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# Katanga Evenkis in the 20th Century and the Ordering of their Life-world

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An authorized translation from the second Russian edition  
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## Editor's preface to the English edition

*David G. Anderson*

We are pleased to offer English-language anthropologists a translation of Anna Sirina's path-breaking monograph *Katanga Evenkis*. This work documents the lives of a group of hunters and reindeer herders living at the headwaters of the Lower Tunguska River at the end of the 20th century. The author argues that the Katanga Evenkis are best described by the flexible and creative way they use the land around them. Her work is unique in the Russian ethnographic tradition in that it makes a strong argument that Evenkis continue to exercise a strong presence on their lands, despite severe pressure by Soviet-era policies and even more devastating dislocations by recent industrial development and privatization. According to Sirina, Katanga Evenkis at the end of the 20th century are best characterized not by what they have lost, but instead by the way they continue to "make a home for themselves in the taiga" using a variety of adaptive strategies and intuitions that reflect what she calls the "outlook of a mobile people." While based on extensive fieldwork, the book is also supported by an excellent command of the published and archival material on the region. As such, it is a solid reference work on this region and these people, as well as of the complex relationships that one can find in the taiga of Eastern Siberia.

The book is also unique for the fact that it is written by a woman representing a new generation of Russian ethnologists. Anna Sirina was one of the first young Russian ethnographers to travel to international conferences and form strong friendships with European, Australian, and North American anthropologists who were interested in the ethnography of Siberian peoples. She conveys a sympathy for Siberian peoples, and a knack for representing their humanity among all of the structures that have shaped their lives and economy. There is a natural overlap between Anna's ethnographic style and the birth of a new trans-national project to write an ethnography of Siberia which focuses upon issues of identity and the way that social and economic projects impact upon local societies (Schweitzer 2001; Gray et al. 2003/4). For that reason, an English translation of this well-known work is particularly appropriate.

There is an element in this work that looks towards the Euro-American tradition of social anthropology. I write this somewhat controversially, for I know that Anna herself has a strong sympathy for both the Irkutsk and Moscow schools of Russian ethnography, and that she would undoubtedly see her inspiration as lying with them. It is true that she is faithful to this tradition. Sirina's book makes careful reference to the typologies and the archaeologically informed models that are characteristic of these two schools. However, a strong emphasis in this book is also on analyzing how Evenkis make decisions and react to circumstance using what anthropologists

educated in a different tradition might call agency. We can clearly read in her typologies of mobile architecture the fact that Evenkis hold to no structural canon on how to build a lodge, or even how to make offerings to the land. She writes that every case presents a new opportunity for elaboration, and that the sheer variety of examples is in itself a proof of the operation of a mobile culture.

Although the examples and the theme of this work look towards Euro-American social anthropology, the work is not worded in this way. The heart of Sirina's description of the way Evenkis "order their life-world" is a very clever adaptation of models taken from Russian architects to the analysis of how built structures represent a certain "ethnic" ecological inspiration. Had this book been written in a different time and place, we would not be surprised to read her approach described as "ethnoarchaeology," and to find citations not to architects but to Lewis Binford (1983) and Susan Kent (1984). Indeed, her conclusion to the analysis of Evenki lodges at the end of section 3.2.5 speaks of the presence of "invisible boundaries," or even "zones," representing the structured way in which Evenkis use space. Nevertheless we can only find these ideas between the lines. Overtly, the work is worded in the classically descriptive and classificatory tone of Russian ethnology.

The master concept of the book—*organizatsiia sredi zhiznedeiatel'nosti* 'the ordering of the life-world'—is also a clever adaptation of another Soviet models. It has proven to be an extremely difficult phrase to translate, partly because of the way that English syntax works but also partly because the concept itself is more suggestive than it is definite. The term translates literally as "organization of the environment of life-activities." As such, it combines two elements that in English-language anthropology we usually like to contrast: the creative agency of "life-activities" and the inanimate structural weight of an "environment." Mediating the two ideas is the thought that Evenkis quite casually—almost subconsciously—"organize" or "order" both elements in a way that suits them. In this translation, I have chosen a word from the field of phenomenology to represent the "environment of life-actions:" life-world (Schutz & Luckman 1973). I also have chosen to confine it with the verb "to order," which is the strongest among the possible translations of the Russian word *organizatsiia*. In support of my latter choice, Sirina clearly defines the term *organizatsiia* in the introduction as about making things tidy (*uporiadochit'*) in a planned manner (*planomerno*). Moreover, there is no doubt that in this text, the concept is more often than not applied to the use of space rather than to the division of labour (as the English term "to organize" usually implies). It is important to state that my decision to use this translation represents a thinking-through of the implications of Sirina's original term, which are not fully described as such in the text. Instead, the text demonstrates her concept through examples. Evenkis order their life-world by placing skin lodges outside their new stationary cabins, by arranging furnishings within their cabins as if they were tents, or by preparing wood or articles in one place at one time in order to use them in a different

season at some time in the future. They tend not to order their environment by getting elected to local government or retraining themselves to take up a different career. In my opinion, this phenomenological accent given to Sirina's use of *organizatsiia* pays respect to a certain sense of agency, implicit in the text, which makes this work unique.

