

## NEWS IN BRIEF

*This is a copy of the article from printed version of electronic journal*

### ***Folklore Vol. 16***

ISSN 1406-0957

*Editors Mare Kõiva & Andres Kuperjanov*

*Published by the Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM*

---



**Electronic Journal of Folklore**

Electronic version ISSN 1406-0949 is available from

***<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/folklore>***

It's free but do give us credit when you cite!

© *Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM, Andres Kuperjanov*

---

**Tartu 2001**

## **NEWS IN BRIEF**

### **KINSHIP & INHERITANCE: PROPERTY RELATIONS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SAKHA NATIVE COMMUNITIES**

The traditional kinship structure and inheritance rights of the Sakhas were influenced by at least three historical periods: the Russian colonial system before the Revolution, the Soviet period and the formation of the Sakha Republic, in an attempt to gain autonomy within the Russian Federation. During each of these periods, special strategies of survival and adaptation were necessary. Not only did the material culture and lifestyle of the Sakhas need to react to the new social and political conditions, but the kinship structure as well.

In the old “traditional” Sakha kinship structure prestige was based on age. The kin-groups were led by elders. The older a person was, the more prestige he would gain and the greater his authority would be. I am not very familiar with the traditional social and political structure of Sakha society, but according to the general model of society among the Siberian natives, the prestige and authority of a person determined his share in family/kin resources and his influence in making decisions within the family, as well as on a more general level (kin/tribe/local). This means that the amount of power, prestige and goods (or property) were all correlated and accumulated at the top of the age-determined structure.

First of all, the Soviet period made corrections to that order. The plan to transform Siberian indigenous society from feudalism or primitive Communism to advanced Socialism put their whole culture under pressure. In order to civilize them, the whole life-style of the Siberian indigenous peoples was changed by force. I won't go into this in greater detail, because we have already heard of these processes in previous discussions. I would like to mention only two features that are important for my research - education and forcible collectivization. The Soviet education system as such did not fit in with the social structure of most Siberian indigenous groups. In most cases children were sent to boarding schools (internaty). This means that families were sometimes separated in very crude ways.

The parents had to stay in their villages or with the reindeer-herds and the children were only able to see them about twice a year during their school holidays. After secondary school most young people usually studied at the vocational schools (VUZ), or in some cases attended university. Thus they were equipped with the skills necessary for modern Socialist society. Even if families lived in villages and sent their children to day schools, young people mostly lost their connection to their parents' traditional way of life. Roughly 1/3 or less of the indigenous population now living in Siberia are involved with the reindeer herding and other traditional activities (although in some regions this number is still above 50%). The educated generation worked on collective farms, state farms, forest farms, hunting farms, in administration, etc., i.e. usually in professions that had hardly any connections with the traditional indigenous economy and way of life (lorry driver, mechanic, tractor driver etc.) and slowly lost the connections to their traditional culture and economy.

One reason for that distance from their own culture was the collectivization of the reindeer economy, so that even less people were needed to work there. Another reason was that the new skills and professions could not be used within the reindeer economy. And last but not least, the reindeer herders had always been at the bottom of Siberian society. Reindeering in Siberia is a typical "ethnic" profession. Being an indigenous person meant being a reindeer-herder and being a reindeer-herder meant being an indigenous person. Because both were situated (as already mentioned) at the bottom of society, many people tried to escape that category. By learning some other ("Russian") professions, people had a chance to climb the social hierarchy. In doing so, they usually lost part or even all of their ethnic identity.

With the collapse of the Soviet economy the life of the reindeer herders changed once again. The planned and controlled economy with regularly paid wages etc. vanished. The condition of the post-collapse state and collective farms varies throughout Siberia. They exist in Western Siberia also, yet no one actually knows where and how. As we heard from Patty, in Chukotka the farms are still dominant and a sort of servitude relationship between the workers and management has developed here. Florian described how the rein-

deer-herders in the Yamal Peninsula use the collective farms for subsistence and do not hesitate to cheat them if necessary.

I have no idea what things are like in northern Sakha. I have only heard that the government of Sakha Republic had closed down the state and collective farms and that it was from the ruins of these farms that the obshinas were formed.

Another feature of the economic and political changes in Siberia is that young people return to their families to stay there after losing their jobs in non-reindeering branches of the economy or after being unable to find a job after completion of vocational school.

The task of my research project is to discover how kinship structure and property relations reacted to these processes. As I noticed in Western Siberia, the traditional age-determined kinship of the Siberian indigenous peoples underwent a great deal of changes. One purpose of kinship is to guarantee the people's existence through mutual aid and cooperation. This demands a certain flexibility in adapting to new strategies and methods. On the other hand kinship is one of the main bearers of a people's identity. In this case some conservatism and the preservation of some of the old symbols and constructions is needed.

