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The Hunting Techniques and Equipment of the Peoples of Siberia and the Russian Far East

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Introduction

Many kinds of ethnography written in the regimes of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union represented hunting of the ethnic minorities in Siberia and Far East as a primitive, uncivilized subsistence, which should have been reformed to a civilized, modernized, commercial and productive activity. For example, in “Peoples of Siberia” edited by M. G. Levin and L. P. Potapov in 1954 (translated in English and published in 1969 in Chicago), hunting is always described as one of their typical subsistence activities before the Socialist Revolution and as a representative of their primitiveness (Levin and Potapov 1954: 228). However, the image and representation of the hunting and the perspective of its research are recently changing from the archaic, primitive subsistence to the effective usage and control of the natural resources.

The author has long engaged in the research and analysis on the hunting techniques, equipment, and technology, natural and social conditions, and its historical change seen among the indigenous people in the Russian Far East, especially the Nanai and Udeghe (Sasaki 2000a; 2000b; 2002; 2003b; 2009). In this paper, comparing with their cases, I will analyze the hunting equipment and techniques of the Buryat people in Pribaikalia and Transbaikalia. Before the description and analysis, I will raise two theoretical and hypothetical assumptions on the hunting techniques and equipment of the people in Siberia and Russian Far East. First, those for the subsistence hunting aiming big games such as moose, red deer, roe deer, wild bores, and so on and the commercial hunting aiming fur-bearing animals such as sables, ermines, weasels, squirrels, and so on are interchangeable. The both hunting requires the same skills like chasing, driving, waiting, shooting, and trapping (Sasaki 2003a: 108).

Secondly, hunters have often changed their techniques and equipment, when they met better ones that enabled them to catch animals more effectively or when they could not but change them in the given political, economic, and social conditions. In other words, they could flexibly adapt themselves to new conditions if necessary (Sasaki 2003a: 108). For example, some types of automatic bow guns, spring-traps, deadfall traps, snares, rifles of the Soviet army, and some methods of driving and waiting animals are widely seen among the hunters from different places and ethnicity in Siberia and the Far East. This implies that many hunters

recognized their usability and excellent performance regardless of their locality, culture, and ethnicity. On the other hand, the distribution of the gun hunting and steel jaw trap hunting has much to do with the national policy concerning the hunting and natural resource management and the economic conditions under the socialist and recent market systems.

In this paper, I will examine these assumptions on the materials from the ethnography on the Buryat people and other people in Siberia and Far East.

Classification of Hunting

Hunting activities can be classified into several ways. For example, an ethnologist from Republic of Sakha, F. M. Zykov, classified the hunting of the Sakha people (the Yakut) into two categories like “active hunting” and “passive hunting” from a point of view of the action to the animal. According to him, the former includes the methods like creeping, chasing, driving, and waiting, while the latter is almost equal to trap hunting. F. M. Zykov further classified the passive hunting into two categories by types of traps: the portable type and non-portable type. Snares, jaw traps, *cherkans*, and automatic bow guns can be categorized into the former, while pitfalls, dead fall traps, and snares with some heavy devices into the latter (Zykov 1989: 65; Sasaki 2003a: 92). S. G. Zhambalova insisted two ways of the classification of the hunting of the Buryat people: the collective hunting and individual hunting from the number of hunters participating in the hunting and the active hunting and passive hunting like F. M. Zykov did (Zhambalova 2004: 107).

From a point of view of the human side, the hunting can be classified into the “offensive hunting” and “defensive hunting.” In the former, hunters capture animals to get meat, fur, and other useful materials from the animals. They both actively go to hunting with weapons and passively wait animals to fall into traps. On the other hand, in the latter, people kill or drive away animals to protect their life and production. In many cases hunters set traps or pitfalls at the points, where animals often pass to get into the human space. The meat and fur of the captured animals are the by-products.

One can classify into three categories like “subsistence (or self-supplying) hunting”, “commercial (or market-oriented) hunting”, and “royal hunting” from the socio-economic point of view. The final one was often done by the people of the ruling class like kings and emperors all over the world for the training of their army. The first two can be approximately rephrased by the classification into “hunting for large mammals for meat” and “hunting for small and middle size animals for fur and pelt.”

