking part in the ritual. I was also aware that the Eastern Khanty had a feeling of cultural dominance by the Northern Khanty, whose dialect was the basis of the written standard of Khanty language introduced by the Soviets and whose members are overrepresented among the Khanty intelligentsia. This brings a second aspect into the discussion, the relationship between the various participants, not only the Northern and Eastern Khanty, but also diverse non-Khanty guests who took part for various reasons and with various motivations. Apart from human participants I was introduced to non-human actors who influence the performance of the ritual to a serious degree. This brings up the third aspect, the rules of behaviour and the ethics that the participants observed. The character of the ceremony as an event characterised by regulated and structured behaviour makes the question of ethics an especially important one.

To discuss these three aspects, I will now look at the arenas of interaction and describe the forms of hybridity, potential ideas of purity and ways of negotiating during the event. These arenas are defined by the interaction of certain categories of participant, whose forms of negotiation could be observed and were discussed during the event. I was involved in many of them myself, both directly and indirectly, by being an ally of the organisers, an interlocutor or medium who reached an external audience through the camera.

Interaction of External Agents with the Khanty Organisers

In early 2016 I received two independent invitations from two different people to visit the bear ceremony in Trom'yogan. Both were representatives of the Khanty intelligentsia whom I had known at that time for almost 23 years. The Khanty ethnographer and activist Timofey Moldanov, who is for sure the most prominent person behind the cultural activities aimed at preserving the bear feast traditions, knew that I was quite familiar with the forest lifestyle of the Khanty, and personally with some of the ritual specialists and had spent long time with the reindeer herders in their settlements. He asked if I could provide good quality audio and video equipment to record the ceremony. The other person was Agrafena Sepochina, with whom I have collaborated

since the 1990s as well as supporting her political activism. She knew that I planned to document the oral history of Meri's film materials from the 1980s. She had participated in the film as a consultant and interpreter for Meri and knew a lot about past events. She suggested recording a contemporary event instead of reminiscences of the past. I suggested engaging the artist Antti Tenetz as a cameraman, with whom I had worked before among the Khanty and who had access to good equipment. Time was short and I did not have any funding, but Sopochnina and Moldanov ensured shelter and access and the consent of the ritual specialists. Two of them, Sergey Kechimov and Danil Pokachev, I already knew from previous fieldwork. Agrafena Sopochnina introduced me to the third of them, Semën Rynkov, shortly before the event in the village of Russkinskaya. All of them are known in their community for their extraordinary level of cultural competence and their leading role during collective sacrifices. They were involved in the renewal of regular sacrifices (see VSR) at an important sacred place devoted to the deity *As-ty-iki*, 'the god of the Ob River', near the confluence of the River Irtysh and Ob at the mouth of the Ob-tributary Nazym (Rud' 2016a: 140). All three live with their families in traditional territories by small scale reindeer herding, fishing and hunting in the vicinity of oil fields in the Surgut region.

Sergey Kechimov is a well-known performer of songs and myth and the custodian of the sacred place at lake Imlor (Wiget and Balalaeva 1997; 2022; Taagepera 1999; Cronshaw 2002; Pesikova 2014; Moldanova 2016; Rud' 2016b; Dudeck et al. 2017; Leete 2017b; Balalaeva 2019; de Chambourg 2019). Kechimov is an outspoken critique of the activities of the oil industry, especially the frequent oil leaks in the vicinity of the small forest settlement on which he lives, at the public hearings around sacred lake Numto and has faced persecution from the oil workers and the state (Korniienko 2016). As he told me, he had already planned to perform a *pupi jek* at the Trom'yogan for some time, inspired by his own participation in the bear ceremonies he visited at the Kazym River and his contact with Timofey Moldanov (FM 2016: Russkinskaya).

Danil Pokachev is less publicly and internationally known, but not less important in the Khanty community at the Trom'yogan River as a performer of oral tradition and a ritual specialist. Over the last years he has performed public ceremonies together with Sergey Kechimov, such as at the region's competitions in traditional Khanty dug-out boats, where they perform sacrifices for the deity of the water initiated by Timofey Moldanov (Shanina 2019). Semën Rynkov is rarely seen at public events but is another informal religious leader of the Trom'yogan Khanty. He collaborated with Agrafena Sopochnina in collecting folklore and took part in linguistic research in Novosibirsk (*Khänty Yasän* 2014).

As I learned in conversations with community members who were not at the event, not all members of the Khanty community acknowledge and respect the competencies of the ritual specialists (FM 2016: Russkinskaya; see also Shanina 2019). On the one hand the Eastern Khanty are currently experiencing a major religious split into followers of the religious traditions of their ancestors, and converts to two forms of Protestantism, Pentecostalism and Baptism. However, even among some of the so-called 'pagans'¹¹ in the community some accused the organisers of the *pupi jek* of profanation and selling out tradition (see also Shanina 2019). One of the elders later complained of being criticised by neighbours and socially isolated, as some of the community members didn't respected his engagement in the 2016 event. Ritual critique is an important

part of any ritual activity in the community, as I learned during my fieldwork at collective sacrifices (Dudeck 2014: 182). It points to the precarious character of communication with the spiritual world. Often after rituals concern is voiced that the ritual deviated from the tradition or taboos were violated. Misfortune is interpreted as being the result of such violations and determines the need for divination, further ritual activities and purist attitudes towards the rituals. The alternative of conversion to Protestantism is new as a source, or consequence, of such criticism. A key role in the protestant critique is played by erotic elements and the eroticised humour of the performances, which are degraded as “pornography”. The display of such forms of eroticism in the local museum in Russkinskaya in visual form in a video installation, especially during humorous scenes when male performers make symbolic attacks on female participants with a special wooden staff, raised such criticism. (Shanina 2019) Here the protestant moral feeling is in accord with moral discourse in Russian society that contrasts traditionality against an imagined eroticised and sexually permissive other. The museum display is perceived as detached from and outside of the limited ritual context of the ceremony and thus also embarrassing for some Khanty viewers from the perspective of traditional ethics, which forbids any display of sexuality outside the context of the *pupi jek*.

Not only were Khanty activists and the ritual specialists involved in the organisation but various state organisations also sent representatives. Most of them I knew from previous fieldwork (Dudeck 2014) during which I visited the local A. P. Yadroshnikov Museum of Nature and Men in Russkinskaya, the Surgut local and natural history museum and the Torum Maa Museum in the regional capital of Khanty-Mansiysk. Erika Petrovna Surgutskova, whom I also knew already, was the representative of the latter museum and present throughout the event. Under the guidance of Timofey Moldanov her museum organised a project to support the revival and preservation of the bear ceremonies called *The Bear in the Traditions of the Indigenous Peoples of the North* starting in 2014, and including the Ethnoacademy of the Ob-Ugrians from 2016 to support Khanty education activists and teach bear ceremony traditions to young people. State sponsorship of the event, planned since summer 2015, came from the regional cultural budget and was channelled through this museum (Shanina 2019). As Surgutskova said (FM 2016: Russkinskaya), she and also the state cultural bureaucrats were quite aware that they should not interfere in defining the content of the event. They perceived their presence as potentially disturbing the authenticity of the Indigenous ritual and understood that they should submit themselves to the guidance of the Khanty organisers (Shanina 2019). On the other hand, the state sponsorship and the organisation of the infrastructure of the event was in the hands of these state cultural organisations. Timofey Moldanov, who worked at the Torum Maa Museum, had negotiated the conditions. The acknowledgement of his competence and leadership gave the Museum symbolic capital. State institutions deliberately refraining from their authoritative role in defining the form of cultural expression of ethnic and religious difference and diversity seems to be a rare example in the post-Soviet space. The principle of non-interference by state cultural institutions is motivated by the concept of ‘living culture’ as cultural heritage is considered able to be preserved only in a functioning traditional ethnic community (Shanina 2019). According to this logic state cultural institutions might be a disturbance to this imagined presence of an ideal precolonial ethno-

graphic past. Khanty activists and ritual specialists promote this version, securing their autonomy in important decisions on such cultural events.

An important aspect is the non-public character of the event with strictly regulated access, making it an internal Khanty event but at the same time allowing for controlled publicity through state institutions and media. Non-Indigenous organisers and state bureaucrats were aware that the Khanty performed rituals in secrecy for decades. The limited publicity controlled by Khanty activists could be interpreted as a required condition of the trust required from their side to perform an authentic ritual. That such trust might not have been gained easily can be understood given the quite recent experiences of persecution for performing religious ceremonies in public on the Trom'yogan, as at the beginning of the 1990s with the beating up of ritual specialists including Sergey Kechimov (Taagepera 1999: 12; Balzer 1999: 153).

