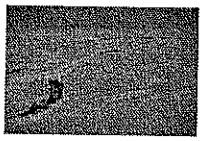


CHAPTER 3

SHAMANISTIC REVIVAL IN A POST-SOCIALIST LANDSCAPE: LUCK AND RITUAL AMONG ZABAIKAL'E OROCHEN-EVENKIS

David G. Anderson[1]

INTRODUCTION

The émigré Russian anthropologist Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (1935) is famous for attributing to Vitim River Orochens a special 'psycho-mental complex'. His work carries a heavy debt to the intellectual currents of his day, which sought to link the diffusion of ritual across space to cultural evolution. However, his 'psycho-mental complex' also could be read from the very way that the tent was set or the way that a seamstress took measurements with her thumb and fore-arm. It is with his subtle intuition of linking intimate personal action to places, which I would like to frame in this ethnographic study of a contemporary Orochen family. Here I wish to examine how their everyday practice, and in particular one ritual, are important to understand how they are adapting to new political-economic circumstances; conditions nearly as tumultuous as the days of the Russian civil war when Shirokogoroff first wrote.

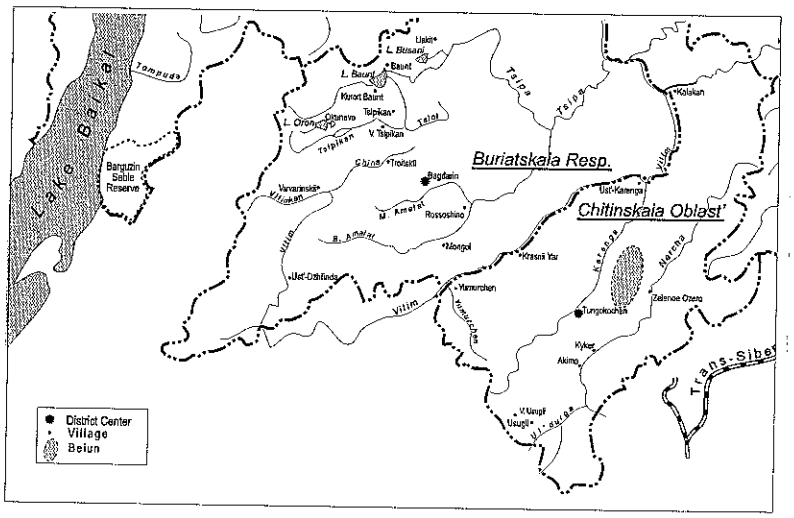
The chapter is based directly upon two short six-week ethnographic excursions in the region, first in 1989 and again in 2004. The latter visit was organised in collaboration with a group of Canadian and Russian archaeologists, who directed our attention towards the material signatures of everyday practice. In particular, this chapter is the result of many fire-side discussions—or even arguments—with the archaeologists about the degree to which contemporary Orochen society has been degraded or assimilated by the industrial vortex created by the former Soviet Union.

Here, I will argue that contemporary ritual expressions of 'luck' and reciprocity provide a frame through which post-socialist environmental and market conditions can be understood.

The issues of time and space frame this research in all aspects —theoretically, substantively and logistically. If in 1989, I was carried through the low, forested mountains of this region in a series of publicly-subsidised helicopters; in 2004, our intrepid expedition had to cover large distances on foot and canoe to find the Aruneev family. After ten days of overland travel through the taiga on foot, which at the time seemed to be quite a hardship, we were charmed by the warm and matter-of-fact welcome we received. Evenki-Orochen hospitality is a well-known comfort to travellers. What was more surprising was the smiling and knowing manner by which we were told that we were expected, our intentions seemingly announced to Nikolai Aruneev ahead of time by a prophetic dream.

The Work-unit 'Beiun' and the Aruneev Family

The Aruneev family occupy one of the most distant of the newly-privatised territories of the former Tungokochen state farm. Legally incorporated as the work-unit *tovarishchestvo* 'Beiun' ['wild cervid'—moose or reindeer], they spend most of the summers along the Poperechnaia river and its headwaters. Their summer territories are located high up at the watershed between the Vitim and Nercha rivers—which due to the peculiar hydrology of the region, is also the continental divide between the Pacific and Arctic watersheds. In the winters, Nikolai Aruneev and his brother Iura travel further East through the Nercha valley with their reindeer hunting sable and other fur-bearers (Figure 3.1). The heart of the work-unit is made up of the two brothers—Nikolai and Iura, and their elderly mother Ol'ga Aruneeva [Zhurumeeva]. At various times of the year, they are assisted by cousins, nieces and nephews, as well as in-laws married into the family. The family practises a rich assortment of traditional skills ranging from sewing and treating hides, cooking traditional foods and practising traditional ritual (Pastukhova 2006). Amongst themselves, they spoke Evenki (a mixture of Eastern dialects) but with us, all except the elderly matron Olga would communicate well in Russian. Together they manage a rather large herd of taiga reindeer, numbering between 250 and 400 head, kept for meat, for transport and their impressive prestige value. The main output of the work-unit was fur (chiefly Barguzin sable) but also exotic animal parts such as elk and bear parts, velvet antlers, and plant medicines—most of which are bartered through intermediaries, often to China.



