



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Final Research Report

Dr. Olga Balalaeva

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The Impact of Baptist Missionary Activity on Cultural Persistence and Ethnic Identity
among the Eastern Khanty

TOPIC OF RESEARCH

During the post-*perestroika* period, Siberian indigenous peoples have been engaged in the conscious effort to revitalize “traditional culture” as a marker of national aspirations and ethnic identity. The same period has been characterized by the rapid revival and blossoming throughout the Russian North of the Baptist and evangelical Protestant religious denominations whose appeal is quite different from Russian Orthodoxy. This project aims to provide a foundational understanding of the sociocultural impacts of this missionary activity on local native understandings of “traditional culture” and ethnic identity among the Khanty, one of the indigenous minorities living in Western Siberia, mostly in Ob river basin. Khanty (as well as Mansi) belong to the Finno-Ugric group of Uralic language family. The Khanty population, according to the last census, is 22.5 thousand people, divided into three dialect groups: southern (extinct), northern and eastern Khanty. The remaining northern and eastern groups also are distinguished by different economies, ethnographical features and kinship, differences in turn determined by different environments which support them (taiga, tundra, marsh-lands) and dominant cultural influences (other Ugrian, Turkic, Russian, Samoyedic). Khanty traditional economy is based on subsistence including seasonal hunting, fishing, gathering and reindeer herding. In the last decade majority of Khanty were still living in widely scattered and remote extended family settlements on their traditional lands leading and traditional life based on subsistence economy.

For the Khanty, as well as for the other native peoples of Siberia, the past fifteen years has been a period of serious transformations in their worldview. A characteristic phenomenon was a rapid growth in the formation of ethnic identity and self-consciousness, which was reflected in a keen interest in native history, language and traditions. This was accompanied by the revival of traditional cultural values first and foremost in the sphere of religious views, since traditional culture primarily takes form on the bases of a religious worldview. Religion has often become the sphere of ethnic identity formation for the

Khanty, because Khanty traditional culture and worldview, over the past millennium, has been influenced on daily bases by other people's cultural and religious traditions.

At one period there was widespread Turkic influence bringing Muslim faith and ideology along with the elements of material culture and customs deep into the area. Starting from the end of the sixteenth century, natives of the regions were exposed to Christian religion and practices of Russian Orthodoxy. Although in the beginning the economic interest of Russian government in preserving flow of Siberian valuable furs into the treasury\restrained most widespread proselytizing,, by the late eighteenth century proselytizing and Peter the Great's repression of native religion had inevitably changed cultural dynamics among indigenous peoples and prepared the soil for a greater religious diversity in the region. Protestantism also came to Russia through the initiative of Peter the Great, who set standards for more tolerance towards the foreign specialists he invited, the majority of whom belonged to protestant church. Free churches spread to Siberia at the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century representatives of the free churches, such as Baptists, evangelical Christians, Mennonites, Adventists, etc., were a significant part of the stream of Siberian colonization. During the Soviet period, the free churches were persecuted in fact and demonized in public media. After collapse of the Soviet Union, however, free churches renewed missionary activities. In Western Siberia their proselytizing work is being conducted mainly among native people, primarily because ethnic Russians historically identify themselves either with Orthodoxy or with atheism (the right and left sides in Russian cosmos). For its part, the Orthodox Church is not competing with this missionary activity, though it disapproves of it because of the semi-official position put forth that the Russian Orthodox church is the church for all Russians.

Native religion again became caught up in the problem of ethnic identity beginning from the end of the 1980s, when social life in Khanty-Mansiysk okrug was characterized by the conducting of nationality holidays, folklore festival and events. Since most of the phenomena interpreted as elements of native culture were associated with the reflections of traditional ethnic religions and were ritual ceremonies, the organizers should have turned to traditional religious practices. However majority of the promoters belonged to native intelligentsia and were thus distanced from traditional cultural practices. Thus the public representation of native heritage at best turned into folklorismus and at worst into commercial souvenir nature performances for non-native or mixed ethnicity audiences. In contrast to the native intelligentsia, for traditional Khanty society, where culture and main cultural values have been shaped mostly on the bases of a religious world view, there has been a noticeable absolutization and conservation of their own cultural values and rejection of the other influences. This probably accounts for the rejection of Orthodox Christianity as a religion brought by Russians.