Another crucial organisation to secure the state sponsorship, along with support like transport for the event, was the Organisational and Methodical Centre of the Surgut Rayon, a municipal state cultural institution represented by Valentina Terent'yeva Shadrina, who was working in the organisation's department of ethnography and historical-cultural heritage. Being of Mansi origin and simultaneously the head of the Surgut city branch of *Spaseniye Yugry*, the state-controlled Association of the Indigenous Peoples in Surgut not far from the village of Russkinskaya, Valentina was communicating on the local level with the involved participants and organisers. She took care of the props and ritual clothing through the village cultural centre, prepared lists of participants allowed to travel to Kar-Tokhi, secured transport and entry permits to the oil-fields that one had to cross to get to Kar-Tokhi, organised accommodation and food, heating materials and fuel for the electric generator. Her municipal state organisation was the binding link between the cultural institutions in the regional capital (Torum-Maa and the department of culture) and the local organisers (Shanina 2019). As an Indigenous bureaucrat she took over the function of intermediary between the ritual specialists and the state cultural institution. Through her organisation and with state finances Valentina organised the purchase of a sacrificial reindeer, reindeer hides to sit on, headscarves, and paid for the musical instrument, the birch bark masks and even for the head of the bear (Shanina 2019: 66–68).

The Khanty use state institutions to receive finances from a paternalist state which they keep at distance when it comes to particular decisions considered internal. The publicly demonstrated involvement in such a patron–client relationship seems the basis for the sponsorship of the state institutions, who refrain from direct interference. The role of negotiation between the internal decision making on rituals by Khanty elders and the claim of patronage by outside actors is taken over by representatives of Khanty intelligentsia who are employees of state institutions, belong to state controlled NGOs, are close allies of the ritual specialists – or simultaneously have several of these roles.

While some participants from the Surgut museum of local and natural history were present only as passive observers along with some other state officials from the Surgut administration and media representatives, the local A. P. Yadroshnikov Museum of Nature and Men in Russkinskaya played a more prominent role. The museum was represented by the present director and daughter of the founder of the museum, Tat'yana Aleksandrovna Yadroshnikova. In a divination ritual¹² the bear decided to be moved after the ceremony to the local museum in a similar way in which she might

have become the protector of a Khanty family home. The museum already has a display of sacred storage for the bear's remains and a bear's head, representing the way the Khanty venerate the protector spirit, to whom visitors, but also community members, occasionally bring offerings, mainly in form of coins and sweets, but in the case of locals also headscarves and cloth. This reverses the objectification of cultural items accessed to the museum, the detachment of things from their social and everyday context, and recontextualises them by bringing social and ritual life into the museum. This integrates the museum into the sacred landscape of the Khanty, into the network of sacred places, storage houses and rituals spaces. The museum underwent hybridisation and became a sacred space. I suppose that the bear paraphernalia and the bear's head will be involved in further ritual activity in or outside the museum. This act strengthens the status of the givers of the objects within a reciprocity relationship between the cultural specialists and the museum leadership, who try to secure its competence and legitimacy in representing local culture (cf. Liarskaya and Kushkova 2011).

The participation of members of the Indigenous youth organisation was clearly a sign of the logic of state cultural politics. This part of civil society closely connected with the state bureaucracy and finances and being under certain ideological control were, like the generation to be trained in the traditions, the symbolic recipients of the event. Interestingly the participation of the organisation's members differed considerably. The head of the organisation, a young Khanty man from the regional capital, showed little interest in the performances and was absent from the ceremony most of the time. For him the event was an official duty and he chose to hang out with friends in a neighbouring hut. Some other young members of the organisation, Ruslan Bogordayev, Dmitriy Tarlin and Aleksandr Aypin, took their participation seriously. They took on the role of ritual dancers, even if they did not feel competent to perform songs in Khanty.

The Integration of Human and Non-Human Perspectives

The bear ceremony is part of the social relationship the Khanty maintain with various beings in the environment. The feast itself is only part of a whole complex of rituals. The women, who go berry picking, address the bear in the forest with polite words and some put berries on the path in the wish that their paths might not cross. The ceremony becomes necessary in the human–bear relationship when their paths cross and the bear is killed. Subsequently he/she is brought to the human settlement in order to be treated as an honourable guest. The main aspects of the social relationship between the bear and human society are obvious in keeping a distance and the potentiality of both aggression and hospitality. These aspects are performed in the ceremony of the bear feast as well. Distance is marked by a taboo language that avoids the direct verbal denomination of everything associated with the bear hunt, the belongings of the bear and its body and spiritual essence. In addition, in the physical contact with the bear during the ceremony, precautions are present in form of clothing and masks. The performers cover particular body parts during different parts of the ceremony. In discussions with the performers I became aware that Khanty clothing and footwear¹³ were considered preferable. Criticism was expressed by some elders of female, especially non-Khanty, participants for wearing non-Khanty clothing, particularly trousers. The performers put on additional

particular elements of clothing when performing. The most obvious of such were the birch bark masks and two types of overgarment, a caftan made of colourful material and a closed hooded overcoat made of brown felt. During certain songs the performers from the Trom'yogan area put on headscarves and a belt, gloves and in some special cases also a piece of cloth around the neck. Additionally, sometimes a knife or axe was placed on the ground behind the performer as a protective device. The concept of protective distancing was explained by Agrafena Sopochina and Semën Rynkov using the Khanty concept of *rüw* (FM 2016: Russkinskaya; cf. Steinitz 1966: 1289–1290; Pesikova 2006: 29; Rud' 2013: 195). This is an invisible volatile substance surrounding people similar to an aura, according to the Khanty. The term also describes the substance or energy that emanates from offerings, especially food, and reaches the divine recipients. In everyday language the word means something like steam or heat, also breath, but in the spiritual realm it seems to denote the sphere around a person or a thing that should be treated with care and might be potentially harmful if it mixes with others without measures of precaution. The protective measures, as our Khanty interlocutors explained, are meant to be not only signs of respect, but also separate the *rüw* of the human person from that of a spiritual being or object in order to prevent harm.¹⁴ With the spiritual concept of *rüw* Agrafena Sopochina and Semën Rynkov explained one of the principles of Khanty ethics towards spiritual beings and things. Ritual behaviour thus meant respecting the potential benefit, but also harm of human and non-human *rüw* to mix, come close or be exchanged. I might suggest that it denotes the medium through which relationships are negotiated, and the substance that might make them beneficial, but also risky, for both sides.

The ambivalence of relationships between different beings, between humans, between humans and non-humans and also between animals, deities etc., towards mutual benefit or conflict is expressed in the ceremony at different levels. Especially important are performances that play with or symbolically transgress the fine line between friendliness and aggression. The bear hunt, the killing of the bear followed by acts of hospitality and respect was represented in a theatrical play of the bear hunt itself on the second day of the feast, full of humorous acts including erotic allusions. Approaching the audience, and especially women, with the wooden staffs that are the main prop for the sketches and aiming symbolically between their legs clearly had sexual connotations and provoked laughter. Several songs contained erotic allusions, sometimes about tabooed sexual relationships between relatives. At the end of the ceremony we saw the widespread scene of the crane attacking the bear in revenge for the destruction of the cranes nest by the bear.¹⁵ All this is embedded in the feast as an act of hospitality, where entertainment, food and joy should please the guests and construct social relations of reciprocity. The term for the performances, first of all sacred songs, is *läñälatəp*, which is a noun formed from the verb *läñ-* [enter], referring to the fact that deities and other spiritual beings enter the feast with these songs to participate in the ceremony (Csepregi 2019: 48).¹⁶ Some of the myth of the deities are sung in the first person indicating the voice of the gods or goddesses speaking through the performer. There are obligatory songs dedicated to the bear (*pupi arəγ*) telling his myth, as well as songs that wake him and put him to sleep on each one of the several days of the ceremony. There are also other songs, described as incantations to particular deities, songs telling myths or epics (*tarnəñ arəγ*), and some songs about particular animals (*wəḵəγ*

arəγ) (Csepregi 2021: 350).¹⁷ As Agrafena Sopochina told us, one of the performers dared to revive sacred songs that were forgotten in the community, by reconstructing them using the content of corresponding mythical prose. To frame this as an active creation of songs is, according to the Khanty concept of performance, misleading. The ethics of singing implies respect for the agency that is located outside the performer. A Kazym elder explained in a story told about his own father, a well-known singer, that despite the fact that performers might compete over who performs which song and how many songs, there is a fine line to not announcing one's intention or will to sing a particular song. He told the story of a man who boasted at the bear ceremony that he would perform a particular song. After starting to sing he began to stammer and was unable to finish the song several times. His premature death shortly thereafter was perceived as punishment by spiritual forces for breaking the taboo. (FM 2021: reindeer herding settlement near the village of Kazym) Csepregi (1997) cites a Khanty elder explaining that only religious specialists chosen by spiritual forces might be able to perform sacred songs at the bear ceremony, pointing to the concept of spiritual agency in performance. She also describes how the sister of this elder could sing certain of the bear feast songs that her late father used to perform after he expressed his wish that she might do so in a dream. Another case of external agency was told by Enn Säde and Mart Meri, members of Meri's Estonian expedition (FM 2015: Tallinn). The main singer Ivan Stepanovich Sopochin, father of the elder mentioned before, could not stop to sing after the bear feast on the way back home in a motor boat because songs approached him demanding to be performed. As musicologist Katalin Lázár (1997: 278) stresses, songs are a divine method of communication, they make language understandable for the non-human beings, who are the primary audience of bear feast songs. I could summarise by saying that the Khanty do not deny that performers have agency, skill and a particular gift, but clearly emphasise the agency of spiritual forces as primary in the performance of the songs.

