

## Borders and Land: Ideal Perceptions and Real Practices of Evenk Hunters and Herders

Olga Povoroznyuk

Researcher

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology

Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

Evenks represent one of the nomadic reindeer herding and hunting indigenous peoples widely scattered across Siberia and the Far East. Their communities, presently living in the north of Chitinskaya Province<sup>1</sup> have also been known for their reindeer hunting and herding tradition, which determined their lifestyle, adaptation and strategy of exploitation of natural resources. It was the combination of hunting elks, deer and fur animals, on the one hand, with small-scale transportation type of reindeer herding and subsidiary fishing, on the other, that was underlying the unique economic model, nomadic patterns and land use practices of Chita Evenks (Vasilevich 1969). Thus, diversified subsistence economy and nature management based on ecologically reasonable exploitation standards of hunting ground and pasture, along with the constant migrations constrained rather by natural than other kinds of borders, ensured the survival of the most of Evenk communities back in the beginning of the XX century.

While sustainable use of renewable natural resources provided for economic success of Evenk herders and hunters, the complex system of customary law, moral and ethical norms and values regulated their everyday life and land use and guaranteed continuity of economic organization. These elements forming a unique indigenous worldview and expressed in the traditional ecological knowledge, with both concepts profoundly described by researchers<sup>2</sup>, were also characteristic of nomadic Evenks. Many researchers stress the fact that Evenks, like many other indigenous peoples, have never had a concept of private property to land. Although the nomadic groups or clans could have some conditional and more or less visible boundaries of the territories they used, they were far from being the real owners, especially in the contemporary juridical meaning of the word (Suslov 2002; Pekarskiy and Tsvetkov 2002). Instead, the land, as well as any other natural resources, were believed to belong to the supreme de-

ity and the master of the land/place called *Barelakha* by Chita Evenks (Vasilevich 1969; author's field records 1999-2000), and could be temporarily used by any person or group of people. New territories, thus, were gained by people according to the "pioneer" or "exploration" principle.

Several categories of land existed, or, rather, the territory itself could have a particular, yet flexible and shifting, status. For instance, it could have been perceived as *temporarily occupied* in the case of nomadic routes crossing it or a settlement being based there at the moment. Personal things, household utensils, tools and hunting traps, left in the vicinities of abandoned settlements, as well as special signs, including cuts and notches, intentionally made on the trees along migration routes, could help define the status of a certain territory. Yet, the lands exploited by one Evenk nomadic group, be it clan, family or other group, if needed could also be used by others, provided that they were on friendly terms with the current "users" of the territory and had good intentions (Uvachan 2001).

*Sacred lands* constituted a special category of territories which could be used for no other human activities, except for occasional religious rituals and sacrifices. For Evenks, as well as for instance, Nenets people, those lands include ancestors' and shamans' graves, "poor" places associated with interclan conflicts and epidemics, as well as "places of power" and places inhabited by spirits, often materialized in different natural objects, such as mountains, lakes, islands, rivers and trees of extraordinary form, color or geographical position (Kharyuchi 2003). Among Evenks trees *obo* devoted to deity of the land *Barelakha* are quite common and noticeable. At the same time the information on other sacral territories itself is rather scarce and fragmented due to its sacral nature and restricted access to it by the uninitiated or outsiders to the group (Author's field records 1998-1999).

Among different categories of territories, existing among Evenks, the notion of “one’s own land”/“ancestral land”/“clan territory” is outstanding. In brief, this concept implies a land with no strict borders, on which one’s ancestors and kinsmen have migrated while herding and hunting deer. Or, in the universal indigenous worldview, it may also be the center of one’s or one group’s familiar well-known world in contrast to hostile unknown world extending beyond its borders (Spodina 2001). The perception of the environment as “home” has also been core to Evenks’ every day land use practices and organization of occupied space (Fondahl 1998). Such territory has been associated with a certain, truly, traditional nomadic pattern and economic organization of a certain clan, on the one hand, and psychologically comfortable environment and spiritual connection with the ancestors, on the other (Suslov 2000; Sirina 2002). Today, the concept of “ancestral land” still has a symbolic value even among sedentary Evenks, living in villages (Author’s field records 2002).

New administrative borders, established at the dawn of the Soviet era, re-established during the whole Soviet period and still being negotiated, have had a strong impact on the socio-economic and cultural development and ethnic identity of Evenks through the 20th century. The example of Chita Evenks demonstrates how in the early twentieth century they could be consecutively included in different kinds of territorial administrative units. In 1922 northern districts, traditionally occupied by a number of Evenk clans and presently included in the administrative borders of Chitinskaya Province, were annexed to Yakutia. Two years later the ongoing territorial reform resulted in division of these territories between the neighboring Irkutskaya Province and then existent Far Eastern Region. However, shortly, in 1930 Vitimo-Olekminskiy National District, established by the governmental decree on the national autonomous territorial units, embraced reunited and renamed clan territories of Chita Evenks.

