

MAKING A HOME IN THE TAIGA: MOVEMENTS, PATHS AND SIGNS AMONG OROCHEN-EVENKI HUNTERS AND HERDERS OF ZABAİKAL KRAI (SOUTH EAST SIBERIA)

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will explore interrelations between place making, movement, use of paths and signs among the Orochen of Zabaikal Krai. Although under the Russian Tsars Orochen-Evenki hunters and herders were referred to negatively as wanderers, today my ethnography demonstrates how movements of animals and humans are crucial for the success of their subsistence, place making and worldview. Hence, walking in the taiga is an important skill that is essential to hunting and herding activities when humans strive to identify animals' 'living places' (Orochen *bikit*) by reading their tracks and movements. Humans also leave their own tracks and paths as well as signs communicating with each other while subsisting in remote areas, in this way creating their own living places. Thereby, I show how movements and the use of paths is an important dimension of Orochen-Evenki wellbeing as well as their moral code.

KEYWORDS: Orochen-Evenki • movements • living places • tracks • routes • signs • rituals

INTRODUCTION

After visiting Orochen reindeer herders' and hunters' nomadic camps in south east Siberia imperial official Vladimir Orlov (1858: 180) states in his report that the scornful term "wandering Tungus" is an apt word depicting their lifestyle well. Indeed, "wandering Tungus" was a pejorative term adapted in the official press and legislation starting from the 17th century, meaning that people living mobile lifestyles and attributed to this category were the least advanced. Orlov confirms that the Tungus indeed live in the wilderness and have no understanding of a homeland (Rus. *rodina*) or living place (Rus. *obschezhitie*), although they are always "wandering in the bushes" (Rus. *skitayutsya po debryam*), migrating through forests, hills and places that are hard to be walked through by human beings (ibid.). He also states that this chaotic wandering in the taiga results in complete dependency on "the rough taiga" as well as on Russians. Hence, Orlov

(ibid.: 181) colourfully illustrates how “poor people” (Rus. *bednyi narod*) Orochen aim to meet Russians to beg for a piece of bread during the course of their wandering. Such a description is concluded by the statement that the Orochen live in poverty and pristine innocence, as well as having an “unelaborated culture” that is driven by behaviour that is similar to that of animals (ibid.: 180).

My long-term ethnographic research demonstrates that walking in taiga for Orochen hunters is crucial for their subsistence and is an important way of gaining knowledge about animals and their ‘living places’, called in Orochen *bikit*.¹ Furthermore, Orochen hunters and reindeer herders perceive their own living places to be created through their use of landscapes for subsistence that is inseparable from their movements and maintenance paths as well as for the success of interactions with animals and other non-human beings. *Bikit* can also be identified by use of monumental structures such as a network of paths, short- and long-term camping sites, and sites of ritual performance. In this way the analysis of ideas of movement and the interaction of humans as well as non-human beings (animals and spirits) can represent the structured way in which the Orochen use and perceive their space.

Evolutionary anthropologists Eric Halden Smith and Bruce Winterhalder (1992: 57; cf. Winterhalder 1981: 90) argue that a Cree hunter’s success depends on a strategy called ‘rule of thumb’. This strategy can be described as one’s movement in between “highly ranked patches” intercepting fresh tracks left by animals and only visiting patches when they know that prey inhabits it. These optimal foraging theory scholars propose that the environment as a source of resources is seen by subarctic foragers (the Cree example) as “heterogeneous habitat” or as a “mosaic of resources” that is termed “patchy” (MacArthur, Pianka 1966; Winterhalder 1981; Smith, Winterhalder 1992). In such an understanding the patch embraces a set of multiple environmental features that are delimited by the physical differences containing distinctive collection of fauna and flora (MacArthur, Pianka 1966). According to this assumption, a hunter who is knowledgeable of local areas ranks these patches according to productivity and visits only favourable patches aiming to reduce his average travel costs while hunting (ibid.). In this article, I argue that for Orochen hunters and reindeer herders, animal inhabited places are more than patches, they are vibrant places to which one has to adapt one’s own senses and movement while hunting a particular animal. In this context hunting activity is a dynamic personal competition with an individual animal. Hence, hunting is a process of fine-tuning one’s attention toward movement of animals in certain places (see also Ingold 1996).² Furthermore, the success of subsistence is also based on the master-spirits’ good will and therefore should also be secured through rituals of exchange with them. Thus, I aim to elaborate on the vernacular Orochen term *bikit* and show how movements through taiga paths are linked to gaining knowledge about animals, other humans and the weather. Systems of signs left near paths by hunters and herders serve as important ways of communication with other humans. I also argue that the success of subsistence and use of paths bring a sense of a person’s own *bikit* that is charged with spiritual meanings of interactions with ancestors and spirits.