However, strictly to say, the subsistence hunting is not equal to the hunting for large mammals, nor is the commercial hunting to the hunting for fur-bearing

animals. Large animals like red deer and bears were hunted with a purpose of selling their horns, meat, and organs for drugs. In the previous ages, when the people always suffered from the food shortage, hunters and their family often consumed the meat of small and middle-size animals like foxes, sables, and squirrels.

Hunting techniques and equipment of the Buryat

Active hunting

Hunting activities have played an important role in the Buryat society as well as in that of the Evenki and other forest indigenous minorities. Though the primary productive activities of the former were stock farming and agriculture, the Buryat people are fond of participating in the group hunting and conducting the individual hunting.

As mentioned above, S. G. Zhambalova classified the Buryat hunting into two ways, the collective hunting and individual hunting, and active hunting and passive hunting. The horse riding drastically changed hunting ways and methods, and gave them more variety. According to her, the collective hunting consisted of the battue hunting and the drive hunting. She insisted that the difference between them were concluded in the principle of the organization, structure, and number of hunters. In the former case, fundamentally hunters lined up in a circle to surround the animals, constricted it to the center, and captured the animals. On the contrary, in the latter case, participants (usually 15–20 persons) split into a shooting group and a driving group, of which the former was the majority. When the members of the shooting group stood at previously decided positions, the driving group made noise to drive animals away to the shooters (Zhambalova 2004: 109).

The battue hunting was widely seen in the steppe and forest-steppe zones in Eurasia. The Jurchens, Manchurians, and Mongolians often conducted this kind of hunting and composed their army from the organizations of the battue hunting. The typical case was the Manchurian eight-banner system. According to K. V. Viatkina, the old records on the battue hunting of the Buryat people were seen in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. It was called *zegete-aba* in the western Buryat and *aba khaidak* in the eastern Buryat. She showed us an example of the battue hunting of the Khory Buryat recorded in the late nineteenth century. The *aba khaidak* was usually organized in winter, especially in December or January. It continued for 1.5 to 2 months. Once, 1000 people gathered to participate in the hunting. They made some camps that shared the same fire (*gala*). All the hunters were divided into two groups, named *sharagalzotov* and *nagataitsev*, and some kinds of hunting leaders were chosen in each group. The most important leaders were called *tubuchi*, who instructed the hunters from where

and how to begin the hunting and where to conclude the hunters' circle. Other leaders indicated the position, where the arrows should have been set. This alley of arrows indicated the border of the shooting place. When the animals, including wolves, foxes, moose, and bears, was rushed out from the forest surrounded by the hunters, they put a spur to their horses and started the hunting. The hunters had a right to chase the animals within the alley of arrows. When conflict on the right of the games was seen, special leaders called *zasagulu* mediated it. When the hunting was finished, the games were equally divided among the members of the same camp (Viatkina 1969: 77–79).

Buryat hunters also used the waiting as well as driving and battue. In the red deer hunting, they put salt on a fallen tree to attract deer. When deer came to taste the salt, a hunter waiting on a terrace built near the salt place shot it (Viatkina 1969: 80). The shot from a terrace was also used in the winter bear hunting (Viatkina 1969: 80). In autumn, i.e., the mating season of red deer, Buryat hunters used a long whistle, which sounded like the call of a male deer in estrus. When a hunter played the whistle, a deer that heard the sound came to the hunter, misunderstanding that a rival appeared near. He waited the deer and shot it (Viatkina 1969: 80; Zhambalova 2004: 111).

The techniques of the waiting on a terrace and the attraction by a whistle are also seen in the other indigenous people in Siberia and the Far East like the Evenki, Nanai and Udeghe. Though dogs played important roles to search, chase, and drive animals, they did not take dogs or restricted them to stay at a camp in the case of the waiting. The Nanai and Udeghe captured wild bores by the battue and drive hunting in the forest. The Evenki hunted moose and red deer in creeping, chasing, and driving. Different from the case of the Buryat, who were horse riders in the steppe and forest-steppe zones, the Tungus speaking people, who were fundamentally the forest people, conducted their hunting on foot, in skis (the people in the Far East), and on the reindeer back (the Evenki), except the Manchurians, nomadic Evenki (including the Solon in the Inner Mongolia), and the horse riding Orochen (in the Heilongjiang province of China).

