

FROM THE REINDEER PATH TO THE HIGHWAY  
AND BACK – UNDERSTANDING THE MOVEMENTS  
OF KHANTY REINDEER HERDERS  
IN WESTERN SIBERIA

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ABSTRACT

The following article\* explores the meaning of roads and the practices of movement for a small group of forest inhabitants in the Western Siberian lowlands on the middle Ob. The indigenous people known as the Khanty live as reindeer herders, fishermen and hunters in the midst of oilfields in the Surgut Rayon. The article examines their emic point of view opposed to the evaluation of the state administration.

Anthropological research can access the mobility of people in two ways. At first researchers map movement in physical and metaphysical time and space, they observe and record the practice of movement. The second important source for anthropological insight is what people say about their practices of movement and how they evaluate them and the spaces in which they move. The following article tries to show that these perspectives remain incomplete without a synthesis of both. The first perspective allows only for a functionalist classification and the second allows the researcher to be taken in by the black and white pictures of moral evaluations that render the complexity of everyday life invisible. Only a synthesis of both, a careful interpretation of indigenous narratives before the background of social and political circumstances let us understand the practices of movement we can observe in the everyday life of people.

Khanty reindeer herders try to build up a distance from the world of intruders and try to defend their autonomy in the forest. By accessing everyday practices and motivations instead of ready-made explanations it is revealed that the Khanty are not doomed to adapt to new situations, but they try to negotiate and manipulate them in their favour. The article tries to prove that one has to skip the objectifying approach to a hermeneutic one to grasp their abilities to do so.

KEYWORDS: mobility • modernisation • indigenous resistance • narratives • Khanty

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK  
AMONG KHANTY REINDEER HERDERS

Khanty are semi-nomadic fishermen and reindeer herders in the Western Siberian lowlands. This paper concentrates on the Eastern Khanty in the Surgut Rayon north of the River Ob whose livelihood has been heavily affected by the oil industry since the 1980s (Wiget 1999; Novikova 1997; 2002; 2008; Wiget, Balalaeva 2004; 2011). The Eastern Khanty families live dispersed in the taiga and forest tundra on two to four small seasonal settlements. They maintain small reindeer herds of several dozen to several hundred reindeer. Today, connections to nearby oil towns and central villages established during the Soviet Union are frequent. A lot of the reindeer herding families have to rely on different forms of material and monetary compensation to supplement their mixed subsistent economy of hunting, fishing, berry picking, and reindeer herding, heavily affected by the ecological destructions of oil development. The oilfields are here explored in a dendritic form building main roads along the rivers and then expanding in branches into the marshland between the rivers (Barkalaja 1999a). The seasonal Khanty settlements were originally concentrated along the main waterways. With the approach of geologists, Khanty settlements were destroyed, huts were removed by bulldozers, the waterways were dammed up when roads were built over the marshland, reindeer pastures on the riverbanks destroyed. Khanty moved to the hinterlands, into the swamps towards the watershed, up the river. The roads of the oilfields connect them with the existing towns and with the new emerging settlements of the oil workers.

From 1993 on I conducted altogether more than one and a half years of anthropological fieldwork with reindeer herding families in the vicinity of the oilfields. The main motivation as a young student of anthropology was to support the reindeer herders' struggle for their land rights and their efforts to revive their culture. I built up personal relationships with several families, organised several photo exhibitions and took part in the production of two documentaries about Khanty reindeer herders in order to popularise their cause for a Western public. In 2008 and 2009 I conducted fieldwork for my dissertation project, titled "Diversity of lifestyles between reindeer herders' camps in the taiga and the oil city Kogalym, Western Siberia" to explore the Khanty strategies to maintain their distinctive culture in the midst of the oilfields. The present article draws on this fieldwork and research of the everyday practices and narratives of movement of the reindeer herders.

My main fieldwork method was that of participant observation, which means first of all becoming immersed in the social world of the people one tries to understand. I had to use my own person – consciousness and body – as a research instrument to detect the different meanings of practices and objects in the society I did research in. Narratives are not mere texts and do not even represent a symbolic order that can be read and interpreted within the text. To be able to understand them I had to acquire by my own practice the social context the stories are embedded in and emerge from (Kirby 2008). Stories and statements always answer other stories and statements that are not directly present but 'in the air'.

