

LITTLE MOS'-WOMAN (1): THE STORY OF A (FAIRY-)TALE

Aado Lintrop

In the summer of 1977 I spent some time at Sukyrja village in the north-western corner of a Mansi (Vogul) area, recording a considerable number of local fairytales and folk songs. Having as yet no experience in the transcription of texts, let alone texts in a foreign language, I asked Klavdia Sainakhova, a student of the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute, who happened to be at home on holiday, to write down a couple of more interesting tales for me, so that I could translate them later on. I noticed that while doing it she often turned to her mother for consultation. True, Praskovja Sainakhova had been the performer of one of the tales recorded. But she also found fault with the presentation of Maria Albina, saying that her language was not good and her story lacked the beginning as well as an end. So Klava supplemented the text according to her mother's instructions. Despite my protest, she also revised Maria Albina's text, improving some sentences and substituting Mansi words for Russian ones. This resulted in a tale I was able to translate later at home, but it differed considerably from the original taped version. For the sake of comparison, I will now present two fragments of the text - one of the original story and the other of Klavdia Sainakhova's transcription. The major differences are underlined. Marina Albina's story was as follows (the tape does not contain the beginning of the story):

... aps'iteteent ooleg. Tokh oolimaten aps'ite tokh voorta jaali - okhotniki ta jalaas. Uvs'ite jun ooli. Akvmateertyn ooli - aps'ite jokhtyn kastyl puut vaarunkve eeri. Tav matyr juntti - jomas vaarnut vaari, n'okhs vaarnut, ui vaarnut vaari, uuri. Aps'ite jokhtyn pora jemtys, kolkann vaagli, punksovanyl nokh tagmatave, nokh tagmatave tokh laavi: "Luur!" Nokh tagmatave, ta khanaas'li. Jongkhotaalt jool taarmatave. Jool taarmatave, puute naal vaagtagatite, nokh man s'i puuti, pag aalmite - n'aar. Aps'ite jokhti (okhotnik uzhe), sunsat'i - puute siiryi. Nematyr at laavi. Khoolitanyg jemti, os mini. Os akvtokh, khote-jaarti (khote-n'aarti?) puute matryg, khotos vaaryn tuvle s'altat'i ta punksovanyl nokh tagmatave - "Luur!" Kolalan tagmatave, khanaas'li numyn. Os ta nomsi - aps'i tygyjen jokhty. Taarmatave jool, jool taarmatave tuvl, os puute mol'amtakhtim vaari tagate, n'ovl puut paitim vaaglui da os n'aar. Aps'i os nematyr at laavi. Khurmit khootal jemti, os mini, os okhotnika ta jalaas, jun at ooli aps'i. Os aps'ite jokhtyn kastyl vaarnut tane vaj vaari, man' tamle. n'okhys jemtys vaari, jotyl salset vaari. Os ta kol kan kos vaaglui si, os ta tagmatave. "Luur," numyn ta khanas'li. Aps'iten teeg..., aps'i ta jokhti an' tenkve teeg, aps'ite laavyglai: "Uuvs'ikve, puutn ti manryg n'aare khurmit khootal tai n'aar?"

And this is what Klavdia Sainakhova wrote:

Oolsyg-khulsyg man' mos'nee jagpygeent (jorn kolt oolsyg). Aps'itetent ooleg. Aps'i voorta jaali - voorajankhumyg. Uvs'ite juun ooli. Aps'ite jokhtyn kastyl puut vaarunkve eeri. Tav matyr juntti, jomas vaarnut vaari, n'okhs vaarnut vaari, ui vaarnut vaari. Aps'ite jokhtyn pora jokhtys, punksovanyl nokh tagatave, tokh laavi: "Luur!" Nokh tagmatave, ta khanas'li, tuvl jol tarmatave. Puute nalv tagatite. Pag almite - n'aar. Aps'ite jokhtys. Aps'ite nematyr at laavi. Kholitanyg jemti, os mini. Os akvtokh, jol vaagli, os nokh tagmatave os laavi: "Luur!" Kolalan tagmatave, khanas'li. Os ta nomsi, aps'i ta juuv. Os ta tarmatave, mol'amtakhtim puute tagatite. N'ovl peeti. Puute os n'aar. Aps'ite nematyr at laavi. An' khurmit khootalyng jemti. Aps'i os ta jaalasi, juun at ooli. Aps'itet jaalne sis tav njokhs varnut vaari. Os kol kannyn vaagli, os ta tagatave. "Luur" - numyn ta khanas'li. Aps'i an' teg tenkve patsyg. Ta laavi: "Uuvs'ikve, puutn manryg n'aar, khurmit khootal ti?"

The following translation is based on both variants (asterisk * marks the end of the taped material):

There lived a little Mos'-woman together with her younger brother. (They lived in a conical tent). As they so lived, the brother went hunting in the forest, a hunting man he was. The sister stayed at home. She was to prepare some food by the time the brother came. She did some sewing - good things she made, of sable, of leather - and waited. When the time came for the brother to return, the sister entered the tent, but there she was hung up by the hair. Someone said, "Luur!". She was hung up and so she was hanging there. Later she was let down again. Having been let down, she put the kettle on. When she took it off, the meat was still tough. The brother came home, tried - the food is not done. He did not say anything. The next day he went hunting again. Everything went as the previous time: the sister worked on something, later she came in and was hung up by the hair. High under the roof of the tent she was hung. While hanging there she thought, well, brother is coming home soon. Later, having been let down she hurried to put the kettle on. When she took the meat off, it was tough again. Again the brother did not say anything. The third day came, the brother went hunting as usual, he did not stay home. Again the sister sew things of leather and sable fur and made some footwear, while the brother was out. And again, as soon as she stepped on the floor of the tent she was hung up. "Luur!" and there she was, hanging. The brother came home, began to eat, then said, "My little sister, why has the food been not done three days running?" - "I cannot enter the tent. When I am going to step on the floor I get hung up by the hair. When looking around I cannot see anybody." Then the brother said, "Tomorrow I'm going to hide."

