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## Evenki Hunter-Gathering Style and Cultural Contact<sup>1)</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article is based on several periods of long-term field research conducted between 1995 and 2009 among various groups of Evenki, who inhabit the Baikal region of East Siberia. During these expeditions the researchers recognized that it was problematical to categorize the Evenki as exclusively hunter-gatherers, although compared to other people, especially their neighbors, they seemed to maintain a lifestyle best described as hunter-gathering. Based on evidence collected by other ethnographers, mainly Shirokogoroff and Shubin, this article argues that the hunter-gathering lifestyle is always framed by contacts with cattle-breeders, traders, peasants, miners and people with other occupations. Very often transformations and transitions in a hunter-gathering lifestyle are caused by either social or environmental changes. As a conclusion it could be said that the hunter-gathering lifestyle can be defined as a strategy of adaptation to external circumstances, and in this respect temporary inclusion of cattle, horse and reindeer breeding, as well as wage labor, do not mean complete assimilation. On the contrary, these strategies help maintain hunter-gathering activities in the long term.

### INTRODUCTION

The term “Evenki” is used to designate the indigenous people of Siberia, and includes various subgroups and tribes. There are three main distinct groups of Evenki people; Orochon (reindeer herder), Tungus (fisher) and Murchen (cattle breeder). This article examines how the relations among them are interconnected with those of the Russians and Buryats, their other neighbors. These interethnic and intergroup interactions are examined as parts of the local ecological and regional economic distinctions. Through comparisons between strategies of contacts with other people it is demonstrated that the hunter-gathering lifestyle is based on a special form of relationship with non-hunter-gathering communities, as well as a particular market strategy.

The Evenki represent modern hunter-gatherers of Siberia, despite it being

almost impossible to find a pure hunter-gathering community following Soviet restructuring and forced sedentarization. The authors' observations since the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, revealed that most Evenki had to rely on traditional occupations, because of high unemployment rates, poor infrastructure and lack of medical support in their home regions, with the end of obligatory enrollment in collective enterprises such as *sovhozes* and *kolhozes*. So the end of the Soviet Union witnessed a relative increase in a hunter-gathering lifestyle, which simultaneously became integrated with new forms of capitalistic relations. However, to some extent it had been always part of the global economy. For example, sable hunting (*Martes zibellina*), was an original Evenki occupation, which even during Soviet times was always connected to the world economy, because sable fur was an important export of the Soviet Union. Despite many attempts by the State to control sable hunting, there was always an illegal trade in the fur, the smuggling of which connected local hunting communities with international fur auctions in commercial centers like Copenhagen.

Evenki specialization in fur hunting arose from their integration both into the colonial expansion of the Russian Empire and resultant economic forces since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For centuries the Evenki were obliged to pay tribute in fur to Russian tax officers, and, in Soviet times, their image as professional fur hunters was incorporated into iconographic representations of indigenous people. A statue of an Evenki sable hunter is on display in Moscow at the permanent "Exhibition of Achievements of People's Economy," a principal site of propaganda displays for the former Soviet Union. Therefore, what is thought to be an authentic hunter-gathering lifestyle cannot be separated from its global and historical context.

This article examines the local hunter-gathering lifestyle of the Evenki of eastern Siberia as a complex system developed through constant and intensive interactions with neighboring communities, State organizations and global economic forces. It demonstrates that the hunter-gathering lifestyle is a flexible strategy and far more complex than a mere autonomous relic of now vanished traditional societies.

This article takes a comparative approach focused on three scales of comparison. First, it looks at two scientific traditions in Evenki studies. One is the attempt to study Evenki lifestyle as a complex and in the second researchers studied the ethnogenesis of the Evenki, focusing on their roots. In contrast this article demonstrates how the hunter-gathering lifestyle is seen either as a synchronic process or as a result of historical development, led mainly by the processes of assimilation. Comparison of these two research traditions shows that hunter-gatherers attracted researchers because of their image of a self-sustaining autonomy and independence. In contrast, the authors' observations show that, far from being autonomous and self-sustaining, the hunter-gathering lifestyle depends heavily on interactions with others and with various natural resources. Rather than living in isolation, Siberian hunter-gatherers are integrated closely into their wider social and economic environments, and their strategies aim at a broad

diversification of dependence on various scales.

Second, a comparison is made among three strategies for configuring dependencies on the outer world; practices by reindeer herders, cattle breeders and Evenki fishing communities. Despite these groups nowadays not being purely hunter-gatherers, the way they keep cattle and practice gardening differ from the ways the Russian and Buryat perform the same tasks. As a result, it can be assumed that the hunter-gathering lifestyle is characterized not by the content of activities, but by the ways in which they are interconnected and their risks diversified and spread by undertaking various occupations simultaneously.

Lastly, two neighboring regions with traditional Evenki populations are compared to demonstrate that the different development of two regions - one closely associated with large state construction projects and the other more connected to the mining industry - affected local Evenki communities and their lifestyles. This demonstrates strikingly different versions of the Evenki hunter-gathering lifestyle, despite both groups sharing close kinship and historical relations. State economic and administrative policies have had substantial impacts on shaping hunter-gathering economies and the relations Evenki establish with non-hunter-gathering communities.

#### **SHIROKOGOROFF AND SHUBIN: CULTURAL CONTACT BETWEEN EVENKI AND ETHNOGRAPHERS**

It is useful to locate the theme “Evenki and its neighbors” in the Russian ethnographic scene, by referring to Russian scholars who worked on Evenki materials in various periods. These studies could be interpreted either as part of a continuous tradition, or they might have been influenced by political interests at different periods regarding the Evenki in the U.S.S.R. .

