
“The Bear Ceremonial” and bear rituals among the Khanty and the Sami

By Håkan Rydving

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Abstract: Researchers from different fields of study agree on the importance of comparison, but debate how to compare. Rather than comparing globally, on the basis of secondary literature and looking for similarities alone, this article argues for a limitative approach that restricts itself to just a few cultures, is based on local sources, and takes both resemblances and differences into account. In contrast to the idea of a uniform and transcultural bear ceremonial in northern Eurasia, it focuses on plurality and diversity when discussing and comparing the bear rituals found among the southern Khanty (about 1900) and the southern Sami (about 1750).

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INTRODUCTION

When the non-theological study of religions began at European universities during the late 19th and the early 20th century, analysis by means of various forms of comparison became *the* characteristic method of this new field of research; as a result, at a number of universities the subject was named “comparative religion”.

In most cases, the comparative enterprise consisted of macro-comparison and a search for similarities. Data was collected from all over the world – generally from secondary sources – and arranged according to types, based on evolutionary theories. When these theories were abandoned during the 1950s, various non-evolutionary and non-historical morphologies were developed. These were often called “phenomenologies of religion”, a confusing term, since they had little or nothing to do with philosophical phenomenology. Even in studies of singular religions, parallels and analogies drawn from one or another of the “phenomenologies of religion” were used to interpret the data, without paying any attention to time and place.

While the study of religions still adhered to comparison as its main analytic tool, anthropology had taken another direction, not least due to the seminal local studies of British anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose investigations were based on prolonged fieldwork. The anthropological focus on the local field required scholars to learn local languages and – rather than use phenomena from elsewhere to interpret the culture under consideration – to

try to understand the elements of that culture in relation to its own context. The era of the armchair anthropologist was over.

It was not until the 1970s that this reorientation towards the local began to exert any significant influence on the study of religions, but during that decade, the criticism of earlier global constructions (especially those of Mircea Eliade) became increasingly pronounced. This of course did not mean that scholars stopped comparing (since making comparisons is a natural and necessary human activity), but merely that “the comparative method” – at least when applied on the global scale – was effectively dead. It is only in the past two decades that scholars of religion have once again begun to discuss comparison as a method (cf. SEGAL 2006).

DEBATING COMPARISON

During the 1990s, both the American Academy of Religion and the North American Association for the Study of Religion arranged seminars on comparison, or, as it was called, the New Comparativism. This American debate was inspired by the publication of the second edition of William Paden’s *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (PADEN 1994), a book that is used as an introductory text at many universities both in the USA and in Europe. Both Paden and most of the other participants in the debate were searching for a middle way between Eliade’s essentialism, based on universals, on the one hand, and the anti-comparative trends found at the extreme of what has been called (at least by its opponents) “post-structuralist” or “post-modern” thought, on the other. However, to quote one of the mantras in the debate, the question is not *whether* we should compare, but *how* to do so. Even if most of the participants in the debate agreed on the importance of discussing appropriate modes of comparison, it is clear that they were using the term in at least three different ways. Some of them emphasised that comparison is a universal cognitive process of human beings, others discussed various methodological questions, in relation for example to the comparison of two different forms of Judaism or of Judaism and Hinduism (i.e. the limitative approach to comparison, illustrated in this essay), but the majority were concerned with appropriate principles for global comparison, based on ideas either of universals or of resemblances.¹

The universals/resemblances dichotomy is reminiscent of one of the most basic questions in philosophy, the relation between individual things on the one hand and general terms on the other (cf. SALER 2000, 152–153). The philosophical debate has for a long time been leaning towards various kinds of resemblance theories. The comparative method used by students of religion, however, has so far focused almost exclusively on comparison on the macro-level, and has related the actual comparative work to various theories of universals or particulars, resemblances or differences, on a global level. Most of the proponents and opponents of “the comparative project” or the “new comparativism” have discussed it solely in terms of comparisons where the researcher is dependent on secondary literature for most of his or her examples.