So he did. He prepared his sword, honed it and went into hiding. What he saw was a hand showing from the roof of the tent. The brother struck out and the hand fell. Whoever had been there, he left the hand lying and disappeared. Now the sister had a hand, a hand with a bell. The brother said to the sister, "You hide this hand now, put it in a bag, don't keep it in the open. If it remains outside, he will spot me for sure. The hand will find us and kill us." The brother resumed his everyday hunting. Once when he was in the woods as usual a little woman looked into the tent, saying, "Give me my brother's hand, my brother is dying." The little Mos'-woman said, "Come into the tent." The other woman did not enter, but beckoned to her to come out. "You come on in. Do I have to reach the hand out for you?" The woman entered the tent. Later the brother caught her. He married her. So they lived for a winter and a summer. The woman gave birth to a child. The woman taught the child. The man was not afraid of the woman. Whether her brother was dead or alive did not matter. The child came of crawling age. One day mother taught it, "You ask your aunt to give you a hand, say: Our uncle's hand with a bell - give me, give me, I'll play!" Then she went gathering lopped twigs for firewood. (That was all lies, she did not go anywhere far but hid behind the tent.) Now the child started crying, "Our uncle's hand with a bell - gi'mme, gi'mme!" The woman hesitated, to give or not to give? At last she gave the hand to the child. Its mother rushed in, grabbed the child as well as the hand, pressed them to her breast and was gone. The Mos'-woman was waiting for her brother. There she noticed him on the other side of the river, so he was coming. The dog was also there at his side. But it was getting dark and the brother was still out. The next day arrived, but the brother was still standing on the same spot. She went to see. The Hand had been there. The brother had been shot with an arrow, got killed and turned into a stone then and there. (Like a monument he was.) The Hand had come there. The Hand With a Bell. He had come to life again. Now he is living happily. That was my story. *

The little Mos'-man grew up and asked, "Where's my father?" - "Father is on the aunt's side, frozen into a stone," said the mother. The son said, "Let's go there, I want to see my father." So they went and saw - indeed, the man is standing." But how did he get killed by the arrow? The arrow was still sticking out of his back. The son drew the arrow out and shot it at his mother. The mother died, the son went to his aunt. He asked, "Who killed my father?" The aunt hugged him and kissed him,

saying, "Your father was killed by the Hand With a Bell." Then the aunt asked, "Where is your mother?" - "I killed Mother. Who will kill me?" - "You won't be killed. I'll be killed by the Hand With a Bell, but you will live." (RKM, Mgn. II 3220 (4) + transcribed by K. Sainakhova)

Having submitted the tapes to the archives I could not, however, get the strange story of the mysterious Bell-Hand off my mind. Who was the Hand With a Bell? It often happens in Mansi tales that a character is referred to metonymically, i.e. by a certain characteristic feature or quality that suffices to identify him for the members of the cultural group the story is addressed to. In 1979, for example, I recorded a story about someone called Lungs (*khopsi*). As was explained to me, *khopsi* meant 'a skinny man who perspired in the sun'. No comment, however, could be elicited about the Bell-Hand. According to Éva Schmidt, in Ob-Ugrian epic songs taboo names would usually be replaced by various euphemisms, such as Two/Three Men With a Bow and Arrows, Two/Three Men Who Hit a Wild Duck etc., which are often impossible for us to unriddle. (Schmidt 1989: 201) Such names are also known to refer to the sprites whose songs were performed at bear feasts, viz. *saat n'alup khum* (the Man With Seven Arrows), *kit vil'tup japyt* (the Two-Faced Sprite - Tshernetsov 1974: 292, 302), *sorny kal'sa khorasyn ai nai* (the Little Fairy Appearing As a Crossbill), *juur kashty khu* (the Man Looking For Rivals - Steinitz 1939: 370, 416). While translating the above story I was first convinced that it was all about relations between two tribal groups. The sister (from the Mos'-moiety) is sitting at home and making nice things of sable fur, waiting for a suitor. There comes a man, symbolized by the hand with a bell, and intimates that it is time for the sister to stop taking care of her brother. The brother, however, reluctant to give the sister away, makes an ambush and chops a hand off the suitor. There follows a retaliation from the side of the Bell-Hand or his tribesmen. The chain of events is triggered by the brother violating the consuetude.

Strange as it may seem, however, another story recorded in the same village at the same time starts from an opposite situation: a younger brother, acting as the head of the family after the parents' death, makes efforts to marry his sister off sooner than she would like to. One day while hunting, he meets a handsome and wealthy man (a prince) from the King's Town to whom he commends his sister. The man tells him to bring the sister to town, saying, "If I like her, I'll marry her." The brother goes home and says to the sister, "Sister, I'll have you married." The sister, although previously admonished by the late parents that she should obey his brother, does not like the idea of getting married and says, "I won't get married until the threshold of my parents' home is trodden low." Now, while the sister is out for a walk, her brother works away at the threshold with a file and knife. "Sister, it's trodden low now. Will you go?" But the unwilling sister sets a new condition, "I won't get married until the dress given to me by the parents gets torn." So, when the sister is in bed, the brother tears her dress up. "Will you go now?" - "As Father and Mother told me to obey you," says the sister, "I will." But on their way to town they meet a (Por-?) woman with a small face and a big nose, due to whose treacherous tricks the sister is changed into a black duck and jumps into the water, so that the brother has got to dress the strange woman in her sister's clothes and take her to town in his sister's place. And although the story has a happy end - the brother and sister meet again - it is not to happen too soon: the sister has to spend a lot of time swimming in the sea as a duck, while the brother is toiling in King's stables. (RKM Mgn. II 3220 (6) Praskovja Sainakhova) In another tale of the Mos'-woman-and-Por-woman group a rich and beautiful Mos'-woman is suited by a nobleman's son who is, in turn, coveted by a shabbily dressed Por-woman who lives in the woods. (Sokolova 1987: 119). Maybe the sister who was transformed into a black duck was also a Mos'-woman? At least the beginning of the tale sounds suggestively similar: "There lived, in a huge forest, a man and a woman. They were very rich. They had a son and a daughter." (RKM, Mgn II

3220 (6.) The rich and beautiful girl is being taken "to the Heavenly/Lord's Town, the King's Town" (a usual cliché, in Mansi tales, cf. e.g., Rombandejeva 1979: 25 - *nooh kvaalmeet: khoon uus t'eeptyl khoon uus, toorm uus t'eeptyl toorm uus* '... wakes up - there's a king's town like a king's town, a heavenly city like a heavenly city', or Fairy-tales 1991: 8,10) to be married to a nobleman's son, but an ugly woman from the woods takes her place by cunning. There is even a direct reference to her coming from the woods: *hun'ti puvluptuluv - paankyg, voort janygmas* 'Shouldn't we wash her? She is dirty, grown up in the woods.' If so, it is another tale referring to the relations between the two tribal groups.

