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SOCIAL MEMORY AND OKA-SOIJOT REINDEER HERDERS: ON THE CHALLENGES OF REINDEER IN MULTI-SPECIES MOUNTAIN HOUSEHOLDS

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Abstract. In this paper I draw on Oka-Soijot reindeer herders' diaries (1995–1997) as an inspiration for the sustained commitment of the small-numbered peoples of the Russian North and Far East to revive aspects of their ancestral cultures, and as a recent historical source that helps illuminate the rebirth of an ancient herding occupation in the mid-1990s. To do so, I rely on historical data for pre-revolutionary reindeer herding in Oka, which consists primarily of the account of Swiss-Russian anthropologist B.E. Petri (1927). From an anthropological perspective, the herders' diaries are significant because they illustrate how reindeer herding constitutes a symbolic marker of Oka-Soijot identity, fulfilling a role similar to that of ancestral language re-acquisition in indigenous minority contexts which have been subject to extensive colonial and assimilative processes. The diaries also shed light on the costliness of re-learning “lost” ancestral skills, while providing an account of the efforts made by a group of novice herders. The paper concludes with a call to reassess early reindeer domestication in the Altai-Saian region in light of recent 're-learning' experiences.

Keywords: *Reindeer, South Siberia, domestication, Oka-Soijots, cultural revival, identity, cultural tradition, symbolic marks, ethnography*

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СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ПАМЯТЬ И ОКИНСКИЕ СОЙОТЫ ОЛЕНЕВОДЫ: К ПРОБЛЕМАМ СЕВЕРНОГО ОЛЕНЯ В МНОГОВИДОВЫХ ГОРНЫХ ХОЗЯЙСТВАХ

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена дневникам окинских сойотов оленеводов (1995–1997) как вдохновения для неустанной приверженности многих малочисленных народов Северного и Дальнего Востока России возродить аспекты собственной традиционной культуры, а также как источник недавней истории, иллюстрирующий процесс возрождения древней оленеводческой отрасли в постсоветские годы. Автор опирается на данные российского этнографа швейцарского происхождения Б. Э. Петри (1927) о дореволюционном хозяйстве окинских сойотов. С точки зрения антропологии дневники оленеводов представляют особый интерес, поскольку иллюстрируют как оленеводство выступало в роли символического маркера идентичности окинских сойотов, выполняя роль, аналогичную той, которую играет восстановление предковых языков коренных малочисленных народов, подвергшихся экстенсивным колониальным и ассимилирующим процессам. Дневники также проливают свет на трудности процесса повторного обучения «утраченным» умениям предков, и рассказывают об усилиях, предпринятых группой начинающих оленеводов. Автор призывает в итоге пересмотреть раннее одомашнивание оленей в Алтай-Саянском регионе в свете недавнего опыта переобучения пастухов.

Ключевые слова: *северный олень, южная Сибирь, одомашнивание, Окинские Сойоты, культурное возрождение, идентичность, традиция, символические маркеры, этнография.*

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Introduction

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013–2014 with Oka-Soiots¹ of Okinskii Rai'on in the westernmost part of the Republic of Buriatia. It also draws on a more recent expedition to the area in May of 2018. The thrust of this work was oriented around human-animal relations, examining indigenous approaches to animal domestication in a region long known as the birthplace of Eurasian reindeer domestication. As part of a larger multidisciplinary circumpolar research project, the fieldwork contributed materials from the Eastern Saian Mountains to help forge an alternative language for domestication studies – a language rooted in northern understandings of reciprocity and recognition of personhood in landscapes and animal species that co-constitute domestication relationships. This renewed attention to sentience and autonomy in human-animal relations contrasts predominant archaeological interpretations of animal domestication stemming from the equatorial hemisphere, where human domination over animals has long served as a predominant interpretative model.