Two scholars have a typical and also a special place in Russian ethnographic science. The outstanding Russian theorist, Sergei Mihajlovich Shirokogoroff, is well known internationally by anthropologists as a specialist on Evenki society and shamanism. His famous monograph, the *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus* was referred to frequently by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Shirokogoroff's *ethnos-* and *psychomental complex* theories have been prevalent, although recently several researchers have tried to reinterpret them. The other main ethnographer of Evenki, Aleksandr Sergeevich Shubin, was a native Evenki folklorist. He collected folklore materials (partly in the Evenki language) from the various Evenki groups among which he lived in different periods of his life. His materials were edited posthumously by colleagues and friends and published recently as a monograph entitled *The Evenki*.

Shirokogoroff was born in 1887 in Suzdal, to a well-off Russian family. He studied anthropology and oriental studies, first in Saint-Petersburg and then, between 1906 and 1910, in Paris. Shirokogoroff worked at the *Kunstkamera* in Saint-Petersburg, as a researcher under the direction of academician Radlov. He

was a member of the second generation of anthropologists working in Siberia following the Jewish ethnographers, who included Bogoraz, Shternberg and Iochelson, and Polish ethnographers, who included Piekarski, Sierosewski and Pilsudski, and who were exiled to Siberia as revolutionaries. Between 1912 and 1917 Shirokogoroff conducted several field studies among the Trans-Baikal and Manchurian Evenki. In 1922 he emigrated to China.

Shubin was born in 1929 among the Barguzin (Belovodskie) Evenki. Until the early 1950s he studied and worked in Baunt, and later moved to study in Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic. In 1955 Shubin went to Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg) to study at the Northern branch of the Herzen State Pedagogic Institute. In 1964–7 he wrote and defended his candidate-dissertation<sup>2)</sup> in Moscow at the N.N. Miklukho-Maklaj Institute of Ethnography (Academy of Science of the U.S.S.R.). After returning to Ulan-Ude he worked at the Institute of BKNII (Buryat Cultural and Scientific Institute of History) as a researcher, under the direction of Professor Zalkind, the archival specialist of court records. In the 1960s Shubin conducted fieldwork among various Evenki groups living in Trans-Baikalia, then published articles and a book about them. His official scientific career ended when he was compromised by a colleague and dismissed from his place of work. Until his death he served as a teacher in North Baikalia, and continued his research among various Evenki groups in Buryatia.

Shirokogoroff was not only a great theorist of the Evenki and Manchu peoples, but also a very serious fieldworker. He visited various Trans-Baikal and Manchurian Evenki groups seeking material to develop his theories. Instead of comparing directly these two main Evenki regions he developed a context of how various ethnic units are interrelated. He investigated the past and present inter- and intra-ethnic relations (including other Manchu-Tungus peoples, linguistic relatives of the Evenki, such as the Manchu). His original and rather complex concepts are based on his own field materials. Shirokogoroff also interpreted frequently and critically the works of other scholars, primarily Russians, on the Evenki. Ethnogenesis is a dynamic process. In his interpretation, contact with neighbors played a significant role in assuring that the Evenki *ethnos* did not collapse. Interestingly, Shirokogoroff thought of contacts between Soviet ethnographers and indigenous people as a new type of interethnic relationship, such as when officer ethnographers visited them seeking materials to illustrate the political interests of the new communist regime (Shirokogoroff 1929: 97).

An equilibrium between an Evenki and neighboring ethnic groups could be found through adaption of new elements and through the forgetting of their own (Shirogoroff 1935: 410). However the role of contact with other Evenki or Manchu-Tungus groups is even more significant, in his interpretation, because only during them was there a chance to reactivate, to remember almost entirely forgotten former elements of an Evenki *ethnos*. The contents of various Evenki groups are quite similar to that of their neighbors in Shirokogoroff's analysis. Not satisfied with a description of similarities and differences, he took it one step

further in the last chapter of his *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus* in which he generalized the Evenki features, relationships and institutions, which are radically different from how non-Evenki societies are organized (Shirokogoroff 1929: 308–44).

Shubin, in his *Evenki* book (posthumously published in 2007), used historical sources and the materials of Soviet ethnographers and folklorists, who apparently were his professors in different phases of his scientific career. These include Dolgih, specialist of the *yasak* (fur-tax) system in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Voskoboynikov, a chief Evenki folklorist and head of the Herzen Institute of Small Peoples of the North, in Leningrad (now Saint-Petersburg), with Barguzin, who collected and published folklore materials in Buryatia. Among ethnographers, Vasilevich and Levin conducted important research in the (North) Baikal region. Shubin worked in archives to seek materials and used them, as did Zalkind and Dolgikh did, to construct the micro-history of the local Evenki groups in Buryatia. He visited Evenki villages and collected “folklore materials” from their elders. In his interpretation, folklore materials mean not only fairy tales or other publicly known texts, such as shamanic prayers, but also texts (often in the Evenki language) containing details of the interviewees’ own life or knowledge on particular topics determined by the ethnographer’s questions.

In the former U.S.S.R. ethnography was one of the “historical sciences”. Ethnographers went to the field to collect narratives about the past, usually focusing on the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Another special feature of Soviet ethnographic science was that usually only a person with a Russian background could become an ethnographer, whereas scholars of local indigenous origin could be only folklorists. The ethnographers’ main task was analysis, whereas folklorists collected materials (for the ethnographers) in indigenous languages. Shubin’s case is similar to this configuration. Despite Shubin’s ambitions to be an ethnographer, his folklorist position was preordained by his Evenki background.

The ethnogenesis approach was the predominant methodology of the Soviet (and partly also the post-Soviet Russian) historical sciences, including ethnography. Ethnographers (and folklorists) were looking for the origin of either various phenomena, objects, elements and institutions of the material culture or the social, economic and religious life of ethnic groups, clans and forms of economic organizations. The analysis happens in the context of an ethnicity, i.e. tracing an element in the history of an ethnic group, and looking for singular genealogy or the relationships (similarities and differences) in the context of other (relative, neighboring) ethnic groups. Practically, the researchers trace step-by-step back into the past the similarities and differences of the features related to an ethnic group and later also investigate the relationship between the features, with the aim of creating evidence to define archaic elements of a culture and generalize about it. In the Soviet social (historical) sciences during the investigation of a topic with the ethnogenesis approach every step between the starting and the final points should stay inside the territory of the U.S.S.R., owing to political

considerations. This is the method of isolated culture (State). It could be dangerous (leading to a conflict), also for the researcher, because it could be the basis of a claim by a neighboring country to acquire a territory, if a relevant (cultural) element originated in the territory of that country. It also meant that Russian researchers studied only elements having a relevant place in a culture in Russia.