A LIMITATIVE APPROACH

If modernist research has been (and is) characterised by grand theories and generalisations that are often global in their reach, research inspired by more recent theories has focused on the particular and

1 See contributions in *Method and Theory on the Study of Religion* 8, 1996; PATTON/RAY 2000.

on contextuality.² Such a perspective, however, does not make comparison impossible; there is a type of comparison that restricts itself to a single region or just a few cultures. This limitative approach to comparison – a term coined by Jan Platvoet (PLATVOET 1982) – can be combined with a focus on the local as well as with demands for contextualisation and with the scholar’s knowledge of the local language and culture, which we now consider so important. Good examples of this type of study are Clifford Geertz’ comparison of Islam in Indonesia and Morocco, and Roberte N. Hamayon’s studies of indigenous religions in Siberia (GEERTZ 1973; HAMAYON 1990). It is a type of comparison that starts from the local and compares syntheses based on the study of a few local cultures.³ Where an individual scholar does not personally have the local knowledge necessary for a comparative study, a group of specialists might co-operate on a comparative project. I hope (and believe) this type of joint venture will be more common in the future.

The example of a comparative analysis that I will present in the following is a very limited one, a comparison of two rituals that share (at least) the common feature of having a bear as the focal point of their respective activities: these rituals are the bear ceremonials of the southern Khanty (c. 1900) and the southern Sami (c. 1750). My interest in these two ceremonials was initially merely linguistic, and consisted in collecting material about the language used in the Sami bear ceremonials.⁴ However, the differences I found when I also began to study Khanty and the literature on the Khanty bear ceremonials made me increasingly sceptical towards the common idea that all the different types of bear ceremonials in northern Eurasia, from the Sami in the west to the Ainu in the east, were to be regarded as concrete forms, or representatives, of *a single ritual, the bear ceremonial* (*la fête de l’ours, das Bärenzeremoniell*).

The occurrence of bear ceremonials among several northern Eurasian peoples has in other words been used as an argument to support various generalising theories (two classical comprehensive comparative monographs are HALLOWELL 1926 and LOT-FALCK 1953; cf. PAPROTH 1976; PENTIKÄINEN 2007): about religions in northern Eurasia, about hunting peoples, about certain ecological conditions, etc. These theories were not, however, based on any careful comparison of the different ritualisations in local settings. They merely focused on similarities while disregarding the dissimilarities. Since I agree with Lauri Honko that “the religious beliefs and practices of the Finno-Ugric peoples provide an interesting test case for comparative methodology in the history of religions” (HONKO 1987, 330), I here attempt to test the claim that the bear rituals of the Khanty and the Sami are in fact so similar that they can – and should – be regarded as concrete forms of one and the same “North-Eurasian Bear Ceremonial”. As I hope to show, the answer to this question is not as self-evident as scholars have tended to think.

CONTEXTS

Before describing and comparing the two rituals, I present some basic information about the two peoples under study.

The Khanty

The traditional settlement area of the Khanty – the easternmost of the peoples that speak a Finno-Ugric language – stretches in an arc along the Ob’ river and its tributaries, from Vasyugan in the southeast towards the mouth of the Ob’ in the north (Fig. 1). There are today about 25,000 Khanty,

2 Cf. the different suggestions in, for example, GINGRICH/FOX 2002; GOTHÓNÍ 2005; IDINOPULOS et al. 2006.

3 Another type of comparison is exemplified in RYDVIING 2010.

4 I am preparing a Sami counterpart to BAKRÓ-NAGY 1979.

some 70 % of whom speak Khanty. One usually reckons with eight main dialects. Of the five different literary languages in use, the most important is the one based on the Middle Ob' dialects (SKRIBNIK/KOSHKARYOVA 1996). Culturally, the Khanty in the different areas are closely related to the other Ob-Ugrian people, the Mansi, but linguistically the two ethnic groups are clearly differentiated. This means for example that the northern Khanty have a culture that is more similar to the culture of the northern Mansi than to that of the southern and eastern Khanty, although their language is distinctly Khanty. A typical characteristic of the social culture of the Khanty is the division into two exogamous patrilineal phratries, the *por* and the *mosh*. The Por are linked to the bear and the Mosh to the hare (or goose; cf. BALZER 1999, 184). Since the Khanty are a small people spread over a large area, there are considerable cultural and linguistic differences between the different regions.⁵ Even so, scholars have had a tendency to generalise and write as if all the Khanty (or even all the Ob-Ugrians) shared an identical (or at least very similar) culture and religion, although this tendency has not been as common in studies of the Khanty as it has in those of the Sami (see below).

