Shamanistic Revival in a Post-Socialist Landscape: Luck and Ritual among Zabaikal’ Orochen-Evenkis

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1.0 Introduction

The émigré Russian anthropologist Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (1935) is famous for attributing to Vitim River Orochens a special ‘psycho-mental complex’ evident in their language, everyday practice, but especially in their respect for the spirits who live in their land. His work carries a heavy debt to the intellectual currents of his day, which sought to understand the evolutionary implications of various forms of animistic ritual, and the complex way that they diffused across space. However, for anyone who has lugged one of his substantial volumes off of a library shelf, it is difficult to confine his work to a footnote in the history of anthropological thought. Despite their old-fashioned theoretical frame, the volumes contain a rich, if eclectic, description of everyday life in Manchuria and Zabaikal’e. His accounts generate rich insights into how identity comes to be embedded in forms of practice far more subtle than dialect, ethnonymns, or the grand ethnogenetic pedigrees which eventually became associated with his earlier category of the *ethnos* (1923). Instead, he suggested that the ‘psycho-mental complex’ could be read from the very way that the tent was set, or the way that seamstresses measured their sewing with their thumb and fore-arm. It is with his subtle intuition of linking intimate personal action to places, which I would like to frame in this ethnographic study of a contemporary Orochen family. This family is struggling to revive autochthonous reindeer herding in the difficult conditions of a post-socialist economy. Here I wish to examine how their everyday practice, and in particular one ritual, are important to understand how they are adapting to new political-economic circumstances; conditions nearly as tumultuous as the days of the Russian civil war when Shirokogoroff first wrote.

The chapter is based directly upon two short six-week ethnographic excursions in the region, first in 1989 and again in 2004, It is indirectly supported by fieldwork with many other Evenki families through central and northern Siberia between 1993 and 2003. The latter visit was organised in collaboration with a group of Canadian and Russian archaeologists, who directed our attention towards the material signatures of everyday practice. In particular, this chapter is the result of many fire-side discussions – or even arguments – with the archaeologists about the degree to which contemporary
Orochen society has been degraded or assimilated by the industrial vortex created by the former Soviet Union. Thinking back over fifteen years, I argue that post-socialist market conditions have changed the way that people react to time and spatial constraints, and that these changes, in turn, effect the way that Orochens perceive and mark the environment (Anderson in press). Here, I will argue that contemporary ritual expressions of ‘luck’ and reciprocity provide a frame through which post-socialist environmental and market conditions can be understood.

The issues of time and space frame this research in all aspects – theoretically, substantively, and logistically. If in 1989 I was carried through the low, forested mountains of this region in a series of publicly-subsidized helicopters, in 2004 our intrepid expedition had to cover large distances on foot and canoe to find the Aruneev family. The Aruneev’s were reputed to be the largest reindeer-holding family in the region. This was one of the reasons why we sought him out. Their lead personality – Nikolai Aruneev – was also rumoured by the villagers to be a practicing shaman. The issue of the convenience of our access to this family is an important part of this story. The collapse of Soviet-era public services is the most tangible change brought about by neo-liberal forms in the region. To some, Orochens who continue to live in the forest today physically embody a type of ‘wildness’ borne of necessity from the collapse of a strong, interventionist state. To others, like our guide Oleg Taskerov, the lack of an industrially forged point of access necessitated we watch for other markers in the landscape, ranging from footprints to an evaluation of forage and river conditions, in order to deduce where a reindeer-herding family would choose to live. Indeed, it is possible to argue that situating ones reindeer herding enterprise out-of-sight on the very boundaries between settlements, distribution zones, and radio contact points is one of the keys to success in post-socialist conditions. After ten days of overland travel through the taiga on foot, which at the time seemed to be quite a hardship, we were charmed by the warm and matter-of-fact welcome we received. Evenki-Orochen hospitality is a well-known comfort to travellers. What was more surprising was the smiling and knowing manner by which we were told that we were expected, our intentions seemingly announced to Nikolai Aruneev ahead of time by a prophetic dream.

2.0 The Work-unit “Beiun” and the Aruneev Family

The Aruneev family occupy one of the most distant of the newly-privatised territories of the former Tungokochen state farm. Legally incorporated as the work-unit tovarishestvo ‘Beiun’ [‘wild cervid’ – moose or reindeer], they spend most of the summers along the
Poperechnaia river and its headwaters. Their summer territories are located high up at the watershed between the Vitim and Nercha rivers – which due to the peculiar hydrology of the region, is also the continental divide between the Pacific and Arctic watersheds. In the winters, Nikolai Aruneev and his brother Yura travel further East through the Nercha valley with their reindeer hunting sable and other fur-bearers (Figure 1). The heart of the work-unit is made up of the two brothers – Nikolai and Yura, and their elderly mother Ol’ga Aruneeva [Zhurumeeva]. At various times of the year they are assisted by cousins, nieces and nephews, as well as in-laws married into the family. The family practices a rich assortment of traditional skills ranging from sewing and treating hides, cooking traditional foods, and practicing traditional ritual (Pastukhova 2005). Amongst themselves they spoke Evenki (a mixture of Eastern dialects) but with us, all except the elderly matron Olga would communicate well in Russian. Together they manage a rather large herd of taiga reindeer, numbering between 250 and 400 head, kept for meat, for transport, and their impressive prestige value. The main output of the work-unit was fur (chiefly Barguzin sable) but also exotic animal parts such as elk and bear parts, velvet antlers, and plant medicines – most of which are bartered through intermediaries, often to China.

Nikolai Aruneev is a larger-than-life figure. Back in 1987, village elders spoke to me of him with great hope as an aspiring student pursuing an education as a veterinarian in Irkutsk. When we met him in 2004, he was completing a full year of self-imposed exile from the village in what he described as an effort to fulfil a prophecy given to him by a Buriat shaman. He is an extremely energetic man with a great love for making long elliptical hikes across the taiga to search for lost reindeer, to assess plant and forage conditions, and to keep watch on the movements of animals in the region. He has an unnerving laugh, and a passion for showing off his knowledge in a number of different spheres ranging from Evenki dialects, to aboriginal land-rights across Russia and in Canada. What was particularly memorable was the confident way that he would mix knowledge traditions by healing reindeer with a combination of anti-biotics and traditional blood-letting, part of his larger speciality of mixing shamanistic and Soviet-industrial ritual traditions.