Similarities to the ethnogenesis approach can also be found in Shirokogoroff's materials. Despite never have used the term "ethnogenesis", he sought historical evidence of the origins of shamanism, reindeer herding or various Evenki tribes and clans. The latter is especially important when the interest is the migration of various Evenki groups in different archaeological and historical periods. The events of his personal life (Shirokogoroff emigrated to China) and results of his research (he published his two main books in China and the cradle of the Evenki culture was located by him in Northeast China) and the historical events (in the 1930s, after the Soviet Union lost the East Manchurian Railway, Russia came into conflict with China, and their shared border was closed), made for an unfortunate coincidence. This was deemed suspicious by the leaders of Soviet ethnography, and as a result his name appeared on the black list of Russian scientists during the Soviet Period. The Soviet specialists of the Evenki ethnogenesis, Okladnikov and Vasilevich, constructed the opposite of Shirokogoroff's approach, and located the origin of the Evenki in the Baikal region. It should be mentioned here that a copy of the translation of Shirokogoroff's *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus* can be found in the archives of Kunstkamera in Saint-Petersburg, so there is a chance that prominent ethnographers were familiar with it. It is known that Vasilevich and Shubin read it, but, despite the richness of Shirokogoroff's ethnographic materials they refused to take it seriously. This was for political reasons, i.e., because of his 'incorrect' methodological approach to the 'Evenki' topic (Vasilevich 1969: 31; Shubin 2007: 230).

It is still possible to use ethnogenesis approaches to become familiar with the ancient (Evenki) populations of the region, despite the aim of this paper being to understand recent ethnic tendencies (memory of the intra- and inter-ethnic migrations). Shirokogoroff dealt with the Mamugir (Shirokogoroff 1929: 58), whereas Shubin dealt with the Vekonor (Shubin 2007: 62). The Vekonor bred cattle in the region between Ust-Dzhilinda and Romanovka. The Mamugirs of the Barguzin Valley supposedly were Tungus who had recently migrated from the territory of Yakutia, and made war on the local Evenki population. In recent times these ethnonyms have become powerful. Some individual strangers (for example Buryats or Yakuts) identify themselves with these ethnonyms, trying to fit in so as to live among the Evenki.

Shubin was not a specialist of ethnogenesis. He never directly used it as a frame for analysis, however Shubin organized the chapters of his book in a similar way. On the basis of archival work and collected folklore materials he produced summaries of the history of the Barguzin, Baunt and North Baikal districts, the origin of Evenki groups and their Russian and Buryat neighbors living in these

districts, and the origin of such occupations as hunting, horse breeding, and reindeer herding (Shubin 2007: 241–262).

Reindeer herding was an important topic for both scholars. In the 1910s, as well as the 1960–70s, the origin of reindeer herding had not yet been clarified, a situation that allowed researchers to propose other ideas and hypotheses. Shirokogoroff was reluctant to say anything, except to note the problematical nature of the topic. He mentioned different aspects: small- and large-scale herding, wild and domestic character, and the like. Reindeer herding is significant for him because of the multidimensional approach to life among the Evenki, and being a reindeer herder is the most complex full-scale occupation of the various Evenki groups.

Probably one of the most interesting concepts about reindeer for Shirokogoroff is its usefulness in travel and communication. He found that any place could be reached with reindeer, whereas by horse or a cart the number of reachable locations is limited (Shirokogoroff 1935: 406). As already mentioned, Shubin was not a specialist on the topic, and for him reindeer herding was a subject for speculation about origins as the most primitive type of transportation, an archaic feature of Evenki culture. He collected folklore texts about the origin of reindeer herding which were organized similarly to a Buryat genealogy (the fourth brother became a reindeer herder and the occupation of reindeer herding originated from this ancestor). It was also a goal of both scholars to understand the annual cycle of herding reindeer (Shirokogoroff 1929: 28–38; Shubin 2007: 255).

Finally, there follows here some details about Evenki and their neighbors. Shirokogoroff referred to the Barguzin *taiga* including the Vitimkan River, the Baunt, and Amalat regions, the Northeast Baikal region, and the upper Angara River. He differentiated the Barguzin Murchens and the Kurumkan Tungus, Baikal nomads and Baunt reindeer herders, as well as Russians and Buryats. In 1912–3 he travelled through the Baunt reindeer herder territory and the Kurumkan Tungus to the Barguzin Murchens. He was the last and probably the first anthropologist who saw the Barguzin *taiga* as a large complex system (primary milieu) including Kurumkan and Baunt. In addition to seeing primarily hunting, and secondarily reindeer herding, horse breeding and fishing groups, he also mentioned gold mining and agriculture as being among Evenki occupations.

Shubin's aim was to see the Barguzin, Baunt and North Baikal Evenki as historical and archaic people. He wrote about conflict with neighbors, especially with Russians, before the October Revolution, but not during the Soviet Period. The latter can be taken as the sign of his loyalty to the Soviet regime. His approach is Buryat style, looking for genealogies, histories, legends and origins to declare that the Evenki are also an equal people, similar to Buryats and Russians. He mentioned also the concentration of Evenki people of the Barguzin Valley in the beginning of 1930s, when Barguzin Evenki were forced to migrate to the north among the Kurumkan Evenki. The Barguzin Evenki were recognized by the State,



along with neighboring Buryats. They had the right to own territory, but had no special status as Evenki. Although the reindeer herding Orochons of Baunt had a special status as Evenki, and received supplies for hunting as well as other privileges (free boarding school and medical care) from the State, they had no right to their own land. This State policy was aimed at resolving the problem through the concentration of various Evenki groups into the northern Barguzin Valley, to offset differentiation among the Barguzin, Kurumkan and Baunt Evenki.