Human living places can shift with the seasons, migrations of animals and experiences of misfortune in those places. Such *bikit* can match a river or a few river basins. French anthropologist Alexandra Lavrillier (2009), who carried out extensive fieldwork among the Evenki (Orochen) of Amur Oblast (Region) and southern Yakutia, discerns two spheres of habitations: the ‘wild world’ is inhabited by spirits while the ‘domes-



Photo 1. The reindeer herd owned by the Zhumaneyev-Aruneyev family in Tungokochen Rayon, Zabaikal Krai. Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.

tic world', which she identifies with the vernacular Evenki word *biechi* (*bie* meaning 'man'), refers to the 'territory of men' and includes 'locations of domestic reindeer' and 'forest roads'. The idea of *biechi* is quite similar to the idea of human *bikit* and also involves cultural modification of the landscape and marking of it that includes creating camps and marking forest tracks (ibid.). However, the Orochen of Zabaikalye believe that they dwell in an area that can be mastered by spirits. A master spirit (Rus. *dukh khozyain*) is seen as the main ruler of different river basins and it can control animal life there.³ This spirit is in charge of different geographical locations such as a watershed, hill, lake or celestial object such as the sun or moon, which are seen as having influence on wild and domesticated animals and the destinies of people. The place ruled by the master spirit is seen as his household, where he can control the success of animal procreation and rebirth as well as influence almost all spheres of human life, including travelling, dwelling, storytelling, or human interaction with animals. Therefore, one must interact with these spirits to dwell in different places successfully.

The research is based on my 19 months of fieldwork research conducted in 2004–2005, and in 2010 and 2011 among Orochen reindeer herders and hunters in rural areas of the northern parts of East Siberia (Zabaikal Krai and the Republic of Buryatia). The northern part of Zabaikal Krai is characterised by a continental climate with radical temperature extremes. Orochen hunting and herding grounds are coniferous taiga covering the hills and ridges and swampy lowlands. Today the Orochen of Zabaikal Krai continue their activities as reindeer herders and hunters although most of them live in villages established by the Soviet state to sedentarise nomads in the 1930s where, in most villages, they constitute a minority of the population. After the collapse of the



Photo 2. Aleksei Aruneyev hunting squirrels in late autumn. Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.

Soviet system some of the Orochen privatised reindeer herds from liquidated collective state farms and established clan enterprises (Photo 1). A few families still spend all year migrating in the taiga with their reindeer herds, harvesting game and fur animals. The reindeer are the pride of the community; the Orochen say that their name can be translated from Tungus-Manchu language as 'reindeer people' (*oron* 'reindeer'). Indeed, the Orochen believe that the reindeer is irreplaceable when transporting gear and supplies for their mobile taiga camps, as well as when transporting the carcasses of hunted large animals (moose, elk, wild reindeer, roe deer, wild boar and bear). Most of men and some of the women spend almost half of the year hunting in the taiga for fur and large game animals, although they remain based in villages (Photo 2). Indeed, with the collapse of Soviet centrally funded economic activities in taiga villages, the taiga, with its abundance of wild animals, has become the main source of cash income and food for many families based in the taiga or villages.

LIVING PLACES: MOVEMENTS, AWARENESS AND THE SUCCESS OF SUBSISTENCE

According to the Orochen, hunted and domesticated animals also have their own *bikit*. Animal movements and tracks are important when it comes to identifying animal *bikit*, knowledge that is used by hunters in gaining hunting success. Hunters and reindeer herders often use the word *bikit* to describe the living place of an animal (or group of animals), such as a wolf, bear, sable, squirrel, rabbit or domesticated reindeer as well as humans. Indeed, Arkadiy Anisimov (1959: 18–20) writes that the Orochen, in a similar way to many other Siberian nations, relate different places and spaces to specific animals. Hunters gain knowledge about *bikit* only after examining animal marks and tracks, in this way noting the movement of animals. Multiple tracks, scrapes and marks found imprinted on the surface of soil, plants or trees can be interpreted as signs of a certain animal's presence in the area for longer periods. Over the period of observation, the hunter eventually gleans information about an animal's personality, character, social life, and preferences. Hunters start to adjust their movements and dwelling activities to the hunted, or domesticated, animal's *bikit* in order to secure hunting or herding success.

The concept of *bikit* became familiar to me during my first hunting trip to the Taloy River basin close to Buryatia, which was organised by experienced hunter Aleksei Aruneyev. Typically, the term *bikit* was employed when my hunting mates, Aleksei Aruneyev and Gena Dushinov, shared their knowledge of a particular area where an animal was being tracked. Aleksei used to announce to me, with an air of importance, the results of examining tracks, finding for example that moose live (Rus. *zhivet*) in a certain valley. In the evening, after finding *bikit*, he would typically give a brief summary of his revised hunting plans for the coming day, saying with some importance:

We will walk all the way by the Siikta River [pointing toward the river valley] since I saw some fresh tracks of three moose playing there. I know they live there. Tomorrow, we have to take both dogs.⁴