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

Figure 3.1 Map of Vitim River valley showing rivers and villages. (Source: Basemap drafted by Dr. Gail Fondahl, University of Northern British Columbia. Annotations by the Author, David G. Anderson.)

Nikolai Aruneev is a larger-than-life figure. Back in 1989, village elders spoke to me of him with great hope as an aspiring student pursuing an education as a veterinarian in Irkutsk. When we met him in 2004, he was completing a full year of self-imposed exile from the village in what he described as an effort to fulfil a prophecy given to him by a Buriat shaman. He is an extremely energetic man with a great love for making long elliptical hikes across the taiga to search for lost reindeer, to assess plant and forage conditions and to keep watch on the movements of animals in the region. He has an unnerving laugh, and a passion for showing off his knowledge in a number of different spheres ranging from Evenki dialects, to aboriginal land rights across Russia and in Canada. What was particularly memorable was the confident way that he would mix knowledge traditions by healing reindeer with a combination of antibiotics and traditional blood-letting, part of his larger speciality of mixing shamanistic and Soviet-industrial ritual traditions.

During our numerous evening discussions, Nikolai Aruneev was keen to emphasise that his secret to a good life in the taiga was to keep good relationships with the land's spirits. Citing parts of his genealogy, which include Buriatiia-based Orochen shamans two generations ago, he sees himself as re-adopting local spirits who were orphaned during the period of state-sponsored violence against religious practitioners.

His interest in reviving ritual seems to have grown with the decline of state control over the economy, and follows the general growth in pride in aboriginal life-ways all across the Russian Federation. What is very unique about his story is that he prefers to revitalise traditions amongst a small close-knit group of kinsmen roughly 70 kilometres from the nearest settlement.

A Sacrifice for the Spirits

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

In the early afternoon of 27 July, the entire reindeer herd was brought back to camp —a teaming mass of bulls, cows and calves which seemed to grow out of the brush opposite the camp like a dark thundercloud. The herd congregated in the corralled portion of the camp greedily lapping up the salt Ol'ga had rubbed on the tree trunks. Taking advantage of his increased labour power, Aruneev immediately seconded our group of three into an afternoon of chasing, capturing and inoculating reindeer. Many reindeer were caught and tethered that afternoon. One young bull (approximately three years old) with one blind eye was left off to the side. Having been asked if he was going to treat and heal this deer as well, Aruneev exploded with nervous laughter and replied that the deer was to be given as a sacrifice (*zhertvoprinoshenie*) to the spirits. Puzzled, we were led slowly into the ritual.

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

The offering began with Nikolai's request that Gregorii hit the tethered reindeer at the back of the head with the blunt end of an axe—which was quite a shocking beginning. When living with Evenki in other parts of Siberia, I was strictly taught that hitting a reindeer (or even a sable) was a serious act of disrespect (reindeer are usually slaughtered

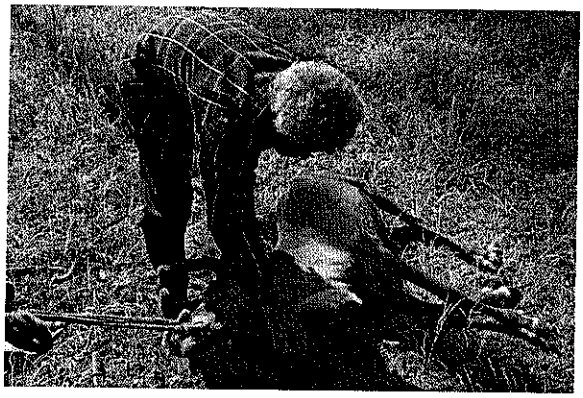


Figure 3.2 db-3839-034 Gregorii Chernykh draining blood from the stunned, tethered reindeer. (Photograph by D. Brandisauskas) Figure 3.3: 2004-07z-59 Skinning the reindeer starting from the feet. The animal is kept clean on a mat of willows. The skin is removed before the cavity is opened. From left to right— Nikolai Aruneev, Gregorii Chernykh, and Donatas Brandisaukas. (Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

