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Reindeer Trail

History and Culture of the Amur Evenks



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This study is concerned with the history and modern conditions of Evenks in the Amur region, Russia. It is mainly based on field research, conducted by the authors for over a decade, and depicts the lifestyle, worldview, and traditions of the modern Amur Evenks. It also contains personal archives, tables and illustrations. The book is intended not only for specialists in ethnography and cultural anthropology, but also for a wider audience.

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Preface

This book represents the modified and supplemented edition of the book about Amur Evenks that was published in Russian in 2012. The present book generalizes historical data on the Evenks living on the left bank of the Amur River, reveals their regional features and describes their current state. In it the Evenks' practical skills and centuries-perfected methods of survival in conditions of the severe Siberian taiga are described in detail. A considerable part of the book deals with spiritual culture of the Amur Evenks in the recent past and at present: taiga ethics, religious notions and rites, and shamanism.

The book is mainly based on the data of annual field research conducted by the authors from 2002 to 2016. Our first expeditions to the Amur Evenks were organized together with Anatoly Mazin (1938-2008). Therefore it would be fair to call him the inspirer and coauthor of many sections of this book and of its illustrative material.

Expeditions in March, 2006 and July, 2007 were conducted together with our French colleagues from CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) within the project "Adaptations biologiques et culturelles: le système renne" (Funding: French Ministry of Research to S. Beyries CNRS UMR 7264 CEPAM). A considerable part of the included photos was taken on these expeditions by Auréade Henry, who has kindly agreed to their publication in this book. The book also contains many documentary photographs from family archives of the residents of Evenki villages in the Amur region. We thank them all for the provided photos.

A significant part of the book is constructed through archival materials and funds of regional museums: Amur Museum of Regional Studies by the name of G. S. Novikov-Daurskiy, the Scientific Museum of the Amur State University, and also local museums at Zeya, Tynda towns and Evenki settlements of the Amur region. In writing the last section of this book, the works of the Russian writers Georgy Fedoseyev and Vladislav Letsik have also been used.

A considerable part of the book is constituted from memoirs and evidence provided by the Amur Evenks who became not just informants, but in a sense coauthors of this edition. Their words speak from pages of the book; they are present through photos in typical daily situations, capturing unarranged and authentic images. For many years they helped

the authors to collect materials and data. They accepted us into their homes – in settlements or in taiga camps – and guided us through the taiga. We are indebted to these people, opening their heart and soul, maintaining their native memory and taiga life tradition: to Raisa and Sergey Nikiforovs, Gennady, Georgy and Vitaly Struchkovs, Lidiya Solovyova, Tatyana Safronova, Eduard Yakovlev, Galina Solovyova, Arkady Okhlopkov, Maxim Gumenyuk (Ivanovskoe village); to Galina Nikolaeva, Klara Abramova, Svetlana Kulbertinova, Tamara Fedorova, Tamara Andreyeva, Georgy Nikolaev (Ust-Nyukzha village); to Elena Kolesova, Pavel Trifonov, Evgeny Fedorov, Rimma An (Bomnak village); to Trophim Pavlov, Eduard Zhumaniyazov, Veronika Dray (Ust-Urkima village); to Oleg Solomonov, Galina Makarova (Pervomayskoe village); to Alexander Andreyev (Gulya village), and also to Svetlana Voronina (Bagdarin village, Buryatia) and Saveliy Vasilyev (Iyengra village, Yakutia) and to others.

The authors also thank these individuals for their help in organizing the expeditions: Larisa Sadayeva, Sergey Nikiforov, Alexey Melnikov, Elena Kolesova, and Veronika Dray.

We address special thanks to Nikolay Zaytsev, the author of the original idea and the initiator of the Russian edition of this book, and also to Elizabeth Gross who kindly agreed to correct our translation.

Notes on Translation

There are several variants of spelling the name of the Evenks (*Evenki*, *Ewenki*, *Evenkil* etc.). In this book we use the most widespread variant *Evenks* with its form *Evenki* for adjectives and *Evenk* for single form.

Sometimes the term Amur region (also Amur Region or Priamurye) is used in a wide sense, as related to all territory near the Amur River from its upper courses to the mouth. We use the term *Amur region* as the name of the administrative subject of the Russian Federation in its modern borders (*Amurskaya oblast'*).

The names of the administrative parts of the Amur region (*rayons* in Russian) we translated as *areas*, keeping their original spelling (Selemdzhinskiy area, Zeyskiy area etc.). The two areas that existed due to the historical division of the Amur region in 1926-1930 (*Amurskiy okrug* and *Zeyskiy okrug* in Russian) we translated as *Amur district* and *Zeya district*.

The Evenki words are written in italics. Their transliteration corresponds to their sound in local Evenki dialects or their spelling in the Russian-Evenki Vocabulary (1948) and the Evenki-Russian Vocabulary (1958) edited by G.M. Vasilevich.

In the following text we transliterated Russian **э** as *e*, **ё** as *yo*, **й** as *y*, **х** as *kh* after *c*, *s*, *e*, *h* (in rest cases we used *h*), **ц** as *ts*, **шч** as *shch* (except for *Blagoveschensk*). We also used this transliteration system for the bibliography (the titles of the papers are followed with a translation).

Introduction

Evenks are an ethnos living on an enormous part of Russian territory, from the Yenisei River to the Sea of Okhotsk. Different territorial groups of Evenks, whose settlements and nomadic tracks are spread on the open taiga spaces of Siberia and the Far East, have distinct regional features in language, ethnic history and culture. Evenks are mostly nomad hunters and reindeer herders, but historically among some Evenki groups, fishery, horse breeding or dog sledding dominated.

In the past the Amur region was inhabited by several groups of the Evenks (or Tungus as they were called before): some of them were reindeer herders, others were horse breeders. It is noteworthy that it was Evenks who opened the road to the Amur River for the Russians: in 1638 the Evenki shaman Tomkoni on the Aldan River (Yakutia) described to the Tomsk Cossacks (led by the ataman Dmitry Kopylov) that in the south, beyond the Stanovoy Range, a big rich river flows.... Since then more than three and a half centuries of Amur Evenks' history is closely connected with Russia and the people inhabiting it.

As the waters of the Amur River flowed, so did time. The political systems, economic arrangements, and cultural practices in Russia changed dramatically several times. Likewise, the nomads of the Amur taiga did not remain the same. Together with other people inhabiting Russia they shared achievements and losses, ups and downs, hopes and disappointments. Generations followed, however this people have conquered the mountain passes of history and remained. Of course, there are no historical Evenks in their former "ethnographic" life any more. New generations of the Amur Evenks lay new tracks for their history and culture.

Many aspects of both big and small ethnoses' lives recede into the past and disappear, forgotten. Sometimes this descent into oblivion exempts people from a burden of negative memory, but, unfortunately, positive aspects also often disappear, impoverishing the ethnos' spiritual heritage. The movement of a nation is a flow of history, similar to the movement of ice floes during a spring ice drift: having come off the coast, all of them flow further downstream, turn, clash against each other, crumble their edges, break up into blocks, losing their former integrity part by part... The irretrievable immersion of past generations' culture into the abyss of time

is a relentless regularity. It occurs in the history of each nation. It is impossible to stop this process in general. Culture cannot just be conserved. However it is possible to find the components of ethnic culture that were not lost yet, to accent them and to keep them, at least partially, in the changing cultural reality. Scientific research can make a useful contribution to accomplishing this admirable task.

In our book we deal with, first of all, those layers of Evenki culture which did not extend too far into the past, or lose communication both with modern lifestyle and ethnic memory. We tried to demonstrate evidence of a tradition that is still alive, lasting in memoirs, narrations, activities of our contemporaries, or the preceding generation. Different manifestations of this live tradition are revealed during taiga expeditions among the Amur Evenks. The ethnographic data from the recent past and the present were included in this book, constituting its main content. This content is augmented with archival data reflecting the past of Amur Evenks, as well as with a large collection of documentary photographs reconstructing their life from the 19th to the 21st centuries.

Chapter 1

The Amur Evenks: Brief Review of the Nomads' History

1.1 Common characteristics and history of scholarship

Evenks (until 1931, *Tungus*; self-named: *Evenkil*, *Orochen*) are one of the indigenous peoples of the Amur region living in northern mountain and taiga areas (Tyndinskiy, Zeyskiy, Selemzhinskiy areas). They inhabit almost all territory of Siberia, including the Russian Far East, as well as China and Mongolia. The total number of Evenks in Russia is about 35 thousand people; in China, (including *Solon*, *Orochen* and *Khamnigan*) about 50 thousand individuals; in Mongolia, (*Khamnigan*) about 3 thousand individuals.

Dispersion is a signature characteristic of the Evenks. In Russia there are about one hundred settlements where they live, however in the majority of these settlements their number fluctuates from several tens to 150-200 people – and they seldom make the national majority there. It has an adverse effect on the preservation of traditional Evenki culture.¹

Anthropologically the Evenks represent a rather motley picture, comprised of a complex mixture of features from the Baikal, Katangskiy and Central Asian anthropological types of the North Asian race.

Evenki language relates to the Tungusic languages of the hypothetic Altai language family. In the Amur region three dialects of east group of the Evenki language dialects are represented: Selemzhinskiy (Ivanovskoe village), Dzheltulakskiy (Ust-Urkima, Ust-Nyukzha, Pervomayskoe villages) and Zeyskiy (Bomnak village). Modern Evenki script was created using the alphabetic basis of Cyrillic and has been used since 1937. Before that Evenks used the system of taiga tags (signs like broken or bent branches on a track, pictures on bark, etc.); some Evenks used Manchurian script.

Today the Evenki language is under threat of extinction and has entered the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger: in everyday life it is used by no more than 10% of the Evenks, generally by elders.

¹ See: Evenki [Evenks] // Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East (RAIPON) URL: <http://www.raipon.info/peoples/evenks/evenks.php>

The Amur Evenks are one of the less studied local groups of Evenks. In written sources, they were mentioned for the first time only after the Russians' arrival to the Amur River, i.e. in the middle of the 17th century. For the next two centuries, when the left bank of the Amur River belonged to China, there was no mention of the Amur Evenks in written Russian sources. That is why (despite the Evenks of Yenisei, Transbaikalia and Yakutia, who were well-described by the early 19th century) the first ethnographic descriptions of the Amur Evenks are dated only by the middle of the 19th century, when they were first studied by A.F. Middendorf², and then by R.K. Maak³, I.V. Orlov⁴, G. Radde⁵, K.N. Dadashkeliani⁶, L.I. Shrenk⁷. The latter initially classified the Tungus-Manchurian peoples of the Amur River, assigning the Orochons, the Manegrs and the Birars to one group, which is now known as Amur Evenks. All these researchers collected valuable information on the Amur Evenks as they appeared in the 19th century, which is still considerably different compared to the 17th century.

The Amur Evenks continued their transformation into the beginning of the 20th century (largely due to the loss of reindeer by the Birars), which was described by R. Ivanov.⁸ Some data on the Manegrs, Birars

² Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri*. Chast' II. Sever i vostok Sibiri v estestvennoistoricheskom otnoshenii. Otdel VI. Korennye zhiteli Sibiri [Travel to the North and East of Siberia. Part II. The North and the East of Siberia in the Natural-historical Relation. Department of VI. Native Peoples of Siberia]. SPb., 1878.

³ Maak R. *Puteshestvie na Amur, sovershyonnoe po rasporyazheniyu Sibirskogo otdela IRGO v 1855 g.* [The Trip to the Amur Made According to the Order of the Siberian Department Imperial Russian Geographic Society in 1855]. SPb., 1859.

⁴ Orlov I.V. Amurskie orochony [Amur Orochons] In: *Vestnik Imperatorskogo Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*. Kniga IV. Chast' 21. № 6. SPb., 1857.

⁵ Radde G. I. *Berichte uber Reisen im Suden von Ost-Sibirien* [Reports on Journeys to the South of Eastern Siberia]. *Bertrage zur Kenntniss des Russ. Reiches und angranzenden lander Asiens*, Bd. 23. SPb., 1861.

⁶ Dadashkeliani K.N. Chast' Amurskoy oblasti mezhdru rr. Bureey i Amgun'yu, issledovannaya v 1887 godu [The Part of the Amur Region Between Bureya and Amgun' Rivers, Investigated in 1887]. In: *Sbornik geograficheskikh, topograficheskikh i statisticheskikh materialov po Azii* [Collection of geographical, topographical and statistical data on Asia]. Vyp. 32. SPb., 1888.

⁷ Shrenk L. *Ob inorodtsah Amurskogo kraya* [About Indigenous Peoples of the Amur Region]. T. 1. SPb., 1883; T. 2. SPb., 1899; T. 3. SPb., 1903.

⁸ Ivanov R. Polozhenie tungusov i drugih inorodtsev, prozhivayuschih po r. Bire Amurskoy oblasti, v rayone priiskov Khinganskoy i Sungariyskoy system [The situation of the Tungus and other indigenous peoples living on the Bira River of Amur region, near Khingan and Sungary systems' mines]. *Trudy IV Khabarovskogo s'ezda*. Khabarovsk, 1903.

and Horse Orochens can be also found in the works by S. M. Shirokogorov, published in 1920s.⁹ Both described the pre-revolutionary state of the Amur Evenks.

The first Soviet research on the Amur Evenks was conducted only in 1947-1948 by Glafira Vasilevich¹⁰: she studied Evenks of the Tyndinskiy and Zeyskiy areas of the Amur region (but not the Evenks of Selemdzha) and the Upper Bureya area of the Khabarovskiy region. Vasilevich described the transformations in the Amur Evenks' traditional culture, which were influenced by socialistic reforms. These transformations, especially in economics, were also studied by Vladilen Tugolukov¹¹, who conducted field research at the Selemdzhinskiy and Tyndinskiy areas in 1960 and 1975.

Anatoly Mazin had been studying the Amur Evenks (mainly in the Tyndinskiy and also in the Zeyskiy areas) for many years since the 1960s until his death in 2008. He was the first scholar who carried out comprehensive research on this Evenki group. His research results were described in several scholarly books (the first ones on Amur Evenks) and numerous papers concerned with different aspects of material culture, as well as spiritual life of the Amur Evenks.¹²

Related to field researches among the Amur Evenks, we could not overlook Alexandra Lavrillier, a French scholar who not only studies the Amur Evenks (mainly those of the Tyndinskiy area), but has also already been actively

⁹Shirokogorov S. M. Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva u tungusov [Experience of a Research of Bases of Shamanism at Tungus] In: Shirokogorov S. M. *Etnograficheskie issledovaniya*. Kniga pervaya: Izbrannoe / Sost. i primech. A.M. Kuznetsova, A. M. Reshetova. Vladivostok, 2001; Shirokogorov, Sergey M. Northern Tungus Migrations in the Far East. In: *The Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. LVII, 1926. Pp. 121-183.

¹⁰Vasilevich G.M. Po kolhozam dzhugdyrskih evenkov [On the kolkhozes of the Dzhugdyr Evenks] In: *Izvestiya Vsesoyuznogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*. 1950. № 2. Pp. 163-173.

¹¹Tugolukov V.A. Preobrazovaniya v khozaystve i culture u evenkov Amurskoy oblasti [Transformations in the Economy and Culture of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. *Preobrazovaniya v khozaystve i culture i etnicheskiye protsessy u narodov Severa*. Moscow, 1970; Tugolukov V.A. Polevye issledovaniya v severnom Priamur'ye [Field Research in the north of the Amur region]. *Polevye issledovaniya Instituta etnografii*, 1975. M., 1977.

¹²Mazin A.I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov* [Traditional Beliefs and Rites of the Evenk-Orochons]. Novosibirsk, 1984. Mazin A.I. Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov (konets XIX – nachalo XX v.) [Daily Life and Economy of the Evenk-Orochons (the end of XIX – the beginning of the 20th century)]. Novosibirsk, 1992; Mazin A.I., Mazin I.A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [The Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007.

contributing to their lives for many years. She had been living with Amur Evenks for several years, studying their worldview, lifestyle, and religion.¹³ Along with A.P. Zabiylko (one of the authors of this book), and French researchers from *Collège de France and l'École pratique des hautes études*, A. Lavrillier participated in the 6-years research project "Nomadisme, sociétés et environnement en Asie centrale et septentrionale". The field data on the Amur Evenks, collected by A. Lavrillier and A. Zabiylko, were published in separate chapters of the book based on the project.¹⁴

There are also other modern researchers of the Amur Evenks. Among them Nadezhda Ermolova (1955-2011) should be noted, whose PhD thesis¹⁵ was concerned with the history of the Amur Evenks from the 17th to early 20th centuries. Indigenous scholars also study various aspects of the Amur Evenks' culture, including Galina Varlamova (folklore studies) and Nadezhda Bulatova (language studies); both were born in the Amur region.¹⁶

1.2 Genesis and first contacts with Russians

The exact time of the Evenks emerging in the Amur region is unknown. This problem is directly connected with still unresolved issues concerning the origin of the Evenki ethnos. Studying genesis and ethnic history of the Evenks is complicated by a number of factors. In this chapter three of them will be mentioned.

The first problem is the small archaeological imprint left by the Evenki culture: the majority of objects of traditional Evenki life were made mainly of wood and skin – materials with low resistance to soil and climate conditions of the Russian Far East.

¹³Lavrillier A. *Nomadisme et adaptations sédentaires chez les Evenks de Sibérie postsoviétique: jouer pour vivre avec et sans chamanes* [Nomadism and the adaptations to a sedentary lifestyle among the Evenks of post-soviet Siberia: playing to live with and without shamans]. PhD diss., Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Section des Sciences Religieuses), Paris, 2005; Lavrillier A. Orietnatsiya po rekam u evenkov yugo-vostoka Sibiri. Sistema prostranstvennoy, sotsial'noy i ritual'noy orietnatsii [Orientation by rivers among the Evenks of Siberian South-East]. System of spatial, social and ritual orientation]. In: *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*. 2010. Vol. 6. Pp. 115-132.

¹⁴Nomadismes d'Asie centrale et septentrionale [The nomads of Central and Northern Asia]. Sous la direction de Ch. Stepanoff, C. Ferret, G Lacaze, J. Thorez.. Paris: Armand Colin, 2013. 288 p.

¹⁵Ermolova N.V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sakhalina. Formirovanie i kul'turno-istoricheskie svyazi*. XVII – nachalo XX v. [The Evenks of the Amur Region: Forming of Cultural and Historic Relations]: diss. ... kand. ist. n. Leningrad, 1984. 205 p.

¹⁶Varlamova G. I. *Mirovozzrenie evenkov: otrazhenie v fol'klоре* [The worldview of Evenks: its reflection in folklore]. Novosibirsk, 2004; Bulatova, Nadezhda Y. *Govory evenkov Amurskoy oblasti* [Dialects of the Evenks of the Amur region]. Leningrad, 1987. 168 p.

The second issue is the nomadic way of life of Evenks, who, in fact, were in a state of permanent migration. They constantly moved in small groups around huge and mainly remote territories, not forming permanent settlements or burial grounds (as they practiced air burial in charnel grounds).

The final problem is the absence of Evenki script (up to 1930s) and, actually, the failure to mention them in written sources before the first arrival of the Russians to the Amur in the middle of 17th century. The information about the Amur groups of Evenks from the end of 17th to the 19th centuries (the period between Nerchinsk and Aigunsky Treaties, when the Amur region belonged to China¹⁷) is very poor and contradictory.

Thus, the early history of the Evenks remains unclear. Different scholars name various possible locations of the ancestral homeland of the Evenks: Siberia (J. Bella, G.F. Miller), Altai (M. A. Kastren), Mongolia and Northern China (L. I. Shrenk), the basin of the Huang He River (S. M. Shirokogorov), Manchuria and Middle Amur (A. P. Derevyanko), the Amur basin (V. A. Tugolukov), the Baikal region and Transbaikalia (Yu. D. Talko-Gryntsevich, A. P. Okladnikov, G. M. Vasilevich, E. V. Shavkunov, E. I. Derevyanko). Most researchers suppose that the ancestors of the Evenks were the Sumo Mohe, the tribes that lived in the Amur region in the 4th-7th centuries AD¹⁸. Others see some links between the Evenks and the Transbaikal people Uvan' who herded reindeer in the 5th-7th centuries AD, or with the Talakan archaeological culture (at the Bureya River). Genetically the Evenks might also be close to the Jurchen¹⁹ and the Manchu.

Over at least several centuries the forming of the Evenki ethnos was connected with reindeer herding, however the exact time when this practice emerged among

¹⁷ The Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) was the first treaty between the Russian Empire and China (Qing Dynasty), in which Russia gave up the area north of the Amur River as far as the Stanovoy Range, keeping the area between the Argun River and Lake Baikal. The Treaty of Aigun (1858) reversed the treaty of 1689, transferring the land between the Stanovoy Range and the Amur River from China (Qing Empire) to the Russian Empire.

¹⁸ Alkin S.V., Chikisheva T.A., Gubina M.A., Kulikov I.V. *Arheologiya, antropologiya i paleogenetika Troitskogo mogil'nika (kultura mohe: pervyie rezultaty kompleksnogo analiza [Archeology, anthropology and paleogenetics of the Troitsk burial ground (culture of the Mohe: first results of the complex analysis)]. Problemy biologicheskoy i kulturnoy adaptatsii chelovecheskih populyatsiy [Problems of biological and cultural adaptation of human populations]. Vol. 1. Arheologiya. Adaptatsionnyie strategii drevnego naseleniya Severnoy Evrazii: syriyo i priemy obrabotki [Archaeology. Adjustment Strategies of the Ancient Peoples of Northern Eurasia: Raw Materials and Refining Techniques]. SPb.: Nauka, 2008. Pp. 202-207.*

¹⁹ Jurchen were the founders of the Jin Empire in northeastern China of the 12th-13th centuries AD.

the Evenks is also in dispute. Many researchers supposed that initially the Evenks were pedestrian nomad hunters, and reindeer herding was a quite late tradition, influenced by horse breeding cultures. For instance, Glafira Vasilevich²⁰ argued that the Evenks already inhabited the huge territory of Siberia before they herded reindeer, and then they just adapted horse breeding methods and equipment – used by neighboring peoples – to the reindeer. She also supposed that reindeer herding originated in the Amur region, Altai-Sayansk uplands and Trasbaikalia²¹.



Evenki woman. 1840.

The process of forming the Evenks as a single ethnic community, apparently, at all its stages was determined by interethnic relations. The Amur Evenks were considerably influenced by the Yakut, the Manchu, the Daur, and, to a lesser degree, by the peoples of the Lower Amur (the Nivkhs, the Nanais, the Ulchi) and Paleo-Asiatic peoples. However, the East Slavic peoples (generally the Russians and later the Ukrainians) had the greatest impact on the Amur Evenks. In the 17th century this influence was minimal, but starting in the middle of 19th century when the left bank of the Amur River became a part of Russia, it increased considerably.

It is remarkable that it was the Evenks (the Tungus as they were previously referred to) who opened the road to the Amur for the Russians. In 1638 the Evenk shaman Tomkoni on the Aldan River (Yakutia) told the Tomsk Cossacks led by the ataman Dmitry Kopylov that in the south, beyond the Stanovoy Range, a big rich river flows. The Evenks called this river *Omur*: that was transformed by Russians to Amur. In the following 6 years the Russians organized several campaigns to the Amur, moving from Yakutia. Some of them were led by the Evenki guides. Vassili Poyarkov was the first Russian who managed to reach the Amur in 1644. Poyarkov and another explorer of the Amur, Yerofey Khabarov (who led an expedition in the Amur from 1649 to 1653) got *yasak*²² from the natives (the Daur, the

²⁰ Glafira Vasilevich (1895-1971) was a prominent scholar of the Evenki language, history and culture. She participated in more than 10 expeditions to the Evenki taiga camps and nomadized together with them for a long time. In 1947-1948 she studied Evenks of southern Yakutia, Khabarovsk region and Amur region.

²¹ Vasilevich G.M., Levin M.G. *Tipy olenevodstva i ih proishozhdenie* [Types of Reindeer Breeding and Their Origin]. *Sovetskaya etnografiya* [Soviet Ethnography], 1951, Vol. 1. Pp. 63-87.

²²Yasak is a natural (usually fur) tax that was paid by the peoples of Siberia to Russian Tsars.



Orochons' caravan. Drawing. 19th century.

Tungus, and the Dyuchers). Despite the given orders not to conflict with the aborigines, both of them were rough and dishonest with these peoples, including the Tungus, and therefore caused a part of them to develop hostile feelings toward the Russians. Trading relations between the Russians and the natives began at least in 1649, when Vassili Yuryev discovered a shorter way from Yakutia to the Amur through the Olyokma River.

1.3 Clans and ethnic groups

By the time of the first contacts with the Russians the Amur Evenks were not a single ethnos. They represented a conglomerate of separate tribal groups that had their own names and types of economies. Today a number of features enable to consider them separate ethnoses.

It is important to mention that there is a problem with the ethnonymy of the Amur Evenks, which includes the distortion of Evenki clan names and co-existence of ethnonyms with patrimonial names and names of local ethno-territorial groups; the names of real clans and the so-called “administrative” clans (created artificially in order to collect *yasak* more efficiently); endoethnonyms and exoethnonyms²³. Another difficulty is that in the 17th - 19th centuries the word “Tungus” was related not only to the Evenks, but to

²³ Turaev V. A. Etnicheskaja istorija dal'nevostochnyh evenkov [Ethnic History of the Far-Eastern Evenks]. *Vestnik Dal'nevostochnogo otdeleniya Rossijskoy akademii nauk* [Bulletin of the Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences]. 2009, 5. Pp. 90-102.

to other Far-Eastern peoples as well (e.g. those of the Lower Amur, the Evens, Manchurians, Xianbei, Khitan and even the residents of ancient Korea)²⁴. Therefore in many written sources of that time it was rather difficult to understand whether the people mentioned were the Evenks or some other tribes.

According to the Russian written sources of 17th century the average number of Evenks in the Amur region (Albazinsky uyezd) between 1643 and 1681 was about 4000 people. Of them, 2260 were reindeer herders, 1240 were the so-called “agrarian Tungus of Zeya”, and 500 were Amgun Tungus who had no reindeer²⁵. Two centuries later, during the Russian Empire Census of 1897, there were 1350 Evenks in the Amur region (1.12% of the regional population). The decrease of the Evenki population was caused both by economic and social factors, including a series of smallpox epidemics that hit Siberia in the 17th-19th centuries.

In the 17th century the Evenks used genonima (clan names) instead of the common ethnonym: *Bayagir*, *Shamagir*, *Uillagir*, *Managir*, *Koltogir*, *Duncan*, etc²⁶. Only two of them remained as ethnonyms by the 19th century: *Birars* and *Manegrs* (they were applied to horse breeding groups of the Evenks). Others (reindeer herders) started to be called the Tungus and later – the Evenks and the Orochons²⁷. These groups are considered in larger detail in the following section.

The Birars (or Biral, Birarchen; originated from the Evenki word *bira* – the river) lived along the course of the left Amur River tributaries (Bureya, Zeya, Selemdzha), on the western slope of Turana Range. The Evenks, the Daur, the Manchu and the Lower Amur tribes were united to form the Birar

²⁴ Sokolova Z.P., Tugolukov V.A. Starye i novye nazvaniya narodov Severa [Old and new names of the peoples of the North]. *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, 1983, 1. Pp. 76-87.

²⁵ Dolgih B.O. Etnicheskiy sostav i rasselenie narodov Amura v XVII v. po russkim istochnikam [Ethnic groups and their settlement in the Amur Region in the 17th century. Based on Russian sources]. In: M. N. Tihomirov (ed.), *Sbornik statey po istorii Dal'nego Vostoka* [A collection of Articles on the History of the Far East]. Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Far-Eastern Subsidiary of the History Department. Moscow, 1958. Pp. 140-141.

²⁶ Main Evenki clans known in the Amur region since 17th century until today: *Akchigar*, *Boyagir*, *Bukachar*, *Bullyot*, *Buta*, *Betum*, *Guragir*, *Dalmay*, *Der*, *Deyugan*, *Dolon*, *Dongo*, *Donmal*, *Dulan*, *Dengme*, *Ingilas (Ingelagir)*, *Kangay*, *Kaptuguar-kun*, *Kargir*, *Kachin*, *Kilen*, *Kindigir*, *Koltogir*, *Kontagir*, *Kuchugur*, *Keptuke*, *Laligir*, *Malakul*, *Manyagir*, *Menge*, *Murgat*, *Mokogir*, *Nenegir*, *Ninagan*, *Nyurmagan*, *Oylagir*, *Suyagor*, *Ulegir*, *Hevgin (Hevgingkur)*, *Chakagir*, *Shamagir (Samagir)*, *Shologon (Sologon)*, *Sholon (Solon)*, *Egdyire*, *Egilainkunl*, *Edyan*.

²⁷ Ermolova N.V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sakhalina...* Ibid. P. 7.

culture. The Birar language did not differ much from the one of other Amur Tungus, therefore in the 19th century there was a problem of differentiating the Birars from the Manegrs. The Birars were first mentioned in the 1640s, at the time of the Russians' first campaign of the to the Amur, led by V. D. Poyarkov (the 1640s). At that time the Birars (about 400 individuals) inhabited the upper Selemdzha and Byssa rivers, the upper courses of the Uda River, and the top part of the Shevli River course. In 1661 Ignatiy Milovanov met the Birars on the lower course of the Selemdzha River and reported that they had been paying tribute to the China Emperor through the Daur.²⁸

Initially the Birars were nomadic reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen. But then they moved to the plains (Zeya-Bureya Plain and the right bank of the Amur River). Influenced by the Manchurians, the Daur and the Chinese, Birars became settled horse breeders and farmers (the first data on horse breeding among the Birars is dated in 1679). The considerable influence of the Manchurians on the Birars was mentioned by the prominent researcher of the Amur region Richard Maak in the last quarter of the 19th century. By its end the Birars almost completely disappeared from the Amur region (last mentioned in 1887) – having migrated mostly to Northern Manchuria; others were assimilated by the reindeer herders.

The Manegrs (or Manegirs, Manygrs) originate from the Evenki clan of Manyagir. They also underwent considerable cultural influence from the Daur, the Manchurians and the Lower Amur peoples and gradually moved from reindeer herding to horse breeding and (partially) to a settled life. The Manegrs had a peculiar type of horse breeding: their horses in fact simply replaced the reindeer that were used similarly and were on a year-round self-pasture. The lifestyle and crafts of the Manegrs compared to the reindeer Evenks did not undergo any considerable changes, and their economy was still based on hunting and fishing.

The first mention of the Manegrs in Russian written sources dates back to the middle of 17th century, when they inhabited the northern and southern slopes of the Stanovoy Range and the upper courses of the rivers Nyukzha and Urkan. Most likely, at the end of the 17th – beginning of 18th centuries the Manegrs moved southwards and occupied the areas that

²⁸*Dopolnenija k aktam istoricheskim, sobrannym i izdannym arheograficheskoj komissiej* [Additions to historical acts collected and published by the archaeological commission]. Vol. III. St-Petersburg, 1848. P. 53; Spasskiy G.I. Svedenija russkih o reke Amur v XVII stoletii [Data on the Amur River in the 17th century obtained by Russians]. *Vestnik Imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshhestva*. St-Petersburg, 1853. P. 183.

were empty after the Manchurians forced peoples who lived there (the Daur, the Ducher, the Gogul and others) to move to China²⁹. Within all the 18th century other Evenki groups (who also became horse breeders) gradually joined the Manegrs, and by the beginning of the 19th century they were the main ethnic group in the region, occupying huge territories of the Upper and Middle Amur and its tributaries, from Never to Bureya³⁰.

In the middle of the 19th century the Manegrs doubted when asked about their citizenship and changed their answers according to the situation. In the second half of the century the Chinese and Manchurians had a significant impact on the language, culture and lifestyle of the Manegrs. At the same time the Manegrs living in the Amur region considerably decreased in number because of the intensive development of previous Manegr territories by Russian peasants. As a result the Manegrs moved to China (Northern Manchuria) where they assimilated with other ethnic groups. As a result, by the beginning of the 20th century they actually disappeared from the Amur region³¹.

The Orochons (*Orochen, Orochol, Orochel*) is one of the names of the reindeer herding Evenki groups of Transbaikalia, the Amur region, China and Mongolia. The origin of this ethnonym and the possibility of applying it to all Amur reindeer herding Evenks remains in dispute; different opinions were expressed about it by L.I. Shrenk, S.K. Patkanov, G.M. Vasilevich, A.I. Mazin, N.V. Ermolova and other researchers.



Orochons. Transportation of a child.

²⁹Shrenk L.I. *Ob inorodcah Amurskogo kraja* [On the Indigenous Peoples of the Amur Region]. Vol. 1. St-Petersburg, 1883. P. 181.

³⁰Ermolova N.V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sakhalina...* [The Evenks of the Amur and Sakhalin...]. Ibid.

³¹According to the Census of 1926, 35 the Manegrs lived in the Zeyskiy district; in the 1930s six families of horse breeding Manegrs were registered on the Zeya River, below the from Giluy mouth. According to a 2002 Census, 27 people called themselves Manegrs.

The Amur Orochons were reindeer herders, and they nomadized with their herds all the time. Unlike the Manegrs and the Birars, the Amur Orochons underwent greater influence from Russians than from the Chinese, the Daur or the Manchu. Even before the Treaty of Aigun they were considered Russian citizens and paid yasak to the Russian Treasury. In the middle of the 19th century some Russian researchers specified the Yablonevyy Ridge (in the north), the upper courses of the Amazar River and the Olyokma River (in the west), the Olda River (in the east) as borders of the Orochons resettlement on the left bank of the Amur. The Orochons lived on its right bank from the confluence of the Shilka and Argun rivers to the Albazikha (Omuri) River.

At the beginning of the 1880s there were eight Orochon clans (about 1000-1800 individuals) living in the Amur region, who owned over 1500 reindeers. In 1892 after a devastating epizooty, Orochons' reindeer herds declined dramatically. That was one of the reasons for their migration to other territories and changing way of life: some of them began to breed horses; others worked at mines and settled in villages. By the end of 19th century the Orochons moved to territories earlier occupied by the Manegrs, and then moved lower, to the mouth of the Never river. Other groups of Manegrs moved down the rivers Gilyuy and Urkan and reached the right bank of the Zeya River. At the beginning of the 20th century they inhabited the left-bank inflows of middle Vitim, the upper course of Olyokma and Aldan, the middle course of the Maya River and the left-bank inflows of the Upper Amur. According to the 1926 Census there were 65 Orochons in



Evenki summer rawhide tent

the Amur district³² and 448 Orochons in the Zeyskiy district. In the 1930s all the Orochons, except for the horse Orochons of Northwest Manchuria, were officially integrated with the Evenks.

During the 19th century new Evenki groups arrived to the Amur region from the neighboring territories (mainly, Yakutia, Okhotsk coast and Transbaikalia). Gradually they assimilated with the local Tungus tribes and became the basis for the modern Evenki population of the Amur region.

The North-Eastern Evenks (or “Russian Tungus”) were the Evenki groups that moved from southern Yakutia and the Uda River (that flows to the Sea of Okhotsk). Konstantin Dadeshkeliany, who explored the northeastern the Amur region in 1887, argued that the Evenks moved there in the 1830s because of the loss of fur-bearing animals in their previous lands³³. They migrated in waves and nomadized along the Selemdzha, Zeya, Bureya, Amgun, Niman and other rivers. In 1887 there were about 3500 Evenki migrants; they belonged to *Buta*, *Edyan*, *Kangalas* Evenk clans of Yakutia and *Lalygir*, *Betnen*, *Sher* clans of Uda basin. The most numerous group of the Evenks from Yakutia (about 1000) nomadized along the Bureya River.

Moving to the south, almost all of these Evenks preserved a nomadic way of life, replacing their reindeer with horses. Fur trade played a significant role in their life. Every year they gathered in the Niman and Umalta river basins, where big fairs took place, and exchanged their furs



Orochon hunter with a spear

³² Between 1926 and 1930 the Amur region was divided into two districts – *Amurskiy okrug* and *Zeyskiy okrug*.

³³ Dadeshkeliani K.N. Chast' Amurskoj oblasti mezhdru rr. Bureej i Amgun'ju, issledovannaja v 1887 godu [A part of the Amur Region between the Burea and the Amgun rivers explored in 1887]. *Sbornik geograficheskikh, topograficheskikh i statisticheskikh materialov po Azii* [A Collection of Geographic, topographic and statistic data on Asia]. Vol. 32. St-Petersburg, 1888. P. 270.



Evenks at a settlement

necessary items. As a rule, merchants (generally Yakuts and Russian Cossacks, retired soldiers and peasants) intentionally offered a significantly lower price for the Evenki furs on the one hand, and, on the other hand, demanded double or sometimes a threefold price for the goods that they sold to the Evenks. Such an unfair trade turned the Evenks into debtors completely dependent on dealers. Dadashkeliani noted that on all the northeast of the Amur region there was no Evenki family that would not have owed a sum varying from 100 to 600 rubles to some Yakut merchant³⁴. Peter Shimkevich wrote that Yakut dealers complained to him that the Evenks, because of the lack of resources, paid their debts very slowly. The total amount of Evenki debt to the Yakut merchants in the 1890s reached 90 000 rubles³⁵.

Actually, the contacts between the north-eastern Amur Evenks and the Yakuts were rather close. As Alexander Middendorf noticed, the enterprising Yakut tradesmen moved to the Amur after the Evenks: several dozens of the Yakuts nomadized with the Evenks to the northeast of the region. There were also interethnic marriages between the Yakuts and the Evenks. A Yakut settlement was founded on the river Niman, where they organized a school for Yakut and Evenki children and held annual fairs; this was also where the Evenks exchanged their furs for food, guns and other items.³⁶ Due to neighboring and

³⁴ At that time, a milk cow or horse cost 60-100 rubles; the salary of a higher official (such as a privy councilor) was about 500 rubles.

³⁵ Shimkevich P.P. Inorodtsy Amurskogo kraja [Indigenous peoples of the Amur Region]. *Priamurskie Vedomosti*. 1894. Vol. 15; Shimkevich P.P. Sovremennoe sostojanie inorodtsev Amurskoj oblasti i bassejna Amguni [Contemporary state of the natives of the Amur region and the Amgun basin]. *Trudy Priamurskogo otdela IRGO*, 1895. Vol. 1. P. 1-24.

³⁶ *Istoriya Amurskoy oblasti s drevneyshih vremen do nachala XX v.* [The History of the Amur region from ancient times to the beginning of the 20th century]. Eds: Derevyanko A. P., Zabiyaiko A. P. Blagoveschensk, 2008. P. 28.

constant joint nomadizing, everyday contacts and interethnic marriages, the northeastern Evenks gradually assimilated with the Yakuts. Culture and language of modern Evenks of the northeast Amur region (living in Selemzhinskiy and Zeyskiy areas) still bear traces of Yakut influence.

1.4 The Amur Evenks in the last decades of Imperial Russia

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, the lifestyle of the Evenks began to change dramatically. This change was caused by the integration with Russians. The main reasons for that were trade contacts, missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church, interethnic marriages and active development of the northern areas of the Amur region by Russians.

Another reason was the loss of reindeer because of epidemics and, consequently, debts. Inexperienced in buying and selling, the Evenks often fell victim to debt-serfdom due to some unfair merchants. Hunting was not profitable anymore for different reasons including an increasing number of hunters, animal migrations out of the developed territories, loss of guns used to pay debts, etc. Deprived of their reindeer and wild game, and left starving and helpless, many of the Amur Evenks had to settle in gold-mining and farming villages, where they assimilated with other peoples rather quickly.

Living near gold mines, they gave up hunting and worked for those companies as guides, cargo or mail carriers, haymakers, etc. Some of them were engaged in illegal activities (they panned for gold, transported spirits



Evenki hunter

to gold miners). These new activities, high earnings, close contacts with gold miners and Cossacks, and interethnic marriages caused deep changes in their habits and worldviews. While gambling, thieving, and alcoholism, had been unknown to the Evenks before, these activities now became serious problems for them³⁷.

At the end of the 19th century the patrimonial organization of Evenki society began to change, nuclear families became more independent from clans, social differentiation increased. Along with denser and increasing multinational settling of the Amur region in the second half of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th centuries, interethnic marriages became more varied. The gender disproportion (the prevalence of males) of the first decades among the immigrants promoted Evenki brides to marry into Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and other families. At the beginning of the 20th century the process of mutual intermarriage had obvious results in terms of anthropological type, way of life and culture of the Amur taiga people.

Thus, as we can see, the Amur Evenks underwent considerable assimilation in the last decades of the Russian Empire. But most of them still preserved their traditional way of life, and language and culture until the October Revolution of 1917, although they were usually deeply in need.

Incredible poverty prompted most of them to accept the October Revolution. Not all their expectations came true, but certain positive changes occurred in their life: deaths (including epidemic mortality) was considerably reduced, the hunger issue was solved, the Evenks got their own writing system based on the Cyrillic script, their children went to schools and entered universities. At the same time, the Soviet period with its politics and methods brought a lot of disappointment. Sometimes it led to attempts at confronting new



*Evenki man in Russian clothes.
Beginning of the 20th century.*

³⁷Shimkevich P.P. *Sovremennoe sostoyanie inorodtsev Amurskoy oblasti...* Ibid. P. 10.

authorities (for instance, the so-called “Tungus revolt” in 1924-1925 that happened in the neighboring Khabarovsk region) that were quickly stifled. The Evenks were involved in the process of “building socialism”.

1.5 Soviet period

In Soviet Russia major changes in the Evenki lifestyle occurred. Those changes were a part of the overall processes of transforming Russian society into a “new historical community” – the Soviet People.

In the 1920s and the early 1930s most of the Evenki families (clans) still nomadized in the areas where their ancestors previously pastured reindeer. Until that time they had preserved their traditional economic activities and forms of relationships. There were three types of property among them. *Delken* (the raised platforms where they stored food and equipment), boats, fishing weirs, meat and fish procured together comprised the *collective ownership*. Relics (such as ritual carpet *namu*, family amulets *sevekichan*) flints, hooks for hanging boilers, and reindeer were considered to be *family property*. Every male adult owned *private property* such as gun, machete *palmá*, skis, dogs and, reindeer, which he received either at birth or upon reaching a certain age. He had full control over reindeer and was free to sell or give them away. For women, the



An Evenki family in a settlement. Beginning of the 20th century.

dowry and tools were considered to be personal property. In cases of dividing the property, a person preserved all his or her things and there was never any dispute about it.³⁸

Communal relations were the basis of Evenki society. “Its members pastured reindeer, hunted for big animals, fished, and practiced the traditional family rites, such as *sevekan* and *sinkelaun*. Within the community existed customs of mutual aid and game sharing (*nimat*). The production teams had their shamans and blacksmiths, they were headed by the elders, and the management of economic affairs was collective. At the same time, each family ran the household individually – they independently hunted for furs, bought products and consumed them. The products obtained together were divided.”³⁹

During this period the Evenks still preserved their traditional way of life, native language, folklore and religious notions and rites.

Fundamental changes in the Amur Evenks lifestyle mostly started due to the public policy carried out in the 1930s called collectivization. In different areas of the region hunting crews and reindeer farms (later called *kolkhozes* and *sovkhazes*) were formed. The latter were based on herds withdrawn from personal property during collectivization. Being deprived of their reindeer and hunting areas, more and more Evenks had to leave taiga and settle in national villages built especially for that purpose, where they were under control of the officials. Children of those Evenks who worked in taiga reindeer farms were placed in boarding schools. Many parents, who could not bear being separated from their children, followed them to the villages. There, many of them died of alcoholism and diseases previously unknown to taiga nomads.



M. Fyodorova (central figure), the founder of Ust-Nyukzha village, with relatives.

³⁸See: Mazin, A. I. *Byt i hozjajstvo evenkov-orochonov* (konec XIX – nachalo XX v.) [The way of life and Household the Evenk-Orochons (the end of the 19th – the beginning of the 20th centuries)]. Novosibirsk, 1992. Pp. 11–12.



Building of log houses. Ust-Nyukzha.

disappeared. Mass starvation was also becoming an extremely rare occurrence in Evenki camps. Soviet officials took care of the preservation of taiga nomads' lives and reorganized the foundation of their lifestyle according to the ideals that seemed to be the most progressive and promising at that time.

Nomadizing areas of many Evenki clans and families changed fundamentally in 1930s-1940s. Large-scale development of the Far East during the industrialization of the country, dramatic expansion of logging activity and gold mining, road building and the founding of settlements pushed some families out of their native lands. This partly was determined by restricted access to border areas along the Amur River. Some clans were forced to migrate away from the border, from their old nomadic camps and from relatives who nomadized on the other bank of the Amur River within a puppet state Manchukuo, which was hostile towards the USSR. Since that time the pathways of the Amur Evenks living on Russian territory, and the Evenks of Northeast China proceeded in different directions.

However, there were positive aspects within these contradictory processes. For instance, young Evenks got free access to education at all levels, and there was a great advantage in free health care for both humans and reindeer. Illiteracy and the terrible scourge of the past – the epidemics that killed many families and their herds – became rare, and eventually



Missing the taiga. A.P. Nikolaeva in her rawhide tent set near her log house. Ust-Nyukzha.

In order to raise women's employment and to develop local production, workshops for making national clothes and other products of reindeer fur were organized in many Evenki villages. Warm fur coats and fur footwear, hats and gloves, sleeping bags and other things were sewn during those workshops. This national Evenki craft turned out very useful during World War II: many of such clothes were sent to the Red Army and protected the soviet soldiers against the hardest frosts.



Handing furs on to sovkhos. Ust-Nyukzha.



Fur farm. Ust-Nyukzha.



Sewing clothes of reindeer skins. Ust-Nyukzha.

Many Evenks joined the Soviet Army, becoming brave warriors. Much of the native skills of Evenki hunters (like their ability to walk for a long time through the forest without food and water, to creep soundlessly, to shoot accurately) proved quite useful in war. Many of them gave their lives in the name of victory. For example, 141 men went to war from the Evenki village Ust-Nyukzha (Tyndinskiy area, the Amur region), and 102 of them were killed on the battlefield.



Those Amur Evenks who returned to their homes brought military awards and experience of army brotherhood, which united many peoples of the huge country into one single family. Among those war heroes are E.M. Malchakitov and E.P. Nikolayev (Ust-Nyukzha).

In the postwar years the Evenks contributed to the development of the Far East. They transported different loads on their reindeer during the construction of roads and communication lines, supplied gold-miners and forestry workers with meat. The Evenki women sewed warm reindeer-fur sleeping bags for the builders of the Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) to survive the severe frosts with the average temperatures around 50°C below zero in that area. The Evenki farm “*Lenin Okton*”⁴⁰ was one of the strongest economic units of the Amur region. In addition, the Evenks worked as guides during various expeditions including geological ones. Who else but the Evenks, whose ancestors wandered on the Amur lands for centuries, could be better guides in a primeval, impassable taiga? One of these guides, an Evenk from the village *Bomnak*⁴¹ named *Ulukitkan* (Ev. – “little squirell”) participated in the geodesic expeditions in the 1940-50s and was depicted in ethnographic novels by the famous Russian writer Grigoriy Fedoseev.

In 1960s-70s reindeer herding began to develop at a rapid pace: the herds counted many thousands, deer slaughtering was massive – usually 200-300 animals at a time. The living conditions of reindeer herders were improved: permanent log houses were built for them in taiga, and each reindeer herding brigade had a portable radio to maintain contact with the village. Helicopters regularly flew to the nomad camps, supplying them with necessities and food. Special helicopter flights were organized for exchanging reindeer between herds of the Amur region,



E.P. Nikolaev (1923-2009), veteran of World War II, Ust-Nyukzha.

⁴⁰ The name is translated as “The Way of Lenin”.

⁴¹ Bomnak is an Evenki village in the Zeiskiy area (northeastern Amur region).



Ivanovskoe, 1971.



Reindeer herders' council. Ivanovskoe village, 1971.

Yakutia, Khabarovskiy and Primorskiy regions – in order to avoid inbreeding and degeneration of the breed. Vaccination campaigns of reindeer against common “deer” diseases (i.e. foul-in-the-foot,⁴² *Oestrinae*, *Hypoderma tarandi*⁴³, etc.) were organized. However, such

⁴² Foul-in-the-foot is an acute and highly infectious disease of ungulates characterized by swelling and lameness. This extremely painful condition can become chronic if treatment is not provided, allowing other foot structures to become affected, and lead to death of the animal.

⁴³ The bot flies' (also known as warble flies, heel flies, gadflies) larvae are internal parasites of mammals, with some species growing in the host's flesh and others within the gut.

a large-scale reindeer herding had its drawbacks: these huge herds completely trampled the reindeer moss, which recovers very slowly – just one millimeter per year. As a result, pastures were getting poorer each successive year and the herders' brigades had to move farther and farther into the forest, which made the inevitable problems even worse.



At school. Ivanovskoe, 1971.



Young herder. Ivanovskoe, 1971.

*New life in a
Russian-Evenki
settlement,
Ust-Nyukzha*



*An airplane in
Ust-Nyukzha*

1.6 Modern history

The “Golden Age” of reindeer herding in the Amur region was gradually replaced by a severe crisis of the 1990s: an unstable economic situation, a lack of financing, decreasing wages for reindeer herders, unemployment, and an ideological and psychological degradation of basic values (collectivism, mutual aid, equality, and respect for work) struck the Evenks hard. Reindeer-herding farms collapsed one by one, and the amount of animals sharply decreased – partly due to the lack of regular vaccination, but mostly because people simply had nothing to eat and had to kill their reindeer. The Evenki population itself was reduced due to diseases, alcoholism and increased number of suicides.

The general economic anarchy and lack of a strong legislative base caused a situation in which the lands where the Amur Evenks traditionally wandered and hunted were occupied by numerous businesses. Usually engaged in gold mining and logging activity, these businesses polluted the rivers and ruined forests without performing even simple re-cultivation (reclamation of the soil) and did not meet any environmental standards. As a result, the environment in the Evenki traditional nomadic areas considerably deteriorated, many pastures used by them for centuries were depleted, and the incidences of diseases among Evenks increased.⁴⁴

On the other hand, while governmental grants and subsidies were used to considerably boost the economy of reindeer-breeding sovkhozes, their sharp reduction gave an incentive for some Evenki families to return to a traditional taiga lifestyle. Left without the aid of the authorities, they began to buy reindeer and nomadize with their small herds (usually about 20-30 animals), hoping that taiga will feed them. This hope in nature, deeply rooted in the psyche of many Amur Evenks, helped ensure the survival of the most able-bodied part of this ethnos and managed their adjustment to a new social and economic situation.

Nowadays there are about 1300 Evenks in the Amur region; they mostly live in five villages: Bomnak of Zeyskiy area, Ivanovskoe of Selemdzhinskiy area, Ust-Urkima, Pervomayskoe, and Ust-Nyukzha in the Tyndinskiy area of the Amur region. Several Evenki families are officially permanent residents of the Mayskiy village of the Mazanovskiy area and nomadize along the tributaries of the Nora River.

⁴⁴ *Ulgen: ekologiya i zdorov'e evenkov: opyt raboty po proektu ROLL* [Ulgen: ecology and health of the Evenks. ROLL project]. Obshchestv. org. OOS «Ekolog. initsiativa» ; In-t Ustoychivyh Soobshchestv – Proekt ROLL [i dr.]; [pod obshch. red. L. E. Fedorovskoy]. Blagoveshchensk, 2000.



*Reindeer
herders’
festival.
Ivanovskoe,
2007.*

Not all of the Amur Evenks live a traditional way of life: only about half of them — like their ancestors — breed reindeer and hunt in the taiga they consider home. Most of the Amur Evenks live in settlements, in rather comfortable log houses. They use electrical appliances, mobile phones, and the Internet. They work at the mines, at schools, kindergartens and rural administrations, and they speak mainly Russian. Their children are university and college students who are not willing to become reindeer herders.

Nevertheless the statistics show that traditional economies of the Evenks (reindeer herding, hunting and fishery) are still the main type of economic activity. They form the basis of their everyday life and culture, and provide them with the main source of income and primary employment. Almost half of the Amur Evenks at working-age are employed in these traditional activities: about one third of them deal with reindeer herding, the other arranged with hunting. More than a third of the Evenks who are able to work are engaged in the social sphere (education, health care, culture) – the rest, in other fields⁴⁵.

At the beginning of the 21st century the social, economic and cultural situation in the Evenki villages of the Amur region stabilized and even improved compared to the recent past. Regional authorities created and financed several programs supporting Evenki culture and traditions,

⁴⁵ Generalized analysis of data provided by the Russian Federal State Statistics Service of the Amur Region, 2012-2016.

including reindeer herding. Each herder now gets about 1300 rubles per reindeer every year – for the owners of big herds (some of them include 300-700 animals) this is rather useful aid. Today the total area of reindeer pastures in the Amur region is more than five thousand hectares, and there are about seven thousand domestic reindeer in the Evenki economies (about one third of them are government-owned). Of course, it is much less than in the 1970s-1980s, but it is rather stable and seems enough for the taiga Evenks to live on. There are some plans to increase the reindeer herds for meat production and processing, but they cannot be launched in the near future for several reasons, including depleted pastures and a lack of investment.

