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Leaving Footprints in the Taiga. Luck, Spirits and Ambivalence among the Siberian Orochen Reindeer Herders and Hunters

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The book under review is a monograph published by associate professor and senior researcher at Vilnius University of Lithuania, Donatas Brandišauskas, who is also affiliated with such leading centres of Siberian research as Aberdeen University in the UK and University of Versailles in France. This ethnographic research is based on excellent first-hand material which the author collected during extensive fieldwork among Orochen People in the Tungokochen District of Zabaikal Province, Siberia. The Orochen are the most distinct Evenki group. Their language belongs to the Tungus branch of Altaic language family and is endangered. The people are primarily known as hunters and reindeer herders. Apart from the rest of the Evenki communities, their reindeer herding is traditionally characterised by big herds, from twenty to 500 reindeer, which are used both as pack and riding animals (Vasilevich 1964). Besides reindeer herding, they are also involved in horse breeding.

The key idea of the book is to show ‘how the anxiousness for luck permeates people’s practical activities, discursive strategies, practices of place-making and spatial experiences in the taiga and the village’ (p. 14). The author discusses a variety of strategies that the Orochen use to obtain and maintain luck through their interactions among themselves and with non-human beings. The notion of hunting luck is central in this research and is discussed throughout all nine chapters organised around one or a few main themes, such as, for example, subsistence, sharing, dwelling, walking, healing and so forth. A good deal of the book is devoted to the analysis of movement and dwelling in the taiga. In this sense it continues a series of research on the Evenki patterns of movement that has been published over the past decade (see Anderson 2000; Safonova and Sántha 2010, 2011; Davydov 2011; Lavrillier 2011; Mertens 2016). The author skilfully reveals how human movement is bound to interaction with spirits and knowledge of the environment and landscape and how it is considered by the people as an important activity of getting luck.

The concept of luck (*kutu* in Orochen) is one of the most complicated and there has not been any comprehensive research on this issue so far, although its importance is highlighted in research by

prominent ethnographer and linguist Sergey Shirokogoroff (1935; see also Anderson 2011). The reason seems to be grounded in the fact that, in order to understand how the Orochen (and the Evenki in general) conceptualise luck, one has to consider a number of hard-to-grasp relationships between people, animals, spirits, environments and even objects. This task appears to be more problematic considering that luck is a subject which is not supposed to be talked about among the Orochen as it is surrounded by numerous cultural regulations and prohibitions which one must learn largely through experience and involvement, not through communication. To approach this peculiar subject and, at the same time, not to break the local cultural norms, the author applied one of the most classical ethnographic methods, namely long-term participant observation. Over the course of seventeen months of fieldwork, he was a member of a few hunting families, living and moving along with other hunters in the taiga. Consequently, his ethnography is very personal and based on individual relationships with the community members who taught him how to understand different behaviors of animals and spirits, to hunt and deal with reindeer, to read footprints and nuances of landscape, to predict weather and so forth.

The numerous references the author uses in his research demonstrate his good acquaintance with the relevant literature, including Soviet-published sources on shamanism, ritual and healing practices. However, the use of the latter works, although important on their own, requires more critical analysis. For example, Chapter 2 could have been more consistent if the author had discussed Soviet research on the Evenki shamanism in a more analytical way by taking into consideration the political and social context of that time. This remark is especially relevant with regard to the research published in the period from the early 1920s to the late 1930s. It is also important to consider geographical location of a particular Evenki community as there have always been significant differences between numerous Evenki groups in terms of rituals and cosmology. Thus, a great deal of research on Evenki shamanism is based on the material obtained in the territory known now as the Evenki District of Krasnoyarsk Krai. Otherwise, it gives an impression of timelessness when it comes to the contemporary Orochen community. As a result, a very interesting paragraph (p. 88) on empathy as a way of predicting animals' movement and gaining knowledge appears to be lost in the numerous citations referring to the past rather than present. However, this critical remark does not refer to the whole monograph but mainly to this particular chapter.

I found the author's attention to linguistic material to be excellent. The book is provided with a good glossary of Orochen and Russian terms which can also be found in the Index. It makes the reading very helpful for those who are interested in the native language. I really appreciate the fact that the author gives both Orochen and Russian terms in brackets to a number of concepts

and objects throughout the text. However, being especially interested in the language, I have found occasional misprints, as well as spelling of the same term in different ways. Finally, although it was not the author's intention, it would be significant to learn more about the exact difference between *mahin* and *kutu* since this monograph is about luck. The term *mahin* (or *main*) appears on the very first page of the introduction in a citation from Shirokogoroff's work on the social organisation of the Northern Tungus and is translated as luck. Unfortunately, this concept is not examined in the book under review at all. In the glossary it is determined as 'luck among the Orochen of Buryatiya'. In some ethnographic accounts *main* also has a meaning of soul (see Vasilevich 1969: 226). However, the Evenki of the Podkamennaya (Stony) Tunguska River, where I did my fieldwork in 2007, interpreted *main* as luck given by god or as one's guardian angel (*mainyči* 'lucky man', 'one who has a guardian'). It is closer to what Shirokogoroff recorded among the Evenki in pre-Soviet time and, thus, the geography of this term could be expanded. At the same time, my interlocutors knew the term *kutu*. If the Orochen are familiar with both terms, it would be important to examine the difference between them in more detail.

On the whole, I believe that this outstanding and original research will definitely become one of the classic books on the Orochen-Evenki, continuing the best ethnographic traditions of fieldwork in tandem with an excellent and detailed interpretation of the notion of luck in a broad cultural context of spirit-human and human-landscape relationships.

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