with a quick stab behind the skull). I was asked to hold the quivering reindeer as Gregorii slit the throat and gathered all the blood in basin (Figure 3.2). When the reindeer shuddered, releasing its life, Gregorii began skinning the animal under Nikolai's close direction. The rest of us were then gradually recruited into the butchering process. Nikolai lit and maintained a small fire away from the slaughtering site while instructing us—often in Evenki—to what seemed to me (and to others) the unusual manner he wanted us to treat the remains in comparison to the way that reindeer are usually slaughtered. The animal was skinned in one piece starting from the hooves. Thereafter careful effort was applied to not severing any external part of the animal from the skin. This included ensuring that the four sets of dangling hoof-nails remained attached to the leg-skins. This delicate and unusual operation was done by severing the hooves from the lower leg bones at their joints but by not severing the hoof-nails from the skin at the very bottom-front (as one would usually do if one were interested in tanning or preparing the skin). Nikolai had to perform this operation himself since nobody, not even Gregorii, was clear on what he needed to do (Figure 3.3).

In addition, the neck and head area was skinned such that the ears, nose and velvet antlers remained attached to the head skin (the hard portions of the antlers severed from the skull under the skin with an axe). The penis was also left attached to the skin. During the entire process, willow branches were liberally spread out to keep the skin and carcass clean of dirt. Only after the grinning carcass was completely

Figure 3.3 2004-07z-59 Skinning the reindeer starting from the feet. The animal is kept clean on a mat of willows. The skin is removed before the cavity is opened. From left to right— Nikolai Aruneev, Gregorii Chernykh, and Donatas Brandisaukas. (Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

skinned, and the entire skin removed to the side, was the carcass gutted and the meat cut apart. As is usual, the lower cavity was opened with care so as not to split the intestines. First the intestines and then the inner organs were removed. The interesting element, to my eyes, was the placing of parts onto the nearby fire. First the steaming intestinal contents were emptied onto the fire. The collapsed intestines were set aside in another basin to be washed out and cooked later that evening. Then the lungs, heart, liver and kidney were each carefully removed. A small portion of each organ, including each stomach and intestine, was cut and fed to the fire. After this, the organs were neatly placed—or rather displayed—on another mat of cut willows (Figure 3.4). Some of us nibbled on the fresh kidneys and liver. The rest of the body was cut up in an exactingly clean way. Legs were disarticulated and ribs cut apart. The head and neck were severed and the head split into two. All of the disarticulated pieces were set aside and displayed on more willow mats, with a small part of each piece fed to the fire. We were urged to bring more and more dry wood to ensure that the smouldering fire devoured all the gifts —a feat which was particularly difficult to arrange for the stomach contents. All parts of the deer were either reserved for future use, or burned.

It later turned out that this was only the beginning of the ritual (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.4 db-3839-036 Nikolai Aruneev displays the meat on willow maps and burns portions of each piece in an offering fire. (Photograph by D. Brandisauskas.)

Figure 3.5 2004-07D-001 Nikolai Aruneev constructs the offering site on a small rise between the Poperechnaia River and the camp. (Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

Donatas and I were invited to follow Nikolai to a special site that he had chosen in the forest between the camp and the river. We were asked to each bring axes and our cameras. Some 30 metres away, on a slight rise (which was a sort of island in-between dried-up river channels), we were asked to prepare several long poles (approximately 3–4 metres long) made of larch and birch. We were told that the mixture of larch and birch poles was an important detail. Nikolai brought with him the skin of reindeer. The skin was mounted on a long larch pole such that the head, neck, spine and tail hung along the ridge pole and the legs, feet and dangling penis hung over the sides. The skin was tied to the pole with colourful cloth ribbons (made of strips from old clothing) at the nose and neck. The dangling front and rear hooves were also tied together with ribbons. We then were asked to help elevate the entire mounted skin by lifting the ridge pole up with the help of two other larch poles (each of which had a Y-shaped crux cut at their ends). We secured the offering by *leaning* the poles against two standing larches. It was important for Nikolai that the scaffolding lean against standing trees (and not be fixed) and that the animal offering faced east. Nikolai later told us that ideally the structure should have been mounted on top of a substantial hill with a clear view of the rising sun, but that since there was not such a hill in the immediate vicinity of our camp, we were forced to improvise. The ridge pole was weighted down with birch poles, which seemed to shine white against the brown colour of the fur and the trees. The entire scaffold recalled a classic Evenki mortuary *lokovun* —a structure used both to store everyday goods, but also to elevate the clothes and possessions of a deceased person (Figure 3.10) (Sirina 2002). Behind this mortuary scaffolding, we were asked to help erect a triangular stage set lower than and behind the reindeer offering but still a good 2 metres high. It too was constructed with thick short larch poles set to lean against three standing trees. The triangular stage was covered with small broken sticks to make a platform. This triangular structure recalls the triangular offering stages made by northern Iakut-reindeer herders (Gurvich 1977). No nails were used in any part of the structure; however, flexible willow branches (if necessary twisted or warmed over a fire) were use to tie the joints between leaning pillars and the ridge-pole (Figure 3.6).

