

BOOK REVIEWS

REFLECTIONS ON INDIGENOUS ADAPTATION IN WESTERN SIBERIA

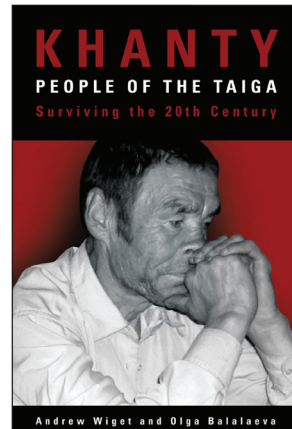
Andrew Wiget, Olga Balalaeva. *Khanty, People of the Taiga: Surviving the 20th Century*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2011. 398 pp.

This monograph presents research about the survival of the Khanty people in Siberia. The main research goals of the monograph are related to discussing contemporary survival strategies of the Khanty. The authors approach the Eastern Khanty comprehensively, covering a wide range of aspects of the Khanty culture and everyday life.

The main arguments of the research concern problems of the Khanty indigenous movements that have been relatively unsuccessful although local indigenous leaders have been quite active and tried to adapt their strategies to continually changing circumstances. The scant success of these movements is closely related to rapid changes in the local economic, social and natural environment. Rapid and large-scale development of the oil industry in the region has decisively changed circumstances of survival for small indigenous communities. Indigenous groups had managed to preserve their way of life, traditions and autonomy relatively well until the second half of the 20th century. However, the oil industry has dramatically changed the pattern of interests in the region. The Khanty were not ready to meet the tremendous pressure (influx of migrants, building of new cities, development of industrial infrastructure, pollution of the environment) they have experienced during the last few decades. Indigenous communities have developed a variety of adaptation tools and skills to manage the situation. Still, the options of the Khanty to improve their survival chances are rather scarce.

The conclusions of the monograph are presented clearly and they deal with the prospective for the Khanty to redefine their adaptation strategies because there is always hope that the situation is still manageable. But the authors also point out a certain need for commitment from the government and local administrations to substantially improve “the fate of the Khanty and other native minorities of the Russian North” (p. 311).

The monograph presents plenty of original field data about the Khanty way of life during recent decades. Reflections on Western Siberian history and the traditional culture of the Khanty are mostly based on previous research, or studies of other contemporary scholars, but this is quite understandable. Especially important is the issue that not too many monographs exist about the Khanty people. This monograph differs from other researches on similar topics because it is obvious that it is based on a very long series of fieldwork, conducted in the same region. The authors are familiar with the



local situation and can tell us the true story of the dramatic changes over a relatively long period of time.

The scope of the monograph is embedded in time and it covers very different aspects of Khanty life. Part of the book provides an overview of the Khanty history and changes in the local religious landscape, social and economic environment. Most of this vast material is provided on the basis of earlier research, done by multiple scholars (of whom most are, or have been, prominent in the field) in different time periods. This historical and descriptive segment serves as preparation for the reader for the main, more contributive part of this research. Chapters that deal with recent and contemporary issues are remarkably sound and the analysis of the indigenous movement can be considered sufficient. The final parts of the book serve as an example of dedicated and high-level research.

The monograph contributes greatly to the studies of the Khanty people. Although ethnographic literature about the Khanty is extensive, this research explores the contemporary situation of the Iugan, Pim, and Tromyugan Khanty groups in a precise, detailed and empathic way. It must also be stressed that the Eastern Khanty groups have not been covered by ethnographic research well enough. This book helps to fill this gap substantially.

The main contribution of this research is related to documenting indigenous everyday realities and native movement attempts among the Khanty in the post-Soviet period. The authors of the research have had continuous contact with these processes for more than two decades. This has enabled them to provide an extensive and reliable documentation of these crucial decades of local Khanty life. The complicated relationship between the local indigenous population, oil companies, and administrative agents is also richly analysed.

Chapters of the monograph are organised in a logical way, the more important and intensive ones in the final section. The reader is guided towards the understanding of the Khanty people's contemporary culture and social situation through an overview of the regional history, indigenous traditions, and the Khanty worldview.

Art Leete