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Tyles kurok iki, or the Eagle Comes for THE NEW YEAR

The author of this publication, historian and ethnographer, once managed to see how the Khanty see the New Year in – during an ethnographic expedition, he paid a visit to a remote camp in the upper reaches of the River Vakh, a tributary to the River Ob (Nizhnevartovsk region, Tiumen oblast). According to our calendar, it was March 1970.



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The Khanty, or Ostyaks, is an indigenous, relatively small, Finno-Ugric nationality living in the north of West Siberia. According to their traditional beliefs, the year consists not of 12 months but of 13 periods, so the number 13 is sacred and present in all their rituals and practices.

All the periods are closely related to the natural phenomena: “light frosts” period, “severe frosts” period, “geese and ducks have come”, and “fish spawns and leaves fall” periods. They vary in length: the “geese and ducks have come” can be quite short whilst “severe frost” can last over two months.

The New Year is celebrated in late February—early March. The exact date is named by the shaman prompted by the Moose (this is what the Khanty call the Big Dipper). In the Khanty language, the New Year is called “tyles kurok iki” (the “old eagle” period), which can be loosely translated as “the period when the eagle comes”.

As with all the other peoples of the world, coming of the New Year means for the Khanty that a new, “good” life starts and all the “bad” things are left behind.



Displays at the Berezovo, Oktiabrsk, and Surgut ethnography museums (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)





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Bronze figurines of Mir-susne-khum (Mansi) and Tarum-pakh (Khanty)—the deity that brings luck in hunting and fishing, and cures diseases. Before the New Year, the rider goes round the earth and helps the needy. To make a landing site for his horse, on the New Year eve people used to put four silver saucers on the window sill and ask the deity to grant their wishes.

1—6th—8th cc. Middle Cis-Ob region. *Novosibirsk State Ethnography Museum*; 2, 3—Tomsk Cis-Ob region. *Tomsk Oblast Ethnography Museum*. From: (A. I. Solov'ev, Weapons and Armour.—Novosibirsk: Infolio-press, 2003)



Display at the Berezovo ethnography museum (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)



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The evil spirit was beaten with sticks

The Khanty's greatest concern as they see the New Year in is getting rid of the misfortunes—diseases in the first place—they used to suffer from in the past. To this end, on the edge of the camp a sacred rowan or aspen tree was chosen, whose trunk was 10–15 centimeters in diameter, wedged apart, and quite a long a cross bar was put in between. After that, the shaman would make a fire, beat a tambourine, and all the camp's residents, young and old, would squeeze themselves through the split rowan.

This ritual is meaningful. The Khanty believe that a person cannot see the spirit, which can be nearby, chasing the person no matter where he goes. The spirit, however, can be caught: when it follows the person as he/she goes through the split tree, the shaman knocks out the cross bar with the tambourine beater so that the two halves of the tree come together and crush the spirit. It should then be finished off, so the camp residents beat the space around the tree, where the spirit is presumably stuck.

What is a spirit? This is *kyn'-iki* (old man of diseases) or *pykhty-iki* (black old man), a carrier of diseases, who penetrates the people's world from the cemetery, through grubbed up stumps, and so on. In the same year, 1970, people living in another camp made a huge effigy of the smallpox spirit out of cedar, the dark tree of the lower world. The spirit's face was drilled to make marks looking like pocks. The effigy was burned, that is killed. For the Khanty, smallpox used to be a deadly disease that even the shamans could not cure: sometimes it wiped out a few camps at one blow. Even though this is now in the past, the memories linger.

After the split tree ritual was completed, people would step over the fire and go through the smoke as a kind of guarantee in case the spirit had not been crushed and managed to set itself free. For the Khanty, fire and smoke have always performed the circumcising function.

The rank of a patron spirit like this varied from a family deity to the patron of a large territory, such as a principality. Lower Cis-Ob region. Materials by courtesy of I. N. Gemuev and A. M. Sagalaev.

Wood. *Museum with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SB RAS)*. From: (Solov'ev, 2003)



Tutchan is a women's bag for needlework. S. Tegi. Deer fur, deerskin, beads, and metal. *Sherkaly Ethnography Museum (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)*



The Khanty's good spirits live in heaven, where the color is white (color of health, well-being, and comfortable life); while under the ground, where the dead and evil spirits live, the color is black. Under the earth everything is upside down. When it is daytime here, it is night there; rivers flow in the opposite direction; and the dead live backward until the moment of their birth, when they reappear on the earth.