The feast started with a reindeer sacrifice in honour of the bear, where prayers and offerings are sent to the deities including the bear. Sacrifices and offerings are a gift exchange with the spiritual beings who partake of the slaughtered meat consumed raw and cooked, and of other bought food and prepared dishes and drinks. Offerings in form of big pieces of cloth were presented next to the bear's head on his cradle¹⁸ during prayers near the slaughtered animal and the sacrificial fire. They were then deposited in a nearby sacred grove on the riverbank. The feast was celebrated not only together with the bear, but also with deities, who were invited to visit the feast during the sacrificial ceremony and were performed in songs, where they approach the feasting community through the singers.

Kazym River and Trom'yogan River Traditions Interacting

As our Khanty interlocutors, first of all Agrafena Sopochina (Eastern Khanty) and Timofey Moldanov (Northern Khanty), explained, Trom'yogan and Kazym traditions had to be mixed on this particular occasion because of the lack of Eastern Khanty performers. Later, two of our Eastern Khanty interlocutors, Sergey Kechimov and Agrafena Sopochina, explained in an interview (FM 2016: Russkinskaya) that they would like to

avoid such a compromise in the future. There are several potential singers and performers alive among the Eastern Khanty who could be involved in the ceremony. As I learned about the 1985 and 1988 bear ceremonies at the Agan River, some of them might have been hesitant to perform the ritual in public, some have converted to Protestantism and consider the ceremony a forbidden religious practice, and some would like to receive a decent honorarium for their performance (FM 2016: Russkinskaya and Kogalym).

The two performing guests from the Kazym River: Timofey Moldanov and Andrey Aleksandrovich Ernykhov clearly performed a greatest number of scenes and songs during the three-day event. Ernykhov sang 48 songs and Moldanov sang and took part in 46 performances. Of the Eastern Khanty performers, male singers Sergey Kechimov, Danil Pokachev and Semën Rynkov, and women performers Nadezhda Ivanovna Pokacheva, Agrafena Sopochina, Svetlana Mikhaylovna Sengepova and Lyudmila Kayukova performed in total 75 songs. Some songs had mixed participants from the Kazym and the Trom'yogan. Several of Andrey Ernykhov's songs were accompanied with dances by Trom'yogan women, one time even with the participation of Zsófia Schön, a linguist from Munich. Likewise, I was asked to accompany four men in a song who swung their arms hooked by the little finger, the singer Timofey Moldanov in the middle.

During the ritual itself the male performers from Kazym and the Trom'yogan were constantly negotiating and discussing the order of the scenes and songs and the particular day to have them performed. I got the impression that they tried to find the right balance between scenes from both traditions. Wiget and Balalaeva (2022) point to the general bipartite structure of the performances, which could be detected in this case as well with a concentration of deity songs and dances from the Kazym on the last night. On the basis of the Eastern Khanty performances it is hard to judge such a bipartite division. The women's performances were clearly concentrated on the second day when most of the external guests and media representatives had left.

A point of discussion, as I learned in a later interview (FM 2016: Russkinskaya) and in some conversation with the Eastern Khanty women who participated, was the question of whether they would perform, and if so, at what time and in which genres. Agrafena Sopochina stated that the Kazym tradition is stricter when it comes to the active participation of women who are only allowed to perform dances. In 2016 women performed slightly over 10% of the scenes, mainly short personal songs, dances and sketches with almost no songs from the *äñälatap* category.

That the discussion had a competitive aspect did not violate ethics as long as the performers didn't announce their individual will to perform a particular song. One participant from the Kazym River told me about a spiritual challenge that he sensed in one of the ritual specialists from the Trom'yogan (FM 2016: Kar-Tokhi). I do not feel competent to evaluate the seriousness of his expression of a 'shamans war' but I sensed competitiveness between the representatives of the two Khanty groups. The main organisers from the Eastern Khanty I spoke to, saw the joint ceremony as a necessary compromise (FM 2016: Russkinskaya). However, the underlying ethical principles of performance praxis, based as it was on negotiated social relations that necessitated balancing distance and contact and respecting non-human agency, did not differ between the two traditions.

Apart from media artist Antti Tenetz and myself, who were invited to document the event by Agrafena Sopochina and Timofey Moldanov, Zsófia Schön was also invited through her closest collaborator Lyudmila Kayukova and joined in with documentation. Despite her awareness of gender taboos in respect to working with genres of bear ceremonial folklore, especially the genre of *лӱηαλταρ*, she was keen to visit the event. Even if she would not be able to work with and publish certain texts, she would get access to linguistic material and contextual knowledge. Agrafena Sopochina had also invited Aleksei Rud', a Russian ethnographer and archaeologist for whom she had experience as a cameraman documenting folklore and ritual practices for several years for her Surgut Khanty folklore archive (Karchina 2020).

We four researchers, Zsófia Schön, Antti Tenetz, Aleksey Rud' and myself, were visiting the event not on behalf of state cultural institutions, who invited all the other non-Khanty, our legitimation to participate was guaranteed only by Agrafena Sopochina, Timofey Moldanov and the ritual specialists. Their authority in conducting the ceremony was not questioned by any of the representatives of the official sponsors and organisers, who just accepted our sudden presence. One official asked for our passports and disappeared with them in order to register us somewhere. Later Zsófia and myself had a short and polite conversation with a German-speaking representative of the Surgut administration, who was interested in our whereabouts and work. I was quite open with him and underlined our long-term acquaintance with the main Khanty organisers. We were slightly concerned that state security organisations might hinder our collaboration with the Khanty, but fortunately did not experience anything in that direction.

There was nevertheless one state official, a representative of the Indigenous peoples herself, who expressed discontent at the participation of "foreigners" and "journalists" and questioned the need to use transport and accommodation resources on them. Her criticism of our presence was disputed by other participants as illegitimate and she dropped the subject. The background for questioning the legitimacy of our inclusion on the guest list, as I learned later, was that many more people from the Khanty village community wanted to participate in the event, but were not allowed to do so.

It was important for us to emphasise that we did not take part in the event out of curiosity or scientific interest. I never expressed the wish to do research on the religious traditions of the Khanty and would not have asked the Khanty to provide access to the bear ceremony. It was important that our presence had been explicitly requested: we were there on the basis of our long-term acquaintance with Khanty culture and language. It was therefore clear that we had no agenda other than to document the ritual according to the wishes and principles of our Khanty hosts.

To summarise their guiding advices before the ritual I would like to highlight two aspects. The first was that we pay maximum attention to the leading ritual specialists and accept their orders without question. When they would ask us to turn off the camera or other devices, we should immediately do so. The other request concerned the position of the camera. They suggested putting one camera on the back wall to let it record the entire event continuously from start to finish. This turned out to be impossible as the digital cameras had a limit of roughly half an hour running time. The compromise was to position one camera next to the head of the bear in front of the back wall

and to film as continuously as possible. The Khanty obviously envisioned the camera mimicking a panoptic view from the perspective of the bear. A similar panoptic view from the perspective of non-humans was chosen for filming the sacrifice at the start of the ceremony with a drone getting a bird's-eye view. For the second camera, the Khanty suggested any position among the human participants. Antti Tenetz therefore filmed from different angles throughout the audience.

Through the work of the recording devices and the discussion with our Khanty hosts, we learned about the organisation and structure of the ritual space and the directionality of the actions and could draw conclusions about appropriate positions and movements for the camera as requested by the Khanty. The presence and work of the camera itself was legitimised during an initial divination ritual, where the bear was asked if she would agree with the recording of the event. The camera and cameramen were included in the rituals of purification such as fumigation and throwing snow. All actions involving the audience involved us behind the camera as well, for example greeting the bear, kissing his forehead, taking part in the prayers, giving offerings to the bear and being fed with ritual food during several performances. We had to take part in communication, paying respect and entering the reciprocal relationships, in communal emotional and bodily experiences and learning the practices of negotiation, balancing avoidance and closeness. A detached perspective was not possible, but the involvement provided the access to the cultural context and revealed the ethics underlying the ceremony. We were invited to build a relationship with the people and non-humans who organise, direct and execute what happens in front of the camera. The camera became part of the social contract that is performed and renewed in the ritual through negotiated relations, mutual obligations, and demonstrations of respect.