Nikolai Aruneev became the brigadier of the Beiun work-unit in 1992, cutting short his formal education to take advantage of the great privatisations that marked the end of the Soviet period. Together with 12 other state farm members, the majority of whom were Evenki, they laid claim to 450 reindeer, a stock of equipment, and a long-term lease to a large territory of corrals, cabins, traplines and reindeer pastures. The
work-unit had a difficult time. Within two years there were two divisions of capital in order buy-out disgruntled members leaving the work-unit. Nikolai is quite proud of the fact that in the intervening period he was able to cultivate his reindeer herd from a lean size of 200 head to its present documented official size of 309 head (although 500 would be closer to the truth).\(^1\) His success is due to carefully guarding and bringing back his animals from the forest, ensuring that the herd has access to good pastures, and through an aggressive and energetic policy of bringing in breeding bulls via acquaintances from most reindeer breeding regions in southeastern Siberia.

During our numerous evening discussions, Nikolai Aruneev was keen to emphasise that his secret to a good life in the taiga was to keep good relationships with the land’s spirits. He came to this realisation in his mid-thirties as he participated in a network of visits between indigenous peoples across the circumpolar North. He associates the beginning of his apprenticeship to the taiga’s spirits to a trip to Prince George, Canada in 1998 at the invitation of Dr. Gail Fondahl at the University of Northern British Columbia. Following this visit, he made many other trips to participate in meetings of the newly forged Association of Native Sparse Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East (more commonly known as RAIPON) and various cultural festivals in Buriatiia. Citing parts of his genealogy, which include Buriat-based Orochen shamans two generations ago, he sees himself as re-adopting local spirits who were orphaned during the period of state-sponsored violence against religious practitioners. On the basis of his meetings with Buriat shamans, discussions with local elders, and consulting material in published ethnographies and in museums, he is working to dress the landscape with old rituals in order to please the spirits. His interest in reviving ritual seems to have grown with the decline of state control over the economy, and follows the general growth in pride in aboriginal life-ways all across the Russian Federation. What is very unique about his story is that he prefers to revitalise traditions amongst a small close-knit group of kinsmen roughly 70 kilometres from the nearest settlement.

3.0 A Sacrifice for the Spirits

Nikolai Aruneev’s philosophy was demonstrated for us prominently not only in words but in practice. On the second day of our visit we were treated to a ritual spectacle made more mysterious for the fact that most of it was unannounced.

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\(^1\) According to my fieldnotes from 1989, although people fondly remember a maximal herd size of 2000 animals in 1972, smaller reindeer herds were more common (See also Fondahl 1989). In 1989 there were four reindeer herds each of 200 head.
In the early afternoon of 27 July, the entire reindeer herd was brought back to camp - a teeming mass of bulls, cows and calves which seemed to grow out of the brush opposite the camp like a dark thundercloud. The herd congregated in the corralled portion of the camp greedily lapping-up the salt Ol’ga had rubbed on the tree trunks. Taking advantage of his increased labour-power, Aruneev immediately seconded our group of three into an afternoon of chasing, capturing, and inoculating reindeer. Many reindeer were caught and tethered that afternoon. One young bull (approximately 3 years old) with one blind eye was left off to the side. Having been asked if he was going to treat and heal this deer as well, Aruneev exploded with nervous laughter and replied that the deer was to be given as a sacrifice (zhertvoprinoshenie) to the spirits. Puzzled, we were led slowly into the ritual.

The processes of making this ‘offering’ (podarok) to the spirits started with sending the two women in the camp off on a rather futile far-off trek to pick blueberries. Aruneev made an attempt to gather all the remaining men together (at this time, five). Two of the men wandered off in an ironic mood, since they seemed to know what was about to happen, muttering something about Nikolai’s shamanising. These sceptics were Nikolai’s brother Yurii and a cousin – Petr – who had been spending the summer with the work-unit away from the village. Three uninitiated male assistants were left – two University of Aberdeen anthropologists (myself and Donatas Brandisauskas) and one Evenki guest (Gregorii Chernykh) from Ust'-Karenga who had helped us find the family.

The offering began with Nikolai’s request that Gregorii hit the tethered reindeer at the back of the head with the blunt end of an axe – which was quite a shocking beginning. When living with Evenki in other parts of Siberia I was strictly taught that hitting a reindeer (or even a sable) was a serious act of disrespect (reindeer are usually slaughtered with a quick stab behind the skull). I was asked to hold the quivering reindeer as Gregorii - slit the throat and gathered all the blood in basin (Figure 2). When the reindeer shuddered, releasing its life, Gregorii began skinning the animal under Nikolai’s close direction. The rest of us were then gradually recruited into the butchering process. Nikolai lit and maintained a small fire off away from the slaughtering site while instructing us – often in Evenki – to what seemed to me (and to others) the unusual manner he wanted us to treat the remains in comparison to the way that reindeer are usually slaughtered. The animal was skinned in one piece starting from the hooves. Thereafter careful effort was applied to not severing any external part of the animal from the skin. This included ensuring that the four sets of dangling hoof-
nails remained attached to the legskins. This delicate, and unusual, operation was
done by severing the hooves from the lower leg bones at their joints but by not severing
the hoove-nails from the skin at the very bottom-front (as one would usually do if one
were interested in tanning or preparing the skin). Nikolai had to perform this operation
himself since nobody, not even Gregorii, was clear on what he needed doing (Figure
3). In addition the neck and head area was skinned such that the ears, nose, and velvet
antlers remained attached to the head skin (the hard portions of the antlers severed
from the skull under the skin with an axe). The penis was also left attached to the skin.
During the entire process willow branches were liberally spread out to keep the skin and
carcass clean of dirt. Only after the grinning carcass was completely skinned, and the
entire skin removed to the side, was the carcass gutted and the meat cut apart. As is
usual, the lower cavity was opened with care so as not to split the intestines. First the
intestines and then the inner organs were removed. The interesting element, to my
eyes, was the placing of parts onto the nearby fire. First the steaming intestinal
contents, were emptied onto the fire. The collapsed intestines were set aside in another
basin to be washed-out and cooked later that evening. Then the lungs, heart, liver,
kidney, were each carefully removed. A small portion of each organ, including each
stomach and intestine, was cut and fed to the fire. After this the organs were neatly
placed – or rather displayed – on another mat of cut willows (Figure 4). Some of us
nibbled on the fresh kidneys and liver. The rest of the body was cut up in an exactingly
clean way. Legs were disarticulated and ribs cut apart. The head and neck were
severed and the head split into two. All of the disarticulated pieces were set aside and
displayed on more willow mats, with a small part of each piece fed to the fire. We were
urged to bring more and more dry wood to ensure that the smouldering fire devoured all
the gifts – a feat which was particularly difficult to arrange for the stomach contents. All
parts of the deer were either reserved for future use, or burned.