Even prior to coming to the Oka district of Buriatia, I held an interest in the origins of reindeer domestication and herding, which was sparked by British anthropologist Tim Ingold, the writings of Norwegian zoologist Orjan Olsen, and Soviet ethnographer and archaeologist Sevan Vainshtein (Ingold, 1980; Olsen, 1915; Vainshtein, 1971). All three researchers shared a curiosity in the Saian-Altai region, an area considered a possible origin point for reindeer-herding in general, and in particular of the Saian-style of reindeer herding. The latter utilizes small herds of domestic reindeer as a source of milk in summer and as a

means of transportation for hunters in winter. The Saian-style of reindeer herding was traditionally used by four related ethnic groups: Tozhus of northeastern Tyva, Dukhas of northwestern Mongolia, Tofas of southwestern Irkutsk Oblast', and Oka-Soiots of northwestern Buriatia. Of these four groups, Oka-Soiots are the most culturally assimilated, having transitioned from reindeer herding to yak and other cattle breeding, following the example of Buriat settlers who arrived in Oka around the middle of the 17th century (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 52).

It does not come as a surprise that little research has been conducted on Oka-Soiot reindeer herding in contrast to the three neighbouring ethnic groups. Although reference is made to Oka-Soiot reindeer herding in the writings of anthropologist and archaeologist B.E. Petri (1927), as well as in the more recent ethnographic work of L.R. Pavlinkaya (2005, 2002), minimal ethnohistorical data are available on pre-revolutionary Oka-Soiot life ways. During the Soviet period, the kolkhoz system maintained local herds of reindeer as transportation for their hunting brigades. However, following an official order in 1963, all reindeer husbandry was removed from Oka (Rassadin, 1999. P. 17–19; Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 98)². This paper focuses on handwritten documents – the reindeer herders' diaries which were written by herders of a newly introduced herd between 1995 and 1997. These herders

¹ In this article the term "Oka-Soiots" is used to differentiate Soiots historically residing in the Tunka Valley and what is today the Okinskii Rai'on from eastern Tuvians (Tozhus) who are often referred to as "Soiots" in Russian ethnographic literature.

² As late as 1956, the Oka Aimsobiet instructed the regional "Zagotkontora" (hunting department) to "commit the direction of Ulan-Mal'chin and the Komintern kolkhozes to enlarge the number of [their] reindeer, and to increase the income made from reindeer herding by providing transportation services to hunters of other kolkhozes". These two collective farms were the last to have any reindeer (334, combined) (AAMO 1935–1956 11-1-149; AAMO 1953–1960 11-1-305). It follows that while reindeer were being killed in some kolkhozes, other kolkhozes were encouraged to increase their numbers until 1963, when all herding activities were suspended.

had taken turns in fixating many of their activities³, sometimes including drawings, for their own memories' sake⁴. The texts are of interest because they document Oka-Soiot herders' post- Soviet (re-) learning experiences under Tofa instruction⁵. Based on their diaries, this paper explores the symbolic aspect of reindeer herding for Oka-Soiots in past and present, examines some of the challenges of re-learning ancestral skills, and provides a brief analysis of some of the most important themes gathered from the reindeer herders' diaries⁶.

In 1994 the Soiot Village Advisory (Rus. *Soiotskii Sel'soviet*) and its kolkhoz, "50 Let Oktiabria," located at the village of Sorok, purchased 60 head of reindeer from the Buriat District Directory "Baikal" (Rus. *BRO "Baikal"*), representing the Tofa *koopzverpromkhoz* at Nizhniudinsk, Irkutsk Oblast' (AAMO⁷. 38-1-176, 2). The transaction occurred as part of the "Oka project for protecting the genetic base of disappearing animals," and it involved the movement of 45 does, seven males, and eight trained riding reindeer (AAMO. 38-1-176, 5). As well, two Tofa reindeer herders were to instruct their Soiot neighbours in herding skills. Support for the purchase came from American activist and founder of the Totem Peoples Preservation Project NGO, Daniel Plumley, who was at the time actively supporting the survival of reindeer herding in

Tozhu⁸, Dukha (Jernsletten, Klokov, 2002. P. 154), and Soiot contexts (herders' diaries, pp. 1–3). Tsyren-Dorzho Tsyrenovich Dondokov, (b. 1947, interviewed Sept. 2013) remembers joining the Soiot delegation that rode their horses on a four-week long trek to collect the purchased herd⁹ near the village of Alygdzher in Tofalaria, Irkutsk Oblast. Upon arrival, a veterinarian guided the members to Alkhadyr mountain, where the reindeer were kept by the Shebkeev and Khangaraev families. On 1 November 1994 the delegation returned to Oka with no losses to the herd. To this day, humorous¹⁰ stories of the trek contribute to a collective memory of the time when reindeer came back to Oka (Fig. 1).

