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# The World of the Khanty Epic Hero-Princes

*An Exploration of a Siberian Oral Tradition*

Arthur Hatto

**The World of the Khanty Epic Hero-Princes**

In his final book, the late A. T. Hatto analyses the Khanty epic tradition in Siberia on the basis of eighteen texts of Khanty oral heroic epic poems recorded and edited by a succession of Hungarian and Russian scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book examines the world-view of an indigenous culture as reconstructed from its own words, demonstrates a flexible outline for organizing an analytical dossier of the genre of oral heroic epic poetry in a specific culture and presents an abundance of new information to compare with better-known heroic epics. Consisting of main sections on the cosmos, time, the seasons, geography, spirits, personae, warfare, armour and weapons and men's handiwork, the book also includes a section of background information on the Khanty people. There is an afterword by Daniel Prior. Marianne Bakró-Nagy contributed specialist knowledge of the Khanty language to the linguistic interpretation of the texts.

ARTHUR T. HATTO, FBA (1910–2010) was a scholar of medieval German literature and, especially after his retirement from the University of London, where he served as Professor of German from 1953 to 1977, the comparative study of oral heroic epic poetry. He was elected an Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies, of which he had served as a Governor, and a Corresponding Member of the Finno-Ugrian Society. His other publications include translations from Middle High German poems for Penguin Classics: *Tristan* (1960), the *Nibelungenlied* (1965), and *Parzival* (1980); the edition and translation *The Memorial Feast for Kökötöy-Khan (Kökötöydün Aši): A Kirghiz Epic Poem* (1977); general editorship of *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* (1980–1989), the two-volume proceedings of the London Seminar on Epic, which Hatto chaired from 1964 to 1972; *Essays on Medieval German and Other Poetry* (1980); and *The Mohave Heroic Epic of Inyo-Kutavêre* (1999).

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*The World of the Khanty Epic Hero-Princes*

*A series list is shown at the back of the book*

# *The World of the Khanty Epic Hero-Princes*

## *An Exploration of a Siberian Oral Tradition*

ARTHUR HATTO

Based on Eighteen Khanty Heroic Epic Poems

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the Memory
of the
Heroic Lineage
of
Hungarian Recorders
Editors and Translators

Antal Reguly (1819–1858)
József Pápay (1873–1931)
Miklós Zsirai (1892–1955)
Dávid Fokos (1884–1977)
István Erdélyi (1924–1976)

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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'The eighteen Khanty[1] Heroic Epics which form the basis of the present investigation were recorded in the mid- and late nineteenth century in pen or pencil by ear in sessions with willing bards and not in the live presence of patron, bard and cultic audience. Scholars versed in such poetic song regard Khanty heroic songs as of a rare high quality.'

In his original preface to this volume in 2005 my father confessed that he was not versed in even one of the many Khanty dialects, and further that he was unmoved by it. He wrote: 'My belief that important aspects of Heroic Epic Poetry can be profitably studied in good translation was clinched recently by a letter from a stranger who approved of my handling of the Mohave Heroic Epic of Inyo-Kutavêre in a book of that title published in 1999.[2] My work was based on A. L. Kroeber's English edition of the Epic (1951) and supported by Kroeber's Field Record, also in English (1902). Had the Mohave original been available Kroeber would have edited it and published it, leaving scholars of my ilk to ponder whether we would or would not acquire a competence in Epic Mohave. But alas! – the Mohave original was wafted away on the dry breezes of Arizona as it fell from the lips of Inyo-Kutavêre while bilingual Jack Jones Englished it for Kroeber's stylus. The Writer-out-of-the-blue, now an esteemed Friend, proved to be a distinguished Professor of Southwest American Anthropology, too modest to be named here. I thank him again for having unwittingly confirmed my belief that it is permissible to investigate some aspects of Heroic Epic Poetry in good translation, a belief based on seventy years, on and off, of the study of Heroic Epic Traditions, for the most part in the original.