It later turned out that this was only the beginning of the ritual (Figure 5).

Donatas and I were invited to follow Nikolai into a special site that he had chosen
in the forest between the camp and the river. We were asked to each bring axes and
our cameras. Some 30 meters away, on a slight rise (which was a sort of island in-
between dried-up river channels), we were asked to prepare several long poles
(approximately 3-4 meters long) made of larch and birch. We were told that the mixture
of larch and birch poles was an important detail. Nikolai brought with him the skin of
reindeer. The skin was mounted on a long larch pole such that the head, neck, spine
and tail hung along the ridge pole and the legs, feet, and dangling penis hung over the
sides. The skin was tied to the pole with colourful cloth ribbons (made of strips from old clothing) at the nose and neck. The dangling front and rear hooves were also tied together with ribbons. We then were asked to help elevate the entire mounted skin by lifting the ridge pole up with the help of two other larch poles (each of which had a Y-shaped crux cut at their ends). We secured the offering by leaning the poles against two standing larches. It was important for Nikolai that the scaffolding lean against standing trees (and not be fixed) and that the animal-offering faced east. Nikolai later told us that ideally the structure should have been mounted on top of a substantial hill with a clear view of the rising sun, but that since there was not such a hill in the immediate vicinity of our camp we were forced to improvise. The ridge pole was weighted down with birch poles, which seemed to shine white against the brown colour of the fur and the trees. The entire scaffold recalled a classic Evenki mortuary *lokovun* – a structure used both to store everyday goods but also to elevate the clothes and possessions of a deceased person (Figure 10) (Sirina 2001). Behind this mortuary scaffolding we were asked to help erect a triangular stage set lower than and behind the reindeer offering but still a good 2 meters high. It too was constructed with thick short larch poles set to lean against three standing trees. The triangular stage was covered with small broken sticks to make a platform. This triangular structure recalls the triangular offering stages made by northern lakut-reindeer herders (Gurvich 1977). No nails were used in any part of the structure, however flexible willow branches (if necessary twisted or warmed over a fire) were use to tie the joints between leaning pillars and the ridge-pole (Figure 6).

The conclusion to the ritual ended with setting offerings on the platform and around the site. We brought one shoulder piece (*lopatka*), the testicles, some cartilage from the knees, and some odd scraps that were left from the butchering process. It was important for Nikolai that there was only one piece of each type. Four trees in each of the cardinal directions surrounding the offering were tied with coloured ribbons (*trapochki*) in three rows. Cigarettes (*paperosy*) and matches were placed in behind each ribbon, taking care to circle the offering in a clockwise (‘sun-wise’) direction. Nikolai told us that it was important that we exit the offering site towards the west by walking backwards facing the offering, only turning southwards towards the camp once the line of sight was broken by a tree (this he called a ‘corner’). We documented the site before making the offerings.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of the ritual – a part that now everybody joined in on – was the feast. This was held in the camp. Over the next two days we
consumed the remains of the entire animal. This was served in a variety of ways. We made blood sausage out of the intestine, boiled meat, ate the liver raw, and even ground meat to make Russian *pirozhki* (Figure 7). The fresh meat was no doubt a welcome diet to the brigade, which up until this time (and again after this time) subsisted on a diet of salted and dried moose meat (*kukuru* – Ev.). It was an unforgettable welcome to the Poperechnaia river valley, and a somewhat mysterious moment for anthropologists.

4.0 Luck and Ritual in a Post-Socialist Landscape

There is nothing unusual in participating in gifting rituals in this part of Siberia, as in almost any other part of the circumpolar North. The phenomena of ‘feeding the fire’ with fat or spirits is documented widely across Eurasia (Alekseev 1993; Tsybikov 1927; Dmitriev 1989; Jordan 2003; Vasilevich 1969; Vitebsky 1992). The idea of making offerings (or placings) of coins, matches or gunshells is also well documented among Evenkis – with some of the best known references going back to Shirokogoroff (1935: 193-197) but common in other regions as well. The respectful treatment of the bones or other remains of wild reindeer and reindeer foetuses, and of bear, is well known among Evenkis (Anderson 2000; Anisimov 1950; Vasilevich 1969) and in particular in Zabaikal’e (Abe 2005). Across Siberia these rituals of reciprocity with the taiga, the tundra, or with spirits are also not limited to indigenous nationalities with many authors documenting the participation of local Russians (Anderson 2000; Sirina 2001). These gifting rituals were present in the Imperial period, and remained common in the Soviet period. It is not surprising that they continue in the post-Soviet period.

What is unusual, or at least caused some discomfort, was the intricately structured and built nature of this ritual. This ‘sacrifice’ was never really explained to us during or indeed after the ritual. When I asked the brigadier delicately about the ritual I was told very simply that the reindeer was an offering/gift (*podarok*) to unnamed spirits. In different contexts and at different times Nikolai sometimes spoke of spirits being linked to concrete individuals or ancestors who had once lived in these valleys. Again in different contexts, he mentioned his belief that making gifts to concrete ‘old [deceased] men’ or to the ‘spirits’ would bring ‘luck’ (*kutu*-Ev.) in reindeer husbandry and in hunting.