According to Shirokogoroff, the relations with neighboring peoples (Evenki, non-Evenki or Manchu-Tungus) permit a dynamic picture of various Evenki groups and their neighbors. In his opinion, no Evenki group has an isolated position, and no Evenki territory has a peripheral situation, because there are other sides of the “periphery” inhabited by other Evenki groups. Methodologically, Shirokogoroff tried to determine the time and place of events, positions and situations with the aim of investigating the limits to the validity of a relationship.

Shubin drew a more rigid picture of Evenki groups in Buryatia by assembling their local micro-history. Investigation of the history of their neighbors is important to locate sources (archival materials) about the Evenki. For Shubin, the ties with neighbors in the Evenki landscape mean either the core of progress and development for Evenki through cultural contact with Buryats and Soviets, or past exploitation of Evenki by capitalist or bourgeois Russians.

## OROCHON

The authors lived among the Orochon Evenki in the Baunt Region, where some families maintain reindeer herding as their main occupation. However, this is now more an exception than the rule. Before the 1950s, some Orochon families also kept reindeer in the Kurumkan Region (in Garga), but then moved to Baunt as well. Before Soviet collectivization, when reindeer was redefined as a kind of cattle, expropriated by the State and kept on large collective reindeer farms, most Orochon families kept their own reindeer. These were usually small herds of 7–12 head, used mainly transportation and as pack animals. Orochon very rarely killed their own reindeer, preferring to hunt for the wild species. During fieldwork the authors stayed with three Orochon families, two of which were reindeer herders and one that lived in a forest village and kept cattle. Reindeer and cattle played an important role in contacts with strangers and relatives from elsewhere; to some extent the meat was the main medium for such contacts.

The family of Dogonchiny consisted of two couples, a mother and daughter with their common-law partners. They lived isolated in the forest and kept 23 reindeer. Initially this camp belonged to the family of the deceased husband, an Orochon, whose wife was not Orochon but from a Russian-Gypsy family. She gave birth to nine children, and after the death of her husband stayed in the forest, where she now lives with a partner more than 10 years younger than herself. One of her daughters, after breaking-up with her own husband also moved back to the

*taiga* to be with her mother. There she met her new partner, who is 10 years younger than herself.

The older couple had to go once a year to the central village to renew their disability statuses, collect their pensions, and buy supplies, such as sugar, tea, flour, rice and gasoline used to fuel a small electric generator that enabled them to watch DVD films and listen to music. Usually they invited some friends from the village who drove huge all-terrain vehicles to reach the campsite. For the whole winter hunting season the older couple also hunted wild reindeer; the woman was responsible for carrying and transporting meat by reindeer, and her partner for shooting, who, because of an old injury, could not lift or carry anything. This meat was stored frozen and given to visiting friends in early spring as payment for the transportation. The same vehicle took the couple back with supplies. The younger couple mainly hunted sable, fished and panned for gold. All these various products were sold through their own contacts, which included many former boarding school classmates.

The young couple had no other source of income; neither State benefits nor salaries, and depended totally on the older couple. They were responsible for searching for the reindeer and doing household chores. Reindeer herding provided no direct profit, but was instead like an anchor that kept people in the forest where they spent little for living. That people could buy supplies only once in a year forced them to purchase in large quantities and only essential products. Thus their consumption was efficient. Also they were without alcohol, which constitutes a substantial expense for villagers. Further, they did not have to pay for water, firewood, meat or fish, all these were collected and hunted in the forest. Isolation was the price people paid for their economical lifestyle, because the camp was far from the village and during some seasons was almost unreachable. Reindeer, which need to stay in the mountains, was not only a means of transport, but had to be prevented from roaming. The need to keep a constant eye on reindeer forced people to live in seclusion and isolation, which had its material advantages.

The other Orochon family with which the authors stayed with was also living in the *taiga*, but on a reindeer farm supported by a local indigenous mining company. Unlike the previous group, most residents of the camp were hired as reindeer herders, and received salaries. The farm, unprofitable alone, and its expenses were covered by the company. The farm's main function was to provide an indigenous façade for the mining enterprise, which presented itself publicly as an Evenki family community enterprise that supported and developed traditional Evenki occupations like reindeer herding and hunting. The company's reindeer herd comprised 60 animals, some of which were purchased by it and transported from the neighboring region.

The core of the reindeer herders was composed of a couple. The wife was an elder daughter and sister to the women in the camp described above. One officially hired herder and one volunteer helped tend the reindeer. The latter was a young unemployed man whose hearing difficulties prevented him from finding a

job in the village. There were always guests or other workers staying at the camp. The camp was located mid-way along the route taken by a military vehicle convoy that transported semi-precious stones from the mine approximately every 10 days during the June-October mining season. The convoy always stopped at the camp, where the reindeer herders prepared food for its drivers and security guards. After staying only about an hour, the convoy would leave. The same vehicles delivered various supplies of food and forage for the reindeer. Being situated on the only road that led to the mine, the camp served also as a watch post and gateway. Thus the Evenki knew about all the travelers, including illegal poachers and miners, who penetrated the territory that the mining company attempted to control. Thus the reindeer herd served not only as a shield that helped secure the position of the company and its legal status, but was also an important reason to station people in a distant and relatively isolated place, to control access to the mining area.

The company also used reindeer as their symbol. Although living in a city, the company leaders wore high boots made of reindeer skin, and, to welcome special guests, they ordered reindeer meat from the farm. In all other ways this reindeer farm was particularly nonfunctional; no attempts were made to train the animals for transportation<sup>3)</sup>, and they were never milked. The animals were expensive to maintain, because herders fed them with good quality fodder to keep them near the camp, so they need not be rounded-up everyday. Further, the animals were vaccinated, just like other cattle in the region, and their blood was studied in veterinary laboratories, as a check against epidemics.

