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## Throwing a “Tynzyan” Lasso at a “Khorey” pole as an element of physical initiation of boys in the modern culture of the northern peoples

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### ABSTRACT

*The article describes a traditional sport of the people of the Russian North – throwing a lasso (tynzyan) at a special wooden pole (khorey). This physical activity plays an important role in the culture of the northern people because it demonstrates attainment of skills and abilities which are important for the working life of the reindeer herders of the Far North. Proof of mastering the techniques of throwing a tynzyan at a khorey is one of the elements of the initiation ritual for boys of different ages in the traditional cultures of many native Northern people. In modern culture it is a major part of the sports of the Northern polyathlon where it retains its traditional cultural value of physical initiation of young men.*

**Key words:** Anthropology, Far North, indigenous people, rituals, initiation, reindeer herders, traditional sports.

### INTRODUCTION

In traditional societies based on families and clans, various rituals and actions aimed at socialization of the younger generation play an important role. Specific attention is paid to the education of men as providers because the wellbeing and mere survival of the families and clans depends on them. Levi-Strauss, in his monitoring of the life of traditional peoples of the North, describes the manner of the initiation where the boys must, by enduring various kinds of suffering and deprivation, prove to the elders of the family that they have become worthy to be accepted as grown-up young men [1]. For example, in a tradition of the Evenks, boys of certain ages have to go alone into the wild forest and provide themselves with food and shelter without any advice and assistance from adults.

According to traditional Northern cultures, these rites contribute to the formation of endurance, will, courage, hard work and sagacity [2]. As is noted by Danilova, in non-Western cultures the notion of close connection between the inner world of a man and the surrounding nature is retained. It can be found in all aspects of a person's existence in traditional cultures, including ceremonial activities and rituals such as initiation [3].

A whole human life from birth to death in a traditional society is divided into several stages. Shkurina observed that the passage of an individual through these stages may be accompanied by a series of rituals which symbolize a change in the social status and transition to a new age stage [4]. We believe that ritual actions related to age are

closely linked with social rituals and, therefore, can be regarded as initiatory. Their main purpose is supposed to be an inclusion of the individual into some closed circle of social ties. Gennep points out that the role of an individual in social rituals and actions depends on his age [5]. This fact can serve as a grounding for the conclusion that rites of socialisation belong with initiatory rites and are associated with the change of social status.

Mendot et al. put forward the hypothesis that initiation of traditional peoples is connected with the solution of the problem of identifying the role of the life of an adult [6]. Children growing up identify themselves with "significant others" of the same sex, in the process of construction and reconstruction of their gender, and they are also trained to obtain certain skills (competencies). The purpose of this whole system of social actions is the recognition of oneself as a performer of a particular social role.

However, the majority of researchers (Howitt, 1904 [7]; Elkin, 1952 [8]; Tsareva, 2004 [9]; Fanselow 2014 [10]) note that there are no socially recognised ritual practices and actions that different ethnic groups enact under a common scheme. Thus, the question of the possibility of the creation of an initiation system that could be unified, classified and codified as a tradition remains open and unexplored. According to Shkurina, initiation can be regarded as rites of transition implying some significantly rapid and stable changes in the individual [4]. However, in our opinion in some cases the initiation may include the natural processes of socialization of the individual. Thus, in the structure of initiation there are different actions of a social nature that indicate the aptitude of an individual to perform various socially significant roles in the community or family.

Thesis: Traditional sports is a method of initiation of boys in the modern culture of Northern peoples

The culture of indigenous peoples has always been connected with adaptation to their living conditions. In this respect, the Northern peoples are of particular interest, because despite the process of globalization they retain their cultural and spiritual traditions. Peoples of Northern Russia are a good example of the preservation of traditional cultures. Among various rituals and ceremonial acts the priority has always been given to demonstration of physical endurance, agility and strength. For example, sporting games are part of the celebration of the annual holiday *Ysyakh* in Sakha republic [11].

The national sports of the Northern peoples allow boys, young men and adults not only to compete but also to demonstrate various qualities and abilities that are important for the everyday life of reindeer herders: strength (in tugging of sticks), speed (in national jumping), accuracy and speed of reaction (in throwing a tynzyan at a khorey). The Northern polyathlon is based on the work activities of the Northern peoples [12, 13]. The transition of boys and young men to a new social stage in the traditional culture of Northern peoples occurs via mastering the national sports that are included in the everyday life of the clan and family.

Examples of the integration of initiation actions and actions which illustrate the traditional life of the people, in our opinion, include the mastery by children of the Northern peoples of different national sports. These sports and games initially represent some models of the actions of the adult population during traditional husbandry: first of all, reindeer husbandry, and also hunting and fishing. One example of such games is the throwing of a tynzyan at a khorey.