My subsequent experiences of tracking wild animals and working with domesticated reindeer taught me how hunters and herders gain knowledge about an animal's *bikit*. I learned how one must be skilled enough to find marks left everywhere – broken branches, tracks left on the ground – and to interpret from them an image of an animal's life. Nikolai Aruneyev, who is the richest owner of a 500-reindeer herd in Zabaikalye, often liked to employ different metaphors when talking about the daily aspects of a herder's life in the taiga (Photo 3). Once he described his daily tracking activity in the following way: "You can tell all the details about an animal's *bikit* by seeing its tracks just like you get information from reading a newspaper." Nikolai used to say that he knew all local animals living in the valley personally because of his daily walks in the taiga. He knew each animal's ways of walking, history, and styles of hunting. Indeed, tracks might also reveal an animal's gender, age, and activity, and inform us where a particular animal stays most of the time while grazing, resting or drinking water. Tracks can show how an animal prefers to walk and if it is a careful animal. Tracks might also bring information about how long an animal has lived in an area, whether it resides in the area or is just passing through (Photo 4). Herders and hunters bring home stories of the social life of animals in the whole valley. Just from observing webs of tracks, they will know such things as: what direction a moose walked, what the predators were doing and how many squirrels live in certain islands of trees. When we were searching for reindeer or hunting squirrels, Nikolai used to describe his observations of tracks in following way:



Photo 3. Nikolai Aruneyev, the leading herder of the largest reindeer herd.
Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.



Photo 4. Reading elk tracks on the slope of the hill. The elk was shot ten minutes later.
Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.

Look, there are the tracks of four moose, they were butting all the way and competing for the good grazing area [...]. Look, they used to run away and meet there near the forest line again, butting there again.

An older hunter, Chulan Kirilov from Bugunda village, could tell a wolf's mood, its social life and if it ate or not just by looking at tracks and the imprints of nails, identifying their shape, and telling where the wolf could spend the night.

An animal's *bikit* can be seen as an area of constant movements – 'playing', eating, and procreating there. Many animals show that they are 'masters of places' by leaving tracks or marks. Hence, people believe some animals can be seen as masters of certain places and humans must show them respect. Different marks are left to warn newcomers that they should avoid dwelling there. Wolves often urinate to leave their own smell at different sites. They also break bushes to mark their territory. A moose or a red deer will often leave marks with antlers or their hooves on the surface of the soil and on trees during rutting time. Elder Kirimbai even explained to me that animals can show their strength (Oro. *chinen*) through their marks. Furthermore, animals can also hide their tracks to escape being hunted or to mislead a hunter. Elder Vladimir Torgonov also told me how powerful hunters in the past used to talk about special spots found in a boars' *bikit*, where many animals could meet each other to spend the night together. He maintained that only hunters with extraordinary skill could find this place, which

moved around the area. Hunting success was also based on a hunter's skill in stalking near a certain spot for long hours waiting quietly for the animal in the cold weather. As a young hunter and skilful craftsmen Andrei Dogonchin said that powerful hunters 'dissolve' (Rus. *slitsya*) into such places to gain hunting or herding success.

It was expected that if an animal (or group of animals) lives in a certain place for longer periods, it becomes somehow tied (Rus. *privyazan*) to the place, or as one hunter says "the animal is nurtured by that place". Orochen hunters and reindeer herders believe that if a predator or hoofed animal lives in a particular place, it will stay in the area for a longer period. Therefore, if a moose is not frightened by predators or killed by another hunter, then one can still expect to find the animal in the same place even after two or three weeks. It is also said that domesticated reindeer have intimate attachments to certain areas, while avoiding others. For example, female reindeer always return to their birthplace to calve. Nikolai Aruneyev told me his experiences of how several reindeer who were exchanged with Baunt Orochen (Buryatia) returned to their initial place of birth, which was more than 500 kilometres away. Orochen hunters say that animals who are masters of their living places bring balance to it, protecting it. It is said that places where reindeer live are well balanced for other animals to dwell. As Nikolai says, "If somebody removes reindeer from the land, such land would definitely be completely destroyed."

When I used to ask where I should go to hunt roe deer, Nikolai used to say that "animals are everywhere and nowhere" (Rus. *vezde oni est, i nigde*). Indeed, platforms built near the salt licks (Rus. *solontsy*) are seen as points of possible animal visits. However, hunters never overemphasise this and do not refer to these places as successful. Although people come to these platforms located in the trees to stalk animals, one must first know that an animal lives there and constantly visits the salt lick site. Such stalking on the platform is also linked to the ideas of exchange with non-human beings and to moral responsibilities. Many hunters encounter evil spirits and bears when stalking overnight at the salt licks without performing rituals. One also must rely only on hearing and hide one's intentions and movements when sitting in the darkness, rain and wind.

The hunter aiming to gain hunting success always starts by searching for animal tracks in the taiga while masking his own presence. These skills might involve certain ways of walking through different terrain, adjusting movements to the certain weather and seasonal conditions, while paying attention to wind characteristics and cardinal points. Hunters always state that one must seek to see the hunted animal before the animal sees you. Some hunters even used to prefer a delay in hunting, always walking and observing tracks and even observing the animals before starting the actual hunting. Elder Bultai used to say "if you see an animal – try to know him first, do not start shooting right away" (see also Shirokogoroff 1935: 335). Every hunting strategy is adapted to a particular individual animal rather than to a particular kind of animal.