In an attempt to attract tourists, the regional authorities created and financed the project named “The Evenki village” in 2012. This ethnographic open-air museum is located near Pervomayskoe village (Tyndinskiy area). It reconstructs an Evenki taiga camp with traditional Evenki dwellings, corrals for reindeer, fireplaces, etc. There are several log houses where different workshops and conferences take place.

The social organization of the Evenks has grown stronger and larger in recent decades. Created in 1990, the “Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North of the Amur Region” organizes regular congresses, where the Amur Evenks can discuss and solve their problems. Biannually they hold a nomad festival “*Bakaldyn*” (Ev. “meeting”), where Evenks from different Amur villages represent their native culture and skills (like shooting, reindeer riding and sledding, sewing and cooking), participate in common religious rites and rituals such as “fire feeding” and “cleaning” with larch branches. These festivals attract a lot of tourists and considerably join the Amur Evenks together, helping them to preserve their culture.

In recent decades more than fifteen native Evenki communes were formed in the North of the region. Most of them are engaged in traditional taiga activities – hunting, reindeer herding, creating native clothes, footwear and accessories, gathering berries and cedar nuts. Children are also involved in these activities.



Native dance group. Ust-Nyukzha, 2009.

In order to preserve and transmit their culture to next generations, several educational projects have been developed. The most remarkable of them is the “Nomadic school” created in Ust-Nyukzha by the local Evenks and Alexandra Lavrillier – a French scholar studying the Amur Evenks for many years. This school was inspired by the wish of Evenki parents to keep their children near them in taiga all year round and, at the same time, to give them standard school education. The solution to the problem was quite simple: now teachers visit taiga camps and teach the children there. Therefore, thanks to this project Evenki kids stay in the taiga with their parents and practice traditional Evenki skills, while simultaneously receiving a quality education.

The pupils who live in villages study the Evenki language (1-2 hours a week) and such national subjects as sewing skins, herding, fishing, etc. National educational programs are also used in primary schools (for instance, in Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area). In the last few years, several academic competitions were held at Amur State University in the Evenki language.

It is obvious that nowadays the Amur Evenks have two main vectors of development. The first refers to preservation of a traditional way of life as hunters and reindeer herders. The second is concerned with further integration into the new economy and employment, which implies changing their place of residence, language and ethnocultural traditions.

So what will it be – the future of the Amur Evenks?

Table 1. Dynamics of the number of Evenks in the Amur region, according to the Censuses 1897-2010.⁴⁶

Year	1897	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989	2002	2010	2016
Entire population number	1350	1653	803	1388	1479	1041	1617	1501	1481	1397
A share in the population of the region, %	1,12	0,55	0,17	0,19	0,19	0,11	0,15	0,16	0,17	0,17

⁴⁶ Source: *Demoscop Weekly*. (The Institute of Demography of the National Research University «Higher School of Economics»). URL: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/>. For 1926 data for the *Amur district* (794 Evenks, including 65 Orochons) and *Zeya district* (859 Evenks, including 440 Orochons) are summarized in the table. 2016 data is given according to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service of the Amur Region.

Chapter 2

Daily Life of Reindeer Herders and Hunters of the Amur taiga

2.1 Orochon: "the person owning a reindeer"

"*The person owning a reindeer*" – that is the translation of the word *orochón*, one of the most widespread self-names of the Amur Evenks. Perhaps, such a name perfectly reflects the main feature of the Evenki people, which distinguishes them from other ethnic groups and defines their entire lifestyle – a lifestyle that is closely connected with reindeer herding.⁴⁷ "*Oron achin – Evenki achin*" ("No reindeer – no Evenk") – illustrates a famous Evenki proverb. The wellbeing of an Evenki clan directly depended on the reproductive health of their reindeer. A big, strong herd was a guarantor of full life, an indicator of success and social status of an Evenki man. Before marrying, each young Evenk had to get his own small (up to 30 head) herd: for the bride's family, this meant that he was ready for marriage. The Evenk having 100 and more reindeer was considered to be rich.

When did the close relationship of the Evenks and reindeer begin? History is silent on this matter: neither archaeological, nor written sources can yet shed light on this secret and give us an accurate answer. There are some vague ancient legends about the emergence of the Evenki tradition of reindeer herding. For instance, the Evenks of Angara believed that they acquired reindeer herding and all the necessary tools thanks to the self-sacrifice of a bear. According to a myth of the Aldan Evenks, a reindeer was tamed by an Evenki woman: wild reindeer began to come to her dwelling in order to regale with the moss moistened with her urine.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ It should be noted that not all Evenks were engaged in reindeer breeding – some groups bred horses (for example, the Manegrs and Solons) or dogs (Khundysals). In written sources dated in the 18th-19th centuries we find references to an Evenki transition from reindeer breeding to horse breeding and back in crisis conditions. (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tungusov i etnicheskikh processov u evenkov)*. [Evenks (to the problem of ethnogenesis of the Tungus and ethnical processes at the Evenks). Doklad po opublikovannym rabotam, predstavlenyi na soiskanie uchenoy stepeni doktora istoricheskikh nauk. L., 1968. P. 47.) However, most of the Amur Evenks were reindeer breeders.

⁴⁸ Vasilevich G. M. *Ibid.* P. 53.

According to a number of researchers, the process of domesticating reindeer by Evenks began no later than one and a half thousand years ago: in Chinese written sources there is mention of herding reindeer for transport among the *Uvan'* people, who lived in the upper reaches of the Olyokma and Vitim rivers.⁴⁹ The prominent researcher of Evenki language and culture, Glafira Vasilevich, believed that the domestication of reindeer occurred for several centuries before the first mention of their use as a mode of transport.⁵⁰ Before this time the Evenks, presumably, were engaged in fishing and collecting, and hunted on foot.⁵¹

The question of the location of the Evenks' historical homeland still remains one of the biggest riddles for scientists studying Siberian peoples.⁵² Anyway, by the beginning of the second millennium AD the Evenks already occupied a huge territory stretching from the Sea of Okhotsk in the east, to the Yenisei River in the west and from Amur River in the south to the Arctic Ocean in the north. There exists an opinion that Evenks could have actually inhabited this huge space (in fact, half of the territory of modern Russia) precisely because of the domestication of reindeer.⁵³ The reindeer is best adapted for the severe conditions of the Siberian taiga. It is hardy and capable of breaking through any thicket, overcoming any mountain pass. Thanks to their warm fur (consisting of hollow fibers), the reindeer does not freeze even in the most severe frosts and can directly sleep on the snow; in addition, the special configuration of their hoofs ensures that it doesn't sink into the snow or bog when crossing the marshland (this, by the way, favorably distinguishes it from a horse). Therefore, according to this theory, the settling of the immense Siberian spaces by Evenks became possible only thanks to reindeer herding.

Glafira Vasilevich adhered to another position. According to her assumption, the ancient Tungus who hunted on foot were settled on the Siberian taiga even before the domestication of reindeer. At the same time this scholar makes the assumption that Tungus domestication of

⁴⁹ According to Vladilen Tugolukov, the Uvan' people were direct ancestors of the Evenks. See: Tugolukov V. A. *Etnicheskie korni tungusov* [Ethnic Origin of the Tungus]. In: *Etnogenez narodov Severa*. M, 1980.

⁵⁰ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tungusov ...)*. Ibid. P. 53.

⁵¹ Glafira M. Vasilevich, Alexei P. Okladnikov and Anatoly P. Derevyanko share the same opinion.

⁵² See Chapter 1.

⁵³ It has been argued by many scholars, including M. Levin.

reindeer began only after "the Tungus ethnographic complex" (i.e. the main distinctive features of the Tungus ethnos) was completely formed.⁵⁴ Domestication of reindeer by the Tungus, as Vasilevich believed, happened in the Upper Amur and in Transbaikalia. In her opinion, exactly from this point the reindeer herding began to extend to neighboring territories beginning in the 12th century.⁵⁵ This was realized by the transferring the reindeer from the Orochens (a big group of horse and reindeer breeders living in the Upper Amur and Transbaikalia) to the Evenks (pedestrian hunters from the mountain and taiga areas of Transbaikalia) as dowry for the contracts of intertribal marriage. "Perhaps, these Orochens were also the first reindeer breeders living, according to legends, "on the Siberian and Khitan lands" (to the East of the Onon and Anyuy rivers) [who were] linguistically related to the pedestrian hunters", – Glafira Vasilevich wrote. According to G. M. Vasilevich, the ethnonym *Orochon* comes from the Evenki word *oron* ('a domestic reindeer'), which is based off the word Oro, the Tungus name of the area near Albazin.⁵⁶ Thus, according to Vasilevich, the Amur region is the homeland of Evenki reindeer herding.

It can be therefore seen that the question of whether reindeer participated in the initial settling of Siberia by the Tungus or whether they were tamed later is disputable. In any case, reindeer herding undoubtedly played a significant role in the development of the Evenki ethnos, in the formation of their lifestyle, beliefs and rites. Domestication of reindeer became a guarantee of survival in the severe Siberian conditions, facilitated their movement in the taiga, increased their mobility and opened access to the new and remote territories.

An important factor in such an extensive resettlement of Evenks was also that, unlike other reindeer herders, they have a tradition of riding on the reindeer's back. This tradition was widely promulgated by the Amur Evenks, leading, according to G. M. Vasilevich, to "an Orochon type of reindeer herding". The researcher distinguished two types of reindeer herding among the Evenks: the *Evenki type* and *Orochon type*.

⁵⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tungusov...)*. Ibid. P. 37-38.

⁵⁵ And, by the way, was adopted by Yakuts approximately in the 13th century.

⁵⁶ See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tungusov...)* P. 21-22. It should be noted that, according to her opinion, the ethnonym Orochon, as related to Barguzin reindeer herders, has another origin.

The *Orochon type*⁵⁷ differs from the Evenki type in the larger amount of reindeer (200-300 animals); riding tradition and the presence of special riding saddles (*nama*); a low staff (*tyievun*) and other features. It was widespread on the spurs of the Jablonevyj and the Stanovoy Mountains, on the Vitim-Olekminsky plateau and spurs of the Verkhoyansk Mountains.⁵⁸ As we can see, the herding traditions of the Amur Evenks should, according to the geographical criterion of this classification, be related to the *Orochon* type. The data of our field research⁵⁹ show that the features of the *Orochon* type of reindeer herding listed by Vasilevich dominate at all three specified groups of Amur Evenks (Tynda, Selemdzha, Zeya). However, at the same time they have some features of the *Evenki type* of reindeer herding such as killing the domesticated reindeer in case of unsuccessful hunting, use of hunting skis, killing fawns born by domestic female reindeer and a wild male reindeer, etc. In general, the Amur Evenks who practiced the *Orochon* type of herding relied more on reindeer in their everyday life and economy in comparison with western Evenks; they were by their reindeer all the year round,⁶⁰ always nomadized and often hunted from reindeer backs.

Riding by reindeer back became possible due to the domestication of a large and hardy, mountain-taiga breed of reindeer. Riding allowed the Amur Evenks to go considerable distances not only in winter (via sleds), but also in summer, using riding (*nama*) and cargo (*emegen*) saddles. They made saddles of wood, horn, and reindeer skins. Such saddles were very convenient and allowed them to even transport babies, by putting them in special birch carriers (*emke*) tied to saddles.⁶¹ Each saddle was decorated with a unique ornament by which it was possible to determine the owner's Evenki clan.

⁵⁷ See: Vasilevich G. M. Tipy olenevodstva u tungusov (v svyazi s problemoy rasseleniya po Sibiri) [Types of reindeer breeding among the Tungus (in connection with the problem of their dissemination in Siberia)]. In: Mezhdunarodnyi kongress antropologicheskikh i etnograficheskikh nauk. Moscow, 1964. P. 3-9. Specified classification is here: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tngusov...)*. Ibid. Pp. 49-52.

⁵⁸ And also to the north from Lower Tunguska, on Kamchatka and Sakhalin.

⁵⁹ The field research was carried out by the authors of this book annually from 2002 to 2016 in all Evenk settlements of the Amur region, including taiga nomads' camps on Selemdzha, Olyokma, Middle Nyukzha rivers and others.

⁶⁰ In the Evenki type of reindeer herding, people allow their reindeer to herd in the tundra hills independently for the whole winter and sometimes all summer. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tngusov...)*. Ibid. P. 50.

⁶¹ These carriers could additionally be hung and used as cradles.



Evenki cradle

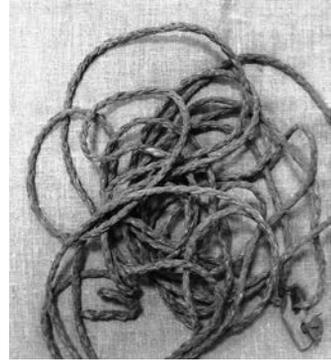
However the reindeer traditionally served not only as a vehicle for the Evenks (and for many Amur Evenks still today), but also as the main livelihood and center around which all their lives revolved. Evenks avoid the word “domestic” in relation to their reindeer, preferring the term “domesticated” which indicates a certain degree of independence of these animals from their hosts. “The reindeer is

necessary to man, and man is not necessary to the reindeer” – such a sentiment can often be heard from Evenki reindeer herders. The relative freedom of reindeer as well as the principles of their breeding significantly distinguish the Evenk lifestyle from the peoples who are engaged in cow or sheep breeding. The Evenki reindeer herders' conduct directly depends on the habits and needs of their reindeer. They are very convenient for breeding: it is not necessary to prepare food for them as they can feed themselves. In summer, they eat *reindeer lichen* and the grass and green shoots of deciduous trees.



Pack saddles with patrimonial signs

In winter, they eat lichen from under deep snowdrifts (the snow depths in the northern the Amur region can reach one and a half meters). On the other hand, such self-sufficiency of the reindeer turns into a problem of herd preservation. If they do not find and gather all the reindeer in time, they could run wild. That is why reindeer herders walk 10 to upwards of 30 kilometers every day. They do so in any weather, regardless of high or low temperature. In this line of work there are no holidays.



Maut (Evenki lasso)

To prevent the reindeer from going far, the herders tie to their necks *changaj* – small roundish logs complicating movement by hitting their legs. They also hang a small bell, called *kungiljan*, to the reindeer’s neck. The ringing of the bell helps keep the herd together and find lost reindeer easily. Having found a deer, the herder beckons him with a *javer* – a little bag with salt that rattles loudly because of the hooves that are tied to it (the domestic deer are accustomed to the sound of *javer* from the time they are fawns, and they love salt, just like other hoofed animals). The most obstinate reindeer are caught by means of a *maut* – a lasso woven from buckskin and thrown at the reindeer’s antlers). This process demands considerable skill from the reindeer herder.

Every Evenk knows all of his or her reindeer by sight – they all look similar from the point of view of a stranger, but for the reindeer herder they are absolutely different. Evenks learn to distinguish tens and even hundreds of deer from each other in their childhood. Traditionally the only toys for the Evenki children were *orokon* – small stylized figures of reindeer, cut out of osier (a species of willow) and having a unique carved pattern on their backs. Owning 200 or more *orokon* in his or her toy “herd”, the child remembered each figure and easily noticed the lack of any of them. This skill is necessary for an adult reindeer herder in order to know whether his entire herd has assembled and which reindeer are absent.

Such an individual approach to reindeer is also reflected in the Evenki language: there are more than fifty names for a deer depending on age, sex, season, its order in a pack⁶², colorings, habits, state of health and even character. Besides, many reindeer have personal, usually comic names: Lenin, Gingerbread, Honda, Komsomol, President and so on. Each domesticated reindeer is of great

⁶² These packs would comprise of approximately 10 reindeer travelling in a single file line bound to each other.



Herder G. Struchkov releases his reindeer with changay (stick) and kungilyan (bell) on its neck.

value to an Evenk, they are only killed when it is a necessity. This is not surprising – a lot of time and effort is spent on raising, caring for and training each deer.

Spring is the hardest time for the reindeer herders: in April or May, fawning (reindeer childbirth) usually happens. Each female reindeer gives birth to one fawn a year, and statistically every second one dies by the end of the summer: often they become the victims of wolves and bears, the natural predators of reindeer. (This problem is becoming more and more serious because of an increasing number of these predators in the Amur region in the last several years.⁶³) For this reason, during fawning and

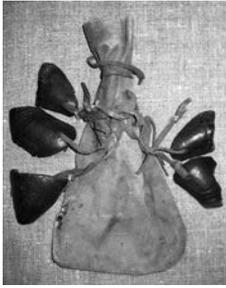
the following period during which the fawns grow, maximum effort and attention are required from a reindeer herder. Many taiga men spend nights in places of fawning for several weeks wishing to protect the growing fawns and adult females from attacks by predators. They also carefully nurse the diseased fawns and constantly look after them and their mothers.

In summer, the reindeer breeders burn smoky fires (*samnin*) in order to protect reindeer from midges and gadflies (flies that lay their eggs in the nose, skin, and the growing horns of a reindeer⁶⁴). If a reindeer is not protected from these flies, it can get sick and even die. Escaping from midges, and also looking for more juicy, young grass, reindeer gradually begin to go further and further from the camp, toward the cool heads of the rivers, and the herders need to go after them, moving to a new place each two or three days⁶⁵. Frequent movement helps to avoid an epizooty (for example, of necrobacteriosis) and provides the herd with a sufficient amount of fodder.

⁶³ In 2015-2016 there were about 10 thousand of bears and 3 thousand of wolfs in the Amur region.

⁶⁴ Reindeer lose their antlers annually.

⁶⁵ It is notable that Vasilevich considered this necessary movement with the reindeer seeking better fodder to be the main factor in the spread of the Amur Evenks: “Distribution on spurs has been caused by herd life. Treading a moss of the mountain tundra, reindeer moved further to the east (to Stanovoy Range) and to the northwest (the Vitimo-Olekminsky plateau), and they were followed by Tungus”. (Vasilevich G. M. *Tipy olenevodstva...* Ibid. P. 7.)



Javer (salt bag)



Orokon (willow toys depicting reindeer)

Closer to fall, when mushrooms appear (a favorite delicacy of reindeer that tempts them to run away from the herd, one by one), Evenks do *annomar'*. This is the practice of keeping the herd together. To accomplish this, they bind the fawns in the camp for a night and let their mothers pasture freely, but the mothers don't go far away from their fawns and pasture nearby. Then, in the afternoon the herders bind the adult females, as fawns, in their turn, pasture around them. Other reindeer also stay near the camp, and so this ruse keeps the whole herd together. With all these activities (constant movement, *annomar'* and burning smoky fires), summer passes quickly for reindeer herders. Fall is the time of estrus, the mating season for reindeer. Scrapping off the remains of a velvet skin from their already stiffened antlers, the "bulls" (sexually mature males) fight to mate with the majority of the herd females. By this



*Doe tied for annomar', and its fawn.
Selemzhinskiy area, 2009.*

moment the reindeer herder has to carry out selection in order to update the gene pool of his herd. For this he castrates males who have already inseminated females for several seasons. Thus, each skilled reindeer herder performs the functions of a shepherd, a breeder and a surgeon at the same time.

In the winter season Evenk usually don't nomadize – many of the Amur Evenks generally have permanent winter log houses in which they live out the cold weather.⁶⁷ During this period

⁶⁷ For instance, all Evenks at Ivanovskoe spend winters in such a way. However some Evenki families at Bomnak and Ust-Nyukzha are nomadic even in winter, enduring severe frosts in tents.

reindeer require less attention, so men have time for hunting, while women process skins and do needlework.

Naturally, through centuries-old practice in reindeer herding, the Evenks have become masters in the technology of processing reindeer meat and skins. The modern Evenks who lead a traditional way of life are proud of the fact that they still use all parts of a reindeer's body, nothing is thrown out: meat is eaten; bones are used in cooking broth and jelly; and skins are used for sewing footwear, headings, sleeping bags, sacred rugs (*kumalan*), saddles, lasso (*maut*), etc. Evenks eat the young velvet antlers and carve various useful and



Fawns are getting used to licking salt from yaver (salt bag)



Castrating of a male reindeer



Sawing off the antlers of a castrated reindeer

decorative objects from the stiffened horn; they make threads and glue of reindeer sinews and use the long hair from its “beard” instead of threads for embroidery. Even reindeer hoofs are used as rattles on the salt bags *yaver*. Such a “waste-free production” is a striking example of how Evenk can live in harmony with nature and survive in severe conditions without harming the balance of nature. The experience accumulated through centuries of reindeer herding encourages them to treat the gifts of the taiga most carefully.

Today, reindeer breeding is becoming rarer and rarer. Young Evenks decreasingly want to work in the taiga – many are forever torn away from taiga life after studying at rural schools and universities. Evenki elders increasingly settle in villages, as it is difficult for them to stay in the taiga and breed reindeer. Small herds and the dwindling practice of reindeer exchange between herds lead to inbreeding and the degeneration of herds. Consequently, reindeer are often born weak and sick. It becomes more difficult to keep reindeer herds, because of the increasing wolf population in the Amur region. New laws forbid using poisons to fight wolves; alternatively, installing traps or using guns in mountain and taiga conditions are expensive and inefficient means.

However the main problem – common to all Evenk villages of Amur region despite considerable distance between them – is the problem of preserving the lands on which the ancestors of modern Amur Evenks hunted and bred reindeer for centuries. Now these lands are intensively used by gold miners and timber producers, and these companies don't care to follow even minimal standards of recultivation of the soil, leaving behind them a lifeless landscape of dumps and ditches. Gradually these ditches fill with water, and the domestic reindeer sink in them, having no way to cope with the ditches' unstable edges and reach solid ground.

Contrary to existing rules that govern gold mining, the dredging machines often follow the course of the river directly, breaking up a natural landscape and destroying rivers' ecosystems. As a result of these barbaric activities, the reindeer pastures, which in the conditions of severe northern climate require hundreds of years to recover, collapse. The wild animals which Evenks hunt leave these territories or decrease, depriving them of one of the main sources of livelihood. To defend their rights, Evenks are addressing executive and judicial authorities and trying to draw public attention to this problem, because reindeer breeding and hunting are the keys to preserving the unique Evenki culture.



Dredging machine. Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.

2.2 Nomadic life

Hunting and herding as the center of nomads' culture

It is a well-known fact that there were historically two main types of cultures – cultures of settled farm breeders and those of nomad breeders. Belonging to the former or latter type in many respects defines the outlook of the people, forms its values, and establishes its ways and the rhythm of its life. Cyclical movement and its related attributes play an important role in nomadic cultures, as agrarian seasonal cycles are critical to agrarian cultures.

The life of Evenks was most likely connected from the earliest stages of their ethnogenesis (at a stage of “pedestrian hunters” or after domestication of reindeer – in this case it does not matter) with continuous movement and the development of huge territories. Incessant movements, lack of permanent settlements and freedom of travel, certainly, could not avoid affecting the culture and outlook of these people. Evenks wandered from time immemorial and could not imagine another way for themselves: a settled life seemed to be the greatest misfortune. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, living in the same place (like Russians or Yakuts) was considered among the Evenks to be the worst destiny: only extreme need forced them to settle in villages.

Because of the strong territorial dispersion of the Evenks and external cultural influences on the lifestyle of different groups in this ethnos, significant differences were already observed in the 17th century. These differences allowed the Russian researchers to distinguish among them “horsy”, “reindeer-breeding”, “agrarian Tungus”, “Tungus-fishermen”, “Tungus-hunters”, etc.

Some of the Evenks led a settled life by this time: under the influence of Mongols, Buryats, Yakuts, and Russians, they bred horses, cows and sheep. Other groups remained nomads, hunted in the mountains and taiga zones and kept reindeer. Different types of economy produced distinctions in traditions,



Tungus. Amur region, Kotop. 1920-s.

language, daily life and economic cycle of various groups of Evenks, including those in the Amur region. However such differences were observed even between groups of Amur Evenks who were categorized as one type. For example, there were some differences also between separate groups of the Orochons.

Glafira Vasilevich distinguished two major groups of Orochons wandering in the Amur region – the Vitim-Olyokma group (the Vitim-Olekma plateau) and the Dzhugdyr group (spurs of Yablonovy and Stanovoy Mountains).⁶⁸ The economic cycles of these groups differed. Here is the description of the **Vitim-Olyokma group** of Orochons given by Vasilevich:

With the Vitim-Olyokma group of Evenks, who have rather large number of reindeer (30-100 heads or more), the working year was also generally defined by hunting. They wandered with reindeer all year round and did not release them for the whole winter in the taiga without supervision. In the spring, during the period Sonkan⁶⁹, they moved to a place for fawning. Usually the middle reaches of inflows of the Vitim and Olyokma rivers were such places. After the period of fawning those groups of Evenks who had 10-30 heads per economy [commune] stayed in the lower reaches of these rivers for hunting elk and wild reindeer; the groups owning big herds went to the hills (the Vitim-Olekma plateau), lived there until the lichens dried up, meanwhile hunting jerboa and, by means of a caller, musk deer. In the hill camp there were several dwellings (dyu). By the middle of July the lichen began to dry up and families left, moving down to the middle reaches of the rivers where they continued hunting elk and reindeer. At the end of this period they went to a trade point, leaving their dwellings and reindeer at distance of 2 to 3 km from it. In the fall they approached their "small rivers" (inflows of the Olyokma and Vitim) on

⁶⁸See: Vasilevich G. M. Tipy olenevodstva u tungusov (v svyazi s problemoy rasseleniya po Sibiri) [Types of reindeer breeding among the Tungus (in connection with the problem of their dissemination throughout Siberia)]. In: Mezhdunarodnyi kongress antropologicheskikh i etnograficheskikh nauk. Moscow, 1964. P. 3. The remaining Orochon groups defined by Vasilevich live in Yakutia, Primorye, Sakhalin and Kamtchatka. In her resulting work she also defined smaller groups of Amur Orochons: Tungir-Olekma group, Zeya-Uchur group, and Amur-Bureya group. (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki (XVIII — nachalo XX vv.)* [Evenks. Historical and ethnographic sketches (XVIII — the beginning of XX centuries)]. L., 1969. Pp. 43-44.) According to our field research, the neighboring groups of Aldan-Uchur and Uda (Chumikan) Evenks were in close contact with the Tynda and Selemzha Evenks.

⁶⁹Fawning period for reindeer.

which they wandered, hunting fur animals. Unlike other groups, these hunters not only went hunting on the reindeer's backs, but rode them looking for a squirrel – and even shooting – without descending from the reindeer. The artiodactyl animals were killed on the way. In the spring, by the end of March, they went again to a trade point, from which they wandered to the place of fawning. Fish for everyday food was caught in summer only by families owning a few reindeer."⁷¹

Unlike them, the **Dzhugdyr Orochons**⁷² planned their summer migrations according to places of seasonal forage for reindeer. G. M. Vasilevich writes:

*"Like the Olyokma Evenks, these Evenks during the **Sonkan**⁷³ period tried to withdraw to the place where female reindeer usually gave birth. Here they put up fences for fawning. After fawning, they withdrew to the fire-killed forests where young grass grew. Here they also hunted elk and reindeer. Then, during the **Ilaga** period, they rose up to the valleys rich with *Chamerion*⁷⁴, getting closer to the hills. In heat waves they stayed in the mountain tundra (**kilandya**), rich with reindeer lichen, favoring such places where the aufeis, formed on mountain streams and the rivers, thawed for the summer. Here on stones, the grass that reindeer loved grew. At this time, people picked berries and pine nuts for additional food. When the reindeer lichen in the hills dried up at the end of September, the herders went down to the narrow valleys which where horsetails grew. Here they arranged fences, into which they drove the young animals to keep them separate from the breeding bucks, which were often fighting each other because of the females. After the **Sirudyan** period they went to forested areas to allow the reindeer to regale on mushrooms. Then they prepared for winter fur hunting, catching coniferous forest game on the way (before hunting some left to go to trade points). Then they moved to their rivers, "where warehouses with winter clothes and stocks of food were amassed and where the graves of their relatives were situated. Since valleys in fall were rich with sables, each family set up to 100 crossbow traps on the tracks. In order to prevent inadvertently triggering the*

⁷¹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 50-51.

⁷² If taken into account that Selemzhinskiy Ridge is a continuation of the Stanovoy Mountains, then all the Amur Evenks can be called the Dzhugdyr ones.

⁷³ Bold italics is used for Evenki names for months. See pp. 53-57.

⁷⁴ *Chamerion angustifolium* is an herbaceous plant, commonly known in North America as fireweed, in some parts of Canada as great willowherb, and in Britain as rosebay willowherb.

*crossbows traps, they transferred their reindeer to other valleys. Hunting for fur animals continued until March with some breaks during big frosts. In March (the **Turan** period) they moved to trade points. Hunting for hoofed animals was carried out incidentally [without prior arrangement] all year round, but the killing of a domestic reindeer was forbidden. As with the Olyokma, Evenks could only be caused to move long distances or to move to new places by an epizooty in the herd. In such cases Evenks left old places of nomadization for several years."*⁷⁵

So, the economic cycle of the Vitim-Olyokma Evenks was defined more by hunting, and the Dzhugdyr ones – by reindeer breeding. In general, as G. M. Vasilevich argued, the movements among Orochons the movements from spring to deep snow were defined by the reindeers' needs for this or that type of a forage (the groups of reindeer Evenks which don't belong to Orochons, on the contrary, were guided not by the needs of reindeer, but by the best conditions for fishing and hunting). In other words, Dzhugdyr Evenks were more *Orochons* (i.e. reindeer herders) than Vitim-Olyokma, and the latter, in turn, were more hunters.

The famous researcher of the Amur Evenks Anatoly Mazin adhered to a slightly different view of classification, economic cycles and calendar of Orochons.⁷⁶ He pointed out that by the end of 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, the Orochons nomadized along the left-bank inflows of the middle Vitim, at headwaters of Olyokma and Aldan, along middle Maya (the right inflow of Aldan) and left-bank inflows of the Upper Amur.⁷⁷ According to this, he distinguished the following 11 groups of Orochons: Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan, Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha, Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui, and Urkan groups.⁷⁸ Unlike Glafira Vasilevich, who believed that the calendar of Evenks (judging by the names of months) hasn't reflected reindeer-breeding traditions⁷⁹, Anatoly Mazin emphasized a big role of reindeer breeding in the lives of Orochons, reflected in their traditional calendar.

⁷⁵Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 51-52.

⁷⁶In his terminology – “Evenk-Orochons”.

⁷⁷Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov* (konec XIX – nachalo XX v.) [Daily life and economy of the Evenk-Orochons (the end of the 19th – the beginning of the 20th centuries)]. Novosibirsk, 1992. P. 3.

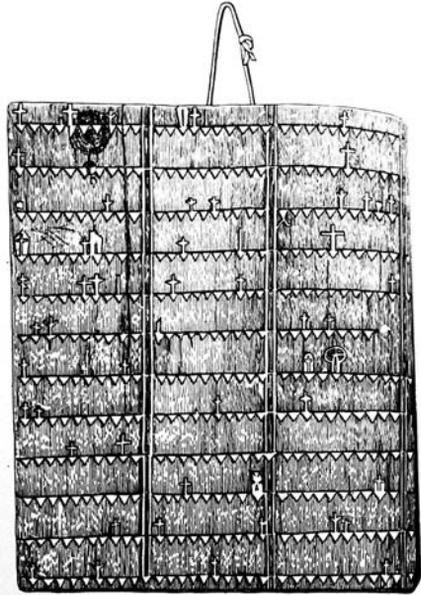
⁷⁸Ibid... Pp. 62-70.

⁷⁹She used this fact, as well as the absence of any mention of reindeer in ancient Evenki tales as an argument that they were initially pedestrian hunters but not reindeer herders. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. C. 42.

Evenki calendar

There are some data according to which Evenks in ancient times divided a year (*enani*) into 13 lunar months (*bega*)⁸⁰, which were named according to the parts of the human body: beginning from the wrist of one hand, rising to the top and further down to the wrist of the second hand.⁸¹ In some groups of Evenks these names – for example, *Mire* (“shoulder”), *Khugdarp* (“wrist”), *Ichan* (“elbow”), *Khoron* (“top”) partially remain to the present. There are also references indicating that the Evenki year was “double”, i.e. the summer and winter were considered separate years: “They have a summer and winter year, – the famous German ethnographer of the 18th century, Johann Gottlieb Georgi, wrote, – but they don't consider years. <...> a person who paid *yasak* thirty times, is thirty summers and as much in winter years, therefore sixty years [old]”.⁸²

These two periods in the calendar year remained among Amur Evenks. They reflect various economic cycles: reindeer herding (from the second half of April to the middle of October) and hunting (from the second half of October to the middle of April). The beginning of these periods was celebrated by ceremonies *sevekan* and *sinkelaun*.⁸³



Wooden calendar. 1903.

⁸⁰ For instance, we can find references to this in works by Johann Gottlieb Georgi (see: Georgi I.G. *Opisanie vseh obitayushchih v rossiyskom gosudarstve narodov, takzhe ih zhiteyskikh obryadov, very, obyknoveniy, zhilishch, odezhd i prochih dostopamyatnostey. Chast' 3. Samoedskie, man'chzhurskie i vostochnye sibirskie narody.* [The description of all the peoples living in the Russian State, also their everyday ceremonies, belief, habits, dwellings, clothes and other features. Part 3. Samoyed, Manchurian and East Siberian peoples]. SPb., 1777. P. 38.)

⁸¹ Based on data received by G.M. Vasilevich, T.I. Petrova and A.I. Mazin (See: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 63.)

⁸² Georgi I.G. *Opisanie vseh obitayushchih...* Ibid. P. 38.

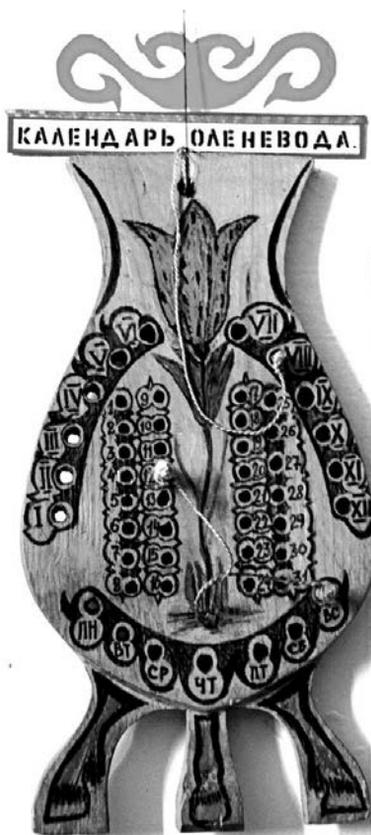
⁸³ See: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 67.

There is an assumption that Evenks used ritual objects, and also art-and-craft objects as calendars: information about phases of the moon and sun, about reproductive cycles of reindeer, and about the fur hunting period was depicted on their ornaments.

Evenks didn't count days before they became familiar with Christianity. After this, they began to use calendars which were carved on wooden plates with an indication for months and numbers of days. For counting the days of the week, seven holes were put into the plate for the annual calendar. As a rule, the calendar was managed by the head of the family.⁸⁴ Gradually Evenks completely transferred to the Gregorian calendar borrowed from the Russians, but their way of nomadic life still corresponds to a traditional Evenki calendar.

Almost all Evenki groups' seasons have the same names (winter – *tugani*, spring – *nelki*, summer – *dyugani*, fall – *boloni*), but the names of months differ considerably: even one clan of one group can have several names for the same month. These names, as a rule, reflected seasonal changes in nature – melting of snow, emergence of midges, ripening of berries, etc. Often names of months corresponded to the hunting periods (a *Segeleger* – “the beginning of hunt”) and reindeer breeding (*Irkin* – “peeling of horns” and *Sirudyán* – “mating”). The approach of a new year was usually associated with the arrival of spring and the first calling of a cuckoo.⁸⁵

For descriptive reasons, the tables with Evenki names of months based on materials by G. M. Vasilevich and A. I. Mazin are provided here.



Wooden calendar
(School Museum at Ust-Nyukzha)

⁸⁴ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid.. 67.

⁸⁵ The New Year's ritual connected to the first calling of a cuckoo described by Anatoly Mazin (Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. 63).

Table 1. Names of months among different groups of the Amur Evenks (according to Glafira Vasilevich⁸⁶)

Month	Different groups of Evenks of the Amur region and neighboring territories				
	Tungir-Olyokma	Zeya-Uchur	Amur-Burea	Aldan-Uchur ⁸⁷	Uda (Chumikan) ⁸⁸
I	giravun, («walking period», «transition period»)	giravun («walking period», «transition period»)	ingilekhe («frost period»)	mire («shoulder»)	mire («shoulder»)
II	mire («shoulder»)				giravun («walking period», «transition period»)
III	ektenkire («the period when snow lays on the branches»), nelkini («spring»)	ektenkire («the period when snow lays on the branches»)	turan («crows' arrival»)		ektenkire («the period when snow lays on the branches»)
IV	turan («crows' arrival»), ovilakhani («ice crust period»), chegalakhani («ice crust period»)	turan («crows' arrival»)	ovilakha («ice crust period»)	turan («crows' arrival»)	shonkan («fawning period»), tyglan («debacle»)

⁸⁶ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 43-44. Yakut names of months, widespread among the Amur Evenks, are omitted here.

⁸⁷ Aldan-Uchur Evenks influenced Tynda Evenks (i.e. Tungir-Olyokma and Zeya-Uchur), which is why they are also mentioned in the table.

⁸⁸ Uda Evenks influenced Selemdzha Evenks. See related to their close genetic and language interaction: Turaev V.A. *Okhotskie Evenki v XX v.: ot etnokulturnoy revolyutsii k sotsial'noy degradatsii* [Okhotsk Evenks in the 20th century: from ethnic and cultural revolution to social degradation]. URL: <http://www.ethnonet.ru/etnografiya/okhotskie-evenki-v-hh-veke-ot-jetnokulturnoj>

V	sonkan («fawning period»), ovilakha («ice crust period»)	sonkan («fawning period»)	nenneni («spring»), chukalakhani («grasses period»)	ovilakha («ice crust period»)	sonkan («fawning period»), nenne («spring»), ilaga («green»)
VI	irbelekhe («spawning period»), dukun, dallin	muchun («larches become green»)	irbelekhe («spawning period»)	muchun («larches become green»)	ilkun («formation of berries»)
VII	ilaga («ripening of berries»), ilkun («formation of berries»), унмилэхэн (unmu – «fragrance»), ирбэлэхэни («spawning»)	ilkun («formation of berries»)	irilekhe («ripening of berries»)	ilkun («formation of berries»), ilaga («ripening of berries»)	irin («ripening of berries»)
VIII	ugun («period of water frozen near the bank»), irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»)), boloni («autumn»), hunmilekhe («midge period»)	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))
IX	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»)), sirudyen («mating»), sirulakhani («mating period»)	sirudyen («mating»)	urelakha («period of hunting for red deer with yelper»)	sirudyen («mating»)	ugun («period of water frozen near the bank»)
VIII	ugun («period of water frozen near the bank»), irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»)), boloni («autumn»), hunmilekhe («midge period»)	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»))

IX	irkin («peeling the antlers (of a velvet layer»)), sirudyān («mating»), sirulakhani («mating period»)	sirudyān («mating»)	urelakha («period of hunting for red deer with yelper»)	sirudyān («mating»)	ugun («period of water frozen near the bank»)
X	sigelekhe («period of snow and sludge ice on the river»)	sigelekhe («period of snow and sludge ice on the river»)	khigelekhe («period of snow and sludge ice on the river»)	sigelekhe («period of snow and sludge ice on the river»)	
XI					khugdarpi («wrist», («the month of superficial snow» ⁸⁹)
XII					otki («severe frost»)

Table 2. Names of months among different groups of the Amur Evenks (according to Anatoly Mazin)

Month	Evenk names	Evenk groups	Meaning (according to A. Mazin)
May	Ennekaie bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month when fawns are born»
	Enneken bega	Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	
	Ennekal bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	

⁸⁹ See: Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar' [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 489.

June	Daltanyi bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month when midges appear»
	Bereni bega		«the month of bears' mating»
	Daldelon bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	«the month when midges appear»
	Abdarna bega		«the month of green leaves»
	Daltaniger bega	Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	«the month when midges appear»
July	Ergalaga bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of gadflies»
	Ekini bega		«the female month»
	Irgalagar (Ergalagar) bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui, Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	«the month of gadflies»
August	Hunmuleger, Hunmulehe, Hunmilego bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan, Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui, Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	«the month of midges»
	Hukten bega	Oldoy, Urusha	«the month of roe deer mating»
Sep tember	Selulagar bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	«the month of reindeer mating»
	Serulage bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of reindeer mating»
	Surgulanagi bega		«the month of spots after leaves fall»
Oktober	Sagaleo bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of frozen fish»
	Hurunmilya bega		«the month when a bear withdraws to lair/den [begins to hibernate]»
	Segeleger bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	«the month of starting to hunt»
	Sigolo bega	Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	
	Dontologo bega		«the month of freezing rivers»

November	Emmenologe bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month when the snow falls»
	Senteni bega		«fur hunting month»
	Emennologer bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	«the month when the snow falls»
	Eminnolosa bega	Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	
December	Olono bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of pursuit/ frightening of animal»
	Oron bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha, Tynda, Gilyui	«the upmost month» ⁹⁰
	Bulta	Zeya, Nora, Selemdzha	«hunting»
January	Kumnikta bega	Oldoy, Urusha, Nyukzha	«the month of den»
	Menederileger bega	Tynda, Gilyui, Urkan	«the month of sitting»
	Toksonyu bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of settling»
	Ingini bega	Zeya	«the month of frost»
	Sannani bega	Nora, Selemdzha	«the month of smoking»
February	Ektenkir bega	all mentioned groups	«the month of snow falling from the branches»
	Edin bega		«the month of winds»
March	Kuluntator bega	Middle Olyokma, Upper Aldan	«the month of changing glow»
	Ektenkire	Tungir-Olyokma, Zeya-Uchur	(«the period when snow lays on the branches»),
	Nelkicha, nelkini bega	the remaining groups	«the arrival of spring»
April	Turan	Zeya-Uchur, Aldan-Uchur	«the month when crows arrive»
	Ovilaha bega	the remaining groups	«the month of ice crust»

⁹⁰ In Mazin's translation. Vasilevich translated it as "top of the head".

As we can see from the provided tables, the data on the names of months used by Amur Evenks differ considerably between the studies of Glafira Vasilevich and Anatoly Mazin. As the last one is longer and more thoroughly researched specifically among the Amur Evenks, then perhaps in regard to this question, it is better to rely on Mazin's research. However it is necessary to consider that Mazin generally studied Evenks of the Tynda and (partially) Zeyskiy areas, while the Evenks of Selemdzha remained practically outside the scope of both researchers.

According to our field research, conducted in 2009 among the Evenks of Selemdzha, the names of months used by them partially coincide with the data provided by G. M. Vasilevich. So, the names of the first three months coincide with the Chumikan Evenks:

January is called *Mire* (“the month of the shoulder”);

February – *Giravun* (“the month of walking”),

March – *Ektenkire* (in translation of respondents – “the month of horns’ growth”);

April – *Turaki* (“crow”; similar to *Turan* in Aldan-Uchur, Zeya-Uchur and Tungir-Olyokma);

May – *Sonkan* (“the month of fawning”; this coincides with Chumikan);



Winter riding

June – *Muchun* (in translation of respondents – “the month of greens”; this coincides with Zeya-Uchur and Aldan-Uchur);

July – *Chorilin* (“the month of blazing sun” in translation of respondents; this does not coincide with any name provided by G. M. Vasilevich or A. I. Mazin);

August – *Irkin* (“the month of peeling the antlers” in translation of respondents; this coincides with the majority of names, including Chumikan);

September – *Syrudyayn* (“the month of mating”; this coincides with many other groups and does not coincide with Chumikan);

October – *Ugun* (“the month of freezing water”; this coincides with Chumikan);

November – *Khugdarpi* (in translation of respondents “the month of deep snow”; this coincides with names of October among the western groups of Evenks according to G. M. Vasilevich, who translated the opposite meaning, “the month of superficial snow” or “wrist”);

December – the *Hegdykh* (in translation of respondents “long month”; coincides with names of December for some western groups of Evenks; in translation of G. M. Vasilevich – “a big frost”).

Thus, the names of months among various groups of the Amur Evenks substantially differed from each other, as they had no uniform calendar. However the lifestyle and nomadic cycles of all groups of Amur Evenks were identical and their movement directly depended on hunting and reindeer breeding.



Summer riding

Reindeer as a mode of transport: options and equipment

The Evenks were historically an extremely mobile people learning to maximize the possibilities of reindeer as a mode of transport. They were aided by a number of factors. First, the breeds⁹¹ of the reindeer kept by the Amur Evenks were unique in their rather large size and superior endurance that allowed them to be ridden. Secondly, Amur Evenk-Orochons (unlike other Evenki groups) used special saddles made specifically for riding (i.e. not transportation of goods). These saddles (which were borrowed from the neighboring horse breeders, according to G. M. Vasilevich⁹²) have been best adapted for riding a reindeer. Thirdly, the Amur Evenks improved the sledge they borrowed from the Samoyeds⁹³, adapting them for movement through the mountain and taiga area. Fourthly, they looked after the reindeer all the year round, without releasing them to forage for themselves in the taiga as many other Evenks did. This helped to preserve the herd and to bind the deer to the camp. All these factors helped make the reindeer the ideal mode of transportation in the taiga: each Evenki family could travel between 300 and 600 kilometers a year.⁹⁴ (This is a very long distance for the taiga area.)

The Evenk-Orochons wandered all year round, guided primarily by the needs of the reindeer. They also wanted to find places rich with game and fish. Originally the care of reindeer and leading caravans were the duties of women.⁹⁵ They were involved in loading and unloading the bags from the deer, which as a process usually takes one to two hours.

As we mentioned before, the Amur Evenks used reindeer not only for pulling sledges (in winter), but also for riding and carrying goods. Therefore two types of saddles are widespread among them, which are packsaddles and riding saddles. The latter includes female and male saddles for adults, and also three kinds of children's saddles.

⁹¹ These are, according to Mazin, Tungus taiga reindeer and Vimoyskiy reindeer. (See: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozhaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid.)

⁹² As Glafira Vasilevich argued, the Evenks initially learned to ride on horses and then – on reindeer. She embraces this line of thinking because of borrowed names for parts of horse saddles and harness. Later the saddles were adapted to reindeer. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 78.

⁹³ Through Dolgans and Russians. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 101.

⁹⁴ Ibid. P. 53.

⁹⁵ Ibid. P. 79.



Reindeer caravan leaving a taiga camp. Ust-Nyukzha, 2011.

The pack saddle is employed in two versions – *danne* and *emegen*. The first type, *danne*, has been used by Evenks since extreme antiquity. In the 20th century it could be observed, for example, among the Aldan-Zeya Evenks.

Such saddles consisted of two wing-like boards, fastened with suede thongs. In order not to harm the reindeer's back, a saddle-cloth was used (usually a piece of reindeer hide).

However the second, advanced type of pack saddle – *emegen* – is more frequently used today. *Emegen* consists of two oval boards with their ends bent outwards, wrapped in reindeer hide with the fur on the inside. Two arched pommels (made of wood or horn) are fastened to these boards with leather



Packing ice from the river on the sledge (for melting it). Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.

thongs. These pommels, given the same name as horn, *ive*, were always ornamented; this was a characteristic feature of the Evenk-Orochons. Every clan used its own ornament by which the Evenks distinguished their saddles. Besides, the ornament helped to use the same saddle for the same reindeer (to prevent any reindeer back injuries and the bags from falling). Some groups of the Amur Evenks put another piece of reindeer hide (*tanine*) between the saddle and bag.⁹⁶

The riding saddle – *nama* (also *nema*, *name*, *ugucharun*) – exemplifies an advanced pack saddle. Arc-shaped "wings" (*degtyle*, *teger*) are perpendicularly fastened to its boards. Its pommels are small and made of deer or elk horn and fastened obliquely – the front pommel is higher. The boards are also wrapped with reindeer hide (fur on the inside), and the saddle is wrapped from above with strong skin (which is usually taken from the head of an elk) or strong, non-slip fabric. A saddle-cloth (*doptun*⁹⁷) is put under the saddle. The riding saddle for men only differs



Packing a reindeer. Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.

⁹⁶ For instance, the Evenks of Selemdzha (according to our field research of 2006-2009 at Ivanovskoe village).

⁹⁷ The names *tanine* and *doptun* are given according to our field research of 2006-2009 at Ivanovskoe. Glafira Vasilevich gave another interpretation of these words (*doptun* instead of *tanine* and vice versa).



*Nama (riding saddle).
Amur State University's museum.*

the reindeer, as placing the full weight on the back most certainly would. The convenience of the Orochon riding saddle has caused it to spread to the Evens, Oroks and Negidals.⁹⁸ The Vitim-Olyokma Evenks had no "wings" on riding saddles; the boards were often not wrapped and were put on *tanine*, and the women fixed small soft bags over the saddles and put a fur rug (*kumalan*) over it. *Tanine* and *doptun* are also used as the lower layer of bedding.⁹⁹

Saddling is carried out on the right side: the left hand holds the front pommel and the right hand leans on a special short staff – *tyevun*. *Tyevun*¹⁰⁰ also performs other useful functions: it can be used while crossing rivers to prevent falling off a saddle due to a strong stream, for

from that of women in having smaller "wings", which are not so abrupt. This saddle has no stirrups, however it is still convenient to sit in – it is not placed on the back, but on the shoulder blades of a deer, and therefore the legs of the rider are raised. This is a feature of the Evenk-Orochon saddle distinguishing it from types of saddles used by other northern peoples. Moreover, placing the saddle on the shoulders prevents damaging the spine of



*S. Nikiforov leading a caravan.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2008.*

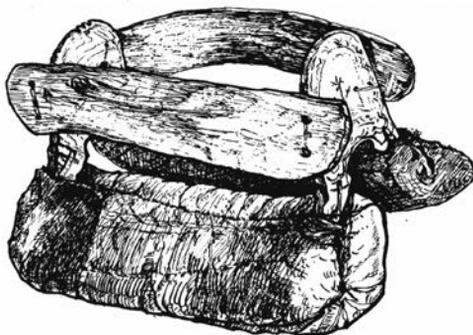
⁹⁸ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...*Ibid. P. 100.

⁹⁹ The upper layer of bedding is a big, whole skin of a reindeer.

¹⁰⁰ According to Mazin – *tyisyvun*.

checking the depth of snow or fords, to drive deer and to brush away branches getting in the way. The Orochons also had a long staff with a metal hook fixed on its end, *nyori*. It was used by the women leading a caravan, for correcting the bags which have moved to the side.¹⁰¹

Children's saddles consist of three main types: *emkoru*, *turul* and *tyru*. *Emkoru* is similar to a pack saddle, but it has higher pommels on both sides to which the arc-shaped plates are attached, which form the seat for the child. *Turul* is similar to an *emkoru*, but instead of plates, a basket woven out of rods or leather belts is used. *Tyru* is a form of an attachment put on a pack saddle. It is made of a thin birch board, which is steamed and bent in the form of a horseshoe, with leather strings in the front. To make these saddles softer, Evenks put pillows or skins inside.



Emkoru (saddle for children)



*Making a cradle of birch wood.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.*

For transportation of babies, a special carrier (*emke*, *bebe*)¹⁰² tied to a pack saddle is used. In the top part of this cradle a round hole is made to prevent damaging the baby's head during riding. There are also safety belts – the leather strings that holds the baby. The cradle's construction allows one to regulate the position of the seatback. Inside the cradle Evenks put soft moss or dry chopped rotten wood, which

¹⁰¹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 99-100.

¹⁰² The word *emke* is used among Selemdzha and Zeya Evenks; *bebe* – among Tynda Evenks (according to field research in Ivanovskoe, Bomnak and Ust-Nyukzha).

is used as a nappy. Such convenient cradles are still used among the Amur Evenks.

The reindeer harness consists of, besides a saddle, a bridle (*ugi*), strings for the bridle (*tergu*), strings for tying the bags (*supty*), reins (*nyovu*), girths (*gorgi*, *tyneptun*) and safety belts. Amur Evenks often sew a fringe on the bridle that the deer uses for repelling midges. Sometimes in order to protect the reindeer from midges, the Evenks also bind small pieces of dense fabric to their muzzles. The reins (*nyovu*) are only put on the deer that is heading the caravan, and operated only from the right side. Saddles are fastened to a deer with girths – *tyneptun* (for the pack saddle) and *gorgi* (for the riding saddle). The girth is thrown over the saddle (for pack – in the middle; for riding – closer to a front pommel) and fastened under the stomach of a deer with special buckles (*gorgi*) or rings (*ukanyaptun*, *kemaka*)¹⁰³ which are usually made of horn or metal. Before moving downhill they put the back belt (*ogogun*) around the deer's loin (under the tail) and tied it to the saddle: this fixes the saddle and doesn't allow it to slip on the reindeer's neck. Before moving uphill they similarly use a breast belt (*ul'kumyo*). For fastening the bags to the saddle they use leather ropes (*supta*). The reindeer's load is tied with the leather rein and fixed to the pommels of the saddle (or to a special slip – *gilbevun*¹⁰⁴, that is made of horn and attached to the back pommel) of the lead deer. In this way a caravan – *el'gevun* – is formed.