The idea of ‘luck’ is an important element in this region. Shirokogoroff (1933: 154, 187) notes both the close link between the ideas of luck and of spirits and the fact that key ritual concepts such are common to both Buriats and Evenkis. Hamayon (1990: 555ff), in her fundamental work on Siberian shamanism (but in particular among
Zabaikal Buriats and Orochens) sees luck as forming a foundation for interpreting ritual through its connection with the life force. Associating the details of this ritual with other stories that he told later about his travels in Buriatia, it seems possible that specific details of the ritual (the coloured fabrics, the precise manner of circling the reindeer and exiting the site via ‘corners’) may have been adopted from Buriat shamanic rituals that Nikolai had observed. However, at no time did Nikolai ever say this directly. One late evening he did mention that he was inspired to make this particular structure from a photograph that he saw in the local museum in Bagdarin (but he added that he confirmed many details of the ritual with his mother and other elders). When I asked him if he regularly practices this ritual, his answer came in terms of an authoritative timeless present ‘Orochens always did kind of thing’. At other times he gave thanks to the Buriat shamans, with whom he was friendly, who had encouraged him to start a programme of honouring ‘his own’ spirits, but said that since they could offer no direct experience with these spirits, that he would have to learn about these spirits himself. Aruneev, again in separate discussion, provided yet a third possible source, citing his experiences visiting Sekani and Beaver First Nations Communities in British Columbia as part of one of the first circumpolar exchanges of indigenous northerners. Here he was struck by the way that these communities were reviving and incorporating new ritual to heal community problems such as alcoholism and suicide. The sceptical reaction of many of his comrades, and the fact that none of his long-term helpers agreed to participate in the ritual, did lend an impression that this particular ritual was a bit of an innovation, and perhaps a strategic one. Our suspicions that the ritual was done for strategic purposes were strengthened by the fact that we were asked to photograph the ritual and to send a set the photographs to the Evenki cultural centre in the regional capital of Verkh Usugli. We were directly asked to mention that ‘this is the type of thing that we found in the forest’. It was clear by the context that Nikolai did not hold a high opinion of the intelligentsia who ran this museum. Our archaeologist colleagues, who arrived on foot a week later, were extremely dismissive of this ritual and other types of overt spirituality that they witnessed during their short stay in the forest. The gist of their argument was that it was clear that this young man could never have witnessed these rituals in action. Without this direct ‘genetic’ link they were seen by the archaeologists as being nothing but poor (and meaningless) imitations of a forest culture that was, for all intents and purposes, extinct.

2 Alexandra Lavrillier reports that Evenkis in Amur district of the Sakha republic link their poor economic conditions to their failure to honour their spirits “nous vivons mal parce que nous n’honorons plus les esprits de la nature” (Vate & Lavrillier 2003:103). (I am thankful to Virginie Vate for pointing me to this citation)
None of us ever confronted Nikolai with our doubts, although I am sure he is quite used to performing his work around sceptics. If one were obsessed with authenticity, one could attribute many cynical motives to Nikolai for wanting to ‘construct’ or ‘revive’ versions of older ritual complexes. In the new status economy provided by foreign-sponsored indigenous Non Governmental Organisations, primitivist rituals lend a strong veneer of cultural difference and authenticity that could be later used to defend claims to land-rights. Further, by acting like a mysterious dark woodsman living for months, and even years, alone in the taiga, Nikolai was building up a reputation of somebody who wielded very strong survival skills. This would certainly quash any attempt by local villagers to characterise him merely as a ‘city-boy’ brought up and educated in a series of boarding school. Eyewitness accounts of professionally-performed shamanic ritual, from objective outsider observers, could only increase the respect he could expect in local and regional political circles. Finally, in the aggressive post-socialist economic environment of free-wheeling middlemen and poachers, having a reputation for dabbling in dark matters could serve as a relatively inexpensive form of protection. With this reputation, chronically superstitious Russians would more be unlikely to poach on his territories, or block his movements, if they could just as easily hunt or trap on other unoccupied stretches of taiga, of which there are many.

In the end, the issue of authenticity is not the most interesting aspect of this ritual. It was clear to all of us that Nikolai Aruneev was a highly skilled and imaginative reindeer herder and we would have to admit that the ritual was unquestionably executed with grace and with respect. I expect that if I had figured out a polite way of broaching the question of authenticity with Nikolai, he would answer that he is simply rebuilding relationships with spirits who have always been present on the land during the entire Soviet period but who been ignored for many generations. Aruneev said something of the kind to the Hungarian ethnographer Istvan Santha (per.comm.) by claiming that during the Soviet period tungus spirits were cared for, and essentially adopted, by Buriat shamans in the neighbouring settlement of Bagdarin (Santha 2005). If we apply this fantastic, and rather beautiful statement, Aruneev can be seen as taking over responsibility for spirits temporarily ‘leased-out’ to other tenants - much like he is now legally taking over family lands temporarily managed by the Tungokochen state farm.

Alexandra Lavrillier (2003), who documented the reconstruction of the seasonal Ilkenipke ritual among Amur river Evenkis in the 1990s, also documented the sources

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3 We were told that in 2004 the validity of the Aruneev’s lease to this area of the taiga was being challenged by authorities in oblast’ capital of Chita as part of a general revisions and re-registration of the lands privatised during the first period of economic re-structuring.
used by urban intelligentsia to revive a ritual that had not been practiced for several generations. However she too hauntingly describes how despite the extreme political pressure to abandon their late-spring ritual of respect, Amur region Evenkis nevertheless continued to experience the deeper ecological context of the rite. This continued through the joy they experienced in the birth of a new generation of reindeer calves and in the solidarity they felt through the officially sanctioned ‘Day of the Reindeer Herder’ held roughly at the same time.

All of these ecological clues are glosses on the classic explanation provided by Siberian shamans in all times and places that they take their calling and their cues not by choice, but directly from the spirits themselves (Znamenski 2003). The route by which they learn to perform their respect – either through kin or through books – is not as important as the ecology of respect in itself.