Another film team present, documentarist Ol'ga Korniyenko and her cameraman Yevgeni Romanov followed the principles of purely observational cinema and did not share our hybrid approach of documentation and participation. She was invited to produce a film for the museum in the local village of Russkinskaya and refrained from participating, trying to be a mere observer. Her perception of authenticity of the filmed material implied carefully avoiding filming anything she perceived as not Khanty, and she was not happy with our presence at the ceremony. Her aim was a documentary presenting the ritual as purely traditional without foreign disturbance for mainly non-Indigenous visitors to the museum. I was standing or sitting quite often just beside the bear and appeared in her frame, spoiling the 'authenticity' of the footage.

The event was not only documented on camera. There was a parallel and very different form of obligatory and traditional documentation of the ceremony in the form of a wooden tetragonal staff engraved with marks and symbols depicting the event. From time to time different participants, generally the main performers, marked the staff and discussed how many songs, scenes and dances had already been performed.

At the same time Agrafena Sopochina and Lyudmila Kayukova documented each scene in their notebooks in an attempt to reconstruct a written scenario from the actions. Another set of data came from the sound files made of each performance on two sound recorders with internal time and date stamps. Combining these data allowed us to construct a table with an exact timeline of all scenes and songs and notes on content and performers.

Both forms of documentation are parallel and seem not to interact or overlap, indeed the opposite. The first one, the counting staff as a memorial object, serves the Khanty as proof for a legitimate and comprehensive performance of the ceremony. Stored in a sacred place the bear feast staffs serve as evidence that the tradition is preserved and that respect is paid to the bear and the deities. The necessary number of songs were sung and the celebration went on for the necessary number of nights. Certain symbols carved on the sides of the staff might show particularly memorable aspects.¹⁹ However, the number of notches on the staff does not correspond to what the other form of recording would consider an exact number. The logic of the memorial staff provides a more exact measure of the spiritual value of the songs than the number of performances or songs. A similar count was done with the days of the ceremony, which in this case had to be an even number because the festivities honoured a she-bear. The four days of the celebration according to the spiritual count were condensed into three days of the profane count.

Conflict Avoidance with a Local TV Team

The role played by a team from local Surgut TV station TRK Sever on the first day of the event might demonstrate some limits of hybridity from the perspective of the bear ceremony organisers. Along with a number of state bureaucrats, who showed rather limited interest in the bear ceremony, but obviously had to be on the guest list to demonstrate support for the preservation of this element of officially recognised Khanty intangible cultural heritage (see *Reyestr*), a local TV team arrived to produce a short report. With very limited knowledge and ability to understand the event, they were interested in catching elements potentially interesting for an urban non-Indigenous audience. They completely misunderstood the logic of the performance and interpreted it according to European theatre traditions with a clearly divided space between the stage and a passive audience. Without seemingly asking any advice, they were moving freely across the room where the ceremony was being performed, between the performers and the other participants and in front of the bear, placing their tripod where they considered appropriate. Participants were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the bear on the back wall; performances happened in the centre of the semi-circle in front of the bear. The TV crew moved around without paying attention to the fact that the leaders of the ceremony were either silently sitting next to the bear or preparing performances near the door. For them these were obviously just unimportant performers and their silence and lack of authoritative appearance even confirming this impression. I strongly sensed discontent and suppressed anger in the way the ritual specialists were behaving while the TV team was present. When they went out of the hut for a break I ran after them and told them what I sensed. They reacted with anger, questioning the legitimacy of my critique as a foreigner, who did not have the right to tell a local team what to do. A nearby Khanty women came to my aid and started to criticise them too, but I decided to retreat. I complained later to Agrafena Sopochnina that the performers were not prohibiting the TV team from behaving in such an inappropriate way and instead expressing their anger silently. She explained that during the ceremony participants have to observe a strict taboo on any argument or conflict, which was more important for the performers

as the misbehaviour of the TV team. The presence of local TV was also important for the sponsors to present their cultural activities and their own role as supporting Indigenous culture in public.

The Belonging of the Bear

There was a secret kept carefully from almost everybody, especially from state representatives. One of the organisers told me what it was after the ceremony in order that I understand some of the difficulties the organisers had faced. I was told that the real 'hosts' of the bear could not be present at the ceremony because the owner of the gun that killed the bear had not had a valid licence. Usually the person, who 'hosts' the bear takes the seat of honour beside the bear. In the case of the ceremony we documented this place was occupied by one of the elders who lead the ceremony. State legislation regulating the use of hunting weapons in Russia in many respects does not considering the life reality of Indigenous people. Under these circumstances a firearm might be a means of survival needed not only to provide meat, but also for self-defence against predators. Bureaucracy often exploits forest inhabitants as easy victims, fining them for violations of gun safety rules and reporting activity to higher authorities. In our case the hunt was completely legitimate from the point of view of Khanty customary law, but illegal from the point of view of state law. The identity of the hunter could not be revealed, and he had been obliged to be absent from the public event, which was clearly a violation of usual procedure at the bear ceremony. This knowledge was certainly shared only among a limited number of participants. British anthropologist Michel Herzfeld (2016 [1996]; cf. also Steinmüller 2010) says that knowledge of secrets about things, causing condemnation or embarrassment outside the social group, serves to provide cohesion and create complicity characteristic of the notion of cultural intimacy. Such forms of secrecy play an important role in Khanty cultural resilience. To whom the bear would move in the future remained unclear until the end of the ceremony, when in the last session of the divination on the bears head the bear decided where he would wish to reside after the ceremony. According to local Khanty tradition at the Trom'yogan River the bears head might be kept inside the house of the hunter on a shelf on the back wall serving as a protector spirit of that house, to be addressed with prayers and offerings in rituals along with other divine being within the polytheistic pantheon. Unexpectedly the she-bear decided in this case to move to the village museum of Russkinskaya, where all the other ritual paraphernalia were to be kept after the event.

Critique of Extractivism as the 'Other' in Bear Ceremonialism

In an interview recorded on video, Semën Rynkov and his wife Tatyana Alekseyevna Rynkova gave not only a detailed account of Khanty bear hunting traditions, they also used the interview to tell an outside audience the Khanty principles of respect and the consequences of disrespect towards the bear within the shared environment (FM 2016: Kar-Tokhi). The text contains a critique of colonial relations and in particular of the attitudes of urban non-Indigenous hunters, and of violations of the social contract

with bears. The greed and carelessness of the trophy hunters reproduce the approach of the colonial powers interested only in the extraction of resources without establishing reciprocal relations or a negotiated social contract. New forms of Protestantism frighten Semën Rynkov with their logic of rationality and success, which seem to him a worship of “the other side”, meaning the opposite of the ideal of Khanty ritual practices to establish negotiated relations through offerings and sacrifices with diverse non-humans. New media such as the filmed interview become a new part of the ceremony and new ways of education for the younger generation, as well as towards a broader audience demanding recognition and respect for Khanty ontology and rights to ways of living.

I will cite here some passages from the interview with Semën Rynkov from March 23, 2016 in which he contrasts the approach of the Khanty with that of outsiders:

It is known that in the beginning of time the sky god did not designate the bear to be killed. Today things have changed. With people from other countries, you hear in every song and every fairy tale, in every sung word: kill the bear, kill it! But you have to feed it with sacrificial food. According to our custom, you have to keep all the bones, big and small, in a storehouse. You put them in a special storehouse so that no animal or anyone else can desecrate them. [...]

Today in our region Khanty people know it and this summer the Russians in other places and other countries have also realised that the bears have become aggressive. Today, the Khanty already have a hard time, and in addition, the Khanty themselves are hastening their end. Today there are some people, not just anyone, but Khanty people there in the village of Russkinskaya even, from our people, who have changed to another religion and worship the other side. They have become Russians. And Russians have also turned to other faiths. If they consider it necessary to chop up meat with an axe, they do it with an axe. They chop it into small bloody pieces and then eat it that way. They do not cook it and eat it raw. They give the big bones to big animals and the small bones to small animals to eat. So that’s how some of our people are behaving now. [...]

This is what you should do today, this is what the Khanty say, that you should pray and consult the gods so that the Khanty people will be preserved. Lately the bear has not been able to hold back his anger: he attacks Russians and Khanty people indiscriminately and tears them to pieces. The sky god has educated him to be obedient, just as his parents taught him to be obedient, so that he will let things be. If he is as uninhibited again this summer, it will be very difficult. Unfortunately, it is no different. My hope is in the Khanty people. I said, that’s the way it is: they are even coming to town already! If he behaves like this here in the forest, then soon there will be no reindeer or other animals. And he will also attack the Khanty people living in the forest. [...]