In this case again, the reindeer was important not as a provider of either meat or transportation, but as a medium that connected people to their land, traditional identity and new capitalist investment strategies. The herd attracted wild reindeer during the mating season, and reindeer herders hunted them, sometimes recognizing among them animals they had lost many years ago. This hunted reindeer meat was sent to their relatives and friends in the village as a gift and a form of payment for the hospitality received when reindeer herders visited the village. And this meat was precious not for the calories it provided, but because there was a tacit belief that every Evenki should occasionally taste the meat of wild animals. This taste of the *taiga* was part of the experience of being Evenki.

The third Orochon family with which the authors stayed lived in an isolated *taiga* village. They had no reindeer, but instead kept cows, horses and pigs. Both grandmother and grandfather remembered how they had lived in the *taiga* when their parents were reindeer herders. But since collectivization no private reindeer remained around the village; the specialization of which thus became cattle breeding. Evenki families of Orochon origin switched to cattle breeding as well, although Tungus people still mostly avoid keeping cattle. The authors lived with the younger daughter, who had three sons. Her mother (who was called “grandmother”) lived in a neighboring house and helped care for the 11-year old middle son. The seven year-old youngest son lived with his mother, and the eldest, aged 17, attended school in the central village of the district, living there with his

aunt. The grandmother and mother cared for the same cattle, and a substantial part of the meat was sent to the older sister in the central village. The latter worked as a school teacher, and did not keep her own cattle.

Meat also served as a form of payment for transport, and was in a way analogous to the reindeer meat described the previous examples. Most interesting is that some Orochon strategies used in caring for reindeer have been projected onto cattle breeding. For example, after the collapse of the Soviet system, many horses were lost in the *taiga*. Now they are regarded as being as wild and villagers, including Orochons, hunt them. Frequently, these semi-wild animals are stamped as domestic by the local veterinarian and the meat sold as if having originated from a family farm. This same ambiguity regarding the wild or domestic origin of the meat also characterized reindeer meat production.

Most Orochons were resettled in villages and so were unable to continue reindeer herding. They adapted to the new situation, although retaining some traits associated with the reindeer herding lifestyle. For example, meat remained an important medium for maintaining kinship and friendship relations at a distance.

Reindeer herding was subordinated to hunting, and reindeer was used either to attract wild reindeer, as a convenient form of transport in the *taiga*, or as a reason to stay as close as possible to areas inhabited by wild animals. Reindeer herding was a frame for hunting. When Orochon switched to cattle breeding, they regarded it as a secondary occupation that helped to maintain some other types of subsistence. In a way, reindeer were never seen as a source of meat, but mainly as a means of connecting with both wild animals and neighboring nomadic families and settlements. Cattle breeding occupied the same niche in the Orochons' lives, by providing them with a way to maintain connections with the outer world yet stay integrated into the local ecological system.

## MURCHEN

Two families of Murchen Evenki provide examples of how a hunter-gathering lifestyle can be converted into a specific management strategy that helps to coordinate various economic activities. Both families have distant kinship connections, but live in neighboring regions with different ecological systems. The background is that many Tungus and Orochon were relocated by the Soviet State in the 1930s to the lands of the Murchen people. When these people started to live on the land of the Murchen Evenki, they adjusted to the new ecological situation and began to breed animals, mainly horses, and assimilated with local Murchen families. Thus when some families later left these territories and moved to the neighboring region, they were already experienced in adjusting and switching to new economic activities.

In the Kurumkan Region, on the border between the steppes and *taiga*, a family of Murchen Evenki maintained a farm 5 km from the village. There were more than 100 cows, a flock of sheep, and two herds of horses amounting to

approximately 50 animals. Nominally, most of the stock belonged to the family-based Evenki traditional community, headed by Irgichi Stepanovich. He was helped by his younger son and his wife. Irgichi's wife, Maria Stepanovna, lived at this farm with their three small grandchildren. They also kept cattle belonging to some villagers. The arrangements were negotiated individually, and frequently the animals belonged to close relatives.

There were many such family farms in this region, including some held by Buryat people, but only Evenki kept their cattle on the border between the *taiga* and the steppe. Beside cattle breeding, Evenki engaged in fishing, and some family members were hunters, but this was no longer a permanent occupation. Striking was the multiplicity and complexity of farm organization. Animals were left to pasture freely in neighboring fields, and only in summer were they driven to other pastures, while the areas around the farm were enclosed to allow grass to grow and for making into hay in the autumn. Thus cattle were moved between summer and winter camps, just like the reindeer in the neighboring region. Horses were left almost unattended; people rarely checked them and never fed them. Human intervention was limited to the poisoning of wolves. This way of keeping horses as semi-wild animals corresponds to the way horses lived on the Orochons' territories in the previous example. Cows grazed freely and returned each evening to their cowshed. In winter, they were also allowed to graze freely, but received hay as well. Cows, sheep and horses grazed in different places, often separated by forests. The mixed landscape was used for different purposes on the farm, whose autonomy was based on the complexity and differentiation of various occupations, from keeping diverse stock to hunting and gathering in the forest. Because the farm animals enjoyed much freedom, the Evenki could travel and leave them, sometimes for several consecutive days. Local Buryat and Russian families never left their households unattended, but always left somebody in charge of the farm.

The other Murchen family made a remarkable shift in the scale of its household organization, from leading a local village collective farm to owning a huge industrial company that specialized in gold and jade mining. During Soviet times the founder of the company was the chairman of a collective farm that existed in a village of Orochon families. After the collapse of the Soviet Union he organized a family-based community, a class of firm that was exempted from major taxation if it developed traditional occupations of Evenki people, a group recognized as indigenous.

The family-based community began as a small shop in the village from which Evenki sold supplies for hunting, ammunition and food items. They also collected fur and resold it to more central fur traders. At some point, the Evenki started panning gold and obtained a license to do so. When Chinese people started to come to the region to buy jade pebbles, the community switched to that business, starting with pebble collection in rivers. By the time the company applied for a license to mine jade, the older family head had retired and been replaced by his son. His daughter was also coordinating the work of a firm.

