

ON THE FUNERAL CUSTOMS OF THE NORTHERN KHANTS IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Edgar Saar

The Khants live in West Siberia, on the banks of the Ob River and its tributaries. The Khants' burial customs have been studied by K.F. Karjalainen, V. Chernetsov, Z. Sokolova and V. Kulemzin. This paper is mainly based on the material collected by the author during fieldwork between the years 1974 and 1989 and in 1996. The paper gives a survey of the funerals in the Oktyabrskoye, Beloyarsk and Beryozovo regions of the Khanty-Mansi autonomous district (okrug) and the Shuryshkary and Priuralsk regions of the Yamalo-Nenets autonomous district.



In the Oktyabrskoye, Beloyarsk, Beryozovo and most part of the Shuryshkary regions the Khants bury their dead in a grave dug in the ground. Nowadays the coffin is made of boards, in earlier times it was made of a boat, the ends of which were sawn off. The Khants bury their dead on the third day after death. In former times it was sometimes done on the day the person passed away.

In the summer of 1988 I witnessed a funeral in the graveyard of the Azovy village in the southern part of the Shuryshkary region. The coffin was taken to the graveyard on a sledge drawn by a horse (* Photo 1). The coffin was fastened to the sledge with ropes. An axe was placed under the head of the coffin to keep away the evil spirits. The sledge was drawn to the graveyard by a horse. The graveyard was situated at a distance of about a kilometre from the funeral building, in the forest near the village. The forest consisted mainly of pines with some spruces and birches among them.

In the graveyard the coffin was taken off the sledge and put on a stand made of boards. The horse with the sledge was taken back to the village. The lid was taken off the coffin and placed next to it. Then the men started to dig the grave. The mourners had brought some food - white bread, salted fish, candies, cookies, and a jar of cloudberries. They had also brought glasses, bowls, and a kettle. A fire was made and the kettle was put on it. A small table, which was placed next to the coffin, was taken from a nearby tomb. It was placed next to the coffin. After some time a horse drawing a sledge with a small dining table on it reached the graveyard. This table was also placed next to the coffin and the food and tableware brought from home were put on it. After the about 80cm-deep grave had been dug, the mourners went to the tables to have something to eat. Another sledge drawn by a horse arrived from the village, carrying boards. After the men had had a bite, they started to build a gravehouse from the boards (* Photo 2), which resembles a small house and has a two-gabled roof. The women put some clothes (a jacket, a pair of trousers, some shirts) into the coffin and covered them with a width of cloth. Before putting the clothes into the coffin, they were brushed over five times with a birch twig to purify them from evil. When the gravehouse had been completed, the mourners again came to the tables to have something to eat. They also drank diluted spirits from a glass which was passed round.

After that the coffin was covered with the lid. A pole was placed on the lid lengthwise and on it two smaller ones were laid crosswise. They were fastened to the coffin with ropes which were tied around the coffin. All the mourners went to the coffin one by one to raise it. While doing it, they grabbed the end of the lengthwise pole and raised the head of the coffin a little. Both men and women did this three times each and also gave the lid of the coffin three parting kisses. This was first done by the deceased's sisters and brother and then all the others followed suit. I also did this. Later on I asked them about the reason for this tradition. The Khants explained that it was to bid farewell to the deceased.

After that four men lifted the coffin and carried it to the graveside. The edges of the grave were brushed over five times with a birch twig to purify the grave from evil. The bottom of the grave was covered with a rug and an axe was put at the head. The ropes tied around the coffin and the poles placed on the lid were removed and the coffin was lowered into the grave. Bundles of clothes were tucked behind the coffin in the grave. The coffin was covered with a cloth and on it were placed a jacket and two fur coats. These were in turn again covered by a cloth. A dented bowl was also put into the grave. Over the grave they placed five bow-shaped birch branches which had been purified from evil with a birch twig. On the bow-shaped birch branches two strips of tar-paper were placed over the grave. On the tomb a small gravehouse was placed, and the roof boards were fastened with nails. In the front side of the gravehouse there was the so-called soul's opening. Earth was shovelled to the sides and back of the gravehouse. In front of the gravehouse a table was set with a bottle of diluted spirits, a glass and a bowl with cookies on it; pieces of bread were thrown in through the soul's opening to treat the deceased. After some time the bottle with diluted spirits, the glass and the bowl with cookies were taken away from the table in front of the gravehouse and put on the dining table. The mourners ate and drank at the table. After that the mourners went to bid farewell to the deceased. They knocked at the gravehouse three times and also gave it a parting kiss. At last the soul's opening was covered with a shutter. The dining table which the mourners had taken from a nearby tomb after their arrival at the graveyard, was put back. The other one, which had been brought from the village, was placed on the brand-new gravehouse with its legs up. The kettle was also left at the gravehouse. Then the mourners left the graveyard.

There were over 60 graves in the Azovy graveyard ([* Photo 3](#)). The gravehouses were made of boards. Some of them had birch bark under the roof boards, others had tar-paper. Some, however, had neither. All the gravehouses had soul's opening on the front side. Some of the older gravehouses were decayed. On the gravehouses or near them small dining tables, kettles, buckets, mugs, bowls, and other objects had been placed. These objects are used at funerals and later on at remembrance feasts. The graveyard abounded in empty bottles of strong alcoholic drinks. At the tombs one could see the deceased's personal belongings: reindeer sledges, boats, oars, skis, sledges, and so on. Not far from the graveyard, in the forest under the trees the deceased's clothes and footwear had been laid.

