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"Flying half a metre above the ground"

Vodka in the Culture of Vasyugan Khanty People

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Abstract Zoltan Nagy's paper about the Vasyugan Khanty people is based on empirical data from the 1990s. It interprets the culture of the Vasyugan Khanty as an alcohol culture – a culture in which vodka and the consumption of vodka permeates and determines daily life. The paper is a micro-focus analysis from the Khanty viewpoint. Alcohol is interpreted as the force that constitutes society, and alcohol consumption as a social act. It has an important economic significance with a strong impact on Khanty customs, which it regulates and by which it is regulated, with remarkable moral implications that significantly influence their daily routines and way of life. The paper surveys the role of alcohol in customs, the ritualistic elements and rules of drinking, the drink types consumed, the relation between alcohol and mortality, as well as the Khanty's concept of drunkenness and how it influences their interpretation of crime. In reviewing the relation between alcohol consumption and economy/work activities, the author also examines the role of vodka in the everyday exchange of goods, the strategies of acquiring alcohol, and the role it plays in determining the scheduling of worktime. Finally, he offers two examples that illustrate how the consumption of vodka influences the fate of individual families.
Keywords: Khanty people, Siberia, economy, culture of drinking, way of life

In memory of Sashka

"It is indeed interesting... that opinions regarding inebriation are tinged with a certain indulgent humour, as if drunkenness were merely a form of male mischief rather than a manifestation of misery, anxiety and fear. The strangest aspect of this convivial attitude is that it is promoted and cultivated by alcoholics themselves, who gain some sort of odd gratification from a detailed recollection of their sufferings after those have – fortunately – ended." (Hajnóczy 1993:11–12)

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This study intends to focus on Vasyugan Khanty people[1] and alcohol. The latter has been a frequent topic in professional literature concerning Ob-Ugric peoples. These texts generally emphasise that the spread of alcohol consumption was a tool of Russian/Soviet colonisation, a weapon used by Tsarist merchants to exploit the Khanty.[2] Such studies have also tried to define possible paths away from alcoholism – sometimes on the basis of practical considerations and sometimes on moral grounds.

The production of alcohol in various forms is a classic theme of ethnographic science and economic history. Having therefore gained the attention of sociologists and cultural anthropologists as well as historians, the socio-cultural aspects of alcohol consumption are also by their very nature fundamental topics of literature in the field of addictology. It is important to emphasise here that the present study will discuss alcohol consumption as a cultural phenomenon using an ethnographic approach. I do not wish to analyse alcoholism as a disease. In other words, like Mary Douglas, I regard drinking as a social act, the examination of which primarily focuses on the system of social rules that determine where, when, what and with whom members of a given community can drink (Douglas 1987:4). In this sense, alcohol as a central phenomenon in the culture of Vasyugan Khanty people bears an important economic significance and has a strong impact on their customs, which regulate it and are regulated by it. Alcohol is a regular topic of discussion among the Khanty, with remarkable moral implications that significantly influence their daily routines and way of life. This text was written on the basis of research I conducted in 1992, 1993 and from 1998–1999, which at the time totalled one year of fieldwork.[3]

[1] My study primarily focuses on the temporary population in a settlement (*юрт*) in the taiga and a bigger adjacent village, where their relatives and acquaintances lived. Vasyugan Khanty people live in Siberia along a western tributary of the Ob River known as Vasyugan. Due to their constant proximity to Russian culture, the resettlement policy of the Stalinist regime and the impact of economic migration in the wake of oil extraction, they have become the most acculturated Khanty group, which means that use of the Khanty language can also be regarded as having ceased to exist.

[2] This is also apparent in earlier professional literature and in the contemporary handbook, including, among others: Zsirai 1994:177; Hajdú – Domokos 1980:151; Mikesy 1996:28; and Csepregi 1997:67, who supplements earlier works with important observations in connection with the Soviet system.

[3] This study is an abridged and slightly modified English language version of my text which appeared in Tabula in 2000 (Nagy 2000). At the time that it was re-published, I decided that re-writing the text would be more damaging than useful. Due to the impact of significant changes that have taken place in the given environment since then, a new analysis of the data would yield different results. Therefore, my data and my claims reflect conditions as they existed at the end of the 1990s and do not include the changes that have occurred since that time, which I have reflected on elsewhere (Nagy 2014). In light of the time that has passed, the text is written in the past tense. Naturally, I do not think that the general assertions included here are valid only for the given time period.
Wishing to avoid completely distorting the structure of the study, I am also unable here to reflect on tendencies that have been discussed in professional literature dealing with alcohol consumption since then e.g. studies based on new statistics (Pivnyeva 2005) or post-colonialist critiques on the role of alcohol in professional literature (Leete 2005). Neither do I utilise the results of two conferences held in Tartu since then (unfortunately unpublished), in which issues in connection with alcohol consumption in Siberia were analysed. In addition, I hardly reflect on the debate which has taken place regarding the overconsumption of alcohol presented as a psychological fact and as a cultural construction (for example, Heath 1987; Douglas 1987; Mandelbaum 1965; Room 1984; Szeljak 2001). This would require significantly expanding the present text to comprise a study of much greater length – which I do in fact attend to achieve.

THE DICHOTOMIES OF JUDGEMENT

Attitudes towards drinking, participation in drinking and exclusion from the activity continually form and reform (reflect) social reality, meaning social categories that the given society wishes to separate and define. At the same time, the quantity and quality of alcohol consumption also divide various prestige groups from one another. The aspect of quality in this context denotes the role that different types of alcohol play in group-building while quantity reflects the opposition of the given society to norms-deviance. In the following, I will analyse the quantitative aspect.[4]

Certain *dichotomies* could be observed among the Vasyugan Khanty with regards to drinking and their relationship to alcohol. There were significant differences in alcohol consumption among those who lived in villages in comparison to those who lived in the taiga. In villages, vodka could easily be acquired practically anytime, provided that some form of payment was involved. Nevertheless, barring exceptions, the majority of Khanty villagers were unemployed, supporting themselves through various benefits, which meant that the continuous acquisition of alcohol became a decisive issue and problem in their daily lives. In contrast, the taiga primarily served as a model for traditional ways of making a living i.e. fishing and hunting, but also as a natural regulator of alcohol consumption. It was impossible to transport an infinite supply of vodka to remote areas, which meant that for the Khanty the taiga was directly and indirectly synonymous with "dryness", sobriety and work while the village represented alcohol, seeking alcohol and laxity.[5]

A dichotomy was also apparent in judgements regarding alcohol, which Khanty society basically rejected in spite of its presence in their daily life – "We live like pigs." The term *drunkard* carried a negative connotation in characterisations of absent locals, even in the words of those who drank a similar amount. In other cases, however, being able to hold one's drink was considered a virtue.

This duplicity can be traced to special issues of male identity. On one hand, the male was seen as the provider, his primary task being to acquire the goods necessary to support members of his family, and thus male attitudes towards work were a dominant element of male identity: diligence, cleverness, and endurance were considered male virtues. Coming of age was also equated with a man's ability to work, his first successful hunt and his first participation in a collective fishing excursion. In this context, alcohol was seen as destructive and unacceptable, making it difficult, if not impossible, for a man to fulfill his tasks. On the other hand, alcohol also constituted an integral part of male identity: carousal, revelry, and "hardiness" were also important male attributes. Boys on the path to manhood were characterised as "already drinking vodka too". It is no accident that besides hunting, drunkenness was the main topic of male conversation among the Khanty.

In the meantime, Khanty women also consumed significant amounts of alcohol, even though social norms dictated that women could not drink alcohol at all, or only on rare occasions. Conservative Khanty women living in accordance with these norms were

[4] Regarding the quantitative factor, see: Thornton 1987; Mars 1987; Nagy 2014; Sárkány 1997.

