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"To Do Something when Something is Forbidden" – The Clean, the Sacred and the Forbidden in Synya Khanty Culture

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Abstract: Khanty culture in its present state – in the process of language loss and acculturation – still offers a wide field for the examination of notions related to everyday and sacral purity and their embodiment. Earlier research has explored certain details of these notions (e.g., regulations related to animals of mythological role, nutrition taboos and linguistic restrictions), it seems, however, that the concept of purity is more complex than that: it is a fundamental system which plays a central role, encompassing the whole of the traditional Khanty world, which ultimately defines the order of the world. This fact about the Khanty culture has practically not yet been articulated. The present research aims to explore the intersections of notions of purity and order in Khanty culture and to analyze the individual sub-fields.
Keywords: Khanty, purity, taboo, sacred

INTRODUCTION

It is almost a commonplace in the anthropological literature that cleanliness (as well as pollution) is not an absolute but a culturally defined concept (Douglas 2002:XVII). This topic is closely linked with the concepts of taboo, prohibition and sacredness in the history of scholarship. Since a series of prohibitions can apply to both uncleanness and phenomena belonging to the category of sacred, the profane-sacred discrimination also falls within this theme. In the research of Ob-Ugrian peoples, details of this subject were given serious attention (especially Rombangyejeva 1975; Bakró-Nagy 1979; Schmidt 1990; Lapina 1998; Taligina 2005; Adayev 2000; 2005). We know the consequences of female uncleanliness, the rules relating to it, but there is still a number of issues in regard to this matter.

The culture of the Western Siberian Khanty has been intensively studied in Hungarian linguistics and ethnology since the mid-19th century; after all, we are talking about one of the closest relatives of the Hungarian language and the speakers of that language. Today it is no longer primarily comparative research that is carried out; the goal is to understand certain phenomena in and of themselves. With the changes in fieldwork techniques, research among the geographically and culturally quite divided Khanty groups came to the fore, as opposed to general "Khanty" and "Ob-Ugrian" research.

My writing focuses on the culture of a riverside community, as my fieldwork in the past 20 years has been conducted in the settlements along the Synya River on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains in the Shuryshkarsky District of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, among the Khanty groups living there. As an adult woman – and a housewife – I accumulated plenty of personal experiences regarding women's uncleanliness and its associated prohibitions, the many aspects of which are well documented in professional literature.[1] My targeted research on this topic has been summarized in a monograph, from which I provide excerpts here.[2]

CLEAN, DIRTY, FILTHY AND HOLY: WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Based on my field experiences and data from professional literature, concepts relating to cleanliness in Synya Khanty culture can be articulated in the following way:

The *sistam* 'clean' word is used in a very broad meaning; it is actually used for the vast majority of the discussed concepts, while there are separate words available for expressing the contrasting 'unclean'.

There is a cleanliness concept that is casual, practical in nature. Things are either *sistam* 'clean', or those which are not may be *χuleŋ* 'dirty,' *naprəŋ* 'filthy', *ńoχləŋ* 'smeared,' or covered in *wŏsi* 'smoke, *soot* dust.' This type of dirtiness, filthiness, dustiness can be terminated: it is washable, wipable, sweepable, dustable depending on the kind on contamination and the properties of the contaminated object. Since cleanliness is sustainable or can be produced, it is expected that objects and persons must be cleaned – in a specified manner and to a specific extent.

However, the word 'clean' is used in other contexts as well. A *sistam let-ŏt* 'clean food' is not clean in a physical sense but refers to a food that has not yet been served. So clean is the freshly cooked food, the freshly cut bread slice, the unopened bottle of drink, the just unwrapped store-bought food, etc. Here, then, the meaning of *sistam* approaches more the notion of 'new', 'intact'. A similar meaning can be detected in the *sistam tăχa* 'clean place' term, which refers to a place, an area that no one visits, is out of sight, and is thus intact, undisturbed.

Additionally, the weather and the sky can be 'clean', too, when there are no clouds, the sky is blue, and there is no precipitation.

They also use the word 'clean' to express the lack of female uncleanliness, *śŏχma*, which will be address in more detail later on.

The *χuli, χuleŋ* 'dirt, dirty' word usually refers to a type of dirt or dirtiness that sticks to the object, to body parts, can be removed with water, or seeps into the material. So *χuleŋ* are the unlaundered clothes, the unwashed dishes, but also *χuleŋ* is the water used for washing products; *χuleŋ* can be the face, hands, objects from which the dirt can be removed by washing.

[1] For the presentation of the written sources, see Ruttkay-Miklián 2014:24–26.

[2] My research has been conducted within the framework of the OTKA PD 83284 project, which also included the release of my book *"When the Foot Turns Heavy..." – The Cleanliness Concept of the Synya Khanty*. For the data, see under Ruttkay-Miklián 2014.

In contrast to washable dirt, the word *nampər, naprəŋ* 'garbage, trash' refers to a piece of waste. This is eliminated by dusting it out, shaking it out, sweeping it up. While the water used for washing is therefore *χuleŋ* 'dirty', the drinking water brought from the creek is *naprəŋ* 'polluted' if there is a leaf or moss floating in it. Dirty water cannot be cleaned, but polluted water can be made usable by sedimentation, filtration, careful measurement or pouring. There is a clearly noticeable difference, for example, between a dirty and a polluted floor: mopping will clean the first and sweeping the second.

There are grimy, slimy, sticky things which are marked by the word ńoŋχəl, *ńoχləŋ* 'smudge, smudged'. Most typically it is used for mud and the slime on the bodies of fish. It can be cleaned by wiping, washing.