Passive hunting (trapping)

Hunters generally assumed the active hunting much more prestigious than the passive one and were proud of having excellent skill of the former. However, the passive hunting (trapping) is superior to the active in hunter's safety and, in some cases, the quality of games. Especially, in the hunting for fur-bearing animals, it is much more useful and effective, because it gives less damage on the precious fur. Some excellent trappers, who could capture many sables of high quality during a season, were able to get high reputation. While the active hunting demands a hunter more physical skill and more excellent weapons to directly fight with

animals, the passive hunting requires him more intelligence to learn animal's habit and to presume its future action.

K. V. Viatkina insisted that hunting equipment of the Buryat hunters was notably primitive and that their main equipment consisted of all kinds of traps like deadfall traps, board traps, snares, pitfalls, and automatic bow guns (Viatkina 1969: 80). However, such pretension was only followed after the discourse of the Soviet anthropology that always determined all the traditional items that had used since before the Socialist Revolution as "primitive". On the contrary, S. G. Zhambalova showed us characters and ways of use of many kinds of traps without any evaluation. She wrote that in the forest zone Buryat hunters set various traps on animal trails and other narrow places such as pitfalls (*nukhun*), snares (*urkha*), automatic bow guns (*hali*), deadfall traps (past', kulem, kulemka) (*khiraas*, *daralga*, *zanga*.), fence (*nuro*, *khashaan*, *khurue*), and board trap (plashka) for sable, while in the steppe zone they captured wolves and foxes by setting jaw traps with baits (Zhambalova 2004: 108).

Buryat hunters captured large mammals by pitfalls dug out more than two meters in depth and one and half meters in diameter. They put a wood frame around the mouth of the pit so that its edge did not crumble. The pit was covered with branches, leaves, and snow. Snares were made of hair of horsetail or wire. They captured roe deer, musk deer, and lynx by snares (Zhambalova 2004: 108). The fence hunting was popular among the Buyat hunters. They built a fence of 200–300 meters long crossing animal trails. They cut some loopholes for the animals to go through, but, at the same time, they set a pitfall or automatic bow gun to capture the animal passing there. They captured moose, red deer, and roe deer by this fence hunting. For the musk deer hunting, hunters set a snare in the loophole instead of setting a pitfall or automatic bow gun. This kind of hunting was also seen among the Evenki and Udeghe in Siberian and Far East (Vasilevich 1969: 55; Sato 2009: 33). The fence hunting was effective in the forest, where various kinds of deer were living.

Hunting equipment

Weapons

S. G. Zhambalova insisted that hunting equipment of the Buryat consisted of a bow (*nomo*), arrows (*godli*), a spear (*zhada*), a lash (*minaa*, *tashuura*), a stick (*goldo*, *uldar*), a knife (*khutaga*), a gun (*buu*), an automatic bow gun (*hali*), a snare (*urkha*), кулем, кулемкас (*daralga* and *zanga*), a deadfall trap (past') (*khiraaz*), a board trap (plashka), a whistle for a red deer (*uram*), and a whistle for roe and musk deer (*shebshuur*) (Zhambalova 2004: 110)

Though the most fundamental weapons of the Buryat hunters were a bow and

arrows, other equipment for horse riding and breeding could be applied to hunting in the steppe zone. For example, a lash and a stick with a noose were used for the drive hunting for a wolf and fox. A stick of 2–2.5 meters long made of a birch bark tree was also used for the wolf and fox hunting.

Bows and arrows were the most popular and reliable weapon to shoot an animal from the horseback. Especially, it was more advantageous to use them at the battue and drive hunting on the horseback. S. G. Zhambalova shows us a photo, in which a hunter set an arrow to a bow to shoot on the horseback (Zhambalova 2004: 112). He had a bow case in his left side, while an arrow case in the right side so that he could smoothly take the bow and arrows. According to her, the Buryat people had been prohibited to use guns (*buu*) until the eighteenth century. However, they began to use them, at least, in the seventeenth century. They accepted them from the Chinese people and borrowed a term from the Manchurian language (a Mongolian word *buu* came from a Manchurian word *poo*, which meant a canon (Haneda 1972: 352). Until the early 20th century, they used a gun of flintlock type with a bipod (photo 105), which supported to stably set up the gun (Zhambalova 2004: 111).