The conclusion to the ritual ended with setting offerings on the platform and around the site. We brought one shoulder piece (*lopatka*), the testicles, some cartilage from the knees and some odd scraps that were left from the butchering process. It was important for Nikolai that there was only one piece of each type. Four trees in each of the cardinal directions surrounding the offering were tied with coloured ribbons (*triapochki*) in three rows. Cigarettes (*papirosy*) and matches were placed in behind

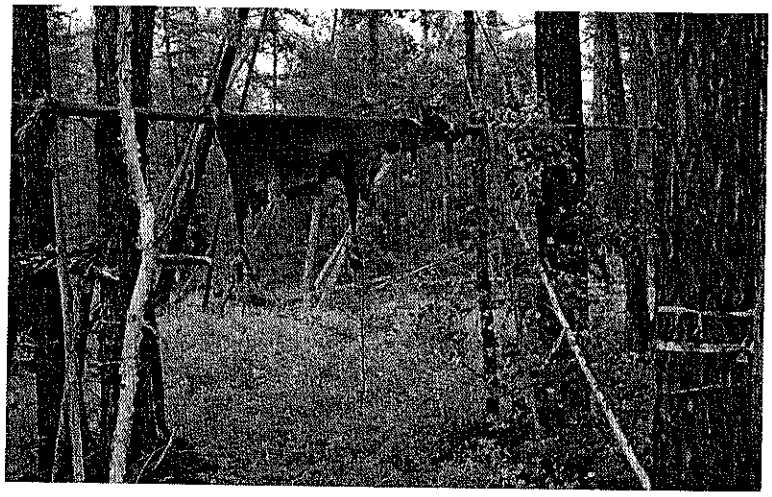


Figure 3.6 2004-07D-002 Completed reindeer offering scaffold. The reindeer is facing east. Offered meat was placed on the platform behind the animal. Matches and cigarettes were left as gifts in the ribbons on each tree.(Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

each ribbon, taking care to circle the offering in a clockwise ('sun-wise') direction. Nikolai told us that it was important that we exit the offering site towards the west by walking backwards facing the offering, only turning southwards towards the camp once the line of sight was broken by a tree (this he called a 'corner'). We documented the site before making the offerings.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part of the ritual—a part that now everybody joined in on—was the feast. This was held in the camp. Over the next two days, we consumed the remains of the entire animal. This was served in a variety of ways. We made blood sausage out of the intestine, boiled meat, ate the liver raw and even ground meat to make Russian *pirozhki* (Figure 3.7). The fresh meat was no doubt a welcome diet to the brigade, which up until this time (and again after this time) subsisted on a diet of salted and dried moose meat (*kukuru* —Ev). It was an unforgettable welcome to the Poperechnaia river valley, and a somewhat mysterious moment for anthropologists.

Luck and Ritual in a Post-Socialist Landscape

There is nothing unusual in participating in gifting rituals in this part of Siberia as in almost any other part of the circumpolar North. The

Figure 3.7 2004-07z-68. The author and Nikolai Aruneev making reindeer blood sausage. (Photograph by Anastasila Pastukova.)

phenomena of 'feeding the fire' with fat or spirits is documented widely across Eurasia (Alekseev 1993; Dmitriev 1989; Jordan 2003; Tsybikov 1927; Vasilevich 1969; Vitebsky 1992). The idea of making offerings (or placings) of coins, matches or gun shells is also well documented among Evenkis—with some of the best known references going back to Shirokogoroff (1935, 193–97) but common in other regions as well. The respectful treatment of the bones or other remains of wild reindeer and reindeer foetuses, and of bear, is well known among Evenkis (Anderson 2000; Anisimov 1950; Vasilevich 1969) and in particular in Zabaikal'e (Abe 2005). Across Siberia, these rituals of reciprocity with the taiga, the tundra, or with spirits are also not limited to indigenous nationalities with many authors documenting the participation of local Russians (Anderson 2000; Sirina 2002). These gifting rituals were present in the Imperial period and remained common in the Soviet period. It is not surprising that they continue in the post-Soviet period.