Following on and related to the master concept, the second most difficult phrase in the book captures the author's important observations on the way that Evenkis move through and occupy the taiga. In Chapter 2, Sirina argues that Evenkis have a "dynamic-logistical model" of using space or ordering their environment. As with the master concept, this category was not easy to translate. The Russian original refers to the *dynamicheskii (lineinyi) sposob* employed by Evenkis (with brackets in the original). In literal translation, this would be rendered as a "dynamic (linear) way"—again creating an uncomfortable contrast between a pattern that shifts creatively and one that is locked in a definite, unidirectional trajectory. Again, the meaning of this important term is not self-evident in the text, but it comes out through an important contrast. At the end of section 2.1.2, Sirina contrasts the "static" strategy of Russians staying in fixed cabins with the trajectories, routes, and "rhythms" of Evenki movements all through the taiga. The fact that she sees this motion as a trajectory, rather than a deliberate line, is emphasized by the odd word *lineinyi*, which carries a broader meaning than the word "linear" in referring to how hunters identify places along a trail. To my mind, this is close to Ingold's description (1986) of a hunting environment that is organized through a system of paths. My decision to use the term "logistical" to represent this action evokes the English-language literature in ethnoarchaeology, which is not referenced in the original. However, the comparison fits with and sums up the ethnographic examples given in the book. According to Sirina, the dynamic-logistical model is evident in the way that roads are maintained and marked for specific purposes (section 2.4), as well as by Evenki toponymy, wherein the environment is labelled by the resources that can be found there (section 2.3).

I have presented my reasoning for the translation behind these two key categories not only because it helps to understand the text, but also in order to illustrate the nature of the translation that we are presenting. This is a translation done by anthropologists for anthropologists. As such, it adapts the overt meaning of terms to make their deeper meaning understandable. I feel that this less-than-literal translation makes the text more readable—and more importantly, that it puts the author's intentions in the best light. However, I do admit that it would be hard for someone to learn Russian or English by comparing the two texts side by side.

Before I turn to a more technical description of other parts of the translation, I would like to point out some other important highlights in this book. One of the rare aspects of this book is the great detail that it provides of local practices. It is important to emphasize that the large number of Evenki words in the text are specifically Katanga Evenki words, which differ

from both the literary Evenki language published in the central (Soviet or Russian) dictionaries and the dialects that one might encounter in other parts of Siberia. This aspect makes Sirina's book an important reference work for the upper reaches of the Lower Tunguska river valley—a region that sits at the intersection of many cultural traditions.

Furthermore, besides putting great effort into describing and mapping the more traditional aspects of Evenki bush life, Sirina also directs our attention to other, completely undocumented aspects. In her eyes, the hanging pole *lokovun* is not simply a pole, but a device that can be erected in several different ways and for different purposes. In her eyes, the smallest details of camp architecture take on significance. This is a welcome departure from standard ethnological description of camps, which focus our attention on the lodge and the main campfire. Linked to this sensitivity to detail is another rare element that regrettably is missing in much Russian ethnography. Although the book is entitled *Katanga Evenkis*, the monograph is actually about a set of cultural practices that are reproduced not only by Evenkis but also, in part, by Yakuts and Russians. Chapter 5 presents the quite radical argument that *Russkie starozhily* 'Russian settlers' differ in no significant way from Evenkis, and deserve the same rights and protections that Evenkis now enjoy as members of an "indigenous" nation. The author also demonstrates the now widely accepted phenomenon that Evenkis remain Evenkis even if they drive snowmobiles, use wooden cabins, and cover their meat caches with plastic sheets.

I would like to alert readers to the following aspects of the translation:

- 1. Mobile peoples.** In most instances, I have chosen not to use the word "nomadic" for the Russian word *kochevoi*. This is due to the fact that in this work, Sirina places a heavy emphasis on the planned, deliberate nature of motion in this economy. In many places, she describes Evenkis as *neosedlye* 'non-settled' (cf. Andrianov 1985). In my opinion, the English word "nomadic" connotes a more random type of motion than the dynamic-logistical model put forward here.
- 2. Administrative units.** We have chosen to use the Russian originals for the administrative-territorial divisions encountered in the book. Ordinarily, for example, it would be better to translate *raion* as 'county'. However, this book covers such a large swath of time that the text would quickly become littered with other county-like identifiers from the Tsarist and early-Soviet periods (*uprava*, *uezd*, *okrug*). To help the reader navigate the transliterated terms, we have provided definitions and temporal context in a glossary.
- 3. Bush lexicon.** Stemming from the book's intimate portrait of local skills, there are a great number of terms referring to hunting lifestyles in the Subarctic that have no standard English literary equivalents. We have chosen to use English words that are in common use in

Northwestern Canada to represent these activities. While it is an arbitrary choice to some degree, these terms are taken from a place with great ecological and historical similarities to Eastern Siberia. Thus, for example, *ambar* is translated as ‘cache’ and *profil’* as ‘cut-line’. I would especially like to thank Tom Andrews of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife for his guidance in translating the terms for portable skin lodges and log cabins.