The earliest information we have about Khanty bear rituals dates from the beginning of the 18th century, but it was not until the late 19th century that descriptions became more detailed. The most important information was collected and published by Russian scholars like Nikolay Gondatti (GONDATTI 1888) and Serafim Patkanov (PATKANOV 1897; 1900), and, at the beginning of the 20th century, by the Finnish scholar K. F. Karjalainen (KARJALAINEN 1914; 1927, 193–235). In the post-revolutionary era, the material collected by V. N. Chernetsov is especially valuable. Chernetsov documented bear rituals in 1936/37, succeeded in filming dances at a bear ritual in 1948, and collected new material during the 1960s (TSCHERNJETZOW 1974, 285, n. 1). During the Soviet era the bear ceremonials did not cease, at least not in the north and east. They were so popular that the authorities even thought of declaring them secularised (BALZER 1999, 190), bringing them under the general policy of folklorisation. However, such a decision was never made. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the renaissance of indigenous customs, some of the bear festivals have become important political manifestations of Khanty (and Ob-Ugrian) unity. Today, we might echo the Russian folklorist Olga Balalaeva in distinguishing two types of bear festival: “quite private, elder-led festivals that occur on the back rivers of Eastern Khanty camps and the larger, more popular festivals led by [members of the political Association for the Salvation of the Ugra] as well as elders” (BALZER 1999, 197). The traditional bear ceremonials differed from one Khanty region to another. In the north there were only few rituals during the actual hunt and in bringing a bear home to the settlement, with more elaborate ceremonies occurring during the bear festival itself; in the south, rituals connected to the hunt and the homeward journey were dominant; in the east, the bear ceremonials were relatively insignificant (KARJALAINEN 1927, 194, 200).

The example I will discuss concerns the rituals of the southern Khanty, as that area is best documented in the oldest sources. Today, the southern Khanty are Russified and totally integrated into mainstream society.

The Sami

The traditional settlement area of the Sami – the westernmost of the peoples that speak a Finno-Ugrian language – stretches in an arc from the central parts of Scandinavia to the Kola peninsula (Fig. 2). There are today about 80,000 Sami, of whom approximately 40 % speak Sami. Like the Khanty, the Sami are a small group of people spread over a large area; the Sami language is therefore split into a number of different dialects and dialect groups. One usually reckons with ten main dialects, further divided into dialects and sub-dialects. Of the six Sami literary languages in use, North Sami is the most important.

5 Cf. the excellent introduction to the Khanty world-view in JORDAN 2003.

Despite the great linguistic and cultural variation, most scholars who have studied Sami culture have disregarded this variation and written about the Sami as if they all shared an identical culture.

The oldest information about Sami bear ceremonials dates from the beginning of the 17th century, but the most important sources are from the late 17th and the first half of the 18th century. The first monograph was published as early as 1755 (FJELLSTRÖM 1755). We know that there were regional differences, but even today no study has tried to map them. Unlike among the Khanty, the Sami bear rituals are no longer performed, since the indigenous religion perished during the 18th century. A few examples of bear ceremonials, however, are mentioned in 19th-century sources. The area that is best documented is that of the South Sami, and my example is therefore from that region. Despite several centuries of cultural and linguistic influence from Norwegian and Swedish, as well as a cultural impact, many South Sami still speak their original language. This is accounted for by several factors: the South Sami have lived isolated from Norwegians and Swedes, with an economy based almost exclusively on the reindeer; Sami is used as a means of communication within families; the language has a high status and is an important social and cultural symbol of identity (JERNSLETTEN 1997; RYDVIING 2004a; b; 2008).

THE RITUALS

How should rituals be compared? One possible way is to break them up into elements, as Anna-Leena Siikkala did in her study of indigenous ritual specialists (“shamans” in her terminology) in Siberia (SIKKALA 1978). I did the same in my study of ritual aspects of the process of religious change among the Lule Sami, although I used another terminology, adopted from Melford E. Spiro, which is the terminology I will use here as well (cf. RYDVIING 2004a, 93). This means that I use “ritual” as “the generic term for any kind of cult behaviour, regardless of its degree of elaboration or complexity”, while “rite” denotes “the minimum significant unit of ritual behaviour”, “ceremony” “the smallest configuration of rites constituting a meaningful ritual whole”, and “ceremonial” “the total configuration of ceremonies performed during any ritual occasion” (SPIRO 1982, 199).