What is interesting for an ethnography of post-socialist forest subsistence economies is not the question of the authenticity of observed ritual but that the way that ritual fits into an ecology of social practice after the collapse of the Soviet state. To my mind, this event presents two important ethnographic facts. The first is that the peculiar social ecology of a collapsing industrial state has provided certain opportunities for Orochens to re-occupy their lands and a certain necessity for them to re-employ ritual forms that have not been practiced for many generations. The second, is this that even though rituals of reciprocity have always been practiced in this region in both the Imperial and Socialist periods by Evenkis and Russians alike, there is something unsettling to anthropologists, and to locals, when respect is marked by erecting a tangible public monument. Both facts together suggest that in post-socialist conditions there is a tension – or a debate – about what forms of ritual are important in conditions of the ‘wild’ market. For me, this suggests that heart of the Orochen ‘psycho-mental complex’ – that part which adjust personal embodied behaviour to the social environment – is still very much alive in this region of Siberia.

5.0 On Identifying and Cultivating the Orochen Taiga

Overtly, rituals of respect are directed at the taiga (or, at spirits living in the taiga). However where exactly is the taiga? At first glance, it is not difficult to find uninhabited and forested areas in this region of Siberia. Since the end of the Soviet period, there has been a steady collapse of most publicly funded economic activity in all but the largest settlements. If in 1987, the taiga was covered with reindeer-herding bases, military outposts, geological exploration camps, and meteorological stations, today there
is little evident built occupancy other than a few scattered home-made hunting shelters and a few villages (and those often without electricity). At least conversationally, the taiga is everything in between the population points of Tungokochen, Ust'-Karenga, and Kyker (Figure 1) – an area of approximately 1,000 square kilometres.

However when looking at the post-socialist taiga with the eyes of an independent reindeer herder, it is not such a big space at all. Both the socialist period, and the first ten years post-socialist reform, has left tangible material markers which limit the ways in which the forest can be used. A common ecological feature here, as all over Siberia, are the overburdened forests and meadows in the immediate vicinity of artificially constructed settlements. Beginning after the end of the War, and continuing through the 1970s, central planners forcibly resettled hunters and small-scale agriculturalists into larger and larger settlements which were designed to be serviced by centrally subsidized state farms and their industrial networks of electricity, sanitation, and distribution. These expensive networks were the first to collapse at the end of the Soviet period leading residents to harvest-out most saleable, edible and combustible resources immediately surrounding the settlements. The first stage of any trip to the ‘taiga’ is a sprint across a zone of twenty to thirty kilometres in diameter where it is difficult to keep reindeer or to feed oneself for more than a few days at best.

Zabaikal’e had its own Soviet-era industrial features which place further limits on the places where one might be able to live. One large, but officially invisible feature, is the now abandoned military poligon directly to the south and west of Tungokochen. This was an area where, in the Soviet period, large cohorts of hungry armed soldiers were kept – soldiers who often enjoyed hunting in their free time. The poligon was also a weapons-testing range – a practice which is probably the most important spark in the fire history of the region (Fondahl 1998; Pyne 1997; Soja 1996). Similar problems, although on a smaller scale, occurred at the geological camp to the North of Ust'-Karenga. Uncontrolled fires in the region are extremely destructive over the medium term of seven to ten years. The sharp hills and ridges are made of a type of shale, lightly covered with a thin layer of turf, roots, and soil. A fire destroys not only the trees and the surface lichen, but also the overburden that holds roots and allows bushes to grow again. The usual result of a wildfire is a barren, eroded hillside made up of the ghostly husks of fallen larches, projecting their sharp, burnt trunks at random odd angles over the sharp exposed edge of the fractured bedrock. These landscapes are not only barren of forage for many years but, are hazardous to walk across. During my fieldwork
in 1987, the extent of damage from fire was cited as the reason for instituting a drastic
cull in the size of reindeer herds from 2000 head to 500 head.

The post-Soviet period, apparently, led to a surprising acceleration in the erosion
of the taiga environment. According to all members of the Beiun collective, and
villagers in Tungokochen and in Ust'-Karenga, one adaptation to the new economy in
exotic animal parts encourages traders to set fire to the taiga in the autumn in order to
better expose the whitened hulks of discarded antlers. The antlers are gathered,
broken up, and sold for oriental medicines. Some of the people interviewed even hinted
darkly that fires were set in order to destroy the trap lines held by competitors. Using his
characteristically mystical way of speaking, Nikolai also spoke of the taiga withdrawing
and hiding itself from the touch of anyone using mechanised equipment. He claims that
all the valleys which have been crossed repeatedly by all-terrain tank-tracked
vezdekhody and snowmobiles sooner or later are destroyed by fire. Sirina (2001: ch 5)
describes similar places in the northern part of Irkutsk oblast’. The immediate cause,
according to Nikolai, are the sparks from the engine, or a carelessly discarded cigarette.
The deeper fact, according to him, is the fact that the taiga only protects itself in places
where people and reindeer choose to walk.

It is difficult to give an authoritative reason for the fires in the region, but the fact
that the fires were there is evident to anyone walking through the forest (Figure 8).
Whether the result of malice, industrial pressure, climate change, or ‘feeding the spirits’,
it is indeed true that the Aruneevs’ taiga, lying high at top of the Inner Asian continental
divide, looks and feels like a sanctuary in between a series of burned-out and barren
regions.

The reaction of Aruneev and his work-unit to this insecure environment is
characteristically constructive. The area surrounding the abandoned poligon and
geological camp is viewed as a handy source for abandoned metal and canvass useful
for making tools and tents. The sanctuaries in between the burned-out valleys are in
turn cultivated to preserve or enhance their productivity. Unlike in Evenki areas in the
Arctic, Aruneev seems to follow a strictly planned pattern of rotating pastures for his
flock by moving up and down the Poperechnaia valley (Figure 9). Our team
encountered the work-unit at their lowest camp – called Ust’-Poperechnaia. Over the
course of July and August Aruneev shifted camp once upwards to the head-waters of
the Poperechnaia (camp ‘Poperechnaia’) and were speaking of moving again higher to
the Bazarnaia camp. According to Aruneev, their winters are spent high up on the
mountains surrounding these two alpine rivers, with forays out for hunting. As the year
moves to spring, the reindeer gather themselves in the damp valley bottoms at specially-maintained kever meadows. As spring moves to summer, the herders provide reindeer with salt at specific places, as well as light smudge fires (to drive away insects) in order to provide them with an attractive living environment. If the herders did not alter the environment such, the reindeer would grow wild, seeking out pastures and insect-free escarpments independently of their human hosts. To make this herding strategy even more effective, the herders also deliberately choose damp areas infested with mosquitoes and black-flies in order to exaggerate the reindeer’s dependency on the environment that people create.