[5] In contrast, local Russians go to the forest to drink, precisely because it provides refuge from control by the family and the village.

not to drink in the presence of men, which is why older women humbly rejected offers of alcohol at first, but no longer considered the norm to be a problem as they became more inebriated. Norms regarding female behaviour allowed no space for alcohol consumption. In fact, women were expected to reject alcohol as an obstacle to their womanhood, one that impaired their ability to care for their family and children: and it did so on more than one occasion. Thus, alcohol consumption by women was a crisis of self-definition. Gender norms in connection with vodka were clearly apparent in the words of one pregnant woman, who was always saying: "I hope to God it's not a boy. They're all criminals and alcoholics."[6]

Frequently, the *aim* of drinking was "to forget everything and fly half a metre above the ground." Even so, different answers are available as to who wished to forget and what. Some answers are related to individual life trajectories: personal sorrows, the anniversaries of deaths, illness. As one acquaintance suffering from tuberculosis said: "When I drink, I'm not ill. When I don't drink, I immediately start coughing and gasping for breath." Another possible answer could be found in the circumstances of the country and its politics. Some people regarded the collapse of the Soviet system as a deep personal loss and saw it as the cause of their alcoholism: "In the old times, in the old system, everything was alright because it was possible to live a normal life."

It may not even be necessary to search for causes as drinking and inebriation in Khanty society required no explanation. It was so natural and inevitable that the question of who was drinking and why never even arose. On the contrary, the fact that someone was not drinking – usually a man – was a source of amazement and confusion. If the abstinent individual was even a bit of an outsider, the only response deemed possible was contempt and scorn. If the individual was a part of the community, there was no explanation and he was considered an oddball. One man who had quit drinking was described as follows: "He used to be such a good person. Even if he drank, he was cheerful, always joking and peaceful. Now…well, he's been ruined."

VODKA CULTURE: DRINKING IN CUSTOMS AND THE CUSTOM OF DRINKING

Vodka – alcohol – also played a role in the sacral culture of the Khanty. Attitudes towards alcohol served to separate the world of the sacred from that of the profane and influenced the relationship between the two as well. On one hand, alcohol was excluded from certain religious situations (for example, a drunk person could not foretell the future),[7] but it also helped separate the two spheres and regulated people's behaviour: under

[6] I shall address the relationship between crime and alcohol in more detail later. Suffice it to say for now that while inebriation among men frequently led to incidents of crime, the same could not be said of women. Statistics available to me – covering cases of crime over the course of four years – indicate an insignificant ratio of Khanty women in comparison to that of men.

[7] At the same time, there are omens associated with vodka: if someone's nose itches, someone will be bringing vodka.

normal circumstances, toasting took place on every occasion, and yet it was forbidden in customs associated with commemorating the dead.[8]

The consumption of vodka played an extremely important role in the sacred culture of the Khanty, alcohol being a necessity in the transcendent world perceived as analogous to the human one. In keeping with this perception, it played a crucial role in practically every sacrificial ritual. The gods received vodka directly via glasses placed in front of idols, but also indirectly through the consumption of alcohol during rituals and in the form of libation.[9] The sacred consumption of alcohol often turned into profane drunkenness, with the revelry lasting several days.[10]

Vodka was also a familiar element in death cults, among the fundamental needs of the dead as well. It was frequently an accessory at gravesites, in some cases specifically at the request of the dying individual. Food was set aside at burial-feasts along with a large glass of vodka with a slice of bread and a crepe placed on top. This could only be removed from its place after the fortieth daily burial-feast, after which it could be poured out or fed to the dogs.

The dead also request any vodka accidentally sloshed on the table, along with any fallen table-scraps, which could not be consumed by humans and also had to be given to the dogs. Spilled vodka was also said to have healing properties; rubbing the hands with it helped cure frostbite and also prevented the hands from freezing. Drinks poured backhanded were also the property of the dead.

Vigils were kept next to the dead every night until the burial, and alcohol was always consumed during these watches. Three topics of conversation dominated one vigil that was observed: previous cases of death and acquaintances long passed, the future of the widow, and alcohol. True enough, the topic of alcohol gained more importance in this case because vodka had played a significant role in the death of the person in question. Moreover, the grave-diggers at the funeral for the same person were compensated with vodka instead of money and were clearly drunk by the time of the burial itself, chuckling beside the deceased and trying to make jokes with the widow.

Naturally, burial-feasts were also accompanied by abundant vodka consumption, to the extent that some alcoholics made a point of visiting every house where vigils were being held – sometimes several times a night – in the hope of acquiring free vodka. Quite frequently, burial-feasts turned into huge drinking binges, which ended in physical fights on more than one occasion. The burial-feast mentioned above also ended in an argument when the drunken relative hosting the feast on behalf of the widow not only sent the grave-diggers packing, but the relatives as well. The hosts for this particular feast ordered two cases of vodka, totalling 30 bottles, whereas the number of guests only comprised a total of 27, including children. During the vigil on the ninth day, the widow got drunk as well and got into a fight with the husband of her niece. The vigil

[8] Toasts can only be made using a glass, never with a bottle – nor is it permitted to drink directly from the bottle. In no cases have I ever seen a Vasyugan Khanty person drink from a bottle. This is facilitated by the fact that those who traverse the forest always carry mugs, which can also be used for tea. I have, however, observed cases in which people did not drink the vodka they had bought with them because they had forgotten to bring glasses.

[9] For detailed information on alcohol sacrifices, see: Munkácsi 1892–1921:II/1.

[10] For data on the relationship between alcohol and sacrificial rites, see: Mészáros 2012.

on the fortieth day also descended into scandal when the drunken hosts locked the food away from the guests, after which the widow slapped and then beat up the niece she had previously been hugging, in response to which the guests became outraged and quarrelled with the hosts. All three burial-feasts led to personal offenses and greatly wounded solidarity between members of the family.

Vodka was also a vital part of every other celebration, all of which involved drinking to intoxication: New Year (January 1), the "old New Year" (January 13), "Defender of the Fatherland Day", which served as a holiday for men (February 23), Women's Day (March 8), Easter and all birthdays. This was so predictable that one man left for the forest on the day before the New Year's celebration because he wanted to avoid getting drunk in the village.

Not only did vodka influence Khanty customs, but vodka drinking itself had its own set of rules and customs as well. Alcohol consumption can also be characterised by its time frame. An individual drinking "party" (*para* in the Khanty language, *гулянка* in Russian) almost never lasted only for one day, but much longer. The key word in drinking binges lasting several days was the hangover. The Russian expression *похмелье* could be translated as *hangover* or *the morning after*, but there is no exact translation for the verb form *опохмельяться*, which was adopted unchanged in the Khanty language. A night of drunken revelry was followed by extreme suffering the following day, and this illness could only be cured by drinking again. At first, the aim was only to get rid of the torturous hangover, but after the first few "medicinal drinks" the euphoria would set in and the cycle would begin again. According to the exact description given by one Khanty: "I've only got drunk once over the last two weeks, but it's taken me 14 days to get cured."

Hangovers and the healing "hangover drinks" were a highly respected and integral part of Khanty culture. This was also respected by the wives of drunken men, who would usually hide some money or a bit of vodka so as to cure their spouses. If both the money and the vodka ran out, they would collect the drops remaining at the bottom of the bottles and visit neighbours, who would usually take pity on the suffering. Drunken individuals would rarely be served, but it was considered impolite to refuse those with a hangover.

Hangovers were perceived as an illness which could also be fatal. One example involves the case of a man during the second half of the 1980s, when shops only served alcohol after 11 am. The man in question attempted to beg a shopkeeper to give him a bottle before the designated time, but was refused. He then settled on the stoop in front of the shop, but did not survive until 11 o'clock: he died of a hangover. According to the Khanty, death from a hangover is caused by heart stoppage.

Drinking binges lasting several days or weeks usually came to a stop when the vodka, the money for its acquisition or other means of purchase ran out. In the worst cases, they ended in a major fight or as the result of an accident or serious tragedy. During the seven months that I spent there from 1998–99, I observed no cases in which the participants stopped drinking of their own accord.

The Khanty were aware that their alcohol consumption[11] differed radically from the European norm, but they were also convinced that their own customs were healthier:

[11] This was practically the same as the drinking habits of local Russians, which, according to Elvin Morton Jellinek – as quoted by Keller 1981:96 – can be defined as gamma-alcoholism.

"The Hungarians drink more than we do, a little at a time, regularly. I rarely drink, but when I do, it's a lot."