Bear ceremonials among the southern Khanty in the decades around 1900⁶

Among the southern Khanty, in the decades around 1900 the bear hunt was undertaken roughly as follows.⁷

A. The hunt

1) Preparations for the hunt. The bear hunt was never to be planned and it was regarded as dangerous to try to track a bear (KARJALAINEN 1927, 194). Those who were going to participate in the hunt first had to go through a purification ritual. Both the participants and their food were purified with incense, and they prayed to the bear that it would let them kill it without hurting any of the hunters. After the participants had made the sign of the cross in front of the icons they set out.

6 After PATKANOV 1897; KARJALAINEN 1914; 1927, 193–235; cf. GONDATTI 1888; KHARUZIN 1895a; b; KÁLMÁN 1968; TSCHERNJETZOW 1974; SCHMIDT 1989; GLAVATSKAYA 2005.

7 Since the level of analysis in this short article is restricted to the comparison between Khanty and Sami bear rituals in relation to the idea of a “North-Eurasian Bear Ceremonial”, I have neither here, nor in the next section (about bear ceremonials among the southern Sami), discussed variations and changes *within* Khanty and Sami bear rituals, only between them. Discussing internal variations as well as differences between different types of sources (texts, archaeological material, participant observation) within each of these two cultures would be the next step in the investigation. Of course, I also need to discuss bear rituals among other north Eurasian groups than the two here under examination in order to test the general applicability of the results of this pilot study.

2) The hunt. Once the bear had been killed, the man who had killed it would throw snow (in the winter) or earth (in the summer) on himself before all the hunters ate the food they had brought with them. The bear, too, was regarded as participating in this meal. Then the body of the bear was laid on its back with its head towards the east, and it was skinned. During the process of removing the skin, the one doing the skinning said a short phrase and broke a few⁸ short sticks that were placed beside the bear.

3) On the way home. Where the eating of bear meat was prohibited,⁹ the meat was left at the site of the kill, otherwise it was taken to the village. In either case, the skin, with the head, was taken to the village. On the way to the village, those who carried or dragged the bear told it about the places they passed by.

4) Returning to the village. When the hunters and the bear arrived at the village they were greeted. The hunters fired their weapons and the people in the village answered with shots and came out to meet them. The bear skin was sprinkled with water and incense, and the one who had killed it was thrown into the water. Despite the clear division of male and female rituals, both men and women participated in these rituals.

B. The bear festival

1) Preparations for the bear festival. The skin with the head was taken through a back window into the room where the festival was to be held; there it was placed in the sacred corner, with its head resting on its front paws facing the door. A male bear was provided with a cap and a scarf, a female bear with a head cloth and a neck collar with pearl embroidery and rings on the claws. Usually the eyes were covered (in some places the nostrils as well) with coins or pieces of birch-bark. Different types of food were then placed in front of the bear (KARJALAINEN 1927, 203–206).

2) The bear festival (*ike-pore*). This ceremonial consisted of entertainment for the bear and the participants. It continued over several (often three) evenings. All the participants were sprinkled with water or snow, and they greeted the bear with kisses. The host (or someone else) said to the bear: “Turem’s son [...]! With an arrow made by Russians you were killed, with a spear made by Russians you were killed. Don’t be angry with us!” Thereafter everyone sat down in a fixed order and the festival could begin. It consisted of three elements: bear songs, dancing performances, and short plays (KARJALAINEN 1927, 206–224). *The bear songs* were sung by male singers without masks and they described the life of the bear.¹⁰ *The dancing performances* took place in intervals between songs and plays. Among certain southern Khanty, for example those living along the river Konda, these dances were the most important element of the bear festival. The dances were performed by men and women in garments that differed from their ordinary clothes and with their faces covered. One of the dances, the so-called bear dance, gave an account of the life of the bear. *The plays* (which were a considerably less important part of the bear festival among the southern Khanty than among the northern) were performed by men in red masks which were often made of birch-bark. The masks that represented men had large noses, while those who performed women wore women’s clothes and head-scarves. The actors distorted their voices. The themes were everyday subjects; they could be serious or humorous, and made use of many puns, and were sometimes offensive (even to persons who were present).¹¹ Each play was very short, but the number of plays could in some areas (but not among the southern Khanty) be very large (KARJALAINEN 1927, 229–230). In the breaks between the plays songs were sung. The bear festival ended with games to decide when and by whom the next bear was to be killed.