Traps

Traps of the Buryat hunters can be classified into five types in the mechanism for capturing games: pitfalls, deadfall traps, snares, jaw traps, and automatic bow guns. As mentioned above, pitfall traps capture the animal by its drop into the pit. In many cases hunters set some wood sticks on the bottom to restrict animal's movement and not to allow it to escape from the pit. Buryat hunters used such type of traps to capture big games like moose and red deer. Cage traps and box traps capture animals in the same way, i.e., they restrict the movement of the animals by put them into a small space.

Deadfall traps capture animals by folding their body or hitting on their head or neck by heavy things. For example, *kulemka*, *kulem* (in Buryat – *daralga* and *zanga*), *past'* (in Buryat – *khiraaz*), and *plashka* are able to be included into this kind of trap. They were often used in Siberia and the Far East in the hunting for animals of different sizes. The Evenki, who had lived near the Russian villages, also used these kinds of traps. According to G. M. Vasilevich, a Soviet anthropologist that was a specialist of the Evenki culture, fundamentally the deadfall type traps were not characteristic for the hunting equipment of the Evenki (photo 106), and, moreover, they often complained to the Russians about the use of such traps in the 17th and 18th centuries (Vasilevich 1969: 65). However, later, these kinds of traps were gradually distributed among them. In the Evenki language traps were generally called *lang*, *nyang*, *sokso* (this word was borrowed from the Yakut language), and *pahi* (from Russian). The words *lang* and *nyag* share a common root with similar words of the Tungus languages, which implies a deadfall trap with

simple structure (Sasaki 2009: 82). Therefore, unlike G. M. Vasilevich's pretension, I think that such a deadfall trap was also one of the traditional hunting equipment of the Evenki.

Generally deadfall traps have a common structure that consists of a heavy board or stick (in many cases, a trunk or branch of a tree) hung over or supported by special devices that work by a slight touch of an animal. In many cases it can kill the animal by a single blow of the heavy thing, and it gives little damage on the surface of its body. Therefore, traps of this type were often used in the hunting for fur bearing animals. Moreover, it was not necessary for hunters to prepare special materials to make them, but they could make from the materials they were able to get around the setting points. Though this type was widely seen in the people of Siberia and Far East till 1960s, the distribution of the steel jaw trap, which could be set at much more places than the traps of the deadfall type, drove them out.

Snares were also widely distributed traps. They could be applied many kinds of animals from a small fur bearing animals like ermines and squirrels to large mammals like moose and red deer. Their structure was also various. Hair of horsetail was the best material of the snare. Even the Nanai and Udeghe in the Far East, who had seldom engaged in the horse breeding, recognized it as the best one (Sasaki 2009: 77). When industrial materials were distributed under the Soviet regime, horsetail snares were replaced by the wire. One can assume that the Buryat name of the snare, *urkha*, shares a common root with terms of Tungus languages. For example, it was called *hurka*, *okurka*, *orka*, *ukurga*, *urka* in the Evenki language, *potka*, *poika*, *purka*, *foika*, *hutka* in Nanai, *huka*, *hukka*, *huika*, *hurka* in Udeghe, and *hugra*, *hurka* in Manchurian (Sasaki 2009: 82). Though it is difficult to say which languages borrowed the term, this fact shows us that the Mongolian and Tungus people have shared the common type of snare hunting for a long time.

Automatic bow guns were popular among the hunters all over the world. As far as I know, there were two types in Siberia and the Far East. The one can be named the Siberian type, on which hunters can change the strength of the bow in accordance with the difference of the size of the target. This type was seen in Yakutia and a part of the Far East. The other type can be called the Far Eastern type, which had a hook shaped trigger to hold the string. This type was seen in the Lower Amur basin, Sakhalin and Hokkaido. The Ainu people in the Hokkaido Island used it with arrows with poison, while other people, including the Ainu in Sakhalin, did not use the poison. Hunters should have made signs around the setting point to avoid unexpected incidents.

