

BOOK REVIEW

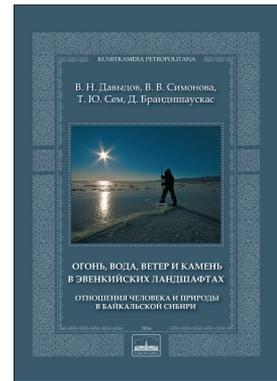
A STUDY OF HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONS

Vladimir Davydov, Veronika Simonova, Tatyana Sem, Donatas Brandishauskas. *Ogon', voda, veter i kamen' v evenkiiskikh landshaftakh: Otnosheniia cheloveka i prirody v Baikal'skoi Sibiri*. St. Petersburg: MAE RAN, 2016. 196 pp. In Russian.

This Russian-language monograph titled *Ogon', voda, veter i kamen' v evenkiiskikh landshaftakh: Otnosheniia cheloveka i prirody v Baikal'skoi Sibiri* (*Fire, Water, Wind, and Stone in the Evenki Landscapes: Human–Nature Relations in the Baikal Siberia*) examines the relationship between the Evenki of the Baikal area in Siberia and their natural environment. Water, wind, stone, and fire as natural phenomena are crucially important for the life of any living being. The study of these phenomena can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how people in different contexts experience themselves and the worlds in which they live.

One cannot say that the relations between humans and nature have not been of interest to Russian/Soviet ethnologists. These relations were understood by the Soviet ethnography of the 1960s–1970s mainly from a retrospective point of view. Scholars studied indigenous peoples by tracing their relations with nature according to “traditional” economic and religious life. For example, an excellent collection of papers edited by Innokenti Vdovin was devoted to the northern indigenous peoples’ ideas about nature, soul, and death, as well as shamanic worldview and practices dating back to the middle of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (Vdovin 1976). Since the 1980s these relations have been studied within the framework of a new sub-discipline called ethnic ecology (*etnicheskaia ekologiia; ethnoecology*), which was developed by the leading research scholars from the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, and was influenced by the cultural ecology of J. Stuart. A special department concerned with ethnoecology has been working within the framework of this institute since 1981, studying different problems; for example, the phenomenon of longevity among the Caucasus population, the influence of radiation on the local population of the Ural region, problems of the ethnoecological expertise, and some others (Yamskov 2013). Contemporary problems connected with pollution, land rights, and use of resources received much attention under the new socioeconomic and ecological conditions at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. In relation to climate change, traditional ecological knowledge has become attractive for the Russian scholars quite recently (Bogoslovskaya & Krupnik 2013). One might agree with the authors that so far anthropological studies have paid little attention to water and wind, while fire and stone have received some more attention.

The authors of the book under review believe that the environmental experience of the Evenki might be of great use in the practical policy concerning nature conservation.



“An attempt has been made in the book to show how sensitive and wise the human-nature relations might be and how different the understanding might be of what a landscape is, and how it would be necessary to interact with it” (p. 13). The authors use interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of these relations, combining methodologies from sociology, ethnography, social anthropology, and cultural geography.

The book is based on the field data gathered during long-term fieldwork in the northern Baikal district of the Republic of Buryatia (Davydov, Simonova), in the Tungokochen and Baunt districts of the Transbaikal region (Brandishauskas), and also in the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic (Sem; the expeditions of 1980–2000). The authors have also used archival sources from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, and from a few local archives.

Addressing human-nature relations, the authors use methodological concepts of ecological ethics, cultural landscape among others. These concepts are regarded as modern and dynamic categories rather than static and historically rooted ones. At the same time the authors insist on the importance of the historical perspective in their research.

The book begins with a chapter that deals with Evenki mythology and cosmology. Based on museological, archival, and field materials, Tatyana Sem has reconstructed the Evenki's views on the sun, stars, and stones, and offers an explanation to their understanding. She traces the links of the Evenki worldview with their everyday rituals, shamanic practices, and art. Petroglyphs found on the territory of the mobile Evenki are regarded as ancient narrative structures, which produce strong mental influence on the current mobile Evenki (p. 44). In comparison to the other chapters, this one could be characterised as rooted in the Soviet ethnography of religion and history.