I. Reindeer-herding as 'symbolic marker'

1. Reindeer as a nation-building tool. The reintroduction of domestic reindeer to Oka must be understood within the context of a larger movement of cultural revitalization among Soiot descendants, which was gaining momentum toward the turn of the millennium (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 65, 98). In 1993 a group of Soiots founded their own association of 812 members, and in 1994 the Soiot National Somon, with the village of Sorok as its centre, was officially recognized as an area within the Oka District. A year later, census data showed that 1,973 individuals had chosen Soiot identity for themselves, and by the year 2000 Soiots had achieved recognition as a small numbered people of the Russian Federation (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 65). The same year the Republic of Buriatia agreed to rename Oka District into Soiot National District (Rus. *Soiotskii natsional'nyi raion*) (ibid. P. 65). The desire to reestablish one of the most enduring symbols of the Oka-Soiot way of life in the Eastern Saians – hunting and reindeer herding – had thus reached its hiatus,

³ When I asked the wife of the hunter, who had kept the hunting notes, whether they had been written in Russian, she replied, "Of course they are! What other language would he have used? Russian is what he learned in school".

⁴ My reading of the diaries was aided by former herder Iura V. Sharaev (b. 1974) who is one of its authors and who helped clarify several difficult to understand or humorous sections in the document. Interviewed, May 2014.

⁵ Evgenii T. Kudriatsov and Vitalii Lomov had come as herder-instructors from Tofalaria. While Kudriatsov returned to Tofalaria shortly after his arrival, Lomov stayed for two years.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Oka-Soiot life and their historical and contemporary relationship to surrounding indigenous populations (Tofas, Tozhus, Dukhas), please refer to the author's PhD dissertation: Oehler, A. 2016 *Being Between Beings: Soiot Herder-Hunters in a Sacred Landscape*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen. Available at: https://saiandomus.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/oehler_thesis_10_mar_2017.pdf.

⁷ Administrative Archive of the Municipal Formation "Oka District".

⁸ Donahoe B.R. A line in the Saians: history and divergent perceptions of property among the Tozhu and Tofa of South Siberia. Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 2004. 329 p.

⁹ Two reindeer had been given as provision for the return trip to Oka.

¹⁰ According to T-D. T. Dondokov, the trip was originally planned to take no longer than two weeks. However, the delegation got lost on their way to Alygdzher, lacking maps and a compass, and having difficulty hunting due to faulty firearms.