During the six year period that Vitimo-Olekminskiy District existed, its population was growing, the organization of herding and hunting kolkhozes and cooperatives was underway, while the economy based on traditional industries remained unprofitable. In that period the fact of formation of Evenk autonomy itself strengthened the ethnic identity of aboriginal population, but officially declared unprofitability of the local economy lead to the abolition of the district as an autonomous territorial unit in the final end. This immediately resulted in another re-establishment of administrative borders and the northern districts with Evenk population passed on to the newly created Chitinskaya Province (Traditsionnoe prirodoopolzovanie evenkov... 1995).

In most cases these administrative borders transected ancestral lands and split clan communities. According to the national Polar Census and field records of individual researchers, about 1500 (fifteen hundred) Evenks occupying the lands within the borders of northern districts of the contemporary Chitinskaya Province in the 1920s - early 1930s belonged to the clans of *Ngangagir*, *Chakigir*, *Ingolagir*, *Laks(h)ikagir*, *Lalygir*, *Bukochar*, *Tamingankur*, *Bullyatyr*, *Ogdyrenkur*, *Yakotkar*, *Dongoil* (Terletskiy 1932; Vasilevich 1930). Thus, these and other “traditional” clans were divided by the artificial, in the aboriginal worldview, boundaries and substituted with new so called “administrative” clans (Dolgikh 1960), demonstrating general process of indigenous clan transformation which started much earlier, with the annexation of Siberia to the Russian Empire.

However, newly established divisions served rather as an efficient administrative tool used by the Soviet government than as an integral part of the indigenous perception of space and kinship. Nomadic Evenks, for instance, still had a notion of the ancestral lands as a whole territory where their traditional hunting and herding roots laid, regardless of the administrative borders. Usually, it was mostly natural objects such as rivers, lakes and mountain ranges which served both as territorial markers and borderlines dividing, at least, symbolically the lands occupied by different clans or nomadic groups. For instance, the nomadic routes of *Turuyagir* Evenks stretched along Kalakan, Amalat, Vitim, Kalar, Karenga rivers, while *Lakshikagir* Evenks moved with their reindeer along the right bank of Vitim River (Titov 1926).

However, the policy of sedentarization of nomadic indigenous peoples of the North, initiated in the early Soviet period, was gradually leading to the establishment of reindeer herding and hunting kolkhozes with a different land use and allocation system. The concept of nomadism, the land and the border also transformed, especially, among many recently settled Evenks, while semi-nomadic and nomadic families were following old “traditional” nomadic patterns and reindeer herding and hunting methods. Thus, among Evenks of northern Chitinskaya Province, as well as among other Evenk communities, kolkhoz-based land use and state legislation have co-existed with the notion of borderless land and customary law, regulating the use of this land, its special sacral status and the general solicitous attitude to the environment, through all Soviet time (Anderson 2000; Vitebskiy 2005).

Evenks, presently living in the northern districts of Chitinskaya Province, are descendants of such widely scattered clans as *Inelas*, *Metakar*, *Yakotkar*, *Nyamagir*,

*Kindigir*, *Lakshikigir*, among others. Many of the informants can still remember their clan affiliation and draw the symbolic borders of their ancestral lands on the map. Although, in fact, a clear distinction between the “administrative” and “original” clan to which their forefathers belonged and these two overlapping notions have blurred, with the generations of Evenk people who lived through the Soviet kolkhoz system (Author’s field records 2002-2003). However, I would like to stress that even among Evenk village dwellers, let alone nomadic hunters and herders, clan identity and the concept of the ancestral land are important cultural resources which are often mobilized or, at least, referred to during the cultural revitalization and struggle for participation in the decision making and resource management processes (Fondahl 1998).

Traditional aboriginal and modern perceptions of the borders, land and nature management can be illustrated by the case study of an Evenk *obschina*<sup>3</sup>. *Obschina* G. is a reindeer herding and hunting enterprise owning the largest herd of over 300 reindeer in the district (Field records 2003, 2004). It was legally registered in 2002 according to then recently enforced federal law<sup>4</sup>. The enterprise includes over 20 members, both Evenks and non-Evenks, and many more candidates put on the “waiting” list. The *obschina*’s economic cycle and its participants’ way of life are determined by reindeer herding and hunting demands, although other non-traditional activities like fishing, herb and mushroom gathering and tourism are registered in the charter of the organization. In every day life, land use practices of *obschina* members are still regulated by the system of traditional knowledge, customary norms and moral and ethic standards. This system, underlying their worldview, prescribes them solicitous attitude to natural resources, including the land and animals, obedience to the rules of exploitation of different categories of territories, as well as inherent affiliation to “one’s own land” or “ancestral land” with quite flexible borders, stretching from Chitinskaya Province to the neighboring Republic of Yakutia (Author’s field records 2003-2004). Such perception of the land and the border, existing on the “unofficial” level, is core not only to the successful carrying out of basic economic activities of *obschina*, but to the mentality and ethnic identity of its members as well:

I was born in that region [Yakutia]. I am local to there. Evenks were not used to have any borders. Only later, when they were divided...In the early times our kinsmen used to move from here to there with the reindeer...We are migrating on territories where our ancestors lived and where we must live.<sup>5</sup>

The official setting of the *obschina* appears in a different

light. Paradoxically, as noted by many researchers, the above-mentioned federal law on *obschinas* underscored their clan-based character and type of membership, while, in practice, *obschinas* often include friends, neighbors and other members who are not sure about their clan affiliation at all. Moreover, the notion of *obschina* itself, deriving from Russian peasant community, is not inherently indigenous (F. Stammler 2005). This situation is characteristic of G. as well. Another federal law<sup>6</sup> provides a definition of “traditional land use territory” and sets standards of allocations of such lands among *obschinas* (Status korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossii..., 2005). According to this law *obschina* G. was also allotted a plot of land for reindeer herding, hunting and fishing activities. However, on the one hand, this territory is encapsulated within the administrative borders leading dissecting traditional migration routes of *obschina* members. And on the other, it is partially unproductive for traditional activities, especially reindeer herding, in terms of ecological conditions and vegetation. Therefore, the *obschina* still has to exploit their ancestral lands, extending beyond the borders of Chitinskaya Province to make their herding and hunting activities more efficient. Every time they cross the border between Chitinskaya Province and Yakutia on their migration to the pastures, they violate the provincial border, and every time they pursue the game on the ancestral lands in Yakutia they commit an illegal action, at least, according to a juridical non-indigenous point of view (Author’s field records 2004).

In this situation the *obschina* had to initiate a land claim in order to gain more land from other non-indigenous land users, including commercial fur-selling enterprises, competing for the same territory. The federal legislation, including but not limited to the above-mentioned laws, protects the rights of indigenous populations to prioritized traditional use of the land involving the application of their traditions and customs in every day activities. However, the long-awaited law on traditional land use territories turned out to be inapplicable both on a federal and provincial level. One of the commonly cited reasons is the lack of enforcement mechanisms, especially, on the provincial and local level. Another one is connected to internal contradictions inherent to the federal legislation. In practice, though, more fundamental reason is unwillingness of the local administration to give the land for free to indigenous users instead of putting it up for auction among entrepreneurs who will pay for it, as well as the lack of experience in settling land claims on a win-win basis. Due to these reasons the negotiation process between the *obschina* and the local administration were postponed and the proceedings of the case of *obschina* G. delayed for an uncertain time.

Thus, *obschina* G., striving for its land, is only one example of how ideal notions of land and existing land use practices of indigenous peoples of northern Russia can turn the borders penetrable and fluid when interpreted according to nomadic tradition. Though, the same *obschina*, claiming the land from the state and other non-indigenous users, presents a case in which the territory for traditional use is limited and administrative borders of the province and the districts are strict and solid as re-interpreted or mis-interpreted by officials and non-indigenous population (Field records 2002-2004). Besides these conflicting interpretations of the land and the border, this example also shows that Russia's indigenous peoples are just starting in resuming control over their lands and developing resource management strategies that incorporate their cultural values and traditional knowledge, thus, helping to articulate a new concept of territoriality and border<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1 Chita Province (Chitinskaya Oblast) is one of the Eastern Siberian federal subjects of Russian Federation, with the administrative center of Chita City. Indigenous Evenk population resides, mostly, in three northern districts of the province.

2 For instance, see the reflections of T. Mustonen and F. Trudel on this matter published in their position papers for the 4-th NRF Meeting.

3 *Obschina* abbreviated from *rodovaya obschina* (Russ.) is literally translated as "(clan) community" but actually stands for a form of an indigenous enterprise based on "traditional activities" such as hunting, reindeer herding, etc.

4 Federal Law "On the principles of organization of *obschinas* of indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East" (2000)

5 Head of the *obschina*, Evenk S.N. G. (Author's field records 2002-2003)

6 Federal Law "On the territories of traditional land use of indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East" (2001)

7 Also see G. Fondahl's position paper written for 4-th NRF Meeting.

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