It is very important to assemble a caravan correctly. You need to take into account the reindeer's character, habits and its training level: an



*E. Yakovlev riding a reindeer.
Avlaya, 2009.*



*Mask protecting the reindeer's muzzle
from midges*

¹⁰³ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 56.

¹⁰⁴ We didn't see such slips at Selemdzha.



Single pulling cord for two reindeer, harnessed in a team. Ivanovskoe, 2009.

inexperienced and obstinate reindeer often gets its bags hooked on a tree, drops its bags, gets entangled in the reins. Because of this, the caravan has to stop in transit too often. Taiga tracks are narrow, so the deer usually go one after another, and the long caravan sometimes lasts hundreds of meters. For convenience it is usually broken into several separate teams.

In the summer the average speed of a caravan is about 5 to 7 km a day. Usually the journey lasts from 9-10 a.m. to 8-9 p.m., with a lunch break. Before dark the person leading the caravan looks for a place to spend the night: people need some time to unload the reindeer and release them to pasture, to put up a tent, and to make dinner. The place for spending the night should be close to the water, but dry and well aired, with the high visibility and enough firewood, and, above all, rich with reindeer lichen. During long journeys it is necessary "to spend the day" every two or three days: to give rest to the deer, to dry clothes, etc. If the place is good (i.e. rich with reindeer lichen, berries, game or fish) people stay here for several days or even weeks, as there is usually no hurry in the taiga.

In the winter Evenks move using a light wooden sledge. Many scholars believe that some groups of Evenks borrowed the sledge from other people: for example, the western Evenks – from the Samoyeds; the eastern Evenks (including Amur groups) – from the Yakuts.¹⁰⁵ They also believe

¹⁰⁵ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 103. In her other work she argues that, vice versa, Yakuts borrowed both reindeer breeding and sledges from Evenks (see: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki (k probleme etnogeneza tngusov i etnicheskikh processov u evenkov)*... Ibid. Pp. 39-40). In both cases she notes that reindeer sledge takes its origins from a dog sled.

that this happened quite recently, approximately sometime between the 18th—19th century.¹⁰⁶ Before, Evenks were most likely only familiar with a hunting sled on which people dragged the game and other freight. Similar to the development of the *Orochon type* of reindeer breeding¹⁰⁷ such a sled was gradually replaced by the reindeer sledge among the Amur Evenks. However, upon adopting the tundra sledge, Evenks substantially enhanced its design, adapting it for the taiga conditions. Unlike a wedge-shaped team formation, a taiga team is paired, i.e. it is always harnessed with only two deer. There is also an important invention in the Evenki sledge harness: a single pulling cord for two deer harnessed in a team is used. This cord, thrown over the *barda* (the front part of a sledge, functioning as a bumper), automatically regulates the deer running in pairs and allows the sledge to move equably, without jerking or erratic speed. This is especially convenient on a twisting road.

There are several types of the Evenki sledges – cargo (*sirga, serge*)¹⁰⁸, riding (*olok, tegek, syugdu*) and children’s sledge (*kasyma*)¹⁰⁹. The cargo sledge is usually higher, wider, longer, and heavier than others. It is crudely manufactured but still durable, and its legs are straight. The riding sledge is lower and lighter; it has small notches on each side of the seat and little borders in the front and backside. Its legs (among the Amur Evenks – 4 or 6 total) are curved and located to make it possible to put a person’s legs on runners. The firm pack is put on the seat. Sitting on the sledge differs slightly from sitting on a deer. The children’s sledge is a cargo sledge with a “hood”, or a tent protecting the child from branches, wind and snow.

The parameters of the sledge (its weight, height, width and legs’ tilt angle) vary in different groups of Amur Evenks and are usually chosen individually. According to the results of our field research, partly in agreement with Mazin’s data, the sledges of the Evenks of Tynda and Selemdzha differ in some aspects. At Selemdzha there is no straight crossbar in the front of the sledge; the sledge is lower and its legs are more angled. There are also differences in the structure of the boards of the riding sledge and in the method to fixing the *barda*.

¹⁰⁶ See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp.101-102.

¹⁰⁷ See previous chapter.

¹⁰⁸ According to Anatoly Mazin (Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 57).

¹⁰⁹ According to Anatoly Mazin (Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 56). In Vasilevich’s dictionary *kasyma* is a box for legs in the front part of the ledge. See: *Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar'* [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 195.



Riding sledge. Ivanovskoe village, 2006.



Reindeer tied to a sledge. Kharga River, 2006.

Each part of the sledge can be replaced by a new one in case it breaks. Different parts of the sledge are made of different types of wood: usually larch, birch, spruce and willow are used. All parts are fastened with strings made of reindeer or elk skin cut in a continuous spiral to make long strips about two centimeters wide.¹¹⁰ Each detail of the sledge has a name. The legs (*khalgan*) are inserted into grooves that are drilled or burned in curved runners (*tokchoko*). The boards for sitting (*adarai*) are put over a cross-piece (*torei*). The arch made of purple willow and attached in front (*barda*) serves as both a “bumper” and a brake for moving downhill; in order to prevent harming their legs with the *barda*, deer split by pair and disperse to the sides, which draws the cord taut. This allows them to escape from and brake the sledge at the same time. The person sitting on the sledge also uses a small whip (*kimni*) as a brake. The same whip is used to hasten the lead deer (the right one), which usually just requires keeping it visible to the deer.

The winter reindeer harness consists of a bridle, straps, reins and a backband (for the lead deer in a team). The loop of the bridle passes over the eyes of a deer, distributing the main load around its forehead. The straps are thrown over the shoulder of a deer, pass between front legs and are buttoned sideways to the trace. The reins (kept by the backband) also fasten to the bridle of the lead deer: on the right side of the backband a hook made of a horn is sewed for holding the right rein, at the left – a ring for the left rein.¹¹¹

Thus, the Evenki sledge team is easiest to use and adapted for driving on the taiga area. On a riding sledge usually one person sits. Holding up to 200 kg of freight, the cargo sledge moves with an average speed of 12 km/h; with light baggage – up to 25 km/h.

It is also important to note that the speed and length of the attainable distance in the taiga, both in winter and summer, depends on many factors, such as the health of the deer, state of the track, weather, quantity of freight, availability of reindeer lichen and many others. This life in the proverbial slow lane, having been developed for centuries, is embodied in a popular Evenki proverb: “the shortest path is not always a straight line.” It is probably for this reason that Evenks formed a peculiar attitude towards space and time: both dimensions are not usually measured by kilometers and days, but by the number of relocations.

¹¹⁰ Evenks carry a roll of such strips while moving on sledges and use it for repairs, putting it in cold water in order to defrost them (Field research at Ivanovskoe, 2009).

¹¹¹ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo* ... Ibid. P. 56-59; Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki*...Ibid. P. 102.



Riding on a sledge. Kharga River (Selemdzhinskiy area), 2007.

2.3 Hunting and fishing

Hunting

In addition to reindeer herding, hunting was always very important for the Amur Evenks. And since domesticated reindeer were (and remain) primarily a means of transportation, and secondarily a source of livelihood, hunting is the main way for Evenks to support their family.

In the hunting traditions of the Amur Evenks, two main types may be distinguished: hunting for food and hunting for the fur trade.

The first is focused on big game – elk, wild reindeer, red deer, roe, musk deer, boars, stone rams, and bears. In fact, Evenks hunted for almost all of the big animals living in the Amur taiga. This type of activity was always considered very honorable among Evenks, and that was reflected in their language – there are several names for an elk, a wild deer and a red deer depending on the season.¹¹² Numerous legends and real stories about dexterous and fearless hunters who

¹¹² Some names of the wild reindeer (e.g. *kuraika* – male deer at winter the a domestic ones. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P.54.

managed to track game and kill it with one shot or in a single blow of a bear spear were chronicled and passed from father to son. This type of hunting is an everyday practice, providing livelihood to each hunter's family and clan. According to the ancient Evenk custom *nimat* (that is still currently practiced among all groups of Amur Evenks¹¹³), the game is shared between all members of the collective. Therefore hunting for food is important not only for the hunter, but also for the whole community he belongs to.

The second type of hunting – fur trade – was never of paramount importance for Evenks. The *nimat* custom did not extend to furs: the hunter kept all the pelts for himself, therefore their production mattered mainly for the hunter and his relatives. This kind of hunting by the Evenks was not an object of honor, as it did not require a remarkable ability of endurance, force or bravery (unlike hunting for a bear or an elk). Only accuracy, patience, and the knowledge of small animals habits are necessary for fur hunting. Therefore all who are able to shoot are able to start hunting; for example, traditionally Evenk children began to hunt squirrels by the age of 7 or 8 years old.

In the past, fur trade was necessary for the Evenks to be able to pay their *yasak* to the state treasury. It also served as exchange for guns, fabrics and products. For this purpose, annual fur fairs (later: so-called “factories,” or trading points) were organized. Today this style of fur trade actually remains and has even grown. The hunter gains 20-30 sables a season and hands them over at trade offices (the former hunting-reindeer-breeding collective farms). After that, the pelts are offered for sale at a St. Petersburg fur auction. With the money earned, the hunter usually buys necessary equipment and products. It's quite often that this profit is the only income the hunter's family will earn until the next hunting season. Reindeer herding in the Amur region is obviously not in its golden age. In addition a successful hunt for a large animal happens less and less frequently because of the active industrial development of traditional Evenks' lands, climate changes, and poaching of taiga animals. Therefore, in general, it is accurate to say that today there is a gradual decreasing role of hunting for food — traditional for the Evenks — and a rise in the role of fur trading. Sable is, as before, the main object of fur trade for the Amur Evenks, and to a lesser extent, squirrel, hare, Siberian weasel, fox, wolf, lynx and ermine are as well.

How do the Amur Evenks hunt? Let's consider the traditional hunting equipment of the Amur Evenks first.

¹¹³ According to our field research in the Ivanovskoe, Bomnak, Ust-Nyukzha, Ust-Urkima, and Pervomayskoe villages (2006-2016).

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the Amur Evenks-Orochons, unlike other groups of the Evenks, more frequently hunted on deer than by foot. Their deer were accustomed to shots being fired without fear. Therefore some elements of hunting equipment which are necessary for the Evenks living in other regions were not used by the Amur Evenks. For example, they almost did not use a manual hunting sled (*irivun*), as well as the so-called "Evenk backpack" – *ponage*.¹¹⁴ In ethnographic sources of the 17th century there is recognition by the Evenks from the *Bayagir* clan nomadizing in the Amur region: "Our fathers and we never went on skis and we are not able to make skis". Glafira Vasilevich considered the non-use of skis by the Amur Evenks-Orochons as their distinctive feature in hunting. However today all groups of the Amur Evenks hunt on skis: they use both simple hunting skis¹¹⁵ and fur skis (with skins added underneath¹¹⁶), as well as ski poles. Most likely, all this mean that Amur Evenks used skis for quite a long time, and the respondents argue that their "elders" also used such skis.

For spring hunting, the Amur Evenks also used, and still use snow goggles (*sarapchi*), necessary for protection of eyes from the glare of the snow – otherwise the hunter risks temporary snow blindness. Earlier the Evenks from the Middle Amur made such goggles from the Amur pith tree, birch bark, later they used a piece of a tin plate with a thin crack or a grid woven from horsehair. Today they are usually made of soft plastic or birch bark, and, more often, modern sunglasses are used.

However the most necessary part of hunting equipment is, of course, weapons. Traditional types of the Evenks' weapons are: *koto* (knife), *utken* (machete), *gida* (spear), *berken* (crossbow trap), *ber* (M-shaped bow) and *alanga* (simple bow).

All these weapon each Evenk could make by himself. For instance, every man could make a knife (*koto*). In the past, the Evenks exchanged the iron of the edge for furs from the Yakuts, Manchu and other neighboring people. Now it is often made by melting the parts of broken agricultural machinery. The fuller ("blood groove") is done only on men's

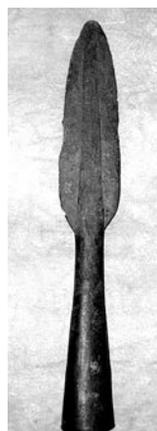
¹¹⁴ *Ponage* is a board put on a person's back for carrying weights. Hunting equipment or game are tied to this board with 6-8 rows of strings. The isolated case of a deerless Evenk using *ponage* has been recorded by us during the expedition to one of the taiga camps near Ivanovskoe in 2008.

¹¹⁵ *Cit.:* Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...*Ibid. P. 66.

¹¹⁶ Such skis prevent the hunter from slipping down while he rises uphill; this is possible because of the direction of fur.

knives, which are also longer than women's, or kitchen knives. The handle of a knife usually is made of a birch root or birch burl (burr), which are dyed a red color by hours-long boiling with aspen bark. The sheath is usually made of a birch and decorated with carving, ornamented tin, suede, and velvet fur of a fawn. The Amur Evenks tie the sheath to a belt, affixing the knife with a leather thong passed through a special opening in the handle (to the West of Baikal the Evenks tie a knife to the right hip). Evenks always keep their knives in a good fettle: it is considered that it's better to lose an axe, than a knife. They only use a knife while dressing a carcass (especially deer's or bear's), and for this purpose it is necessary to know the anatomy of the animal very well (namely, the location of all joints and sinews).

Besides knives, machetes (*utken*) also were widely used among Evenks (before they began to use Russian axes). *Utken* is a single-edged hatchet 50 -60 cm long, fastened to a stick (up to 1 m long for eastern Evenks, and



Koto (knife) and gida (spear head). Amur State University's Museum



Putting utken (machete) into wooden sheath. Ust-Nyukzha, 2010.





Bear trap. Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.

higher than human height for western Evenks). According to A. F. Middendorf, the Evenks used *utken* as an axe for cutting through a thicket and for cutting firewood; as a knife; as a staff for swinging into a saddle; as an ice pick for testing ice strength.¹¹⁷

Until the end of the 19th century the Amur Evenks also used spears, *gida*. It is an Evenk leaf-shaped spear with a long (human height) shaft. Its head could be both single-edged and double-edged. *Gida* was used mainly for bear hunting.

There were three types of bows among the Amur Evenks: *ber*, *noma* and *alanga*. *Ber* is the Evenk name for the composite M-shaped bow. It

¹¹⁷ See.: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 83.

was made of a two-bowed stave of spruce, larch or birch laminated together with fish glue. Besides *ber* all of the Amur Evenks used the so-called “Daur bow” (*noma*), which was a kind of a cable-backed bow laminated with baleen. *Alanga* is a simple bow, which was shorter than *ber* and was made of a single piece of wood. It was made of larch laminated with birch bark.

The bowstrings were made of nettle or hemp fibers. Evenks taped the ends of the bows with sinew cables. Arrow shafts were made of compression wood (*acra*), which is a reaction wood that develops on the lower side of a leaning trunk. The fletching was made of woodpecker or black grouse feathers. The quiver was sewed of reindeer suede and was highly decorated.¹¹⁸ Evenks also used a finger protector – a ring made of antler that was put on the finger before shooting. According to Richard Maak, in 19th century, Manegrs greased their arrows with rotten fat to accelerate the death of the wounded animal.¹¹⁹

The prevalence of crossbow¹²⁰ traps (*berken*) and loops (*hurka*) was a specific feature of the Amur Evenks’ hunting (as well as other Evenks settled to the East of Baikal; to the West from Baikal, hunting with bows and later with guns was more widespread). This was determined by the landscape: the northern areas of the Amur region, where the Evenks traditionally nomadized, are mountainous and hilly, and it was not always convenient to hunt with bows there. That is why the bows were used for hunting on the open area or at a short distance.

Their crossbow traps and arrows were made of tension wood (*acra*). Arrowheads differed according to the prey they were hunting; a hunter could have up to 300 different arrowheads. The Amur Evenks put crossbow traps on animal tracks, at watering places, and also in *okhor* (a kind of abates) or fences. *Okhor* is an obstacle formed of trees laid in a row: the Evenks cut trees at a watershed (a narrow pass where both animals and people transfer between rivers) on one line and brought them down to each other, leaving several passages at distance 40-60 m where they drew many crossbow traps (sometimes to 200 traps). Such crossbow traps in fences’ passages were used by the Evenks of Olyokma and Zeya for hunting elk, wild reindeer, and musk deer.

¹¹⁸ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P.62-63.

¹¹⁹ See in: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 64.

¹²⁰ Amur Evenks used the crossbow traps together with guns until the middle of the 20th century. Nowadays these traps can be seen at regional museums’ collections.

Hunting on hoofed animals, the Amur Evenks often used enclosings combined with trapping pits (*hukhelki*)¹²¹. For hunting elk, the Evenks of Olyokma and Zeya put crossbow traps in the openings of long fences which were specially built for this purpose. The Evenks from the left tributaries of the Middle Amur River also made long fences in which they dug trapping pits in intervals, hiding them with branches and pine¹²² or larch needles. Looking for an opening, the animal fell into a pit (*hukelki*) or was killed by a crossbow trap.

By the 18th-19th centuries the bows and crossbow traps of the Evenks were gradually replaced by guns. The Amur Evenks and the Manegrs became acquainted with guns (namely, a firelock), most likely, through their neighbors, the Daur dealers. The Aldan and Ayan Evenks knew about guns from the Yakuts and for a long time bought the remade Russian guns from them, adopting the Evenk name for a composite bow – *ber*¹²³. Evenks practiced both handheld shooting and shooting from rest.¹²⁴ Later the ramrod and percussion rifles replaced firelocks, and were in turn replaced by the smooth-bore and rifle-bore weapons. Up to the middle of the 20th century Berdan rifles were widespread among the Evenks. Today most of the Evenk hunters use modern carbines, small-bore rifles and shot-guns. The quiver was first replaced by the powder box (*natruske*) and then by the cartridge belt (*patroruk*).

At the same time Evenks began to use Russian deadfall traps (Rus: *past'*, *kulyoma*, *plashka*). Evenks did not use such traps earlier and rejected them (they called it *lan* in Evenki, or *sokso* in Yakut¹²⁵); they even destroyed such traps, having found them in the taiga. The Evenks from the basins of Olyokma, Aldan and Zeya rivers rejected these traps even at the end of the 20th century. However they are widely used by the Evenks of the left-bank inflows of the Amur River, and also at Selemdzha and Bureya rivers, being the basic types of traps for big animals (mainly bears).

In the past Evenks also did not use foothold traps; they learned of them only in the 20th century. For a long time they had been using handmade foothold traps instead of manufactured ones. Now the foothold trap is an

¹²¹ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 85.

¹²² In the north of the Amur region the Siberian dwarf pine is more widespread.

¹²³ They also used words *ulumugdy* (a gun for hunting for squirrels), and also *miichen* (Daur word). *Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar'* [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 440

¹²⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 63-64.

¹²⁵ This name is used by the Evenks of Selemdzha.

integral aspect of hunting for small and large animals. For example, it is used against wolves that are causing a notable loss to reindeer herders.¹²⁶

The amount of wolves in the Amur region has increased in the last several years. They pose a special threat to reindeer in the spring: just before, during, and after the fawning. Recently, cases in which a wolf pack kills about ten, and even several tens of adult females and their fawns at the same time, has become increasingly frequent. Earlier the Amur Evenks did not hunt for wolves, perhaps because they considered them to be their totem (for instance, the Evenks of Urmi, Uchur and Selemdzha rivers call it *dolbohik*, which is a euphemism meaning “nighty”). In Soviet times wolves were poisoned by strychnine. This was successful in reducing wolf population, but poisoning was dangerous for other animals in the food chain and spoilt the fur of the dead wolf. Now, the foothold traps and the use of poisons are forbidden, and therefore gun hunting is the only means of protection from wolves.

The Evenks living at the basin of Zeya and on the lands to the east also used snares. They used them not only in hunting for small animals (like hare, musk deer, fox), but also for large animals (elk, bear, Manchurian deer, wolf). The snares for large animals were made of a thick wide belt of a strong elk skin (now metal cables are used). Today the Amur Evenks use snares mainly for catching bears, which often destroy all the stocks in hunting cabins and attack domesticated reindeer.

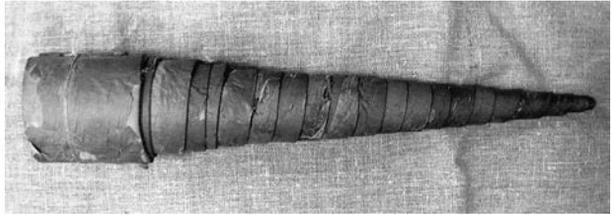
In addition to trapping, the Amur Evenks also use such wide spread hunting techniques as calling, blind hunting, driving, persisting hunting, and stalking.

Calling is the use of animal noises to attract animals. The Amur Evenks practice calling, using different devices (callers) for different animals. For instance, *pichavun* is a caller that is used in hunting for Siberian musk deer. This hunting is usually conducted at the end of summer (during the rutting period). *Pichavun* is made of a small piece of birch bark that is folded in half. It sounds like Siberian musk deer male, and female comes to this sound and the hunter who makes it. *Orevun* is a caller for Manchurian deer¹²⁷. It is a pipe made of birch bark or wood, used for attracting wapiti females. There were also callers for other animals and birds. By this means, a hunter beckons the animal and shoots it from a short distance. The calling demands a lot a patience and knowledge of animal habits from the hunter.

¹²⁶ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 85.

¹²⁷ This name is spread among the Evenks of the Zeya, Urmi and Selemdzha rivers. Manchurian deer (*Cervus canadensis xanthopygus*) is named *elk* or *wapiti* in North America.

The hunting for large hoofed animals (elk¹²⁸, wild reindeer, Manchurian wapiti) usually is conducted from late fall to early spring. In the past, men usually left to hunt extremely far



*Orevun (caller for Manchurian deer). Birch bark.
Amur State University Museum.*

away from their taiga camps. For example, the Evenks from the Olyokma and Tungir rivers often left to hunt at the Gilyuy and Zeya rivers (in fact, this distance is 100 to 300 kilometers).¹²⁹

The main methods of hunting for large hoofed animals were stalking (or still hunting) and persisting hunting on skis. In both cases hunters walk upwind (with the wind in their face) so that the game ahead of them cannot smell them, and shoot behind a bush. During the persisting hunting the Evenk hunters chase an animal by traces for a long time to pursue it to exhaustion. Sometimes hunters have been tracking and pursuing an elk for several days; they fall, rise and run again. In driving hunting, usually four people participate: two of them lie in ambush, and two others drive the animal. In late fall, when the snow is not so deep, the Evenk hunters drive elks with a dog, which holds the elk until the arrival of the hunter.¹³⁰

Earlier the Amur Evenks often hunted for elk and Manchurian deer from the boats. They floated their light birch bark boats in the dark silently to an animal at a watering place, and killed it with a direct blow of a spear or a single shot. It demanded bravery and dexterity from the hunter – one incorrect movement could lead to tragic consequences, as elks and Manchurian deer are very strong animals capable of killing a person with one blow of a hoof. Such type of a stalking is not practiced anymore.

The Amur Evenks also practice blind hunting for Manchurian deer. A hunter makes an ambush near natural or artificial mineral licks: lying since evening on a tree stand, he or she waits for the animal which usually comes by morning. The Amur Evenks never hunted a bear intentionally. They killed it only on occasion, during autumn or spring hunting, or in winter when found by coincidence at a den. This is because of totemic beliefs

¹²⁸ By the name of *elk* we mean *Alces alces*, which is called *moose* in North America.

¹²⁹ See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 68.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

connected with the bear. The Evenks consider bears to be their ancestors and call them relatives: *ege*, *egeka* ('grandfather'), *amakan* ('uncle', 'grandfather'), *atyrkan* (old woman; the words that contain the same root have such meanings as 'bride', 'wife', 'to get old').¹³¹ It is considered that a dressed bear has a similar appearance to a person. Due to these notions, hunting a bear was strictly regulated: there were special rules for dressing the hulk and eating the meat of the killed bear. The Amur Evenks very rarely hunt bears in autumn; they kill them in thickets of *bolgikta* (Siberian dwarf pine), where the beasts feast on ripened nuts. Sometimes they hunt a bear, which has awakened in the middle of winter because of hunger and is very dangerous. Usually they pursue it on skis and use dogs.



*Processing the head of a killed elk.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.*

There were specialists for bear hunting among the Evenks. These hunters fought with the bear face to face using only *gida* or *utken*. Beckoning the bear and forcing it to rise on its hind legs, they made a sharp blow, trying to get into the bear's heart. The hunter placed the spear against the ground at its rare point, so that the bear fell on the spear with all its weight. These men hunted bears only in such a manner, and the rest of the taiga people honored the legends about them for a long time.

Usually two or three people participate in hunting a bear in its den, sometimes the team consists of only a husband and his wife.¹³²

As they approached the den, they would put several logs at its entrance, entice the bear and shoot at it as soon as its head was seen. They threw *maut*

¹³¹ See: Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar' [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 40.

¹³² Sometimes Evenk women also practice hunting: for instance, Svetlana Kurbaltunova from Ust-Nyukzha (Tyndinskiy area) hunts on an equal basis with men, including hunting for large animals such as elks, Manchurian deer and bear.



A skilled female hunter from Ust-Nyukzha village. 20th century.

(the lasso woven of strips of elk or reindeer skin) over the dead bear's head to pull it out from its den. Then they dressed the hulk by certain rules. However it should be noted that these rules are applied less and less frequently nowadays: the bear cult has gradually faded to the past, and bears often become special game to hunt for. Bear bile and paws are in great demand on the black market. These parts of the bear's body are bought from hunters by the dealers who illegally transport them to China, where they are used for making drugs and delicacies. A similar situation happens in the hunt for musk deer, which are killed most often not because of their meat, but because of their musk glands – used in pharmacology and perfumery.



Bear's paw



Killed musk deer with its canines pulled out (for good luck in future hunting). 2007.

The Amur Evenks also hunt for birds: generally for wood-grouses, hazel grouses, and rarely for ducks and wild geese. They continued using bows in bird hunting until the middle of 20th century¹³³, when they began using shotguns for it. Today they also often use the small-bore rifles for this purpose. If the hunter has no cartridges anymore and is hungry, he or she catches a Siberian grouse (*karaki*) with a loop thrown over its neck. The Evenks believe that the higher spirit, *Seveki* created this sluggish and trusting bird especially for such cases.¹³⁴ Modern Evenki hunters lead the prohibition against killing ravens. There is also general moral prohibition against killing any animal for fun, and beyond the sake of livelihood.¹³⁵



Form for drying sables' skin

¹³³ *Narody Sibiri. Etnograficheskie ocherki* [Peoples of Siberia. Ethnographic sketches] Eds. M. G. Levin, L. M. Potapov. M.–L., 1956. P. 707.

¹³⁴ This notion is reflected in a fairy tale that was told to us in 2006 by an old Evenki hunter A.A Okhlopov (Ivanovskoe, Selemdzhinskiy area).

¹³⁵ Field research at Ivanovskoe, Selemdzhinskiy area (2006-2009).

Collective and individual hunting for elk, wild deer and birds is mentioned in all Evenki legends, unlike the fur trade that played very small role in the Evenks' economy. In the past, the skins of fur animals served more for decoration and only partially were an object of exchange. The further development of exchange increased the value of fur hunting in the economy of Evenks; additionally, the arrival of Russian soldiers (Cossacks) who demanded furs as *yasak*, as well as Russian dealers buying them gradually moved this trade to a place of prominence.¹³⁶ At the end of the 19th century the price of one sable skin equaled the cost of a live pig.¹³⁷

While hunting for large animals was often collective, the fur trade was and remains an individual business. The methods of fur hunting were varied, but the main game was a sable. Earlier a hunter placed small nets with little bells near the sable burrows, causing the small animal to become confused. The hunter heard the ringing bells and got a sable. If the sable ran into a squirrel hollow, it was smoked out or flushed out by knocking on the trunk with sticks. Today the Amur Evenks use the small-bore rifles and various self-made traps for attaining valuable fur. When the snow is not very deep, they hunt for furs with their dogs, which are specially trained to seek squirrels or sables: the dog drives a small animal up a tree or into a burrow, preventing its escape until the hunter comes. When hunting the Evenks try to minimize the damage to the skin so that it will be worth more at auction.

Fishing

Traditionally, fishing did not play a leading role among the Evenks; they practiced it only as an auxiliary trade. It was reflected in their language: there is no expression in any dialect for the notions “to fish” or “to catch fish” (there is only a combination “to beat fish”).¹³⁸ In the middle of the 20th century some of the Amur Evenks often withdrew to the rivers of the Okhotsk basin during salmon spawning period. There they caught salmon by beating them with sticks, an easier tactic as they were moving upstream against strong currents. Then they salted the caught fish in barrels (bought from the Russian coopers).¹³⁹

Spearfishing is an ancient Evenk method of fishing. The Evenks used three types of harpoons.

¹³⁶ *Narody Sibiri. Etnograficheskie ocherki* [Peoples of Siberia. Ethnographic sketches] Eds. M. G. Levin, L. M. Potapov. M.–L., 1956. P. 706-707.

¹³⁷ See: Amur. Spravochnaya knizhka Amurskoy oblasti dlya pereselentsev [Amur. Reference book for migrants]. Composed by A. Tarnovskiy. Blagoveshchensk, 1899. P. 68.

¹³⁸ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 80.

¹³⁹ Field research at Ivanovskoe, Selezhdzhinskiy area (2006-2009). Respondent: L.A. Dmitrieva.

1) *Kiramki* is a trident; it was used for beating taimens, pikes, and graylings.

2) *Debge* is a fish-spear harpoon in which the trident detaches from the staff with a rope up to 20-30 m long (to which some Amur Manegrs also tied a bobber made of a swim bladder of kaluga); it was used by the Amur and Transbaikal Evenks for catching large fish up to 20 kg. (beluga, kaluga¹⁴⁰, Siberian salmon, humpback salmon, sturgeon, taimen, lenok, etc.).

3) One additional type of harpoon, *elgu*, was widespread on all tributaries of the Amur River and the rivers flowing into the Sea of Okhotsk. Its staff reached 4-6 meters, and the Evenks at Zeya used such fish-spears up to the middle of the 20th century.¹⁴¹

Evenks fish from boats and from the coast. In the past they also used the so-called



Kiramki (harpoons)



Fish fence (fishing weir). The beginning of the 20th century.

¹⁴⁰ Kaluga (*Huso dauricus*) is a sturgeon living in the Amur River. It is the largest freshwater fish in the world.

¹⁴¹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 82.

fish fence (fishing weir), which was a widespread obstruction for fishing at small rivers. A fish fence was placed across the river in order to trap fish such as salmon as they attempt to swim upstream. For this purpose the Evenks put several tripods across the river with the crossbeams on them. The crossbeams were bound with willow rods and the fish traps were fixed in the remaining openings.¹⁴²



*Evenk G. A. Struchkov is fishing from the coast.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.*

The Manegrs also made fences across rivers, leaving one or two passages. When the river was frozen they made ice holes over these passages, then made a tent (in order to see the river bottom better) and jabbed the passing fish with harpoons.¹⁴³

The middle Amur Evenks, according to Maak's descriptions, often jabbed fish, looking out at them in low water from *tegemkin* (a sort of arbor made of long poles in the middle of the river). Also they fished with use of a lure (*pechevun* – the Evenki name of the rod and bait altogether), of alive or artificial small fish (made of stone) on a short string, which enticed fish as they beat them with harpoons.¹⁴⁴

The Amur Evenks also used night fishing lights: burning chips put in a special plate, *talivun*. They also beat the fish through ice-holes in the winter. Usually they did not use nets in the past, though there are some descriptions of Manegrs and the middle Amur Evenks using these devices.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² According to our field research at Ivanovskoe (Selemdzhinskiy area), 2006-2009.

¹⁴³ *Narody Sibiri. Etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 704.

¹⁴⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp.82, 84-86. The fish-shaped bites made of stone or bone were also used by Bronze age tribes of Transbaikalia. Based on this fact and other similarities, Russian archaeologist Alexey Okladnikov supposed that Evenks came from this region. (See: *Narody Sibiri. Etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 704.)

¹⁴⁵ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 84-85.

The catch was divided approximately equally between fishermen and was eaten by all members of the collective, giving a part to the widows and orphans also. The surplus was dried and kept through the winter; during severe frosts, when hunting was unsuccessful, it replaced meat. The fish heads, skin and bones were used for making glue; the skins of big fishes were processed and used for sewing bags and (sometimes) coverings for their traditional cone-shaped tents.

Today the Amur Evenks, nomadizing along the tributaries of the Amur River and Lena River, fish taimen, burbot, pike, lenok¹⁴⁶, grayling and other species of fish. They use spinning rods, simple rods, hooks on throw-line and fish traps. As a lure they use bark beetles, gadflies, and also self-made *mormyshka*¹⁴⁷. Shooting the large fish is still practiced by Evenks occasionally; earlier it was carried out with bows, but today the small-bore rifles are used for this purpose.¹⁴⁸



Eduard Yakovlev with fresh-caught lenok. Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.



Young fishermen, Ust-Nyukzha.

¹⁴⁶ Also known as Manchurian trout.

¹⁴⁷ *Mormyshka* is a sort of fishing lure based on the spoon lure. Invented in Russia in the 19th century.

¹⁴⁸ For instance, it is still practiced among the Evenks of Selemdzha.

2.4. Crafts

Every Evenk was not only a reindeer-breeder, hunter, and fisher but also a carpenter, furrier, tailor, and smith – in short, a universal specialist. Its little wonder: the existence of crafts as separate jobs was impossible due to nomadic Evenki camps being scattered in the taiga. Every family had to be autonomous; therefore every member had to be able to do everything by themselves. Men crafted metal, timber, animal horns, and bones while women curried skins, made clothing and footwear, and crafted bark. It is worth mentioning that men were the first to acquire new skills; for example, men were first to learn how to operate sewing machines when they initially reached the Evenks in the 19th century¹⁴⁹. Even today Evenki men demonstrate various skills: besides typically male work they are capable of all types of widely considered feminine jobs like cooking, baking bread, sewing, processing skins and crafting bark. Such versatility is partly required as very few Evenki women nomadize with their husbands in the taiga and prefer to stay in comfortable villages. It is rare luck for an Evenki man to find a wife who wants to share her husband's nomadic lifestyle, and therefore most men nomadize and hunt alone.

Skins processing. Skin currying was traditionally considered a female activity. No children or even teenagers were allowed to participate in the process¹⁵⁰, as one wrong move could spoil the skin. Additionally, very few Amur Evenks can process skins. They are mostly elderly women who grew up and lived in the taiga all their life. Among the most famous experienced ones who make the best-quality leather are Raisa Nikiforova and Galina Soloviyova from Ivanovskoe village, Elena Kolesova from Bomnak village, Antonina Urkanova, Tamara Fyodorova, and Galina Abramova from Ust-Nukzha village, among others. There are also some young crafts women, e.g. Svetlana Kulbertinova from Ust-Nyukzha



*Processing bear skin with compound feed.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.*

¹⁴⁹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 90.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. P. 94.

village. In their skillful hands rough skin turns into light and soft leather perfect for making footwear, hats, fur coats and other necessary items.

Skin processing is a labor-intensive craft that undergoes several stages. First, the skin is taken off the animal (mostly deer or moose) using a sharp hunting knife. This is done by males during the flaying process. The skin from deer legs (*camus*) and head is taken off and curried separately, however, skin processing and camus processing techniques are almost the same. First, the membrane is delicately scraped off the flayed skin. This process requires great precision, for any uncertain move can cause the skin to be pierced and spoiled. Then special frames are used to stretch the skin – small cuts are made at its edges, and a string is passed through them to fix the skin on the frame.¹⁵¹ Camus is stretched using stretching sticks. If currying takes place in the settlement or in the taiga winter, hut skins and camus are stretched by nailing the edges to the wall, with the fur inwards.¹⁵²

The stretched skin is dried for some time¹⁵³, and after that it is ready for currying. A woman places the skin on the ground and uses a special tool to scrub the dry membrane out, holding the opposite edge with her feet. Then she spreads some fat on the skin and rolls wet rotten osier-bed pieces¹⁵⁴ in it, forms it into an envelope and sets it in a warm place for several days. Then the skin is kneaded with a tool called *chuchun*, and, if necessary, with another tool called *kedere*. Then they continue kneading using hands and, finally, they smoke it using a device called *nuchinek*. During that process a thin but strong layer called *nukse* covers the skin. The more you smoke the skin the more water-resistant it becomes.

The process of making chamois is even more complicated. Similarly, it is made of moose¹⁵⁵ or deer skin. First, they cut the skin into halves along

¹⁵¹ Sometimes skin as well as camus is stretched on crossed poles (this technique was seen being used in Ivanovskoe village in 2008). A. I. Mazin also describes stretching skin right on the ground by fixing it with pegs (See: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-rochonov...* Ibid. P. 112.)

¹⁵² Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006-2009.

¹⁵³ The drying period depends on the weather, lasting 2-3 weeks or more.

¹⁵⁴ According to the subject – mistress A. Urkanova from Ust-Nukzha village (See more in: Voronkova E.A., Kushnareva S.A., Soldatkina I.M. *Ust-Nyukzha. Materialy kompleksnoy etnograficheskoy ekspeditsii Amurskogo oblastnogo Doma narodnogo tvorchestva* [Ust-Nyukzha. Materials of a complex ethnographic expedition by the Amur Regional House for Native Arts]. Ed. by E.A. Voronkova. Blagoveshchensk, 2012. P. 26).

¹⁵⁵ If needed to curry moose skin quickly, it was placed in an ice-hole for 3-4 days. After being removed, it was spread on the ice with membrane side down. During the day the skin froze to the ice and in the evening it was torn apart so that the membrane was left on the ice. (See: Ibid. P. 26.)



*Making chamois from elk's skin.
Kharga River, 2007.*



Putting skin into water mixed with brain

the spine, then they douse it with a mixture of water and bits of rot and let it soak for several days until the fur starts falling out. Then they scrub the remaining fur out of the skin with a tool called *nuchivun* – in the process, they place it on a slanting log, with one end fixed in a special carrier or on a woman's leg, and the other end leaning against the ground. After that, the skin is stretched on a frame and dried. Then it is scrubbed again with the tool called *oo*, watered with wet rotten wood and allowed to soak for several more days. After being cleaned and dried a little it is kneaded with *chuchun* and *kedere* so that maximum flexibility is obtained. After that the skin is wetted again using boiled marrow, deer milk, or laundry soap¹⁵⁶ and formed into an envelope. After two to three days it is kneaded with *chuchun* and smoked until it turns yellow. Chamois made of elk¹⁵⁷ skin is stronger and rougher while chamois made of deer skin is conversaly more elastic. The thinnest and softest chamois is made of musk-deer skin. In the past, it was used for making diapers for Evenki babies.¹⁵⁸

Big ungulate animal skin is used for making ropes, straps, and lassos. Freshly removed skin (usually from an animal neck or hip¹⁵⁹) is cut for this purpose in a continuous spiral (to get a long strap). It is cleaned of fur with

¹⁵⁶ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006-2009.

¹⁵⁷ In this text, we used elk for *Alces alces*, and Manchurian deer for *Cervus Canadensis*.

¹⁵⁸ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006-2009.

¹⁵⁹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2009.



Antonina Urkanova with processed skins. Ust-Nyukzha, 2011.

a knife and stretched for drying. After drying it is soaked in a leaf rot infusion for several days, then dried again and beat with a tool called *idakavun*. After that, it is thoroughly wetted using boiled marrow or oil and smoked.¹⁶⁰ To protect the leather strap from insects and decay, as well as to make it stronger and more water-resistant, it can be rubbed with cedar bush resin.¹⁶¹

Fur-bearing animal skins of sable, squirrel, ermine etc. are taken off in hose-like manner and then stretched using various stretching sticks called *teleptun*. The membrane is sometimes wetted in sour milk (this stage is optional).¹⁶² Then they evert the skin fur outwards and let it sit in a warm place for 2 to 3 days. Finally the skin is dried and kneaded, with hands stretching it a little. Holes that appeared in the skin as a result of damage during hunting are carefully sewed.

In the past Evenks could process fish skin. For that they would scale the skin, remove it from the fish, stretch it using sticks, dry it and wet it with fish liver and knead it. However, Amur Evenks do not process fish skin today any more.

¹⁶⁰ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 113.

¹⁶¹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006.

¹⁶² Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006-2009.

Horn and bone processing. Crafting horns and bones is another important part of the Evenks' activities, although it has never been as essential for them as it has been for other peoples of the North. It has always been and still remains male work. The Evenks made toys, breloques, and some tools (e.g. *kuvuka* – a piece of horn with holes to soften lassos). They also used horn or bone to make special hooks to fix the reins to the harness of a lead deer in a sledge; as well as to make saddle fasteners; saddle-bows (*iye*); handles for knives and some other tools; rings for lassos deer; buckles for fixing the halter to previous deer saddles in the caravan (*gilbevun*) and other necessary items. They also used horn to make needles for sewing skins together. Axes, knives and files were used for crafting with horn. They embellished their products with carvings, mostly geometric designs.¹⁶³

Woodcraft. However woodworking is more important for the Amur Evenks because the whole territory of the northern Amur region – where most Evenks live – lies in an area abundant with various sorts of trees. Two kinds of woodworking can be singled out: timber-crafting (male work) and bark collecting and crafting (female work, particularly with birch-bark).

Timber is used for building houses¹⁶⁴ as well as household constructions, making sledges, saddles, kitchen woodware, carpentry and



A hook for the reins



A horn pommel of a saddle with clan's sign

¹⁶³ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007.

¹⁶⁴ According to G. M. Vasilevich, straight lines and dots on horns and bones were made with the knife, and circles – with compasses. Then she describes the way of making circles within one another: «For making 2-3 circles one of the compasses legs was substituted for with a plate with denticles». (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 92.). It should be noted that similar ornament was widely used in the Amur Region in Medieval times. (See: Zaitsev N. N., Bolotin D. P., Volkov D. P. et al. *Ancient Arts of the Amur*. Blagoveshchensk, 2008. P. 18.)



*Compression wood.
Selemzhinskiy area, 2007.*



*Bending birch boards.
Selemzhinskiy area, 2007.*

other tools and cases for them, various boxes for storing tools and other household items, small tables, boats, skis, bows and arrows, traps and crossbows, spears, sticks, pipes, cradles, toys, calendars, ritual items (idols and spirits images). Larch, birch, fir, aspen, poplar, osier-bed, Amur velvet tree, bird cherry tree, and chozenia (*churimkure*) are most frequently used for this process. The Evenks who have lived in the taiga for hundreds of years learned to skillfully use certain timber features for their needs. For instance, they noticed that *acra* (compression wood) was much stronger and they started using it for making bows, crossbows and arrows.¹⁶⁵

They used not only the trunk but branches, roots (e.g. bird cherry tree and larch roots for ropes) and burls (for making handles for knives and some other tools). Larch bark and birch bark were used more frequently, the former commonly used for covering shelters, warehouses and awnings.

Birchbark is stored in May or June during birch-sap period, when it is better to take off the trunk. In dry weather they make two circular cuts around the circumference of the tree, one at the bottom and another about 1 meter above the first, with a final straight cut connecting the top and bottom cuts. Bark is taken off the trunk and rolled. Then they scrape off

¹⁶⁵ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007.



Taking off the birchbark



Soaking the birchbark in the river water



Scraping off the white layer



Steaming the birchbark over the campfire

nodules and the upper white layer (although sometimes that layer can be left untouched) with a knife and place it for 2-3 days in the hot water of a cauldron or bucket on a campfire, to make it soft and flexible. Now bark is used to make pack bags; boxes and cases for needlework and other items; berry pickers (*gujavun*) and boxes for storing them; kitchen utensils (for water, meat, fish, dry foods); lures; sheaths (*eneki*); and further in the past – boats and rawhide tent covers. Birchbark pieces are joined tightly



Attyak (a container for fish and meat)



Ornamented birchbark box



Making birchbark box



*Making tyevun
(rider's stick) of willow*

together with tendon threads (*chiva*, *sumo*), glue made of fish (*ungken*), or thin larch and bird cherry tree roots. Currently, thick nylon threads are often used, but those are not as strong as tendon ones. On the whole, the Amur Evenks decreasingly use birchbark items, preferring modern plastic, glass and metal utensils. However they still use birchbark utensils for storing berries and other foods, or when modern utensils are unavailable. Duffle bags are increasingly used in place of birchbark pack bags (*inmek*).



Making ityk (a stirrer for whipping reindeer milk) of birch wood

Smithing. Finally, the last craft traditionally developed by the Evenks is smithing. The exact time when Evenks started to process metal is unknown. However, it is clear that they had been doing it before their first contact with the Russians. It was even reflected in the language: for example, the Evenks living on the Viluy river¹⁶⁶ used to say “The wind is blowing as strong as a smith blowing with a bellows”. Almost all Evenks could reforge metal, some of them learned to mine metal – a fact that was proved during excavations on the Angara and the Viluj rivers. However the Evenk practice of mining metals was not mentioned in written sources before the 18th century.¹⁶⁷

Every Evenk could forge metal (usually reforging old items). Certainly, there were very skillful craftsmen who could make excellent knives, axes, charms for shamans’ costumes, and even reforge rifles. They also made cast lead products by pouring molten lead into wooden or stone molds. Almost every Evenki man could make arrows, spears, and harpoon heads, tools for currying skins and small decorations.¹⁶⁸ Today most Evenki reindeer breeders living in the taiga make all the necessary items

¹⁶⁶ In the 17th century this territory was inhabited by the Yakuts who soon became the best at producing metal items and started to supply Olenyok and Olyokma basins with these products (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 94.)

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. P. 90.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. P. 91.

like knives themselves (it should be noted that young Evenki males make their first knives when they turn 15-16 years old). For this, they most frequently use spare parts from old tractors and other agricultural machines.¹⁶⁹

Devices in the smithy comprised of an anvil held secure in a log of wood, forge bellows, a hammer, nippers, screw vice, point chisel, files, dippers for melting lead and tin, tools for making holes and forming bullets. All tools were packed and moved with the caravan while nomadizing, and forging was done only in summer.¹⁷⁰ Today less tools are used for forging: a point chisel and hammer are enough. A flat stone easily substitutes for an anvil and forge bellows are rarely used – the air is pumped with an ordinary plank. Using these simple tools modern Evenks are able to make high-quality knives and other items.

To review, the Amur Evenks preserved their traditional way of life to a considerable extent. Besides their reindeer-breeding, hunting, and fishing skills they still possess various skills that ensure survival in the severe conditions of the Siberian taiga. After hundreds of years, the taiga lifestyle of the Evenks has become more comfortable (if living in the taiga can be comfortable at all); every detail has been carefully planned and perfected. In the past hundred years, their way of life has surely changed much: some things have disappeared, others have improved as a result of cultural contacts with the newly-arriving population. However, those Evenks who still live a traditional lifestyle have not lost the unique skills and abilities of their people, including the most significant – their ability to live in harmony with nature.



*Evenki smith.
The beginning of the 20th century.*

¹⁶⁹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in 2006-2009.

¹⁷⁰ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 91.

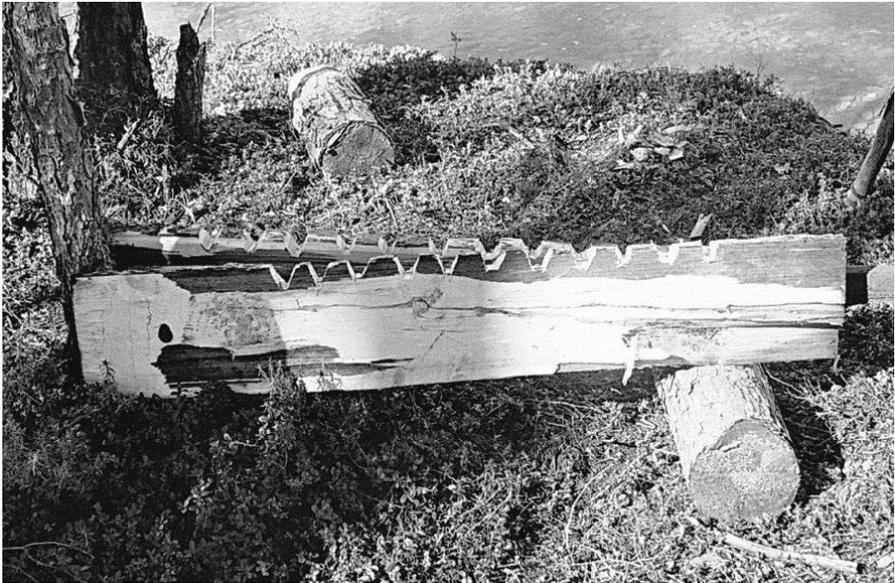
Evenki tools

Centuries-old experience with crafting leather, wood and metal has improved the tools used for it. Some of them must have been invented by the Evenks themselves, others – borrowed during contact with neighboring cultures.

Every family had their own *seleruk* – a tool-box for making necessary items of metal, wood, bone and horn.¹⁷¹ Female tools for currying skins were kept in special bags called *uruk* and *avsa*. Tools were always moved with the caravan while nomadizing.

For processing skins, knives called *koto* were used as well as various scrapers (*oo*, *nuchivun*, *shidyvun*), hand-operated (*chuchun*, *kedere*, *kuvuka*) and large stationary devices to induce “wear-and-tear”, awls (*silgivun*) and needles (*inme*), and later – scissors (*kipty*).

Major carpentry tools include an axe (*suka*), a machete (*utken*), a big saw (*kuvun*) and small saw (*kuvukan*), tools for chopping wood shingles (*ovun*), two kinds of hand planes (*iripchune*, *handavun*), a file (*irege*), a hammer (*halka*), and a drill (*purupchane*).



Stationary device for making skins softer. Selemzhinskiy area, 2007.

¹⁷¹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki*...Ibid. P. 91.



*Evenki hand tools (from top to bottom): chuchun, oo, iripchune, kedere.
Amur State University Museum.*

In smithing, tools include a hammer (*halka*), an anvil (*ije, tavn, typturge*), a forge bellows (*kurge*), nippers (*eurge*), a screw vice, a point chisel (*sivaki*), files (*irege*), dippers for melting lead and tin (*sovokun*), and tools for making holes (*sangarin*) and forming bullets (*ichade*).

Many of these tools are not used any more, and are being displaced by more modern ones. For example, the Amur Evenks widely use gasoline-powered saws in the taiga and electric planes, fraises, and screwdrivers in villages.



Khandavun (Evenki plane)

Chapter 3

Taiga Life

3.1 Housing and encampment

«In the taiga I'm at home, » said young Evenk Victor Solovjov, squatting at a camp-fire.¹⁷² The working day at camp was over: everyone already had dinner, and the deer were set free for the night to pasture – only fawns were tied to *annomar'*, and they were calling for their mother in sad low voices resembling honking. Does were wandering nearby, ringing their neck-bells each in their own manner. It was getting dark and cold – night was coming. That evening, looking for warmth, everybody moved closer to the camp-fire, which encouraged confidential conversation. «So, you're going back to the city. There, at home you walk, don't you?» continued Victor. «As for me, I can't stand being in the city. I would prefer walking here. Like you walk in your streets or from city to city, I move from river to river. Here I feel at home». The black eyes of the young Evenk were glittering merrily in the campfire light, his vigorous voice full of assurance that gave a particularly firm significance to his words. This was the assurance that the ancient taiga traditions of the ancestors are alive and that, far from being strange and frightening, the taiga was really his sweet home.

For many Amur Evenks today the taiga is home not only in the metaphoric but also in a direct sense. They were born in the taiga in far-away encampments or even at pass ways during long nomadic ventures.¹⁷³ Such «children of the taiga» (at least until the age of 6-7, when they were taken to Soviet boarding schools) said «home» did not mean a particular house – they meant the taiga in general and their parents' encampment. Home is the place where you set your tent.



A birchbark tent (drawing)

¹⁷² Victor Solovyov, an experienced taiga-man and a master of wood carving, lives in Ivanovskoe village in the Selemdzhinskiy area.

¹⁷³ Travelers in the 19th century noted Evenki women's endurance; they described that a couple of hours after childbirth, women were able to do the work about the house.



Summer settlement. The beginning of the 20th century.