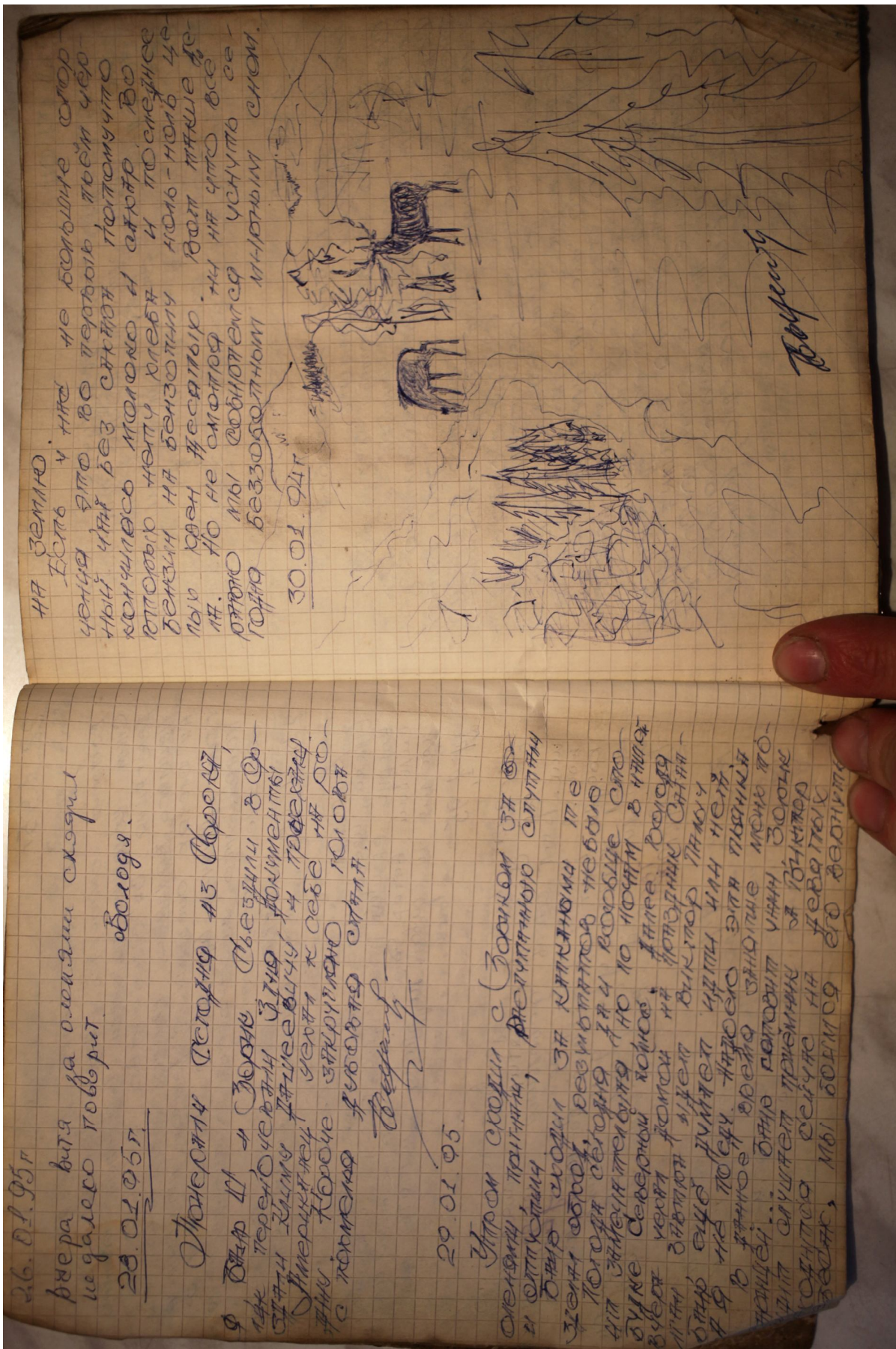


Fig. 1. Excerpt from the Reindeer herders' diaries, in the possession V. Dondokov (photo 2014 by author)
 Рис. 1. Выдержки из дневников оленеводов, собственность Б. Дондокова (фото автора, 2014 г.)

together with the wish to reacquire their ancestral language (Rassadin, 2010. P. 9). Although it may have seemed that these desires reflected a genuine intention in the administration and its population to return to more historical Sioit patterns of life (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 99), over a decade later this seemed out of the question. Although reindeer herding had not caught on as an economically viable alternative in the Sioit Somon, one herd continued to graze around the peaks of the Onot River valley.

2. "Sioits should probably have some reindeer". Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the desire to revive reindeer herding in the Sioit National Somon occurred at roughly the same time as the population's growing interest in ancestral language revitalization. The question is whether both strands of revivalism – language and traditional practice – served the same end. In many indigenous contexts there exists some discrepancy between 'cultural' and 'ethnic' identity, as can be seen in the example of the Canadian Arctic. Here linguist Louis-Jacques Dorais has suggested that with increasing loss of Inuktitut, Inuit "fundamental cultural identity will [...] grow weaker and weaker for want of ancestral linguistic support," while ethnic identity, which is retained by "social and political relations a native group maintains with the majority society" (Dorais, 2010. P. 272), can be maintained more easily and in absence of a heritage language. This seems to ring true also for Oka-Sioits, who maintain a relatively strong ethnic identity in spite of the loss of their ancestral language, and the loss of reindeer herding as an occupation in support of a hunting economy. In fact, the presence of language revitalization efforts and of reindeer herding¹¹ seem to serve primarily as symbolic markers of an ethnic rather than a cultural identity. In answer to my question of why the Sorok Sel'soviet continues to maintain a reindeer herd, an anonymous male informant (b. 1966, interviewed November 2013) fittingly replied: "Sioits should probably have some reindeer."

¹¹ The Sioit language has been taught at the Sorok school since 2005 (Rassadin, 2010. P. 9), and 20 years have passed since the reintroduction of reindeer to Oka in 1994. Neither the language nor reindeer herding have become significant parts of the daily lives of most Sioits, yet their symbolic values remain significant.