Survival in the modern Sakha Republic requires not only traditional knowledge of reindeer herding but also good relations with the bureaucracy and new legal, technical and other skills, as well as an understanding of local and general "power games". My hypothesis is that the young generation is the one that will be able to orientate itself in these new conditions. Besides, according to my observations in Western Siberia, young people more often have personal relations to the local bureaucracy and the energy to develop and maintain these relations. The local bosses are often former state and collective farm functionaries or Communist Party leaders with whom young people had worked during the Soviet era. At that time, however, the older generation did not have such intensive contact with the local authorities because they were herding reindeers most of the time. The other reason for the lack of intensive connection between the old people and former power-holders is also the fact, that almost everywhere in Siberia the "civilisation" of the indig-

enous populations began late in the late 60s and at the beginning of the 1970s, when the older generation had already worked on state and collective farms in reindeer brigades and due to their profession had been farther away from the modernizing processes of Siberian “agriculture”.

Thus it is no wonder that we find people between the ages of 20 to 45 in positions where they have to deal with the “outside” world in order to represent their group and politics. After the collapse of the organized Soviet-planned economy, the indigenous people of Siberia very often had to find ways of selling their products, of obtaining access to resources, dealing with big companies, finding necessary equipment etc., i.e. to be successful on their own. After the implementation of Yeltsin’s law in the beginning of the 1990s, the indigenous population of Siberia had the right to own family or kinship territories ( ). Family territory does not mean that a family owns its land, but that it was registered in its name. Family members could use it free of charge and control what was happening within the boundaries of their territory. In various regions of Siberia, some families broke away from the state or collective farms and established their own households. It is not always true that only 30 or 40-somethings did so. For example, in Western Siberia the whole land is divided up into family plots and very often belongs to extended families, where the elders are still in control. In general, however, the “public relations” sphere is dominated by the above-mentioned 30 and 40-somethings: they make contracts with companies, deal with the authorities, serve as elected deputies on village councils (selsoviet) etc. The fact that the elders remain in the background does not mean that they have no influence on decision-making. Plans for the future, contracts etc. are often negotiated within the kinship-group before anything is done.

### **Obshchina**

The other aspect of the changes that have taken place during the last decade concerns obshchina, which Aleksandr Pika gives defines as follows: the obshchina is a group of indigenous persons and families often related through familial or marital bonds, who have nomadized together, owned property collectively or enjoy collective rights to a given territory. Actually it could be whatever you want it

to be. The Sakha Republic passed a special law on tribal obshchinas. That law defines the obshchina as an autonomous economic unit, the purpose of which is to preserve the traditional indigenous way of life and traditional cultural heritage. The obshchina is a voluntary association of its members, governed by the general meeting. The land used by an obshchina is given to them for free, but still remains state property.

In fact there are even more versions of obshchinas than the possibilities to write that word in Latin letters. In the Central Ob region the obshchina is an association of neighbors living next to each other along the same river. In one case they included one Russian family, and the Khanty families involved were not related. Another case was an association of two extended kinship-groups with the aim of obtaining more compensation from the local oil company. According to Patty there is an obshchina in Chukotka formed by four former reindeer brigades, two of whom were, in the meantime, private enterprises. Patty presumed that these four groups might be linked to one another by ties of kinship ties.

According to the information in my possession, the obshchinas in the Sakha Republic were also formed on the basis of reindeer brigades. In one case, the Yukagirs and Evens who worked in one reindeer-herding brigade split up and formed two separate obshchinas, one for the Yukagirs and one for the Evens. The obshchinas in Sakha are more like cooperatives that privatize part of a state or collective farm. This does not exclude the possibility that the obshchinas are formed on a kinship basis, but I have no evidence for that either. Again, the same age group dominates the public face of the obshchinas.