Traditional shelter types of the Amur Evenks

The major type of Evenki traditional shelter is a light conic rawhide tent called *dyu*. The Amur Evenks built a framework consisting of 5-6 major poles: two thick supporting ones (*sona*) that were stuck into the ground, 3-4 additional ones (*turuvun*) that were placed aside strengthening the construction, and the middle one (*chimka*). To those 20-40 thin ones¹⁷⁴ were added to finalize the construction. It should be mentioned that unlike other peoples of the North, the Evenks did not use any rims or bundles to stick the poles together¹⁷⁵ — they used holes or knots at the end of one of the supporting poles.¹⁷⁶ The Amur and Olekma Evenks cut the upper ends of the frame poles to the same level so that the top of the rawhide tent (the smoke hole) looked neat. At Amur Evenks encampments there were

¹⁷⁴ According to G. M. Vasilevich, among pedestrian Evenks in the past, (primarily Western Evenks) it was forbidden to count supports and use too many of them (more than 30-35). However, for Eastern Evenks, including Amur Evenks, it was characteristic to use a large number of supports (up to 50). It allowed them to construct larger and more spacious rawhide tents. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 111.

¹⁷⁵ Only Evenks living near the Yakuts tied these poles.

¹⁷⁶ See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 110.

usually 3-4 large rawhide tents placed in a semicircle¹⁷⁷; in each tent a family of twenty could settle.¹⁷⁸ Sometimes the inner space of a rawhide tent was divided by special enclosures forming small “rooms” for spouses.

Unlike the tundra Evenks who moved poles with them while nomadizing, the Amur taiga Evenks always left the frame in the taiga – the woods around were rich enough. After arriving at a new encampment and making a frame, they covered it with boiled and smoked birch bark, larch bark, deer or moose chamois, and later – with tarpaulin. Often times the Amur Evenks used different types of covers – chamois for the bottom and birch bark for the top. The covers were placed by tying their upper ends to the poles, in four rows from the bottom to the top – so that the upper ones slightly covered the lower ones. At the top, the covers were held with small poles so that the wind would not blow them off. The doorway was closed with a birchbark curtain that can



Evenki men in a rawhide tent after hunting. 1938.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. P. 108.

¹⁷⁸ See: Vasilevich G. M. Ugdan — zhilishche evenkov Yablonovogo i Stanovogo hrebtov [Ugdan – the shelter of the Evenks from Yablonovoy and Stanovoy Ranges] In: *Sbornik muzeya antropologii i etnografii* [A collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography]. Vol. XX. P. 31.

be drawn aside or with a chamois or cloth curtain stuck to the top of the cover. The Birars covered their summer rawhide tents with reed or grass;¹⁷⁹ in winter, some Amur and Okhotsk Evenks covered the bottom of their rawhide tent with covers made of fish skin. But usually in winter rawhide tents were covered with chamois covers and burrowed in soil or snow; to make a chamois cover 8-14 skins were needed. Both in summer and winter the floor was covered with a thick layer of pineneedles and put skins on top of them.

In permanent winter encampments (*tugadjak*), the Eastern Evenks made their rawhide tents of billets, *golomo*. Billets were made of medium-sized trunks split into two parts. *Golomo* were constructed of billets the same way as rawhide tents. The inner space looked the same too. Outside the *golomo* was covered with soil, sod, and snow. After a big snowstorm such shelter was half heaped and became almost an earth-house, where people got in by jumping from the door-step. Apparently such shelter type is ancient, originating from the Stone Age.¹⁸⁰

In ethnographic literature there are also descriptions of other shelter types of the Amur Evenks such as *kalta*, *kaltamni*, and *kaltan*. *Kalta* was a quadrangle constructed of logs. It was covered with soil or clay from the outside; it had windows, a door and looked like the shelter of the Negidals and other peoples of the Lower Amur: it had a furnace with a wide smoke duct with a plankbed above it. *Kaltamni* was semicircular like a semi-rawhide tent: a frame made of billets covered with sod. *Kaltan* was a light semi-rawhide tent covered with just a cover: it was a temporary type of housing made during hunting or nomadizing. However, the Upper-Aldan and Olekma Evenks constructed *kaltan* more thoroughly by placing small larches in a semicircle, tying their tops, and fixing them on cross-bars that were placed on piles.

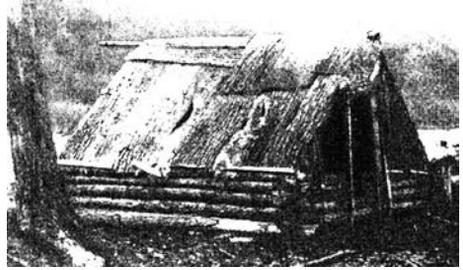
The Amur Evenki elders still keep the memories of another housing type – a quadrangular bark shelter called *ugdan* (originating from the Evenki word *ugdaksa* – bark). It was widespread from Uda to Olekma. According to the descriptions given by modern Selemdzha Evenks, *ugdan* was a shelter with a wooden frame, covered with larch bark. It looked like a tent but was larger and more spacious. It had a door and windows. When the bark wore out, new bark coverage was made. The furnace was located in the same way as in modern Evenki tents and there was a big window on the back wall.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 111.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. P. 112.

¹⁸¹ Respondents: R. P. Nikiforova, G. A. Struchkov (Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007).

It is believed that this shelter type was spread to the Amur Evenks encampments later in the 20th century, originating from the Low Amur where it was used by the Negidals, NAnai, Orochi, Ulchi and other peoples engaged in fishing.¹⁸² According to G. M. Vasilevich, the appearance of *ugdan* can be explained by the fact that many Evenki families from the left tributaries of the Amur river lost their deer and gradually shifted to settled fishing. In her article “Ugdan – the Evenki shelter of Yablonevyj and Stanovoi ranges” G. M. Vasilevich traces the quick evolution of *ugdan* from a bark gabled hut to a wooden house. This is an example of how the Amur Evenks adopted *ugdan* from the neighboring peoples and improved it considerably, turning it into a wooden house (*gule*) – and all during a relatively short time – several decades.



Ugdan – hunting semi-frame shelter



Ugdan turned into a log-house, similar to Russian izba



Modern Evenki village

¹⁸² See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 113.

The Evenks who lost their deer stock started living in them; they kept close contact with the Russians. Before kolhoz formed, the first Evenki villages appeared: Koton, and Ngoku on the Bira River, Tyrmi and Chekunda on the Bureja River, Kukan on the Urmi River. This settlement process facilitated the transition to industrial production and kolhozes, where both Evenks with and without deer entered having fully or partly chosen a settled way of life.

Light tarpaulin tents with a small iron furnace are a recent acquisition of the Evenks: they began to use them in the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁸³ Light and compact and possible to fit in one pack, they quickly replaced less convenient rawhide tents. Practical-minded Evenks adopted tents from Russian geologists and cartographers and improved them: they made “windows” of light cloth, and made a chimney out of the front wall of the tent. To avoid catching fire the chimney was set through *kologran* – a small tin-plate with a hole that is placed in a specially designed recess in the wall. For the same reason flat stones were put under the furnace, or iron cross-bars were affixed that are placed on wet logs. Thus, the furnace in the tent is placed as it previously was in the rawhide tent – in the front part, to the right from the entrance.¹⁸⁴

On the whole, spacing within the Evenki shelter remained the same. Although traditional names of the shelter (*du*) and the furnace (*togo*, *aran*) were replaced with the Russian ones (“palatka” (=tent), “pechika”, “pechu” – furnace), the interior parts retained Evenki names. For example, *malu* retained its ancient Evenki name, which is a holy place in front of the entrance, behind the furnace where only most honorable guests could sit – and where women were not allowed. The woman’s place in the tent – *dalba* – is traditionally located next to household utensils. Men sleep next to the entrance to be able to quickly react in case of danger. Names and the traditional locations of household zones were retained: a place for kitchen utensils (*chona*), the inner corner (*munnu*), and a place for firewood. The Amur Evenks use special small stands for kitchen utensils (*duna*) that are

¹⁸³ Tents with iron furnaces were first adopted by Eastern Evenks in the 19th century; only by the beginning of the 20th century did they spread to the west to the Vitim and the Lena rivers. Initially cloth for the tent and the furnace was bought. (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 115-116). Today the Evenks make furnaces themselves using materials at hand.

¹⁸⁴ The furnace is lit using special kindling – *kangna* or *kuvapty*. They are made by scraping a log with a knife or a special scraper (*kangnavun*, *kuvavun*) directed towards oneself. Such kindling was caught fire quickly and enabled to light the furnace even with wet logs.

placed along the wall near the entrance. As with the earlier rawhide tent, there are special hangers for hunting utensils, for drying wet stuff, and drying fish or meat – *lokovun*.

It takes no more than half an hour to set up a tent. Having chosen a dry, flat place they set two low poles (up to two meters high) forked at the top, fix a three-meter long pole in between those forks having put the pole through a special hole in the tent. The corners of that gable roof are fixed to vertical holders that are not too high, the edges are fixed with small poles or stones. This is the way the Selemdzha Evenks make tents. The Tynda Evenks used the frame of several crossed rails instead of poles (that were stuck together the same way as a rawhide tent), the roof corners are fixed to the crossed rails that are put above the cross-bar. In winter the lower covers of the tent are entrenched in snow to provide heat insulation, in summer they are lifted for ventilation. Today, Evenks more often cover the tent with awning or polyethylene film during heavy rains.

When the tent is made they start fixing the furnace, and then as in early times the floor is covered with fresh fir-and-larch twigs (*sekte*), of which the thick ends are stuck in the soil almost horizontally and close to each other. As a result there is a soft carpet that is renewed every two or three days – the Evenks make it a joke of “cleaning the floor”. No wonder – coniferous aroma refreshes and disinfects the air better than any deodorant, and creates a neat and comfortable atmosphere.

Deer (or sometimes moose) skins (*sektevun*) are put over fir-and-larch twigs. If necessary, under-saddle skins (*tanine* and *doptun*) are put under them. To avoid the destructive effect of insects in summer they put wild marsh rosemary (*senkire*) under them – its smell scares them away. Before going to sleep they cover the floor on which the



*A summer tent of the Selemdzha Evenks.
A. S. Kolesov is on the photo*

bedding is put with skins. In the past Evenks sewed blankets using squirrel, lynx and hare skins, as well as soft buckskins. The Amur Evenks as well as the Yenisei Evenks used blankets with a special fur pocket for feet that was stuck to the end of the blanket. Such blankets were large and were meant to cover the whole family. Pillows were made of chamois or thin cloth stuffed with wool. Very soft and thin chamois made of perfectly treated musk deer skin served as baby diapers (underneath they put an adsorbent layer – moss or dry rotten wood that was crushed into powder). Today the Evenks use ordinary beddings: printed cotton linen, feather pillows, woolen



A stove inside a tent. 2007.

or synthepon fabrics in summer, and wadded or downy blankets in winter. Often times sleeping bags for camping are used. They have replaced traditional Evenki ones made of deer skin (with the fur turned inward) – wrapping himself up to his or her head a hunter could sleep in it right on the snow, no matter the frost.¹⁸⁵ Now such sleeping bags are rare.

Evenks usually sleep with feet to the furnace, placing skins against the fiber's direction in order not to slip towards the furnace. Sometimes the husband and wife lie down with heads to the furnace to be able to add firewood without getting out of bed. It is particularly convenient on frosty winter nights when the furnace must be heated every two to three hours: although a warmer tent is used in winter, it grows cold quickly (in the northern Amur Region, the temperatures can reach 50° below Celsius or even lower).

In the day time skins are rolled and put at the edge of the tent to form seats, and bedding is packed in special sacks – *chempuly*. In the center of the tent, free space is formed. There, the food is cooked and meals are taken; in rainy

¹⁸⁵ Old-timer Evenks remember making such sleeping bags for the front during the Great Patriotic War (Field research in Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area).

weather they read books and newspapers brought from the villages¹⁸⁶, gamble (play chess¹⁸⁷, checkers, dominoes, cards), do needlework, repair saddles etc.

In good summer weather most time is spent not in the tent, but at the encampment, *urikit*.¹⁸⁸

The center of the encampment is the **fire**. The outside fire for cooking – *guluvun* – is usually placed 5-6 meters away from the tent. Not far away a place for firewood – *molakit* – is prepared. The Evenks who spend the winter in tents while nomadizing usually make an outside fire to quickly boil water, in order to make tea and cook food for their dogs while the tent is being set up (this is the way the Tynda Evenks do it). The Selemdzha Evenks do not make an outside fire at their permanent encampments because they spend nights in their winter log houses (hunting cabins), and do not need the outside fire. The Zeya



Summer dinner table under an awning

¹⁸⁶ In the evening candles (candlestick is stuck in the floor of the tent), kerosene lamps or electric lanterns with accumulators are usually used for lighting. In the past they used sticks (*talivun*) that were also used for jackfishing.

¹⁸⁷ Besides, as many researchers believe, the Evenks adopted chess earlier than the Russians.

¹⁸⁸ Nowadays the Amur Evenks most often use Russian word *tabor*.

Evenks do not make an outside fire at their encampments either – the fire is made inside the tent, in the furnace.¹⁸⁹

As a rule, fire is made in a previously existing fire pit. To place a pot on the fire they use different campfire stock footages (*kepten*): a slanted rods stuck into the ground or fixed with stones; a tripod made of rods; or a cross-bar fixed to vertical stands. To regulate the pot height a special chain made of hooks – *ollon* – is used. In summer, the outer fire is used to cook meals, dry meat, and heat water for house needs. Similar to past roles, nowadays a woman's responsibility is to constantly keep the fire and get the boiling teapot ready. At encampments where the Evenks stay regularly, a small table with benches under the awning is placed near the fire. Not far from the fire, they fix a bar (*lovan*) on branches between some trees where they usually hang parts of animal carcasses – the smoke scares away insects and it preserves the meat, preventing spoilage for up to 2 weeks in hot weather.

A smoke-maker – *samnín* – is an essential feature of a summer Evenki encampment, a saving grace for deer suffering from midges. They are fed with wet logs, punks, and moss to produce more smoke. Depending on the herd size and weather, 3-8 smoke-makers work at an encampment simultaneously. It is women and children's responsibility to maintain them. To protect reindeer from burning their sides if they come close to the smoke-makers, a conic frame of bars is constructed around smoldering coals – therefore smoke-makers look like small uncovered rawhide tents. The similarity grows stronger when special smoke-makers



Campfire in a summer taiga camp.



A bivouac hide-smoking hearth

¹⁸⁹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in the Selezhdzhinskiy area (2006-2009) and Ust-Nyukzha village in the Tyndinskiy area (2009, 2011).

for smoking skins, fish, and meat are set. Together with various devices for making the skin softer (so called “crocodile” and other leather kneaders) they form another class of household constructions on the Evenki encampment.

An integral element of an Evenki encampment is *kure* or *kurei* – an enclosure for deer made of rails, its size varies from 40 to 200-300 square meters. Usually such enclosures are made without a single nail. Deer are placed in the enclosure to count the herd, to clean horns and skins of parasites, for milking, and for selection purposes. The drinking bowls are placed there and the mineral licks (salt) that deer love so much are provided. Removable barriers to the enclosure enable a way to separate one part of the herd from another, e.g. young animals from mature males. However, deer are not kept in the enclosure on a long-term basis as they forage for food themselves. In hot weather special awnings are made for deer to create shade (*uten, kaltan*). For that, they cut several small larches and put them in a semicircle sticking the tops together. The small herd can fit completely under that awning.

In addition, scaffolds for storing items are constructed in the encampment. In a single-day stay at a camp they make a simple low platform constructed of rails (*umnevun*) and protect it from rain with



Reindeer in an enclosure (kure). Selemdzhinskiy area, August 2007.

birchbark (today – more often with tarpaulin or polyethylene film). There they keep their stuff packed in bags. In the encampment where they stay more frequently or leave their belongings for a long time, the scaffold is placed on high piles (two or four) and they often make a small log cabin with one door on it – *del'ken*.¹⁹⁰

A ladder is placed at the entrance; its function can also be performed by a log with deep cuts substituting for steps. After using the ladder, it is taken away to prevent beasts (particularly bears and wolverines) and gnawers from



Reindeer licking a mineral lick in kure. Selemdzhinskiy area, March 2006.

¹⁹⁰ The use of the word *delken* slightly varies between different Amur Evenks groups. E.g. the Selemdzha Evenks use it as the name for low scaffolds and uncovered flooring on high piles; covered pile warehouses (small wooden constructions on piles) are called *kolbo*. (Field research at Ivanovskoe village in Selemdzha area in 2006-2009; respondents R. P. Nikiforova, S. S. Nikiforov, G. A. Struchkov, V. A. Struchkov et al.). G. M. Vasilevich noted that the Uchur Evenks used *kolbo* as a name for a small plank that was used to cover afterbirth after burying it, and Ilimpeya Evenks used it for making coffin (see: *Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar'* [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 207). The Tynda Evenks use the word *delken* as a name for covered wooden warehouses and ritual constructions that were built to keep bear's bones and skull. Simple flooring on piles was called *neku*. (Field research in Ust-Nyukzha village of the Tyndinskiy area in 2011; respondent T. S. Fyodorova).

getting into the warehouse.¹⁹¹ Piles are wrapped with tin or covered with grease to protect the stored food from mice, chipmunks, squirrels, and bears.

In such warehouses, items¹⁹² necessary for a hunter or nomad are stored, including ammunition and traps, ropes and tools, winter clothes and footwear, kitchen utensils and food supplies. A common taiga rule allows every passerby in need to use food and supplies stored in the warehouse, but later that person must return there to replenish the stock. The same rule applies to winter hunting cabins. Any traveler caught in bad weather can spend a night in any hunting cabin: there they can find dry firewood supplies, matches, salt, kitchen utensils and a minimal food supply. However, before leaving they must put everything in order and prepare a new firewood supply.

Presently, many Amur Evenks (mostly at Seledmdzha and partly at the Zeyskiy and Tyndinskiy areas) spend winters in log houses¹⁹³, and prefer them to colder tents. Some winter log cabins (and baths – Russian *banya* – next to them¹⁹⁴) were made by Russian carpenters during the kolkhozes and sovkhazes times; others were constructed by Evenks themselves. For example, Seledmdzha Evenks from Ivanovskoe village spend winters in such log cabins: they live in the “tent way” from late spring to late fall, constantly moving from place to place, and with the first snow they move to their permanent encampment (*menejen*) in winter log houses.¹⁹⁵ Encampment names vary depending on the season (*tugadyak* – winter encampment, *nelkidyak* – spring one, *dyugadyak* – summer one, *bolodyok* – autumn one), or take the name of rivers and streams at which they are

¹⁹¹ In the Seledmdzhinskiy area during one of our expeditions (2009) we discovered an old warehouse with a deadlock that, according to our respondents G. A. Struchkov and E. V. Yakovlev, was used for storing meat. It was an on-ground construction of two rims with the top covered with logs. The logs were fixed by a bolt that prevented beasts – wolves and wolverines – from getting inside.

¹⁹² According to the evidence of old-timers, in the past even people could live on *delken* for a while, e.g. a hunter family could survive the beasts or sudden flood there while the hunter was away. The staircase was drawn inside for the night. (Field research at Ivanovskoe village in the Seledmdzha area in 2007, respondents R. P. Nikiforova, G. A. Struchkov.)

¹⁹³ Here taiga Evenks are meant, and these are the minority today. Most Amur Evenks live in villages in ordinary wooden houses and use all modern conveniences including sputnik TV antennas, the Internet, cell phones etc.

¹⁹⁴ If there is no wooden bath, then it is constructed in a special tent (any tent will do). Water is brought from the nearest stream, heated in buckets, large pots or metal basins. In winter melted ice is used.

¹⁹⁵ Field research in Ivanovskoe village in the Seledmdzhinskiy area in 2006-2009.

located (*Dyelo, Talyma, Yukte* etc.). Usually encampments and winter log cabins are assigned to a particular family or patrimonial community in accordance with their hunting area borders. This territory, which comprises pastures where their deer graze, is considered “home” by the Evenks.



Reindeer-herder brigade at the autumn encampment at Ivanovskoe.

3.2. Traditional cuisine

Many ethnographers noted that Evenks were true food connoisseurs. No wonder: having little variety of food that can be found in the taiga, traditional Evenki cuisine is still represented by a large variety of dishes, including some delicious ones. Here the Evenks demonstrated their quick wits and ingenuity, using the taiga gifts most effectively.

More often the Evenks use traditional meat, fish, deer milk, and “pasturage” – what they jokingly call vegetable items (berries, nuts, wild greens, etc.). But an integral part of the Evenki traditional cuisine are surely **meat dishes**. Meat (*ulle*) is consumed in large amounts – boiled, stewed, fried, jerked, dried, raw. It should be noted that after many

centuries of daily meat consumption, the Evenki body has mostly adapted to digesting it: an Evenk can have solely meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner for a month or longer and feel completely healthy.¹⁹⁶

Evenks have always preferred wild hoofed animal meat – wild deer, moose, musk deer, roe deer, argali, or wild boar.¹⁹⁷ Bear, hare, and quite rarely squirrel and lynx meat, are also used. Such game as hazel hen, wood grouse, partridge, wild duck etc. is also used. It is common to use all parts of an animal, nothing is thrown away – a deer carcass is the epitome of this. Brisket (*tyngen*), ribs (*eptele*), and the *midsection* of the spine are considered delicacies. The last vertebra (coccyx) is considered the worst part when sharing the game.¹⁹⁸ According to a very interesting observation by G. M. Vasilevich, in the 1920s the Evenks used the question “What did you eat?” as a greeting, and in response any Evenk named a particular part of an animal carcass.¹⁹⁹



Smoked nose of elk



Fried bear fat

¹⁹⁶ More so, no cholesterol was formed. In 2008 during a research project, “Historical roots of the Amur Evenks” (Institute of Cytology and Genetics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Preserving historical-cultural heritage of the Amur Regional Center) blood was drawn from more than 50 Amur Evenks to conduct genetic research. The medical assistant who was drawing the blood was surprised at how clean and transparent the plasma was in all the samples, even of the elderly ones and the ones who lived in villages for a long time, using ordinary food from shops. Such results might be explained either by regular consumption of reindeer meat— dietary advantages—or by genetic peculiarities.

¹⁹⁷ Alexander Middendorf pointed out that Yakut merchants sold their horses to slaughter, as well as big reindeer to Evenks on the spurs of the Stanovoi Range in the 19th century – e.g. on Selemdzha. Ham was also sold – one sable for one ham. (See: Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri ...* Ibid. P. 723-724).

¹⁹⁸ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2009 and in Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 123.

A carcass is usually dressed using a knife cutting along the joints, which requires a lot of skills and knowledge of animal anatomy. The rules regarding the procedure are strictly regulated. It is forbidden to use an axe for dressing a deer or bear carcass (the grounds for that are religious – not to hurt the animal’s soul). Dressing is done on stones or osier-bed cover near the water to make sure the blood does not fall on the soil, or that dogs don’t lick it.²⁰⁰ After scraping it, the meat is frozen in winter and stored in warehouses. In summer it is hung next to the campfire. Smoke scares away flies and the crust that is formed helps to preserve the meat. Sometimes (when they cannot take everything with them and are planning to return to the same place soon) a part of the meat is put on the ground, hidden underneath some Siberian dwarf pine twigs. In cool summer weather, Evenks can keep meat fresh up to two weeks.²⁰¹

Usually boiled meat is preferred. Big cuts are cooked, only adding salt. It does not take much time to boil hoofed animal meat – a little under-cooked one, rose-tinted in the middle is considered the most delicious, which has a certain resemblance to French cuisine. Broth is served separately. Boiled meat is eaten from a knife²⁰² holding it between the teeth and cutting small pieces right at the mouth turning the blade up. Such a way might look dangerous for a stranger – without proper skills you can indeed cut your lips. Therefore mothers cut small pieces for their young children themselves. Evenks have always eaten in a quiet accurate way, minding their turns.²⁰³ Any present at the beginning of the meal could enjoy it equally with others²⁰⁴ – a hospitality custom that is strictly kept even nowadays.



Getting marrow from a bone

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2009.

²⁰² G. M. Vasilevich noted that the meat of a sacrificial reindeer was obligatorily eaten from birch bark while sitting around the campfire. (Ibid. P. 129).

²⁰³ Middendorf A. F. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri ...* Ibid. P. 708

²⁰⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 122. Middendorf describes the Evenks showing too much hospitality (to his opinion) with bitterness (Ibid. Pp. 709-710.)

Boiled moose or deer tongue is considered a delicacy. It is sliced and salted, and in summer it can be used as an ingredient for a salad together with wild leek and sorrel. Many Amur Evenks never eat the tongue tip; instead they throw it in the fire due to the belief that the one who eats it will become too chatty (a quality that is among the least respected of traditional Evenki values). Galantine (*enevun*) made of cleaned boiled hoofs and cartilages, including vomeronasal cartilage, are another delicacy. The most favorite dishes are made of hooped animal brains, meat from under the back tendons, blood sausage stuffed in cleaned small intestines (*buyukse*), sausage stuffed in cleaned large intestines with the fat inside (*kuchi*), or blood boiled in deer stomach. Whipped blood is added to a meat broth – that is the way to cook white thick soup called *nimin*. In the past blood was dried and stored for that purpose.

Bear meat could only be boiled²⁰⁵, and it should be boiled for several hours. Because the bear is a totem animal for all Amur Evenks, the process of eating it is accompanied by different rules and prohibitions. The ancient ceremony *tekemin* is still practiced among the Amur Evenks – e.g. the Ust-Nyukzha Evenks hold it, and there were some attempts by the Selemdzha Evenks to perform it.²⁰⁶ Bear liver is eaten with caution, and dried bear bile is used for medical purposes or sold. Bear fat is one of the most prized delicacies.

In general, the Evenks loved lard – *imukse* – and use it in large amounts. Traditional Evenki meat dishes have always included fat, obtained after two days of boiling bones in pots: the fat rose to the surface, was gathered in a bowl and then used for different purposes, including making pancakes.²⁰⁷ Bones were stored in warehouses for hard times – any hunter could use this stock when passing by. In the past, Evenks dried boiled moose fat that could be stored up to two years.²⁰⁸ Fat was used with crushed dried meat – *telik*. The best Evenki dish was considered chopped meat of a young animal mixed with brain boiled in fat. Guts, stomach, and liver were boiled together with meat. Even today taiga Evenks have a fondness for dipping bread into greasy sauce: e.g. the Selemdzha Evenks make *chompo* – a mixture of vegetable oil, ketchup, and pepper or chili sauce.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Today this rule is not enforced: e.g. Selemdzha Evenks use bear meat to make chops, goulash etc.

²⁰⁶ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha village (2011) and in Ivanovskoe village (2007).

²⁰⁷ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskoe ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 125.

²⁰⁸ See: Ermolova N. V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sahalina...* Ibid. P. 163.

²⁰⁹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2009.

Meat, liver (*akin*), lungs (*evche*), kidneys (*bohokto*), heart (*mevan*), and testicles of deer or moose can be fried. Shish kebab (*selavun*) is made of musk deer or nursing moose calves or fawns, moose lips, doe udder, and meat from a reindeer's back.²¹⁰ Velvet antlers (*pantu*) of a young deer or Manchurian deer can also be fried: they are stuck on roasting stick and held to the fire to scorch the skin (*nimekte*) and then are cleaned, sliced, and salted before they are ready to eat. Antlers can be stored; before storing, they are tied and steamed over a pot or hung in a tent – usually over the furnace for several days. Storing antlers and antler trade is an additional source of income for the Amur Evenks.

Evenks were usually unaccustomed to accumulating more meat than is needed to feed the family for a short time, but sometimes some extra was left to conserve. There are three main ways to conserve meat with two corresponding means of storing it – *ulikte* (*hulikte*), *kukrya* (*kukre*)²¹¹ and *hapcha*²¹². *Ulikte* is made of fresh flesh, spiral-cut, each strip around 2 centimeters thick and up to a meter and a half long. The meat is salted a little and hung on special hooks over the campfire or furnace. Such a method preserves all the meat's useful qualities, which is kept in cloth sacks for several months. *Kukrya* is small cuts of boiled meat or entrails dried in a frying pan or the sun – usually the ones that were left after a big meal. *Kukrya* can be stored for a year or more. *Hapcha* is cut from dried raw meat.²¹³ Dried meat can be used for soups, goulashes and other meat dishes, and therefore it is indispensable while nomadizing in the summer.²¹⁴ In the past dried meat was used for making meat powder (*urgakte*), added to dough for flat cakes or to soup – *sile*, *selei*²¹⁵. *Ulikte* can be roasted on a roasting-jack, or crumbled and mixed with blueberries to make *kulnin*. Jerked meat can be lightly smoked and mixed with cowberry to get *telik*²¹⁶. All these kinds of meat are ready to eat right after jerking and drying – hunters often take them with them when they go hunting as they are light and convenient for carrying and storing, besides the fact that such meat is nourishing.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² See: Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozjajstvo evenkov-orochonov...* P. 36.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2009.

²¹⁵ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007.

²¹⁶ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 124.

Deer kidneys (*bohokto*), liver (*akin*), heart (*mevan*), bone marrow²¹⁷ (*uman*), suet²¹⁸, vomeronasal cartilage and knee-joint cartilage are consumed raw; raw meat (*talaka*) is consumed more rarely, with other examples including eyeballs²¹⁹ and whipped blood. These are considered the tastiest after flaying an animal, while they are still warm. The tip of a raw deer tongue was used as a baby's pacifier²²⁰.

Depending on the season, meat could be partly substituted with **fish**. But fish has never completely replaced meat for the Amur Evenks²²¹ – it was more characteristic of the Okhotsk, Sakhalin and Baikal Evenks. They boiled fish, grilled it with charcoal, placed it on a skewer near the fire, and dried, smoked, and froze it. Boiled fish was served separately from its broth.²²² Pieces of stretched charcoaled fish were mixed with blueberries. Fish was used for making ground fish (*irivcha*)²²³. Dried fish was also used for making fish flour that was added to soups and flat cakes. Caviar (*tyhe*) was fried, dried and, when stored for the winter, frozen and sliced²²⁴. It was also mashed, put in boiling water, and whipped with twirling stick; then chopped fish was added to get fish soup called *tyhemin*.²²⁵ Fish was smoked in special smokehouses where they could make both cold-smoked fish and hot-smoked fish. Deciduous kinds of wood were used for smoking – poplar, osier-bed etc. Sometimes they ate raw fish, slicing it very thin (*tala*). Under the influence of Russians, the Amur Evenks who moved to the rivers during Siberian salmon spawning period, started to salt fish in barrels. Barrels were bought from Russian cooperers.²²⁶

²¹⁷ It is drawn splitting the long bone longitudinally with a knife. The long bones are not given to dogs but placed in a small warehouse to prevent the dogs from chewing on them and scattering them around (otherwise deer can harm their hooves).

²¹⁸ Mazin A. I. *Byt I khozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* P. 36.

²¹⁹ Based on data collected during the expedition to Ivanovskoe village in Selezdzhinskiy area in 2006-2009. G. M. Vasilevich points out that eyeballs (which were used as talismans) and lungs were not eaten. On the contrary, our respondents pointed that eyeballs were a special delicacy.

²²⁰ Dummy in UK English; see: Vasilevich G. M. (2002). *Rody i ukhod za novorozhdennym* [Birth and caring for a new-born baby]. *Narody Kraynego Severa I Dal'nego Vostoka Rossii v trudah issledovateley* (20 v.) [Peoples of the Far North and Far East of Russia in the works of researchers (the 20th century)]. Moscow, 2002. P. 75.

²²¹ The only exception were settled Evenks who lived on large rivers banks.

²²² Mazin A. I. *Byt I khozyaystvo evenkov-orochonov...* P. 37.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 126.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ According to L. A. Dmitrieva from Ivanovskoe village, 2006 (the respondent's family was nomadizing on the Maya River). G. M. Vasilevich noticed the same for Baikal Evenks.

In the summer period from May until October, one of the major components of traditional Evenki cuisine is **deer milk** (*ukunyo*, *ukumni*), used for cooking deer-milk dishes. Because Amur Evenks adopted the Orochon deer-breeding way, they have always had more deer than many other Evenki groups, and as a result have more milk and milk dishes in their cuisine.²²⁷ Everybody has the ability to milk: children and adults, men and women. One doe cannot give more than a glass of milk – much less than a cow. However deer milk is much more nourishing than cow milk: it contains 3 times more proteins and 5 times more fat. Due to the higher fat content it can be whipped using a wooden stirrer (*ityk*) that looks like ridged disc with a handle. Cold milk is whipped into a foam by rotating the handle in one's palms, increasing the foam's size by 4-5 times. This dish (*ityk*, *kortik*²²⁸) tastes like melted ice cream; it is consumed right after cooking while the foam is still thick, soaking flat cakes in it.

The Evenks cook another interesting milk dish, similar to cottage cheese. To make it, they heat milk at low heat, stirring while heating until it curdles and turns slightly yellow. It is spread on flat cakes or just eaten with spoons.²²⁹ The Evenks could also make deer-milk-butter²³⁰ (*imure*), sour cream (*chuchugui*), curds (*kanjak*). They put a small piece of dry meat (*mokoldyvun*) in the milk to make it sour.²³¹ Deer milk is



Evenki stirrer ityk



*Milk taken from one doe
(at one time)*

²²⁷ See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 77.

²²⁸ The name was borrowed from Yakuts (compare: *korchek*, *kurtik*).

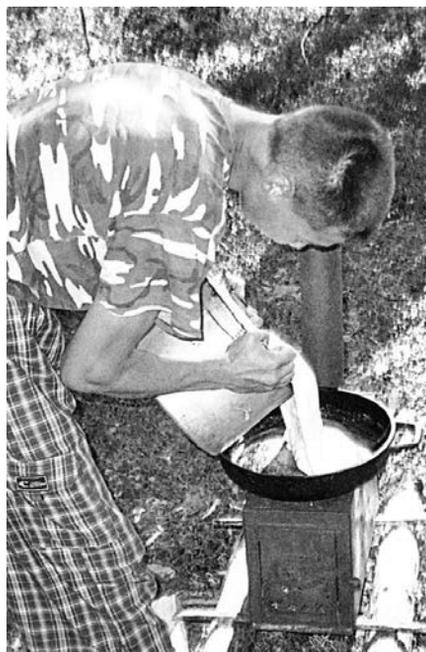
²²⁹ Field research in Ivanovskoe village (Selemdzha Area), 2006-2008. G. M. Vasilevich points out that the dish was covered with whipped milk and used as baby food. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Rody i ukhod za novorozhdennym...* Ibid. P. 78.

²³⁰ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki ...* Ibid. P. 125.

²³¹ *Evenkiysko-russkiy slovar'* [Evenki—Russian vocabulary]. Composed by G.M. Vasilevich. 1958. P. 255.

traditionally added to tea and various broths. However, the most favorite deer-milk dish is “the Evenki yogurt”, *manty*. It is made of fresh cold deer milk, and mixed with lingonberries or blueberries (sugar is also added today). Both adults and children love it.

Vegetable food items in the Evenki diet are mainly represented by berries that grow in the northern areas of the Amur region – lingonberries, blueberries, cloudberries, honeysuckle berries, wild raspberries, black current, sweet-briers, blackberries, bird-cherries, etc. Ground berries were added to broths, mixed with meat or fish, added to flour, or used to make berry drinks. Lingonberries and blueberries are mostly stored for winter. Lingonberries are picked with a picking rake with tines and then stored



*Baking bread in a frying pan.
Selemdzha River, 2007.*

in a dry place in a birchbark container (today – more often metal or plastic containers are used). *Gujavun* (a cone-shaped birchbark box with a handle) is used for picking blueberries, which conveniently fall into the box after hitting a blueberry bush with the tool. Then the berries are sorted out and placed in a birchbark box that was partially buried in the dry (usually pine) forest and covered with dry pine needles.²³² It is stored that way until the first frost, and then it is frozen and can remain in that state the whole winter, until the spring comes. Such berries are used to make berry drinks, pies and other delicacies.

Bird cherries were dried and then ground to make flour that could sometimes be mixed with caviar and oil for making flat cakes.²³³ Ground bird cherries were added to bone soup or dried-meat soup.²³⁴ They were also used to help stomach disorders.²³⁵

²³² According to N. P. Akimova from Ust-Urkima, 2008; G. A. Struchkov, R. P. Nikiforova from Ivanovskoe village, 2006.

²³³ According to Gennadiy Struchkov and Raisa Nikifiriva from Ivanovskoe village in the Selemdzhinskiy area, 2006.

²³⁴ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 125.

²³⁵ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2008.

Besides berries, nuts from the Siberian dwarf pine were abundant in the northern Amur Region and therefore widely used. These nuts were consumed together with their shells while they were still soft. Nuts were also baked in cinder and ground to get flour, which was used as seasoning²³⁶ for meat and fish dishes, as well as for flat cakes for hunters ready to hunt.

Wild green onion, garlic, sorrel, rhubarb, and ramson were gathered and salted in birchbark containers.²³⁷ In the past Evenks, including the Amur Evenks, ate wild lily roots and Apiaceae roots. They were baked, dried, ground into flour for making flat cakes, and scalded for making pap.²³⁸ In times of famine, Evenks neighboring the Yakut eat larch sapwood cut into small pieces and boiled in bone broth.²³⁹

It should be noted that Evenks never ate mushrooms in the past, considering them deer food (because deer were very fond of them). They wondered how Russians could eat such unappealing animal feed. Only in the second half of the 20th century did Evenks start consuming mushrooms – boiling, salting, drying, and frying them according to Russian recipes. However, many elderly Evenks refused to eat mushrooms even in the late 1980s.²⁴⁰

As major **drinks**²⁴¹, Evenks preferred berry drinks, broths, milk, and herbal tea – e.g. cinquefoils (*erbevan*)²⁴²; leaves of lingonberries, sweet-briars, wild raspberry, and blooming sally were also used. In places abundant in birch trees, the Evenks stored chaga mushrooms (*Inonotus obliquus*) and drank birch sap (*churgi*). Burnt flour²⁴³ poured in boiling water and added with milk served as a substitute for coffee. Sometimes they just drank boiled water, but almost never drank water if it was not boiled. For a long time the Evenks preferred to trade tea bricks for furs together with other major foods – rich Evenks could consume 4-5 kilos of tea a year.²⁴⁴ Today the Evenks drink a lot of tea, have

²³⁶ However, usually spices were not used. See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 122.

²³⁷ Ibid. P. 87.

²³⁸ Ibid. P. 127.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2008.

²⁴¹ Initially there were no alcoholic drinks like *araki* in Evenki cuisine. Russian traders brought spirits to them selling it at fairs. There, both men and women drank it, but they never stored it (See: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp. 129-130.)

²⁴² According to Gennadiy Struchkov from Ivanovskoe village in Selemdzha Area, 2009. G. M. Vasilevich transcribes it as *erbegu*.

²⁴³ According to Gennadiy Struchkov and Raisa Nikiforiva from Ivanovskoe village in the Selemzhinskiy area, 2006.

²⁴⁴ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri ...* Ibid. P. 741.



Evenki traditional dishes. Bakaldyn festival, Ivanovskoe, 2008.

very little in transit to prevent a feeling of heaviness in the legs and feet, but consume several cups at a time on arrival. Mostly black tea or coffee are preferred, although there are aficionados who prefer some sorts of Chinese green tea. As in the past, they usually have tea with flat cakes.

It is hard to say when bread became a part of the Evenki diet. On the one hand, they knew of grains and flour before Russians appeared on the Amur: it is known that the mid-Amur Evenks traded with the Daurs for millet (together with beans and dried pepper). The Evenki word for flour – *talgan* – demonstrates this. On the other hand, Russians, who appeared on the Amur in the 17th century, met Evenks who were transporting bread on rafts from agricultural populations in exchange for furs. In other words, they bought ready-made bread because they could not make it themselves yet. Besides, words that mean “bread” (*lepeske*, *kolobo*, *kilep*) are borrowed from Russian ones “*lepyoshka*”, “*kolobok*”, and “*khleb*”. Therefore, the Evenks must have learned to bake bread from Russians, further evidenced by the long time they had been using the same small stationary Russian-type ovens (that were placed in the open air). First, bread was only baked by men, and then it became the woman’s job. As in the past, bread is baked every day, and it is only stored if a hunter goes hunting for several days.

Water, salt, milk, caviar, ground nuts, berries, and bone flour were added to the dough. Poplar ash was used as leaven²⁴⁵ (today baking soda is used instead). Yeast bread is made using yeast that is purchased, although soda bread is more preferable. Flat cakes were cooked in cinders by covering them with charcoals or roasted on sticks near the campfire. For this, they first put the flat cakes on hot stones near the campfire and after the flat cake hardened enough, it was hung on a stick stuck in the ground near the campfire and left there until well-cooked.²⁴⁶ In rare cases when they were in a hurry they could make *selavun* – for this, they rolled out a piece of dough and spiraled it on a spit, baking it over the campfire.²⁴⁷ With the introduction of iron stoves, they started to cook flat cakes on a stovetop; frying pans were also used for this purpose. Today some Evenks bring special bread molds with them.

Traditional Evenki kitchen utensils were generally made of wood and birch bark, and less frequently with bones and horns. It should be noted that the Evenks learned to make soup even in birchbark boxes: they poured water into the boxes and then added burning-hot stones using osier-bed tongs, exchanging the stones for new ones when the former cooled down.²⁴⁸ It took around two hours to cook meat soup – quite a lot of time, although it could be useful in an emergency.

A modern Evenk diet hardly differs from a Russian one (the latter being hardly different from other ones because of globalization). Evenks nomadizing in the aiga buy major foods once every 2-3 months (or even rarer if they nomadize farther) – such as grains, macaroni²⁴⁹, flour, sugar, salt, various canned goods, sweets, biscuits, spices, ketchup, and some vegetables. When Evenks transitioned to settled life in the middle of the 20th century, they learned to plant gardens and kitchen gardens, and grow potatoes, carrots, onions and other crops. In summer many nomadizing Evenks go to their villages several times to care for their kitchen gardens. Living this way – balancing time between the village and taiga, between settled and nomad life – many Amur Evenks build a unique lifestyle.

²⁴⁵ According to Gennadiy Struchkov and Raisa Nikifiriva from Ivanovskoe village, 2006.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ According to Gennadiy Struchkov from Ivanovskoe village, 2009.

²⁴⁸ According to Arcadiy Okhlopkov from Ivanovskoe village, 2007.

²⁴⁹ It should be noted that “macaroni” was first perceived as cursing as it sounded like the Evenki word *mokoron* that means “having sex”. Even now Selemdzha Evenks make jokes about this.

3.3. Clothing and decorative arts

A famous Finnish philologist, M. A. Castrén, who travelled throughout Siberia in the first half of the 19th century, called the Evenks “the Noblemen of Siberia”. This title should not be understood as evidence of excessive propriety or self-conceit – on the contrary, all outstanding ethnographers pointed out the cheerful temper, simplicity and openness of Evenki character. In characterizing them this way, Castrén was referring to first, their special build and second, their “fondness for dressing up”. This name – “the Noblemen of Siberia” – was later supported by a Russian ethnographer A. F. Middendorf, who noted that any other native Siberian would look like a jester wearing this colorful bright dress, but that it actually adorned the well-built, slim, and dexterous Evenk.²⁵⁰

Evenki traditional clothes could be divided according to its function into casual, hunting, traveling, holiday, and cult. The basic clothing type was casual, which was characterized by large variety.²⁵¹

Male and female clothes were of the same cut differing only in decorations (with more decoration on the female one) and length – knee-long for men and a bit below the knees for women. Clothes for children were exactly the same as for men.²⁵² A simple coat open to the front, with no buttons or ties, was characteristic of the Amur Evenks. Taiga hunters and cattle breeders of Southern Siberia and Far East had the same gear.²⁵³ The East-Amur group had an open caftan (never closed in front) and wore it over the apron²⁵⁴ *nel*. However, no apron was mentioned for the Western Evenks.²⁵⁵ The male apron was pointed at the bottom, while the female one was straight. The caftan was the

²⁵⁰ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri...* Ibid. P. 704.

²⁵¹ Voronkova E.A., Kushnareva S.A., Soldatkina I.M. *Ust-Nyukzha. Materialy kompleksnoy etnograficheskoy ekspeditsii Amurskogo oblastnogo Doma narodnogo tvorchestva* [Ust-Nyukzha. Materials of a complex ethnographic expedition by the Amur Regional House for Native Arts]. Ed. by E.A. Voronkova. Blagoveshchensk, 2012. P. 23.

²⁵² Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozjajstvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 38.

²⁵³ Karapetova I.A. *Obrabotka mekha i mekhovye izdeliya. Odezhdza* [Fur processing and fur products. Clothes]. In: *Traditsionnye promysly i remesla narodov Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka*. SPb., 2004. P. 18.

²⁵⁴ Vasilevich G.M. *Tungusskiy nagrudnik u narov Sibiri* [Tungus apron among the peoples of Siberia]. In: *Sbornik MAE. Vyp. XI. M.-L., 1949. Pp. 42-61*; Zavadskaya E.A., Soldatkina I.M. *O nagrudnike v kostyme evenkov i ego religiozno-mifologicheskoy semantike* [On the apron in Evenki costume and its religious and mythological semantics]. In: *Religiovedenie* [Study of Religion], 2014. Vol.1. Pp. 52-73.

²⁵⁵ Ermolova N. V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sahalina...* Ibid. P. 168.



A pelvic cover (herki)

*A fur mitten
(kokollo)*



first layer touching skin: underwear like shirts (*urbake*) appeared relatively late, with first contacts with the Russian population.²⁵⁶

The summer dress was made of chamois and the winter dress was made of reindeer skins with the fur turned outwards.²⁵⁷ Because the Evenks walked frequently in deep snow, often they did not dress very warmly – they could even wear light summer chamois clothes and spend the night at a big fire. Middendorf wrote: “*In spite of hard frost that could freeze mercury, we used to meet a Tungus wearing light, open in the front summer chamois caftan. At every move, under the shifting apron we could see whole naked front part of the body. That man, who I remember very fondly, spent three nights in the forest at the fire such a way [=in those clothes]. Skin for bedding was with him. Tungus is no doubt the most frost-hardened among all nomads. Only the face was protected ... with a facial, (chin and cheek) mask, as well as the shoulders in cold-humid weather with a bear collar that prevents wetting*”²⁵⁸.

Headdresses were of two major types: *intyka* (bonnet type) and *avun* (with parts to cover the ears and a hole for the hair). In the past, they put on goat, roe deer or young reindeer skin with horns and ears while hunting – that fact was described by Ides in the 17th century and by Georgy in the 18th century.²⁵⁹ Girls wore a frontlet (*derbeki*) that was put on the forehead and tied on the nape.²⁶⁰ Beginning in the 19th century, Eastern Evenki groups adopted peaked caps (for men) and shawls (for women). Often in

²⁵⁶ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. Pp.132-134.

²⁵⁷ Mazin A. I. *Byt i hozjajstvo evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. P. 38.

²⁵⁸ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri...* Ibid. P. 721.

²⁵⁹ Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P.134.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. P. 135.

hard frost the head and neck were wrapped with *vachi* – a lace with squirrel tails threaded into it.

In the cold time of the year, they wore gloves and mittens made of chamois and leather. They made a cut in the palm area of the mitten to take their hands out without taking off the mittens. Chamois gloves for men and women were decorated with embroidery: “they were so skillfully made and trimmed with silk design at the joints that we would be honored to use them as gloves for traveling”, noted Middendorf.²⁶¹



Buckskin shoes decorated with embroidery. Ivanovskoe, 2006.

Integral parts of the costume were the pelvic cover (*herki*) and leg cover (*aramus*). The pelvic cover looked like shorts on strings or with special holders. Fringe was attached to the front part, holes for legs were completed with a narrow strip that gradually lengthened, turning them into pants – these chamois pants replaced leg covers among the Evenks of the Middle Amur River.²⁶² Selemdzha Evenks used such pants up to the middle of the 20th century.²⁶³ In women’s clothes, leg covers were retained longer. They were separate trouser legs that were fixed to the belt (usually chamois) with strings. In winter they put fur stockings – *dokton* – over leg covers.

Footwear (*unta*) was made of elk chamois and skin from lower parts of the leg (usually reindeer) – *kamus*. There were two kinds of cuts – for three and six parts. *Kamus untas* could be short (*emchure*) for casual wear and high (*muruvun*) for walking in deep snow and riding on sledges. *Zeya* and *Selemdzha* Evenks sewed *bile* – a strip of cloth embroidered with beads and threads – to the top of *untas*; *Tynda* Evenks decorated *untas* with a fur mosaic (these differences are still retained). Summer boots – *olochi* – were made of deer or elk chamois and looked the same for both men and women. Their soles were made of skins from the space between reindeer hooves which created a non-slip surface for walking. To fasten the *untas* tighter to the soles, they were tied around the ankles with chamois bands that were attached to the heel. Grass was used as an insole.

²⁶¹ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri...* Ibid. P. 716.

²⁶² Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki...* Ibid. P. 136.

²⁶³ According to G. A. Struchkov, his grandfather wore such pants his whole life (Field research at Ivanovskoe village, 2006).

In the past the cutout was performed without any patterns – old samples were used. First bone, then metal needles were used (including ones with a trihedral top – *inme*) for sewing the parts together and embroidering – that was the way to easily pierce the skin without tearing it.²⁶⁴ Threads – *sumo* – were made of reindeer tendons that were dried and rolled on the hip.²⁶⁵ Some skillful women use such threads even today



A lesson in traditional sewing. Ust-Nyukzha.

considering them stronger than the modern nylon ones²⁶⁶, but others think that the technique is too hard and therefore prefer modern ones.²⁶⁷ Lines of joints were embellished with decorative seams that masked them and at the same time facilitated attaching cloth appliques.²⁶⁸ Winter clothes were stored in warehouses where wild rosemary was arranged to scare insects away.²⁶⁹

To embellish clothes various metal gadgets were used – chains, buttons, rings, necklaces as well as braids, fur edging, tassels, chamois fringe, and embroideries of colored horse hairs or hair from under a reindeer’s neck (*gurgakte, mujalle*). Major patterns for embroidering clothes depicted vegetation or geometric types and contained various curls, petals, rhombuses, triangles and flowers. At times stylized animals were illustrated.

The most widespread colors in the Evenki costume are white (*bagdarin*²⁷⁰); red, the color of life (*hularin*); light blue – that had an important symbolic meaning in folklore (“The one dressed in blue is the most beautiful”, Evenki proverb); yellow, orange, gold – the color of the

²⁶⁴ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, 2006-2007. Respondent R. P. Nikiforova.

²⁶⁵ This process was demonstrated to us in Ust-Nyukzha village in 2011.

²⁶⁶ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011.

²⁶⁷ According to a skilled woman, T. N. Safronova, from Ivanovskoe village.

²⁶⁸ Voronkova E.A. et al. *Materialy kompleksnoy etnograficheskoy ekspeditsii...* Ibid. P. 25.

²⁶⁹ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent S. A. Kul'bertinova.

²⁷⁰ Trofimov E.E. *Skazki zolotogo olenya. Evenkiyskie mify, predaniya, legendy*. [The fairy-tales of the golden deer. Evenki myths, narrations and legends]. Khabarovsk, 1989. P. 121.

Sun, warmth and autumn; black (*kongnorin*) was traditionally (and is now) used as the background color.²⁷¹ Colors of “smoked” skin, fur, wood, animal bone and natural dyes created a natural harmony of color in the Evenki costume. Warm quiet coloring with a little bit of bright ornamented elements is a feature that differs the North Tungus-Manchus costume from other peoples.²⁷²

A.F. Middendorf highly appreciated skilled Evenki women: “... a Tungus woman dresses up all people dear to her heart and herself in the greatest and the most gorgeous dresses. Products of our tailors and suits and regiments of our dandy-guardsmen look poor compared to those dresses”.²⁷³

To style their hair, silver or silver covered pipe-shaped hair ties were used for both men and women. In the past men did not cut their hair, they tied it hard with tape and put into the aforementioned hair tie. Women wore two kinds of earrings – the ones that look like Yakut earrings (trapezium-shaped lavalier with clasps) and silver rings with big glass beads.²⁷⁴

This is the way the traditional Evenki costume looked. By the time of Middendorf’s trip, the Amur Evenks nomadizing on the spurs of Yablonovoy Range and Stanovoy Range (“south Tungus” as he called them) were dressed differently than e.g. Low Tunguska Evenks. First, they were “not such dandies” – even for celebrations men often wore casual clothes, and various accessorizes were the only decorations that they had. The caftan was not trimmed so elaborately, “although their wives made close-fitting dandy-type ones, these were not as trim as the Low Tunguska ones”.²⁷⁵



*Embroidering the buckskin.
Ivanovskoe, 2006.*

²⁷¹ Karapetova I.A. *Obrabotka mekha i mekhovye izdeliya...* Pp. 6-33.