8 Five or seven, if it was a male bear, four or five, if it was a female bear (KARJALAINEN 1927, 197).

9 Depending on which phratry one belonged to, the *mosh* (who could eat the meat) or the *por* (who could not eat the meat).

10 Such South Khanty bear songs are reproduced in, for example, KARJALAINEN/VÉRTES 1975; PAASONEN/VÉRTES 1980.

11 Some plays are presented in GONDATTI 1888 and KARJALAINEN 1927, 215–220.

3) After the bear festival, the skin was taken out through the back window near the sacred corner. If the bear meat was to be eaten, it was cooked so as to be ready when the festival was completed.

C. Afterwards

The skin was given to the host (the one who had found the bear and arranged the festival) and he could use it as he liked. Generally, it was sold to cover the expenses of the festival. However, it could not be sold until forty days had elapsed, and the host had to celebrate memorial days on the 9th, 16th, and 36th day after the festival.

*Bear ceremonials among the southern Sami in the mid-18th century*¹²

Unlike among the Khanty, the Sami bear festival was generally celebrated in springtime (although it could also be celebrated during autumn or winter). It thus functioned as a calendrical spring ritual. The following synthesis is based on sources describing the southern Sami festival during the first half of the 18th century.

A. The hunt

1) The bear was tracked (or encircled) during the autumn after the first snow had fallen so that it would be easy to know where it was hibernating.

2) Before the hunt. Among the southern Sami, no preparatory rituals are known from this period that would be comparable to the strict order in which the hunters approached the place where the bear was hibernating found among the Lule Sami during the 1670s. In the latter case, the person who had tracked the bear went first, followed by the others in a specific order.

3) After the hunt. Once the bear had been killed, the hunters walked over it on their skies. Then a twig was attached to the bear's mouth, and one of the hunters sang a *vuelie* (chant) and pulled the twig three times. He could also aim a spear three times at the bear. After that the bear was covered with twigs and left at the hunting ground.

4) Returning home. As the hunters approached the huts they sang a special *vuelie* in order to let the women and children know they had killed a bear. The *vuelie* also told the persons in the settlement whether it was a male or a female. Using the back door, the men entered the tent where the women were sitting with their heads covered. The women looked at the bear hunters through rings of brass, spat chewed alder bark on them, and fastened brass rings on the men's clothes (cf. PAPROTH 1963). Then they feasted on the best food they had, the hunters in a tent that was erected especially for the purpose of the bear rituals, the women and children in the ordinary tent. After the meal, everyone went to sleep.

5) Collecting the bear. On the second day, the bear was collected with great honours. On the way home the hunters sang different *vuelieb* (chants) and prayed to the bear to protect them from evil.

B. The feast

The bear was taken to the special tent, and the women spat red chewed alder bark at it. It was then skinned by the men, while they sang various *vuelieb*. In one of the *vuelieb* they sang to the bear that it had been killed by men from Sweden, Poland, England, and France. The other *vuelieb* were about where the bear had been taken, about the honour it should be shown, about what the women might be doing in the ordinary tent, etc. Per Fjellström, who wrote the first monograph about the Sami bear rituals, gives the following characterisation of the *vuelie* to the bear:

12 After FJELLSTRÖM 1755; cf. NIURENIUS 1905, 18–19 (original text c. 1640); RHEEN 1897, 43–46 (original text 1671); LUNDIUS 1905, 18 (original text late 1670s); HÖGSTRÖM 1747, 209–211; text by Holmberger (1770s), in HASSELBRINK 1964; cf. ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974; EDSMAN 1994; 1996; KORHONEN 2008.

“[...] the so-called bear song is not the same and does not have the same contents among all [groups], nor would they decide in advance and prepare a precise order in which to sing it. Instead they probably adjusted [the song] both to existing circumstances and to the bear hunt itself, as well as to the Lapps’ own conditions and nature. [...] Thus, it is believed that their bear song is performed more with voice and sound than with words. Even if their song makes use of pure words, they are such as are unusual and not used at all in the ordinary Lappish language, and therefore they cannot be understood by anyone, regardless of how skilled they might be in their language, other than those who are instructed and trained in their superstition” (FJELLSTRÖM 1755, 21–22).