What is unusual, or at least caused some discomfort, was the intricately structured and built nature of *this* ritual. The 'sacrifice' was never really explained to us during or indeed after the ritual. When I asked the brigadier delicately about the ritual, I was told very simply that the reindeer was an offering/gift (*podarok*) to unnamed spirits. In different contexts and at different times, Nikolai sometimes spoke of spirits being

linked to concrete individuals or ancestors who had once lived in these valleys. Again in different contexts, he mentioned his belief that making gifts to concrete 'old [deceased] men' or to the 'spirits' would bring 'luck' (*kutu–* Ev.) in reindeer husbandry and in hunting.

The idea of 'luck' is an important element in this region. Shirokogoroff (1935, 154, 187) notes both the close link between the ideas of luck and of spirits and the fact that such key ritual concepts are common to both Buriats and Evenkis. Hamayon (1990, 555ff), in her fundamental work on Siberian shamanism (but in particular among Zabaikal Buriats and Orochens) sees luck as forming a foundation for interpreting ritual through its connection with the life force. Associating the details of this ritual with other stories that he told later about his travels in Buriatiia, it seems possible that specific details of the ritual (the coloured fabrics, the precise manner of circling the reindeer and exiting the site via 'corners') may have been adopted from Buriat shamanic rituals that Nikolai had observed. However, at no time did Nikolai ever say this directly. One late evening, he did mention that he was inspired to make this particular structure from a photograph that he saw in the local museum in Bagdarin (but he added that he confirmed many details of the ritual with his mother and other elders). When I asked him if he regularly practises this ritual, his answer came in terms of an authoritative timeless present 'Orochens always did kind of thing'. At other times, he gave thanks to the Buriat shamans, with whom he was friendly, who had encouraged him to start a programme of honouring 'his own' spirits, but said that since they could offer no direct experience with these spirits, he would have to learn about these spirits himself.[2]

None of us ever confronted Nikolai with our doubts, although I am sure he is quite used to performing his work around sceptics. If one were obsessed with authenticity, one could attribute many cynical motives to Nikolai for wanting to 'construct' or 'revive' versions of older ritual complexes. In the new status economy provided by foreign-sponsored Non Governmental Organisations, primitivist rituals lend a strong veneer of cultural difference and authenticity that could be later used to defend claims to land rights.[3] Further, by acting like a mysterious dark woodsman living for months, and even years, alone in the taiga, Nikolai was building up a reputation of somebody who wielded very strong survival skills. This would certainly quash any attempt by local villagers to characterise him merely as a 'city boy' brought up and educated in a series of boarding school. Eyewitness accounts of professionally-performed shamanic ritual, from objective outsider observers, could only increase the respect he could expect in local and regional political circles. Finally, in the aggressive post-socialist economic environment of free-wheeling middlemen and poachers, having a reputation for dabbling in dark

matters could serve as a relatively inexpensive form of protection. With this reputation, chronically-superstitious Russians would be more unlikely to poach on his territories, or block his movements, if they could just as easily hunt or trap on other unoccupied stretches of taiga, of which there are many.

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

On Identifying and Cultivating the Orochen Taiga

Overtly, rituals of respect are directed at the taiga (or, at spirits living in the taiga). However, where exactly is the taiga? At first glance, it is not difficult to find uninhabited and forested areas in this region of Siberia. Since the end of the Soviet period, there has been a steady collapse of most publicly funded economic activity in all but the largest settlements. If in 1987, the taiga was covered with reindeer-herding bases, military outposts, geological exploration camps and meteorological stations, today there is little evident built occupancy other than a few scattered home-made hunting shelters and a few villages (and those often without electricity). At least conversationally, the taiga is everything in between the population points of Tungokochen, Ust'-Karenga and Kyker (Figure 3.1) — an area of approximately 1,000 square kilometres.

However, when looking at the post-socialist taiga with the eyes of an independent reindeer herder, it is not such a big space at all. Both the socialist period, and the first ten years post-socialist reform, has left tangible material markers which limit the ways in which the forest

can be used. A common ecological feature here, as all over Siberia, are the overburdened forests and meadows in the immediate vicinity of artificially-constructed settlements. Beginning after the end of the War, and continuing through the 1970s, central planners forcibly resettled hunters and small-scale agriculturalists into larger and larger settlements which were designed to be serviced by centrally-subsidised state farms and their industrial networks of electricity, sanitation and distribution. These expensive networks were the first to collapse at the end of the Soviet period leading residents to harvest out the most saleable, edible and combustible resources immediately surrounding the settlements. The first stage of any trip to the 'taiga' is a sprint across a zone of 20 to 30 kilometres in diameter where it is difficult to keep reindeer or to feed oneself for more than a few days at best.