²⁷² Davidova T.A. *Tsvetovoy kanon v iskusstve narodov Rossiyskogo Dal'nego Vostoka.* [Color Canon in the art of the peoples of Russian Far East]. In: *Zapiski Grodekovskogo muzeya.* Vol. 18. Khabarovsk, 2001. Pp. 30-47.

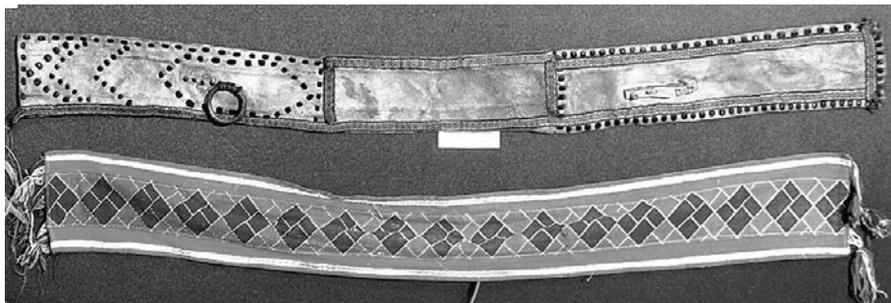
²⁷³ Cited by: Voronkova E.A. et al. *Materialy kompleksnoy etnograficheskoy ekspeditsii...* Ibid. 23.

²⁷⁴ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri...* Ibid. Pp. 716-717.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

Second, there was a notable Chinese and Yakut influence: “In general, due to various contacts with different neighbors bordering them, the Tungus must have lost their original national costume and adopted everything that seemed beautiful to them. Anywhere along the border with China, Yakut merchants promoted their patterns”²⁷⁶, wrote Middendorf. “Evidence of relations between Chinese and Tungus were Chinese coins on [Tungus] clothes, lavalieres on skirt edges etc.”²⁷⁷ Women looked better dressed: those who were richer wore bright woolen skirts, cloth for producing them was obtained from the Chinese for furs.

Yakut influence on the Amur Evenks’ clothes was seen in borrowed clothes, their parts’ names and most importantly – in the cut. Unlike Western Evenks, who wore close-fitting caftans in the waist with triangle gussets and a small stand-up collar, the Amur Evenki cut was sack-type and the collar was turned down²⁷⁸, in some cases leg-of-mutton sleeves are attached.²⁷⁹ Therefore an Evenki woman was no different from a Yakut woman in dress.²⁸⁰ Besides, the Evenks adopted female waistcoats from the Yakuts.²⁸¹



Harnesses for reindeer. Amur State University Museum.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. – P. 715-716.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. – P. 717.

²⁷⁸ Ermolova N. V. *Evenki Priamur'ya i Sahalina...* Ibid. P. 168.

²⁷⁹ Vasilevich G.M. Tungusskij kaftan (k istorii ego razvitiya i rasprostraneniya) [Tungus caftan (concerning the history of its development and spreading)]. In: *Sbornik MAE*. Vol. XVIII. M.-L., 1958. Pp. 122-178. In this work G. M. Vasilevich points to the similarity between the Evenki caftan and the North-American Indian one, supported by linguistic data. Thus, she points to the similarity between the Evenki and Indian clan names – e.g. *Buta* who live in the Amur and Khabarovsk regions, and *Bota* who live on Lake Victoria in Canada (See: Ibid. P. 171).

²⁸⁰ Middendorf A. *Puteshestvie na sever i vostok Sibiri...* Ibid. P. 713.

²⁸¹ Voronkova E.A. et al. *Materialy kompleksnoy etnograficheskoy ekspeditsii...* Ibid. P. 28.

At the turn of the 20th century there were serious changes in Evenki clothes – their cut changed, new materials appeared, some patterns changed, others disappeared. Russian clothes spread out – shirts, pants, wadded jackets, kerchiefs, ushankas (Russian fur-caps with ear-flaps), leather boots, knitted mittens, sweaters and dickeys. New clothes, which were more comfortable for living in settlements, gradually replaced traditional Evenki clothes used in the taiga. Today a few items of traditional clothing are used by the Amur Evenks, especially in the taiga: footwear, gloves and mittens, and fur coats *mukuke* with the fur outward – for severe frost while hunting or celebrations.²⁸²

However it would be wrong to say that making traditional clothes and their accessories has stagnated: rather, it is a matter of change in their targets and assortment. In the past, crafting traditional clothes was a matter of survival during hard frosts, but now it is rather a means of income. The Amur Evenks produce clothing items in large quantities to sell to the Russian population – being skillfully trimmed and exotic, these items are in great demand and their sales are peaking. The main products include *untas*, mittens, fancy bags, earrings and necklaces made of beads and fur as well as fur mobile phone cases embroidered with beads. A traditional Evenki product is a carpet called *kumalan*, which in the past was used for rituals and was believed to contain magic power.

Moreover, making traditional clothes is a matter of prestige where the Evenks can demonstrate their skills. Local, regional, and all-Russia exhibitions of decorative and applied arts are held on a regular basis for this purpose; there, collections from the Amur Evenki villages are always presented. Special ethnic centers are organized in Ivanovskoe village where Evenki women manufacture souvenirs and national Evenki costumes, including ones for national Evenki vocal and dance performances. After all, costume is the face of any ensemble.

Today the traditional Evenki dress draws attention from Amur designers – college and university students often create collections of modern fashionable dress including elements of traditional Evenki dress. In other words, one can say that today, Evenki dress is receiving new life.



Fur carpet with the Yakutar clan sign

²⁸² E.g. they are used in Ust-Nyukzha. (According to Svetlana Kulbertinova, Ust-Nyukzha, 2011.)



Evenki patterns for fur footwear



A girl in stylized national costume



Kumalan exhibition. Pervomayskoe vallage.



Modern handmade souvenir



Schoolgirls at Evenki fashion festival. Bomnak, 2010.



Native Evenki dance group. Ust-Urkima, 2009.

Chapter 4

Myths and Religious Notions of the Amur Evenks

In this section, we will attempt to reveal the layers of Evenki spiritual culture which have not yet fallen to the past, and preserve their live communication with national memory. We will highlight the fragments of live tradition lasting in memoirs, narrations, and activities of our contemporaries. Different layers of this live tradition are recorded by ethnographers who collected material among the Amur Evenks on taiga expeditions. Ethnographic data from the recent past and present were included in this section of the book, which was written primarily thanks to the works of the remarkable archaeologist and ethnographer, Anatoly Mazin, who was born in the Amur region and journeyed thousands of kilometers in the Amur taiga.

4.1 Traditional worldview of the Amur Evenks

Every known culture in every historical era had an image of the world, i.e. a system of ideas about the origin, development and structure of the universe. The image of the world organizes its fragments into a single whole, both in collective and personal consciousness. It gives a sense and high appointment to all significant objects of the surrounding world – both big (for example, the sky) and small (the dwelling). The traditional model of the world has, as a rule, a three-part structure. It is an expression of the basic universal navigation system, in which a person and the collective organize the top and the bottom, the past and the future, in relation to their own location. Each ethnos fills this general three-part model of the world with peculiar content, forming an ethnic image of the world. The ethnic image of the world reflects the features of the natural and historical habitat of the people, and is decorated with paints expressing the palette of their imagination.

The Upper World — *Ugu Buga*

In summer and winter an Amur taiga person sees a huge dome of the blue sky over the tops of the highest larches, with a bright sun at day, and a clear moon and large flickering stars at night. Continuous rains, fogs, and snowstorms are unusual here, as the climate of the Middle and Upper Amur is temperate continental, with long sunshine duration (when the sun



Winter movement. The Kharga River (Selemdzhinskiy area), March 2007.

is over the horizon and shines without clouds). In the north of the Amur region, the average sunshine duration is about 2000 hours per year, and in the south it is more than 2500. For comparison: in midland Russia the sunshine duration is about 1600 hours per year, and in Central Asia it is about 3000 hours per year.

This clear blue sky is *Uga Buga*, “the upper world” in Evenki traditional beliefs. The concept of *Buga* itself contains multiple meanings in Evenki culture: it denotes the world in general, the Universe, and the source of life and movement, the highest deity – *Buga*, the supernatural animal that is depicted as an elk, but first of all is the sky. “The deity *Buga* is *buga* [=sky]”, – the Evenki shaman Savey said to the authors of the book, pointing his hand to the sky. The deity *Buga*, which is as immense as the sky and all that exist under it, has no certain image, and cannot be described in exact details. But it is clear that *Buga* is the omnipresent creator of the world, the omniscient benefactor. Like the sky, it is at the same time far and close, involved in destiny of each person, but seldom interfering with it directly. It does not punish the guilty person with troubles, but deprives him or her of its help. In the past Evenks seldom addressed *Buga*, and did so only in the most extreme and important cases.

Many scholars explain such diversity and indivisibility of the *Buga* image through a syncretic way of thinking, inherent to the primitive

cultures. But it is not necessarily so. Like many other similar notions, the Evenki notions of *Buga* were created by quite developed thinking, however within the limits of this thinking, different systems of perceiving the world can coexist. In one cognitive “coordinate system”, the objects of surrounding reality exist as they are perceived by the senses – here the sky is simply the sky. In another “coordinate system”, the objects and processes have the ability of transformation, mutual transition and interpenetration: here the sky becomes a human-like being, the person develops the ability to fly in the sky like a bird, and the bird is able to speak with a human voice. In many traditional cultures people believe that such transformations are natural. The recreation of reality according to this scenario of general transformations is a characteristic method of traditional thinking. Thanks to this traditional thinking, the magical worldview, belief in the supernatural world, and many folklore images have arisen that sometimes seem unusual to a modern person. However this “unusualness” is not alien to our consciousness. The multidimensionality of thinking and ability to create the imagined realities has not been lost by the person of modern culture, however this culture gives him or her few opportunities to live in imagined worlds as if they were real.

The sky-Buga, or the upper world, has a complex structure in Evenki traditional worldview. It consists of three levels.

On the first, most distant level of the upper world there are celestial bodies, among which the main body is the Sun (*sigun*). Its emergence in the morning and disappearance in the evening is not just a physical process, but the real dramatic action conceived by the rich imagination of the taiga people, in relation to their most important and fascinating occupation, hunting. In 1976 N. I. Antonov from the Chakagir clan told Anatoly Mazin an entertaining legend. “It was a very long time ago, when the earth hadn't expanded yet and was absolutely small, but there was already vegetation on it, and animals and people lived there. At that time, there were no nights, and the sun shone all the time. One autumn day, the elk Buga (a male elk during mating period) grabbed the sun and ran towards the sky. The elk-cow (*Ennyn*), which had been following along with the elk, ran behind it. Then night came to the earth. People were confused. They didn't know what to do. At that time, among Evenks there lived a famous hunter and athlete Mani. He was the only one who wasn't puzzled. Has took his bow, called two hunting dogs and ran after the elks. By this time, the elks had left and ran to the sky. The dogs of Mani

overtook and stopped them quickly. The [male] elk, seeing that they could not escape the dogs together, passed the sun to the elk-cow and began to distract the dogs. The female [elk], having seized the moment, sharply turned and ran towards the North to a celestial hole to disappear from the pursuers. Appearing in time, Mani shot the [male] elk, but the sun wasn't with him. Guessing that the elk had given the sun to the elk cow, he began to look around the sky and saw that it [=the cow] was already close to the celestial hole and could disappear. Then he began to shoot at it with his powerful bow. The first arrow hit two body lengths in front of the elk, the second — one body length, and the third precisely hit the target. As soon as Mani got the sun and returned it to people, all participants of the cosmic hunt turned into stars. Since then there is a change of day and night and the cosmic hunt repeats. Every evening the elks steal the sun, and in turn, Mani pursues them and returns the sun to the people by morning".²⁸³

Many plots of the Evenki folklore are closely connected with ancient images drawn on rocks – petroglyphs. A portion of these drawings were created by ancestors of the modern Evenk. Other petroglyphic compositions were created by their predecessors, long before the Evenki clans' resettlement of the vast territory of the Far-Eastern taiga. Later these rock paintings were procured by the Evenks, mythologically reimagined, and included in their culture. The oral story about the hunter Mani is displayed in the rock paintings near the river Maya: a man with a bow in his hand running for an elk cow is depicted, with the sun hidden under its belly.

For the taiga reindeer-breeding nomads, the bright stars in the sky and their configuration are a reliable reference point for space and time. According to the legend, the four stars forming the bowl of the Big Dipper in constellation Ursa Major (*Heglen*) are the traces of the male elk, the thief of the sun. The three stars of the dipper's handle, as well as three stars of the fifth size near them and the star that is the closest to the Canes Venatici constellation, are the traces of Mani's dogs which stopped the elks. Mani himself is the five stars of the constellation Ursa Major located below the bottom of the bowl. The Little Dipper of the Ursa Minor constellation is the traces of the elk cow trying to escape its pursuers. The first and second stars of the dipper's handle are the arrows of Mani. The third star of the dipper's handle (the North Star) is an opening or hole (*sanarin*) through which the elk cow tried to disappear.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007. Pp. 10-11.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.* P.11.

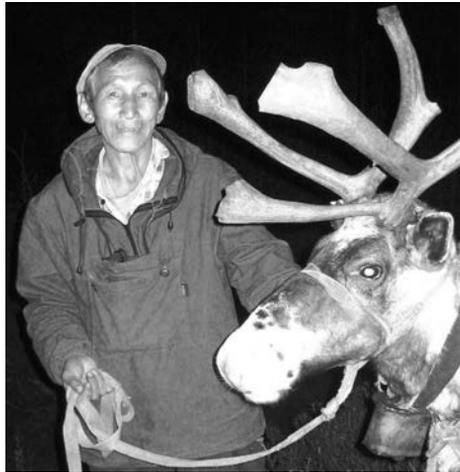
These mythological ideas of the remote past remain in the oral tradition of the Evenks of Selemdzha. “Once upon a time our god Mani who lives in the upper world went for a hunt. He journeyed and journeyed in the woods, [then] looked – an elk is standing, a big [elk] with branchy horns. The elk saw Mani and began to ran, and Mani pursued it on skis. And so Mani still pursues the elk, even the trace remained – the elk (the North star) is running ahead, and the Milky Way is the trace of Mani’s ski track ”, – Gennady Struchkov from the Buta clan told us.²⁸⁵



Mani, chasing the elk which has stolen the sun. Rock painting at the Maya River.

In the northern areas of the Amur region , the temperature usually falls lower than -40°C on a winter night. In the frozen night sky, the cold bright flickering gloss of stars causes the impression of a magical enchanting spectacle: “Once Mani decided to hurry in the upper world. He harnessed the fastest reindeer to his sledge and rushed off in the sky. [He moved] so fast that sparks flew from under the reindeer hoofs. These sparks are stars, and the traces of the sledge is the Milky Way”, – so this impression is expressed in the fairy tale told us by Lidia Solovyova (the Mengel clan, Ivanovskoe).²⁸⁶

Another narration also contains a description of the wonderful reindeer that are involved in the creation of an enchanting stellar spectacle, this time not with a divine ancestor, but with two people in love. “A very long time ago, two fawns were born from one doe. The doe died while giving birth, and a little girl took care of the fawns.



Gennady Struchkov with his reindeer. Ivanovskoe village, 2008.

²⁸⁵ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007

²⁸⁶ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007.

The reindeer have grown, and became mature adults, but they didn't depart one step from the girl. Her family lived in poverty, and her father sent the daughter to work for a rich person. The girl met a man and fell in love with him, but the rich person didn't allow them to see each other. Then the reindeer picked up the girl and the man and carried them very far away. They passed through the taiga to the end and rose up. Small pieces of ice flew away from their hoofs and stiffened instantaneously:



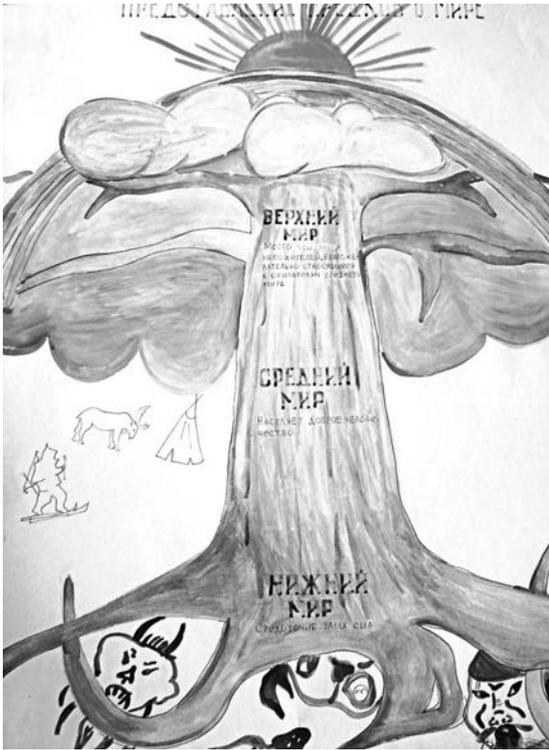
Arkady Okhlopov translating Evenki tales into Russian. Ivanovskoe, 2007.

that is how the Milky Way was created. And the two stars at the end of the band are the lovers”, — so this story was described in Arkady Okhlopov's (1942-2014) version from the Der' clan, Ivanovskoe.²⁸⁷

On the most remote level of the upper world, the planet, Chalbun, (Venus) is located, which is very noticeable in the sky. The Evenks of the Upper Amur believed that its territory is divided into patrimonial sites on which high dry larches grow. Bird's nests hang on the upper branches of the larches, and the souls (*Omi*) of yet unborn ordinary people live there: they are similar to a titmouse's baby birds. In the hollows of these trees the souls of future shamans live, akin to baby birds of eagles, swans, and loons (lat. *Gavia*). The souls of the dead ancestors – *heyana* – look after the unborn souls. These Evenki heavenly larches with nests containing unborn people's souls represent the mytheme of a tree of life, typical for world's mythologies and creatively improved by the imagination of the taiga people in accordance with their natural environment. The fact that these larches – life trees – are dry, is quite in keeping with the rules of a mythological “other world”. In this case, the law of mythological inversion works: the live larch in the “other world” looks dry.

K. V. Grigoriev from the Kaptugar clan recounted that in his youth he got seriously sick and should have become the shaman as, allegedly, the souls of his ancestors required. To avoid such a fate, he addressed

²⁸⁷ Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2009.



A part of a mitten with decorations depicting the tree of life. Ust'-Nyukzha, about 1950.

A drawing depicting the tree of life and Evenki notions of world structure

the shaman from the Donmal' clan, A. N. Dmitriyev, with a request to cure him. They went to the taiga, made a tent, made four *mentaya* (wooden idols with anthropomorphous heads, without hands and legs), one eagle, one loon, two teals, and 27 *tagu* (high young larches with naked trunks and branches at top; *tagu* are used during a shamanic ritual to serve as "stops" for rest for the shaman's soul and assistant spirits). From *malu* (the place in a tent, opposite to the exit) in the direction of *Chalbon* they first put the images of birds, and then they put *tagu*; four *mentaya* were also put in the corners of the tent. In the evening, the shamanic ritual which lasted two days began. During the first day the shaman, according to his words, flew to Chalbon for investigation, in order to learn where the patrimonial territory of the Kaptugar clan's unborn souls is located. During the second day the shaman again flew to Chalbon to "steal" the soul of K. V. Grigoriev, to prevent him from becoming a shaman. After the shamanic ritual

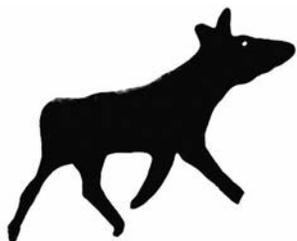
A.N. Dmitriyev reported that he saw his soul, which has the image of a baby eagle, in a hollow at the top of the highest larch – *mugdyken*. There was a strong noise and shout. All the larches were covered with bird nests; nests were also in the hollows. As he hurried greatly, he did not notice anything else. Having grabbed the soul he flew for, he quickly went back. When green trees appeared, that meant that the shaman had almost reached the Earth, but he met a huge bear in a den; he was strongly frightened by it and lost the soul. A. N. Dmitriyev regretted it for a long time and was afraid that his soul could be stolen by the bear.²⁸⁸

The second level of the upper world is populated with souls of dead people, which transferred there and continue to lead their existence in that world. Evenks belonging to different patrimonial and territorial groups imagined the other world in different ways. As with other peoples, the traditional Evenki ideas about the world of post-mortem existence were deprived of clarity: so, in addition to the idea of the heavenly area of posthumous life, the image of a *buni* – the underground world where the dead exist – was also widespread among the Evenks. Such multidimensionality of the afterlife is caused, in particular, by the notion in which a person has several souls, and each of these souls have its own fate after they leave the body. Despite the local distinctions, there are some common features in Evenki views.

The Evenki “other world” is not pastures of Heaven, blissful islands, or a land of milk and honey. It is the same world of hunters and reindeer breeders, but it is beyond the earthly life, invisible to a casual glance. Each clan has its territory, and families have their own sites for hunting and reindeer breeding. Taiga occupations, a habitual landscape, vegetation, animals, and reindeer accompany the Evenk who has passed into the other world. How would the Evenk live without reindeer and hunting? It is impossible even in the upper world...

Thus, it is impossible to live without concerns of livelihood, without daily affairs, even in the upper world. Still, this world is the best: not because there is less work here, but because there is more justice. Everyone is rewarded according to his or her just deserts here. Those who lived ethically on the earth – did not offend people, animals, or vegetation – live without any deprivation in the other world. And

²⁸⁸ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007. P.13.



*Enekan Buga on a shaman drum
owned by I.I. Yakovlev from
the Bullyot clan*



*Seveki on a shaman drum
owned by I.I. Yakovlev from
the Bullyot clan*



*Patron spirit of animals.
The rock painting at Smirnovka.
The Upper Amur.*

those who lived unethically, who breach the taboos, pay for their offenses here. The idea of a posthumous consequence belongs to the category of complex religious notions; it can be both a result of outside religious influence on the Evenki religion or an original Evenki view. One way or another, it is significant that nowadays this idea is an important religious and moral regulator of human behavior. According to the Evenki shaman Savey, all kind and evil acts of a person receive the equivalent requital after death: “If a person stole [something] here [=on the earth], then there [=in the other world] he will walk with a heavy filled backpack ...”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Field research at Iengra village (Southern Yakutia), 2002.

The third (closest to the earth) level of the upper world is a home to the benevolent female deity named *Enekan Buga* (“the Heavenly Granny”). *Enekan Buga* is the hostess of the world, the empress of animals, and the manager of taiga life. Reindeer and their issue, animals and hunting, are within her power. If she has kind feelings toward a person, family, or clan, then she provides growth of the reindeer herd and successful hunting, and if not, then one shouldn’t wait for good things. The image of *Enekan Buga* differs in different Evenki groups, but in general they agree that she is an old woman, the defender of life, the provider of blessings. In some notions her image is combined with the image of an elk cow, which is connected either with the most ancient sources of the taiga empress of animals, or with the idea of her wonderful transformation into a zoomorphic being, a supernatural elk cow.

Other kind spirits also live near *Enekan Buga*. They mostly look like people; these are the “grandmothers” and “grandfathers”, or assistant spirits. One of them is *Seveki*, the spirit of the upper world which predominates over all who live in the taiga. He is manifested in male, female or animal form (elk, reindeer), and helps people with hunting and distributes good luck. This ancient anthropomorphic image of the master of fauna is represented on a rock painting at Smirnovka (the Upper Amur). It is depicted at the top of the composition: the biggest figure with hands risen in a characteristic protective gesture. An animal stands still at the legs of the spirit — the owner of the taiga – in a circle symbolizing the borders of the guarded territory.

The characteristic image of the upper world is recreated by a drawing on a shaman drum dated in the first third of the 20th century, which has come to a museum fund in 1933 from the Dzheltulaksky (nowadays Tynda) area. The drawing made with red and black paint is found on the inside of the drum. Here the sun in the form of a circle is represented with radial beams inside; to the right and slightly above the sun there is a soaring anthropomorphic being — perhaps, this is *Seveki*, — above him a flying bird, and under him a heavenly reindeer (or an elk) are depicted. The round moon outlined by a red line finishes the general composition; in the lunar circle there is an anthropomorphic being with a shaman belt on its hips — possibly, this is *Enekan Buga* who, according to some Evenki narrations, lived on the moon.

The Middle World — *Dulin Buga*

According to the traditional Evenki worldview, “the middle world” is the earthly world: it is inhabited by people, animals, plants, and spirits of different places and objects.

N. I. Antonov from the Chakagir clan told A. I. Mazin the following legend. “Once there was [just] water and the sky. In the water there lived a snake and a frog. In the sky, the sun, moon, and star Chalbon shone; [also] Enekan Buga with her heavenly assistants lived there. The snake was old; she was often tired and felt cold in the water. Once she asked her assistant, the frog, to get the earth [from under the water] and to fortify it on the water so that she could have a rest and bask in the sun. The frog dove and got the earth. When [the frog] began to build it up, the earth began to sink. At this moment, the snake swam to her [=the frog]. The frog was frightened that the snake would abuse her for her helplessness, so she turned over and began to support the earth with her feet. And she is still doing it”.²⁹⁰

According to N. I. Antonov, when the earth appeared, Enekan Buga settled a mammoth *Seli* there. It wasn't pleasant to the snake, and she began to drive the mammoth out from the earth. They fought until they both fell under the earth. After that they reconciled their quarrel and became spirit-guards in the lower world. The mounds of soil which they heaped up during their fight turned into mountains, while the pits turned into rivers and lakes. Similar legends were told by other Amur Evenks, V. I. Abramov from the Chakagir clan and M. A. Boyarkovskaya from the Hebgimngu clan.²⁹¹

The legends about a frog supporting the earth with its feet and the hostility of a huge snake and mammoth are also widespread among the Evenks outside the Amur region; perhaps this indicates that their origins lay in the remote past.

Everything that is born, grows, moves, changes in this world, has *musun*: a specific moving power or energy, invisible to an eye. The beings which show signs of reasonable behavior possess souls (*omi*). Everything that exists in the earthly world is created by the deities (in human or animal image), powerful ancestors, or other unusual beings acting in “the beginning of times”.

In the past, the legend of two brothers – the creators – was in broad use among the Evenks. The younger of them (*Seveki*) creates good things, and

²⁹⁰ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007. Pp. 24.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

the senior one (*Khargi*) harms creation. So, the younger brother laid down on land to have a rest, after finding an initial bit of dirt with the help of a loon (which procured the lump of earth from the primitive water depths). Then the senior brother tried to snatch the earth out from under his younger brother, but he could not do it and only stretched the earth — that is how the earth became big and flat. The younger brother made the first people of clay and stone, and then he disappeared for a while, leaving them under the protection of a watchdog. During his absence, the elder



The rock with paintings at Smirnovka

*The creator of people,
first people,
and watching dog.
Smirnovka rock painting.*



brother deceived the dog, broke the figures, and spat on them: therefore people have illnesses.²⁹²

The legends of two creator-brothers, and the method of deceiving or bribing a watchdog, were in use among many peoples wandering on the vast territory of Eurasia. The Evenki legends kept this fragment of the narrations about humanity's ancient origins for a long time. The images and plot of this legend are visually portrayed on rock paintings at the Smirnovka River (the Upper Amur). The main figure — the creator of people (Seveki) — is an anthropomorphous being that stands with hands spread in a protective gesture. To the lower right and left of this figure two humans are depicted of a smaller size. Nearby, a dog is represented in the characteristic sentry pose: with an open mouth, ears raised up, tensely standing paws and head turned to the side from its owner, Seveki.

Before he created people, the younger brother had crafted useful animals (for example, a reindeer and a dog), and the elder brother had made harmful ones (for instance, a wolf). People and animals are close not only because of their common origin, but also due to the fact that they all have souls. After a person or an animal dies, the soul goes to a better world where it exists in the form of a bird or a hair of fur, and then it can come back and dwell in a new body.

The fairy tale stated below, which was told to us in the Selemdzha area by the Evenk Arkady Okhlopkov, sounds like an echo of these ancient legends about the origin of the earthly world, its primary arrangement, and role in structuring the way of life of its inhabitants. “Once upon a time, a very long time ago God brought together all his citizens — the animals — to instruct each of them how it had to live. “You, elks, have to eat willow and coastal bush. And reindeer, the reindeer lichen will be your food. For you, musk deer, food will be moss as well — that which hangs on trees, and if you manage [to do this], then you can also dig reindeer lichen and eat it together with the reindeer. You, geese, depart to the far lands, and return home to produce offspring. You, partridges, wander, otherwise all of you will be exterminated. And you, fishes, live in water and eat [there]” — he said so. And before this, when the animals passed by a grouse²⁹³,

²⁹² Vasilevich G. M. Doshamanskie i shamanskie verovaniya evenkov [Shamanic and pre-shamanic beliefs of the Evenks]. In: Sovetskaya etnografiya [Soviet Ethnography], 1975. № 5. P. 57.

²⁹³ Siberian grouse which is close to the North American spruce grouse. It is a rare species that inhabits the northern areas of the Amur region, Sikachi-Alyan, and Sakhalin. It does not fly away if it sees people approaching it: this allows for catching it easily with a single rope or even bare hands.



Dressing a bear hulk. The Kharga River, 2008.

they called her to go with them. But the grouse was too lazy, didn't want to go, and answered the animals: "You go, and then tell me what [God] said about me". And then she went to sleep. The meeting ended, and the animals came back. When they passed by the grouse, she asked them: "So, what has [God] said about me?" And the animals answered her: "And about you [he has] said the following: you stand and wait until you are caught and eaten, as you will be food for hungry hunters". Since then the grouse, if somebody passes by, sits until they throw a loop around her neck. And therefore the grouse is also called *akary*, which means "a fool". And before,



Evenki hunter Ivan Solovyov with caught wolverine. Ivanovskoe, 1970s.



Reindeer eating lichen. The Selemdzha River, 2009.

according to our belief, God created the grouse so that the hungry Evenk would not starve to death”.²⁹⁴

The Lower World — *Khergu Buga*

The lower world (*Khergu Buga*), according to traditional Evenki beliefs, is underground. Evil spirits live in the lower world, among which one of the most harmful is *Khergu (Khargi)*. In the same place, *buni* was situated: the territories of dead ancestors’ dwellings. The lower world is also the place where the souls of people who speak foreign (unclear to Evenks) languages live. Here were the reasons for all adversities, diseases, and death. Souls of ordinary people, as a rule, could arrive here only after their death, while the souls of shamans reached the lower world only during special shamanic rituals which were performed under extreme circumstances – as the dangers faced risked death. Therefore, only strong shamans “went” to the lower world.

²⁹⁴Field research in Ivanovskoe village, 2007-2009.

From among the Amur Evenks A. I. Mazin has recorded ideas of a three-level structure of the lower world.

In the first level (most distant from the earth) the land of dead ancestors (*buni*) is located. There the dead relatives live a life that is similar to the earthly one.

The second level of the lower world is the river *Tunete* (“the fragments”). Neither inhabitants of *buni*, nor inhabitants of the lower world’s third level can cross the river *Tunete*. It is available only to shamans. The river *Tunete* is full of numerous blockages, whirlpools and thresholds. There are legends of “weak” shamans whose souls “died” in the river *Tunete* during shamanic rituals.

The third level of the lower world (the closest to the earth) is the land of *Khargi*. He always brings only grief to people. He would have killed all people and useful animals a long time ago if not for the kind spirits — *Enekan Buga* and her assistants. The appearance of *Khargi* is similar to an ordinary Evenk, but he is several times taller and massive. In place of the right hand, he has a terrible human head with evil green fangs, while on the left hand he has a huge claw. Some believe that he has stumps instead of legs: the right one is amputated lower than the knee; the left one, to the knee. His head is completely bald, and his torso is grown with hair. Some storytellers claim that *Khargi* is one-legged. The closest assistant of *Khargi* is his right arm with the human head instead of a hand, *Bal'buka*. *Khargi* can make it appear from under the ground to any place. Upon seeing this head, a person is frightened, and *Khargi* catches him or her with his left claw and drinks their blood. After that, the person is ill for a long time and, if not helped by a shaman, eventually dies. If the person is not frightened, then *Khargi* cannot touch him.



Khargi in rock painting at the Bol'shoy Onon River (Tyndinskiy area)

Another assistant of *Khargi* is *Kandykakh*. It is portrayed as a headless anthropomorphous being, which has no hands and feet. His left arm is short, and the right one is long. Instead of a head it has a huge mouth on its torso. Evenks believe that *Kandykakh* is the greatest glutton. It opens its mouth with its right arm, and throws big pieces of meat in there with the left one. It is always hungry. To unsettle people, *Khargi* sometimes sends his assistant *Kandykakh* to hunters during the hunting season. A hunter shoots at an animal, but it escapes even though it's dead. These are *Kandykakh's* tricks, who then catches and swallows the animal. If *Kandykakh* is on the earth, then people die of hunger due to unlucky hunting. Only *Enekan Buga* can cope with it by means of *Agdy* — her heavenly assistant, the deity of thunder and lightning. When *Kandykakh* appears on the earth, *Enekan Buga* invites *Agdy* to throw fire daggers into *Kandykakh's* mouth. As a result, *Kandykakh's* stomach burns, and *Kandykakh* must go to the lower world to be treated for a long time.²⁹⁵

Some of these traditional religious notions partially remain in the modern culture of Amur Evenki groups. For example, the Evenks of Selemdzha recognize the connection between the name of the small river Kharga (the inflow of the Selemdzha River) and the dangerous, killing forces mentioned above. Sometimes the notion of a river which flows through the world of the dead and connects it with the world of the living appears in their legends and songs.

4.2. *Buga* in the rock paintings of the Middle Nyukzha

In the vast taiga spaces of the Amur region there are several dozen rock painting sites; many of them were found and described by Anatoly Mazin.²⁹⁶ Perhaps, the most interesting of them is the Middle Nyukzha rock painting, of which the general composition and images are similar to the traditional Evenki worldview. The symbolic model, or the model of *Buga* (the Universe) is presented here as it was perceived by a person of traditional taiga culture. Possibly, a part of these drawings was created by the ancestors of the modern Evenk-Orochons. This rock painting is located at the small Onyon River, which flows in the Tynda area near the Evenki settlement

²⁹⁵ See: *Istoriya Amurskoy oblasti s drevneyshih vremyon do nachala XX veka* [History of the Amur Region from ancient times to the beginning of the 20th century]. Eds. A. P. Derevyanko, A. P. Zabayako. Blagoveshchensk, 2008. Pp. 160-162.

²⁹⁶ Mazin A. I. *Drevnie svyatilishcha Priamur'ya* [Ancient sanctuaries of the Amur region]. Novosibirsk, 1994.

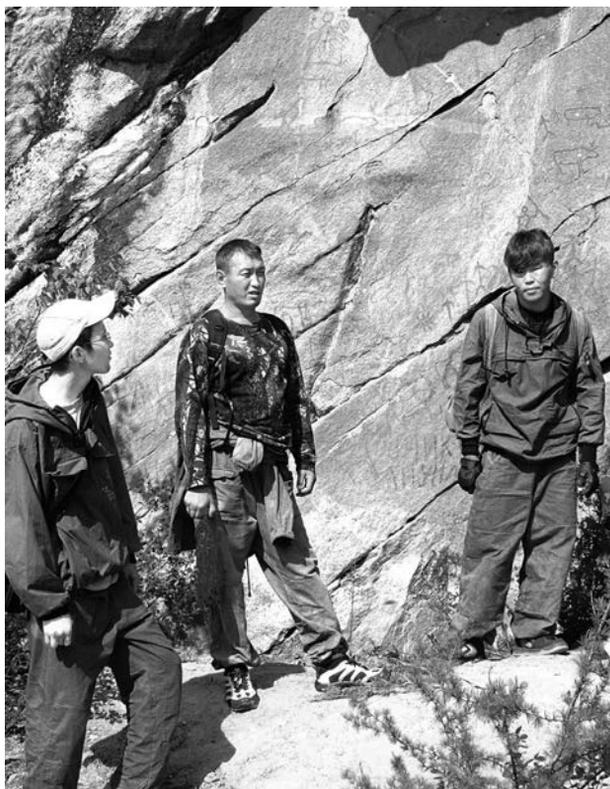
named Ust-Urkima. This historical object received the name of the settlement called Middle Nyukzha, which does not exist anymore.

On the rock's surface the three levels of the universe and their inhabitants are depicted. The pictures are made with red ochre pigment.

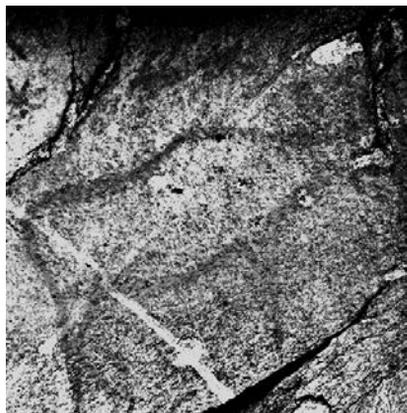
In the upper most part, the upper world and major celestial bodies are depicted: the sun with a woman's face (Evenks called the sun *Enekan-Sigun* — Granny-Sun) surrounded by stars, a half moon, and Venus (*Chalbon*) with female features. There are

also flying birds, human figures (anthropomorphous inhabitants of the top world), the heavenly reindeer *Buga*, and a shaman performing a ritual with a drum and beater in his or her hands.

On the lower right from the upper world, the lower world is represented. The image of the lower world is in many respects similar to the image of the upper world, because the existence of inhabitants in the lower level of the universe proceeds in a way, similar to other worlds. Here there is also the sun, half-moon, stars, animals (mainly reindeer), birds, spirits, and as well as people (those who moved on to the afterlife — not incidentally one of the figures portrays a person lying on their back with arms and legs raised up). Possibly, the largest anthropomorphous figure in this part of the composition represents the governor of this world (the evil *Khargi*): this character, with widely placed legs and a hand oppressively raised up, hangs over all other beings.



Ust-Urkima residents at the rock paintings of the middle Nyukzha River. 2009.



*Celestial reindeer.
The rock paintings of the
Middle Nyukzha River.*

Between the upper and lower worlds of the Middle Nyukzha rock painting, the middle world is depicted. There are celestial bodies, animals, and people. The local Evenks, who sometimes visit the “Shaman-stone” (as they call this rock), easily distinguish the images of elk and reindeer among the drawn figures, and sometimes perceive the imprinted plots as hunting scenes.

However the traditional Evenki image of the world correlates not just with rock paintings.

4.3. *Namu* — the image of the world on reindeer skin

The traditional Evenki worldview is also reflected in the ritual rugs *namu*. They are made of the buckskins processed to the point of soft suede, painted with pigments and decorated with leather ribbons, fringes, fur pieces, and fabric. *Namu* differ from *kumalans* (another type of Evenki fur carpet), first of all, in the smaller size, in addition to the exclusively ritual mission.

With respect to their content, and sometimes also their function, *namu* are similar to rock paintings. In the recent past some Evenks told us that people previously depicted the images on rocks in which the spirits (*sevek*) live, and which are visited by *Enekan Buga*; then — because of the emergence of foreigners — they began to draw them on pieces of reindeer skins to conceal the sacred drawings from outsiders’ view. Perhaps, these legends about the role of newcomers partly reflect a historical truth, or maybe there is more fiction to them.



*Muruchun box.
Amur State University Museum.*



Sevek —the white reindeer , which is devoted to the spirits

The nomadic way of life of Evenki families assumed the existence of sacred objects which accompanied people throughout their constant movement. Drawings on a rock cannot be put in pack bags and even on a sledge. However, *namu* could simply be packed in *muruchun*: a box for storing family relics, that together with other cult objects was carried in pack bags by a white reindeer – which was used only for this purpose and also called *sevek*. According to old customs, they chose a white deer in their herd and devoted it to the spirits. After this, it became a sacred animal and earned the name *sevek*, related to the name for the idolized beings. They tried not to use this reindeer for riding or transportation of usual house utensils.

The tradition of creation, worship, and cult use of *namu* could be observed among the Amur Evenks up until the last few decades. In 1972 F. G. Boyarkovskaya from the Hebgimngu clan (born in 1911 at the Amutkachi River, the left tributary of the Amur River) and N. I. Antonov from the Chakagir clan (born in 1902 at the same river) made *namu* for

A. I. Mazin and his family at his request. It was made of a single piece of buckskin bordered with 3-cm suede tape on its perimeter. The production was followed by imbuing the *namu* with *musun* power during a ceremony called *sevekan* (a ritual of the revival of nature). This ritual was carried out by the shaman Konstantin Vasilyevich Grigoriev from the Kaptugar clan (born in 1908 at the Big Olda River, the left tributary of the Amur River). The final *namu* was 50 cm wide and 31 cm high.

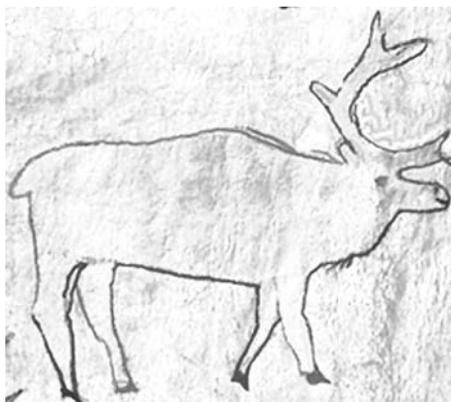
The images of the sun, a half-moon, two anthropomorphous figures and 11 reindeer are depicted on the rug. F. G. Boyarkovskaya explained the meaning of *namu*'s content: "You see – here is the sun, the moon, your reindeer. The sacred reindeer, *sevek* – the keeper of the family and the herd – goes ahead.

[The figure] behind them with *maut* (a lasso) is you: you graze the reindeer. And this — she pointed to the anthropomorphous figure located below the solar symbol — is *Seveki*, the patron of vegetation and fauna. If necessary he will always send you an animal and will give reindeer". Having kept silent a little, she added: "Let there be wellness with your family, that hunting and economic affairs will be successful with you".²⁹⁷

Namu were personalized for strengthening the wellbeing and health of that specific family which asked for help. In many cases (as, for example, is described above) *namu* recreated the territory of a family or clan's movements in symbolic form. Thanks to *namu* and the sacred power *musun* dwelling in it, the patrimonial territory and its inhabitants found a



The images on the *namu* made for A.I. Mazin: sun, *Seveki* and *sevek*



²⁹⁷ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007. P. 114.



*Trophim Pavlov at a taiga camp on
the Nyukzha River, 2003.*

new pulse of vital energy in a magical way. The wellbeing of the taiga site, the reindeer herd, and its masters were imprinted in the images of *namu*, which were projected onto the real territory and became a promise of a good life. A person thrives with hope, and hope looks for support. Some hope for a bright future becomes stronger due to the letters in a sacred book, some are strengthened by the sounds of sacred speech, while others by the figures on a sacred buckskin rug.

A remarkable sample of *namu* is represented by the ritual rug belonging to Trophim Vasilyevich Pavlov's mother, Fedosya Fyodorovna Pavlova from the Kindigir clan, who was born in 1918.

In the summer of 2003 A.P. Zabiyako and R. A. Kobyzov, together with A. I. Mazin stayed at T. V. Pavlov's settlement on the Nyukzha River, 40 kilometers below Ust-Urkima. During an evening conversation the old Evenki man mentioned that near the settlement, approximately a two hours' journey by reindeer, there are some of his mother's things hidden by him on a tree after her death. Fedosya Fyodorovna was a shamaness, and about thirty years ago, after leaving for the other world, her son carried a part of her cult accessories far away into the taiga and hid them in a warehouse built on a tree. According to the custom, the Amur Evenks did not transfer ritual accessories of a deceased shaman down the hereditary line and did not store them before the appearance of his or her successor. Since then he seldom visited that place and tried to avoid it, but he remembered the location of the warehouse pretty well. On our request to show us the shaman accessories, Trophim Vasilyevich answered evasively, mentioning the rules forbidding disturbing a dead person's things.

This remarkable taiga inhabitant, who was born in 1937 and whose father belonged to the Bullyot clan, kept the memory of many traditions

of the past in his soul. But at the same time his life had already developed during a new era: he studied at school, read books, was informed on events happening in the world, repeatedly became a “strike worker” in the reindeer-breeding business during the Soviet period and even went to Moscow to the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy, and was awarded with other trips around the country. Therefore he attentively listened to arguments that the things stored in the warehouse will become completely worthless soon, will be spoiled, that they could serve scientific purposes, be stored in the museum and, in this case, keep the memory of old Evenki times for a long time to come. “It is forbidden to touch the things in vain” — he said in deep thought. And then decided finally: “But for science it is possible”. Early in the morning he brought together a reindeer, took a sack and left. He returned with the items, but gave them to us reluctantly, with clauses addressed obviously not to us, but to someone invisible. He said that he participates, in this case, not according to his own personal wish, but for the highest reasons – upon the demands of science. In the sack, there were bridles for a sacred reindeer and *namu*. These things were already partially spoiled by long storage in the taiga warehouse, but nevertheless remained in a quite satisfactory condition.

The *namu* of F. F. Pavlova constitutes a rug of 68 cm wide and 32 cm high, made of a single piece of buckskin. It is bordered with a fringe, embroidered with hair from under an elk’s neck, and also decorated with red and blue strips of fabric, leather strips with brushes, and two elk tail tips. The rectangular surface of the *namu* is divided into two parts by a vertical red line, both sides of which contain drawings. To the left, the half-moon, 13 stars, and two Manchurian deer are painted with red ochre. Three elks, two reindeer, and a human figure with the right arm stretched towards the elks are depicted with the black pigment. Giving us the *namu*, T. V. Pavlov explained that this figure is a shaman (or a shamaness). In the right part there are the images of a solar disk and a small star completed with ochre (perhaps, this is Venus – *Chalbon*), 9 birds and 18 reindeer. The shaman, who is depicted standing on the border of the two spaces, magically transports the reindeer from the sublunary, cold, and nighttime world to the solar daytime world where light, heat, and life reign (which are symbolically expressed not only by a disk of the sun, but also by the red color of the figures).

The surface of the buckskin is covered with numerous brown specks: these are the droplets of dry reindeer blood that the shaman splashed on the *namu* (hung up on a special ritual column, *serge*) during the spring ritual *sevekan* that was performed to bring about a magical revival of nature. According to Evenki beliefs, *namu* promotes and awakens the forces of life weakened by the pernicious impact of winter. They believe that this is possible, first of all, because the invisible mighty power of movement — *musun* — was stored in *namu*. In a ritual of prayerful appeal, the power *musun* becomes more active and radiates to the surrounding space by sprinkling *namu* with sacrificial blood, filling it with the energy of movement. The power *musun*, according to T. V. Pavlov, was imbued in this *namu* by his uncle, Alexander Vasilyevich Pavlov, from the Kindigir clan (born in 1914), whom the Evenks of Nyukzha considered to be a strong shaman. The expected magical impact of *namu* on the patrimonial territory, animals and people was also caused by the fact that, according to traditional Evenki views, the images on the buckskin — spirits, deities, people, animals, birds — had an invisible communication with the real beings that were depicted. The appeal to beings drawn to *namu*, their “revival” and activation by prayer, blood sacrifice, and other ritual actions magically stimulated the vital forces of the earth’s inhabitants.

Namu is a taiga icon, a sacred image, expressing the living conditions and features of the nomad reindeer breeders’ worldview.

The idea of a magical interrelation between the image and the represented object, related to the ideas of *namu*, can be observed among the Amur Evenks up through the present. Their manifestation is found in the hunter’s production of magical animal prototypes and imitation of successful hunts for them, in a wood carving of benevolent animal figures – the possession of which shall bring good luck – as well as in drawing animals and embroideries.

4.4 Serge – the worldview, manifested in wood

Another material representation of the Evenki worldview are *serge* — carved columns made from trunks of trees (usually larches), which Evenks have used for ritual purposes for a long time. The cone-shaped top symbolized the upper world, the disk-shaped part beneath it represented the middle world, and the third part depicted the lower world.



*Serge, a visual representation of Evenki world structure.
Ust-Nyukzha, 1970s.*



Serge at Ivanovskoe, 2007.

Serge are widespread among many Siberian peoples. The nomadic way of life and use of reindeer or horses demanded (especially on open spaces of huge treeless steppes) the production of special devices for binding animals. From such simple devices — logs dug into the earth and fixed poles — the ritual use of *serge* apparently originates. The nomads' mythopoetic imagination turned a vertically standing log into an image of the axis mundi (cosmic axis, world tree, intermediary between terrestrial and heavenly, ladder to the upper world, etc.). In congruence with mythological transformations, the column changed its appearance under the power of the carving, found new meanings and began to be used in ritual actions. *Serge*, a ritual column, is the symbolic representation of their worldview.

When they are in the taiga camp, Evenks do not need to make a separate column for binding their reindeer, though some simple devices are sometimes used for these purposes. However, the ritual attitude toward a carved column as a symbol of the universe has been embedded in their tradition. In modern Evenki culture — both secular and religious — this symbol still maintains its meaning.



A rock with paintings by the Getkan River



*Taiga animals
in the Getkan rock paintings*

4.5 Onyon and Odyokit: sacred and tabooed sites

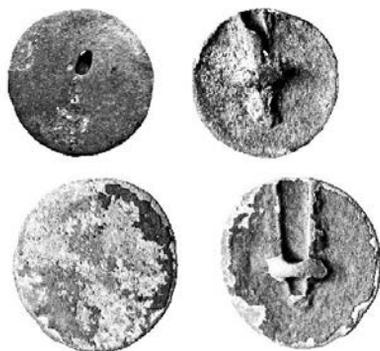
The Evenki word *onyon* (also *onyoni*) means “a drawing”. Among the toponyms of the Amur region, this is a frequent name of many small rivers and streams. Perhaps, in the past each of them was connected with the drawings depicted on the surface of the rocks near these small rivers. In several cases, the location of rock paintings corresponds to the toponyms with striking accuracy. The most indicative example is the Middle Nyukzha petroglyphs, which are situated close to the stream called Onyon.

Among the Amur Evenks, rocks with drawings historically acted as sacred places. In Evenki culture they are closely connected with the worship of spirits. In the 1960s, one of the Amur Evenks told A. I. Mazin about the Getkan petroglyphs in the Tynda area of the Amur region: “The rock with drawings down the river Getkan is considered to be sacred to the Evenks, but now it doesn’t work. And in old times it worked and when the hunter went shooting,

he had to approach this rock and ask the owner [=local spirit] how many animals he will kill during the hunt. If the owner favored the hunter, then as many new [pictures of] animals as the hunter would kill appeared there on the rock. At that time, each hunter must make sacrifices to this rock.



*A rock with paintings
at the Uteni River*



*Bronze buttons from the altar near
the Uteni rock paintings*

Now, though the rock doesn't work, people give it some objects [being grateful] for its last kindness". There is also an explanation for the fact that, nowadays, the rock "does not work". Pointing to the big stone lying at the base of the rock, the Evenk said: "In the past this stone lay on the top of the rock. Once one bad person decided to take the gifts [that were laying] around the rock. When he picked them up and went to leave, the stone fell from the top and landed on him. So he was killed by the stone, but anyway the owner became angry at people very much and left the rock".²⁹⁸



*Stone arrow heads and Berdan
rifle bullets from the altar at the
Uteni rock paintings*

Near the Erofeiy Pavlovich railway station there is a rock named Uteni, which resembles an ancient cult complex: a sanctuary with rock paintings and altars. Rock paintings were connected with magical notions and practices, which is partially confirmed by the sacrificial objects found nearby. According to the content of the drawings and specifics of the objects from the altar, the age of this petroglyph (and, therefore, the religious acts that are connected with it) can vary from the 10th millennium BC to the 1st millennium BC. Objects from very different historical eras —

²⁹⁸ *Istoriya Amurskoy oblasti s drevneyshih vremyon do nachala XX veka* [History of the Amur Region from ancient times to the beginning of the 20th century]. Eds.: A. P. Derevyanko, A. P. Zabiako. Blagoveshchensk, 2008. P. 159.



*Ritual ribbons
at the Middle Nyukzha rock paintings*

from stone tools to bronze buttons and bullets from a Berdan rifle – were found at the altars near the rock.

The objects from the altars indicate that, despite historical changes and migrations of different ethnoses through this territory, the monument was used as a sanctuary for several thousand years, up to the 20th century. At the last stage of its operation, it served as a cult object that was worshiped among some clans of the Amur Evenks. The fact that this ritual complex was used in the 20th century is confirmed by the words of people

living nearby. For instance, A. Ragozin, the resident of the Erofeev Pavlovich settlement, reported that his father, the old hunter, told him that Evenks regularly visited this rock with drawings many times in the 1930-50s: they came on reindeer with families, set up camp near the rock, and performed some cult actions for several days. As the old residents say, “the Tungus prayed” near these rock paintings.