An interesting phenomenon can be observed in the case of *wŏsi* 'smoke, soot, dust'. It is difficult to give an exact translation: it mostly designates something that is created as a result of bonfires and heating, has to do with smoke and other combustion products, and is powdery, almost airborne. It has a characteristic smell (smoky) and color (yellowish-grayish). The opposite of cleanliness, *wŏsi* is deposited on the beams of a log wall, the objects in the house, thus its meaning approximates house dust. Besides being dirty, however, there are cases when the *wŏsi* can play a useful role, especially in preserving leather and fur. Generally, the raw material to be preserved (often an already tailored piece of clothing) is hung over the summer mosquito smoker so that it would "catch the *wŏsi*," which in this case means smoking.

The Khanty also recognize a concept that could be called moral pollution – *śŏχma* – which is related to the female uncleanliness well documented in other cultures as well. Although its origin is quite physical (physiological), the concept does not cover physical contamination. In this sense, when a woman's *kŭrəl lawərta jis* 'legs turn heavy', that is, her monthly cleansing commences, she is considered contaminated from her soles upward all the way to her waist, and even to her neck (Rombandeyeva 1975:301). This contamination, the *śŏχma* 'uncleanness of female origin', is permanently present in a woman's foot, its effects periodically amplified during her monthly cleansing. It only ceases with menopause, when the woman *sŭwəl χot-loŋəla wŏśkəlle* 'throws her cane on the roof'. Although from this moment on her moral uncleanliness loses its reason, a woman usually does not change her behavior in regard to *śŏχma*. The *śŏχma* is a substance that is present in a woman's "heavy" foot, and can even spread from the top down, as if "infectious." Therefore, everything an unclean female foot has stepped on, slipped into, or crossed has become *śŏχma*ja *jis* 'unclean'. What's more, the contaminated object itself can continue infecting: whatever it gets on or hovers over even without contact becomes unclean. And whatever is *śŏχma* carries risks, brings diseases. According to a Khanty woman, "the old Khanty feared nothing more than *śŏχma*." It is important to note that *śŏχma* does not spread upwards: the floorboards (also) used by women can be used without risk by men and children considered clean, but once they are lifted (which is inevitable with the frequent relocations of a semi-nomadic fishing-hunting-reindeer herding lifestyle), they become a risk to all objects or persons that got underneath them. Cleaning of *śŏχma* (objects and persons, even body parts) is done with special smoking or steaming (Taligina 1999; 2005), but in many cases it is not even possible: a śŏχma object will forever remain that. It seems, then, that women's uncleanliness has a number of stages. It has been known that the rules for women are stricter during menstruation, pregnancy and confinement than during the rest of the period between first menstruation

and menopause, while during the preceding and subsequent periods the issue of female impurity is theoretically not relevant. Rombangyejeva's classic description (Rombangyejeva: 1975) spelled out the difference in the vertically measurable quantity of the spread of contamination: the feet and soles are always unclean, whereas upwards from there only during certain periods. However, it appears that "leg heaviness" during menstruation is caused by the quantitative or qualitative change in contamination, as precautions which may seem justified at other times too, based on the pollution of the foot or sole, must also be taken at this time. Women may, for example, walk around freely on the floorboards of the tent even when they have entered the unclean category, that is, when their soles and feet are considered contaminated. The floorboards are thus deemed quite contaminated and dangerous, as mentioned earlier. But when women's "feet turn heavy", i.e., they begin menstruating, they slide the floorboards towards the inside of the tent, and they themselves only enter the area by the door, they even sleep there near the door – the synonym for menstruation is the expression "to come to the door, to be by the door." They are obviously refraining from contaminating, or, to be precise, contaminating even more, the objects underneath them – which may already be unclean anyway. From certain stories it seems that the degree of cleanability depends on the extent of contamination, that is, objects that get soiled in their "base state" can be cleaned, but objects that come in contact with a greater degree of filth cannot. As mentioned above, the opposite of *śŏχma* is also the *sistam* 'clean'. The woman considered unclean "begins to live cleanly" upon entering menopause, so theoretically the ritual or sacred uncleanness surrounded by prohibitions is no longer relevant to her.

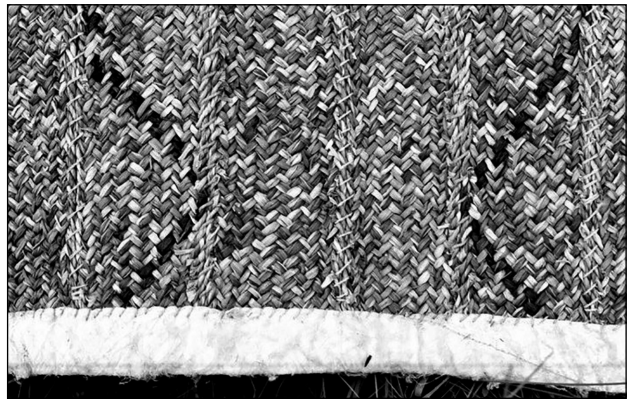

Figure 1. The rush mat used on the berth is one of the most unclean objects. Its edging was made of ling skin, Ov-olang-kurt, 1992. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

Prohibitions help to separate the clean and unclean, as well as prevent their commingling. The *raχəl, ăt raχəl* 'may, may not' expression is used in a practical sense, but it is also used for explanations of prohibitions and taboos. So the word *jem* 'sacred, forbidden, taboo' in Khanty is primarily explained with ăt *raχəl*. In Russian it is usually translated as *svyatoy* "holy" by the Khanty; in classical Hungarian literature, besides 'holy' it is also translated as "bringing atonement." Similarly to *śŏχma, jem*