To make subsistence as successful as possible, hunters and herders also strive to camp near the hunted or domesticated animal's living places. Therefore, the *bikit* of reindeer herders and hunters often overlap. The sketch map drawn by reindeer herder Nikolai Aruneyev represents reindeer *bikit* that demonstrates a set of intermingled events of human interactions with animals (Figure 1). It depicts a long-term Poperechnaya River reindeer herders' winter camp, the hill (Oro. *ural*), a system of rivers (Oro. *biral*) in highlands and different types of hills such as treeless hills (Oro. *ianil*) and ranges (Oro. *tok-*

sokol). Toksokol were constantly used by reindeer herders of the Zhumaneyev-Aruneyev family for hunting and trapping sable, squirrel, and lynx during the late winter, while *ianil* was an important reindeer grazing area used up to the early spring. On the right side of the sketch map, Nikolai left a space that can be identified as an open field of grass hummocks (Oro. *kever*) located near the camp. The *kever* was recently visited by groups of reindeer searching for first fresh grass growth on root hummocks at the time of our sketch making. This signalled that reindeer were about to move down the river while searching for fresh grass and extending their activities to a nearby *kever*. The open place is a *kever* located near the camp and is important to herders for mastering animal movements through their multisensory awareness. Herders always observe directions of movements of reindeer and predict their routes of migration when doing household chores in the camp area.

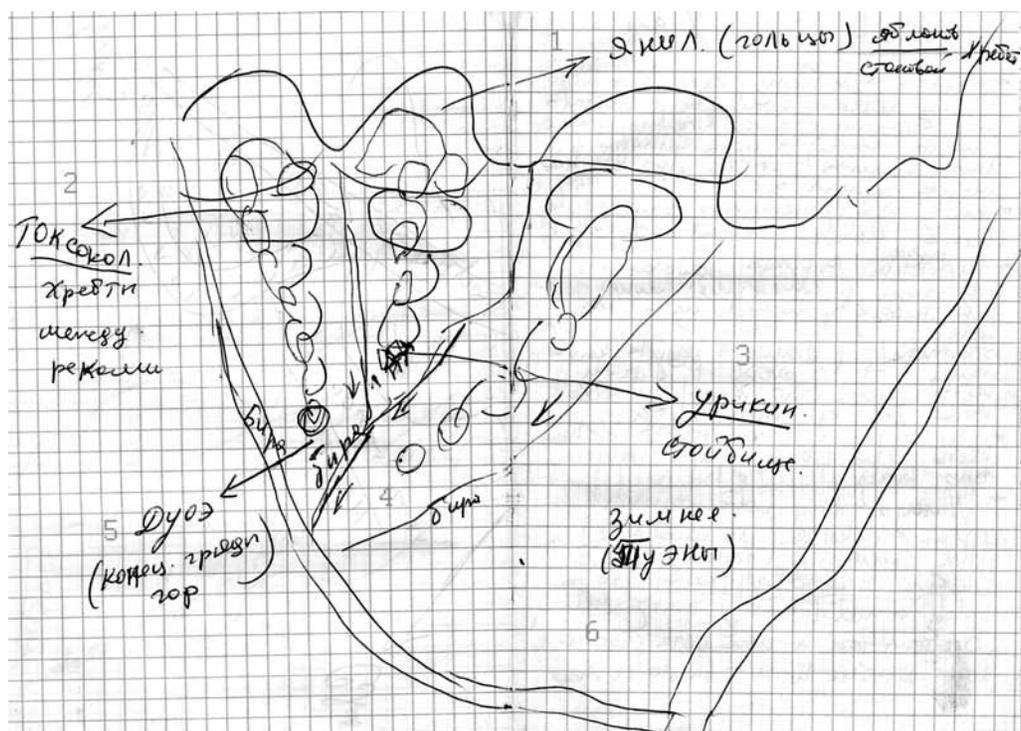


Figure 1. Sketch maps of *bikit* drawn by Nikolai Aruneyev: 1 – *ianil* ‘treeless tundra hills’; 2 – *toksokol* ‘ridge’; 3 – *urikit* ‘camp’; 4 – *bira* ‘river’; 5 – *duoe* ‘ends of hills’; 6 – *kever* ‘field of hummocks’.

One’s *bikit* can be also created through movement. Today, any fur animals’ hunting territory has its formal master hunter who rents the area from the state, businessmen or indigenous clan community. The mastery of places is very much taken into account and respected during the winter fur animals hunting. However, in the post-Soviet environment of contest between hunters, the areas that are not attended by other humans can be seen as places free for others to use. Hence, hunters can start hunting squirrel or sable in neighbouring territories if they “see no tracks there” (Rus. *nevidno trop, beztropia*). Similarly, if one fails to arrive at the place in time, one can find that other hunters

have already harvested squirrels or that squirrels are not yet in good condition to be hunted. For this reason, maintaining places for reindeer grazing and the hunting of wild animals is continuously linked to one's abilities to visit a place or predict the right time to visit these places. One's mastery of places is based on success of constant use of places by taking all opportunities of subsistence. If a hunter is unable to use an area for subsistence, his claims to the land and resource could lapse.