The bear, that is, the bear, it is like us, outwardly very similar to the Khanty. Even I have met the bear many times. It is said of the bear that outwardly it looks very much like a living human being. I say it like this in Khanty: if the bear is very aggressive, then his partner, the Khanty, the hunter, is also very angry. His Khanty partner is angry when he is also angry. But to the one who is not angry but has good thoughts, the bear is also like that. He grunts quite loudly when you block the opening to his den in various ways, and attacks the staff when he is angry. One says

to the bear: You, as I speak to you, do not frighten me or attack me. Move calmly and he will stop. All the words that the Khanty speaks to him, he understands. (FM 2016: Kar-Tokhi)

The relationship between the Khanty and the bear is based on their likeness, and on how both are related in a hierarchical relationship with the heavenly father and are linked with each other in a relationship of respect and reciprocity. The outsiders' relationship is characterised by plain aggression and ignorance of the Khanty ways of worship. Outsiders demonstrate disrespect and a lack of any understanding of reciprocity. This causes now drastic change in the behaviour of the bear, but also in the environment at large. Engaging in ritual activity and restoring the order of peaceful coexistence with the bear is for Semën Rynkov a Khanty duty and his only hope. Implicitly the involvement of non-Khanty participants, and the interview he gave together with his wife explaining his view on the bear hunt and the logic behind the ceremonial activities, demonstrates that he hopes to influence the relationship between the outside world and the bear and the environment.

Innovative Performances on the Edges of Tradition

There were two scenes that we can understand as influenced by contemporary social processes ongoing in the Khanty community. One was a humorous theatrical scene staged on the second evening by Agrafena Sopochina in Khanty, presenting a Khanty woman dealing with representatives of the state bureaucracy and the oil companies. In a satirical manner the scene demonstrated how the woman allows herself to be cheated during negotiations for compensations for industrial activities on her land. The scene was meant to ridicule the naivety of women as well as the greed and deceit of bureaucrats and oil company managers. Agrafena Sopochina played all the male roles as well, somehow similar, but reversed from the traditional cross-dressing of the bear feast. She used a chair as a prop putting on it sheets of paper with written titles for the situation or place she was performing. The sketch went beyond the usual bear feast humour and adapted a form of sketch taken from a popular Russian movement called the KVN Club of the Funny and Inventive, originating from a Russian (and formerly Soviet) TV comedy show.

The other scene was a demonstration by Yegor Kelmin of his technique of self-defence called The Bear's Fight (*pupi núu vältap*) or The Bear's Paw (*pupi köt*). He demonstrated movements called, for instance, 'hare', 'wagtail' and 'hit with the bear's paw'. The form of his demonstration has no parallel in the genres of the bear feast. Wrestling is a common element of the bear feast,²⁰ as sports competitions are also a regular element of communal sacrificial ceremonies among the Khanty (Wiget and Balalaeva 2001). But Kelmin did not engage in any fighting or competition, nor were his demonstrations humorous. He explained what he was doing in Russian and received some friendly but critical remarks saying that he could have spoken in Khanty, in which he is fluent as well. It seemed as if his demonstration could have served as an advertisement for a Khanty martial art that he had invented and which was mainly aimed at the urban public. Its presentation in Russian seemed odd as most of the non-Khanty audience had left a day before and underlined the foreignness of this scene. He was also instructed

by the main performers on how to properly address the bear before his performance as if he did not know himself. As this was the only performance that received this reaction I would cautiously assume that I might grasp limit of hybridity that the organisers accept. Especially in comparison with the oil company scene it becomes clear that the innovative content didn't bother the ritual specialists or the Khanty participants, and perhaps not even the deviation from the traditional form of presentation, which was also changed in Sopochina's sketch. Sportive competitions would have a perfect place in the ceremony. What went beyond the traditional ethics of performance was the serious demonstration or even advertisement of individual capabilities without the aim of provoking laughter.

This story demonstrates that punishment might even follow after an expression of a personal intention to demonstrate one's own skills in a particular performance. But no open criticism of his transgression appeared during the ceremony due to the strong taboo on conflict as one of the main ethical rules.

DISCUSSION: SOURCES FOR HYBRIDITY AND NEGOTIATED RELATIONS

The notion of hybridity could be considered to have a racist undertone implying the purity of breeds mixing through cross-breeding of some kind of biological entities, but then also through cultural and other types of element. Such an opposition between pure origins and later mixing is in cultural terms at minimum misleading and illusionary. I consider it therefore not appropriate to take a normative stance here on hybridity, judging the degree of authenticity, Indigenusness, assimilation, preservation, etc. The task of the paper is to look at the ways the actors deal with hybridity and evaluate in what ways they promote or hinder change or innovation. Therefore, I will not concentrate here on the identification of the influences that mix together in hybrid forms, but on the original notion of cultural hybridity stemming from Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 358–360) and looking at the multiplicity of voices in a cultural form.

This can be done only indirectly as hybridity as such was not discussed openly. Instead tradition being preserved and needing protection and support as acknowledged cultural heritage belonging to the Khanty as an Indigenous minority of the region was mentioned (see Shanina 2019). Conflicting notions of tradition and its preservation go mainly unrecognised and publicly unchallenged. Tradition, Khantyness and Indigeneity in general seem to be synonymous as the public discourse (and the Russian legislation as well) put the main emphasis on traditionality instead of other characteristics of Indigenusness. Colonisation and lack of self-determination are silenced in the public discourse in Russia and claims of voluntary integration and state protection of vulnerable small-numbered groups by state policies dominate (Cepinskyte 2019; Sulyandziga and Sulyandziga 2020). In the following part I try to distinguish the different sources of hybridity that determine how the voices that appear in the ritual are welcomed, tolerated, but also criticised and excluded. I also try to characterise the forms of interaction and rules of negotiation establishing the relations in which hybridity appears.

I defined hybridity as the relationship of forces that influence cultural forms in their change or resistance to change. The question is under what circumstances this happens and what streams and forces can be identified. The dialectical interplay of hybridity and purism produces balance between innovation and conservatism in the cultural policies of the actors involved, including their failure to do so in certain cases. The notion of a third space beyond cultural exploitation and assimilation appears to be naïve from such a point of view.

Hybridity always seems the result of an encounter. What interests me here is not so much the encounter of mixing cultural forms, such as ritual elements adopted from orthodox Christianity or the mixture of recording devices as we saw with the memorial staff and the video camera. The encounters here are between diverse agendas and perspectives. In the following I try to single out three principles that I consider are informing hybridity in the Khanty bear ceremony recorded in 2016.

Perspectivism

The main voices speaking to each other in the Khanty bear ceremony are those of the bear and the human community cohabitating with the bear. At the basis of this relationship lies the acknowledgement that not only do they share a common environment, but they also respect each other's existence in a balance of distancing, competing, sharing, ambivalence of hospitality and potential hostility. Both parties are aware of their differences, but also commonalities, despite of an interest in similar resources (reindeer, fish, berries). Both sides understand the same language, even if human need to address the bear in a special song language and the bear the divination ritual to speak directly to the humans. Both understand the same gestures of veneration and respect, the same forms of merrymaking and entertainment. The dances, songs, sketches, prayers, offerings and divination form the ritual language of communication between bears and humans. Both are bound by their subordination under the same heavenly god-father, both have been sent by him to live on the earth and both ensure in the joint ritual that the soul(s) of the bear can return to his father.

In the presence of other non-human guests like deities and animals a similar coexistence of perspective and acknowledgement of difference and commonality is enacted through songs called *läŋälat̄ap*. Again, this is specific ritual language that enables communication and a specific way of performance that includes forms of distancing and protecting the *rüw* of the actors involved. These relationships are negotiated and maintained through offerings and prayers at the beginning and the end of the ceremony with expectations of reciprocal gifts for the humans expressed in incantations.

A difference in perspectives and a simultaneous multiplicity of messages can be detected among the human community. The parallel existence of different messages can be explained using the example of 'fairy tale plots' of certain performed songs. The less knowledgeable listeners understand a story of a fairy tale hero who has to go through difficulties, manages them and through this achieves a lucky ending. The more knowledgeable listeners identify particular deities behind the fairy tale heroes whose social relationships are explained in the story.²¹

Methodologically the perspectivist perception of the Khanty bear ceremony became clear through practical involvement in the event through audio-visual documentation. Sharing authority over the camerawork enabled us to learn about Khanty ideas of the main visual perspectives, but also of the taboos that regulate human ritual behaviour and ways of decision making. I learned how culturally specific forms of showing respect among the Khanty – hospitality rituals, practices of mutuality, reciprocity and negotiation, ideas about entertainment, the acknowledgement of closeness and distance in relationships within the human community and with non-humans – informing the actions of the ritual. The bear ritual can thus be perceived as in line with Clifford Geertz (2003 [1973]) as a model of and a model for appropriate forms of social behaviour. I attempted to build a relationship with the people who organise, direct and execute what happens in front of the camera. I took orientation from understanding how a social contract manifests itself in the ritual through negotiated relations, mutual obligations, and demonstrations of respect.

