

The Northern Khanty Folklore Archive in Belojarskij, 1991– (1997)

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Hungarians’ closest linguistic relatives

In the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. in Southwestern Siberia, the ancestors of Hungarians split off from the ancestors of those who would later become the Khanty and the Mansi. The latter group moved up along the Ob River to the marshy lands of the taiga and developed an extraordinary culture. As if they had been directed to serve as the guardians of their roots, they returned to their traditional forest-based livelihood and swapped their horses for reindeer. At the same time, their valiant warriors lived in fortresses and preserved their complex religion; the heights of their spiritual culture always stood in stark contrast to their humble lifestyle.

Russian colonialism reached the Khanty and Mansi in the late 1500s, and by the late 1800s, the impoverishment that ensued had begun to threaten their way of life. Soviet rule lifted them up at first, but the repression, shocking loss of the male population in war, forced resettlements and roundups, and boarding school system broke the traditional culture. Within the last thirty years, the effects of the oil boom, with its destruction of nature and the influx of one million workers, has made the situation of the Khanty and Mansi peoples similar to that of Native American tribes on the brink of extinction.

Mansi speakers now number around 3,500, while Khanty speakers total about 17,000. The last generation raised within the traditional culture are now in their sixties. The youth, who have been intentionally alienated from their native culture, do not have a particularly strong attachment to their native language and ethnic culture, but at the same time, they feel like their lives have been irreparably destroyed. The best among them have realized that the only true way of life is the ethnic life. For them, Hungarians are like a magical mirror showing that a people with whom they share roots have been able to survive within their own ethnic island and have enriched humanity with their own form of civilization.

The study of the Khanty people

Few researchers have had the opportunity to preserve Khanty spiritual traditions in their original language. The first major researcher to collect works from the Khanty was Antal Reguly, who in 1844 documented a library's worth of epics from a single northern singer, detailing the heroic past of this people. József Pápay deciphered his manuscript and further expanded this research in his expedition of 1898. The Russian researcher Patkanov published a volume of Southern Khanty folklore at the turn of the twentieth century. The Finnish researcher H. Paasonen gathered heroic epics in 1899, and later from 1898 to 1902, his compatriot K. F. Karjalainen documented sample materials in his study of all the dialects.

In the Soviet period, it was considered undesirable to conduct fieldwork abroad. It was only W. Steinitz, a German emigrant and researcher of Finno-Ugric studies, who managed to collect additional materials; he gathered three volumes' worth of various materials around 1935. Not even the few Russian specialists who spoke the language found better opportunities for fieldwork. During this most crucial half-century, the practice of documenting Khanty culture in its original language became an unknown phenomenon.

The founding father of native Khanty philology, N. I. Terěškin, had begun in the 1940s to preserve folklore in every dialect, at the same time that his own Southern Khanty group was disappearing up to the very last person. The few Khanty people skilled in linguistics were tasked with developing textbooks for schoolchildren. Anyone who wanted to preserve the message of the ancestors from the last performers had to do so without training and without the faintest hope of publishing it. It was not until 1990 that Khanty intellectuals began to value preserving and researching the spoken language of the remaining dialects and the folklore that served as a key to their ethnic identity.

The history of the Northern Khanty Folklore Archive of Belojarskij

In the early 1980s, Khanty culture was so deprived of opportunities to reproduce itself that it was on track to entirely disappear in thirty years. It was at this time that Éva Schmidt, trained in ethnography, folklore, and Finno-Ugric studies, began the work of establishing an international center for education and documentation. The proposal, through the intercession of renowned ethnographer N. V. Lukina from Tomsk, reached the appropriate

Soviet administrative bodies, with the support of Hungary's Minister of Culture and Public Education, as well as the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. At that time, the idea of such a complex international academic institution verged on fantasy. The plan was not rejected, but its implementation became the achievement of a later period.

The Khanty and Mansi had their first independent opportunity for cultural diplomacy when they were introduced at the Seventh International Finno-Ugric Congress in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1990. Bertalan Andrásfalvy, Hungary's minister of education, discussed the planned folklore archive as a form of cultural cooperation. It was agreed that the host party would cover the basic expenses, office space, and an apartment for onsite accommodation, while the Hungarians would cover the costs of Éva Schmidt's contract and her specialized library. A copy of the Hungarian researcher's fieldwork collections and textual analysis would be submitted to the Institute of Ethnology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and it was in this way that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences would support the endeavor as one of its own programs.