3. Herd acquisitions and self-determination (1930 and 1994). The Oka-Sioit battle for official recognition as a separate indigenous people has long gone hand in hand with attempts of maintaining reindeer herding as a subsistence practice. As L.R. Pavlinkaya (2002) aptly points out in her book "*Kachevniki Golubikh Gor*", in 1930 an Oka-Sioit delegation was sent to Irkutsk to complain about having been prevented from purchasing and transferring a herd of reindeer from Tozhu herders in eastern Tyva to Oka (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 61–62). Their attempted purchase had likely been intended to remedy the recent decimation of their own reindeer herds¹² (Petri, 1927. P. 16–17). Judging from archival materials, Sioits considered it a basic right to decide about their own economic future, especially since receiving recognition as a "small numbered people of the North" (Rus. *malochislennyi narod severa*) under the Northern Committee (Rus. *Komitet Severa*) (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 61–62). It is for this reason that the 1994 purchase of a herd of reindeer from Tofalaria can be considered symbolic in more than one way: While the arrival of Tofa reindeer helped strengthen a newfound sense of Sioit identity, it also marked the triumph of a long-sought Sioit affirmation of economic self-sufficiency in light of larger colonial forces, bringing full circle a previous attempt that had been on hold for 64 years. Arguably, the attempted purchase reported in 1930 had been aimed at maintaining cultural integrity by keeping an old practice as integral element of Oka-Sioit livelihoods. In contrast, the 1994 purchase seems to have aided primarily in the affirmation of a distinct ethnic identity, whether or not reindeer herding would one day become a common practice again.

4. Living language and herding knowledge. In 1926, B.E. Petri encountered a few elders still able to speak the Turkic Sioit language (Petri, 1927. P. 19), which much resembles that of their Tozhu and Tofa neighbours. Linguist V. I. Rassadin mentions that there were reports of passive knowledge of Sioit in several

¹² According to prof. B.E. Petri, all reindeer kept by Oka-Sioits and Tofas (Karagass) had originally come from eastern Tyva. Yet B.E. Petri noted an observable difference in size between reindeer kept in Tofalaria and those held in Oka, the latter being notably smaller, which he attributed to the overall poor state of herding in Oka at the time.



Fig. 2. Members of Bair Sharaev's 2014 herding crew with castrates in alpine terrain near Kitoi River, 2014
Рис. 2. Члены скотоводческой бригады Баира Шараева в 2014 г. с оленями-кастрами в горной местности
вблизи р. Китой, 2014 г.

elders as late as 1953 (Rassadin, 2012. P. 3). Gathering data in the 1970s for his dictionary (Rassadin, 2003) and grammar (Rassadin, 2012), the linguist relied on data gathered from elders who were born prior to 1917 (ibid. P. 9). It is clear that the Soiot language contained many terms to describe a now lost way of life. Although taught in school since 2005 (Rassadin, 2010. P. 9), the language is not spoken in Soiot homes today. Knowledge of traditional Oka-Soiot reindeer herding practices had to be reconstructed from the memory of elders in similar fashion to linguistic knowledge (Rassadin, 2012. P. 215). Given that Oka-Soiots had been without any reindeer for at least 31 years (1963–1994), most of their traditional herding knowledge was lost by the 1990s¹³ (Pavlinkaya, 2002. P. 98). Igor

V. Rassadin (2012) interviewed several former reindeer herders and their descendants, reconstructing herding practices from their memory, and finding strong resemblance with Tozhu, Tofa, Dukha (Tsaatan), and Darkhad traditions (Rassadin, 2012. P. 217). My own ethnographic interviews with members of the only herding Oka-Soiot family at the time confirm Rassadin's findings (Fig. 2).