The following chapters of the book are written by young scholars who received their scientific degrees in social anthropology in Aberdeen, Scotland. Their Western education has greatly influenced the themes and methodology in the book, and they are rather new for Russian Siberian studies. One of the methodological tasks of the book was “to liberate the discussion of the problems of human-nature relations in the Baikal Siberia from the received abstract schemes” (p. 174). In fact, traditional historical and ethnographical approaches, as well as postmodernist and phenomenological ones are used in the book. One may find new concepts in the book (in chapter 2 and 4, for example), such as “ethic of minimum”, “paper forest ethic”, “ethic of domination”, “water ethic”, and some others. While the concepts of the “ethic of minimum” and the “water ethic” are without doubt meaningful, and therefore useful as a methodological tool, the rest of the concepts seem not to be so successful, if one would understand ethic as a moral principle that governs a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity.

A special chapter is devoted to the relations of the Transbaikal Evenki with fire. D. Brandishauskas considers these relations to be rooted in economic and religious practices. This part of the book has already been published in English (Brandishauskas 2007). He pays attention to the Evenki manners of managing their landscape, namely to the practice of cultural fire, which brings success in hunting and reindeer-herding. The observation and description of the Evenki's practice of intentional fires is of great value, as not all Evenki groups have it (or we do not know about it). It is obvious that this practice is a form of environmental adaptation to the local landscape. One of the preconditions for intentional fires in the forest is reindeer-herding economy and mobility. The reindeer tread paths through the forest, which also change and cultivate the

landscape. Burning practice is also known to the Khanty (Adaev 2007). Australian aborigines call their own cultural fires “country cleaning”. Australian anthropologist Deborah Rose has mentioned: “It has taken white settlers, scientists and others a very long time to appreciate the fact that indigenous peoples in Australia (and elsewhere) consciously manage their country through the expert use of fire” (Rose et al. 2002: 21). If a comparative approach were used in the chapter, it would help to find out local features in the controlled burning practice and also study the reaction of the national states on cultural fires in the context of today’s problems with the forest wild fires.

The authors deal with water and wind as new objects of the anthropology of landscape and anthropology of weather (e.g. Ingold 2007, 2010). They bring in new anthropological perspectives and present new ethnographic data concerning the Evenki of the northern Baikal region. As with fire, these natural phenomena are considered through the optics of everyday “traditional” economic activity in the given landscape.

In spite of the stereotype about Baikal as the purest lake in the world, the local population has experienced coastal water pollution as well as encountered problems concerned with access to water resources for fishing. These problems receive some attention in the book. The authors study what they call Evenki water ethic, and their economic practices of water use, including mobile practices, when water serves as a road and as a barrier. They provide valuable ethnographic observations on everyday life, including Evenki narratives about water and ice.

In scientific literature air is regarded as a mediator and an element within which humans live and act. Since air became an object of anthropological research, landscape has been given a new dimension, where air has become a full-fledged actor of everyday Evenki life. The authors trace how the Evenki calculate the wind movement in order to predict the weather, which is crucially important for conducting their economic activity – fishing, hunting, reindeer grazing – as well as for constructing dwellings, organising campsites, and in many other cases.

The Evenki of the Baikal area in Siberia were strongly influenced by Russians and Buryats, which reflects in their culture and language. Unfortunately, there are no comments on this fact in the text. For example, the idea that among the Transbaikalian Evenki “the owner of the place is often a dead relative” (p. 123) is not commented upon, while it is likely a Buryat cultural influence (see, e.g., Khandagurova 2008). Speaking about water as medicine, the author gives an example of the northern Baikal Evenki ideas about holy water, but there is no discussion that it is the Russian Orthodox church and popular beliefs that influenced the local Evenki worldview (p. 144). The wind *hilos*, according to its definition in the book (p. 168) is very likely a deformed name from the *hius/hivus* wind (a cold wind; the air flows in the river valleys, which increases the influence of low temperatures); the name was brought to Siberia and the Far East by Russians from the north of European Russia, where this kind of wind is known.

Some paragraphs of the text leave an impression of incompleteness and remind us of a sketchy description rather than a full-loaded text. Some published ethnographic data have not deserved the authors’ attention. It would also be interesting to trace the Evenki ethnographical cases of the mutual interconnection of the phenomena under consideration; for example, wind and water, water and stone, wind and fire, fire and water.

The book contains extensive new field data, including photographs that enrich the text. It would be of use both for Russian scholars, who may learn about new methodological approaches as well as new research data, and for our foreign colleagues, who know

the Russian language and study indigenous peoples of the Baikal area of Siberia and neighbouring regions.

This collectively written monograph is a very encouraging example of the study of human-nature relations and as such it gives new perspectives for further work on the topic. The book is available as a free download on the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography website (http://www.kunstkamera.ru/lib/rubrikator/03/03_03/978-5-88431-303-3/).

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