On the other hand the rejection of the alien cultural values didn't mean embracing the values that could unite Khanty as a people. The history of Khanty people was complex enough that there are still linguistically and ethnographically distinct groups living along Ob river tributaries and considering themselves separate peoples. Thus realizing the program of restoring aboriginal Khanty values resulted in cultural events being proclaimed as traditional for all Khanty which were in fact celebrations of specific local ethno-territorial groups. Cultural misrepresentation and the promotion of one ethno-territorial group over another combined with lack of effective political representation and deteriorating of social-economic conditions on the ground, has led some representatives of native communities dismiss the notion of traditional values. This negativism is strengthened by their alienation for the ecosystem which had supported the subsistence, but which is now polluted by oil development and desecrated with the defeated local deities.

The above-mentioned factors are influencing cultural and religious processes. People's choices that constitute this cultural process are becoming more diverse. Facing new economic and social challenges native people are turning to new paradigms which as they believe can give them a sense of security and communal support. Caught in a paradigm shift and traditional economy collapse some of the native people are making their choice in favor of conversion, joining various Protestant group in search of security or remedy from despair. Thus contemporary cultural processes among Khanty people are

characterized by rapid religious changes and more religious diversity reflected in people's behavior, cultural practices and stories.

RELEVANCE AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a crisis of identity of the peoples living on the territory of the USSR. Concept "Soviet" lost its meaning and the peoples were forced to look for new identities. At the same time, the native intelligentsia began efforts to revitalize a concept of Khanty ethnic identity. On the territory of Khanty-Mansiysk okrug there emerged a number of religious organizations belonging to different confessions, there were foreign religious missions, there was an active construction program of new church buildings. There is some evidence in Khanty-Mansiysk Okrug of nativistic and revivalistic movements based on traditional Khanty values that put a demand on its followers to associate themselves with certain religious system. Among these groups, elements of traditional religions become parts of ethnical manifestation. However, the religious diversity in Khanty-Mansiysk okrug, which is a very recent phenomenon of the newest history responding to the void created in the recent past, has attracted some Khanty. These Khanty, losing their sense of security and suffering disillusionment in regional political cultural and religious institutions, are becoming converts to evangelical Protestantism. They are looking for new institutions to provide them with a sense of comfort, security and unexplored avenues of social mobility. The phenomenon of religious conversion in the context of an ethnic revival movement, including new ideology of indigenous religion, is of special interest both for comparative religion studies and ethnic history.

There are two well known approaches in academic research towards the study of religious processes among indigenous peoples of Siberia. One kind is concerned with the studies of traditional religion; another research concentrates on the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Khanty culture. There is a solid academic school of Khanty religious tradition research including general works on the religion of Ob Ugrians generally and their separate groups. Also some aspects of Khanty religion were raised in a number of works dealing with anthropology and history of Khanty people. There are also a number of studies focusing on relationship between Russian Orthodox Church and Khanty people, policies of baptizing Khanty and history of orthodox missionary activities in Siberia. My work is aimed at the studies of the changes in religious traditions, the phenomenon of religious conversion among indigenous peoples of Western Siberia.

This phenomenon has been described in relation to the indigenous peoples of North and South Americas and Australia but there is a lack of research on conversion of Siberian native peoples, especially to protestant religions, for the Soviet and post-soviet period. So this work is trying to present new finds associated with the changes in Khanty religion and fill the gaps due to the lack of contemporary research aimed at the phenomenon of Christian conversion of Khanty.

The work also contributes to the comparative religion studies. This field has been actively developed in the world since the 1970s but even the very term religion is still has many interpretation which depend upon the context. The present work considers a religious phenomenon in various contexts as a result of socioeconomic conditions. It adds to a better understanding of different aspects of religion and its phenomenological manifestations in different religious traditions.

The work also indicates the areas of latent conflict in Khanty community due to the religious differences. It registers the level of tolerance in the parties representing traditional values and non-conformist values. It also shows a bigger picture of the tensions between religious/ethnic minorities and Russian population/Russian orthodox church in the region.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY.

The empirical part of work was based on a method of a field research which includes participant-observation and photo-video-audio-documentation of the phenomenon. Also the materials were gathered through structured and non-structured interviews.