In addition to the timeframe, the issue of quantity was also important. The Khanty apply a unique system of unit measurement with regards to vodka. The smallest unit – obviously in keeping with the Russian model – was "100 grams", meaning one decilitre. As such, shot glasses were not used; the portions were poured in water glasses.

The smallest unit available in shops was half a litre, which is why one Khanty reacted in terror when saw two-decilitre bottles of liquor in Hungary: "My God! We're not going to be drinking cologne again, are we?" As invited guests, or for simple visits to relatives, it was considered polite etiquette to bring one bottle, but if the occasion was a dinner celebration, then guests arrived with two bottles. Usually, drinking occasions involved having to acquire more vodka, after which the guests returned with two more bottles. They only returned with one bottle if they could not afford a second.

Another essential question is the kind of alcohol being consumed.[12] It can be said that the Khanty almost exclusively drank vodka, or its home-made version, *samogon*. Vodka could be purchased in shops or from those travelling to larger towns. The quality was uneven, but became relatively reliable after the introduction of tax stamps. I use the word relatively here because the tax stamps were often faked and the vodka substituted with industrial alcohol. Counterfeit vodka was attributed to several individual cases of death in 1999. The most serious case of poisoning took place during the late 1980s in the village, where forty people died.

Samogon was pure for the most part, although it was also subject to counterfeiting. It could be acquired from home distilleries, unlicensed dealers and illicit pubs. Some of these establishments were also open for business during the night, signalled by lamps placed in windows: the owners were awakened by customers wishing to be served. So many illicit distilleries were in operation that on weekend nights the electric grid was often overloaded (due to stills running on electricity), sometimes to the point where the television broadcasting station became inoperable. The quality of *samogon* was unpredictable. Dealers gave sober customers the newest and purest goods while inebriated buyers were served lesser quality: the drunker the customer, the weaker the quality of the alcohol sold.

In times of scarcity and in places where vodka was unavailable, a vodka-substitute called *braga*, or *braska* was often produced. The recipe was quite simple: add one cup of yeast powder to a bucket of boiled water (10 litres), mix in three kilograms of sugar, place a slice of bread on top, seal the bucket and leave to ferment. If the maker was impatient, the drink could already be consumed within 3–5 days, but it could also be fermented for up to 2–4 weeks. If it was sour, more sugar could be added, which was usually necessary when the concoction fermented over a long period of time, because yeast "eats" sugar. Potatoes, potato peels and berries were added for flavouring, and sometimes birch juice was used instead of water. The final product was whitish in colour and sported a foam, not unlike beer and with a similar alcohol content.

The Khanty sometimes drank beer as well, but primarily as a chaser in conjunction with vodka and *samogon*. Besides the drinks listed, all other alcoholic beverages (wine,

[12] This was be discussed later and in greater detail elsewhere: Nagy 2011.

liqueur, cognac) were referred to collectively as "wine". The reasons for this were obvious. Such drinks were rarely available, and so experience with them was limited. Moreover, they were characterised by a sweet taste and were weaker than vodka. They were regarded as products with a high level of prestige and thus foreign to Khanty culture.

In connection with various types of drink, it is also important to mentions "dry laws" during the period of prohibition (*сухой закон*) under Gorbachov. Even during this time, everyone brave or clever enough to do so managed to acquire the alcohol they needed. A great deal of aftershave lotion and cologne was consumed and a multitude of techniques were employed to produce drinks with alcohol content.[13] One method involved diluting glass cleaner with water, which was then fermented in 3-litre bottles and consumed shortly thereafter. Glass cleaner was regarded as extremely dangerous – people easily "lost their wits" from it – and general gossip mentioned several cases of delirium caused by drinking it. Some people made and drank alcohol produced from glue: much stirring was required to make it drinkable. One Khanty hunter, a master in the art of producing fake alcohol, died a sudden and inexplicable death, which everyone attributed to his drinking glue and window cleaner. There was also an insecticide spray called "Diklafos", which people simply drank or sprayed onto scarves and inhaled.[14]

Some Vasyugan Khanty people drank *chifir*, an exceptionally thick, refreshing tea, which also acts as a hallucinogen when brewed to the appropriate strength. This was achieved by filling half a mug of boiled water with large amounts of tea (the contents of 3–4 tea filters) and then continuing to boil it for another 3–4 minutes. Regular *chifir* users drank the tea 2–3 times a day. *Chifir* was the drink of choice among members of the Russian prison population, and my Khanty acquaintances who favoured it had all spent time in prison.

The rules of etiquette associated with alcohol consumption should be mentioned as well. A drink could not be poured by anyone: either the host poured or someone who had been delegated by the host for this task; but the right to do so could also be exercised by the individual who provided the alcohol. For all intents and purposes, offers to drink could not be refused. Long toasts were only said prior to drinking the first glass, but further toasts were then made with every glass thereafter, accompanied by a brief acknowledgement of who or what was being toasted. Drinks taken later on were accompanied by funny toasts, which were frequent and variable.[15] Since very few people living along the Vasyugan River spoke the Khanty language, toasts were made in Russian. To my knowledge, the

[13] It is worth comparing these "recipes" with content from Venedikt Erofeev's work *Moscow to the End of the Line* (Erofeev 1992).

[14] In the course of my fieldwork in 1993, I succeeded in obtaining several recipes from Selkup people for producing vodka substitutes: window cleaner is poured into a large pickle jar, salted and stirred for half an hour with a wooden spoon so that the dry part of the mass sticks to the spoon, after which the remaining liquid can be consumed; shoe-paste is spread on a slice of bread and left to stand for several hours, after which the moulded bread is squeezed to drain the liquid that can be consumed; cologne is mixed with '*zavarka*', a thick tea base, heated and drunk hot.

[15] A few examples of funny toasts: "This won't be the last", followed frequently by others; "So the last one won't be bored", "So the previous ones don't argue", "So I can tell what the previous ones are doing." There is also a well-known verse among the Khanty, also familiar to Russians, which basically sounds good only in Russian, usually preceded by knocking on the table: "*Кто там, сто грамм, заходи, хамм.*" – "Who's there? 100 grams. Come in! Yum!"

Khanty language contained no polite formula specifically for the purpose of making toasts. In light of this, the term *jimeki* – alright, fine – was used, but the expression also fulfilled several other functions: it was used to say thank you, but also served as a farewell greeting.

VODKA AND THE ECONOMY: BARTER, ACQUISITION, WORK

After the Ruble failed in 1998, financial traffic along the Vasyugan collapsed as well. Pension payments were late by 2–4 months and salaries were sometimes delayed for up to six months. Under such economic circumstances, money only remained functional as a measure of value and commercial transactions were temporarily replaced by bartering, in which alcohol played an important role.

Vodka was high on the list of valuable barter items, evident in the fact that almost anything from furs to collectible items and fish could be traded for alcohol, and in many cases clothes and personal articles as well. Moreover, certain products could only be sold in exchange for either money or vodka, for example used household appliances and furniture, but also fur. I know of no cases in which any of these items were traded for food, flour or sugar.

In addition to its exchange value, vodka held a prestigious rank in the order of necessities and played a major role in the planned spending of income. One Khanty hunter used to plan a strict budget for all income, and whenever money came in his first trip was to the store, where he purchased everything that he absolutely needed – food and other goods – and immediately spent the remainder on vodka. In the summer of 1998, for example, he built two logboats, sold one for a sack of flour and a sack of sugar, and then drank away the other one with an acquaintance. In local terms, this hunter was regarded as clever and thrifty, whereas others proved to be less practical and spent their entire income on vodka. Another hunter used to exchange every prize for alcohol and, distrustful of himself, had his Russian neighbour take responsibility for handling his pension. He would then regularly borrow his own money from the neighbour. The neighbour's task was to withhold the money on some occasions, encouraging him to buy goods or food that he might be in need of. This particular hunter often drank his entire monthly pension within 1–2 days, after which he would sober up, cursing himself, and return to the taiga without supplies – where he was forced either to rely on others for help or to do without. On one occasion, his money handlers purchased flour, sugar and yeast for him (all of the basic necessities). This led to a serious argument in which the hunter prohibited them from spending his money without his consent. On another occasion, the same individual made *braska* from leftover bread (substituting the bread for yeast) because he could no longer go without alcohol, and then he waited for days until he could obtain yeast so that he could bake bread. Vodka was the item that people were always able to purchase, even in times when they were practically starving. As the local saying went: "We can always afford vodka."

