Reviews

General

Ogihara Shinko
***Inochi no genten "umai": Shiberia shuryōmin bunka no seimei kan* ("Umai," the Source of Life: The Concept of Life in Siberian Hunting Societies)**

Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 2021. 248 pages. Indices of names of persons, names of major populations, and of major geographical regions. 29 illustrations, 2 diagrams, 3 groups of references (Japanese, Russian, and other European languages). Hardcover, ¥2,860. ISBN 9784865783186.

In the title of this book, as it is printed on the cover, a single term in red katakana letters strikes the reader's eye. If that person happens to be Japanese or at least fairly knowledgable in the Japanese language, two possible meanings of the term might come to its mind: "tasty" and "skillful." However, the meaning the author Ogihara Shinko unfolds to the reader is quite different, since here *umai* means something related to the "origin (or source) of life." Yet, this is not the origin of life identified by modern scientists of biology or chemistry; rather, it is an expression for how certain traditional populations imagine what life is, from where it comes, and how it originates. Such peoples are societies of hunters and gatherers, who chase game animals and collect food plants for their daily needs to survive, while at the same time they are also concerned about the survival of these sources to the benefit of their own life. The author says that she encountered the term "*umai*" in a folk story of the Udeghe, a people of the Amur Land, who speak a Tungusic language (209). The discovery put her on track for a long journey through immense spaces of time and continents in search of a plausible solution to the Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio's puzzle concerning the gender of the Japanese mountain deity, the *yama no kami*.

The term "*umai*" is originally a Tungusic term for the vulva or the womb, but it may also mean various matters related to childbirth, such as umbilical cord or afterbirth, as well as concerns about the health and safe development of babies and young children. It is not only a term of many meanings in various Tungusic languages but also part of groups of terms with related meanings in the languages of still other indigenous peoples of Siberia and Central Asia.

Ogihara's longtime experience with the Russian language and Russian sources allows her to make good use of the data from old field reports of Russian ethnologists and linguists who have spent extended periods among Siberian indigenous populations

around the 1900s, a time when these populations were not yet brought under the impact of the Russian socialist revolution (37). These reports provided her with a window to look at the real lives of some hunter-gatherer societies as they may have been at the most ancient stage of human culture, the stage of hunter-gatherers. This window was decisive for the direction her research would take. It inspired her to ask if there might be a line connecting the cluster of meanings of *umai* in present-day Siberian indigenous societies with representations of the vulva in cave paintings of southern Europe (Spain and France) during the Late Stone Age. The reports of the Russian ethnographers concerning their observations in living hunting and gathering societies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Siberia inspired her to attempt to supply an "informed speculation" about the meaning of certain images found among the southern European cave paintings and the way actual Siberian indigenous people think about "life" today. In both cases—that of the cave dwellers during the Old Stone Age and the modern hunters of Siberia—"life" is a matter of quotidian concern. But what did or do these people think of what "life" actually is? Is it a spirit, a soul, or still something else? In this context Ogihara, based on findings of the specialist of Ket culture Alexeenko, says that the Ket of western Siberia have a term, "*etles*," which means "life force." It is a term related to a similar one, "*il'*," which means "breath." *Etles*, however, does not mean "breath" but "life force," something that leaves a deathly hit moose when it raises its head for one last time. This movement signals the moment the animal's "life force" flies away into the universe. At the same time, the Ket believe that life force resides individually in many parts of the animal's body, such as its blood, each of its organs, and even in its shadow. Because of such differences in the use and meaning of vernacular terms, Ogihara warns researchers to be careful using seemingly generally applicable scientific terms such as, for example, "soul" (44–46). In the reviewer's view, this warning is fully justified with respect to the variety of ideas about life and its source in the thoughts of people representing the oldest level of humanity's culture that the author unfolds before the reader.

This book is described as being "a journey to reflections about life (*seimei*)," a journey that covers the Eurasian non-tropical landmass from west to east and from its mountain ranges in the south to the polar coasts in the north. Furthermore, it covers the temporal and spatial beginnings of European cave dwellers of the late Old Stone Age up to Siberian hunter-gatherers of the nineteenth century. Both these society clusters built their lives on what they could reap from nature either by hunting animals or by gathering plant food. However, for information on life in societies of the last two or so centuries, the author makes good use of precious ethnographic reports about what (mainly) Russian ethnographers or adventurers had observed or heard in Siberia. To study the life and thought of people living tens of thousands of years earlier, though, she needs to rely on archaeological data, which she interprets in the light of findings from the relatively "modern" societies of Siberian hunter-gatherers.

Ogihara prepares the reader for the journey with a brief introductory chapter of short notes about the landmass Siberia: about its populations under Russian colonization and, connected with it, about ethnological research, local languages, and finally their way of life. The last point is especially important, because it clarifies the basic idea guiding the author in her approach, namely to study how people living the oldest form of culture think of what it means to "be alive, to live" and how they mentally perceive the "source of life."

In the first part of her argument, she discusses in five chapters ethnographic data of how indigenous people of Siberia and Japan (the Ainu) think and feel about life, whose origin they observe and experience, in particular when a woman is preparing for and giving birth to a baby. In this context *umai* is not only related to the birth of new life, but it is also conceived as a powerful entity that protects the mother during birthing as well as the new life emerging during the birthing process, and furthermore the newborn's first months or years after birth. Along with questions about where the source of new life is to be found and what may threaten it, Ogihara discusses the question of why a dead baby is buried in a box put on the branches of a large tree, that is, the question of what the reason for a tree burial is. The tree is imagined as standing on the top of a mountain, and life is thought of as a bird perching on one of the tree's branches until this bird can move to a tree at the mountain's foot, where it eventually will get a chance to return into the womb of a woman and so to be born again.

In the five chapters of the second part of the argument, Ogihara turns her attention to the significance of mountains and their relation to the meaning of *umai*. For the present-day hunters and gatherers of the Altai ranges, a mountain is the place where the ancestor of the clan, whose hunting ground is also the mountain, is thought to have first been living in a stone cradle deep in one of the mountain's caves. The mountain provides and guarantees the clan's life and is, therefore, thought of as a mother deity. But since it provides game and other food as a gift to the clan, the mountain is called the "lord" and "owner" (*nushi*) of these gifts. This is an idea the author finds expressed already in images of the Old Stone Age cave paintings in Spain and France, where, for example, young (small) deer seem to be jumping out from an opening in cave walls that look like vulvas. Here is the moment and place where Ogihara sees the earliest expression for an idea of life's origin that, together with the wanderings of that early time's cave dwellers in chasing their game, was carried to the eastern end of Siberia. The geological conditions during the last interglacial period in these areas did allow wide movements of game animals and, as one of their consequences, also of the animals' hunters. In these movements the hunters brought along with them the concept of the source of their own life being based on the life of the game provided as a gift from the mountain, the "lord" of their hunting ground.

My account of this study hardly does justice to the effort of Ogihara's long period of intensive preparatory work. What her background work suggests can be gleaned after reviewing the impressive list of her previously published articles related to the book under review here together with her autobiographical preface and afterword included in this work. At some points in her argument, she mentions that what she says might sound like a dream. Keeping in mind the huge geographical space and long time period she endeavors to bridge so to connect the reader with an immensely deep past, one might be prepared to acknowledge that not all of the relevant questions raised are definitely answered. Her effort bears fruit, however, in that she can show that immense distances across time and space need not necessarily mean separation but rather development of relations based on a common ground, in this case, the appreciation of the source of life as the source of a precious gift and respect for it.

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