

An Arctic indigenous knowledge system of landscape, climate, and human interactions: Evenki reindeer herders and hunters. A. Lavrillier and S. Gabushev. 2017. Fürstenberg/Havel: Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien SEC Publications. 467 p, softcover. ISBN 978-3942883313.

The question of climate change and adaptation to it has been a major focus of the international scientific community in recent years. At the same time, a limited number of studies based on Siberian ethnographical materials have been undertaken over this period. The authors of this book, experienced French social anthropologist Aleksandra Lavrillier and Evenki reindeer-herder and hunter Semen Gabushev, present the results of a transdisciplinary international project BRISK (Bridging Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge), conducted during 2013–2016 by a group of French geographers and anthropologists, and by Evenki. The idea of the project emerged from the reindeer herders, who mentioned that the weather was getting hotter and “some years brought very significant anomalies that triggered real panic among the herders” (pp. 21, 23). However, the main task of the book was to show how the environment is understood by Evenki, and what kind of systemic knowledge gives local people and communities an opportunity to adapt to climate changes in general and to unpredictable abnormal changes in particular.

Unfortunately, the book’s title does not reflect its content accurately, as the area of fieldwork covers the Amur province and the southern part of the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic of the Russian Federation, which are considered to be Subarctic. Perhaps it is worth noting that the book deals with eastern Evenki, who make up *ca.* 15–20% of the total Evenki population, scattered over a huge territory with varied landscape, from the Ural Mountains to the Sea of Okhotsk coast.

However, the reader will become acquainted with an extremely informative, rich and multi-layered text, consisting of a serious anthropological study and texts written by Evenki hunters and reindeer herders, as well as photographs, tables, diagrams, and digitally processed topographic illustrations of the landscape, vegetation, snow and ice cover of this area.

The book consists of a preface, an introduction (Interdisciplinary observations on the community level: methods and co-production, pp. 13–41), two parts (System of Evenki ecological knowledge and its typology, pp. 41–367; Observing and predicting norms, anomalies and transformations, pp. 370–449), and a conclusion (pp. 451–458).

The most valuable lesson from the Russian SIKU (Sea Ice Knowledge and Use) project on indigenous knowledge in Chukotka, conducted during 2007–2013, was its legacy of “seeking a balance through respectful coexistence of various types of knowledge” (Krupnik, 2017, pp. 43–44). One of the main methodological tasks of this book was to equate science and Evenki indigenous knowledge, which is understood “as a complex and organised reading grid containing different typologies and conceiving of elements of the landscape as an interactive system” (p. 32). Although from the materials presented it becomes obvious that Evenki knowledge is connected directly or indirectly with hunting and reindeer herding practices in a changing local environment, the authors stress its analytical character and give examples (see table on p. 20).

Part 1, System of Evenki ecological knowledge and its typology, consists of three sections. The first section, on an ecological calendar, was written by an anthropologist on the basis of her previous long-term fieldwork among Evenki, and gives a brief but deep insight into the annual cycle of hunters and reindeer herders, providing the reader with vivid first-hand descriptions of Evenki economic and spiritual activities and emotions connected with their natural environment. The second and the third sections remind one of the entries in an illustrated encyclopedia on Evenki knowledge of natural landscape and climate, respectively. Typological categories were suggested by an anthropologist and discussed with Evenki (pp. 32, 454–455). The book presents extremely rich field data, quite unusual for classical social anthropology, concerning the local micro-landscape, air, and the typology and physics of snow and ice, and is supplemented by indigenous explanations.

Searching for a new language of landscape description, Lavrillier photographed various aspects of the landscape, and Evenki commented on them. Initially they drew pictures on snow or paper, but with the help of the anthropologist they learnt computer programs and translated some of their knowledge into electronic format.

From the very beginning it should be mentioned that indigenous environmental knowledge is formatted in accordance with the models suggested by an anthropologist of the French

anthropological school, who in turn experienced the strong influence of the Soviet/Russian ethnographical tradition in the area of Evenki studies, and also the British and American scientific framework in the area of climate change studies. The great influence of the scientific legacy and ideas of the prominent Soviet scholar in the area of Evenki studies, Glafira M. Vasilevich, can be traced in the approaches to the materials, methods and descriptions (e.g. p. 162, pp. 164–172), and the attention given to ethnographic facts and language concepts, which, as Lavrillier justly stresses, are not raw material but have a value from the conceptual point of view (pp. 35–36).

The study of topographic typology of the landscape in relation to a local territorial Evenki group is new for Evenki ethnography. This part of the book made a very strong impression on me. Travellers and ethnographers have remarked on the staggering skills of Evenki to orient themselves, and their excellent knowledge of the land, outstanding hunting skills and experience, but the mechanism of these abilities has not yet been understood. The data presented confirm the conclusions of social and cultural geographers about the close systemic interconnections of all components of the landscape, and its continuity and distinctiveness. The typology of microrelief is very informative, but it has a weak point – an abstractness, because the photographs are not “tied” to the map of the place and have no geographical annotation. Here an anthropologist has presented new concepts that have not been described in detail in previous academic texts (for instance, *amnunna* as the basin of a big river, and other concepts).

Part 2, Observing and predicting norms, anomalies and transformation, sheds light on the landscape components for the ideal camp, snow road construction, and characteristics of grazing pastures in winter, and touches upon the question of landscape transformation due to climate change.

Through the whole book one constantly feels the crucial role of the anthropologist as an excellent interpreter and translator from one culture’s language to another. I would also note Lavrillier’s ability to interpret a phenomenon having in mind a specific audience. For example, she introduces the term “nomadic seminars”, concerning the evening discussions of the Evenki on the results of their hunting and reindeer-herding day-trip activity. Such a presentation is aimed at building bridges between scientific and indigenous knowledge.

Although the book is written in English, field materials are presented in the Evenki and Russian languages as well. For many readers the fact that the Evenki language is used in the book along with world languages spoken by millions will be quite a discovery, as the

Evenki language is a language under threat of extinction. Such a presentation is important also for the Evenki themselves, because it may help them to maintain a respect for, and interest in, their own language, culture and identity. Together with the language, the unique knowledge nested within it could be lost.

Unfortunately, the authors do not give information concerning the exact places where the research was conducted. This fact lessens the opportunity to verify the data presented, including language data. It is quite strange to read in the section written by Semen Gabushev that he “was born in a small Siberian village” (p. 23–26) without giving its name, because for Evenki a local territorial identity is not less important than ethnicity, and according to my fieldwork experience Evenki never conceal this kind of information.

The anthropologist’s statement that “one of the key issues of indigenous knowledge is its ownership” (p. 18) could be regarded as an attempt to translate Evenki knowledge into the European language of property. Knowledge sharing as well as sharing the results of their hunting were and still are characteristic features of Evenki culture. Some questions remain: Who is assumed to be party to Evenki knowledge? And what should be done with cross-cultural environmental knowledge?

Lavrillier and Gabushev’s book is a fundamental study containing reliable and valuable ethnographical data. It is written in clear language, in a lively style and with deep understanding of the subject matter. I would strongly recommend it to scholars working in the area of human–environmental studies in Arctic and Subarctic regions. The book is readable and downloadable free of charge at <http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/PDF/lavgab.pdf>. This review was written with the support of the Russian Science Foundation (grant no. 18-18-00309). (Anna Sirina, Department of the North and Siberia, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Leninskii pr., 32A, 117991, Moscow, Russia; Department of Siberia, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Universitetskaya nab., 3, 199034, St. Petersburg, Russia (annas@iea.ras.ru))

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DOI: [10.1017/S0032247418000487](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247418000487)