Figure 2. Ritual cleaning of headscarf by smoking. The owner of the headscarf stepped on it by accident, this is why she cleans it, Tiltum, 2000. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

refers to a substance of some kind, because in utterance it is said of something that *jem tăjl* 'it has *jem*'. The use of the adjective *jemәŋ* 'holy, sacred' and the verb *jemәlti* 'following the rules relating to *jem*' formed from the root *jem* highlights the dual aspect of the concept. While the word *jemәŋ*, in accordance with its 'holy' meaning, is used primarily in relation to religion (e.g., sacred place – sacrificial place; holy house–a dwelling that houses a high-ranking idol or which has hosted the bear rites; sacred animal – a mythological animal), the verb *jemәlti* is commonly used to designate behavioral modes that regulate the relationship between son/daughter-in-law and father/mother-in-law and which aim to avoid contact. The most common manifestation of this is that a woman conceals her face from a man with her headscarf (mother-in-law from son-in-law, daughter-in-law from father-in-law), but also the way of speaking in which those in a higher kinship category address each other in Sg.3. instead of Sg.2. (e.g., "Let him move over!" rather than "Move over!"). The concealing of the face may also be required in connection with the 'holy' (e.g., when passing by significant sacred places by boat), yet it cannot be declared that it is always referring to sacred content. The validity of the rules belonging to the concept of *jem* can be wide-ranging in terms of the people affected and the duration of the prohibition. According to the Khanty, violating *jem* – even if unwittingly – brings illness and misfortune (e.g., stepping on a forbidden place–foot disease, consuming forbidden plants–toothaches, forbidden view – eye disease). To detect and remedy the error generally requires a specialist (shaman). Most commonly the solution is the offering of an adequate sacrifice.

A less often used synonym for the word *jem* is the Khanty word *kărek*, which stems from the Russian *grekh* 'sin'. This, on the one hand, has retained the original Russian 'sin' meaning, so it is related to the Khanty *jem* 'forbidden' meaning; on the other hand, as a result of definition-adaptations, it received the rather prosaic meaning of 'stool', which exists as a verb, too, thus creating a direct connection between the moral and physical aspects of waste.

THE TWO SIDES OF PROHIBITION

While presenting the meanings of the word 'clean', I pointed out that among the Synya Khanty, as with many of the world's cultures, the concepts of clean, forbidden, taboo and sacred are closely related. The central category of these concepts is the word *jem*,

the translation of which brings up the major problem of distinguishing between the ‘forbidden, taboo’ and the ‘sacred’ meaning. The first question, then, is: what is the content of the *jem* category?

Figure 3. Dictionary collection from Roza Makarovna Rokhtimova (b. Taligina), Ovgort, 1999. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

For understanding the Khanty words, Roza Makarovna Rokhtimova’s (b. Taligina) explanations to numerous entries of the DEWOS[3] are helpful as a source. As an example, about the meaning of the word *jem*, she gives the following answer:

> “Well, *jem* is from someone ... how should I say, *jem* ... Well, what do we think is *jem?* Eating a pike raw, as a raw fish, is *jem.* Cutting a ling is also *jem*, eating it raw is *jem* too. You cook it, you eat it. Then what else? Well, saying something bad is *jem*. Or saying an ugly word to a child is also bad. If you don’t let him, it is also wrong, *jem* or what, definitely wrong.” (Rokhtimova (Taligina) Róza Makarovna, 1999, Ovgort)

In this definition, in addition to previous meanings, the category of wrong appears as a new element, mostly via ‘forbidden’: when you do anything that is prohibited, it is wrong. Wrong is of course used in the ordinary sense too:

> *“atəm* [‘bad’]? It is when you get something wrong. Something bad. Well, not adequate, or something. It’s wrong. What is bad? That perhaps, what is not adequate? What is wrong? I did, they say, I sewed my pattern wrong. Bad, the word wrong, aha, sewed it wrong. You say: what did you sew wrong? The dress is bad. Or it is badly sewn, that’s what they say. Or your dress is wrong, you say. And why is your dress wrong? It is poorly sewn.” (Rokhtimova (Taligina) Roza Makarovna, 1999, Ovgort.)

[3] The etymological dictionary of the Khanty languages, covering all dialects, including a vast number of examples and explanations (Steinitz 1966–1993. Hereafter DEWOS).

However, the word *jem* also comes in contact with the definition of *jăm* 'good', because a space protected by prohibitions is clean, good.[4] The meaning of *jăm* 'good' also extends to practical, everyday topics: "The *jăm*, look, you just said it, you sewed it well, and it's good. You washed the dress and it's good. Or what, such places. Well, he's a good one, they say. He does not quarrel or something, they also say." (Rokhtimova (Taligina) Roza Makarovna, 1999, Ovgort.)

Inasmuch as the meaning of *jem* can connect with both "good" and "bad," it is clearly not the content but the frame that may be the same: the fact of the prohibitions is true in both cases, regardless of what and why they regulate. Prohibitions of the *jem* type – no longer speaking of prohibitions of a practical nature, for example, that one should not go out in the cold in light clothes – may cover very different areas: who, when, with whom, with what, what, and where may or may not do.

There are certain rules that always apply to everyone (e.g., a Synya Khanty never eats a raw pike[5]), while other rules apply only to a group (e.g., prohibitions relating to the totem animals of certain clans). There are rules that are valid for certain periods (e.g., during a waxing moon, on a given day, in the mourning period, or even during the monthly cleansing).