According to traditional Evenki views, it was spirits who made the first drawings on the rocks. The idea of an unusual origin of the petroglyphs still remains among the Amur Evenks. Many of them still attribute the occurrence of rock paintings to the spirits, using the fact that these images remain well-visible despite their ancientness as proof for their beliefs. So, T. V. Pavlov told us: “Even my grandfather and father saw them [=the pictures] [in] such [a good state]... They told me that these drawings existed for many years and did not turn pale, were not washed away with a rain ... [If] a human would draw [something] with paint, it will be erased in one or two years, while the drawings on these rocks are not erased”.²⁹⁹

In 2003 and 2004 Alexander Andreyev (born in 1942), the grandson of the shaman Semyon from the Egilainkur clan and the resident of the Gulya settlement, (which is located on the river Tungir – the inflow of the Olyokma River), told us about rock paintings and shamanism. He

²⁹⁹ Field research at Ust-Urkima, 2002.

mentioned that sometime in the past, images were drawn on rocks by strong shamans.

Up to the last few decades, Amur Evenks visited the rocks with drawings, performed some rites, built altars, and made sacrifices. According to the memoirs of Alexander Andreyev, his grandfather often went to the rock paintings before and after his shamanic rituals: “My grandfather went to the *onyon* and prayed, in case of some failure he went there, to the rock *onyon*, by any means”³⁰⁰.

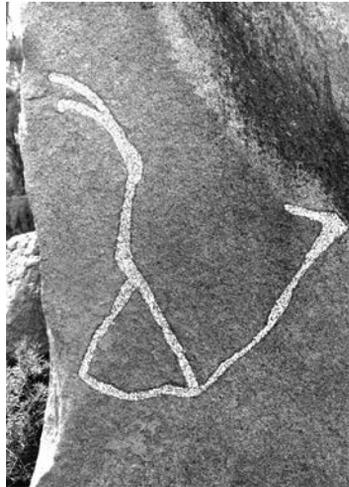
Andreyev told us that when local Evenks were going to hunt, they first went to the drawings to receive a sign: “All hunters went to *Onyon* before hunting. According to our beliefs, if the rock reddened, there will be some game [caught]. If the rock didn't redden, and grew white, the hunters will get nothing. There was such a belief in this rock”³⁰¹.

The worship of taiga petroglyphs has not disappeared among some groups of the Amur Evenks. They still visit the rocks with drawings – especially those located near their hunting tracks. They bring various gifts to the spirits: cartridges, cigarettes, candies, matches, coins, and other objects. They make a sacrifice asking for good luck, and as a sign of honoring the spirits. They leave ritual ribbons of different colors and lengths, tying them to the branches of trees or inserting them into the trees' crevices.

At the same time, it is considered to be generally unsafe to visit these places and,



*The boulder with a carving
(the Big Onon River)*



*Carving in the boulder at the
Big Onon River*

³⁰⁰ Field research in the Gulya settlement, 2003-2004. See in detail in Chapter 6 (Appendix).

³⁰¹ Ibid.

more importantly, undesirable to go there without any serious reason. Such visits disturb the local spirits, and then it is necessary to pay for the infringement (there will be some misfortune for the person who did it).³⁰² According to the words of two old residents of Ust-Nyukzha, the local shamans did not even perform shamanic rituals at these rocks, preferring other places in the taiga.³⁰³

It is remarkable that in 2002 in the Tynda area of the Amur region a rock was found with an image carved on its surface. According to A. I. Mazin, there was no such a petroglyph in that place two decades ago. The petroglyph is



*Arcady Nikolaev
by the rock paintings at
the Middle Olyokma River, 2003*

carved on a big cone-shaped stone about 3 meters high, located on the right bank of the Big Onon River. Its surface is oriented to the southeast. The lines range from 1,5 to 4 cm wide; they are carved to a depth of about 2 mm. About 100 meters uphill, a big rock with drawings that was surveyed twice by A. I. Mazin is located (once in the 1970s and again in the beginning of the 1980s). It was difficult not to notice the boulder standing nearby a reindeer trail. The image is distinctly visible on the darker background (the boulder surface). Judging by the invoice of the processed sites, it has been carved rather recently. However, the boulder could still have been left unnoticed by A.I. Mazin, in which case the drawing would have been present before the 1970s.

The petroglyph depicts a being with a wedge-shaped body, a head on a long curved neck, and a tail. The mythological nature of this being is obvious. However there is no close analog of the newly-discovered

³⁰² Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁰³ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondents: Klara Abramova, Valeriy Nikolaev.

petroglyph among other rock art objects of the Amur region. Perhaps, the drawing represents a snake-like being: such characters are well-known in Tungus-Manchurian mythology. In Evenki mythology, a snake could act as a kind of spirit guard; objects with its image were used as charms. Images of snakes (executed in other techniques and manners) are often found in rock paintings of the Amur region: namely, in those of Arbi, Kalinovka, and others.

The Evenki shaman Semyon Vasilyev from the Ilylas clan (the Iyengra settlement of Southern Yakutia), gave a confident interpretation of the petroglyph when he saw a copy of the petroglyph. He explained that a shaman eagle *Kiren* is represented in the drawing.

Kiren is an assistant spirit of shamans; it helps shamans with their flights to the lower and upper worlds. According to Vasilyev, he noticed such images on metal pendants on the suits of shamans who were able to travel to the lower world. Putting them on their vestments, shamans used such images as “talismans” in which assistant spirits dwelled. According to S. S. Vasilyev, this drawing appeared after the death of some local shaman: in order to become the real shaman, his or her successor had to create this drawing. He said also that the location of the rock is not incidental: it designates the entrance to the lower world; here the shaman and *Kiren* go down to *buni*.

It is obvious that the origin and interpretation of this petroglyph leave room for different interpretations. It is also clear, however, that it is closely connected with Evenki beliefs and represents a relic of the ancient tradition of creating and worshipping sacred rock paintings: the tradition that existed up to the end of the 20th century and into the new millennium.

Among the modern Amur Evenks, the traditional ideas about rock paintings, their connection with shamanism, and magic hunting rites intended to bring good luck, health, and well-being still remain. Along with it, many of its elements are lost amidst the crisis of the traditional worldview, and the half-forgotten culture becomes a basis for syncretic views. New mythology is now being created, in which the rocks with paintings continue to act as sacred sites of earthly space.

In Ust-Nyukzha a special relation to rock paintings is shown by Arkady Nikolaev, a local Evenk of average years. For many years he has regularly withdrawn to the taiga for a long time. There he lives at the rocks with known drawings or in places where, according to his statement, there are other sacred images, but he is the only one who knows about them. These

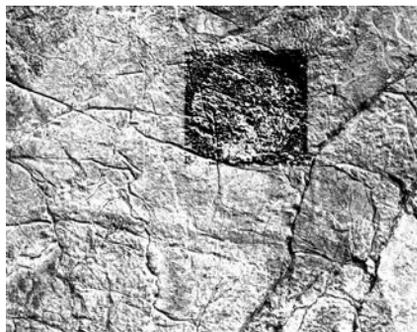


*A cave near the Kharga River (the Selemzhinskiy area, 2008).
Evenks believe that some caves are the entrances to the Lower World.*

rocks with drawings are sacred for him, and idle conversation about them is undesirable, therefore he talks about them reluctantly. In the worldview of this modern taiga inhabitant, traditional Evenki notions and the religious ideas of other cultures intertwine. In the nearest future he expects a world disaster caused by a battle of kind and evil forces. These rocks with drawings will be the epicenter of this fight, because here the majority of the main kind spirits are concentrated, drawing the attacks of the world's evil. The Evenk who spends his nights at the rocks with drawings sees the pictures of these future events. The kind spirits will win (with the assistance of the elected people), and then here "the earth will begin to break up", as new times and a new repartition of



Rainbow: a way to the Upper World.



Solar symbol with arrow indicating the path of the sun



The rock with paintings at the Smirnovka River

the Earth will come. Therefore, as he believes, it is necessary to keep closer to the rocks — the dwellings of kind spirits, which grant people who assisted them not only the new Earth, but also a long life without aging.³⁰⁴ This is an example of creating new mythology based on the perception of rock paintings by a person of a changing traditional culture.

Onyon — rocks with drawings — are not only sacred places for Evenks, but they are also forbidden places — *odyokit*.

But *odyo* (the ban) is applied to these places not in an absolute degree: it is only forbidden to visit them in vain. Evenks usually did not settle near the rocks with drawings; they also did not perform any economic or household activity there.

³⁰⁴ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha, 2003.

However, it is not only rocks with drawings that are sacred and forbidden for secular activities for the Amur Evenks.

The attitude toward caves as sacred places remains at present for many nomadic peoples. The Evenks living at the Selemdzha upper courses told us about a special cave on the Shevli River (the tributary of the Uda River, Khabarovsk region). According to Gennady Struchkov (a resident of the Ivanovskoe village of the Amur region), his grandfather who was born in 1900 told him that there is a cave on the bank of the Shevli River in which the hole “goes to the center of the earth”. This place was foreboding among Evenks: evil spirits lived there, according to their beliefs. G. A. Struchkov remembers the story told by his grandfather, that in ancient times several shamans tried to go down this hole to show their power and superiority over other shamans, but none of them came back. Last time, a very strong, highly esteemed shaman decided to go down there. In full shaman vestments, with drum and beater, he went down this hole, having wrapped himself with a cord made of three lassos (*maut*) tied together (the length of a *maut* is about 8 or 10 meters), which were held by the Evenks who came with him to this place. After the shaman went down rather deeply, the people who held the cord above felt a sharp jerk and, frightened of being pulled into the hole, released the cord. The shaman did not escape the cave.

A similar story was told by Tatyana Sofronova (born in 1935), a resident of the same village. In her childhood, she lived together with her parents near the Shevli river. She heard this story from her parents and other adults who forbade children to approach the described place, calling it *odyokit*: a holy site, the tabooed place which is impossible to approach without special need and near which it is forbidden to sin or make any impious actions. In the traditional Evenki worldview, caves are the places where the way to the lower world begins.

In many cultures the status of sacred place was also attached to heights, mountains, and rocks. In the conditions of nomadic



The Avlaya plateau

life, the high spots of a landscape served as reliable reference points during movement on the steppe or taiga. In traditional worldviews, mountains and rocks were perceived as places connected to the upper world. According to Evenki notions, a rock is the place where the sky meets the earth. In religious views of these people, the sky is *Buga*, the divine origin of the universe. Some high sites of a landscape, owing to their proximity to the sky or some other natural features, received a sacred status in Evenki consciousness. At the tops of such mountains important patrimonial or private rituals were performed. For example, the person wishing to prove their case in a dispute climbed to the top and said a spell: “If I am guilty, then death will apprehend me or all my children, and I will lose my animals and I will be never happy in neither hunting, nor in fishing”.³⁰⁵

The rock with drawings that is called the Smirnovsky petroglyph is a physical example of worshipping abrupt heights. On the surface of this rock, which hangs over the Amur River, drawings are made with red ochre. Among them there are solar symbols, arrows indicating the movement of the sun, and other symbols connected with the sky and the upper world.

In the upper courses of the Selitkan River (the tributary of Seledzha River) there is a plateau called Avlaya (this Evenki toponym means “a good flat place”). This geographically unusual place³⁰⁶ is extremely beautiful and rich with flora and fauna. Earlier, the paths of many Evenki clans’ movement met here. Every spring, taiga nomads gathered in this place to hold rituals. Such ritual Evenki meetings are called *bakaldyn*. On a specially prepared ritual platform – *tomtor* – the representatives of different clans performed dances together, sang songs, and exchanged data on important events. One of main goals of such meetings at Avlaya was the acquaintance of young people from different clans and arrangement of marriages. The religious functions of this sacred place closely intertwined with the social functions, extremely important for a nomadic conduct of life: 1) strengthening group solidarity; 2) preserving ethnic identity; 3) maintaining general historical memory; 4) broadcasting knowledge; 5) encouraging marriage exchange between clans, which reduced the

³⁰⁵ Yel’nitskiy K. *Inorodtsy Sibiri i sredneaziatskih vladenyi Rossii. Etnograficheskie ocherki* [Natives of Siberia and Middle-Asian territories of Russia. Ethnographical sketches]. Second ed. SPb., 1908. P. 50.

³⁰⁶ See: Osipov S.V., Korotkiy A.M., Sazykin A.M. “Urochishche Avlaya” - landschaftnyi fenomen khrehta Yam-Alin’ (Dal’niy Vostok, Bureinskoe nagoriye) [“Avlaya Plato”: landscape phenomena of Yam-Alin’ Range (Far East, Bureya mountains)]. In: *Geografiya i prirodnye resursy*. 2000. №3. Pp. 91-99.

probability of incest. Avlaya is still considered the Holy Land by the Evenks of Selememdza, which is pure, rich with game and foraging for reindeer, and, above all, is capable of curing one's body and soul.

Besides caves and heights, many other natural objects also have the status of sacred place in the traditional outlook: these are trees of special species or uncommon shape, unusual stones, streams, and rivers. A reason for worship of such objects is a special power that is allegedly dwells in them. So, K. S. Abramova tells about existence of a sacred stone that is located in the taiga near Ust-Nyukzha village. This stone is believed to be able to take away, or “to involve itself in” human grief and diseases, and to cure mental disorders. Her brother once brought her to this place; she was sick. He performed some rite near the stone, and then put her on the stone and left her alone for some time. Having returned, he made ritual actions again and they came back home. According to the storyteller, after this procedure she felt better.³⁰⁷

Sometimes before crossing through a river, Evenks still break willow branches: it is a peculiar sacrifice to the spirit of the river.³⁰⁸

For nomadic societies, mountain passes served as an important part of a nomadic track and had special value. The achievement of certain points of the mountain pass (its upper part) was usually followed by special ritual actions: prayers and sacrifices. Evenks believe that taiga sites which were difficult to pass through – for instance, mountain passes, – were considered the dwelling places of *musun* power, which was manifested in the spirit of the mountain — *ure seveki*. It was considered that a person can overcome the difficulties of the taiga path with the help of the spirits. Therefore, after passing through the difficult part of the pass, they thanked the spirits and made sacrifices. For instance, near Ust-Nyukzha there is a pass called Krutoy, where a special tree grows. “It is high, thick, and noble: we throw candies [under it], we knit strips, put cigarettes there” — tells K. S. Abramova.³⁰⁹

Passing through the mountain passes, taiga Amur Evenks always tie ribbons to the branches (Evenks of Selemdzha call this rite *хулгадерен*, the place is called *hulgakit*, and the knotted strip of fabric is *khulgaptyn*). They also pour grain on the earth, carefully, as if they put it in someone's hand.

We also thank the keepers of memory and our generous storytellers — all who helped us to overcome the difficulties of collecting data on Evenki culture. So, we will tie a symbolic ribbon too — and go further.

³⁰⁷ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁰⁸ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³⁰⁹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

Chapter 5

Taiga Ethics and Rites

5.1 Living in harmony with people and nature

Since olden times Evenki culture has held the belief of the world as a unit organism, where the sky, stars, rivers, plants, animals and people are inseparably linked in a single whole. These notions required of a person a special – economical as well as careful – attitude towards everything that was nearby.

“It is forbidden to do any harm to anybody. Don’t kill more animals than you really need. If you have killed a bear, then hang up its skull on a stake where you caught this bear”, – Lidiya Dmitriyeva from the Mengel clan, born in 1939, says. The female resident of the Ivanovskoe settlement (Selemdzhinskiy area) acquired these precepts since her childhood. – “There was a tradition from time immemorial: if you, the young hunter, have caught your first animal in the taiga, you have to present the best pieces of meat – the back part of the hulk – to your senior relatives and neighbors. Such were the rules, this is what I remember”.³¹⁰ In fact, game killed by a hunter was shared not only after the first hunt– *nimat*, the custom of fair sharing of game and donating it to relatives and close people, remains among the Amur Evenks even now.

These rules are based not only on a patrimonial law of care for close people and respect for a person, but also the aspiration to defend fauna from destruction, to ensure its reproduction, and to maintain harmony between people and other inhabitants of the taiga. Thus, N.I. Antonov (born in 1902) from the Chakagir clan, which nomadized down the river Amutkachi (tributary of the Amur River), told a legend to Anatoly Mazin: “Once upon a time two hunters from the Pochegor clan killed so many elk during their autumn hunting that they couldn't dress and process them. They had to throw away a part of the animals’ bodies. The owner of the taiga³¹¹ punished them for it. Both of them got sick and died quickly”.³¹²

³¹⁰ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.

³¹¹ They meant *Seveki*.

³¹² Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayushchem mire* [Worldview of the Evenks of the Amur Region]. Blagoveshchensk, 2007. P. 52.

“If you arrive at the taiga and spend the night in someone’s hunting cabin, burning all the firewood, you have to prepare and leave at least a daily inventory of firewood, kindling, and some food. If you have eaten the food found in the cabin and you have no more food (or you have very little) to leave in its place, then write on a piece of paper who you are and what you took. Then come back there and return everything. Never take things that belong to others: theft is the most terrible sin, and the taiga will severely punish you for it. If you live in someone’s hunting cabin, then you should tidy it up before your departure”, – Sergey Nikiforov and Georgiy Struchkov said, supplementing the set of rules of taiga ethics.³¹³

“When you undress a reindeer, don’t throw the skin into the fire, otherwise your reindeer will fall ill. It is forbidden to burn birch logs in a campfire – the reindeer will get sick and you also will fall ill, because a birch is a special tree, like a sacred one”, – Raisa Nikiforova (born in 1946) advises. She firmly adheres to this rule on her camp located in the remote taiga on the Kharga River (Selemdzhinskiy area).

Animals in the Evenki worldview are similar to people: they have a soul, reason, and language. Therefore it is necessary to treat them with respect.

“When you are going to hunt, the main rule is: never brag or speak too much. You should not tell anybody that you are going hunting. Just rise silently, put on your clothes and go. Be silent about an animal in order to not frighten it off”.³¹⁴

Undue compassion towards animals can bring bad luck in hunting: “If a musk deer, a hare or something else gets caught in a snare trap and does not die immediately, then the hunter has to kill it by the same means of hunting. You should never release this animal, otherwise it will tell other [animals of the same species], and then good luck will leave you”.³¹⁵ Deliberately or not, some people violate the rules of taiga ethics and oppress animals excessively. According to Evenki notions, this causes discontent among the spirits who keep order in the taiga. They punish such people, depriving them of help, taking animals away from the unfair hunter.

N. I. Antonov retold the ancient legend: “A very long time ago in one taiga camp there lived an old man with an old woman. They had two sons. Once their sons went hunting and caught an elk. They dressed its hulk in

³¹³ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

the Evenki way³¹⁶, but for some reason they suddenly stretched its guts and began to laugh at their length. Their father was absent at this moment, and their mother looked sadly at her sons, shook her head and said nothing. After a while their father went hunting. He had been wandering about the taiga for several days, but he hadn't seen even a hazel grouse despite the fact that he was considered the best hunter in the settlement. After coming back he went to a shaman and asked him why the hunt was so unsuccessful. The shaman told him that his sons had laughed over an elk, and added that nobody in his family will get an animal and now they all are doomed to starvation³¹⁷. The hunter cannot neglect killing an animal; hunting for the sake of livelihood does not break the natural balance between people and animals. However a person has no right to offend the inhabitants of taiga with bad words or actions.

Having broken this unwritten law in one way or another, the hunter has to confess it. “When the hunting is unsuccessful for a long time, it is necessary to feed the spirits of taiga: if there is bread, you’d give them a little piece of bread; if you have meat, you have to give them meat; if [you have] vodka, then a little bit vodka can be given. It is done to cajole the spirits. And when the good luck comes, it is necessary to thank the spirits, to give them some fresh meat, throwing it into the fire³¹⁸”.

It is necessary to protect not only those animals that serve as a game, but to appreciate the taiga as a single whole, to appreciate all nature, because it is similar to a person. In their movement to a new place the Evenks follow some unwritten rules. “Coming to each new place, we always respect nature. We forbid children to shout, laugh loudly. The seniors perform a rite so that the taiga would feed us and send us game, so that the reindeer would not fall ill. They tied ribbons with their wishes. My mom always did so: she took a ribbon and tied it to a tree – on some special tree, healthy, strong, undamaged tree, – and spoke at the same time: *let there be a lot of berries, and deer, and fish, and animals.*”³¹⁹

It is believed that nature and spirits can hear these requests, and if these words are told validly, sincerely, then what was told will come true. The words, according to the traditional worldview, possess independent existence and hold special power in them. Not only kind words, but also

³¹⁶ Meaning they did everything correctly and used only their knives.

³¹⁷ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya...* Ibid. P. 52.

³¹⁸ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009. Respondents: Sergey Nikiforov and Georgiy Struchkov.

³¹⁹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

evil ones have their consequences. Evil words have bad consequences, and not only for those about whom these words are told: their negative energy can return to the scandalous person. Therefore, according to Evenki ethics, it is necessary to speak with care, not to speak too much, shout, or speak scandalously without cause.



*The taiga. A souvenir made by a child.
Ivanovskoe village, 2007.*

These and other legends, precepts and instructions occurring among the Amur Evenks form a moral core around which the ethics of the taiga hunter and reindeer herder is built. The Evenki ethic norms were of two kinds: *ity* ('custom') and *odyo* ('taboo'). These ethic norms were supplemented with rules of conduct in the taiga camp and in the dwelling.

5.2. Fire as a source of life and well-being

For a person of traditional culture, fire and life are inseparably linked. Evenki hunters and reindeer breeders wandering in the severe conditions of long winters, cold rivers, and strong downpours cannot survive without fire. Fire is the beginning of everything that maintains the life of a taiga person: heat after the long cold trip, hot tea and food, a sincere conversation, a full-fledged dream, dry clothes, a smoky fire against the midges. Since ancient times the spirit of fire was worshiped by all Tungus groups, however notions about it differed considerably. Thus, the Barguzin and Nerchinsk Tungus depicted it as an old woman and called it *toyo on'in* (fiery mother) or *toyo on'o* (fiery grandmother). The Tungus of Hingan and the Kumarchens called this spirit *golomta* and depicted it as a little old woman, "very thick and red as fire".³²⁰ In the observations of I. A. Lopatin, who described the peoples of the Amur River in the middle of the 19th century, the Nanais (Golds) depicted this "spirit of fiery elements" (which

³²⁰ Shirokogoroff S.M. *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*. London, 1935. Pp. 128–129.

they called *podya*) as a decrepit, hunched old woman in a red dressing gown. Among the Orochs (Nani), living in lower reaches of the Amur River, the spirit of fire – *puzya* (*pudzya*) – is depicted as an old man. The Evenk-Orochons depicted their *enekan togo* as “an old hunched woman who has a sack of coals hanging off of her shoulders”.³²¹ According to Klara Abramova, the resident of the village Ust-Nyukzha, her parents warned her against insulting fire as a child: “The grandmother will become angry, she will give you sores, and this will be bad for you”.³²²



*Ritual smoking during the Bakaldyn festival.
Ivanovskoe village, 2008.*

Fire is not only a basis for Evenki lifestyle: according to their beliefs, it has a wonderful ability to expel evil spirits. For instance, Evenks perform rites evicting evil spirits from the dwelling, hunting equipment, shamanic and other cult accessories by means of fire. To make these ritual accessories “pure”, Evenks fumigate them with the smoke of fire. In case of diseases or misfortunes, and quite often in funeral ceremonies, they also resort to fire as a cleaning technique (for example, fumigating their tents, clothes, etc. with smoke). Sacrifices to fire make an important part of a marriage ceremony and celebration of the New Year, which comes with the first song of the cuckoo.³²³

The Amur Evenks still believe in the special cleaning action of the smoke of smoldering wild rosemary and juniper branches. For ritual clarification the Evenks of Ust-Nyukzha fumigate people, deer, tents, and houses. It is considered that by doing that, they not only banish evil spirits

³²¹ Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov* [Traditional beliefs and rites of the Evenk-Orochons]. Novosibirsk, 1984. P. 12.

³²² Field research in Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³²³ Shirokogoroff S. M. *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*. London, 1935. P. 129.

and diseases, but also get rid of any malefice. “*Ulgani*: [this means] smoking, clarification. If someone leaves a camp in the taiga, and there is no [successful] hunting, there is no good luck, [then] this means that somebody has maleficated this person. My grandmother, [who is] the sister of my father, smoked him, saying: ‘let the spirit go away, not touch you, so that you will be as pure as the taiga, as a small river’ – so she spoke”.³²⁴ The tradition of fumigating remains nowadays in the life of young Evenks: “If guests come [to a camp], we smoke, [we] drive away the evil spirits”, – the young taiga woman Svetlana Kulbertinova informs.³²⁵

Fire is present in many hunting rites. For example, according to A.I. Mazin, after having killed large game and brought the cut hulk to the dwelling, the Evenks of Ust-Nyukzha acted in this way:

“The head of an elk or wild reindeer [which was] brought home was put at the place of honor (*malu*), on a specially embroidered rug (*kumalan*), with its muzzle turned to the fire. A little table with an idol *sevekichan* was set near the head with an amulet (*sinken*) put on it. Directly opposite to the little table they hung up *namu*³²⁶. An idol *mentaya* [serving as a] security guard was placed by the entrance of the yurta or tent. Only after this the ceremony began. The hunter put a frying pan on the furnace or the fire and, when it was heated, threw [a piece of] fat into the pan (the fat must also be thrown into the fire to feed it). When the fat began to burn, the hunter took the frying pan in his hand and fumigated the head of an elk, *namu*, *sevekichan* and *sinken* with its smoke. At the same time he spoke, addressing *Seveki* or *Enekan Buga*: “Send one more of the same”. On this [action] the rite came to an end, [and people] started cutting and cooking the meat.”³²⁷

Up to the present, Evenki hunters feed the spirit of fire and other spirits with a part of the meat they acquired after a successful hunt. It is also important “to feed” the fire before hunting: the hunter, upon waking up, first throws some food into the fire, and then eats himself.³²⁸ Usually they throw pieces of bread or meat into the fire, or splash a little vodka; it is believed that the spirit of fire will be kinder because of this action and hunting will be successful. At each relocation to a new place it is considered necessary to feed the spirit of fire.

³²⁴ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³²⁵ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³²⁶ See previous chapter.

³²⁷ Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya...* Ibid. Pp. 49–50.

³²⁸ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

According to Evenki notions, the spirit of fire does not need a special receptacle (an idol or other cult image) because the constant place of its dwelling is the fireplace. People have to be very kind and attentive to fire; everyone entering the dwelling had to bow first to the fireplace, and then to the head of the family. Among the Tungus of Manchuria there was a widespread oath containing the expression “*golumta icheran*” (“the spirit of fire sees everything”). Probably, it has arisen by analogy to a Manchurians oath “*apka icheran*” (“the sky sees everything”).

Pyromancy (the divination by means of fire), or “talking with fire”, was a widespread practice in the past and is still preserved among the Amur Evenks. This tradition is alive even among a part of the Evenki youth. For instance, the young wife of hunter and reindeer breeder Svetlana Kulbertinova says: “When the oven ‘talks’, then after that [we have] a dead man. We are already afraid of it. We begin to put more firewood [into the fire], to move them in order for it [the fire] not to talk. It is ok when the log just ‘whispered’, that is normal. But when it begins to talk, it [is a sign that there will be] a dead person... Well, here is one more example: if [my] husband left to hunt and the oven made such a lingering sound, I already know that he has caught something, I mean sable or deer. [Judging] by the fire I know when he will come. If he left for a sable, and the oven peeped, I [begin to] make dinner, I warm it up. It was always like this, I [have been nomadizing in the taiga] with my husband for eight years already, and it is always like this. I noticed it by myself, nobody taught me it”.³²⁹

The representatives of the senior generation are even more dexterous in pyromancy: “Those who are older can tell by judging the fire [that] the person will arrive, from where [they will come], [and whether they are] Russian or not Russian. The oven cracks specially somehow. And, when it begins to crack, they take [an animal’s] shoulder-blade and put it on the fire, and it burns a little bit. Then it bursts and the strips become visible, [like] the roads. Then the old men determine by these cracks from what direction the person will arrive”.³³⁰

Among the inhabitants of Ivanovskoe there is such a lore: “The fire portends good luck: if during preparation and packing for a hunt a spark jumps out of the oven and gets on you, there will be good luck. It happens by the fire beginning to mutter strangely in the oven as though [it begins] to talk.

³²⁹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³³⁰ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

It [means that] the spirit is warning: wait for guests, they will come soon”.³³¹

The attitude towards the fire is surrounded with strict prohibitions on disrespectful and reckless acts which can offend the spirit of fire. For example, it is forbidden to push any sharp object into a flame, to spit into the fire, to put a knife with its edge towards the fire, to cut firewood near the fire, or to pour water on it. It is also forbidden to throw into the fire something besides



*Bridle for sacred reindeer (sevek).
The first half of the 20th century, the Nyukzha River.
Amur State University Museum.*

firewood: “Nothing can be thrown, it is possible to feed only, with bread or vodka. And it is forbidden [to throw] sharp [objects] into the fire because it [the fire] is a living being. Otherwise you will pierce your eyes. If you spit [into it] then a sore will appear on your lips. If you step on it, boils will appear on your leg. My parents said this to me”.³³² “It is forbidden to throw different stuff or garbage into the fire; only firewood shall be burned. It is forbidden to throw a used bandage into the fire; otherwise your wounds will not be healed for a long time. It is forbidden to step on an extinct campfire or put reindeer on its place: you will get sick. It is forbidden to urinate on a campfire: then you will do the same in bed for all your life”.³³³

Through this respectful attitude to fire as a supreme value, a living being, and a sacred object, the crucial role of fire in the ancient past of mankind is still quite clearly visible.

³³¹ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, Selemdzhinskiy area, 2009.

³³² Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³³³ Ibid.

5.3 White reindeer cult

Due to a connection with the reindeer breeding from time immemorial, Evenks have special feelings for reindeer. Before the domestication of reindeer, the movement, hunting, housing, tailoring, good nutrition and many other things were very difficult for an Evenk. The lives of the taiga people directly depended on their reindeer. Therefore almost every reindeer in a herd (and every one of those for riding) has its own name. The owner can tell a story about any of them, and shows a specific attitude toward each one. Reindeer are the highest value not only for practical or economic aspects of life — the attitude of Evenks towards their reindeer is determined both by practical needs, and by special ethical standards. For example, in the past Evenks tried not to slaughter domesticated reindeer without an extreme need and avoided trading in reindeer. A reindeer herd has a nonmonetary value which exceeds the regular relations between people and domestic animals. In a traditional Evenki worldview, reindeer are the chosen ones. The attitude towards them is deepened in the spiritual, religious basis of traditional Evenki culture.

This spiritual character of the relations between people and reindeer partly remains even now. Among the Evenks of Ust-Nyukzha, Ivanovskoe and some other settlements of the Amur region, the cult of reindeer and taboos related to it are still widespread. For example, it is forbidden to cut the bones of a reindeer with an axe (only knives should be used); dogs cannot eat its hoofs.³³⁴

In particular the white deer is highly esteemed. An idea that a white reindeer is not just a rare and beautiful animal, but a sacred being (*sevek*) and the charm that protects the whole herd (“it conducts the whole herd”³³⁵) is widespread among the Amur Evenks. The name of such a reindeer – *sevek* – is related to the name of a deity, *Seveki*. This indicates the interrelation of these two beings and the sacred nature of this animal.

The traditional rite of initiation of a white reindeer exists to this day. During this rite the Evenks choose a white reindeer from the herd. They make a fire, spell formulas, and fumigate with smoke the ritual bridles that were made especially for this rite. These bridles are often embroidered, covered with ornaments, and painted with drawings. They have fringe and brushes which are hanging down in front, covering the

³³⁴ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011; Ivanovskoe, 2006-2009; Bomnak, 2010, Ust-Urkima, 2009.

³³⁵ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

reindeer's eyes. This ritual bridle, when put on the reindeer's head, is similar to a shaman's cap.³³⁶

The sacred white deer does not undergo training, and is not harnessed or loaded with bags. Evenks do not ride it and kill it only in extreme cases. Evenks consider that the well-being of their herd depends on their attitude towards the *sevek*. In the past, the sacred rug *kumalan* was made of fur of a sacred white reindeer. Nowadays if such a rug contains the fur of a white reindeer, its magic power is considered to be exponentially increased. The fur has to be taken from the head of the sacred animal, and these pieces of skin are located in the center of a *kumalan*. Only the most respectable people – the elders and the heads of clans or families – were privileged to sit on it. The edge of a *kumalan* was decorated with bright red fur, usually of a fox (later a cow). This strengthened its magic abilities, attracting the power of fire or the sun to the person.³³⁷ When a woman sews a *kumalan* for anybody (usually for her daughter or other relatives), she tries to put her positive energy into it, wishing this person wellness, happiness and well-being during sewing. These rugs are passed from mother to daughter.³³⁸ But today they are used mostly for decorative purposes.

5.4 Bear cult

Traditions connected with the bear cult are still strong in the culture of Amur Evenks. There are lots of prohibitions and prescriptions about bears. For example, the bear cannot be depicted. It is forbidden to use the bearskin for sewing *kumalan* and clothes, and also to step on it (especially for a woman). You should not shake a bear skin: otherwise there will be a nasty turn in the weather (a snowstorm in winter, a rain with strong wind in summer). However there are circumstances when this action with bearskin is necessary. For instance, if the winter is too dry and there hasn't been any snow for a long time – that is unfavorable for hunting as traces are more visible on fresh snow – then the hunter takes the bearskin out from the dwelling and shakes it wishing to cause snow. To prevent a bear attack, the skin is cut and hemmed near the armpits. This makes its forepaws stretch horizontally, not upside (“as though it attacks you”). Evenks also sew up the eye openings and mouth of the killed bear's skin so that it

³³⁶ This is also recognized by the Evenks. For instance, this similarity was noted by Trophim Pavlov, whose mother was a shaman. (Field research at the Nyukzha River, 2002).

³³⁷ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³³⁸ Ibid.

would not see anything and would not attack the person. It is accepted to use the skin only as a wall carpet.³³⁹

It is forbidden to speak abusive things about a bear, and it is better not to mention it at all: “When we live in the taiga, we try not to speak of it at all, [because] it feels everything. We don't use [its fur] in *kumalan*. We don't leave its canines, we put everything on *delken*³⁴⁰, and the skin can be sold”, – Svetlana Kulbertinova from Ust-Nyukzha notes. The bear claws are sometimes used (for example, by the Evenks of Selemdzhinskiy area) as hunting amulets.



*Ritual burial of a bear.
Selemdzhinskiy area, 2007.*

The Amur Evenks avoid hunting bears intentionally, and rouse a bear from its den only when they really need it (for instance, when they want to take its fat, which they use as medicine). Many hunters believe that if an unarmed person meets a bear, the latter will not touch him or her. And if a bear comes to a taiga camp or people meet it on their way, then, before shooting, they should persuade it (in Evenki language) to go away and to not touch the people or reindeer. Evenks claim that usually the bear leaves after these words. “Usually, if the person is unarmed, it [the bear] doesn't touch [a human], [and] won't cause any trouble. Once we, my father and I, met an unusual bear, on its back there was a white strip, and my father began to speak in Evenki: ‘leave, don't touch us, pass by’. And to the reindeer he told sharply: ‘do not be afraid’ (usually they run away, [but that time] the reindeer stood). And the bear passed by”, – Klara Abramova remembers.³⁴¹ The Evenks of Selemdzha believe

³³⁹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondents: Svetlana Kulbertinova, Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁴⁰ *Delken* is a raised platform for storing food and clothes. The platform for ritual burial of a bear (like a human corpse, its body was exposed on trees or platforms – burial scaffolds) also is called *delken*. Comparable to the scaffold burial of sacred horse by the Yakut.

³⁴¹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

that a bear will not touch a woman if she shows it her naked breast.³⁴² This notion is perhaps connected with the totemic myth about the relationship between a girl and a bear – the relationship that is believed to have given birth to the Evenki people.

Similar whispers or formulas are also spelled when a hunter finds the marks left by a bear on his way (usually the clawed trees). Only males are familiar with these whispers, and as a rule the most senior of them ‘whisper’ in order to prevent the bear’s attack. Women are not allowed even to look at these traces. It is also believed that women cannot participate in hunting for a bear.³⁴³

It is necessary to undress the carcass of a bear and to perform all rituals connected with this process by the light of day. Therefore Evenks try to do it before sunset. First of all the eyes are cut out – so that the bear would not see who is doing it – and put on *delken* turned to the east. (It is believed that a bear will reincarnate soon if its eyes look to the east.) It is forbidden to use an axe (similar to reindeer, a bear is undressed only with a knife). They handle the pelvic part of the bear body with special care, trying not to injure the bones inadvertently: otherwise the bear will take offense with them.³⁴⁴ When cutting the hulk, the hunter says that it was not him who has killed this animal or that it was a compulsory measure.³⁴⁵ Everything connected with production of a bear is strictly regulated: “How to kill, how to undress, how to divide... [When you] have eaten [the bear’s meat] you mustn’t give its bones³⁴⁶ to the dogs. [There is] *delken* on the trees, and the bones are put there, they shouldn’t been scattered. We take a bear’s fat from its liver – *teke*, *tekemin* rite. Before eating we say ‘*kuk!*’... Only after that we eat. Also a wish of good luck is spoken. *Tekemin* is translated as ‘dipping’, [or] ‘to dip bread in grease’.”³⁴⁷

Both Evenki elders and youth (those who live in the taiga) preserve a tradition of hanging the bear’s head on a pole or putting it on *delken* with its eye-sockets turned to the east: “As if it was alive... there the sun ascends, and it sees everything; the sun sits down, and it dies again”, – describes the young taiga woman Svetlana Kulbertinova. “We try to make

³⁴² Field research at Ivanovskoe, 2008.

³⁴³ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondents: Klara Abramova, Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³⁴⁴ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³⁴⁵ After first contact with Russians and sometimes even now Evenks say that a Russian man killed the bear during this ritual.

³⁴⁶ The diminutive form of the Russian word ‘косточки’ (little bones) is used here.

delken far away from the tent, from the camp, in order that [the bear] will not see us ... it is strictly forbidden to approach [this place] afterwards, [or] to touch the bones”.³⁴⁸

As was already mentioned before, the bear is considered to be the Evenki ancestor in their mythology. Klara Abramova, an inhabitant of Ust-Nyukzha, told us a tale she heard in her childhood from her grandmother and mother: “Once upon a time a girl went to the taiga and got lost. She met a bear. The bear took her in its den and lived with her, as a man lives with a woman. And from this [relationship] the Evenki people trace their origin”.³⁴⁹

5.5 Amulets and talismans

Many of the Amur Evenks maintain a belief in the magic power of amulets (apotropaic objects) and talismans (good luck charms). They are used both by men and women; there are also special amulets for children.

Amulet *bubun* is a scrap of fur or other part of *sevek* (sacred white reindeer), which are sewn up in a small leather sack. Men hang it to a saddle or cartridge belt, and women tie it to *muruchun* (a box for their needlework). We found one of these amulets at Ust-Nyukzha.

The teeth, fur, and unusual bones of animals are widespread among Evenki hunters, who use them for attracting good luck in hunting. Some hunters store these talismans in special little bags and always keep them around.³⁵⁰ For the same purposes, the canines of a musk deer or some other animals are strung on a thread and hung inside tents and hunting cabins. This practice is observed practically in all groups of Amur Evenks.³⁵¹

Some of the Amur Evenks partly preserve idolatry. The worship of idols remained among the Evenks at least until the middle of the 20th century. Klara Abramova and Galina Nikolaeva, two sisters from Ust-Nyukzha, remember that their father had an anthropomorphous wooden idol: “It is made similar to a human being... not a human being but... I can't understand what it is”.³⁵² Now this idol is stored at their brother's camp in the taiga. Their father told his children that this idol must not be touched or disturbed. “When something went

³⁴⁸ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁴⁹ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁵⁰ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondents: Klara Abramova and Eduard Abramov.

³⁵¹ Field researches of 2002-2012.

³⁵² Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.



Bubun amulet



The muruchun box with the bubun amulet tied to it

wrong, he addressed [this idol]. He told us nothing of it, but we knew that it was an amulet.³⁵³ [He] stored it in the back part [of the tent] – *malu* – where all guns [are stored]. He hung it up there, forbidding us to touch and play with it. He [was] the owner; only the man as the head of the family could touch it. Now [my] brother [cares for it], then his son [will do it] or the one to whom he will give it”³⁵⁴

Along with the hunting charms, among the Amur Evenks family charms had been used up to recent times; one such example are *sevekichan*. Family *sevekichan* are small wooden figures of a man and a woman. They are wearing small clothes made of reindeer skin and caps, similar to a shaman’s headdress. After production of these wooden idols, the rite of imbuing with special power (*musun*) is performed (most often, by a shaman). Then this couple is joined with a rope and stored in such a way. It is considered that the male spirit served as a patron for male occupations, and the female one did the same for women’s work. Now such idols or house spirits have become an extreme rarity.



*Sevekichan idols.
The Nyukzha River, 1978.*

³⁵³ The used Russian word ‘оберег’ refers not only to an amulet, but also to any apotropaic object including idols.

³⁵⁴ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

5.6 Lores and taboos

Among the Amur Evenks a belief in different signs and lore is still widespread. Most of them are concerned with hunting. For example, it is believed that if you see meat in a dream, then you or your close relative will get sick.³⁵⁶ If a mouse or a chipmunk runs across the road in front of you, then your hunting will be unsuccessful for the whole year.³⁵⁷ For the same reason you must definitely kill a sable that has crossed your way.³⁵⁸ Each hunter fumigates the first sable he or she caught in the new hunting season: the hunter gets a piece of fire stick from the oven, drips some fat on it and pokes the sable's muzzle into it. Then he or she allows the sable "to smell" them so that the sable would remember the smell and then come (after its reincarnation) to this smell when hunting.³⁵⁹ This custom represents a striking example of the archaic hunting magic which has remained among the Amur Evenks.

The belief in bad signs connected with various evil spirits also remains. For instance, the residents of Ust-Nyukzha, Ivanovskoe, and Bomnak told us lots of cases when several people simultaneously saw (or heard) in the taiga the so-called *avagi*, dark beings similar to devils. *Avagi* can be manifested as a woman riding a reindeer without a saddle.³⁶⁰ Sometimes Evenks also identify various sounds heard in the taiga regarding *avagi*; they may be similar to bark of a dog, the shout of a person³⁶¹, or Evenki songs as if they were performed by a chorus.³⁶² It is considered that soon after such visions and voices, great grief happens to a family and someone will surely die.

Numerous taboos still regulate taiga life. Many of them are gender-specific. For example, husband makes a cartridge belt for himself and does not share it with his wife, and she also makes such a belt for herself in case she hunts too.³⁶³ Both men and women have their places in the tent.³⁶⁴ Women are forbidden to walk around the tent or step on the sacred place in

³⁵⁶ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁵⁸ Ibid. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁶¹ Ibid. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev.

³⁶² Ibid. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁶³ Ibid. Respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

³⁶⁴ See Chapter 2.

it, *malu*.³⁶⁵ Women also must not take men's weapon or fishing tackles, or look at a man's back when he leaves to hunt.³⁶⁶ In turn, men are forbidden to step on the female place in the tent (*dalba*) and the place between the stove and the front side of the tent (*munruk*). It is also restricted to pass anything above the oven; the gun is forbidden to be touched for those who do not hunt.

A lot of such notions have irrevocably disappeared. However, many customs that form the peculiar features of Evenki culture still exist. It is remarkable that, first of all, elements of Evenki culture which are connected with hunting and reindeer breeding remain. It is important that they remain not only among the senior generation, but also among those representatives of the Evenki youth who live in the taiga and lead a nomadic life. It allows us to hope that the original Evenki culture will remain alive not only through the efforts of staff of various settlements' native culture centers, kindergartens and schools, but also thanks to preserving the traditional way of life in the taiga, through which this

³⁶⁵ Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.

³⁶⁶ Field research at Ivanovskoe, 2009; respondent: Sergey Nikiforov. Field research in Ust-Nyukzha, 2011; respondent: Svetlana Kulbertinova.

Chapter 6

Shamanism of the Amur Evenks

6.1. Insight into the past

Shamanism has been practiced among the Tungus-Manchurian peoples for centuries. It was the brightest and most visible characteristic against the general background of a taiga lifestyle of Siberian hunters and reindeer breeders. Consequently many travelers met Tungus (the previous name of the Evenks) on the way, who mentioned the shamans and described their appearance in their notes. The Russian word *shaman* originates from the Evenki word *saman*; then from Russian it has passed into many Western European languages.

The origin of the word *saman* is a source of fundamental long-term debate among researchers. Without getting into details, we will only mention that there are various opinions, which contend that the origin of this word is from Sanskrit (for example, from *çramanás* — the Buddhist ascetic³⁶⁶), or from an Evenki base *sa-*, that means ‘to know’. In some recent research on this issue, the Tungus-Manchurian word *saman* was related to the Chinese numeral *san* (‘three’) in its Canton (South-Chinese) variant *sam*. The author came to



Тунгусское Шаманъ при рѣкѣ Аргунѣ съ посохомъ.
Ein Tungusischer Schaman am Argun-Fluss vorwärts.
Devin toungouse auprès de l'Argoun par devant.

Tungus shaman at the Argun River
(a picture by I.I. Georgi, 1799)

³⁶⁶ Fasmer M. *Etimologicheskij slovar' russkogo yazyka* [Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language]. Vol. 4. SPb., 1996. P. 401.

conclusion that the word *saman* originates from Chinese numerological notions.³⁶⁷

However, such etymologies, especially those that are based on a loanword hypothesis, suffer from some serious weaknesses. The Tungus-Manchurians did not need to borrow from other languages a concept designating a phenomenon primordially inherent in their own culture. The idea of a shaman's knowledge, certainly, was important, however it was not knowledge that distinguished the shaman from a circle of his or her relatives. The Tungus shaman was the main character in special rituals where he or she executed a peculiar dance. The rhythmical movement and shaking of the lower part of the body were



*A Tungus shaman
with drum and beater*

distinctive elements of this shaman's dance. These sharp shaking movements rung metal bells, which were hanging down in the back from the shaman's belt. In 1870 near Blagoveshchensk the teacher of theological seminary Roman Tsyrenpilov observed and described a healing by a Manchurian shaman: "*The shaman dress was simple, just small gear with iron trinkets and copper bells; he hit a drum, muttered drawlingly [something] that couldn't be caught because of the sound of the drums; behind him another, apparently, simple Manchurian [man] hit a drum too, timing. An old man sat at a cauldron, holding another drum close to the cauldron, also hitting it. To the left of the shaman there was a young Manchurian [man] ... two boys knocked and splashed with some [wooden] plates, giving additional sound to the drums. Then suddenly the shaman, who was standing on one place until that time, began to go back and forth, wagging his bottom, and making noise by clanking the trinkets hanging on his back*".³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Wang P. The Power of numbers in shamanism: a patterned explanation of shaman names in Inner Asia. In: *Journal of Central Asian Studies*. 2002. Vol. 7. No. 1. Pp. 1-34.

These rhythmic gestures, clanking the pendants together with other elements of shaman's actions, formed a specific image which assumed the verbal form in the consciousness of the people participating in the ritual. The word *saman* is derived from of the verb *samna-mi*, which is a verb designating movement of the lower part of the body.³⁶⁹

Shamanism is a religious complex of beliefs and rites united by the idea of special abilities unique to people called 'shamans' (other words also can be used, somewhat related). Shamanism finds its content thanks to the shaman figure; through the shaman, it ascribes its peculiar features distinguishing it from other forms of religious life. The shaman is the member of a community possessing the greatest authority in communication with the world of spirits and gods. The distinctive features of the shaman are: 1) the right to special relations with spirits, which is recognized by the community and is based on his or her "election by the spirits"; 2) passing through a special state, "a shaman's sickness"; 3) the successful completion of special tests within the shaman's initiation (shamanic trial); 4) the ability to achieve an altered state of consciousness (religious trance, ecstasy); 5) the community's belief in the shaman's ability to move freely to the upper and lower worlds. In traditional communities, the situation in which "the elect of the spirits" had no experience of "a shaman's sickness" or did not pass initiation tests, was possible only in exceptional cases. In modern conditions such situations have become more typical.

Numerous historical data confirms the huge role of shamanism in Tungus-Manchurian cultures. At the same time, shamanism never was a uniform, complete religious system: neither within the Tungus-Manchurian community, nor within borders of one ethnos or even clan. The variety of forms of Tungus-Manchurian shamanism was caused by several factors: the migration that accompanied the formation and development of the Tungus-Manchurian peoples; the almost full isolation or nomadic way of life of some ethnic groups within this community; an oral tradition transferring shamanic knowledge; the personal nature of

³⁶⁸ Putevye zhurnaly uchitelya dukhovnoy seminarii R.V. Tsyrenpilova [Travel journals R.V. Tsyrenpilov, teacher from Blagoveschensk Orthodox Academy. 1870-1871.]. In: Anihovskiy S.E, Bolotin D. P., Zabiyaiko A.P., Pan T.A. «*Man'chzhurskij klin*»: istoriya, narody, religii ["Manchurian Wedge": history, people, religions]. Ed. by A. P. Zabiyaiko. Blagoveshhensk, 2005. P. 293.

³⁶⁹ Hamayon Roberte. Le concept de chamanisme: une construction occidentale [The concept of shamanism: Western construction]. In: *Religion & Histoire*. № 5. Nov.-Dec. 2005. Pp. 8-23.

mentoring; the personal and psychological character of the religious practice, connected with an altered state of mind (trance). This variety explains the difficulties that arise in describing of shamanism: historical sources and modern ethnographic data are connected with local groups or with a concrete informant. This leaves a noticeable imprint on the process of studying shamanism (describing the mythological notions, religious ideas, and cult actions, which elude systematization).

Nevertheless, the historical evidence of Evenki shamans are important for understanding the phenomenon of shamanism in its development. Here are the characteristics of Evenki shamans from the Okhotsk coast, given by the Jakob Lindenau, a traveler of the 18th century:

*Shamans, as the Tungus say, have existed since the beginning of the world, and they inherited shamanism from their parents. Those who are born with a caul become shamans, and those who were completely born in a caul become big shamans, and those who were not completely in a caul [when born] become absolutely little shamans or female shamans. If father or mother is a shaman, then after their death their son or daughter or someone from their clan will be chosen by the spirits to become a shaman. The tortures that such a developing shaman have to overcome are no better than those of Koryaks or Yakuts. Each clan has a shaman and a prince. The one who can be the highest, [who] better shows the dignity than others and has higher advantages can hold this position. Shamans vary; some [of them] have a gift to predict the future, others can help the sick. There are also those who [magically] harm the people”.*³⁷⁰

The beliefs recorded in this description have remained in the Evenki culture until relatively recent time.

Tungus-Manchurians, as well as other people of Siberia and the Far East, considered the shaman “the elect of the spirits”. Shamanism was both men's and women's activity. The division into “black” and “white” shamans was atypical for Tungus-Manchurian shamans. The most important criteria of distinction were their power (“strong” and “weak” shamans), the field of movement preferable to the shaman (whether the shaman “goes” to the “upper” or “lower” world or to both of these two

³⁷⁰ Lindenau Ya.I. Opisanie narodov Sibiri (pervaya polovina XVIII veka). Istoriko-etnograficheskie materialy po narodam Sibiri i Severo-Vostoka. [Description of Siberian Peoples (the first half of the 18th century). Historical and ethnographic materials on the peoples of Siberia and the North-East]. Magadan, 1983. In: Shamanizm narodov Sibiri. Etnograficheskie materialy XVIII-XIX vv.: Khrestomatiya. Sost., vstup. st., issled., prilozh., zaklyuch., podbor ill. T. Yu. Sem. SPb., 2006. P. 517.

worlds), and also specialization. The last has been connected with the preferred functions of the shaman: treatment (one of the most important functions), fortune-telling, guiding souls of the dead to *buni*, performance of certain magic rites (e.g., with Evenks — *sinkelaun*, a rite of attracting a successful hunt), etc. Execution of these functions often demanded uncommon personal qualities from the shaman.

The identity of the shaman was formed in a certain worldview system and in conditions of special collective attitudes. Here are the main components of shamanism as a social phenomenon: 1) the belief in the existence of spirits (gods) which exert influence on people and nature and with which certain people ("the elect of the spirits") can have special relations; 2) the idea of the existence of different levels of the universe inaccessible for free penetration of souls of ordinary people; 3) the belief that souls of "the elect" can voluntarily overcome the barriers between universe levels by means of spirits, or "travel" around the lower or upper worlds.

