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THREE BOOKS ABOUT EVENKI

Анна А. Сирина. *Эвенки и эвены в современном мире. Самосознание, природопользование, мировоззрение* [Anna A. Sirina. *Evenki and Eveni in the Modern World. Identity, Nature Relations, World View*]. Moskva: Vostochnaia literature, 2012. 604 pages

Ольга А. Поворознюк. *Забайкальские эвенки. Социально-экономические и культурные трансформации в XX–XXI* [Olga A. Povorozniuk. *Baikal-Region Evenki. Social-Economic and Cultural Transformations in the 20th and 21st Century*]. Moskva: IEA RAN, 2011

Tatiana Safonova & Istvan Santha. *Culture Contact in Evenki Land. A Cybernetic Anthropology of the Baikal region*. Leiden & Boston: Global Oriental, 2013.

Evenki seem to be the most eagerly studied Siberian indigenous group. Therefore, this is no wonder that the Evenki research has shaped several categories and concepts that are used in Siberian and Arctic studies, or in anthropology in general. First of all, the word 'shaman' comes from the Evenki (or Tungus) language and its spread is rooted in a fundamental work of the Russian Tsarist ethnographer Sergei Shirokogoroff – *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*. Another of Shirokogoroff's highly influential works – *Social Organisation of the Northern Tungus* – helped to shape pre II World War structuralist social anthropology from Scandinavia to South Africa. Soviet classic ethnographers like Boris Dolgikh, Il'ia Gurvich and Andrei Popov developed their Marxist-Leninist concepts – ethnicity, ethnohistory and culture of using their fieldwork data collected among Evenkis. Another Soviet ethnographer, Vladillen Tugolukov, is appreciated by researchers of nomadism for several accounts based on Evenki reindeer herders. In

Western academia, David Anderson (Anderson 2000) wrote his often cited monograph – Identity and ecology in Arctic Siberia: the number one reindeer brigade – also on Evenkis. Cambridge based Russian scholar Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003) and American anthropologist Alexia Bloch (Bloch 2004) wrote their monographs about the construction of Siberian indigenous ethnic identities also after studying Evenkis.

Evenkis are one of the biggest Siberian small indigenous people's, counting over 35.000 according to the 2010 Russian census. When adding closely related Eveni people – ca. 22.000 – and ca. 35.000 Evenki living in Mongolia and more than 500 Evenkis in China, the size of the Evenki becomes considerably large for a Siberian indigenous ethnicity. Traditionally, Evenkis have inhabited a large territory from the Yenissei River to Sakhalin and the Arctic Ocean to northern China and Mongolia, and have been historically known as nomadic reindeer herders and hunters. However, in Mongolia and Siberia several Evenki communities have shifted to semi-nomadic horse and cattle breeding.

The first book under review, Anna Sirina's (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences) approximately a 600 page monograph, has been informally described as 'the Evenki book'. The book is based on her fieldwork materials, conducted among Evenki and Eveni in different Russian regions since the late 1980s combined with a careful reading of works of (mainly Soviet) ethnographers and archive data. The author has structured the book thematically, beginning with the analysis of different ethnonymes and their historical development, followed with the section about Evenki spirituality and discussing in further parts the use of nature, sense of space and world view. The first contribution of Anna Sirina to larger debates of Siberian studies is a well argued questioning of existing ethnic categories. Throughout the book, the author demonstrates her scepticism on the division between Evenki and Even, arguing that the cultural, linguistic or economic differences are not very significant, nor do Evenki and Eveni see themselves in many Siberian regions as separate people (e.g p. 56).