The prohibition can manifest in several ways. Prohibitions on the consumption of certain foods depend not only on the nature of the particular food but also on the consumer's personality, condition; that is to say, pike is usually consumed by the Khanty, the Synya Khanty do not eat it raw, and Synya women do not eat it at all during their cleansing periods and while confined. It may be forbidden to visit certain sites, but, again, regulations differ for different groups: restrictions are strict for foreigners in general, for members of other clans and for women, but certain sacrificial sites may have clan regulations that apply to men, too. Women in an unclean condition cannot participate in the bear rites, but mourning men also cannot attend presentations of plays or songs. The Ob-Ugrian "bear-language," a taboo-language used in situations related to bears, is well-known (linguistically processed by Bakró-Nagy 1979), which is extended to everyday foods that are consumed during the bear rites; for example, during the bear rites bread is called *părta pelək* 'left side', knife is *jetləŋ* ŏt 'sharp thing', therefore the men in charge of food preparation converse with sentences like, "give me the sharp thing, let me cut some left side." The taboo-language is used in other situations as well: causes of death are typically referred to with paraphrases or taboo-words. If someone drowned, for example, they announce it with *jiśt* ŏtən *părəs* 'died in a drinkable thing', using *jiśt* ŏt 'drinkable thing' that customarily refers to water during the bear rites. The prohibition of utterance applies to names too. Among the Synya Khanty, it is a verbally articulated norm that a person's real name should not be uttered; for their protection, other names or description, paraphrases must be used. The easiest way, of course, is the customary traditional method

[4] Morphologically the word *jem* 'forbidden, taboo', 'sacred' and and word *jăm* 'good' are close to each other. The difference is evident to the native speaker; however, with insufficient language skills one would come to the summary opinion that the two are the same. An edifying example is the Khanty volume of the Uralic mythological encyclopedia series published by an international editorial team, in which the articles written by V. Kulemzin totally mixed up the concepts and words (Kulemzin 2000:112–113; 134–135).

[5] Unlike other Khanty groups.

of Khanty conversation: using kinship terms as both identification and salutation, group names as proper names (e.g., *ŏw-oləŋ* 'woman from Ov-Olang'), as well as nicknames and sobriquets. Since the introduction of church registry practices, the Khanty use Russian forenames. With regard to forenames, it is also common to use a different forename than the one recorded in the official birth certificate. According to Sokolova (1972a:52), this system applies to everyone, but my own data only relate to particular cases. Sokolova also states that the Khanty are eager to give their children the latest fashionable Russian forenames because, due to their novelty status, they are well suited for the requirements of the taboo-name category (Sokolova 1975:44). Of the Russian forenames, it is the archaic ones that the Khanty consider to be "true" Khanty names, as their known ancestors bore these names. Russian forenames – especially the ones with a long history of use among the Khanty – have conformed to the Khanty pronunciation mode. So, for example, the Russian Fedos became *petuś* in Khanty pronunciation, Josif became *uśəp*, Andrej became *untər*. The Khanty attribute these changes not to phonology but to taboo rules: if a name is not pronounced exactly as it "officially" should be, then it becomes suitable to describe the person without harm – it's as if you didn't even use their name. There are even complete "taboo translations" in the use of names. For example, instead of the Russian forename Anna, I have heard used – with a bit of a humorous and even sarcastic undertone – the Khanty *lipi* 'internal, vessel' word. The explanation for this is that the name morphologically coincides with the Khanty *an* 'cup, bowl' word, thus it has been replaced with the synonym of the Khanty meaning.

The prohibition of contact – through the concepts of the untouchable and inviolable – forms the basis of the category of *jem*. Primarily it occurs in relation to certain sites and certain species of animals but is also present in the regulation of human relations.

CLEAN PLACES

Prokop Jermolovich Pirisev, a Synya Khanty student in Leningrad, wrote a Synya Khanty-language essay in 1937 for his teacher, Wolfgang Steinitz, choosing a community sacrificial offering as its topic:

> "Who does not know among the Synya Khanty people about the Holy River Cape and the City Gulf among the residents of Synya? Above Masa-kurt, about the distance of three straight sections of the river, reaching into Hart Bull, there are two large, wooded promontories. The lake used to get so big in the spring that the river willows on the other bank can be barely seen from the corner of your eye. The Synya Khanty stop by the Holy River Cape and City Gulf every spring to offer food and animal sacrifices. The more wealthy offer animal sacrifices, the less wealthy stop by to offer food. The ones who move right on bring a small bowl of food as sacrifice, and the ones who can't offer even a small bowl of food throw out some money" (Steinitz 1975:53).

The *jeməŋ* ńŏl 'Holy River Cape' used to be the most important sacrificial place to the Synya guardian spirit, *jŏχanəŋ* iki 'Old Man River', until it was possible to keep the area clean according to Khanty taboo rules. The sacred character of the Holy River Cape is still well known. Passersby – in the method described by Pirisev – still throw

money into the river to this day, even if they do not stop to offer a food sacrifice. The rule that is common in *jeməŋ* 'sacred, forbidden' sites applies to the Holy River Cape as well: it is forbidden to fish in this stretch of the Synya River, one may not even drink from it, only from the creek nearby, and the plants should not be touched either. Despite all this, in the early 1940s a settlement grew out of the ground at the Holy River Cape. Steinitz's 1937 commentary already mentions that Russian and Komi residents from the nearby district center, Muzi, would go fishing there (Steinitz 1976:109). During World War II deportations Kalmyk people were forcibly relocated here, the area designated for them to build houses and fish. Since then the settlement's name has been Svjatoj Mys – the Russian mirror translation of the Khanty Holy River Cape. However, when the settlement was being developed, the Khanty women following a traditional lifestyle did not even leave the boat in accordance with taboo rules. When in the summers a bakery and store opened for the fishermen in the village, only the men went there, the women waited in the boat. After the end of the war, the Kalmyks moved away. In her 1963 fieldwork report, Sokolova still mentions Svjatoj Mys as a settlement (Sokolova 1972a:15), but in 1971 she reports that the previously inhabited settlement has been deserted by then (Sokolova 1972b:165). Today there is still a house there where people en route somewhere stop to spend the night when it gets dark, but it's considered a scary place, invisible creatures scaring people at night.

Nightly commotions at sacred places are so undesirable that an adult Khanty man confessed to me: at night he dares not go up to the attic of his own house, where the idols are kept.