### **inside the families and kinships**

The active role of the younger generations does not fit into the old “traditional” age-based hierarchy of the Siberian natives. On the one hand the families and kinship-groups use their skills, knowledge and abilities to deal with the problems of modern post-Soviet life. How independent are they to make decisions? According to my experience in Western Siberia, the elders control and influence the activities of their sons and grandsons. The kinship-group or family

absorbs new strategies and know-how to guarantee its existence. As long as new elements do not change the social structure too radically, they will be accepted. In this process it is interesting to note how these new skills and strategies are legitimized and recognized. To avoid principal “disharmony” within the social structure and hierarchy, very often some kind of “folklorization” is used. As I discovered in many regions of Western Siberia and having read about other parts of Siberia, ethnographic terminology is used to represent new agents and structures as a natural part of the indigenous culture. For example indigenous peoples’ representative bodies were often referred to as “councils of elders” (*soviet starikov*) and its members “tribal elders” (*stariki*). The real elders (old men) were somewhere else; those terms were used for publicity. This effect also pertains to obshchinas and other alliances. Therefore legends about ancient cooperation between particular kinship groups were founded and cultivated. The right to use particular territories was established, sometimes with the friendly help of anthropologists. In some cases even special rhetoric was used to symbolize the ancient harmony between nature and the natives in order to prove the thesis of “primary rights”.

In this context, I do not mean the neo-traditionalism of the indigenous elites to symbolize otherness and “consciousness of one’s roots” through folklore festivals and the use of ethnographic symbols. I mean the use of the “white man’s” idea of the natives for their own ends and in certain cases also believing in it.

### **The young rebels**

The old age-based hierarchies and gender roles of the indigenous cultures have nevertheless changed. The domination of the younger members of the communities is not only cosmetic. Young people, who play important roles within families, claim the larger share of prestige and power in the community. This requires some modifications in the distribution of power, prestige and property. Being important for the community, the younger generation wants to have a greater say in the decision-making process.

It is interesting to observe how the social and political commitment of these young people correlates with the transmission of property and land use rights. If he inherits more reindeers, he also has to obtain a larger share of the family plot in order to graze his herd. The social evaluation of such outside-directed activities takes place through the reorganization or non-reorganization of the sharing of power and property within the kinship group.

An interesting aspect of the transmission of prestige and property is the correlation between these. The general view on the rebirth of the “traditional” native cultures is that the Siberian indigenous people want to return to their roots and own reindeer. In this case the owner of the big herd should be more respected than the one who does not have as many animals. But is this really the case? In Sakha we have two groups of people who do not have reindeers. Some people do not have reindeers because they are poor. They became alcoholics or ate their animals, and now try to make a living without them (in the West Siberian case they could have heavily relied on the compensation paid by oil companies). The other group of people who have no “traditional indigenous property” are people who live in villages and cities and have a proper income through wages. The position of these two categories within the reindeer-farming kinship group should be equal. But I suggest that this is not the case. According to my experience, people living in the cities are respected by their rural relatives. The social capital of those “propertyless” members of the family competes with economic capital.

## **Gender**

School education, leaving one’s family and being independent at a relatively early age also acted to transform the gender relationship. Many of the native intellectuals I have met have been female. They do a lot of lobbying for indigenous rights, form native associations etc. In addition to the intellectuals there are a great number of women who have a job and have undergone on-the-job training. In many cases daughters refuse to return to their families after finishing school in the village or city, although their parents would like to have them come back.



These women, who play a leading political role, act against the male dominated structure of the indigenous society. They are also altogether very important actors in local life. What is their position within the kinship group and what are their property rights? Do they have more access to the family property as rebellious daughters refusing to return, or as women who follow the traditional norms? If there are different categories of how to share communal power and property with the women, how were they justified and legitimized?

### **The elders**

When all these transformations took place and all the young people acquired their share of power, prestige and property, what remained was stored in the traditional kinship structure, as already pointed out, at the top of the age-based hierarchy. What is the actual authority and influence of the elders?

The elders are still respected by most indigenous groups. Especially today, when the traditional knowledge of hunting and reindeer herding could be a matter of survival (there are no subsidized helicopters, “cheap” reindeer or free distribution of food in most parts of Siberia). The weapon possessed by the elders is their cultural capital. Not only does economic and technical knowledge part of to this capital but is also connected to the supernatural world. Through rituals they can legitimize or fight change, regulate the power balance within the kinship, obshchina etc.

Aimar Ventsel

## TIME AND SPACE II

On October 13-14, 2000 seminar “Time and Space II” with subtopic “Culture and Landscape” was held in the Estonian Academy of Arts. Interdisciplinary questions on the reciprocal relations and influences of people and landscape brought together thirty-three lecturers from Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway. The first seminar day of plenary presentations was followed by seminar in two sections: the working language of one section was English and of the other Estonian. English-language sections concentrated on issues of art theory, while Estonian-language section discussed the role of time in semiotics, dramaturgy and environmental art. Workshop dedicated to the Estonian literature was bilingual.