Naturally, there were differences in terms of the percentage of income that individual families spent on alcohol.[16] One family of three in which both parents received pensions

[16] The exact ratio of pure income to the amount spent of vodka is difficult to calculate without revulsion. For this reason, the examples given here should suffice. Unfortunately, it is equally impossible to calculate the exact quantity of alcohol consumed by one individual over a given period of time – although this would be interesting in itself.

used the pension money to cover all necessary food expenses, but they still paid a huge amount (nearly 75%) for vodka. The hunter mentioned above, however, spent none of his income making a living from the sale of the 30 sables he had bagged that year. In another family, the aging father complained that he would have to go fishing again because his sons and grandchildren would often sell their catch for vodka before they even arrived home.

As we have seen, vodka held a prestigious rank in the system of bartering, but of course this did not mean that its exchange value was exceedingly high. One bottle of vodka was worth a bucket of potatoes (8–10kg), or two boxes of tea (200–250g), or 400g of butter, 2l bottles of cooking oil, 3kg of biscuits or ten packs of Prima cigarettes. On the street, six bottles of vodka were worth one sack of top quality flour (50kg) or one sack of animal feed (25kg, конбинкорм – for dogs and pigs), sold from lorries by travelling merchants from Omsk. The fur of one sable was worth five bottles of vodka while two squirrel skins could be exchanged for one bottle.[17]

The alcohol prices listed above reflect what could be planned and estimated on a realistic scale, but there were also unpredictable and unrealistic vodka prices. The reason for the difference between the two price ranges could be found in the given customer's level of sobriety. A drunken individual was willing to pay practically any price in order to obtain the next bottle of alcohol. In the winter of 1998–1999, the following barters represented the most unrealistic differences in value: one sable fur for one bottle of vodka (a realistic price was five bottles), one colour TV for four bottles of vodka (the profit for the exchanger being approximately 20 times higher). The most scandalous case of bartering involved a buyer who exchanged two sable furs and one fox skin for three litres of *braska* (his gain being difficult to calculate as *braska* was a weak, home-brewed drink which had no specified monetary exchange value and was not even among the list of goods that could be bartered). Naturally, the two possible exchange rates for vodka were a source of much conflict. Buyers would regret their transactions after they became sober, and on several occasions demanded the return of their furs – all in vain. The individual who sold the *braska* in the case mentioned above actually inspired locals to file a police report, but nothing could be done against him because, as cited by another man who sold 36 sacks of fish for ten bottles of vodka: "What's to be done? People are weak."

These price conditions recall the words of contemporary travellers in connection with the relationship between merchants, dealers and the Khanty during the tsarist period: unfair bartering practices, the exploitation of drunken Khanty, the advance purchase of spoils from their next hunting season. The so-called "new Russians" who were beginning to represent local capital at the time used the techniques of their predecessors from the previous century with great success and with similar impunity. This meant that fishermen and hunters forced to rely on local mediators and their own bartering opportunities experienced the collapse of central economic control as an unequivocal loss. Hunting collectives in the Soviet system had fixed transfer prices (and defined a much wider range of transferable goods), which provided a stable and reliable means of making a living, and this was completely lacking after the political transition. The cessation of compulsory delivery was what made it possible to waste entire incomes on

[17] Data was analysed on 14 January 1999 in the village.

vodka. Within the collective framework, guns, ammunition, health care packages, certain essential clothing and free permits were issued automatically, but after the Soviet system people had to purchase these items from their own exploited – and wasted – income.

As I have already mentioned, it was possible to acquire vodka or *samogon* practically anytime through local shops and illicit dealers. At the turn of the last century, however, the system in operation was more complex: vodka could either be obtained via dealers from Tara who travelled along the river in winter[18] or by taking a long trip to the market in Kargasok, or by taking even longer six-month journeys to obtain alcohol from the direction of Tara itself. It was around this time that the Khanty began distilling *samogon* and *braska* for themselves. According to Orlov, Khanty people living along the Vasyugan – by their own admission – used half of their bread allotment to produce grain alcohol (Orlov 1926:79–80). In comparison with the circumstances that regulated the acquisition of alcohol at the turn of the previous century, the conditions prevalent in the 1990s meant no obstacle whatsoever, the only uncertain factor being whether an individual had enough money or a suitable means of barter. In light of these conditions, occasions for the acquisition of vodka largely depended on how money for this purpose was acquired.

It has already been stated earlier that almost anything could be exchanged for vodka, and if someone lacked resources, they tried to obtain them in other ways, one of which was through the institution of credit. The Khanty drank in advance when dealing with merchants and then had to pay off their debt from the spoils that they acquired during their hunting expeditions, which constituted practically the same system of obligation as the one typical of their transactions with dealers at the turn of the last century. Even so, the creditors were also undertaking a significant risk, unlike their counterparts a century earlier, who had enjoyed a monopoly and could therefore levy their demands by taking advantage of their situation. In the 1990s, no-one held a monopoly and so the power to collect debts was also gone. From time to time, Khanty who had accumulated debt refused to pay it on the grounds that they could not remember when they had taken the vodka and did not trust the seller, or they simply stopped dealing with the given merchant and thus managed to avoid contact. Within families, a limited amount of responsibility for one another also remained valid – including financial help. There were several examples involving the payment of debt by close relatives, which kept the reputation of the given family intact, but there were also cases in which even the widow of a deceased man refused to pay off his debts in spite of the fact that she had been his regular drinking companion. It was not cultural norms that determined how people behaved in such situations (the norm clearly favoured taking responsibility), but rather the personal morals of the individuals in question.

Another similarly accepted way of obtaining financial resources were loans, which could be requested from anyone. If the parties involved had a close relationship, the conditions of the loan were clear and both parties were aware of the risk, but it was precisely the nature of their relationship that also provided a certain guarantee that the loan would be repaid. With regards to strangers and distant acquaintances, however, all sorts of excuses were employed: ill family members, an urgent trip, a lack of food. It was

[18] The Tara is a Russian river which flows into the Irtis River in the territory what is now Omsk County. It originates in present day Novosibirsk County, and the city at the mouth of the Irtis carries the same name.

no surprise, therefore, that when one Khanty man found out about his brother-in-law's death, his first inclination was to think that the news was actually false, a way of tricking him into lending money. Many people became so indebted that they could no longer keep track of their loans. I personally witnessed a case in which a woman attempted to pay back a significant sum to someone who she actually owed no money to at all.

Money could also be obtained via theft. Sometimes people simply stole vodka, but anything else of value could also be stolen e.g. furs, household items etc. This and other methods existed in spite of the fact that society (including the micro society of the Khanty) clearly judged them negatively. Those who failed to pay back debts or loans became the subject of scandal, and people who stole developed equally bad reputations.[19]

Vodka, therefore, contributed greatly to the indebtedness and impoverishment of the Khanty, which was especially true given the fact that any accumulated income could be spent or wasted at any time as a result of one or two lengthy periods of inebriation. One man purchased a snowmobile from the money he had saved and was even able to take it home before the transaction was actually made. He then began to drink in joyful celebration of his acquisition and proceeded to drink away the money he had saved. It took him two years to pay off the debt, and in the meantime he lost the snowmobile in the course of another drinking binge.

Alcohol also had an influence on the amount of time devoted to work.[20] The fact that the taiga was regarded as a "dry", alcohol-free zone compared to the village did not prevent people from getting drunk there from time to time, but there was no opportunity to engage in binge drinking as it was not possible to transport the necessary quantities of alcohol. Locals tried to compensate for this, either by having helicopter pilots still active in the area transport alcohol form time to time in exchange for fish, or by making the journey to the village themselves. The trip was long (34 km) and required almost an entire day, which meant that people only chose this alternative on rare occasions. They were aware that time spent in the village would entail drunkenness and no work, and so visits were selectively postponed as way of self-regulating their alcohol consumption. As one local expressed it: "Time's moving on and health is deteriorating."