According to a well-known Khanty *syuzhet*, two men were discussing which is a more dangerous place at night: the cemetery or the sanctuary? They decided that one of them would spend the night in one place, the other in the other place. In the morning, the one who slept in the cemetery recounted that the dead thought he was a tree trunk as he lay on the ground, tripped over him, kicked him, did not understand how he got there, but they did not hurt him. The other man never returned from the sanctuary. When they went looking for him, they saw that he has been mangled, his intestines wound around the trees.

To maintain the purity and inviolability of sacred, forbidden places, a fairly complex system of motivations and mechanisms has developed, which is activated based on date, person, sex, and origin. Depending on the importance and nature of the place, the circle of people allowed to visit a sacred place, for example, narrows: foreign women are usually the first to be banned, then women belonging to the kinship group are banned from participating, next up are foreign men, and in areas considered the most sacred, the behavior and presence of even a small group of males is highly restricted.

In the case of sacrificial sites, it is essential that they be in difficult-to-find places, with hardly any path leading there. Narratives recount a sacred place where men enter in single file, stepping in each other's footprints, thus causing the least possible damage to nature – and leaving the slightest possible trace. Although they go to these places in the cleanest clothes and after a ritual cleansing (at least in old times), sometimes they tie a clean birch bark to their soles, as "you have to pee and poop" and the sole of the footwear may get dirty. The sanctuary located at the source of the Synya River is visited by men for only a short time. They camp at a stone's throw from there, and go to the actual sanctuary only with an empty sled. There they quickly cook some tea and food, but do not spend a lot of time. If nature calls, one silently rises and returns in his sled to the

distant camp, where they eventually eat and drink. They are not allowed leave "traces" near the sanctuary (Vasily Petrovich Pugurchin, Hor-punang-kurt, 2002).

Nonetheless, there are sacrificial sites for families and women, too, where both sexes can be present, although there may be some regulations depending on the subject of reverence, such as occasionally an unclean woman may not go even to a family sacrificial site. At women's sacrificial sites, it is primarily women and children that attend the ceremonies, but the men are not banned. However, events usually take place at both sites concurrently: men and women remain in their separate sacrificial places, and only clean children are allowed to go from one site to the other (geographic distance permitting).

The intact, forbidden surroundings of the sacrificial sites serve almost like a conservation area for the fish and wildlife population. The abundant possibilities of game in forests that have never been hunted, lakes that have never been fished, were the "golden reserves" of the Khanty: in lean years, during famines, they could resort to this source (Adayev 2007:160–164). I noted about the Holy River Cape that for other nationalities, simply its abundance of fish had a great allure. One of the reasons for the outbreak of the Kazym Rebellion of 1933–34, Western Siberia's only anti-communist movement, was the harvesting of Numto Lake, sacred to the Khanty and forest Nenets (Yornykhova 2003:65 onwards).

Sacrificial sites were considered reserves not only for their untouched natural environment, but because the sacrificial objects – textiles, furs, coins – also represented a significant value, which in hard times the community could borrow from for its survival. On a smaller scale but similarly serving as a safety box are the sacred corners in the home,

Figure 4. Garbage heap on the edge of the village, Ov-olang-kurt, 2000. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

where the cigarettes offered to the spirits are practically constantly in use, exchanged. Similarly, the cigarettes, matches, food, alcohol placed in the boxes of mourning dolls can also be removed, replaced. While trading with the spirits is a functioning and accepted activity, the removal of objects placed in the cemetery is condemned. Graves have small doors that are opened during cemetery visits and gifts are left for the dead – cigarettes, textiles – and of course a steaming bowl of cemetery food sits by the door until the visitors consume it. Here the cigarette is smoked by the gravesite in memory of the dead,

or lit and left there to burn out – the box may not be removed. The traditional process of slightly damaging the objects left by the grave is nowadays explained by saying that they are protecting them from theft.

The cemetery is not considered a sanctuary: firewood, water can be collected on-site, there is no ban on plants or animals, although it is not customary, for example, to collect berries in the vicinity. Interestingly, untouchability still appears, though in a somewhat "reverse" way: neither burial structures nor burial monuments may be touched for repair purposes, "after all we brought it here to rot ultimately" (Jevdokija Mihajlovna Longortova (Taligina), Ov-Olang-kurt, 2007). It is also prohibited to pick up dropped morsels or small trash, because once something was dropped there, it belongs to the dead.

We cannot say, though, that all so-called clean places should be protected: a spot in the forest, for example, where no one ever goes, is considered clean and is thus suited for leaving used clothes or garbage, because it is hidden from view.

SACRED ANIMALS

The *jem* 'prohibited, sacred' is also a central category in relation to fauna, and is usually listed as 'sacred' in professional literature. Among the rules for hunting, utilization and consumption, the most well-known rules are the ones concerning bears because of all the research into the Ob-Ugrian bear cult,[6] but there are restrictions for several other animal, bird and fish species. The Synya Khanty most often indicate the following animal species

Figure 5. Processing ling is a man's job. Women may not cut ling with metal, and in the unclean condition they cannot even consume them, Ov-olang-kurt, 1999. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

[6] For the linguistic aspect, see Bakró-Nagy 1979; a complex analysis of the bear cult: Schmidt 1990, 2011; ethnographic description of specifically the Synya Khanty bear rites: Taligina 2007.

as having *jem*: frog, lizard; sturgeon, ling, pike; Arctic loon, several types of geese; moose, bear, wolf; dog, cat, mouse, ermine. Prohibitions regarding these animals range from full or partial restrictions on touching, hunting, consumption and utilization. In the following I try to show the content of *jem* and its relationship to cleanliness through some regulations related to typically 'sacred, forbidden' animal species.