I once went by car with one of my Khanty friends from the oil town of Kogalym to their house in the forest<sup>1</sup> and asked him the question: “Volodya, what do you think, have the new paved roads more advantages or do they do more harm to the reindeer herders?” He looked at me and said: “You know it by yourself. Why you are asking.”

I did not ask further and thought by myself he is right. I travelled, I heard all the stories, and I experienced the opportunities that came with the roads and the tragic stories connected to them. There is no single answer to this question. There is a diversity of practices and a variety of stories. Volodya refused to give a generalising answer to the question and referred instead to our common experience while moving together through the landscape. Instead of searching for the answer to my question I will try to present the outline of the plurality of aspects connected to the tremendous changes that Khanty reindeer herders experience in terms of transportation infrastructure.

I will start with a citation of an extraordinary speech I documented at a meeting of reindeer herders and state officials in the village of Russkinskaya in 2009.

So, you people who came from such different places! It’s not just me speaking about my own private problem! I’ll tell you about the snowmobiles. They demand papers, meaning official registration, for the snowmobiles, they teach the children to make licenses. This is a big deal, a big problem. You are small children. Some of you are educated in using papers. They make papers for you, hand them out to you. But we, who reached that age! We are like rotten tree stumps, we have to prepare our papers for the other world already, and we reached that age. Why do we have to sit down and make those papers? Nobody can prohibit driving on snowmobiles. And now we have to pay for them every year, so much money to pay, but where to take all the money? We people from the forest tundra don’t drive on the roads made for cars. Sometimes the youth is driving on concrete roads. But we use the roads of our forefathers, and for that they want us to pay a penalty, for that they make such trouble. In other regions they don’t make such trouble. This happens because some Khanty like to drive too fast, that’s the reason for the trouble. I have good reason, young people; I don’t speak only for myself but for everybody. Imagine! For such a jalopy collected from ten or five spare parts, which is the snowmobile Buran, now they want to make papers. From the place, where they make the papers you don’t drive away without it breaking already. But the paper does not break, it will be in place forever.<sup>2</sup> (Nadezhda Ivanovna Pokacheva, born in 1951)

As a bare transcription this text remains opaque if one does not take into account the circumstances of this speech as an oral performance in a certain setting. The speech argues obviously against a common official perception of roads, which is not explicit in this moment but known by everybody. Nadezhda Ivanovna was visibly emotionally aroused. It took courage for her to stand up as a woman in a male dominated<sup>3</sup> political arena.

She used her internal social role as a respected elder in the Khanty community where elder women gain high respect and often become leaders of their extended families. She emphasised this role by using the Khanty language, even risking not being understood by the Russian-speaking officials. She also used her mother tongue to underline that she is presenting a distinctive Khanty perspective. In that way she accented the difference to a version of the story that the Khanty would call the Russian viewpoint.

There are some aspects in this speech that shed light on distinctions that are crucial to understand her Khanty perspective.

First – there is a generational distinction. Nadezhda Ivanovna distinguishes herself and her generation quite drastically from the younger ones, who differ in their relationship to new infrastructure and technology. The keywords here are education and adaptation to bureaucratic procedures but also the racing and risky behaviour of the youngsters on the roads.

Second – she makes a link between new technologies and the state authorities, called by the Khanty *nachalstvo* (authorities). This is an overarching term, which embraces for the Khanty the bureaucracy as well as the management of the oil companies.

Third – she builds up a symbolic distance to state law and to an economy based on money, which are associated with the outside world and contrasted with the Khanty ways and traditions of the forefathers. In this way she emphasises a separated Khanty sphere, which has its own type of roads, its own type of norms, and its own driving licenses to the underworld.

To summarise these points I would say that she is referring to transformations that she links not entirely to technological innovations but also to the intergenerational change in the Khanty communities. Then she evaluate this change with an explicit Khanty perspective, a hidden transcript, to use the term of James Scott (1990), that has to be revealed in public to oppose the bureaucratic perception of roads and mobility. What Scott calls hidden transcripts are perspectives on the social relations and associated narratives that have to stay silent because they put the predominant power relations and the social status quo into question. Only in extraordinary situations the tacit agreement to keep to the official narratives is broken and the hidden transcript that is kept alive inside subordinated groups revealed to the public.

#### THE OFFICIAL VIEWPOINT

In the following paragraph I try to describe the version she argued against, the official perception of the roads.

