

SIBERIA

GARANGER, MARC (photographs); ROBERTE N. HAMAYON (text). *Taïga, terre de chamans*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Éditions, 1997. 215 pages. Photographs, maps, bibliography. Cloth Fr 450; ISBN 2-7433-0163-5. (In French)

In *Taïga, terre de chamans* text and artwork felicitously combine to let the reader and viewer encounter peoples of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) such as Evenk, Even, and Yakut, and their environment, especially the taiga. The word "encounter" is used on purpose, because the book is not simply an objective and therefore detached ethnographic description illustrated with documentary photography. The scholar's knowledge and the photographer's discerning eye do not impose themselves as something consciously different from the peoples described; both function simply as a means to have these peoples and the various circumstances of their lives speak for themselves as much as possible.

The book's very title suggests that the taiga is the ever-present support for all phenomena described, especially the shamans. Roberte N. Hamayon, the author of the text, introduces the reader first to the taiga's animal and human inhabitants, to the cycle of its seasons, and to the feelings these changes evoke in the people experiencing them with rhythmical regularity each year. She traces the history of waves of migrations that caused the indigenous societies to look for ways to come to terms with new circumstances in order to survive. In particular she points out how these migrations involved more than spatial displacements. They led to new ways of adaptation in a severe environment and prompted various reformulations of the societies involved, and they are, therefore, a sign that these societies were more concerned about how to survive together than how to eliminate one another. This attitude led to various forms and degrees of intermingling, so much so that the names of present populations are of only limited value as designations of the physical perimeters of ethnic groups or whole nations, let alone particular ethnic identities.

Having set the scene in such a manner, Hamayon then proceeds to consider the forms and functions of shamanism in the taiga. In these core chapters she analyzes attitudes and ways of thinking that become the foundation for the specific forms of shamanism as it exists among the hunters (Evenk, Even) and the herders and cattle breeders (Yakut), respectively.

The hunters' thoughts and attitudes are an outcome of their intimate familiarity with the forest and its animal inhabitants. For them the return of migrating birds, for example, not only announces the imminent advent of spring but at the same time is a sign of new life after a deathlike winter, and, as such, is testimony to the return of souls from the land of death. Furthermore, games played at the seasonal festivities that bring the whole community together mimic the habits of the forest animals. "Familiarity" with the animals, therefore, means that the hunters know their habits, but it means further that they conceive of themselves as members of the same family with the forest dwellers. As a consequence, it comes as no surprise that human souls are thought of as being of the same status as the spirits of animals, and thus, as of a kindred character, they can be expected to react in similar ways. And, because souls/spirits are thought to be intimately related to their respective bodies, human and animal, the possibility of entering into relations with the spirits of animals grants at the same time access to the animals' bodies. According to Hamayon the concept of such a fundamental likeness between souls and spirits of animals is the very foundation of shamanism (97).

The shaman's, and with him the hunters', relation with the spirit guarding the animals being hunted is thought of in terms of a marriage alliance and its related forms of exchange between the partners. Within this exchange the hunters are granted their life-sustaining catches, i.e., the meat of the game animals, under a contract that obliges them, in return, eventually to provide the guarding spirit with its food, i.e., the hunter's soul/life. In the ritualized hunt for animals to eat, the hunters are sensitized to both their indebtedness towards nature and their responsibility for the well-being of their community, among which the game meat has to be equally distributed. Hamayon's goal is to show how much this feeling for mutual dependence pervades the people's interaction with nature and its spirits. However, she does not claim that this amounts to an all-pervasive system in the area discussed, and even less to a universal characteristic of shamanism as such. For instance, she shows how differently the same people behave in the hunt for fur animals that are not considered to be food. Here individual initiative, greed, and competition reign; at times even theft may occur. All of these are branded as strictly antisocial activities if they occur within the framework of hunting for food.

Another example that shows that Hamayon does not think of the hunters' conception of their world and of shamanism as a universal one is her discussion of shamanism among the Yakut herders. Her description of their world is less detailed, but the point of her argument is that here the shaman and his partner spirits have become marginal figures in societies structured by lineages that are oriented toward their ancestral spirits, and not anymore toward the spirits of the wild. The shaman's spirits are not the providers of the group's staple food, and as marginal beings they are thought of as the disturbing sources of sickness and death. On the other hand, in a most recent development, shamanism has been given a new interpretation in these same societies. It has been chosen as a means to nurture a new cultural and spiritual identity in the policies of a State that just recently has won independence from an oppressive system and is endeavoring to rediscover its cultural roots and to return to them.

It has been said that ethnography reveals more about the writer than about the people described. This applies also to *Taïga, terre de chamans*, but not in the sense that the people studied end up being buried under the author's self-scrutiny and private musings. The author's scholarship remains subdued and makes an effort to let the people speak for themselves wherever possible (explicit references to scholars' opinions take second place to quotes from poetic creations or utterances from the local people themselves). The careful descriptions, in combination with photography that does not simply show people and nature but suggests more than meets the eye, do not impose opinions or views; together, they invite the reader to a personal encounter with the taïga, its populations, and the rich variety of lives that inhabit it.

Resuming the main thrust of her earlier argument (HAMAYON 1990; for a review see KNECHT 1993), Hamayon succeeds here in making it accessible to a wider interested readership. As a result she and Marc Garanger have produced a book that not only is a pleasure to read and view but also offers substantial food for the scholar. It should be added that, considering the publisher's careful and beautiful production of the volume, its price is quite reasonable. It is a pleasure to recommend this book to specialists as well as to those with an interest in the relationships between humans and nature.

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