One priority of the company was to maintain its indigenous status. As a result its activities were highly diversified. Several hunters were hired to supply the company with sable fur and also to patrol the distant territories surrounding its mine in winter, when there was no mining activity, but when many attempts were made to steal jade from it. One of the reindeer farms described above belonged to the company, and was subsidized by it. This allowed the company to rent huge territories for reindeer herding and also to control the vast forests surrounding the mine. Also, the reindeer camp was transformed into a base, where convoys with jade stopped to rest and have lunch. At some point the principle of diversification of the household became a leading strategy for the whole company, and it invested in a brick factory, a sausage factory and other businesses. The company mined white, green and brown jade, and invited carving masters from China in an attempt to sell jade sculptures.

Although most income came from the trade in white jade stones, the Evenki were investing in diversification, which they regarded as a priority for their business. This attempt to diversify their own structure and cover as many production niches as possible works at all scales of the Evenki economy. The principle has particular consequences for relations of the Evenki with the world of outsiders, since diversification and attempts to integrate various occupations lead to the intensification of contacts with strangers. The Evenki organization was not only hiring various specialists and incorporating people of different cultural origins, it was searching always for new categories of clients and new contacts. This can be compared with the nomadic lifestyles of reindeer herders that move not only to increase the variety of the resources, but also to increase their range of contacts with strangers.

Some Evenki succeed in expanding their households and in organizing huge firms that are highly diversified and produce many different products simultaneously. This cannot be explained just as economically rational behavior, because some of their occupations, such as hunting and reindeer herding, constantly prove unprofitable and costly. Nevertheless Evenki maintain them and invest in such unprofitable activities, as well as highly risky new ventures.

Thus sometimes that strategy even looks irrational, such as when the Evenki maintain occupations that are unprofitable, but continue to invest in creating diverse activities, some of them in an “art for art’s sake” mode. Such strategies can be regarded as a form of collecting; the Evenki collect various activities and maintain them, enjoy the multiplicity and complexity of their company structures that attract various clients and strangers. In a way Evenki entrepreneurs remain hunter-gatherers, while accessing new capital and resources and incorporating new activities and networks into their lifestyles. And because these lifestyles are flexible from the beginning (people can switch from reindeer herding to cattle breeding and fishing with relative ease), they encompass all forms of new occupations, from jade mining to brick production.

## TUNGUS

The Tungus are associated with fishing. There are no local Tungus groups, and all Evenki that seem to be identified as Tungus came to the region at different times. Some are related to Evenki from the nearby lake district, who were forcibly relocated by the Soviet authorities. Others entered the region after the 1960s, when the newly built Baikal-Amur railroad cut through their native territories and prevented them from remaining in their own lands. Some of the latter argue that they were Orochons, and their families had reindeer before they came to the new place, where they had to start their life from scratch. Now these people depend heavily on fishing, which sometimes becomes their specialization, because they lack resources to add other occupations and activities to their repertoire. Some Tungus people start reindeer herding as hired herders working for a salary. This switch in occupation also allows them to hunt. During fieldwork the authors met one person who had become a hunter.

Several extremely poor Evenki families that had moved in several decades ago lived in the village where the authors stayed with the Orochon family. They had been forced to leave their own territories by a major railway construction project during Soviet times. In those days, they were themselves Orochon, but after moving and losing their reindeer and their hunting territories, they took up fishing and were regarded by local Evenki as being Tungus. Their village was on the Vitim River, where for the entire winter fishing season most family members spent their days fishing on the ice. In summer they set nets and also made a brew from sugar and yeast that they exchanged for food. They also drank heavily. Unlike all other Evenki families in the village, they had no animals, not even a horse. Some worked on distant farms, spending the whole season herding and caring for other people's cattle. They used these opportunities to hunt and fish. When they managed to get some precious fur, such as sable, or lynx (*Lynx lynx*), they returned to the village and exchanged it for alcohol, provisions and ammunition. The conditions under which they lived were visibly worse than those of the other villagers, with unrepaired and poorly insulated houses equipped with old stoves. It can be suggested, therefore, that the transformation from Orochon to Tungus these families experienced was not only a change of lifestyle, but a drastic change in material status, so that their new identity as Tungus also referred to their poverty. Fishing *per se* was not a stigmatized practice; on the contrary, many villagers saw it as a luxurious and pleasurable way to spend time. However, that these people had no other occupations and had to rely so heavily on fishing, was seen by their neighbors as an outcome of their poverty.

Tungus identity was not only regarded as associated with fishing. For example, a friend of the people the authors lived with at the reindeer camp was sometimes seen as Tungus, because his grandmother was from the neighboring lake district. Despite his relationships with other Orochon families of the region, he was very often seen as not an Orochon, but as a Tungus, who had inherited

some black shamanic talents from his grandmother. Frequently, he was a victim of violence and abuse. But once during a stay at the camp where he worked as a reindeer herder, the authors witnessed how his status was transformed. That autumn he managed to kill two wild reindeer in quick succession, which was seen as a sign of extremely good luck. Simultaneously, he managed to collect some money from his salary and was planning to leave the job to stay in the village caring for his sick mother. His status changed and people started to respect a person they previously did not believe was skilled in any activity. He became perceived as a relative who shared the Orochons' skill as a good reindeer herder and a hunter.

What exactly triggered this shift remained an open question for the authors. Simultaneously he became lucky in hunting, collected cash and started talking about leaving his job. It could be seen that identities were changing, and this happened rather quickly. The same person could be regarded as Tungus, or Orochon or Murchen in different phases of life, and these changes coincide with the expansions and contraction of the horizons of occupations and activities. The higher one's status, the better one's chances of doing a variety of things and not needing to rely on a single occupation.