A road built either by the state or by the oil companies is an unquestionably good thing. There is a well-known saying in Russia: “There are only two problems in Russia: fools and roads.” The quality of the road is evaluated by its durability. A sustainable, long lasting surface that allows heavy machines to drive on them without destroying them characterises a good road. The road makes the region and the landscape accessible for everybody who is allowed to use the road. Building permanent roads is seen as a sign of development towards a better future. This is the road from a settlers and agriculturalists perspective but also from the perspective of the state and the oil companies. The state is the planning and controlling institution. It issues licenses to use the infrastructure and enforces the observation of rules on the roads.

The generalising and universalistic viewpoint of the state officials ignore the fact that there could be different and alternative conceptions of roads and movement through the landscape because it is oriented to only one concept of progress. It does not take into account that there could be different perspectives on development and on the evaluation of permanent roads.

## MAPPING MOBILITY

Theories of Nomadic Movement try to build up a neutral and objective perspective from above the level of everyday knowledge (a good overview about the theories is provided in Istomin, Dwyer 2008). The perspective of local viewpoints is being seen as biased, one sided and dependent upon political viewpoint, social status and limited access to knowledge. This positivist scientific approach is looking for a value-free concept of movement that could be found in a concept of mobility solely based on objective factors like time, space, and resources. Research in nomadism as a lifestyle based on frequent spatial movement developed a structural-functionalist scheme that can serve as a starting point to explore Khanty mobility. It classifies different types of nomadism according to types of movement and aspects of space and time.

The first aspect is the frequency of movement. Nomads change settlement and spaces of activity in time circles. They have seasonal campsites and use the landscape for different activities in different time.

Secondly the movements can be classified according to the distance, distinguishing tasks that are accomplished next to the campsites from, for instance, trips to far away hunting grounds.

The third aspect is the purpose or motivations for movements. There are different resources that have to be secured; there is social or economic capital that is gained, and different means to do so.

I have the strong feeling that something is missing in this way of mapping the mobility of nomads. However, before I will find out what is overlooked I will try to access and describe Khanty mobility through the proposed scheme. I will make an attempt to identify different forms of movement according to the three aspects the scheme – time, space, and resources.

## THE KECHIMOV FAMILY

As an example I will present here the everyday life of the Kechimov family. The Kechimovs are a family of respected Khanty reindeer herders living in the vicinity of the oil town Kogalym in the Surgut Rayon in Western Siberia. I visited the family several times for several weeks during my fieldwork between 1999 and 2009. The family consists of a couple with their two already grown up children. They have a small reindeer herd of not more than around 100 reindeer. I had the chance to live and move with them in their everyday life between their settlements in the forest as well as to the town during different seasons of the year.

I will start with a description of the ways of moving connected to the forest lifestyle. The family lives at three settlements in the forest. At the winter settlement and the summer settlement the family lives in log houses and in the spring in a light dwelling made of plastic sheets or in a conical tent called a *chum* near the calving grounds on the swamps. The movement between different dwellings is linked to the annual economic cycle of reindeer herding and fishing.

The reindeer herd and its need for different types of pastures in the annual circle determines mainly the location of the settlements. Winter pastures with reindeer

lichen are located in the forests. Reindeer move to the first places free from snow on the swamps in May to give birth to their calves. In summer they hide from the mosquitoes in shelters where the reindeer herders light smoking fires. Different pastures are located several kilometres from each other in the mosaic landscape. This forest type of reindeer herding differs considerably from the northern tundra type of reindeer herding (Stammler 2005; Dudeck 2009). The herds are small and were kept mainly for transport in former times.

The reindeer sledge was replaced by snowmobiles but the importance of reindeer herding has grown in the last decades. This happened due to the fact that reindeer became one of the most important markers of indigenous identity in the region; to keep them became a way to proving that Khanty really occupy their land and defend it against the claims of the oil companies. There were also several economic reasons that let Khanty reindeer herders orientate their forest economy towards reindeer herding. The Soviet enterprises employing Khanty broke down already in the eighties. Fishing resources diminished due to ecological destruction caused by oil production. The nineties saw economic crisis and the decline of prices for fur. Reindeer herding helped the Khanty deal with these economic uncertainties.