It is rather common in world folklore that a fairy tale or a legend is centered around marrying or getting married, while the protagonist often travels in distant lands or in the realm of the supernatural. Here we can recognize the world view of small exogamous hunting tribes, with marriage problems occupying a central position, as making a successful match could easily be a matter of life or death for a whole tribe (v. e.g., the novel "Zhenitba Kevongov" written by the Nivkhi author Vladimir Sangi, and based on his own family tradition - Sangi 1975). Yet in many tales marriage problems are associated with supernatural beings, not humans. In that case the scene is set in the mythical Time of Creation and the events have an impact upon the order of the world to come. Thus, for example, the chief person of a Mansi legend of Creation, written down in the 19th century, visits the Lord of Waters, the Old Man of the Moon, the Sun-Woman and several other supernatural beings, fighting with some of them and outwitting some others to make their wives and daughters his own. Finally he happily returns home to his parents together with six wives. They are received with a feast. During the feast his mother says, "Since today let there be people in the previous world and let there be people in the present-day world, let there be places for women and places for men, inhabited by many women in simple furs and many men in simple furs. And let them offer you reindeer, bucks and jennies alike!" The next morning the mother says, "You, sonny, stay here now, here in the lower heaven, while we are going to the upper one. In the lower heaven you'll become the man who protects the world - *Mir-susne-khum* (2), while your father will be *Numi-Toorum*, the highest of all gods, and I shall be *Kaltesh*." (Shestalova-Fidorovitsh 1992: 22-23) The story is reminiscent of some Papuan legends of the deeds of dema-deities during the mythical Times of Creation, whose active contacts, amounting to killing each other, are told to have laid the foundation to the emergence of different tribes, cultivated plants, domestic animals and the future order of the world.

As for the Bell-Hand, I got a new idea while watching a bear feast in 1991. During the performance of the sacred songs of the last night the singer was accompanied by a man who had little bells tied to his both wrists. While the song was performed, he was standing behind the singer, whence he passed on to dancing, rhythmically shaking his hands, when the song was over. Maybe the bell of our tale is meant to emphasize a special relation of the Bell-Hand with bear feasts? If that should be so, could it not serve as a symbol of tribal membership? As is known, the bear as a totem animal, as well as bear feasts are especially closely connected with the Por-moiety (v. e.g., Great Bear p. 126, or Sokolova 1987: 118-119). In this case it is likely that the Mos'-man killed a Por-man. As according to the principle of dual exogamy a Mos'-woman could be suited only by a Por-man, the Mos'-man committed a crime in which his sister was an accomplice, if not the main culprit (refusing proper treatment to the suitor), so the punishment was fully deserved. Or, could the hand with a bell rather belong to a supernatural being? But who?

There is quite a well-known type of Mansi tales about a little Mos'-woman and an owl. One of them has also been published in Estonian, in a children's series called Tales of a Hundred Peoples (Mansi muinasjutud: 3-9). This is a tale of an owl who in order to get to live in a woman's house, keeps hassling her by evoking winds, hurricanes and snowfall until she does accept him. According to

Sokolova, the owl was one of the totem animals of the Por-people (Sokolova 1987: 119), and according to Tshernetsov this totem was worshipped by the village of Hal'-paul. (Tshernetsov 1987: 151, 185, 191). The owl was an important personage at the bear feast as well, singing of his marrying seven little Mos'-women (Tshernetsov 1987: 104). Tshernetsov's diary carries the following lines: "K(irill) Sampiltalov sang the owl's song - *jipyg eeryg*. He did not sing it to the end, though, saying that if one sang it to the end, it would be snowing and the road to Ivdel would be snowed up. The song tells about the owl burying the house of seven Mos'-women under the snow. If during a hunting season it had not snowed long, the hunter would go out in the evening and imitate an owl's call: *Puhu! Puhu!* to evoke snowfall." (ibid.: 191) Another tale of a Mos'-woman and an owl was recorded by myself in Sukyrja village in 1979: A little Mos'-woman is walking in the forest alone. She meets an owl who wants the woman to sing to him. So she sings to him. The owl does not like the first song, neither is he pleased with the second one. But the third song pleases him and he takes the Mos'-woman with him and marries her. But the woman does not like it at the owl's and decides to kill him. She hides a needle in the porridge. The owl eats it and dies. The owl's relatives, suspecting the woman of murdering her husband, discuss the matter and decide that the woman should not be punished, as it was the owl who was to blame for making a human girl to live with the owl-folk. So the little Mos'-woman is allowed to go back to her old home. (RKM, Mgn II 3221 (9) Pjotr Sainakhov) If we agree that the lecherous owl is a symbol of a Por-man, the group of tales of the Mos'-woman could be regarded as reflecting the relations between the two exogamous groups, at the same time referring to the mythical Time of Creation, in which the cohabitation of the owl and a Mos'-woman as if laid the foundation to a certain tribe of the Por-moiety.

Another legend that is known practically among all Ob-Ugrian peoples, associates the origin of the whole Por-group with a Mos'-woman and a bear (v. Sokolova 1987: 119, Schmidt 1989 195). In bear feast songs the bear calls his mother Mos'-woman:

The paw on one side
 Like a mottled sheet of ten patches,
 Sewn by the Mos'-woman, my mother,
 I spread under myself,
 The paw on the other side
 Like a furry quilt cut from the neck
 And sewn by the Mos'-woman, my mother,
 I pulled over myself.
 (Kannisto 1958: 153)

In a tale written down from Sygva Mansis it happens that a lone Mos'-woman's son whom his mother forbids to go playing far from home, turns into a bear. The boy disobeys until suddenly all village children start running from him, crying, "The Mos'-woman's son is coming!" The bear-boy attacks his mother and, contrary to prohibition, goes to the forest. (Schmidt 1989: 195) Although no mention is made of the boy's father, it could hardly be anybody but a Por-man, at least that is what Tshernetsov thinks (Tshernetsov 1974: 288). Éva Schmidt, however, thinks that the boy was fathered by a sylvan giant menk (Schmidt 1989: 195).