The signing of the initial three-year agreement and the founding of the institution took place in 1991, the most difficult year of the post-communist transition. Due to the undeveloped nature of the Khanty administrative agencies, the District Council of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug was originally responsible for financial support, and the Cultural Department of the Raion Council in Belojarskij served as its supervisory body. Lacking the appropriate premises to house the archive and its director, they managed to find a temporary rental lease on a three-room apartment within a housing block, which served as both the archive's workspace and its employee housing. Furniture was provided by the host country, but the technical infrastructure needed for academic research was not available in a small town in the taiga – Hungary's Ministry of Culture and Public Education provides this funding even today. It was a positive development when the institution later fell under the budget of the Northern Fund and under the administrative purview of the department for nationalities. In recognition of the importance of this work, Éva Schmidt's contract was extended to 1996, and later 1999, but following the departure of its director, the archive and its irreplaceable collection of materials are at risk of disappearing.

During the "heroic" period of 1991–93, the archive offered a financial and organizational foundation for the revitalization of Khanty culture, and it was involved in historic events, such as participating in four bear ceremonies and organizing a string of sacrificial feasts, all fully documented.

Due to a lack of sufficiently trained professionals for fieldwork, technical work supplementing fieldwork was performed within its walls – although one employee, T. A. Moldanov, later went on to have an impressive career. The real work began in 1995. Following the archive's example, five other archives soon opened, creating a whole network for preserving disappearing dialects and traditions. Without the Folklore Archive in Belojarskij, it is likely that the history of Hungarians' linguistic relatives would have turned out differently...

The work of the folklore archive

The fundamental principle of the folklore archive is that instead of having distant, foreign institutions conduct random expeditions, it is preferable for northern peoples to document their ethnic information base themselves. They should do so in a way that meets their own needs for cultural development and allows for future academic research. This is only feasible if every river region (that is, dialect) has two to three local mid-level academic professionals stationed within that region's main town or settlement, and these individuals are dedicated to professionally gathering materials from within their own natural environment.

A small city with a natural gas compressor station, Belojarskij has existed for barely twenty years and has a population of 14,000; it is located along the lower reaches of the Kazym River, an eastern tributary of the Northern Ob River. It marks the border between the Kazym, who herd reindeer, and the Ob Khanty, who raise horses and face the threat of assimilation. Its folklore archive is the first completely independent academic institution in history where both education and research are conducted in Khanty. Its five employees were trained by Éva Schmidt and completed their education at the Herzen University in Saint Petersburg. Their activities are as follows:

1. **Field collection.** With attention to the critical state of traditional culture, there are no restrictions on the materials that are collected. The focus is on folklore, the ancient worldview, and traditional cults, which can only be gathered from the older generation. In addition, any kind of information related to ethnography, genealogy, local history, or linguistics should also be documented. The sites of collection are assigned based on the employees' places of origin, and every summer, Éva Schmidt conducts expeditions to more remote areas

- (at her own expense). Recording is done with a tape recorder and, at least in part, with an 8mm video camera (including for linguistic data collection).
2. **Database collection.** In the interest of developing Khanty academic research, the archive collects, copyrights, and preserves all kinds of information on Ob-Ugric topics. This is how the archive has collected materials ranging from Finnish phonograph recordings from 1903 to audio materials and manuscript contents of earlier expeditions, as well as academic literature, amateur writings, copies of recordings, etc.
 3. **Archiving.** Copies of video recordings are produced in VHS and audio formats, and working copies are created of the most valuable tape recordings.
 4. **Audiovisual materials.** As the need arises, edited versions of tape recordings and subtitled video materials on specific topics are produced for educational purposes, with independent copyrights.
 5. **Processing and translation of materials.** The collected materials are transcribed by Éva Schmidt using phonemic transcription and by archive employees using the Cyrillic alphabet with diacritics. After editing and including annotations, the collector types up the materials on the computer. Materials that are selected for publication are translated into Russian.
 6. **Cyrillic transcription and annotation of source publications.** With the goal of establishing a professional-level philological study of Khanty, Éva Schmidt works in collaboration with various local academic institutions. After appropriate fieldwork, she reviews the published heroic epics from the previous century, transcribes the source materials into Cyrillic with diacritics, and provides Khanty annotations. Audio or video recordings of the materials and their supporting commentary serve to advance the field of Finno-Ugric studies in Hungary.
 7. **Education.** Under the direction of Éva Schmidt, philological training is provided to Northern Khanty and Mansi mid-level academic professionals: Cyrillic transcription, interpretation of academic transcription, history of the field, source analysis, and linguistics. Technical training includes tape recorder use, photography and videography techniques, editing, and use of the ChiWriter and Winword computer programs.