Due to these circumstances, those who spent time doing important seasonal work in the taiga (the winter hunting season, fishing in the spring, which coincided with spawning time, berry-picking and pine collection) lost relatively few workdays. During the 1998–1999 hunting season, which lasted from December to March, the hunter quoted above lost approximately 15–20 days because of drinking.[21] He spent a total of eleven days on three occasions in the village and also spent three days drinking in the "yurt". The number of days varies depending on whether we add a minimum of one inactive day after each drinking binge for the purpose of regaining sobriety.

As the Khanty generally had no means of transportation, trips to the village constituted a part of their bartering system in addition to being an inhibitor of alcohol

[19] See below for a more detailed account of judgements regarding crime.

[20] Since it is frequently impossible to determine exactly what constitutes work and what does not in the eyes of the Khanty, the ratios are expressed here in work days rather than work hours.

[21] This figure seems low in comparison to other intervals when he spent approximately twice as much time drinking.

consumption. Transportation services had to be paid for, usually in the form of fish and furs, but compensation could also be provided by granting the vehicle owner the right to hunt in the given territory while the hunter was present. Young people had no difficulty making the journey between the two villages on foot, but older individuals were forced to rely on vehicles and their drivers. Since the "non-Khanty" residents of the village drank in similar amounts, their inebriation also had an impact on the work time of their Khanty acquaintances. During the aforementioned 1998–1999 winter hunting season, one Khanty man – who happened to be abstinent – lost 20 work days because his potential drivers were drunk.

Alcohol also had a major influence on the work life of villagers. One man from the "yurt", who also worked in the village, only managed to complete less than one third of his delegated tasks during the first four months of 1999, and so it was no surprise when he "resigned" in May at the request of his supervisor. If he had not done so, he would have been fired, which would have decreased his chances of finding more work.

In consideration of the above, alcohol significantly inhibited performance as well, especially when certain types of work were compensated in vodka. In such cases, either a specified amount of alcohol was offered in exchange for the work or an unlimited amount of alcohol was provided by the employer during work time and afterwards when the workers were invited for dinner. If employers failed to provide a sufficient quantity of alcohol, they were branded by public opinion: for example, gossip would spread through the village that the six gravediggers working at a burial only received three bottles of vodka.

Vodka also affected performance in other ways. The idea of collecting and accumulating goods was foreign to Khanty hunters, who also had limited demands, which means the less they drank, the less game they needed to hunt for. One Khanty hunter had previously been a severe alcoholic, but he had also worked hard, constantly traversing the forest and laying a huge number of traps. As soon as he became abstinent, however, he only continued to produce the goods that he directly needed to live on. Among all the residents of the "yurt", he was the one who spent the least amount of time in the taiga, and by 1998 the number of traps he set steadily dwindled to none. Hunting became useless to him as he was able to cover essential food purchases from his pension. Fishing provided a sufficient amount of meat, and he was even able to give away or barter some of this. One of his friends commented thus: "He doesn't need to run around anymore. He gets a pension, which is enough, and if he needs fish, he goes out once a month and comes back with two sacks. When he was drinking, he was out and about because he needed the furs. Now he doesn't drink anymore, thanks to his wife."

FATES: DEATH, CRIME, PATHS IN LIFE

"We're a fucked-up lot. Everybody dies because of vodka. They choke to death, burn to death, get run over, or freeze to death. We can't live normally." This is how a Khanty woman and her husband reacted upon hearing about a new case of death related to vodka. "Alcohol, alcohol, alcohol. It's our biggest problem, you know." In reality, she was right. Witnessing the lives of individual families, one saw tragedy after tragedy caused by alcohol and inebriation. In the five years preceding 1999, for example, one woman lost

her husband to an alcohol-related illness, her son-in-law drove his tractor into a lake, her brother was killed brutally by a group of men who were hunting while drunk, and not long after I left, her other son fell in the water while drunk and drowned.[22]

Alcohol ranked high among the causes of death within the Khanty community and the general population of the village.[23] In the first two month of 1999, there were eleven cases of death in the community, only one of which was not directly or indirectly attributed to alcohol consumption. It was also a cause of crime. Various fights, stabbings and murders were all linked to inebriation as well cases of robbery and theft in the pursuit of alcohol. Non-Khanty locals typically associated these crimes with the Khanty population in keeping with the stereotype that Khanty people were prone to aggression as a result of alcohol consumption: they became drunk faster and raged more frequently, and the many tragedies among them were exacerbated by the fact that they were hunters, which meant that knives and guns were always close at hand.

Accusation was of great significance in explaining cases of death among the Khanty. Practically every case that could be attributed to vodka as a possible cause gave rise to numerous stories in which specific individuals were named as the obvious murderers of the deceased. On one hand, such gossip provided plausible explanations for "accidental" deaths that were otherwise inexplicable. On the other hand, they specifically named and defined conflicts that existed between the deceased and the accused (as well as the accuser). Accusations were not only directed at those with whom alleged conflicts existed, but also at individuals with a reputation for violence as well as those who had already participated in other murders.

According to the Khanty, the concepts of tragedy and crime could not always be separated from one another. Serious crimes, murders, attempted murders and fights that lived in their memories were always associated with vodka and intoxication. Even so, drunkenness was seen as a passive condition that was suffered, along with the acts of inebriated individuals, who were also sufferers rather than being the causes. Consequently, they were able to remove the blame from themselves. Crimes became inevitable accidents in which both the perpetrators as well as those who actually suffered or died as a result were victims.[24] For this reason, there were virtually no unforgivable crimes. Fratricide, matricide and other forms of murder did not result in rejection or exile from the community. Such crimes were condemned as inadmissible, but since the perpetrators themselves were also seen as being victims, they clearly had an opportunity to re-assimilate within the community once they had completed their prison sentences. There social status was clearly harmed as they had been confronted with their crimes more than once, but Khanty micro-society tended to be more forgiving than the non-Khanty community in the village.

Surprising as it may be, the social consequences of crimes against property were far more severe. Those who were caught stealing lost social prestige to a greater degree than those who were sentenced for murder. All early written sources describe the Khanty as a

[22] Her third son was killed by his brother during the time of my next field trip (2001), the boy who is mentioned in the text as having been released from prison.

[23] Exact data is unavailable since the cause of death cannot be determined in every case and there are no written sources.

[24] Regarding the case of A.V. I. – who murdered his wife, but was acquitted in public opinion – see below.

people unfamiliar with the phenomenon of theft – where stealing occurred, a significant Russian influence could be observed. The reason for this is that care and responsibility for others – including strangers – was a fundamental norm among the Khanty. A society of hunters in the taiga could not function without manifestations of solidarity. Vacated hunting cabins had to be left behind at minimum with a supply of dry firewood, matches, salt, sugar and a filled petroleum lamp. These could be vital in times of crisis, even life-saving, but under normal circumstances they at least facilitated the comfort of subsequent dwellers. In keeping with the above, cabins were not locked and it was perfectly acceptable to enter any of them, eat from the provisions stored there and use the available supplies, but failing to replenish those supplies was regarded as a crime. By the end of the 1990s, this norm was no longer valid in all cases and theft became more and more frequent. These instances were nevertheless strongly condemned, regardless of whether they were related to alcohol or not.

As such, alcohol turned certain crimes into tragedy while lending a comical element to other cases. Some incidents resulting from drunkenness became the subject of jokes for years to come, like the case of a hunter from the "yurt" who once came to the village while drunk. Upon arriving, his need to answer nature's call became so urgent that he began urinating across from the dance hall when a representative from the county seat happened to be visiting. This resulted in a scandal and the hunter was sentenced to 15 days in prison, which was in Kargasok. His story was always recounted with the following anecdote: "He pissed in the village, but he shat in Kargasok." More serious incidents of fighting and drunken rambunctiousness were also described in a humorous way. The main theme of these stories was usually a comical event e.g. someone falling into a campfire face first, singing his hair and beard, someone swinging a wooden stick back and forth before passing out on a table, or the man who was almost stung to death by a swarm of mosquitos while sleeping in the street. The following is a specific case: a man got drunk and became wild, just as he had many times before. He chased his children out of the house and almost beat his dog to death. Later, he also beat up his wife, who had been arguing with him. He then picked up a log and began chasing his sister-in-law around the house with it before using it to hit his neighbour in the head. After this, he exchanged the slab of wood for an axe, causing everyone to run away from the house. While searching for his sister-in-law, axe in hand, he bumped into a barrel, staggered and slammed the axe into the barrel, shouting: "Halt!" When he realised that no-one was there, he moved on. By the next day, everyone in the village was telling the tale, especially the victims – the sister-in-law and the neighbour – but the "hero" of the story himself was laughing right along with them.