During the field work following methods were employed to study religious situation:

- Interview with the experts – administrative officials, law enforcement officials, public figures (representatives of the Native Assembly of Khanty-Mansiysk okrug Duma, raion affiliation of native association “Spaseniye Iugry”), scientific experts and people working in cultural and educational departments. These are people who are not connected professionally with confessional activities independently of their religious views.
- Non-structured interviews with the local Khanty people on the religious situation. These interviews were conducted (1) in the houses of the respondents, (2) in the village residences of the community heads.
- Interviews with the people professionally associated with confessional activities and the church activists
- Gathering the documental materials
- Documenting the cultic objects, religious rites, confessional meetings.
- Participant-observation in the course of the field work of the episodes and relationship concerning ethnoconfessional spheres.
- Some of the interviews were not recorded on tape but only transcribed by hand due to the sensitive character of the subject and traditionally fearful attitude of the local population to the disclosure of the religious matters which in the Soviet times were a subject of state prosecution.

The methodology of the research was based on a multicultural approach and system analyses of gathered materials. System approach permits to take into consideration linguistic, ethnical and administrative features which help to find out the specific character of religious traditions and religious changes among different groups of Khanty and the factors influencing this process. It also allows us to look at the phenomenon in different contexts.

The research was conducted on the territory of eastern Khanty distribution in Surgut region, Khanty-Mansiysk Okrug. The territories of compact eastern Khanty living are the basins of the rivers Bolshoi and Maliy Yugan, Trom-Egan and Pim – tributaries of the Ob river. Khanty people living there preserve traditional way of life. The interviews were conducted: 1) in Surgut city – (“Belyi Yar” the House of Prayer, Evangelical Baptist Church of Jesus Christ, Surgut Raion administration) – 3 people; 2) in village Ugut (river Yugan) – 11 people; 3) yurty Kayukovy (Yugan river) – 6 people; 4) Russkinskiye village (Trom-Egan river) – 5 people; 5) Yubileinie village (Staryi Trom-Egan) – 3 people; 6) Lyantor, region centre (Pim river) – 1; 7) Khanty-Mansiysk city (KMAO Duma) – 2 people.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

In the course of several centuries of being a part of Russian State Khanty religious traditions has changed a lot as a result of cultural contacts, especially with Tatars and Russians, as well as a result of policies of the state aimed at religious beliefs of its subjects. In the context of ideological domination, first Orthodox and then atheist, Khanty cultural and historical development was connected with the idea of ethnic or regional sovereignty. For politicians and native intelligentsia, in the post-Soviet era, the ethnic idea, and consequently religion, was connected with this original native culture which existed before the Khanty became a part of Russian empire, an idea of an aboriginal culture which could become an ideology of ethnic autonomy.

The attempts made in the 1990s to assume traditional cultural values forced Khanty people to make choices in the question of their religion. The conventional response was to come back to traditional religious beliefs. (For Eastern Khanty that would be hunting cults, such as the Bear Cult, and shamanic practices mostly to the North of Ob river). The collapse of the Soviet Union heavily impacted economic and social ties in the community, reinforced historic divisions of the Khanty into separate local groups. Left on their own, insecure and uncertain in about their future, some Khanty people turned to new protestant religious institutions, whose approach to the existing clichéd government-sanctioned reconstructions of traditional culture and programmatic ideologemes would be an unorthodox and evangelical sermon of the most energetic and far-reaching character.

It's also clear that the "spheres of influence" between the confessions have been divided. The most active players in the region are the free protestant churches, which now not only provide spiritual guidance but partially substitute for failing state apparatus by providing the native population with social services including children and youth summer camps, transportation, and different types of social gatherings.

Proselytizing, however, has not been forgotten. On Bolshoi Yugan River the part of native population which is actively religious has more or less made their choice of religion. Choices there were quickly polarized, and the process of religious affiliation speeded up, because the evangelic Baptist missionaries there belong to the most conservative branch of the organization and try their followers to the extreme. The level of education of the missionaries doesn't exceed high school level, and they are the source of spreading eschatological folklore identifying modern technologies such as computers, as the tools of Satan.

The most successful and energetic Christian denomination are the Pentecostals or charismatics, who accept a lot of modern forms and all elements of Khanty reindeer herding traditional culture of except shamanism, alcoholism and smoking. One of the priority goals for this church is obviously to develop pastors belonging to the native people (this is the case on Trom-Egan where the one of the pastors is a Khanty woman). The main accent the missionaries make on the promoting family values and providing various occupations for youth in order to prevent alcoholism and criminal behavior. For church members and their relatives there Bible schools, summer camps. Church in essence works as a centre of social support and rehabilitation. The involvement of native people on Trom-Egan with the protestant churches is much wider. On the other hand many of them are not committed to their religious choice and go "back and forth".