4. **Geographical names.** Unless there is a commonly used English equivalent (e.g., Manchuria for *Man'chzhuriia*, Transbaikal for *Zabaikal'e*, and Siberia for *Sibir'*), all geographical names have been transliterated using the Library of Congress system (described below). The names Evenkiia, Iakutiia, and Buriatiia are common informal designators of the official Evenki Autonomous Okrug in Krasnoiarsk Krai, the Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia), and the Buriat Republic, respectively.
5. **Evenkis.** It is a clumsy coincidence that the singular form of the word Evenkis use to call themselves—*evenki*—corresponds to the way that Russian-speakers make plurals. Thus, the Russian-language literature renders *evenk* as the singular form and *evenki* as the plural. The literature often implies that this corresponds to the way Evenkis speak. Actually, in the Evenki language, *evenki* is the singular designation, and *evenkil* is the plural. Since this book is written in English, we make full use of the original stem—Evenki—and add an ‘s’ to mark the plural. To Russian-speaking readers, this may make it seem that the word has two plural endings. I would ask those readers to give consideration to the Evenki grammatical forms.
6. **Russian settlers.** The descendants of Russian settlers who came to Siberia in several waves between the 17th and late 19th centuries are often spoken about as a unique group known as *starozhilye*. The direct translation of this term would be ‘Russian longtime-dwellers’. One sometimes finds the term ‘Russian old-settlers’ in the English language literature. I have chosen to translate this term simply as ‘Russian settlers’ since the term ‘settler’ itself has a frontier ring to it. However, one should be aware that the Russian settlers written about here differ substantially from the communities of geologists and petroleum workers who moved to Siberia in the 1960s and 1970s. These Russians are often called *priezhnye* ‘newcomers’. The descendants of Russian settlers typically have acculturated to local ways and preserve special creolized or dialectical differences that make them appear to 20th- and 21st-century ethnographers as a qualitatively different type of people than the Russians who arrived during the period of Soviet industrialization.

## 7. Passive constructions, implicit phrases, and explanatory footnotes.

Russian academic discourse favours passive constructions and sometimes subjectless sentences, which sound more objective. These phrases are difficult to translate in a way that makes them readable, and in the end they violate what I see as the central message of this book about Evenki creativity. In English-language anthropology, it is permissible not only to write about oneself but also to make one's field consultants the subjects of their own sentences. Thus, in very many places in the translation, we have reversed the order of phrases and added implicit subjects. In the Russian original, Sirina had a tendency to indicate trajectories in her own thought with ellipses (...) and the phrase *et cetera* (*i t.d.*). In most cases, these have been deleted for the sake of clarity. Finally, if the author has referred to knowledge that is implicit to Russians living in Russia, or even to Russians who live with Evenkis, this has been spelled out either in square brackets or in a series of separately numbered editor's footnotes prefixed by the custom mark §. The set of footnotes by the author has a separate numbering system. For consistency, the author's footnotes have been renumbered from the system in the original book.

**8. Evenki dialects.** The Baikal region has an incredible diversity of cultures. As a reflection of this, in the Russian original Sirina often lists three, sometimes four, versions of the same Evenki word to capture all the possible ways that one can hear it in use. This is valuable information for linguists, but somewhat cumbersome for the average reader. With Sirina's agreement, we have put the emphasis in the text on the northern dialect (*kh*-sibilant version), with variants listed in the glossary.

The English text itself was produced by several people and evolved in nine discrete drafts. The Editorial Committee of the Baikal Archaeology Project (BAP) hired two people to produce the base translations. Alia Chaptkykova prepared the first, founding translation of the entire text from Russian to English. Ksenia Maryniak wrote a base translation of the author's foreword, prepared an initial draft of the glossary, and formatted the reference list using English-language bibliographic standards. She also reworked the Russian versions of the maps and diagrams, while Darren Shaw reformatted the drawings and photographs into the versions printed here. The BAP Editorial Committee produced the index added to this translated edition.

The BAP Editorial Committee initially asked me to read the translation for accuracy. However, it soon became evident that the text, glossary, captions, and reference list required a literary editing as well. I rewrote almost every sentence, correcting syntax, changing awkward formulations, and then verifying several versions of the text with the original Russian version sentence-by-sentence. Only the fifth, sixth, and ninth versions were produced

without close line-by-line comparison to the original. Unclear passages were clarified with the author at several points, and she read and corrected the fourth and seventh versions. The eighth version of the manuscript was the most accurate version. In the ninth version, the BAP Editorial Committee removed many square brackets—which alert the reader to departures from the original text—to make the text more readable.

In the course of revising the text, Anna Sirina took the opportunity to correct some small errors and omissions in the original text, to update and supplement the reference list, and in places to add a few sentences to clarify the text. These new passages are clearly marked. To some degree, this translation is a more correct version of the original Russian text.

We all hope that this book will find a welcome audience among English-speaking anthropologists, and that it will contribute to making the life and traditions of the Katanga Evenkis better known. In her foreword to the second Russian edition, Sirina refers to the challenges that await Katanga Evenkis as petroleum exploration increases at the start of this century. We hope that through this text, some of the anthropologists who have worked to protect the local land rights of First Nations people in Canada, Australia, and Alaska now might be attracted to this region.

I conclude this preface by thanking Anna Sirina, both for her patience during the four years that it took to produce this book and for the tireless work she has put into her travels to Evenki and Even communities from Katanga to Kamchatka. In a sense, the text itself embodies the dynamic-logistical type of attention to the environment that so well characterizes the life of a mobile people. This English translation has been my constant companion at conferences, while travelling to Canada to visit relatives, and even during fieldwork based out of Irkutsk. Anna herself has worked on it between her trips to the Far East and in Moscow. I am happy that Anna's work, with the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is now reaching a wider international audience.