The Azovy graveyard is similar to the ones situated near the Khants' villages in the Oktyabrskoye, Beryozovo and Beloyarsk regions and in most part of the Shuryshkary region. The Khants from the northern part of the Shuryshkary region and the Priuralsk region bury their dead in small gravehouse on the ground ([* Photo 4](#)). The sides of the house become wider at the top. Each gravehouse has a soul's opening in the front side. The roofs of the gravehouse are covered with turf, grass and moss. On some roofs small birches grow, put there together with the turf.

Reindeer are slaughtered during the funeral. The meat is eaten, but the antlers are placed on the gravehouse. On and at the gravehouse one can see reindeer sledges, skis, kettles, buckets, dining tables, ladles, mugs, bottles, and jars.

After the funeral the Khants come to the graveyard to remember the deceased. If the deceased is a female, it is done after four days, if it is a male, it is done five days after the funeral. The next ceremony takes place in 40 or 50 days, respectively. When the Khants come to the graveyard to remember the deceased, they all knock on the gravehouse three times to greet the deceased. The shutter is removed from the soul's opening. A fire is made in the graveyard, and tea is made and meat and fish are cooked. The food is put on a small table. First of all a glass of vodka or wine and some food is put in front of the gravehouse to treat the deceased. Later on they are taken away and put on the dining table among the other drinks and food. All the Khants who have come to remember the deceased, drink and eat at the table. Before leaving, the soul's opening is again covered with the shutter and everyone knocks three times on the gravehouse to say good-bye.

I have repeatedly mentioned that there is a soul's opening in the front side of the gravehouse. The Khants believe that a human being has several souls. According to V. Chernetsov, the Khants maintain that a woman has four souls and a man has five. What exactly do they think they are? The first one is a shadow-soul, *is-hor*, which is described as a visible shadow. After death this soul goes to the grave together with the body. The second soul, *urt*, is described as man- or bird-shaped. After death it goes to the realm of the dead. The third one is wood grouse-shaped. It is inside a human being only when he is asleep, that is why it is called the sleep soul - *ulem-is*. This is the one that dies together with the human being. The fourth one, *lil*, is a breath soul. It is a renascent, reincarnating soul, which, after the person's death, goes into a doll image specially made for it - *ittyрма* - (* [Photo 5](#)), and later on into a newborn baby of the same kin. The doll image for a dead person's soul is still made today. If the deceased is a female, the doll is dressed in women's clothes, and if it is a male, in men's clothes. I saw one of the male dolls at Synya Khants in 1979. It was kept in a box in the holy corner. And now what is the fifth soul of a Khant man? Some Khants believe that it is the energy of a man but others think that a man has two reincarnating souls.

In the case of an unnatural death (e.g. freezing, drowning, suicide) the Khants on the banks of the Synya River build a small house and put it on top of a pole. (* [Photo 6](#)) Then they make still another soul dummy called a *ura*, which they put into the house. In 1979, near the Khants' village Ovgort, I saw 23 houses built of boards and put on top of poles cut out of growing trees. The upper part of the tree had been cut off, the lower part together with the roots served as a pole.

If we compare the funerals of the Northern Khants with those in neighbouring regions, we can say that the funerals by the Khants who bury their dead in the ground in a coffin are most similar to those of the Northern Mansi and the Eastern Khants. The funeral customs of the northernmost Khants who bury their dead in gravehouse on the ground are similar to those of the Nenets who inhabit the lower course of the Ob River. The Nenets also bury their dead in gravehouses on the ground and place skis and reindeer sledges by them. The difference between them is that the Khants put the deceased into the gravehouse in a coffin whereas the Nenets wrap them in reindeer hides and put them in the gravehouse without a coffin.

In conclusion, it can be said that if we compare the Khants' funerals of today with those at the beginning of the 20th century, we can say that more and more people tend not to believe in the after-life. In comparison with earlier times, fewer objects are put into the grave and not all ceremonies are performed. Formerly the grave was covered with birch bark, whereas nowadays tar-paper is also used; formerly gravehouses were built from tree trunks, nowadays they are usually made of boards. Funeral customs have become simpler; however, one may say that the Northern Khants' funerals are still quite traditional.

Translated by Tiina Mällo

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Photos

[Photo 1.](#) A horse pulling a sleigh-borne coffin to the graveyard. The Azovy village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province (oblast). Photo by the author, 1988.

[Photo 2.](#) The construction of a gravehouse. The Azovy village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province. Photo by the author, 1988.

[Photo 3.](#) Graves in a Khant graveyard. The Azovy village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province. Photo by the author, 1988.

[Photo 4.](#) A grave in a Khant graveyard. The Yohan Ov village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province. Photo by the author, 1989.

[Photo 5.](#) A doll image. The Ovgort village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province. Photo by the author, 1979.

[Photo 6.](#) A small house for the doll image of a Khant, died in an unnatural way. The Ovgort village, the Shuryshkary region, the Tyumen province. Photo by the author, 1976.