After a short review and discussion on Evenki rituals and religion, the author focuses on several topics that have been handled in individual works but rarely summed up by using complex material from different Evenki regional cultures. In Chapter 2 of Part II the focus is on Evenki names and nicknames, how these are linked subsequently to Russian and non-Russian influences. Chapter 3 of Part II thematises Evenki socialisation, especially what David Anderson has called 'Evenki pedagogy', the education and preparation of children for adult life. Here, the argument of independent learning through playing is also supported by the third book of this review, Safonova, and Santha. As an economic anthropologist, I find Part III extremely impressive, which – despite the title 'Nature use' (*Prirodopol'zovanie*) – scrutinises the Evenki economy and places it in the larger context of political, social and economic processes of Siberia and the Far East. For an anthropologist it is of great help in the discussion on post-Soviet reforms, indigenous rights, and laws on indigenous land use and reorganisation, topics that are linked historically to the Soviet economy and concept of 'tradition', often used to define the indigenous economy and social organisation (p. 207). Moreover, Sirina goes back to the pre-Soviet period to offer a complex interpretation on the development of Siberian indigenous identities and economies. A similar complex approach is applied for the first time in anthropological literature on the tradition of sharing and giving-Nimat. Nimat has been seldom mentioned and rarely discussed by Soviet ethnographers except in the context of one regional group. Here, Nimat in the works of Soviet scholars is combined

and compared with research from Western scholars on other Arctic regions. Sirina shows that sharing was one instrument of creating an egalitarian society, discussed also in two other books in this review (p. 324–325). Sirina's monograph is an excellent source of data for scholars about the Evenkis, this sophisticated bibliography helps to find comparative and thematic literature on any topic related to the past and present of Siberian indigenous people.

While Anna Sirina's book is a general analytical overview of Evenki culture and economy, then the other two books are in depth case studies. Olga Povorozniuk (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences) has published a more regionally focused research on the Transbaikalian (*zabaikalskie*) Evenki. This book is based on the author's fieldwork in the region since 1998, unpublished archive materials and newly published archive resources. The focus of the monograph is – among others – on socio-demographic processes like the gender shift, migration and transformation of identity. What, however, makes the book outstanding, is that these developments and processes are discussed through the prism of establishment and transformation of the civil society in the post-Soviet era.

Probably one of the most valuable contributions of the book to existing post-Soviet studies literature is its discussion of the Soviet enlightenment (*prosveshchenie*) in relation to social and economic reforms and the impact of these changes on various cultural, economic and social processes in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. In the book, the author shows the complexity of the enlightenment on a micro level. Soviet era development was accompanied with increasing access to education and medical care; but also forced sedentarisation and psychological trauma (p. 58). The Transbaikalian Evenki, nevertheless, maintained private and state reindeer herding and close emotional ties with the animals. Interestingly, Povorozniuk argues that reindeer herding existed through the Socialist era particularly due to its low costs – reindeer did not need expensive facilities or preparation of winter supplies. Moreover, the Soviets believed that the northern indigenous people were psychologically dependant on reindeer. Therefore state reindeer herding was seen as a compromise, and a tool to prepare the former nomads for a sedentary Socialist life style (p. 60). This is one interesting argument in the ongoing debate on whether reindeer herding was (and is) a cheap or expensive sphere.

The discussion on Soviet enlightenment also shows that people's 'nostalgia' for the Soviet era is, in fact, a quest for the social security and free entertainment provided by the state. People miss child day care (p. 79) or the free cinema shown by *agitbrigady* (p. 86). Simultaneously, respondents have negative memories from boarding school (*internat*) which was an institutional tool for the social exclusion and marginalisation of Evenki children (p. 79). The Soviet enlightenment machinery introduced forms of collectively celebrated holidays that are still a firm part of the demonstration of 'traditional culture', like the Reindeer Herder Day, folkloristic elements in New Year celebrations or the First of May (p. 88–89). The controversy around the Soviet era 'civilisation process' is not specific or unique to Transbaikalian Evenkies, but is seldom analysed in its complexity. Therefore a deeper description and analysis of the Soviet era 'inventing the tradition' would have been welcome. The topic of the impact of the Soviet enlightenment continues throughout the book and is nicely wrapped up with the section about the different modes of the 'revival of the tradition' in contemporary times.