After the bear had been skinned, the meat was carved from the bones and boiled in a certain order. The men ate certain parts of it (which parts, depended on the sex of the bear) in the special tent, the women and children other parts in the ordinary tent. After that everyone rested. Then the hunters washed themselves in lye, ran three times around the place where the bear had been cooked and into and out of the ordinary tent through the ordinary door and the back door, while imitating the growl of the bear.

C. The burial

1) The bear’s bones were buried in a precise order. It was important that no bone was broken and that all of them were buried.¹³

2) After the burial. The skin or the liver was used in a game that decided when and by whom the next bear was to be killed.

D. Afterwards

The man who had tracked the bear received the skin and sold it.

COMPARISON

If we now compare these two ritual complexes we have to look at both the structural level (how elements are connected, the order of the different elements) and the individual rites (the elements of each complex; cf. Tables 1–2). This is possible even if we do not know the exact meaning of all the rites performed. Earlier ritual theories regarded rituals as something scholars could use to “read” the respective culture, since rituals were regarded as communicative acts; the theories formulated by Frits Staal, Catherine Bell, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, and Roy Rappaport, in contrast, emphasise, among other things, the role of rituals as tools for enculturation and for the “disciplining of the body” even if the “meaning” (as suggested by the ritual specialists or by scholars) is not understood by all – or by any – of the participants (STAAL 1975; BELL 1992; HUMPHREY/LAIDLAW 1994; RAPPAPORT 1999). This means that the activities (movements, sounds, etc.) are interesting objects for analysis, even if they only help us answer the question “how”, but not the “why”. However, for the purpose of the comparison of Khanty and Sami bear rituals, I will compare both outer form (how rites were performed) and “inner meaning”, where it is known to us.

Apart from banal resemblances, such as the fact that among both the Khanty and the Sami there is first a hunt and then some kind of festivity, it is evident, even from the very brief summaries of the

13 The fact that the bones in excavated bear graves generally have been split (cf. ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974, 39, 96–97) is a good example of the gap between hunting ideology and actual behaviour that SMITH (1982, 53–65) called attention to in a classical article.

contents of the two rituals presented here, that the main structures are different. Most of the individual elements differ, each of them occurring in only one of the two rituals. The focus is different: for the Khanty, the most important element was the festival and its entertainments, while for the Sami it was the feast and the burial. Therefore, the principal conclusion to be drawn is that the structural differences between the bear rituals of the southern Khanty and the southern Sami are considerable.

However, there are a few elements that are strikingly similar: from the perspective of “meaning”, both rituals involved a) purification rites (even if different ones) for both the hunters and the bear, and b) games to decide when and by whom the next bear was to be killed; while in terms of resemblances in outer form, both rituals involved c) prayers and songs to the bear (in one case with similar content, namely that others were to blame for the death of the bear), d) several meals (feasts), and e) the use of the back door.

It might appear that these resemblances do indeed suggest a close connection between the two ritual complexes. However, there are various types of resemblance. Purification rites, prayers, songs, and meals (feasts) are all found in various types of ritual context (not only bear rituals), and their occurrence in the two bear ceremonials thus cannot be used to support the hypothesis of a connection. What remains are three (more specific) elements: a) the fact that the killing in both contexts is blamed on someone else, b) the games to decide about the next hunt, and c) the use of the back door during the ritual. But since the first two elements are found in hunting ceremonials around the world (cf. HUTTER 2001), neither of them can be used to support the hypothesis. The sacred back door is the most interesting resemblance and might indeed be a connecting element (cf. RÄNK 1949). However, one or two elements do not make a ritual.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of the bear ceremonials among the southern Khanty and the southern Sami gives a negative result when we consider both resemblances and differences, rather than resemblances alone, as was the case in earlier versions of the comparative enterprise. It seems as if the main connecting point is the bear itself. The conclusion has to be that the two examples of bear rituals do not support the hypothesis that the different bear rituals in northern Eurasia are concrete forms, or representatives, of one common ritual. This conclusion calls into question the whole idea of a “North-Eurasian Bear Ceremonial”. However, this negative result does not mean that the religions of the Finno-Ugric peoples cannot “provide an interesting test case for comparative methodology in the history of religions” (HONKO 1987, 330). On the contrary: it is in my opinion evident from the case presented here that they can indeed function as exemplary sources for comparative analysis.