Special road signs mark Khanty roads to the reindeer pastures, to fishing and hunting grounds, and to the settlements. The way of orienting oneself in the forest is different from that in the open landscape of the treeless tundra in the North. Generally speaking in the open landscape reindeer herders find their way by sticking to a general direction (and probably imagining a three-dimensional scheme of the landscape) but in the taiga and forest tundra people orient themselves in a sequential way by following paths which go from one point of orientation to the next (see Istomin, Dwyer 2008).

Both movements have in common the fact that the traces left are almost invisible. A whole network of paths and roads, almost invisible for outsiders is laid out over the landscape. The points of orientation in the landscape consisting of forest, rivers and a network of lakes and swamps and small marks left on the vegetation (Leete 1997a; Istomin, Dwyer 2009). Broken branches, cut of bark, removed tree tops, or moss deposited in the top of a tree are some of the ways to mark a path. In the forest the path goes from one marked tree to the next. On the lakes the path is marked on the shore so one can look out on the opposite shore for a sign, like for instance a piece of sphagnum moss in a tree top, to aim for.

The paths used in winter are different from those used in summer. The winter roads are paths made by sledges (snow mobile or reindeer sledge) over the snow cover. The summer roads are footpaths over the dry parts of the land and routes over the lakes and on the rivers with places where the light, dugout canoes are drawn across small land bridges.

#### DIFFERENT SCOPES OF ACTIVITIES

Movements and paths belong to different spheres of practise. The first sphere is that of everyday activity which is executed on land belonging to the family, which is in Russian called *rodovye ugodiya* (kin land) (Novikova 2000; Danilova 2009). There are paths linking the settlements of the family and the places of everyday activity, the reindeer pastures and the hunting and fishing grounds.

The borders of these family territories were drawn on maps and were fixed in this form for the first time at the beginning of the 1990s to have a basis for negotiations with oil companies that were operating on the same territories. In addition to the territories allocated to a family there are commonly used territories for all the people living along a river for hunting, in addition to which there are tabooed territories that are not used for the local economy for different religious reasons. They are considered to be inhabited by or the property of supernatural beings that should not be disturbed by any human activity. Otherwise these beings could do harm to human society. These territories have no officially recognised status at all and suffered the most severe destructions through the establishment of infrastructure for the oil industry (Pesikova 2006).

Beyond the family territory, which extends up to a distance of 20–30 kilometres from the seasonal settlements, family members travel regularly and mainly in winter to visit relatives. These visits have a different character according to the place the visited family has in the kinship system. Relatives who belong to the same patrilineage and are younger<sup>4</sup> than the husband have a very close relationship to the family. The male head of the Kechimov family also has a very close relationship with the husband of his wife's sister, who lives on a neighbouring territory approximately 100 kilometres away. Relations with relatives of the patrilineage from which the wife comes follow more complicated rules. The social links with them and the visits to them are very important, but a lot of avoiding rules (Steinitz 1938; 1980) have to be followed to show respect for each other. Khanty women hide their face and use indirect forms of address among other rules that express extraordinary respect. The same avoidance rules have to be followed by the wife, when the couple is visiting elder relatives of the husband's patrilineage, for example his older brother, cousins or his father. Searching for brides was and is an important motivation (or excuse) especially for young men to make sometimes journeys to settlements that are quite far away.

#### TRAVEL TO OTHER BEINGS

These journeys beyond the family territory can be compared to a whole group of movements in the landscape and travel that is motivated by the social relationship that people have with beings different from them but surrounding them. In addition to the living relatives there are the people dwelling in the 'village of the dead', which means the cemetery for deceased members of the patrilineage. These have to be visited at certain times, but generally have to be avoided, have to be kept at a distance. Hunting can also be considered a visit to non-human beings. This is especially obvious in the ritual treatment of the bear hunt. The bear is considered to be a relative and guest who is invited to the human settlement and has to be honoured as such (Mitusova 1926; Chernecov 1968; Schmidt 1989; Lukina 1990; Lintrop 1998; Kulemzin 2000; Moldanov 2002; 2008a; 2008b; Sokolova 2002; Balzer 2003). There are hints that a similar ritual approach existed for the moose (Jordan 2003; Csepregi 2005; Wiget, Balalaeva 2011). Therefore, hunting trips always have the aspect of social interaction and can be considered a kind of visit.