The phenomena of the kever meadow is quite a unique adaptation to the region and perhaps to Siberian reindeer herders (although it is well documented for Canadian Cree hunters (Lewis 1989; Pyne 1997). The kever is an open-marshy place kept clear of brush by the deliberate application of fire either every year, or every other year, in the early spring. If burned at a point in time before the snow melts on the hillsides, the damp and frozen trunks of the surrounding forest naturally ensure that the fire does not spread. The blackened space attracts more solar energy than the snowy regions, which in turn melts the snow even further and providing a rich and fertilized meadow to encourage growth. In these spots a type of grass (nirgate – Ev.) sprouts early and rapidly becoming ready forage for the herd. The animals are automatically attracted to these instant meadows eliminating the need to run after them. When the mosquito season falls, the herd then gathers itself around the smudge fires provided by the herders. Donatas Brandisauskas (in prep) is researching the history of this adaptation in more detail. Preliminary discussions suggest that this adaptation may have come from the horse pastoralists who have always lived beside and between Orochen reindeer herders. Whether or not this is true, the kever meadows also allow herders the option to keep horses in summer giving them easier access to a more robust form of summer overland transport.

This rather clever but strict pattern of migration is described by Aruneev by a rather formal calendar of dates, which are interspersed with key feast-days of the Russian Orthodox ritual calendars (Table 1). During our short visit, one particular day (2 August), said to be an Orthodox feast day, was organised to be a day of rest in between certain days reserved for harvesting velvet antlers, inoculations, antler-trimming, and so-on through-out the year. The use of ritualised days to structure hunting and herding activity is not unusual to Siberian herding. Reindeer herding all over Siberia in the Soviet period was also structured according to an industrial ritual
calendar punctuated by New Year’s, the Day of the Reindeer Herder, and the ‘First Bell’ of the Village School (Anderson in press). According to Aruneev, strict respect for feast days and the natural rhythms of the reindeer herd gives one ‘luck’ (kutu). This element of being able to place oneself best to take advantage of ecological opportunities would seem to be of much greater importance in the post-Soviet economy than it was when one could rely on the provisions of a publicly-funded welfare state.

Given the limitations of time and space in this post-socialist, burned-out ecosystem, and the need to cultivate special places to attract reindeer, it is not surprising to me that Aruneev is also cultivating new forms of ritual. The timely and evocative sacrifice of one reindeer (and one that happened to be blind in one eye) is a smart move, both in terms of hosting distant guests, improving one’s reputation, but expressing respect for a place that is quite unique. Given Aruneev’s isolation, both socially and geographically, he relies on the taiga to treat him well in order to survive. It is probably the case that the structure of this particular ritual was re-invented, but I have no doubt that it was applied sincerely in an effort to express thanks to a place, to the spirits, and to the present guests who might also bring other positive things in the future. As such it is not an artificial addition to the place, but part of the local sentient ecology.

6.0 On Built and Embodied Forms of Ritual

What is perhaps more surprising than the ritual itself was the level of puzzlement and concern among local Evenkis that Aruneev was eager to build structures to signal his respect for the land. It is difficult to describe this sentiment, but it seemed to involve a collective opinion that such actions were old-fashioned, a little childish, and perhaps a little dangerous. It would be not unreasonable to say that most people in the Tungokochen region evaluated hunting and herding using a productivist register – by means of quantities of deer and fur, the quality of housing, and the ability of the hunter to generate a cash income. Given the overwhelming dominance of Soviet productivist ideology in the recent past, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that some forms of local belief blended well with Soviet modernity. Local forms of ritual seem to survive in a much more robust form in embodied forms of actions – forms that were not so visible to the Soviet state (Long 2005). Built structures, on the other hand, seem to challenge Soviet sensibilities more radically (Humphrey 2005).

The offering of a reindeer (or rather a reindeer skin and some parts) was only one rather overt ritual endowing ‘luck’ among others which were judged to be
uncontroversial. Among the uncontroversial forms we observed (and the others participated in) were the feeding small bits of meat to the fire\textsuperscript{4}, placing ribbons or other small gifts at mountain passes between river systems, leaving coins or matches at the places where medicine is harvested\textsuperscript{5}, and throwing small offerings (or lighted cigarettes) in the direction of known grave-sites. Offerings are made at the special rocks or cliffs where prophecies can be read (these are often sites of Neolithic rock art) (Arbatskii 1978). In addition to these active actions which ensure luck, we were told that hunting luck can be indicated by a dog lying on its back, a dropped knife landing blade-up, the presence of spider’s webs on dishes, a woman who comes to a hunter in a dream (incidentally, guests are foreseen when unfamiliar dogs arrive in one’s dreams). All of these rituals or signs are extremely subtle. They are conscious acts, but they never announced or discussed. My impression is that this is the case not so much since people wish to hide these rituals as the fact that they are regarded as an important and obvious part of everyday life. They are embodied as part of people’s personal repertoire, much like familiar routines around the campfire.

Of course, many forms of everyday practice leave material signatures, but one could argue they are one step less than constructing a monument. The ritual placings of coins and bones obviously leave material signatures. Similarly, the everyday routines around a camp leave a signature of deposition providing the ethnoarchaeologist with proof of regularities in everyday life (Anderson in press b; Pastukhova 2006). Perhaps the most important architectural signature today, as in the Soviet period, are the prohibitions surrounding re-occupying a camp built by members of a different family or clan. To this day, each of the four named camps along the Poperechnaia river is actually a collage of a dozen or so individual campsites established by known individuals over the last twenty years. Even during high Sovietism, Orochens never re-occupied the spaces used by other people or re-used the tent-frames or structures they left behind. In the case of people with particular power, it was prohibited to hunt or cross their former places (especially if their final resting place was located there). According to all people we spoke to in the taiga or in the village, reusing somebody else’s place was unlucky or even could trigger accidents or death. Many stories were cited – and sometimes repeated - to underscore this point (perhaps deliberately for the benefit of our archaeologists). In a forest ecology, and especially in winter, it is not always possible to see the places where other Orochens travelled and lived – especially

\textsuperscript{4} As in other Evenki places, sharp bones should not be fed to the fire.