#### **Description of equipment (tynzyan and khorey)**

A tynzyan (or "mauta", as the people of Central Siberia call it) is a leather lariat (lasso). The length can vary from 10-15 metres up to 30 or more (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. Tynzyan in the hands of a native of the North

In the front end of a tynzyan there is a knuckle – the “sarmik”, which has two holes, a big one and a small one. The tynzyan is poked through these two holes, forming a loop. Tynzyans are used by the nomadic herders of the Far North for catching deer. The indigenous peoples of Yakutia call the tynzyan “Yamb-Uda”, which means “long arm” [14]. Indigenous people say that an experienced shepherd needs just a few minutes to catch a selected deer from the herd. According to Klovov, reindeer herding of the North can actually be considered as a unique sector of the rural economy of the circumpolar Arctic region, because this activity occurs only among indigenous peoples of the North [15]. In addition, it is not only a sector of the economy, but also a part of the lifestyle of indigenous peoples. That’s why nowadays reindeer husbandry is important for preservation of the ethnic traditions of the Northern peoples.

Making tynzyans is a summer occupation for male reindeer herders. A tynzyan is made only from deer skin. Whereas the knuckle, or sarmik, is made from part of the lateral surface of the antlers, the tynzyan is made completely from deer skin and bones and this has both practical and sacred meanings as the deer is the source of life of the nomadic peoples of the Far North (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. The deer as the central element of the lifestyle of the people of the North**



**Fig. 3. Khoreys**

All the men of the family, including children, are involved in the process of making the tynzyan. Thus, one can see the processing of deer skin for the tynzyan is a male ancestral craft. This activity requires the skills of skinning a deer carcass, as well as the ability to crust leather. During the work the younger generation learns to master the technique of currying and acquires special skills and abilities necessary to the nomadic reindeer herders of the North. Every family and clan has some different techniques which are passed from one generation to another. For example, one of the features of the tynzyan by which one can determine the family that produced it, is its cross-section, which is optional. Further, one can judge the age and social status of the young men of the family according to the quality of the tynzyan and the technology of its manufacture, because only an experienced reindeer herder can make a quality tynzyan which meets all the requirements. In our opinion, it can be assumed that the making of a

tynzyan is one of the stages of a boy's initiation in the traditional culture of indigenous peoples, the mastery of which indicates a change in the social status from a child into a young herder.

The khorey is a wooden stick about 3 metres long and 3-5 centimetres in diameter. The herders use this stick to chase deer in the herd (Fig. 3).

#### **Description of the sport game**

Throwing a tynzyan at a khorey is included in the Northern polyathlon of the peoples of the North. Traditionally competitions are held on national holidays. The celebration of *Ysyakh* – the Yakut New Year – is considered to be one of the most popular. Magomedova and Aliyeva came to the conclusion that folk holidays and ritual actions combine into a single body of folk song, dance, music and traditional crafts, representing the syncretism of different types of folk art that should not be studied separately [16]. The whole system of upbringing and education of the rising generation is displayed in preparation for national holidays and in celebrating them.

A. Younger boys throw a tynzyan for distance without a particular target

It should be noted that the holding of competitions on throwing a tynzyan at a khorey means dividing the participants into two age groups. Boys from ten to fourteen years old throw tynzyan for distance – this is the first test for the young deer herders. Throwing tynzyan for accuracy is one of the ultimate tests in the process of initiating a boy into a man (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4. During the competition**

In the first age group the number of participants is not limited. An important condition for participation is the possession of their own tynzyan, which indicates that the boy belongs to a particular clan and family. Most often this type of game can be seen at camps during the winter. Before the game starts, a line is marked out on the level ground. With tynzyan in hand the first participant takes his place near the line. Performing the backswing, he throws the tynzyan up and forward as far as possible. The participant is allowed to run out the line and run a few steps, on condition that the tynzyan flies as far as its length. It is important not to release the end of tynzyan from the hands (Fig. 5).





**Fig. 5. Throwing the tynzyan**

The place where the tynzyan loop dropped is marked with a stone or a stick. The player is allowed to make three more attempts and the best result is taken. Then the next boy takes his turn to throw his tynzyan, and so on until all the participants complete their turns. The boy whose tynzyan flies the farthest wins the competition. This game helps to develop arm muscle strength, which is an important quality for the reindeer herders of the North. The ability to throw a tynzyan as far as possible is a necessary skill for a herder, because it is not always possible to closely approach a particular deer in the herd. The children also practice the technique of throwing a tynzyan. Transfer of knowledge about the technique of throwing, as well as practice of skills during the game is, in our opinion, one of the elements of the initiation of a boy into a young man as a young reindeer herder, a successor of the traditions of family and clan.