What has all this got to do with our tale? The first connection lies, of course, through the little Mos'-woman. A whole group of legends are actually called by that name by the very bearers of the live tradition. Here is another of its variants: "There were a sister and a brother who lived together. The brother said it was wrong to live this way. He moved away and made a wife for himself out of a cedar-tree. The sister went looking for her brother and found him. While the brother was out, she chopped the cedar woman to splinters which she buried under a pile of shingles. Then she put on

the cedar woman's clothes and lay down on her place. So she lived with her brother. Soon a son was born to them. One day the boy heard a voice saying, "Your mother killed me and buried me under a pile of shingles." The boy told his father what he had heard. Learning the truth the man flew into a rage and killed both his sister and his son. Spring came. The blood of the little Mos'-woman fertilized a plant called *poryg* (*Heracleum Sibirica*). The weed was eaten by a passing she-bear. When time came, she gave birth to two bear-cubs and a little girl, the first Por-woman. One day the bear told her daughter, "Tomorrow people will come and kill me as well as your brother and sister. When people cook my meat, take care you do not eat it. When night arrives, come to the back of the house." Everything came to pass as the bear had said. At night the girl went to the back of the house where mother taught her how she should behave and what should be done with the meat and bones of the killed bear. The last night mother took leave of the girl and left by the road. Leaving, she gradually rose up to the skies (becoming the constellation of the Little Bear). Her daughter, however, became the mother of all Por-people." (Tshernetsov 1968: 108-109) According to another variant the Por-people have their origin in a marriage between the renascent Mos'-woman and an alien hunter (*a son of uusyn ootyr-ooika* 'the Town Elder' (3). (Schmidt 1989: 203) There is, by the way, an Khanty (Ostyak) legend, also connected with a bear, with a beginning rather similar to that of the tale of our interest: "There lived a sister and a brother. Not remembering their parents, they just lived alone in the forest. The sister was at home preparing food, while the brother went hunting. Hunting time came and the brother set out for the forest. Before leaving he instructed his sister, "If visitors should come, receive them courteously. If a chipmunk comes, you feed it, if a magpie comes, you offer it some food." But who came was a she-bear. The sister got frightened and flung some hot ashes at the bear's face. Evening fell, but the brother never came. Until early spring the sister lived alone, then she went looking for her brother. On her way she met a frog who turned into a beautiful girl and, in token of kind treatment, helped the sister to find a bridegroom. After the wedding the sister resumed the quest for her brother, accompanied by her husband. One day they noticed two bear-cubs sitting up in a cedar, eating cones and arguing. One of them said, "I'll give my cones to my aunt." - "But I'll give mine to my uncle!" The bear-cubs ran to the riverside, turned into human children and showed the sister and her husband the way to their home, saying, "Auntie, when Mother heard you were coming, she got very angry. Father did not get angry, he is waiting for you at home, but mother turned into a bear. But you need not fear, just come near. You bow to her and give her what you have on you." The sister did as instructed: she bowed to the bear and covered her with a silk cloth. The bear turned into a woman who had a burning-mark on one cheek. So they made peace." (Fairy-tales 1991: 23-26)

But still, who is the Bell-Hand? The possibility of his being a supernatural creature is supported by many reports of a bell being associated with a dead person or a supernatural being. In an Estonian publication of Mansi fairy-tales there is a story called A Crow-Girl With Plaited Hair. In this tale, with an undercurrent of the totemic, the daughter of the Mother-Crow is a girl in a dark fur-coat and with plaited hair, with beads in her ears and bells on her sleeves. (Mansi muinasjutud: 26). According to Karjalainen one could often notice a copper bell hanging in a tree at some Ob-Ugrian sacred site. Northern Khantys used to tie such a little bell to the crossbar of the burial house. (Karjalainen 1918: 232) The diary of Tshernetsov carries a note of his giving a Mansi (Pjotr Sampiltalov from the village of Jany-paul) seven little bells for fairy-dolls called *jalping*. *Jalping*-dolls were kept in caskets of *Mir-susne-khum*, *Topal ooika*, *Kaltash-s'an* and *Kul'-ootyr*. (Tshernetsov 1974: 160) The word *jalping* means sacred. The illustrations to Tshernetsov's article on bear funeral shows only one "bell-hand" - the sprite of Vanzevat village. (Tshernetsov 1974: 292) According to Éva Schmidt, some Khantys placed the homes of the Master of Diseases and the Lord of the Underworld not far northwards from Vanzevat. (Schmidt 1989: 223) Is it possible that the sound of the bell was to remind one of the distant peal of church bells? If that should be true, the

tinkling message of the mysterious stranger could have rung out a warning: the Mos'-woman could have been warned of incest. For she was hung up every time she entered the tent with an intention to make some food for her brother. Something must have been wrong with the relations between the brother and sister, otherwise, why should anybody feel bothered about a simple act of cooking? This argument seems to be corroborated by the beginning of the variant collected by Tshernetsov, viz. it contains a statement that living cannot go on this way (i.e. brother and sister together). And incest is, after all, not altogether a rare motif, occurring in some form or other, in the folklore of several peoples. Of course, Bell-Hand could also have been the name of some other sprite. At Mansi bear feasts, a horse-bow with bells, or a bell tied to the clothes was characteristic not only of the sprite of Vanzevat, but also such sprites as *jat uusyng ooika/jat vosh ooik* (the Elder of Jat-Town), *otyr luuv urne khum* (the Master Pasturing Horses), *menkv aagi jigpygyg* (Two Little Sisters of the Menkv-Girl) *otyr/mastyr* Tshernetsov 1987: 218, 234, 246, 249). Except the sisters of *menkv*, the sylvan giant, the rest of the names associate with *uusyn ootyr-ooika* 'the Town Elder' and *jalp-uus-ooika* 'the Sacred Town Elder'. The former may stand for several regional sprites, called Town-Elders, but in some cases he has also been called the Sacred Town Elder (4), a deity generally worshipped by all Ob-Ugrian peoples. His home *jalp uus* 'The Sacred Town' has even made its way onto every more or less solid geographic map, its Komi form reading Vezhakary. His anthropomorphous manifestation is an armed warrior and the zoomorphous one is a bear. Hence another of his names - The Clawed Master (Schmidt 1989: 212-215). Steinitz, in his collection of Khanty bear feast songs has published a song of the Sacred Town Elder, beginning as follows: By my luminous Father who lives in the Seventh Heaven in a house with a roof-lath and a vent-hole

