

EINSHTEIN, SEW'JAN I. *Geheimnisvolles Tuwa. Expeditionen in das Herz Asiens*. Oststeinbek: Alouette Verlag, 2005. 264 pages. Map, illustrations, bibliography, with DVD. Hardcover €39.90. ISBN 3-924324-11-5. (In German)

It is probably no exaggeration to say that Sew'jan I. Weinshtein is an *Altmeister*, i.e., seasoned expert, if not even *the* expert on Tuvinian culture. Among modern ethnologists he is also one of the few who have extensively published on a wide range of aspects of the culture studied: history, archeology, sociology, economy, art, and religion (shamanism). The basis of his work and of his familiarity with Tuva, her people and her land comes from almost ten years of continuous living in the country after he found employment as a young scholar at the Museum of Kyzyl. Ever since his first encounter with the country in 1950, and also after his return to Moscow, he has traveled extensively and visited every corner of the country. He has conducted numerous scientific expeditions up into the late 1990s. Most of his numerous publications, the fruit of his extended and intensive research, are, however, quite difficult to access for readers not familiar with the Russian language or the complexity of the problems discussed.

Geheimnisvolles Tuwa is, as the title suggests, a work of quite different character. What Caroline Humphrey once wrote of Weinshtein's earlier work, *Nomads of South Siberia*, can be applied also to this one, albeit in a very different sense. This book too is "unique in this field," i.e., among the usual ethnographic reports, however its uniqueness does not lie in "the systematic coverage of its subject" (HUMPHREY 1980, 1) and a thorough scientific analysis; it is unique because of its very personal touch. It is not a systematic ethnography but a story of the author's various encounters with Tuva and the Tuvinians, the story of his research plans and his experiences in pursuing these plans, but most of all it is the story of his meetings and conversations with the people of Tuva. The thoughts and feelings of the author himself are as much part of this story as the responses and reactions of the people he encounters. He introduces his work and conversation partners by name, which has the pleasing effect of rendering this book a narrative in which people are alive and not just the hidden and amalgamated stratum of a technical report under the name of ethnography. Although it is not "a diary in the strict sense," to borrow from the title of Malinowski's famous diary, the author constructs his narrative based on the notes of his field diaries of many years. The reader is therefore allowed to follow the author on his sometimes adventurous tours and meet the people he meets. In the process the readers almost inadvertently learn a great deal about Tuvinian culture without being burdened with heavy technical jargon and discussions.

Nevertheless, references to technical questions and to problems of interest for scholars are not lacking, but rather than being pursued for their own sake, they appear as one aspect of the author's narrative. For that reason these references seem to be made rather casually, yet this does not reduce their importance. For example, when Weinshtein reports that the nomads keep fields for growing barley and millet, or that they engage in fishing,

these are no doubt important facts even though they contradict the picture commonly held about nomadic peoples. Weinshtein furthermore repeatedly addresses the question of the population's ethnic background, pointing out the complex ethnic composition of the population due to repeated wars, marriage arrangements, and movements in search of pasture.

After the dissolution of the Communist system a number of areas formerly under its sway have experienced a revival of shamanism as a return to the population's original spiritual sources. The case of Tuva has become relatively well-known outside the country, one of the reasons being an exhibit on Tuvan shamanism that was shown in several cities in Europe attracting a great deal of interest (VAN ALPHEN 1998). Weinshtein touches on shamanism on a number of occasions, most interesting probably being the description of a ritual by the "great" shaman Schontschur-cham, whom he met quite by chance. However, his own stance towards shamans seems to be rather skeptical, since he also quotes at some length Russian scholars who opine that shamans tend to be kinds of hysterics or cheaters that use simple tricks or methods, such as hypnosis, which is also used by medical professionals. If I understand this latter section correctly I ask myself by what standards Weinshtein considers Schontschur-cham to be a "great" shaman, unless he intentionally puts the word "great" between quotation marks in order to express his disbelief (197–213). On the other hand I can understand his skepticism towards the "new shamans" who have appeared recently in Tuva and elsewhere. Whether they will be able to continue the centuries-old tradition of the shamans who were active before they were silenced by Soviet persecution certainly remains a problem. Here I gladly support the author's suggestion that the phenomenon of new shamans in these areas needs to be seriously studied (196).

At this point it is appropriate to refer the reader to the documentary *Genähte Pfeile* [Sewn arrows] by Leonid Kruglow about Weinshtein's research in Tuva. The documentary comes with the book and combines old records from Weinshtein's earliest time in Tuva, blending images of him at work with the movie's preparation and records of Kruglow's own expedition to Tuva in 1998. The documentary offers a fascinating glimpse at the life of the reindeer breeders, but most intriguing is probably the section that reproduces the movie that was made by Aldochin, a cameraman from Moscow, who happened to be with Weinshtein when he visited the "great" shaman (199). Not only is it a rare document, Weinshtein also comments on it with much empathy. For that reason I sincerely regret that this comment is spoken only in German without English subtitles. There is also a good section on the activities of modern shamans which makes their differences with the old shaman evident.

Geheimnisvolles Tuva is a real pleasure to read, not the least because it is free of unnecessary jargon. However, for a reader with a more scholarly bent the book is not entirely without problems. Although the editor added a sizeable bibliography, some of the authors quoted at some length in the text do not appear in it. The book is presented as a translation from the Russian, but it is not made clear whether it has been previously published in Russian. A note on page 4 suggests, though, that the author, who knows German, and his collaborators established the text directly from an original manuscript.

At times the author makes a general statement without offering proof to support it. Why, for example, should a certain sexual freedom among young people tolerated before a marriage be a remnant of the "Urgesellschaft" and therefore of a former praxis of the "whole of mankind" (70)? When he discusses that animals or things of a certain color are often used as offerings to the spirits he mentions a "ritual veneration of white reindeer in Japan" (84). There is, however, at least to my knowledge, no such thing in Japan because there are no reindeer. Sakhalin would be the closest place to Japan where the animal can

be found. In Japanese the reindeer is called *tonakai*. This is an Ainu term, and it is possible that it originates from the Ainu who were living in Sakhalin. The term may have found its way as a foreign word into Japanese from their language because the Japanese did not know the animal from their own experience. I am further puzzled by the author's claim that the yurt of the nomads can be found even in Japan (146). Although there were certain groups roaming the mountains and living in tents, their tents are similar to a *chum*, but not to yurts, which are made of a circular wooden structure covered by sheets of felt.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned at the beginning, this book is not meant to be a scientific treatise, and so there is not much of a point in insisting on some of its problems. In the first place it is meant to be a personal account of an experienced scholar and as such it provides not only an informative but also a human background to his scientific and technical work. In this sense it is no doubt a "unique" work that I can highly recommend.

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