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

The post-Soviet period, apparently, led to a surprising acceleration in the erosion of the taiga environment. According to all members of the Beiun collective, and villagers in Tungokochen and in Ust'-Karenga, one adaptation to the new economy in exotic animal parts encourages traders to set fire to the taiga in the autumn in order to better expose the whitened hulks of discarded antlers. The antlers are gathered, broken up and sold for oriental medicines. Some of the people interviewed even hinted darkly that fires were set in order to destroy the trap lines held

by competitors. Using his characteristically mystical way of speaking, Nikolai also spoke of the taiga withdrawing and hiding itself from the touch of anyone using mechanised equipment. He claims that all the valleys which have been crossed repeatedly by all-terrain tank-tracked *vezdekhody* and snowmobiles sooner or later are destroyed by fire. Sirina (2002, chapter 5) describes similar places in the northern part of Irkutsk *oblast'*. The immediate causes, according to Nikolai, are the sparks from the engine, or a carelessly discarded cigarette. The deeper fact, according to him, is the fact that the taiga only protects itself in places where people and reindeer choose to walk.

It is difficult to give an authoritative reason for the fires in the region but the fact that the fires were there is evident to anyone walking through the forest (Figure 3.8). Whether the result of malice, industrial pressure, climate change, or 'feeding the spirits', it is indeed true that the Aruneevs' taiga, lying high at top of the Inner Asian continental divide, looks and feels like a sanctuary in between a series of burned-out and barren regions.

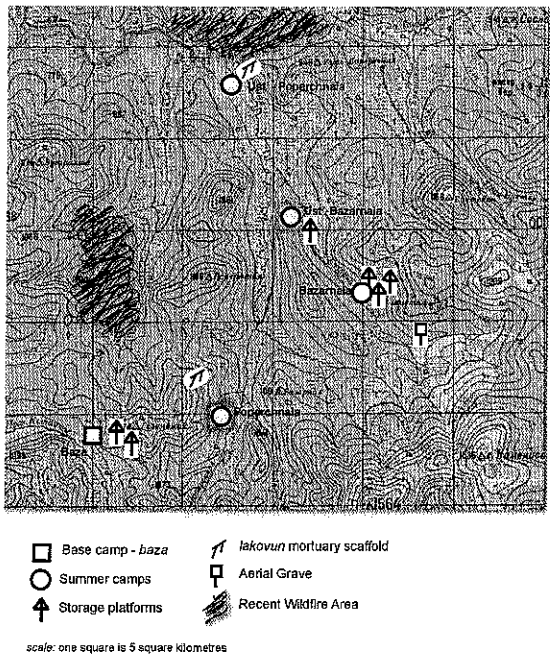


Figure 3.8 Schematic map of the Poperechnaia river valley showing summer camps, storage platforms, mortuary structures and burned-out areas.(Prepared by David G. Anderson.)

The reaction of Aruneev and his work-unit to this insecure environment is characteristically constructive. The area surrounding the abandoned *poligon* geological camp is viewed as a handy source for abandoned metal and canvass useful for making tools and tents. The sanctuaries in between the burned-out valleys are in turn cultivated to preserve or enhance their productivity. Unlike in other Evenki areas in the Arctic, Aruneev seems to follow a strictly-planned pattern of rotating pastures for his flock by moving up and down the Poperechnaia valley (Figure 3.9). Our team encountered the work-unit at their lowest camp called Ust' -Poperechnaia. Over the course of July and August, Aruneev shifted camp once upwards to the head-waters of the Poperechnaia (camp 'Poperechnaia') and were speaking of moving again higher to the Bazarnaia camp. According to Aruneev, their winters are spent high up on the mountains surrounding these two alpine rivers, with forays out for hunting. As the year moves to spring, the reindeer gather themselves in the damp valley bottoms at specially-maintained *kever* meadows. As spring moves to summer, the herders provide reindeer with salt at specific places, as well as light smudge

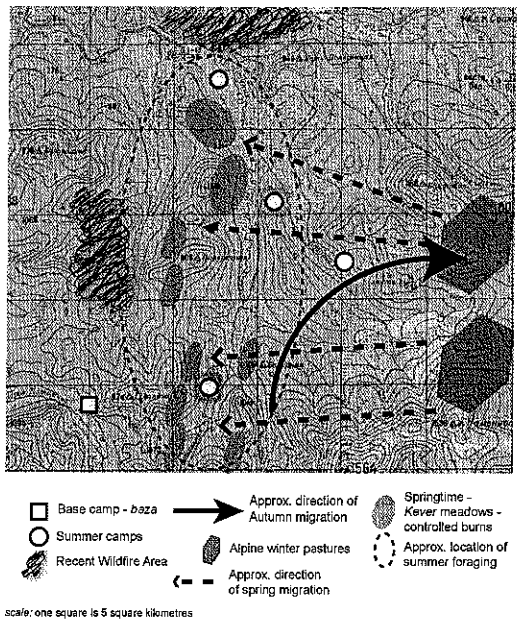


Figure 3.9 Schematic map of the Poperechnaia river valley emphasising the yearly round and the specially-maintained *kever* meadows.(Prepared by David G. Anderson.)