The book is volume 2 in a series of publications devoted to the archaeology and anthropology of Siberia. As this book goes to press, there are plans to publish an already completed manuscript translation of Mikhail Turov's (1990) work on Central Siberian Evenkis, which will nicely complement this book.

## Note on transliteration and the rendering of languages

This text transliterates Evenki Cyrillic and Russian Cyrillic text with the Library of Congress romanization standard, but without ligatures. The standard for hard and soft signs is respected. Readers should note that the way the Library of Congress standard glosses over the iotized and uniotized Cyrillic *e* does not serve Evenkis very well. Evenki words very rarely have an iotized *e*, and thus one should expect that the romanized character 'e' represents an *ə*

in Evenki or in Evenki-derived Russian words. This is especially the case for the name of the capital of Katanga raion—Erbogachen—and for the people themselves. Neither is pronounced as Yerbogachen nor Yevenki. However, the Enisei River is pronounced as Yenisei.

Russian terms are indicated in italics: *bania*, *palatka*, *shapka*. Evenki terms are indicated in italicised bold type: ***amaka***, ***delken***, ***golomo***. Russian plural forms are transliterated, as are Evenki plural forms, which are often consistent with Russian grammar. Note that some Evenki words have become so widely used by local Russians that they have entered their everyday lexicon: *rovduga*, *argish*, *shaman*. Proper names, nicknames, diminutives, and acronyms are transliterated directly.

### References

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## Author's foreword to the second Russian edition

[translated by K. Maryniak]<sup>§1</sup>

The “little-known and most interesting” Lower Tunguska River is a right tributary of the Enisei River in Central Siberia. Another name for it is the Katanga: “Elders say that the Lena [River] was opened by way of the Tunguska. They say the Tunguska is older than the Lena. The Cossacks, who collected *iasak*, set out from the Turukhan [River], not from the Lena...” (Shishkov 1985).

Central Siberia ranges between the Enisei and Lena Rivers, bordered in the south and southeast by the mountains of southern and southeastern Siberia. Most of this territory consists of the Central Siberian Plateau. Siberian and Daur larch, pine, and cedar grow in its permafrost-taiga and alpine-podzol soils. Fir grows in the river valleys. The forests of the Lower Tunguska are home to moose, wild reindeer, bear, sable, and squirrel. Muskrat was imported from America after the [Second World] war. Much of the terrain is covered with reindeer moss pastures, which is the main forage for wild and domesticated reindeer.

The climate is rigorously continental, with average temperatures of +14 to +17 degrees Celsius in July and –22 to –28 degrees in January in the west, dropping to –35 or –38 degrees in the east. The Siberian high-pressure system dominates in winter, resulting in predominantly calm weather, with little cloud and severe cold. Most of the year—from the end of September or early October to mid-May—the ground is covered in snow, but not to any great depth.

For its first thousand kilometres, the Lower Tunguska flows from south to north, and then it changes its course sharply westward. The river is frozen over from the first part of October until May, with flooding starting in May or early June. The waters of the Lower Tunguska flow with moderate speed, at 1–5 kilometres per hour. In spring, this flow triples, and the depth at this time reaches an average of eight metres. The Lower Tunguska meanders greatly. The local population calls the river's many bends *megi*. The most important [left-bank] tributaries are the Upper, Middle, and Lower Kochema, the Teteia, the Great and Small Erema, the Great Chaika, and the Nepa. The Chona and Vakunaika are on its right bank. There are many lakes and marshes. Local residents catch fish in the rivers and lakes.

The upper course and start of the middle course of the river fall within the administrative borders of Katanga raion, which is the northernmost district of Irkutsk oblast'. The territory of Katanga raion covers 139,043 square kilometres, which represents at least twenty percent of the oblast', while the population itself numbered 9,500 according to the 1989 census [Goskomstat

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<sup>§1</sup> The abbreviated English translation of the foreword in the second Russian edition has not been reprinted here. —Ed.

1992]. By [2000], the population had fallen to 5,647. Katanga raion adjoins the Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia) in the north, northwest, and northeast; and in the south, southwest, and southeast it adjoins Ust'-Kut, Lower Ilim, and Kirensk raions of Irkutsk oblast' [Russian Federation].

The Tungus people were renamed Evenkis by the Soviet state. The Katanga Evenkis call themselves *ile* 'human being'. They continue to live in these places, but through the years of Soviet rule, nearly all of them changed to a settled way of life. Today, no more than 30 Evenki reindeer herders remain, who live most of the year in the forest. I was drawn to the Lower Tunguska for the first time in 1981, not so much because of the Evenkis as by the call of a completely "different" way of life. In those years, there were flights to Erbogachen every day, although it was nevertheless necessary to worry about getting tickets in advance.

Before the establishment of permanent connections by air, the only way to get to the Lower Tunguska was by river and sledge path in winter. The Cossacks, who preferred to travel overland from the Lower Tunguska river system to the Lena River, knew about the portage at Chechuisik. The distance from the village of Chechuisik on the Lena to the village of Podvoloshino on the upper course of the Lower Tunguska is 40 versts [42.7 km]. The old Chechuisik portage served as the crossing point for over two-thirds of the freight in the past. The Cossacks would wait for the river to rise and would float the freight downstream. Even today, this route is crucially important with regard to provisioning Katanga raion. The sledge and riding trails through the taiga took many days and were not without danger. Now, one can fly from Irkutsk to the raion capital of Erbogachen in 2.5 hours.

