

BOOK REVIEW: *LEAVING FOOTPRINTS IN THE TAIGA: LUCK, RITUALS, AND AMBIVALENCE AMONG THE OROCHEN-EVENKI*

Donatas Brandišauskas. 2017. *Leaving Footprints in the Taiga: Luck, Rituals, and Ambivalence among the Orochen-Evenki*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.

The book, by Lithuanian anthropologist and Siberianist Donatas Brandišauskas, focuses on a sphere that some 15–20 years ago was more or less dominant among anthropologists who studied Siberian indigenous cultures – so-called spiritual culture. Mysterious spirits and even more mysterious shamans drew Western scholars to Siberia at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s when it was finally possible to travel to, and conduct research in, Siberia. This interest was supported by Soviet scholars who also loved to do research on the same spiritual life. Currently, with Russia and Siberia no longer so exotic, there is less academic interest in its inhabitants and the various cultures that exist in that vast territory. As paradoxical as it may seem, with the decline of interest in Siberian indigenous peoples' spirits, shamans and healers, there is suddenly a gap in this field of study. There should be more research on the topic that documents changes and transformations in religious, cultural and social practices in Siberia.

For the indigenous people of Siberia, religious belief, cultural practice and everyday life were never separable. Brandišauskas' monograph is about this complex relationship between hunting as an activity, and the various beliefs and rituals that are embedded in hunting. Everybody who has studied the hunting culture of Arctic indigenous people knows that hunting is accompanied by a myriad complicated and detailed practices, ways of behaviour and omens or rituals that are supposed to guarantee hunting luck. The author has conducted fieldwork

among the Orochen in southern Siberia, close to lake Baikal, in a region that is widely known as Transbaikalia, or Zabaikal'ia. The Orochen are, according to some accounts, a sub-ethnos of the Evenki; according to other scholars they are closely related to the Evenki but are a separate group. The Orochen live in a large territory that stretches from Russian southern Siberia to Mongolia and northern China. In Mongolia some Orochen are horse breeders, while in China and Russia they are mainly reindeer herders and hunters. Orochen reindeer herding is typical of taiga reindeer herding, where reindeer are mainly used as transport animal and are rarely eaten. One specific feature of Evenki culture, according to ethnographers, is that among the Evenki women traditionally participate directly in hunting as full time hunters. (Brandišauskas also mentions female indigenous hunters in the book.) The main activity of the Orochen is hunting and trapping various animals that inhabit the local taiga. That includes short and long hunting trips, scouting locations for animals or checking trap lines. Most of this is done by walking in the taiga, either carrying their equipment themselves or using reindeer as draft animals.

The centre piece of the monograph is luck – *kutu* – a “relationship [...] with spirits who are responsible for humans' success and well-being” (p. 1). Throughout the book the author demonstrates how obtaining or losing luck is related to morality and behaviour. Interestingly, according to Orochen perception, hunting luck is like a commod-

ity that can be stolen by others, spoiled by strangers or won by following certain rules. To some extent, luck is related to sharing, in Evenki *nimat*, or to reciprocal relationships with other people and the whole community. Sharing is, however, not total. Hunters do not share their knowledge, for example where the best hunting grounds are and how to get to them. As the author admits, the approach to luck is, in this book, "in the active mode", or, luck depends on interaction with all living and non-living beings around the hunter and reindeer herder.

The book is full of detailed ethnography that is reminiscent of how Soviet scholars such as Vladilen Tugolukov and Glafira Vasilevich described the life of Evenki. Such – today rare – ethnographic description and analysis demonstrates how intertwined human practices and deeds are with the spiritual world and how all this affects one's luck. The fourth chapter is about walking in the taiga. Everyone who has conducted fieldwork in Siberia will have done this more than once. Brandišauskas, however, shows how walking is an interaction with the landscape and animals. This chapter is a brilliant conceptualisation of walking in silence for hours carrying a heavy rucksack. Walking in the taiga is reading tracks but also creating tracks. The success of a hunting trip, i.e. hunter's ability to read tracks, is affected by what he or she did before the hunting trip as well as how the hunter behaves time during the walk. Other chapters in the book focus on how space (camp sites and traps), time, and weather all depend on one's luck. The last chapter deals with what Piers Vitebsky (2006) has called "shamanism without shamans" (2006), as situation we can encounter in Siberia where the tradition of shamanism is alive although active shamans are already history. For a novice of the field it will be illuminating to know how indigenous people deal with a situation in which they have to cope with the Great Unknown, or a very uneasy constellation where shamanic knowledge is

beyond the reach of the ordinary hunter or reindeer herder and they have to lean on legends about how shamans operated. The conclusion, in which Brandišauskas offers a thoughtful analysis of the ethnographic literature on luck, reciprocity and domination, is recommended reading. What the book also makes clear is that the political economy of Orochen hunting has gone through a serious transformation process. Since being part of a planned economy and heavily subsidised by the state during the Soviet era, hunting has now become nearly a subsistence economy for indigenous people from remote settlements. This has also affected the meaning of the rituals and beliefs that accompany hunting.

The Evenki enjoy a special place among Siberian indigenous peoples. Because they live from central Siberia (the Yenisei river) to Sakhalin island in the Russian Far East, a researcher encounters them everywhere when conducting fieldwork in the eastern parts of Siberia. Therefore, the academic literature on the Evenki is rich and broad. Brandišauskas' book is an outstanding contribution to that literature. It is brilliantly researched and very well written. This book is recommended reading not only to scholars of Siberian and Arctic studies. *Leaving Footprints in the Taiga: Luck, Rituals, and Ambivalence among the Orochen-Evenki* could be used as a textbook in anthropology classes. Moreover, the book could be of interest for people studying religion or theology, for students of cultural studies, and even students of archaeology.

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References

- Vitebsky, Piers. 2006. *The Reindeer People: Living With Animals and Spirits in Siberia*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.