[1] In his lifetime Arthur Hatto wrote of the Khanty people and their epics using the term 'Ostyak'; it was the word employed by other scholars of his generation. More recent scholars use 'Khanty', the name the people call themselves. This, as well as the now widespread perception of 'Ostyak' as a derogatory term, has led the editors to substitute 'Khanty' for 'Ostyak' in the present work. For consistency with current usage they have also substituted 'Mansi' and 'Komi' for 'Vogul' and 'Zyrian'.

[2] A. T. Hatto, *The Mohave Heroic Epic of Inyo-kutavêre* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1999).

'The virtually complete Mohave Epic of Inyo-Kutavêre is supported within its genre by no more than a few fragments. By contrast, any one of the Khanty Epics studied here is supported by seventeen others, not to mention the closely related Mansi Lays. Confrontations of the many variants in the thesaurus of formulae, topoi and themes, can only deepen our understanding of the Singers' intentions.'

My father had earlier recognized that 'the Khanty tradition of heroic epic is at once the most arresting in the whole of Siberia and one of the most problematic as regards textualization'[3] and later acknowledged that 'the path to their full appreciation was marred by deficiencies.

'All of the textual editions except probably for the last (István Erdélyi's) had to rely on a knowledge of Khanty that was still in the making. The texts were in Khanty with Hungarian and German translations. Of the two languages of translation Hungarian, as a co-member of the Ugrian group of languages, was very well suited for translations from Khanty, an advantage which extended to metrics and, often, to poetics. As to the other language of translation, German, its efficacy was the reverse, sometimes with wretched effect. Of course German was the second language of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The English translations in this book are thus at a double remove from the Khanty original.

'With the field left wide open it seemed reasonable that a scholar (ATH) who had studied heroic Epic on and off for some sixty/seventy years should use his German to make a coordinated study of the eighteen Khanty Heroic Epic editions which he had meticulously collected over the years. As he studied this theme, on and on, his eyesight no longer served to hunt up the latest publications of the Khanty lexicographers for cruxes affecting the translations. The book hung in abeyance for some time until a perspicacious publisher put him in touch with a highly experienced linguist, Professor Marianne Bakró-Nagy of the Research Institute for Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, whose forte is Khanty.'

Professor Bakró-Nagy checked every construction in my father's 'German-English rendering against the latest Khanty lexicography and commented on every Khanty crux in his original typescript. Mounting knowledge of Khanty revealed more and more the semantic and even poetic misconceptions in the German and even Hungarian translations.' In 2007 a meeting followed and my father decided to accept Marianne's kind offer of help to rescue the book.

My father very much welcomed Professor Bakró-Nagy's specialist contribution to the linguistic and philological interpretation of the transcriptions, and her proposal to provide background and illustrative material on the Khanty people. The fruits of Professor Bakró-Nagy's invaluable work

[3] A. T. Hatto, 'Textology and epic texts from Siberia and beyond', in L. Honko (ed.), *Textualization of Oral Epics* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), p. 149.

are incorporated in the text of the book and in additional footnotes. However, in accordance with her wishes her contributions are not attributed. I also record my grateful thanks here.

In his original acknowledgements my father wrote, 'My heartfelt thanks for generous assistance in the making of this book are due to the following: to Mrs Sheila Mackay for the gift, in Xerox, of S. K. Patkanov's Two Volumes on the Khanty and their Folk-poetry; to Professor Michael Branch, C.M.G., former Director of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies in the University of London, for crucial borrowing concessions from the School's Library, as administered by a succession of sympathetic Librarians whom I also thank here; to Dr Daniel Prior of Ohio State University, Columbus, U.S., for hunting down elusive dates of Hungarian Khanty specialists, and for his part in a continuing dialogue on the dynamics of Oral Heroic Epic Poetry; to Dr Thomas Eggers of the Biologische Bundesanstalt, Braunschweig, for vital information on Eurasian 'swamp-trees'; to Mrs Wendy Brierley, who deftly transferred the Manuscript in my aged hand to disc; to my Son-in-law, Dr Peter Lutman of Rothamsted Research, Harpenden, for his critical revision of what I had to say on the habitat and diet of Berserkers and those who ran amok: and, last but far from least, to my Daughter Jane, who lifted the logistical burden in the making of this book from my shoulders to her own, failing which it could never have seen the light of day.'