8. **Network of amateur collectors.** Individuals interested in folk traditions can be found both among the intellectual class living in the countryside and among the relatives of informants. After a brief training, the archive provides these individuals with tape recorders and creates archival copies of their recordings.
9. **Relearning of folklore.** The archive was the first institution to incorporate the reeducation of the middle and youngest generations into its official program. With the help of audiovisual materials, these generations learn prose narrative, personal songwriting, sections of the bear ceremony repertoire, dances, etc. Many of the employees belong to folklore performance groups.
10. **Mass media.** The local Khanty radio broadcast is recorded in the archive, and folklore recordings are often played on the main Khanty radio station and published in the Khanty newspaper.
11. **Public service.** Copies of written and audio materials are created for ethnic institutions, informants, and their relatives.

The activities listed above make it possible for any Khanty person who possesses intelligence and a high school diploma to contribute meaningfully rather than letting his or her talents go to waste. Individuals can preserve and develop their ethnic culture while also providing the raw materials for academic research, and they can do so without the risks they would face in foreign cities and academic circles.

Funding and supporters of the folklore archive

Without high-level support, this archive in the middle of the taiga would have never been established. On the host side, the institution was supported by the leadership of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug; the leadership of the Institute of the Peoples of the North; Messrs. V. M. Kurikov, A. M. Konstantinov, and M. G. Lazarev; the organization Association to Save Yugra; the Research Institute for Revival of the Ob-Ugric Peoples¹; and the top Ob-Ugric intellectuals.

On the Hungarian side, the archive enjoys the personal support of the president of the republic, Árpád Göncz. The agreement was made possible by the sacrifices made by the Secretariat of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Ethnology, and the establishment of the

¹ Editor's note: Known today as the Ob-Ugric Institute of Applied Research and Development.

archive was possible thanks to the help of Bertalan Andrásfalvy, minister of education. Research equipment is provided on an annual basis through the help of the minister and secretary of education, the International Relations Department of the Ministry of Culture and Public Education, and other employees. Special thanks go to the Hungarian Cultural Center in Moscow, under the leadership of Rita Mayer, for its support. The computer programs were developed by the Institute of Linguistics at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an employee of Chemokomplex. Transportation has been provided by TNT Airways and the Chemokomplex corporation, and winter clothing by the Ministry of Defense. In practical organizational matters, Eszter Ruttkay-Miklián, the Reguly Association, and the Józsolgálat Foundation have helped the most, and support has of course also been provided by the country's various Finno-Ugric studies and ethnography departments and research institutes.

The Northern Khanty Folklore Archive of Belojarskij is grateful to everyone whose support has made the archive's work possible, despite the challenges it faces.

The archive currently has two computers, two VHS video-editing tools, three 38mm video cameras, and eight tape recorders. On an annual basis, the archive requires approximately \$1,000 USD from Hungary for supplies.

The greatest problem facing the archive is that the lease for its physical premises could be terminated at any moment. A three-bedroom apartment was renovated at significant cost to serve the purposes of this institution. Along with the end of the management employment contract, the end of the lease could lead to the complete dissolution of the archive. Given that even institutions of much less importance in the same city have purchased their own premises, the archive will not be safe until this space is under its own ownership. The cost is about \$25,000 USD, and this funding must be secured – through international cooperation, if need be – to ensure that the first Khanty folklore archive, its unique repository of information, and its trained professionals do not fall victim to any administrative changes.

In terms of equipment, the archive is seeking a donor or financial sponsor to acquire the following items:

- 1 computer
- 1 Xerox machine
- 1 gasoline-powered generator to allow video recording of the oldest informants in spaces without electricity, such as during the bear ceremony and other similarly important performances

The employees of the folklore archive²

Rima K. Seburowa (Slepenkova): deputy head of the institution
Great Ob Khanty, previously employed as a sales clerk, and in her last year
of university.

Journalist, videographer, folklore collector, and producer of the Khanty
radio broadcast.

Sofia S. Lozjamova (Uspenskaja): research fellow
Kazym Khanty, previously employed in cultural outreach, trained in music,
and currently a university student.
Folklore collector trained in phonemic transcription.

Tamara R. Pjatnikova: research fellow and administrator
Great Ob Khanty, previously employed as an educator with administrative
experience, and in her last year of university.
Translator of specialized texts.

Ljudmila L. Lel'khova (Khomljak): research fellow and general manager
Great Ob Khanty, previously employed as an accountant.
Folklore collector.

Ljudmila D. Dolgušina (Kotova), librarian.
Khanty-Russian, previously employed as an educator, and currently a college
student.
Proofreader and copy editor of Russian.

(English translation by Melinda Széll)

² Editor's note: The employees completed their studies through a distance learning program at the Herzen University in Saint Petersburg, within the Department of Northern Peoples. Seburowa and Pjatnikova graduated in 1997, Lozjamova in 1998, and Lel'khova in 1999.