I have been let down
 in a cradle with an iron bow,
 I have been let down
 in a cradle with a copper bow,
 on the dear tip of an iron chain,
 on the dear tip of a copper chain,
 I have been let down,
 I, the Lord With the Claws of a Swamp Beast,
 I, the Lord With the Claws of a Wild Beast...
 (Steinitz 1939: 384-385)

At bear feasts he is personified as a man in a white robe, with a kerchief tied round his neck and an arrow in either hand. Another arrow is stuck through the back part of his headdress (Tshernetsov 1974: 314). Or else, maybe the Bell-Hand is the son of the Town Elder? This idea seems to be borne out by another variant of the Little Mos'-woman tale, in which the Mos'-man (brother) is first married not to a cedar woman, but to the youngest daughter of the Town Elder, but a Mos'-woman (sister) kills her by means of cunning in order to enjoy (incestuous) marriage with her brother (Schmidt 1989: 203). The sister of the Bell-Hand, who in our tale of analysis becomes the wife of the Mos'-man, could then perhaps be the same daughter of the Town Elder. Only the situation is the opposite: to prevent (or end?) an incest the Bell-Hand (Town Elder's Son) comes to arrest the sister (by hanging her up by the hair). After his hand has been chopped off by the Mos'-man, his sister (the Town Elder's daughter) appears and really succeeds in preventing or putting an end to incestuous practices. But by the act of stealing her brother's hand she causes her husband's death, revenged by their son. The Mos'-woman is also to be punished for her treacherous conduct. But again, who is the son of the Mos'-man and the Town Elder's daughter, who is the only one to survive? At the Time of Creation the marriage of a supernatural being and a human usually produces ancestors of the people, animals and plants of the world to come. Whose forefather is the surviving boy?

The fact that too enthusiastic conclusions can often be premature, was brought home to me once again while reading another variant of the tale in question, written down from a Konda-Mansi story-teller in 1905. Here it is:

The Woman's Nephew was living together with his auntie. Everything that he hunted for he caught, all animals were found, caught and stored by him in the barn. Before going to set his traps and snares he said to his younger sister, "Take the head of the buck I killed at the leafy time and put it into the kettle." The brother left and the sister put it into the kettle to cook. As soon as the kettle boiled, something gave a ring in the vent-hole and the girl was hung up by her seven plaits, each a fathom long. Now, was she hanging there for a short or long time, who can say, but when she was let down, there was nothing but a little water to be seen in the kettle. Everything had been eaten. She ran to the barn, brought in the head of a buck killed in the leafy time and put it into the kettle. The kettle hardly boiled when the brother came in. "Is the food ready?" - "It has been cooking ever since you left, of course it's ready!" They sat down to eat, but the meat was tough. "It has been cooking ever since you left, how can it be tough still?" They lay down. They got up. The brother was preparing to go out setting traps and snares in trees and in the grass. He said, "Take the head of the buck I killed at the leafy time and put it into the kettle." When the brother was gone, the sister put the head of the buck killed at the leafy time into the kettle to cook. The kettle hardly boiled when something rang out in the vent-hole. Was she hanging for a short time or long, who can say, but when she was let down, there was nothing but a little water to be seen in the kettle. She hurried out, brought the head of a buck killed at the leafy time and put it into the kettle. The kettle boiled. The brother came and asked, "Is the food ready?" - "It has been cooking ever since you left." They scooped the meat out and sat down to eat. The brother asked, "How come the meat is still tough?" - "It has been cooking ever since you left." - "If it has been cooking ever since I left, why is it still not tender?" - "I had to do it twice, " said the sister. "What?" said the brother. She said, "The kettle boiled; I was hung up by my seven plaits, each a fathom long. Was I hanging long or for a short time, I wouldn't know, but when I was let down again, there was nothing but a little water to be seen in the kettle." The brother said, "Now be quiet!" He honed his sword, climbed onto the upper half of the door and waited. Then he said, "Now do the same way as you did yesterday." The sister went out, brought the head of a buck killed at the leafy time and put it into the kettle. Hardly could the kettle boil, when something went ringing in the vent-hole and she was hung up by her seven plaits, each a fathom long. Now the brother struck out (at whoever had come). Somehow they lost consciousness. Were they lying for a short or a long time, who would know, but when they got up, they saw a hand with a bell lying on the floor. They put it away in the bottom of an unused bag, an unused basket.

They resumed living. What should they have feared? They just went on living as they had lived before. The brother went setting traps and snares in trees and in the grass. The Iron-Copper Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables came in and said, "Will you marry me?" Whether she wanted or not, she had to. When the time came for the brother to return, the Old Man left. The woman got pregnant. The brother could not know it. Time came for the child to be born. She gave birth to it. When the brother came, she hid it behind the tshuval. One day the brother said, "If only we had someone to eat fat and tender meat!" After his saying so the child started crying behind the oven. "My dear sister! If you have such a one, why are you hiding it?" - "Because I'm afraid of you," said the sister. "What is there in me to be afraid of?" The sister pulled the child out. Only now she began to raise it before her brother's eyes. The brother went setting traps and snares in trees and in the grass. Inside his sister's little son began crying. Whatever the sister would do for him, the child would not stop crying. Then she sought out the thing lying in the bottom of the unused basket. She gave it to her son. The son threw it down. Now the seven edges of the heaven, that had been calm all the time, the seven edges of the low-hanging heaven boomed and clanged against each other, and

a ring! ring! ring! was heard outside. Inside there appeared the Iron-Copper Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables. The little boy was crawling on the floor. He seized the boy and tore him into two. One half he devoured standing on this side of the threshold, the other half he ate beyond the threshold. After that he was somehow raised up. The time came for the brother to return. The sister waited, but the brother was not there. Although she went out, the brother was not there. Then the brother appeared. And his dog appeared. When the sister went out now, she saw - her brother is coming, yet not moving from the spot. The girl, his sister ran up to them. She seized the dog, but it gave a rustling sound, being stuffed with hay. She seized her brother, but it gave a rustling sound, being stuffed with hay. She went running back, plaited a silk rope as thick as her little finger and strangled herself. That was the end of my story, that was the end of my song. (Kannisto 1956: 74-78. The tale was told by Vassili Vassiljevitch Njemotop from Somjupaul village on 10 January 1905.)