Pauli Tapani Karjalainen’s *Three Ways of a Landscape are the distant, the intimate and the unpainted* landscape. The first aspect views landscape in the spirit of traditional geography, the object of perspective. The intimate landscape is the one the viewer can personally relate to, perceive with all his or her senses and feel as one with. Karjalainen’s unpainted landscape is a landscape influenced by landscape architecture and particularly Earth art. The artist fills the previously generally understood location that had no aesthetic meaning with a random message, which he or she wishes to convey to the viewers.

Sven Arntzen argued that the message the landscape intends to convey to a certain group of people or members of culture constitutes a significant part of the values that need to be preserved. Arntzen illustrated his arguments with examples from the Sami and aboriginal Australian culture, where the entire landscape is viewed as spiritual; in the philosophy of these cultures the concept of landscape without the spiritual dimension is unthinkable. Arntzen emphasised that this should be the goal of modern environmental protection. If we wish to preserve our environment, the western nominalistic attitude towards the surrounding environment must be replaced with reciprocal circumspection.

Hannes Palang and Piret Paal elaborated on the question of differences in cultural and natural landscapes in the light of stories recorded from one farm.

Arnold Berleant proceeded from the hypothesis that culture cannot be observed separately from environment, and that we have to reassess our understanding of *aesthetics*. We must realise that the meaning underlying this notion, as it is traditionally applied in modern art theory, does not cover all cultural areas, it is not universal. Berleant introduces the term *affecting presence*, which should help to explain why we consider a painting or a literary work aesthetic, but also why a cattle-breeder from, say, North Africa will take aesthetic pleasure in seeing a black-and-white cow.

On the first seminar day the audience of the English language section heard interesting insights into the history of Latvian art mediated by Latvians Ruta Aupova, Kristina Bele and Jānis Kalnas. The presentation of Maria Zadencka (Sweden) discussed changes in the meaning of steppe and sea relative to the national identity of the Polish. Natalja Zlydneva (Russia) spoke about urban waste slot (*pustyry*) as cultural text. Urban wasteland formed as the result of forced restructuring of Russian towns, or during the periods of rebuilding, is in the Russian spiritual culture the symbol of chaos, death, and destruction, whereas on the other hand the word contains references to supreme sacredness, holiness, utter void. Stella Pelše (Latvia) provided an overview of picture space and spatiality in Modernist theoretical writings. Anti Randviir (Estonia) gave a presentation on the semiotic understanding of space and the use of space as a semiotic practice. Pasi T. Korhonen (Finland) continued on the subject of attributing culturally and politically topical meanings to landscape on the example of Suomenlinna Sea Fortress.

Marja Kallasmaa observed Estonian toponyms from the viewpoint of users and researchers of toponyms. Village and farm names may suggest the onetime worldview of the users of these names. By studying place names as a part of language it is possible to partly reconstruct the worldview and sense of space of Estonian peasant community and observe its change in the course of time. Timo Maran contemplated on the relationship between landscape as the bearer of cultural memory, pointing out that people's preference for a certain type of landscape may originate in pre-cultural era. Peet Lepik spoke about symmetry in semiosis, focusing on the iconic aspect of symmetry and various symmetrical substitute relations. Toomas-

Vahur Lihtmaa discussed the different ways to interpret visual objects and demonstrated on the example of *Nokia* advertisement that in reality interpretation depends on the standards and habits of a given cultural environment.

Liina Unt, Monika Läänesaar and Anneli Saro touched upon the subject of theatre, space and time on the stage.

Lectures of the following day viewed landscape as communicative structure (Kalevi Kull, Valter Lang). Representation of landscape and space in Estonian literature was the subject of four presentations delivered by Kadri Tüür, Ene-Reet Soovik, Anneli Mihkelev, Arne Merilai. In the section of environmental art and theory of art Kaia Lehari treated the image of bridge as a focal point in landscape relying mostly on the comments of Martin Heidegger and Georg Simmel. Vappu Vabar pointed out the conceptions of body and senses in different philosophical schools and traditions, focusing on the relationships between language and treatment of arts, and the relationships between the language and the sense of body and space in the Estonian art of the past decade. In her presentation Mari Laanemets treated urban environment through Michel Foucault's notion of heterotrophy. Karin Paulus brought out differences in the notion 'home' through the architecture of Soviet Estonia and that of the independent Republic of Estonia. Virve Sarapik observed different ways of interpreting the notion '*representation*' on the example of landscape painting, centring on the issue of marking the natural and the conventional in pictorial art.