I have shown that the awareness of the diversity of perspectives of humans and non-humans sharing the environment is expressed, performed and educated in the Khanty bear ritual. In addition to the shared character of the environment, the ability of human and non-human participants to understand the particular form of ritual communication and enter into and maintain a negotiated social relationship is also demonstrated. What causes difference is the place in the environment determined by the heavenly father, the degree of agency, a kind of strength that is expressed in the Khanty concept of *rüw* which distinguishes agents and is also the sources of distancing practices as well as the basis for gift exchange.

Perspectivism requires more than just the ability to put oneself into the shoes of the other; it is more than mimesis or empathy. The Khanty Bear ceremony demonstrates that what the agents coexisting in the environment and engaging in negotiated relationships share is not only a ‘nature’ as a tool and ability to see the world, to act and communicate with each other in a meaningful and understandable way, their mimetic abilities etc., they also share the environment as a social world, as an inhabited space with a multiplicity of obligations in balanced and ambivalent relationships between cooperation and competition, hospitality and hostility, distance and closeness. This first of all requires the ability to acknowledge the existence of a diversity of perspectives. It requires the conviction that others are equally capable of such acknowledgement and are able to enter social relations on the basis of such acknowledgement of difference. It also requires an epistemic mobility that is realised in mimetic performances that are theatrical and partly involve states of enthusiasm if not possession.

Paternalism

Not all actors participate in the ritual with the same amount of agency. Power relations influence the way relations are negotiated. As we have seen, the Khanty perceive their own place in their polytheistic universe as subordinated to the heavenly god and other deities, but also as equally able to establish relationships. Simultaneously they face state power and the economic power of the extractive industries in the colonial relationship. The notion of cultural heritage preservation allows the Khanty to demand support from the state to help safeguard cultural practices. The concept of ‘living culture’ as a vulnerable and fragile but precious object that has to be left exclusively in the hands of

knowledgeable practitioners defend intangible cultural heritage from interference by the cultural institutions of the state. Nevertheless, the state agrees to provide material resources and organised the necessary infrastructure.

Representatives of the Khanty intelligentsia play a key role in negotiating this paternalist relationship that sees a patron voluntarily abstain from interfering in 'internal affairs'. On one hand this is based on a particular concept of lack of agency, which presents Khanty culture as on the verge of extinction, vulnerable and a relic of the past. On the other hand, it includes a particular idea of agency that can only be exercised by insiders who must not be disturbed, like the relationship between an artist and his or her patron. This particular version of the patron–client relationship is embedded in a framework of domination, where autonomy, self-government, land and resource rights are limited by the state and the industry. The cultural sphere remains the last area where, at least on a declarative level, Indigenous cultural rights can be formulated. But a look for instance at the realisation of language rights makes the marginal position of the Khanty in this region obvious.

This relationship of domination is normalised to such a degree in public discourse that nevertheless the sponsors invited a local TV team and representatives of state institutions, who obviously had a merely superficial interest in an exotic ritual, instead of members of the local Khanty community. The condescending manner of one Russian woman, whisperingly questioning the trustworthiness of the divination ritual with the bear, typical of the patronising attitude of well-meaning museum workers towards Indigenous informants, was not met with protest or even explanation. The Khanty silently stopped the divination ritual, exchanged the diviner and started again, so as not to offend either the bear or the Russian women.

I would identify two main strategies in the way Khanty deal with the patron: distancing, and negotiating reciprocity through an exchange of gifts and favours. Loyalty and refraining from open conflict might not be the least important among these favours. The state's attempt to use the cultural practices of the Khanty to promote the cultural image of the region in order that it be attractive as a 'brand' is met by the Khanty with attempts to integrate state cultural institutions like local museums into their sacred landscape, as we have seen with the emergence of places of veneration inside ethnographic exhibitions. Paternalism is a form of domination of the other that establishes hierarchies, while emphasising the need of the dominated to be safeguarded and conserved. This automatically leads to forms of hybridisation in which the dominance of the patron is expressed together with the vulnerability of an other who has to be preserved and deserves support. Perhaps I could speak of a Khanty strategy to find compromises in the situation of dominant paternalism and to make attempts to educate outsiders in order to make them respect the alternative forms of power represented in the ritual, which requests recognition and respect like the bear and the divine beings of the Khanty pantheon. Similar propagation of Khanty alternative spiritual powers in the public sphere and in face of state power we can see in ritual offerings done at public events and the reclaiming of lost sacrificial places as at the confluence of the Rivers Ob and Irtysh.

Extractivism

The third source of hybridity in the case of the bear ceremony is the ideology of extractivism. What I found at the ceremony was resistance to cultural assimilation as 'collateral damage' of the expanding extractive industries and their infrastructural violence. As a form of resistance, I see cultural activism as strengthening alternative values and expressing practices opposed to the ideology of extractivism, which Khanty face on various levels. First of all, in the form of resource extraction on their land associated with the destruction of reindeer pastures, fishing and hunting grounds, sacred places, settlements and cemeteries. They also experience it in forms of cultural exploitation and misappropriation and in the form of exoticisation by popular media, the tourism industry and in cultural production by state-run institutions. The example of the TV crew filming fragments of the first day of the ceremony, as well as the protest of certain Khanty against screening of a documentary about the ceremony in the museum, serve as examples. Nevertheless, the Khanty remained silent on such cases of extractivist attitudes not least because of the strong taboo on conflict during the ceremony. Semën Rynkov expressed the only explicit verbal critique of extractivism in his interview cited above (FM 2016: Kar-Tokhi) when he contrasted the extractivist attitudes of urban hunters with the negotiated and reciprocal relationships of the Khanty with the bear.

Many satirical scenes in the bear ritual build on ridiculing greed, egoism, short-sightedness and violations of the rules of reciprocity inside Khanty society. The only moment when this critique was addressed towards outsiders, and explicitly oil workers and state bureaucrats, was in Agrafena Sopochina's sketch. She is known for her uncompromising critique of rights violations by authorities and industries and her sketch was obviously a sign that she considers such critique well placed in the moral order promoted in humorous scenes.

Summarising, I would say that extractivism was present through implicit criticism, which became explicit only in two innovative forms of expression that made clear that the social and moral principles represented in the ritual are opposed to its logic. In this way extractivism not only contributed to increased ritual activity, palpable for several years among the Eastern Khanty in terms of renewed and increased sacrificial activities, but also in the way hybrid forms appear in the ceremony.

Negotiated Relations

For the Khanty it is important not only to understand the perspectives of the others but to build appropriate relationships that are negotiated based on the right balance of avoidance and communication, based on the right forms of reciprocity and the right and often ritualised forms of interaction.

Forms of Reciprocity

The main principle of establishing social relations is organised by forms of mutuality and exchange. The most obvious form is offerings given to the bear and to deities with the demand they provide in exchange support and protection, maintain fruitful relationships, refrain from attacks and avoid conflict. The prayers during the sacrifice before the feast and at the very end of the feast express such wishes verbally as well as

in song incantations performed during the ceremony. In contrast the divination rituals are in the form of receiving wishes and demands from the bear. Interestingly one well-known Khanty form of divination, a shamanic ritual performed with a drum, usually at night, is not, and should not be, as one elder told us, performed at the bear feast (FM 2014; 2016: forest settlement near the city of Kogalym). Shamanic trance is a form of divination performed after sacrificial rituals at sacred places belonging to divine beings.

The exchange also includes other elements of the feast such as the redistribution of food including the performers repeatedly feeding the participants with ritually prepared bread in the form of little reindeer, or the distribution of cedar nuts from a basket offered to the bear in the same circular way starting from the bear and going around clockwise. Here we see the bear in the role of a redistributor of things offered to him, which are consumed during the feast. To stay awake and share entertainment and joy is considered obligatory for the participants. Anyone who falls asleep during the hours-long performances might be teased and their face smeared with charcoal.

The relationship with the state exercised in the sponsorship of the cultural institutions follows the rules of reciprocity, and the Khanty manage quite well to convince this patron to follow their ideas. The same principle is valid for the work of researchers, who have to assure the community that they will submit their work according to the ethics of the Khanty as told by the performers. They promised not to publish material without consultation and that they will share audio and video with activists and performers for their educational aims. These relations are purely based on trust and verbal agreement.