Change of religion among Khanty give rise to tensions and unhappiness in the community. Neophytes regard the indigenous polytheism of the other Khanty members of the community as "idol worship" and "devil work" and consequently treat the other traditions based on those beliefs, like rites of passage, as tabooed. Traditional Khanty, on the other hand, regard the converts' attitudes and practices as "betrayal". Such antagonism and alienation was met in all the places we visited.

The relationship between the government administration in KHMAO and protestant missionaries is governed by an official, and often expressed commitment to maintaining "traditional Khanty culture", and unofficial support of the traditional confessions (mostly Orthodox and Muslim). Administration tends to publicly express itself frequently in support of traditional Khanty culture, though it provides little in the way of actual support, and at the same time, doesn't declare itself publicly in support of the traditional confessions, though it provides a lot of unofficial support. Practically, the position of the state is expressed as indifference, since the religious problems are of interest to bureaucrats only when it is a matter of political interaction with the big confessions. The administration doesn't see much harm in the missionaries who by the end of the 1990s were represented not by foreigners but mostly Russians. Conflicts emerge usually not with okrug but with raion and village administration, and in this case happen to be the reflection of a hidden conflict of protestant missionaries with the Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church opposes to active Baptist and Pentecostal missions but not with their own missionary efforts. One explanation for the lack of missionary activities of Orthodox Church is that, as a result of adapting the Law on the Religion in 1997, in which Orthodoxy as well as Buddhism and Islam were recognized as Russia's traditional religions, each religion tacitly recognized that each confession has its own "canonical" territories. Orthodoxy traditionally observed some geopolitical norms which did not allow it to open missionary activities among the non-Slavic peoples who were recognized before revolution as a separate cultural type. Instead of proselytizing, the orthodox Church organizes "anti-sect" propaganda campaigns in the newspapers to influence indirectly administration. Such attempts usually backfire because "persecutions" or idea of it tends to make the young church evangelic Baptist churches more, not less attractive, at least to native people.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Conversion of Khanty people into Christianity is associated with accepting new values (Russian iconoclasts or European style Protestantism). Instead of Orthodoxy's historical allusions associated with sacred Russia, the protestant churches propose a model of society bound by the 'universal' norms of protestant morals and ethics. To the traditional, native Siberian peoples this model is one of the ways of the national development to overcome the inferiority complex of dominating "Big Russian Brother". The number of converts among Eastern Khanty now is relatively small. However since we speak about a small-numbered people there is a hypothetical possibility of the conversion of the whole nation. . In the case of the steady growth of the number of regular communicants the success of a Protestant missionary work will be noticeable on a public level. These new processes raised questions that should be answered by further research. For instance – the culture and social significance of native protestant communities; the relationship between native intelligentsia and free Churches; ways and possibilities for a participation of the native Christian church in political life; the influence of the latest migrations on the religious situation among Khanty People.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U. S. POLICY COMMUNITY

The United States is interested in promoting freedom of belief and freedom of worship as well as developing an atmosphere of tolerance and supporting cultural diversity as a value. In developing democracies, balancing the interest in cultural diversity, tolerance, and the protection of minorities with the promotion of universal, fundamental freedoms is always difficult because majorities can tyrannize over minorities. The collapse of the Soviet Union provided openings for a new nationalism in Russia, which support for the Orthodox Church contributes to, that is intolerant of minorities. Even those who are not explicitly ideological nationalists, in the name of a "majority rules" democracy, nevertheless quietly support the idea that a central government, acting in the name of the ethnic Russian majority, should decide the fates of minority groups, cultural or religious.

At the present time, the Khanty, like other Siberian indigenous peoples, are in an especially vulnerable situation. Right now they have been victimized by forty years of intensive oil development, and the pressures for exploitation are increasing. At the same time, the social and economic support system they had under the Soviet system has collapsed. Siberian native peoples are now subject to intense economic and social pressures, which are either created by, directed or quietly supported by the government.

Some things could be done to improve the situation and make democratization a reality in Russia instead of a curse word.

- 1) Make cultural diversity, the preservation of local cultures and tolerance for ethnic minorities in Russia as much a foreign policy priority today as religious freedom has been in the past.
- 2) Adapt affirmative action language and promote affirmative action strategies to overcome the discrimination of majorities in developing democracies like Russia.
- 3) In promoting religious freedom to Russian government officials at all levels, support the idea that indigenous religions are religions as much as the majority book religions, and that they suffer distinctive forms of persecution, such as destruction of sacred places and the ecosystem. For people like Khanty, being Khanty means practicing their native religion in a specific land.
- 4) Promote cultural exchanges between American Indians and native Siberians that develop leadership and vision.