The automatic bow gun was generally recognized as a dangerous weapon, because it often injured immigrants that did not know the implication of the signs made by hunters. In Russia it had been officially prohibited since the 1930s. However, hunters secretly used it in remote areas. As a result, we can get the

information on the way of its use in some degree even today.

Steel jaw traps or sandwich traps capture animals by biting or sandwiching a part of animal's body with power of a spring. Traps using a bow instead of an iron spring are called *cherkan* in Russian and they were widely seen in all over the world. Before the distribution of the modern steel jaw traps, they were used both in the steppe and forest zones for the capture of small fur bearing animals. The soviet policy that recommended the use of modernized industrial materials accelerated the use of steel jaw traps in the hunting for the fur bearing animals. As far as my field research in the Far East shows, there are a lot of ways of setting jaw traps in the sable hunting in accordance with the geographical and climate conditions of the hunting places (Sasaki 2006: 145–148). The indigenous hunters, as well as the Russian hunters, developed various ways to capture the sable surely and effectively. The sable fur was a strategic material of the Soviet Union, which could be exported to European countries and the United States, and the government strictly controlled their production. The distribution of the steel jaw traps to the people of Siberia and the Far East represented the political conditions of the given times often gave much influence on the techniques and equipment even to the remote indigenous hunters.

Conclusion

As a result of the comparison of the hunting techniques and equipment between the Buryat and the Siberian and Far Eastern people, we can conclude that they share some common features, though, of course, difference can be seen. The Nanai and Udeghe in the Far East are not the nomadic people in the steppe and forest-steppe zones unlike the Buruyat and Mongols, but sedentary or semi-sedentary people in the forest and the riverside zones. Therefore, they do not ride on a horse, and hunt animals from the horseback. Instead of the riding, they moved on a boat in summer and a dog sledge in winter (in present day, they move on a boat with onboard motor in summer and on a snowmobile or off-road car in winter). In the drive and battue hunting, they chase animals on foot in summer and in skis in winter. The Evenki are the forest people, who conduct the reindeer breeding to use domesticated reindeer as a vehicle. They usually go hunting on the reindeer back. However, they share some similar forest ecosystems and, as a result, some hunting techniques and equipment with the people of the Far East.

Moreover, each ethnic group has a different historical background. Shortly say, the Buryat and Evenki have long accepted the control and authority of Russia since the mid seventeenth century, while the Nanai and Udeghe had recognized the authority of the Qing dynasty (Manchurian dynasty) in China during the same period. They began to share the common history only after the Socialist Revolution

in 1917.

However, one can see some common traits in their hunting techniques and equipment, which can be explained in different ways. For example, the Buryat, Evenki, and Far Eastern people wait red deer and wild boar on a terrace built near the place where hunters set a lump of salt or a wallow. This common hunting method can be explained by habits and behavior patterns of the animals. Deer are fond of tasting salt and boars like to bathe in the wallow. However, at the same time, one can assume that these people borrowed such a method from European hunters. Under the socialist regime, productive organizations (like collective farms and soviet farms) recommended the indigenous hunters to adapt new methods like this to raise the productivity of their hunting. As I mentioned above, the distribution of the steel jaw traps for the sable hunting can be explained in the same way.

On the other hand, some types of traps, equipment, weapons, and costumes were distributed and shared through the cultural contact and exchange between different ethnic groups before the rule by Russia and the Soviet Union. In my field research on the hunting tradition of the Udeghe people in the Primorye region in 1992, I heard that a cap ornamented by a tail of a sable or squirrel and a hood wearing under the cap were a copy of a helmet of Mongolian warriors. Though I could not check the information in other kind of data, I think that it was possible that when the ancestors of the Udeghe people encountered the Mongolian warriors, hunters recognized their helmets and armors very stylish and cool, and adopted them in their hunting costume. May be, in fact, it was not the Mongolian warriors, but the Manchurian that the ancestors of the Far Eastern people had met, because they fought against the Russian Cossacks with the Manchurian army in the middle of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, direct or indirect contact promoted the cultural exchange even between remote ethnic groups and distributed some common or similar techniques and equipment.

More detail research on the Buryat hunting and comparison with that of other ethnic groups will be able to open wider perspective on the study of the hunting culture of the Siberian and Far Eastern people.

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