LIVING WHEN WALKING: PATHS, SPIRITS AND METAPHORS

The constant movement of humans in the taiga creates imprints on the land known as paths (Oro. *oktol*). Hunters and herders reach different remote areas in a relatively short time by using these paths stretching through the taiga. Humans maintain the paths by cleaning them, removing dry and green wood. Paths are seen as going through seasonal passages like a river, and indeed they sometimes become paths for water after the rain. As soon as a path is heavily used and deeply cut into the earth's surface, it often turns into a water channel especially when the snow melts in May. As the waters further erode parts of these paths, they begin to form a 'V-shape', becoming difficult for humans and domesticated animals to traverse. Horses are very vulnerable and unstable when walking along such muddy paths, and in such instances, hunters adapt by forming new paths that parallel the original path.

There are well-known kolkhoz paths in the taiga marked on different maps. They are widely used by kolkhoz workers and are still used by hunters, foresters, and hay-cutters (often former kolkhoz workers). These paths are well observable in all places since they are deeply carved into the surface of the soil by ATVs that formerly belonged to the collective farm. In different seasons, paths are also used for travel to hunting sites or hay-cutting areas by horse or reindeer by most village hunters. These paths lead to all important valleys, log huts, and hay-cutting sites. Using kolkhoz paths to travel in the taiga can bring many benefits, but it can also be linked to possible challenges. One can encounter other hunters as well as unwished officials when moving along such paths. The main arteries were often avoided by hunters and herders since they often aimed to conceal their hunting practices by avoiding people along the way. Orochen-Evenki hunters believe that if someone questions their activities too deeply he or she might bring misfortune. Indeed, Aleksei often used kolkhoz paths, returning to the village soon after darkness fell.

Often the movements of a group of reindeer herders and hunters create a network of paths that are maintained and used only by them (Photo 5). These paths often stand as the observable and intuitive guide for activities in different places. Some paths used by reindeer herders and hunters can be more or less observable and completely unseen to the untrained eye. These paths cannot be seen as one line, rather, they can be understood as certain directions of movement marked by footprints or imprints. Yet, the observable parts of paths might also change if a large tree or other obstacle happens across it and people begin to go around it, or if there are other physical changes to the land that make modifications simpler than maintaining the original path. Herders create their own paths that stretch over the mountain passages and which are well known only to the groups of hunters. People also feel they can appropriate a place through



Photo 5. Winter walk while searching for reindeer and hunting fur animals. Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.

their constant movements along paths while subsisting. In addition, they can start avoiding certain paths when moving through a place known to cause misfortune because certain spirits *arenkil* (plural form of *arenki*) dwell there. These strategies of path use for moving in the taiga also reveal how hunters aim to secure their life in the taiga, while adjusting to the post-Soviet social environment in the context of mistrust.

Burned taiga places are known as pathless. These places have become an idiom not only of state domination over the herders and hunters during the Soviet period, but also represent contemporary contests between hunters. Many taiga places suffered from extensive forest fires caused by competing hunters. Herders believe that their enemies burn the taiga deliberately, while motorised poachers often burn the taiga because of engine sparks or when they carelessly leave cigarettes or campfires. These places cannot be

used as reindeer pastures for up to 25 years because fire damages turf, roots and soil. Nikolai says: “In *diagdanda* [burned areas] even birds do not fly, while animals die in such places if they accidentally visit.” Burned places are dangerous to move through since dried standing trees can fall at any time and kill a traveller. Herders always try to walk quickly when crossing burned places.

Since most village people cannot avoid using *kolkhoz* paths, stretching in all directions into the taiga, they meet frequently on the path and chat there. Usually people stop for 10–20 minutes to smoke cigarettes and exchange ideas about the area when hunting during the rutting season. Hunters rarely give explicit information about hunting results “to maintain luck”, but they will always share their knowledge about the animal tracks they saw, and the direction and location of the tracks. Sometimes, the group of hunters that included me used to pass camping sites that were occupied by hunters for a night. Since there were a limited number of permanent shelters (Oro. *kaltamni*, Rus. *balagan*), we would share a camp space for the night if they were friends. In such cases, hunters used to exchange news about life in the village and about people who hunt in particular areas. Additionally, people will share their food, especially freshly hunted meat during such meetings, saying that they also share their luck. If a hunter needs to get something or gain any knowledge, he would probably make his camp near the main path in order to encounter somebody and ask them for help or for something he needs.

Elders say “to live means to walk by paths imprinting them” (Rus. *zhit – tropy tropyt*). This means creating different places that have a walkers own ‘energies’ (Rus. *energiya*), which affect a walker’s life. Hence, Orochen-Evenki today believe that successful walk-

ing through paths still left on the land by past generations is viewed as receiving the place from the ancestors. One's sense of belonging to the land is based on skilful walking, visiting different places as well as rituals of cooperation, creating new networks of paths for the best use of a landscape. Vladimir Lokushin, from Zelenoye Ozero village, describes the interrelation between herders' generations and places by saying, "A herder's grave is covered with grass and even when it can hardly be seen, his paths are still present on the land and his path is used by his children."