II. 'Re-learning' ancestral practices

In his brief summary of the 1926 expedition, which had been conducted under the auspices of the Northern Committee (Rus. *Komitet Severa*), B.E. Petri (1927) reports that only one group of Oka-Soiots was

¹³ It has to be mentioned that some elders remember herding practices from kolkhoz times. One example is Maria Manzaraksheevna Sharaeva (b. 1937, interviewed Novem-

ber 2013), who remembers teaching her own sons in the mid- 1990s some of the herding practices she had gleaned during summer holidays from her father who had herded kolkhoz- owned reindeer near the settlement of Saiany.

still actively engaged in reindeer herding as an important occupation. This group consisted of eight households, numbering 28 individuals, 63 reindeer, 37 cattle, 23 horses, and nine dogs, living around Lake Il'chir (Petri, 1927. P. 14–15). As is evident from the cattle count, this group was beginning to transition from reindeer herding to bovine-based husbandry, a trend that had progressed even further among other groups of Oka-Soiots. At the Khonchin and Khan-Modon rivers two more groups of reindeer herders were encountered: Here a total of 56 individuals were in possession of 32 reindeer (ibid). Although they were avid fur hunters, these two groups also kept 203 head of cattle (yaks and Mongolian cows) and some 73 sheep and goats, for which reason B.E. Petri concluded that they belonged to a “transitioning group” (Petri, 1927. P. 14). The remaining Oka-Soiot groups had already completed their transition from reindeer herding to cattle breeding, all the while maintaining their fur hunting activities to sustain a steady cash flow (ibid. P. 18). Consequently, at the time of B.E. Petri's visit in 1926, 250 Oka-Soiots were in possession of a total of 124 reindeer¹⁴, held in 8 locations within the Oka District¹⁵ (Petri, 1927. P. 15). To date only limited archaeological research¹⁶ has been conducted on former camp sites in Oka to record palynological evidence of reindeer presence and surviving material implements and structures, and which might aid in a comparative study of regional herding styles.

1. Loss of knowledge and skill. Although B.E. Petri had predicted a total demise of Oka-Soiot historical life ways (and presumably of reindeer herding), resulting, among other things, from intermarriages with Buriat settlers in the District (Petri, 1927. P. 19), we witness continued use of reindeer for hunting and other transportation purposes well into the Soviet years. Archival records show that 16 years after B.E. Petri's 1926 expedition (in 1942), nine kolkhozes across Oka were herding as many as 543 reindeer

¹⁴ Alongside these reindeer, the Oka-Soiots were holding 1,178 head of cattle (Petri, 1927).

¹⁵ B.E. Petri also lists Oka-Soiot households in the Tunka valley and in Mongolia, which have been omitted here.

¹⁶ See K. Milek, K. Klokov, I. Kamerling, A. Oehler, D.G. Anderson “Identification and Interpretation of Small-Scale Nomadic Herding Sites in Woodland Environments” (manuscript in preparation).

(AAMO. 11-1-149, 1–3; 11-1-305, 1). Yet, in 1963, reindeer herding in Oka was found to be economically unviable by the government of the Buriat ASSR, and consequently all domestic reindeer were liquidated (Rassadin, 1999. P. 17–19; Pavlinskaya, 2002. P. 98). The need to relearn ancestral herding knowledge therefore stood at the forefront of a successful reintroduction of domestic reindeer to Oka-Soiot households and traditional territory.

In retrospective of the first five years (1994–1999) of Oka-Soiot reindeer herding (Pavlinskaya, 2002. P. 98–99) offers four criticisms, which she bases on the loss of traditional knowledge and skill. The herd had grown by only 16 head, when annually it had produced 30–40 offspring, which showed how unprepared the herders were for predators and disease. Firstly, there was a lack of understanding that domestic reindeer require the same amount of care as other domestic livestock. Secondly, there was no apprehension that reindeer had to be tamed or attuned to their owners and winter camp. Finally, herders were not providing protective structures (roofs, fences, smudges) for their animals. Although the herders I spoke with in 2013 and 2014 agreed with several of Pavlinskaya's points, they also recalled many of the efforts they did make in regard to the construction of protective structures. Their diaries serve as evidence for these measures.