In a more abstract way the whole ceremonial cycle could also be seen as a reciprocal exchange of receiving and giving, as the bear must descend from heaven as a punishment from his father and human society assists his soul in returning in order to receive security and wellbeing.

The Precarity of Balancing Distance and Aggression

Apart from this obvious element of hospitality and mutual benefit I also recognised a variety of distancing and avoidance practices and taboos. Not all of them are clearly defined and known to everybody as the discussion about the gender taboos of particular performances demonstrated (FM 2016: Kar-Tokhi). The aim of this paper is not to provide a full picture of the diverse rules for prohibitions. I just emphasise how the logic behind them was explained by the notion of *rüw*, a sphere, invisible substance or energy surrounding beings and things the mixing of which might cause harm. On the other hand, their careful mixing or transfer might also have a positive effect, as in the *rüw* of offerings that are consumed by the spiritual beings.

These measures of precaution and the logic behind risk assessment show how easily the social relationship between different categories of beings can become their opposite. Purification rituals by smoke and by throwing snow at the participants can be understood as part of the risk management. Additionally, I would name the divination rituals conducted by lifting the bears table and asking her questions. The divination was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the ceremony and was an important part of decision making legitimised by the highest authority present, the bear itself.

Another way to avoid harm was to switch off the camera and other recording devices during performances in order not to violate rules of secrecy. The need to do so was discussed and agreed upon quite early on in preliminary talks with Agrafena Sopochna

and later also with Timofey Moldanov and Sergey Kechimov (FM 2016: Russkinskaya). There was no question that we would have switched the camera and sound recorder off at the slightest hint this was required. Prior to stating we asked if the organisers could give us hints as to which parts might be too secret or sensitive to be filmed. They refused to give any detailed information and recommended that we pay attention to the orders of the main performers. We waited through the whole ritual for these moments but they never came. Instead of explicit orders to stop filming, several incidents pointed to the fact that forces outside the control of the performers, or 'bad luck', played the role of decision maker. We were able to cope with the breakdown of the electricity generator on the second night and improvised lightening that added drama to the visual appearance of the performances. But the lack of electricity made it impossible to make instant copies of all filmed material and at a later point some footage of the last night that we had not yet copied was overwritten with an interview and accidentally deleted. It was a relief for us to think that the spiritual authorities took the decision on which performances should be depicted on camera into their own hands.

As another instrument of risk management, I would also interpret the avoidance of open conflict during the ritual. There is a kind of Olympic peace as long as the feast lasts. Punishment for misbehaviour, as with the TV team, should not be exercised by the human participants but is left for the justice of the spiritual beings. On the other hand, abstaining from conflict is constantly tested and underlined by acts of symbolic and humorous aggression that nobody is allowed to take offence at.

Role of Humour and Ritual Forms of Transgression

The role of humour and carnivalesque elements in the bear feast is obvious, but not easy to understand. I hesitate to follow the hypothesis of Timofey Moldanov, who declares humour a marker dividing a profane part of the feast from a serious and sacred part (Moldanov and Sidorova 2010: 147). Such clear division is not observable in the ritual we documented and seems to be based on a concept of sacredness that is not compatible with laughter. It exceeds the limit of this paper to elaborate on my doubts that laughter does not have a sacred meaning in the Khanty bear ceremony. I agree with Moldanov upon the important function of humour and how it allows for criticism of human behaviour when talking about it is otherwise tabooed. Humour is a safe way to express the potential causes of aggression. In such a playful manner the moral and social borders can be enacted, demonstrated and learned in order to avoid violation. Mechanisms of shame are an important part of everyday Khanty culture and relegate the expression and transmission of knowledge of important moral borders, especially in the sphere of gender and sexuality. Joint laughter produces affirmation of such moral borders and also the social cohesion of the group, which experiences coherent emotional reactions. Humour allows one to change perspectives and recognise oneself in the performances of others, as well as learning not to be offended by the symbolic and humorous aggressions of the performers.

A new taboo in this particular event seems to have been the almost complete prohibition of alcohol. We know from other sources that the consumption of alcohol was often an almost indispensable part of any feasting among the Khanty since Russians introduced strong alcohol through trade (Rud' 2021: 226). Alcohol might have had a similar function to ritual humour, allow people to overcome inhibitions and feelings of

shame in the case of transgressive behaviour. Alcohol works as a social catalyst enabling the reconfiguration of social relations (Dudeck 2015b), although consumed in excess might endanger the appropriate performance of the ceremony. In our case only at the very end during the last offering rites after a prayer was one bottle of vodka opened and went in a circle among the participants for several rounds until it was empty. The consumption of alcohol was not a complete taboo, but strictly limited in quantity and in the time available to consume it. I have observed a changing attitude towards alcohol consumption in the religious revival movement among the Eastern Khanty for some years. On the one hand this parallels a nation-wide trend in the official promotion of a healthy lifestyle and refusal of certain stereotypes of alcohol consumption in everyday Russian life. On the other hand, it is strongly associated with the successful abstinence of those Khanty who converted to denominations of Protestantism. An increasingly negative attitude towards alcohol among those Khanty who have very negative opinions on conversion to Protestantism can be understood as a reaction towards this 'power' that new believers have and proof that followers of the traditional religion are capable of the same. Nevertheless, alcohol is a further topic in traditional songs and not all participants abstained from its excessive consumption during the feast. The one person among the performers who engaged privately in heavy drinking was judged very negatively by many participants. This negative evaluation was not expressed openly and even the attempt to mark his face with charcoal, when he fell asleep on the spot, was stopped so as not to provoke a conflict. A lot of participants were quite angry at this man but the taboo on open conflict during the ceremony, as well as his quite high status in the community, prevented his exclusion.

CONCLUSION

Instead of trying to decide which concepts of authenticity, purism and hybridity are appropriate, this article tries to look at them as dialectic and strategies designed to keep the ritual alive and preserve its meaningfulness as a genuinely Khanty ceremony. Instead of denouncing it as a product of colonial domination or separating original purity and postcolonial hybridity I take both as contemporary and functioning. Nevertheless, I follow the organisers attempts to find the fine line between elements of the ceremony that contradicted its spirit, admixtures or ways of hybridity that caused contestation among the participants, and on the other hand recent introductions and innovations that were considered appropriate. By detecting principles that might have served the ritual specialists and organisers to distinguish between them, and potential underlying ideas of purism, I came to an understanding of their ideas of cultural difference in the colonial situation in which they are situated. Thus, I use hybridity not as an analytical instrument, but as a vehicle to look at the existing cultural amalgamation and the agency of cultural specialists and intellectuals to employ hybridisations as well as purism, without even speaking about them.

If hybridity is meant to be an admixture or coexistence of power and decision making on the form and content of the cultural performance, one could see that the organisers tried to minimise certain forms of hybridity. They managed to domesticate the forces that were hybridising the event. They made certain borders of hybridisation clear: the misbehaviour of the TV team, the successful limitation of interference

from state cultural institutions (which voluntarily abstained from decision on any of the organisational questions), the ethical borders of innovative performances (reached with the 'advertisement' of individual skills), but also the wish to perform the event in future in a form other than that of mixed local traditions. In certain cases, this means accepting compromises that might not be repeated when conditions are more favourable. Here attempts at purism will underline the authentic preservation of traditions and ban threatening influences. In other cases, this meant the successful integration of new elements, new meaning and innovations in form and content. This was the case with the introduction of new content in satirical sketches, the reconstruction of mythological songs from prose texts, the participation of sponsorship from state cultural institutions, the alcohol ban during most parts of the ceremony, the use of new mnemonic devices in form of the audio-visual recording of performances along with old ones based on very different principles (the memorial staff), the integration of new forms of transmission of knowledge including those based on scientific methods. There is also the continuation of hybridity on the level of different perspectives, polyphony of involved actors and their submission under the common ethics of feasting. The most important part I identified was reciprocity, visible for instance in the sharing of food, the exchange of offerings and participation in sacrifices, as well as the sharing of recorded materials. As important as the confirmation of kinship and social relations is relationality, which often reflected a well negotiated balance of potential conflict and fruitful coexistence based on the model of the human–bear relationship. This is all based on a notion of a shared environment and management of the balance between contact and distance, between courage and caution, between risk-taking and avoidance, between awareness of similarity and difference, all regulating the ethics of sharing and cohabitation.