Kadri Tüür, Timo Maran, Ester Võsu

## POPULAR RELIGION AND FOLKLORE AT THE TURN OF MILLENNIUM. CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH METHODS

On November 9-12, 2000 the conference *Popular Religion and Folklore at the Turn of Millennium. Contemporary Research Methods* dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Oskar Loorits's birth was held in Tartu. Lecturers from 8 countries delivered 24 presentations on three long conference days. The conference forum was interdisciplinary, including folklorists, historians, religion historians, philosophers, linguists and semioticians. The conference was organised by the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum, the Estonian Folklore Archives, the Chair of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, the Academy of Sciences.

Three exhibitions were displayed during the conference, those by Marika Mikkor and Kärt Summatavet can be viewed on the conference web page, which also contains other virtual exhibitions and e-articles by these two authors.



*The keynote speaker Dan Ben-Amos with his wife.*

Presentations of newly issued electronic and printed publications were given, among others the German translation of P. Kippar's animal fairy tales (<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/rls/tiere>). In the evenings entertainment was provided by Tõnis Mägi, Anne Maasik and the folk group *Ilmarikas*. Further information on the conference is available in Folklore vol. 17 and web address <http://haldas.folklore.ee/loorits>.

## NEWS IN MEDIA PROJECT

The *Media Project* of Tartu folklorists has continued with various digitalisation projects, electronic corpora of material, databases and the preparation and publication of journals and books. 12 extensive e- and virtual publications were issued in the year 2000.

In the recent years we have given more emphasis on promoting multilingualism and interactivity. Aside from that we have been working at setting up portal, establishing online service and generating automatic registers. We have also made efforts to increase information on Estonian folklore and folkloristics in English and German in the Internet (K. Realo, L. & S. Vesik, R. Hiimäe, M. Kuperjanov, K. Kärnsna, M. Mürsepp).

Research and editorial work on the Finno-Ugric Web was carried out in collaboration with different institutions and scholars and artists from different countries. Aado Lintrop's doctor's thesis on the religion of Udmurts represents a novel approach to multimedia publications (NB! A longer survey of the subject in English complements the publication), offering numerous visual examples, including video clips of sacrificial rituals, etc. This represents a whole new level of studying tradition and religion. The material enables to better understand the contents of study and perceive information flow that connects it with semiotic context through visual associations.

Forthcoming publications are *The Shaman Book* by M. Hoppal, that will appear in the electronic form in Estonian, Russian, Hungarian, German and English and as an interactive CD with video samples. In the year 2000 the Estonian translation was edited (Piret Toomet & Aado Lintrop) and the book was translated into Russian (Nikolai Kuznetsov).

Continuing work at the publication *Ethnology, Folklore and Religion of the Mordvins* (<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/rl/folkte/mordva>) was an interesting experience: we worked with its multilingual aspect – texts on the subject were translated into Erzyan and English, new studies added. Articles on clothing, mythology and food were translated into the Erzyan (N. Mokšin, N. Aasmäe, V. Danilov), a mythological dictionary into the Moksha language (T. Devjatkina), studies

on ethnography and family lore into English (K. Realo). The dictionary of Mordvinian mythology was published in the Estonian language (compiled by T. Devjatkina, translations by N. Kuznetsov, M. Kõiva, I. Orehhova, edited by M. Kõiva, A. Niinemets), the translating of M. Jevsevjev's work on nuptial customs was continued (A. Lintrop); a study on Mordvinian popular calendar was made available in the Internet (M. Hiimäe). The material was prepared for the web and designed by A. Kuperjanov. The preparation work will be carried out by the Estonian National Museum, Estonian Folklore Archives and Paul Ariste's Centre of Finno-Ugric Peoples at the University of Tartu.

We have initiated the setting up of the Zyryan (Komi) Web with translating the dictionary of Zyryan mythology into Estonian and Zyryan by Nikolai Kuznetsov.

. pdf files of the first two volumes of the Livonian Folk Religion (M. Kuperjanov, P. Paal, E. Ehastu, M. Susi) were entered to the Livonian home page (<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/rl/folkte/sugri/liivi>).

Introduction of Internet publications and Media Project has enjoyed considerable success. Presentations given at the special session of the Estonian Academy of Sciences concerning the application of information technology in the field of humanities as well as those delivered to the President of the Republic of Estonia and the Academic Council of the President were received with favour. Curiously though the success of the project has resulted in almost 50% cut in budget, so that for the first time the issuing of journals *Folklore* and *Mäetagused* was impeded by shortage of finances. Production cycle lengthened and the distribution of issues to authors and exchange partners was delayed. Despite the current situation the editorial board makes efforts to continue the scheduled work. Hereby we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Cultural Endowment of Estonia for their kind support.

A thorough overview of released e- and virtual publications and other Internet projects is available on the address:  
<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/>

Mare Kõiva, Tartu