Thirteen squirrel stomachs

For their New Year celebrations the Khanty would prepare their traditional treat: 13 squirrel stomachs per person, as many as there are periods in the year. A squirrel's stomach is about the size of a walnut; it is filled with nut dough so it is very tasty. The stomachs were roasted on the coals. Each resident of the settlement (which normally included 2–4 related families) should eat 13 stomachs. It would occur sometimes, however, that there were not 13 but, say, only

Tambourine is one of the shaman's main ritual attributes, their means to communicate with the spirits and penetrate other worlds. Under the tambourine's handle, "shaman's helpers" were often suspended – symbolic things made of metal, which chinked messages to the spirits.
Berezovo ethnography museum (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)

9 stomachs left for the last individual. This was interpreted as a sign that in the 9th period a misfortune could befall the person. So, during that time, he/she was excused from any routine activities like fishing (lest he drowns) and hunting (lest he gets killed by a bear). Throughout the period, the person was treated with special care, sacrifice for his/her health was offered to the white celestial spirit. And only after the dangerous period was over, life resumed its course.

New Year gifts were given only to guests and spirits: to the forest spirit, the water spirit, the celestial spirit and, without fail, to the black spirit at the cemetery. The latter would usually get a black gown with a hood (all evil creatures were believed to have peaky heads so they could be given such clothes). All these rituals completed, the people considered themselves fully protected against any misfortune in the new year.



Mask for the Bear Feast.
Birch bark.
Homecraft
Exhibition Center
(Khanty-Mansiysk)

Narkas-yukh is an ancient musical instrument of the Northern indigenous peoples. Its moose tendon strings are strung against the bridge made out of grouse bones. Music performed with the help of this folk instrument accompanied festivities, shaman shows, and sacrifice offerings.
Oktyabrsk ethnography museum (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)





The fiery fox is the Khanty legendary symbol of relationship between the sexes. The myths depict him running across the snow and calling loudly, with his "fertility symbol" furrowing the snow. When the women hear his call, they are supposed to feel embarrassed.

Moose horn, mammoth bone, German silver.
Cut by M. Temirgazeev.
Nature and Man Museum (Khanty-Mansiysk)



As for other gifts, these would be given both by hosts and guests. The Khanty would exchange beads, bead-embroidered pouches, tobacco-boxes, things made out of birch bark, etc. They would treasure the gifts given to them by guests because these would remind them of the person.

The New Year festivity lasted one night. After the circumcision ritual, the Khanty would jump over the sledges pulled by a deer. As for the dancing and singing, these were performed during another holiday, the Bear Feast. The New Year celebration was much more modest, which is understandable: its main function was to ensure a healthy life for the camps and to get rid of the evil spirit-chaser. Entertainment, special treats and drinks were not appropriate.

How willing were the Khanty to let other people be present at their New Year celebrations? Traditionally, all the festivities were only for the kin, i.e., only close and blood relatives were allowed. However, this tradition began to go away back in the 19th century. In fact, the Khanty would treat their guests with utmost respect - no taboos applied to them (even though the traditional Khanty culture is obeying taboos). A guest could even be offered somebody's wife...

In the mid-1970s, oil derricks began to spring up in Siberia. The new developments in economy and culture had a powerful impact on the life of native Siberians.

When hunting, present-day hunters set traps invented back in the Neolithic times, with a mobile or walky-talky in the pocket

Today, such a combination of the old and the new is typical of the native way of life. Russian and Ukrainian practices work in, squeezing out ancient Khanty customs.

Nowadays, the Khanty see the New Year in on the same date as all other Russian citizens: the night from December 31 to January 1. They put up and decorate fir trees. The Khanty adopted the fir tree gladly as it is their kin tree (women used to give birth under them, and the afterbirth was hung underneath). Also, they have Father Frost (Santa Claus).

Certainly, there is a handful of old people left who still remembers about "the coming eagle". Somebody still bakes a couple of squirrel stomachs and tells the children about the old days, when their ancestors used to wedge the tree trunk to get rid of the evil spirits...

In honor of the bear killed during hunting, the Khanty, similarly to many indigenous peoples of Siberia and North America, used to organize a feast.
Oktyabrsk Ethnography Museum (Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug)

In contrast to the traditional New Year celebration, the Khanty Bear Feast was lively and flamboyant.

The Khanty believed the bear to be their relation and ancestor. He was the judge and master of the whole world. When a bear was hunted down, it was considered to be paying a visit.

The Bear Feast lasted five days for a he-bear and four days for a she-bear. A special counting stick was used to mark how many songs and dances were performed.

Traditional masks used for the Bear Feast can do credit to a modern New Year carnival.
Birch bark. Homecraft Exhibition Center (Khanty-Mansiysk)