It is difficult to define the nature of a shaman's "election". Some researchers believe that the shaman gift was mainly transmitted from generation to generation.³⁷¹ Others focus their attention on the psychological factors and consider that mainly the impressionable, irritable and vulnerable people with an unstable temperament became



*Manchurian shaman gear
with metal bells on the belt.
Small Peoples Museum,
Harbin, China.*

³⁷¹ Golubtsov I. *Religiya, obryady i nravy plemyon, zhivushchih po zapadnomu beregu Tatarskogo proлива, po nizov'yam reki Amur* [Religion, ceremonies and customs of tribes living on the West bank of Strait of Tartary, on the lower reaches of the Amur River] In: *Domashnyaya beseda dlya narodnogo chteniya* [The home conversation for common people]. Vyp. 34. Spb., 1859. P. 321; Shimkevich P. P. *Materialy dlya izucheniya shamanstva u gol'dov* [Materials for studying shamanism among the Golds]. In: *Zapiski Priamurskogo otдела Imperatorskogo Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*. [Papers of the Amur Department of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society]. Vol. 2. Issue. 1. Khabarovsk, 1896. P. 133.

shamans.³⁷² Some researchers express the opinion that sexual motives form the cornerstone of the shaman calling. For example, Lev Shternberg recorded a story told by a Nanaian shaman about a female spirit, which entered into sexual relations with him and called him to become a shaman.³⁷³

It is obvious that in the traditional communities the shaman candidate found and cultivated in himself a certain psychophysiological predisposition to a special type of religious activity. This shamanic type of religious activity assumes that the shaman is able to reach an altered state of consciousness and put the people around him or her into a trance. Reaching such states – in which the person fully or partially loses contact with reality and with their own "I", reincarnates, endures bright visions, hears voices, feels the strongest emotional shocks – is an extreme spiritual experience available to people with highly mobile mentality. On the other hand, the shaman must possess a steady temperament, a high level of self-regulation and physical health to control the altered state of consciousness and to maintain the heavy psychophysiological load accompanying a shamanistic ritual. The people capable of overcoming "shaman's sickness" without going crazy, of controlling the altered state of consciousness and putting the people around them into a trance, received the status of a shaman. Some candidates for "the elect" could not cope with the "shaman's sickness" and the psychophysiological stress accompanying it. In these situations an experienced shaman "treated" this person, persuading the spirits to refuse the choice and to release the elect's soul. In some cases the "shaman's sickness" became uncontrollable, because the person could not send it on the necessary course, or the experienced shamans were absent or denied their assistance. Most often, it led to a tragic end: heavy depression, madness or even death of the candidate who did not pass the test.

Most often the shaman's gift was discerned by the symptoms of "shaman's sickness" (a shamanistic initiatory crisis, involving both physical and psychological illness). The "sick" people became deep in thought and scattered, incapable of usual work; sometimes they showed disorders or mental illness, hallucinations, and delirium. The shaman's sickness could strike both certain elects, and several members of one clan.

³⁷² Arsen'ev V. K. *Shamanstvo u sibirskih inorodtsev i ih animisticheskie vozzreniya na prirodu* [Shamanism of the Siberian indigenous peoples and their animistic views of nature] In: *Vestnik Azii* [Asia Bulletin]. Harbin, 1916. № 38–39. Kn. 2. P. 337.

³⁷³ Shternberg L. Ya. *Pervobytnaya religiya v svete etnografii* [Primitive religion in the light of ethnography]. L., 1936. P. 144.

Usually it began soon after the death of a patrimonial shaman, when, as it was considered, the spirits of a clan began to look for a new owner among his or her immediate family, most often the children or grandsons.³⁷⁴

Anatoly Mazin noted that Evenks of the Upper Amur consider mental diseases to be connected with a calling for shamans. As soon as one of the sick began to practice shamanism (i.e. to sing shaman songs), the diseases in the clan stopped. Its members considered that the spirits had elected the singing person and the spirit patron dwelled in him or her. The patron spirit told the elect where spirit assistants (spirit guides) lived and how he or she could collect them. From this point, the wanderings of the elect began: he or she withdrew far into the taiga and lived there in isolation from other people. The process of “collecting” spirit guides continued for two or three years. At this time, the shaman candidate overcame great difficulties and tests, which could not necessarily be passed by everyone.

After successful “collection” of spirits and passage of various tests, the elect started production of a drum, a beater and other shaman accessories of the shaman: gear, apron, headdress and other things. This process continued between 6 to 12 years depending on the capabilities of the young shaman. The development of the shaman’s attributes was followed by a ceremony of imbuing them with sacred power *musun*. After the shaman acquired his or her own suit and tools, a special ritual was performed, during which the young shaman shows their skills. The ceremony consisted of two shamanic rituals in which the shaman “went” to the supernatural worlds. An experienced shaman acted as an examiner. The successful completion of this ritual marked the end of the period of apprenticeship for the candidate and recognition of him or her as a shaman.³⁷⁵ Thus, “shaman’s election” is a complex cultural and psychological phenomenon, in which religious mythological ideas, collective expectations and individual psychological features are closely bound and interdependent.

Shamans were considered intermediaries between people and spirits. People addressed shamans for help when their own independent admonitions or sacrifices could not eliminate or weaken the harmful effects of spirits, as well as when they wanted to find out what spirits are

³⁷⁴ Shirokogorov S. M. Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva u tungusov [Experience of research on Shamanism foundations among the Tungus]. In: *Shirokogorov S. M. Etnograficheskie issledovaniya. Kniga pervaya: Izbrannoe*. Sost. i primech. A. M. Kuznetsova, A. M. Reshetova. Vladivostok, 2001. Pp. 164–165.

³⁷⁵ Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov* [Traditional beliefs and rites of the Evenk-Orochons]. Novosibirsk, 1984. Pp. 81–85.

harming the person and why. A suit and a set of special ritual objects helped the shaman to carry out communication with the spirits. It was considered that spirits “dwelled” not only in the shaman’s body, but also in various parts of his or her suit. Therefore special attention was paid to the shaman’s attire. The type of objects included in the shaman’s vestments depended on his or her patrimonial belonging, experience and magic power, as well as the type of performed rite. Sergey Shirokogorov noted that several types of shaman attire have been widespread among the Nerchinsk and Barguzin Tungus: for example, a bird suit, or a Manchurian deer suit (which was a type of gear for extremely “strong” shamans). The first type of suit consisted of a coat, an apron, trousers, jambarts, footwear and a headdress. Parts of the suit were decorated with iron trinkets and fringes symbolizing a skeleton and plumage of a bird. The Manchurian deer suit was made of skin from this animal and decorated with the trinkets and staffs representing a skeleton and extremities of a Manchurian deer. Manchurian deer horns, real or symbolic (made of iron), were fastened to a headdress. In addition, a combination of both elements – the Manchurian deer suit and bird suit – occurred among the shamanic attire of the Tungus of Transbaikalia. Copper mirrors *toli* were an integral attribute of any shaman suit.³⁷⁶ The functional purpose of *toli* in shaman rites differed for various peoples. Shamans of Orochs, for example, lit the road to the lower world by means of these mirrors.³⁷⁷ Nanais considered *toli* to be a board to protect shamans from the arrows of hostile spirits. Manchurian shamans also used them as a protective armor.³⁷⁸

Evenki shamans also had ritual headdresses (*avun*). Sometimes they differed from those of Tungus-Manchurian shamans. The Evenki shaman headdress must not have a metal rim and other metal parts (hoops, trinkets, horns etc.). They were mainly made of leather and fabric. The fringe which hung down over the shaman’s eyes, covering the majority of his or her face (some kind of a veil), was an obligatory element of such a headdress. Calling the spirits during a ritual, the shaman put it down over his or her face once the spirits entered him or her at that point, when he or she has

³⁷⁶ Shirokogorov S. M. *Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva...* Ibid. Pp. 32–33.

³⁷⁷ See in detail: Bolotin D. P., Korneychuk E. N. Chzhurchzhen'skoe zerkalo so Srednego Amura [Jurchen mirror from the Middle Amur] In: *Traditsionnaya kul'tura vostoka Azii* [Traditional culture of East Asia]. Vol. 3. Blagoveshchensk, 2001. Pp. 152–153.

³⁷⁸ Yahontov K. S. «*Kniga o shamanke Nishan'*» kak *etnograficheskiy istochnik* [“Book about the shamaness of Nishan” as ethnographic source]. Diss. na soisk. uch. st. kand. ist. nauk. SPb., 1999. P. 88.

turned into another being. It was also considered better for ordinary people not to see the eyes of the shaman during a ritual to prevent drawing any trouble upon themselves. Among various shaman accessories, the drum was considered an especially important object. Anatoly Mazin noted that the shaman drum had several symbolic functions in Evenk-Orochons beliefs. It symbolized the Universe, represented the place for “collecting” spirits — both assistant spirits and patron spirit — and served as the “voice” by which the shaman talked to the spirits. The drum also performed the function of “vehicle” for transporting souls secured by the shaman in the upper and lower worlds. Drums of Evenki shamans had an ovoid or oval form, and their size fluctuated from 70 to 90 cm in the longitudinal section. A special shovel-shaped beater (*geyk*) made of an old dead larch (*mugdyken*) was used to beat the



Evenki shaman gear from northern China with drums, beaters, bird-amulets, and timpani.

Small Peoples Museum, China.

drum. In certain cases a handle made of horn from a deer or elk was fastened to this wooden shovel. The length of such beaters reached 50 cm, and the width was about 5 cm. Each shaman had five or six different beaters that were used according to the type of ritual performed.³⁷⁹

Types of shamanic rituals varied and were defined by the tasks which the shaman was required to solve. The ritual connected with travelling to the lower

³⁷⁹ Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. Pp. 59, 75–77.

world was considered especially difficult and dangerous, as on the way his rivals could take his soul (and so cause his death). Such travel was undertaken only by very powerful shamans and extremely seldom, in critical situations such as: meeting with souls of dead relatives, the search for and return of a soul of a seriously ill patient, and also guidance of a soul of the dead to the lower world.³⁸⁰ According to S.M. Shirokogorov, at the beginning of the 20th century there were a little more than 14 shamans among three groups of Transbaikal Tungus (Barguzin, Nerchinsk and Urulga), from whom only two could make a trip to the lower world.³⁸¹



*Evenki shaman gear.
Tyndinskiy area, Amur region.
The first half of the 20th century.*

The shamanic rituals organized for obtaining good luck in a hunt (*sinkelaun*) were of great importance. According to A. I. Mazin, this ritual was performed in October and consisted of four cycles: making cult images of artiodactyl animals with rods (*beyun*); the shaman “walking” to Enekan Buga to request the sending of an animal and good luck for hunting (*sinken*); purification of the hunters by passing through *chichipkan* (an idol made of young larches, which was believed to protect them from malice and evil spirits); magic hunting and dressing of the *beyun*.

Evenks accepted shaman predictions with a great deal of trust. In one of the first pieces of evidence of a divination ritual, such rituals are brightly depicted in “The Description of the Tobolsk vicegerency” (1789-1790).

³⁸⁰ Shirokogorov S. M. *Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva...* Ibid.

³⁸¹ Shirokogoroff S. M. *Psychomental complex of the Tungus*. London, 1935. P. 386.



*Evenki shaman. Transbaikalia.
The beginning of the 20th century.*

“For such predictions several people gather in one rawhide tent, where a fire burns in the middle. All sit down, drawing their legs under themselves, and, bending down, look into the fire. At the same time they sing and beat a drum. And a little later the shaman gets up and begins to jump in a variety of ways around the fire very high and occasionally rushes to the fire repeatedly, while the others [=shamans] descend into the earth. [They] are invisible for a short time, and the [people] sitting [nearby] only hear his [=their] voice, and [then they] again are [=show themselves] to the audience. And then, being encumbered with iron metal plates and idols hung [on his gear], [he] jumps out from the tent up through the flue, and, after staying outside for a short time, reenters through the same flue or through the door. Having become very tired, [they] lie on the ground, resting as though fainted, and recovering, begin to sing and call their dead relatives who were

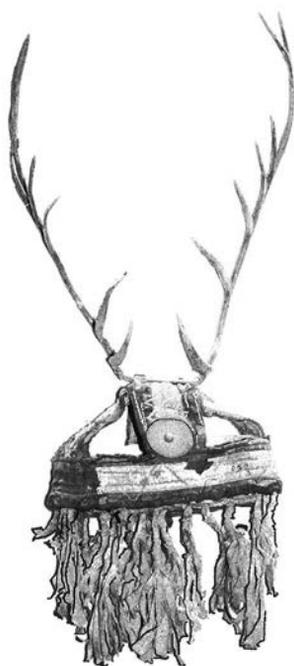
the same shamans [as they are] before. And after that [he] tells the people sitting around [him] what he saw and heard about each of them, as well as what all of them thought of more generally”.³⁸²

This description in many details matches what is stored by records, photos, films of recent times, and memory of the old-aged Amur Evenks. Because he or she interacted with the spirits of his or her ancestors, the shaman could “see” future events during the rituals; forecast the weather, or success or failure of any undertaking; find lost or stolen items; identify and expel pathogenic spirits; protect a person from the harmful effects of

³⁸² *Opisanie Tobol'skogo namestnichestva* [The description of the Tobolsk vicegerency]. Novosibirsk, 1982. Pp. 237–238.



Tungus shaman

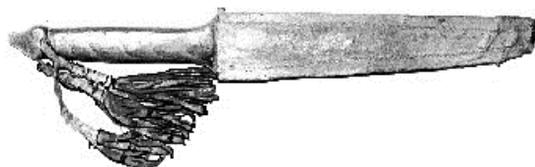


*A headdress of Evenki shaman
Alexander I. Rostolov
(from the Ninogan clan),
who was born in 1893.
The Urkan River,
Amur region.*

spirits; help a child's birth; and provide a good issue of domestic animals.

Shamanism's close connection with hunters' and reindeer breeders' way of life, with the spiritual life of taiga nomads, and the related bonds connecting the shaman and his environment – these and many other reasons explained the long existence of shamanistic beliefs and practices of the Amur Evenks' culture.

*A beater for a shaman drum.
The beginning of the 20th
century.
Tyndinskiy area,
Amur region.*





Manegr shaman on the bank of the Zeya River, Amur region



Drum and beater of Evenki shaman Semyon Vasiliev (Savey)

It is important to note, however, that Evenki shamanism had a contradictory character. It is incorrect to idealize history, to represent shamans as absolutely positive figures in the Evenki past. Unfortunately, such an approach to shamanism is often seen nowadays. In real life there were many cases of charlatanism, deception, and self-interest from some shamans. People nearby tried not to address shamans without extreme need, and were sometimes afraid of the unpredictable consequences of their actions. Evenks believed that even the shaman, who is kind in his own character, can involuntarily become hostage to bad intentions due to their close connection with the (sometimes foolish) spirits, and extend, without wishing, the evil around himself or herself. “Owing to these specific reasons people, generally speaking, dislike shamans. Therefore it happens quite often that the shaman lives absolutely separately... The shamans’ love starting wars [between each other] and the heavy



*Manegr shaman.
The Zeya River basin (the Amur region)
The beginning of the 20th century.*

consequences resulting from this prompt some people to temporarily refuse shamans in general – so that aggressive shamans would disappear completely”.³⁸³ All this and many other things left a dual mark on the real situation of shamanism in its context.

6.2. The echo of the shaman’s drum: memories of the recent past

Shamanism deepened its roots in the traditions of Evenki lives and remained in its main form up to the end of the 20th century; the tradition of transferring shamans’ knowledge and status continued until that time. In the 1970-90s there were more than ten shamans just among Evenks of the Amur region. Among them: K. G. Rostolov from the Ninogan clan (born in 1915, river Gilyuy); V. Urkanov (Ust-Urkima village); K. V. Grigoriev from the Kaptugar clan (born in 1908, the Bolshoy Oldoy river); G. Ya. Sologon from the Mochen clan (born in 1919, the Bolshoy Oldoy river); V. Pavlov from a Ninogan clan known as “Deaf”; A. V. Pavlov (born in 1914) from the Kindigir clan; V. I. Makarov (Ust-Urkima village); Ya. I. Makarov (Ust-Urkima village); Ilya Yakovlev (Bomnak village); Nikolay Struchkov (Kharga river). By the middle of the 1990s all of them died. In 1996 the famous shaman M. P. Kurbeltinova, who lived in Iyengra village, died.

The remaining memories of these shamans are quite contradictory and not great in quantity. Some Evenks call into question the magical abilities of several shamans, calling them sorcerers or doctors. The reason of it lies, perhaps, in conflictual intergenerational relations, in persecutions of shamans during the Soviet period, and in worldview disagreements. Others speak of them positively; most of them are people of middle and old age.

“We had shamans Ponomaryovs, [they] practiced shamanism down the river Shevli; then Struchkov and Abramov-grandfather. There were three of them total. And the strongest one was Abramov; the tent where he lived with [his] wife stood in a forest, near the settlement – that was there they practiced shamanism. Some [people] went to them for help. They addressed them when someone got sick, and I don’t know anything more about this shamanism. I never looked at shamans, for some reason I was rather afraid [of them] and [my] grandmother forbade [me] to approach them”, – Lidiya Afanasyevna Dmitriyeva from the Mengel clan (Ivanovskoe village) remembers.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Shirokogorov S. M. *Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva*... Ibid. Pp. 179–180.

³⁸⁴ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, 2009.



*Shamanic ritual, 1960s.
Ivanovskoe village,
Selemdzhinskiy area, Amur region.*



*Lidiya A. Dmitrieva
from the Mengel clan, Ivanovskoe
village. 2008.*

“I saw three shamans in [my] childhood. In our area there were families from which the shamans [came] — for example, Rostolovs, Vasilyevs were shamans. Shamans — they, by the way, knew the future how you will live longer, for some reason knew... It [was] terrible, I was afraid to ask them [anything]. The last shaman by the name of Victor was at Ust-Urkima in 1968. He was deaf, absolutely deaf, but he sang so beautifully! And from where such words were produced by him? He was deaf, but he was a great shaman³⁸⁵... He had a special, beautiful cap, it covers the whole face. And he sang about life. For instance, how you will live longer. Well, usually [journalists] write that they [shamans] deceived. But it never was like this. And they treated, it was precise” — Evenk Sergey Akimov, one of Ust-Urkima's old residents told us.³⁸⁶

Tatyana Nikolaevna Sofronova from the Edyan clan (Ivanovskoe village), born in 1935, remembers medical practices of shamans:

“I remember, once I was ill for a long time in my childhood. [My parents] invited the shaman. I slept, and he told my mother about me, that tomorrow's morning, when the sun will rise, she will wake up. I woke up early in the morning, I look, the sun shines, and jumped to have tea ... From then on began to recover gradually. And once, sometime in 1955, there came a shaman from Sofiyisk. And our mother was ill, all her life

³⁸⁵ Literally – ‘he performed the shamanic rituals cool’ (Rus: “a *shamanil on zdorovo*”).

³⁸⁶ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, 2009.

she was ill. Our father talked about it to the shaman. The shaman commanded: I will come tomorrow's evening, and you go and remove birch bark. Make of it six cups. The father went, removed bark, and made cups. We lived in a tent. In the evening the shaman came. Mother was absolutely sick, she hadn't gotten up for two weeks already, didn't eat anything, her liver swelled strongly ... Nothing helped to cure her. The shaman came; I came to a tent too. He took these cups, bent to [my] mother and began to stroke her stomach with his hands, and as if to suck something from her liver with his lips, then spit it out in the cups. I look [in the cups], and there [were] worms! Oh, that was so terrible! Worms, natural worms, the same as they appear in meat [when it is spoilt], they move in cups, and rustle, rustle. Having finished, the shaman told our father: "Carry all this away tomorrow very early and suspend it on an old birch". [Father] was going to carry [it] away. But two Yakuts were also nearby, the husband with the wife. And the Yakuts didn't trust [the shamans]! Here they were called, they came specially. They were told that mother was ill, she didn't pretend, and here, you see, is a disease. When they saw the [worms] in the cups, they nearly threw up. The shaman said: "There are worms, they ate her in her stomach, but tomorrow's morning she will get up". Precisely, mother got up in the morning, asked for tea and since then she was healthy, and lived up to eighty five years old. Well, how not to believe in the shamans? Really?"³⁸⁶

The residents of Ust-Nyukzha village remember a set of cases and stories about shamans performing rituals here or in the neighboring settlements.³⁸⁷ They remember miracle cases of healing and even revival as a result of a

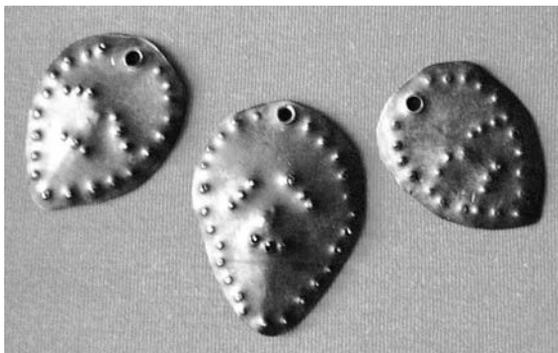


*Interview with a shaman. 1960s.
Ivanovskoe village,
Selemdzhinskiy area, Amur region.*

³⁸⁶ Field research at Ivanovskoe village, 2009.

³⁸⁷ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondents: Klara Abramova, Tamara Fyodorova.

shaman's ritual. For instance, Evenki hunter Valery Nikolaev told a story about white shaman Kararbuk, who lived nearby behind the Stanovoy Range: *"In [my] childhood there was an old shaman, Kararbuk, Nyor as we called him in Evenki. He could do everything. Once people left for hunting, and his*



*Face-like pendants for shaman gear.
Amur region.*

*younger son was staying at the swamp [waiting for an animal] — he saw an elk and killed it. And it appeared, [this elk was not an elk but] was a shaman. There were two shamans, and the son of one of them shot at another one with a Berdan rifle. So he had killed him. Well, he left him [=the dead body] and went for his father, Kararbuk. And the latter performed a ritual over him [=the killed shaman] for three days and three nights, and by the fourth day he had returned him to life”.*³⁸⁸

Valeriy Nikolaev also told us another story about the fight of a shaman with personified smallpox. This disease, which, as the teller argues, had accepted the shape of a person, captured all local taiga camps and caused an epidemic. *"Earlier there was smallpox, and Shamanchikan here was the strongest shaman ... and smallpox was like a person. The elders told [us that] Shamanchikan began to fight with this Smallpox, this Smallpox became a bull [buck? elk?], and that one [the shaman] became a bear, as soon as he laid down — he dragged him off. And he [the shaman] sent his brother instead of himself. I mean, he could not [fight] anymore and told his brother: 'I have forgotten the cartridge belt there, go there and bring it back'. Well, he [=shaman's brother] came and saw bear's and a bull's traces. [He] thought – what are the traces doing here? Well, he died too. And at once this smallpox vanished as if by magic; at once nobody began to be ill. It was precise; I was convinced. It was long ago, here [the residents of] all the taiga camps died out because of smallpox — on the Olyokma [river] there was a taiga camp, all [of the people who lived there] died of this Smallpox. It vanished as if by magic, nobody began to be*

³⁸⁸ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev.

*ill at once. And this Smallpox has also said: “My son is buried there” — that what he said. When you go on the BAM [Baikal-Amur Mainline], there the rock stands, there is [he is] buried. And he said also: “Nobody must rustle there, otherwise it would be bad”. And it was precisely like this: all who built the BAM first, they all began to die at once. Here the first builders of BAM – ooh, such good people they were — sat and died at once, without any reason ... And here the noise, it shouldn’t be noisy, and here this railroad ... It shouldn’t be...and they built the road right in these places. It was Smallpox who buried [his son there] ... Well, it is a disease, but he had a human appearance”.*³⁸⁹

Evenks keep memories of shamans’ fights, sometimes using elk horns, and also recount shamans’ hostility to people who were engaged in similar magic activity — “sorcerers”. Trophim Pavlov told us a legend about an Evenki shaman and a “sorcerer” (presumably from another clan — the clan of Grigorievs), who squabbled. They gathered in a log cabin, sat down at a table and competed in the presence of witnesses. The “sorcerer” called his spirits and threw them, which were manifested as snakes, frogs, and lizards, out on a table at his rival. *“In reply, the shaman began to hit his drum and a bear came from the taiga. The Russian audience was frightened by the animal; they were ready to jump through the windows which were opened, as the shaman forced the owner [of the log cabin] to open [them] in advance. The bear trampled all these assistant spirits of the “sorcerer” with his paws’. The latter [=sorcerer] began to shout in fear: “Move away your shaman!” After that the “sorcerer” lived three days and died”.* In this legend, written down one hundred years before by S. M. Shirokogorov from the Evenks of Manchuria, now told by the old Evenk in the light of a fire on a taiga camp at the beginning of the 21st century, plots about fights between patrimonial shamans sending bear spirits at each other clearly appear.³⁹⁰

With great surprise Trophim Pavlov remembered the physical endurance of his uncle, who was a shaman: *“He was small, and he had a suit weighting twenty or thirty kilos. Gee, he put on the suit and danced and sang songs all night long! And simple people can't do this. I am, for example, a simple person, and when I put on the uncle's suit, I danced for ten minutes and that was all, I felt exhausted. Despite the fact that I was young and healthy ... And my uncle sang songs, performed shamanic rituals all night long. Sometimes he performed shamanic rituals for two or three days long”.*

³⁸⁹ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev.

³⁹⁰ Shirokogorov S. M. *Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva*... Ibid. Pp. 116–186.

Many Evenks believe in shamans' power, but at the same time some are afraid to address them, considering it unsafe for a person.

"I didn't address shamans. My mother said to me that nobody should address them, if you address once, then you'll suffer. She instructed: "Never address [shamans for help]". The shaman treats one person, and [at the same time] harms another. He or she will cure one person, and directs the disease to another one; this is the cost of their treatment. For example, [he or she] will cure someone from a family, and send another [member] of the same family to his [or her] place".³⁹¹ However Klara Abramova (born in 1962), assumes that only black shamans act so: "Black shamans, if someone addresses them, they treat, but someone will surely die from his family ... and white just treats".³⁹²

There is also an idea that black shamans, similar to vampires, can exhaust life from a person to survive: "If he is a shaman, for survival he needs to ... well, like vampires — he can eat his brother — it is dangerous".³⁹³ It should be noted that in traditional shamanism of the Amur Evenks there was no division between "white" and "black" shamans. Apparently, the emergence of such differentiation in certain cases is a consequence of borrowing or syncretization of non-Evenki beliefs.

All that is connected with shamans bears the impression of danger. Not only the shaman and those who address him or her, but also the one who makes the suit for him or her is exposed to it: "It [the shaman's suit] is done only by those to whom he [or she] will direct. [If the shaman] tells [somebody] to make these clothes, that [person] should make [them], and the same for the drum, it can't be made by any person. And after that, the [person] who did these clothes also has problems [because of the spirits]", — Valeriy Nikolaev notes. According to his evidence, in his mother's family before their death shamans requested that their bodies be burned so that their children did not inherit the gift of shamanism: "They instructed their children to burn them, their bodies — in order that their children would not suffer, in order that [the gift of shamanism] would not descend, because shamans were harassed by Soviet officials".³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev. Its notable that V. A. Nikolaev's mother, Maria Yakovleva (born in 1917 or 1918), came from a family of hereditary shamans, but she refused to be the a shaman, though she possessed, according to V. A. Nikolaev, the capability of clairvoyance (she predicted the future for people).

³⁹² Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Klara Abramova.

³⁹³ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev.

³⁹⁴ Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Valeriy Nikolayev.

The Evenks' cautious attitude toward everything that is connected with shamanism and their unwillingness to tell too much about shamans are caused by a traditional taboo on this subject and superstitious fears. For instance, during our conversation about shamanism with an Evenki women of Pervomayskoe village we asked them about current shamans. The women somewhat unwillingly talked about this subject and when the conversation had passed to the shaman living in the Iyengra village, the elderly woman Eudokia Sologon, she said gesturing and smiling: "Go there and ask him, because he has a small bell, he brings it to his ear and hears everything".³⁹⁵ Other women have confirmed it. The mention of "bell" is, possibly, a special case. In such cautious attitude towards verbosity, the traditional idea of a hidden connection between the word and the designated object remains. The word is some kind of auditory representation of the object, therefore pronouncing of the word is a way of contacting the designated phenomenon.

Alexander Andreyev (born in 1942) from Egilainkur clan, Gulya village, kept bright impressions about his grandfather, who was a shaman. Among his fellow villagers he also had a reputation of a person who also "practices shamanism a little", "heals", and "correct one's head". However Andreyev never considered himself to be a real shaman, firmly maintaining that he had the hereditary gift of shamanism, but it remained in vain because of personal unwillingness to accept his grandfathers' order. In his mature years A. F. Andreyev was burdened by the fact that he did not execute the will of his ancestors.³⁹⁶ He described his memories of his grandfather-shaman together with other memoirs in a small work called "The Call of My Ancestors". This text has been published previously³⁹⁷ and is republished in our book in the following section.

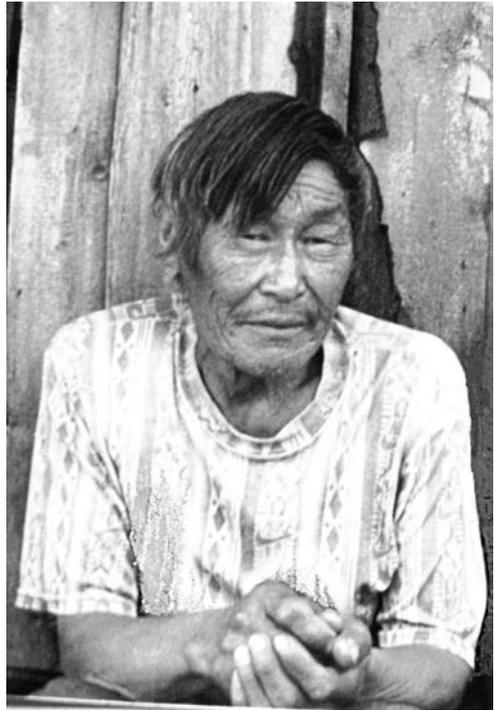
For the past few decades Evenks of the Amur region and Southern Yakutia made requests to Semyon Vasilyev (1938-2013), who was born in the Amur region and lived in Iengra village (Southern Yakutia) since 1966 – he kept contacts with the Amur Evenks for all these years. More known as Savey or Savelyi, this Evenki shaman was considered to be the most powerful shaman of Yakutia. Both Russian and foreign journalists as well as

³⁹⁵ Field research at Pervomayskoe village, 2002.

³⁹⁶ Field research at Gulya village, 2002.

³⁹⁷ Andreyev A.F. Zov moih predkov. Iz zhizni shamana iz roda Kaptuguarkun [The call of my ancestors. From the life of a shaman of the Kaptuguarkun clan] In: *Traditsionnaya kul'tura vostoka Azii* [Traditional Culture of East Asia]. Vol. 5. Blagoveshchensk, 2008. Pp. 300-306.

scientists wrote about Savey. Unfortunately, in many newspaper, journal and electronic publications, the identity of “grandfather Savey” is represented wrongly; his activity is mystified to the point of attributing him with the Olympic Committee’s choice of the Russian city Sochi as the venue of the Winter Olympic Games: allegedly in 2007 the shaman turned the vote outcome through spirits, as requested by Moscow. Such doubtful publications do not bring enough serious contributions to studying and understanding Evenki shamanism. We interviewed S. S. Vasilyev in 2002; that interview was published in Russian.³⁹⁸ Here we just include some notes on life, shamanic notions and practices of this Evenki shaman.



*Evenki shaman Semyon Vasilyev (Savey).
Iengra village (Yakutia), 2002.*

S. S. Vasilyev was born in 1938 in Ust-Urkima. His paternal grandfather was a shaman. In his youth the grandson helped his grandfather to perform shamanic rituals, listened to songs, and participated in rites. Semyon Vasilyev believed that he also inherited the destiny of the shaman from his grandfather — his grandfather, having departed to other world, promoted his “elect”. At a young age (about 25 years old) Vasilyev was suspected of shamanism by Soviet officials and arrested, being held under examination for a long time.

Really strong features of “shaman’s disease” became obvious by the age of 35 years old. Vasilyev began to hear the calls of spirits. He often

³⁹⁸ Zabiako A. P., Kobyzov R. A., Mazin A. I. Shamanizm evenkov Priamur'ya i Yuzhnoy Yakutii (sovremennoe sostoyanie) [Shamanism of the Evenks of Priamurye and Southern Yakutia (current state)]. In: *Traditsionnaya kul'tura Vostoka Azii* [Traditional culture of East Asia]. Vol. 4. Blagoveshchensk, 2002. Pp. 294-304.

lost consciousness, and in such a state he wandered on the taiga for a long time. Sometimes he suddenly lost control over himself while on a hunt and lost the way, and for a long time – up to two days – took the incorrect road, experiencing life-threatening circumstances. Alarmed relatives tried to prevent him from going into the taiga. Semyon Vasilyev connected the “disease” and the adversities accompanying it with intervention of the spirits in his life, which were testing the future shaman with these “tortures”. The spirits “tormented” the elect about 5 years long. Once, crossing a rough river in a forgetful state of mind, Vasilyev fell into a whirlpool, began to sink and survived, as he believed, only due to the help of the spirits. Having come back home, he slept for three days. After such obvious displays of “shaman’s disease” the council of the clan recognized that he must become a shaman. His first shaman’s suit was sewed of deer skin. Semyon began to practice shamanism, the “disease” passed, and since then mental disorders do not disturb the Evenk anymore.

In his psychological type S. S. Vasilyev was a quiet, balanced and judicious person. The shaman tried to live a traditional Evenki way of life: all his life he engaged in reindeer herding, spent a considerable quantity of time in taiga camps, and hunted in the taiga.

He had several assistants who helped him practice shamanism. Among them Oktyabrina Naumova (born in 1964) from the Nyurmogan clan played a major role; she had been helping the shaman at his request since 1996 until his death in 2013. Sometimes Savye also invited several old-aged Evenks to participate in shamanic rituals.

The circle of people asking Savye for help was quite extensive – Evenks from near and far settlements, and also Russians and Yakuts from Neryungri, Yakutsk and other neighboring places. Quite often the shaman had to abandon Iyengra, going sometimes quite far – for example, to Yakutsk. Most often the requests were traditional: people asked him to cure them or their relatives of some disease, to give them good luck for a hunt, etc. The duration and complexity of the rituals performed by the shaman depended on many circumstances. Sometimes the rituals were very long and took up to two days. There was not any strongly established procedure of payment: the people expressed their gratitude in any convenient form (food, clothes, money, etc.).

Treatment was the main sphere of Savye’s shamanic practice. At the same time he claimed that he was only an intermediary between patients and spirits: “the shaman doesn’t treat, spirits treat”. According to Savye,

the true healers of illnesses were the shaman's "grandfathers" and "grandmothers" in the Upper World. During a shamanic ritual the shaman evoked and gathered them, asking them for help. The council of shaman spirits inspected the patient, and then they told the shaman about the reasons for the disease and the means of treating it. To help the patient, during the healing ritual Savey "went" to the world of spirits, where he met both kind and evil spirits, sometimes fighting the latter. Savey believed that there are only benevolent spirits in the upper world, while the malevolent ones came from outside its borders.

There were also patron spirits that helped Savey: initially it was a deer, and then it was replaced by an elk, and not long before the shaman's death a bear spirit became his main patron spirit. In 2002, when we interviewed him, Savey was waiting for the moment when the spirits would tell him which bear is needed for making the shaman's suit and drum, where and when it has to be killed. He was sure that, after getting a bear assistant and a bear suit, he would reach the highest level of his shamanic abilities.

Two shaman mirrors attached to Savey's suit played a special role in the healing ritual. He called these mirrors *Chalbon* (Venus) and *Sigun* (Sun). It is known that mirrors are important elements of shaman equipment, which were widespread among many peoples.³⁹⁹ As mentioned before, the purpose of these mirrors varies in different shamanic traditions. It is supposed that they can serve as magic protectors against malevolent spirits or as embodiment of spirits, reflect the acts of the person, etc. Savey gave the following interpretation of their function: "During treatment the spirits look into the mirrors and treat the patient". Thus, in his shamanic practice the mirrors act in a very unusual way — as the means of illness visualization.

³⁹⁹ Vaynshteyn S. I. *Tuvinskoe shamanstvo* [Tyva Shamanism]. M., 1964; Grachyova G. N. Traditsionnye kul'ty nganasan [Traditional Cults of Nganasans]. In: *Pamyatniki kul'tury narodov Sibiri i Severa*. L., 1977; Zolotaryov A. M. Rodovoy stroy i religiya ul'chey [Clans and religion of the Ulchs]. Khabarovsk, 1939; Lopatin I. A. *Gol'dy amurskie, ussuriyskie i sungariyskie* [Golds of the Amur, Ussuri and Sungari Rivers]. Vladivostok, 1922; Lopatin I. A. Orochi — sosedi man'chzhur [Orochs — the neighbours of the Manchu] // *Vestnik Man'chzhurii*. [The Bulletin of Manchuria]. Harbin, 1925. № 8–10; Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid.; Manzhigeev I. A. *Buryatskie shamanisticheskie i doshamanisticheskie terminy* [Buryat shamanic and pre-shamanic terms]. M., 1971; Pekarskiy E. K., Vasil'ev V. N. *Plashch i buben yakutskogo shaman* [The coat and drum of the Yakut shaman]. SPb., 1910; Prokofyeva E. D. *Shamanskije kostyumy narodov Sibiri* [Shaman suits of the Siberian peoples]. In: *Religioznye predstavleniya i obryady narodov Sibiri v XIX — nachale XX veka*. L., 1971.

Savey knew that sometimes shamans are distinguished as “white” and “black” ones, but he did not consider this division important for Evenki shamanism. He divided shamans between those who are connected with the upper world and those who deal with the lower one. Despite the fact that he was an “upper world shaman” until he received the bear spirit, he “went” to *buni* (the Lower World) several times, and each time it was considered a great risk for him.



*Evenki shaman Semyon Vasilyev
during a shamanic ritual*

Not only the shaman’s capabilities and spirits’ help, but also the impersonal power *musun*, is important for a successful healing ritual. This force, according to Savey, is very important to the shaman and to people in general, “as it affects everything”. This power bears a positive charge, unlike an *eru*, which is the evil power, generating diseases, failures, and natural disasters (for example, floods). To the question of where the powers *musun* and *eru* come from, the shaman did not give a certain answer. He only explained that *musun* is connected with a shaman’s power and with kind spirits, while *eru* comes “from the air”. It is known that the idea of sacred power *musun* plays an important role in the religious views of Evenks of the Upper Amur. During shamanic rituals Evenki shamans put *musun* into a sacred carpet *namu*, a drum and a beater, and hunting amulets. It was received from the deity *Enekan Buga* for the revival of nature, reproduction of wild and domestic animals, health of clan members, etc.⁴⁰⁰

Rumors are travelling around Evenks about Savey’s magic abilities. Among them are stories of his supernatural skills and miracles. For instance, once in Yakutsk, the shaman was willing to show his abilities and

⁴⁰⁰ Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady evenkov-orochonov...* Ibid. Pp. 23, 83, 86, 91–93, 99.

induced sleep upon a Korean delegation during a meeting with them. Another time, in the presence of journalists and scientists he retrieved a big pebble from the bottom of the frozen Olyokma River in a hard frost – without splitting the ice. During our interview, S. S. Vasilyev and his assistant O. V. Naumova confirmed that these events really took place, and added some details to the story. Savey also reported his ability to turn usual paper into money. However, according to him, he never did it, as this, in his opinion was wrong to do, and only sorcerers carried out similar tricks.⁴⁰¹

Semyon Vasilyev was a bright example of the Evenki shaman: his activity, outlook, and lifestyle are quite typical for the Evenki shamanic tradition and for shamanism in general. The shaman Savey had powerful authority in his environment. It is worth noting, however, that he did not train a successor. Savey was not really anxious with the continuity problem, and he relied entirely upon the will of the spirits. He believed that the spirits would “choose” the new applicant sometime after he left for the other world, and they would also teach him or her.

6.3. Waiting for “the chosen by the spirits”

In general it is a wide group of people that maintain shamanic beliefs among Evenks of the Amur region and Southern Yakutia. In critical life circumstances (a disease, the death of a relative, etc.) many Evenks feel the need to resort to shamanic practice. However by the beginning of the 21st century almost all shamans have disappeared from Evenki settlements in the region. But there are some people, who to some extent correspond (as people around them consider) to the Evenki ideas of a shaman, but for personal or other reasons such possible candidates do not become “chosen by the spirits”.

For instance, a few years ago in Ust-Nyukzha, the village’s own female shaman might have appeared: a young woman Elena Maximova was a candidate to become a shaman. She was going to accept initiation; they had already sewed a shaman’s suit and made a drum for her, however she soon committed suicide. Some see medical intervention in the normal course of the so-called “shaman’s disease” as reason for the suicide.⁴⁰²

Arkady Nikolaev, who sometimes wanders alone in the taiga for many weeks without weapons or any inventory of products, spends nights at rocks with drawings, seeing some visions of future world catastrophic

⁴⁰¹ Field research at Iengra, 2002.

⁴⁰² Field research at Ust-Nyukzha village, 2011. Respondent: Tamara Fyodorova.



*Shamanic ritual performed by Svetlana Voronina.
Bomnak village (Zeyskiy area, Amur region), 2010.*

crashes, but does not accept shamanism for ideological reasons. Being young, he spent much time in geological expeditions, read the Bible and other books, and talked with people on religious subjects. From these experiences, he came to believe that shamanism is the dark side of the historical past.

Some Evenks suggest that in Ust-Nyukzha there is one more contender to become a shaman: it is a young woman, named Natalya Gabysheva, who shows signs of shaman's disease. There were several shamans in her clan, and her mother was foretold that in her family there will be a young shamaness. This gives Ust-Nyukzha Evenks a reason to hope that they will soon have a shaman.

In Bomnak village, a young Evenki poet Evgeniy Fyodorov also showed some features of shaman's disease, mystical visions, and some experience in performing shamanic rituals. But he has five children, and being a "professional" shaman working without salary is an unacceptable prospect for

him at the moment. Besides, his religious consciousness could be called syncretic, as it combines shamanic, Christian, theosophical and other notions.⁴⁰³ But the main problem is the gap in local shamanic practice. The last local shaman, Ilya Yakovlev, died more than thirty years ago (now his shaman suit is stored at the Museum of Local Studies of Zeya town). Before his death the old shaman wanted to transfer his responsibilities to his young successor, Valery Yakovlev. But during the rite of initiation there was an accident that caused the death of an old woman who participated in the rite, and the young shaman candidate was recognized by the court as deranged, spending almost the rest of his life in a psychiatric clinic.⁴⁰⁴

In recent years, there is some revival of national consciousness among the Amur Evenks and interest in national traditions, including shamanism. The gap in their local shamanic practice forces them to ask for help from shamans of other regions. For instance, the residents of the Bomnak village have invited the Evenki shamaness Svetlana Voronina⁴⁰⁵ from Buryatia several times already to perform shamanic rituals in their settlement. Born in Buryatia and having received shamanic initiation from a Buryat shaman, Svetlana Voronina performs shamanic rituals according to the Buryat shaman tradition, which considerably differs from the Evenki one. Nevertheless, we observed the local Evenks' enthusiastic interest in the activity of this shamaness and their energetic participation in the shamanic rituals she performed when carrying out field research in Bomnak in 2010.

Thus, there is quite a difficult situation with shamanism for the Evenks of the Amur region. Most of them act to some extent as carriers of shamanic beliefs: they recognize shamanism as special religious institute, maintain belief in the supernatural abilities of shamans, and if necessary, address (or are ready to address) a shaman for help. On the other hand, the line of shamanic continuity is broken now. It is clear, that in the case of critical circumstances, the faith in shamans and the need for shamanic rituals will bring somebody from the circle of Evenks (or neighboring Russians, or Yakuts, or Buryats) forward – somebody with initiative, ready to dedicate themselves to shaman duties. Will the organic integrity of doctrinal and ritual tradition remain in this case? Or, on the other hand, are the agreement with and strict adherence to tradition so important for shamanism? It is more important that people believe in shamans' authenticity.

⁴⁰³ Field research at Bomnak village, 2010. Respondent: Eugeniy Fyodorov.

⁴⁰⁴ Field research at Bomnak village, 2010. Respondent: Rimma An.

⁴⁰⁵ See our interview with this shamaness at: Zavadskaya E.A. Sinkreticheskie tendentsii v sovremennom sibirskom shamanizme: interv'yu s shamankoy Svetlanoy Voroninoy [Syncretic trends in modern Siberian shamanism: Interview with the shamaness Svetlana Voronina] In: *Religiovedenie [Study of Religion]*. Blagoveschensk. 2015. Vol. 2. Pp. 148-161.

Appendix

Alexander Andreev

The Call of My Ancestors: About the Shaman from the Kaptuguarkun Clan

The keeper of memory

In July, 2003 a small expedition of three scholars — A. I. Mazin, R. A. Kobyzov and A. P. Zabiylko — drifted along the Tungir and Olyokma rivers for the purpose of collecting ethnographic material and data on rock paintings. The Evenk-Orochons had been wandering recently along these two and other nearby rivers of the Amur region. Our small group in two rubber boats started our journey from the Tupik village in the Chita region. About 200 kilometers further downstream there was the first settlement — Gulya, consisting of about 10 economies and a little more than 20 inhabitants. For the majority of the year, this village is almost cut off from the “Continent”; motor boats, which occasionally reach these places, are the only seasonal transport here. The products and other necessary items are delivered only on the winter road. After five days of traveling, already on the way to Gulya, we met two Russians fishing on the river. We learned from them that there is a remarkable person in this small village, an Evenk named Alexander Andreev. They told us that this man from time to time “treats people without drugs” and remembers some things from old customs. The small house of Andreev stood directly on the high river bank, but he lived (out of, probably, a habitual preference for nature) in a



*Alexander Fyodorovich Andreev
(Gulya village, 2003)*

separate summer building. Alexander Andreyev appeared to be a friendly and open person, and communication with him achieved many interesting insights.

The next summer, R. A. Kobyzov and A. P. Zabiyako went to the Amazar River where, in the words of A. F. Andreyev, there should be interesting archaeological sites. They once again visited this old Evenk to specify some details of the forthcoming route. At the end of the conversation, Alexander Fyodorovich happened to mention that he recorded his memories of the past. After we requested that he show the text, he answered that the manuscript is stored in the taiga, in his winter hunting cabin, and that it is only possible to reach when the snow falls. Then he promised to send it to us later. Frankly speaking, we did not really believe there was such a manuscript. More than a year passed, and suddenly, in November, 2005 we received a letter. In the envelope there was a school notebook with text written by a ball pen with the characteristic name — “The Call of My Ancestors”. A. F. Andreyev⁴⁰⁶, a resourceful autodidact with merely four classes of education, consolidated his memoirs in the taiga backwoods in the most interesting text, which we now publish with minimal editorial editing, just omitting the fragments which do not relate to the history and religion of Evenks.

A little about myself

[I] was born in 1942 on January 10 on the Urka River in a poor Orochon family. [My] father was a born hunter, [my] mother — from the Kaptuguarkun clan. And our clan is [called] Egilainkunl. Our clan was [=consisted] of eight people (and now they remain so). Our clan lives in Tynda and [Ust-]Urkima – these are my relatives, and [my] father married a shaman’s daughter (the daughter of Lizard). And here I had to become a shaman (as my grandfather ordered), but for some reason I can’t dare [to do this], afraid of something. It seems to me — they go on their legs to me, the dreams come [to me] — the dreams call [me] somewhere, [they] attract [me] with their fingers — I don’t know what will happen — [it’s] likely, I will die soon. And [my] grandfather becomes angry in a dream that I didn’t execute his order. But I can’t, it is simply heavy to me to bear such a

⁴⁰⁶ First published in: Andreyev A.F. Zov moih predkov. Iz zhizni shamana iz roda Kaptuguarkun [The call of my ancestors. From the life of a shaman of the Kaptuguarkun clan]. In: *Tradicionnaya kul'tura vostoka Azii* [Traditional Culture of East Asia]. Vol.5. Blagoveshchensk, 2008. Pp. 300-306.

burden. Sometimes it turns out ok, and at times not. And here before you I can't plow up [my] soul — it is forbidden ... I am still heavy at heart if I remember my grandfather. I remember his dialect, gestures, and gait. He was always dressed in leather [=buckskin] jacket sewed by his wife Aksinya – she was my grandmother. In the summertime — in June, July, August and September — there were appropriately-sized *olochi*⁴⁰⁷ of well-processed skins [taken] from elk's legs; the trousers were sewed from strong fabric. His hair was red (light). [He was] quiet, didn't smoke, didn't drink. He had a saying: “don't drink wine — you'll burn down”. And it is right ... Coming into a rawhide tent, he sat down on his place, having crossed his legs [“Indian style”]. And then spoke in a whisper: “*Chaya unkukul*” (“Pour the tea, wife”). Upon recollection of my grandfather, his clan was rich, [they] had reindeer, hunted for furs — squirrels, sables (my grandfather said that at the time sables also could be found along the Amur). The sable cost much: it was possible to buy a house and a cow [for one skin]. The Russian merchants on reindeer bought up the sables (they had Orochons as guides, [as at the same time] they [the Orochons] were their farmworkers). Merchants brought flour, sugar, tea, matches, tobacco, and soap. All this was exchanged for furs. [They] also brought alcohol, [which they] received by smuggling it from China. The merchants went to China themselves, [and] exchanged [this] for furs. How much gold left — could not be counted. [My] grandfather didn't drink. He thought if he would drink, then the spirits would turn away from him.

His clan consisted of 20 people (women and men, not counting children). [He] had two wives (my mother is his daughter from the second wife). His homeland is Kuduchi – a natural mineral lick is situated there. The name of the river Kudechi is wrong, distorted [by the cartographers].

His native places — springs, the rivers Amazar [and] Ushmur. *Davan*⁴⁰⁸ — *Derinda kovykhita* — is on the Amazar, on the river bank. The name of this rock *Onyon* — from Orochon “The rock — the punishing/ordering⁴⁰⁹ drawing”. All hunters went to *Onyon* before hunting. According to our beliefs, if the rock reddened, there will be some game [caught]. If the rock didn't redden, and grew white, the hunters will get nothing. There was such a belief in this rock. And my grandfather went to pray at *Onyon*.

⁴⁰⁷ *Olochi* is a Far-Eastern hunters' footwear made of buckskin (usually of elk).

⁴⁰⁸ The toponim; *Davan* in Evenki means “mountain pass”.

⁴⁰⁹ In the text the Russian word *наказывающий* is used, which can be translated in these two ways.

Shaman's clothes

I remember the shaman clothes of [my] grandfather. The gown was sewed from soft buckskin. It was curried from a young animal: very well smoked — like suede. The figures of animals – a bear, a sable, snakes, worms, Manchurian deer, an elk, a reindeer, a lynx, hares – were attached to the eyelets or sewn to the gown. And all this was shaped by a good smith. Figures were up to ten centimeters [long], the copies of animals — precisely lifelike. When my grandfather began to execute his dancing, all clothes rattled in step to the dance, as to the sound of music.

He put on [his] legs light footwear — high fur boots painted by alder. In spring they removed the bark from young trees and submerged it in hot water, putting the skin there for one day. When the skin became red, it was processed and sewed.

The shaman put a beautiful cap on his head sewed as if from feathers. [The threads of] beads even covered his eyes. These threads [were] like strings, but only covered with skin pieces manufactured from skins of squirrels, a kolonok [Siberian weasel], or an ermine.

Grandfather's gown was completely covered with figures of animals in front and behind — from the shoulders to the high fur boots.

He had two drums. The first drum was tensed on the rings-hoops made of a birch, therefore [they were] light. The drum was covered with a thin skin of young Manchurian deer. Fur to the top — like a drum. The internal skin was tightly stretched from above, which gave the main sound. The drum was kept in a big fur cover, [which was] was tied by leather thongs. Before a shamanic ritual it is dried thoroughly near the fire in a rawhide tent. The second [drum] was naked, on its rim small [figures of] animals were attached with rings: all the animals that live in the forest, there were even birds.

It is possible to begin to dance. Here the shaman had such gear!

[I] also forgot about the beater. [Its] Length [was] 45 centimeters, [it was] made of a wooden board.

The conversation about my grandfather

We lived separately from my grandfather, in our own family. [My] elder sister – Sonya – was [still] alive. There was [also] my father' mother (my grandmother); she was about 68 years old. The elder brother – Vasily, after him — Volodya. I don't remember [my] other brothers. I know that there were four of them. They [all] died. My father had a brother named Sashka — [he was] younger than him. My mother died when I was five

years old. My father married for the second time, Maximova Maria Vasilyevna [was her name]. [He] brought her from the Guli [village] (the Ekderemkul clan), [which] this clan still exists, [and] there are many of them — Maximovs. So she became my stepmother.

We lived near Northern Communication: Dyos — Dyapibdyak. Big Kuli — Small Kuli, Sonnechnyi. In 1950s they panned for gold there. That was my homeland. My father was seriously ill: something was wrong with his head. So we often went to my grandfather for healing. We had reindeer: twelve heads [=animals]. [The way] from Dyos to Kuduchi was approximately 70 or 80 kilometers. Once in the summer, in June, my father got up early and told [my] mother [=stepmother]: “Let’s go to visit grandfather⁴¹⁰, [he] calls [me], I saw him in a dream, gather [your things] ... My head strongly hurts,” my father complained, “let’s go.”