In the explanation of the word *jem* quoted above, Roza Makarovna first mentions the taboos regarding the consumption of ling and pike. As a woman, this is what she thought of first of the ban. In regard to female uncleanliness, three fish species are subject to special regulations among the Synya Khanty: the ling, the pike and the sturgeon. These are *jemәŋ* 'sacred, forbidden' fish. It is true of all three that among the Synya Khanty neither men nor women consume them raw, women may not kill them and cut them with metal, and women can absolutely not consume them on days of menstruation and confinement. The prohibition of using metal for cutting also means that women should theoretically not be catching fish, but this is nowadays breached by younger girls and women in the case of pike, because flashing is one of the most popular summer activities. The processing of these fish, however, remains a man's job, the cutting taboo is customarily not breached, though Khanty women found loopholes: they can break smaller pike by hand if there are no men nearby who would prepare them for cooking.

There are significant numbers of pike in the Synya, and unlike the migratory whitefish types, they are available in the Synya year-round – they are *šŏši χŭl* 'native fish'. In the summer, there is hardly any other fish in the river, in July and August the most common catch is the pike caught with the flashing method. Although in other river regions[7] they are consumed freshly salted, for the Synya Khanty – men and women, adults and children – this is not permitted. There are stories about huge pike living in isolated ponds which are said to have antlers on their forehead. On the outskirts of Ov-Olang-kurt village, on the other bank of the river across from the village, there is a largish pond whose name is *oŋtəŋ soʁ tŭw* 'antlered pike lake'. Besides the restrictions about consumption by women in the unclean condition and cutting with metal, there are no other specific rules about pike.

Sturgeon is very rare in the Synya; it might be caught from time to time in the lower section of the river, but otherwise they may get caught in nets while fishing on the Ob River. Sturgeon may be consumed salted and frozen, then it is not considered raw. Of course, it is also consumed cooked. When the sturgeon is processed, the dorsal nerve cord is removed in one piece. This should not be cut, nor is it edible. The liver is not consumed either.

The sturgeon is very valuable, not only among the Khanty but also on the Russian market. Because of overfishing and environmental damage – the Ob is one of the most polluted rivers in the world – their numbers have dwindled, and they are protected. Nevertheless, the Khanty still consume it today, if at all possible. A very special feature of sturgeon is that it can be a sacrificial animal. This function is fundamentally fulfilled by domesticated animals, probably because the wild forest animals belong to the spirits „anyway," they cannot be given as offering. So it is most often reindeer or horses that are used as sacrificial animals; today sheep and poultry may also be suitable for this function. In order for the sturgeon to fulfill its role of sacrificial animal, after being trapped in the

[7] e.g., along the Kazym river.

Ob it had to be transported live to the Synya, which could take several days. During this time it was kept wet. Alternatively, as a last resort, instead of a live animal, it is sufficient to bring its blood to the sacrificial site (Longortov Arkady Petrovich, 2013, Ov-Olang-kurt). Thus the sturgeon, despite the fact that it is neither domesticated nor warm-blooded, can be a sacrificial animal. I do not have further information about the reason for this.

In contrast, burbot, which is also considered native to the Synya, is not allowed in a sanctuary, not just as a sacrificial animal but altogether. As a reason, Ilya Ivanovich Longortov said that the burbot is *śŏχma* that is, ‘infected with female uncleanness’ (Ovgort, 2012). Nevertheless, burbot is still consumed, its liver considered a real delicacy. It is noteworthy that there are essential, contradictory differences in terms of the bans and permissions regarding the three fish designated as *jem* ‘sacred, forbidden’. Furthermore, there are no restrictions on the consumption of the so-called “Khanty” fish, the humpback and peled whitefish, which are considered staples.

fish	*burbot*	*pike*	*sturgeon*	*whitefish*
can it be fished?	women no, only remove from net	women no, only remove from net	women no, only remove from net	yes
can it be skinned, cut?	women no, neither raw nor cooked	women no, neither raw nor cooked	women no, neither raw nor cooked	yes
is its meat edible?	yes	yes	yes	yes
raw	no	no	frozen anyone	yes
some parts under special rules	no	no	dorsal nerve cord removed in one piece, should not be cut, inedible; liver not consumed	no
for women in general	yes	yes	yes	yes
for women in unclean condition	no	no	no	yes
in the cemetery	yes	yes	yes	yes
at the sacrificial site	no	yes	yes	yes
at a burial site	no	yes	yes	yes
parts can be used	yes	no	yes	no

altogether	yes*	-	yes**	-
for women	yes	-	-	-
other	-	-	suitable as animal sacrifice	-

Figure 6. Summary of the rules for some fish species.
* e.g., cover for a man's knife sheath; sack for women's boots; edging for rush mat
** glue from swim bladder

In the case of 'sacred, forbidden' mammals, the mythological background is well-known, so the various prohibitions – also related to purity – are easier to interpret. József Pápay recorded the following among the northern Khanty near the Synya about the 'women's month' or 'small house':

> "If the Ostyak woman gets to her month (small house), she goes to a separate house: she may not be with her husband, she behaves [according to the rule] (cautious). She does not eat elk meat. The elk is a favored animal in heaven, the Word of God ordered it not to be eaten during the "small house" condition; because if it is eaten during the "small house" condition: [that woman's] husband will have a reason to be penalized (tormented by the sacred animal), he will not find a elk. A woman in the "small house" does not take (=eat) bear meat. She replaces the chips in her loincloth in shorter intervals (some throw them away, take another)" (Pápay 1995:63).[8]

The elk-myth says of the origins of the elk that initially it was created with six extremities by the Father in the Highest Heaven, but since it fled so quickly from the hunters that they were not able to catch it, he sent a mythical hunter after it, who caught it and cut off its two hind legs. These legs he hurled into the sky, which became the Elk-star, that is, the Big Dipper. In light of this myth it is understandable why the rump area of the elk – the place of the feet that got into the sky – falls into the category of forbidden foods for women. Namely, women of a fertile age may not consume the elk's head, heart and the meat along the rear section of its backbone, and during unclean periods they cannot eat elk meat at all. Elk fur cannot be made into footwear for women, only for children and men.