Indeed, wolf predation and sicknesses had posed the greatest challenge (especially between 1997–1998), but to the herders' defence, even Dukha / Tsaatan herders of the Zuun tundra in northern Mongolia were experiencing losses of 30–35 reindeer to sickness¹⁷ in the year 2000 (Jernsletten, Klokov, 2002. P. 150). Although the herders found reindeer to behave quite differently from other domestic animals they owned, they did attempt to find the best possible feeding grounds year round. However, as will be discussed below, the fact that brigade members did not hold stock in the herd may have been disadvantageous, a problem that was common also during Soviet years in neighbouring regions (cf. Donahoe, 2004). Herders used all methods generally applied to accustom reindeer to herders and camp sites: they tied

¹⁷ Presumably *Bacilæz hemoglobinuri*, a cattle and sheep born virus.

down mother does and fawns near the camp (Diary, 18th May, 1995), built a corral (Diary, 12th Jul., 1996), used kombikorm (enriched cereal feed) to draw animals to camp (Diary, 3rd Mar., 1995), fed salt from their hands to fawns (Diary, 20th Jan., 1996)¹⁸ used smudges in summer (Diary, 24th Jul. 1996), and lit fires to protect against wolves in winter (Diary, 11th Mar. 1995). However, roofed shelters were installed only in 2001.

III. Lessons from the diaries

1. Seeing landscape like reindeer. Reading the diaries, it is fairly easy to reconstruct the annual cycle of a reindeer herder's life, and even more so of the herd. What makes this diary special is the fact that we find here an account of cattle breeders and hunters who have agreed to help look after a herd of reindeer not their own, and who roam with them through a territory they are intimately familiar with from their own annual livestock migrations, and from extensive hunting treks. Yet, it is evident that, in spite of their intimate knowledge of this mountainous taiga environment, the herders must learn to see it from the viewpoint of their reindeer's *Umwelt*, or way of perception (Uexkuell, 1932). Although the herders knew the requirements of domestic livestock (yaks, cows, horses, sheep, and goats) and how to optimally satisfy animals belonging to each of these species within the given terrain, they soon came to realize that reindeer are different animals altogether: "It took three days to drive the herd from the peaks. In hot weather reindeer turn out to be restless animals. They need to go to the very peak" (Diary, 4th Aug., 1995). This "restlessness" came as a surprise to the herders, in spite of their familiarity with yak, which also seek the cool of higher altitude in summer. In an interview from October 2013, Iura V. Sharaev (b. 1974) recalls herding reindeer at Uro: "It's not like keeping cows. They are quite the beasts (Rus. *zveri*) after all. You had to get

them back from the mountains, and often you'd spend the whole day walking after them".

2. Human-animal joint decisions. But, according to the herders, the most significant marker of difference between reindeer and more familiar animals belonging to the household was their habit of straying comparatively far from human camps and settlements. While many Oka-Soiot households drive their livestock from winter camp to summer camp (early June) and back (late August), the reindeer often decided for themselves when, where, and for how long to be in a place, upsetting the migration plans of their herders. While yaks stay within a predictable range of human summer and winter camps (unless scattered by wolves), reindeer will disappear for longer periods of time, as was the case in early September of 1995, when the herd had been moved to a winter camp on Belaia River. By 4th October so many reindeer had returned to their previous location on Daialok River, that after a month of coaxing, the herders decided to set winter camp at their old location on Iakshop River (Diary, 9th Sep., 1995). This decision may be attributed in part to the fact that the herders were only learning to view their landscape in terms of reindeer requirements, but it may also indicate that reindeer generally manifest stronger agency in the decision making processes involving the selection of migration routes and camp sites.

3. Human divided commitment. Although there was a dedicated group of young men helping with the herding of the herd most of the time, several of the men had to uphold their commitment to the care of livestock privately owned by their families. Particularly during migration periods in Spring and Autumn, these men had to leave the reindeer herd to help drive cattle from their lower winter valleys to summer camps at higher altitude (Diary, 2nd Jun., 1996). The reindeer were never left alone during these times, but the need to attend to domestic stock with divergent needs illustrates the conflict of commitments that had become evident already to B.E. Petri in 1927, when he noted that at Khonchin individuals with fewer reindeer would entrust them to the care of the Badmaev household in summer, so that they were free to look after their cattle at lower altitude (Petri, 1927. P. 16–17). When I asked a former herder why reindeer herd-

¹⁸ Salt, which was carried at all times by herders in little bags, was fed primarily to fawns. This made it easier to catch them, according to former herder Dorzho Sharaev (b. 1978, interviewed June 2014). Stepanoff mentions that for Tozhu herders the main objective of hand feeding is to foster an association of pleasure with human scent (Stepanoff, 2012. P. 294).

ing had not taken off as a new and viable occupation for Oka-Soiots since their re-introduction, the response was that “everyone is busy looking after their own cattle” (Iura V. Sharaev, b. 1974, interviewed May, 2014). But the division of commitment is evident in the diaries also in relation to the idea of ownership.