[Our flight in 1981 made] a brief stop in Kirensk. It was a small, old city situated at the picturesque junction of the Lena and Kirenga rivers. [After Kirensk] the landscape gradually changed, with the huge tracts of ploughed land replaced by taiga and many lakes and marshes. Sometimes, when the weather in Erbogachen was not conducive to travel in AN-24 planes, passengers would be transferred to "Annushka" [AN-2] biplanes in Kirensk. From these, one could observe the land, its mosaic of marshes and lakes, the winding little streams, and the occasional drilling rig. And below the airplane, the Lower Tunguska meandered like a silver ribbon, evoking the mythical Tungus dragon Dzhiabdar as it made its way quietly and inexorably northward, to the sea.

It seemed that the entire village came to watch our airplane land at Erbogachen Airport. The airport was built on old pasture lands that had been claimed from the forest through the efforts of Russian peasants. In the businesslike hubbub of greetings and farewells, we were strangers. We had arrived in this unknown place, and were the only ones who had no-one to meet them. Having loaded its Irkutsk-bound passengers, our airplane waved its silvery wings, as if to say goodbye, before flying off. Then, a deafening silence fell. The only sound was the whine of the mosquitoes. We had been left by ourselves and did not know what to expect. In a sense, that was fine, because

we did not have any preconceptions or stereotypes. Our main objective was to collect all possible ethnographic data, with a particular focus on children's drawings. The managers of the Laboratory of Archaeology and Ethnography at Irkutsk University, which was dominated by archaeologists, had set this topic for us. In the fall, at the end of the field season, the archaeologists would charge into the university, all suntanned and smelling of campfires, with new discoveries and stories. This attracted the first-year students. In their efforts to fathom primitive thinking, they turned to [Lucien] Lévi-Bruhl, and to the research on aboriginal children's drawings carried out in Irkutsk during the 1920s by P. F. Trebukhovskii, B. E. Petri, P. P. Khoroshikh, and others (although this work was left unfinished) (Vinogradov 1926: 30–2).

We stayed in the wooden, single-storey Erbogachen Hotel, located next to the airport. The raion capital was also the base for an oil exploration company [*ekspeditsiia*]. Most of the hotel tenants were businessmen whose work was connected to geology. The façade of the hotel was decorated with an Evenki pattern made of pine-cones, while the corridors and sitting room were decorated with woodcut pictures of the local taiga residents—bear, moose (or *sokhatyi*, as they are known locally), and wood-grouse. Another panel showed a slant-eyed man with a tired smile sitting near a winter campfire in the taiga, his trusty *laika* hunting dog by his side.

At the entrance to the canteen, which was always overcrowded, a poster exhorted the people to hand over “More Soft Gold [furs] to the Motherland!” The raion specialized in trapping furs, and had two [state] hunting enterprises—the Katanga Promkhoz and the Preobrazhenka Promkhoz—with subdivisions in smaller settlements.

Erbogachen village is located on the sandy, high right bank of the Lower Tunguska River. The river quietly channels its waters to the Enisei and the Arctic Ocean. The water is rust-coloured from iron oxalates, and brackish in taste. Drinking water is taken from artesian wells that were bored by the geologists. The oldest street, Naberezhnaia, has wooden log-houses along the river, with garden plots running down towards the water. Until recently, old wooden houses still stood here, blackened and tilted from age, while in the courtyard of the promkhoz shop a trader's *ambar* ‘storehouse’ still stood. Once, furs hunted by Evenkis and Russian settlers would be exchanged here for provisions and equipment. Even the shop (*lavka*) of Kulberg, a political exile and trader, was still standing 15 years ago [in 1981]. Then, it was still being used as a store.

Both the architectural face of the village and the anthropological features of its residents testify to the ancient roots of human life in these places. One may glimpse an Evenki *babushka* in the pretty blonde woman with slightly tilted blue eyes and broad cheekbones, or a Cossack ancestor gazing roguishly at the world through his great-great-great-grandson. Living as neighbours for three centuries, the Tunguses [Evenkis], Russians, and Yakuts, who make up the bulk of the population, came to know one another well, borrowed

cultural traits, and some intermarried. Gradually, a unique social environment developed at the headwaters of the Lower Tunguska River.

Hunting is the main activity that unites the local population, both in the past and in the present. Perusing the personal registration cards of hunters at the local branch of the [state] hunting association, it occurred to me that there was something special in their facial expressions, which marked them as hunters. It was not their nationality, which could differ even between brothers and sisters, and not their racial type, which in this region is not always clearly marked.

Now, when one travels down the Lower Tunguska, one no longer encounters very many old Russian villages, hamlets, and homesteads. Mobile Tunguses, or Evenkis, are almost all gone, as well. At the headwaters of the river, they have been settled for almost half a century now, and do not keep reindeer anymore.

During the 1980s, a town built by geologists sprang up about two kilometres from the old village. Its atmosphere was markedly different from that of Erbogachen. People received good and stable salaries, and enjoyed social benefits. Some of the new arrivals became “addicted” to hunting, and even became hunters. But there were not many of those.