Taking into consideration all that has been said about the Vasyugan Khanty in connection with alcohol and alcoholism, the following two examples should serve as a graphic illustration of the above. I have included two charts comprising the family trees of two men. The charts indicate those whose deaths can be attributed to alcohol as well as those who were known or used to be known as regular vodka drinkers, prone to "drunkenness". These figures are followed by a description of everything related to the subjects' relationship with alcohol, including the topics of conversation that arose in their families.

A total of three generations are represented in each family tree: the subjects observed, their parents and their children. As this provides a comprehensive illustration in itself; any attempt to expand the framework of the investigation would only distort the results since

information in connection with other generations was lacking. Naturally, additional data was also not available, partly due to the limited knowledge and memory of the human "sources" and partly because the available written sources were far from complete.[25] In spite of this, the two examples help to ascertain the rate of alcohol consumption, its impact on life trajectories and its role in death statistics.

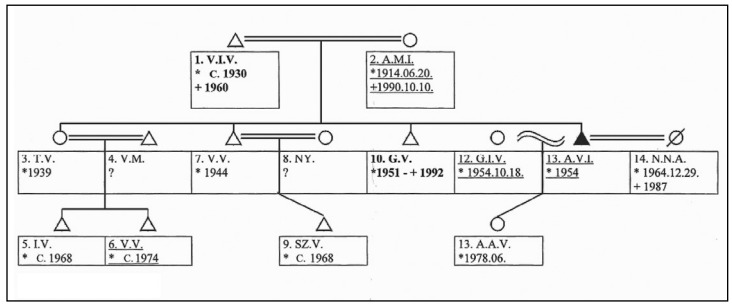

Figure 1. The family tree of A.V.I.

The first male subject is A.V.I. – whose family tree can be seen above.[26] A.V.I. was a Khanty hunter with a troubled life. He had been in prison twice, and had escaped by accident on several occasions. Many claimed that he had received his initial three-year sentence for breaching the peace, but his own interpretation was that he had failed to provide his partner with child support. After spending time imprisoned in several cities, he ended up as a construction worker on the BAM (Baikal – Amur Mainline) project, in which prison inmates with records of good behaviour were also allowed to participate. In the end, he escaped from the construction site – by simply boarding a plane and flying home. The subsequent lengthy search for him failed to reveal his location: he had disappeared into the woods. He acquired part of his food supply himself, the rest being sent to him or delivered to him by his mother on rare visits. It was during one of these that he was re-captured, nine months later. Even so, his punishment was not prolonged and he only had to complete the original prison sentence.

Following his imprisonment, he married N.N.A. (14), but he killed her after four years of marriage. A.V.I. was ten years older than his wife, who was an exceptionally attractive woman. He provided her with everything and "dressed her like a doll", but she always wanted more and more, forcing him to increase his expenses. He then caught her with other men on two or three occasions. She threatened him, saying that he could do nothing against her; he had a criminal record and so she could have him locked up whenever she wanted. In the end, A.V.I. got drunk one night, shot his wife to death, lay down beside her and went to sleep. In the morning, with no memory of the night before, he was attempting to wake her up when he was told to leave her alone because she was already dead. There were various explanations regarding N.N.A.'s death. The only

[25] Written sources included documents from the diocese of Srednij Vasyugan up to 1922 and housekeeping records from 1920–1960 regarding the "yurt".

[26] I have underlined individuals who had, or used to have reputations as alcoholics; bold letters indicate those whose deaths could be attributed to alcohol. Serial numbers are referred to in the text so as to make it easier to identify each individual.

certainty was that the couple had been partying together with others in the "yurt", where they had done a lot of drinking. When A.V.I. got out of bed the following day, he found his wife next to him with a gunshot through the shoulder, having bled to death. Some claimed that he had been cleaning the gun when it went off and hit his wife. Others said that he had shot her accidentally through the door. In front of the jury, A.V.I. claimed that in his drunken stupor he had mistaken her for a bear, but he also frequently mentioned that he might not even have been the actual perpetrator.

A.V.I. was sentenced to seven years in prison, most of which he spent under psychiatric treatment. After all, he had killed the person he loved the most. Eventually, he was pronounced cured. Following his release, he went straight for the harbour and travelled to Kargasok. He became hungry on the ship and went to the snack shop. In the meantime, however, everything had changed; the currency was different, the prices were different and he could not understand anything. Recognising the situation, the shopkeeper explained everything to him. Upon his arrival in Kargasok, he purchased bread, fish and vodka on the street – he had a strong yearning for fish. As he had no more money, he requested help, after which the local council assisted him by paying for his accommodation and tickets. He spent the remaining week in Kargasok. Returning to Vasyugan, he found himself standing at the airport wondering what to do. He had no idea where to go since his mother and brother had both died while he was in prison. The man who had been asked to care for the empty house had neglected his responsibility, and so all of his possessions had been scattered: his clothes, photo albums and his traps, and even his hunting territory had been taken by others.

At first, he lived with acquaintances, one of whom helped him to get accommodation at a bunkhouse and a job as a guard at the oil mines. There he entered into conflict with his supervisor over the issue of unpaid wages, among others. Two months after his release from prison, his backpack disappeared from the bunkhouse together with all of his remaining supplies, after which he decided to take justice into his own hands. Using an axe, he chased everyone away and then entered the offices in search of his supervisor, who only managed to escape by going through a window. For unknown reasons, the police were not contacted. Naturally, the incident was reported later, but no charges were pressed, allegedly because nobody liked the supervisor in question anyway. Of course, A.V.I. was fired the next day, after which he began hunting and fishing in Ajpalovo and then in the village before finally settling in the "yurt". Officially, he was not permitted to engage in other kinds of work as he had contracted tuberculosis while still in prison.

He ran into trouble with the police on several occasions thereafter. Once, he was imprisoned for a night along with a friend for drunken rowdiness. The next time he visited the municipal government offices half-naked in a drunken stupor and demanded accommodation, and then he received a six-month suspended sentence for "illegal" possession of a hunting knife. This was when he realised that he had little chance of remaining free if he continued to have conflicts with the police. From then on, he continued living in the "yurt" and only visited the village for the expressed purpose of acquiring supplies, and to get drunk.[27]

[27] Two years after the first publication of this study, A.V.I. died a tragic death at the end of a long fight when his travelling companion shot him on the way from the village to the "yurt". The circumstances of the murder, its consequences and the related gossip cannot be analysed here.

His family statistics can be observed in the chart below:

TOTAL	14 persons
Deceased	**4**
death attributed to alcohol	3
death not attributed to alcohol	1
Living	**10**
alcoholic	2
adult, abstinent	1
adult, drinking habits unknown	7

Figure 2. The family of A.V.I. – statistics concerning alcohol consumption[28]

Father: V.I.V. (1): hunter, lived separately, drowned in 1960 while drunk; hardly any information available.

Mother: A.M.I. (2): consumed large amounts of alcohol in old age, primarily after her son's first imprisonment. In spite of this, her death cannot be clearly attributed to alcoholism.

V.V. (6): was spending time in prison for drunken violence and breaches of peace.

G.V. (10): died while drunk on the street in the village; fell on the way home and froze to death.

G.I. (12): ex-partner of A.V.I. – two years older. They were constant drinking companions; alcohol brought them together and destroyed their relationship as well. At the time of my research, they were no longer in contact with one another and her actual whereabouts were unknown.

N.N.A. (14): younger sister of G.I., shot V.P.K. (see: next family, 26); officially wife of A.V.I. at the time of my research, shot by A.V.I. after four years of marriage.