The bear feast is at the focus of Khanty cultural preservation and revival activities at the present time as Khanty cultural practices are conceived as endangered by industrial development and urbanisation in the Western Siberian oil province where the Khanty live. What they also perceive as a threat is the extractivist approach of the media and cultural institutions of mainstream society, which is interested in representations of otherness for identity building in order to domesticate it and change it into a digestible and entertaining element of regional identity, or exoticise it as a justification of paternalist or colonialist attitudes towards a less developed, vulnerable other, who has to make way for progress and the legitimate interests of a dominant culture and might survive only as souvenirs or ornaments. I demonstrated how the Khanty preserve their particular ways of interacting in a shared environment and in a ritual complex that contains a huge variety of performance of relationship building between diverse actors. At the very centre stands the relationship between the brown bear and humans, with performances of this relationship among humans, deities and animals arranged around it. I also speak about the social differences between humans – group relations, kinship, power structures in human society. Three terms could serve to describe the most important aspects of these interactions. First a notion of *perspectivism* based on mutuality and sharing between humans and non-humans in the environment with its awareness of difference, as well as the rights to differences and the mutual awareness of these differences. Perspectivist ideas inform not only human–animal relations and religious concepts, but also political and economic relations between different human actors and communities. Secondly, *relationality* means an awareness of relatedness and the negoti-

ated character of relations, which are not given but have to be established, maintained, celebrated. And third, *reciprocity* expressing the importance of mutual exchange in order to keep relations between actors durable, balanced and fruitful. The basis for this is the acknowledgement of differences in perspectives as well as commonality.

The bear feast can be considered a mirror in which not only all the aspects of human–bear interspecies relations are reflected, but also social relations in general. Almost all possible members of the ‘commonwealth’ of the shared environment come together and take part in the feast. Social relations with ‘significant others’, partners of interaction that always remain ambivalent, can be identified as sources of hybridity. These relations are thematised in the bear ritual on different social levels with the different perspectives producing hybridity and polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense (1981: 358). The first level would be the Khanty society encompassing gender relations, relations between exogamic patrilineages within the endogamic territorial groups, between the deceased ancestors and the living. The second are human relations with the animal world including the most significant one in the ceremony, the bear, but also other mammals, birds and fish species. The third group is spiritual or divine beings inhabiting the worlds around, of which only deities were present as visitors of the ceremony. A fourth group could be associated with modernity, the institutions of the colonial state, for example trade, bureaucracy, religious systems imposed from the outside, i.e. instruments of power and authority. These include oil companies, tourists, journalism and the scientific community. Here we have patrons as well as allies, and also hybrid actors who belong to several categories, such as Khanty bureaucrats or scholars who are at the same time activists. What the bear ceremony of 2016 demonstrated was the principles of bear ceremony ethics and how these ethics show the limits of the ceremony to integrate hybridity, safeguarded and propagated by a core of organisers consisting of Khanty activists and elders. The taboo of openly expressing discontent is itself part of these ethics, a challenge to the leading ritual specialists who have to use indirect and sometimes innovative means to resist the ideology of extractivism, which appears in many aspects to oppose the values of Khanty social ethics.

NOTES

1 Khanty scholars and cultural activists Timofey Moldanov and Agrafena Sopochnina, with whom the author has been a friend since the mid-1990s, not only invited the author but also shared their deep knowledge of the ceremony with me and other invited researchers, especially Sopochnina, who was already involved as an expert and interpreter in the documentation of the Eastern Khanty Bear Ceremony in 1985 and 1988 through the invitation of Estonian ethnographer Lennart Meri. Sopochnina was in constant conversation before, during and after the bear feast and facilitated conversations with main performers Sergey Kechimov, Danil Pokachev and Semën Rynkov.

2 In the following I use the terms Eastern Khanty and Northern Khanty to distinguish between the culturally and linguistically distinct subgroups of the Khanty. More specifically, I speak about the Kazym dialect subgroup of the Northern Khanty and the Surgut dialect subgroup of the Eastern Khanty.

3 I prefer here the term research partners instead of informants to underline the collaborative character of the work.

4 Khanty not involved in such activism express in conversations doubt about the sincerity and unselfishness of such activism, especially when outsiders and state institutions are involved. Similar criticism of community members was recorded from the community of the Khanty at the Trom'yogan by Yulia Shanina (2019) in her Master's thesis.

5 The closely linguistically and culturally related peoples of the Khanty and Mansi share a common history and sense of kinship. In the scientific literature as well as in the ethnopolitical discourse they are referred to as Ob-Ugrians in reference to their belonging to the Ob River and the Ugric branches of the Finno-Ugric languages. I will use this term in the following to denominate both groups together.

6 See the interview with Semën Rynkov (FM 2016). These rules were stressed by elders like Yuri Vella (a Forest Nenets reindeer herder, poet and activist living among the Eastern Khanty; see Dudeck 2014; 2018; Toulouze and Niglas 2019), Agrafena Sopochina, Iosif Sopochin, Sergey Kechimov, Danil Pokachev (FM 2014–2016).

7 The dances of deities, specially dressed and adorned with precious pelts of fox, sable, ermine, etc., according to the specific deity and covering their face with a headscarf are a characteristic of the Northern Khanty and Mansi version of the ceremony and were only performed by performers from the Kazym and Ob-River Khanty in our case (see Wiget and Balalaeva 2022).

8 I observed such marks at the Agan River (FM 2014: Var'yogan village); the same is reported by Jordan (2003: 118).

9 *Pupi jek* (lit. 'the bear dance') is the most common term for the bear ceremony among the Khanty at the Trom'yogan, apart from *pupi qɔt* ('the bear's house') or *pupi pori* ('bear offering ceremony'). Here and in the following I use a unified linguistic transcription for Eastern Khanty terms established for the *Typological Database of the Ugric Languages* (Havas et al. 2015).

10 If I use "we" in this text, I refer to the group who often made decisions on working methods collectively consisting of Zsófia Schön, Antti Tenetz and myself.

11 The Russian term for pagan *yazychnik* is used widely by practitioners of the traditional ethnic religion of the Khanty. From the perspective of the practitioners, this term seems to be more neutral than others such as shamanism, which is considered a particular practice of divination and magic and does not describe the Khanty religion as a whole or Animism, which has a clear evolutionist undertone.

12 The divination is a ritual in which the bear provides answers through a medium chosen by divination itself. The medium tries to lift the table with the bear's head. If the bear gives a positive answer to the question, the table sticks to the floor so heavily "that not even a sheet of paper can be put under" (see Rud' 2013: 195).

13 This includes for the women an ornamented dress in the traditional Khanty form and for the men either a *malitsa*, a traditional overcoat made from reindeer skin, a similar dress made of felt, or an ornamented men's skirt and long reindeer skin boots.

14 Metal has a protective function here. Covering body parts which play a particular role in communication (like the face, genitals or extremities) with cloth or leather has the same purpose.

15 The crane song and scene, which is common among all groups of Ob-Ugrians (Wiget and Balalaeva 2011; 2022; Vasylenko [Mazur] 2016), was recorded by Karjalainen at the beginning of the 20th century (Csepregi 2021) and interpreted as originating in the tensions between the two moieties among the Northern Khanty expressed in "symbolic reenactment of Por and Mos antagonism" (Balzer 1999: 195).

16 The term *ääηαααα* is used among the Eastern Khanty to define a genre of bear feast songs (Lázár et al. 1997: 303; Csepregi 2019: 48). There seem to be performances at the bear feast that do not use this term, and indeed the precise limits of the term are not completely clear to the author. On special occasions these songs might also be performed outside the bear ceremony, as well as by women. Some informants expressed the opinion that elderly women might be able or allowed

to perform them at the bear feast as well, but due to the presence of Kazym Khanty, who have a strict taboo on women performing these songs, this was not considered in 2016.

17 The work on transcription and analysis of the recorded materials from 2016 is still underway with the help of Khanty collaborators.

18 A wooden frame of branches, on which the bear's hide and head are laid down in the "sacrificial pose" (with the head between the front leg, cf. Jordan 2003: 118). At the Yugan River, the cradle is represented by a large birch bark basket.

19 Meri's film *Sons of Torum* for instance contains a short scene showing a film camera and the exact date of the event carved on the memorial staff (Meri 1989).

20 See the two old men in the film by Meri (1989).

21 To exemplify such a plot with hybrid meaning in a song would exceed the scope of this paper. Cf. the work of Aado Lintrop (1997; 1998).

SOURCES

FM 2014 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Eastern Khanty, Western Siberia, Russia. September 2014 (in the author's possession).

FM 2015 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets, Western Siberia, Russia. November 2015 (in the author's possession).

FM 2016 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Eastern Khanty, Western Siberia, Russia. March–April 2016, and with Agrafena Sopochina in Estonia and Sápmi August–September 2016 (in the author's possession).

FM 2018 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Eastern Khanty and Forest Nenets, Western Siberia, Russia. March 2018 (in the author's possession).

FM 2019 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Kazym Khanty and Eastern Khanty, Western Siberia, Russia. August 2019 (in the author's possession).

FM 2021 = Author's fieldwork material. Collected among the Kazym Khanty, Western Siberia, Russia. September–October 2021 (in the author's possession).

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