The celestial origins of the bear have similar consequences: as the son or daughter of the Father in the Highest Heaven who asked to come to earth, bear meat shall not be eaten by women in their unclean period, and they shall not consume its left side with the heart or its head at all. The system of rules regarding the bear is, of course, much more complex than this: it covers everything from the taboo-language used in issues and situations relating to bears to the details of the bear rites. Keeping the issue of cleanliness in mind, there are two aspects of the regulations regarding the bear: on the one hand, they really ensure that the bear not come into contact with impurity, but on the other hand, as a kind of reverse behavior, profanity and obscenity unimaginable in other situations are mandatory

[8] The text presented here is Pápay's own translation of his Khanty-language collections; both have been published. I have some reservations in regards to Pápay's translation, but the notation only generates questions, it does not give answers; the essence of the information is obviously correct.

components of the behavior towards the bear. One must curse while consuming bear meat, and blame someone for instigating this deed, but all the while scrupulous care must be taken to make sure that the wood chips used for cleaning hands and mouth are placed in the fire – a clean place – or that even the act of eating is addressed in taboo-words, as if "collecting berries." One must also swear upon a chance encounter with a bear in the woods – so not only during the peak of Ob-Ugrian sacrality, the bear rites.

mammal	*bear*	*Wolverine*	*wolf*	*elk*	*reindeer*	*dog*
can it be hunted?	no data about women / no	no data about women/no	women can only wound it	No data for women[9]	yes	depending on clan
can it be skinned, cut?	women no	women no	women no	no data for skinning, can be cut	yes	depending on clan
Is its meat edible?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
raw	no	no	no	no	yes	-
Some parts under special rules	gall dried; women only the right side; women head no; only men cook it, in a separate vessel, without salt	women only from the right side; women head no; only men cook it, in a separate vessel	only men	head, meat near rump men only	head is not eaten raw	-
for women in general	right side, not head	yes	no	yes, but head, meat next to rump no	yes	-
for women in unclean condition	no	no data/no	no	no	yes	-
in the cemetery	no	no	-	yes, but not the head	yes	-

[9] There is no data from the Synya Khanty; elsewhere, for example, among the Mansi, female elk hunters are common.

at the sacrificial site	yes	no data	-	yes	yes	-
at a burial site	no	no data	-	yes	yes	-
Parts can be used	yes	yes	no****	yes	yes	yes
altogether	yes*	yes	-	yes***	yes	yes**
for women	no	no	-	no	yes	no
other	-	-	-	-	-	killed upon commission; otherwise, when a dog is killed, sacrifice must be offered in Tegi

Figure 7. Regulations regarding some of the important mammals.
* Canines, claws
** undercoat-fur, men's hat; garment knitted from hair for women too
*** Leg-fur footwear for men; calf-fur for men and children
**** yes for ritual objects

The summary of the data on fish and mammals shows that species considered staple foods – reindeer, whitefish – have barely any prohibitions, while prey animals consumed less frequently – dependent on hunter's luck – or seasonally are surrounded by plenty of prohibitions. In nutritional taboos, the restrictions are not about the consumption of certain species but about determining the circle of consumers. They exclude women during critical periods or at any time, but depending on the mode of consumption the ban can also extend to everyone. However, while these prohibitions are clearly applicable to certain animals, assuming that they are of 'clean, forbidden, sacred' quality, because its maintenance seems to be the aim of the bans, there is also an example of an animal – the burbot – that is considered inherently unclean, inasmuch as it is *jem*. It seems, therefore, that the category of *jem* can be summarized with the existence of prohibitions, while the purpose and content of prohibitions can range widely.

FORBIDDEN CONTACTS

Khanty men used to make peculiar bets. When they ate grouse meat together, two of them broke the breast bone into two and pledged to never take anything from each other's hand.

The violator of the pledge gave his "opponent" a predetermined gift – usually a bottle of drink. This pledge was kept for years, because we are talking about people who rarely meet.

The prohibition of hand to hand transfer is known from mythological times, as the Synya Khanty recall a people that used to dwell in the forests, in high places, in earth lodges whose pits are still visible. Several people seem to know that when encountering members of this people, one was not supposed to transfer anything from hand to hand but place the item on the paddled ski poles – especially tobacco, because that's what they asked for – and hand it over like that. A similar rule applies to salt to this day, which in several Khanty groups is not passed to someone in the palm but on the back of the hand.