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Dr. Håkan Rydving
 Professor of the History of Religions
 University of Bergen
 Norway
 hakan.rydving@uib.no

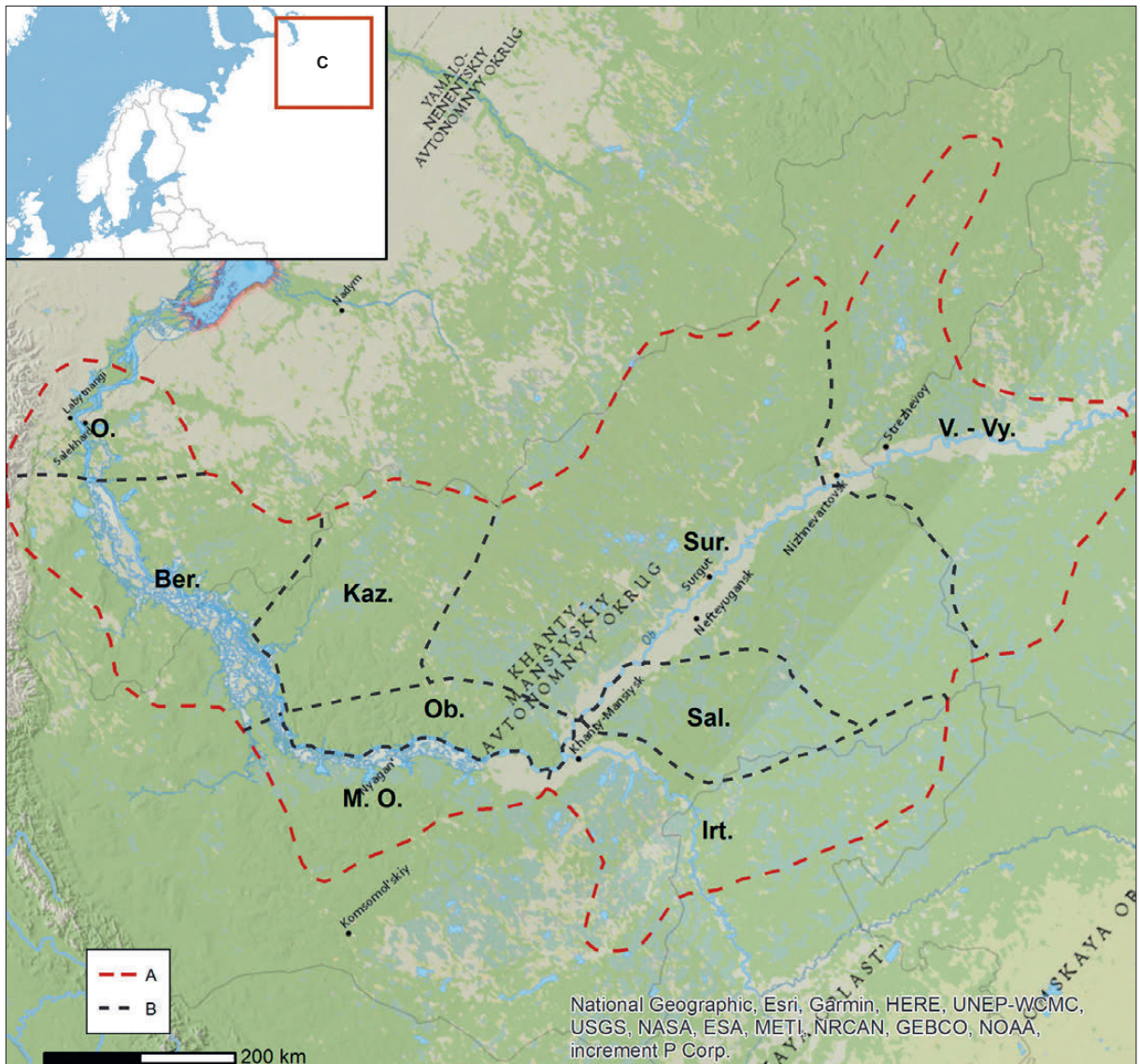


Fig. 1. The main dialect areas of Khanty. A: extent of the Khanty area of settlement; B: approximate borders of the main dialects of Khanty; C: the area on the main map. Northern Khanty: O.: Obdorsk Khanty; Ber.: Berezino Khanty; Kaz.: Kazym Khanty; M.O.: the Khanty dialects at the Middle Ob. Southern Khanty: Irt.: Irtysh Khanty (incl. Konda and Demyanka). Eastern Khanty: Sal.: Salym Khanty; Sur.: Surgut Khanty (Pim, Yugan, Trom'yugan, Agan, etc.); V.-Vy.: Vakh and Vasyugan Khanty (mainly after SCHMIDT 1989; MARTYNOVA 1994; map GIS department, ZBSA).



Fig. 2. The main dialect areas of Sami. A: extent of the Sami area of settlement (as depicted in most modern surveys, despite the fact that the South Sami language area, for example, extends to the Gulf of Bothnia); B: approximate borders of the main dialects of Sami; C: the area on the main map. Western Sami: S.: South Sami; U.: Ume Sami; Arj.: Arjeplog Sami; L.: Lule Sami, N.: North Sami. Inari Sami: I.: Inari Sami. Eastern Sami: Sk.: Skolt Sami; Akk.: Akkala Sami (extinct in 2003); Kld.: Kildin Sami; T.: Ter Sami (after RYDVIING 2004b, 358; map GIS department, ZBSA).

Table 1. Bear ceremonials among the southern Khanty (decades around 1900).

Ceremonial 1: The Hunt

Ceremony 1: ritual before the hunt

rite 1: purification with incense

rite 2: prayer to the bear

rite 3: the sign of the cross in front of the icons

Ceremony 2: rituals after the hunt

rite 1: (purification) the throwing of snow or earth

rite 2: a meal

rite 3: the skinning (skinning + utterance of words + breaking and placing of sticks)

Ceremony 3: rituals on the way home

rite 1: telling the bear about the way

Ceremony 4: rituals on returning to the village

rite 1: shooting and greeting

rite 2: (purification) sprinkling of bear skin with water and incense

