

Alexander D. King, *Living with Koryak Traditions: Playing with Culture in Siberia*. Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press 2011, 348 pages.

Alexander D. King is a lecturer of anthropology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, UK and managing editor of the *Sibirica: Interdisciplinary Journal of Siberian Studies*, an academic journal with a growing reputation. Alex King, as he is commonly known, has been studying the Koryak culture of the Kamchatka Peninsula, in the Russian Far East, since 1995. He has published extensively on the culture, language and identity of the Koryaks in various academic journals, including *Estonian Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*.

Despite his training as a cultural anthropologist, King's approach has been rather unusual for that subdiscipline – in a Boasian spirit he uses very 'thick' data to outline his arguments and spends less time on theorising. This makes reading King's works enjoyable and the reader indeed learns much about different aspects of Koryak culture. With his monograph, King continues in the same style. With this book the author sums up and analyses several contradictions every Siberianist has encountered in the field. In short, native identity in Siberia is very complex and people themselves are engaged in constant debates over the nature and essence of what it means to be Koryak (or Even, Evenki, Dolgan, Sakha, etc.). In this book, King contests the widespread view among indigenous activists in Siberia that 'tradition' and 'culture' are fixed and essential, often codified in the texts of earlier ethnographers. At the same time the author distances himself from the popular Western academic approach that any identity is actually a non-identity, i.e. identity is a construct from different elements and is in a constant state of re-shaping in such a way that it often makes no sense to speak about identity at all. What Alex King argues is that Koryak identity is a set of norms and values or "what

elders do or say" (p. 33), something I also observed in the tundra of the north western Republic of Sakha among Dolgan reindeer herders. Following and knowing norms in Siberia is often the watershed that distinguishes 'our people' from 'others'. In the light of this approach other identity markers like language, 'traditional culture' or certain forms of economy become ambivalent and are always topics of discussion.

The ambivalence of 'culture' and 'tradition' is well demonstrated in the fifth chapter, about the Koryak language. The situation in Koryak communities is typical for most Siberian indigenous people: in nearly every village people speak different dialects and when students visit classes in their mother tongue at the village school they are confronted with an artificially created 'literary' Koryak (or Evenki, Khanty, and so forth) which is usually based on a distant dialect and does not sound "like we speak". The nature of the 'real' indigenous language (whether Koryak or not) is a matter of continuous discussion among Siberian people and arguments like "they speak differently" in respect to closer or distant neighbours is not something specific to Kamchatka. Nevertheless, as King shows, a sense of one community which overlaps all distinctions of dialects exists among Koryaks. The case of what is often called "traditional culture" is similar. Using dance and other spheres of Koryak culture, King demonstrates that all these fields contain much that could be called invented, either by ethnographers, teachers or native activists. However, this does not mean that various forms of Koryak dance or folk costume are inauthentic to people themselves. King demonstrates that the belief in the authenticity of (for instance) dance gives a "social power" to this practice and makes it to part of the existing Koryak culture. With this concept of the authenticity as lived practices that are believed to be "old" King conflicts with the essentialist views of a whole group of ethnographers, activists or cultural workers who constantly

criticise dance and folklore groups of Siberian natives (and not only Siberian natives, we can find similar discussions in Estonia) for too free an interpretation of the same 'tradition'. Therefore it is logical that the author of the book dedicates a whole chapter to the role of museums and schools in maintaining and shaping Koryak culture. As the reader sees, the schools and museums may be holders of certain codified concepts of 'tradition' and 'culture' but the interpretation of these texts depends on museum workers or teachers, i.e. becomes ambivalent and is a topic of discussions due to personal differences of approach toward 'real' Koryak culture.

With this monograph, Alex King helps us to understand how from the first sight contradictory and chaotic perceptions of authenticity fit together and establish an identity of a group. The book is an excellent example of the on-going revival of a Boasian tradition in anthropology that supports rather loose and creative bonding between language, physical type and other elements of culture. This work also demonstrates how flexibly people construct their identities in a situation when they live at the same time in a 'modern' and 'traditional' world, in a transition society that is simultaneously rooted in inherited economic, social and cultural practices. Considering the broad scope and rich argumentation of the book, Alex King's monograph should be interesting for people not only interested in Siberian or Arctic studies but in complex and controversial cultural processes in general.

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