The second male subject is P.M.M., who – by his own admission – had been a heavy drinker during his youth. When proposing to his future wife, he had informed her that he would cooperate with her in everything, that he would work hard and bring all of his earnings home, but also that he would continue drinking just as he had before. He did as promised: in spite of his constant work, the couple was always experiencing financial trouble because P.M.M. spent a significant portion of his income on alcohol.

Changes came to his life in April of 1994, when his brother died. This was the sibling with whom he had had the closest relationship. They had been intimately connected economically and helped each other a great deal. His brother's death came in the form of a lethal accident in the wake of a drunken binge which almost killed P.M.M. as well (see: below). The person who broke the news claimed he saw P.M.M. "grow old" right before his eyes. For a long period of time, P.M.M. even avoided the hunting territory

[28] The figures indicated here reflect conditions in 1999. I have not continued to track the lives of these individuals in the time since then.

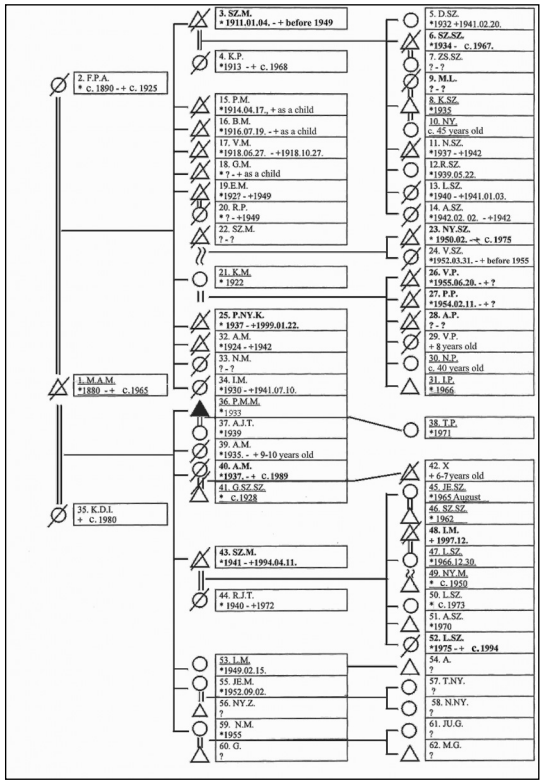

Figure 3. The family tree of P.M.M.

where he and his brother had hunted together, and he also began drinking less and less vodka.

The final push came when a certain “professor” from Moscow was invited to the village. This individual was supposedly capable of curing heavy drinkers by using hypnosis and a few drops of poison on the tongue. He was said to have “de-coded” many other alcoholics prior to his visit. According to P.M.M.’s wife, the “poison” was actually pure alcohol, and the professor assigned a treatment interval of two years, during which any consumption of alcohol could prove lethal. It was his wife who convinced P.M.M. to take part in the treatment and persuaded the “professor” to lengthen the treatment for her husband to five years. The appearance of the man from Moscow had a tremendous impact on P.M.M., being a manifestation of the authority he had always feared and shunned. An important contributing factor may also have been that P.M.M. was very familiar with his own Khanty religion. He still practiced certain rituals, knew of sacred legends, kept religious rules and believed in them. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the orders of a “holy man” were to be obeyed without question. For P.M.M., prohibition and the related punishment seemed completely believable and real. As a consequence of this quasi-religious regulation, and through the effective assistance of his wife, he managed to remain abstinent throughout the time of my research, even though the delegated time frame had already expired.[29]

It should be mentioned that at the time I was writing this study, P.M.M. was the only one among thirty people involved in the treatment who actually did not drink at all. There was also a mining engineer, who only continued drinking moderately, but all of the others relapsed.

Despite the explanations above, the question of why someone becomes abstinent in Khanty culture still requires an answer. In the case of P.M.M., the reason cannot be traced to his personality, but to that of his wife, A.J.T. (37), and to her life story and her attitude. A.J.T. was born in a now uninhabited area along the Chertala, a tributary of the Vasyugan River. Her family constantly starved during the war, and following her mother’s death

[29] Following the first publication of my research, P.M.M. lived for an additional 15 years and maintained his abstinence.

she was taken to a foster home. During her youth, she resided at foster homes in the area of Tomsk and was thus raised in an urban environment. Eventually, she obtained three secondary diplomas in economics, health care and typing. She lived and worked for a long time in Tomsk and then in Krasnoyarsk. It was from this environment that she entered life in the "yurt" and the village, keenly aware of the prevalent circumstances. She precisely observed and defined the consequences of her husband's alcoholism – and that of the Khanty in general – and when she saw a chance to take advantage of the opportunities dictated by the circumstances, she used every bit of the authority and cunning she had at her disposal to help him stop drinking and remain abstinent.

P.M.M. continued to derive pleasure from participating in drinking sessions, but only as quiet observer. He greatly enjoyed watching the antics of drunken revellers, but never drank a drop of alcohol. At first, people had tremendous difficulty accepting his abstinence, but later he was simply offered drinks out of politeness and was never forced. P.M.M. himself strongly condemned drunkenness, but he was happy to recount the drunken adventures of his youth. Three generations of his family are included below. Heavy drinking, alcoholism and alcohol related death are clearly evident in the case of 23 family members over three generations.

TOTAL	62 persons
Deceased	**36**
Death attributed to alcohol	10
Death not attributed to alcohol	16
No precise information regarding cause of death or history of alcohol consumption	10
Living	**26**
Alcoholic	13
Former alcoholic	1
Children	4
Adult, abstinent	4
Adult, drinking habits unknown	4

Figure 4. The family of P.M.M. – statistics concerning alcohol consumption

Father: M.A.M. (1), also a well-known heavy drinker; went on year-long acquisition trips during his youth and requested that a bottle of vodka be placed in his grave. It is unknown whether alcohol was directly responsible for his death or not.

Son: S.M. (3), also known to be a rambunctious drinker; his first partner, a 16-year-old girl, escaped home to her parents after living with him for two weeks. The cause of his death is unknown, except for the fact that he died while drunk.

S.S. (6) died at the age of 33 when he burned to death while inebriated in the oil mine.

K.S. (8) was a family member in the "yurt", possibly the one who was most dependent on alcohol. I have mentioned above that he did not even handle his own pension, but regularly drank away all of his income. He had already suffered several accidents: almost dying of delirium tremens, burning down his house while drunk, and shooting his own mouth with a shotgun, obviously an attempted suicide (although not admitted).

Wife of K.S.: M.L. (9), also a victim of alcohol. The exact circumstances of her death are unknown. The official version stated that she went outside to the street during the winter in the nude, fell asleep and froze to death. Her husband, who had been drinking with her, did not discover that she had died until the following morning. Other accounts suggest that she was murdered by the drunken husband and his aunt.

Partner of K.S.: N.Y. (10), a Russian woman who lived in the village with her children. Their relationship was mainly characterised by the fact that they were "drinking buddies". Their drinking was usually financed by K.S. This fact, and their relationship in general, was the subject of many jokes among their relatives and acquaintances.

K.M. (21) was already 80 years old and her health was deteriorating, which meant that she had to leave her cabin and settlement in the taiga in order to move into the village. After this, she was left with practically nothing to do, and by her own admission the only goal of her daily life was to end the day. She lived in constant lack of money, which was only alleviated somewhat by the sporadic arrival of her pension. When this money arrived, she would get drunk with her family for days at a time, after which the moneyless cycle would begin again. The only changes in her life had come during her periods of "dryness": she had been a heavy drinker previously as well, drinking similar quantities with similar intensity, but she had also worked very hard. Even at the age of 72, she had still gone hunting and fishing.

Son: N.S. (23), died before the age of 30 as the result of a typical and frequent accident; he fell into the Vasyugan River and drowned in the icy spring water.