rite 3: the person who killed the bear was thrown into the water

Ceremonial 2: The Bear Festival

Ceremony 1: preparatory rituals

rite 1: the bear (skin and head) was taken to the place for the ritual

rite 2: the bear was dressed

rite 3: food was offered to the bear

Ceremony 2: the bear festival

rite 1: purification with water or snow

rite 2: the bear was greeted

rite 3: introductory words (the Russians killed you, not we)

rites 4–6: a) bear songs

b) dancing performances

c) short plays

rite 7: games to decide when and by whom the next bear was to be killed

Ceremony 3: concluding the festival

rite 1: the bear (skin and head) was taken out

(rite 2: a meal in places where bear meat is eaten)

Ceremonial 3: Remembrance Rituals

rites 1–3: remembrance of the festival on the 9th, 16th, and 38th day after the end of the festival

Table 2. Bear ceremonials among the southern Sami (mid-18th century).

Ceremonial 1: The Hunt

- Ceremony 1: rituals before the hunt
 - (no such rituals documented)
 - Ceremony 2: rituals after the hunt
 - rite 1: skiing over the skin
 - rite 2: a chant was sung
 - allorite 3: a twig in the bears mouth was pulled three times
 - or*
 - allorite 3: a spear was aimed at the bear three times
 - Ceremony 3: rituals on returning to the village
 - rite 1: a chant was sung
 - rite 2: (purification) the women spat chewed alder bark on the men and fastened brass rings on their clothes
 - rite 3: meal
-

Ceremonial 2: The Bear Feast

- Ceremony 1: the bear was collected
 - rite 1: several chants were sung to the bear
 - rite 2: prayer to the bear
 - Ceremony 2: the bear feast
 - rite 1: the women spat chewed alder bark on the bear
 - rite 2: the bear was skinned and several chants were sung
 - rite 3: meal
 - rite 4: (purification) the hunters washed themselves in lye
 - rite 5: the men ran around the bear imitating it
 - rite 6: a game to decide when and by whom the next bear was to be killed
-

Ceremonial 3: The Burial

- rite 1: the bear was buried