That daughter now adds her own heartfelt thanks to two colleagues of her father in the field of epic, Dr John D. Smith, Emeritus Reader in Sanskrit, Cambridge University, U.K., and Dr Daniel Prior, Associate Professor of History, Miami University, U.S., for their painstaking and devoted editorial support over several years, which has brought this book through to publication; also to Dr Jarkko Niemi of the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere, Finland, for kindly answering queries on Khanty song traditions; to Dr Stephan Dudeck of the University of Lapland Arctic Centre, who so generously reviewed the text of the background chapter (Chapter 1) on the Khanty and offered numerous insights and suggestions (Dr Dudeck also allowed us to incorporate his thoughtful words on Khanty oral traditions in the text, pages 18, 20); to Dr György Kara, Professor of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University, U.S., for providing István Erdélyi's dates and for translating the Hungarian caption to the facsimile of Reguly's manuscript; to Dr Aleksei P. Zykov, Senior Researcher at the Institute of History and Archeology of the Ural Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Yekaterinburg, for permission to republish some of his drawings of Iron Age archaeological reconstructions that appeared in his book;[4] to Dr Andrew Wiget, Professor

[4] A. P. Zykov et al., *Ugorskoe nasledie* [*Ugrian Heritage*]*: Drevnosti Zapadnoi Sibiri iz sobranii Ural'skogo universiteta* (Yekaterinburg: Ural State University, 1994).

Emeritus of English, New Mexico, U.S., for supplying the photograph he took of the Kurlomkin family and previously published in his book,[5] and for permission to publish it again; to Professor Peter Jordan, Director of the Arctic Centre, University of Groningen, for supplying the photograph he took of a group of Khanty visiting a shrine and previously published in his book[6] with its caption and for permission to publish them again.

Where our diligent efforts have been unequal to the task of aligning my father's original text with the insightful contributions and guidance of others, John Smith, Dan Prior and I accept responsibility for the resulting shortcomings.

I leave the final words to my father: 'Through the lighter losses in Hungarian and the heavier renderings through German and English, nevertheless, a magnificent World of the Khanty Epic Hero-Princes emerges with not a shred to compare with the hopelessly *post*-oral *Iliad* – no Aristotelian heroic epic from the bard's tongue but a huge epopee that would gladden the heart of a prisoner in his cell as well as a don in his den.'

Jane Lutman

[5] Andrew Wiget and Olga Balalaeva, *Khanty, People of the Taiga: Surviving the Twentieth Century* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010).

[6] P. Jordan, *Technology as Human Social Tradition: Cultural Transmission among Hunter-Gatherers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