Note the beginning of the above variant: one of the characters is called the Woman's Nephew, and he is said to live together with his auntie. As no mention is made of the aunt later in the story, we might surmise that for the story-teller such a beginning served as typical for a definite kind of tales, according to a popular traditional classification, identifying the story to follow as one telling of the Woman's Nephew, not of anybody else (this is important for getting the context right). But who is the Woman's Nephew or the Woman's Son (*eekva pygris'*) but the profaned equivalent of the World-Surveyor Man, re-playing the Creation-Time tricks of the deity here, in a human environment. Indeed, the tales of *eekva-pygris'* often begin with the cliché, "Not far from the Heavenly City, near the King's Town there lives a Woman's Son together with his grandmother" (v. Fairytales 1991: 6,10), or "There lives a Woman's Son together with his grandmother. Although he goes hunting, he never catches anything" (ibid.: 15). It should be noted that "the Heavenly City, the King's Town" of such tales, even though inhabited by merchants, clergymen, soldiers and other "mundane" people, need not be an earthly town. Even *Numi-Toorum* had his own town in the heaven. The bear-feast song telling the myth about a bear who was let down from the heaven on a golden chain, contains the following lines:

She got out.
 She heard
 Voices sounding from the direction of the town.
 She heard:
 There are a lot of people to be seen.
 A musician is playing his instrument.
 A rider started after him,
 She fled back.

And while fleeing, her foot happened to sink through, and seeing the land under her she mused, "What a nice place for a wild girl like myself to walk around a bit." (Bartens 1986: 66)

Consequently, the story-teller of Konda associated his story with the tales about the Woman's Son, whereas the man from Sukyrja classified his story with those telling of the little Mos'-woman. Both are, of course, popular personages, but their similarity reaches even further. In the regions where Ob-Ugrian communities used to be divided into two exogamous groups, the World-Surveyor Man was associated with the Mos'-moiety (v. e.g., Sokolova 1987: 128, or Schmidt 1989: 216). As Konda Mansis did not practise such dual exogamy (Sokolova 1987: 121-122), the tales could hardly have been evolved around a Mos'-woman or a Mos'-man. Likewise, it would evidently have been inconceivable to tell stories of a six-legged Mos'-man who went pursuing a heavenly elk and left his skiing-tracks in the skies as the Milky Way (Tshernetsov 1987: 29, Karjalainen 1918: 396), and

other tales of this kind, using the Mos'-woman or the Mos'-man as symbols of the mythical forebears of the respective exogamous group. Therefore it is only to be expected that in the South-Mansi variant the Mos'-man is replaced by the Woman's Nephew. And the cliché: "There lived a Mos'-woman together with her younger brother" can be regarded as an equivalent of: "There lived a Woman's Nephew together with his auntie". According to Munkácsi, who is a real expert of Mansi folklore, *Kaltesh* was a daughter of the God in Heavens, in which case she was not the mother of the World-Surveyor Man, but his educator, aunt, or older sister (5). (Karjalainen 1918: 250) It also applies to Khanty tales: in some of them the brother returning from hunting and clapping his skis, covered with the hides of five animals, with a powerful rumble is a Mos'-man, whereas in some others it is the Woman's Nephew. (Steinitz 1939: 244-245, 280-281) Besides, in one of the tales collected by Steinitz (and published in two versions) it so happens that while the brother is away, the tent is entered by a Hero of the Height of Seven Sables, who asks the sister to pick his head for lice. By the time the brother should come home, the hero leaves. Finally the sister becomes his wife. She gives birth to a son who grows so fast that the Hero of the Height of Seven Sables begins to question his own fatherhood (suspecting incest?). The boy has got to stand various trials, such as, for example, a competition with his own seven brothers in stone-slinging. As befits a World-Surveyor Man /Woman's Son /Woman's Nephew, he defeats all his brothers. Then his father sends all his sons to the Town of Seven Stony-Eyed Giants. There the boy escapes from his pursuers and swims back home in the bird-like form of a diver (6). The story ends with a big feast, during which the boy is instructed by his uncle as follows, "You go to your own land now. Offerings missed in the morning you receive in the evening, and offerings missed in the evening you receive in the morning." Then he instructs his own sister; "You go to your mound with a diver's nest on it, that rose out of the waters all by itself, to the mound with a loon's nest on it, that rose out of the waters all by itself (7). Offerings missed in the morning you receive in the evening, and offerings missed in the evening you receive in the morning." The uncle says, "Myself I'll go to my Town of the Shape of a Running Horse, to my Town of the Shape of a Walking Horse. Holding the souls of little girls I will be living there, holding the souls of little boys I will be living there." (ibid.: 244-263) Quite like in the above fragment of a Mansi tale, the deities are dividing their places of living and their functions at the end of the Time of Creation. It is evident that the uncle going to live in the Town of the Shape of a Running/Walking Horse is the Sacred Town Elder (v. Steinitz 1939: 385), who was largely responsible for the length of a person's earthly progress. Notably, he was the last one visited by a dying man's soul before entering the domain of the Lord of the Underworld. (Schmidt 1989: 223) This may explain his promise to go holding the souls of little children. The woman sent to the nest of the Bird of Creation is, of course, *Kaltesh*. This is shown even more clearly by another Khanty tale: "To the Ob that feeds us, you go, to the Ob that serves us fish, to the branching-place of its four points you go! To its winding branches filled with the cries of geese, you go, to its winding branches filled with the cries of ducks, you go! To the mound with a diver's nest on it, that rose from the waters just by itself, To the mound with a loon's nest on it, you go! -- And live there, stating the span of little girls' lives, live there stating the span of little boys' lives. To little boys, who should live a long life you state a long life, and to little girls who should live a long life you state a long life!" (Steinitz 1939: 301-302) Who else is there, believed to be responsible for a person's lifespan but *Kaltesh-EEKVA/IMI/ANKI*. Even her place near the river Ob is well known. The protagonist of the tales, however, is the World-Surveyor Man. His uncle addresses him as follows: "You, cousin, go to the headwaters of the food-giving Ob, to the fish-giving Ob, with its capes all covered with golden turf, with golden grass, go to the foothills all covered with the spring feathers of cocks of the wood grouses, to the foothills all covered with the autumn feathers of cocks of the wood grouses, go to your own town hanging on a bowstring, to your own town hanging on a shoelace, go to your moon-coloured sacred house, go to your sun-coloured sacred house! At your table with its golden