fires (to drive away insects) in order to provide them with an attractive living environment. If the herders do not alter the environment, the reindeer would grow wild, seeking out pastures and insect-free escarpments independently of their human hosts. To make this herding strategy even more effective, the herders also deliberately choose damp areas infested with mosquitoes and black flies in order to exaggerate the reindeer's dependency on the environment that people create.

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

This rather clever but strict pattern of migration is described by Aruneev by a rather formal calendar of dates, which are interspersed with key feast days of the Russian Orthodox ritual calendars (Table 3.1). During our short visit, one particular day (2 August), said to be an Orthodox feast day, was organised to be a day of rest in between certain days reserved for harvesting velvet antlers, inoculations, antler-trimming, and so on throughout the year. The use of ritualised days to structure hunting and herding activity is not unusual to Siberian herding. Reindeer herding all over Siberia in the Soviet period was also structured according to an industrial ritual calendar punctuated by New Year's, the Day of the Reindeer Herder, and the 'First Bell' of the Village School (Anderson 2006b). According to Aruneev, strict respect for feast days and the natural rhythms of the reindeer herd gives one 'luck' (*kutu*). This element of being able to place oneself best to take advantage of ecological opportunities would seem to be of much greater importance in

Table 3.1 A Sketch of the Beiun Yearly Round (as dictated by Nikolai Aruneev)

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

the post-Soviet economy than it was when one could rely on the provisions of a publicly-funded welfare state.

Given the limitations of time and space in this post-socialist burned-out ecosystem and the need to cultivate special places to attract reindeer, it is not surprising to me that Aruneev is also cultivating new forms of ritual.

On Built and Embodied Forms of Ritual

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

Built structures, on the other hand, seem to challenge Soviet sensibilities more radically (Humphrey 2005).

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

Of course, many forms of everyday practise leave material signatures, but one could argue they are one step less than constructing a monument. The ritual placing of coins and bones obviously leave material signatures. Similarly, the everyday routines around a camp leave a signature of deposition providing the ethnoarchaeologist with proof of regularities in everyday life (Anderson 2006a; Pastukhova 2006). Perhaps the most important architectural signature today, as in the Soviet period, are the prohibitions surrounding re-occupying a camp built by members of a different family or clan. To this day, each of the four named camps along the Poperechnaia river is actually a collage of a dozen or so individual camp-sites established by known individuals over the last 20 years. Even during high Sovietism, Orochens never re-occupied the spaces used by other people or re-used the tent-frames or structures they left behind. In each of these cases, the material or ghostly signatures were artefacts of the practice of concrete people. They were not deliberately built to outlast person or to serve as agents in their own right.

Aside from the scaffolding for the sacrificial reindeer, there are other ritual structures which I would argue were designed to have a monumental quality—and which are recognised and generally respected. The most important of these are graves and other mortuary structures. Orochens, and other Evenkis, traditionally used aerial burials—and in this region

Figure 3.10 2004-08z-39 *lokovun* mortuary structure for depositing the clothing and personal goods of a deceased person.(Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

continued the practice well into the 1960s (Arbatskii 1982; Vetrov 1999). Even after the vast majority of Orochens were interred in graveyards, their personal possessions continued to be given aerial burials. Clothing, personal dishes and basins, hunting equipment, personal idols and even reindeer were ripped, broken, or slaughtered and suspended from poles usually at the gravesite. If through some tragedy, the person died and was buried away from his or her possessions, the objects themselves could be suspended separately in a *lokovun* scaffold similar to that which we constructed for the reindeer (Figure 3.10). All of these places would be subject to avoidance and gifting rituals — even during the Soviet era. If a mortuary site was accidentally encountered, the hunter would leave an offering as a sign of respect (and would not harvest anything at that site). Some valleys, which were reputed to hold the remains of powerful shamans, would be avoided entirely, even if their specific mortuary structures were not visible. In these cases, the mortuary monuments became synonymous with the geography. These built mortuary sites, while clearly associated with a concrete historical person, should be considered to be more than the signatures of embodied practice. They

were clearly built as monuments—and everyone respected them as such.[6] Party instructors tolerated them as exceptions, presumably because even Soviet planners could not plan away death. Perhaps they felt that this type of mortuary structure would itself die off over time with older generations, and indeed they are not that common today.