Communication and interaction with beings like the spirits and the gods, which differ from living people, have to follow ritual rules of behaviour involving a respectful distance. The places where people can communicate with these beings form a sacred

landscape that has its own network of roads. The sacred landscape (Jordan 2001; 2003) is interlinked and somehow mirrors the social landscape of the kinship system. There are gods who belong to the family and the patrilineage of the husband and there are gods who are venerated by all the people living in a river system that build up a social unit called in Khanty, *yakh* (people, community) (Barkalaja 1997; 1999b; Wiget, Balalaeva 2001). However, there are also different types of spirits and supernatural beings that can be dangerous for people and have to be avoided and treated respectfully. The social interaction inside a community that is traveling to the sacred places, gathering there for animal sacrifices and moving in the sacred landscape is mirrored in the spiritual communication with the deity that protects that community. Movement through the sacred landscape is in this way performing the social relationships of the community.

Then there are holy places of regional importance that could be visited at other river systems, sometimes quite far away. Several times during one's lifetime one has to travel to certain exceptionally sacred places far away. Several years ago the Kechimov family undertook a very long journey to a sacred place several hundred kilometres away. The Kechimovs travelled to the Heavenly Lake, called in the Khanty language Torumlör, better known as Numto (which means the same in the Nenets language) (Leete 1997b; Leete 1999a). One reason for that journey was to sacrifice reindeer at an important sacred place; another reason was to search for a bride for the family's eldest son. The result was indeed that he later married a Nenets girl from this place.

Agrafena Semenovna Sopochnina (Pesikova) a Khanty woman from the Lyamin River system told me the story of her grandfather who decided to visit the source of the river Ob and the proposed sacred place of one of the most important Khanty gods – the old man of the Ob – in pre-Soviet times (Pesikova 2006). According to Khanty mythology the source of a river is considered its top and considered to host the most important sacred place of the deity linked to that river system. He returned only after a year or so and said that he went as far as China. Probably he met people in the Altai region located at the border between Russia and China at that time. Although the journey was probably an exception at that time it shows that people travelled quite far for the purpose of visiting sacred places they heard about. During the Soviet period and especially during the decades after WWII it was almost impossible for the Khanty reindeer herders and fishermen to leave the territory of the collective enterprise or state farm they were working in.

Linked with the religious sphere are two other types of journeys that extend the picture of Khanty movements into the spiritual sphere. First there is the soul-journey of the shaman, the religious trance specialists for divination and healing rituals (Balzer 1991; Kerezsi 1993; 1996; Kulemzin 2004; Koshkareva 2005; Csepregi 2007). Similar to this spiritual journey there is the performance of the songs of Khanty deities during the bear ritual. These songs describe the heroic myth of the deity and the singer is acting and dressed as the respective deity during the performance, which can last for hours. The text is recited in the first person and in present tense and describes the journey of the deity from the bird's perspective, as well as the heroic events during that journey up to the present holy place where the deity resides (Moldanov 1999; 2002; 2008a; Moldanov, Moldanova 2000; Moldanova 2009).

The Khanty world was always connected with the outside world. In former times these connections were mainly military conflicts with neighbouring people and trade



networks that reached as far as the Middle East (Golovnev 1995; Balzer 1999). It seems that similar to the avoiding strategies and rules between relatives and different beings the trade contacts to outsiders encompassed avoidance that is described in the so-called "silent trade" (Leete 1999b; Christian 2000). Trade goods were deposited and exchanged with time delay and with great trust, avoiding face-to-face meetings with the strangers.

## ROADS ON THE OILFIELDS AND TO THE TOWN

With the arrival of Russian, and later Soviet, power and the heavy impact of extractive industries and huge migration to the region, the strategies of avoiding direct contact no longer worked. The reindeer herder and fishermen had not only to adjust their economic strategies but also to change their ways and means of moving in the landscape in order to survive.

The Kechimov family lost a part of their reindeer pastures, and fishing and hunting grounds when oilfields were expanding. Up to the eighties there were cases in which the seasonal settlements or the wooden storage buildings in the forest were destroyed by bulldozers or robbed by oil workers when the reindeer herders were not present. This happened to relatives of the Kechimovs in the vicinity of the oil town Kogalym, but happily not to them. They told me about a graveyard that was destroyed without consideration, when the oil pipeline was constructed beside the newly built road that leads from the town to the oilfield next to their settlement.