hoofs you sit there, reading your holy book made of spring-time hides of squirrels, made of autumn-time hides of squirrels! -- On your moon-coloured holy horse you ride around the circular world that is circling like a ring, ride around the circular fairy-world that is circling like a ring!" (8) (ibid.: 300-301)

Thus the leading characters of both of our tales can be associated with the World-Watching Man and *Kaltesh* (the possibility is certainly evident from the tale from the river Konda, but the initial sentences of the North-Mansi variant also seem to allow for such an interpretation.) Another notable detail of the Konda-variant is the appearance of the Iron-Copper Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables. In the North-Mansi variant, the sister who comes looking for the hand with a bell, does not reveal the identity of the Bell-Hand, but the Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables is clearly associated with the supernatural. So, what information could be deduced from his name? Ob-Ugrian folklore features several personages characterized by means of animal measures. The killer of the bear is sometimes called the Hero of the Height of a Mouse (Leegajused: 14). In Mansi fairy-tales one meets an Old Man of the Height of a Hare. As to their real stature, it evidently presents no problems. But seven sables? If the measure should correspond to the length of a hide, we get 40-50 cm for a sable, or tail included, even more than that. That makes the Old Man about 3.5 m tall. Such a figure could indeed stick his hand through a vent-hole to catch a girl by the plaits. What sphere could he be associated with? If we consider ermine, who is of the same family, zoologically speaking, as sable, we find that ermine is quite popular in Siberia as an ancillary spirit of the shaman, while its activities concern mainly the underworld. Nothing of the kind has ever been told of the sable, though. And this is, indeed, no wonder, because unlike a ermine, a sable will never go occupying other animals' burrows, as it lives in hollow trees and stumps. Another detail: a sable never lives far from cedars, as cedar cones make up nearly a half of its food. But cedar is a holy tree for several Siberian peoples. According to Ob-Ugrian myths, birch and cedar were the first two trees planted on the Earth by the God of Heavens, while birch is associated with the Mos'-people, Kaltesh and the World-Surveyor Man, whereas cedar is associated with the Por-people, the Sacred Town Elder, and *Numi-Toorum*. (Sokolova 1987: 119-120, Schmidt 1989: 216) Besides, sables with their dark fur with a greenish lustre have been called dogs of *mis*-sprites. (9) Most information of the Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables can be found in Khanty tales collected by Steinitz. According to those tales he is both the father of the World-Surveyor Man and his enemy. More than once he questions his wife's fidelity and makes his youngest son compete with the older ones. But this is exactly what *Numi-Toorum* did. He also accused his wife of being unfaithful to him. (There is a rather wide-spread legend according to which the World-Surveyor Man/the Woman's Nephew was born just as *Numi-Toorum* had cast *Kaltesh*, his wife down from the Heaven, suspecting her of infidelity, v. e.g., Toporov 1989: 170). And so did *Numi-Toorum* make his sons take part in a contest, finally won by the youngest. (ibid.: 171) And although the Hero of the Height of Seven Sables has some doubts as to his own fatherhood of the boy, the latter always calls him Father. Only at difficult moments he turns for help to his "luminous father living in the seventh heaven in a house with a roof-lath and a vent-hole" (10), beginning like this, "If you have indeed put me over a hundred winged spirits, if you have indeed put me over a hundred footed spirits..." (Steinitz 1939: 249) "Bright" or "luminous" is one of the Ob-Ugrian epithets for *Sänki-Toorum*, the God of Heavens. (Karjalainen 1918: 296) So, when reading the Steinitz collection one gains the impression that the father of the World-Surveyor Man is as if split into two halves, of which the earthly half is the vexer, standing in opposition with the heavenly half as the protector. The problem whether this development has occurred under Christian influences (according to Karjalainen the World-Surveyor Man was associated with Jesus Christ in some areas early this century - v. Karjalainen 1918: 255), or in the process of the God of Heavens developing an ever more abstract and holy image, while the negative traits of his original character were gradually concentrated into a separate personage,

remains beyond the present discussion. From our point of view it is notable that the Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables can be associated with *Numi-Toorum* even in the South-Mansi variant of our tale in which his appearance was accompanied by "the rumbling sound of the previously calm heaven's seven edges, of the low-hanging heaven's seven edges touching" And after having devoured the boy he returned to Heaven. But what about the Bell-Hand? Maybe the hand with a bell was one of the attributes of the God of Heavens? The last mentioned manifestation of the Old Man of the Height of Seven Sables was, after all, accompanied not only by the boom and rumble from the skies, but there was also some bell-ringing to be heard. True, that did not happen until the hand had been found. Here, it seems, we have reached a crucial moment: according to both variants of the tale, the child is procreated as if in order to lure someone to produce the hand with a bell. Does it mean to say that through the child the truth is brought to light? In the previously cited legend of the origination of the Por-people it is also from a child that the brother learns about the incest he has committed.

It is also interesting that the instructions given to the sister as to how she should prepare food is an almost word-for-word replica of a fragment from an Khanty tale recorded by Steinitz, but there it is a father's way to instruct his daughter as to how she should feed a suitor. And the same words are used to describe the way a young wife feeds her husband. (Steinitz 1939: 121-122) Maybe the offering of a buck killed "at the leafy time" (spring? summer?) has a special meaning? In this case the motif of incest could be borne out.