During this visit [in 1981], we met Vasilii Pavlovich Kaplin, an old Evenki from the Pangarakai clan. He and his entire family lived in the taiga, and only rarely came into town. Along with his son, nephew, and stepson, Vasilii Pavlovich worked as a tenured hunter in the local promkhoz. He invited us to visit their camp, and we lived in the taiga for about a month. After that, our acquaintance grew into a long-standing friendship.

His summer camp was located 20–30 kilometres from Erbogachen. We had to walk to get to this home in the taiga, for the old man had let his reindeer go when he came to town. First, a Russian man who knew Vasilii Pavlovich took us in his motorboat across to the left bank of the Lower Tunguska, which had become shallow in the dry summer. We arrived in the settlement of Zarech'e, consisting of a few wooden izbas. After Zarech'e, the taiga began. Evenkis usually left their reindeer here before going into the village. It seems to me that for them, this was the border between the taiga and town, between two lifestyles. I felt this for the first time when we returned from the camp. It was late in the evening, and suddenly a whole constellation—a sea of lights, as I recall—appeared where there was only dark space before. That was Erbogachen. Joy, excitement, and some kind of strange timidity came upon us. The feeling of a border was compounded by the necessity of crossing the river, which is regarded in the folklore of all nations as a final frontier.

Evenkis showed up on their reindeer in town during winter and summer, especially for the Soviet-era festival called the Day of the Reindeer Herder (which coincided with a local Russian holiday marking the end of winter). At those times, the border disappeared for a while. Even the river was frozen. Mobile Evenkis arrived from the taiga dressed in their winter national costumes, and harnessed their reindeer in festive harnesses (Fig. 1).



*Figure 1. V. D. Kaplin and his wife, A. P. Sychegir, at the Day of the Reindeer Herder, Erbogachen village, March 1988.*

All the people gathered on the ice of the Lower Tunguska River, where the festival took place. Prizes were given for the winners of reindeer races held on the snowdrift-covered ice of the river. In those rare days, something like an equilibrium prevailed, a hope for the possibility of various ways of life to coexist, and for mutual understanding. To be sure, everybody drank—drank a lot—and that was always a concern.

Vasilii Pavlovich became noticeably happier and more lively when we left the village and passed through Zarech'e. At first, we walked on foot along a road, which ended abruptly. Then we followed a cut-line and, after that, a seemingly invisible trail through the forest. We stopped for a rest and made some tea, but there were not enough cups. Vasilii Pavlovich swiftly made one out of birch bark, joining the edges with a twig that also served as the handle. The hot tea out of this cup did not scald one's lips, and smelled tastily of birch and smoke. For some reason, I have remembered the smallest details of this first trip: a faded calico kerchief tied in an Evenki fashion around Vasilii Pavlovich's head; his soft and silent strides in the taiga, not at all those of an old man; and his exceptional attentiveness and ability to orientate himself [Fig. 2].

When we finally arrived at the camp, it was completely dark. Our guide caught the smoky scent of the smudges from afar, and maintained his silent stride with poorly concealed incomprehension at our noisy stumbling through the taiga. The dogs set to barking, having smelled strangers at a distance. Sparks flew from the burning fireplace into the black night sky, while the smouldering logs in the smudges glowed with a mysterious, flickering light.



Figure 2. A rest break in the taiga, 1981.

We heard reindeer that had strayed from the herd, calling out. We also heard human conversation. A young man came out of the conical lodge [Russ. *chum*]. While we crouched by the fire, exhausted, introductions were made. This first meeting was unforgettable—the expectations, the long and hard walk, and the “others”—people who were different from us. Their way of life was disappearing fast, like [Balzac’s magic] *chagrin* skin. It was not so easy to see and understand it. Probably the only way was to experience it for oneself.

Today, it is obvious to me that we began our research so naively. We did not have sufficient professional training or preparation. On the other hand, the freshness of our impressions and the direct contact with Evenkis played a positive role, such that one could say that my ethnographic university was there, in the taiga, among the tributaries of the Lower Tunguska [Fig. 3].

Later, there would be other expeditions. By comparison, this first one would undoubtedly be evaluated as the poorest for ethnographic results. However, it sparked my interest in the way of life of hunters and reindeer herders, which has burned till this day. I made friends among the Evenkis, and our meetings are always pleasant.

The Kaplin family is a typical Evenki family, having survived various socioeconomic experiments of the Soviet era, such as collectivization, the imposition of atheism, and agglomeration of settlements [Fig. 4]. Marina Petrovna [Egorchenok] was born on the Tetera River, a right tributary of the Podkamennaia Tunguska River. She married Vasili Pavlovich [Kaplin] of the Pangarakai clan, who lived among the left tributaries of the Lower Tunguska. They were registered in Teteia when a kolkhoz [collective farm]

was established there. They worked and recorded their “labour-days”<sup>§2</sup> with the rest of the formerly nomadic Evenkis. After the [Second World] war, diamond prospecting began. Evenkis were hired as porters and guides for the Amaka Company, since there were no roads. After the kolkhozes were disbanded and promkhozes were established at the end of the 1950s, Evenkis achieved a relative independence. Those who kept reindeer and could live permanently in the forest automatically became tenured hunters [with the promkhozes]. This period did not last long, but it seemed to be, in my opinion, one of uneventful calm [*zastoi*] and relative prosperity. It was during this time that I began my research.