Safonova (Centre for Independent Social research, Saint Petersburg) and Santha (Research Centre for the Humanities at the Hungarian Academy of Science) joint monograph is the most theoretical of all three books. The book leans on the linguistic theories of Gregory Bateson, an [English anthropologist, social scientist, linguist, visual anthropologist, semiotician and cyberneticist](#) who extended cybernetics to the social sciences. In the context of the book, cybernetics is applied as a tool to identify 'things' via their relationships to other 'things'. The authors believe that Bateson's cybernetics is 'a non-hierarchical language' that is an appropriate tool to 'describe patterns within individual, social and ecological systems' (p. 11). The data was collected in two different regions near Baikal among reindeer herding and horse breeding Evenki. The main arguments of Safonova and Santha are that a) Evenki society is an egalitarian society b) mobility and movement are essential for the Evenki culture c) the egalitarian and non-hierarchical nature of Evenki are expressed by their spontaneous travels and behaviour. These qualities are not new in books and articles focused on different aspects of Evenki culture, society or economy. Apart from being discussed to some extent in the previous two books of the review, the spontaneity and 'Evenki pedagogy' was one of the main themes in the David Anderson monograph, whereas egalitarianism has also been addressed by Gail Fondahl (1998). However, there are segments in the book that include new concepts, intriguing approaches or interesting field material.

The book opens with an introduction that is thoroughly reflective, explaining the difficulties of adaption in the Evenki host communities, subsequent problems and conflicts that (in the spirit of Bateson) had to be solved in order to build a fruitful communication process. The authors also describe how the Evenki life style has influenced their own behaviour after the field work, for example encouraged their own spontaneity and 'wage hunting'. In the first chapter, the authors focus on companionship (i.e. communality) and *pokazukha*. *Pokazukha* is a Russian word for fake or showing off, in this context it is used as ritual behaviour aimed to impress outsiders. Safonova and Santha have been working on Evenki *pokazukha* for a long time and here have summed up their findings. The authors draw on the shamanistic rituals, which are more performed for outsiders than Evenki community members. In the chapter ethnic rituals that are presented as staged performances for Russians or Buryats are analysed. It is interesting that the authors have managed to look behind that screen. In Siberia, every anthropologist has come across such staged stylised performances but only a few have had the privilege to talk to the performers and find out what they really mean and how seriously these performances are taken. As it turns out in this text, Evenki tend to laugh when watching video recordings of their own dances and rituals (p. 31). The authors conclude that *pokazukha* is a strategy to guard their independence from outsiders and leave their egalitarian society untouched.

This book also gives an overview about the relationships and communication patterns of Evenki with the different ethnic groups they meet. The relationships with Russians and Buryats are complex but the nuances fit nicely within the already existing academic interpretations of interethnic relations in Siberia. Relations with the Chinese, however, seem to be qualitatively different to relations with Russian and other indigenous groups. As a fact, Siberian indigenous – Chinese relations have found very limited coverage in the academic literature, if at all. The authors show that Evenki-Chinese economic relations are based on the 150 years history of Chinese presence in the region, where

Chinese have been living from the Tsarist period and throughout Soviet times. During that time the Evenki and Chinese have developed a mutual cooperation that was in 2007 and 2008 used in the trade of nephrite that Chinese purchased with the aim to resell in China. The authors believe that the Chinese possess a certain 'Chinese ethos' that has been formed due the semi-legal status of Chinese workers in the region. Chinese try to maintain a similar autonomous position as the Evenki, keeping their distance from other groups and being independent of other ethnicities. The Chinese ethos in the context of the book means that the actors 'must work hard to maintain their hard-won independence' (p. 119). The Evenki and Chinese 'system of interaction' is based on 'paradoxes' of various kinds of reciprocity, mutual expectations and disappointments (p. 122–123). Using the concept of Bateson – the double bind – Safonova and Santha try to find a logic in – from first sight – irrational interethnic trade and reciprocity. This logic embeds the fluidity between business and friendship. It is not uncommon to move from one sphere to another and back. The shift between different types of interaction also involves shifts in family, gender and social roles (i.e. a wife can turn into a wage labourer and back). It is also remarkable how a partner applies strategies to hinder these shifts if they are unsuitable.

These three books are worthy complementary reading that not only illuminate different aspects of Evenki culture but also enrich the readers' understanding of the historical background of the current social, cultural, ethnic and political processes in Siberia. While Sirina's book is recommended as a basis work to those looking for the general picture and good references on Siberian natives, then the other two should be interesting for readers expanding their knowledge on different shades of post-Socialism in Russian Asia. Povorozniuk adds new facets to the knowledge of how economic restructuring of the indigenous community is linked to cultural and social process, the last work is a good read for people looking for fresh interpretations of formal and informal social relations.

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