\textsuperscript{5} This is specifically true of the places along cliffs were momeo ‘petrified sap’ is harvested.
in a political ecology where many families were forcibly resettled into new places. However many of the stories told are about discovering these facts through other signs such as unwelcome sounds or apparitions appearing suddenly at campfires warning the living of their trespasses. Moving camp was always the solution to these problems. In each of these cases, the material or ghostly signatures were artefacts of the practice of concrete people. They were not deliberately built to outlast person or to serve as agents in their own right.

Aside from the scaffolding for the sacrificial reindeer, there are other ritual structures which I would argue were designed to have a monumental quality – and which are recognised and generally respected. The most important of these are graves and other mortuary structures. Orochens, and other Evenkis, traditionally used aerial burials – and in this region continued the practice well into the 1960s (Arbatskii 1982; Vetrov 1999). Even after the vast majority of Orochens were interred in graveyards, their personal possessions continued to be given aerial burials. Clothing, personal dishes and basins, hunting equipment, personal idols, and even reindeer were ripped, broken, or slaughtered and suspended from poles usually at the gravesite. If through some tragedy the person died and was buried away from his or her possessions, the objects themselves could be suspended separately in a _lokovun_ scaffold similar to that which we constructed for the reindeer (Figure 10). All of these places would be subject to avoidance and gifting rituals – even during the Soviet era. If a mortuary site was accidentally encountered, the hunter would leave an offering as a sign of respect (and would not harvest anything at that site). Some valleys, which were reputed to hold the remains of powerful shamans, would be avoided entirely, even if their specific mortuary structures were not visible. In these cases, the mortuary monuments became synonymous with the geography. These built mortuary sites, while clearly associated with a concrete historical person, should be considered to be more than the signatures of embodied practice. They were clearly built as monuments – and everyone respected them as such.\(^6\) Party instructors tolerated them as exceptions, presumably because even Soviet planners could not plan away death. Perhaps they felt that this type of mortuary structure would itself die-off over time with older generations, and indeed they are not that common today.

Another interesting exception is the carving of wooden images on mountain passes – idols – as a foci for accepting offerings. This is an old and well- documented

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\(^6\) One of Nikolai Aruneev’s more controversial practices during our visit was to directly visit a grave, with gifts and cleansing rituals, in order to directly ask for luck from the deceased owner. Although this is fascinating and rather humorous story, it will have to be told in a different place.
Evenki practice that is enjoying a strong revival not only among forest Orochens but among urban Russians as well. Nikolai carved and placed an idol at the top of a pass between the Poperechnaia and Kotanschal river valleys along the path that connects his main base and storage area and the outlying reindeer camps (Figure 11). Each time he passes the *kunakan inuvun* [child’s toy] he leaves a lighted cigarette. This is consistent with his belief that luck (and the spirits that hold it) is confined to specific watersheds. He sees this idol as sitting at the main entrance to the places where he holds his reindeer. During our visit he was anxious to feed it to try to forgo problems with a troublesome bear – an animal that managed to harvest two reindeer silently, at night, while we were asleep. The construction of idols, while not very monumental, has until recently been treated with as much suspicion as the construction of mortuary scaffolds for reindeer. Today, other visiting Evenkis did not treat even this idol with much interest. The distinction between a carved idol, and the other legitimate forms of reciprocity and respect, seems to be that the idol was carved to represent something other than the person who made it. It is a humble artefact, but monumental in purpose. It is a fascinating that such idols, which were frowned upon as much by Orthodox missionaries as Soviet planners, have now become quite fashionable. On the main gravel highway between Kyker and Chita the Russian drivers have erected an image of an Evenki idol at a particularly steep pass. It is said that this ‘shaman’ is placed at the approximate burial site of an old Evenki shaman (Figure 12). Russians and Orochens alike claim that if drivers do not stop to offer him vodka, coins, or cloth that one risks a mechanical breakdown or worse. As figure 12 shows, this shaman (in contrast to the child’s doll) is extremely popular and wealthy. He is also a local celebrity, since his location is not clearly marked. One would have to know ahead of time at which place to stop and which path to take to reach him. These motorway placing sites are widespread throughout Siberia today and are one of the most common ways that older forms of belief are being revived in the post-socialist economy.

Given the varied ways that members of indigenous nationalities, and Russians, indicate their respect for places, and entrances to places, today, it is surprising that Nikolai’s mortuary scaffold attracted such suspicion. I suspect that the real reason for this reaction was the context of the meeting between an indigenous Orochen and foreign anthropologists which implied a deeper quality of authenticity than might have been the case if we had all been Russians. Beyond this, I also suspect that there still is a deeply rooted suspicion of vernacular architecture with a monumental aspect – the quality of transcending the person who built it. Finally, I suspect that making an idol out
of useful resource (a reindeer) cleaves close to deep Soviet productivist taboos (in the Soviet period it would have been illegal to eat a state reindeer let alone sacrifice it). Ritual forms which are embodied, or closely part of everyday practice (such as feeding the shaman along a busy highway), do not attract such censure. Nevertheless, even this element is changing under post-socialist conditions. I would not at all be surprised if in a few years Nikolai Aruneev is successful in making traditional built reciprocity rituals popular once again, as he cannily observed in Canada and in Buriatiia, and as Lavrillier has documented in Amur oblast'.