# 1
# Background: The Khanty

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

## Territory and Population

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

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

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

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

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

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


*Figure 1.1 Current political map of Western Siberia.*

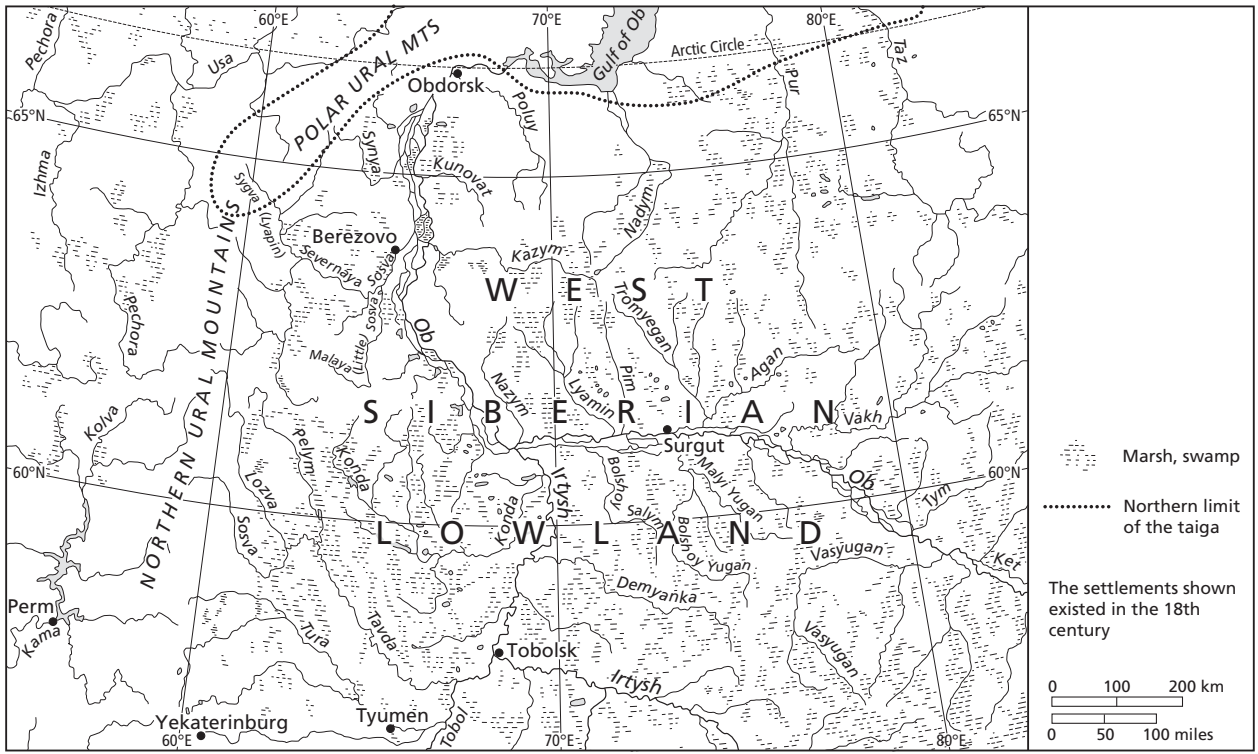


*Figure 1.2 Map of Western Siberia and the Khanty homeland. The settlements shown existed in the eighteenth century AD.*

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

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

## History

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

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

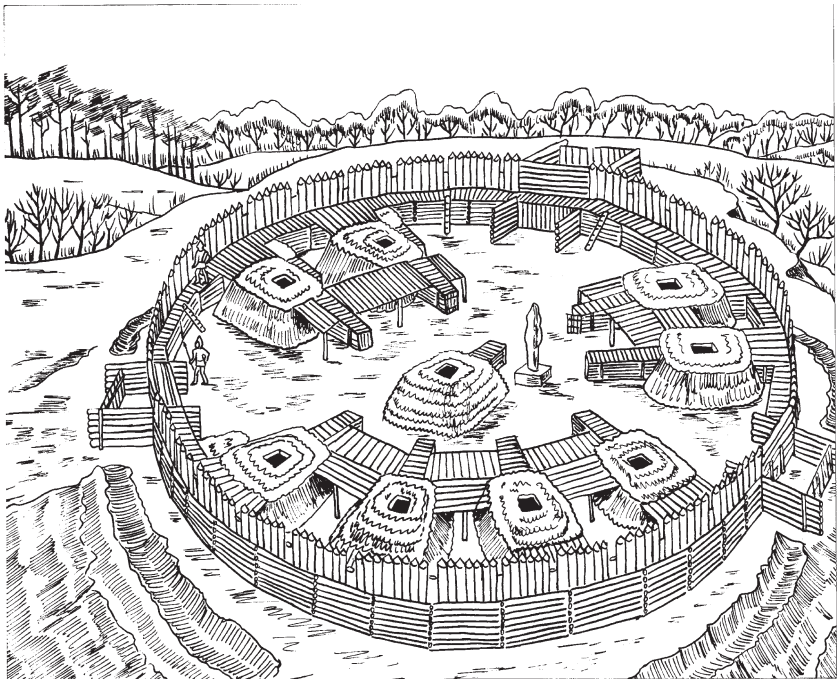

*Figure 1.3 Settlement, late sixth to seventh century AD (reconstruction based on archaeological finds of the Surgut I fortress). (Drawing © Aleksei Zykov, from A. P. Zykov et al.,* Ugrian Heritage*, fig. 19.)*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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