### **THREE CASES OF EVENKI MIGRATION**

Cultural contact with neighbors initiated by the State (sometimes through the State representative ethnographers) has significant influence on an Evenki community. Cultural contact with non hunter-gathering and other hunter-gathering communities often results in specialized occupations or changes in social status. It is difficult to comprehend the complex local micro-historical situation of the of an Evenki community, so the aim here is to only illustrate the argument with three cases typical of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Before giving details of the cases it needs to be mentioned that, naturally, the three recently investigated Evenki regions each has its own local history based on contacts with neighboring groups. Barguzin was and is a region inhabited mostly by Russians. It was the settlement center for local businessmen until the early 1920s, when the Baunt and the Barguzin were separated. The first case is the enforced northward migration of the Barguzin Evenki, between 1928 and 1932, to among the Kurumkan Evenki. Before this migration the Baikal Evenki had already been forced to leave the area northeast of Lake Baikal, owing to the founding of the Barguzin Nature Reserve on their land, in 1916. Besides hunting, their other main occupation was fishing.

So the Barguzin Evenki (including the former Baikal Evenki) had the right to use their land for horse and cattle breeding, whereas the increasing number of arriving Buryats and Russians had no access to land. The State recognized them like the neighboring horse-breeding Buryat clans, but they were not recognized as Evenki people, and thus could not obtain support from the State as Evenki. Most



of the former Barguzin Evenki moved to the upper Barguzin River, to Dyren, where, together with other local Kurumkan Evenki, they formed the village of Alla. However, contrary to the expectation of the State some Barguzin families moved not north but east, through the Ikat and Barguzin passes to Baunt and on to Vitimkan and the Romanovka-Ust-Dzhilinda regions. As a result of this complex State-initiated migration, Evenki (Tungus) individuals originally from Barguzin could be found everywhere in Baunt. The former population of Barguzin Evenki dissolved, and they lost the collective rights to their land.

Former Barguzin Evenki, originally from the south, now had similar privileges to other Evenki, such as Tungus and Murchen, who inhabited the northern part of the valley. This migration resulted in the full assimilation of the Barguzin Evenki, and the concentration and homogenization of the Evenki population of the Barguzin Valley as a whole, as well as to the complete sedentization of former Barguzin Evenki nomads. However, intra-ethnic relations among various Evenki groups with different primary occupations (such as fishing, horse breeding, reindeer herding etc.) allowed the Evenki to be more flexible than they previously had been. The social status of the former Barguzin Evenki (in these situations 'Tungus') was emphasized by the Baunt or Kurumkan Evenki (Orochon and Murchen) in rare moments of exclusion, such as while drinking alcohol or during strange shamanic practice.

The second case is a Soviet-project that, between 1970 and 1994, changed the life of many Evenki communities, among others that of the Upper Barguzin river (i.e. the Kurumkan Evenki). Kurumkan is a region dominated by Buryat cattle breeders with a few Russian agriculturalists. Before 1970 and after 1994 the Evenki lost their flexible ways of dealing. Gradually they appeared to be more similar to the local Buryat population. They performed almost exclusively Buryat occupations in the Evenki way. This Soviet project was meant to integrate the northern periphery, an almost untouched territory of *taiga*, into the main body of the State. During the project a service road was built between 1970 and 1994 to serve the construction of the B.A.M. (*Baikal-Amur Magistral*) railroad, north to Lake Baikal. As a preliminary condition for this *komsomol* (Communist Youth) project, Kurumkan became an independent district distinct from Barguzin.

Evenki from the *taiga* in neighboring regions arrived in Kurumkan either alone or with their reindeer to work as guides, transporters and hunters for the geological and topographic expeditions. Some Evenki families escaping from the construction of the B.A.M. railroad used this new infrastructure for their own benefit, moving along the service road from north to south. As a result of the cultural contact among the *taiga* experts of the neighboring Evenki groups, the peripheral position of the Evenki disappeared for a quarter of century. Evenki had a chance to reactivate traditional skills, such as hunting, fishing and transporting with reindeer. Another result is that individual Evenki became citizens like the Soviet people, receiving salaries, medical attention and pensions. A process of individualization and specialization, such as Evenki being recognized as guides,

was initiated by strangers (the representative of the State), paradoxically making possible, for a while, a larger repertoire of Evenki occupations.

However, it is crucial to note that this project was not an Evenki initiative. The social status of the neighboring Evenki groups was equalized for the period of the construction project. The neighboring Evenki groups were similar, and the image of the Evenki as an autonomous person had been initially created by the organizers of the geological and topographical expeditions. The opening of the BAM railroad meant the closing of the service road and the *taiga* north of Kurumkan; in 1992, a nature reserve was established in the former hunting territory of the Evenki. Except for a few rangers, Evenki *taiga* experts were no longer necessary for the Soviets and the new post-Soviet State. The Kurumkan Evenki could no longer hunt legally. Either they worked as cattle or horse breeders or they organized a Tungus team for illegal logging. These may look like strange innovations in Kurumkan, however, the Evenki dealt with their situation like they dealt with their own traditional occupations.

The third case is taken from the Baunt District. Because of gold mining, for almost two centuries the former territory of the Barguzin *taiga* has traditionally been occupied by Russians. There were a few Buryat inhabitants, such as Buryat *kulaks* escaping from neighboring regions in the late 1920s. Some of their descendants easily could identify themselves as local Evenki (never as Orochon) in order to receive privileges from the State. After the beginning of the 1990s, some national bureaucrats established administrative careers in peripheral areas of Buryatia.

In 1993, owing to the increasing power of the regional policy, as opposed to the centralization policy of the Soviet Period, the Baunt District received “Evenki” status and more privileges. Some Evenki individuals originally from Kurumkan, followed by their families, parents and relatives, moved to Baunt to establish Evenki careers as hunters or as representatives of Evenki culture. Evenki *obschinas*<sup>4)</sup> were also organized in Baunt for hunting and reindeer herding. In 2000, one of these *obschinas* obtained a license to mine nephrite. This new Evenki occupation of mining nephrite was generated by demand from China. Other occupations generated by the *obschinas* include reindeer herding and hunting, which helped reinforce the Evenki nature of the *obschina*.