7.0 Conclusion

Our departure from the Poperechnaia river valley, and our farewell to Nikolai Aruneev, was as memorable as our arrival. To compensate for the lack of public transport in the region, we were hiking with a set of portable canvas canoes (baidarki) which we now planned to unfold into the Nercha river, and in that way paddle and float our way back to the highway at Kyker (Figure 1). With an impressive escort of twelve freight reindeer Nikolai and his brother Yura escorted us to the top of the mountain pass that marked the continental divide between the Vitim and Nercha watersheds, and the divide between the Arctic and Pacific Oceans. It was a blustery autumn day with a touch of rain turning to snow. Just short of the top of the pass we stopped to make a fire and have a last cup of tea together. Nikolai gravely informed us that he could not travel with us any farther, since his Buriat shaman friends had advised him to stay within the watershed of his home spirits. At this spot, at the top of the world, we left his sanctuary to Orochen reindeer culture to continue our adventures back to the industrial centres of southern Siberia. It seemed a departure touchingly more appropriate Conan Coyle’s *Lost World* than a 21st century ethnoarchaeological expedition.

Despite Nikolai’s penchant for drama, one of my goals in this chapter was to describe a monumental ritual of reciprocity in an active mood – as part of the colourful and chaotic way that rural hunters are adapting to post-socialist economic conditions. With the collapse of the Soviet state, with its centralised networks of procurement and distribution, and its capricious social guarantees, people are searching for a new way to dispel the uncertainty of the present with the impression that they are building a secure future. Coveting ‘luck’ is one way to this end. Unlike with entitlements to resources in a socialist state, well-being in the post-socialist ‘wild’ economy revolves around maximizing one’s flexibility and ability to take advantage of opportunities. Profitable opportunities for a taiga hunter revolve around encounters with prey animals, as well as
cultivating a safe and secure place for one's domestic animals. They also involve chance meetings with a variety of informal and quasi-criminal traders involved in the distribution of furs and animal parts to external markets. In unpredictable conditions such as these, one cannot rely upon fax-machines, bank accounts, and lawyers to ritually structure one's life. Rituals of reciprocity, as with rituals of hospitality, are perhaps the most permanent markers of relationships that one can expect. In conditions like this one should not be surprised to see the hearty revival of older forms ritual.

Rather than treating them as peculiar, these rituals are best seen as a healthy persistence of a type of intuition perhaps mistakenly formalised as a neo-shamanistic 'return' to the past. The inspiration for these revitalised rituals may be initially come from templates taken from stories, old ethnographies, or from an old photograph. But they are nevertheless 'placed' within existing social networks and a taiga environment that itself is recovering from seventy years of Soviet industrialism. The ideology of 'placing' was highlighted by Shirokogoroff (1935: 150; 160; 191-192) as a uniquely *tungus* concept which grammatically and pragmatically blurs the line between spirit, place, respect and action. In the opening sections of his book, Shirokogoroff placed the emphasis of his analysis on the idea of an idol or a place as being a kind of receptacle for abstract essences such as spirits – much like most evolutionist theorists of his day. However in the examples throughout the book the 'placing' reaches out from its receptacle such that it is integrally connected to certain 'roads', bloodlines, and valleys. According to him, in the *tungus* psycho-mental complex, the essence of places (the 'spirit of the place') express themselves through the action of creating placings, which are in turn inseparable from taiga life itself. From one old-fashioned point of view, this may indicate a certain primitiveness of religious intuition, but from another it shows how the genealogy of form is irrelevant to understanding the meaning of ritual action. Aruneev's ritual monuments are undoubtedly clever reconstructions, and also have a strategic element to them. Nevertheless they also express a vibrant attachment to taiga life and the ecology of luck that it implies. Placed within a post-socialist context, his impressive monumental rituals of respect capture the peculiar challenges of this time and place.
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I am especially grateful for the hospitality of the Aruneev family in the Beiun tovareshchestvo and hope that this article will serve as a monument to their dedication to a life in the taiga.
### Table 1: A Sketch of the Beiun Yearly Round (as dictated by Nikolai Aruneev)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Velvet antlers begin to grow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Calves and castrated deer lose their antlers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of March</td>
<td>The burning of the <em>kever</em> meadows to encourage the growth of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin. April</td>
<td><em>nirgate</em> grass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 April-22 May</td>
<td>The dropping of calves as the cuckoo-birds start to sing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 June forward</td>
<td>Velvet antlers can be trimmed if they are more than 20cm long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June – 1 Aug</td>
<td>Trimming of the bull’s antlers in preparation for the rut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 August</td>
<td>Ilin day. Holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 June – 15 Sept</td>
<td>Maintenance of the smudge fires against mosquitoes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 15 Septr</td>
<td>The cows rub the velvet off their antlers up to this date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Sept forward</td>
<td>The bulls start to rub the velvet on their antlers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin. October</td>
<td>The immature bulls begin to lose their antlers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Map of Vitim River valley showing rivers and villages](source)

*Source: Dr. Gail Fonsehl, Dept. of Geography, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, USA.*

Figure 1: Map of Vitim River valley showing rivers and villages
Figure 2 Gregorii Chernykh draining blood from the stunned, tethered reindeer. Photo by D. Brandisaukas.

Figure 3 Skinning the reindeer starting from the feet. The animal is kept clean on a mat of willows. The skin is removed before the cavity is opened. From left to right – Nikolai Aruneev, Gregorii Chernykh, and Donatas Brandisaukas.
Figure 4: Nikolai Aruneev displays the meat on willow maps and burns portions of each piece in a offering fire. Photo by D. Brandisauskas.

Figure 5 Nikolai Aruneev constructs the offering site on a small rise between the Poperechnaia river and the camp.
Figure 6 Completed reindeer offering scaffold. The reindeer is facing east. Offered meat was placed on the platform behind the animal. Matches and cigarettes were left as gifts in the ribbons on each tree.

Figure 7: The author and Nikolai Aruneev making reindeer blood sausage.
Figure 8 Schematic map of the Poperechnaia river valley showing summer camps, storage platforms, mortuary structures and burned-out areas.
Figure 9: Schematic map of the Poperechnaia river valley emphasising the yearly round and the specially maintained kever meadows.
Figure 10 *lokovun* mortuary structure for depositing the clothing and personal goods of a deceased person.

Figure 11 Aruneev's *kunakan inuvun* [child's toy] at the mountain pass between the Poperechnaia and Kotamchal rivers. The plastic sheet is to keep gifted cigarettes dry.
Figure 12: The *shamanka* idol erected in the forest along a steep pass along the highway between Kyker and Chita