On the other site the geologists and later the oil workers used helicopters in the absence of roads to get to their drilling places and the pilots took some indigenous passengers in exchange for some furs or even for free. Later, helicopter flights were included in the compensation provided by the oil companies. According to the agreement with the oil company the Kechimov family got eight helicopter hours per year to fly to the city in emergency cases or whenever and wherever they wanted.<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, when I was visiting them in late autumn they even ordered the helicopter to get to their berry picking places not far away, although difficult to access in the swamps, because they thought that they would not use them any other way in the remainder of that year.

An almost unsuccessful state policy to settle the reindeer herders down in central villages already started during the Soviet period (Korovin 2004). Since then, reindeer herders living in the forest have officially been included in housing projects and the state and the oil companies pursue projects to provide housing in villages and towns for the reindeer herders. As a result, many reindeer herders got flats in the central villages and towns in addition to their settlements in the forest, but did not move there permanently. Rather they commute whenever needed between the forest and the town, as the Kechimov family do with the private car they bought at the turn of the millennium.

Getting a higher education for some of the children and subsequently a profession in the settlement, the town, or on the oilfield could be considered as a strategy to broaden the economic basis of the family. Almost every reindeer herding family now has some family members working with the oil companies. The working arrangements are very different. They cover from part-time reindeer herders who commute bi-weekly from their settlement in the forest to shift work on the oilfield to permanent work in the town.

The Kechimovs have a son who lives more or less permanently in the town of Kogalym while he is working for different oil companies. He had difficulties adapting to the working discipline on the oilfield and has already changed jobs several times. He spends his free time and time between the jobs on his family's settlements in the forest. He lives in the apartment, which the Kechimov family bought from compensation money they received from the oil company.

The members of the family use the permanent road that leads from the town to the oilfield. This road spreads out in a dendritic way on the oilfield covering a huge area that becomes useless for the Khanty economy. Old dirt roads established by the geological exploration are used to reach the concrete roads on the oilfield. Here the family members use the oil workers' buses or they hitchhike on the oil company trucks to reach the town. But increasingly the Khanty use their own private four-wheel-drives to drive to the town; the Kechimovs even clean the dirt road regularly from snow in the winter.

Travelling to the central villages and the town became much easier, but also the reasons to visit the town increased. Children or grandchildren visit the school and live with some relatives in the town or village. Services for health, entertainment facilities like the Saturday evening discotheque, and shops to buy the needed supply goods for life in the forest are located there. Additionally, the occasion to meet and negotiate with oil companies and state authorities have increased in the last decades.

The range of travelling also grew with the arrival of the oil companies. The son of the family got a holiday trip to the Black Sea from the oil company he was working with. In another situation he was hired in an informal agreement by some managers of the oil company to work as a guide on their hunting trips to the forest. The social capital gained this way is obvious and very important for the survival of the reindeer herders.

The description of the different forms and techniques of travelling of the Kechimov family helped me to draw a picture of the patterns of movement in different frequency, over different distances, and oriented to different resources. These patterns are oriented towards two opposite poles that follow the rules of two different authorities. On the one hand there is the city or the central village with the oil companies and the state administration. On the other hand there is the forest with the local deities, and the Khanty elders and shamans as intermediaries to the power of those spiritual authorities.

#### GOING BEYOND THE SCHEME

The structural-functional picture helped me to map the variety of practices of movement and to understand the forms of mobility in the everyday life of the Kechimov family. It shows that they manage to secure resources under difficult economic and political circumstances and pursue a strategy of broadening the possibilities of access to these resources. But still the well-ordered scheme does not allow for an understanding of the initial described conflict of perspectives and does not fully cover real life experiences in the field. There are at least three dimensions of movement that are accessible only with a hermeneutical approach of anthropological fieldwork oriented towards an emic perspective of roads and mobility. I will call this the dimension of morals, of consciousness and of autonomy.

## MORALS

The first dimension describes mobility according to a certain moral evaluation of space. Reindeer herding, fishing and living in the forest seem to be one pole, while connectedness to the town and to work on the oilfield seems to be the other pole. This dichotomy is linked to two types of authority. There is the state bureaucracy and the oil company management as the paternalistic patrons in the town and the Khanty deities linked to patrilineage and river system in the forest. The town is considered a place associated with immorality and moral transgression like alcohol, laziness, violence, sexuality, but also entertainment and excitement, while the forest is seen as a highly structured and moral space.