The prohibition of hand to hand transfer is part of a complex set of rules previously mentioned briefly, the *jeməlti*. The verb formed from the word *jem* 'forbidden, sacred' is usually translated as 'following the prohibitions regarding *jem*', but most of the sources also suggest that this is not related to sacrality but primarily regulates people's relationships with each other (Steinitz 1966–1993:373; Dudeck 2013:246 and following). As I showed above with the interpretation of the words, in my observation the word *jeməlti* is not commonly used in cases when they are complying with, for example, rules about *jem* animals, but is used to specifically regulate the behavior of affinal relatives. The Khanty kinship system is classifying in nature, and rules of conduct also apply between individuals and classes and between class and class. In forming the classes, sex, age relative to self and ancestor in direct line, paternal or maternal relatives and affinal relatives play a determining role. For the wife, all of her husband's male relatives who are older than her husband are considered *ŭp* 'father-in-law', while their wives and older paternal female relatives are *untəp* 'mother-in-law'. For the husband, his wife's paternal male relatives will be fathers-in-law, all the way to the generation of common children, and their wives are considered mothers-in-law. For these groups, the wife is *meń* 'daughter-in-law', the husband *weŋ* 'son-in-law'.[10] The best-known example of *jeməlti* rules is the concealing of the face with a headscarf as part of the regulations between daughters-in-law and fathers-in-law, as well as sons-in-law and mothers-in-law. Women pull the edges of their headscarf tightly forward from the two sides of their face so that their face is not visible. Beyond hiding the face, Khanty women's wear is loose, its cinched cut even hides the contours of the body. Young brides always wore a shabby coat, no matter how hot it was, just so their shape may not be accidentally visible through their clothes. A firmly tied headscarf allowed them to use their hands while working, and if necessary, the edge of the headscarf was pulled tight with their mouth or teeth. Separation within the dwelling – such as for quiet sewing, but during the wedding ceremony even for dining – was provided by the χăśap, a canopy-like tent of thin linen, or in log houses parties subject to the ban would settle down on two sides of the hoarding separating their berths located by the wall. In addition to hiding the view, physical contact should also be avoided, and so, for example, the transfer of objects from hand to hand could not occur; instead, the requested object was put down and the other could pick it up from there. They also had to abstain from directly addressing each other, thus using third person instead of second person to speak to each other (corresponding to formal addressing). These rules are introduced on the occasion of the wedding. The future son-in-law, for instance, offered

[10] For the presentation of the kinship system, see Steinitz 1957; Ruttkay-Miklián 2007, 2012: 45–58.

a glass of drink to each of the women in the mother-in-law group, placing a ring in the glass. Those who accepted the invitation to the *jeməlti* took the ring and thus commenced complying with the prohibitions.[11] According to a Khanty woman living in Ovgort, so a larger municipality, when her daughter got married, she had to prepare to follow the rules of *jeməlti* towards her son-in-law. To do this, she contemplated where the young couple would live, what routes she and her son-in-law would take, and she planned new ways to avoid their encounter and prevent the need for "active hiding" (Sijanova (Kontyerova) Jelizaveta, 2003, Ovgort). The same situation in a small village where male relatives live with wives brought from other villages means that women are constantly on "alert." They have to keep track of when and from which direction a man from whom they must hide may emerge. Accordingly, they must wear a headscarf when stepping out of the house, so as to cover their face at any time. One summer an elderly woman worked in front of her house without a scarf. When I asked how she could be bare-headed, she replied that there is no one here from whom she would have to *jeməlti*, as her husband is the senior of all the inhabitants of the surrounding houses, the others all being younger than him. According to a story about another woman, once when she was not wearing a headscarf and suddenly had to hide her face from someone, she pulled the bottom of her dress over her head. Even though she solved the issue of *jeməlti*, she also revealed her bare buttocks. This *syuzhet* by Stephan Dudeck (written communication) is known among the Eastern Khanty, according to whom Khanty women respond in this way, a Nenets woman, however, if caught unprepared and barefoot by the forbidden visitor, will sit with her legs pulled under her as long as the person is present. There are situations in relation to the *jeməlti* where several rules intersect. A woman's daughters married men from different clans. The mother-in-law abides by the rules regarding her sons-in-law, but there is one exception: she does not conceal her face from the son-in-law that is her close relative. But I also listed among my examples a case where a son-in-law comes from the same clan as the mother-in-law but a different branch. There the mother-in-law strictly follows the rules of taboo. Of course, this difference may stem simply from the different relationship of the two women with taboos, but the woman not concealing herself from the close relative still follows the rules of taboo in the presence of her unrelated sons-in-law.

Figure 8. Family photo without the face of the mother: "who knows whose hand it falls into…". Aleksandr Vasil'yevich Longortov and his family, Aj-kurt, 2002. (Photo by Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián)

In addition to the many prohibitions, these same groups also have some permissions. According to literary data, a younger brother could develop a confidential relationship with

[11] Unfortunately I have no data to show what would have happened if someone did not accept the invitation.

the wife of his *jaj* 'older brother, older paternal male relative' during the lifetime of the 'older brother', and upon the 'older brother's' death he could even marry the widowed *ăńχi* 'aunt' – this is the institution of levirate. The wife of the 'younger brother', however, falls in the category of *meń* 'daughter-in-law' and is protected by the above strict taboos (e.g., Steinitz 1957:328).

Compliance with the rules of *jeməlti* falls to both parties: not only does the woman have to conceal her face, address the appropriate male relative formally, not cross behind an old man's back, etc., but those affected should also facilitate its success. For example, the man must signal before he enters the house or tent: he coughs, stomps, and lets some time pass so that if there is a woman in the building who is required to conceal her face, she may do so before he enters. It is proper for a man to turn his head, not to look her in the face; to turn and position himself so as to avoid having the woman pass behind him, etc.

According to data in professional literature, the practice of *jeməlti* may be necessary not only between relatives of different sex but also between same-sex affinal relatives. The father-in-law and son-in-law cannot do their "business" together (Csepregi 1997:450), and there is even data about men's concealment (Dudeck 2013:249).

SUMMARY

Based on the above-described three themes – places, animals, and relationships possessing *jem* – it appears that *jem* can be mostly conceived of as a framework. The commonality between things that have *jem* lies not in the "why" but in the "how," not in the content but in the fact of the regulated nature of the relationship. It is apparent that in contrast with the "sacred" translation of the word *jem* – which is most prevalent in the literature – its 'forbidden' meaning deserves to be brought to the fore.

The examples of the rules regarding pike, sturgeon and burbot clearly show that certain prohibitions – the best known being the ones applicable to women in general, and to women in the unclean condition – are the same, while completely different properties can be detect with certain species. While the sturgeon as a sacrificial animal comes into contact with the upper world, the burbot in its filthiness belongs to the lower world, although both belong to the category *jem*.

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