4. Ownership and the notion of “work”. While living with Oka-Soiot cattle breeders and hunters, I have not once witnessed a person referring to their daily activities as “work” (Rus. *rabota*). In fact, the term “work” seems to be used primarily in reference to paid labour and the commitments that come with employment. Yet, throughout the reindeer herders' diaries, the term “work” is used repeatedly in relation to reindeer herding activities (as opposed to hunting activities): October marks a year of “work” in reindeer herding, time that seems to have “flown by” for the herders (Diary, 18th October 1995). This may have to do with the fact that at least one of the herders was being paid a salary for his services. But it may also indicate that – in contrast to hunting – reindeer herding was not something that members of the brigade would have naturally been engaged in. That is to say, reindeer herding was likely perceived as an alien activity, something done for someone else (not for oneself or one's own family), and which involved commitment to something of which the herders had no direct ownership.

Conclusion

Many lessons were learned during the first years of reindeer herding in Oka. The aid of Tofa herder-instructors was essential during this process, and the skills and material implements brought from Tofalaria constitute a form of cultural borrowing that has served in the effective re-learning of ancient Oka-Soiot skills. Yet, hopes expressed in the mid-1990s that reindeer herding and the Soiot language might once again become part of Oka-Soiot life in the Saians remain largely disappointed. Arguably, reindeer herding – like Soiot language skills – has assumed primarily a symbolic role, upholding an Oka-Soiot ethnic identity rather than having become integral to contemporary cultural identity.

Perhaps one of the most promising aspects for future research into the re-introduction of reindeer

herding in Oka is the possibility of juxtaposing contemporary herders' experiences with other reindeer herding contexts in neighbouring mountain terrains. By so doing differences may be identified, which may illuminate early learning processes in domestication and human-animal attunement in this mountain region. It would be useful for this purpose to examine the learning experiences of Oka-Soiot reindeer herders spanning over a more extensive period, namely from 1994 to the present. During these years, there have been many changes in herding style, particularly in terms of following vs. driving reindeer between feeding areas. While this paper is limited to the exploration of only a few aspects of the first three years of Oka-Soiot reindeer herding, there remain many other topics to be explored.

Between 2004 and 2010, for instance, the Sharaev family (under the guidance of elder brother Bair Sharaev) were annually migrating with the Sorok herd over a distance of ca. 180 km. These years resembled present-day Tozhu, as well as historic Oka-Soiot herding practices. Since 2010 the herd has permanently been moved to the southeast of the Oka district, a place that has historically been an important centre for Oka-Soiot reindeer herding. Here, on Kitoi and Onot Rivers (Fig. 3), the herd has been free of diseases and there have been no wolf attacks between 2010 and 2013 (Bair V. Sharaev, b. 1970, interviewed Nov., 2013). Although herding has not become part of the 390 contemporary Oka-Soiot households of the Sorok National Somon, the one symbolic herd that has survived is facing difficulties once again in 2018.

When a new mayor took office after the 2014 elections of the Soiot Municipal Formation of Rural Settlements, Bair V. Sharaev's job as the community's chief reindeer herder was handed to someone else. Given weather-related and other difficulties, the newly enlisted herder was not always able to attend to the herd's needs on time. Consequently, in the spring of 2018, the herd had not yet been visited, and thus the calving period had not been prepared for. According to Bair Sharaev, this meant that the fawns of 2018, belonging to an already decimated herd of approximately 55 head in late 2017, had been lost to the herders. Reindeer calve individually and in isolation when not corralled. Where this happens,



Fig. 3. Sharaev's crew trekking over a high alpine pass near Onot River (2014)

Рис. 3. Переход бригады Шареева через высокий горный перевал вблизи реки Онот (2014 г.)

new offspring grows up in absence of humans. To keep new offspring approachable they must be kept near human encampment, tied down for regimented periods of time. Similarly, the current number of rein-

deer trained for riding has been reduced due to infrequent human training. Therefore, from Bair Sharaev's perspective in 2018, the future of Sorok's reindeer herd is at best precarious.

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