The places where the Russians live, especially the cities, are associated with the underworld. These settlements are situated downstream from the Khanty settlements; this is the direction all dirty things go. The Khanty settlements are structured in a way that the trash is deposited in the downstream direction and the upstream direction is considered ritually pure (Pesikova 1998; 2002; 2006).

Khanty living in the Russian settlements are called literally 'living by the shop' in the Khanty language. This expression has a double meaning. The word for a village set up by Russians in the local Khanty language is *lapka* (derived from Russian *lavka* 'shop'). The proximity to the shop is in a second meaning also associated with the availability of alcohol. People who live by the shop are considered to be often addicted to alcohol. Alcohol serves as a marker of loose morals and transgression.

Life outside the village as a reindeer herder is considered to be more moral and people who cannot stand the temptations of the village or town are considered morally weak. The forest requires a respectful relationship between different kinds of beings like animals, people, deities, spirits, the deceased, and between people of different genders, age groups and lineages.

This evaluation provides an alternative moral order to the hegemonic moral order of the mainstream society represented by newcomers and the Russian-speaking population in the region. In their moral order the town stands for progress and civilisation, opposed to life in the forest as underdeveloped, primitive and doomed to die out.

Even in the everyday lives of the Khanty reindeer herders there are rarely open references to the internal Khanty moral perspective. Of course real life is not evaluated strictly only by this religious moral order. In everyday life reindeer herders seem to switch between different moral evaluations depending on the situation and on their social status, gender and age. However, the internal Khanty moral can be activated and often lies often behind decisions made in order to organise the movement of the family between different living places.

## ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The second phenomenon I came across in connection to movement could be called the altered state of consciousness while moving. I first did not realise what a young reindeer herder asked about when he said, after a trip on the reindeer sledge through the forest tundra on a sunny morning: "Did you experience it also?" I asked him what

he experienced. "It's almost as if my soul is singing", he answered. I was quite surprised about this kind of romantic feeling in my companion. Probably it is not linked to the European romantic notion of the sublime but to what I preliminary would call an altered state of consciousness.

Other situations proved that the time of traveling is a situation in which forms and topics of communication are possible that do not appear at other times. When traveling by car or reindeer sledge I often recorded conversations that touched especially sensitive topics like, for instance, in one case the suicide of the father of my travel companion. It is difficult to say what the exact difference of the condition is. Victor Turner's (1969) concept of the liminal phase could be a hint here, because travelling is always a passage and the journey itself is the liminal phase in between. Extraordinary spiritual experiences are in Khanty religious practice often associated with ideas of travelling and the journey of the soul of either a human or a spiritual being, for example a deity.

#### AUTONOMY

As a third aspect I refer to the question of autonomy. This aspect allows us to understand the context of the conflicting perspectives on the roads that I described at the beginning of this article. Changes in the infrastructure of movement and transportation in the region threatened the lifestyle of local reindeer herders in manifold ways. However, the reindeer herders tried to cope with these negative consequences. I would describe their main strategy as protecting the autonomy of the forest space.

The influx of new population and the infrastructure of towns and oilfields enabled the intrusion of outsiders into the taiga and forest tundra, previously used exclusively by the reindeer herders. Poaching, hunting of domestic reindeer, the profanation of sacred places and the destruction of cemeteries were especially traumatic for the Khanty.

Until quit recently the lack of transportation and roads prevented the population of the Russians towns entering the forest and coming close to Khanty settlements. Now new roads, vehicles like snowmobiles and helicopters, and new technologies like GPS, for instance, make this possible. Oil workers often consider the forest just wilderness and a kind of no man's land and drive wherever possible. The knowledge these people have about Khanty life is very limited and stereotypical.

The Khanty try in different ways to prevent outsiders from entering the forest and avoid contact with them. There are official ways, like metal sheets with inscriptions, road signs, or roadway gates, to prohibit entry to Khanty territory. Sometimes the reindeer herders can convince the oil companies working on nearby oilfields to construct physical barriers, like for instance ditches, that make it difficult to drive vehicles onto Khanty land.

The oil companies promised the Kechimovs that they would react immediately if the family reported unwelcomed intruders on their land by mobile phone. However, if the 'big bosses of the company' or his friends enter the reindeer herders' land to hunt it is almost impossible for the reindeer herders to object if they do not want to risk an open conflict with their powerful neighbour.

