

Why I do not research the Khanty religion

Stephan Dudeck (University of Tartu)

After more than 30 years of studying the Khanty way of life using anthropological methods, I've now been involved for three years in a research project on ethnicity and religiosity. Although I have participated in religious practices as part of my research and even documented them scientifically, in particular the 2016 Bear Ceremony among the Surgut Khanty (Author 2022), I have always avoided publishing ethnographic texts about these practices.

Precisely because of the importance of religious practice, and the ideas and values associated with it, for the cultural persistence of the Khanty, my research partners repeatedly made it clear to me that I should not describe their religion. I understood these admonitions in the spirit of Kenneth M. George's conclusions about the secrecy tactics of Indigenous religion in the highlands of Sulawesi to protect itself from Muslim and Christian monotheism. One of George's interlocutors puts it succinctly:

I have coffee beans. I will give them to you and you can roast them and make coffee. I have sheaves of rice. Go ahead and take them and cook some rice. But this is my religion. I will give you my religion. But don't, don't turn my religion into culture' (George 1993, 234).

Yet without knowledge of the ideas and practices commonly described as religious, no knowledge of Khanty culture is possible. Since the Enlightenment, scholarly speech has always been public speech. But what to do when public speech about religion contradicts the ethos of a religion itself? And how to research cultural objects and fieldwork materials related to religious practices and knowledge when direct communication is no longer possible? What are the options for risk management to minimise harm when risk is difficult or impossible to assess?

In my presentation, I will explore the reasons for these contradictions and present methodological approaches that I am currently using in collaborative research with Khanty partners on their cultural heritage located abroad.

The question of religious affiliation has been controversial at least since the Christian missionisation of the Khanty in the 18th century. Speaking publicly about religion is associated with the obligation to confess, which meant that at first only affiliation to the Christian religion, then to state-imposed atheism, and finally to the colonial concept of shamanism could be legitimately declared in public. In addition to these external factors, there

are principles of information management inherent in Khanty social and environmental concepts that sanction the transmission of knowledge in linguistic form.

My paper will touch on the social function of secrecy in holding groups together and demarcating them from the outside, thus facilitating the autonomy of social elements in the units they encompass. Secrecy also has a protective function, which cannot be reduced to the avoidance of moral judgement, exclusion and loss of status. Frequently, internal risks, the loss of effectiveness of internal practices or their danger to the outside world are also reasons for drawing information boundaries. Secrecy practices also always contain elements of transgression in the establishment of the hidden and the secret, its disclosure or its destruction. Finally, keeping secrets from the inside and respecting information boundaries from the outside are linked to ideas of respect and recognition.

How can communicative boundaries be explored without violating them? If words and knowledge cannot be considered neutral, but their potency and associated risks must be recognised at different levels of communication, what are the implications for the possibilities and impossibilities of researching Khanty religion? I will consider how these insights into secrecy strategies and information management in communication within Khanty society, but also with outsiders, can contribute to an understanding of the anthropological methods I use today.

Literature

Author 2022. (Title anonymized)

George, Kenneth M. 1993. 'Dark Trembling: Ethnographic Notes on Secrecy and Concealment in Highland Sulawesi'. *Anthropological Quarterly* 66 (4): 230–39.