We packed [our reindeer] and left. We also had riding reindeer. Father went ahead, conducting my reindeer, [my] mother went behind with other reindeer; two dogs – Sable and Katya – ran ahead. [We] moved in the evenings: there was an intolerable heat in the afternoon. We stopped at noon, released [our] reindeer and cooked dinner. About five [o’clock] we left again. We moved for six days in such a way. On the seventh day in the morning my father told [me]: “Let’s walk forward, and Mother [with the reindeer] will catch up [to us]”. We drank tea and went. My father knew where Grandfather’s settlement [was situated]. Having passed seven or eight kilometers, I saw [my] grandfather’s camp near a hill — there was a big birchbark tent, near which my cousin Sonka ran. “*Emadera wound!*” (“Guests are coming!”) — she cried. My grandma ran out from a tent, began to make a fire and to put a copper teapot over it. My father and I came into the tent. My grandfather sat near the smokefire.⁴¹¹ He got up, shook my father’s hands and said loudly: “*Dorovo, avuskan!*” — and also embraced my father. It meant: “Good fellow, you will be our guest, my little son-in-law”.

Then my grandfather turned to me and, smiling, embraced me, stroked my head and said: “*Nakakan* (my Evenki name is Nakakan), *bidekel a gorokuna angadyree!*” (“Live for many years!”). He laughed again and put me on his knees. Meanwhile my grandma boiled the tea. [She] brought the teapot into the tent, sat down at her place, near the table with four legs, and began to pour us some tea. My grandfather asked [us] where our mother was, my father answered that she was behind [us], [and] would arrive soon. There was

⁴¹⁰ Here it means “your father”.

⁴¹¹ Here it means an open fire inside a tent; it is called smokefire here, as it usually makes a lot of smoke inside the dwelling.

delicious food on the table: lump sugar, butter, white bread. I became puzzled: I didn't know what to take. My grandfather smiled and said: "Eat". I gnawed on the sugar, washing it down with tea, spread the butter on the bread and ate, ate... (We had almost no products, only meat; we lived in poverty). After about three hours my mother came on reindeer. While my mother had tea with my grandma, my grandfather helped my father to set up a tent. My grandfather and grandma explained that [their] sons left to hunt in mineral soil, took away all [their] reindeer, and the three of them remained there together with their granddaughter [in the taiga camp]. [They said that their] sons would not arrive soon, [but] when they would catch an animal. "Stay! And you (my grandfather looked at me) play with Son'ka". I was seven years old then, and when I was eight [years old] I began to study in Guli; I was sent to a boarding school [which was situated there]. We arrived from Chichayka in 1951, and my father entered the kolkhoz in Guli. [We] lived [at]: Zhanna, Uteni, Kovali, Kolokol'nyi, Potayka; [all these] are small settlements. Sometimes we lived in Amazar: my father handed over furs there. Earlier there was a mine in Big Kuli, [they] panned for gold there, and there were many people. There was another mine 7 or 8 kilometers [from this place], Small Kuli (Solnechnyi). And now everything was taken out, there are no houses, not to mention settlements; the roads were quite good, and now, likely, everything is overgrown [with plants].

... But let's return to my trip which I'm telling about. In the evening my grandmother called us to have tea. My parents gathered quickly, and all of us went to visit the elders. My sister and I began to play with each other, while the adults came into the tent. My grandfather shouted [from the tent] that we [should] come [inside] to have tea too. We ran into the tent. My grandfather put me on his knees again and, addressing my grandma, asked in a whisper: "*Arakikanme ganakat!*" ("Serve the wine [=alcohol] to the guests!"). My grandma quickly went off to her things, and returned in about five minutes, carrying a bottle in her hands. She sat at her place and gave the bottle to my grandfather. My grandfather mixed the alcohol with water and put it on a little table. A general conversation in our native language began. [Men] spoke about life, about hunting — where [they] went, where [they] hunted, where [they] will hunt, and women [talked] about their cares — about skin processing and sewing the high fur boots and fur jackets. My grandfather was not talkative. [He] constantly agreed with my father, listening to his stories mindfully. By the end of the meal my grandfather cheerfully laughed and spoke: "[In case] we will be healthy, we will look for animals!" — and laughed again. My grandfather has a Russian name Semyon, but he didn't know any Russian

words. [He] talked to Russians with gestures and facial expressions. When [the authorities] began to prohibit him from practicing shamanism, he moved down the Amazar [River] to the Pokrovka settlement (earlier there was a border [between Russia and China]) and lived near the border with his family. Yet the policemen found his taiga camp. They had a guide — my grandfather's son Andrey (that was him who fetched the policemen to take away his father). [The policemen] took away his family — my grandma, his sons and the nephew of my grandfather, Pavel. [The police] carried [them all] to Moscow. [They] held [them all under arrest] for some time and [then] released [them]. But my grandfather escaped: he hid near the taiga camp. During the search [the policemen] didn't find any shaman clothes — not a dressing gown, or a drum, or a beater: everything was hidden and remained in another place. The raised warehouse, *kolbo*, was made on trees, similar to a log house, covered with bark on columns 7 or 8 meters high. There was a ladder. My grandfather had many of such warehouses for storage of products — flour, sugar, and winter clothes — [they were situated] in quiet places, on the Northern side of big hills. Even people didn't pass there. He had a lot of food; he exchanged it for furs — squirrels and sables. He sold meat in small settlements, at [railway] stations Zhanna, Uteni, Chichayka, Kolokol'nyi. The father of my grandfather was a powerful shaman (upon recollection of my father — he knew all this as they lived together). The wives were taken from other clans. [People] lived separately with [their] clans. But if an elk was killed, then [they] shared [the meat] with all [members of the collective] (the sharing was called *nimadyvkat* — presented).

... So my grandfather had such a fate. My grandma told [me] that he began to go crazy. [He] began to dig the soil with his hands, to sing at nights, and, upon recollection of my grandmother, he died in terrible agony. And his shaman clothes were burned by my uncle. [He] threw a dressing gown, two drums, high fur boots, and a beater into a fire; he threw into the fire everything that was there. Other shamans told him [to do this]: they were in Tynda, [Ust-]Urkima and [Ust-]Nyukzha. Look for them — likely, some of them are still alive. [They are] old, of course. In 1972 I saw one [of them], but I didn't communicate with him, his name was Uncle¹² Kolya. He [was] a kind of relative to my aunt through her husband. By the way, my aunt Dunya (this is

⁴¹² In the Russian language, the word *дядя* ('uncle') is used for naming or addressing a man who is older than the speaker and is usually a relative, or neighbor, or is somehow closely related to the speaker. It is a sign of the speaker's informal, but at the same time, respectful and friendly attitude towards a person.

her Russian name) is the daughter of my grandfather-shaman, his blood daughter; her Evenki name is Tugso. You can find out more, she lives in Tynda. Her surname is Sologon Eudoxia Semyonovna, she remembers her father very well and knows the places I spoke about. Generally, she will tell everything to you if she is alive. Now she has her family, two sons; they lived with her in [the kolkhoz] “Zarya”. She knows well where Onyon [is situated]. Since her childhood she lived there, she grew up in the woods. She was taken away by the Sogolons – I was there when she was stolen [by them and taken] to Kuduchi – I remember [this and] I saw [this] well. There came the family — the owner [=the head of the family], his wife, and two sons. They were matchmaking Dunya with their eldest son, and the next day [they] stole [her], hid in the woods, and then took [her] away. They were on reindeer — about twenty reindeer were with them. [They] left through the wood from Amazar to the Amur region, to the kolkhoz “Zarya”. There was no railroad then, only road vehicles went to Tynda. And later the BAM [=Baikal-Amur Mainline] was built. But let’s return to my grandfather-shaman again. My grandfather was fair, [he] was generous and not greedy. He shared [his stocks] with close people, and sold the others flour, sugar, vegetable oil and Chinese alcohol in iron barrels. The Chinese dragged this alcohol across the border themselves. [Then they] exchanged [it] for gold. There was a checkpoint in Pokrovka settlement.

My grandfather had a talisman, I remember it. A beautiful box sewed of birchbark — [such boxes are called] *muruchun*. Two white titmouses sewed from white swan skins and saturated with a St. John's Wort smell (by the way, it grows on scatterings [of stones], but not everywhere). *Muruchun* was stored together with the shaman clothes, separately from other things. [It consisted of] pieces of birchbark [that were] sewed [together]. My grandfather had an old Berdan rifle. He forged machetes himself. The blades [were] forged from steel. The bows — with arrows one or two meters [long] — were put on elks’ tracks. They went to [kill] a bear in the den in winter. They went with blades, killed an animal with them [=with blades].

When [they] killed a bear, they brought [the game] into the camp, shared the meat and the skin with all [members of the collective] equally (it was called *nimat* in Evenki), removed the skin from the bear’s head, cooked it in a copper, then continued peeling off the meat for a long time — [until] there was only the skull. It was hung up on a long pole in the direction of the sunrise, and the eyes were hidden behind tree notches.

The feast began in the same day's evening. All [members of] the clan – both children and adults, and elders – were convened. For this purpose the special dish was cooked — they mixed brain, liver and kidneys. They cooked the whole tub of meat. The full big tub *chuman* was put in the center of the tent; [everybody] sat down around this *chuman* and began to eat. The first [person] tried [the dish] and shouted “Kuk-kuk-kuk!”, and all [the rest] repeated afterwards: “Kuk-kuk-kuk!”. And then they began to speak loudly: “We didn't kill you, it was other people who killed you”. Neither laughter, nor smiles — all were serious. So in such a way the festival proceeded. Of course, there was no wine [=alcohol], they drank dense tea.

It was forbidden to sit down, and for women — even to go through the place of the shaman [in a tent] — [that was the place] where he slept, ate and practiced shamanism. Swans, geese and titmouses were the kind spirits of my grandfather-shaman, while a bear and a wolf were the angry ones.

When my grandfather began to practice shamanism, he didn't talk to anybody; it was forbidden. Another tent, where he would practice shamanism, was put separately in a new place. They killed the fattest [domesticated] reindeer for the spirits, made a platform like a plank bed, and put the killed reindeer there. The fence is made of columns, [and] flying [figures of] swans are staying [tacked on sticks] inside. It was forbidden to enter there, this was allowed only for the shaman's sons, Vasily and Anatoly. And he [=my grandfather] respected my father very much. He told [my father]: “You will kill many animals”; and my father caught many animals and furs.

Having stayed with my grandfather for about ten days, we came back to our place, to our site again. He [=my grandfather] supplied us with food.

[In the past Evenks used to go] to the rock Onyon by reindeer, and asked spirits to help to get somebody [=to kill the game]. And they didn't go [there] in vain — it was forbidden; they went there [only] out of need. But, likely, it helped. My father told me: “Go [there], ask for good luck”. But I was too young, and I didn't go there. “When you grow up — my father ordered — surely go [there]”. But I left there forever for Gulya. And I haven't visited the rock. And I should do it. I regret not going there.

A small narration — but not a real story. The name of the river in Russian — Pidzhak, in Evenki — *Dyapivdyak* (man-eating bear). Why such a name was given to a small river — *Dyapivdyak*? *Once there lived a man: he was a saint, he was very strong and he was a very good hunter; he caught a lot of animals. Once in autumn he found a bear's den. And he has a friend, who was a big boaster. So his friend came to the man and he told the boaster that he*

had found a den, that they need to prepare to catch the bear in its den. But the boaster wanted to get [the bear from the den] immediately. So he took a bear spear and went alone to the den. He closed the exit to the den as they usually do and [when the bear appeared] positioned the spear and injured it. But the bear snatched the spear out of his hands and killed him. The place where it happened was called *Dyapivdyak* — *Pidzhak*⁴¹³ in Russian⁴¹⁴.

All Evenks were afraid of my grandfather, [they] were afraid [of him] very much, [they] spoke: “*Illekun so – uru shaman*” (“The Lizard [=the shaman's nickname] is a bad person”). My grandfather died at Kovykhita, in a tent; [it happened] in the summer. As my grandma told me, their son, [my] uncle Vasya, buried him; my aunt wasn't [there], [as] she lived in Tynda in the kolkhoz “Zarya”. Nowadays all [of them] have died, except my aunt; it seems [to me] she is still alive.

When they peeled a skin from a killed elk or Manchurian deer, they did like so: they cut down four sticks about 10 or 15 centimeters long, stuck their ends into the snow or soil, smearing the ends with blood. They put them in four corners. The skin of a bear wasn't shaken on the street, or on the wind — it was forbidden, [considered to be] a sin.

Shamanism of my grandfather

His healing [ritual was performed] by means of his spirits: “*When it becomes warmer, bring me shamanic clothes. I saw a bad dream. They were pulling out my organs, catching me, cutting me, and swallowing me all the night long. Dress me*”. And he remembered how he shot well in the past.

As he was going to practice shamanism, my grandfather instructed: “Kill the fattest reindeer, the spirits ask [you to do this]”. They killed the reindeer and made a warehouse or a little table of thin trees and put the whole reindeer together with its skin there. My grandfather's sons prepared two figures of life-like flying swans made of dry pine boards according to his instructions. These figures were tacked to the poles that were stuck near the killed reindeer. The plot of about ten meters [in diameter] was fenced with poles. Such plots, probably, have remained in the taiga to the present day.

⁴¹³ The distorted name (*Dyapivdyak* sounds similar to Russian *pidzhak* - ‘jacket’).

⁴¹⁴ The text given in italics was originally written in Evenki. It was translated into Russian by Elena Kolesova from the Buta clan (the Bomnak village, Zeyskiy area). We thank her for this translation. It is obvious that A.F. Andreyev used Evenki language intentionally in his manuscript: for self-protection in the case of taboo subjects and maintaining Evenki secrets. See the Evenki text in: Andreyev A.F. *Zov moih predkov...* Ibid.

Chapter 7

Traditional Evenki Culture in the works of Amur Writers

(Gr. A. Fedoseev, Vl. G. Letsik)

The literature on Evenks is an integral part of Far-East science and fiction ethnography.⁴¹⁵ Inspired by wondrous Far-Eastern nature and images of its taiga inhabitants, Russian travelers gave birth to artistic description of the Far East (N. M. Przhevalskiy, S. V. Maksimov, D. I. Staheev, A. V. Eliseev). Having the gift of artistic vision and an admiration for far-eastern lands, N. M. Przhevalskiy had a great impact on his followers – N. A. Baikov and V. K. Arsenyev. In the 1910s-1940s they studied far-eastern nature and taiga inhabitants: Arsenyev in the Ussuriysk Region, and Baikov in Manchuria.

A writer who addresses native tribal life is similar to an ethnographer: they both observe, compare and generalize. However, where a scientist relies on exact scientific data and places them at the center of his or her conclusions, an artist is guided by the magnitude of emotions, associations, and images. At times a scientist, secretly a poet at heart, yields to artistic temptation and gives philosophic and romantic commentaries that are evoked by the object of study or by the need to popularize a scientific text (e.g., «popular travel reviews» by

⁴¹⁵ See, e.g. in: Przhevalskiy N.M. Opyt statisticheskogo opisaniya i voennogo obozreniya Priamurskogo kraja [An Essay on the Statistical Description and War Review of the Amur Region] (1863). Rukopis' AGO RF F. 13. Op. 1. D. 14. L. 91, 92, 94 ob. Grave V.V. Kitaytsy, koreytsy i yaponsy v Primorskoy oblasti [Chinese, Koreans and Japanese in Primorye region]. In: Trudy komandirovannoy po Vysochayshemu poveleniyu Amurskoy ekspedicii. Vol. 11. SPb., 1912; Nevelskoy G.I. Podvigi russkikh morskikh ofitserov na Kraynem Vostoke Rossii. 1849-1855. [The Feats of the Russian Marine Officers on the Edge East of Russia. 1849-1855]. M., 1947; Shrenk L. Ob inorodtsah Amurskogo kraja [About indigenous peoples of the Amur Region]. Vol. 2. SPb., 1899; Zabiyaiko A.P. Russkie v usloviyakh dalnevostochnogo frontira: etnicheskii opyt XVII-nachala XVIII vv. [Russians in the conditions of the Far-Eastern Frontier: the ethnic experience of 17th and the beginning of 18th centuries]. In: Zabiyaiko A.P., Kobyzov R.A., Ponkratova L.A. *Russians and Chinese: ethnic-migration processes in the Far East*. Blagoveschensk, 2009. Pp. 11–24.

V. K. Arsenyev, «stories of an archaeologist» by A. P. Derevyanko⁴¹⁶, «stories about the quest of rock carvings» by A. P. Okladnikov⁴¹⁷ etc).

To be successful in ethnographic fiction the following issues are of primary importance: charismatic writing personality, profound understanding of his or her own culture, openness to other cultures, previous experience in cross-cultural contacts, and deep awareness of the research field.⁴¹⁸ Another important factor is psychological authenticity of the object portrayed.

Thus, V. K. Arsenyev introduced the image of Dersu Usala – an artistically generalized, but simultaneously vivid image of an “indigene” (according to the use of this word in the beginning of the 20th century) who was a real Nanai guide with his animistic views, peculiar taiga ethics, and certain speech peculiarities. Due to the sincere and cute Dersu, soviet and foreign readers were attracted to the Far East and the lifestyle of its minority peoples. The 1940s (right after Arsenyev's sudden death) were years of peak interest in Arsenyev's books. The scholarly background pertaining to native peoples of the Amur was in the following state: pre-revolution works of the encyclopedist-immigrant Shirokogorov were hidden deep in archive⁴¹⁹ – other researchers' reports ended up there as well.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁶ Derevyanko A.P. *Ozhivshie drevnosti: rasskazy arheologa* [Revived Antiquities: The Tales of An Archaeologist]. M., 1986. 240 p.

⁴¹⁷ Okladnikov A. P. *Olen' Zolotyie roga* [Deer the Golden Antlers]. Khabarovsk, 1989.

⁴¹⁸ Zabayako A.A. *Mental'nost dalnevostochnogo frontira: kul'tura i literatura Russkogo Harbina* [The Mentality in the Far-Eastern Frontier: Culture and Literature of Russian Harbin]. Novosibirsk, 2016. 447 p.

⁴¹⁹ See, e.g. in: Shirokogorov S. M. *Opyt issledovaniya osnov shamanstva u tungusov* [Experience of research on Shamanism foundations among the Tungus]. 1919; Shirokogorov S.M., Shirikogorova E.N. *Otchyot o poezdakh k tungusam i orochonom Zabaykal'skoy oblasti v 1912 i 1913 gg.* [The report on the travels to the Tungus and Orochons of Transbaikalia in 1912 and 1913]. In: *Izvestiya Russkogo Komiteta dlya izucheniya Sredney I Vostochnoy Azii*, Series II. SPb., 1914. № 3

⁴²⁰ Orlov. *Amurskie orochony* [Amur Orochons] In: *Vestnik Imperatorskogo Russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* [Bulletin of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society]. *Kniga IV. Chast' 21*. № 6. SPb., 1857; Shimkevich P.P. *Sovremennoe sostojanie inorodtsev Amurskoj oblasti i bassejna Amguni* [Contemporary state of natives of the Amur region and the Amgun basin]. *Trudy Priamurskogo otdela IRGO* [The Works of the Amur Department of the Empire Russian Geographic Society], Khabarovsk, 1895. Vol. 1. Iss. 1; Arsenyev V. K. *Shamanstvo u sibirskih inorodtsev i ih animisticheskie vozreniya na prirodu* [Shamanism of the Siberian indigenous peoples and their animistic views of nature]. In: *Vestnik Azii* [Asia Bulletin]. Harbin, 1916. № 38–39. Kn. 2; Yel'nitskiy K. *Inorodtsy Sibiri I sredneaziatskih vladeny Rossii. Etnograficheskie ocherki* [Natives of Siberia and Middle-Asian territories of Russia. Ethnographical sketches]. Second ed. SPb., 1908. P. 50.

G. M. Vasilevich started her active expedition work but her major publications would appear only at the end of the 1960s.⁴²¹

The 1960s were marked by a number of historians and archaeologists who entered the Russian science to discover the connections between the Amur native people's culture and the most ancient cultures of the Amur (A. P. Derevyanko, A. I. Mazin, B. S. Sapunov). In light of the substantial mass consciousness of the epoch of “great victories”, “epoch accomplishments”, total Russification facilitated the process of forming the “great community” of Soviet People, and the issue of minority peoples – “the others” – was moved to the sphere of anecdotes. At that time Grigoriy A. Fedoseev broke into the field, where the leading characters of his captured narrations were elderly Evenks who had never read a single book in their lives. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the Fedoseev’s books were published in many thousand editions and republished – children and adults alike were carried away by those books.

G. A. Fedoseev was born at the turn of 20th century in the Stavropol Region (1899, Kardonikskaya Cossack village). Since childhood he was fascinated by mountains and romantic adventures. The future researcher grew up in a region where the ways of the Russian population had intermixed with the multicultural population of the Caucasus for centuries (Russians, Ukrainians, Kabardians, Balkars, Ossets, Armenians, Greeks, Karachis, Circassians, Chechens etc.).⁴²² First, Fedoseev went to a local village



Grigoriy Fedoseev

⁴²¹Vasilevich G.M. Evenkiyaskaya ekspeditsiya (predvaritel'nyi otchyot ekspeditsii 1947 g.) [Evenki expedition (preliminary report on the expedition kept in 1947)]. KSIE, 1949. Vol. 5; Vasilevich G. M. Po kolhozam dzhugdyrskih evenkov [On the kolkhozes of the Dzhugdyr Evenks] In: *Izvestiya Vsesoyuznogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*. 1950. № 2. S. 163—173; Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki (XVIII — nachalo XX vv.)* [Evenks. Historical and ethnographic sketches (XVIII — the beginning of XX centuries)]. L., 1969.

⁴²²Belousov V.S., Panin A.N., Chihin V.V. *Etnicheskiy atlas Stavropol'skogo kraya* [Ethnic atlas of Stavropolskiy region]. Stavropol, 2008.

school and then to a gymnasium⁴²³, read a lot and became interested in adventure literature (his favorite writers were *Fenimore* Cooper, Stevenson, and Jules Verne). As stated in the epigraphs to his books, he was familiar with and adored the works of N. M. Przheval'kiy. In 1926 he earned a degree in geodetic engineering; he spent 30 years of his life on work that meant everyday risk and life-long travel. Kola Peninsula, East Sayans, Transbaikalia, Caucasus, Ural, West Siberia with all the three Tunguses, near-Okhotsk Region, Far East were among the list of Fedoseev's accomplishments. As Fedoseev himself acknowledged in one of his last letters, he became a writer on the Zeya River, where he met the Amur Evenks and learned their taiga skillfulness and nomadic traditions. The Amur Evenks' lifestyle that was scrupulously embodied and poetically praised in Fedoseev's works became a real discovery for literature and, most importantly, for ethnographic science.

The materials for his narratives were "...personal diaries, impressions and memories of my fellow-travelers – the characters of the narrative. When describing events, I tried to feature the true-to-life setting – our working conditions. I did not have to imagine situations because the reality was too full of events to add something to it or exaggerate it" (from «Death Will Have to Await Me»). Fedoseev worked every day – no matter the snow, rain or foul weather. He was a born writer.

In his books Fedoseev reflected on the events of his six-year adventures in the near-Okhotsk region (1948-1954). The narrative "The Trail of Ordeals" (1958) became a genre prototype for all "Evenki stories" following it. An instinct for writing provided Fedoseev with the most suitable artistic form: the reader together with the narrator – the author's alter ego – embarks upon a *journey* full of dangers, adventures, and temptations. The end of the narrative "The Trail of Ordeals" is not the end of travels, which will last for the whole epic of Evenki life. The narrative "The Evil Spirit of Yambuya" (1966) is its sequel and "The Last Campfire" (1968) is its symbolic end.

The polysemic title «The Trail of Ordeals» is mixed not only with different meanings but also different ethnic and cultural concepts. The trail is a «concentrate» of mental precepts and ethnic and religious views of Evenks. From the very first pages of the narrative, *the image of the trail* turns into a linguo-cultural and linguo-religious concept of Fedoseev's

⁴²³ A gymnasium is a type of school with a strong emphasis on academic learning. Gymnasiums were widespread in Russia before the Russian revolution of 1917. Nowadays they can also be found in Russia.



Ulukitkan (to the right)

ethnographic fiction: through it and its various definitions, the nomadic nature of Evenks, as well as their ethic, ethnic-cultural and ethnic-religious image of the world is expressed. The root of this concept is the Evenki notion of trail (*okto*).⁴²⁴ Its conceptual meaning (as well as the linguistic world-image of a nomadic tribe) is based on its practical meaning. The Evenki *trail* is a track in the taiga beaten by reindeer and hunters. A reindeer trail is a reliable, and often the only, guide for a hunter in the ever-changing space of the taiga (depending on the season, lighting, and weather). That is why the Evenki hunter *Ulukitkan* can say about himself with quiet assurance: “*An Evenk knows the trail and will never get lost*”.

The denotation of the word “trail” comprises a whole bunch of meanings, and the chain of connotations develops and fills various ontological, ethical and religious gaps. E.g., “to help each other” is “to go the same trail”; «to deal with a person» is to “to go his or her trail”; «to seek an easy life» is “to seek an easy trail”. This understanding of *trail* is semantically connected with the idea of generational links, traditional

⁴²⁴ See: Shirokogoroff S.M. *Psychomental complex of the Tungus*. London, 1935. P. 440.

lifestyle, and ancestors' precepts. The *trail* is a way of life, a person's destiny. Therefore "to bear your *trail*" means "to pave the way" and simultaneously, "to direct your life, your destiny".

The Evenk, Ulukitkan, occupies a central place in Fedoseev's ethnographic fiction. He first appeared in the narrative "In the Grip of Dzhugdyr" (1956). Ulukitkan is simultaneously a biographic and a collective image. The people of Bomnak village in the Amur region still remember the real Ulukitkan, as his photo is kept in a local museum, and his tomb is a site that receives praise from those who are interested in Evenki culture and Fedoseev's writings (see Fig. 4. The Memorial to Ulukitkan). The writer intentionally points out his Evenki birth name. However, the real Ulukitkan had a Russian name – Sergei Grigorievich Trifonov (all Evenks were given Russian names after baptism). He had a wife and four children. (see Fig. 5. Ulukitkan's wife).



Ulukitkan learning to write in Russian

Ulukitkan pioneered the trail of Evenki culture to the world – he walks his Russian fellow-traveler through a real "trail of ordeals". A good guide in the taiga is not just a guarantee of a successful expedition but of *survival* as well. In this journey, the Russian character starts learning about this ancient people's traditions and himself, as well as learning to correlate his worldviews with nomadic ethnic group philosophy. Ulukitkan is not only a guide in thorny routes and total mists who helps geodesists find a mountain pass through the Stanovoi Range. He is "an old-timer", the idea of a Wise Elder – a bearer of sacred Evenki knowledge. He performs the function of mediator to the world with other cultural and religious views. From the very first story told by Ulukitkan at the campfire, we learn about migrations of Evenks before the Revolution, their traditional family life, and rites of passage that were an integral part of their religion.

The leitmotif of all plot lines is nomadizing. Nomadizing is the essence of Ulukitkan's life. A long time ago, it saved his family from death: only

due to nomadization could his mother and younger brothers and sisters survive. Nomadizing until old age determines the major milestones in his destiny – his first daughter's birth, his son's birth etc. Ulukitkan belongs to one of the newly-arrived Okhotsk clans, therefore the way to the Stanovoi Range is equivalent to the way to his origin. The image of nomadizing determines the cosmogonic and etiological Evenki mythology – first, Ulukitkan retells the myth about “why the Evenks started nomadizing” and then links the Evenks wandering in taiga to the image of *Khargi* who stole happiness from the Evenks. In Evenki tradition such genres are known as *nimkan* (*nimngakan*) – myths, legends, stories, and tales about life in the far-away past.⁴²⁵

Ulukitkan is an eye-witness to the historical processes that the Far East was experiencing in the late 1890s and early 1900s, bringing drastic changes to native peoples' lives. He is one of the last representatives of that ethnic group's generation, whose lives were crushed by the powerful machines of Russification, Christianization and then Sovietization. In Ulukitkan's stories, we grasp information about the first meeting of native Amur peoples with new-comers – Russians. Judging by the first childhood memories of the old Evenk, the image of *luchi* – Russians – is connected with images of semi-mythological *monsters* and *magic items*. It's little wonder that kids run from strangers as if from something *scary*.

The process of Christianizing of Evenks by the Russian Orthodox Church at the turn of the 20th century⁴²⁶ is shown by Fedoseev from different angles –



Ulukitkan's wife with their children

⁴²⁵ Vasilevich G. M. *Doshamanskie i shamanskie verovaniya...* Ibid. P. 59; *Evenkiyskie geroicheskie skazaniya* [Evenki heroic tales]. Sost. Myreeva A.N. Novosibirsk, 1990. Pp. 80–88.

⁴²⁶ See: Veniamin (Blagonravov). Amurskaya duhovnaya missiya v 1870 g. [The Amur Orthodox mission in 1870]. In: *Irkutskie eparhial'nye vedomosti* [Irkutsk Diocesan Sheets]. 1871. № 35.; Kirillov A.V. Materialy dlya istorii hristianskoy missii na Amure so vremeni prisoeдинeniya ego k Rossii i do 1865 goda [Materials for the history of a Christian mission on the Amur since accession to Russia and until 1865] In: *Kamchatskie eparhial'nye vedomosti* [the Kamchatka diocesan sheets]. Blagoveshchensk, 1896. №1, № 24.

the perception of Evenks of those times, the attitude of eighty-year-old Ulukitkan, and the attitude of a soviet traveler who was brought up as an atheist. In Ulukitkan's mind “The God of lucht”, primeval animism, and Evenki spirits coexisted peacefully.⁴²⁷ In Fedoseev's texts there is no mention of shamans or shamanism, although in the middle of the previous century, in spite of cruel religious repression, those were a vivid reality. Ulukitkan himself possesses some shamanic abilities to a considerable extent.

Nomad mind and the Amur wild nature: mountains, rocks, trees, reindeer, ground squirrels, and bears – are linked by the relations of primeval parallelism. Ulukitkan does not separate himself from them, correlating his being with their being, his attitude to people and the relationships between



Ulukitkan and his friend Nikolay Likhanov



Grigoriy Fedoseev, Ulukitkan, and other participants in one of their Far-Eastern expeditions

⁴²⁷ Varlamov A.N. Khristianskie motivy v mirovozzrenii i folklore evenkov [Christian motifs in Evenki worldview and folklore]. *Religiovedenie* [Study of Religion]. 2009. № 1. Pp. 74–78.

people. The animistic worldview of Ulukitkan appears in the aphorisms and proverbs that accompany his conclusions: “A human being lives a short but constantly changing life: he is small or big, young or old, but mountains and rocks live long and are always the same”; «Roots hold a rotten tree while thoughts hold an old person»; «Often a raven cries not seeing the food yet, the Siberian jay believes it and follows it in vain»; «When good luck falls upon you you'll get an animal even without a rifle, but when there's none you can't light gunpowder even with fire» etc.

In Ulukitkan's animistic mind the taiga is stronger than God. However, the taiga is not hostile but an element of the same nature as he is. Fedoseev writes, “Once I asked Ulukitkan, “What do you like the most in the taiga”, he thought a little, smiled and answered “Everything that the eyes see and ears hear””. In Ulukitkan's mind not only natural objects and animals have souls, but even parts of his own body are personified in an animistic way – nose, ears, eyes, legs, arms – the ones responsible for sense perception and ensuring survival in the taiga.

The whole life of an Evenk is determined by the nomadic cycle and animal behavior. Centuries of observing changes in taiga nature formed an “unwritten calendar of the Evenks”.⁴²⁸ Ulukitkan cannot read and write. However, he knows the “taiga writing” without which a person is “blind”. This kind of “writing” has been used by Ulukitkan's ancestors for centuries. Knowing the “taiga writing system” is an issue of survival for him. In an emergency, when the guide (Ulukitkan) goes blind, and leading the caravan goes to luchi's hands (to Fedoseev), Ulukitkan's taiga school demonstrates its thoroughly practical meaning. In that case, even the blind and helpless guide has more vision than his sighted companion.



A tombstone over Ulukitkan's grave. The epigram says: "He was initiated into the mysteries of nature. He was a great tracker, adviser, and friend" (by G. Fedoseev)

⁴²⁸ Compare: Petrova T.I. Vremyaischislenie u tunguso-man'chzhurskih narodov [Time measurement at Tungus-Manchurian peoples]. In: *Pamyati V.G. Bogoraza. Sbornik statey*. Moscow-Leningrad, 1937. Pp. 79–123.

Evenks (Orochons) are «reindeer people». A reindeer is at the center of the Evenki worldview. That is why the birth of a new reindeer while nomadizing is the *personified happiness* of a nomad. Ulukitkan believes the luck in his life journey connects with a stupid and obstinate doe called Maika. Since ancient times Evenki religious views were connected with the image of bear.⁴²⁹ The bear is the constant companion in an Evenk's life. It is both a desired, honorable game and a constant enemy, as meeting it always means a fight.⁴³⁰ No Evenk can be secure when confronting the awesome beast. It is most dangerous in the winter – at that time it is no ordinary beast but an *insomniac bear*. The farther it is from an Evenk – the better. No hunter will fail to take the opportunity to kill a bear. Bear meat is an Evenk's favorite delicacy primarily because it is the totem spirit and a cult animal. Eating bear meat is like consuming blessing to an Evenk.⁴³¹ “Bear religiosity” penetrates all levels of Evenki ethnic consciousness. Cult worship of the bear (*amikan, amakan* – grandfather, old man, old father⁴³²) is expressed most strongly in hunting skills, which was inherited from ritual practice of primeval zoomorphic magic. Ulukitkan hunts wood grouses taking on the image of a bear.

A real poem about the bear cult includes the narrative “The Evil Spirit of Yambuy”, the plot of which is built on a group of researchers confronting a real insomniac bear and “bear spirit” (they were not aware of this confrontation from the beginning), that Evenki guides believe to be real. Considerable difference between the ritual described by Fedoseev and the one described by ethnographers is because, in this situation, the responsibility for killing the bear is shifted to some “other” man, “a lame stranger”. However usually it is shifted to some other ethnos representative, as a rule – to “luchi” who is absolutely unaware of it. The image of the bear is connected with its mythological “brother” – the raven. A raven's croaking is always a bad omen for a

⁴²⁹ See, e.g.: Ivanov S.V. Medved' v religioznom i dekorativnom iskusstve narodnostey Amura [Bear in religious and decorative art of the Amur peoples]. Pamyati V.G. Bogoraza... Ibid. Pp. 1–47; Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki*... Ibid. Pp. 216–217.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. Pp. 44–48.

⁴³¹ *Sravnitel'nyi slovar' tunguso-man'chzhurskih yazykov* [Comparative dictionary of the Tungusic-Manchurian languages]. Sost. V.I. Tsintsius. Vol.2. Leningrad, 1977. See: Shirokogoroff S.M. *Psychomental complex of the Tungus*... Ibid. P. 432. Other Evenki dialect names of a bear see in: Vasilevich G. M. *Evenki. Istoriko-etnograficheskie ocherki*... Ibid. P. 216.

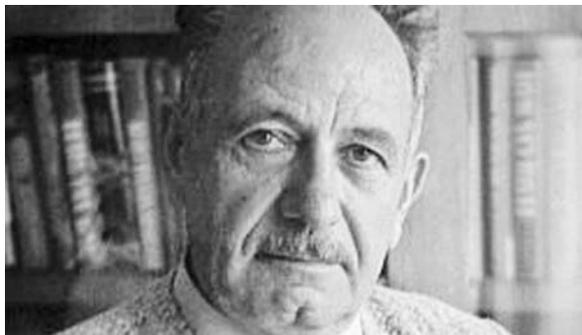
⁴³² See, e.g.: Ibid. Pp. 235–236.

traveler. In Evenki taiga mythology the raven is initially created by Hargi as “harmful”, but later becomes an assistant in creation acts.⁴³³

Another theme that is personified in Ulukitkan's worldview is *death*, a constant companion and antagonist of an Evenk. It is personified in the same way as happiness and hunter's luck. Ulukitkan says, “Death is greedy, it would take everything from a person, but life is stronger than death”. Death always haunts nomads in the taiga. However, death can be localized – in this case its dwelling place is the worst one. A bad place is usually a place where people are buried: «No people should stay to live there – the dead must not be disturbed”. Prohibitions concerning the dead and entombments is alive and active in Ulukitkan's mind. The everlasting fight of an Evenk with death is embodied in a whole system of deceit. Death can be escaped when you move; you can outwit it by imitative or substitutive movements and by using the right words.

The syncretic religiosity of Ulukitkan and other old Evenks is demonstrated by the sacralization of nature objects, primarily hills and rivers. As a rule it is based on ideas about “bad places” – the way to localities which are prohibited. Foul Khargi rules there, therefore death awaits travelers on the way to Dzhugdzhur and Yambuy. According to an old woman Langara, Khargi built his dwelling on Yambuy.

The fire cult is one of the oldest cults that are still retained by nomads. Ulukitkan measures days by nomadic “campfires”. Feeling death haunting him (although he was lucky to deceive it), blind Ulukitkan appreciates each “campfire”: «*Now [only] a few of my campfires are left in the taiga*». That is why the narrative devoted to Ulukitkan after he tragically passed away will be called “The Last Campfire” (1968). At his last campfire the old-timer Ulukitkan freezes to death. “The Last Campfire” was not only a parting episode with Ulukitkan – it was the last book written by



Grigoriy Fedoseev. 1960s.

⁴³³ Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady...* Ibid. P. 55.

Fedoseev, published after his death. That was the symbolic purpose of the writer's destiny, in which his works and life went hand in hand.

We do not know Fedoseev's religious views, however, his delicate and profound approach to Evenki traditional views resulted in the circumstance that many ritual formulas, mythological narratives and magic actions were captured by him alone. Having no idea about scientific techniques of collecting material during expeditions, Fedoseev was able to gain Evenks' trust and managed to penetrate deep into the peculiarities of their ethnic culture from the religious angle, intuitively using techniques of interview, observation and historical analysis. For modern Evenks, getting acquainted with Fedoseev's books is akin to returning to the past of their culture and to their origin. For "luchi" (Russian) readers it is like beating the trail to understanding ancient Evenki culture and mastering (if possible) the taiga "writing system".

In the 1970s-1980s artistic research on Amur Evenks lifestyle was continued by Vladislav Grigorievich Letsik – a poet, prose writer, and editor. He was a descendant of the third wave of migrants who moved to the Far East from Ukraine and the midlands of Russia. Little Letsik must have inherited not only a particular linguistic feeling and love for playing with language, but openness to other cultures as well. After finishing a pedagogical institute, Letsik chose a career in journalism. In the 1970s young Letsik spent four years in the northern Amur Region working as a salaried hunter and cooper in the summer, and after that he became a journalist working for a local newspaper.

Being a young and ironic romantic, he moved from a regional center to an atmosphere that was drastically different in its ethnic, social and mental qualities. Cultural openness inherent in



Vladislav Letsik in Ekimchan. 1971.

Letsik, strengthened as a result of his family upbringing, enabled him to perceive his new reality in a very creative way. In the winter of 1972-73 he hunted side by side with an Evenk called Zahar. His nomadic area neighbor became his “taiga teacher”.⁴³⁴ Having gotten into the wilderness of Amur Taiga, the young philologist could eye-witness how precise Fedoseev's observations had been, could hear with his own ears real Evenki speech and feel all the peculiarities of their ethnic psychology in personal conversation. The writer does not deny that Dersu Usala and Ulukitkan are prototypes of his own taiga characters. In those years the local paper “The Miner of the North” published V. Letsik's Evenki essays.

One of Letsik's first articles was devoted to the skill of Evenki embroidery.⁴³⁵ The next endeavor in ethnographic observation was an article written in the spring of 1969, “Pasture on Talama”⁴³⁶, which was devoted to local deer

breeders, Yegor Solovyov and Dmitriy Yegorovich Porotov.⁴³⁷

Being just a beginner, Letsik was interested in everything: reindeer-breeding terminology, the functions of reindeer-breeding tools and devices. The newspaper readers could get acquainted with a reindeer-breeder household, relationships in an Evenki family, where the husband performs his reindeer-



*Reindeer, dog, and rifle:
three friends of a taiga man*

⁴³⁴ Interview with Vladislav G. Letsik was undertaken by A.A. Zabayko (2011).

⁴³⁵ Letsik V.G. Drevnee iskusstvo naroda [Ancient ethnic art]. In: *Gornyyak Severa*. 1967. № 14. P. 2.

⁴³⁶ Letsik V.G. Pastbische na Talame [A pasture on the Talama]. In: *Gornyyak Severa*. 1969. № 56. P. 2. (Talama is a tributary of the Kharga River, flowing into the Selemdzha River.)

⁴³⁷ Letsik V.G. Drevnee iskusstvo naroda [Ancient ethnic art]. In: *Gornyyak Severa*. 1967. № 14. P. 2.

breeding business from morning to night, and how the wife keeps the house, cooks meals, processes skins, and makes fur boots called *unta*. At that time a short story “Thrifty Vanya and Tanya – *kuturuk*” appeared.⁴³⁸ Its characters – Vanya and Tanya – were Evenki children of Zahar from the neighboring hunting grounds.

The reader of the newspaper discovers that the reindeer is the center of the Evenki worldview. «Reindeer philosophy» penetrates all aspects of the little Evenks’ life: through this image they learn the basics of their folk ethics and aesthetics, gain necessary household knowledge, and go through the steps of hunter initiation. In the



*Tanya-kuturuk at a taiga camp.
1973.*

religious views of Evenks, the white reindeer is a sacred animal that brings good luck to the herd and the family. That is why cutting reindeer out of white paper is widespread among Evenki children even nowadays – it must have been a simplified cultural inheritance from the ceremony called *sinkilau* (getting “hunter luck”).⁴³⁹

The skill to care for reindeer is formed in childhood and is considered a guarantee of “hunter luck”. Even the pet name “Tanya-kuturuk” evokes reindeer imagery; when a little girl followed her “economical” brother everywhere “she was called *kuturuk* – small tail”. The peculiarities of children's daily routine are an integral part of ethnographic data. Letsik was able to capture Evenki children’s lifestyle while nomadizing with their parents – a rare case among modern Evenks. In the recent past, there were three types of saddles: male, female, and those for children. A little Evenk-nomad is more mature relative to his Russian peer, as his life since childhood has been determined by the severe law of survival in the taiga.

⁴³⁸ Letsik V.G. Khozyaystvennyi Vanya i Tanya-kuturuk (tayozhnye kartinki) [Thrifty Vanya and Tanya – *kuturuk* (taiga sketches)]. In: *Amurskaya pravda*, 1979, the 18th of March.

⁴³⁹ The ceremony of “hunter luck” (*sinkilau* [*sinkilaun*]) is described in: Mazin A. I. *Traditsionnye verovaniya i obryady...* Ibid. Pp. 94–99; Mazin A. I., Mazin I. A. *Predstavleniya evenkov Priamur'ya ob okruzhayuschem mire...* Ibid. Pp. 39–71.

It's no wonder that little children shout: "What did you kill?" upon meeting their father on his return home (unlike naughty and demanding urban children who shout "What did you buy?"). A little Evenk since childhood executes the regular rhythm of his family household: «During the day Vanya manages to bring firewood, feed the dogs and do a lot of other small errands. He helps to treat the furs and gets offended if he is not given sable skin to process. For an Evenki child of the 1970s the obvious truth learned from parents is the following: «*Why go to the taiga if you lie on your plank bed?*». «Easy fame is not for him. An Evenki son, a hunter son knows how hard hunting is. He has been nomadizing on his father's hunting grounds together with his parents for two years already. They have made countless relocations! In winter, Vanya is on the sledge in his fur coat as in a warm booth. In summer, they all ride their reindeer. In his saddle Vanya looks like a real hunter". Evenki children's lifestyle is not only related to adult worries – Letsik portrayed purely "childish" features of nomadic life that were closely connected to the linguo-cultural worldview of the Amur natives in the 1970s.

In 1975, Letsik came back to Blagoveshchensk. His life and writing experiences would be embodied in his fiction collection "A Pair of Leg-Skin Untas". The originality of the short novel with the same title is expressed in its topic, system of images, and plot line. Untas became a yardstick of human dignity and at the same time – the imagery of destruction of an ancient people's traditional culture. Zahar's family (as a Yakut he lived among Evenks all his life with his Evenki wife) in this "epic with untas" become hostages of modern tendencies in the newborn society of consumers. For Evenks *unta* are a necessity – without them they will die in the taiga – but urban culture turns everything into entertainment and fashion, devaluing not only traditional foundations, but the whole culture of making this rare footwear. Giving his ethnographic notes and observations within the frame of a



Tanya-kuturuk and her granny in a taiga log house

fictionalized novella (“God's Dew”), detective story (“Old Byankin – Private Detective”), short novel (“A Pair of Leg-Skin Untas”⁴⁴⁰) the writer plays with complicated ethnic, cultural, and social processes of the Far East frontier experience, where Russians, Ukrainians, Evenks, Yakuts, and Chinese take equal part.

Today, ethnographic fiction materials from writers of the second half of the 20th century, G. A. Fedoseev and V. G. Letsik, have imperishable value: original Evenki culture is passing away. The language is almost forgotten, or is studied in local village schools as a foreign language; crafts are forgotten; almost no skillful women who can treat skins are left; Evenks hardly know their folklore – *nimkan* tellers are a thing of the distant mythological past. Long stories at the campfire are being replaced by computers and computer games. Traditional nomadic lifestyle is becoming an anachronism – Evenki youth dream about an “easy” urban life. Modern Evenks set off in a thorny direction to hunt for their own culture. What will this way be like? Is there a right trail? At times, we forget that there are representatives of an ancient ethnic group right next to us Russians (not just in North America!). The works of Russian writers – “luchi” like Grigoriy Fedoseev and Vladislav Letsik – contain an abundance of discoveries for native peoples of the Far East as well as for everyone interested in the customs and traditions of their own ethnos.

⁴⁴⁰ The fir footwear called *unta* in Evenki, are sewed of the skin taken from the lower parts of reindeer legs (*kamus*).

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deystvuyushchih zakoneniy ob inorodtsah Amurskoy oblasti ot 29 fevralya 1900 g. Zapiska o preobrazovanii upravleniya osedlymi i kochevymi inorodtsami v mestnostyah, na kotorye rasprostraneno deystvie Vremennogo Polozheniya o krest'yanskih nachal'nikah». Gosudarstvennyy arhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii (GARF)
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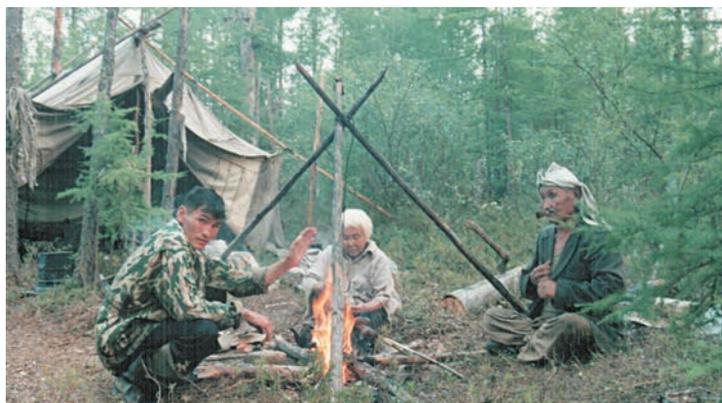
Summer dyu covered with larch bark



Delken. The Kharga River, 2008.



Summer taiga camp. The Avlaya plateau, 2009.



Summer taiga camp at Ust-Nyukzha, 2003.



Kolbo (a warehouse)



*Winter taiga log house at Ivanovskoe.
(The Kharga River, 2006).*



Setting a tent at Ivanovskoe 2007.



Taiga Evenks playing domino.



*Domesticated
reindeer in kure
(an enclosing).
The Kharga River,
2008.*



Males fighting. September 2007.



A reindeer which has scraped its antlers.



Riding reindeer. The Avlaya plateau, 2009.



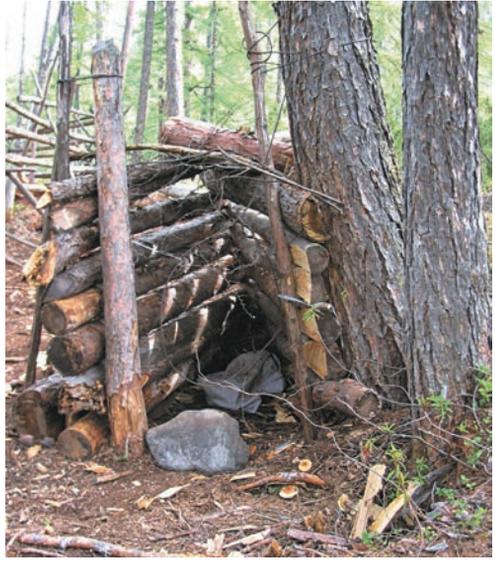
Crossing the Kharga River. 2008.



*Skis with fur slipping surface.
Amur State University Museum*



Sable skins prepared to send to an auction



A bear trap. The Kharga River, 2008.



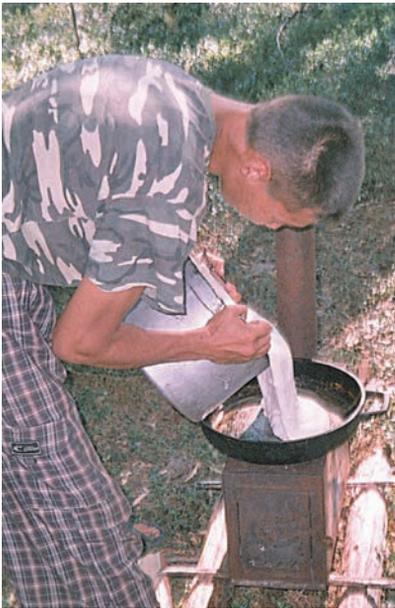
A bear trap. The Kharga River, 2008.



*Crossbow trap.
Amur State University Museum*



*Dressing a bear hulk.
The Kharga River, 2008.*



*Making bread in a frying pan,
The Selemdzha River, 2008.*



An Evenk fishing from the riverbank.



Singing of the lenok's skin



Smoking of meat to prevent spoilage. The Avlaya plateau, 2009.



Kukrya (dry boiled meat)



Reindeer stomach boiled with blood



Making ulikte (jerk-like meat)



Elk tongue mixed with wild sorrel



Meat covered with fur twigs



Fried organs and boiled guts



Ingredients for manty (yogurt)



*Wiping reindeer milk with ityk.
The Kharga River, 2008.*



*Reindeer milk warmed
to a state of cheese*



Evenki traditional dishes. Bakaldyn festival, 2008.



*Stretching the kamus.
The Kharga River, 2008.*



Processing skin with a “crocodile”



Making a hearth for smoking skins.



*Kuvuka—a utensil for softening
lassos made of skin.
The Kharga River, 2007.*





The process of softening a lasso with kuvuka utensil



*Sleeping bag sewn of reindeer skin.
The Kharga River, 2008.*



Smoking a bear skin at bivouac



Buckskin mittens



Fur footwear—unta.



Evenki taiga winter clothes



Fur footwear with fur decoration.



Fur carpet decorated with white fur



Souvenirs made of musk deer canines



A. Urkanova with her fur carpet



A mitten with tree-of-life pattern



Fur footwear exhibition, 2008



A bag for mobile phone



A bag for storing utensils



Children's buckskin shoes



The rock paintings at the Middle Nyukzha River, the Amur region



A shaman and the Upper World in the Middle Nyukzha rock paintings



Ritual smearing of the serge pole



Evenki teacher with her granddaughter



Native dance group in Ust-Nyukzha, 2009



The ritual rug namu. Amur State University Museum.



Namu made for A.I. Mazin. Amur State University Museum.



*Ritual of tying ribbons to the tree. Shamanic ritual during the Bakaldyn festival.
The Bonnakh village, 2010.*



Evenki shaman Semyon Vasilyev, Andrey Zabiyaiko, and Anatoly Mazin. 2002.



Shaman gear owned by Semyon Vasilyev



Evenki shamaness Svetlana Voronina



The moon with a spirit in it (Enekan Buga?)



Sun, Seveki, bird, and celestial deer (elk?)



A shaman drum. Tyndinskiy area. The first third of the 20th century.

This study is concerned with the history and modern conditions of Evenks in the Amur region, Russia. It is mainly based on field research, conducted by the authors for over a decade, and depicts the lifestyle, worldview, and traditions of the modern Amur Evenks. It also contains personal archives, tables and illustrations. The book is intended not only for specialists in ethnography and cultural anthropology, but also for a wider audience.