Well, it is time to call the long story short, otherwise we might perhaps never find a way out of the fairy-world of Khantys and Mansis. As I do not support the idea of there ever having existed a mythical Ob-Ugrian "Golden Age", during which all Mansi and Khanty tribes and families shared one and the same interpretation of their religious songs and tales, I should not really prefer one interpretation to another. So, if the object of our discussion is not a set of fairy-tales, but rather some religious legends associated with the mythical Time of Creation, the characters could well personify *Numi-Toorum*, *Kaltesh* and the World-Surveyor Man, who are somehow or other related by an incest. The fact that some of the deities get killed does not mean much, as this may be just a case of testing another possible variant of the relations between the three, while another tale would depict the same personages in quite different relations with each other. If, however, we have a legend reflecting the relations between two exogamous groups, the "earthly" characters could be interpreted as the mythical forebears of the groups in question, whose life is intervened by the supernatural, manifested either by *Numi-Toorum* or the World-Surveyor Man. Here, too, the motif of incest can be substantiated. If, however, the tales discussed are just fairy-tales, they could perhaps function as horror stories of the type "the eater is already listening behind the door" (v. Mansi muinasjutud: 18). I hope, nevertheless, that even in this case the above digressions into Ob-Ugrian mythology were not quite in vain. We hope they helped the reader to get an inkling of the multi-storeyed architecture of the Ob-Ugrian world of folk religion and lore, intimating how, in some cultures, the chain of myth - legend - fairy tale can form a circle sometimes. What may be perceived by an outsider as the degeneration or decadence of a myth, may - for the bearers of the live tradition - serve as a profaned variation of a sacred motif, in which each cliché, refers to a whole myth, or a group of myths, thus leaving the chain open for new tales and interpretations to be added.

Translated by Sirje Ainsaar

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Comments

1 Mos' and Por are the names of two Ob-Ugrian exogamous moieties. Dual exogamy dominated with all Ob-Ugrian communities except Konda Voguls (Sokolova 1987: 121), persisting right into the late 19th century (Sokolova 1983: 164).

2 The World-Surveyor Man is the mythical youngest son of the heavenly god *Numi-Toorum* and his wife *Kaltesh-EEKVA*, who rides above the Earth on his winged horse, protecting people. He is the most popular deity of the Ob-Ugrian peoples, one of his manifestations being a wild goose. His image bears traces of being influenced by beliefs connected with St. George and St. Nicholas. In folk tradition he is often called *EEKVA-PYGRIS'* (Woman's Son, Woman's Nephew). According to Tshernetsov's diaries the genealogy looks like follows: *Kos'har-Toorum* is the progenitor of *Kors-Toorum* who fathered *Numi-Toorum* and *Tapal (Topal) ooika* alias *Mikol-Toorum*, of which *Numi-Toorum* is the younger brother. *Numi-Toorum* was the father of seven *Toorums* the youngest of which was *Mir-susne-khum* alias *EEKVA-PYGRIS'*. He had a hundred wives and a hundred sons, the forefathers of shamans. *Mir-susne-khum* was first a villain (*os'mar-khum*). He had a *saav-sov vaarim-kent* - a hat of different leathers that made him invisible. But after he had killed many heroes and done a lot of other evil things, *Topal ooika* said, "That's enough, now you'll become the protector of all people." (Tshernetsov 1987: 153-155)

3 *Uusyn ootyr-ooika* is a character frequently occurring in Ob-Ugrian legends, mythical songs and fairy-tales. In stories telling of *EEKVA-PYGRIS'* he sometimes figures as an antagonist of the Woman's Son (v. Muinasjutud 1991: 15-20). Although Éva Schmidt seems to consider him a supernatural being in his own rights, the impression gained from reading the texts leads us to believe that the Town Elder is rather a general term for sprites associated with central strongholds of different regions. The term has even been associated with the Sacred Town Elder (v. the footnote below).

4 Kannisto notes, "According to Savel *uusyn ootyr ooika* is a *pupyg* (guardian spirit) living *aas ta paalt* (beyond the river Ob) upstream of Berjozovo in a place called *jalp uus* (sacred town). (Kannisto 1956: 210)

5 Of course one should not take this argument too literally either. As a scholar of his time, Munkácsi regarded folklore texts as fragments concealing remnants of an once integral world view. His approach seems to exclude all possibilities that some regional differences might perhaps also exist in the tradition.

6 Referring to Munkácsi, Karjalainen writes that in some myths of creation it was the Son of Mother and Father (=World-Surveyor Man) who, having assumed the form of a diver, dives to the bottom of the primordial sea, while in some others it was done by a sprite called *khul'-ootyr* (=the Devil) (Karjalainen 1918: 298). It is likely that the motif of escaping in a diver's form has been included in the tale just as a reminder of the Creation. I believe that "the mound with a diver's nest on it, that rose out of the waters all by itself" and is associated with the home of *Kaltesh*, can also be interpreted as an indirect reference to an association between the diver and the World-Surveyor Man. (v. the footnote below).

7 This looks like another reference to the Creation: the phrase "rose out of the waters all by itself" evidently means that the mound with a loon's nest on it was there before the beginning of all beginnings, unlike the land brought up from the bottom of the primordial sea by the loon.

8 The same clichés are used to refer to the homes of *Kaltesh* and the World-Surveyor Man in the bear feast repertory (v. Steinitz 1939: 339-341, 347-348).

9 As for *mis*-sprites, they were believed to be less hostile to humans than the sylvan giants *menkvs*. They could often be manifested as animals. (One of my personal recordings tells also about a hunter following a *mis*-woman taking flight in the shape of a fox.) The daughters of *mis*-sprites were believed to practise temporary intercourse with men sometimes, in which case the man prospered. (Karjalainen 1918: 377)

10 The same cliches are used in the bear-funeral songs performed by the Bear, the Loon, the Old Cuckoo-Woman, the Sprite of Kazym, "the Little Fairy Appearing in the Shape of a Crossbill", and the Old Man of the Holy City, when referring to their father. (v. Steinitz 1939: 309, 320, 331, 336, 363, 370, 384-385)