Vasilii Pavlovich and Marina Petrovna had three grown children, each of whom had different biological fathers because Vasilii Pavlovich could not have children. Nikanor, Tania, and Katia considered Vasilii Pavlovich to be their only and true father, and called him *papa*. However, they also knew their own [biological] fathers and were included in their kinship networks. This was particularly obvious during their important rites of passage. In this family, everyone loved and respected one another in their own way. Vasilii



*Figure 3. The author riding a reindeer, 1989.*

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<sup>§2</sup> A “labour-day” [*trudoden*] was a unit of work on collective farms, from which enterprises calculated a worker’s entitlement to a proportion of the profits of the enterprise. A worker’s entitlement to a state retirement pension also came from this figure. This became controversial in the 1960s and 1970s, when changes in prices and the cost of living effectively eliminated the value of pensions calculated on labour-days. In Siberian ethnography, it is important to note where labour-days were used in order to indicate quality of life. —*Ed.*

Pavlovich was illiterate and spoke Russian poorly. He did remember shamanic performances. He fit the famed descriptions of Tunguses written by travellers during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Vasilii Pavlovich and Marina Petrovna visited me and my family in Irkutsk several times. A born hunter, Vasilii Pavlovich knew only life in the forest. He amused my father, who never held a weapon in his life, by greeting him with the question, “How’s the hunting been?” He dismayed my mother by sitting on the floor, ignoring the chairs and crossing his legs under him in a dignified manner.

In those days, it seemed that our friendship would last a very long time, if not forever. But life makes its own decisions. Starting in the 1990s, I began losing my friends, starting with the younger members of that family.

The first to leave for the other world was the eldest, Nikanor. He was getting ready to go into the taiga with his cousin, Petia [Fig. 5]. Younger men lived as bachelors [in the taiga]. Town girls did not aspire [to marry into a taiga lifestyle] after being brought up in boarding schools and living in town. They were also cautious with young men, knowing their weakness for vodka. Marina Petrovna sewed for Nikanor and Petia, gave them clothes, and cooked for them. But the two men also knew how to do these formerly exclusively female traditional tasks themselves. I learned of Nikanor’s death in 1990, when I was doing research in the southern part of the raion. I was flying back from Preobrazhenka to Erbogachen, and by chance landed nine days after his death. Local Evenkis mark this date with a wake, according to the Russian



*Figure 4. The author with the Kaplin family, 1989.*



Figure 5. Petia Kaplin, 1989.

custom. Nikanor drowned in the Lower Tunguska River while returning from Erbogachen to the taiga. What was he thinking when [some time earlier] he threw his sweater into the river as a gift on his way to a rendezvous? Did he foresee his death? After his death, the family's taiga lifestyle [*khoziaistvo*] began to fall apart. Broken-hearted with grief, Marina Petrovna began taking solace in the drink more and more often.

Business brought me to Erbogachen [again] in 1993. The Shishkov Regional Studies Museum [of Katanga Raion] was planning to move into a new, specially built building beside the older one, which was built at the start of the [20th] century. I was supposed to create a new exhibit in it. It was March, and it was cold, with a lot of snow. I stayed, as usual, in the same single-storey wooden hotel, which now had no guests because [state] financing for geological exploration had ceased. It was early evening, and I planned to spend the rest of it visiting my Evenki acquaintances. It had just snowed, and it was incredibly quiet. I had a conversation with the floor housekeeper about life's problems, about inflation, about mutual acquaintances. From her, I found out that Katia, the Kaplins' daughter, had crashed her Buran [snowmobile] when driving from Erbogachen to the geologist's town, three kilometres from the village. Katia had been the same age as me. She had married early and had two children. It was hard to believe that the happy, lively, and hardworking Katia was no longer among us. Before she went to school, she had grown up in the taiga, and afterward she had spent every summer and all her vacations in the forest, as did her brother and sister. Vasili Pavlovich, who was hard of hearing (even his nickname was *Kuiki* 'deaf one'), would take Katia as a little girl hunting with him, asking her to "listen to the dogs" [for him]. Katia had

organized one of the first [native] co-ops in Erbogachen. She sewed with fur very well, and she was an excellent hostess. It seemed that she was equally at home in the taiga and in town.

I went to see Marina Petrovna, both wanting to see her and at the same time dreading the visit. The old couple lived on Nabrezhnaia Street, not far from the boarding school. They now lived in a new, strong house, built of squared timbers and set on the same spot as their old log house. That house had dated to the start of the [20th] century. Nimble mice used to run around the floor at night. Among the ordinary dishes on the wooden kitchen shelf was a lovely plate from the Kuznetsov Porcelain Factory. It was a real museum piece. How many sables had they given for it, and to which trader? In better times, guests were immediately offered everything the hosts had in their refrigerator, including various delicacies from the forest. On this visit, the refrigerator was empty, and there was only bread and tea on the table, obtained on credit [*pod zapis'*] from the store.

We were both glad to see one another. We sat near the stove on low wooden stools. Marina Petrovna smoked and told her story, wiping away tears.