It is said that one should establish better relations with the master spirit in order to use the old paths. Furthermore, these paths are traversed by *arenki* and therefore it is better to avoid camping near such paths (see also Basharov 2003: 9). *Arenki* will probably come to humans if they locate their camp particularly at a crossroads. Nikolai used to smoke cigarettes as he approached different crossing places greeting local master spirits (Rus. *mestnogo dukha khozyaina*) (Photo 6). He told me that he once wounded his knee failing to perform rituals of respect. He always performs elaborate rituals when he is transporting his supplies by truck to remote camps. Once, Nikolai asked a driver to stop near every big river and mountain pass, which raised the ire of the driver. Walking, leaving tracks on the paths, as well as ritual performance are parts of the subtle interactions with spirits in different places. Successful interaction with spirits and constant experiences of luck also bring a sense of belonging to a place. Similarly to many ethnographic works, an elderly hunter said, "*bikit* is a household [Rus. *khozyaistvo*] of *buga* [god]" and one must deal with that master spirit in order to use a place. However, one might neglect a place after experiencing a failure that was probably caused by the malevolent spirit *arenki*.



Photo 6. Bultai leaving offerings for a master spirit when stopping on the mountain passage called burkhan, in Buryatia. Photo by Donatas Brandišauskas.

When Orochen-Evenki elders talk about their lives, they always use metaphors of paths. They say that someone who does not commit sins lives by a "straight path", while someone who poaches walks a "curvy path" (Rus. *krivaya tropa*), which always leads to the "end of the path" (Rus. *konets tropy*). It is said that good people die in their old age still actively hunting and herding in the taiga. As the elder Olga Zhumaneyeva used to say, "I will live as long as I walk" (Rus. *budu zhit poka khodit budu*). In Orochen-Evenki herders' political rhetoric, walking along paths is often used as a metaphor for the Orochen-Evenki who lead traditional ways of life such as reindeer

herding or hunting. Mortuary rituals are also based on the idea that the soul walks by a path to the “world of the dead” (Oro. *bunil*). Therefore, Orochen-Evenki often prepare food and tools for the dead and put them into the gravesite. Living people are responsible for helping the dead get ready for the trip. A corpse must be dressed in clothes crafted without ties. As Anya Semirekonova explained to me, “dead people should not stumble [Rus. *nespotykalsya*] on their path”, a path that leads only one way. These metaphors of paths, which unite place and time, life and death, luck and biography can also be found among many Inner Asian nations (see L’vova et al. 1988: 71–85).

SIGNS, COMMUNICATION AND LAND USE

Walking in the taiga is a way of gaining as well as leaving information. At the beginning of the 20th century hunters and herders used to leave different signs by paths in the taiga communicating between families and relatives who hunted in different river valleys and used to meet only a few times per year. Hunters and herders of the Tungokochen Rayon also used to travel hundreds of kilometres to reach Aga Autonomous Okrug in the south and Kurumkan Rayon in east Buryatia for trade. Furthermore, during the Soviet period reindeer herders often hunted independently from each other in the taiga, while living separately from their families in the village in different camps for long stretches when herding their respective scattered herds. They also used to visit their relatives who lived as far away as Yakutia, which often meant walking up to 1000–1500 kilometres one way. In this context, different signs have been widely used for communication. These signs also allow important plans or news related to health, hunting, herding, and migration to be conveyed, or places where resources were located to be identified or sites of misfortune avoided. Elders remember that their relatives used to travel everywhere migrating around a large region. Vladimir Lokushin from Zelenoye Ozero village describes how he used signs in the past, saying:

Orochen-Evenki knew each other’s plans well in the past; they knew where a person was migrating, where you can find relatives, as well as when and where you can meet them. People could migrate everywhere in the past, they could visit any valley, and therefore, there were many people moving in the taiga. People used to leave signs for each other. They also used to order [Rus. *zakazyvali*] meetings. Every clan had its own sign. My father often used to leave a cut on the tree that formed a young moon and a kamus-shaped cut as his own mark.

Today so-called *sama* signs continue to play an important role in the everyday lives of nomadic and sedentary Evenki.⁵ These can be made from a long pole that is put on a tripod or leaned against a tree stump. The end of the pole would be wrapped with cotton or grass to indicate the direction of migration. As head of a family of reindeer herders Nikolai Aruneyev explained to me, “The higher the angle of the pole from the ground, the further you can expect your relatives to travel to their long-term camp.” Orochen-Evenki reindeer herders can leave a sign by breaking the branches of young trees at eye level and hanging or tying a piece of moss or grass on the tops of short trees to convey different information. Nikolai often left me different signs on the snow when migrating since he often used to walk much further and I used to follow him.

Today, the Zhumaneyev-Aruneyev family of reindeer herders, as well as other village-based hunters, use glass bottles filled with written papers and leave them on certain crossroads or mountain passes. Herders might write to each other that predators came to the area, or inform each other about the deaths of different animals, or order ammunition or certain goods from their remote storage platforms. They could cooperate with each other by stringing plans for herding and hunting without meeting each other. Herders constantly break the ends of branches when travelling by horse or when walking with reindeer to maintain marked paths for future use. They also leave signs for other members of the family and for themselves when leaving animal meat at the butchering site. One expects that his family or other hunters will find a place by following the signs. When leaving such a killing site, Aleksei Aruneyev used to break tree branches in several places. As soon as he was on the path, he used to make a special cut on the bark of a tree. A special stick can also be left pointing toward the carcass of a killed animal. Often, some of the meat is left and can be brought to the camp by another relative who is hunting or trailing around. Yet, hunters walk back to the main camp after an animal is killed and will tell their wives or children to go and fetch the meat and transport it back with a reindeer. These signs allow them to spend a minimum amount of time performing different activities.