**B. Elder boys throw a tynzyan at a khorey for speed and accuracy**

Throwing a tynzyan at a khorey occurs in winter at the camp, when the deer are unharnessed. The number of participants is not limited. Before the competition they stick the khorey in the snow. At the end of the khorey bells are attached because, according to the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the North, the sound of bells frightens off the evil spirits. It is also important to note that according to the folk epos *Olonkho*, as well as in the records of P. A. Oyunsky "Nyurgun Bootur the Impetuous" it is noted that a khorey, mounted upright in the snow, served as a symbol of achieving the summit and superiority of herder. In "The master's son, Yabta Salya", in *Olonkho*, his khorey is also used to show the presence of someone on the land. The protagonist rises on the shore after long wandering by sea and ice. He sticks a khorey in the ground to show that the son of a Subtle Cape was there. We can see that khoreys as well as tynzyans are not only work instruments for herders, but also they have cultural and spiritual values [17, 18]. The rules of throwing a tynzyan at a khorey differ from the rules imposed on children when throwing a tynzyan for distance. When throwing at the khorey it is important to demonstrate the ability to throw a tynzyan at a certain distance with accuracy, taking into account weather conditions and other factors. Each

participant takes part with his own tynzyan. Players stand sideways to the khorey so that the closer leg would be at a distance of not less than 50 metres from it. Boys unwind only the required length of tynzyan for throwing at the khorey and the rest of it is pressed to the ground by the foot that is closer to the khorey. Then the tynzyan is thrown up sideways from below so that the loop can be hooked over the top of the khorey or cover it.

According to the rules each participant can make three attempts. It should be noted that every attempt continues until the first miss. Thus, with the first miss the attempt is considered to be used up. The best result from three attempts is counted. The participant is given a limited time of three minutes to throw the tynzyan. The countdown starts once the player is called. The time for tynzyan throwing is limited because such are the conditions of its use in the life of reindeer herders of the North. It is necessary to have quick reactions and skill when throwing a tynzyan, because the deer are constantly moving, sometimes at very high speed. Slowness in throwing a tynzyan can allow the deer to move away to an unreachable distance and then the herder will have to chase it. This requires additional efforts on top of the demands of the harsh living conditions for indigenous peoples in the Far North and calls for the right distribution of physical capacities. Consequently, the ability to throw a tynzyan accurately and quickly is an important quality of a reindeer herder. The presence of this quality in a young man may, as an element of initiation, indicate the recognition in the family of him as a man and push for a new social stage in the social structure of the clan and family.

It is worth pointing out that Konev describes another technique of throwing a tynzyan at a khorey, noting that this technique is used by young men aged sixteen to eighteen years [19]. Here, the tynzyan is straightened on the ground by a simple throw as this helps to avoid tangling. Sometimes boys just go and drag the tynzyan in order to straighten it in a line. It should be noted that the rules prohibit anyone to help the participant to straighten up the tynzyan. This helps the young man to show his knowledge and acquired skills. He needs to master the technique of straightening the tynzyan, because he often has to catch deer on the run, and the tynzyan is normally folded before throwing; also he will be on the move while his eyes are searching for the deer he wants to catch among the herd. The sarmik, through which the tynzyan is passed, is in his left hand. The braided cord of the tynzyan is pulled through the hole of the sarmik with the right hand for approximately 50 centimetres. Before throwing, the young man folds the extended part of tynzyan into small loops with a diameter of approximately 20 centimetres. Additional sections of the cord are drawn from the hole of the sarmik when necessary for making the loops. As a rule, the young man gathers in his right hand five or six such small loops. This amount is enough for throwing the tynzyan. George notes that the number of loops depends on the size of the hunting loop that is intended to reach and catch the deer. The diameter of the loops is also important, because it affects how easily the hunting loop will straighten in the air [15, 20].

After folding up the small loops to the right of sarmik, the young man also grasps in his right hand the knuckle itself, together with the folded loops. Here the folding of the hunting loop ends. The folded loops can now be thrown. However, the tynzyan will not fly far, because the energy of the throw will be used to pull the rest of the tynzyan along the ground. To avoid this, and to ensure that the loop flies far, the young man gathers in his left hand the large loops of cord. At this point the preparatory phase of throwing the tynzyan at a khorey is ended. In the right hand the young man holds the prepared hunting loop, consisting of the small loops and the sarmik. In his left hand the young man holds the rest of tynzyan folded into large loops.

The tynzyan throwing takes place as follows. The participant has both his hands with the folded tynzyan in front of his body. First, the hunting loop is thrown with the right hand. After the loop has gone in the direction of the target, in a moment, the young man releases the left hand, freeing the large loops. It is an important fact that the hunting loop straightens itself up in flight, and pulls the "hanging in the air" loops that were released from the left hand. Kochnev writes in his observations of the peoples of the North, that it is important to stretch the tynzyan well before throwing as this will make it flexible and to ensure that the loops open in flight to the khorey. It was also noted that some of the men spread polar fox fat all over the tynzyan [2, 21].

### **Synopsis of the argument supporting the thesis**

Throwing a tynzyan at a khorey as a part of the Northern polyathlon plays a very important role in the culture of the peoples of the North. This type of contest allows the participants to demonstrate their basic skills and abilities necessary for life as reindeer herders of the Far North. Participation in competitions in this sport is limited to certain age groups with their own rules and requirements for the level of mastering the technique of throwing a tynzyan.

### **CONCLUSION**

The ability of boys to master the technique of throwing a tynzyan at a khorey can be considered as one of the elements of initiation for young men in the traditional cultures of Northern peoples.

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