In several situations I had the impression that reindeer herders deliberately use the widespread fears some townspeople have of entering the forest or even Khanty settle-

ments and villages. They confirm almost all stories of risk and dangers connected to the forest and like to tell horrifying stories, sometimes even about themselves. I got the impression that some of these 'dark' stories, sometimes involving even the supernatural, also have the function of frightening strangers away. Stories about reindeer herders getting so angry that they threatened poachers or oil workers with guns are especially popular, even though I could not confirm a single case where this happened. Quite often they choose to tolerate the presence of poachers and illegal fishermen on their land and try to get at least some benefits from them in the form of barter of goods or transportation services.

## CONCLUSION

What Nadezhda Ivanovna presented was a narrative with the characteristics of a hidden transcript as Scott (1990) calls it. Things that are usually kept internal in a marginalised group become outspoken and appear in public in an act of resistance. This presents an alternative to the universalistic claim of the discourse of development and economic growth, against the discourse of the 'opening up of the North'.

I consider it important to reveal in the research these perspectives suppressed by the official discourse that is dominant in the public media. However, it is not enough to describe the Khanty practises of movement and mobility. Sheryl Ortner (1995) describes a misunderstanding of these performances of resistance in what she calls the "ethnographic refusal", in which the outburst of the suppressed discourses is seen as an act of resistance and is taken as face value and for the "real truth" of the subordinated. What we need is careful examination of the everyday practices that are embedded in the social context that produces the official evaluations as well as the suppressed resistance against them. The oppositions between new/modern/industrial versus old/traditional/subsistence practises do not help us to understand how the reindeer herders move on the different roads and how they perceive their own movements.

The structural-functional approach seems to suggest a third neutral standpoint. One can easily deconstruct it. It is blind to its own position, which is quite similar to the ordering, universalistic and objectifying perspective of state bureaucracy. Nevertheless it can help to outline the variety of different practices in the field. The objectifying of the movement of reindeer herders by relating it to the availability of resources in time and space renders the agency of these herders invisible. They are not doomed to adapt to ever changing external circumstances but are able to change and influence this circumstances by themselves.

To understand their ways of creative adaptation I introduced certain aspects that seem to be important for the strategies of the reindeer herders. One of them is the question of dependency, or, better to say, the dialectics of interdependence and independence. Different forms of mobility are judged from the perspective of reindeer herders by their capacity to secure and enhance autonomy or sovereignty in the forest. There are of course huge and powerful developments, like the exploration of oilfields that seem to belong to the large innovations (Pelto 1973); people have no choice but to accept them and integrate into everyday life. But even these huge projects issued by powerful centres provide sometimes unexpected side effects that help ameliorate the nega-

tive consequences they bring to peripheral communities (Stammler 2009). New emerging forms of infrastructure and technology are evaluated and integrated according to known moral or religious schemes.

An important aspect of the question how people cope with changing circumstances of travelling and mobility is the question of access to modes of travel, to roads, to knowledge and information and to places and resources. Some forms of movement are still exclusive to the semi-nomadic Khanty living in the forest, with the Khanty themselves influencing the restrictions on the use of certain ways of movement. The use of land and roads and the knowledge required to travel on them are constantly negotiated between reindeer herders, the oil industry, the state and the urban population.

## NOTES

1 Forest refers to the land the Khanty live on. In fact it is a mosaic of different forests, swamps and lakes which belongs to the forest tundra zone, the intermediate zone between the boreal forests – the taiga – and the boreal step – the tundra.

2 I am very grateful to the Khanty scholar Agraferna Semenovna Pesikova for the translation of the Khanty speech into Russian. The English translation is made by myself trying to keep the original tone of the speech in the Khanty language as much as possible.

3 Gender roles inside Khanty society associate high competence in community decisions with elder woman especially after menopause, but Russian gender models that place no political agency in rural woman without higher education dominate the political arena in the village.

4 Khanty women have to follow rules of avoiding in the presence of the older siblings, cousins, etc., of the spouse. They hide their face and use indirect forms of address among other rules that express extraordinary respect between the relatives.

5 The compensation agreement was negotiated at that time from year to year so this number is just a snapshot in the ever-changing amount of compensation the family received.

## SOURCES

Fieldnotes, audio recordings and video materials from ethnographic fieldwork March – May 2008, October 2008 – January 2009, and March – May 2009 that were used in this article are located in the private archive of the author. Copies of the video materials are stored in the archive of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany.

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