When people want to draw attention to a place in the taiga, they sometimes cut the bark of a birch tree or they form a circle of birch around a young, growing tree. This sign is seen from far away, since the white colour of the peeled tree is easily discernible. Hunters can mark different items that are left for other people by cutting bark near the mortuary scaffold, expecting that other humans and animals will not disturb the place. Indeed, if a person crosses a mortuary scaffold, the master spirit can become very angry and bring failure to anyone who passes the area. Nikolai Aruneyev once picked up a knife from the ground that belonged to an old mortuary scaffold, and since then, several visiting hunters lost their knives there because “a master always takes one for his own lost knife”. Warning signs can inform other hunters that they should treat these places better to maintain luck when passing the site. Nikolai frequently told me of his own misfortunes, for example when he lost his valued riding reindeer (Oro. *evuchak*) because he had unwittingly walked through a burial site. Hunters continue to mark burial sites to inform others even though these are destroyed. Different signs of attention are also left on the trees to warn others about poison left for predators, suggesting that the hunters care for their dogs. Thus, different signs help one to maintain wellbeing and avoid misfortune in the taiga. Similarly, signs can be made to demonstrate a person’s mastery rights of different places, caches or other storage sites. These signs are seen as bringing some kind of protection. Aleksei sometimes used to leave a piece of cloth near a butchered moose saying, “I do this so nobody takes it”, since these are seen as imbued with one’s energies. We find descriptions by Glafira Vasilevich (1969: 187) of Evenki who even used to carve faces on the trees beside the migration path, knowing that it might become a place for spirits. Such ‘placings’ served to protect the area as a way of creating secure places for one’s own subsistence.

Some signs are made to convey complex information. The local ethnographer Aleksei Arbatskiy told me that the large Zhumaneyev family used to cooperate by building a small rectangular building made from thin sticks (Figure 2). Arbatskiy documented a few types (A and B) of signs that were intended to catch the attention of hunters when

they were near such constructions (C). In the first case, birch was wrapped around the stem of a larch tree so that the white bark would be visible. In the second case, a young tree was tied to the stump. Fyodor Zhumaneyev used to make four or five layers of sticks, which meant a number of overnight stays. If there were four layers it meant that the family could be about 80 kilometres away. The stick inside of rectangles marked a direction of migration, while other signs with crossed sticks could also mark the number of nights spent in camps.