Representatives of other Evenki groups and non-Evenki peoples, particularly neighbors, also arrived from all over Buryatia to work to this region. However, the crews of the various work teams were continuously changing, because workers, except perhaps the local Evenki and the anthropologists, could not avoid stealing nephrite. This case is unique, because it is exceptional that an Evenki *obschina* had the right to manage a traditionally non-Evenki occupation. The Evenki leaders of the *obschina* tried to manage this new occupation in their own way, simultaneously with other occupations, such as reindeer herding and hunting, and gold and nephrite mining. The way they deal with a single occupation, as well as the way they manage various occupations simultaneously, is significant here.

It needs to be emphasized that most of these new occupations maintain contact with the *taiga*, so that while pursuing new occupations like fishing, reindeer herding or horse breeding, the Evenki could find time for hunting. The social status of Evenki rose among local people, both other Evenki and their non-Evenki neighbors. Finally, it should be noted that since 2005 signs of a centralization policy generated by the State in Moscow have also appeared in this region of Siberia. In the area of inter-ethnic relations, cultural contact also meant the activity of State ethnographers for the sake of the State. The State ethnographers believed that their task was to assist the Evenki to preserve Evenki culture. Ethnographers were worried mainly about outside attacks on Evenki traditional occupations. So they initiated a law, accepted by the State, that the Evenki have a right to protect traditional Evenki occupations. In the explicit interpretation of the State Court it means that the Evenki and Evenki *obschinas* should not be licensed for non-traditional occupations. In 2012, the excavation of nephrite was halted and the *obschina* was liquidated.

## CONCLUSIONS

It was intended to contest the image of hunter-gatherers as being isolated and self-sustaining. It has been demonstrated here that hunter-gatherers of East Siberia form a distinct community, not because they hunt and gather forest products, but because they diversify risks by combining in a distinctive way various occupations, including reindeer herding, horse and cattle breeding and elements of farming. It could be said that hunter-gatherers transform all economic occupations into forms and variations of foraging, but they do this not with an aim to minimize their dependency on other people, but to make this dependency as diverse as possible.

Evenki identification as Orochon, Murchen or Tungus becomes a designation of social status and shows the access to specific resources. Status transformations are slow, but may happen within a single generation. Thus it can be seen how Orochon transforms into Tungus or Murchen, or *vice versa*.

During the research discussed here it was first thought that changes in the ecological system led to the migrations of various Evenki communities. However, later it was found that the need for migration often was generated by historical events, initiated in most cases by the State. The Evenki and their neighbors were pushed to react to these situations. Social status and the repertoire of occupations was changed during migration to neighboring regions inhabited by other Evenki communities. The Evenki people lost some of their previous occupations when they were forced to move. It was then necessary to make contact with other Evenki groups, which also resulted in the refreshment of a set of forgotten Evenki former occupations.



**Figure 1** Horse breeding (photographed by authors in Jirga (Republic of Buryatia) in 2006)



**Figure 2** Fishing (photographed by authors in Ust-Dzhilinda (Republic of Buryatia) in 2008)



Figure 3 Reindeer herding (photographed by authors in Taloi (Republic of Buryatia) in 2008)

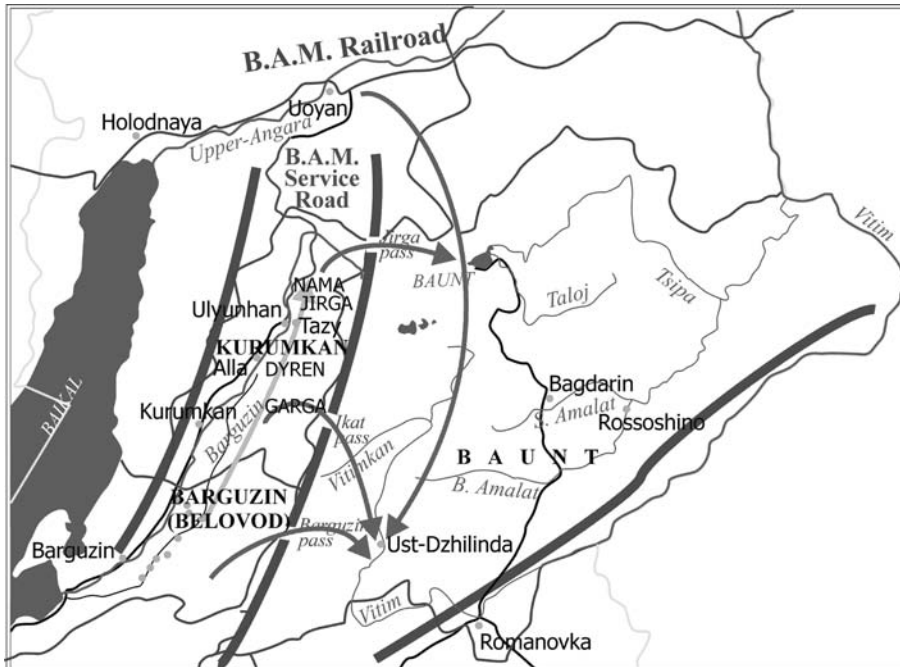


Figure 4 Migration of Evenki hunter-gatherers in 20<sup>th</sup> century in the territory of the former Barguzin taiga (the map prepared by Sántha István in 2015)

## NOTES

- 1) A preliminary version of this article was presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> conference of Hunting / Hunting and gathering societies, in Liverpool on 28 June, 2013, during the session entitled “Hunter-gatherers and their Neighbors”, organized by K. Ikeya and R. Hitchcock .
- 2) Equivalent to a Ph.D dissertation.
- 3) Only once did the author see a couple of reindeer from this herd being used for transport. That was when the head of the group secretly helped his brother-in-law, a mining poacher, make a short trip to the mining area, in winter when the mine was closed.
- 4) A form of indigenous economic enterprise supported by the State in Russia.

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