Husband: P.N.K. (25), died during the time of my fieldwork; the circumstances of his death were not clear. The only certainty was that his death was preceded by a drinking binge which lasted several days. His son had acquired a large sum of money from hunting, which they drank away quickly thereafter. On the day of his death, he had also picked up his pension, after which he purchased some bottles of vodka and drank them with his wife, his son and a friend. After four bottles of vodka, his son went out for more and returned with four newer bottles. They became progressively drunker, drinking larger and larger glasses of vodka until – according to the accepted version – P.N.K. stood up, asked his wife if there was water in the wash basin, washed his hands, lay down on the floor and stayed that way. His heart could not take the strain. His death went unnoticed by his completely drunk fallen asleep on the kitchen floor. It also seems certain that he was already dead by the time the police who visited the house that evening arrived (for reasons undisclosed here). Among those present at the time, the friend was escorted to the police station and was only released the following day. When he returned to the house, he found P.H.K. lying on the floor next to his son. At first – not remembering anything – he wanted to help the older man get up and noticed that his hands were cold. He woke the drunken boy up and notified P.N.K.'s brother-in-law, who then finally began to organise the burial of the corpse, which by then had been on the floor for almost a day. The funeral itself had to be organised practically from

beginning to end by distant relatives since the drunken wife was incapable of doing anything. She continuously begged for more vodka, and her son was not capable of much either due to his hangover. Having lost all self-control, he went out to the street in freezing temperatures in a hat without earmuffs and contracted frost-bite. This was the most accepted version of P.N.K.'s death. The varying accounts may also have been due to the fact that no-one involved could remember exactly what happened because they were all drunk, or – according to public opinion in the village – they actually did not want to remember. It is not precisely known who was actually present or whether anyone else had been at the scene in addition to the three people mentioned. There was also no acceptable explanation for the spots of haematoma that covered the corpse, the existence of which the woman who washed the body did not keep secret. Many considered it likely that the victim was killed in the course of a fight, and there was much gossip asserting that P.N.K. was poisoned by drinking poor quality vodka with a high acetone content – which was not confirmed by the police investigation.

P.N.K.'s sons were well-known bachelors in the area of the village. They were exceptionally handsome, excellent hunters, and they had a reputation for rowdiness. Their deaths were all directly attributed to vodka, one exception being the result of a fight. V.P. (26) got into a quarrel and a fight with his younger brother during a family vodka binge and killed him by stabbing him several times. V.P. died in a similar way: during a drinking spree, an old schoolmate recalled the time V.P. had reported him to a teacher on duty in the dormitory for stealing a cassette-player, after which the schoolmate murdered him with a shotgun. P.P. (27) suffered from epilepsy and died when he rolled into a lake during a seizure. Some claimed that he was also drunk before his death.

Among siblings who were still alive, N.P. (30) had completed college and was living in the Ukraine with her husband and two children. Family members knew little about her standard of living or about how she financed it since her own account was different from that of her children. Even so, it was clear that when she visited the village, her lifestyle was similar to that of her family, with equally intensive alcohol consumption.

I.P. (31) was the only surviving male child and was unmarried: his partner was a married woman who he often drank together with. In keeping with the alcohol, their relationship was stormy and also embellished by incidents of stabbing. He was the one who relatives unanimously condemned for his wasteful negligence of the family hunting territory and their cabins in the taiga.

T.P. (38) was P.M.M.'s only daughter, who lived for a long time in Tomsk, after which she made a living as a huckster. She lived in a bunkhouse for a considerable length of time and then with her fiancé's parents until he died in a workplace accident. She then began living in bunkhouses again, drinking more and more until her mother convinced her to return to the village. The only work she could find was a job as a maid at the nearby oil-extracting town, where shifts changed once a month. This existence exacerbated her drinking until she finally lost her reputation and was branded in the village as a derelict alcoholic. The final push, however, was when her parents also witnessed her lifestyle first-hand after a lonely drinking binge. She tried to change her situation by committing suicide, but she recovered from the trauma, everything carried on as it had before.

A.M. (40) died while she was ill. She was unable to walk and lived alone after her husband had abandoned her, under the care of relatives. She was also taken care of by one of her girlfriends, until they had a mutual drinking binge during which the electric hot-

plate was knocked over and the house caught fire. Drunken as well as disabled, she burned to death in the house. Many claimed that it was not an accident, suggesting wilful intent.

A.M.'s ex-husband, G.S.S. (41), was an old man who regularly kept his house locked and only made contact with his acquaintances during his frequent and lengthy drinking sprees. In spite of this, he was preparing for his second wedding in 1999 and many people in the village expected that marriage would give him less opportunity to drink.

S.M. (43) was P.M.M.'s closest sibling in terms of age, lifestyle, work habits and moral views. They helped one another regularly. They were also drinking together with S.M. and his brother-in-law, I.M. (48), on April 11, 1994 – but as I have already mentioned, P.M.M. parted ways with them. On the aforementioned occasion, S.M. and the brother-in-law intended to visit an oil-well by snowmobile. Being drunk, S.M. fell off the vehicle (unnoticed by his brother-in-law) and presumably fell asleep on the road. He died violently when a lorry carrying pipes ran over his prone body. His remains were found scattered over a large area and the driver of the lorry was never identified. Wilful intent was also suspected in this case, and some people accused his brother-in-law of being responsible for his death. S.M. had also planned to attend the sobriety séance that had made his brother abstinent, but it was held three months after his death.

S.M.'s oldest daughter was J.S. (45), the wife of S.S. (46), who was a Cossack. Her husband was a heavy drinker, which led to many workplace conflicts. J.S., however, drank far less at the time since she could hardly afford to leave the house while raising her two children. On the other hand, she participated in her husband's drinking binges at home and regularly became drunk as well.

L.S. (47) had an Udmurtian husband, I.M. (48), who played a role in the death of his father-in-law. In the beginning, I.M. proved to be an extremely diligent man, and his wife's relatives had positive memories of him throughout the time of my research. He had great difficulty coping with his wife's alcoholism, and when it turned out that she was cheating on him regularly, he wanted to divorce her and move back to Udmurtia. The economic recession at the time made this impossible and he also began to drink more and more. He continuously drank away the valuables they had accumulated: the television, the washing machine, food supplies. Two years after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, when he shot himself in the neck, his wife's lover killed him by pressing a pillow over his mouth and strangling him. After her husband's death, his wife continued to drink non-stop, regularly wasting her widow pension and her family allowance. Her two children were often starving and were provided for by relatives. Due to her lifestyle, she was penalised by the local government, which threatened to take her children away from her. Other members of her family, including her brother and her aunt, also supported the idea of placing the children in a foster home. The first child was born with a spinal injury, which proved fatal within a month. His mother was unwilling to care for him and drank away the money that had been saved for his care. She did not even bury the child. Her lover was L.S. (47), a Russian, who remained with her until he was imprisoned, which scandalised many people since everyone already held him responsible for her husband's death before the police investigation was even closed. He beat her regularly, and she was even hospitalised with a broken jaw as a result. In the end, L.S. was found guilty of four murders. In spite of this, both his partner and his children sent him home since his presence at least meant some form of security. If he was home, their mother stayed home as well and there was food on the table regularly. After he was imprisoned, the children

were afraid to go home because they never knew who would be there and when, so they moved in with their aunt.

L.Z. (52) worked in Tomsk, where she married a Russian boy. After their wedding, the boy was killed by his former lover, who poisoned him out of jealousy. He was 19 years old.

L.M. (53) was the black sheep of the family, regarded by everyone as a derelict alcoholic. He did not live in the village, but in the county seat, Kargasok. He maintained no contact with the family. His alcoholism was often the subject of conversation, however, and he was constantly mentioned with scorn and irony, frequently in comparison to his two sons, who led exemplary lives away from him. These harsh opinions were no doubt rooted in the fact that he had torn away from the family and was inhospitable to relatives who occasionally visited him.

SUMMARY

As we have seen, alcohol plays an undeniable role in the culture of the Khanty. It is present in every aspect of their lives: in the self-definition and identity of individuals, in sacred rituals, in the behavioural norms of profane culture, in folklore, in housekeeping preferences, in the dominance and organisation of values, in divisions of labour, in perceptions of crime, as a leading principle of fate, and as a frequent cause of death. The situation of the Khanty cannot be regarded as unique, however. Similar phenomena can be observed in all cultures where alcohol consumption is not limited by society. In these environments, alcohol becomes both the aim and the meaning of acts, socially legitimised in the same way and losing its criminal character. Where strong systems of prohibition are lacking, alcohol becomes absolute and leads to an alcohol-centred system of values in which there is always a reason to drink and individuals are always forgiven: an alcohol culture.

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