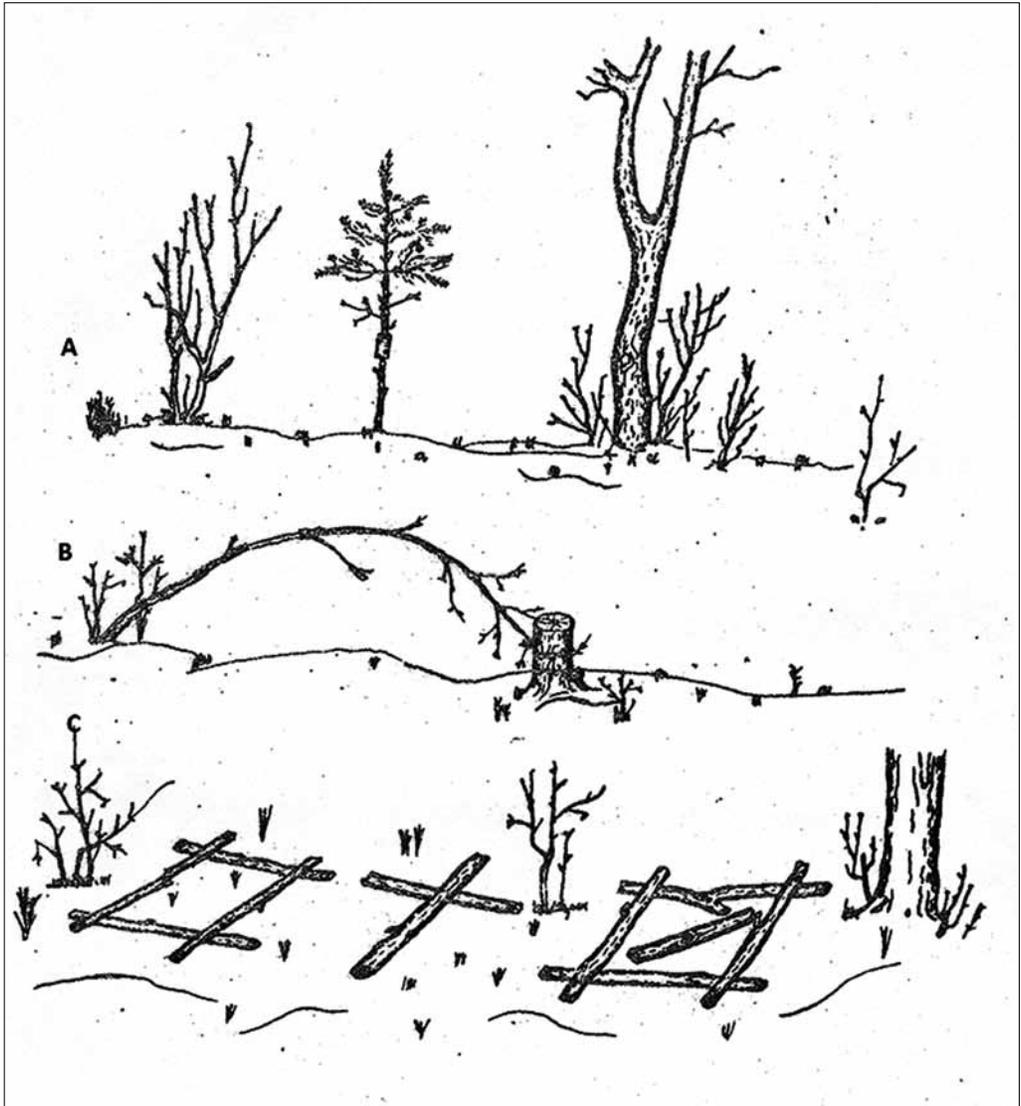


Figure 2. Sketch of Fyodor Zhumaneyev's signs drawn by Aleksei Arbatskiy (1981: Appendix). A – sign of attention (birch bark wrapped on the tree); B – sign of attention (bent tree); C – construction representing the direction of migration and number of camped nights.

CONCLUSION

In this article I showed how movements in the taiga and the use of signs and paths as well as successful subsistence are crucial to life in the taiga and the creation of living places. A living place, *bikit*, evolves out of human movements while leaving footprints and culturally modified areas such as trees, camps, paths and path signs on the land. Sign-making practices allow herders and hunters to deliver important information about all life events as well as about important sites for subsistence, thus maintaining community or family in the taiga. By moving through paths, hunters and herders also interact with master spirits as well as ancestors who left their own, still visible, tracks and imprints on the landscape. The success of a person's movements is based on the performance of rituals of exchange with spirit masters and other non-human beings. Hence, such place making is also based on experiences of success and interactions with spirits, ancestors and animals. These non-human beings can challenge humans as well as empower them, shaping their sense of belonging to the land. For this reason, the idea of walking by paths is a strong metaphor that links the past and present as well as revealing morality and how successfully a person lives in different places in the taiga.

Orochen hunters and herders do not search for animals in a 'patchy' environment using the most optimal strategies, as was stated by evolutionary anthropologists, rather they are aware that animals or the place itself may react to their actions. As David G. Anderson (2000: 234) states "their [Evenki herders] actions, motivations, and achievements are understood and acted upon by non-human beings". In this context, successful subsistence is gained through hunters' knowledge of animal *bikit*, skilfully discerned by observing fresh animal tracks and marks. These prints can deliver information about an animal's personal characteristics, age, gender and patterns of behaviour. A hunter aims to hunt a particular animal-person in its particular living place. The hunter has to contest with an animal by hiding intentions and movements, and by concealing emotions through prescribed ways of behaving and talking. In this context, the hunter's skills in fine-tuning his own attention and movements as well as camping places to wild and domesticated animal movements is crucial in gaining hunting and herding success. In terms of Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008: 5) "the movement of walking is itself a way of knowing. [...] walking is as much a movement of pensive observation – of thinking as you watch and watching as you think – as it is a way of getting around." Thereby, success dwelling in the taiga is based on skilful attunement to a place and to all its inhabitants while moving through it.

Hunting skills and success together with moral responsibilities to master spirits are described by herders as bringing their 'energies' to different places. Similarly, hunters can emplace their 'energy' in objects by crafting tools. These items also become independent agents, influencing positively or negatively anyone who uses them. New users of crafted tools can bring their own identity to such items, or re-inherit destinies from previous users (see, for example, Varlamova 2004: 60). In this article, I aimed to return positive values to the formerly pejorative ways of describing the Walking Tungus perception of place by showing how movement, use of different places for subsistence and ritual performance are part of the practice of place-making itself.

NOTES

1 The notion *bikit* can be translated literally as ‘living place’ (*bi* ‘live’, *kit* ‘a place’); see Tsintsius 1975: 79.

2 In Willerslev’s (2007) book dedicated to Yukaghir hunters of north east Siberia we can find many more significant examples of how a hunter imitates his prey, taking on the animal’s identity while hunting it. In this way, the hunter can perceive the world in the way the animal does, yet at the same time he does not cease to maintain his human self.

3 Descriptions of the *khozyain* (master) can also be found with references to Manchu, Turkic and Mongolic speaking groups in Siberia as well as Inner Asia (see the comparative study by Zelenin 1929 and Alekseyev 1992: 28–59, 76–101; also Petri 1930; Gurvich 1977; Mikhailov 1987).

4 Citations from informants here and below have been taken from the fieldwork diaries of the author.

5 See more on Evenki signs in Georgi 1779: 36; Mainov 1898: 7; Khoroshikh 1950: 57–59; Vasilevich 1969: 186–187.

SOURCES

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