Another interesting exception is the carving of wooden images on mountain passes—idols—as a focus for accepting offerings. This is an old and well- documented Evenki practice that is enjoying a strong revival not only among forest Orochens, but among urban Russians as well. Nikolai carved and placed an idol at the top of a pass between the Poperechnaia and Kotamchal river valleys along the path that connects his main base and storage area and the outlying reindeer camps (Figure 3.11). Each time he passes the *kunakan inuvun* [child's toy], he leaves a lighted cigarette. This is consistent with his belief that luck (and the spirits that hold it) is confined to specific watersheds. He sees this idol as sitting at the main entrance to the places where he holds his reindeer. During our visit, he was anxious to feed it to try to forgo problems with a troublesome bear—an animal that managed to harvest two

Figure 3.11 2004-08z-05 Aruneev's *kunakan inuvun* [child's toy] at the mountain pass between the Poperechnaia and Kotamchal rivers. The plastic sheet is to keep gifted cigarettes dry. (Photograph by David G. Anderson.)

reindeer silently, at night, while we were asleep. The construction of idols, while not very monumental, has until recently been treated with as much suspicion as the construction of mortuary scaffolds for reindeer.

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

Conclusion

Our departure from the Poperechnaia river valley, and our farewell to Nikolai Aruneev, was as memorable as our arrival. To compensate for the lack of public transport in the region, we were hiking with a set of portable canvas canoes (*baidarki*) which we now planned to unfold into the Nercha river and in that way paddle and float our way back to the highway at Kyker (Figure 3.1). With an impressive escort of twelve freight reindeer, Nikolai and his brother Iura escorted us to the top of the mountain pass that marked the continental divide between the Vitim and Nercha watersheds, and the divide between the Arctic and Pacific Oceans. It was a blustery autumn day with a touch of rain turning to snow. Just short of the top of the pass, we stopped to make a fire and have a last cup of tea together. Nikolai gravely informed us that he could not travel with us any farther since his Buriat shaman friends had advised him to stay within the watershed of his home spirits. At this spot, at the top of the world, we left his sanctuary to Orochen reindeer culture to continue our adventures back to the industrial centres

of southern Siberia. It seemed a departure touchingly more appropriate; Conan Coyle's *Lost World* than a 21st century ethnoarchaeological expedition.

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

Rather than treating them as peculiar, these rituals are best seen as a healthy persistence of a type of intuition perhaps mistakenly formalised as a neo-shamanistic 'return' to the past. The inspiration for these revitalised rituals may have initially come from templates taken from stories, old ethnographies or from an old photograph. But they are nevertheless 'placed' within existing social networks and a taiga environment that itself is recovering from 70 years of Soviet industrialism. The ideology of 'placing' was highlighted by Shirokogoroff (1935, 150; 160; 191–92) as a uniquely *tungus* concept which grammatically and pragmatically blurs the line between spirit, place, respect and action.

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from Aberdeen. Our travel was sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Baikal Archaeology Project. I am grateful to colleagues for comments on earlier versions of this paper presented at the Departmental Seminar at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Tromsø and to Virginie Vaté, Jorun Jernsletten, Joseph Long and Peter Jordan who gave extensive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. The Research Council of Norway provided a research leave stipend attached to the NFR project 'Homes Hearths and Households in the Circumpolar North' which allowed me time to work on this article. The NFR project was part of the BOREAS research initiative co-ordinated, but not funded, by the European Science Foundation. I am especially grateful for the hospitality of the Aruneev family in the Beiun *tovarishchestvo* and hope that this article will serve as a monument to their dedication to a life in the taiga.

Notes

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2 Alexandra Lavrillier reports that Evenkis in Amur district of the Sakha republic link their poor economic conditions to their failure to honour their spirits 'nous vivons mal parce que nous n'honorons plus les esprits de la nature' (Vate and Lavrillier 2003, 103). (I am thankful to Virginie Vate for pointing me to this citation).

3 We were told that in 2004, the validity of the Aruneev's lease to this area of the taiga was being challenged by authorities in *oblast'* capital of Chita as part of general revisions and re-registration of the lands privatised during the first period of economic re-structuring.

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

5 This is specifically true of the places along cliffs where *momeo* 'petrified sap' is harvested.

6 One of Nikolai Aruneev's more controversial practices during our visit was to directly visit a grave with gifts and cleansing rituals to directly ask for luck from the deceased owner. Although this is a fascinating and rather humorous story, it will have to be told in a different place.

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