All the family members and neighbours had helped with the funerals. Help also came from the *lesnye liudi* 'forest people'. This was how Evenkis called those who live in the forest tending reindeer and who rarely show up in town. One such family gave them a large piece of moose meat, and money. Kolia (nicknamed *Moriak* 'Sailor') gave them a deer carcass. Another family gave them money. Relatives from Teteia sent them fish.

Marina Petrovna was a good mother, a hardworking woman, and an excellent craftsman [Fig. 6] She could sew *gurumi* 'winter boots' from



Figure 6. Stretching hides in a summer camp, 1989.

reindeer leg skins [*kamys*], *olochi* ‘summer footwear’ from moose hides (*rovduga*), hunting parkas, hats made of fur taken from the heads of reindeer calves, often with antler buds, and children’s snowsuits made of fur. The villagers asked her to sew *untiy* ‘winter boots’, and paid with potatoes, pork or beef, and cooked food, only sometimes with money.

Before, her children had restrained her drinking. It was [concern for] their well-being and happiness that restrained her. The taiga also helped. They literally escaped the town there. Now, all the restraints snapped. Of all her children, only Tania was left, and she had her own family.

Vasilii Pavlovich had lived the past two years in the village [Erbogachen]. Although he was ill a long time, he was constantly planning to go into the forest. He had nothing to do. He smoked his pipe incessantly, or went out, leaning on a cane and wearing glasses, to meet the “Ilimpeia people”. These were close or distant relatives and acquaintances, whom he used to meet while travelling in the taiga or at shamanic performances. There were, of course, no Ilimpeia people there. As Marina Petrovna complained, he was hearing voices. These people stopped visiting with their reindeer long ago. The old man was reliving his youth, and it was obvious that he would not last long. When I came to Erbogachen on business again in 1995, I found out that Vasilii Pavlovich had passed on.

These people had accepted me instantly and treated me as one of their own. This attitude was not one I had necessarily earned. It was only an integral part of their cultural tradition, which has remained strong. Today, I miss that openness. I have still not gotten over the fact they have passed away. In a way, a part of me went along with them. The caches, lodge poles, and smudges still stand abandoned in the taiga. Is it possible that the land misses them, in the same manner as people do? Does it remember its former masters?

I had had the opportunity to compare the behaviour of my Evenki acquaintances in town and at home. Their true home was the taiga, where their space was not enclosed by the walls of permanent dwellings. There, they were in their element. In the Soviet period, new realities restricted their movements: sport hunters took their hunting areas; large tracts of the taiga were burned; and the as-yet-infrequent drilling rigs began appearing.

This is what I have tried to understand—their life-rhythm under these new conditions. Because Evenkis travelled constantly, they had to learn to exploit many different types of places [*ugod'ia*]. In summer, they travelled often. In fall and spring, they spent more time in one place, to allow the reindeer to have their autumn rut and to calve in spring. Moose hunting was another factor that tied them to one place. Evenkis embraced hunting with their “body and soul”, and it inevitably affected their character and psychology.

From that time up until today, I have been intrigued by these transformations, which are part of an ongoing lively cultural tradition. It was not an abstract tradition, one that existed unto itself. Here, real people refused to reject their “uncivilized” way of life. This was how their parents had lived, but they also wanted to live the same way (or had grown up living

that way). They made this choice even after studying in boarding schools, or living in towns or cities. Thanks to the taiga, they were independent to a certain extent of the state executive and legislative bodies. It helped them to avoid the management and administration systems that curtailed initiative. This independence, even though it was very relative, gave them a measure of moral superiority over the settled Evenkis. Only the hunters could measure up. But their independence had a short-term quality—limited by licenses, inspections, hunting associations and permits, and by their vacation entitlements. Theirs was an attractive life, just the same. It was inevitable that the real independence and autonomy, or call it the “differentness”, of the taiga people could not fail to provoke the dissatisfaction of the authorities, resulting in efforts to assimilate them. At the same time, it was obvious that the “forest people” were tightly bound to the towns by thousands of familial, economic, socio-cultural, and everyday ties. This complicated life on the frontiers of different worlds exacted an enormous moral and ethical price on Evenkis.

Much changed after these mobile people were incorporated into the sphere of influence of the Russian (and particularly the Soviet) state. For Evenkis who keep reindeer, the taiga still remains their home. There, they recover their confidence, dignity, and rejoice in life. Why cannot the townsfolk see them there? It is they, the townsfolk, who have developed the not unfounded stereotype that Evenkis represent poverty, alcoholism, and social apathy.

It was only after defending my dissertation that I came across the research done by Australian anthropologists on the land claims of the aborigines in the Northern Territory of Australia (Sirina 1998).<sup>1</sup> I found out that for a long time, they had been collecting even more detailed information about the social structure of the aborigines, sacred sites, and particularities of land use, striving to establish the borders of the territory they had occupied in the past. Although so far there have not been any visible signs of a larger geological boom in the area of my studies, it is completely possible that this time is still to come. Then, this book will represent not only a page from the cultural history of the Katanga, but it might be of practical use in confirming the land rights of those Evenkis who still hunt on reindeer and travel in the taiga in the 21st century, or who plan to return to their traditional occupations.

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<sup>1</sup> [New footnote by the author] The author would like to extend her thanks to Deborah Bird Rose and Darrell Lewis of the Australian National University for introducing her to this research.